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Title

The Feminist Debate Over the History of the U.S. Welfare State Theda Skocpol. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge, Mass.:The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1hm52168>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 14(0)

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Publication Date

1994

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The Feminist Debate Over the History of the U.S. Welfare State

THEDA SKOCPOL. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992.

THEDA SKOCPOL's recent book, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, has generated a great deal of attention and controversy both as an instant classic in its field and a problematic work. In a recent exchange in the journal *Contention*, Theda Skocpol and Linda Gordon, both distinguished scholars in the field, debate their relative positions on "gender, state, and society" in the formulation of early twentieth century social welfare policy in the United States. Considering that many prominent reviewers also have commented extensively on this book, what can a mere graduate student add to the discussion?¹ I venture forward with such a perspective in the hope that one who is less vested in academic expectations and rivalries, yet has been greatly influenced and impressed by the work of both Skocpol and Gordon, can help evaluate the relative merits of their positions. Thus this essay will present a brief summary of the book, analyze its contribution to the field, and try to understand just what all the fuss is about, considering that both Skocpol and Gordon agree on many fundamental points.

Skocpol has attempted an extremely ambitious set of tasks in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*: she moves the origins of the debates over welfare policy back many decades, from the New Deal to the Civil War; she analyzes the failure of programs proposed for male workers during the Progressive period; and she traces the limited success of programs designed to aid women and children to widespread and politically unconventional female organizational activism. Skocpol synthesizes a wide body of work developed by many historians, particularly those who study women and gender issues. What is novel, and controversial, about her interpretation is the assertion that the United States, rather than being laggard in establishing social-democratic welfare programs, actually antedated similar European policy initiatives by establishing a "precocious" system of military pensions for Civil War veterans based on cross-class, cross-racial entitlements (earned benefits).

In developing this thesis, she draws upon the work of Stephen Skowronek and others, who have analyzed the peculiar development of American political and administrative structures into a "state of courts and parties" (Skowronek's term). In this analysis, extensive partisan patronage systems characteristic of the late nineteenth-century political climate precluded class-based identifica-

tion and thus demands for the types of programmatic incentives designed to win workers' loyalties that were common in Europe. In addition, several European countries also had strong government bureaucratic traditions that promised to administer benefits efficiently, structures which were largely absent in the United States at this time.² Skocpol observes that Civil War pensions quickly became embroiled in political rewards systems and the perceived taint of corruption compromised subsequent support for new social welfare proposals. Furthermore, she elaborates upon her own earlier development of a state-centered model, which emphasizes the extent to which political and state structures and officials influence, and are in turn influenced by groups with particular social policy goals. In the new work, she includes the reform efforts of distinctly non-governmental groups (particularly those of women in this case), and then attempts to evaluate the "fit" between their goals and the political opportunities available within the state at any given point.

Skocpol explores this model through three different phases of social welfare policy debate in the United States from 1870 to the late 1920s: the massive and constantly-expanded system of pensions granted to Northern Civil War veterans; generally unsuccessful efforts to institute largely contributory old age pensions, disability insurance, and unemployment benefits for male workers; and the passage of a variety of primarily state-level programs such as sex-based labor legislation, mothers' pensions, and maternal and child health services aimed to aid present or future mothers. Disenfranchised and excluded from the political system, women developed alternative strategies, based largely in voluntary organizations, that focused on dealing with social problems, primarily those affecting mothers and children. (Paula Baker's influence is obvious here).³ These "maternalist" strategies, in Skocpol's view, were proposed by women conscious of their own roles as mothers and "domestic housekeepers" in an extended community context to ameliorate conditions that interfered with the ability of all women to fulfill their maternal roles.

