

GOVERNMENTALITY, PATRIARCHY AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN THE CAPITALIST STATE: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS

Prakash Khundrakpam* and Jayanta Krishna Sarmah**

1. Introduction

We live in a world of change. Feminist discourse over the past few decades has uncovered significant new avenues and directions of analysis, using methods and ideas of thinkers that we normally would not have thought, to fit in the discourse before (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 132). The richness and variety of feminisms is impressive but at most times, overwhelming (El?Bushra, 2007). Foucault has been one such thinker, whose ideas have been at the center of feminist arguments. Recent discussions on Foucault and his position vis-à-vis feminism have yielded two major camps of thinkers; a camp which sees Foucault and his theories as incongruent with feminist thought (Balbus, 1988; Di Leonardo, 1991; Hartsock, 1990) and the other, which perceives that the Foucauldian discourse is compatible with feminist theory (Grimshaw, 1993; Hoy, 1988; McNay, 1992; Sawicki, 1986). Such a plethora of varying responses to Foucault from the feminists might be due to the fact he was a transdisciplinary figure; engaged in a number of disciplines, interpreted and misinterpreted competently by countless schools and disciplines. The idea of "disciplinary power" is one of the most explored Foucauldian conceptions and recent developments have highlighted the application of the concept in feminist discourse as well.

In this paper, we use the Foucauldian ideas of disciplinary power and governmentality to contend that the modern capitalist state refuses to mend its patriarchal ways and change for women; for acting ignorant and engaging in inaction is in its own interests. Consequently, we position previous feminist movements that operated within the framework of the capitalist state as misguided ventures with outcomes orchestrated by the capitalist state, due to a politics of appeasement and concessions granted by the latter. Lastly, highlight the role ideology plays in spoiling to the search for alternative arrangements of socio-polity that will result in a holistic emancipation of woman.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault and Power

Foucault did not bother to give a concrete definition of power. A peculiar thing, and

* Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, India..

** Professor and HOD, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, India.

probably what made him much an interesting figure for students and an inimical figure for Marxist discourse, is that his philosophical discourse is based on the question of "How?" (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991, p. 7). He did not stop once, to ask "Why" or "For whom"? Such questions do not figure in any part of the Foucauldian discourse. Foucauldian ideas are thus detailed philosophical layouts of how things (sovereignty, governmentality, pastoral power or sexuality) came into being and how it operates, how a governor "governs" and henceforth. The idea of power is not an exception. Of power, he writes: "Power is relations; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals, a relationship which is such that one can direct the behaviour of another or determine the behaviour of another" (Foucault, 1996, p. 410). Foucault thus describes power in its process, in its exercise; removed from the context of the environment in which it is exercised. This could be particularly problematic. Power is never exercised in a vacuum. The exercise of the power of an individual (say A) over another individual (say B), is done in a specific historical and geographical context. To think that one could study power, removed from its locational variables (both source and destination) and the medium, is unpersuasive. But we will come back to this later.

Foucault believes that there are two main forms of power: what he calls "sovereign power" and "disciplinary power". In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1973) Foucault discusses in detail about the two forms of power. To summarize, sovereign power is in essence the power exercised through coercion and displayed explicitly in public more often than not; to legitimize the authority of the sovereign by striking fear in the hearts of the public and punishing those who dare disobey him with torture and inhumane sentences. Disciplinary power on the hand is hidden and discreet in its exercise, and the process of its exercise has been "normalized" to such an extent that we do not even perceive of it as "power". We perceive of it as a part and parcel of our normal lives. Foucault also identifies that disciplinary power and its many manifestations including the apparent reforms in prison systems, started to take root in the 18th century, replacing sovereign power. Disciplinary power is "exercised through its invisibility" (Foucault 1977, p. 187), constantly reinventing itself so as to appear normal. It is indiscrete and is "everywhere and always alert" (Foucault 1977, 177). Lastly, Foucault also recognizes three ways in which individuals are constructed as subjects of power, namely; knowledge and education, grouping and classification and lastly an individual's tendency to identify himself in relation to a larger constructed structure (including sexuality)(Foucault, 1982).

