

Keynote lecture proposed for the conference THE WAR QUESTION FOR FEMINISM. Sept 22-23, 2008, Orebro University, Sweden.

GENDER AS A DRIVING FORCE IN MILITARIZATION AND WAR¹

Cynthia Cockburn

Abstract

Based on research among women's organizations opposing militarization and war, worldwide, the paper suggests that such activist women tend to view patriarchal gender relations as one of the causes of militarization and war, along with economic and ethno-national power relations, with which they are intersectional. The causality is best viewed where war is understood as relational and systemic, where war-fighting is seen as only one moment in a cyclical continuum, and when the focus is on the cultural processes of militarization and war. Patriarchal gender relations predispose societies to war. There are implications in this perspective for our anti-war movements: a feminist programme of gender transformation is a necessary component of the pursuit of peace.

¹ This talk is summarized from the Bertrand Russell Peace lectures for 2008, given in Canada in March.

In many countries and regions around the world, women are organizing in women-only groups and networks to oppose militarism and militarization, to prevent wars or bring wars to an end, to achieve justice and sustainable peace. Between 2004 and 2006 I carried out empirical research investigating the constitution and objectives, the analyses and strategies of many such organizations.² From their perspectives on their varied situations, the values they expressed and their choice of methodology in activism it was possible to derive a particular feminist standpoint on militarism and war. The theoretical implication, deployed in this article, is that patriarchal gender relations are one of the facts that predispose our societies to war. Our work for peace therefore needs to involve transformative change in gender relations.

A way of seeing war: as a social relation, as system, as continuum

To see this clearly calls for war to be understood in a particular way. First and foremost, it is necessary to bring a sociologist's or anthropologist's eye to the subject. We need to see that warfare is something social. It may be deadly, but it is *relational*. It involves a degree of shared understanding between the warring factions.

Secondly, war needs to be understood as *systemic*. We can usefully imagine it as a set of interacting or interdependent entities, functionally related, with inputs and outputs, and information flows within and across its open borders. It is Ministries of Defence, arms manufacturing firms, training academies and military suppliers, Chiefs of Staff and their commands, with their bombs, battleships, bullets. It is also governing ideologies, values, attitudes and cultures. Any one of its institutions, let us say an arms production company, can be seen as the locus of several dimensions of power, economic, national - and patriarchal. We can see overlaps and information

² The project was action-research in which I engaged both from my academic base in the Department of Sociology at City University London and my involvement as an activist in the international network Women in Black. It resulted in a book, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, Zed Books, 2007, and the supporting materials are available on my website www.cynthiacockburn.org. The research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Un Monde par Tous, the Network for Social change, the Ian Mactaggart Trust, the Lipman-Miliband Trust and the Maypole Fund.

flows between the war system and other social systems in which a gender dimension is particularly significant, such as the educational system, recreation and media.

So, war as relational, war as systemic - and a third qualifier is important: the idea that wars are only phases in a sequence of conditions linked together as a *continuum*. It may sound depressing, but to be realistic, 'War' is not just a spasm of war-fighting, here and then gone, but a spiralling cycle in which societies with a persisting militarist mindset militarize, engage in combat, and then only more or less demobilize, and sustain their military investment while entering a condition of provisional peace that prefigures another war. Women in different countries of the world resisting war at many different moments in the continuum see this clearly. But a lot of academics in mainstream war studies do too. War is changing, they say. Look at the so-called "war on terror". It is a war with an unwinnable goal and with no end in sight. It is expressed not just in military action but in tightened security in everyday life.

Gender as a relation of power, underpinned by coercion

To turn then to this second key word in my title: gender. One advance made in the last half of the 20th century was to lodge this word securely in our vocabularies. It was not easy - in some languages it meant inventing a new word entirely. It was an achievement. It enabled the sex/gender system (Rubin 1975) or gender order (Connell 1987) to become visible as something not given in nature but as a significant dimension of power in evolving human civilizations. In theory, almost any set of sex/gender arrangements could be found in our world. In fact, all contemporary and historic societies of which we have sure evidence have been, with certain variations, characterized by male domination, female subordination. Gender-as-we-know-it is a relation of patriarchal power underpinned by sexual violence.

Some of us, even some feminists, find the word patriarchy difficult to use. It sounds kind of structuralist, old-fashioned. But wherever I went in the

last few years, in the global south and global north, I found women in the women's anti-war movement to be using the term without hesitation in everyday speech. They know patriarchy well - they live in it. Ann Oakley pioneered gender theory 35 years ago. Today she insists, 'Patriarchy isn't an ancestral disease, it's a living institution. It's the default mode: what's always there and will always happen unless it's actively contested... We need to comprehend what goes on,' she insists, 'and what goes on is a constant fracturing of our humanness into divisive and destructive ways of being and living' (Oakley 2002: 5). In patriarchy men and women are specialized, the genders are rendered complementary and unequal. Hetero is the norm. Good qualities like strength and courage are allocated to men and deformed into tools for domination. Good qualities like tenderness and care are allocated to women and have become the badge of submission and service. Both parts of humanity end up as less than fully human.

