The Enlightenment of Man: the Patriarchal Nature of Western Liberalism

This essay explores the western liberal traditions that arose from the enlightenment, creating societies that are dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Both the idea of a ‘social contract’ and the public/private divide that are central to western liberalism are concepts that inherently advantage those who are best able to work within the masculine structures of the modern western liberal state. This hegemon continues to use the enlightenment principles of ‘rationality’ and ‘universalism’ that has forcefully legitimised liberal thinking and social structures to maintain a position of dominance while delegitimising counter-hegemonic movements. This essay argues that a fundamental rethinking of these philosophical traditions is needed if the masculine hegemon is to be successfully challenged. This rethinking of the modern state removed from its traditional masculine structures may allow for a radically rethinking of politics to one that makes room for care and more feminised practices.

Keywords: Feminist analysis, western philosophy, private public divide, social contract, sexual contract, state, discourse, masculinity, patriarchy, gender

Introduction

Since the conception of the modern state, and arguably well before it, feminised subjects have come under the domination of hegemonic masculinity. While ever more attention is being given to the marginalisation of feminised, raced, and classed subjects by both political scholars and the wider public the dominance of hegemonic masculinity remains a large point of contention. This hegemonic masculinity has created and shaped not only our understanding of the state and its role in society, but the very structures of society, the economy, the private, and the political. While the state and societal structures that once completely excluded feminised participation go unchallenged the reign of hegemonic masculinity will continue (Beasley & Bacchi, 2010, p.339). This essay will explore the masculine nature of the state using the diverse school of feminist social and political thought. Using a variety of theories including feminist writers, post-structuralism, neo-Gramscian, and post-political analysis it will be shown how the modern state has been formed into one that continues to exclude feminised participation.
This essay will be divided into three parts. The first will explore the ways in which the state, through enlightenment thinking and structure of thought, has historically developed to favour hegemonic masculinity. In this, the manufactured divide between the private and the public will be analysed to show how masculinity has traditionally been advantaged while femininity marginalised (Walsh, 1995, p.259). The discourse around both citizenship and political participation will then uncover how certain masculine domains have been synonymised with governance and statehood. The second section of the essay will analyse how feminised participation within the state is tightly controlled and the position of masculine hegemony is maintained. Using a neo-Gramscian lens, it will be highlighted how the historical bloc gains consent from subordinate subjects to abolish any counter-hegemonic movements (Ruckert, 2007, p.94). Post-political theory will then be used to examine how issues of the state and society are forcefully removed from political contestation and legitimised by the hegemon, creating structures or solutions that are barred from criticism (Macgregor, 2014, p.619). If the masculinist state is to be successfully challenged and overthrown these insidious tools of hegemonic masculinity must be understood and countered. Lastly, this essay will explore the possible benefits that could come with a shift away from the masculinist state towards one more feminised. This change in the nature of the state would allow for a reimagination of both the political and private, allowing space for not only the feminised but other marginalised groups, whether they be ethnic, abled, or the working classes (Beasley and Bacchi, 2010, p.349). While it is overly ambitious to attempt to propose how such changes may be brought about, it will ultimately be argued that the state is undoubtedly structured and influenced by the hegemon. However, understanding why and how it is so are the first steps towards countering said hegemonic masculinity.

The State and Hegemonic Masculinity

Essential to gaining an understanding of the dominant position that masculinity holds within the state is first having an understanding of how the political structures have been created to advantage certain actors. The modern state is not only the product of the Westphalian Treaty of 1648, but also of the larger Western liberal traditions that came from the enlightenment (Lawson, 2017, p.40). These traditions, growing from the writings of western philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, not only shaped our understandings of the state, but of society too. These philosophical traditions, formulated by a white aristocratic male class, created a political subject that is expected to inherently maintain the principles of rationality, universalism, and reductionism (Jaggar, 1983, p.28). Governance, the free market, the separation of the public and private spheres, education, health and the justice system have all been influenced by these principles of the Enlightenment. These influences go beyond just the structural institutions of the state and can be explored through a post-structuralist lens to show how mainstream discourse, habitus, and cultural capital have all come under the control of hegemonic masculinity, shaping the state and the political on an even deeper level (Beasley & Bacchi, 2010, p.340). The discourses, behaviours, and cultural capital within the modern state have all developed from the existing hegemonic bloc, being formed by, and applicable to, the ‘emotional habitus’ (or
lack of) of masculinity (Thompson & Hoggett, 2012, p.6). Genuine participation in the state, the political, and society occurs within well-defined boarders with the rules of engagement having already been set. Inclusion in these spaces demand both the acceptance of the pre-existing structures and a surrendering of any counter-hegemonic beliefs or practises. Interactions between hegemonic masculinity and those who fall outside of it create a system of subordination of not only femininity, but subordinate masculinity, and other marginalised communities (Schippers 2007: 87).

