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Militarism, male power and the persistence of war.

Talk at the European Social Forum, London 2004

Seminar: 'Militarism and male violence'

A lot of people have an issue in their mind about women in relation to peace and war. Sometimes the question forms as: why do so many women engage in peace activity? There's another way of addressing the issue that I think's more productive. We can ask: why are feminists often antimilitarists? This is the approach I'm going to take in this talk.

Women opposing war

The first question – relating 'women' to 'peace' - usually gets answered in a way that's positively unhelpful: women are peacemakers 'by nature'. This is a reductive train of thought that supposes women all partake of the same essence. But the question is sometimes answered not from nature but from life experiences. Women's gender-specific lives (in the home, at work, in war) induce in them certain values, propensities and skills that tend toward dialogue and conciliation. Either way you're left trying to explain away quite clearly militaristic women.

Feminism opposing militarism

Posing the question in terms of 'feminism opposing militarism' instead of 'women opposing war' is helpful because instead of reasoning from supposed 'types of people', men and women, it reasons from how society's organized, how power works. Unfortunately there's a snag here because the term 'feminism' is applied to a lot of different theories and practices. For instance, essentialists who think women are all different from and superior to men call themselves feminists. So do women who want to individually climb the career ladder, in business, the state or the armed services – to get equal with men, uncritical of the world they're aspiring to join and neglectful of the women they leave behind.

Collective feminism

So we have to specify which feminism we're talking about. What I mean by it, very briefly, is: a collective feminism, with a project of transformative change, that perceives oppressively interlocking dimensions of power in all of which gender is implicated. It's a feminism that sees the world we live in as bad for men as well as women, and its institutions not as things we want to get control of but as things we want to dismantle and reshape. That's the sense in which I'm going to use the word 'feminism'.

Feminism's main project, as theory and practice, is understanding and undermining patriarchy, which is 'shorthand' for the long-lived, widespread and historically adaptive sex-gender system involving male domination. It's because of the connection between patriarchy and militarism that feminists do antimilitarism. Feminist theory of this kind, being alert to power, looks for the mechanisms by which power is enacted. One mechanism is militarization.

Feminist opposition to militarization

Anybody reading the daily papers, watching TV news, scanning Indymedia on the Web, sees vivid illustrations every day of how militarist ideology, and the structures, forces, weaponry and manpower of militarization, are involved in the pursuit of various power projects – projects of economic exploitation, imperial domination, national statehood. Any antimilitarist, man or woman, feminist or not, is in no doubt of that, and will go out on the street to demonstrate against threats of

war. So what's different about feminists? Why do we sometimes organize separately from the mainstream antiwar movements that comprise both sexes? There are two short answers. First, highlighting the position of women in war, which is otherwise neglected. Two, doing our opposition in a feminist way, which isn't the way it gets done in the mainstream antiwar movement. I'm not going to say more about those things, important as they are.

Patriarchy and militarism

I want to stress another reason: theory. Because we are, being feminists, acutely attuned to the workings of patriarchy. This shows us several things about war and militarism that, without a feminist lens, remain invisible.

First is that the form taken by gender relations in the military is the very form favoured by patriarchy: in which leadership, authority, aggressiveness and responsibility reside in men and masculinity; while nurture, compliance, passivity and dependence are the part of women and femininity. Patriarchy and militarism each nicely do the other's job. Anyone with a critique of patriarchy is bound to critique militarism. (Unfortunately it doesn't work the other way round – a lot of antimilitarists don't even notice patriarchy.)

Secondly, we see that militarization and war are very old. Our wars today may appear to be peculiar to capitalism or to nationalism. But war in fact pre-dates not only these economic and political systems but feudalism too. The propensity to organize men and masculine cultures to fight and kill can't be reduced to an epiphenomenon of capitalism or nationalism. It's 'overdetermined' as they say. Standing armies seem to have been invented, simultaneously with the city, the state and a patriarchal gender order, in the eastern Mediterranean towards the end of the neolithic. Organized warfare seems to be a characteristic of patriarchy as such.

