

Political Ideologies Context, Ideas, and Practices.
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Topic 6 Feminism Lec 2/4 25:02
Feminism - Main Concepts, with Examples

Hello everyone and welcome to the next of these lectures in this NPTEL Ideologies Course 2019-20. We are part-way through our sixth topic, that is, feminism. We've had one lecture introducing it, we're going to look at some of the themes involved in greater detail from now on. But we've got to look at four particular themes that run through all if not most forms of feminism, and these are concerns which are common to all forms of feminism.

There are four of them - the public-private divide, patriarchy, sex and gender, and equality and difference. We'll look at each one. We've seen something of the first one, first, but it won't do any harm to look at it again.

The public-private divide. One of feminism's great achievements has been to put firmly on the contemporary political agenda the fact that politics extends far beyond the purportedly or apparently conventional arena of elections, parliaments, governments, art, literature and so on. Instead, any spaces where human power relations are involved, such as the workplace, and the family, are themselves also political spaces.

What happens within such spaces is also shaped by the wider political forces in any society, well you saw some of this when we encountered Carol Hanisch last time. Two people who were editing a volume or conference proceedings in which she had given or was about to give a paper, gave her paper the title, gave Carol Hanisch's paper the title, 'The Personal Is Political'.

And that showed us something we badly needed to learn, which was that apparently private spaces are themselves shaped by and permeated by much, much wider influences, economic, political, cultural and so on. So, as feminists have pointed out again and again and rightly so, any spaces where human power relations are involved, such as the workplace and the family, are also political spaces.

And what happens within those spaces is also shaped by the wider political forces in any society. These may of course not just be political forces, they can be of a range of kinds. But as I said last time, what Hanisch has enabled us to do, together with other feminists, is to

recognise that our conception of the political needs to be very much wider than it would be if we left it unquestioned.

So for example, inequalities of wealth and power within the family and the different male and female roles within the family are themselves not natural, but they're the result of political and economic systems and structures. The consequences could be very far-reaching. Many industrial countries have recognised that state-funded childcare enables women to resume working when a traditional family structure would prevent them from doing so either completely, or until children were much older. Some countries have legislated relatively recently, perhaps in the last decade or so, have legislated to grant paternity leave for varying lengths of time too. In addition, the earlier traditions of political understanding quite simply grossly undervalued and demeaned and even obliterated the contributions women have made and always made to keeping even traditional societies functioning at all.

And these contributions, as we saw last time, still include the great bulk of child care and the care of the elderly or sick. They also include the bulk of early years and elementary schooling, and nursing care and hospital or other forms of, organised forms, of childcare. And as I said last time, as we saw last time, without this contribution, many of our societies would barely function at all.

Let's start with patriarchy. This is one of the major concerns that runs right through feminism and rightly so. The feminist critique of patriarchy is based on the argument that all social structures and systems and all political systems are patriarchal. Patriarchy, of course, is a term derived from Greek. It's a combination, it's a neologism derived from Latin and Greek, the Latin word *pater* meaning father is combined with the Greek word *arche* meaning rule.

Other analyses give the term 'patriarchy' entirely Greek roots, but we needn't worry too much about that issue here. Now according to several feminist arguments, the power division between men and women has obtained throughout almost all human history. And this systematically oppresses and disadvantages women. It operates throughout society, in politics, in work, in the family, in legal and judicial systems, and so on.

According to these arguments, gender is the single most important division in human life, and it is even more important than class. Of course, societies vary, they vary in the nature and extent of patriarchal oppression of women. And in most of the global north, the more obvious signs of

patriarchy are much less clear than they were before women got the vote, before legislation, legislation outlawing gender discrimination was passed, and so on.

In many other societies, patriarchy is still extremely crude and often violent. About 80 million women mainly, but not exclusively in African countries, still face female genital mutilation or clitoridectomy. And it may be impossible to count the tens or hundreds of millions who face forced marriages. That is in contrast to genuinely arranged ones. It may also be impossible to find any numbers for any accurate numbers for female foeticide, and of course, for also for explicit sexual discrimination and oppression, insult or violence - women encounter these throughout their daily lives in hundreds of millions, perhaps billions around the world. On the evidence, South Asian countries are the places where female foeticide and widespread sexual violence against women are particularly common. Of course, South Asian countries are not the only places, but for example, among the G20 countries, which is an economic indicator of economic scale and size and production or the rest of it, among the G20 countries, India ranks last, behind Saudi Arabia in this regard. In addition, the practice of forced marriage among South Asian communities has led countries with substantial South Asian-descended populations to declare the practice a criminal offence.

In June 2014, England and Wales followed Scotland with new law. The law also applies to UK nationals who are outside the UK, we saw this in one of our earlier passages, that is the criminal law of the United Kingdom on forced marriage is criminal law with application outside United Kingdom jurisdiction, and British subjects that is Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK or British nationals are liable for UK criminal proceedings even if the offence is committed outside UK jurisdiction. The British foreign ministry, the Foreign and Commonwealth office, as I've said before, has a unit tasked with preventing forced marriages and helping victims thereof. It has sometimes been very active indeed.