Expositions and discussions: Rise of governmentality and disciplinary power

One might ask a simple question here. What led to such a change in the techniques of exercise of power? What is the particular context, in which we should situate such changes? The rise of "disciplinary power" corresponds with the rise of what Foucault calls governmentality or "the art of government"¹; which according to him, emerged in the writings of Anti-Machiavellian accounts in the 16th century and by the 18th century, and became the dominant theme of writings that sought to impart advices to rulers and princes on how to "rule"(Foucault, 2007, pp. 126-160). Such a shift in political discourse was achieved due to two main reasons; dismantling of feudalism and the Reformation resulting in the gradual retreat of the Church from political affairs

(Foucault, 2007, pp. 126-127)². It is worth noting how the rise of the idea of governmentality also corresponds to the rise of mercantilism and eventually capitalism. To Foucault and the Anti-Machiavellian political theorists, governmentality is a general art or ability to govern, and the government of the state is only a particular aspect of it(pp. 129-131). There is also an upward and downward continuity of the art of government(pp. 132-133).

Governmentality, power and feminist movements

First, let us look at this upward continuity that Foucault identifies in governmentality. There is an upward continuity in the art of government in that one first needs to learn to govern himself, then his family and then the state. This statement is extremely interesting for it has important implications for feminist theory and movements. Firstly, starting from the second wave of liberal feminism, there has been a rallying cry that the "personal is political"-stressing that politics does not start from outside the family but from inside it; that the power structures and forms of domination inside the family needs to be studied, that it is a part of politics(Cahill, 2007; Hanisch, 1969). Embedded in this slogan and the general liberal feminist tradition is the belief that what troubles women today is the lack of recognition of their conditions and plight. There also seems to be a presumption that with recognition and awareness, progress of women is inevitable, to be brought about by political and social changes spearheaded by the state. This in turn rests on a firm belief in constitutional agitation and a conviction of the capacity of the capitalist state to provide justice to all the sections of the society, including women. The above idea of governmentality and upward continuity in its exercise, raises questions on all of these assumptions.

As already stated, Foucault and the political theorists starting from the 16th century, postulates that one needs to be able to maintain certain a degree or ability to govern the family, before one even attempts to learn how to govern the state. The family and the

personal are then indeed political as feminists have claimed for decades, and the ruler (the capitalist state, in modern times) is undoubtedly aware of it. They have been taught so, through education and training³. What is important then for feminists and women, is not the longstanding liberal delusion that there is a lack of acknowledgement of the political nature of the family and the personal sphere, but the indifference of the capitalist state towards it; the disregard and the relegation of the family as a pseudo-political unit in the society with little to no importance in theorization. One might argue here that change requires recognition, and one would be true; even more so when the changes seek to address status-quo sentiments and structures that have been existing since ancient times. Our argument here is simply that the capitalist state is well aware that the family is a political unit and the personal is political; but it works to hide the reality which could be stated as - "the capitalist state recognizes that the personal is political and chooses not to do anything to ameliorate the conditions of women, for acting ignorant and engaging in inaction is in its own interests". A secretive recognition is worse than no recognition at all, for in the first case one acknowledges in secret the existence of the injustice and inequalities and chooses to keep it hidden, without a rectification, for one's own selfish gains; while in the other case, one might simply be ignorant of the injustice and conditions. The former is a blatant refusal to change; while in the latter case, there is still hope that one might change for the better, with an infusion of required knowledge and sufficient discourse. The capitalist state simply has been refusing to change for women.

The capitalist state and its refusal to change for women: whys and wherefores

Why would the state refuse to change for women? Because the capitalist state is in essence patriarchal. The patriarchy embedded in the state is deeper than previously envisioned, for if we consider the idea of governmentality, it begins at the family and follows the upward continuity that Foucault identifies. Governors of the family have the same awareness (that the capitalist state has, as argued above) regarding the political nature of the family because they also receive the same education and training from the patriarchal state. The patriarch of the family has a twofold task; one, of explicit coercion and subjugation of women so that they are not mentally and physically able to challenge the patriarchal authority (achieved through division of labor, domestic violence and at times sexual domination) and the second of "normalizing" the patriarchy, of normalizing the "disciplinary power" of men over women, of constructing a patriarchal hegemony that seems natural through familial customs, traditions and norms. Such a system is then magnified and replicated by the capitalist state. The two-fold task that the governor performs at the level of the family is similarly performed by the capitalist state's political society and civil society;

through its own structures of coercion and legitimation respectively. The capitalist state then is indeed "the individual writ large" but the patriarchs at the family make sure that the individual is the "man". Thus, if we think of the patriarchal, capitalist state as an end that is to be achieved, the family is the means.

