

Comparative analysis of Instrumentalist Marxism and Liberal Feminism on the Concept of State

Frequency of International Relations
September, Vol 6 (2) 1-17
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fetrian.fisip.unand.ac.id
Submission track:
Submitted: March 30, 2024
Accepted: May 25, 2025
Available On-line: August 12, 2025

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Abstract

This paper examines the differing theoretical approaches of Instrumentalist Marxism and Liberal Feminism in conceptualizing the state. It begins by tracing the historical development of the state and the dual definitions of its functions and structures. Instrumentalist Marxism, largely informed by the work of Ralph Miliband, portrays the state as a politically neutral instrument controlled by the capitalist ruling class to perpetuate its dominance. Liberal Feminism, particularly through the lens of Betty Friedan's thought, similarly views the state as neutral but emphasizes the role of gendered social constructs in limiting women's political participation. While both theories recognize the influence of dominant groups over the state, their ontological foundations differ: Marxism centers on economic class relations, whereas Liberal Feminism focuses on gender roles and individual rights. The paper argues that Instrumentalist Marxism provides a clearer and more comprehensive framework for analyzing the state due to its structural critique of power and class struggle, especially when integrated with Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In contrast, Liberal Feminism's reliance on liberal ideals and its avoidance of class-based analysis renders its explanation less consistent and more ideologically conflicted.

Keywords: State; Liberal Feminism; Instrumentalist Marxism; Gramsci; Economic Class Relations; Gender Roles

Introduction

State is seen as an abstraction (Edelman, 1964: 1). The description of state can be fixed by only one definition. However, this abstract conceptualization of state can be explored by utilising different theoretical approaches (Hay, Lister, 2006: 4). Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987) noted that there are two distinctive forms of state, the first one is organizational definition, and the second one is functional definition. The first one delineate state as a set of organized entity, which is under governing party's control. In this regard, the government has functions to regulating, rule-making, controlling and also guiding. Moreover, the second one sees state as an institution that has goals and objectives, and it is functioned to maintain social order (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987: 1-4).

This paper seeks to examine the difference between Marxism and Feminism theories, to elaborate on the definition of the state from those perspectives in a in-depth analysis. Both theories demonstrate the meaning of state based on social relations. It is noted that Marxism exemplifies class relations between the ruling and the ruled classed in conceptualizing state, meanwhile, Feminist sees state based on gender, notably class relations between both male and female (Kantola, 2006: 123).

In the further account, based on Colin Hay in His writing "*(What's Marxist about) Marxist State Theory*", both theorists, either Marx and Engel had never explicitly refined an indivisible conceptual framework elaborating the definition of state (Hay, 2006: 65). Nonetheless, their works can be a laid groundwork, to trace and develop the meaning of state in Marxism perspective. More, Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas, Hay discussed about the distinctive natures of the state. They elaborated it to be instrumentalism and structuralism.

Instrumentalist Marxism which was denoted by Miliband, amplifies as the state as neutral unit used by controlling or dominant class in capitalist society, in order for them to achieve their interest. However, in structuralism, it is noted that the nature of state as an objective structure, and this will be influenced and imposed by the mechanism of mode of production (Hay, 2006: 71-76).

Moreover, further investigation about how the perspective of Marxism sees the state is needed. This paper is attempted to examine two perspectives comparatively. To do so, this paper will focus on elaborating the concept of state in Instrumentalist Marxism perspective and later will be differentiated with a perspective in Feminism. Nonetheless, the appropriateness of the comparison will also be highly reliant on the element of feminism discussed. In feminism theory itself, there is several distinctions that cannot be overlooked. These types of feminism are liberal feminism, radical feminism, and also Marxist-feminism. Moreover, there is one typology that is deemed relevant to be compared to instrumentalist Marxism, that is liberal feminism, that indicates the first wave in feminism.

Furthermore, this paper contends that both perspectives recognize state as a neutral body that is an instrument for dominant class in exercising their power. Instrumentalist Marxism presents a more grounded and structural analysis as well as it is historically consistent in explaining the definition of what a state is. Meanwhile, liberal feminist holds ambiguities in the elaboration about the definition of state.

