

Patriarchal Apparatus: The Role of Media, University, and Athletic ISAs in the Nassar Abuse Case

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The Larry Nassar scandal at Michigan State University is the worst and most widespread case of childhood sex abuse in this nation's history to date, affecting over 150 young girls and women. This article asks: What were the structural and ideological mechanisms, policies, and practices that enabled this widespread abuse over a thirty-year period? Louis Althusser's Marxist theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (and feminist responses to this theory) is useful in explaining how state-making institutions—media outlets, universities, athletic organizations, and family units—are not only produced and reproduced along class lines, but also with respect to gendered power dynamics. By examining the patriarchal nature of ISAs, one can begin to understand how Larry Nassar was for so long shielded from suspicion and criminal prosecution by the institutions that employed him.

Keywords: structural mechanisms, ideological mechanisms, feminist responses, patriarchal nature, criminal prosecution

Introduction

In January of this year, people across the United States, particularly women, were awestruck by a powerful display of young female gymnasts confronting their mutual abuser in a court of law. Judge Rosemarie Aquilina allowed over 150 victims to come forward and deliver harrowing stories about the sexual abuse suffered at the hands of Larry Nassar, a former medical doctor for Michigan State University Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team (Denhollander, 2018). During routine physical examinations Nassar would manually penetrate the young gymnasts under the guise that this “procedure” could alleviate their pain and inflammation. Nassar abused hundreds of young athletes in this way for over thirty years. He pled guilty multiple charges of sexual assault and is now serving consecutive sentences that amount to life in prison (Correa, 2018).

As the story circulated, it seemed everyone—the gymnasts, their parents, viewers at home, journalists, and news anchors—was asking: How could this have happened for so long? Who were the people enabling Nassar over this thirty-year period of active pedophilia? Rachel Denhollander, the whistleblower in the Nassar case, who came forward alone over a decade after suffering repeated abuse by Nassar, recently gave an interview with Megyn Kelly in which she said,

The reason why predators like Nassar are able to abuse for so long is because the instant community response around the predator is to circle the wagons and support him. And usually that's because there's some sort of overarching ideal or

identity that is trying to be protected, whether that's the university identity, a religious identity, a political identity. And we have to get to the place where children are worth more than those identities or overarching ideologies. (Denhollander, 2018)

It is the institutional apparatus, Denhollander argues, that demands loyalty and adherence from those within it, even at the cost of the lives and psychological well-being of young women and girls.

In this piece, I will analyze why these state and institutional ideologies and identities exist, and why they are given so much power in American culture. I will apply Marxist critic Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* to the Larry Nassar case in order to show how these apparatuses protect the state and its institutions in order to uphold U.S. hegemony. I will also incorporate a feminist analysis to detail how the state and its institutions (which are for my purposes, universities, athletic organizations, families, and media outlets) are inherently patriarchal and examine the violent ramifications of patriarchal ideologies for young women in this case and others.

Althusser (2010) explains that there are several primary Ideological State Apparatuses. These include religious ISAs, or churches; the family ISA; the legal ISA, such as a court of law; political ISAs, including the dominant political parties; communications ISAs, such as press, radio stations, televisions, and other media outlets; and cultural ISAs, such as literature, arts, and sports. Public and private school systems also make up another dominant ISA, which he calls "educational ISAs" (Althusser, 2010, p. 1346). These ISAs are not to be confused with RSAs, or Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the Army, the Police, and the Prisons, which impose their will onto citizens with overt violence. ISAs complement RSAs in the state-building project by promoting ideologies which are often "attenuated and concealed, even symbolic" (Althusser, 2010, p. 1339). An example of this ideological promotion in public schools might be the routine recitation of the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance by teachers and children at the start of every school day. This act imprints American state ideology into the minds of young impressionable kids, giving them a collective (albeit imagined) sense of community as citizens of this nation-state. Additionally, it promotes a sense of indebtedness in young citizens—the notion that citizens owe a service or measure of gratitude to a nation which grants them "liberty and justice".

The primary aim of the ISA, according to Althusser (2010), is to create obedient citizens who practice the dominant values of the state. Schools, for instance, teach a type of knowledge that "ensures subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'." (Althusser, 2010, p. 1346). This, in turn, ensures that the state can reproduce the conditions necessary to maintain its level of capitalist production. In short, the state, by way of its implementation of RSAs and ISAs, first and foremost protects capital. The state only protects its citizens insofar as they are needed to produce and protect capital. This ideological promotion and subsequent protection of capital can occur at the broader national level, or it can occur on a smaller scale within particular institutions. The institutional identity and allegiance produced by the state in its creation and reification of ISAs is in part what protected Larry Nassar in his abuse for several decades.

