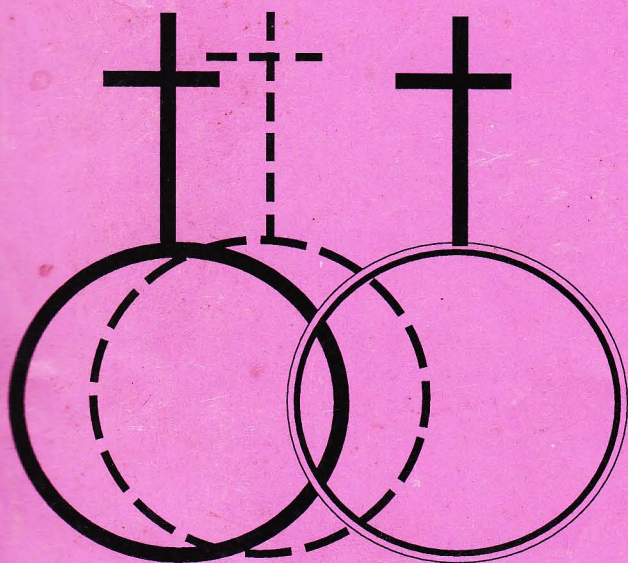


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DEBATES IN THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT



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**Social Scientists' Association
1996**

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The SSA thanks the Gender and Development Fund of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for its support for the Publication of this book.

FEMINISM(S) AND THE POSSIBILITY/ IMPOSSIBILITY OF A SINGLE VOICE

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous attempts to provide a unifying definition of feminism. One variation of the most common definition asserts that feminism is simply the awareness of injustices within male/female relations, and an accompanying commitment to change the situation. Although this is often offered as a minimalist definition designed to achieve maximum consensus, we soon find that the definition is often the starting point for debate. As soon as we attempt to give further content to the "commitment to change the situation," we would find feminists going in divergent directions with vastly different political programs, strategies and priorities. Feminists differ on how broadly or narrowly they would like to define membership in the feminist community, on whether women's history can recover 'feminist' voices from periods where they did not even have the language of feminism.

Through out the history of feminist struggle we have seen a tension between the insistent impulse to provide the all-encompassing feminist manifesto, and the counter impulse that actively resists the idea of a grand theory for all women. The appeal of a grand theory is clear. Such a project would be invaluable in building a unifying perspective from which to understand and critique sexist structures. One might see it as an effort to provide the conceptual machinery to understand the category of gender with the scope and reach of Marxism's treatment of the category of class. Moreover, a united voice would bridge differences between women by providing universally applicable directives to focus and mobilize feminist struggle

across the board. There was a fear that without a unifying political vision, feminism would be vacuous, the notion of a shared oppression would be undermined, the community of women would fragment. Unity was strength.

Nevertheless, it was this claim to trans-historical universality that came under attack from the critics of what we may label as 'grand theory' feminism. Whether it was seen as a question of universalism vs. cultural relativism, or as a different problem concerning processes of inclusion/exclusion, many groups marginalized in the dominant discourse, many women of color around the world, lesbian women, working class women, women who carried a political and theoretical sensitivity to the problems of universalism; different women situated in different social spaces argued that in attempting to offer a universal theory, feminism had re-produced their marginalization. For instance many criticized the dominant strand of American feminism as being primarily white, middle-class, western, liberal, heterosexual - this was not just a comment about the composition of the movement, but an indicator of the interests that the dominant strand privileged. Feminism with a single voice was a feminism that failed to resonate with the reality of lesbian women, women of color, working class women etc. Many questions were asked about who had the authority to speak in the name of women. Could we automatically assume a community of women, a coincidence of interests just by fact of being a woman? Were there not contradictions between women? Many of these feminists argued against not just the possibility, but even the desirability of a single voice. The impulse towards constructing THE feminist theory was critiqued as being the mechanism through which particular interests were pursued through the legitimating rhetoric of universality.