Research Method

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to explore and compare how Instrumentalist Marxism and Liberal Feminism conceptualize the state. A qualitative method is appropriate for this research due to its interpretivist epistemology, which allows for an in-depth understanding of abstract political and philosophical concepts, including ideology, domination, gender, and class. Moreover, the research uses a comparative theoretical analysis. It does not rely on numerical data but instead on textual interpretations of primary and secondary sources from key thinkers (e.g., Ralph Miliband, Betty Friedan, Colin Hay, Zillah Eisenstein). Texts are examined through discourse analysis, focusing on how each theory frames concepts like “domination,” “neutrality,” “ruling class,” and “gendered power.”

This method facilitates the identification of ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying each framework’s view of the state. Moreover, this design helps unpack the ideological underpinnings and conceptual frameworks used by each theory in defining the state.

In the analysis, the ontological assumption of this paper is the essence of each theory in assuming the nature of social reality, which is the dynamic between class and gender. More, there is also a relations between agency and structure, in ways in which how each theory sees the state’s ability to act independently as a tool of dominant groups, either dominating class in instrumentalist marxism, or dominating gender in the theory of liberal feminism. lastly, it also sees the possibility of change, seeing wheter each theoretical framework allows for the transformation of state power.

The History of State Concept

State is an abstraction and is perceived as a body in itself (Dunleavy and O’Leary, 1987, Edelman, 1964: 1, Hall, 2021). The

definition of state can be varied based on the perspectives. By which, it means that there is no one single definition of what the state is (Hay, Lister, & Marsh, 2006). Furthermore, to get insights of the definition of the state, there is a need to see the genealogy of the emergence of the state.

The term “*state*” was initially used retrospectively since the seventeenth century to delineate the structures and procedure of political governing body in the age of Mesopotamia around 3000 BC, where emerging city-states began to integrate power and authority under one institutionalized unit (Hay, Lister, & Marsh, 2006). The concept of the state emerged to mark the transitional period from nomadic hunter-gatherers’ era to a coordinated agricultural system (Hall 1986; Mann 1988; Sahlins 1974). The immobility of agricultural production pushed the agrarian communities to develop institutions and infrastructures needed to project power and govern, over particular territory (Ellickson & Thorland, 1987).

In its early development, state was associated with tyrannical and coercive nature. It was depicted to have authority over certain territory and legitimacy to exercise power over its population (Hay, Lister, & Marsh, 2006). During this time, a significant source of the legitimacy is religion. Religion offered an appeal of divine authority to legitimize the centralized utilisation of coercive power. It was utilized to regulate specific geographical territories and to mobilize military forces. During that period, the use of military power was essential for conquering and expanding into additional territories, and control the population (Mark, 2023).

The replacement of hunter-gatherers to a organized agricultural system also occurred not only in Mesopotamia, but also in other regions like Meso-America, the Indus river valley, China, as well as in Peru

(Hay, Lister, & Marsh, 2006). Similar to Mesopotamia, in those regions, there were also agricultural innovations that triggered the existence of civilization, founded with the combination of political and religious authority (Ahmad, 2023).

The concept of state was considerably refined from the ancient era of Mesopotamia to western Europe where the term of modern state appeared. Since Mesopotamia Era, the legitimation that a state had was always bound up with divine authority (Hay, Lister, & Marsh, 2006). However, the emergence of modern state was prompted by the decline of religious legitimacy (Spruyt, 2022). Westpalia treaty that was signed around May and October 1648 marked a momentum of change, a remarkable milestone, with sovereignty of a state being put in place. This treaty was noted as the initial diplomatic settlement of the modern period, which formed a foundation of sovereign states after thirty years of religious war (Zreik, 2021).

