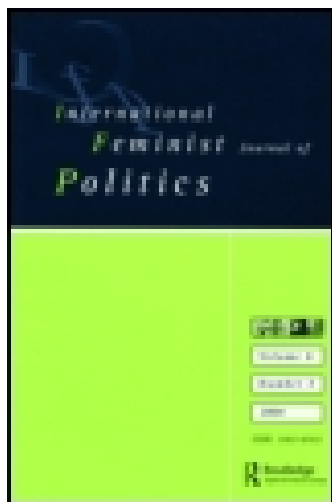


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Anti-statism and Difference Feminism in International Social Movements

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Abstract

Feminist strategies that neglect or consistently deplore state action cannot accomplish what women need – because individuals need collectives such as states to solve collective action problems and to move toward more just social arrangements. Strategies that rely heavily on women's differences from men also cannot accomplish what women need – because women are like men in many ways relevant to individual and collective action. Despite these truths, social movements also need some strategies of action that work separately from and sometimes against the state. Moreover, strategies that accentuate the differences between oppressed and oppressing bring needed energy to a movement. The best overall strategy is, therefore, to realize that both states and difference theories are dangerous weapons, and proceed with caution.

Keywords

state power, anti-state, collective action, coercion, civil society, gender difference, difference theory, in-groups, gratuitous gendering, feminism, women

In this important paper, Jane Jaquette sounds the alarm. She exposes the dangers of ignoring the state and the dangers of 'difference feminism'. She also shows how these are linked. Although I will underscore the merits of anti-state activity and difference feminism, I agree that a feminist strategy that neglected or deplored state action would be weak indeed. So would a strategy that relied on women's differences from men.

First, the merits of Jaquette's argument.

One strand in feminist theory and practice greatly suspects the state. This suspicion can escalate into outright rejection, with potentially grave consequences for women.

The philosophical case for the state is relatively simple. Collective action

can improve human lives. Efficient collective action requires coercion. Instruments of collective action involving coercion can, paradoxically, increase human freedom. We are freer to do many things if we can bind ourselves with legally enforceable contracts. Rather than enforcing these contracts privately, it is more efficient and potentially more just to give a monopoly of legitimate violence to one entity, so long as that entity can reasonably claim to be more just than the alternatives. Humans have long struggled to devise relatively legitimate forms of coercion. The history of democracy is part of that struggle, although that history has nowhere produced national-level institutions that are highly legitimate. Despite their incapacity ever to be fully legitimate, however, we still need both states and international institutions to help solve collective action problems and to give scope to the human capacity for justice.

Regarding women, the practical case for the state, must be grounded in contemporary realities. In some states, such as Sweden, women do better, compared to men, than in the most egalitarian of known pre-state entities, such as the iKung!. Moreover, although the dangers of state power for women are great, it is not practical to contemplate returning to pre-state entities. Human beings seem to want the goods produced by more extensive forms of cooperation, including those that require legitimate coercion. Given that states will not disappear in the near future, what stance should we take toward them? My answer is: wary usage. State power will be used against women, just as other forms of power are used against women, unless we intervene. One response is to establish barriers, such as constitutional or internationally enforceable rights, to certain kinds of invasions by state power. Another is to make states more likely to act in the interests of women.

In the United States both theory and institutional practice carry suspicion of the state farther than in most countries, with some malign consequences. Ours has been a 'liberalism of fear' more than an Enlightenment liberalism that envisions a common good. Americans are wary of state power, encouraged in that wariness by powerful capitalist interests. Jaquette rightly warns against this. State power can serve both as a brake on the negative externalities of capitalism and as a positive force for material redistribution. Particularly when patriarchal power takes violent forms in the private sphere, state power can help women struggle against that violence as well as other non-state evils.

The question, then, is how far to carry wariness of state power and of theories of state universalism and impartiality. I believe we must both use state power and place bounds on. Because the state as a tool is dangerous and flawed, we need to use it with caution.

Jaquette faults contemporary feminist anti-state theorists not for wanting to abolish the state but for spending their energies on wariness rather than on how to use it for redistribution. How important one thinks this problem is depends on how one judges the current balance within feminist theory. Many feminist theorists – e.g. Susan Okin, Nancy Fraser, Iris Young – call for redistributive reforms requiring state power. Perhaps in Latin America, from

which Jaquette takes her lead, theorists of the North are represented by anti-state theory. In that case, one must ask why these are the theorists Latin American feminists choose to read. Anti-state discourse may have informed radical practice in Latin America not because anti-state theory is dominant in the North but because activists in Latin America find that anti-state discourse meets their organizing needs. Anti-state discourse may reflect the reality of individuals working on the margins of states that either are relatively corrupt or, even more obviously than most, enforce the interests of dominant classes.

Jaquette also rightly warns of the dangers of valorizing action in civil society to the neglect of state action. However, we need evidence that the more women participate in NGOs the less they participate in the state. Without such evidence it seems equally plausible that the more women participate in NGOs the more they will acquire the skills and contacts required for involvement in state politics. Some individuals also will not be able to deal with the hierarchy, coercion and male dominance embedded in all states. They will need to work in social movements. Political activism usually sustains a division of labor, with the individuals who can best deal with established institutions doing just that and those who are most repelled by those institutions charting another course. The directions they take sometimes conflict with one another.

Women and feminists trying to achieve places in the state, whether as femocrats or politicians, face major barriers but also major attractions. I do not know how much we should worry that they will not be attracted to these jobs because of radical anti-state discourse. In the United States this does not seem to be a huge problem. In some countries, women who could be agents of feminist change turn down jobs in the state because those jobs are boring and unsatisfying. When these women speak of their frustrations, radical anti-state discourse appears to play a small or non-existent role.