A third emerging strand would agree with the critique of universality, but would also speak to the problematic assumptions behind some versions of the critical strand. If we take the debates over international feminism in illustration, this strand may note that posing the problem as a tension between cultural

relativism and universalism leaves intact assumptions about monolithic cultural cohesion. As a starting point, we would have to unpack the differences that are obscured and the interests that are privileged by framing the question in terms of "West" vs. "East" etc. Positing the naturalness of this divide is not merely the starting assumption of the imperialist project of orientalism, it also actively serves the interests of those (even if they are anti-imperialist) invested in maintaining the gender status quo in the so called "East." For instance, posing the problem of international feminism(s) as a tension between "western" vs. "indigenous" women's movements may reproduce identification of feminism (demands that undermine women's control over their bodies) as imported from the West. A priori labelling of certain feminist demands as "Western" can get dangerously close to denying that feminist demands do not respond to the very concrete material needs of "third-world" women. Moreover, this may itself obscure further contradictions between women by positing so called "Western" feminism, and the feminism of particular "cultures" as internally homogenous, oppositional monoliths.

The question of who speaks for women continues even locally (irrespective of where in the world this 'local' is situated) where urban middle class women may dominate women's organizations. Furthermore, in certain versions of the critique of universalism, there is a positing of a counter tradition that is indigenous. Thus the universalist feminist project is rejected on the grounds that indigenous culture is in some sense feminist. For example, there are those who would cite a glorious past where all was well. This type of reversion to tradition in the name of feminism can run the risk of legitimating practices that are oppressive to women on the grounds that this is 'our' tradition, 'our' voice. Along these lines the third strand comes to a critique of the universalist project not by positing an East/West divide, but by insisting that any community of women (not just internationally) is always constructed rather than a natural given. This stance, while accommodating the impact of imperialism within their analysis, also recognises the need to move beyond a simplis-

tic posting of an East vs West opposition. Thus whether at the international level or the local level, any community of women attempting to unite in struggle is a strategic political coalition rather than a "natural," or culturally cohesive, female community. Rather than fearing fragmentation, it assumes that women are located differently in the social order. It sees feminist theory as itself historically contingent - a response to particular political realities and struggles rather than a specific pragmatic vision that holds currency universally, across a culture etc.

II. DEBATES ON THE GOALS OF FEMINISM

(A) Ideological Debate: Liberal, Socialist and Post-modern Feminism

For the last century, the debate between liberal feminism and socialist feminism has provided the backdrop for most of the critical political theory and activism within the women's movement. Even as it poses a critical internal challenge to liberalism, liberal feminism finds its ideological anchor in this post-enlightenment tradition. These feminists often used the founding principles of liberalism against itself. While celebrating the ideals of liberty and equality, feminists pointed out that this tradition had often denied that liberty and equality to women. Thus while sharing the ideological assumptions of liberalism, feminism has repeatedly challenged the theoretical and practical consistency of the liberal tradition. Whether it was getting women the vote, or campaigns for equal wages, these feminists often spent much energy on making the political and economic structures of the liberal state more inclusive.

Socialist feminism draws from liberal and other feminist traditions just as it draws from socialism. It sees the reformist project of liberal feminism as inadequate to any fundamental

challenge of the status quo. In fact it may see liberal feminism as not only limited, but as being actively co-opted into the current power structure. Liberal feminism's call for inclusion in existing structures legitimates the power relations entrenched in those institutions. Socialist feminism sees sexism not as a set of misguided attitudes, but as a structure that systematically reproduces unjust gender relations. Accordingly, it sees that the feminist challenge involves not reformist tinkering with existing institutions, but an undermining of the material and ideological forces which structure these institutions. Along these lines, socialist feminism sees women's struggles as necessarily tied to class struggle, and in fact other democratic struggles (against ethnic chauvinism for instance) that seek far reaching change on a number of fronts. The call is not just for opening the doors for women's political and economic participation, but for a transformation of political and economic arrangements.

Over the last fifteen or so years, with feminist theorizing participating at the cutting edge of post-modernist thought, there has been a significant shift in the framing of the debates. In its critique of grand theory, in its highlighting of the differences that are masked and constructed by totalizing discourse, post-modernism has offered feminism critical theoretical/political tools. Many post-modernist feminists would even reconceive the feminist project as involving "localized disruptions" rather than sweeping revolutions overthrowing patriarchy (Frug 1992). In this sense there has also been a continued emphasis on who is excluded/included in particular political interventions, a continued de-centering of privileged frames of analysis and debate. There is more on post-modernist feminism that will be included here.

(B) The Equality/Difference Debate - Some references to the Debate on Women and Labour.

The debate between liberal feminism and socialist feminism continues today, sometimes overtly, but more often than not as an undercurrent in other conversations. More recent develop-

ment within feminism have led to a constant remapping of the lines on which ideological differences are drawn. In the 1970s and 1980s this remapping often expressed itself in what many refer to (particularly in the Anglo-American context) as the equality/difference debate on the goals of feminist struggle.