Redefined from Renaissance period, when state was discerned as a distinctive governing body that functioned to preserve regulations to retain the status-quo, the modern state is defined by its complex and multifaceted character (Skinner, 2009) It is an organizational structure that asserts political supremacy and authority over defined territory, which is controlled by the governing body in charge. Notably, the initial work on the concept of the state was actually conducted by Machiavelli in his notable masterpiece '*The Prince*' in 1513. Machiavelli potrayed state as a structurally delineated institution, where there is a ruling system that asserts and maintains particular geographical territory, as well as perpetuates its authority. He emphasized the pragmatic and strategic approach to governance. Machiavelli focused on defining state in the sense of how the ruling regime strategically maintains its authority and sovereignty, which may include diplomacy, manipulation, and coercion if nessecary (Mathur, 1991).

More, the work of Machiavelli then laid a groundwork for other theorists in refining the concept of state further, by taking sociological and legal aspects into account. One of the prominent scholars is Max Weber. In his notable speech, *Politics as a Vocation* in 1919, Weber asserted that a state is ‘*a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*’ (Weber, 1919). In this context, He described a state as a combination of power, legitimacy, and territorial control in modern system of governance. He noted that there is a legal use of force by particular controlling human communities within a defined geographical area. The authority is a subject to contestation. It should always be recognized and practiced, because it is always challenged by other groups. However, what differs the controlling communities from other social actors is the legitimacy it has. Other groups or individuals may also exercise force, but only state has the legitimacy to do it lawfully under the sovereignty and the jurisdiction of the state’s authority (Mann, 2012).

Weber offered a complex understanding of a state through the lens of social and political legitimacy, and focused on how the state is used as an institution to maintain order through legitimate force by humans dominating it. His view was slightly different from his predecessor, Thomas Hobbes. Through *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserted about the brutal nature of state. Hobbes defined state as a unit that has absolute and indivisible authority, that requires either the ruling or the ruled have indivisible allegiance upon the state (Hay, Lister, 2006). Hobbes believed that, the foundation of social order of the state is in its absolute and indivisible authority, recognized and obeyed by what is within it, either the ruling or the ruled. He asserted that without supreme loyalty to the state, the society will be at risk of returning to instability and chaos (Lloyd, 2012).

There is plenty of prominent scholars who offered definition and critics in conceptualizing what a state is. Nevertheless, this paper will try to define and conduct comparative analysis between the concept of state in the lenses of Instrumentalist Marxism and Liberal Feminism. As expected, upon the completion, this paper will provide a conclusion about the comparative analysis and assert which perspective is considered more relevant to define what a state is.

Instrumentalist Marxism

Generally, in Marxists' point of view, state is considered as a mechanism in which bourgeois and proletariat interact socially in mode of production context. However, Collin Hay (2006) argued that this definition offered by Marxism is somehow unclear and implicit (Hay 2006: 60). The ambiguity comes from the fact that Marxism derived from the idea of dynamics of the economic structure and class relations, which make a state in this perspective not an autonomous entity with a clearly delineated institutional identity. In classical Marxist thought, a state is seen as a tool for bourgeois (ruling class) to control and exercise its power over proletariat (the ruled class). It operates in the capacity of a mechanism through which the ruling class maintains dominance and ensures the continued control of both capital and labours (Vickers, 2015).

To elaborate more, this vague situation then creates ambivalence about the meaning of state in classical Marxism. Even so, building on that premise, many Marxists theorist have intended to elaborate more on the state conceptualization systematically, as it had never been conducted by Marx and Engels previously. One notable work in the field is *Instrumentalism* by Ralph Miliband. Through Instrumentalist Marxism, Miliband theorized that a state is notably a neutral unit that is under the bourgeois' (ruling class) control (Hay, 2006: 71). State as a

autonomous organization is used as an instrument for dominant class to accomplish and perpetuate their interest and manipulate it to control the other class. He saw the state as a weak unit which is under government's control. In this point of view, state and its government are often times described as one and similar body, nevertheless, that is not quite correct. It is noted earlier that the existence of the state is based upon its declared monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in some particular defined territory, but that claim about the monopoly is never conducted by the state. It is always the government that retains the claim, said on behalf of the state. As it is mentioned before that the state is a tool used by dominant class, presumably, the state and the government (bourgeois) are distinctive and represent two separate units. Moreover, the state is seen as a body utilized by state's elites to exercise and wield their power over the ruled class. These elites work in capitalist society to maintain their status quo and to achieve their goal to uphold mode of production in place.

