

2023  
**ELLEN  
MEIKSINS  
WOOD  
LECTURE**  
ft. **ARMINE YALNIZYAN**



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# Progress vs. 2023: A Guide to the Fight Ahead

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2023 Ellen Meiksins Wood Lecture

Delivered at Toronto Metropolitan University – May 23, 2023

## Introduction

I am originally from Toronto but have lived for the last five years on unceded, unsurrendered territory cared for by the Algonquin Anishnaabe people, just as it has taken care of them, for thousands of years.

I live on the Ottawa River now and the biggest thing I've noticed about my change of place is how the river constantly changes, shaped by what is happening upstream, and by blocks and openings downstream.

*A changing river changes the landscape.*

*So do some people.*

We may all just be droplets in the river of life, but the instincts and ability of some people to explain why we shouldn't go-with-the-flow attracts so many others that, together, they change the course of the river, and the course of history.

Two such people brought us here today.

Ellen Meiskins Wood taught us not just the importance of understanding history, but the importance of how we tell the story, and how we interpret the story of history to ourselves in order to change its course. Her work showed us that flow is constructed: capitalism isn't inevitable, contrary to what we've been told for decades. It isn't the natural order of things. Capitalism hasn't always existed; and its nature is constantly changing.

Margaret Thatcher's brilliant slogan, "There is no alternative," was just plain wrong, but it accomplished its goal – neutralizing the meaning of free market economic forces, depoliticizing them even as they changed our

material circumstances and the quality of our lives. Ellen's analysis challenges us to consider: How will capitalism change next, and who will change its course?

Then there's Ed Broadbent, who showed us how institutions change the course of the journey, and how you can change institutions themselves if you are clear about what you are trying to accomplish. Ed is a giant of social democracy in this country who has dedicated his life not just to improving political democracy— the right to vote, support a candidate, join a party, or even run for election – but to improving **social** democracy, the conditions that build a just and equitable society.

His unique combination of academic rigour and activism created the type of horse-trading that the politics of the left often promises, but rarely delivers. In his insistence that we challenge ourselves to achieve social democratic goals, from whatever station of life we occupy, Ed has no peer.

Unless you consider Ellen.

If I wasn't Armenian, I'd have a joke for you right now. You know, one of those "A Marxist and a social democrat walk into a bar...." types of jokes.

My colleague and friend, feminist economist Marjorie Griffin Cohen, told me a little about Ed and Ellen's unlikely chemistry, given their uncompromising differences of opinion. She talked about a video (which I wasn't able to find) where they vigorously debated one another, but what shone through was their mutual respect for each other, and their understanding that their different perspectives and strategies on how to use their energy was tied to their love of the shared goal of creating a better type of human existence. And just plain love for one another. What a way to be unified.

So, this prize has a double significance for me – what it can mean to interpret the world, and what it means to change it.

First, I was astonished to receive it, given who it comes from. Then I was grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what it means to belong here. I felt like that character in the Talking Heads song, *Once in a Lifetime*: *And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did I get here?"*

Seriously, this award challenged me to address a question I've been mulling over for years, and bring it face-to-face with the moment: What does it mean to be a progressive in 2023?

What are we on the verge of winning, and what are we on the verge of losing? What forces are we up against, and what could propel us further? Maybe more importantly: What are the organizing principles for progressive change?

Since it's 2023, and I was a little cowed at the prospect of having Ed in the audience, I asked ChatGPT-4 for advice on how to write this speech.

The chatbot told me to start with a story about myself. I mean when the machines tell you to be more human...

But the instruction reminded me of what we repeatedly learn and often forget about the power of personal stories to connect us to one another as humans. For over 70 years in the U.S., that power was harnessed to organize labour on assembly lines and on farms, in communities and in politics by people like Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Marshall Ganz.

Ganz boiled the recipe for successful organizing and people-driven change down to three chapters: **the Story of Self, the Story of Us, the Story of Now**. To quote Ganz, the magic of organizing is about **"how to turn what we have into what we need to get what we want."**

I believe the progressive challenge of 2023 is that we talk to each other but don't often listen to each other. For sure we don't talk to each other personally enough to learn what would motivate another person to want to take some kind of action to get to a better humanity. And we also don't

listen to enough different types of people, nor do we make use of what history has taught us about connecting, inspiring and motivating collective action. Since I think Ganz's recipe is the way to do it, let me tell you my story of self, the improbable story of how I got here, and what exactly called me to be a progressive.

