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News from a “peaceful country”

“War is peace”: Feminist anti-patriarchal anti-war policy in the global North¹

Rhetoric of peace and logic of war

The German government allegedly opposed the war in Iraq. But that should not be confused with a fundamental critique of war and militarisation. Germany would rather appear to be pursuing a dual strategy, speaking out against the war in Iraq, on the one hand, while making large parts of its infrastructure available to the USA for the war in Iraq², on the other. At the same time Germany is playing a leading role in the transformation of the European Union into a military power – armament is to be given the status of a constitutional right. The “no” to the war in Iraq went hand in hand with drastic cutbacks in the German welfare state. Rights to social provision are now being revoked, severe restrictions are being placed on health care and retirement benefits, and public goods, such as water, are being privatised. Women’s projects are particularly hard hit by the cutbacks. At the same time repressive measures are being tightened, in particular against refugees. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s speech announcing these neo-liberal cutbacks was appropriately titled “Courage for Peace, Courage for Reform”³. The peace rhetoric helped to push forward neo-liberal changes that increasingly make competition, division, existential fear, violence, racism and sexism appear perfectly normal. The “common desire for peace” – reflected in the fact that millions of people took to the streets to protest against the Iraq war, while no more than about 10,000 people protested against the social cutbacks – had the effect of camouflaging internal contradictions.

Germany is currently at peace and it continues to enjoy a very high standard of living despite the cutbacks and recent rounds of privatisation. Yet the cuts in social services result from the same dynamics that lead to the waging of war in other places. In this particular case, the rhetoric of peace was employed to enforce neo-liberal interests that are asserted elsewhere by force or war. Making this connection apparent is a major concern of the anti-war resistance in Germany. An awareness of it can change the way in which anti-war resistance is seen in a “peaceful country” in the global North. Our own efforts to counter social cutbacks, privatisation and the tightening of ‘domestic’ forms of control and repression can act as important drivers of anti-war resistance in other places – if we can demonstrate how they are linked to the global reorientation of social priorities towards the generation of profit, growth

¹ This paper has been published as a Policy-Paper of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation (Germany) for the World Social Forum in Mumbai. And it has been written in cooperation with the Anti-Patriarchal Network in Berlin. The aim of the group is to advance a feminist, anti-patriarchal view of globalisation, neo-liberalism and war with a view to radicalising political perspectives and forms of action in Germany. The group is concerned to strengthen resistance in the global North, taking the present situation in Germany as its starting point, but moving beyond the preservation of vested interests, representation of the interests of others and paternalistic support. It considers that political activity should be geared to changing the way of life that prevails in the global North, since this way of life is the specific and structural cause of untold destruction and death elsewhere in the world. The group’s priority at the moment, therefore, is to develop and refine an anti-patriarchal, anti-war policy in Germany. The Anti-Patriarchal Network forms part of War is Peace, a national anti-militarist alliance. At the time as the World Social Forum is being held this alliance will be organising resistance to the so-called NATO Security Conference in Munich. For all these reasons the group has decided not to be present at the World Social Forum.

² At least three US military bases in Germany played a crucial role in preparing and executing the war against Iraq. The German government granted flyover rights etc.

³ Speech of 15 March 2003

and technological development, if we can show how they are bound up with the unrestricted exploitation of human and ecological resources and if we are capable of exposing and counteracting the associated empowerment of neo-liberal players and trans-national companies.

War - the normal state of affairs

“War consists not only of actual military engagement, but also of a period of time – this is the state of war ... The period of time thus refers to the situation and not the battle”⁴. In a country like Germany, therefore, it is not enough to analyse why bombs are dropped on certain countries, which paramilitary groups are responsible for social massacres, who makes the most profit out of war and whose military budgets are being increased. **For the state of peace that we enjoy contributes to a state of war elsewhere and not to its termination.** War does not begin with taking up arms. It is inherent in our everyday normality in the form of structural and global polarisation, inequality and exclusion, in political and media debates as well as in personal attitudes that consider our normality to be the only rightful reality and which ignore and deny all other realities. Do racism, sexism⁵ and the principle of superiority over others constitute normality?

Very normal patriarchal circumstances form the basis for militarisation and war. The systematic glossing over of this fact is tantamount to the reproduction of control. The notion that war might possibly be a solution to things is firmly lodged in our minds, thoughts and everyday normality. This is why it is important to devise a policy that focuses on this normality as a breeding ground for the global dynamics of war and to systematically incorporate it in political strategies.

