Gender And Theories Of The State Essay, Research Paper

It can be said that ‘the state’ is a category of abstraction that is too aggregative, too unitary and too unspecific to be of much use in addressing the disaggregated, diverse and specific (or local) sites that must be of most pressing concern to feminists. (Allen 1990)

The difficulty of any theory of ‘the state’ is an obvious one. ‘The state’ is a generalization that is constantly shifting and redefining ‘itself’ and the power paradigms that exist within ‘it’. Therefore, it is difficult to agree on an identifiable spatial and conceptual vision of what ‘the state’ is. Such are some of the obstacles that the many streams of feminism have had to contend with when theorising about ‘the state’. It is conceptually understandable that there are so many diverse and often conflicting theories of state presented by feminism, especially considering not only the heterogeneity of feminism, but also the abstract nature of ‘the state’ and the paradigms of power and its distribution. When comparing and contrasting the different feminist theories of ‘the state’, the following traditional classifications of feminism will be examined: (1) Marxist/socialist feminism which presents theories of state structured within the framework of methods of production, capitalist domination and exploitation of women and existing class structures; (2) liberal feminism, with its quest for equality by not questioning the present power system and working within it to bring “women into full participation with men.” (van Acker 1999); (3) radical feminism and its total rejection of ‘the state’ as a patriarchal collection of institutions that must be overthrown before the liberation of women can be complete; and (4) the post-structural feminism with their efforts to create new discourses that are not essentially ‘male’ or ‘masculine’ through language and the realisation that ‘the state’ is in a constant state of flux that can be changed. How effective these theories are in understanding the power structures within ‘the state’ will revolve around a few questions: how do theories of state affect a people who do not, for all intensive purposes, belong to a ’state’; and is a theory of state for such people important in ways other than attempting to understand race based power structures, with the added variable of gender to contend with. (Yuval-Davis 1997)

If we ignore the problematic nature of ‘the state’, the motivation for developing theories of it becomes important in determining why feminism is spending time considering it. The main motivation stems from the fact that feminist objectives are focused on legal and policy reforms in areas including abortion, rape, domestic violence, and affirmative action, to name a few, and has thus warranted a focus on ‘the state’ as a local super-structure that serves as a forum and enforcer for such reforms. (Allen 1990) What is agreed upon by all feminist state theories is that the state equals power. What that power is, how it is used, how it affects women and how it should consequentially be dealt with all become diverse amongst the different streams.

Marxist/socialist feminist theories of the state were, for a while, the dominant discourse. Within this paradigm, a feminist analysis of social reproduction, the family and gender was “grafted onto an analysis of the capitalist state which was seen as acting predominantly in the interests of preserving the dominant relations and assisting the accumulation of capital.” (Watson 1990) As is true to any Marxist discourse, all of this analysis is historically based, a point which will gain relevancy when the question of: “Is the state patriarchal?” is examined. So, through the naturally occurring exploitation of the working classes in capitalist society by an elite ruling class (i.e. the capitalist class), women, who are largely responsible for (part of) the unpaid reproduction of the labour force, must remain in a marginalised position. As long as women are in a position of little or no power, as per its Marxist definition, then the continuing social reproduction of labour will take place to the advantage of an established capitalist patriarchy. Thus, the state, which is viewed as being masculine as regards to the historically patriarchal characteristics of ruling classes, is seen in the light of not only exploiting the working classes but also oppressing women specifically. Patriarchy, as defined by Heidi Hartmann in her essay ‘The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union’, is

a set of social relationships between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s control over women’s labour power. (Hartmann 1981)

If this form of patriarchy is accepted, and the state is identified as being a bastion for patriarchy, it becomes clear how the state, class power relationships and gender combine to ensure the dominance of women sexually and as part of the working class. The obvious shortcoming of this specific analysis is that gender quickly becomes subsumed by class politics and class power relations. While this analysis is still legitimate and can be applied to understand many aspects of the power structures that exist within today’s capitalist societies, it also shares some of the deficiencies of Marxism. The immediate deficiency comes in the form of no consideration of the roles race or ethnicity play in determining not just class relations or gender relations, but also power relations within a ’state’. Also, there is the questionable concept of patriarchy that van Acker raises: Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy as relations between men undermines and fails to consider women’s ability not just to resists, but to actually influence institutions of the state. (van Acker 1999) Marxist feminism’s answer to this problem is revolution, but seemingly within the much greater framework of the proletariat’s revolution to overthrow the capitalist class. This raises the further question that why is the proletariat not necessarily patriarchal, and what indication is there that the working class is gender blind vis- -vis power relations.

Liberal feminism, entrenched in the philosophy of liberalism as touted by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, is “fundamentally concerned with justice and equality, arguing that women suffer from discrimination because of their sex.” (van Acker 1999) The state, according to liberal feminists, is not intrinsically masculine or patriarchal, but, historically, happened to be run by men. According to liberal feminists, the state is a neutral arbiter, pluralistic and “can be influenced or captured by different interest groups.” (Watson 1990) Again, while acknowledging that the state is run by men, liberal feminists believe that this is so due to the lack of female participation in state institutions. Their answer as to how to rectify the situation is more women participating in the state, initiatives, legislation and policies that promote equality and address women’s concerns and full co-operation with ‘the-temporarily-patriarchal-state’ to bring about such changes. This is an important concept in that it is loaded with preconceived idealistic notions on pluralistic states and a certain na vet as to how power exists and functions within it. Liberal feminists believe that through better education, employment and similar luxuries, women can change the nature of the state and increase equality for women. This theory is a theory of the privileged. Clearly, liberal feminism is by privileged white women for privileged white women. Liberal feminists fail to take into consideration the important difference in degrees of power and access to such luxurious forms of ‘activism’ in different classes and ethnicities. While liberal feminists have examined the historical nature of the state, they have failed to understand the deeper complexities of the state and its inherently patriarchal nature. The state seems to have been severed from any human qualities and granted a mystical power-unto-itself-nature which is a complete failure by liberal feminists to grasp the concept of power and the origins of the state.

