Historians of modern western feminist movements usually speak of a first wave feminism and a second wave feminism (Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *What is Feminism? A Reexamination* [1986] and Gisela Kaplan, *Contemporary Western European Feminism* [1992]). Although there is marked variation in the periodization of feminisms in the many western nation state cultures, there is nonetheless general agreement with respect to the periodization of these two larger movements. While the first wave is usually positioned in the period from the 1860's to 1920's, the second wave is positioned in the late 1960's and extends to the present. What both movements have in common is the production of feminist knowledge. However, since western feminist intellectuals had not gained much access to universities and other public institutions during the first wave movement, the production and dissemination of feminist knowledge is much more tied to the second wave movement than it is to the first. This is particularly the case with feminist theory. For in the past three decades, women in the western nation state cultures dramatically increased their access to the public sphere and to centers of knowledge production and dissemination. Thereby they participated in considerable numbers in the re-organization of knowledge production in general, as well as in the production of specifically feminist knowledge. Hence the current accumulation of feminist theory is not separable from women’s unprecedented access to public spheres and institutions.
While there is no doubt that feminist theories emerged from all of the second wave movements in the west, it must also be stressed that U.S. American universities, by accommodating large numbers of feminists, facilitated an extraordinary proliferation of feminist theory in almost all the disciplines and fields of knowledge. The establishment of Women Studies Departments and similar programs in almost all centers of higher learning reflects not only the degree of institutionalization of feminist theory, but also the degree of the normalization of feminist research paradigms in the humanities, social sciences, and other professional fields. Since most non-English writing feminist theorists originally developed their own theories against the background of the authority of British/American/Australian feminist texts, my account of the history of feminist theory, based on the “English Model,” does reflect the more general tendencies in western feminist thought with respect to descriptive, analytical, and normative concepts. Significant departures from the “English model” will be addressed subsequently.

Mainstream western feminist theory was launched by a series of texts. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunich* (1970), Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1969), Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood Is Powerful* [1970] and Juliett Mitchell’s *Women’s Estate* (1971) are among those early texts which constitute the canon of classical feminist theory. Influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s famous dictum that women are not born but made, these texts rapidly accumulated an entire range of descriptive, analytical, and normative concepts which have since become indispensable for serious feminist analysis. These oriented themselves on definitions of women’s emancipation, women’s liberation and
women’s oppression. The family constituted the primary object of analysis. Descriptions of
the structures of everyday life in modernity revealed that the family as an institution enacts
a gendered division of labour, as it normatively relegates most women to the private sphere
and most men to the public sphere. Feminist theorists perspicaciously studied the
extraordinarily unequal consequences for men and women resulting from the
normativities of the public/private distinction. As long as woman’s natural social role
consisted in reproducing the private sphere of family, motherhood, and marriage, women’s
access to the public sphere of work, decision making, law making, knowledge production,
culture production, and politics remained minimal. As individuals and as a group or class,
women did not enjoy equal liberties, parities, and opportunities in the public sphere as
compared to those enjoyed by most men. The democratic ideal of a “good life,” inscribed
into the spirit of most western constitutions, was thus only nominally attainable by
women. De facto, in the context of particular social classes more men, than women,
attained this goal.

The public/private distinction revealed an additional factor. Although society on
the whole promotes its own social reproduction with natality policies, women, more than
men, were expected to take on most of the responsibilities connected with social
reproduction, such as childrearing and attending to family needs. Hence feminist theorists
deciphered the basic paradox underlying women’s condition in modern industrial
societies: although society promotes its reproduction, full participation in the work force
usually diminished a woman’s ability to adequately care for families and children without
substantive sacrifices of her own, particularly since the general structure of daily fulltime
work in the twentieth century is largely modelled on men and not on women. Yet women, and not men, usually become or are expected to become the primary caretakers of their children. On the other hand, women’s dedication to family, motherhood, and marriage usually diminished their ability to remain independent, economically and otherwise, and to pursue meaningful professional choices of their own. (Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution [1977]). And again, since career structures were modelled not on women but on life cycles of middle class men whose responsibilities toward the family typically did not interfere with their careers, educated women who re-entered the job market after their children left home often were considered too old to establish a highprofile career at an age when most educated men had reached the peak of their career. By the same token, women with families and children from the lower middle classes and the working class, who had to work in order to support the family, in larger numbers than men tended to work in part-time positions, which again minimized their chances to advance at their workplace. In short, both in the family and at work, most women were subject to the power and domination of patriarchy.