Many new wars – always two genders

Regardless of whether we are talking about *low-intensity* wars in Latin America, the global war for hegemony (now termed the *war against terrorism*) or ethnicised wars as in the former Yugoslavia, they all share an existential but often hidden reality. They exploit and even generate patriarchal relations between the sexes. Rape is used as a strategic tool in all wars, and all militarised environments lead to further polarisation of gender images and hierarchies. The use of violence against women, rape, prostitution, trafficking in women and contempt for women are all on the increase. The war in Iraq, now supposedly over, has turned the country into a “no-women zone”⁶. 80% of girls no longer attend school for fear of violence, rape or abduction; women and girls are sold and murdered. The US occupying power in Iraq not only turns a blind eye to such developments, but positively encourages them. It continues to work with political groups and tribal leaders known for their contemptuous attitude towards women in order to consolidate their power. The price is women’s freedom, and it works because the structures that are in place have forced women into silence. But women are not the only issue. War and the debate about war are based on the deliberate overlooking of, and refusal to accept, the realities of life and potential options. The establishment of polarised gender codes and circumstances enables this to happen time and again.

The strategic silence: gender relations and war

⁴ Michel Foucault: In Verteidigung der Gesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main (2001)

⁵ Violence perpetrated against women and all those who do not conform to the standard heterosexual concepts of gender, e.g. hermaphrodites, transgendered people, lesbians.

⁶ Yanar Mohamad (The Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq) in: *Forward-Brief* No. 14, 10 Sept. 2003. (<http://www.wpiraq.org/english/forwardG/14.pdf>)

Gender relations organise a strategic silence, which is an essential prerequisite for war and militarisation. Discussions of gender in connection with war are usually restricted to showing women as direct or indirect victims of war, violence and the consequences of war. It is much less common for gender relations to be perceived as a basic driving force of war, militarisation and the logic of war. Even in the anti-war movement the link between gender relations and violence only crops up as a matter of secondary importance in the context of “women as victims” or “women and children as victims”. Seen from this perspective, women remain objects, which only serves to maintain existing hierarchies.

This is symptomatic, not coincidental. Feminist economics has described this phenomenon as “strategic silence” (Bakker 1994) and demonstrated that it is firmly rooted in economic concepts. Such silence repeatedly ignores the areas of reproduction in which mostly women are employed – and which account for a large share of global labour and wealth – and excludes them from intellectual considerations and theories despite all the many protestations that their inclusion is necessary.

This silence is accompanied by a particular form of rhetoric exemplified by the case of Afghanistan. Civilisation versus barbarism was a slogan that made the war against Afghanistan seem plausible in Germany. This supposed alternative climaxed in the assertion of the West’s cultural superiority over Islam, a claim made by the Italian head of state, Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, during his visit to Berlin. The oppression of women in Afghanistan was an argument that ensured broad support for such a dualistic approach not just among the supporters of war, but also among its opponents. Put bluntly, images of the suppression of women were used to legitimise the war in Germany. Public approval of the war was tantamount to support for the “liberation of women”, where liberation naturally implied the establishment of western-style gender relations. But the problems and rights of Afghan women were never the real issue. At stake were geo-strategic interests and the interests of governments comprising the so-called alliance against terrorism. That can hardly be denied any more now. But, equally, no one ever asks about the situation of women in Afghanistan.

Women have always been political putty in other people’s hands and things will remain that way until their views count for something in strategic places. But that will not be the case as long as patriarchal relations with their associated values and hierarchal division of labour continue to exist. Only when the views of those who ensure survival under the most adverse conditions, including war and the destructive environment of global neo-liberalism, are systematically incorporated can wars and the practices of profit generation be deprived of any legitimacy they might be deemed to have. This is a reference not to the standpoints of women in terms of biological gender, but rather to the majority of those who, because of the prevailing division of labour and responsibilities, still find themselves trapped in situations where the negative consequences of economic policies and war are most strongly felt. Often enough most, if not all, of these people are women. For included among the constituent elements of war and militarisation is the maintenance of silence about the traumas of war, its physical and psychological consequences and the silence kept about the everyday routine of war experienced by soldiers, refugees, women etc.

Such views have to be blanked out to ensure that war remains a plausible option. Stories, reports and the official histories of war must continue to ignore these inside aspects of war, which is why the public rarely associates them with war and militarisation. This is also the only way to maintain the conviction that the Western status quo can simply be maintained.

These self-images of society need to be opened to debate. Feminist anti-war activists in Israel, for example, have reported on attempts to question the social maxim that “security depends on military force” and to pave the way for alternative approaches. But debates and personal ways of thinking are not the only things that need to be changed. The question regularly arises of how such self-images and the concurrent loss of alternatives have become firmly implanted in structural and institutional terms.

