

MATERNAL POLITICS

Aristarkhova, Irina

2000

Aristarkhova, Irina

Maternal Politics

On-line version: <http://www.constantvzw.com/cyberf/book/articles.php?pg=art26>

In this essay I think through the possibilities of alternative ways to carry out effective and ethical political struggle to go beyond the current crisis in party politics, group affiliations with their reliance on the old political structures and methods. For reformulating it I will be using conceptual means developed by Levinas, Irigaray, Derrida and Kornell. Traditional idea of party politics is based on belonging to and differentiation, separation from; hence, we have a problem of representation (whom, who, when and how).

One of the alternatives to this crisis can be found in the phenomenon that I call "Maternal Politics", examples of which exist, though varied considerably and necessarily, around the world. I will focus on the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM) – an example of Russian organization. I will try to show how CSM transforms theory and practice of traditional political struggle in post-Soviet Russia and near-by states through finding a way out of the current political crisis of representation and political activism.

1. Governmental Crisis

Traditionally the notion of state has been defined through opposition to the civil society. Foucault, among others, has shown that this opposition does not serve us anymore methodologically, for carrying out effective political struggle. When it is maintained, we have to be careful what are the reasons and claims behind such activist foundation – what does it serve and whom, politically. Exclusive importance and central position of the state are presented through a variety of metaphors – "cold monster", impersonal and distant from 'the people', or 'system / machine' which operation can be reduced to economic and other conditions (like the state of productive forces and industrial relations). As it's well-discussed, Foucault's position differed from such framing of the state, and he stressed that today "state no more than in any other moment of its history, does not have such unity, individuality, strong functionality, and, frankly speaking, importance; at the end, the state may be nothing more than an imagined reality, mystified abstraction, which importance is much more limited than many of us think" (Foucault, 1991a: 103). His notion of "Governmentality" serves as an alternative to state in the analysis of political sphere. And indeed governmentalization of the state is probably more significant today, than 'state-zation' of society. (Foucault, 1991a:103) [1]

Another widely used point from Foucault's political analysis is that power cannot be presented anymore in repressive terms only, as something that comes from above down. This makes master/slave and oppressed / oppressors paradigms unproductive (Foucault, 1996:111-152). Today politics is characterized by a situation in which distribution and articulation (or exercise) of power undermines survival and growth of large and stable political bodies – for examples, as the recent case with Russian political movement called "Russia, Our Home".

Another example of shift towards a governmentalization of Russian state was Martin Vacuum's presidential campaign (Russia, June, 1996). One of his main campaign slogans was: "Russia is in need of government, not crown" (One must govern Russia, not be on its throne). We see more and more of move to this new governmental direction in Putin's government. This shift – from sovereign framing of power to governmentalization of Russian state does not mean, certainly, that

the problematics of ruling or law disappears altogether. Moreover, the state becomes a part of a complex system of the problem of government and governing. Or, in Foucault's terms, of "how one enacts tactics, and not laws, or even the use of laws as tactics, in order to distribute things so as to achieve such and such results with such and such means" (Foucault, 1991a:95).

2. Crisis of Representation

Crisis of the State manifests itself also in proliferation of NGOs, or so-called "Third Sector" organizations. This kind of social formations seek to fill the space freed as a result of the process of governmentalization of state, and they promote group interests. Such organizations usually face the same problem as the state or political parties based on it – the problem of representation. If state 'represents' interests of the people, of the working class, of the capital, etc. – as in classical political discourse, weakening of the state shakes the ground of the notion of representation as such. Representation was the function of the state proper, and when state becomes just another member of government, NGOs find themselves in urgent need to respond to crisis of representation – even though they might participate in and grow as a result of weakening of the state, they also need it to carry on filling in its withdrawal. For many non-state political formations the issue of representing – working class, women, animals, minorities, the poor, - becomes a constant head-ache and a struggle for grounding oneself. State crisis leads to representation crisis, one goes hand in hand with another one, depending for the other to exist and justify its existence.

Representation, especially in its current political form, implies homogeneity of shared values, goals, or convictions. Often it is based on claims that not every one has an opportunity to express and fight for their convictions, needs and interests, and therefore they need to be represented by "someone on their behalf, for them". However, after a short while a problem occurs as different and uncompromising needs and convictions by separate individuals cannot ground political programmes and struggles, and get subsumed under one leading ideology that levels difference by a few means [2]. Ideology cements party politics. Fixed and written into a programme or main manifesto, it provides a basis for a principal upon which to choose strategy, tactics, actions and borders of the party – who belongs to it and who is not, and upon which parameters.

[1] See the following works by Foucault, where he develops the notion of 'governmentality': Michel Foucault. *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, IV 1980-1988*. Edition établie sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald avec la collaboration de Jacques Lagrange. Gallimard, 1994. P. 582-583, Préface à l' "Histoire de la sexualité", English translation: Rabinow. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. P. 333-339; also see Pp. 728-729, from *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté*, *Concordia: Revista internacional de filosofia*, n. 6, july-december, 1984, 99-116; p. 785, from *Les techniques de soi*; université du Vermont, octobre 1982. Published in English as "Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault", the University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, 16-49; p. 213-218. *Subjectivité et vérité*, *Annuaire du Collège de France*, 81 année. *Histoire des systèmes de pensée*, année 1980-81, 1981. P. 385-389.

[2] Here I mean by "ideology" a number of ideas and convictions that are written in Party Programmes, manifestos or Codes. It is a "party ideology" and not a Marxist notion of ideology or its derivatives.