So, what are the "dominant values" of Michigan State University, the institution that employed and protected Larry Nassar over the course of his 30-year pedophilic career? According to Michigan State University's website, the university ostensibly promotes "the common good in uncommon ways." The university claims to be committed to tackling "some of the world's toughest problems to find solutions that make life better" (About MSU, 2018). These types of ambiguous mission statements can be found pasted on the websites of every public and private university across the country. What is the "common good"? And what are the "uncommon" methods or lessons promoting it? Which "problems" does this institution aim to "tackle"? Make life better for whom?

Ambiguous mission statements, like the above, allow adherents to these institutions to read into them what they will. These are universalizing words, devoid of any real meaning, designed to rally people together under one institutional identity even when their views, values, and lifestyles differ.

In order to identify and understand any institution's values, ideologies, and practices, one must look deeper into what motivating factors allow that institution to function or expand. Public universities increasingly operate according to a corporate business model (Ahmed & Rao, 2011, p. 121). Universities' primary aim is to increase production (by attracting students and faculty who will produce research for the university) in order to increase profits. Cutting-edge research can itself increase profits for the university, or it can increase profits by attracting still more students who will enroll and pay always-rising tuition rates (Ahmed & Rao, 2011, p. 122). Athletics, too, are a massive source of revenue for the university in terms of ticket sales, merchandise sales, and university branding and advertising. Michigan State Gymnastics and USA Gymnastics are first and foremost economic systems of production aided and abetted by the promotion of ideologies that ensure allegiance to these institutions.

This is why, as Denhollander notes, institutional identities and ideologies are ranked higher than the life and well-being of any particular individual. Identities and ideologies create allegiance to broad-reaching structures that ensure capitalist production more than any individual can. Faculty, coaches, and administration that enabled Nassar for several decades did so because the fabric of the institution and its modes of production were at stake (though the individuals working within this structure may or may not be conscious of this fact). Any particular gymnast could have been harmed without upsetting this institutional fabric; but upsetting university ideological allegiance would upset the modes of production, which hurts the bottom line. (Ironically, that this widespread abuse has come to public light could now hurt the university's bottom line by hurting its reputation, identity, and production of allegiance).

Additionally, there exist smaller institutions (and accompanying ideologies and practices) underneath the Michigan State University or U.S. Olympic Committee umbrella—that is, one could think of each sport or organization within these larger institutions as its own type of ISA. Outside of Michigan State's institutional ideologies, the sport of gymnastics has its own norms, ideologies, practices, and protocols, particularly in the upper echelon where Olympians are trained to compete on a high-pressure international stage. According to Marta and Bela Karolyi—two famous Olympics gymnastics coaches who employed Larry Nassar for several decades at their training ranch near Huntsville, Texas—it is precisely the high-stakes nature of Olympic-level gymnastics that creates a culture of intensity, discipline, and authoritarianism. At the Karolyi ranch, gymnasts were expected to perform daily as though they were competing at the Olympics. As reporter Savannah Guthrie explains,

This was the Olympic training center and it was supposed to be intense. And that's actually one of the things that the Karolyis talk about. Their theory is you have a lot of gymnasts who are excellent. In fact, Marta Karolyi told me there would be gymnasts over the years who were beautiful, technical, great gymnasts, but you've never heard of them because when it came to competition they would collapse because the pressure was so intense. So their theory is when you come to the Karolyi ranch we're going to mimic competition, the intensity of it—there's not a moment where we're slacking, we're laughing, and we're having fun. From the second you are there every day is Olympic gold-medal competition day. And they think that is the secret to producing champions, who when it came time for London 2012 or Rio 2016, when they walk out it's just another day at the office for them. That's how the Karolyis explain the intensity of the environment. (Karolyi, 2018)

Gymnasts training at the Karolyi ranch were subject to a strict authoritarian regimen. Girls at this ranch were taught not to complain about long practices or injuries they sustained. The ranch was located in a very isolated,

rural area of south Texas, where there was no cellphone service and girls could not be in frequent or sustained contact with parents or friends outside. And while the ranch boasted a large and bountiful cafeteria with abundant and easy access to a variety of foods, the caloric intake of gymnasts training there was closely monitored and restricted (Karolyi, 2018).