Radical feminism is a third category of the diverse feminist streams that seek to define and, eventually, overthrow the state. It must be said that ‘the state’ seems to be limited to the notion of government and the enforcement and maintenance of the power to govern. Mary Daly, in her book Gyn/Ecology argues that the system in place in society declares “that males and males only are the originators, planners, controllers, and legitimators of patriarchy We live in a profoundly anti-female society, a misogynistic ‘civilisation’ in which men collectively victimise women.” (Daly, 1978) In radical terms, the state is merely an enforcer of (patriarchal) norms and a principle of patriarchy that oppresses and controls women as long as it exists. The ’state’, it seems, treats women the way men see and treat women. “The state constitutes the social order in the interest of men ensuring male control over women’s sexuality and framing all policies according to male experience. (MacKinnon 1983) The solution to radical feminism’s problems with the patriarchy is also one of revolution. In the ideal radical sense, the revolution will create a new maternal state. However, such a radical philosophy has the obvious pitfalls of any essentialist and rejectionist theory. The most obvious is that radical feminism attempts to create a homogenous entity under the category of women. Radical feminism does not take into account class differences, cultural differences or ethnic differences. Radical feminism has reduced the world into two groups: men and women. These two groups have defined power patterns where the men belong to the dominant, patriarchal, governing group and women belong to the oppressed, controlled, subjugated group. Even if this argument was to be accepted, radical feminism has yet to answer to the legitimate critique made of its philosophy that it fails to concede the important advances made by feminists through the state. Plus, with the ahistoric approach of radical feminism, one gets a feeling of a dominant western radical feministic voice speaking on behalf of women all over the world, challenging many representation issues and crossing into a racist discourse of representing the disempowered.

The fourth stream of western feminism is post-modernism/structuralism. Post-structuralist feminists reject the idea of essentialising the concept of ‘woman’ and emphasise the dynamic and unstable nature of language and meaning, therefore creating a prerequisite for change. This directly affects any post-modern conception of the nature of power and challenges the notion of any defined, tangible ’state’. Due to the abstract nature of the state, therefore, it is possible to define and redefine the state. This is made all the easier by the fact that power is considered transient as well, never in full control of any one group for a permanent amount of time. Presumably, this lack of definite definitions of all these concepts leaves more room for flexibility and maneuvering and defines different, if not new, scopes for resistance. Within the post-modern feminist discourse, resistance takes on the form of challenging existing male dominated discourses and rejecting absolutist definitions of state as patriarchy and striving to create a counter-discourse where gender is not the focus (as it is too essentialising) and feminist politics are. While the post-modern feminist theorists have made it more possible to take into account the full diversity of women and refuses to minimalise to a single explanation “all women’s subordination because this relies on totalising and unifying categories and grand theoretical standpoints.” (van Acker 1999) This theory becomes the other extreme of feminist philosophies, especially when attempting to consider the full diversity of women. It can be argued that it goes too far in that it evokes “the model of endless difference” in the feminist discourse. (van Acker 1999) This is not to say, though, that it is entirely destructive and should be shunned by feminist theorists. Jane Flax argues that certain aspects of postmodern feminism can contribute to feminist theory since postmodern discourses

are all deconstructive in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical [sic] about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary culture. (Flax 1990)

This seems to set up the forum for a merger of certain aspects of postmodern feminism with other streams of feminism, minus the problematic area of no real boundaries or definitions of state or women but rather as gendered institutions with possibility for change from a historically masculine characteristic to a more gender conscious (with the goal of equity in mind) organisation of ‘the state’.

How effective are these theories in helping understand the power structures within ‘the state’? Generally, from what has already been examined, all these theories lack important aspects of understanding the society within which they exist. None really question the problematic concept of ‘the state’ nor include in any effective and satisfactory way the politics of race; all except, perhaps, postmodern feminism. But even then, the other extreme that postmodernism adopts seems to undermine any notion of feminist theorising on concepts of state and power and lacks the necessary acknowledgement of the legitimate nature of a broad women’s agenda. In reality, the only truly effective and convincing theory of the state would have to be one that takes into consideration two essential characteristics that help define power within a state and power of the state: race and class. In this sense, Marxist feminism gets close, but does not go far enough; liberal feminism simply reinforces the racist and classist politics that exist within a state, thus reproducing the patriarchy, but merely passing on the ill effects to less powerful groups; radical feminism fails on both counts, but has served a purpose in taking the vanguard position in feminist theorising – this is most likely less due to its feminist theorising and more to its radical nature; and postmodern feminism seems to have gone too far in emphasising differences within gender discourses and has actually served to shred any form of women’s groups that would and could use gender as a theoretical standpoint. Therefore, a marriage between Marxist feminism and certain elements of postmodernist feminism would result in the most convincing and most ‘truthful’ (problematic as it may be) conceptualisation of ‘the state’ and how it affects and relates to feminism and the women’s movement.

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