Daily sexual harassment and violence in the form of groping and other forms of unwanted contact, including unwanted speech, comments, observations, even looks - these are still widespread all over the world, even in the global north. And the spread of the internet, which affords a form of anonymity, has shown the scale and extent of hate directed against women. For many feminist theorists, these are, these kinds of conduct are expressions of patriarchy. As are the feelings many women victims have that they cannot do anything about it or will not be taken seriously if they try to complain or face even worse brutality if they fight back physically or verbally.

Now Kate Millett took the arguments even further. Patriarchal societies, according to Kate Millett, are hierarchical in several ways. Men dominate women and older men dominate younger men. Patriarchy can coexist with and is part and parcel of other systems of power and status. So there is no single form of patriarchal oppression, it permeates other kinds of relations besides those between men and women.

So it is part and parcel of other power systems of power and status, and there is a vast amount of material to support this, [so] a vast amount of evidence. For example, the concept of *droit de seigneur*, which basically means the right of the master or right of the landowner. *Droit de seigneur* is a French phrase, and was widespread in mediaeval Europe; when the tenant of a feudal lord or landowner got married, the lord of the manor could and frequently did claim the right to have sex with the bride first.

Now various historians have argued that more often than not, the feudal master accepted a payment or tax in lieu of in place of sexual access to the bride, but that does not change either the patriarchy or the sexism it involved. Above all, it maintains the idea that the bride is some kind of good or commodity or chattel to be exchanged or traded.

And similarly, Manu decrees how many wives men of different Hindu castes can have. A Brahmin can have four, men of lower caste three, two and so on. Manu says nothing however about multiple wives for Dalits. The 16th century poem by the way, *Radhika Santawanam*, goes in slightly different directions. It is, among other things, a searing response by a woman to male polygamy and by implication to cultures which give men a right of polygamy or right to polygamy.

Now there are powerful feminist arguments that the very idea of polygamy is only tenable in patriarchal societies where there are severe social stratifications and where more powerful men dominate other men, older men dominate younger men. Wealthier and more powerful men therefore also decide whether they will have polygamous structures in society or not, whether they will practise [polygamy] it or not.

Now this leads us to the idea of natural divisions resulting from our biological nature. Feminism, of course, has challenged a great many such ideas not only in respect of patriarchy, but in respect of all relations between men and women. So our next theme is that of sex and gender. A purportedly or supposedly traditional view of view of sex and gender is that these are natural

divisions, resulting from our biological nature. According to this theory we're male or female, we therefore have natural powers and roles as a result. And therefore society has to be organised according to the biological differences between males and females. This kind of argument can be called an argument from biology because it bases a theory of society on its conception of human nature, and that is, human nature as a biological fact or biological given.

We've seen similar things, for example with conservatism, which has it that we rise to the top in free competition, and therefore the order of society reflects our natural capacities and talents for using them. We've seen it with fascism, which has explicit theories of racial, racial hierarchy and racial superiority and inferiority.

So - let's take a look at how such biological theories might be treated within feminist thought. Well, the traditional view would have it that women can bear and suckle babies - and men cannot do so. Therefore, women must rear babies, men must have other roles in the family, and so on. The feminist challenge to this is that these expectations and roles are largely social or cultural, and are not biological in origin. Women do not need to be mothers, and do not need to take on traditional roles of motherhood. Child-rearing can be shared whether by the parents or by other members of the family, and aspects of it can be and often are taken over by the state. There are plenty of examples; a great deal of law in the global North has to do with the state's part in providing facilities and opportunities for child care, for parental leave to bring up children and support to parents in the form of health services, child-rearing services and so on.

So, the evidence is fairly clear that we've gone a long way from the very traditional idea that male and female roles are biological in origin. We see examples all around us, and this is no doubt going to appear in greater and greater volume and extent in developing countries. The idea that the state has a part, a significant part to play - even the idea of compulsory education is an example of how the state takes on the role of education from the family, which plays a different, now plays a different part in childrearing.

Secondly, sex differences may be biological. That's again the traditional view, the second, second part of the argument. So sex differences may be biological, but gender differences are not, and they are largely social. We're brought up to be boys and girls, men and women. One very powerful critique of the way we are socialized to be of a particular gender is Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, which was first published in 1949.

Now one consequence of works like this and wider, a wider rethinking of the idea of sex and gender, is that it's more accurate to speak in terms of gender than sex. And a further consequence is that gender analysis enables us to examine far more of our lives and social structures and systems than the idea of biological sex as the defining difference between men and women. I add here that anecdotally, of course, a great many women will say, they've never felt any desire to have children.

They might say, 'Maternal instinct, what's that? - I've never felt any such thing.' And that given the way societies work today, that that way of thinking may be far more widespread than we realise. We do occasionally meet people who are willing to say it, but that leaves us ignorant of those who think it and feel it, but aren't willing to say that they feel no maternal instinct whatever and have no desire to have children.