The analysis of the consequences of the public-private distinction underlying the institution of the family in modern societies revealed a factor that proved most startling for feminists: women’s relegation to the private sphere of family, motherhood, marriage left the relations of knowledge to power and power to knowledge mostly in the hands of public men. And so did women’s participation in the dual labor market of patriarchal capitalism that typically relegated women into secondary labor sectors of low wages, fewer fringe
benefits, and fewer skill development programs. Three major research paradigms emerged to challenge the monopoly of public men in knowledge production, research methods, and methodologies. These tendencies are classifiable as the “objective-deconstructive paradigm,” the “subjective-deconstructive paradigm,” and the “constructive paradigm.” Since all three paradigms evolved simultaneously, many of their conceptual instruments overlap. The “objective-deconstructive” tendency is probably the most persistant, in that it traces the ways in which women historically have been relegated to inferior economic, political, social, cultural, psychological, and sexual status. A victimology of sorts accompanies this research tendency which documents women’s oppression and marginalization in practically all fields of knowledge and all structures of public life. Thus, for instance, feminist theorists in the humanities reflected on the fact that in predominant literature, in the arts, culture, philosophy, and history women were either represented as the inferior sex, or not at all. Among the theorists who produced pioneering work in this area are Kate Millet, Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert, Carolyn Heilbrun, Nancy Miller, Lillian Robinson and many others. Theorists in the social sciences such as in education, psychology, child development, psychoanalysis, sociology, political science, legal studies, economics and other fields were quick to recognize that while most social research in patriarchal society and the social policies to which they gave rise affected not only men but also women, experiences typical of men and boys rather than of women and girls were chosen in experiments and research. Hence men’s life worlds and their cycles rather than the lifeworlds of women were taken to represent the social norm. Among the leading social theorists working in this context are Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Smith,
Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and many others. A third development within the objective-deconstructive paradigm focused on the ways in which the organization and representation of western knowledge constructed its categories on the basis of masculine and feminine metaphors. Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* [1980] or Evelyn Fox Keller’s *Reflections on Gender and Science* [1985] demonstrated how the existence of a dominant massculinist metaphor of strength, superiority, rationality, technology was contingent on either ascribing inferior values to feminine metaphors or on devaluing existing feminine values altogether. An rational world of men stood opposite the irrational worlds of women, children, savages, and psychotics. Power and domination of a male principle naturalized the subordination of the feminine.

The objective-deconstructive paradigm produced an abundance of information on women’s misrepresentation or underrepresentation in western art, culture, knowledge organization, research methods, and knowledge production. As a negative epistemology of sorts, it inquired into the absence or falsification of women’s thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and behaviors in mainstream social and cultural contexts. For some theorists, women’s sexual difference, based either on the biological fact of women’s reproductive capacities or on cultural habits of ascribing innate differences to women based on their specific biological capacities, was accountable for the misrepresentation of women’s. Their sexual difference induced vulnerability, marginality, dependency, as it marked them for discrimination, and oppression in a patriarchal society. (Catharine McKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified. Discourses on Life and Law* [1987]. Theorists with radical and separatist
tendencies, who were particularly enraged by the traffic in women’s body in the area of prostitution, pornography, and slavery, participated in this line of argument. (Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism [1979]; Kathleen Barry, Female Sexual Slavery [1979])