Let me start with what *didn't* call to me.

I am not a Marxist. Well, I shouldn't be so hasty. Maybe I am, but of the Groucho Marxist variety – you know, “I don't care to belong to a club that would have me as a member.”

I have been an outsider my entire life. In my profession as an economist. In my generation of feminists. At school. Even growing up in my own home.

It's because I could so clearly see the limitations of all the clubs I belonged to, and because my upbringing required “holding the tension” of opposites.

I have no working-class pedigree.

My formative politics came in two flavours, a mirror of the political tensions in the Armenian diaspora: my mother was a fearful survivalist of the “don't rock the boat” type. My dad was a “leave no one behind” firebrand, a survivor of the Turkish massacre with a true lust for life.

My father died when I was nine, leaving me with a lifetime of debate with my mother, whose essential conservatism and obedience was shaped by the French nuns who raised her. Much to her chagrin, I decided I was a feminist as a young teen after reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

My mother was among the brightest women you'd ever meet, but only completed a Grade 4 education. My father's brilliance, salvation and distinction came from his education as a mechanical and electrical engineer, goals attained with mighty struggle.

It was assumed I would take advantage of the many benefits of living in Canada, including easy access to higher education. I did not. I hated school and went straight from high school to work, in a library, I so hated the world of commerce and hustle.

If I didn't have working class politics before, I sure developed them when I found out that no matter how good I was at my job, or how hard I worked, I would never be promoted – meaning I would never lose my roommates and find economic freedom – without a degree.

That's the only reason I went to university in 1979, and the first thing I had to find out when I got there was why economics was the profession that ruled the world. In my first weeks, I thought there was a mistake. Economic theory seemed based on some pretty nutty foundational ideas, like perfect and symmetrical information, and – my favourite – the indifference curve, where one chose between work and leisure. Surprise! There was no vector for unpaid work! Women were mostly invisible in anything that counted.

Ellen Meiksins Wood described how capitalism evacuates social content.

For me that meant the parts that don't make money are invisible at best (think: women), and problems at worst (think: governments and rules).

Capitalism depoliticizes economics by talking about the economy, when done "right", as if it's simply a maximization machine; and free markets as "neutral," notwithstanding the fact that there is *nothing* more political than who can get what from whom, under what conditions.

Colonialism is the go-to example today, but at the time, I found the treatment of unpaid labour, done mostly by women, perplexing. It made the world go round. How could it be invisible?

As part of my bilingual degree, I studied third year economics in France, where the study of Marx (at a conservative university no less) was mandatory. Fun fact: You couldn't even \*say\* the word Marxist in most Canadian economics courses back then, much less be expected to

regurgitate theories of surplus value, also known as the extraction of profit, which often looks like straight-up exploitation.

I graduated in the spring of 1983, not long after the 1981-82 recession bottomed out. Canadians experienced the biggest job losses since the Great Depression. The only money I could make was as a graduate student on scholarship, working as a bilingual research assistant – but what research. I was the RA to my undergraduate hero, Sylvia Ostry. Twist my arm! In 1972 Ostry and Mahmood Zaidi had written the only economics textbook my undergraduate studies countenanced about systemic differences in labour market outcomes due to gender and race.

She had just returned from a stint as the OECD's chief economist and was researching the impacts of technological change and globalization on labour markets. Forty years on, I am still working on these themes.

Around this time I started attending alternative economics conferences with speakers such as Sam Gindin, Hugh Mackenzie and D'Arcy Martin. They, too, inspired me to think more, be more, do more. They were at the cutting edge of articulating the challenges and possibilities for workers as capitalism's new global economic realities took hold.

I realized that understanding and interpreting economic theory and economic history wasn't enough. I wanted to change the *trajectory* of economics, alongside those who were being affected; working with workers to create something better, because it felt like the deck was getting increasingly stacked against people like younger me.

But unions were bleeding jobs and members. Nobody working with workers was hiring.

