

Reintroducing Politics: Recent Developments in Feminist Theories of the State

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My research draws on recent developments in feminist theories of the state to underscore the necessity to 'reintroduce politics' in feminist analyses of the interrelation between gender, women's movements, and states. This argument stems from my concerns for the contemporary Québécois women's movement and for its relationship to the Canadian and Québécois states, as well as from my profound dissatisfaction, as a feminist activist and as an intellectual, with the pessimistic, disempowering and theoretically problematic accounts that the now 'classical' feminist theories of the state have offered. I begin by recalling what I think are the main problems of the classical feminist frameworks as they have been highlighted by what is currently called 'the new feminist scholarship on the state.' Then, I sketch the three main avenues by which the 'moment of politics' can and should be reintroduced into the analysis. These avenues can be summed up as follows: (1) reasserting the possibility of politics by taking seriously the notion of conflict and political struggle; (2) shifting the focus to women's agency and to women's agents as the actors of politics; (3) 'getting into the black box' to understand how the politics of the state work within specific state-systems.

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What I call 'the classical feminist frameworks' for theorizing the state are exemplified in the works of Burstyn (1983), McIntosh (1978), MacKinnon (1983) and Eisenstein (1981). These accounts of the interaction between the Western liberal state and gender relations of power still inform, even if in a refined manner, much of the current feminist work on the welfare state and social policy (McKeen 1993). The core insight of the early socialist and radical works on the 'patriarchal,' or 'capitalist and patriarchal' character of the state was to identify the state and state politics as gendered. There is unquestionably a gender dynamic present in the workings of the contempo-

rary state, and the classical frameworks rightly point to the state's role in institutionalizing and reproducing gender domination. Yet, there are also major problems in the way these stories of the interconnection between gender relations and 'the state' are told.

The structural-functional bias bequeathed on socialist and radical feminist conceptions of the welfare state and of patriarchy by a particular version of Marxism¹ poses important limits to our understanding of the relationship between gender, the women's movement, the state, and social change. In these conceptions, structures or social relations of power are seen from a one-sided perspective as largely stable arrangements of exploitation and domination. Fully-formed, easily grasped and pre-existing 'needs' or 'dominant interests' are inscribed in the structures of capitalism and patriarchy and which directly inform and impel state intervention (this with or without adding in the play of 'structural contradictions,' or some kind of 'relative autonomy'). State action itself is viewed as always, either immediately or ultimately, functional for domination. Responses by states to women's demands, be they funding childcare facilities, implementing pay equity programs, or recognizing abortion rights, are then interpreted at best as concessions, or "as compromising short-term concerns in the service of broader, long-term goals, such as normalizing the system and stabilizing power relations," (Rhodes 1994: 1185) that only recompose masculine and/or capitalist domination under a renewed guise.

Short of revolution, these formulations leave very little space for women and the women's movement to make meaningful gains or to realize significant social change within and through the state. Yet, women's movements from the turn of the century to the present have pressed their demands on states and have obtained reforms that have undoubtedly had an impact on the way gender relations are lived and, most importantly, have inscribed women's participation in the very "making" of Western welfare state forms.² Accounting for women's effective agency in "shaping the state" is, as Yeatman points out, an element that seriously complicates our understanding of the "patriarchal character" of the state (1990: 144).

Furthermore, classical accounts have tended to postulate a more or less automatic correspondence between social determinants, seen in terms of overarching structures, and a gendered, oppressive or regulationist state intervention.³ Yet, the job of relating 'gendered effects' to 'gender structure' becomes painstakingly hard, and sometimes uselessly reductionist, when confronted with the evidence of the variability with which concrete states have

historically handled gender relations and translated them into policies. As Jenson (1986:22) notes:

The states may or may not have assumed that women provide free labour in the family. They may or may not have discouraged women's work outside the home. They may or may not have tried to establish equality between female and male workers. They may or may not have encouraged childbearing in a way that would subordinate women to men, to the state, or to both.

Increasingly, empirical studies indicate that 'the state' does not occupy "a clear-cut and fixed place in the structure of gender or in the field of sexual politics" (Franzway, Court & Connell 1989: 41), and this seems to hold in comparative perspective as well as internally, within states.⁴ How are we to interpret this?