The question of women's labour has been critically important in challenging conventional ideas about labour, just as it has challenged middle class feminist notions of women's concerns. The fundamental feminist insight that deconstructed the identification of labor with paid labour, provoked a critical reconceptualization of labor such that it went beyond the formal work place to include the invisible performance of labour such as housework and even reproduction. In fact for many feminists, this gendered division of labor provides the pivotal frame for gender relations as a whole. Feminist demands in regard to labour issues have also provoked differing views on strategy based on the equality/difference debate. In arguing for maternity leave, creches, etc., whether you should ask for equal or special treatment becomes a recurrent question. The debates asserted its self in a landmark American case over allegations of job discrimination against Sears. A class action suit was filed on behalf of women who were potentially or currently employed in the sales divisions of Sears across the United States. Prosecutors claimed that the employment practices of Sears systematically discriminated against women by assigning them to low-commission sales jobs. Feminists who came in for the prosecution spoke up for equality in hiring arguing that women wanted equality in all spheres of life, and the denial of that equality was the basis for women's subordination. How we define women will necessarily impact on how we think of the goals of feminism. Feminists argued that the basic equality between men and women should be reflected in the law, educational system, legislatures etc. The dominant feminist tradition (grounded in 19th century liberalism) has always presented 'equality' as the goal - thus, much stress has been on asking for equal treatment as men, and success measured by the achieving of equal status with men. Although

they may have differed on the ideological starting point, and may have perceived the equality demand as just one corner stone of a more radical project of sweeping change, even socialist feminists worked from a basic assumption of equality. These feminists shared a commitment to the early struggles for equal franchise, property, legal, education and economic rights.

The main opposing tradition assumes that men and women are essentially different. While liberal feminism sees sexism being manifested in discriminatory treatment that denies equality of opportunity that would have resulted in equal achievement, this tradition (often referred to rather controversially as cultural feminism), identifies sexism as the denial of the feminine. Thus this tradition works from a basic assumption that women are essentially different from men and that our current political system, ethical traditions etc., unfairly privilege the male over the female. Radical feminism, often considered the precursor to cultural feminism, called for separatism on the grounds of insistent male oppression, the impossibility of male/female egalitarian coexistence. Their analysis developed theorizing on 'Patriarchy', which was seen as a sweeping system of gender subordination that exploited sexual difference (women's biological capacity for reproduction etc.). Sexual difference overdetermined social relations.

Cultural Feminism does not necessarily call for separatism, but like Radical Feminism, it posits a male/female divide as reflecting an essential difference, the central determinant of feminist analysis and politics. Some early variants of Cultural Feminism worked from biological determinism, but increasingly this was over-shadowed by an emphasis on some form of psychosocial determinism. The politics/ethics of women are said to arise from women's basic role as reproducer, nurturer, care giver etc. **Carol Gilligan's** work on differences in the psychological development of women would epitomize the 'difference' tradition. **In the context of the Sears case, the work of feminists like Carol Gilligan became critically important. Just as prosecutors called in 'equality' feminists as expert witnesses, Sears called in the**

'cultural feminists.' The Sears defence argued that the monopoly on high commission sales jobs by male employees reflected the employment preferences of women rather than the employment practices of Sears. The argument was that women, being women, did not like (and perhaps were not capable of) the aggressive sales strategies required of the high commission jobs. Thus it was not that Sears discriminated, but rather the job requirements for the high commission jobs made women less qualified, and in fact by self selection, made women less interested in pursuing those jobs.

III. DEBATES ON THE CATEGORIES OF FEMINISM

(A) The Sex/Gender Distinction

Much debate has arisen even in terms of how we conceptualize the primary categories around which feminism organizes - male and female. Thus there is a history of discussion about whether sex or gender is the correct reference point in speaking of male/female power relations. Feminist social theorists problematized early feminist use of sex as the working category. The argument was that such use accepted male/female role differentiation as a given, without rigorous analysis of the implications of such use. In critique they spoke of a sex vs. gender distinction, where they distinguished between that which was biological and that which was socially constructed. How we conceptualized the production, maintenance and reproduction of asymmetric relations between men and women, and even our understanding of the defining characteristics of men and women, was said to turn on whether we could explain and understand the question in terms of nature or nurture.

