PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* offers contributions to major debates within feminist scholarship and activism on the state, ecofeminism, and postmodernism. Each of these topics has called forth crucial but uneasy conversations linking practical and theoretical concerns. We hope these articles will provide "food for thought" for feminists working at many levels.

Unlike their European counterparts, who tend to live in contradictory and often-crumbling social democracies whose parties and policies they quickly identified and evaluated, U.S. feminists have come to their interest in the state relatively late. Although specific debates about protective legislation, affirmative action, and public patriarchy have surfaced throughout second wave feminism, a systematic focus on the benefits and burdens of state policy is still emerging here. Perhaps because the legacy of our work on "the private domain" has been so rich, perhaps because our deconstructions of citizenship as male have been so profound, we have barely begun to query "what do women want?" from the state.

At the level of theory, Wendy Brown challenges the work of scholars like Frances Fox Piven and Barbara Ehrenreich who have advocated the liberatory potential of women's involvement with the welfare state. She argues that in the postmodern era the state, rather than the family, has become the locus of the project of male dominance and cautions that "masculinist state power . . . is something feminists can, paradoxically, both exploit and subvert but only if we deeply comprehend in order to strategically outmaneuver its contemporary ruses."

Articles by Jane Lewis and Gertrude Åström and by Priscilla Ferguson Clement offer detailed case studies of welfare practices and their consequences for women in two very different settings. By historicizing particular states and placing their development in relationship to changing economic environments and gender systems, they offer important grounding for theorizing about the state. Lewis and Åström probe the development of the Swedish model in the late twentieth century—which offers some of the most far-reaching entitlements available to women—to assess its applicability. Current arguments about the policy implications of "difference" versus "equality" as the basis for women's claims on the state take on new complexity in Sweden where the far-reaching laws passed after 1960 based women's entitlements on

their status as citizen/workers (equality) and within that context recognized the salience of difference. Rhetoric, however, may be less important than the existence of a full-employment economy which is absent in the United States and disappearing even in Sweden.

Clement has unearthed a stunning array of data about welfare practices in nineteenth-century Philadelphia which allows her to trace agencies (public and private), who received welfare, how much, and in what forms. She tracks the roots of the welfare state in private philanthropy and the dramatic growth of public aid over the course of the century. Her findings do not fit neatly into a theory of the patriarchal state; neither do they challenge it fundamentally. They do demonstrate the deep imprint of gender and of race throughout the changing configurations of both public and private aid, and the dynamics of relational power.

The work of Bina Agarwal offers a challenge to a related topic in which U.S. feminist activists and theorists have often taken the lead. Agarwal uses the highly regionalized, nuanced experiences of Indian women with environmental degradation to argue for what she calls a "feminist environmentalism" contra ecofeminism, which she finds to be insufficiently conscious of materialist constraints. In providing a highly specific analysis of Indian women's environmental activism, she also makes the case for a new and renewed understanding of the relations of gender to nature. This is an important accomplishment and one which U.S. ecofeminists should surely welcome as part of our ongoing debates.

There is an overlap between Wendy Brown's analysis of the postmodern state and several other essays exploring postmodern themes. Susan Bordo explores the theories which employ the rubric of postmodernism. She reviews three recent feminist scholarly works which engage, critique, and extend the "postmodern turn" in contemporary feminist theory. Terry Gips suggests, through her art, some essential tensions between feminism and the technologies of postmodern life, especially the problem of memory. She finds in technology something analogous to the state – a source of enormous destructive power and/or potential liberatory force. Her emphasis on the importance of memory, and the danger of its erasure, echoes the historical emphasis of work on the state: neither the state nor technology should be seen as a monolith, nor should patriarchy be understood as disconnected from specific cultural and historical contexts.

Susan J. Leonardi and Elizabeth Meese offer us experimental, postmodern narratives. Leonardi's short story presents a monastery as a sensuous and playful community of women – offering the reader the multiple perspectives and contrasting truths of imagination and memory. Elizabeth Meese takes the challenge to form and content yet another step. Inspired by recent moves in feminist, including lesbian feminist, literary criticism, Meese takes up the challenge of both intertextuality and the authority of experience. She reads the love affair of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West not only through *Orlando* and through their correspondence but also through love letters which she herself has written. Whose experience? Whose desire? Whose authority of interpretation? In other words, again and always, "what do women want?"

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for the editors