

Foucault between men and women, in dismissing



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Foucault talks widely and very convincingly about how it is that power is produced and reproduced in western society however because he power and knowledge as mutually dependent, and the mechanisms of modern disciplinary power as held up by the theory of sovereignty (Foucault, 1980) he reaches the conclusion that there is no real escape from power relations. In a similar way, whilst Millett is capable of arguing very successfully that our society is built upon a patriarchal ideology that produces and reproduces a power difference between men and women, in dismissing other forms of prejudice as equal to sexism she seems to imply that it isn't the existence of power relations that is in itself wrong but the hierarchy of modern power relations. As such this essay will first start by exploring the differing concepts of power they both have regarding knowledge and power being something historically defined for Foucault and patriarchy or sex domination defining power for Millett. I will then move on to looking at where they think the origins of these types of power lie, being within culture as opposed to nature for Millett and a theory of sovereignty developed from justifying the absolute power of the monarch for Foucault. I will then finally look at specific criticisms regarding the breadth of applicability of their theories to different social groups such as women for Foucault and different classes and races for Millett, to conclude that whilst both of these thinkers have strongly developed conceptions of what power relations define modern society, neither of them is capable of creating a full theory of the production and reproduction of power due to them both missing out key areas which power relations are very apparent.

In order to give an appropriate analysis of how it is these thinkers see power as being produced and reproduced it is important to fully understand what it is that they are referring to when they talk of power. Foucault's analysis of power is primarily concerned with criticising the way in which power has up until now been conceptualised; far from being domination or repression he saw power as something which produces the reality that we live in through its various forms (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 64). Power has traditionally been viewed as something localised that can be held by specific individuals (and indeed to some degree transferred) (Foucault, 1980, p. 98) But Foucault fundamentally takes the view that in analysing power we must see it as "something which circulates"(Foucault, 1980, p.

98) which as opposed to being enacted from a central part of society in actuality acts at its peripheries. Foucault introduces the concept that power is not a fixed entity and instead what we mean by it needs to be differentiated historically (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 63), and it is through looking at this conception that we can get a clear definition of what Foucault means when he talks about power. Firstly and perhaps most importantly he makes the assertion that " We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.

" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93) and by this means that the existence of ' truth' or ' knowledge' within any culture is part of that culture implementing rules that go in line with this knowledge. On the other hand, he would define power by its mechanisms and argues that historically there are two distinct forms which power has taken since the medieval period; sovereign and disciplinary

power. (Foucault, 1980) Sovereign power, which is concerned with the relationship between the existence of an absolute power such as a monarch and those subject to the will of this monarch and disciplinary power which, is maintained through a “tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign” (Foucault, 1980, p. 104). When we look at the way Foucault’s conception of power ties into the fundamental way that society is structured it becomes prudent to make an obvious connection with Millett’s conception of power; patriarchy, which she defines as a system of male dominance (Millett, 2000, p. 25).

Whilst it might be a little oversimplistic to state that when Millett talks of power all she is talking about is patriarchy this is where she thinks power is most obvious in society and therefore the best place for us to analyse what power relations really are; “However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.” (Millett, 2000, p. 25). She asserts that patriarchy is seen as a natural fact as opposed to an ideology, and it is this ignorance to its true nature that helps to maintain it (Millett, 2000) This view has striking parallels to Althusser’s argument that the nature of ideology is that “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology” (Althusser, 1971, p.

23). In regards to the ideology of patriarchy the notion of gender identity is a concept fundamental to Millett’s thinking in *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 2000). Not only does she talk of power in terms of sex domination, she talks of power as existing within the notions of masculinity and femininity in that “

aggressiveness” is considered a masculine quality and this by nature places it as a force of domination (Millet, 2000, p. 32).

