

Coming Up for Air: Feminist Views of Power Reconsidered

En créant une théorie féministe du pouvoir, on doit se demander si l'état hiérarchique traditionnel tourné vers la domination, l'exploitation et l'oppression, peut s'adapter à un exercice plus humain du pouvoir et à un changement notable du statut quo sexuel.

Patriarchy, whatever else it may be, is a system of human organization in which power is held by men. And although it has taken different forms in the course of human history, it has generally involved three facets. First, some men hold power over other men — older over younger, richer over poorer. Second, most men hold power over most women. Third, men hold power over children — a power which is frequently shared with women in some ways in many societies. While feminists have expended enormous efforts in their struggle to lay bare the causes of male domination, we have, as a movement, failed to come to grips with the character of power and power relationships except to assign normative labels such as 'problematic but inevitable' or 'male-devised and contaminating.' Both at the level of theory and at the level of strategy and tactics, the movement badly needs the chance to come up for air and to assess our theories of power. It is hoped that this brief overview of where we stand and where we might go will stimulate some discussion.

It is important to start with the realization that feminist views of power and power relationships may well be as distorted as patriarchal views. If this is the case, it would help us to understand our current difficulties in dealing with crucial issues

movement and thus ought to be supported. Similarly, the fact that many women who have rejected the legislative project have welcomed the formation of the Feminist Party of Canada suggests a deep ambivalence towards the non-coercive aspects of organized state power as well.

With these recent issues as a backdrop, I propose to briefly examine the core ideas concerning power and power relationships within the three strains of feminist thought which we find in North America. Then I would like to begin to outline some aspects of a theory of power which I believe could focus feminist theory and strategy more effectively.

It is characteristic in political discourse for partisans of whatever stripe to take an imperialistic approach to key words and concepts. We have only to view the global fight over the term 'democratic', which is claimed by western and communist camps alike, to appreciate the point. The same fate has overtaken the word 'feminist', which is a label applied indiscriminately by those who defend the sexual *status quo* and guarded jealously by groups within the movement who would deny its use to women who do not share all of their ideas and goals. As we examine the character of the different strains of

'IF ELECTIONS CHANGED THE SYSTEM, THEY'D BE ILLEGAL.'

which affect our individual and collective futures. Two issues have surfaced in recent months which strike me as indicators of our inability, as a movement, to deal effectively with the problem of power and power relationships. The first is the debate among feminists in the United States concerning an appropriate response to the proposal to draft women for non-combat military service. The responses ranged from demands that women also be drafted for combat roles, to the view that a draft for military service for anyone must be something that 'true' feminists reject. The fact that this issue focuses on the coercive element of organized state power, which would be used in times of war, makes it a particularly significant test of our ability to formulate a coherent feminist theory of power. The recruitment of women into police forces, another manifestation of the coercive element of organized state power, has in contrast been uncontroversial among feminists in North America. This indicates that our views of power do not fall simply into the category of anarchism, as it is generally understood.

The second issue which has surfaced in both Canada and the U.S. involves the movement's attitude towards the 'get more women elected' project and, in Canada, towards the organization of the Feminist Party of Canada. A wall poster appeared during the recent federal election which read, 'If elections changed the system, they'd be illegal.' This poster was signed with a feminist symbol. It challenged an earlier tacit understanding that, while getting more women elected is no more likely to achieve full equality than winning the vote, the project is not counter-productive to goals which are shared within the

feminist thought, moreover, we find that the litmus test of feminism is more frequently a feminist's view of power and power relationships than of any other substantive issue. In an attempt to sort out these views as they operate within both the public and the academic arenas, I have found it useful to adopt three typologies which distinguish between feminists primarily on the basis of their attitudes towards power and power relationships. The three are liberal feminism, socialist or marxist feminism and radical feminism.