Although many feminists still employ the sex/gender distinction, others (some times called social constructionists) would not use the dichotomized frame. The opposition between sex (that is a biological given) and gender (that is socially constructed) is said to be based on the untenable assumption that

we can identify sex-based differences, 'female-ness,' a 'male-ness,' that is prior to social experience. In this sense the sex/gender distinction is not just artificial, but even incoherent; it is yet another incarnation of unproblematic use of "natural" or "biological." These invocations are profoundly political moves. Even the categories with which we codify biology, the meanings we attach to 'biological,' can be understood only in terms of their particular genealogy.

(B) Essentialism and its Critics: Some References to the Debate on Motherhood and Ecofeminism

Much contemporary feminist debate can be understood in terms of this basic problem of how we conceptualize 'women'. The essentialism debate clearly overlaps with the equality/difference debate which we discussed under the 'Goals of Feminism.' Here the debate has been framed around competing conceptions of how we understand the central category, in fact the *raison d'être*, of feminist struggle. While acknowledging that the essentialism debate alone cannot invoke the rich spectrum of feminist criticism, much of the feminist debate in the 1980s involved theoretical work that took essentialized conceptions of 'woman' as their central reference point. To some extent this debate on essentialism can be seen as descendent from the sex/gender debate that reigned before. Advocates would argue that some essentialized conception of what it means to be a woman, is what gives feminist struggle its strength, and the entire feminist project, its coherence. Critics argue that an essentialist construct of 'woman,' is untenable as a descriptive project, and its inevitable exclusionary effect would make it undesirable as a normative model.

Motherhood and Ecofeminism

In exploring this argument, we can take feminist debate on motherhood as an illustrative discussion. Motherhood has been one of the most divisive issues in feminist debate. To some motherhood is the foundation point for feminism; this reproductive capacity is the central reference point for women's identity as women. Birth and mothering are celebrated as enormously empowering, even heroic, experiences. It is what makes women central to society. Women, by virtue of being mothers, sustain and continue the critically important role of nurturer in society at large. Mothering is an expression of dignity, an expression of women's strength. In some sense this can be represented by the Gandhian ideal of woman as the epitome of self-sacrifice: strong and long suffering. The nurturer role is also invoked by many women organizing for peace and human rights. In Argentina and Sri Lanka groups like the Mother's Front argued against militarization on the grounds of an ethics of care. Motherhood was said to give these women (often mothers of disappeared men) a highly legitimating inroad for political intervention. The celebration of motherhood informs feminist positions on other issues too. For instance, in the context of debates about surrogacy some feminists argue against womb renting on the grounds that this exploits and devalues women as mothers. This is sacrosanct.

Ecofeminists invoke the link with mothering to argue that women's mothering roles as creators/nurturers, give them a special bond with 'mother earth.' It is argued that women are closer to the earth, that women have a better, perhaps even spiritual, understanding of our co-dependence with the earth. In fact women nurture nature. Arguments for placing political power in the hands of women are often grounded in this claim that women are responsible actors. Here again they are the protectors, the care-givers.

The critics of essentialism see this as bio-determinism with a feminist twist - a twist that fails to save it from the perils of determinism. Identification of woman with mother, offers

motherhood as a normative ideal that urges that women conform to the prescribed model. It excludes and disempowers women who are not mothers. The prescriptive model of some variants of pro-motherhood feminism may also hint at sanctions for women who do not conform ... the women who do not want children, the women who may not be in a position to have children (this may involve lesbian women, poor women, infertile women), surrogate mothers who sell their babies, women who abort etc. Like all essentialist positions this identification of woman with mothering reinforces sexist dichotomies between men and women, only now it reverses the evaluation of this identifications. For instance, where sexists may link women and mothering to disqualify women from positions of responsibility, these feminists argue that the link offers women the critical qualification for such positions. Critics of essentialism argue in turn that it is not merely the valuation of the link, but even the positing of the link that offers the basic problem. In taking the link between women and mothering as a biological given, we fail to investigate the complex processes of social construction that attach meaning to 'woman', 'mothering' etc.