The objective-deconstructive paradigm operated with normative concepts such as liberation, revolution, and equality. While socialist feminist theorists shared these normative concepts, they departed from the universality of the predominant descriptive categories of this paradigm, such as men and women. By insisting on the concept of class and class struggle, as does Zillah Eisenstein in her Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism [1979], socialist feminists attempted to align the normative concepts of equality and liberation with a Marxist interpretation of revolutionary history. These efforts were largely unsuccessful for at least two reasons. For one, a powerful republican liberalist tradition infused most texts of classical feminism with a white middle class individualist ideology which typically separates the political persona from economic class. And secondly, traditional class categories from within the classical Marxist tradition were unable to acknowledge what feminists from minority demanded to address: namely that the concept of class must be analyzed in relation to ethnicity, and race. Paradoxically, the analytical category of class re-entered the feminist debate under the auspices of minority feminist discourses at the very moment in which mainstream feminist discourse had all but forgotten it. For discussions of the intersection between ethnicity, race, and class see Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzadua, eds. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color [1981] and Angela Davis, Women, Race, and Class
If the objective-deconstructive paradigm worked from the premise that women are primarily objects of patriarchal constraint, command, hate, and desire, the subjective-deconstructive paradigm expanded feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and normativities by inquiring into women’s functions as subjects in social and historical processes. In the context of this research paradigm, theorists promoted the insight that women not only participate as subjects in their own oppression and subjugation. They also participate in the subjugation of other women and also of other men. Crucial for the subjective-deconstructive paradigm was a substantive re-evaluation of the notion of power. While the objective-deconstructive paradigm ascribed most power to male subjects, be they patriarchal or capitalist, who were deemed to oppress all women as objects, subscribers to the subjective-deconstructive paradigm developed a more differentiated discussion on the complexity of power relations. Important impulses for a re-evaluation of the notion of power emanated from the highly influential work of the European social historian Michel Foucault. Equally important, however, were impulses derived from the experiences of black feminists, notably from the work of Audre Lorde (Sister Outsider [1984], Barbara Christian (“The Race for Theory,” Cultural Critique [1987]) and Bell Hooks (Ain’t I A Woman. Black women and feminism [1981]. Decisive in this discussion was the notion that “the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house,” as Audre Lorde stated it. Hence theorists analysed the ways in which women participate in the construction of their own femininity and feminine identity by taking recourses to symbolic practices commanded
by a male world. This analysis opened up a series of new dynamic research tendencies. On the one hand, it evolved into a pervasive interdisciplinary discussion of the concept of gender, and sexuality, forcefully engaging a vast array of disciplines such as psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, biology, and medicine in the study of symbolic practices in their relation to power. In this line of argument, the analysis of the constructed nature of femininity logically led to analyses of the constructed nature of masculinity. Simultaneously, and again under the influence of theorists from minority groups, an analysis of the constructed nature of mainstream feminine subjectivity revealed the need for an other or otherness in the construction of one’s identity. Against the background of the work of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Henry Giroux on the nexus of identity, otherness, and oppression feminist theorists analyzed the function of otherness in the political discourses of rulers and ruled, authority and subordination, superiority and inferiority. The internal logic of the subjective-deconstructive paradigm produced a powerful insight which significantly furthered the feminist research paradigm: if women (and men) are active agents in the construction of their own identity, and in the construction of masculinities and feminities, then they may also be able to refuse to participate in those symbolic and cultural constructions that lead to their respective disempowerment. Alternative visions of identity and subjectivity can be designed. Hence the subjective-deconstructive paradigm, more than the objective-deconstructive paradigm, promoted the expansion and consolidation of the constructive paradigm in feminist theory. Its primary mission is not to describe and analyze women’s marginalization. It is to empower women.
In feminist theory, the constructive paradigm has been overall the most productive in many areas of knowledge. It shares with the subjective-deconstructive paradigm the concept of gender, namely that feminity and masculinity are socially constructed categories. While orthodox gender theorists contend that due to the constructedness of gender both men, and women, are substantively unfree and devoid of actual power in our societies, constructive paradigm theorists decidedly maintain a feminist position on the issue of gender by insisting on uneven relations of power between the sexes. While relying on the concept of gender, namely that both men and women are socialized via languages, tastes, symbols, fantasies, values into masculine and feminine beings, feminist theorists also insist that substantive differences existed between the sexes precisely because women inhabit different bodies as compared to those of men, bodies which in turn inhabit different social locations. Insistence on this essential difference is usually called feminist essentialism. While the concept of sexual difference, as developed in the work of Catherine MacKinnon, repudiates the notion of gender as unfeminist, the concept of materiality of the body can logically accommodate both concepts, gender and sexual difference. Hence materiality, coupled with the concept of experience has moved into the forefront of feminist theory. Both concepts have played a decisive role in the constructive paradigm.

