Lynne Haney. *Inventing the Needy: Gender and the Politics of Welfare in Hungary.* Berkeley: University of California Press. 2002. xiii, 338 pp. $60 (cloth); $24.95 (paper).

In 1989, after the decades-long cloud of Cold War antagonism lifted, a meaningful exchange of information about the political and social conditions in Eastern Europe emerged with newfound hope. Women's issues in the post-communist transitions became some of the most contested and challenging in this exchange, both in practice and theory. The focus on women and the social roles of the sexes provide a much-needed dialogue across the historically entrenched lines of separation between East and West, communist times and contemporary developments. Lynne Haney's book offers a lucidly written, creative and most insightful lesson emerging from the politics of welfare in Hungary. The shifting interpretations of gender provide a very useful lens to trace the welfare policy and practice of the state and the actions and reactions of its clients.

The author offers a provocative and well-supported argument that nudges the reader to rethink the newly established division between pre-1989 and post-communist times. Rejecting this popular bifurcation, Haney suggests a three-fold chronology: the welfare society of 1948-68, the maternalist welfare state of 1968-85, and the liberal welfare state since 1985. The argument is clearly set forth by juxtaposing the institutional changes and the actions of welfare clients in each period. The most significant scholarly contribution of this book is the keen and detailed analysis of the changes in the gender regime of the welfare society in post-World War II Hungary. Haney successfully establishes that a different architecture of need is legitimized by the values set forth in each welfare period.

With the help of an impressive array of data – 1,203 cases that took place between 1952 and 1995 in three types of welfare offices in two districts of Budapest, 18 months of ethnographic research in these welfare offices and 31 interviews with various Hungarian welfare officers – this book traces the intricate interaction between the political system and women's individual actions. Numerous personal narratives enliven the prose of a sophisticated theoretical argument. Beside the wealth of data and the accomplishment of connecting systematic changes and individual voices, another especially valuable facet of this book is how smoothly it incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data and their respective research methods. This comprehensive methodology allows the author to connect with seemingly little effort the structural and cultural changes of a multi-layered, deeply transformative period in Hungarian history.

The publication of several books in the general area of women and politics in post-communist Eastern Europe points to the increased interest in and awareness of women's plight in this region. Various analyses highlight worldwide trends of continued gender discrimination and reveal the acuteness and the importance of women's meaningful involvement in a democracy. Lynne Haney's contribution joins this welcome trend in scholarly analysis and extends the lessons learned beyond the regional scope of post-communist Eastern Europe. She has created a link from the Hungarian case to universal levels by arguing that under all welfare (and political) regimes,
women continue to shape and manipulate institutions and services. While she acknowledges that the success of women’s involvement (“maneuverability”) is profoundly influenced by the value-orientation of each regime, this constraint could not silence the broad spectrum of women’s needs and voices.

Haney’s book possesses many merits. First of all, Inventing the Needy is unparalleled in its field because it smoothly integrates political change, economic developments, welfare policy, gender studies and discursive analysis. Second, Haney’s book provides a unified voice that only one author can create. The first books treating women’s issues separately from the many other themes of political and economic transition that appeared shortly after the 1989 revolutions were mostly anthologies often with a less-than-clear focus. They provided national studies that revealed the, until then, frequently unrecognized aspects of gender discrimination. Haney’s intricately interwoven lines of gender analysis form one comprehensive unit. Third, this book offers novel and significant insights into long-standing scholarly debates by giving equal emphasis to agents (individuals) and structures (institutions). Haney also engages with and fully utilizes theoretical debates that inform welfare analysis on the one hand and Eastern European gender issues on the other. Fourth, this book reaches out from the detailed focus on one country to universal questions and challenges. Extracting knowledge that is generally applicable and shared among the snapshot kinds of case studies on both welfare and women’s situation was especially difficult in a time of rapid change. And fifth – Haney is an astute observer of formerly taboo topics. Both the neglect of domestic violence and the racism of Hungarian welfare system are clearly present in her analysis.

With all these amazing accomplishments in sight, it is still important to note some omissions and oversight. First, while one of Haney’s main points is that rigid borders did not exist between communist times and post-1989, she does not present the three stages of welfare regimes as a result of fluid change between the various periods. For example, what kind of value changes created the conditions for the third, liberal period of the welfare system to start four years before the official regime change? Second, while it is a commendable scholarly achievement to point to how clients managed to affect the welfare institutions in their various stages, the author fails to give sufficient attention to SZETA (Szegényeket Támogató Alap, Foundation to Support the Poor) and the many groups of civil society that formed various social movements. If both agents and structure matter in this book, how can the intermediary between them, namely the emerging civil society, be of so little importance? For example, NaNe! (a feminist group) established the first domestic abuse hotline in 1994 and since then has been pursuing cultural and political change. Third, the general economic crisis of 1988-93 is overlooked as a possible major reason and justification for the focus on the materially needy in the post-1985 period. Fourth, on the basis of Haney’s analysis a question may emerge: why has the maternalist discourse been so persistently strong in Hungary? Assistance related to maternity only for three years was “targeted” to the materially needy while subsequent governments re-established it as a universal entitlement. To further question the trend of targeting maternity benefits, in 2002 the Hungarian Supreme Court ruled that the funds would be retroactively distributed to those who did not receive them between 1999-2002. However, all these