Liberal feminism is characterized by views of power and power relationships drawn from liberal ideology as it has developed in the past four centuries.¹ Feminists from other strains frequently argue that liberal feminists aren't feminists at all, and some liberal feminists are eager to escape the label because they feel it hinders them in their work to achieve change.² In general, liberal feminists employ the potentially (and historically) radical aspects of liberal thought concerning legal equality and true equality of opportunity in their arguments against the sexual *status quo*, while accepting the inevitability of organized state power, elite dominance (although with female members), and the continuance of hierarchically arranged power relationships with some element of coercion. Liberal feminists do not accept the premise of marxist feminists that the state could 'wither away', under any circumstances. Nor do they accept the radical feminist view that coercion and hierarchy are characteristics of male nature only, and that the feminization of society would render them unnecessary.³ Liberal feminists believe that it is human nature (male and female) to be more self-interested than

Jill McCalla Vickers

altruistic, and that the human condition (for men and women) will always involve some measure of scarcity of necessary and desirable things — either within our societies, or globally, if we have exported our scarcity to other nations. Given the belief that it is these qualities and circumstances which produce competition, conflict, and war (or at least the potential for war) and that they are human and not just male qualities and circumstances, liberal feminists believe that the collective power of the community (organized as state power in both its coercive and non-coercive aspects) will always be needed.

Liberal feminists, therefore, believe that while the *character* of state power and of both public and private power relationships will be changed when men share power with women, they tend to view as utopian and counter-productive the insistence of other feminists that the very existence of state power and of hierarchical power relationships involving dominance must be questioned and challenged. With reference to our background issues, they tend to make a distinction between the use of power and the abuse of power and to believe that the presence of women, whether in armies or in legislatures, will limit the abuse of power while ensuring its use to improve the human condition.

Socialist or marxist feminists have tended to work within the theoretical and strategic frameworks of marxist analysis when it comes to issues of power and power relationships. Few would argue that it is unnecessary to seize state power in order to abolish its coercive aspects. Equally few, however, would now accept the premise of traditional marxism that the liberation of women will somehow 'automatically' follow the establishment of communism. Most have placed their emphasis on the development of theoretical critiques of the limited marxist explanation of the *causes* of the oppression of women; and have offered the strategic insights that (1) women must be actively involved in any revolutionary struggle if they are to struggle successfully for their own full liberation in the post-revolutionary period, and (2) that the elimination of women's economic exploitation may well be insufficient to liberate women fully; in either the public or the private spheres. As a rule, however, the issues of power and power relationships have not been addressed from a feminist stance within this strain.

In general, both liberal and socialist or marxist feminists have accepted the need for a structured hierarchy and for leadership roles within their own groups and movements. Liberal feminists have accepted such structures as permanent features of organized groups, although they have also adopted some of the techniques of consciousness-raising groups⁴ which de-emphasize structure and leadership to encourage the development of assertiveness on the part of women whose usual experiences preclude the acquisition of leadership skills. Socialist feminists have been concerned with the inferior position assigned to women within their broader movements, but have rarely challenged the existence of some form of leadership hierarchy, provided that women are not excluded from it.

While liberal feminism and socialist or marxist feminism are ideologically derivative from the movements they support and criticize, radical feminism is both unique and truly radical, in the sense of going 'to the roots.' Its initial starting point was a contemporary extension of the 'maternal feminism'⁵ of the first women's movement in North America, a movement which sought to blanket the corrupt and violent world of male wars and male politics with the morally superior views of women who knew better because they nurtured life. Of course, a split between liberal women and maternal feminists existed within the first movement as it does today. The interesting thing is the continuity between turn-of-the-century maternal feminist views of power and power relationships and the modern version. The substance of the earlier view is found in the following statement by Elizabeth Cady Stanton:

The male element is the destructive force, stern, selfish, aggrandizing, loving war, violence, conquest, acquisition, breeding in the material and moral world alike discord, disorder, disease and death. . . The need of this hour is not territory, goldmines, railroads or specie payments, but a new evangel of womanhood to exalt purity, virtue, morality, true religion, to lift man up into the higher realms of thought and action.⁶

In a less gory and grandiose way, Mary Austin in 1918 took aim at the second hated feature of organized power (second only after war) — the political party: 'Party politics is an expression, in groups of organization, of the masculine temperament. Political ideas seldom do develop within a party.'⁷ We could find ample parallels for each of these views, and for others in the same vein, in modern radical feminism. Rather more interesting, however, are the images of power and power relationships which emerge from the utopian literature to which radical feminism has so richly contributed.

Two traditions have emerged in radical feminism — both of which illustrate well its dominant attitude towards power and power relationships. The first is the long and distinguished line of utopian books led by Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, which not only challenges the inevitability of organized state power, classes, parties and wars but also challenges the inevitability of women physically and socially bearing the brunt of human reproduction, which she identifies with woman's oppression. A similar, more recent work, Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, is equally radical in its refusal to accept as 'given' any current or historical feature of human social organization. In a very real sense, then, these works are radical, and as such they can provide an enormous impetus to radical theorizing. Each author calls for the most revolutionary alteration in the sexual *status quo*. Neither offers the slightest insight as to how such a revolution might take place or be organized. Each seems aware of the enormous weight of state power (not to speak of private power) ranged against her solutions. Neither suggests how this power might be confronted or circumvented.