By contrast, the Progressive reaction against forms of institutionalized favoritism and concomitant lack of strong administrative agencies, combined with intransigent judicial defense of "freedom of contract," defeated efforts by primarily male reformers, including trade unionists on the state and local levels, to extend these benefits to the male "army of labor." The Civil War pension program worked because it "fit" well with contemporaneous political systems and attitudes, but it had negative consequences for subsequent proposals for male workers. Maternalist strategies adopted by reformers, including massive numbers of women organized in broadly-based organizations, helped circumvent those limitations—at least until internal conflict and an increasingly conserva-

tive political climate evident by the 1920s stopped the momentum. As an example of women's political success, 40 states passed measures to aid indigent unmarried mothers by 1920.⁴

Efforts to protect women workers, based on their identity as present and future mothers, were less successful and more controversial, however, partly because of conflicts which Skocpol's argument tends to obscure. One of the basic problems is an exclusive and celebratory focus on "maternalism." Skocpol is not the first to observe that legions of activist women were instrumental in the passage and implementation of "maternalist" policies in the early years of the twentieth century. The word "feminism" rarely appears in this book. There are no critiques of family relations under industrial capitalism. Thus Skocpol must discount women's alternative motivations for reform, such as professionalization, racist/nativist sentiment, or efforts to improve conditions for men as well as women. The current debate over the term "maternalism" is a vigorous one. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel have recently problematized the concept in the introduction to their comparative study of such policies, where its broad applicability as an organizing concept makes more sense.⁵ As a result of these omissions and her sentimental naturalization of motherhood as a positive universal condition of women, Skocpol rejects a wide variety of possible motivations and is compelled to ignore or diminish much of the recent scholarly work on this topic. Class and race are reduced to epiphenomena in this scheme in favor of a monolithic approach to gender because for Skocpol the real significance resides in the political processes and ideas that mobilize constituencies and create legislation.

For all her emphasis on what she apparently wants to characterize as average women filled with mother love, Skocpol rarely gets beyond the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Congress of Mothers (later the PTA), and the National Consumers League, all organizations that relied on national administrators and lobbyists to achieve their goals. Surprisingly, since her model does emphasize the importance of political systems and bureaucrats, Skocpol has little use for reformers and female social welfare professionals. In fact, she attributes considerable responsibility for the failure to achieve measures designed to assist male workers (other than workmen's compensation, which benefitted industry) to the inability of male reformers to abandon their narrow professional focus, extend their efforts to the grassroots level, and form coalitions with labor organizations.

Similarly, she argues that Robyn Muncy's recent book on the Children's Bureau "greatly overestimates the capacity of a handful of female reformist professionals to 'construct' and 'direct' what she calls 'subordinate' networks of

women's groups....It was a two-way street, even in the centrally coordinated campaigns for the Children's Bureau and Sheppard-Towner.⁶ Skocpol is suitably impressed by the way Julia Lathrop, the first head of the Children's Bureau, recruited local groups of women to help implement the programs of the bureau. Citing her own work on the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Skocpol states that these women consciously emulated the organizational strategy of that agency, an "unusually well-articulated part of the otherwise weak U.S. federal administration of the early twentieth century," which allowed a small group of bureaucrats to reach down "into networks of private as well as public organizations in the states and localities" to "extend the organizational reach of the Bureau" and "provide a means to lobby Congress effectively for increased appropriations."⁷ In fact, however, Muncy repeatedly describes the recognized necessity for interactive relationships between the few professional women at the Children's Bureau and their constituent networks. Muncy describes how organized clubwomen were conspicuously involved in carrying out the programs of the Children's Bureau, especially during implementation of the Sheppard-Towner Act. It was a brilliant strategy that combined the strengths of centralized administration and grass roots activism, extending and institutionalizing the energy of women's reform networks.