Let's look briefly at three expressions of patriarchy in relation to militarism. First, patriarchal structures. The key structure in patriarchy, as perceived by women, is the oppressive hierarchy in which women are differentiated from and subordinated to men. Gender dichotomy enables and legitimates war, but conversely war functions to sustain and deepen the gender dichotomy. But, seen from the point of view of men, the subordination of women is something of a side-show. Patriarchy is primarily a massive hierarchy of men dominating other men. All men benefit, but they don't all benefit equally, from patriarchy. The rank ordering of armies is the backbone of patriarchal society and a model for its other institutions.

Patriarchal cultures

Second, patriarchal cultures. The adaptive reproduction of patriarchy from one generation to the next calls for a lot of cultural work. The aspect of this cultural work that women usually see and question first is the effort needed to smoothe over the contradictions of heterosexual marriage and family. But the bonding of men with men is arguably just as problematic and equally important for the proper working of patriarchy. If it's a challenge to patriarchy to keep women satisfied in the heterosexual couple, it's also a challenge to keep men cooperating productively with each other.

For one thing they have to neutralize class and race inequalities.

Masculine cultures foster bonding among men through ritualized violence and around the sexual availability of women common to men of the same rank. Homo-eroticism (men's love for each other) is necessary, for instance in the army, to create comradeship, loyalty and morale among men. The contradiction here is that socially acceptable homo-eroticism partly reflects a buried and denied homosexuality. And this often surfaces and disrupts authority.

The body in patriarchy

Third, and finally, the body in patriarchy. Recent feminist theory has broken us out of the sterile nature versus nurture debate by showing how bodies aren't only given in biology but are partly

produced through culture. However, because one of the great revolutions prompted by feminism has been the recognition that gender difference is socially constructed, we've been slower to accept the corollary: that the predispositions of male and female bodies – those prepared with XX chromosomes on the one hand and XY on the other – are also social facts. I'd suggest that as feminists we should be as ready to examine the body in relation to patriarchy and militarism as scientists are to study the body in relation to sport. This isn't by any means to revert to the discredited idea that genes are totally determining. We know now that a lot of genes aren't active unless and until they are switched on by happenings in the individual's environment (some physical, some social).

The wiring is there in biology, but as with a light bulb, the switch has to be thrown by life experiences. This is socially useful knowledge, because it means we can change things. But what's given, what the predisposition is, has to be understood first. One reason I think we are sometimes unwilling to look on the body as socially significant (for instance in militarism and warfare) is that we conflate 'the body' with 'nature'. Too often, because we don't want to argue from 'nature' we throw the body out of our arguments too.

Maybe its because I'm a neo-Marxist materialist - but I want to stress material as well as discursive factors in militarization. After all, students of militaries don't neglect the hardware, the weaponry, so why ignore the fleshware, bodies, which are equally significant factors in the practise of warfare? Let's take an example. Testosterone is a hormone high levels of which are associated with aggression and heightened sexual drive. On average people with Y chromosomes (called men) have higher levels of it than those without (called females). The levels in both sexes can be altered by circumstances: food consumed, heightened danger etc. It makes sense to consider testosterone as a management problem for military commanders: a high level is needed to achieve a fighting force; too high a level may lead to uncontrollable behaviour that results in embarrassing human rights abuses. Hormone-controlling drugs are used in sport. Are they used in the army? We need to know.

A feminist theory of war

How are military planners thinking through the bodily implications of including women with men in combat units (and that means a whole lot of things: reproductive, sexual, emotional, cultural)? So many questions in those photos from Abu Ghraib! A little while ago I was invited to a carefully staged discussion between some very straight international relations theorists and some feminists trying to feminize IR studies. At one point, one of the IR theorists burst out impatiently 'The trouble with feminism is it has no "Theory of War".' My first reaction was, like, 'Help! They're right!'

Where's my theory of war??' And then I thought: hang on, the feminist theory of patriarchy is a theory of war. Feminists are saying: Look, militarization is masculine culture at its most aroused, where the bid for patriarchal potency is most manifest. It is a readying and priming of masculine energies for the use of those pursuing many different kinds of power projects. Feminists are saying something about war that mainstream theorists aren't seeing or saying. That means the mainstream understanding is incomplete. And we need to understand war fully if we're to end it.