Our third issue here is equality and difference. This is the third theme running through all forms of feminism, we'll see the different forms. What about equality and difference? This remains one of the most [contented,] contested areas in feminist thought. Feminists can reach wide agreement with considerable political, social impact on ending the oppression of women and on ending discrimination against them. Now today, it's likely that at least in terms of political, democratic, political constitutions, this kind of issue is over; as they say in international law, *chose acquies*. We find such legislation and at least stated policies and commitments in virtually all democratic states around the world. And reaching agreement on ending the oppression of women and ending discrimination against women is not difficult to find, it's not difficult to reach either.

But it is much harder to say what is to count as the achievement of equality, or even if the idea of comprehensive equality is intelligible. Well, let's look at some examples. In a sense, first-wave feminism has achieved formal, legal and constitutional equality in almost all democracies. Throughout the world, women have the opportunity to vote even in the most traditional cultures.

Similarly, laws forbidding discrimination on the grounds of gender are found in almost all democracies. But these formal conditions remain, in much of the world, still formal. They've completely failed to bring about substantive equality almost anywhere in the world. We can add here that there are some startling examples.

Rwanda was the first country to achieve 51% and slightly more of representation of women in Parliament. Rwanda's parliament was the first parliament ever to have 50% or more of women, that is, to be composed of women to the tune of 50% or more. We might have thought some of the Scandinavian countries or Nordic countries that achieved this earlier. But if I am not mistaken, the closest one of them got was to have a parliament which was 48% made up of women.

Now, in addition, it's not clear that the existing world is so wonderful that women must achieve equality in say, combat roles in war or in the notably coarse and ugly world of everyday politics, or in doing backbreaking, manual labour in often extremely dangerous and illegal conditions. Now, we can consider some empirical examples here. For example, some countries have recognised that women can participate in combat roles in war, if I'm not mistaken. Women in the Indian Armed Services, particularly the Air Force, now fly combat aircraft. In the United States, women have been involved in military combat, again if I'm not mistaken. In politics, in everyday politics, yes, particularly in the global North, far more women are involved than were even 20 years ago or even 10 years ago.

But we should note that even in the last fortnight or three weeks, perhaps even more recently than that, women in British politics, with a general election currently in progress, the campaign's already started, a number of women have said they are standing down because of the amount of online hatred and abuse that they get through social media. And, well, it may well be that they're getting far more and far coarser and uglier threats and spoken violence or written violence on the internet than the men. But we must remember that women's participation in the public space is still fraught with global, globally continuing and enormously powerfully persistent ugliness and brutality towards women, whether it's in form of words, in politics, or physical violence.

As to backbreaking manual labour will be familiar in the developing world with the fact that women often do enormously backbreaking work say on construction sites, often carrying cement and bricks day after day, in conditions which are enormous or enormously dangerous working in without shoes, working in bare feet, without helmets, without protection, climbing scaffolding [which] without any safety harnesses, without any protection at all.

And it is not unusual, certainly in South Asia and quite possibly in other parts of the world to see women involved in backbreaking manual labour often at much lower rates than the men, even

for the same work. So equality as an undifferentiated concept makes no sense unless we can also consider in respect of what it is that we want equality. The question is equality in respect of what?

If we accept that war is going to [consider,] continue for the foreseeable future, should we be seeking combat roles for women rather than doing all we can as peoples and as states to put an end to war? Only one question - do we really want women to be equal in backbreaking manual labour, mending roads, digging trenches, putting up buildings? Shouldn't we be looking for far better working conditions for everyone, men and women?

The question is therefore equality in respect of what? Do we all want equality in respect of a brutal, terrifying, and violent world in which we're, certainly in construction work in much of the world we are at serious risk of being killed or injured by the time we are 45. Our earnings will go down as we suffer physical injury and loss of physical powers by the time we are 50 or so. We can notice our, the waning of our physical powers. So the question is equality in respect of what?

Now, as long as we are asking that, we can argue about it and reason about it. It's not surprising that equality and difference are two of the most contested areas of feminist theory, but it is right that they're contested and we should contest them across the board, so that we are clear about what were the kinds of issues in which we are speaking of equality. Do we want equality of access to something that is brutal, violent, and murderous? Do we want equality of access to backbreaking and destructive work for next to no pay at all? Do we actually want that? So equality in respect of what does remain a crucial question and it's right that it does.

What about feminism and other ideologies? We've looked at three major or four major concerns of feminism, but how does feminism relate to other ideologies? Now at this point, I will introduce the theme. We'll keep it, keep the detail for another lecture, but let's introduce the theme, feminism and other ideologies.

Feminism cuts across all other ideologies and rightly so, partly because many ideologies have been propounded by men - and because political parties or movements which express those ideologies or embody them have historically been overwhelmingly controlled and run by men. Nevertheless, different forms of feminism have clearly been informed by different kinds of ideologies, and they show this in assumptions or sometimes explicit commitments, and we'll

need to look at those next. So we're going to move on to look at feminism and other ideologies in our next lecture.