Logic of war and polarisation: the practical value of the polarity between masculinity and femininity for the militarisation of thoughts and realities

The examples that follow are designed to show how gender relations are used to pave the way for militarisation and war. The proposition is that gender polarisation prepares the ground for different states of war.

“Masculinity – femininity” and the prevention of alternatives to militarisation and war

Gender-specific discourses, gender-based evaluation and society’s acceptance of the polarisation between masculinity, on the one hand, and femininity or a lack of manliness, on the other, are a fertile ground for the continued masking and silencing of the destructive, concrete aspects of wars and militarisation. “Arguments” against war and militarisation can always be voided by placing and assessing them in a gender context. This is an excellent fallback position, which always works immaculately, because the heterosexual norm, together with the associated positive and negative values, is very firmly anchored in our everyday reality and also in our minds.

Imagine the following scenario. This is a true story told by a white male physicist⁷. “Several colleagues and I were working on modelling counterforce attacks trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities that would result from distant deployment. At one point, we remodelled a particular attack using slightly different assumptions and found that instead of there being 36 million immediate fatalities, there would only be 30 million. And everybody was sitting around nodding, saying “Oh yeah, that’s great, only 30 million“. When all of a sudden I *heard* what we were saying. And I blurted out: ‘Wait, I’ve just *heard* what we are talking about – *only* 30 million! *Only* 30 million human beings killed instantly?’ Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn’t even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.” Clearly, the outburst of the physicist and his naming of the human side of the scenario did not fit the professional setting. Worse, it actually discredited the person voicing these concerns, raising sudden questions about his competence and professionalism. “The physicist added that henceforth, he was careful to never blurt out anything like that again”.

This is by no means a random, isolated or arbitrary example. The gendered evaluation of events is a central pillar of the culture and logic of war. It can easily be employed to discredit political concepts and individual behaviour, while at the same time threatening exclusion, ridicule and incompetence. But we are not talking here about specific men and women. On account of its heterosexual, or at least gender-driven, concepts of evaluation, the gendered

⁷ This quote is taken from Carol Cohn: “Wars, Wimps and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War”, in Miriam Cooke/Angela Woollacott (ed): *Gendering War Talk*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993. Carol Cohn was a participating observer in the strategic sessions of experts advising the US administration on “national security concerns”. Working in think tanks, these experts develop strategies and scenarios for nuclear attacks. One example is the Rand Corporation, a think tank and US Air Force subcontractor. In the 1950s, many of the most important nuclear strategists did their work under the auspices of Rand. Carol Cohn took part in simulations, recorded informal conversations and conducted interviews.

discourse actually de-legitimises and silences certain patterns of thought and behaviour. Mere association with “wimps” or “pussies” is sufficient. The swear words most commonly used by male youths in Berlin include “fag”, “gay” and “victim”. The behaviour of many young men is driven by the desire to avoid any semblance of association with such designations at all costs.

In other words, “beating the wimp factor” is an important element in the structuring of the social environment and it applies as much in the policy of militarisation and war as it does in the realm of personal behaviour. Numerous examples could be quoted from everyday life and political discussion. Europe’s critical attitude towards the bombing of Libya drew comments of “Euro fags”. Carter’s policy towards the Soviet Union was discredited as “Under Jimmy Carter the United States is spreading its legs for the Soviet Union”. And in anticipation of the first Gulf war, the question was “Does George Bush have the Stones for war?” Gender-based discussions, codes and evaluations continue to discredit antimilitarist perspectives in that they function as pre-emptive deterrents, in-built modes of self-censure or as pre-emptive means of forestalling any objections or alternatives.

Transformation towards war – always a gender issue?!

Wars don’t simply break out. They can be exposed as an escalation of normality by making the individual steps of transformation, such as those that took place in the former Yugoslavia, transparent. Men militarise by using stronger words, ganging together, taking up arms and committing rape. Women adopt a different approach. They start preparing national dishes, being proud of their “strong”, uncompromising “manly” (!) sons and husbands and refusing to chat to neighbours from different ethnic groups any more. Gender-specific roads to war are two sides of the same coin that would be inconceivable without each other.

