

Why has patriarchy proved such a contentious issue for feminism essay



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People who challenge patriarchy from the point of view of human society are not engaged in waging a campaign against the family form as such, but are engaged in a campaign to reform it so that it moves from being a patriarchy to becoming somewhat less authoritarian. In like fashion, the newly participant rights holder (the new civilian) who challenges the customary structure of tribal authority is not seeking to destroy the family, tribe, nation, church, or state.

In every case, what happens is that as they become participants in human society, this entails them in a project to reform these other social institutions in ways that will acknowledge them as holders of basic human rights. In sum, then, joining human society does not need or entail anything so drastic as divorce, detribalization, refusal of the nation, or immigration. Civilians seek transformation not victory. A major trait of human society is that it creates a space within which participants and non-participants alike can take on in a certain kind of politics – a politics prior to the polis, a politics before the state.

The fundamental freedoms which civilians accord to one another and to non-participants, too, gives to everybody a protected space from which they may decisively discuss the social institutions within which they live. It provides them with a space from within which they can think alternative social and political arrangements. The types of social arrangements which may come up for discussion include social units such as families, firms, churches, states and global organizations.

From the point of view of civil society, no societal arrangements, including human society itself, are off limits for discussion within the forum formed by this society. Human society creates the possibility for politics understood as an assured kind of activity. It creates space for politics understood as critical conversation between people concerning the basic rules of association which hold between them. This is politics as it was understood by, amongst others, Aristotle, Bernard Crick and Michael Oakeshott. This view of politics, I believe, accords quite strictly with our ordinary language use of the term.

We often reserve our use of the term 'politics' for those occasions on which people who are participant in several practice turn to discussing (often disputing) the basic rules of relationship within that practice. Thus, within the family in day-to-day life we do not say that all which takes place is politics, but when patriarchy becomes an issue and women seek to change the essential authority structure, we would recognize this as an exercise in politics – it is politics in that it entails a challenge to the basic rules of that association.

In like fashion, the usual functioning of a firm is for the most part apolitical, but while the issue is raised about worker participation in management, this we regard as company politics. Much everyday administration within states may be considered apolitical, but when decisions concerning the laws of the land are to be made (whether in the sphere of ordinary legislation or with regard to constitutional issues) then politics takes place.

Similarly, in the international sphere much day-to-day interaction (trade, communication, sporting contact, tourism, etc. is apolitical, but when the '

underdeveloped' states seek to set up a new international economic order, this must be seen as an attempt to have the fundamental rules of association changed, and may thus be seen as an exercise of politics. Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* (1970) is much more important. Mainly includes detailed description of instances of power inequality in male-female sexual relations , as presented in the literature of Norman Mailer and Jean Genet.

But Millett's work is much more than this. It is analytical, and in her development of a ' Theory of Sexual Politics', she provides an very useful introduction to the understanding of power in relations between men and women (and between men), focusing on the mechanisms by which such power relations are both constructed and retained. She shows how these power relations are acted out explicitly in the sex act

Millett's work may be seen to form the basis of fundamental and revolutionary feminist approaches which seek to theories the social construction of men's and women's sexualities , the role that such constructs play in the social power of women, and, directly related to these points, the matter of violence against women. These are issues which have taken an increasingly prominent position in more current feminist literature . In particular, Millett's work inspires the framework of theorizing women's oppression which revolutionary feminists have adopted and developed further .

Millett begins her analysis, what she calls her ' notes toward a theory of patriarchy', by defining the relationship between the sexes as political. It is political because it is a power relationship, and involves the notion of ' power

over others' (Millett 1970: 24). For Millett, men are the groups who have power over women by virtue of their birthright as male, circumstances that are virtually unique in comparison to other inequalities such as economic class and race, and also very durable.

Yet male power is ideologically constructed rather than biological or 'natural'. This is significant because, while male supremacy might appear to rest on the physical strength of the male, it in fact rests on a particular value system: the political creed of male supremacy where men have power over women by virtue of being perceived as superior—biologically or otherwise. As Millett explains: Superior physical strength is not a factor in political relations—vides those of race and class.