Let us consider Guillaume de La Perrière's definition of the government for example, found in his work published in 1555 titled *Le Miroire politique, œuvre non moins utile que nécessaire à tous monarques, roys, princes, seigneurs, magistrats, et autres surintendants et gouverneurs de Republicques* (Guillaume de La Perrière, 1555, as cited in, Foucault, 2007, p. 34) which states, "Government is the right disposition of things arranged so as to lead to a suitable end." We can then rewrite it in the following ways:

1. Government at the family level is the arrangement of things (structures and mechanisms of violence, division of labor, disciplinary norms and customs or in other words, hegemonic control mechanisms) so as to lead to a patriarchal family.
2. Government at the capitalist state level is the arrangement of such numerous families, assisted and corrected by the structures of coercion and legitimation of the state itself so as to lead an umbrella patriarchy that encompasses the entire state and society.

If we invoke here the ever so classical metaphor of equating governance of a state with that of governing a ship⁴, then the patriarchy and its sustenance is the "harbor" of the Ship of the State; the direction towards which the Ship is headed and the ultimate end of governmentality at the family and state levels. It is also worthwhile to note that the various allusions to the metaphor conveniently ignore the question of "where the ship is headed".

Note how the capitalist state also employs a fail-safe mechanism to safeguard the patriarchy here. If there is an abnormality at the level of family, in that a patriarch of a family fails to perform his "duty", such faults are corrected at the level of the state. Foucault refers to such corrective structures simply as the "police", (Foucault, 2007, p. 133) (Foucault et al. 2009, 94) but a more appropriate terminology would be "structures of coercion and legitimation". Such actions of the capitalist state reinforce and strengthen the base of patriarchy which is the family. The downward continuity of governmentality is apparent here. It is noted that "When a state is governed well, fathers will know how to govern their families" (p. 133). Akin to the base-superstructure argument advanced by Gramsci, it is evident that it is not only the patriarchal family that gives rise to a patriarchal and capitalist state; but the patriarchal and capitalist state also reinforces and sustains the patriarchal family. A vicious co-operative cyclical relationship of co-sustenance of patriarchy at the family and the state levels is exhibited. What this also means is that what feminists and

women have to overcome is multiple, layered, projected and magnified levels of suppression and injustice; what contemporary feminists have come to call "intersectionality" (See, Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Patil, 2013). If a "prince" or "governor" is aware of how to govern his family and govern so that the women in the household are suppressed and not made to speak of rights or revolution or polity; then as society is an amalgamation of such princes and governors, one can only assume the magnitude of opponents a woman would face in such a society; and that is assuming that she somehow managed to rid herself of the chains that her own family's governor had put on her.

Let us now for a moment come back to our statement that the capitalist state refuses to change for women, despite its own secretive acknowledgement since the 16th century onwards of the fact that the personal is indeed political. Liberal feminists and feminists that have worked for changes within the framework of the capitalist state (hereafter referred to as 'constitutional feminists', for the lack of a better word) would scoff at this statement. For them, there has been considerable changes in the conditions of women in the preceding, let's say, a century. Starting from the early 1900s, constitutional feminist movements have demanded a variety of reforms within the capitalist state; and they have been undoubtedly accorded a significant number of their demands, most notably the right to vote. It is therefore not a derangement to perceive the constitutional feminist movements of the 20th century (which gained momentum in the 1960s) as successful endeavors in securing useful rights and liberties for women; thereby uplifting their statuses and conditions. However, there are certain patterns that are associated with such movements. Such movements have either been historically repressed violently through the state's coercive mechanisms or in more recent cases; the modern state has taken an unusual amount of time to heed to their demands. For example, demand for women suffrage rights in the USA started in the 1840s with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848; but it was not until the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States in 1920 that they were granted the right (James, 2021). 70 years of struggle for the right to vote! Why do such patterns of either repressive violence and/or delayed grant of demands emerge as a common theme in most constitutional feminist movements within the framework of capitalist states? Before we attempt to answer the question, a few additional pointers on Foucault's idea of power will be useful. Foucault thinks of "sovereign power" or coercion as some sort of second-rate power to disciplinary power in that the first is to exercised sparingly only when it is extremely warranted; in cases wherein the non-exercise of it would entail a loss of sovereignty and consequently a breakdown of the government. This then means that the exercise of coercion is preceded by a failure of the disciplinary power, or in other words a failure of the hegemonic structures