Whilst one side is all about establishing homogeneity, the other is concerned with the creation of “otherness” by means of the (escalating) use of force, the ostracism of those who are “different” and even their ultimate elimination. Feminist activists from the Kosovo have shown how this process becomes a socially accepted norm. Women in Black consider “normal” concepts of masculinity and femininity to be prerequisites for the development of war as well as for the transformations leading up to war. Ethnicity is transformed into nationalist awareness, which in turn leads to war. This kind of transformation process would be inconceivable without patriarchy, because the notion of “otherness” along with polarity and devaluation are inherent in it and have assumed fixed structural forms. Polarised, hierarchal concepts and gender binarism, expressed in images of masculinity and femininity, and the corresponding self-images, are major factors in the mobilisation for war and militarisation. Like a lubricant, they ease the transformation towards war and create an ever-wider environment of ethnic hatred that legitimises and suggests war (i.e. the destruction and subordination of the “other”) as a solution⁸.

Excesses of violence – such as war – cannot be comprehended, explained or imagined and, therefore, prevented without an appreciation of the fact that hierarchy and violence, subordination and devaluation actually *represent* normality. Such “normality” needs to be critically examined and an alternative proposed in its stead. This entails making it clear that a great deal is suppressed and not allowed to exist in this “NORMality” as well as grasping how alternatives to military force and war are turned into socially unacceptable options.

⁸ Stasa Zajovi (Women in Black): War, Feminism and Anti-Militarism, Paper for the International Meeting Warning Signs of Fundamentalism, London, 11-14 November 2003 (http://www.penelopes.org/xarticle.php3?id_article=2488)

Gender polarisation and hierarchies thus form important *lubricants* for the transformation towards violence and militarisation

- Wars aim to generate, restore and control inequalities. “Sexual abuse and the gender-specific repression of women is a constituent element of the implementation and maintenance of local order based on authoritarianism, violence, control and exclusion”⁹.
- Gendered divisions of labour and the values ascribed to them by society make sure that the economic reproduction process remains invisible. They are essential for maintaining the insanity of the profit and war machinery, yet they do not count in the *crucial* places.
- With gender binarism as a natural state, complementary expressions of masculinity and femininity can be invoked at any time. Expressed as images and concepts of self, they represent key factors in the mobilisation towards war and its legitimisation. The same applies to militarisation and the use of force. Gendered stereotypes can be readily resorted to regardless of whether the issue is the *liberation of women* in Afghanistan or the staged liberation of a female US soldier during the Iraq war.

Demands made of anti-war policies in the global North: Easier said than done. Let's revolutionise our own lifestyle

Left-wing anti-war supporters in Germany limit their discussions of gender - if they take place at all – to the excesses, consequences and side effects of war. This turns the issue into a women's matter, which clearly it is not. Silence on gender, including the un-gendered debate of gendered circumstances, not only causes women to disappear from view, but also removes entire social areas and questions from the political gaze. Questions about everyday existence are blanked out completely. The issue of how people (often women) organise life and reproduction in the wake of social and ecological obliteration is not a spectacular one. Rather it is a private, non-political matter. Through its focus on military concerns - bombers, bombs, soldiers, missions, war-related trade and military budgets - the left-wing notion of war actually reproduces these values. A normal state of affairs thus persists, in which the creation of patriarchal gender relations remains invisible and incomprehensible as a central driving force of war.

But what would happen if sufficient attention were to be paid in Germany to the subtle forces involved in the build-up to war? Social cutbacks – competition – existential fears. What does it mean to live in a society where the structural and specific options for action are increasingly based on individual superiority over others? What does it do to the meanings people give to their lives and to their plans for living them? How does it affect our hopes and dreams and what does it do to our social and political points of reference? No blood for oil – no blood for mobile phones¹⁰? What does it mean to live in an overdeveloped country where lifestyle is based on accessing and controlling resources that exist elsewhere? Gender relations and circumstances are often ignored by the anti-war resistance movement in this country because they affect our own political substance, lives, lifestyles, individual (en-gendered) images of ourselves and our certainties.

⁹ Matilde Gonzales: Nachhaltig zum Schweigen gebracht. Paramilitarismus, Gewalt und Geschlecht in Guatemala; in: Azzellini et al. (Ed.): Das Unternehmen Krieg. Berlin 2003.

¹⁰ Coltan is a rare metal that is a vital ingredient in mobile phones. 80% of the world's coltan reserves are to be found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The ongoing war in the DRC is partly fuelled by the plundering of raw materials by trans-national corporations. The world leader in coltan processing is a subsidiary of Bayer, H.C. Starck, which is headquartered in Goslar.

Feminist anti-war policy in the global North is faced with the difficult question of what it would mean if the statement that “liberation achieved at someone else’s expense is a factor in one’s own subordination” were to be taken seriously.

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