Civilization has always been able to substitute other methods (technical, weaponry, knowledge) for those of physical strength, and contemporary civilization has no further need of it. At present, as in the past, physical exertion is very generally a class factor, those at the bottom performing the most strenuous tasks, whether they are strong or not (Millett 1970: 27) As a political system, male supremacy has to be upheld either through consent or by force and also partly through ideological pressures.

Consent for the system is obtained by socialization of men and women into particular 'temperament, role and status' (Millett 1970: 26). Following on from these categories are the equivalent sex roles which place women in the domestic setting joined to her biological experience. Flowing from temperament and role is status which in turn underlines the others.

Sexuality, both male and female, is significant to Millett's analysis, and male-female power relations are acted out in the heterosexual act.

Referring to anthropological material, she shows how men's and women's sexualities are professed very differently. Women's sexual functions are usually seen as 'impure' and negative and to be controlled. Men's sexuality on the other hand, is typically portrayed as positive, and particularly as genital in terms of the penis: 'The penis, badge of the male's superior status in both preliterate and civilized patriarchies, is given the most crucial significance, the subject both of endless boasting and endless anxiety' (Millett 1970: 47).

Compared to other systems of dominance male dominance exceptionally involves 'interior colonization' (by which she apparently means penile penetration). This is an important idea which has resurfaced in recent feminist literature, including that of revolutionary feminists (see Johnston 1973; Barry 1981; Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981). The initiative of interior colonization also links to an associated aspect of male sexuality—the idea of the penis as a weapon. To use the penis, which is probably the most susceptible part of a man's anatomy, as a weapon seems ridiculous?

But in rape that is in particular what men are doing. Millett does not say so directly, but using the penis as a weapon is possible precisely as it invades the woman's body, making her feel degraded, humiliated and powerless.

Millett uses the example of the men's houses which exist in certain cultures such as Melanesia: The tone and ethos of men's house culture is sadistic, power-oriented, and latently homosexual, frequently narcissistic in its energy

and motives. The men's house inference that the penis is a weapon, endlessly equated with other weapons, is also clear. (Millet 1970: 50)

Furthermore, sexuality in the framework of patriarchy is specifically heterosexual, even if acted out between men. This is because only heterosexual sexuality is constructed as specifically unequal. Ongoing to talk about the example of men's houses Millet explains that: The negative and militaristic coloring of such men's house homosexuality as does exist, is of course by no means the whole character of homosexual sensibility. Indeed the warrior caste of mind with its ultravirility, is more incipiently homosexual, in its exclusively male orientation, than it is overtly homosexual.

The Nazi experience is an extreme case in point here.) And the heterosexual role-playing indulged in, and still more persuasively, the contempt in which the younger, softer, or more 'feminine' members are held, is proof that the actual ethos is misogynist, or perversely rather than positively heterosexual. The true inspiration of men's house association therefore comes from the patriarchal situation rather than from any circumstances inherent in the homo-amorous relationship. (Millet 1970: 50)

On the other hand there is Carole Pateman whose "The Sexual Contract" concern there is with what she takes to be the contractual underpinnings of '[t]he major institutional bonds of civil society-citizenship, employment and marriage' (Pateman, 1988: 180) which structure Western capitalist democracies. Pateman argues that modern social contract theory 'tells a story of masculine political birth', in which the natural paternal body of Filmer's patriarchy is figuratively put to death by the contract theorists, but

the artificial body that replaces it is a construct of the mind, not the formation of a political community by real people.

The birth of a human child can turn out a new male or female, whereas the formation of civil society produces a social body fashioned after the image of only one of the two bodies of humankind, or, more precisely, after the image of the civil individual who is comprised through the original contract.

Pateman presents a challenge to the idea that the social contract institutes liberty and equality for all. Drawing attention to the third element in the Enlightenment catchcry, she argues that the new order is a fraternal order.

