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Rethinking Masculinity and Practices of Violence in Conflict Settings

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Rethinking Masculinity and Practices of Violence in Conflict Settings

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Why rethink masculinity and conflict? After all, the connection of men and masculinities to organized (and seemingly unorganized) violence has been subject to considerable academic scrutiny over the last decades, not least as part of the feminist critique of disciplinary International Relations (IR) (Zalewski and Parpart 1998; Enloe 2000; Hansen 2001; Hooper 2001; Parpart and Zalewski 2008). It is now increasingly common for texts both to note the unequal character of gendered violence (it is predominantly men who do the killing and the maiming) *and* to stress the contingent and sometimes paradoxical status of this situation (women kill and maim too, and the content of 'man' and 'woman' varies significantly over time, space and context). Elite institutions still prove stubbornly resistant to teaching gender, feminism and sexuality within 'the international', despite introductory texts which increasingly offer such insights to the curious student (Shepherd 2009; Foster *et al.* 2012). Certainly, feminist and gender scholars write often of multiplicity in masculinities, of constructions of gendered agency, and of representations of violence as themselves constitutive of gender (Shepherd 2006; Coleman and Bassi 2011; Åhäll 2012; Gentry 2012). The analysis of gender within global politics has also moved beyond the level of the State and war to interrogate the full spectrum of social life, from popular culture to political economy.

Some are more sceptical of this situation, warning that the actions and power of *men* themselves are obscured in the consensus that there are many *masculinities* (McCarry 2007). At the same time as they direct attention to the material practices of men (and not just abstracted constructions of 'masculinity') such criticisms also tend to gloss over rich and situated examples of critical theorizing on precisely those themes (see, for example, Hearn 2004). A different brand of critic has suggested that feminism may be incapable of properly analysing the

variety of gendered experiences in conflict (Jones 1996). But here too, a comprehensive history of the field instead reveals many close and nuanced considerations of men and women at war (Carver *et al.* 1998; Hooper 2001; Hutchings 2008b; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009; MacKenzie 2009; Belkin 2012).

Nevertheless, ambiguities do persist in the way feminist and gender scholars describe and account for masculinity (Clatterbaugh 1998; Hutchings 2008a). Against this background, a number of problems come into sharper focus. First, how are masculinities and violences connected in *specific locations* of power? Second, how do these connections play out *internationally*, in the interactions between political communities, however understood? Third, just how related are gendered identities to *fighting, killing and dying* in conflict settings? And fourth, how do the complexities of violence situated in this way reflect back onto *theorizing* about gendered hierarchy and difference?

Some of these questions are more familiar than others, but the collection of articles presented in this special issue of *International Feminist Journal of Politics* substantially addresses all of them. In the first place, demonstrating a significant empirical commitment, each contribution also includes careful theoretical reflection on both gender and conflict. They are united too by a keen awareness of the intersectionality of gender with other social fields, and by attention to the resulting layers of performance and identity. This comes out particularly strongly where differential international and inter-communal placements of race, ethnicity and nation come into play: for Paul Higate in the contrast between consensual bonding among 'western' security professionals and the more coercive interactions between them and racialized colleagues; for Ruth Streicher in the perhaps surprising valorization of Thai soldiers (and their 'civilized' uniforms) in the eyes of Malay-Muslim girls and women; for Marianne Bevan and Megan MacKenzie in the idea of cautious and restrained New Zealand police culture against a more aggressive Timor Lestese variant; and for Maria O'Reilly in the projection of a paternalistic 'liberal' identity onto the task of state-building among Balkan men posed as devalued and divergent.

A second crucial thread uniting the articles concerns the relation of masculinity to violence. Here the *rethinking* is even clearer, disentangling military masculinities from *war as such*.¹ Most prominently, Luisa Maria Dietrich challenges the connection between masculinity and violence by showing how involvement in guerrilla organizations *undid* pre-existing identities, enabling female fighters to gain the status of heroic combatants and leaders usually reserved for men, and re-valuing activities and emotions commonly designated as 'feminine' (cooking, tenderness, mourning) such that male guerrillas embraced them and reflected on them fondly. Tellingly, it was in the period *after war* when gender norms retreated to older patterns. Putatively 'non-gender' factors, such as political vision and class dynamics, are shown to have a major impact on ideas of appropriate gender identity, just as the conditions particular to private military contracting contribute to the status of *fratriarchy* as a dynamic within Higate's account of hazing.² Across the cases examined, then, masculinities *do* intersect with violence, but in some-

times surprising ways. For example, masculinity and conflict may be connected as much by the *restraint* of violence as by its promotion. Consider Streicher's Thai soldiers, rendered attractive as symbols of cleanliness, civilization and modernity; or Bevan and MacKenzie's New Zealand police officers, emphasizing their training and experience as pacifying aggression; or O'Reilly's reading of Paddy Ashdown as protective father, using his implied strength to settle otherwise warring children.

Finally, the close reading provided by each article reveals a series of disjunctures, slippages and paradoxes in the performance of masculinity. Attempts to articulate a particular form of masculinity fail, remain partial or appear as always in process, part of more-or-less conscious projects of national identity making (Streicher), of undoing and reforming a particular notion of sovereignty (O'Reilly), of narrating the mission of international 'assistance' (Bevan and MacKenzie), of privatizing force in the service of imperial and hegemonic power (Higate) and of revolutionary transformations of social class (Dietrich). So we are reminded again that masculinity (indeed, all gender) is always incomplete, but in a constant dialectic – shifting in different fields, and established temporarily and evasively.

And yet this collection of articles also gestures towards some continuing problems in the analysis of masculinities and violence. The process of 'rethinking' always leaves one open to the charge of having forgotten some old lessons. In particular, the analysis of a series of phenomena *adjacent* to violence (the party as a male-bonding session, the association of the uniform with state identity, the conditions of guerrilla life, training for peace-time policing or the written reflections of a High Representative) may lead us to neglect the role of masculine violence itself. The field of war envelops much beyond combat, and to speak of a 'conflict setting' is to speak of much more than fighting, killing and dying, which take up a relatively small part of it. And yet it is these activities that are transformative, and it is in relation to them that other martial practices are aligned. They are complex forms of social organization, but it is the *violence* which they organize. This need not imply any functionalist support, as if uniforms *only* exist so that there can be armies, but it does suggest a need to remain attentive to what it is that *violence itself* accomplishes in gender orders. We do not, then, propose that masculinity and violence have been successfully rethought wholesale, but the exceptional contributions to this issue do expose, interrogate and assess gender and violence as interwoven processes in motion.

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Notes

- 1 The extent to which any account of war focuses on the actual practices of fighting and killing is itself subject to some debate. See Barkawi and Brighton (2011).
- 2 Indeed, Higate's article is also notable for setting out and extending the much-neglected notion of fratriarchy as a form of masculine power and sociality.

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