Why is Skocpol so critical of professionalized female reformers? Is it because she is avoiding the possibility that something other than "maternalism," social scientific rationales and professional considerations in this case, could motivate and sustain female reform efforts? Is she trying to recover and defend the organizational vigor and independent agency of average middle-class women? Skocpol's account of the eventual termination of the provisions of the Sheppard-Towner Act is extremely critical of the women leaders who "found it easier to strike a back-room compromise than to turn to their member organizations for political support." She suggests that because they underestimated "women's political prowess" they gave in "too quickly...further undercutting American women's distinctive political capacities in the process."⁸ Given that she acknowledges the inauspicious conservative political climate of the 1920s, and the fact that the legislation was not guaranteed by cross-class entitlement status, does Skocpol really mean to imply that grassroots activism was somehow frustrated by the national leadership? Even Paula Baker, to whom Skocpol signals her indebtedness, is quite pessimistic about the survival of women's independent activism once their reform agenda was coopted into the structure of regular party politics.⁹

Conveniently, one important activist woman that Skocpol uses as an example in her *Contention* piece, Katherine Philips Edson, is well-known to this

reviewer through her own work on California. Edson was undoubtedly a formidable character who got her start as a grassroots activist, but she is hardly typical of the "non-careerist married clubwomen" Skocpol rightly notes were so important on local levels.¹⁰ Edson rapidly parlayed her position as a prominent clubwoman and official into a role as a crucial player in the Progressive movement in that state. Edson was instrumental in organizing the initial Progressive insurgency, winning passage of the suffrage amendment in 1911 as well as the minimum wage measure for women in 1913 (over the objections of many female trade unionists). For the next twenty years she served as the head of the Industrial Welfare Commission responsible for administering that act, and she continued to participate in political campaigns and conferences on the local, state, and national level. In short, Edson was certainly a concerned citizen and a dedicated reformer, but she was also an experienced politician and a professional bureaucrat committed to systematic investigative and administrative procedures. Her "maternalism" was combined with her concern for women as workers, but within the context of early twentieth-century policy that preferred the former rationale and rejected the claims of the latter, she had to deal with a series of conflicts with the working-class "clients" she aspired to assist, and who often resented what they perceived as Edson's class-based condescensions and biases."

The reality of Edson's experiences underscores two major problems with the book, the tendency to explore the role of gender without factoring in the effects of class and race, and the superficiality of some of Skocpol's accounts of specific initiatives. There are precious few working-class women in this book, and their claims for consideration based on their roles as industrial workers, not as mothers, receive no attention. In the case of the California minimum wage law, Skocpol states that "Normally, the forces of organized labor concentrated around San Francisco could call the shots in labor legislation; and both male and female trade unionists in California were vocally opposed to a minimum wage law for women." Indeed, San Francisco trade unionists were very powerful, and some were influential allies in the Progressive coalition, but they hardly got everything they wanted legislatively. Furthermore, there were important differences of opinion between labor men and women on this point; eventually, the latter convinced the former to officially oppose the measure. By relying on secondary sources, Skocpol misses this dynamic, crucially omitting working women from the story.¹¹

Women of color are likewise absent from *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, although African-American Civil War soldiers get an honorable mention. This neglect of class and race dynamics has been one of the most consistent criti-

cisms of the book, but rather than deal with the issues, Skocpol has chosen to marginalize or dismiss them. Defending her omission, she claims that Gordon, in a recent article in the *American Historical Review*, did the same "for the same reason that I did, arguing that 'African Americans were concentrated in the South, overwhelmingly disenfranchised, with little influence on government at any level.'" This is disingenuous because Gordon has attempted to address this problem by additional work on the differences between white and Black women reformers, and Skocpol also cites that article in the footnotes. Besides, analyzing race as a broader factor in public policy formulation is not the same as characterizing individual reformers. Gordon's edited collection of essays by other scholars in this field (*Women, the State and Welfare*), as well as her recently-published history (*Pitied but Not Entitled*, unfortunately received too late for full inclusion in this review), address these issues much more fully.¹³