In responding to ecofeminism, it is suggested moreover, that if ecofeminism argues that women are in the best position to take care of nature, then we may be allowing men an 'out' in terms of neglecting their ecological responsibilities. Like the Gandhian ideal of the self-sacrificing woman, this may serve to legitimate a division of labor that disenfranchises women by celebrating that disenfranchisement. Further, ecofeminism is criticized on the grounds that a feminism that is grounded in a back to nature spiritualism, may also involve reactionary (or at least kneejerk) positions on other issues, such as industrialization. It also plays into many of the traditional dichotomies that many feminists have attempted to challenge and problematize - most specifically, the nature/culture frame that links women to nature, and men to culture. In addition of course, peace groups such as the Mother's Front, and Ecofeminist groups contribute to reinforcing the link between women and mothering. This also serves to channel

motherhood as the essential avenue for women's political engagement. In this sense critics see these groups as not only politically complicit in the repression institutionalized in the family, but as also involved in the politically dangerous mission of legitimating women only as mothers. Motherhood is further entrenched as the sacred cow that is beyond challenge and critique. The romanticization of motherhood is key to the ideology of compulsory motherhood. This is alienating, and even destructive to women who seek to make political interventions that are not contingent on (and perhaps even directly resistant to) traditional familial structures. Mother's groups may be coopted against struggles directed at challenging the institution of the family, its role in the regulation of sexuality, its role in the capitalist economy etc. In the surrogacy debate for instance, if we argue against money for babies on the grounds that this devalues motherhood, may we not actually have the opposite effect by continuing to reinforce the fact that women's work goes unpaid, is of no value.

IV. DEBATES ON THE STRATEGIES AND TACTICS OF FEMINISM

(A) Separation or Assimilation? Feminist Struggles in Relation to Other Social Movements: Some References to the Debate on the Uniform Civil Code

The essentialism debate has repercussions not simply in terms of the broad goals of the women's movement, but also in the context of more immediate political engagement. The question of how we define a feminist politics comes up both, in negotiating differences when interacting with other progressive movements, and also within the feminist camp where we have to negotiate intra-feminist differences.

How feminist groups should conceptualize the role/position of the women's movements viz-a-viz other movements (socialism, human rights struggle, nationalism etc., etc.,) has raised repeated controversy. This debate is fuelled by deeper theoretical and empirical questions in regard to how we situate gendered power relations in relation to broader social relations - i.e. the extent to which gender impacts on class, nationalism etc., vs. the extent to which gender is itself determined by these other structures.

While feminists see gender as an important category, some would privilege some other social base, such as class or race, as the macro-determinant that structured the boundaries within which gender intervenes. Or, alternatively, some may see the legitimacy of feminist disquiet as being derivative from "broader" social goals of national self-determination, humanism, human rights etc. Accordingly, these feminists may extend this to the question of strategy - urging that feminist groups organize and act under the framework or umbrella of socialism, human rights etc. For example in the context of academia, they may push for a gender component in all subjects, rather than a separate women's studies program. Moreover, when there is a potential conflict between the feminist project and a movement such as nationalism, some would urge that feminism should concede to nationalism on the theory that the long term goals of feminism are allied with the achievement of national self-determination. The question of separation or assimilation has often come to the fore when highly divisive struggles along other axes are also in a state of heightened tension. The negotiation of feminist concerns has, as always, to be extremely sensitive to other related democratic goals. For instance, in India, where the call for a uniform civil code is often perceived as a pro-Hindu/anti-Muslim/anti-minority effort, the response of many feminists has been to work within the structures of particular ethnic communities rather than assert a broader feminist movement that is not tied to ethnic identity.

An alternative view is presented by those who privilege gender as the central determinant of social relations. In the context of Uniform Civil Code debate mentioned earlier, these feminists would assert that the bond of womanhood would be seen to override and overdetermine the divisions of religion, class, race, nationality etc. Moreover, efforts to tie in feminism with other parallel agendas may be seen as weakening the feminist project. The strongest version of this perspective may work from essentialist/foundationist theories of gender relations. Sex or gender would define the central contradiction in social life. There may be fear that women's concerns will be marginalized unless pursued singlemindedly. These feminists may call for separation rather than assimilation; independent feminist agendas rather than coalitions.