Men, in every social class, though in some more than others, gain from the superior agency with which patriarchy endows males. At the same time women in the main settle for patriarchy, collude in it, do its work. 'We're lost without it and lost within it', Ann Oakley says (Oakley 2002: 27). And in return women are accorded a certain importance in a carefully defined and limited sphere – particularly in reproduction, both reproducing human life and reproducing the community's culture. Colluding in patriarchy sometimes involves women in encouraging war, pillage and even rape – unfortunately.

To say that gender has causality in war, therefore, is not to say that nature has designated men as war-makers and women as peace-makers. If anything 'designates' such a thing it is not nature but the patriarchal social system. However, the facts are complicated. There *is* in fact a sexual division of war, just as there's a sexual division of labour. But the statistics are never totally conclusive. Most soldiers are men, but not 100% of them. Most rape victims are women, but not 100% of them. But there is a strong gender skew that makes for gender-specific experiences. Yet – also to the point – the exceptions to the norm experience their anomalous fate too in profoundly gendered ways. A male experiences rape, and is perceived, differently from a

female victim. Male soldiers exact a price from women soldiers for breaching male ranks. It's not the same thing to be a woman soldier as a man soldier.

The case for gender as a power relation implicated in the perpetuation of war thus does not rest on what individual men and women do. It is not written in stone that the cultures we live in will capture and 'normalize' the gender performance of each and every one of us. Some of us escape, some of us do not match up, some of us 'fail' at gender, some individuals resist gender norms. There are no certainties, only probabilities. The case rests more firmly on the patriarchal gender relation itself, which is a relation as much between masculinity and femininity as between men and women, a relation of dichotomy and complementarity, of heteronormativity, domination and subordination, characterized by coercion and violence. It is the gender order itself that meshes with the war system in interesting and significant ways.

Causes of war and where to look for them

Where do we have to look to see gender as causal in war? The verb 'to cause' has more than one inflection. Brian Fogarty writes that the reason for multiple theories of war is that even a particular war may have multiple causes. 'At the very least, every war probably has immediate causes, antecedent causes, and something like 'root causes' or 'favorable conditions' underlying them' (Fogarty 77).

The economic motivators of war are often, in Fogarty's sense, immediate. Usually they are rather clear to see, written into the news headlines. What are the aggressors demanding? What are the defenders defending? In the middle ages it was control of trade routes. Today it's control of markets. Business interests can often be seen at work beneath the 'security' discourse of states.

Ethno-nationalist issues, foreign-ness, the expression of the perceived security interests of an ethnic or national self in relation to its others, is

another major cause of war. It is often an antecedent cause, in Fogarty's terms, if not an immediate one. Raids against the barbarians on the borders of the early empires. Today Kurds and Turks, Chechens and Russians disputing the containing power of the state. How can this kind of racializing cause in war be detected? By listening to what the ideologues are saying, the religious leaders. What is the propaganda, who is putting it out? What names are claimed, what names are being imposed on others?

By contrast, patriarchal gender relations as a cause of war, I would suggest, most often fall in the 'root cause' or 'favourable conditions' category. On the whole wars are not fought 'for' gender issues in the way they are sometimes fought 'for' oil resources, or 'for' national autonomy. The US attack on Afghanistan was not really about the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women. Instead, gender relations *predispose* societies to war. They foster militarism and militarization. They make peace difficult to sustain. Where, then, does one look to see gender as a causal factor in war? We need to delve beneath the cool 'international relations' representation of war and look at the nitty gritty, cultures as they manifest themselves in societies before, in and after armed conflicts.

Moments in the war cycle

In the last chapter of my book *From Where We Stand*, I take studies by other feminist researchers and use them to illustrate patriarchal relations pushing the cycle of war around - and particularly the process of masculinization which is supremely important to the adaptive reproduction of patriarchy as a social system. I use Robert Dean's work to show how the militarist policy-making that took the USA into a futile war in Vietnam involved a group of elite men socialized in particular masculine values (Dean 2001). I use Carol Cohn's work - where she does participant observation in a nuclear weapons think tank and shows the gendered, macho mindset and language that permits these men to chat over their morning coffee about which weapon will achieve more million deaths (Cohn 1987). I use Susan Jefford's interesting analysis of US culture as it recovered masculine morale after the shattering defeat by a

mere peasant army in Vietnam (Jeffords 1989). And I show how manly values are taken, perverted and abused to turn men into effective soldiers.