**The Social Contract**

Central to Western liberal theories of the modern state is the idea of a social contract. This concept of a social contract creates an image of a state where citizens have consented to surrendering certain freedoms in exchange for protection from the ‘state of nature’ (Garner, Ferdinand & Lawson, 2012, p.37). The social contract has been presented in a way that appears essential to both survival and the pursuit of happiness. To this end citizens are expected to submit to the will of the state and are obligated to behave in a certain way within the public sphere. This contract has worked to legitimise the systems of governance found in the modern liberal state, where citizens in civil society are considered to hold universal freedoms and personal liberty, where it refrains from infringing on another. However, for political theorist Carole Pateman ‘Civil freedom is not universal. Civil freedom is a masculine attribute and depends upon patriarchal right’ (1988, p.2). For Pateman the social contract is not only one concerned with the rights of individuals within the state, but the rights of men over women. While the social contract is presented as the ultimate means of freedom from fear and want, it simultaneously works to legitimise and constitute a societal structure that subjugates those not existing in the inner circles of hegemonic masculinity (Pateman, 1988, p.2).

John Locke’s conception of the social contract and the political draws a clear distinction between the realms of the private and public spheres. For Locke, this divide between the private and the public is a means to protect the individual from the tyranny of the state (Walsh, p.259). Governance and political control occur in the public, while the removal of the private is aimed at ensuring individual liberty. This divide, however, is heavily criticised, with many feminist theorists arguing that it limits both equal access of the feminised to the public sphere and the liberty of the feminised in the private (Pateman, 1988, p.6). The role that women have been bound to play, that of homemaker, caregiver, and mother, acts as a barrier to public participation, and designates the role of women to subordinate in the private. Due to this, it is argued that the individual which the social contract seeks to free is ‘biologically and socially male’ (Walsh, 1995, p.254). In the modern state based on the private/public divide, public participation is strictly made up of the sections of society that have historically been the domain of masculinity, such as governance, philosophy, academia, and the market (Beasley & Bacchi, 2010, p.341). This separation of the private and public spheres not only arbitrarily limits the participation of those outside of hegemonic masculinity but simultaneously defines the shape that citizenship and political participation take.
Contemporary understandings of the public and private divide largely go unnoticed when discussions of citizenship and political participation arise. While shifts in public policy often appear to be aimed at creating inclusion - extending rights to property, voting, and political participation to all those considered ‘citizens’ - it is often argued that these are simply tokenistic gestures that do little to address the true barriers to participation. Citizenship has historically been a shifting metaphor of inclusion and belonging, moving to fit the necessary role given to it by the state. This control over the meaning of citizenship often works actively towards the insidious exclusion of the feminised and other marginalised groups and classes, while appearing on its surface to be encouraging participation (Carver, 1998, pp.15-16). The manipulation of citizenship can be illustrated through the contemporary narrative of political participation in the state. Beasley & Bacchi (2010, p.340) argue that participation in the state has come to be equated with nothing more than the performance of basic individualised and civil rights given to all citizens. This conflation of participation and the basic rights extended to all citizens, such as voting, allows for the continued exclusion of the subordinate classes to remain unchallenged and does little to address the true barriers to meaningful participation. Both the public/private divide and the tightly controlled discourse of citizenship work towards the creation of a state that is dominated by masculine hegemony. Until a reimagining of these concepts occur, shifting away from the imbedded philosophical views of the Enlightenment, barriers to meaningful participation in the state will remain for feminine and feminised individuals and groups (Jaggar, 1983, p.28).