The tendency to depreciate her critics as pedantic, petty, or hopelessly sectarian is a mistake on Skocpol's part, as a quick review of the *Contention* article reveals. At the very beginning of her contribution to this debate, Linda Gordon observes that "I suspect that we agree far more than we disagree" noting that the "purpose of this exchange is to identify and explore intellectual differences so as to reveal the assumptions behind dissimilar approaches and the complexities of historical interpretation."¹⁴ Gordon maintains this gracious tenor throughout her remarks, reiterating this point in the conclusion of her subsequent rebuttal.¹⁵ Skocpol, on the other hand, opens her comments with ambitious claims for the creative nature of her arguments, and one of the main tactics she uses to defend her work is broad criticism of many of the other scholars in the field. She implies, when she does not explicitly state, that the failure of Gordon and others to acknowledge the "fresh questions and...innovative answers" posed by her book is due to their miscomprehension at best, or worse yet, their intellectual rigidity and/or ideological dogmatism. The pejorative term "Marxian" (or "Marxist") appears immediately and is subsequently attached to Linda Gordon specifically.¹⁶ Marxist analysis often contains its own set of problematic assumptions, but this usage of the term quite literally raises a "Red" flag that is very disconcerting to the historically sensitive reader.

What is the problem here? Why does Skocpol adopt such a peevish tone in this exchange and dismiss the reasonable criticisms of concerned and knowledgeable scholars? Certainly there are points of difference, as each author describes in her contribution, but for the most part reviewers have respected the importance of Skocpol's past contributions in directing attention to political processes and structures in policy formulation, as well as the remarkable job of synthesis she has done in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*. The problems are two-

fold, one relating to methodology and disciplinary differences, and the other to controversies over the relevance of feminist theory.

In the first case, Skocpol has daringly crossed the boundary between her accustomed social science ground into that of history. As a result, an important subtheme of the Gordon-Skocpol debate is the use of quantitative methodologies, a perennial source of conflict between practitioners in these respective areas. There is no question that many historians are just plain silly in their stubborn resistance to the use of quantitative techniques, and thus most remain poorly equipped to employ the power of statistical analysis. On the other hand, social scientists often use obfuscating, even irrelevant figures to shore up marginal or weak studies. In this regard, Skocpol and Gordon are each partly right and partly wrong in their criticisms of each other. By virtue of her training, Skocpol probably does have a better quantitative understanding, but she seems reluctant to recognize that the fragmentary and textual nature of much historical evidence can confound attempts to do systematic statistical historical studies. The key issue, to which Gordon alludes, is that of experimental design—the ability to pick the methodology appropriate to the data or evidence under investigation.

The second major point of disagreement is more complex, although it also results to some degree from Skocpol's foray into the unfamiliar disciplinary terrain of apprehensive neighbors. Until now, Skocpol's work has not focused much on issues of women and gender, as opposed to Gordon. This is a fact which Skocpol openly acknowledges, but that does not restrain her from severely judging a body of scholarship with which she appears to be only selectively familiar. As a result, the two authors clash over how to utilize gender as a category of analysis. In her rebuttal, Gordon reiterates her belief "that some historical work is better than others, and...that the field has, on average, progressed in sophistication and complexity in the last two decades." She continues: "Work that generalizes about women and women's organizations is less developed than work that distinguishes among women; work that used the category 'gender' only about women has been transcended by work that examines masculinity as well; work that assumes a single, universal gender system has been challenged by work that recognizes variety in gender systems and explodes binary constructions."¹⁷ While partially admitting the validity of this position, Skocpol blasts Gordon for establishing an elitist "hierarchy" in evaluating this research. Ironically, since she criticizes Gordon for doing much the same thing, Skocpol specifically identifies other scholars with whom she takes issue (e.g., Eileen Boris, Peter Baradaglio, Mimi Abramovitz, Robyn Muncy, and Barbara Nelson), as well as acknowledging those she respects (Paula Baker, Kathryn

