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Theories of Political Power — Filmer, Hobbes, and Locke

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We tend to think of Hobbes and Locke as the same kind of theorists who argued about social contract to establish political power. They both lived and argued in the political turmoil of the 17th century England when the origin of political power was much debated. Their arguments were targeted on the patriarchal theory which insisted that the political power was divine and patriarchal. The champion of the theory was Sir Robert Filmer. He insisted that the kingly power was exactly the same as the fatherly power which had been given by God. So the political power was argued together with the power in the family during this period. Although modern political theory does not deal with family as the subject, the argument of the political theory in the 17th century England included the family as the base of the political power. So we must analyse the power in the family if we try to understand the theory of political power in detail.

Here I compare the political theories of Filmer, Hobbes and Locke including their arguments on the power in the family. If we see the surface of the theories of Hobbes and Locke, we might understand they are in the same group who tried to counter Filmer's patriarchal theory with their social contract theories. But once we recover their arguments about the power in the family, we can see Hobbes and Locke were totally different about the power relations in the family.

Filmer's theory was based on the fatherly power given by God. Hobbes tried to nullify it by constructing his theory totally without God and he gave power to mother to counter the fatherly power. So, his argument includes women in the political process. But Locke tried to nullify the fatherly power by stripping the power from father and return it to God. Family became the area where God governed and men in the family would act according to God's commands. About the relations between man and woman, Locke affirmed that husband had the right of decision in the family and he said it was by nature, i.e. natural by the order of God. Then he proceeded to argue that men would establish political power by themselves through the social contract outside of family sphere.

So, Hobbes included women in his political theory and gave them the political power, but Locke permitted men's superiority to women in marriage relations and excluded women from the political power. Carole Pateman criticizes the marriage contract which establishes man's superiority in the family in Locke's argument as 'the Sexual Contract'. She analyses the modern liberal state was established by the Social Contract after man had established his superiority to woman by the Sexual Contract, which made the structure of the division of the public sphere and the private sphere in the modern liberal state. That was the problem of Locke's theory from the view point of women and family. But Locke's theory influenced far more than that. It changed the nature of power, i.e. for what purpose we have power after all.

Locke wanted to strip the power of fathers whom Filmer gave strong power in his patriarchal theory, and succeeded. In the modern liberal state each man has power and decides whatever he likes. The political power was diminished to the minimal necessary level. It is the structure of the modern liberal state, and it has been praised as the liberation of man. The meaning of the political power before Locke was to keep peace among people and protect people's life. It meant to secure man's present life and the continuation of mankind. So father has the power for the purpose and for that reason it was given by God. That was Filmer's argument. But Locke aimed to negate every point Filmer insisted. Locke denied godly given father's strong political power and its continuation. He relied on God to protect human's life in the family, which meant it was not necessary for men to try to protect the life of family members. Then they just established the state to protect their own life, property and freedom. So the political power was all right to be minimal. That is the liberal theory of Locke.

By this argument, Locke totally changed the meaning of the political power. The state is separated from the family and so the idea of the public sphere and the private sphere was established. The activity to protect life is contained in the family and women become the caregivers. It is one of the problems women tried to solve by the feminist movement in the 70s.

Women tried to solve the problem to aim that women became 'the individuals' who were independent and could contract by themselves. But Pateman insists that the strategy is not effective because the individuals will be symbolized by the image of men if women try to become the individuals who are gender neutral. She argues that 'biology

(of men and women), itself, is neither oppressive nor liberating', so what we have to do is to try to incorporate feminine and masculine individuality fully into political life. In addition to it, we must re-examine the meaning of the power to protect and continue the life of men which was minimized and contained in the family by Locke.