to maintain order in the society. The state only punishes those that step out of line of the hegemonic laws. If the patriarchy is sustained perfectly with no faults and breaks through a flawless exercise of hegemony, then a counter-revolution of feminist ideas and actions will simply not arise. There will be no critique of the existing social order and men (and women) will continue to move linearly in the arc that the patriarchal state had envisioned, effectively being muted, brainwashed "one-dimensional beings"⁵. The capitalist state's repressive action towards feminist movements (and other movements of any nature that seeks to challenge the state and its hegemonic power) is thus only a natural response to protect its sovereignty (including the sovereign power over capital) and to prevent itself from "withering away".

However, the patriarchal and hegemonic state seems to have soon realized that such coercive mechanisms are counter-productive; in that repression led to a sense of magnified feeling of dissatisfaction and resentment towards the state, eventually leading to a cycle of movements and consequent cycles of repression. This was problematic for the patriarchal and hegemonic state for two reasons. First, it put an enormous burden on the state's economic resources. In addition, repression dented the state's human resources, for in most cases the violence associated with such movements and repression frequently led to a loss of lives. Secondly, the political and social turmoil created by the cycle of such movements and consequent repression weakened the sovereignty of the state considerably, both realistically and perceptively. The state while dealing with such movements is prone to challenges on its sovereignty by other sectional movements and even attacks by external agents that challenge its authority. In addition, the state's image becomes that of a weak sovereign which is unable to maintain its sovereignty. The capitalist state, we would argue, is even troubled by the prospect of the proletarian revolution in such chaotic circumstances. All these factors led the state to search for a control mechanism or power exercise method that would do away with such disadvantages. We posit that the hegemonic, capitalist and patriarchal state in its quest to do so, has adopted what Foucault calls "bio-power". Foucault conceives of bio-power as a technique of power exercise that enables the exerciser to manage humans in large groups and thereby control entire populations. It is "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (Foucault, 2007, p. 16). In this light, we view the gradual concession of certain rights and liberties of women by the capitalist state not as an outcome of the liberal feminist movements and other movements that operated constitutionally within the framework of the patriarchal and hegemonic state; but as an exercise of a particular type of bio-power by the patriarchal, hegemonic and

capitalist state, to sustain the status-quo. Such grants or concessions serve two purposes. First, as an action, it serves as an appeasement that will be perceived by the constitutional feminists as a form of positive action of the state, thereby ebbing the movement and sentiments of the feminists. Secondly and more importantly, it serves as a tokenism and sham, thereby perpetuating the belief that the capitalist state is doing whatever it can to ameliorate the conditions of the women; while all the time working secretly to sustain the patriarchy and capitalism, through the state's (and the family's) control system discussed above. In doing so, it further entrenches the legitimacy of the capitalist state and the patriarchy; for with every such minor concession and appeasement (which the constitutional feminists in their delusion, will perceive as positive progress and a success of their struggle), there is an increase in the conviction of the idea amongst the constitutional feminists that all they need to do is educate and sensitive the ignorant capitalist state that the "personal is political". This leads to a vicious cycle wherein the constitutional feminists continue to argue for women rights along such lines within the framework of the capitalist state, leading to an infinite sustenance of patriarchy by increasing the legitimacy of the capitalist state, albeit unbeknownst to them. One should not be surprised then as to why women continue to face problems even in the most advanced of such societies and the most developed of capitalist states.