Athletes explain that this intense “culture of abuse” in Olympic gymnastics, in part, allowed predators like Nassar to “groom” the girls by playing the “good guy” in an environment where coaches, trainers, and other authorities were feared. Olympian McKayla Maroney put it succinctly in a recent interview:

I think I would have starved at the Olympics if I didn't have [Nassar] bring me food. Your coaches are just always watching you, wanting to keep you skinny, and there's just other things about the culture that are also messed up that he used against us. (Karolyi, 2018)

Maroney goes on to explain that Nassar would sneak loaves of bread to her after practices when her coaches were not nearby. According to Maroney these ostensible acts of kindness were almost always followed by still more abuse. Maroney alleges that Nassar sexually abused her hundreds of times over the several years that she was under his care. He abused her “every time” she saw him (Karolyi, 2018).

It may be useful to think of these institutions as tiered. At the most local level gymnasts must adhere to the ideologies and practices normalized in athletic training camps, like at the Karolyi ranch. Above that are the broader-reaching ISAs of USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University, which are responsible for ensuring that the most gold medals (and thus capital) are produced off of the labor of these young athletes. And above MSU and USAG is the US Olympic Committee, which oversees (or neglects to oversee) ethical concerns in U.S. Olympic sports broadly. That each of these institutions, at every tier, is more committed to athletic excellence and the money it produces than they are to the well-being of individuals, in part explains how such a widespread “culture of abuse” in U.S. gymnastics has been fostered. Marta and Bela Karolyi maintain that they did not know about the long-standing abuse committed against their athletes at their training camp, and this may well be true. It was not their job to know about these abuses (though ostensibly the athletes were admitted to their “care”); rather, it was their job to churn out athletes that could make money for the institutions above named. And they did this by following strictly the ideologies and practices that had historically accomplished this.

Gender politics further complicate this dynamic. Althusser writes that in a capitalist social formation:

the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced. The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology. (Althusser, 2010, p. 1347)

In the Nassar case (and in countless other sex abuse scandals) the relations of exploited to exploiters and vice versa are not only reproduced along class lines, but also along gender lines. Nassar's account was for years given more credibility due to his “expertise” as a medical doctor, and the fact that he was middle-aged and male. The abused gymnasts, by contrast, were all young, relatively inexperienced, female, had few or no educational credentials, and thus had relatively little institutional backing. Nassar helped shape institutional policy with regard to athletics and became an unofficial example of Michigan State's excellence; the gymnasts, while also examples of excellence, were simply cogs in the university's modes of production and were given little to no voice or autonomy.

This case broke at a critical time in which American women were struggling to trouble the long-held uneven gender power dynamics in the United States. The long duration and widespread scale of the abuse at Michigan State University makes the Larry Nassar case the most severe case of pedophilia yet documented in U.S. history. The case was reported nationally and clips of the victims' testimonies were shared widely across social media. Many people felt that this case was evidence that the #MeToo movement—in which women publicly confront their abusers and hold them accountable over social media and other news outlets—had been cemented in U.S. gender relations. Many of the gymnasts, including Olympic medalist Kayla Maroney, initially came forward about the abuse by sharing their experiences in social media posts hashtagged with #MeToo. As the movement picked up steam, the Nassar case became widely publicized and discussed in a way that it hadn't been one year earlier. "Where was that anger in 2016 when the Indianapolis Star first reported the allegations against Dr. Nassar?" wrote one *New York Times* reporter (Correa, 2018).

And outside of that case, "gymnastics" "culture of abuse" had been long documented by journalists and former gymnasts themselves. Even when decorated Olympians like Simone Biles and Aly Raisman spoke publicly about the abuse, outside of the "gymtneret"... it felt like only crickets were being heard. (Correa, 2018)

The #MeToo movement may have brought about outrage and publicity at the Larry Nassar case due to the widespread feminist backlash against abuse by men in positions of power.

Althusser would classify journalism and media institutions—particularly those that are state-funded or backed by massive corporations—as ISAs as well, since these perpetuate convenient state ideologies, and continue to function and expand by producing capital and reproducing the means of capitalist production. Though Twitter—where content is created by individuals who (in this case and others) are attempting to speak truth to the state, question the current capitalist order, and/or hold powerful elites accountable—could not be classified as such. Major media conglomerates like FOX and CNN are able to make a profit off of stories like Nassar's by increasing their ratings, viewership, and sponsorship. But the #MeToo movement itself did not begin with capitalist accumulation as its primary goal, and indeed sought to challenge the very patriarchal ideologies inherent in U.S. state-making rather than reify or reproduce them. In this way, social media can, at points, stand in opposition to entrenched ISAs and their (violent) ideologies, whether the ISA is a university, an athletic institution, or another type of media outlet.

