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Life after Feminism: From Governmentality to “Fementality”

Steven Sampson

(talk presented at AXESS conference on the end of feminism) November 2011.

My research has been in socialist societies, how they operated, how they fell apart, and what happened afterwards. Socialism and feminism have much in common, and it is worth comparing them.

Socialism was an ideology. All ideologies have a life. Feminism is no exception. Ideologies which gain appeal to broad groups of people become movements. The socialist movement, for example, established its base within the trade unions and within circles of critical intellectuals. Feminist ideology recruited adherents within circles of women fighting for civil rights and in more elite circles among the middle classes.

Some movements become so successful that they take state power. In Western Europe, socialist movements helped form social democracy and welfare states. In the East, we had 70 years of state socialism in Russia and 50 years in Eastern Europe. Feminist movements also entered the state power: here in Sweden, certainly for the last decade, we have had ‘state feminism’, in which activists, academics, parliamentarians and policy makers have implemented a feminist agenda under the rubric of *jamstalldhet*. State feminism takes on different forms. In my own world, the world of academia, I encountered state feminism in the form of new *jamstalldhets* policies, and particular within the control system called ‘*genuscertifiering*’ in which a policy of ‘*genusperspektiv i undervisning*’ og ‘*genusmedvetanda pedagogik*’ was to be implemented on other institutions by Centrum for Genusvetenskap. My own experience of bringing up *genuscertifiering* as a new form of *formynderi* led to some surprises. The biggest surprise was the number of people who contacted me and said that this same kind of genus mafia is operating at their institution, and that they are afraid to do something; and that they insisted that I was *modig* to bring it out into the open. When I asked these people to write a *kronik* or publicize their discontent, I received replies such as ‘we are walking on eggshells’, or ‘you’ve got to understand my position here’, etc. These responses forced me to think about feminist agendas in a new light. But it was not until much later that I realize that the uncanny (*uhyyge*) that I felt was because it reflected my former research interest in everyday life in Eastern Europe under socialism. Here, too, people were walking on eggshells, people were afraid to say what they really believed, and instead acquiesced to ‘the correct line’. Here ideology, bureaucracy, and control were operating, and if you protested you were seen as anti-working class, just as today someone who protests *genuscertifiering* or *genusorden* can be accused of being anti-woman. Where socialism focused on increased propaganda, feminist agendas were discussed as raising *genuskompetens* eller *genusperspektiv i undervisning*.

Genuscertifiering was a means of exerting state feminist ideology in the university. The current discussion about quotas in bolagsstyrelse, or lika behandling av barn i barnhage are domains in which feminist agendas are pursued by state organs. We need to know more about what happens to ideologies when they begin to enter state administration. We had this experience with socialism. So it is instructive to focus a bit more on socialism and see how it compares with feminism.

Over a century ago, Marxist-Socialist ideology spawned two developments: the workers *movement* which eventually formed the welfare state in the West; and the repressive socialist *states* of the East, where a bureaucratic elite ruled in the name of the 'the working class'. The first development was a resounding success; the second a colossal failure. If both the welfare state and repressive state socialism were based on the same ideology, why did only the welfare state succeed? The welfare state succeeded for two reasons: the ruling classes were afraid of the workers and sought to give them enough security and influence to keep them quiet; this became welfare corporatism, and activists became 'pampers'. Second, the ruling classes in Europe saw advantages in giving benefits to workers and their trade unions; the workers could become the consumers of today. Indeed, today the working classes drive more cars, eat more junk food, buy more goods, and change styles so frequently that they drive the consumer economy forward.

There is nothing bad in saying that state regimes pursue ideological agendas. All states do this. In the socialist states, the socialist ideological agenda took the form of socialist planning and top-down organization combined with socialist ideological training, socialist pedagogy, socialist morality, with the usual amount of control, surveillance and censorship. All intellectual work should have a Marxist or class perspective, and every workplace had someone who made sure that this perspective was followed. Those who contested socialist ideology were considered uninformed, or had backward mentalities, or they were sick and needed therapy or training; or dangerous and even spies. Socialism was a regime of repression, but just as much as regime of political correctness: you had to learn the proper language, read between the lines, and say the right things. You had to keep your mouth shut, or you would get into trouble. Such systems, especially those where ideological support is linked to material rewards and power, reward opportunism and adaptability to trends, which is why so many former socialists could suddenly become nationalists or free market capitalists. Insofar as feminist ideology is now linked to material rewards and power – projects, institutes, journals, policy centers, careers, etc. – we can see the same trends.