The above position is subject to a very simple, but practical critique. A constitutional feminist (including a liberal feminist) would be tempted to argue along the following lines, "So what? How about we just take what we get and stop with the whining? How about we use the concessions so granted by the capitalist state as a base for a stronger movement that will seek to address the concerns of all women?". Such a critique is hopelessly misguided. Gradual changes and reforms are welcome steps towards realizing the ultimate feminist goal (the abolition of patriarchy), but such reforms should not reinforce the patriarchy and systems of hegemonic control; for all it does is to achieve a deviation of focus from solving the real problem to time-slice, temporary coping mechanisms that are in themselves, grossly insufficient. To employ a self-constructed metaphor here, it is absurd to think that one could uproot a mango tree after some time, with the energy one gets from consuming its fallen leaves and fruits; while all the time continuing to add manure and moisture to it, through the wastes one throws under the tree's soil.

Concluding remarks

If constitutional agitations within the framework of the capitalist, patriarchal and hegemonic state are thus insufficient and counter-productive at achieving the destruction of patriarchy, it follows that patriarchy would only be rid of, if we get rid of the state. The first

go-to answer of a stateless society has always been an anarchic society. But we find anarchism and its extreme individualism incompatible with the destruction of patriarchy for the simple reason that in an anarchic society, the basic biological and physical superiority of men coupled with self-interest would reinforce and reestablish patriarchy. The patriarchy, like liberalism, is exceptionally slippery and deceitful for it has the ability to adapt, morph and merge into different structures in different conditions. In anarchic societies, patriarchy will find its home in guilds and rational groupings. By "rational groupings", we refer to groupings that exercise the rational form of authority based on their claim of expertise in the field. These would include for example doctors, scientists, engineers etc. Most anarchists recognize the legitimacy of such authorities.

Marxists might argue that communism then seems to be the societal arrangement only system under which the patriarchy could be effectively demolished. While rational groupings will still continue to exist in communist societies, they will not harbor patriarchy for there is a difference in how we arrive at the two societies. Patriarchy and all other forms of group injustice and discord, arise due to a fight over limited resources - political, social and economic. In a communist society wherein abundance is guaranteed, neither equality nor inequality will be in question and women will simply draw from the common fund of resources whatever their needs might be, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Marx, 2008). While sexual differences are biological and will thus continue to exist in a communist society, the construct of "gender" and associated injustices will disappear altogether; resulting in the tolerant accommodation of even vaguely defined sexual orientations and biological "anomalies". However, such a Marxist argument is prone to a critique. One might simply ask, "How will one tide across the intermediate stage, that of socialism, with its own deficiencies at abolishing the patriarchy? How is the dictatorship of the proletariat any better than the present capitalist modern state for women?" Such ideological debates still continue to remain barriers in the quest for a holistic solution to the problems faced by women under the modern capitalist state. The feminist movement needs to come together and resolve such ideological conflicts and focus on the real goal of the feminist project, emancipation, unfettered by the chains of ideology.

In this essay, we have employed a Foucauldian framework in using his ideas of "governmentality" and patriarchy to present the argument that the modern capitalist state has been insensitive to the feminist cause. The capitalist state has only sought to appropriate the feminist movements within its structure, by granting concessions to the movements and practicing "a politics of appeasement", in order to further its own survival and proliferation. We have also highlighted how the quest for alternative arrangements of society that would

lead to the emancipation of women is limited by ideological conflicts within feminism- especially between the liberal and Marxist strands. Being an expository and argumentative paper based on ideological contours, we hope this article helps in eliciting cross-ideological arguments and discussion to further the feminist cause of emancipation.

Notes

1. Foucault's idea of governmentality took proper form during his 1978 lectures at the Collège de France; titled *Security, Territory, Population*(Foucault, 2007)published posthumously later based on audio recordings. However, it was not until the publication of *The Foucault Effect: Studies on Governmentality* (Burchell et al., 1991), that the notion attracted wide academic interest.
2. It is ironic that the idea of governmentality which emerged out of such a situation and time, when traditional bondages on the individual such as feudal repression and religious dictates were being removed; would serve as a host to the virus that is capitalist patriarchy.
3. To quote: "It is the education of the prince, therefore, that will assure the upward continuity of the different forms of government". (Foucault, 2007, p. 132).
4. For an illustration of the metaphor, see Book VI of *The Republic*(Plato et al., 2016). For a detailed exposition of one-dimensionality, see (Marcuse, 2013).

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