Foreword

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For two decades, feminist scholars and antiviolence activists, particularly those who identify as women of color, have offered a robust critique of the ways in which anti-rape and domestic violence programs have colluded with repressive state forces in the pursuit of justice. The critique began as quiet challenges to the institutionalization and professionalization that characterized mainstream programs and their leaders, who felt legitimized by the attention they received from neoliberal state institutions in the 1980s. The adoption of conservative public policy, which led to criminalization in the 1990s and the escalation of conservative/racist policies associated with a “law and order” society, sharpened the political tensions between two tendencies. More radical antiviolence activists understood violence to be linked to capitalism, white supremacy, gender hegemony, and xenophobia. In contrast, others viewed violence as a problem that could be solved by intensified state intervention, such as policing policies, increased reliance on incarceration, and the adoption of coercive “treatment” programs operated by the criminal legal system.

The political, ideological, and strategic divides between advocates of more state intervention and those who understand the ideological, political, and ethical problems associated with relying upon the conservative state to bring about justice have deepened over the past 10 years as many deleterious consequences associated with engagement and dependence on the criminal legal system have been revealed. As the more radical dimension of the antiviolence movement has documented, these consequences disproportionately affect communities of color, people who identify as queer, immigrant groups, young people, and others whose behavior, decisions, identity, or situations do not fit into the hegemonic/ideological norm. Scholars, activists, and survivors favoring community-based responses to community violence have articulated the serious limitations and dangers of relying on legislative policy, police/prisons, governmental programs, and other state functions to liberate oppressed groups.

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Contributions to this special issue of Social Justice represent the next crucial element of the critique. They advance bold, theoretical challenges to the assumptions upon which mainstream intervention strategies are based and discuss the more subtle fissures in political logic that lead to problematic engagements with institutions that undermine the goal of increasing safety through justice. Moreover, they present invaluable alternatives that locate the work of ending community violence as part of a broader social justice agenda. Thus, they invite those working to end violence to seriously consider using strategies that do not rely on the state. That matters not only because of the negative political consequences of state intervention, but also because community-based alternatives can be more effective in reaching the goals of liberation and justice.

The articles published here collectively challenge skeptics who refuse to disengage from the criminal legal system because “there are no alternatives to using state power” in confronting social problems. These articles instead offer examples of on-the-ground community practices that hold members accountable, attempt to decrease the consequences of individual and systemic harm, and to heal by delivering community-based justice. Each group highlighted in this issue has moved beyond a critique of existing interventions and presents serious alternatives that are embedded in the politics of radical community organizing. This has compelled them to adopt an honest and self-critical (as opposed to defensive) approach as they developed new strategies, to work collectively with other groups (as opposed to competitively), to share ideas and resources, and to undertake a structural critique that seriously accounts for contradictions. Political praxis along these lines is possible only when groups understand that liberatory political action requires reflection.

Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo, Alisa Bierra, and Mimi Kim bring unique advantages as editors of this issue due to their experience with grass-roots organizations, antiviolence activism within communities of color, and participants in debates about prisons and police responses to violence. Their feminist praxis as scholar/activists is reflected in the scope and breadth of this volume. The issue is transdisciplinary and transnational and includes a range of authors whose voices are not often enlisted as authorities. Contributors reflect the highest standards of political ethics, while maintaining a noteworthy commitment to mobilizing for real change. This issue of Social Justice delivers on all essential dimensions of the debate, and thus advances our radical work as we face a new era of challenges.