It would be a mistake when talking about her conception of power to not give space to how she considered masculinity and sexual domination to interact; whilst the act of sex “ appears a biological and physical activity” (Millet, 2000, p. 23) there are many points in which she is primarily concerned with how sex holds up the idea of physical domination, and how for men it is often a violent act. She criticises heavily male sex novels by looking at them in the context of power as she saw the violence and domination within them as clear (Millet, 2000, pp. 45-46). It is along this vein that Jeffreys (2011) even extends this to look at the introduction of “ scatological language” in literature with reference to Millet’s arguments, and how this came under the guise of being modern and liberated but in actuality represents a view of sex as something violent or disgusting. For Millet the ideological system of patriarchy is incredibly present in thought surrounding biological distinctions between men and women, she however argues that it is not categorical differences between men and women that have caused a system of patriarchy within our society but the system of patriarchy that has caused this categorical view of a strong biological gender difference within society. (Millet, 2000, pp. 26-27) She provides us with numerous reasons to believe that the origins of patriarchy does not lie in nature, but perhaps the most important reason given modern evidence would be where she suggests in her footnotes that “ Given the simpler scale of life and the fact that female-centred fertility religion might be offset by male physical strength, pre-patriarchy might have been fairly equalitarian.

” (Millett, 2000, p. 28). What is interesting about this speculation on her part is how it seems to align with evidence that has become available to us in recent years. When Millett was writing the standard model for prehistoric human society was patriarchal as this aligned with modern society, however in the past few years studies done on current hunter-gatherer tribes as well as computer modelling have shown that it far more likely that men and women were fairly equal in early history (Devlin, 2015). The significance of modern evidence like this in relation to Millett’s work is that it backs up her assertion that views regarding gender difference at the time were not based in science. She argued that there just wasn’t the evidence available to say that observed differences were innate and that as such the popular view of this difference was entirely based around ideology as opposed to factual evidence. (Millett, 2000, p.

29) In light of this the most obvious answer to the question of what produces the power relations between men and women for her if not biology is that they must be culturally created and sustained. (Millett, 2000, p. 27) The origins of power in Foucault’s political philosophy are somewhat more complicated, as previously stated in this essay his conception of power had strong links to the idea that power and knowledge are massively intertwined. With reference to his concept of ‘ subjugated knowledge’ (Foucault, 1980, pp. 83-85) we can see clearly that he is primarily concerned with producing a method to combat a “ unitary body of theory” (Foucault, 1980, p. 83) in to make it possible to oppose ‘ the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse.’ (Foucault, 1980, p.

85) and what he means by this is that society is currently structured around a “theory of right”(Foucault, 1980 p. 95) which he later terms the “juridical-political theory of sovereignty” (Foucault, 1980, p. 103).

As power is historically defined for him it is the modern system of disciplinary power which it is prudent to discuss the origins of. Foucault argues that the entire legal system is structured around the rights of the monarch and this has been the case since the medieval period, and as a result the entire legal theory surrounding the concept of sovereignty has been aimed at fixing the “legitimacy of power”. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 94-95) He then extends this and says the current system of disciplinary power was created in the 17th and 18th centuries and a legal code centred around the theory of sovereignty has by guaranteeing everyone their “proper sovereign rights” has upheld the system of disciplinary power inherent in the fabric of modern society.

(Foucault, 1980, pp. 104-106). A clear problem of Foucault’s philosophy he brings up himself is that this concept of power leaves us in a “blind alley” (Foucault, 1980, p.

108) where we can’t escape power because every attempt to do so brings reference to the concept of sovereignty which in itself is upholds the power of the social and legal body. But it is my view that this problem relates largely to his attempt to ensure he does not through his methods create his own “unitary discourse” (Foucault, 1980, p. 86). His wish to define power and knowledge as utterly related means that any conception one has of their own position is in and of itself part of a unitary theory of knowledge; if the concept of repression is a “juridical-disciplinary” one as he states (Foucault,

1980, p. 106) he is immediately placing hierarchizing any differing perspective of it as less than and ' subjugating' knowledge of it. His work is riddled with contradictions like this as writers like Fraser (1989) have picked up on when she for example argues that " part of the problem is that Foucault calls too many different sorts of things power and simply leaves it at that.

" (Fraser, 1989, p. 32), meaning because he places any possible social constraint within the realm of power relations, and he argues against hierarchizing knowledge " all forms of power to him are normatively equivalent." (Fraser, 1989, p. 32). To Foucault nothing we can say or do can aid our situation in regards to power relations because our conception of these power relations is a fundamental part of them. Another significant criticism one might make of Foucault's philosophy in regards to power is an apparent " gender blindness" as McNay (1992, pp. 32-33) put it. But he isn't without importance to feminist ideology, and specifically in regards to his view that biological sex is a constructed category aimed at controlling sexuality as indicated by the quote" We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency which secondarily produces manifold effects of sexuality over the entire length of its surface contact with power.