Male visions of matriarchy have always conjured up what authors took to be women's suppressed capacity for violence and revenge. From Plato's Amazons, to 'the monstrous regiment of women,' to the Red Queen encountered by poor, shrunken Alice, women in power have been assumed by men to be capable of the worst abuses of power. Women, on the other hand, have tended to de-politicize (in the word's traditional sense) other women in power, whether encountered in reality or myth. Sarah Pomeroy, for example, views the ancient myth of blood-thirsty Amazon matriarchs simply as a reflection of the Greek man's recurrent nightmare that, if given the chance, women would turn the tables and dominate men as brutally as they had been dominated.⁸

Recent discussions of matriarchy, whether historically oriented or futuristic in tone, display a mirror-image of the male versions. Whether matriarchies are, in fact, in the realm of fact or myth is irrelevant for our purposes since both treatments assume the *absence* of coercive state power, war, and domination. Treatments such as Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex* hedge the issue of women actually using force to establish matriarchies should men decline to surrender power peacefully.⁹ Similarly, theorists of some prehistoric matriarchy fail to explain the dynamics of its supposed violent fall. Is the presumption that women are morally unwilling to use coercion or that they are biologically unable to do so? Even the few treatments of these issues which do envision women using force — such as the 1967 SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto written by Valerie Solanis — fail to offer a realistic understanding of the nature of power and power relationships. Solanis suggests we establish a

matriarchy by physically eliminating men except for the few required for reproduction, but she fails to outline how we might do so just as Firestone fails to discuss how we might take control of the reproductive technology so central to her solution.

At the practical political level as well, radical feminism has been unique and courageous in its refusal to accept things as natural. While repugnant to some women, separatism with both lesbian and counter-culture implications presents a truly radical challenge to the sexual *status quo*. Its characterization of power and power relationships, however, is as naive or far-seeing (depending on your point of view) as the maternal feminism of the movement's first phase.

It is always disturbing to have something you said in print quoted at you after the passage of years. I had gotten to this point in the present article, having almost despaired of ever answering the question of whether the radical feminists are indeed naive or truly radical in their views of power and power relationships. Huguette Dagenais's quoting of me to me, as it were, in her analysis of the slow pace of social change for Québec women, shook me from my theoretical wanderings and brought me back once again to the firm ground on which I can 'come up for air'.¹⁰ I began my personal survey of feminist views on power and power relationships with the conviction that you must organize to gain control of state power in contemporary state-organized societies even if it is your goal to dismantle state power and to eliminate hierarchical relations of dominance. My wanderings through the very rich analyses of feminism, however, led me to realize that without a feminist theory of power, we will never create the 'New Kind of Power' called for by Rosemary Brown¹¹ and other far-seeing feminists whose words and deeds reveal that women can exercise power over us, but with a power we accept without coercion because of our respect and admiration for a leader's competence and wisdom.

Power, we are told by its classic theorist Machiavelli, ultimately rests upon the consent — active or tacit — of the people over whom you have power. To Machiavelli, state power involved at least tacit consent, but that 'consent' was also related to the economical use of power as a 'damage control mechanism' which was there in the background and which reinforced power based on habit or respect. It seems to me that state power is based solely on force and the fear of force, which radical feminists have rightly rejected as part of their matriarchal visions. It is power that permits domination and exploitation, and which women, with their memories and experiences of being dominated and exploited, must question. This having been said, we must examine other possible bases for power and search our own experiences, especially our power relationships with our children, to begin to distinguish between the uses and the abuses of power.

Feminist anthropology has revealed with increasing clarity that those societies in which women enjoyed equal or close-to-equal power with men existed without a state organization of power.¹² It also illustrates the likelihood that primitive peoples did not organize their world into the sorts of power domains involving dominance, oppression and exploitation that we have come to take almost for granted. And yet every group of people, however simply organized, has had to develop some method for performing various key activities that in state societies are associated with power structures and relationships. Although the following is not an exhaustive list, each activity discussed below is evident in ethnological and/or anthropological accounts of pre-state societies:

(1) *Leadership* Even in pre-human primate groups, the fact of group movement requires an individual to lead the group's movement. While the development of speech makes discussion of group activities possible, many activities appear to require leading. Nor is leading necessarily an activity that involves dominance or coercion — witness our relationships with our children, in which our leading is accepted because of our

experience with the terrain. Similarly, experience and expertise will persuade us to accept the leading of guides because of our desire to share expertise, ensure our safety, and so on.