In contradistinction to the objective-deconstructive paradigm, which seeks to describe and analyze women’s oppression and marginalization and their lack of power, the constructive paradigm in feminist theory seeks to build structures and norms for women’s empowerment. In the social sciences as well as in the humanities, feminists have developed epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic theories. Foremost are the standpoint theorists such
as Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, and Nancy Hartsock (Feminism and Methodology, ed. Sandra Harding [1987]), who already in the early seventies experimented with the notion of a double consciousness in their theory of knowledge. Against a rich background of theoretical impulses that reach from Max Weber’s notion of meaning production and W.E. Dubois’s notion of double vision to Thomas Kuhn’s ideas on normal science, structures of scientific revolutions, and paradigm formation, feminist social scientists proposed that in contradistinction to men theorists, women theorists can observe their object of research not from one but from two points of view: from the point of view of genderblind normal science, and from the point of view of the gendered experiences of women. Standpoint theory emerged as the most powerful epistemological theory in feminism precisely because it has potential for significant elaboration. Patricia Collins, for instance, speaks in her Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment [1990], of intersections of a triple consciousness, which refers to race, sex, and class. In this constructive tradition, the materiality of experience dialectically engaged with the ideality of social change. Bodies matter because anti-hierarchical values do, just as anti-hierarchical values matter because bodies and their experiences do.

Feminist standpoint epistemology finds a counterpart in a feminist standpoint ethics, pedagogy, childrearing practices, education, historiography, psychoanalysis, literature, and other fields. Significant in this area are the works of Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice [1982], Nancy Chodorow The Reproduction of Mothering [1978], Sara Ruddick Maternal Thinking [1989], Claudia Card Feminist Ethics [1991] Sarah Hoagland Lesbian Ethics [1989], Gerda Lerner The Creation of Feminist Consciousness [1993], Rita
Felski Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change [1989]. What clearly emerges from these studies is a fundamental feminist principle: at the moment, only concepts, tools, methods, and methodologies developed by women, rather than by men, will unveil the creative capacities of women in moral, aesthetic, and epistemological realms. By ascribing specific competences to women this kind of feminist theory moves in dangerous waters: for in modernity, classical mainstream political, legal, and social theory -- from Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel to Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons -- has always insisted on women’s inherent differences as compared to men when legitimating women’s relegation to the private sphere, to marginality, and to submission. Yet feminist standpoint epistemology and morality, supported by feminist theology and legal thought, have emerged as powerful instruments of analysis the profound ramifications of which are not as of yet perviewable. The strength of this kind of theory resides in its search for new concepts and methodologies that can assess new phenomena, rather than relying on conceptual tools of the main theoretical cannons of knowledge theories of genderblind normal science. Since the search for concepts is based on the experiences of women, and since, moreover, experiences of women, rather than men, typically constitute their object of study, genderblind normal science has payed relatively little attention to this tendency in the constructive paradigm.

While standpoint theory plays a most important role as one of the research tendencies in the constructive paradigm, it is ultimately the category of experience which fundamentally defines and unites the various research trends within this paradigm. The notion of experience is also at the center of the most significant feminist social and political
theorists. Nancy Fraser’s Unruly Practices. Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory [1989] is a good example, and so is the work of Joan Scott, Drusilla Cornell, Judith Butler, Sheila Benhabi, Deborah Rhode, and Carol Pateman among many others. The category of experience enables these theorists to focus not simply on redressing the pitfalls of predominant philosophical system with respect to women’s experiences in the structures of everyday life. Above all, the category of experience enables these theorists to focus on the nexus between political philosophy and social practice in a democratic context, where the pursuit of happiness, or the good life, is constitutionally guaranteed for both men and women. Hence the concept of experience embodies both a critique of existing social and political conditions, as well as a normative corrective established along feminist lines. When the notion of critique and normative corrective are added to the utopian variables inscribed in standpoint epistemologies and moralities, experience emerges as a complex category with endurability in and for feminist theory. As feminist theory undergoes the challenges of the backlashes against feminism over the past ten years or so (Christina Hoff Sommers Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women [1994]), it is precisely the notion of experience that has proven to guarantee the continuity and advancement of feminist theory. For in the practices of everyday social and political life still based on unequal relations of power between the genders and unequal access to resources, actual experiences of inequities and disparities are much more likely to enhance the analytical and methodological powers of the concept of experience than to diminish it.
While the English Model in feminist theory was emulated to a large degree by many western feminist theoretical traditions, it should also be pointed out that there are profound variations in the production western feminist theories. Variation in production depends on variation in national cultures in the west with respect to the conditions of the production of feminist theory. A whole range of factors in a given national culture affect the way in which feminists have prioritized and developed their conceptual and analytical tools. These factors include the relationships the various women’s movements entertain with other social movements of a particular nation or the opportunities and constraints inscribed in institutional structures. In Italy and Britain, for instance, feminist theory throughout the second wave movement has traditionally kept relative close ties to the political vocabulary of the left which focuses on terms such as solidarity, social justice, and equality. This proximity to the classical left also affects habits of research. Leading British and Italian feminist theorists (such as Ann Oakley, Sheila Rowbotham, or Rossana Rossanda) tend to measure the validity of their theories against the background of the actual gains and losses women on the whole have made in their respective nation states. The relationship between feminist theory and left tradition is even stronger in Spain, where feminists resisted Franco’s hostile anti-feminist regime until the midseventies. Urgent issues of the left with respect to women such as economic equality, equal political representation and social services for mother and children govern the vocabulary of Spanish feminists. The work of Lidia Falcon may serve as an example. In France, on the other hand, dominant feminist theory reveals its selective affinities with two of the most powerful disciplines in the French educational system, philosophy and history respectively. The work
of Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Badinter can serve as examples. In the United States, feminist theory is not separable from the many theoretical and practical achievements of other social movements, notably the civil rights movement. In addition, the large number of feminists which were accommodated by the U.S. American university over the past 30 years facilitated the extraordinary proliferation of feminist theory in almost all the disciplines and fields of knowledge. In contradistinction, the German university has not been very hospitable to feminists. As a result, the most important feminist theory in Germany emerges not from university settings, but rather from the work of feminist filmmakers, such as Helke Sander or Margarethe von Trotta.

