

# Introduction: Feminist State Theory

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This is an interesting historical moment to reflect on feminist state theory. Both the response to the global financial meltdown and the widely celebrated U.S. presidential election signal a faith in the role and promise of state-based politics. Yet it is also true that currents of recent scholarship in a variety of settings have decentered the state. Political theorists of violence, law, and biopolitics have expanded the concept of sovereignty to address distinctly non-state-based contexts, while transnational feminist studies of citizenship have critically dismantled the logic of state sovereignty. The field of development studies has elaborated the need to broaden notions of security beyond military understandings to include the fulfillment of basic needs, and feminist analyses of violence against women have creatively recast our understanding of security. Feminist scholars have also scrutinized the internally contradictory and disciplinary apparatuses of welfare policies. Across various regions, feminists are contesting both the paring down of the state's welfare responsibilities and the intensification of security functions in post-9/11 geopolitical alliances. When taken together, this historical conjuncture and these various critiques of sovereignty, security, and welfare call for more complex modes of engagement with states.

Within feminist theory, states occupy a vexed space. Whereas states have often supported feminist goals, states are also the locus of many of the problems that occupy feminists, such as militarism, moral regulation, and the cheapening of women's labor. This special section of the journal explores this central, and old, tension within feminist state theory, offering a perspective that foregrounds geographic location. This emphasis on location emerges from a philosophical suspicion of the universalizing gestures of state theory. Despite the feminist normative opposition to views from nowhere in particular that purport to be relevant everywhere, feminist state theory has staged its key debates with little specification of state contexts. Geographic coordinates and national histories remain largely undescribed in classics within the field of feminist state theory.<sup>1</sup> What do we mean when we speak of "the state," and how does location inflect our understandings? The articles in this section presume that feminists in different locations vary in their relationship to states and that these differences potentially affect the orientation of their theoretical scholarship on the state.

I express enormous gratitude to Alyson Daly and Nael Bhanji, graduate students in the Women and Gender Studies Institute, University of Toronto, for their spirited and efficient contributions to this special section. Not only did they help plan and manage with aplomb the 2009 "Interdisciplinarity in Feminist State Theory" symposium, from which these articles originated, but they also shared their reflections on the conference in careful detail and gracefully carried out the thankless tasks of adjusting submissions to conform to the journal's style and chas-

ing down full citations. I would also like to acknowledge the funding support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, International Opportunities Fund, and the Worldwide Universities Network.

1. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1988); Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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An emphasis on location does not imply a neglect of common ideological and discursive shifts in how states are approached. Neoliberal globalization and the heightened militarized security objectives post-9/11 have led to cross-national patterns of questioning the role of states in markets and to foregrounding the protective functions of states. The contributions to this special section emerged from conversations and presentations conducted at an international symposium on interdisciplinary approaches to feminist state theory held at the University of Toronto on 6–7 March 2009. This symposium emphasized that, unlike more disciplined and conventional versions of state theory dominated by political science and legal studies, feminist state theories draw on other domains such as literary studies, anthropology, queer theory, development studies, history, and sociology.<sup>2</sup> This special section reflects this diversity. Two of the contributors, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Youme Park, are literary theorists who have records of writing about states and imperialism. Hagar Kotef, working in the field of political philosophy, has written elsewhere about urgent issues such as Israel's occupation. Margaret Little is an academic in political studies and women's studies and an antipoverty activist, while Lynne Marks is a historian interested in issues related to gender history and the social history of religion. Gita Sen is a professor of public policy and a founding member of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, or DAWN, an enduring example of a cross-border network of activists and scholars in the global South.

Each contribution charts a path for innovative feminist engagements with states, steering clear of rigid presupposed teleologies—whether it is the state as a liberating force or as a coercive and co-opting force. Sunder Rajan and Sen argue strongly against ideological purism, articulating modes of engagement that are wary of the dangers of governance feminism while also

being attentive to the redistributive potentialities of state power. A respect for location informs this view—not all feminists have the luxury of rejecting state-oriented politics. Little's article opposes unitary notions of the state, pointing to important subnational regional differences in the case of Canada.

Many of the contributions innovatively re-narrate the stock female figures found in literature about women and war—mourners of those killed by states and bearers of state-inflicted shames, such as comfort women. They also consider newer figures—Palestinian women giving birth at checkpoints and civilian women who are themselves killed by states. Sunder Rajan's article sharply delineates the political deficiencies of the mourning figure as the locus of feminist opposition to the state and argues instead for a more robust agonistic approach to state politics that accounts for a variety of female subjects and political outcomes. Park criticizes the use of "shame" as the framing device for understanding the history of comfort women, calling rather for an emphasis on injury and its attendant redressals. Kotef observes that the targeting of women and children in Gaza in 2008–9 signaled a shift in the moral economies governing security. The gendered formulation of women's role in war and peacemaking is being reconfigured as states such as Israel and Sri Lanka target civilians with impunity.

The goal of this special section, then, is to explore how the variations in national location and disciplinary compulsions lead to innovative forms of feminist state theory. The articles refer to a range of states—agents of neoliberalism, welfare states, developmentalist states, authoritarian states, aspiring nascent states, and rapidly industrialized states. They also feature different disciplinary locations that reflect varying degrees of proximity to the state. Given that research in the social sciences has historically received much more state support than that in

2. See Pateman, *Sexual Contract*; Brown, *States of Injury*; MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*; as well as readers in feminist state theory published by prestigious presses, such as Anne Phillips, ed., *Feminism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Recent works on governance repeat this problem of a focus on literature in political science or international relations. See, for instance, Shirin M. Rai and Georgina Waylen, *Global Governance: Feminist Per-*

*spectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For examples of feminist theorizing of the state outside these conventional disciplines, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

the humanities, it is particularly telling that the more critical writing about states in this section is by scholars in the latter area. There is also much to learn from the sustained feminist questioning of the boundaries between experts and activists, as the contributions of those in the social sciences demonstrate. S