I was a just-in-time economist for two years, living on what could have turned into a never-ending string of contracts. I grabbed the first non-contract position I was offered, in 1987. It was at the [Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto](#), an NGO founded in 1933 to plan for something better than free-market capitalism after the Depression. I was



their first in-house economist (in 54 years!), following in the footsteps of a non-economist, Leon Muszynski, who wrote the first report on de-industrialization in Canada.

That job turned me into a human bridge. I was working with academics, labour leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, social workers, faith groups, settlement services and community-based activists to give voice to the people whose lives were most disrupted by the 1981-82 recession. Each group spoke a different language, but together this tribe was talking turkey on how to fend off a fresh round of attacks on the most vulnerable: the loss of training and literacy supports, the axing of jobless benefits, the quickening pace of job loss in the manufacturing sector, the accelerating housing crunch, the growing role of women in the labour market as male breadwinners lost ground. Economic breakdown translated far too often into family and personal breakdown.

I didn't apply economic tools like most of my peers, who derided my lack of focus on how to grow the economic pie. But I knew these were my people, and my fight. I was realizing who and what I wanted to become. **You become what you do.**

The story of self essentially is a story of becoming, and *that* comes in three chapters too: ***becoming, belonging, breaking down barriers.***

Each deserves a mention.

Back in the day, becoming was about self-actualization, as if it was one thing, one direction. Today, identity politics reflects the reality that you can evolve to become many things over the course of your life.

The reality is you can't *become* without *belonging*. Becoming, like identity, is in relation to others, and responds to the support or alienation from others. Find your people, and you find your purpose.

But *belonging* can be a false flag. People get recruited into all sorts of things with the promise of belonging that either doesn't pan out (you



actually *don't* belong) or you are fighting against your own interests (false consciousness).

Belonging often means *overcoming barriers*. Not everybody belongs everywhere. So becoming relies on belonging, and belonging sometimes requires breaking down barriers.

Let's be clear, though: one person's barrier that needs to be broken down to self-actualize is another person's bulwark against bedlam.

Consider the role of the simple face mask – protecting some but outraging others. (Oh, the painful irony hearing *Our bodies, Ourselves* evolve into the Freedom Convoy's "My body, my choice" slogan.)

Or the promise of free trade, which offered cheaper stuff but fewer jobs, a tough trade-off when worker and consumer are the same person, and everyone wants a deal!

Or the magic of fewer rules. We're all a little libertarian now, aren't we? That you're-not-the-boss-of-me spirit is not just the result of the progressive quest for greater equality. The pursuit of deregulated markets and lower taxes made libertarianism a veritable economic religion and released the sweet whiff of success into the room by preaching meritocracy for all, even as it delivered increasingly concentrated wealth and power. Survival of the fittest, baby. You can't fight nature, amirite?

So there's tension in all three elements of the story of self: becoming, belonging, and breaking barriers. We want many different things for ourselves. Some are contradictory. Our wish list changes partly because we and those around us continually evolve, and partly because we are incessantly bombarded with what we should want by vested interests.

Multiply that complexity by millions. I am but one particular in a sea of other particulars.

What am I talking about when I switch from "me" talk to "we" talk. Who is we?

## The Story of Us

The story of us is a constantly changing equation, even for progressives. It used to be all about class. Then it was all about identity. Now it's about the intersection of these realities.

Some people try to hold the whole shebang together, but most conversations are fragmented into specific interests and individual campaigns. It's easy to lose the plot of what a coherent alternative vision could look like, what "us" could be and what we could accomplish together.

Worse, the conversation about "us" is increasingly being defined by regressives, not progressives – it's **us**, not *experts*; it's **us**, not *governments*; it's **us**, not *immigrants*; it's **us**, not *you*.

Growing insularity is dividing and fracturing the political project of universal progress and shared prosperity. That's no accident. It shifts power from the powerful.

There's so much discontent about the various crises we are facing, about the bald-faced grift and lack of accountability, it's easy to just say – throw it all out, burn it all down. It was never ours in the first place. We didn't own it.

That leaves a vacuum for the powerful to become even more powerful.

And that's crazy, because the big story about power today is about worker power.

There have always been more workers than bosses, but for the past half century the combination of baby boomers flooding into the labour market, and back-to-back recessions in the 1980s and 1990s created decades of labour surplus.

