Women's Political and Social Thought

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Preface

This anthology is intended as an initial contribution to fill the gap in availability of source texts by women political theorists. The collection is designed for classroom use in courses in intellectual history, political theory, and women's studies, but we hope it may also be of use to scholars in many disciplines and of interest to a broad range of readers.

The collection developed out of a National Endowment for the Humanities Institute for college and university faculty held at the University of Cincinnati in the summer of 1991, entitled "Re-reading Intellectual History: Integrating Women's Social and Political Thought into the Undergraduate Curriculum." The Institute originated from our experience that courses in intellectual history and social and political theory included few works by women, that feminist scholarship in those two areas was not devoted primarily to discussions of women's works, and that even women's studies courses often neglected women as intellectuals or thinkers across a broad range of viewpoints. Thus, we conducted an institute for faculty from across the United States and beyond, focusing on selected political writings by women and discussing how they fit into traditional intellectual history and political theory courses, as well as into women's studies classes. In our efforts to locate appropriate works (both in our teaching and for the Institute), we had the frustrating experience of finding the great majority of works of even the most prominent women thinkers out of print or not readily available for classroom use. Hence, we felt that an anthology of such writings was urgently needed.

The coeditors came to these interests from differing but related intellectual backgrounds and interests. Berenice A. Carroll has taught courses in political thought including ancient, medieval, and modern western theory, as well as socialist, feminist, and pacifist theory. She began teaching courses and lecturing on women's political and social thought in 1974. Her interest in this area dates back to her early reassessment of the work of Mary Beard (1972) and of the political thought of Virginia Woolf (1978). Her study "The Politics of 'Originality': Women and the Class System of the Intellect" appeared in the *Journal of Women's History* in the fall of 1990. Hilda L. Smith came to the project from her work in women's intellectual history, especially the history of feminist ideas and women's writings, both feminist and more broadly, in seventeenth-century England. During the early 1970s when Smith was completing her study of seventeenth-century English feminists, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*, social history dominated the interests of those focusing on the history of women. Thus the small attention often paid to women's writings while they were alive, as well as the resistance of both traditional intellectual historians and historians of women to exhibit interest after their death, has been an important motivation behind her interest in editing this collection.

In recent years, there has been a marked growth of interest in the history of women's contributions to science and philosophy, and a growing number of specialized studies relating to women in social and political theory. But the need for a collection presenting selected writings from a broad range of theorists across
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boundaries of time, geography, discipline, and ideology remains undiminished.

It may be well to emphasize that this is not an anthology of feminist theory. While many of the writers have been claimed as feminists or feminist precursors, and many of the writings included are explicitly feminist, many are not, and the varieties of “feminism” expressed have been open to vigorous challenge from contemporary feminist and womanist perspectives.

We have reached far back in time but have excluded (with one exception) selections from the second half of the twentieth century. We have chosen a varied selection of writings, diverse in form and content, by well-known and little-known writers. In general, we have omitted writings by the best-known contemporary political theorists, such as Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as by contemporary feminist theorists, mainly on the ground that their works are more readily available and more often studied today than those we have selected. For the same reasons, we have sometimes omitted the best-known writings of a given theorist, so as to bring to attention and make available other of her works. Thus, for example, we excluded here Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) in favor of her earlier and more neglected Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790), in which she had already signaled some of the central arguments of the later work. We have also chosen to provide relatively long selections. This offers a better sense of the work of the writer but limits us sharply in the number of authors we are able to include.

We are conscious that our selections are biased by our own training, knowledge, standpoints, and interests, as well as by the limitations of space, and that we omit hundreds, indeed thousands, of brilliant and influential theorists who deserve to be better known. Nevertheless, we have sought to convey in these selections some sense of the broad range of women’s political and social thought across time, geographic area, class, race, culture, ideology, and genre. We offer this collection in hopes that the writings included will prove useful, illuminating, provocative, and delightful to others, as they have to us.