That it is Locke who emerges from this history as dominant, rather than the patriarchalist Filmer, must not lead us to assume that patriarchy is thereby defeated. In contrast, the victory of the sons over the father introduces a new form of patriarchy. According to Pateman, 'modern patriarchy is fraternal in form and the original contract is a fraternal pact' (Pateman, 1988: 77). Using a diversity of historical sources (including Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, Kant and Freud), Pateman argues that in the story of the brothers' defeat of the father; a critical element is missing from the narrative.

In addition to the fraternal pact made between the brothers, there is another pact, one which certain that each brother has access to a woman. In this way patriarchal sex-right, which had been wrested away from the father 'is unmitigated to all the brothers through the law of exogamy (kinship). That is, the brothers make a sexual contract. 'What Pateman variously calls 'patriarchal right', 'sex-right' or 'conjugal right' is requirement to

membership in the fraternity as ‘ only men who stand to each other as free and equal masters of “ families” can take part in the social contract.

(Pateman, 1988: 49)

However, Pateman’s reading of the social contract story as one which tells the origin of modern fraternal patriarchy stands in an uneasy relation with her analysis of actually existing modern societies based on free contract. It is by no means clear that Pateman’s retelling of the sexual/social contract story can constantly be characterized in essentialist terms. There are points in her text where she seems to be describing the views of others in these terms rather than putting forward a view of natural and unchallengeable sexual difference herself.

However, there are other points in her text where she does emerge to ground her claims concerning the very diverse civil and private status of women and men in their different biologies. Our views on whether present differences between the sexes are mainly constructed or largely natural, would (or at least should) make an massive difference to the manner in which we originate policies which seek to promote women’s fair treatment in the major social institutions of citizenship, employment and marriage.

Certainly, this is surely one of the main thrusts of Pateman’s argument: that contractarianism operates (always and everywhere) to the disadvantage of women because they are ‘ not incorporated [into the civil order] as “ individuals” but as women’. (Pateman, 1988: 181). This quotation nicely captures the multivalent status of ‘ women’ in the text. To use the term ‘

incorporated' implies that a stable entity, 'women', preexists any given civil order.

An alternative view might claim that part of what it means to be a woman in modern society is to stand in some particular relation to the civil order. That is, it is arguable that what it means to be a 'woman' is constituted or builds, at least in part, by her economic, social and political placement relative to men. Pateman has perhaps already responded to this point: '[t]o draw out the way in which the meaning of "men" and "women" has helped structure main social institutions is not to fall back on merely natural categories'.

Perhaps-but it is to neglect to question the class of sexual difference itself (men/women). This, in turn, assumes a linear chain of causality, where sexual difference, sexual relations and the sexual contract are the consecutive links which together enslave us all in the tyranny of our present social and political institutions. However, if 'women' and 'men' are themselves historical and unstable, rather than usual categories then this throws into subject the force of 'helped structure'.

Our culturally and traditionally variable understandings of what it is to be a man or a woman, what the terms 'men' and 'women' mean, are also affected by the 'major social institutions' through which and in which we live our lives. Additionally, not only are our institutions plastic but our past is open to continuous revision and retelling as our understandings of how we became what we are change. In this sense, one is confronted not so much with a 'chain of necessity', persistently linking the past with the present, as with competing 'sets of narratives' which are open to contestation.

Pateman's notion of the sexual contract, coupled with the thought that women are always incorporated into civil society as women (rather than as individuals), is significantly dependent for its consistency on theories of sexual difference that are essentialist. This permits her to condemn contractarianism per se, rather than limit herself to the historical claim that contractarianism has functioned in specific times and specific places to prohibit women from full citizenship (the privilege of the individual) even whilst admitting them to the body politic (as women, that is, wives) .

Pateman's account of the primal scene is fairly plausible in terms of that which is repressed in the social contract story, but this does not, as she sporadically implies, reveal to us the secret origin of our (repressed) history. The story of the social contract is a masculine fantasy of our origins and, arguably, Pateman has exposed it. However, once exposed it might all too easily be misunderstood as an originary truth rather than symptomatic of the wish of those who have been the narrators of this history.