**Maintenance and Control of Masculine Hegemony**

While the previous section of the essay was concerned with looking at the historical development of the state and the underlying hegemonic masculinity that exist within, this section will focus on how that hegemonic position is maintained. The modern western state has existed for over four centuries. Throughout its history hegemonic masculinity has gone relatively unchanged. While there have been many challenges from feminist movements throughout this period it could be argued that as of the late 20th century the position of hegemonic masculinity is as ingrained and legitimate as it ever has been. Using a neo-Gramscian analysis it will be examined how the dominant hegemon gains the consent of the marginalised in order to dissipate counter-hegemonic movements and legitimise its own position within society (Ruckert, 2007, p.94). Secondly, and in much a similar vein, post-political theory will show how sites of political contestation fall victim to an increasingly technocratic and rationalist process where the discourse surrounding these sites gets managed in such a way that all contention is removed (Macgregor, 2014, p.619).

A neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony focuses its point of analysis on a particular historical order or site of power and domination, looking to ways in which a ruling group uses both cohesion and consent to maintain their position of hegemon (Ruckert, 2007, p.94). The neo-Gramscian lens has traditionally been used to analyse the control the hegemon has over the means of production, capital,
or culture and the ways in which this control dictates social relations and identification, creating systems of class. This lens can easily be transferred to a feminist analysis of the gendered or raced, showing how the hegemon controls not only capital but also the politics of knowledge to create subjected classes. Edward Said, applying these principles, found the works of Gramsci show how the ideas and institutions of a hegemon not only shape how the subaltern (in his case the 'orient') are perceived, but often how they come to perceive themselves through the manufacturing of consent (Said, 1978, p.7). While the historical dominance of masculinity through coercion in the form of threat and force has been, and remains, very real, this analysis will focus on the measures that hegemonic masculinity takes to gain consent of subordinate and marginalised groups. In the words of John Fiske, 'consent must be constantly won and re-won, for people's material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a threat to the dominant class' (1998, p.310). The cultural and moral values created by hegemonic masculinity become ingrained within a society living under its domination. The roles that masculinity and femininity are delegated in society become 'common sense', creating the consent of the subordinate. This is again illustrated in an examination of the public and private spheres and the relegation of the home to the domain of the feminine and the market to the masculine (Beasley & Bacchi, 2010, p.341).

A neo-Gramscian analysis does more than simply point to pre-existing sites of domination, focusing also on counter-hegemonic movements and their absorption into the hegemonic bloc (Ruckert, 2007, p.94). Various western feminist movements have developed to challenge the structures of the modern western state, calling for female suffrage, equal citizenship, political participation, and the current wave focusing on combating sexual harassment (Rhode, 1994, pp.1191-1200). While all these movements may have attained various levels of concession from the state, their ability to fundamentally disrupt hegemonic masculinity must be questioned. Each time strong counter-hegemonic movements have attempted resistance, the political elites have managed to co-opt these movements, surrendering to demands on a very basic level, yet refusing to weaken their hold over the state. The subordinate and marginalised are forced to see no other way than to make their demands under the conditions presented to them (Pateman, 1988, p.14). This can be illustrated in the conversation above on the conflation of political participation with basic citizens' rights such as voting. One contemporary example of this can be seen in Australian politics, where women and other marginalised peoples have become commonplace in government, a move that has largely been welcomed by counter-hegemonic movements (Sinclair, 2014, p.18). Yet, only recently widespread complaints have been made by women in parliament stating the high levels of sexism and intimidation aimed at marginalisation of their participation (Rojas, 2018).

Much like a neo-Gramscian analysis of the hegemonic masculinity in the modern state, post-political theory can show how the dominant hegemon maintains their position. However, post-political theory explores how dominance is maintained through the rationalisation and justification of the normative principles that underlie the current system. Issues of the state, governance, and public policy are all framed in such a way that their current solutions appear to be
inherently common place and legitimate, leaving no room for contestation in the public sphere (Macgregor, 2014, p.619). For issues of feminine subordination, the post-political process allows public discourse to move past the idea of gender inequalities and dictates a debate where gender relations and other forms of subordination are ignored (Macgregor, 2014, p.623). Within the public sphere a ‘depoliticization’ of competing narratives by the hegemonic bloc occurs, where public debate is manipulated so that issues of inequality are either considered non-existent or their solutions are such common-sense that challenge seems irrational. Questioning of these post-political positions, such as debating the wage gap or recent campaigns highlighting the rates of sexual assault faced by the feminised, are often highjacked, labelled as deviant and delegitimised (Macgregor, 2014, p.619). This process not only works to maintain the subordination of the feminised, but simultaneously undermines debate directed towards many of the state institutions that presumably would be questioned if not for masculinity’s hegemonic position. Were these institutions open to meaningful criticism and debate, policies and welfare, health, military, education, environment, and labour would perhaps take on radically different forms.