As citizens, workers, students, and consumers, women experience themselves differently in different national cultural contexts. A comparative approach to western feminist theory reveals that experiential differences tied to national cultures and their histories express themselves in many variables such as in elaborations of particular conceptual hegemonies. The dependency of modern Italian intellectuals on the philosophical cultures of Germany and France, for instance, affects the production of feminist theory as well. The most important theorists incorporate French and German thought traditions into their work, as Luisa Muraro’s Irigarayanism and Adriana Cavarero’s Arendtianism demonstrate. And concomittantly, German feminist theorists have been affected by the prestige of Germany’s Frankfurt School Critical Theory in German intellectual culture (Christine Kulke, Rationalitaet und sinnliche Vernunft. Frauen in der patriarchalischen Realitaet [1985]). Inspite of the variability in conceptual
preference, unacknowledged dependencies, and elaborations in the various western cultures, there is nonetheless one variable in the trajectory of western feminist theory that is a constant: feminist theory written in English enjoys a much higher status and prestige than theory written in non-English languages. Since the hegemony of English in a globalizing world is unlikely to decrease, the prestige accorded to feminist theory written in English is also unlikely to decrease as we move into the twenty first century. However, the hegemonic status of English offers as many structures of constraints as it offers opportunities for western white mainstream feminist theory. For the work of feminist theorists from Indian and Asian diasporas as well as from the Pacific, usually published in English, increasingly questions the existing conceptual framework of mainstream white western feminism as it searches for new contemporary feminist tools. The search for new conceptual instruments is not only necessary in order to assess the potential for women’s empowerment in multiethnic, postnational, and transnational communities. The search for new conceptual elements will also revitalize feminist theory on a global level. I would like to cite three examples: Vandana Shiva Staying Alive (1989), who establishes links between feminist and ecological concerns in South East Asia; Chilla Bulbeck, Re-orienting Western Feminisms. Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World [1998], who approaches feminist theory in the spirit of redirecting it for feminist practices in a postcolonial world; and Parminder Bhachu, who examines the liberating potentials in the relations diaspora women establish in the context of their work: Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, Economy and Gender Relations [ ]. As western feminist theorists increasingly live in societies that are engaged in negotiating traditional vocabularies of universality, rights, citizenship,
democracy in response to the impact of migrant populations in traditional nation states, a dialectical encounter with feminist theories from Asian and Pacific regions and from transnational communities can only enable western feminist theorists to participate in meeting present and future social and political challenges. The feminist revolution has a chance to continue to the extent to which western feminist theorists adjust and expand their theories to a globalist reality that increasingly includes relations between differently traditioned groups and communities. Feminist theorists do not transcend these relations.