Recent developments in feminist theories of the state propose that the kind of state and of gender politics we have at a given time depends perhaps less on the presence of 'structures of power,' and possibly more on the play of 'politics of power.' In short, what has been missing all along is 'the stuff of politics': i.e., the *mediation* of power structures introduced by conflicts, alliances and compromises between real actors outside *and* within the 'black box' of the state, a mediation that gives back to the postulated correspondence of the previous "input-output" model the problematic, contingent, variable and unpredictable quality that the recent historical and comparative empirical works reveal. What then are the avenues by which this 'moment of politics' can be reintroduced in a feminist analysis of the state?⁵

First, 'reintroducing politics' means reasserting the 'possibility of politics'--that is, positing against one-sided views of 'structures' the possibility that political and social struggles not only exist, but make a difference. This can be done only by abandoning one-sided views, with their focus on domination, rule, and regulation, for two-sided ones in which rule and conflict, as well as structure and agency are constitutive of each other, and where the action of social agents, not of reified structures, comes to the forefront. In relation to gender, for example, working with the concept of 'gender relations of power' may be preferable to an orthodox reference to Patriarchy (plagued by systemic, universalizing, and static undertones). Thinking in terms of relations of power helps shift the focus from the analysis of the mechanisms of domination to the *exploration of the tensions* that are inherent in the notion of power as a social relation and as a balance of forces.

Thus, this involves exploring the capacity of subjects to act as social agents in not only reproducing, but also in contesting and *altering this balance* in the *always concrete and specific forms* of discourses and practices into which power relations are enacted and institutionalized. The state, then, rather than being seen as an entity or a device of structural domination takes on the character of these ongoing tensions. This is what is meant by current formulations that propose to see states, their institutional features and their policies as historical constructions: as products of specific, variable, open-ended and unevenly deployed social struggles. Finally, rather than being preempted from the start as an ever elusive goal, the prospects of realizing 'meaningful social change for women within or through the state' can then be seen as residing precisely in these specific, variable, and open-ended possibilities of altering the balance of power in favor of women *in concrete power arrangements*.

Secondly, 'reintroducing politics' implies rescuing from structural oblivion the actors of politics, thus shifting attention towards agency and the action of social agents--because agency only exists as it is embodied in people and in collectivities of people. New developments in feminist theory and feminist theories of the state, however, force us to a revision of the way we understand the women's movement as a political actor and as a particular form of collective agency. The challenge from poststructuralism and from the Non-Western feminist critique makes it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to speak of "women's interests" in "objective" and/or universalizing terms, or to see "the women's movement" as a unitary actor. The diversity of women's experiences, linked to the intertwining and cross-cutting effects of historically and spatially specific power relations of gender, class, and race (among others) in real life situations cannot but translate into a heterogeneous and fragmented women's movement. The unity of this movement, rather than being pre-given, is much more aptly to be conceptualized, in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) terms, as a hegemonic (or counterhegemonic) political *project* (i.e., it has to be constructed).⁶

In its dealings with the state, the women's movement thus speaks with a diversity of voices. The versions of "women's interests" and the claims articulated and put forward *vary* not only in space and time but also among the organizations of national movements. This reflects the subjective construction of these "interests" on the basis (but not the transparency) of the social placings, experiences and representations of gender of their membership, and is further mediated by what is subjectively perceived by the

organizational actors as desirable, acceptable, and feasible as political strategies in a given context (Masson 1994b). It should be noted that it is only unevenly that these organizations challenge the existing gender order. Moreover, their capacity to exert agency is also uneven, and the diverse voices are not represented with the same weight within the movement. As Michaud (1992) argues, some voices are more central in the constitution of this "feminist counter-hegemony," whereas others are pushed, or remain in the margins. Then there is the question of who--which actor or actors of the movement--gets to legitimately 'represent women' (and which women), a question that further problematizes the notion of "women's demands to the state." My point is that there are a series of subjective, as well as political, mediations between the more abstract 'gender relations of power' and the reality of women's encounter with the state. Judging, for example, that a particular policy does not represent "what women wanted" may be too simple an account of the process through which states respond to multiply voiced, historically specific, and already highly mediated women's claims. This is especially the case when diversity might very well mean, as Pringle and Watson suggest (1990: 239) that "no one policy will be a gain for all women."⁷