On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forced, energies, sensations, and pleasures." (Foucault cited in McNay, 1992, p. 29) he is of great import. In taking this view it is clear why he would treat, throughout his work, the body

as something in basis gender neutral, however a very significant criticism of him arguing in this manner whether or not one agrees with his notion of the social construction of sex is that as a result he fails to show differentiation between how men and women relate to institutions in modern society (Bartky cited in McNay, 1992, p.

33). This criticism is particularly damaging to Foucault's theories of how power is produced and reproduced in modern society in the main part because he fails to look at in any depth the ways in which the definition of femininity put onto women has forced their knowledges to be 'subjugated' in ways incredibly similar to the subjugated knowledges he himself talks of (Foucault, 1980, p. 81-83). Being male himself and being part of a canon of literature highly dominated by men he fails to really address how the mechanisms of power he highlights might affect women and instead largely talks about the subjection of individuals in a manner common to men, but relating this to all society. A clear example of where this silence on the issue of gender is significant lies in his analysis of prison regimes. O'Brien (cited in McNay, 1992, p. 34) argues that in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) he does not consider at all how constructions of masculinity and femininity have created differences in the way male and female prisoners are treated.

This is clearly significant when we look at research on the differences in prison subcultures for men and women (Bowker 1981). It seems that whilst it is clear that Foucault's work has been very significant in some respects for feminist theory in regards to conceptualisation of sex as cultural rather than natural, it is also apparent that his work lacks extension across gendered

bounds because of this conception and thus his ideas surrounding power relations are lacking in a very significant manner. In a similar way a large criticism one can draw on in Millett's theory is how it seems to dismiss considerations of class and race in favour of placing sex as the key social divider in western society. bell hooks has significant views in regards to how feminism within american culture has been capable of dismissing race as important for feminism in favour of presenting ideology that claims to be about women as a whole but really only talk about the experiences of white women. (hooks, 1990, pp. 121-122, p. 138).

Whilst it is true that Millett does mention the experiences of black americans on multiple occasions in *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 2000, pp. 38-58) she often does so in order to make an analogy between the plight of the white american women and the black american male. bell hooks specifically brings up the issue of this occurring in feminist literature when she states " A white woman who has suffered physical abuse and assault from a husband or lover, who also suffers poverty, need not compare her lot to that of a suffering black person to emphasise she is in pain." (hooks, 1990, p.

142) arguing that this comparison really only attempts to show the injustice of placing white women on the same level as black men, which in itself implies a less-than view of them. When making assertions of the position of women in society Millett seems to imply she is talking broadly for all women, and Mohanty (2003) argues that the massive issue with doing so is that it " implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy that can be applied universally and cross-culturally." (Mohanty, 2003, p. 21) arguing that this kind of argument isn't aimed at looking at the subjugation of

women in a specific context but instead to find “ a variety of cases of powerless groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 23). It is my view that in making it clear she thinks patriarchy is the deepest and most important example of power relations in society she isn't in actuality presenting any point that shows there class and race divisions aren't massively built into the fabric of western society, but instead showing that she believes sex divisions are more important than those of race and class. It is clear that she believes this when she states “ Perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity.

A referent scarcely exist with which is might be contrasted or by which it might be confuted. While the same might be said of class, patriarchy has a still more tenacious and powerful hold through it's successful habit of passing itself off as nature.” (Millett, 2000, p. 58) which to many degrees indicates that she sees class at least as being as woven into society as patriarchy but, due to the nature of patriarchy, it isn't as important. When we look at how both of these thinkers define power relations in society there is clear reason to agree with the stances they take.

This is backed up very strongly by their examination of the conditions that have led to the production and reproduction of these kinds of power in society, however when it comes to examining key demographics which they pay little to no attention to in regards to their theories as a whole it becomes clear that they lack significant development of their theories so as to expand them to all facets of society. Based on this this essay has to conclude that whilst there is great value and importance in the writings and analysis of

Millett and Foucault in terms of the production and reproduction of power in their specific areas of concern, neither of them produce a theory which is applicable to modern society as a whole.