

## PREFACE

Prochoice/antiabortion struggles represent a cutting edge of American politics today. The virulence of the antifeminist backlash has forced feminists to examine the paradoxical relation between our strengths and weaknesses as a movement. Our challenges to inequality in both domestic and public realms have been taken quite seriously: they provide a central battleground on which recent electoral politics have been organized and fought out, with results for which many feminists were unprepared. Issues of reproductive freedom lie at the heart of the contemporary antifeminist mobilization, as two of this issue's articles point out. What first appeared to be a "single-issue campaign"—antiabortionism—can now be seen as the core of a wide-reaching politics attempting to transform relations of class and race, as well as to defend patriarchal gender assignments. Analyzing the organization, mobilization, ideology, and meaning of recent antifeminist political movements has become a central theme of this issue. Only from such analyses can our strategies of resistance and renewal as a movement be generated. *Feminist Studies* eagerly solicits work that adds to our feminist understanding of antifeminism as it informs our cultural, social, political, and economic lives.

A second theme that *Feminist Studies* hopes to develop in future issues concerns the state of the international women's movement. Here, we publish a cluster of articles presenting and dissecting some currents of French feminism. American feminists have been introduced to some of the work of French theoreticians in a series of past and forthcoming translations and reports in *Signs*; interviews in *Off Our Backs*; the reverberations surrounding the conference, "*The Second Sex*: Thirty Years Later," held in September 1979 at New York University; and in the recent publication of Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's *New French Feminisms*. The sea change required to translate such theory for American audiences is complex. Many of the French debates are couched in the language of textual analysis and psychoanalytic discourse. Their reading requires not only an acquaintance with classic thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, and Freud, but also an introduction to contemporary theorists like Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. As several articles in the Australian feminist journal, *Hecate* (vol. 6, no. 2, 1980) point out with great clarity, the problems surrounding the presentation of French feminism is highly selective; it does not represent the whole range of concerns of the French women's movement, but rather a slice of French intellectual life that is of particular interest to those who reside in academic language and literature departments. Had the fields of history or

economics, for example, been the sites of this analysis of women, the arguments might look quite different from those shaped in the context of literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory.

What is at stake, however, is not only the connection “back” to academic traditions, but also “forward” toward practical activity as well. A group of influential “women of letters” has affirmed the importance of “difference,” focusing on what they see as the special, creative significance of women’s bodily experiences. Charges of essentialism (intrinsic, biological determinism) have been leveled against their writings by other feminist theoreticians. The question of “difference” is central to a struggle to shape not only theory, but the form of the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes). Some of the most important writers on female specificity are associated with the group, *Psychanalyse et politique* [Psychoanalysis and Politics]. *Psych et po* controls immense financial resources in France and throughout Western Europe, and its mass-circulation journals, presses, and bookstores have given it enormous impact. It attempted to copyright the name, “MLF,” and is accused of squelching many voices of opposition from other branches of French women’s activism. Charges of Stalinism have been made against *Psych et po*, and such charges resonate deeply, given the history and current practices of the French Communist Party. The journal, *Questions féministes* (appearing in the United States as *Feminist Issues*), referred to in two of the articles in this issue, has provided one theoretical forum for the opposition. American feminists unaware of the connection between theoretical and activist positions may be caught in what seems, at first reading, to be “merely” an abstract debate, yet it has far-reaching political significance in light of the struggle to gain control of the French feminist movement.

Although its political context is specific to French feminism, the general theoretical questions the debate poses about women’s bodily experiences are directly relevant to American feminism. Some American feminist theorists are similarly engaged in a discussion aimed at the discovery of a contested, specifically female experience. Others warn that the celebration of the specifically feminine is a form of what Ellen Willis has labeled “female chauvinism,” a distorted reflection mirroring the image of women held up to us by our male-dominant culture. Some feminists conceptualize a Euro-American tradition of splitting the mind and body, and then assigning an inferior status to both the body, and to women, who are alleged to inhabit its domain. *Feminist Studies* is pleased to present these articles which increase our knowledge of French feminism, raising significant issues of interest to us all.