What is needed is a critical analysis of the linkages between ideological state apparatuses and the patriarchal power dynamics inherent in state institutions. Feminist standpoint theory may be useful in addressing this. As Marxist feminist theorist Rosemary Hennessy explains,

Standpoint refers to a position in society, a way of making sense that is affected by and can in turn help shape structures of power, work, and wealth. Feminist standpoint theorists have posited feminism as this sort of position, a way of conceptualizing reality from the vantage point of women's lives. (Hennessy, 1993, p.)

One must examine and analyze ISAs from a standpoint feminist lens in order to understand how women's lives and positions are shaped by these apparatuses. This is because women's lives are uniquely shaped by these apparatuses, and one must stand in and look on from their position(s) in order to effectively see this shaping.

When looking at these apparatuses from the standpoint of the gymnasts, one can clearly see the ways in which young women are exploited in college and Olympic athletics. In the same interview with Megyn Kelly, Mattie Larson, another gymnast who was molested by Larry Nassar beginning at the age of fourteen, details not only the abuse she suffered at the hands of Nassar, but also the psychological and emotional abuse she suffered

from coaches, trainers, and other professionals at USA Gymnastics training camps. All of these forms of abuse compounded to make Larson's adolescent life "a personal living hell". She explained,

Larry was a big part of it, but he wasn't the only part. It was USA Gymnastics, Marta Karolyi, my own coaches. I had no voice. I was a shell of a child. I thought there was no way out. I really did think that for the rest of my life I was just going to be used and abused. (Larson, 2018)

Larson goes on to explain how she intentionally slammed her own head onto the ledge of her bathtub in order to sustain a concussion and miss the Karolyis' camp. When Marta Karolyi saw Mattie again at the next month's camp, her only words to Mattie over the entire camp were to shame her for missing her prior training (Larson, 2018).

Mattie Larson's story begs the question: What role do parents play in these power structures? The family ISA is another ISA in part fostering abuse in top-level gymnastics. The only way that Larson perceived that her parents would let her out of going to the Karolyis' gymnastics training camp, was if she sustained an injury severe enough as to require immediate medical attention. Perhaps Larson could have opened up to her parents about the real reasons why she did not want to go back to the Texas ranch, and perhaps they would have understood; but the point is, Larson did not feel as though she could. This means that young gymnasts are voiceless (or at least made to feel voiceless), not just in the institution of gymnastics, but also in their educational institutions, and in their familial institutions. Larson's experience is not unique. Nearly all of the gymnasts spoke about feeling helpless or voiceless during these periods of abuse. This is one reason it took years for Denhollander to blow the whistle on Nassar.

The Nassar case shows precisely what every American ISA has in common. These ISAs are inherently and thoroughly patriarchal. As Marxist feminist Alison Assiter (1990) writes,

The family ISA is ideological because it produces subjects whose gendered consciousness is never whole, pure and non-fragmented. Thus, subjects never have full knowledge of themselves, because such self-knowledge is never possible. The production of gendered subjectivity is an ideological process in another Althusserian sense—ideology is eternal. Though family forms can, and will, alter, and specifically gendered subjectivity may cease to exist in some hypothetical cultures, "ideological" subjectivity in the above sense will always be present. (Assiter, 1990, p. 149)

I would argue that this is true, not just of the family ISA, but of any ISA helping to shape a young woman's life and sense of self in an American context. Assiter also acknowledges that the family ISA, while it is the most immediate and most constant institution shaping a young woman, does not exist in a vacuum:

Men and women are formed as masculine and feminine selves by their position in the family. But this position is influenced by the way in which any particular family is incorporated in the mode of production overall, and by its interrelation with other ISAs. (Assiter, 1990, p. 149)

The families of the gymnasts at Michigan State all have their own institutional ideologies; but every family is also influenced and molded by other patriarchal ISAs, such as elite-level athletic institutions.

This should not be surprising given the fact that nearly every American institution has historically privileged men's interests, ideas, and experiences over women's. That educational institutions continue to privilege powerful men is a holdover from eras in which powerful men founded and exclusively had access to educational institutions. The same could be said about athletic institutions. This is why, in order to understand abuse cases like Nassar's, one must adopt both Marxist and feminist lenses to clearly see class and gender power dynamics at work.

What is needed going forward is more intersectional work of this kind about other prominent cases of abuse. How did race, gender, and class intersect in Bill Cosby's abuse case? What role does patriarchy play in same-sex abuse scandals, such as in Kevin Spacey's alleged abuse of a fourteen-year-old boy? And how do media and mass communications ISAs continue to shape our understandings of the power dynamics at work in each specific case? If we continue to ask these difficult questions and pick apart the institutional ideologies underpinning these abuses, then perhaps in the foreseeable future we can get to a place, as Rachel Denhollander envisions, where the life of a young girl means more than any institutional identity or ideology.

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