No ideology lasts forever. Ideologies grow, decline, die, and are reborn. And in the case of socialism, the gap between state ideology and people's needs led to the gradual decline and collapse of these systems. We now study the socialist period in order to learn how ideologies work, how the bureaucracies functioned from inside, and how these systems fall apart. We study the legacies of socialism in the post-socialist period. What we have learned is that these systems were more fragile than we thought. That without the apparatus of a repressive bureaucracy, without censorship and self-censorship, without the myth of system omnipotence, that these systems would in fact have fallen apart even earlier. We have learned that socialist ideology needed the state apparatus to sustain it. Looking at the dynamics of feminist ideology, the study of socialism thus provides us with some lessons. Lesson one: that ideologies can become degraded or instrumentalized by state institutions and the people who work there because people

have immediate interests. Feminism becomes a career path. And lesson two: that institutions can become radicalized by those with more radical agendas. Radical Marxists took over some socialist states, just as queer theorists have become prominent in certain feminist-inspired institutions.

The dual nature of socialism: successful trade union movements and social democracy in the West, versus repressive communist states in the East, is applicable to feminism. Hence, should we highlight the successes of the women's movement for enfranchising women, or should we focus on feminist ideology in its alliance with state policy makers and administrators carrying out measures such as genuscertifiering or jamstalldhets markning?

Let us therefore turn the clock forward for a moment. Imagine that it is 50 years from now, 2061, and instead of examining life under socialism, let us now imagine how we will look at feminist ideology in Sweden 50 years from now. As an ideological project, we can talk about two kinds of feminism: the feminism that focused on improving the position of women in the political, social and work sphere, principally by extending benefits and opening up channels of legal action. Here I think we could talk about the triumph of likhets feminism. The second kind of feminism focused on highlighting women being uniquely endowed with certain talents, intuitions, sensibilities and abilities; this idea is often referred to as forskelsfeminisme, and is part of the idea that women's true nature is subject to repression by men, particularly men in capitalist or patriarchal systems. For this reason, women as a group need both special protection and special promotion (affirmative action). Forskelsfeminism in its paternalist variant would 'protect' women by denying them the right to take up certain hazardous jobs; or through quotas, it can reward women with special benefits for which they would be otherwise denied: professorships on the basis of 'diversity', quota-based posts in bolagsstyrelser, or most recently in Copenhagen a special 'women only' floor of a hotel (recently ruled illegal by the national discrimination board), based on the idea that women who travel are more vulnerable than men. The danger here is that women who take up these positions might be stigmatized as having earned them on a non-merit basis.

In both cases, the triumphant likhetsfeminism, and the more controversial forskelsfeminisme, were successful because the feminist movement, like other successful movements, recruited more than just 'converts' and activists. It also recruited those who saw their interests being served. These interests – jobs, power, prestige, money, etc.-- were able to operate by colonizing key platforms in the policy worlds and public sector: parliament, government, state administration, academia, foundations, pedagogy, the public sector workplaces, state-run media and certain areas of high culture. These were domains where 'statsfeminism' could operate without opposition. Statsfeminisme is not business-friendly, so feminists had less success in business and industry, which explains the current discussion about using legislation to implant more women in bolagsstyrelser.

Ideologies, including feminism, become successful movements not only by recruiting believers, but also by recruiting those who see the movement as conducive to their interests; this second group – we might call them opportunists – can thus move from one ideology to another, which explains why former socialists can become nationalists, or nationalists could become social democrats, or liberals could become conservatives or socialists can become multiculturalists.

These ideological struggles are not irrelevant, as the experience of FI clearly shows. But the question remains as to whether feminist ideology has recruited so many of these second category that the political opportunities have taken precedence over the ideological project of equality.

Now this leads to a larger question, what does it mean when we say that an ideology has 'won' or become 'orthodoxy'? In looking back at feminism, I would argue that a specific ideological understanding of feminism has indeed made its way into society and become a conventional wisdom. Feminist ideology, be it of the *likhets-* or the *forskel-* kind, rests on a assumption about relations between people.