Pateman concludes her argument with the claim that the stories and fictions of social/sexual contracts should be 'cast aside' if we are to 'create a free society in which women are autonomous citizens', since 'modern patriarchy did not begin with a dramatic act of contract' (Pateman, 1988: p. 220). The relation between text and world, or myth and realism, is here torn asunder- the text is that which should be cast aside. The Sexual Contract is a confusing text because Pateman does not manage to link its two parts: that which concerns social contract stories and history with that which concerns modern social institutions.

The reader is left to assume that what does link these two parts is the primal scene which dramatizes an important sexual difference. But can we cast aside these stories? Are they simply fictions which can be precisely excised from the world of fact? I think that the two parts of *The Sexual Contract* can be linked by undertaking the second moment of genealogy. Though, Millett “*Sexual Politics*” extends her analysis to social relations generally. By reference to both economic class relations and racial dissection she argues that sexual relations are the more basic, but also the least obvious.

Race, gender and economic class intersect, but in such a way that even if a woman is middle class and therefore apparently has more status and power relation to a working-class man, it is actually the man who has a higher status as of his attachment to the ‘superior’ group, men; and eventually he may use force to assert this ‘superiority’: ‘a truck driver or butcher has always his “manhood” to fall back upon. Should this final vanity be offended, he may contemplate more violent methods’ (Millett 1970: 36).

Sexual factors likewise play an intrinsic part in hierarchical relations between men, both in terms of economic class hierarchy as well as racial hierarchy. Millett’s suggestion that low-status males use masculinity as a means of showing that they are not the lowly since that is the place allotted to women. Concomittantly, high-status males place less emphasis on masculinity. Millett expresses these multifarious relations as follows: The function of class or ethnic mores in patriarchy is largely a matter of how overtly displayed or how loudly enunciated the general ethic of masculine supremacy allows itself to become.

Here one is confronted by what appears to be a paradox: while in the lower social strata, the male is more likely to claim authority on the strength of his sex rank alone, he is actually obliged more often to share power with the women of his class who are economically productive; whereas in the middle and upper classes, there is less tendency to assert a blunt patriarchal dominance, as men who enjoy such status have more power in any case.

(Millett 1970: 36)

There are also, certainly, differences between women in terms of economic class status, but Millett argues that these are less significant than those between men because, not only may a woman be reliant on a man for class status, which is an uncertain situation, but left to her own devices she is not likely to rise above working-class status and reputation. Studies done since the early 1970s on income distribution within marriage, women leaving violent partners, and the general 'feminization of poverty' provide recent proof to support this aspect of Millett's analysis .

Finally, Millett argues that 'Patriarchy's chief institution is the family' (ibid. : 33). Unfortunately she mainly bases her discussion of this on William Goode's work, *The Family* (1964), and therefore ends up arguing in a somewhat functionalist means that the main contribution of the family is the socialization of the young to fit the aspects of 'temperament', 'role' and 'status'.

Thus in her discussion of the family she loses sight of her significant analysis of male-female relations in terms of sexuality and power, and therefore does not observe the social control mechanisms acting on women in the family

through the heterosexual power relations, which she otherwise considers significant. But despite the flaw of her analysis of the family, Millett's discussion of sexuality, and in particular the role of male sexuality in retaining power over women, as well as between men, is an enormously significant analysis of the personal as political .

She suggests that these relations are more generalized than purely personal behavior and thereby outlines a theoretical framework which analyses more broadly women's oppression through male-female relations than any of the frameworks. She overcomes Walby's weak spot—the emphasis on a 'leading mode of production', substituting this instead with a more generalized and basic notion of male-female power relations.

It is also feasible to apply Millett's framework to the 'economic' example of Walby. Millett's analysis is also explicitly social, taking into account the significance of material interests, ideological factors, and the prospect of change.