Now the shoe is on the other foot: labour shortages as far as the eye can see. It's happening in every country that had a baby boom after the Second World War, which is most of the richest nations in the world.

The demographic collision of aging boomers and falling birthrates over the last few decades means more people are exiting the labour force than entering it, creating unemployment rates last seen 50 years ago.

The reality of “us” in 2023 is that workers haven’t had this kind of bargaining power in half a century.

Tight labour markets have led to employer demands for more newcomers, a mixed blessing - without them, the labour market would shrink and so would the economy (horrors!).

But the biggest swell of newcomers we’ve seen in 50 years comes with rising tension. There just hasn’t been enough planning for markets and governments to deliver enough housing or social infrastructure, nor enough foresight about how this might work against ensuring all workers already here have a solid chance to do better under these historically opportune conditions.

How are progressives using workers’ historically elevated bargaining power to shape the agenda on needed economic change?

We aren’t. Well, not enough anyway. IMHO, the other side is doing a better job, at least on the face of things.

The math is simple. There are more workers than bosses. That’s where the votes are. Sound like you’re working for workers, and you win. That is precisely the formulation of the current Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.

But the conservatives aren’t progressives. They are not working for the rights of workers. They are working for the right to make money (with few responsibilities). They are working for the wish list of concentrated power, not workers’ wish list for more democratized power.

We voted them in, but political democracy isn’t the same as social democracy. Just ask Ed.

Democracy is not about what someone else can do for you. It's about how we become more engaged in our own lives; how we *develop* and *use* both autonomy and collective action.

The progressive agenda in the post-war period was backed by the masses. It sought greater security and greater opportunity for everyone, characterized by the pursuit of full employment and a strong welfare state. That was a radical agenda, and it *was* transformative for a time. But, as Reverend Jesse Jackson said in the 1980s, we had full employment under slavery too.

Today's progressive agenda isn't primarily about full employment. It is primarily about full engagement.

That means more control over your time. More control over basic life decisions on where to live and whether to have children, or not. More control over the performance and accountability of the companies that shape your days and nights, as workers and as consumers. More control over the performance and accountability of the governments you elect to represent your interests.

Yes, we need new rules to define the sandbox of the labour market. Yes, we need better supports. Yes, governments do all that, and can level the playing field.

But governments are only part of the mechanism and machinery of change, and only become what we push them to be.

No government leads the parade towards social and economic justice. They get in front of the parade others create. The unpleasant reality is that parades are more frequently financed and populated by business interests than workers' interests or outpourings of mass emotion.

But sometimes David beats Goliath. Sometimes emotion grips a people, and they throng the streets. Sometimes something, or some series of

events, pumps up mass expectations and demands, and change moves in a new direction.

That's where you come in.

Your power, *our* power comes not just from how we lobby government, but how we expect and are able to shape our own lives, in our workplaces, in our homes, in our communities every day. *That's* what makes governments of every political stripe *have* to change.

Progressive collective change means we have raised actionable, realistic expectations across society for the dual goals of becoming better humans, and creating a better humanity. That means we've expanded interest in making achievable change, doable goals that describe a pathway to progress so irresistible that more people want to be part of the movement to get there.

As I prepared for tonight, I spoke to people who introduced me to the momentum of people power; people who shaped my thinking by inspiring me and challenging me; people who showed me what it could be like when my generation passes the torch to the next generation. Some of you are here tonight.

Each of the people I spoke to pulled a similar thread, the delicate but powerful energy that Ed and Ellen's story perfectly embodies: ***hold the tension within yourself; learn and grow by engaging with people who are not exactly like you.***

Understand you need incremental change to make transformational change. Because incremental wins and incremental losses build momentum, in either direction. And the more that different types of energy coalesce, the bigger the chance for transformative, not single issue, change.

Sad to say, that happens less often among progressives these days, and more often in the **other** "Story of Us." The right-wing ecosystem of Us is

built on a huge range of very different types of players – evangelical churches, PTAs and school councils, gun clubs, isolationists – coalitions built on the heat and urgency of fear, anxiety and anger, yoked together by easily understood messages; not the cooler temperatures of kindness, empathy and patience, aligned by public policy.

The momentum of the reactionary right follows the Ganz recipe perfectly: the story of self becomes the story of us, harnessed to shape the story of now. Heat, not light has propelled more regressive and tribal forces to conjoin in movement.