The principle assumption of feminism, I think, is that relations between men and women are primarily *relations of power*. And that relations of power are *bad*. The only time when male/female relations are NOT relations of power are situations of mutual 'desire' or in ordinary terms, love. By 'desire' I do not mean sex, because sex can also be about power. Rather, I mean erotic love, one the outside world falls away. Outside of erotic love, feminism views all relations between men and women – in public, at work, in the domestic sphere -- as relations where power is either overt or potential. The academic concept of gender order, or gender power order, fits with this idea. While some feminists can talk of a unique female 'experience', most of this experience is interpreted as an experience of subordination, subalternity, of finding strategies and solutions to their oppression by men. Women become an oppressed group, even if they do not know each other, much like an ethnic or religious minority.

Once we view male/female relations as power relations, of course, it dictates our practices and interpretations. We know our mission: to reveal, or uncover these power constructions, to deconstruct the discourse as academics might say, or show how institutions and practices oppress women, or lately, lock men into gender roles. Somehow, this uncovering exercise is supposed to be liberating as well. By revealing the construction of power, by giving voice to women, we are supposed to see the light, we are 'empowered', and we can change the gender order for the better, either from a *likhets-* or *forskelsfeministiske* perspective. Feminist analysis is therefore always a *maktanalyse*, an analysis of who does what to whom. A feminist perspective is one that accepts the priority of power in relationships and highlights the power that is operating, be it the power of concepts, words, institutions, or physical violence. An analysis of this kind must locate victims and perpetrators and eventually propose means to empower victims or neutralize perpetrators. This can be done through law, through enlightened policies through self-actualizing therapy, or in academia through an emphasis on certain kinds of intellectual exercises; it can even be done by evaluation and monitoring, to ensure that a gender perspective is present, ultimately leading to a kind of certification process. It is in this last practice that state feminism plays a role

Power makes us nervous. Especially in Scandinavia. Power is viewed as inequality and inequality conflicts with the social democratic ethos. Hence, we now have administrative mechanisms to help victims of power, to protect the weak from those who might exploit them, or to prevent the weak from falling behind. This project originally began with aid to the poorer classes in early social democracy, was extended to children, the handicapped and the aged; later on to ethnic minorities through policies of multiculturalism, *mangfold*, and special funds to support minority language and culture; and today, through the implementation of *genus-based*

policies in education, domestic violence, affirmative action and gender certifying. Insofar as 'women' are constructed as a group, who are victims of another group, called 'men', forskelsfeminismen becomes a means of using state power against the so-called gender order. This is state feminism.

Is state feminism just a continuation of the social democratic formynderi? Has gender come to replace class and ethnicity as the prime ideological battle ground? Fifty years from now, historians may conclude that feminism has triumphed, replacing the kind of social solidarity that had formerly been class- or ethnically based. People will be divided into those who have the proper 'genuskompetens' and those who do not. As feminism penetrates state institutions, and attracts the elite, it now tends to be more about individual self-realization than about group rights. Fighting for rights and legal enfranchisement and protecting victims of violence to helping women feel good and stimulating 'genuskompetens'. It is the difference between politics and therapy. I also think everyone should have the right to feel good about themselves. I want people to feel good, without having to take pills to do it. Early feminism sought to empower women as citizens, as workers for equal pay. This has been replaced by feminism as a vehicle for self-realization in the domestic, private or sexual sphere, the kind of feminism that says that women are inherently different types of beings than men, that individual women should be able to have their careers as board members and professors..... it is the replacement of lighetsfeminism with forskelsfeminism, and of group-feminism with individual career mobility. It is the decline of social solidarity, interest group politics, and its replacement by individual career mobility and feel-good therapy, of equal rights with vagina monologues. The change is that this therapeutic regime is now supported by a state apparatus. This, too, is state feminism.

