

Abstract

Vivienne Wee argues that patriarchy is alive and well in secular as well as religious hierarchies. She suggests instead of talking about religious fundamentalisms we need to talk about equality versus hierarchy.

Misguided assumptions

There are many mistaken assumptions around the issues of secularism and fundamentalism. Secularism does not automatically mean modernity, individualism and equal rights. Similarly, religion does not automatically mean traditional values, communitarianism and hierarchy. Nor can we assume that a secular state automatically guarantees gender equality. Patriarchies exist in secular and religious varieties.

Secular patriarchies

Confucianism is an example of an ancient 3000-year-old secular patriarchy. In Confucianism, the rule of the father is not legitimated by reference to any superhuman power (i.e. God, gods or divine law). Instead, patriarchal law is legitimated as statecraft. The formation of a patriarchal state is based on a symbiosis between the emperor as a father at the macro level and the father as an emperor at the micro level. Is this ancient secular patriarchy obsolete? No, there has been a revival of Confucianism in post-1978 Communist China and Singapore - both secular states with high economic growth. ('High economic growth' is mentioned in this context because another common misconception is that patriarchies are found only in countries of low economic growth. Unfortunately, patriarchies persist even in countries with high economic growth - for example, post-1978 China with its 60 million 'missing females' and a double-digit economic growth rate.)

Fascism is an example of a modern secular patriarchy. Here, the cult of machismo as statecraft leads to organized male violence, which is valorized as the highest expression of citizenship. Women are domesticated and seen primarily as biological and social reproducers of leaders and soldiers. Again

these views are not legitimated by reference to any superhuman power (i.e. God, gods or divine law). Examples of fascist states are Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, both of which operated as secular states. The Neo-Fascists of contemporary Europe have also inherited this secular orientation.

Secularism therefore does not necessarily exclude patriarchy; nor is it necessarily egalitarian. On the contrary, there are examples of religious egalitarianisms, such as the Bahai religion, Shaker Christianity and many animistic religions. There is therefore no straightforward opposition between the so-called 'secular left' and 'religious right'.

'Secular left' versus 'religious right'?

In everyday discourse, it has become commonplace to refer to a supposed opposition between the 'secular left' versus the 'religious right'. However, is this opposition valid? Is the 'left' always secular? And is the 'right' always religious? No. Instead, what we need to talk about is equality versus hierarchy.

Box 1. Differences and similarities

	Left	Right	Mode of legitimation
Secular	Secular left	Secular right	Statecraft - that is, a 'good' way to organize a state
Religious	Religious left	Religious right	Superhuman God/gods, divine law
Key value	Equality as desideratum	Hierarchy as desideratum	Setting social norms

Why is the 'right' ascendant now?

Why have religious fundamentalisms and secular neo-fascisms become so dominant now? What characterizes this historic moment?

In 1990, the end of the Cold War was followed by capitalist triumphalism - 'the end of history', to quote Francis Fukuyama (1992).¹

Or, to quote Jeffrey Sachs (2000),² we have experienced 'a capitalist revolution' whereby 'the market economy, the capitalist system, became the only model for the vast majority of the world.'

Underlying the logic of capitalism is the 'survival of the fittest', a phrase coined in 1851 by Herbert Spencer, the man who invented 'social Darwinism'. Capitalism is indeed not just an established power structure (e.g. a monarchy), but a process of structuring power that keeps producing a few winners from a multitude of losers.

In this context, a question of legitimation arises: do winners deserve to win and do losers deserve to lose? Fundamentalisms and neofascisms have emerged as attempts to answer this question from the contrasting perspectives of winners and losers. As shown in Box 2 below, fundamentalisms and neo-fascisms are both embedded in hierarchies of winners and losers. They differ only in their criteria of winning and losing, and thereby their identification of winners and losers.

These fundamentalist and neo-fascist modes of legitimating and counter-legitimizing hierarchy cannot be underestimated. They represent contesting interests on the right that are aiming to capture ideological space and possibly the state itself.

Box 2. Fundamentalist and neo-fascist usages

	Fundamentalist	Neo-fascist
Winners	Use God/gods/divine law to justify inequities - for example, the rich are blessed, the poor are cursed	Use statecraft to justify inequities - for example, the hierarchical state is a 'strong' state, under an elite who deserve to rule
Losers	Use God/gods/divine law to assert another system of winning - for example, believers as superior to all infidels	Use ethno-nationalism to assert another system of winning - for example, indigenes as superior to all newcomers, by virtue of 'blood', 'race', genes, 'homeland', other ascriptive markers

Challenges to feminists

We are in a moment of great danger from old and new patriarchies, both secular and religious. We face capitalist patriarchies, fundamentalist patriarchies, neo-fascist patriarchies - all founded on hierarchies of winners and losers, all with ambitions of expanding their political space. Women are collectively losers in these hierarchies. In fact, these hierarchies are based on women being losers who would 'service' the winners. In the current context of globalized capitalism, the idea of equality as a desired value is being made irrelevant, while the idea of inequality is being established as a 'law of nature', 'law of the jungle', 'divine law', or the 'will of God'. There can be no gender equality if the very idea of equality is lost as a desired value. The key challenge to feminists at this critical moment is to protect and promote equality as a social desideratum and gender equality as part of that. We cannot naively assume that secularism as such can end gender inequalities, since such inequalities are increasingly exacerbated by the ascendance of the right, in both secular and religious varieties.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Fukuyama, Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press
- ² Sachs, Jeffrey (2000), 'Interview', Commanding Heights, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitextlo/int_jeffreysachs.html, retrieved on 26 October 2005