The third avenue for 'reintroducing politics' is to bring the state itself "back in" by unpacking the black box of 'The State' to understand the concrete ways in which the politics of gender are played out within the politics of the state. The institutional, political, and bureaucratic characteristics of particular state-systems as historical productions and fields of ongoing struggles become central in this proposition:

What kind of state [of welfare state, of bureaucracy, of gender regime or gender politics] we have depends on who was mobilized in social struggle, what strategies were deployed, and who won.⁸ (Franzway, Court & Connell, 1989:35)

Social struggles are not fought only outside the state (and nor are they only *about* the state, for the matter), but within the state as well because of the resources and of the constitutive capacity over social relations of power that the state concentrates. That's what "feminism in practice" has seen in the state that makes it worthwhile encountering (Connell, 1990: 518). It would be a mistake, however, to see this encounter as being solely with the state, or with state actors: it is an encounter within the arenas of the state with other political actors that articulate other sets of interests and carry with them particular

assumptions about gender relations (and race, and class). How conflicts, alliances, strategies and compromises materialize over specific policies and programs within particular state-systems constitutes a level of mediation that makes a difference in the outcomes: it makes a difference, for example, between passing an "equal rights" amendment or not, criminalizing abortion or not, and so on. In addition, these outcomes alter the conditions for further contestations, possibly giving rise to "unintended consequences" that may help or hinder subsequent efforts at social change in the field of gender politics.

The other major element we see from unpacking the black box is that gender politics, within the politics of the state-system, not only pertain to how the game of formal politics is played, but to how the game itself is framed by the institutional and bureaucratic reality of particular state-systems. What the legitimate actors are, what counts as legitimate gender issues, what the institutional channels for their treatment are, and how they are to be dealt with in political and bureaucratic terms are all part of how state-systems are gendered in ways that crystallize certain power arrangements and pose very concrete obstacles to women's organizations' social change efforts. Yet, it cannot be overemphasized that these features of state-systems are no less historical than the rest: that they carry possibilities for change as well as barriers or constraints to change, that they are objects of contention, that they are changing and can be changed.

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In short, people and their politics mediate between social structures (relations of power, and so on) and state intervention in a way that makes contingent, variable, and open-ended outcomes possible. That should be the core of our feminist analyses of the state, and should buttress our strategy-making. Broad, sweeping generalizations about "The Patriarchal" or "The Capitalist State" might be easier to come with, but are unduly disempowering for feminist activists and overly myopic for feminist academics. It may be a truism to recall that reality is complex, but I insist that we ought to render justice to this complexity.

NOTES

1. Many authors have pointed to the structuralist bias and to the functionalism inherent in these arguments. On classical feminist theories of the state see Piven (1984: 16), Franzway, Court and Connell (1989: 20, 23), Gordon (1990: 179-180), Watson (1990: 6), Jenson (1986: 10-13); on Marxism see Jessop (1990) and McLennan (1984).

2. Feminist works on the making of welfare states have highlighted the participation of women social reformers and women's movements in the constitution of welfare policies and programs. See for example Andrew (1984), Gordon (1990), Brenner & Laslett (1991), Jenson (1986, 1987, 1989), Skocpol (1992).

3. I am indebted for this argument to Jessop (1990: 80).

4. The recognition of the existence of contradictory policies and positions in the field of gender and sexual politics at the level of particular state-systems is not new. The internal disunity of the state is argued in particular in Franzway, Court and Connell (1989), Pringle and Watson (1990), Watson (1990).

5. The reframing I am advocating here owes much to what has been called 'the new feminist scholarship on the state,' and in particular to the recent works of Fraser (1989), Jenson (1986, 1987, 1989) and Skocpol (1992) on North America and Europe; and of Australians Pringle and Watson (1990), Watson (1990), Franzway, Court and Connell (1989), Connell (1990) and Yeatman (1990).

6. The recognition - and dilemma - of diversity lies at the core of the debate between the proponents of a strategy based on "the politics of difference" (Young 1990) versus the possibilities of more inclusive politics.

7. This should be kept in mind while analysing state intervention in the field of gender.

8. The reference to the welfare state, to the bureaucracy, and to the state's connections with gender relations is from Franzway, Court and Connell (1989: 35). The notion of gender regime is from Connell (1990).

9. See Skocpol (1985) on the notion of "unintended consequences" of state action. See McKeen (1994) for an example of possibilities opened in terms of unintended consequences in the EEC policies.

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