To say that feminist ideology has now won a place in the state system requires that we understand what ideologies are and how they work. Ideologies that fight existing systems have a vision. Every ideological movements begins as a cult, and cults look for converts or believers. Such early ideologies are both an intellectual project and an emotional project. Most ideologies remain cults; they disappear or they fragment. Some ideologies, however, make history. They are called Movements. Early Christianity, Protestantism, Socialism, Fascism, environmentalism, and feminism are examples of such movements that have had a historical impact. Such movements, as stated, do not just have 'believers' or converts. They have mass followers who join movements because they discover that the movement can serve their particular interests. These interests will develop if a social movement becomes so successful that it penetrates or takes state power. The movement, with state resources and positions, can offer more opportunities to attract followers who have strategic interests. We need not call these people 'opportunists' but in fact, that is what they are. People join movements to gain something. With so many people pursuing diverse strategies, however, the divergent interests in the movement may rise to the surface. We get a 'scandal' or 'fragmentation', often disguised as ideological struggle about the 'correct line' or 'policy'. Movements unable to accommodate these divergent interests will fragment. Feminist movements are no exception. Within a short time some years ago, Sweden's prime minister declared himself a feminist, while the FI movement rose and collapsed, largely due to internal pressures. FI was unsuccessful as a party, but feminism penetrated state institutions in other ways.

We tend to think of movements as radical. But those movements that are successful in acquiring

state power – or in occupying enclaves within the state – in fact tend to become conservative. Conservative not just in the sense of ‘realistic’ or ‘pragmatic’, but in a more genuine sense of ‘systembevarende’. Think of how politicians working within the state – left and right -- often resemble each other in their conservative character; while certain radical feminists – especially as they begin to get a taste of organizational or state power -- become image conscious and status conscious; they begin to resemble the people they are fighting, and at worst, become ‘bureaucratic’.

Ideologies that obtain organizational resources want to hold on to power. They tend to label their opposition as not just as ‘different in opinion’ but as unpatriotic, naive, dangerous, or evil; the word ‘forræder’ was used in the FI debacle. Such movements tend to explain their failures as failures of communication....our message was interpreted incorrectly, the public was unable to understand our signal....the masses did not comprehend their real interests...people were brainwashed or misled by ‘the media’. Anyone who follows controversies within the feminist debates can identify these tendencies. In my own little world of Academia, the various protests against genuscertifisering were later ‘explained’ by certain university officials as a ‘kommunikationsfel’. Genuscertifisering was ‘an unfortunate choice of words’, or the protest were made by conservative, male professors who refused to relinquish their privileges. Leading feminists in universities – some known for radical views or queer theories -- were allied with the university bureaucracy against other university institutions. Feminism with bureaucratic power became conservative.

Ideologies that take state power also tend to expand their territory, to colonize ever new areas. Socialism, for example began as equality within the sphere of labour relations, but then expanded to socialist culture, socialist art, socialist music, socialist sport, socialist science, socialist friendship, etc. Feminism has also tended to colonize ever more areas of social and cultural life. Campaigns to eliminate discrimination, to pursue equal rights in the political sphere and equal opportunities for women in the workplace, the foundations of likhetsfeminisme, have now given way to feminist ‘science’ (genusvetenskap), and the pursuit of ‘genusperspektiv’ in culture, literature, art, in psychiatry, philosophy, and projects of self-realization. Feminism now includes the effort to ensure that middle class women can have careers, that academic women can be promoted to professors, that business and professional women could have seats on corporate boards, and that filmmaking or book publishing women could have anerkendelse by having their own prizes and awards.

Feminist ideology has thus evolved from collective projects to feel good, from politics to therapy, from solidarity to career. Feminism has become a careerist movement. In this transition, what was truly transgressive or revolutionary about feminism now becomes conservative. The project of feminism changes from a collective project to one that ensures that women take their place among elites. Elitism itself – the special privileges of professors, the power of the boards, the nepotistic reward system itself – these things remain. The elites are now women. When we look back on feminism 50 years from now, we will observe this transition from system-challenging to system-maintaining. Feminist corporatism will resemble the social democratic corporatism. We will find social democratic pampers in the trade unions, and feminist pampers in the women’s organizations. History repeats itself.

Feminist science: Genusvetenskap

The transition of feminism into a conservative, system-maintaining apparatus, complete with its thought police, accusations of sexism, and closed networks in academia, the media and politics, this movement has now acquired its own body of orthodox knowledge. This orthodoxy constructs the accepted truths about what women are like, about women's unique 'experience', about what gender relations are, and about why and how to study 'gender power' and 'gender identities'. With the support of state research councils and earmarked funds, and with the efforts of intelligent, aggressive and opportunistic scholars who, like scholars everywhere, seek to build their own 'empires' and create 'disciples', this feminist intellectual component has crystallized into a science formerly called women's studies, but which is now called genusvetenskap.