Change for the Better

There are many positive benefits that would come with both the removal of hegemonic masculinity and the renewed politicisation of state structures and institutions. With a shift away from the masculine tradition of the modern state, a space can be opened in which both the state and society are reimagined. The core elements of western liberal thought, rationalism, order, and universalism, all of which have removed emotion and community from the public sphere, can be re-evaluated (Thompson & Hoggett, 2012, p.1). This shifting of discourse and collective understanding of the state can allow for a radical rethinking of previously uncontested state policies and social design. Thompson & Hoggett (2012, pp.13-15) suggest that a feminising of the political process can drastically alter state practices, by allowing solutions and strategies that can draw from positive human emotions and experience. This refocusing on the human understandings of the state and the political has the ability to fundamentally change how feelings of resentment, supremacy, and hatred manifest themselves in public policy. Misunderstanding and ignorance of these feelings can be argued to be the foundation of many societal ills and the subordination of the feminised, raced, and classed both within the state and outside (Thompson Hoggett, 2012, pp.13-15). This shift in statehood has not only the potential to dramatically change the nature of the state internally, allowing for expanded participation and rights, but by making a space for genuine feminine leadership it may bring with it a shift in the way the state interacts externally with the international community (Sinclair, 2014, p.26). Policies of power, security, global trade, aid, immigration, and environmentalism all could all be reimagined for the better.

This reimagining of the state and the political can not only redefine policy and political structures but may also create fundamental changes to the concepts of citizenship and participation. As already discussed, one of the foremost barriers to meaningful citizen participation and equality is the public/private divide. Sites that have previously been considered the sphere of the private, such as the home,
can be reassessed to become sites of political contestation. This would not only have the effect of creating space for the subordinate to participate and be seen as worthy of full citizenship but would also work to erode the control and legitimacy given to those areas designated as public. Beasley and Bacchi (2010, p.349) assert that more than simply creating space for genuine participation, a removal of the public/private divide could dramatically change our social understanding of the physical body. Western philosophy has generally been one of metaphysical dualism, drawing clear distinctions between the body and mind (Jaggar, 1983, p.28). This mind/body dualism is still present in the modern state, where public actors are judged for their mental capacity alone, and the physical body is treated as a point of disdain or disadvantage to citizenship. Removal of the philosophies that underpin hegemonic masculinity may allow for bodies to be treated as sites of knowledge and power, rather than simply obstacles (Butler, 1993). Not only will this make room for mothers, gendered subjects, and people with disabilities in the public arena, but their lived experience can inform policy and reconfigure society for the better, further undermining the hegemon.

Conclusion

The modern state is one that is undoubtedly a site of hegemonic masculinity. The philosophical traditions that have led to the creation and design of the modern state are ones that have been created by a largely masculine base. These traditions have created both the political structures that make up the state and the societal boundaries that those living inside of the state are expected to remain within. As Pateman (1988, p.2) argues, the formation of a social contract was not a formation of rights and freedoms for all, as is popularly touted. The social contract laid the foundations for a state ruled by hegemonic masculinity. This social contract has gone by relatively unchanged since its implementation. While concessions and adjustments have been made along the way, a neo-Gramscian analysis of these changes would argue that such changes have been ultimately tokenistic and aimed at maintaining the historical hegemonic bloc (Ruckert, 2007, p.94). As the modern state develops, the separation between the public and private arenas widen. Public policy is increasingly the domain of a technocratic and rationalised system that allows for minimal questioning. While this strong hegemonic base continually works to legitimise its existence and strengthen its position of dominance it is difficult to imagine where a serious challenge will come from. It is argued in this essay that a redefining of the public/private divide would produce meaningful and real participation. This participation would have the strong ability to create true counterhegemonic movements.

References


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