In short, Jaquette is right that an established anti-state discourse within radical movements makes productive interaction with states less likely, but I am not sure that such discourse is created by feminist theory.

Jaquette also points to distortions produced by difference feminism. It is true that any stress on women's differences reinforces the tendency of dominant groups such as white or middle-class women to interpret 'women's' experiences primarily in light of their own experiences. In recent years, women of color have produced the greatest advances in feminist theory, forcing white feminists to look more closely at their hegemonically defined concepts of commonality; this work has given all feminists the tools to understand better differences within their groups and subgroups.

In addition, in most areas of presumed personality difference between men and women, the differences are extremely small. The currently definitive meta-analysis of studies on Carol Gilligan's hypothesis shows that – at least in the United States, in the highly educated populations where she argues that differences should appear – only very small differences can be found.

Most studies do not show women taking a different approach to justice or behaving more cooperatively than men. Studies designed to elicit behavioral gender differences often generate practically none.

In-groups, we now know, exaggerate similarities within their group and their differences from other groups. The human brain makes these predictable cognitive and emotional mistakes in in-group/out-group differentiation. Recognizing this tendency, we should constantly struggle to take into account the fact that our social and first-order cognitive estimates of such differences are usually exaggerated. In the case of gender, all societies also engage in 'gratuitous gendering' – giving gendered meanings to nouns and patterns of action that do not functionally require that identification. These processes increase even more our perceptions of gender difference.

Today we have little idea what differences might or might not emerge between men and women in a non-oppressive society. It seems mistaken, therefore, to insist on difference rather than focusing on the effects of dominance.

Finally, as Jaquette warns, promising different political results based on the premise that women are different from men is dangerous. We are almost certain not to deliver on that promise, at least in the short run. The backlash after the US suffrage movement was undoubtedly caused in part by disillusion at the lack of change when women won the vote.

And yet, small differences that do appear between men and women can take on major symbolic significance, precisely because of our human tendency to exaggerate group differences. Although using that significance is dangerous, not only because it exaggerates reality but also because it underlines the very stereotypes that have been used to keep women in their place, the existence of danger does not mean that we should forswear this tool – any more than for swearing the tool of state action. Just remember: when using a dangerous tool, take active precautions against its potential harms.

Difference arguments for electing women are not just arguments from 'utility', as Jaquette reports Marian Sawer's point. For example, the fact that women are perceived as more honest than men can advance an attack on corruption by associating its female leaders with honesty. Using positive stereotypes of women in this way need not be degrading. Successful uses may even result in males adopting certain features of female symbolism to signify their own adherence to better standards.

In another example, among professional populations in the United States, women are somewhat more likely than men to adopt participatory, egalitarian styles of leadership. The difference probably derives from women's relative powerlessness, which teaches skills of persuasion rather than command. In the US women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, women used the gender differences they perceived in listening, interpreting body language and participatory style to create significant departures from the prevailing styles of left politics in organizations dominated by men. The message, 'We do things differently' is exhilarating. It prompts greater effort in trying to

forge a new model, because the effort is associated not only with a different culture that can replace the old one but also with a different self and associated selves.

Turning from practical politics to political theory, concepts are also often gender-coded. Freedom and self-interest, for example, are often coded as male, community and altruism as female. It is not surprising, then, that when feminist theorists entered the field of theory, some explicitly supported certain values previously denigrated as female. Although the arguments made for these values might not be female, their proponents often were. Moreover, having been raised in a subculture that had been allocated cultural responsibility for these values, women had often thought about them more thoroughly than men. Women had also usually experienced the denigration of these values first-hand.

In short, Jaquette is right that stressing women's differences from men is fraught with danger. But values and practices that many cultures associate with women are often good in themselves, denigrated because of their association with women. Asserting the value of these ideals and practices from a stance *as women* often makes emotional, cognitive and political sense.

Importantly, Jaquette identifies a link between anti-state discourse and difference feminism. A number of anti-state theorists who are also strongly anti-essentialist would deny this identification. But in social movements themselves, the identification makes sense. The state is male; hence difference feminists should be anti-state. The state is instrumental, self-interested and hierarchical; women are communal, nurturing and participatory. To the degree that these associations are simply accepted as unchangeable truths, they compound the most problematic anti-state mistake.

I agree wholeheartedly with Jaquette's fears in seeing no visible trend toward a renewed interest in the politics of economic justice, at least in the United States. In contrast to the creativity in the struggle against globalization, there has been an absence of 'street-level' activism against, for example, the revolutionary shift in tax burdens in the USA. More positively, the anti-sweatshop movement has had some good effects in raising consumer consciousness and bringing younger activists in touch with international labor movement organizing. As for the causes of the shift away from the politics of economic justice, I agree with Jaquette that it is related to the post-Cold War era and the temporary triumph of capitalism. I am not so sure that it has much to do either with activists' anti-state discourse or with difference feminism.

This commentary has concentrated on the caveats to Jaquette's thesis. I conclude by stressing again my fundamental agreement with her argument. Feminists have a 'stake in a capable state'. It would be catastrophic to be so carried away by the theoretical virtues of civil society or by anti-state discourse as to deaden oneself to the practical need to work with the state to improve the lives of women.

Because ideas have influence, it is worth stressing Jaquette's point that

'norms adopted internationally depend on states to implement them'; and only states can change the rules for women and other disadvantaged groups. The welfare state is a huge improvement over the arbitrary power of men in private families. Women's groups must therefore work closely with governments or remain on the fringe. Feminists will not only have to 'learn to live with the state'. They should learn to work with the state. For those who do not already know this, Jaquette's article is required reading.

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Note

- 1 I thank Ann Tickner for helping edit these comments after a misunderstanding had led me to write a far longer piece.