Genusvetenskap, as I see it, is the intellectual appendage to the feminist postulate that relations between men and women are primarily, fundamentally relations of power in which men oppress women. Genusvetenskap seeks to deconstruct, unmask, or reveal these power relations in all their forms: physical abuse, social hierarchies, linguistic or symbolic forms, symbolic objectification, so that women can be transformed into full human beings. Genusvetenskap is feminist activism at university level.

As the intellectual component of feminism, genusvetenskap is therefore obsessed with this power revealing project, to show how gender is socially constructed or politically repressive, and to show that peeling off assigned roles, like a kind of onion, can expose the gender power order. Playing or reversing these roles, instead of being deviant or 'queer', can now become transgressive and revolutionary. Genusvetenskap thus sees itself as a subversive science.

In exposing 'relations between genders', 'gender power orders' and 'gender identities'. Genusvetenskap functions like a symbolic system. As a symbolic system, it provides some kind of emotional comfort: it makes its adherents feel good to know that this is how things are. It provides a kind of certainty, a kind of emotional security that things are this way, that there is an enemy, that we are right and they are wrong. The problem, however, is that this feeling of certainty and security is just the opposite of a movement. It is, rather, an institution. Feminism has gone from movement to institution, from living ideology to orthodoxy, from activism to careerism.

Feminism as institution: 'fementality'.

Historians 50 years from now will be describing the institutionalization of feminism the way they analyzed the institutionalization of the workers movement into the social democratic folkehemma. Every institution provides certainty and security in an uncertain world. Genusvetenskap provides certainty and security in an uncertain academic world. It provides jobs, grants and resources. Academic institutions are restructured or even eliminated all the time, but the idea of reducing any center for genusvetenskap in Sweden is inconceivable. (although the Norwegian forskningsråd has recently eliminated its special fund for genusforskning, after 15 years, saying it is no longer necessary).

The institutionalization of feminism and genus perspektiv –and its intellectual component,

genusvetenskap – has taken its form as state feminism. Feminist ideologists and also some opportunists -- have succeeded in placing a feminist agenda into government policy in a way that makes the feminist agenda a normal part of state policy, something unquestioned, unreflective. Foucault – a favorite of all feminists – had a name for this process whereby power becomes ‘naturalized’ or unreflective. He called it ‘governmentality’. We should now echo Foucault and perhaps call this process one of ‘fementality’. In a world of ‘fementality’ polices that are ‘gender based’, that give a ‘gender perspective’ or are ‘genusmedvetande’ are now accepted without question, without argument, as something natural..... Anyone who might contest these policies is regarded as somehow backward, retrograde or evil. They need to develop their ‘genuskompetens’. Which can be done by taking lessons from the ‘genusvetare’ who have studied ‘genusvetenskap’.

In Denmark, where I live, a debate has been raging on some of the same issues as in Sweden: making prostitution illegal, forced paternity leave for men, obligatory positions for women on bolagstyrelser, kvotering for kvindeliga professors. Many of these issues are promoted by and for the creative class of elite women: the professionals, innovators, communication workers, journalists, academics, politicians. This creative class includes both red feminists and blue feminists, where the red feminists tend to be a bit older. Otherwise, there is little difference between the red and blue feminists in their life styles, values and ways of speaking. The difference lies in their use of the state to get what they want. Red feminists want the state as an active instrument to achieve their goals. The state is their weapon against the conservative, repressive male dominance in boardrooms, universities, workplaces and other areas where women have not achieved full equality. Blue feminists see the state as an unnecessary bureaucracy which might stigmatize women as individuals even while it tries to help them as groups.

Now let me return to the history of feminism in Sweden..... All ideologies have a life, they make an appearance as if they are the solution to a host of problems. They evolve into left wing and right wing versions, producing factional fights; and when they take state power they harness the state to their own project. Such ideologies, once intended to solve problems, but after a time they become themselves a part of the problem. They become conservative, bureaucratic, repressive, and use the state to stigmatize their opponents as backward or evil. Governmentality-fementality, triumphs. Many ideologies have taken this path. Perhaps fifty years from now, historians will be saying the same thing about feminism and state feminism in Sweden as they said about social democracy and corporatism. That feminism became conservative, bureaucratic, elitist and repressive; and that people who protested this trend were stigmatized or marginalized. Hvor trist.