(2) *Decision-making* A more complex and more general version of leading, decision-making is also a feature of group life. Once again, it does not necessarily involve dominance, coercion or the exploitation of those who are excluded from the process or whose opinions do not prevail. Non-coercive power may be accorded to decision-makers because of their wisdom and expertise and because of their talents in persuading people to cooperate.

(3) *Resource Allocation* As long as some measure of scarcity prevails, every group will have to face the issue of allocating necessary and desirable goods. In relatively simple economies, self-provision may be the rule. In more complex economies, the striking of some priorities will be required. Once again, it is not necessary to assume that unequal allocations are inevitably exploitive, necessitating coercive enforcement. I do not allocate the same portion of food to each member of my family because their caloric needs differ.

(4) *Protection* The environment presents hazards against which we must organize some sort of protection. Clearly, simple societies do not organize their protective forces into police and military entities. They do, however, organize their collective power and wits to ensure protection — especially of the young.

(5) *Dispute Settlement* However altruistic we consider human nature, it is clear that disputes will arise in any human group. Hence, all societies will require some method of resolving disputes, though such a method may be informal and non-coercive.

(6) *Rule Making and Enforcement* The performance of these activities may be viewed in terms of a continuum very similar to that which can be observed in child rearing. Simple societies display no formal rule-making structures; instead, the subtle but persuasive force of custom prevails. Similarly, enforcement will tend to take the form of group pressure rather than coercion or punishment. State societies display formal rule-making procedures with formal coercive and punishment measures. Obviously, there are a number of variations possible along the continuum. Equally clearly, however, all groups have some method of making rules (however simple), and of ensuring some measure of compliance with them.

Each of these activities can be partly understood in the context of our own experiences, especially our relationships with our children. Looking at these experiences can help us to distinguish between power and its use or abuse. Good parenting, for example, involves persuading our children to acknowledge and respect our power over some aspects of their lives (however temporarily), because we have the wisdom and/or knowledge to lead them, make decisions, protect them and the like. Good parenting also involves the process of rearing children to the point where they can perform these activities for themselves, although they may continue to accord us power over some aspects of their lives where we continue to have superior wisdom or knowledge even into adulthood.

It is also important to realize that the performance of some of these activities may involve the use of force. None of us, for example, would stop to explain our actions to a child in the path of an on-coming car. We would command the child (hoping for reactive obedience) or we would physically remove her from the street. Nor would many of us stop to quibble about the morality of using force if our lives or those of our children were physically threatened by intruders. In short, the issues involved in a feminist theory of power are not simply the excellence of non-coercive power and the repugnance of coercive power.

In pre-state societies, involvement in any of the activities described above could confer power on participants without that power necessarily implying dominance, exploitation, or oppression in the resulting power relationships. In addition, power based on respect or affection could also confer status on the

individual. Perhaps because our perceptions come out of a state society, we are suspicious of all power and status hierarchies because they generally imply dominance, exploitation and oppression. Accepting the leadership of someone whose competence and/or wisdom I respect, however, does not need to imply dominance on the leader's part and passive or coerced submission on my part. Nor need it be seen simply as a con game to permit the leader to exploit or oppress me. It may be genuinely to my advantage to accept someone else's lead, and it may be genuinely to the leader's disadvantage.

However useful this kind of reanalysis of power and power relationships may be for feminist theory, it may avoid the key issues for feminist strategy. While many power holders in state societies may acquire power initially for reasons of competence and respect, many others obtain power because of their recruitment into state organizations in which dominance is an accepted part of power relationships. Lord Acton has told us that 'power corrupts', that those who gain power for whatever reason must be distrusted. A contemporary feminist observer on the other hand has commented that:

some women in some positions of power, may be able to reject megalomania without allowing themselves to be shunted into illusory. . . or peripheral forms of power. If women cultivate. . . their dearly bought insights into the abuse of power. . . it may be possible to make some progress toward detaching the ego from power and experimenting with more humane and liberating uses of power.¹³

Clearly, our approach to power and especially to women power-holders must be realistic. We need not reject the 'get-more-women-elected' project because we fear that all women power holders will be corrupted by power and lost to the feminist fight against the sexual *status quo*. While the nature of the lives of those who hold public power in complex societies — legislators, judges, and bureaucrats, for example — has a tendency to isolate them from the realities of everyday lives, enough examples exist of women who don't forget 'their dearly bought insights into the abuse of power' to suggest that a new kind and more humane use of power could emerge.