I'm not saying the answer is "get hotter." But I *am* saying that the battle for our future is here, and we don't just need more soul, we need more soldiers! There's not enough of us to handily win this battle. It's time to get strategic about how we organize more people to come join us.

## **The Story of Now**

This is where we come to the Story of Now.

2023 feels like a moment of pivotal change. But we've been fooled before.

The list of moments of apparent paradigm shifts is long: the collapse of multilateral free trade; the wake of 9/11 and the end of political complacency about western democracy and capitalism; the global financial crisis and global Occupy movements; the rise of authoritarian Me First politics in Trump's MAGA America, Brexit, Russia, China; and a global pandemic that triggered new global supply chains and inflation, as well as a new geopolitics.

We've tried protests. We've tried politics. Nothing has yet delivered the goods – or the good. We need to plan our organizational strategy for change, together.

Without question the world is looking for transformative change, and we have the time-tested recipes, literally the organizing principles that change the world.

If you don't believe in the power of getting organized, if you think that's only for labour unions, check out what leading capitalists have accomplished: Deregulated markets, low taxes, free trade, and monopoly power aren't accidents.

As Karl Polanyi famously quipped: "Laissez-faire was planned."

Markets can't operate without government action. And government action depends on the mix of who's asking for what. Hello, I'm talking to you. What are *you* asking of your elected representatives?

2023 is bringing major headwinds to the progressive agenda, maybe even existential risks to humanity - climate chaos, a new world of unapologetically authoritarian governments, and AI that blurs the line between truth and fiction. There are lots of things to fight *against*.

But we have plenty of tailwinds too - more bargaining power, more people ready for change, more clarity about what's at stake. There are lots of things to fight *for*. And the more we connect, learn from one another, and grow our strategy together, the more we are the ones who shape the future.

It's a pick-your-own-adventure moment: environment, housing, revitalizing politics, human rights, anti-monopoly; it's all future-shaping stuff. Who better to shape your future than you?

For me, I've chosen to go all in on the care economy. It embodies elements of my lifelong fight *against* inequality and *for* becoming the best you/we can be. Plus, it's some kinda big, which makes it a ready-made centre of gravity in change.



What I mean by the care economy is the cradle-to-grave care of our bodies and minds, the combination of two industrial sectors in the system of national accounts: health and social assistance, and education.

The care economy is our social infrastructure, as vital to our ability to “grow the economic pie” as roads and bridges, water and electricity systems. It’s even more vital for creating thriving human beings.

For all the talk of the importance of manufacturing, or mining and oil and gas, you may be surprised to learn that, at 12.6% of GDP, the care economy is a bigger contributor to the economic pie. Its size is rivalled only by the income and expenditure generated by real estate (and that’s not what you want your economic growth to be propelled by, right?).

Yet the care economy is viewed as some kind of economic derivative. It is *not* a derivative, after-the-fact, nice-to-have part of the economy. It’s the foundational ***must-have*** feature of the economy.

And it’s unrivalled in terms of its share of paid work. One in five jobs is in the care economy.

Many, but not all, those jobs are unionized because many, but not all, those jobs are currently in the public sector. That could change.

What *won’t* change is the aging of the population and the shrinking of the share of the working aged population who also need to care for more people too old, too young and too sick to work.

That means we’ll need more caring and more government than we’ve needed in decades, by which I mean more spending *by us, for us*. What we choose to give [or deny] one another has never been more important.

But that doesn’t mean that we will win the battle that, after 40 years, today challenges the “more market, less government” guiding economic nostrum of our lifetimes. Some of our democratically elected governments are already undercutting capacity in public and non-profit care delivery,

setting conditions that favour the for-profits and have the care economy in their crosshairs.

Spoiler alert: The for-profits are not coming because they are interested in providing care. They're not even coming for the public funding, though that sweetens the pot. They're coming for the real estate, and the rents they can extract from us.

We know exactly how to improve material outcomes for the majority of Canadians, both in terms of how we use our paid and unpaid time, and what kind of quality of life we can expect in this country. Gentle reminder: As the 10<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, we can do or be anything we want.