On another note, derived from classical Marxism, instrumentalist Marxism sees economic component is inherently attached within the system of the state. It argues that the elements of politics and economy are both intertwined and determining the mechanism of mode of production as well as the dynamics between the ruling and the ruled. Grounded from that, this system will continue to decide which class has control over the other. Analysing it to the concept of state, the ruling class will always struggle to perpetuate its dominance, and the ruled will always attempt the position to dominate the state. However, whichever class becomes the ruler of the state, they will have the legitimacy to apply regulations and policy favorable to their interests. Subsequently, it will give the ruling class the authority to pertain their position and consequently, it is disadvantageous to the ruled ones.

The scholars of Instrumentalist Marxism deemed that because of its unaligned traits, the position of the state can change predominantly. Nothing is certain about its status quo and the position is possible to shift (Miliband, 1969). As an instrument, the stance of the state is the subject to who dominates and rules it. Any groups can gain control over the state and use legitimate power over its territory and population. It is an indication that either the ruling and the ruled one in capitalist society can seize control and own authority over the state as long as the group has the capability to achieve and preserve it.

Liberal Feminism

The famous written work of Betty Friedan (1963), *Feminine Mystique* is considered the original source of the idea of Liberal Feminism. The idea of Liberal Feminism defies mainstream feminist theories who articulated the idea of state with being a gender-class relations by nature. Liberal Feminism scholars acknowledged state as an autonomous unit that can be dominated and organized by either both male and female (Hay, Lister and Marsh, 2006). However, what happens is that the system of the state is monopolized by the influence of male's domination. The scholars believe that the cause of the domination on the state is due to feminine mystique. Feminine mystique is described as a notion of femininity that entraps the role of being a woman by solely becoming wives and mothers. This idea, that is also willingly believed by not only men, but women themselves shape the systemic relations within the state. Men are considered to be the ones who are capable to handle public matters, including the state, meanwhile women are believed to be in charge only of household agendas (Eisenstein, 1993).

Some feminist theories argued that state is structurally patriarchal, and it will deniably will exclude women from the system as it only serves the interests of men (Eisenstein, 1993). However, Friedan

contended the notion. She believed that state as a neutral body is an instrument that can be used by women to assert their aspiration, eventhough it is dominated by mostly men. By saying this, she implicitly argued against the theory of sex-class relations that is inherent in the idea of feminism. Nonetheless, the idea of Feminism brought by Betty Friedan needs to be discerned as this stance demands equality for women within the system of the state. She believed that female citizens can achieve equal rights as men, if only there is enough representation of women within the system. Enough women in the system will be beneficial for women's interests, and with the policies and regulations produced, the state will be favorable and serve the interests and the needs of women inside it (Eisenstein, 1993: 103).

Discussion and Analysis

Comparison

As noted earlier, state is seen as an autonomous unit, independent, and has authority over delineated territory. In spite of that, both theories, instrumentalist Marxism and Liberal Feminism regard state as a neutral body, that has no objectives, apart from the governing parties' interests that posses authority and legitimacy to control it. State is acknowledged as a passive instrument utilized by either bourgeois or the ruling class in Instrumentalist Marxism, or by men in the sense of Liberal Feminism. Those two perspectives provide distinctive meanings of what a state is. The arguments of both schools of thought offer relevant ways in seeing the conception of the state. It is due to the indisputable notion that the state is governed and functioned by some particular subjects that have objectives through dominating the it.

In accordance with that definition of the state, both perspectives express the same notion in seeing the domination of the ruling party.