In the final analysis, feminists must face squarely this question of whether the highly concentrated power hierarchies of state societies — organized as they are to permit dominance, exploitation and oppression — will permit the emergence of a new kind of power even if we can formulate it fully and coherently. While feminist research and analysis has shown that much of the regulation and enforcement that exists is not necessary to social cohesion, it profits (in many senses of that word) dominant groups in society who are unlikely to surrender their advantage peacefully. If and when feminists determine that state societies cannot or will not accommodate a new kind of power and substantial changes in the sexual *status quo* they must, in their calls for revolution, face squarely the problem of how the concentrated power of such societies might successfully be challenged. They must accept the fact that violence may be a necessary part of a feminist theory of power. For myself, I tend to think that Mark Twain's view of revolution is not an inappropriate one for a serious feminist to adopt. To paraphrase, he said, 'When I'd rather see my baby on the bayonet than living in the society I oppose, I'll know that I'm a revolutionary at last.' ©

¹ This does not mean that they all operate within liberal political parties. Given the hegemonic character of liberal ideology in North America, they may well operate in any centre, right-of-centre or left-of-centre party. Truly conservative women, on the other hand, who are supporters of the sexual *status quo*, are in no sense feminists and would likely be found in the Anti-ERA or 'fascinating womanhood' camps if they are politically active.

² I am using the term 'feminist' to describe any person who rejects the sexual *status quo*, regardless of his or her views on power and power relationships.

³ The linkage I am drawing between the 'maternal feminism' of the first movement and the radical feminist strain of thought in the current movement is not obvious unless attitudes towards power, power relationships, war and political parties are explored. For ideas on an alternate female political culture, see Thelma McCormack, 'Toward a Non-Sexist Perspective on Social and Political Change', in Millman and Kanter, eds., *Another Voice* (New York, 1975), pp. 1-33.

⁴ For an expansion, see Nancy McWilliams, 'Feminism, Consciousness Raising and Changing Views of the Political', and Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness'. These are chapters 9 and 11 respectively in Jane S.-Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (New York, 1974).

⁵ For an outline of the character of 'maternal feminism' in Canada see D. Gorham, 'The Canadian Suffragists', in Gwen Matheson, ed., *Women in the Canadian Mosaic* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 23-56. For the United States, see Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1899-1929* (New York, 1965).

⁶ Quoted in Elshtain, 'Moral Woman and Immoral Man: A Consideration of the Private-Public Split and Its Political Ramifications', *Politics and Society* 4, no. 4 (1975): 463-464.

⁷ From *The Young Woman Citizen*, quoted in Virginia Sapiro, 'You Can Lead a Lady to the Vote, But What Will She Do with It? The Problem of a Woman's Bloc Vote', *New Research on Women and Sex Roles* (Michigan, 1974).

⁸ See S. Pomeroy's treatment in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1975), especially ch. VI.

⁹ For a survey of the matriarchy debate, see Paula Webster, 'Matriarchy: A Vision of Power' in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975), pp. 141-156. Also, Reiter's 'Introduction' deals with the power and dominance issue from an anthropological perspective.

¹⁰ The quote which made me 'come up for air' was '... political and economic power are the critical tools both for those who wish to perpetuate existing social arrangements and for those who wish to change them,' (from *But Can You Type?*). While my wanderings through feminist thought concerning power have made me formulate what sort of power, and distinguish between its use and abuse, I continue to believe that major changes in state societies require the acquisition of power, whether by peaceful or violent means.

¹¹ See Rosemary Brown, 'A New Kind of Power' in Matheson, ed., *Women in the Canadian Mosaic*, pp. 289-300. Brown's power to lead within the social democratic movement in Canada is clearly based on non-coercive factors.

¹² See Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*.

¹³ Barbara Watson, 'On Power and the Literary Text,' *SIGNS, Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1975): 111-118. See also Elizabeth Janeway, 'On the Power of the Weak,' *SIGNS* 1, no. 1: 103-109.