A third strand may not privilege any particular category, a priori, as the central determinant, but may still call for a feminist movement that does not operate under the shadow of socialist movements, human rights struggles etc. How feminist projects should relate to other social movements may be contingent on the particular conditions of struggle. Thus in some instances they may call for focussed attention for gender concerns (for example they may argue that women's studies programs should be distinct if issues of gender analysis are not to be marginalized in the study of other subjects) while also arguing against feminist action that does not work towards other progressive social goals (for example in political organizing, they may argue for coalition politics). In intervening in the Uniform Civil Code debate, these feminist may see it as critical that we simultaneously assert a feminist and an anti-majoritarian perspective. Thus while resisting the pull of Hindu chauvinism, feminist groups would have to be vigilant to deconstruct the gendered interests in what is presented as a pro-minority perspective. Thus while insisting that women are not homogenous (Hindu women and Muslim women may have differing interests), they would also insist that ethnic communities are not homogenous (Muslim men and Muslim women may have differing interests).

(B) Protection for Regulation? - Interaction with the State: Some references to the Debate on Pornography.

Feminist movements have had a troubled history in interaction with the state. The tensions that inhere in the state's interaction with women's lives, are reflected in competing perceptions of the role of the state in feminist struggle. Struggles surrounding sexuality are not only critically important in deciding the conditions of women's lives, the debates surrounding these issues are also quite telling about the lines of division within feminism.

For the most part debates on the state do not involve competing theoretical frameworks on women and the state as such. Rather, the debates come up in various moments of political engagement where more general theoretical commitments, and particular political readings, inform positions taken in different contexts. Most liberal feminists for instance, would be less suspicious of the state, more willing to direct political action at getting the state to protect and pursue the interests of women. Thus, for the most part, these feminists see that women gain security in state regulated institutions such as marriage and divorce, protective measures such as rape laws, police regulations such as mandatory arrest in cases of domestic violence, etc. Sexuality has proven one of the most controversial subjects (even among liberal feminists) in this call for state intervention. Many have called on state regulation of the public expression (on what we may loosely term sex related matters) that is harmful or demeaning to women - for instance, there has been continued feminist agitation for legislative measures such as anti-pornography laws (perhaps even the criminalization of prostitution). The argument here is that pornography is akin to hate speech, or perhaps even indirect physical assault. The objectification of women, the frequent glorification of sexual violence against women, all contribute to concrete exploitation and violence against women in social life more broadly. Moreover, the women

who sell their bodies for porn movies, prostitution etc., are seen as victims, forced into exploitative situations by financial or other constraints. State censorship of porn magazines etc., is seen to make a powerful social statement against sexual exploitation more broadly, but it hardly provides concrete protection for women whose sexuality is exploited in the production of pornographic material.

Feminists who are more suspicious of institutions such as the legislature, the courts, the bureaucracy etc., see state intervention as regulatory rather than protective. The state is seen as institutionally biased towards maintaining and reproducing the status quo. Many of these feminists are profoundly suspicious, for instance, of proposals for state censorship of porn on the grounds that the state will not just criminalize material that is misogynist, but it will also regulate sexuality, curb artistic expression, institutionalize moralistic norms, etc. Belief in benevolent uses of the state is seen as an expression of naivete and/or a legitimization of current political arrangements. They anticipate that the regulation of sexuality in the name of attacking sexist/misogynist pornography etc., will only serve to further regulate and monitor women's sexuality.

A third perspective refuses to fetishize absolutist theories about the state. Instead it would see the state as itself a site of gendered struggle. Accordingly the state is seen as often simultaneously being a regulator, sanction enforcer, protector, rights insurer... etc. This perspective refuses a static picture of the state's interaction with women's struggles. Thus they may call for state intervention in cases where women may be particularly vulnerable, or where the regulatory impact of state institutions can be minimized. The interaction is complex and contradictory; it is always a contested site rather than an absolute good or bad. Thus support or opposition to state intervention is always contingent on the particular political/economic realities. Here again there is refusal of theorizing that is universal and ahistorical.

V. CONCLUSION

It is critical to note, following Teresa de Lauretis, that although there may be differences within feminism, there is an essential difference between a feminist and non-feminist perspective. As the debates show however, there are many feminisms. Feminism involves a broad, richly heterogeneous social movement - not static and bounded, but fluid and vibrant with shifting constituencies, shifting alliances; rather than having a catalogue of objectives, the movement is often working towards multiple goals. Women are located differently in the social order. In celebrating heterogeneity, we continue to avoid romanticizing difference in itself, in recognition that there are high material and ideological stakes implicated in these differences (i.e. they are not neutral). However, instead of denying and suppressing difference, we call for open acknowledgement and negotiation of these struggles.

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 Feminist Review (UK)
 Feminist Studies/Critical Studies (USA)
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