However, the dissimilarity of these two thoughts is positioned in their ontological stances. Ontologically, Instrumentalist Marxism sees the state as power relations between bourgeois and proletariat. It is argued that that standing point will determine the performance of the state to be favorable to bourgeois. On the other hand, Liberal Feminism' ontological level is placed in gender relations. It is concerned about gender power relations (male and female) within the body of the state. These relations influence the behaviour of the state which bring benefits for men instead of women. It leads to inequality and discrimination towards women. (Hay, Lister and Marsh, 2006)

Moreover, in the sense of government, instrumentalist Marxism sees it as an designated agents or apparatus of bourgeois in the society that has the role to serve any objectives of the ruling class. The system is actively controlled by these elites, to preserve the mechanism of mode of production. Consequently, the situation resulted will be unfavourable for the ruled ones, by being disparate and impoverished. The theory asserts that the distinction in social and political relations between bourgeois and proletariats are created by economic factor in mode of production. As a consequence, even though the state is dominated by the ruling class, the situation can be reversed. The ruled class can seize and struggle for the domination of the state (Miliband, 1969).

Deriving from that, it is better to analyse idea of state in instrumentalist Marxism alongside the thinking of Gramsci. Some similarities are found between the two approaches. Instrumentalist Marxism sees that there is a possibility of position change in the system. There no absolute guarantee that the bourgeois can always preserve its ruling position. The system may shift if there is a class struggle occurring inside the state. More, the dynamics of historical bloc brought by Gramsci also elaborates on the alteration in position between the ruling and the ruled. In historical bloc, he said that the ruled can become

the ruling, if the position seized through a party or civil society movement. It is attainable as he believed that everything is a subject to change (Boothman, 2008).

Moving to Liberal feminism. This theory holds the same belief in seeing state as instrumentalist Marxism. It contends that the state is an autonomous body that can be under men's or women's control. It sees that both sexes can have equal opportunity and rights in utilizing state in their interests. However, seeing it deeply, liberal feminists' argument is irrelevant in ways how it overlooks men's monopoly in the system and how it hinders the opportunity for women. For liberal feminists, women are entrapped in feminine mystique, defined socially by their roles as mothers and wives. In spite of that, it believes that women will always have opportunity to break through, as long as women want to release the stigmatization of feminine mystique and take part in the public matters, which is inside the state system (Hay, Lister, Marsh, 2006).

Zillah R. Eisenstein argued against this point of view. In her work, *"The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism"*, she asserted that the stance of liberal feminism's argument is vague. On a one hand, Betty Friedan agreed about the unfavourability happened to women, which entraps women in unfavourable circumstances, but on the other hand, she also showed patriarchal way of thinking in her argument (Eisenstein, 1993: 103). As a self-proclaimed feminist, Friedan eagerly demanded for women's rights while at the same time she never acknowledged the disparity and inequality occurred because of sex-power relations in the state. She never took the domination of men that discriminates women in seeing state into account. Rather she insisted that the thing that needs fixing is the feminine mystique itself. This argument is paradoxical, because as an instrument that is dominated by men, state will generate rules which are unfavourable, and possibly discriminate women's position in the system.

From the discussion above, the ontological foundations of both perspectives are developed from Marxism, but somehow, throughout the analysis, instrumentalist Marxism stays focused on seeing class relations in shaping the dynamic of state. However, the idea of state in liberal feminism is ambiguous. Even though, it agrees on men's domination of state, it does not regard that as a problem, instead it argues that the problem is rooted in the idea of feminine mystique itself. It does not see the male-female sex power relations as a source of what makes state behave as it does.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from the comparison done, it is argued that the approach of instrumentalist Marxism is more applicable in describing state, aligned with the origins of the idea of state offered by scholars like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Weber. This approach sees how class power relations shape the dynamics inside the state, that will define the legitimacy and authority possessed by the ruling class. Aligned with the idea of historical bloc by Antonio Gramsci, instrumentalist Marxists agreed about the possibility of change inside the system, as long as there is an opportunity to take over power by the dominated class. This shows how the state is actually a neutral body, which can be used either by the bourgeois or proletariat as long as they can struggle to have legitimacy over it. Moving to Liberal Feminism, the idea of state it offers is deemed quite unclear. Instead of seeing state as a product of sex power relations, it focuses on the individual rights and the possibility of both sexes to take parts in the state system. Indeed, it recognizes that state is dominated by men, but it never acknowledges that it is men's domination which makes women experience inequality. Instead, it focuses on fixing the feminine mystique itself.

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Declaration of Conflict Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Biography

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