Kish Sklar, Seth Koven, and Sonya Michel).¹⁸ Skocpol's further comments are worth reproducing at length:

No doubt some feminist scholars will follow Gordon's suggestion to relegate *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* to a primitive stage "undeveloped in relation to the theoretical level of much scholarly gender analysis today" (which would make it safe to set the book aside without too much thought). But broad educated audiences—including the readers of *Contention*—should not be fooled into imagining that scholarship on gender in early U.S. social policy is monolithic. Actually, there are lively theoretical and empirical debates—exactly as there should be in a vital area of inquiry.¹⁹

Most scholars would happily agree with the last statement. Regrettably, however, it begs the question by setting up a false opposition between different, but not mutually exclusive, groups of interested readers.

Significantly, the nastiness derives from the politicization of the extremely controversial matter of feminism in modern society, and especially in the academy. Feminist scholars are frequently characterized by their opponents as elitist, vindictive, narrow-minded, and obsessed with "patriarchy." This difficulty surfaces in the introduction to *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, in which Skocpol criticizes "patriarchal domination perspectives" as "too vague," at best, and often "positively misleading" in explaining the specific historical circumstances and political processes. Specifically, she notes that

When patriarchal theorists do mention the role of elite and middle-class women in pressing for new social policies, they present this situation as the imposition of middle-class norms on poor women. We do not learn of the celebration of the universal civic value of mothering—by mothers of all classes and races—that was so central. . . . Or if such ideas are described, they are treated cynically as a disguise for more fundamental system-functions of patriarchal, class, and racial domination.²⁰

This is strong stuff from a sociologist who has so recently turned her attention to women's history, and who is obviously sensitive to the criticism (by Linda Gordon) that her earlier work "tends to occlude evidence of nongovernmental activism" especially by women.²¹

In fact, in her excellent introduction to *Women, the State, and Welfare*, Linda Gordon has also noted the importance of historicizing the term "patriarchy," which is often used too loosely and deterministically.²² While it is true that feminist academics sometimes seem lost in recondite abstractions, speaking a language only a select few can understand, the job of the theoretician is pre-

cisely that—to come up with new ideas—just as it is the responsibility of more empirical scholars to test the applicability of these concepts to practical situations. So Skocpol has a point, but it is not sufficient to invalidate the work of the many conscientious scholars of feminism, women, and gender who have labored to develop detailed understandings of these complicated categories of analysis. Her sharp language expresses the frustration of those who recognize the need for improved communication between abstract thinkers, practitioners, and a wider public, but it also runs the risk of fueling the arguments of those who hope to undermine the feminist project altogether.

Obviously, contemporary feminist scholarship is not monolithic, as even a cursory review of recent literature in women's history indicates. Such work recognizes that the concept of gender itself is a surprisingly flexible category contingent upon a variety of historical circumstances. Perhaps even more significantly is the ongoing—and often quite fractious—debate about the ways race and class interests and identifications work to differentiate among groups of women and men in ways that are often confrontational or exploitative. In the current context, the idea of “maternalism” is itself ambiguous and contradictory, as Seth Koven and Sonya Michel discuss in the introduction to their book. The concept is susceptible to being manipulated in ways that are coercive or demeaning to the disadvantaged people who are often the intended beneficiaries of these programs. It can also function to block the aspirations of women who identify primarily as feminists rather than as maternalists in their claims for equal rights. Yet while Koven and Michel explore the term precisely in order to clarify their definition of its usefulness for transnational comparisons, Skocpol's application is overwhelmingly celebratory and thus limited, even if quite valid for particular groups of women activists.