Clausewitz wrote that 'War is politics by other means'. John Horne wrote, 'War is masculinity by other means'. To understand war, he said, we need to study 'the dense associative life of men' (Horne 2004:31). In the military boot camp we see most clearly the exaggeration and exploitation of the homosociality current in 'peace-time' patriarchies, the furious efforts to deepen each man's bond with his fellows by appeal to masculinity. As he is initiated into the squad the new recruit must kill the woman in himself. At the same time his sense of entitlement – to a woman, any woman, all women, to use as he sees fit – already fostered since boyhood, is affirmed. Conversely, perversely, and equally sad - men are also prepared for war by appeal to other, nobler, values of patriarchal masculinity, honour, love of family and community, and a selfless courage.

The violence inherent in linked systems of power

There are many dimensions along which power is distributed in society. But I would argue that three dimensions of power are the most significant and influential: economic power; ethnic or national power embodied in community, religious and state structures; and gender power. Feminist studies have developed a way of addressing this multiplicity of sources of power from the perspective of the individual, using the concepts of 'positionality' and 'intersectionality'. What is too often overlooked, however, in a 'post-structuralist' climate, is that intersectionality *also and always works at the macro level*. The power structures of economic class based on ownership of the means of production, the racializing power of ethno-nationalism expressed in community authorities and states, and the sex/gender hierarchy *together* shape human social structures, institutions and relational processes. *Together* they establish positions of relative power, thereby laying down the possibilities and probabilities for individuals and groups that variously inhabit them. No single one of them produces its effects in the absence of the other two. They intersect in any institution you look at – though in interestingly diverse ways. A business corporation is an economic institution - but almost all its senior

people are men and of the dominant ethnicity. The family is a patriarchal institution, yes, but it's economic too - it transmits wealth down the generations. It is not possible logically to disconnect the edifices of power themselves nor the processes that express and sustain them. They are utterly intersectional.

The suggestion here then is that militarization and war are caused, shaped, achieved and reproduced over time through all three dimensions of power. If one is at work, the others will be too. The gender drama is never absent: the male as subject, the female as alien, the alien as effeminate (both the one a man perceives out there, and the one he fears inside himself). This is why a theory of war and its causation is flawed if it lacks a gender dimension.

What, then, has the view of power as intersected sets of institutions and relations to do with war? Their emergence in human society, closely related in time, were all necessarily violent processes. They all involved constituting a self in relation to an inferiorized, exploited other – the rich man's landless labourer; the citizen's hated foreigner; the woman as men's property, commodified in bride price, sale or exchange price, in prostitution and the value of her children. All three processes were necessarily violent. These power relations continue surprisingly unchanged today. They are still violent.

Conclusion: gender transformation as part of the struggle for peace

To summarize the argument made above... Patriarchal gender relations involve a masculinity (and a complementary femininity) that not only serves militarism very well indeed, but *seeks and needs militarization and war for its fulfilment*. Why is it important to address the possibility that gender-as-we-know-it plays a part in perpetuating war? Because there are practical implications in this for our worldwide, mixed-sex movements for demilitarization, disarmament and peace. After all, we are ready to recognize that a sustainably peaceful society must differ from today's war-torn societies in more than one dimension. At the very least, its economic relations must be

more just and equal. Additionally, its national and ethnic relations must become more respectful and inclusive. Women committed to organizing as women against war add a dimension to this transformative change. They ask the movement to recognize that, to be sustainably peaceful, a society will also have to be one in which we live gender very differently from the way it is lived today.

That's the message I hear coming from feminist anti-war, antimilitarist and peace organizations. Our many internationally-linked coalitions against militarism and war *as a whole* need to challenge patriarchy as well as capitalism and nationalism. 'We can't do this alone', they say. The message has not so far been welcomed onto the mainstream agenda. The major anti-war coalitions, mainly led by left tendencies, contain many women activists. An unknown number, individually, may share in a feminist analysis of war, but their presence has not yet been allowed to shape the movements' activism. If anti-militarist and anti-war organizing is to be strong, effective and to the point, women must oppose war not only as people but *as women*. And men too must oppose it in their own gender identity – *as men* – explicitly resisting the exploitation of masculinity for war.

REFERENCES:

Cohn, Carol (1987) 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12(4), summer, pp.687-718.

Dean, Robert D. (2001) *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Fogarty, Brian E. (2000) *War, Peace and the Social Order*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Horne, John (2004) 'Masculinity in politics and war in the age of nation-states and world wars, 1850–1950' in Dudink, Stefan, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (eds) *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gender in Modern History*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Jeffords, Susan (1989) *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Oakley, Ann (2002) *Gender on Planet Earth*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rubin, Gayle (1975) 'The traffic in women' in Reiter, Rayna (ed) *Towards an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Words: 2636 text only

Delivery: 20 mins

Author identification: Cynthia Cockburn is a feminist researcher and writer, Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology, City University London, and active in the international network Women of Black against War.

Contact details:

Dr. Cynthia Cockburn
83 Bartholomew Road, London NW5 2AH
020 7482 5670
c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.uk