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Thinking about Women, Violence, and Agency

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Thinking about Women, Violence, and Agency

A CLUSTER INTRODUCTION

To woefully use a cliché: 'We've come a long way baby.' Twelve years ago what literature existed on women's involvement in political and criminal violences denied or seriously limited agency, (relational) autonomy, and very often, any semblance of intelligence (Cooper 1979; Morgan 1989; Neuberger and Valentini 1996). Proscribed violences are tantalizing betrayals of norms and laws. The intrigue is only compounded when women are involved, either as genocidaires, self-martyrs, drug couriers or torturers. Even if those who study gender, whether it is femininities or masculinities, recognize, argue and hold that gender is a fluid and dynamic process, women's involvement in proscribed violence, for one reason or another, is seen as a transgression of both criminal norms as well as gender norms. Thus, women's proscribed violence creates resistance as it alternatively or in tandem seduces. The denial that women can participate in political violence, organized international crime or genocide *used* to lead to the reaction, 'A woman did that?' And to be frank, some of the greatest resistance came from the feminist community; it was feminists who declared, 'A woman did not do that!' Because we received these comments so consistently and constantly in our research and presentations for *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), we made it the title of the introductory chapter. Yet, this blunt questioning is no longer part of the routine. Women's involvement in proscribed violence is becoming more 'accepted' – as in, 'we' can handle the questions and investigations of it without too much resistance and hand-wringing. Which means it is time for new, deeper, further-reaching queries and contestations. Continuing to push the boundaries of agency, feminism and how women and proscribed violence are encountered is precisely what this collection of ground-breaking articles does.

Having no particular desire to rehash previously made arguments against the limited thinking that existed previously on women and proscribed violences, what I really want to emphasize is that the idea of agency is not simple. The work that I have done alone or with other authors has garnered

us some criticism: to some we have conflated agency and violence making, and to others we have uncomfortably disrupted maternal feminist equations of women and peace (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 2011; Gentry 2009; Gentry and Whitworth 2011). I think all that we ever wanted to do is to present complicated women with complicated lives as complicated actors who chose to commit violent acts for myriad reasons that cannot be so easily explained. And it is precisely the argument of agency that these articles pick up on and develop further. Ellie Schemenauer, Linda Åhäll and Jessica Auchter all deftly complicate agency and how feminisms, among other theoretical positions, both adeptly and problematically discuss, assign and limit agency in particular situations, particularly when women transgress norms of femininity.

In some ways, old habits die hard – academics, bureaucratic policy-makers and the media still love to rely upon narratives to describe women's 'deviousness'. Schemenauer's piece on the narratives of women involved in drug trafficking demonstrates just how much work there is to be done on disrupting notions of women-as-victims, especially as criminality intersects with racist notions of South American sexuality and productivity. Descriptions of female drug couriers rather sadly and unimaginatively fall back on those familiar tropes of saintly victim or sexualized miscreant. Schemenauer pushes beyond these narratives to not just engage ideas of agency but how agency is constructed and assigned/denied by others, such as defense attorneys, drug agents and police detectives, who are operating off of (mis)perceptions and assumptions. Just because a woman could easily be constructed as victim – an impoverished, 'naïve', single mother from South America – does not mean that she is indeed powerless. Instead, Schemenauer's interviews with a woman convicted in the USA of trafficking drugs helps to illustrate that there must be room to see agency and power even in the situations typically constructed as lacking in either. Further, it illustrates how the masculinist underpinnings of state power, here as the construction of the USA as a state that needs to protect these victimized brown women, continues to proliferate and shape individuals' views of international events and actors.

In a fascinating move, Åhäll's article analyses the discourse that emerges from representations of women and political violence in physical images, specifically in the British television series *Britz*. Looking at how the myth of motherhood is communicated through media images, Åhäll is able to critique how gender, agency and political violence are communicated within the British 'war on terror' culture. Using Judith Butler to uncover how the talk of agency creates subjects instead of individuals, Åhäll problematizes when agency is ascribed. Through the framing in the script and via the camera in *Britz* of a woman's preparation for a suicide-mission, we, as consumers of images, are left with a freakish image of a supposed agent. As the character looks in the mirror and wraps the bomb around her stomach to *fake* the fecundity that is supposedly inherently female, the audience is fed an image of an incomplete woman and incomplete machine. We have instead a

'cyborg', a blending of human and machine that ends up being neither, that manipulates the images of femininity, womanhood and maternity held by the audience. And it leaves one cold and still removed from the reality of why a woman would choose this path.

One aspect of these conversations on agency is how they work within feminism to move it forward. In this context, Auchter in particular pushes the feminist community on how we construct and then assign agency as it is tied to politics – in a way, she is arguing that current work from some feminists is tying agency to politics, in a way similar to older connotations of agency with the rational, western, white male that Ann Tickner (1992), Cynthia Enloe (2000) and Spike Peterson and Anne Runyan (2009) problematized already in the literature of feminist international relations. Auchter also uses Judith Butler to completely problematize the concept and the assignment of agency. Auchter convincingly argues that agency has become something assigned by some feminists to construct women-as-emancipated actor without troubling what this means and what emancipation and agency are linked to. Thus, some feminist assignments and constructions of agency (re)create delineating boundaries that feminists had hoped would be eliminated. In looking at how women's agency is conceptualized in relationship to terrorism and political violence, Auchter concludes that instead of inscribing agency into women's narratives, we should be simply trying to understand the actions themselves.

Such an answer seems altogether simplistic in the face of the titillating nature of the work done on terrorism and political violence. Yet, perhaps it is a simple answer that is needed. The proliferation of terrorism and political violence literature post-9/11 is astonishing and also devastating (see Lum et al. 2006). How much of this literature is working to understand the basics of why people chose the strategy and how much of it is simply riding the wave of an academic trend that has become akin to a pop-phenomenon? As usual, there is a power dynamic to it – a form of an epistemic violence in which academics become knowledge bearers on/over their subject matter (see Brunner 2007; Fricker 2007). This is precarious in these instances where the violence is performed by people who may or may not be marginalized but who certainly become marginalized after the activity. Thus, how does academic knowledge-bearing contribute to the heft of marginalization? How can we be more aware? These articles raise such an awareness and demand that we think more critically about our own role in the process.

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