In conclusion, Skocpol does herself a disservice and obscures her own significant contributions to this field by attempting to browbeat her readers into agreement and denigrating those who would offer constructive criticisms to help push the debate to a higher level of sophistication. In her book, Skocpol has used her formidable scholarly strengths in a heroic attempt to transcend the limits of any single discipline. She has not been entirely successful, but her insights can greatly benefit historians who are rather belatedly turning their attention to this important public policy issue. Her work, in turn, would be strengthened by integrating many of their findings. We all suffer when differences of interpretation result in caustic confrontations rather than respectful discussions. This is especially true in this case, when the issue of social welfare policy and its relation to class and race tensions in our society is such a volatile contemporary political concern. Skocpol is well aware of these implications.

She is not the Antifeminist. On the contrary, she concludes both her contribution to the Contention debate and her book with a broad call for cooperation "across lines of ideology, class, race, and gender" in order to "develop strong, universal social programs designed to help working single-parent and two-parent families live well and raise their children."²³ If she seems to neglect class and race issues, in part it is because she thinks that the organized female activism of the early twentieth century can serve as a model to help concerned contemporary women overcome these differences, organize, and form alliances in order to achieve this goal. This may be an idealistic hope and a simplistic reading of history, but it is a worthy and timely challenge.

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NOTES

1. For the Gordon-Skocpol debate, see Linda Gordon, "Gender, State and Society: A Debate with Theda Skocpol"; Theda Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers: Gendered Identities in Early U.S. Social Policy"; Linda Gordon, "Response to Theda Skocpol," all in *Contention* 2 (Spring 1993), 139-189. Other reviews that discuss these issues include Paula Baker, *American Historical Review* 98 (April 1993): 458-460; Alan Brinkley, "For Their Own Good," *New York Review of Books* (May 26, 1994): 40-43; Alex Keyssar, "The Long and Winding Road," *Nation* (April 26, 1993): 566-570; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Journal of Economic History* 53 (Sept. 1993): 697-698; Alan Wolfe, "The Mothers of Invention," *New Republic* (Jan. 4 & 11, 1993): 28-35.
2. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
3. Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620-647. See also Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930," in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, Inc., 1993), 43-93.
4. Theda Skocpol, Marjorie Abend-Wein, Christopher Howard, Susan Goodrich Lehmann, "Women's Associations and the Enactment of Mothers' Pensions in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 87 (Sept. 1993): 686-701.
5. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Introduction: 'Mother Worlds,'" in Koven and Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World*, 1-42.
6. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 683, fn9. Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
7. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 486-487; and Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 172.
8. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 521-522.
9. Baker, "The Domestication of Politics," 644-647.
10. For Skocpol's discussion of Katherine Philips Edson, see Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 174.

11. For more information on Edson's career, see Jacqueline Braitman, "Katherine Philips Edson: A Progressive Feminist in California's Era of Reform," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988). On the minimum wage issue, see Norris Hundley, "Katherine Philips Edson and the Fight for the California Minimum Wage, 1912-1923," *Pacific Historical Review* 29 (1960): 271-285.
12. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 415-416. For the trade unionists' perspective on Edson and Progressive labor legislation, see Rebecca J. Mead, "Trade Unionism and Political Activity Among San Francisco Wage-Earning Women, 1900-1922," (M.A. thesis, San Francisco State University, 1991), especially pp. 157-209.
13. Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 163, 181 (fn15-19), citing Linda Gordon, "Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890-1935," *American Historical Review* 97 (Feb. 1992): 19-54, and Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," *Journal of American History* 78 (Sept. 1991): 559-590. Skocpol conflates these two articles, a point that Gordon is obliged to clarify in her rebuttal ("Response to Theda Skocpol," 186). See Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), and Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
14. Gordon, "Gender, State and Society," 139.
15. Gordon, "Response to Theda Skocpol," 188.
16. Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 157-159, 166-167.
17. Gordon, "Response to Theda Skocpol," 188.
18. Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 159-166.
19. Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 160.
20. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 32-33.
21. Gordon, "The New Feminist Scholarship on the Welfare State," in Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 17.
22. Gordon, "The New Feminist Scholarship on the Welfare State," 32, fn19.
23. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 539; and Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 178-179.