Still, it is possible that enough people are sufficiently complacent in what they have today, sufficiently confident that whatever is going on today will not hurt their tomorrow, that as a society we will simply stand by and watch our lives deteriorate, awash in a sea of money.

That's why I'm focusing on the care economy. It's one of the rare economic spheres that is not currently designed primarily to make a profit. But make no mistake: the care economy is absolutely at risk of becoming just another profit centre for the economy.

The progressive agenda within the care economy is transformational, because it could set the tone for decommodifying other aspects of the basics of life, exactly when everything costs more.

Add to that consumer reality a work reality: we have the opportunity to make every job a good job in the care economy.

Hugh and Pat Armstrong gave us the remarkable slogan, decades ago: the conditions of work are the conditions of care. They were speaking about the long-term care sector, but you could apply that adage to the economy and society at large.

Given its scale, the care economy has the potential to transform the entire job market in much the same way as manufacturing created the backbone of the middle class in the 1950s to 1970s, with the rise of unionization which delivered better pay, benefits and pensions to a growing share of 20 percent of the job market.

The demographic moment hands us, on a silver platter, the chance to create a better world, for workers and non-workers alike. But far from growing the good, current conditions threaten to flip the promise of the moment and grow the bad.

That's the choice folks: a contagion of progressive change, or a contagion of profit-seeking in a sector of human development that doesn't now exclude the extractive philosophy of capitalism, but definitely challenges it.

Yep, just like the river, capitalism is shapeshifting again.

One of the biggest challenges of our economic life and times is at our door, and I'm here for it. Ellen told us there are historic moments in economic history, and this is a historic moment unlike anything we've seen for the last half century.

So is being progressive different now than it was half a century ago? A hundred years ago? My answer: it's utterly the same, and utterly different. Just like the river.

More people want to change things up, and at the same time they are anxious to hang on to things as they are. Maybe you feel a bit that way too. A lot is at stake for a lot of people.

I invite you to hold the tension in yourself, and with those around you.

This is our chance to work with and learn from others, and create new ways to invite more people to demand more ways to become better humans. Let's put a premium on becoming and belonging, not just working and making more money.

That could become the viral epidemic that businesses and governments alike feel is hard to contain: the desire to make our societies better for humanity and all living things.

Together, we can create the new currents of energy in the river of life that could carve out a new course in the landscape of history.

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## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements for preparing this lecture offers a bit of an Academy Award moment for me. So, before the music starts playing, my thanks to those who brought me to this place in my life:

- The people who taught me the complexity and depth and possibilities of what love is. My people. My father, Puzant. My mother, Jiyet. The tribe of Toronto Armenians. My amazing children, Annik, Olivia and Ara. The love of my life, the nameless wonder;
- Economists like Brian Bixley, Ian Macdonald, Morley Gunderson, Frank Reid, Sylvia Ostry, Ian Stewart, Arthur Donner, and Mike McCracken who shaped my early thinking about what economics could be;
- Labour analysts and organizers like Sam Gindin, Hugh Mackenzie, and D'Arcy Martin who exposed me to the reality of marrying theory and praxis, how to value the individual in their entirety to harness the power of the collective;
- My Social Planning Council tribe, who showed me how to build change across a broad spectrum of constituencies. They include my colleagues, child poverty activist pathbreakers Christa Freiler and Laura Johnson; and countless volunteer board and committee members across sectors;
- The National Action Committee on the Status of Women, which taught me what feminism meant, and what it could be;
- The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which gave me the opportunity to launch and advance the file that has most shaped my career as an economist: inequality;

- The Government of Canada, which showed me – through the highest levels of the public service – what it takes to make public policy sausage;
- The care economy collective: Laurell Ritchie, Pat Armstrong and Marjorie Griffin Cohen, fellow travellers for decades, who are now on a remarkable leg of the journey;
- The Atkinson Foundation, for giving me the space to become, and the space where I knew I belonged. Special shoutout to the remarkable Colette Murphy for, well, everything;
- And, finally, the people who helped me organize and deepen my thinking for this lecture: Ed Broadbent, Sam Gindin, Andrew Jackson, Laurell Ritchie, John Clarke, Hussan Syed, Michal Hay, Judy Rebick, Michal Rozworski, Marjorie Griffin Cohen, Bill Rosenberg, Colette Murphy, and Alison Uncles.