

State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Gender

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The belated application of gender analysis to nationalism studies is captured in an oft-quoted statement by Anne McClintock:

Nationalism [is] radically constitutive of people's identities, through social contests that are [...] always gendered. But, if the invented nature of nationalism has found wide theoretical currency, explorations of the gendering of the national imaginary have been conspicuously paltry.¹

Until the 1970s, nationalism studies were almost exclusively about men: male intellectuals and politicians who defined the nation for the public, and male revolutionaries or soldiers who attained and protected the nation, often claiming full political citizenship in return for their services. However, the fact of their gender and the connection between national and masculine identities was hardly acknowledged, much less interrogated until the 1980s. Ironically, seeing men *as men* was largely the result of asking where the women were. Mirroring the development of gender studies more broadly, the first steps toward an explicitly gendered understanding of nations and nationalism was an outgrowth of the interest in women's and sexuality studies created by the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and



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1970s. Since the mid-1980s a growing recognition that the complexities of nationalism cannot be understood without an analysis of gender has been accompanied by an explosion of case studies from around the world. Nevertheless, much remains to be done in gendering the study of nations and in creating theoretical structures to organize new research in this area. The newness of the field, combined with the fact that most of the studies are of article- or chapter-length, makes it difficult to identify those that will have the greatest significance over the long-term. However, this review identifies a number of the most important contributions and examples of some of the newer trends emerging in this area of study.

One early and of ongoing line of research has been the gendering of national belonging – analyzing the ways in which male and female citizenship has been differently defined in terms of rights and responsibilities. An early problem tackled by women’s historians was the relationship between women and the nation state, particularly in Western democracies. Historian Linda Kerber’s seminal article, for example, demonstrated that the early American republic created a role for women that deviated from the way that European Enlightenment *philosophes* had configured female citizenship. This role, which she termed ‘republican motherhood,’ grew out of the politicizing experiences of women during the American Revolution, which gave women a stake in the creation and perpetuation of the new nation. It did not include political rights in the public sphere, but it did concede to them a type of domestic moral authority and education that would allow them to raise sons and encourage husbands to virtuously exercise their masculine duties to the state.² The concept of republican motherhood has since been extended to describe women’s relationships to other European states, especially France.³ The historical trajectory of female citizenship, however, differs in most formerly colonized democracies that granted woman suffrage at the same time as men: at the time of

national independence. Thus directly attached to independence movements, the interconnectedness of citizenship, nationalism and gender is perhaps even more apparent there than it is in the West.⁴

Sexed bodies have always been important to nationalist movements – especially as soldiering male and childbearing female bodies. One early work that treated this dyad was Anna Davin’s *Imperialism and Motherhood*.⁵ In it she showed how British doctors, medical officers, politicians and middle-class reformers in the early twentieth century responded to a perceived threat that the numbers and fitness of soldiers was becoming insufficient to maintain the empire. They offered a variety of prescriptions, including pronatalist and maternalist social policies, education of working-class mothers, and eugenic proposals. Karen Offen, Mary Louise Roberts, and Cornelia Osborne investigated similar fears of national decline attached to shrinking birthrates and twentieth-century wartime deaths in France and Germany.⁶ This literature overlaps with another focused more specifically on eugenics, which is concerned with biologically purifying and improving nations from within as well as drawing ‘racial’ boundaries to protect them from ‘aliens’. It was no coincidence that eugenics appeared the height of late nineteenth century western nationalism. However, it was truly an international movement that spread through much of the world.⁷ Ranging anywhere from a fringe ideology to state policy, eugenic nation building is still in evidence in many societies today.⁸

Although producing more and ‘fitter’ soldiers and mothers may seem like an almost predictable concern for nationalist movements, George L. Mosse posited a less obvious link between nationalism and sexuality – that nationalism actually absorbed late nineteenth century challenges to European social norms like homosexuality, masturbation, and bohemian, nudist and youth movements, and channeled them into ‘acceptable’ demonstrations of patriotism like the male camaraderie of the world wars and nationalistic motherhood.⁹ Mosse’s work focused

predominately on men and has been followed by an avalanche of studies showing how masculine identities are entwined with nationalist movements and wars in a wide variety of places and circumstances.¹⁰ A more contemporary co-opting of sexual pluralities by nationalist projects is the phenomenon of homonationalism – a term coined by Jasbir K Puar in 2007 to describe racist strains of nationalism adopted by some circles within the gay right. This, she says, followed the rise of ‘homonormativity’ which included gay communities as (unequal) citizens into the body politic as defined against Islamic ‘outsiders’ to facilitate the war on terror.¹¹ Although rejected by most LGBTIQ movements, the phenomenon of homonationalism persists, as evidenced by the very visible support by some members of the gay community for U.S. President Donald Trump’s nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Recent work on sexual orientation-asylum cases and the way that regulation of homosexuality in Africa and Islamic countries has been treated in the western press continue to draw on Puar’s influential work.¹²

Two pioneering works on women and nationalism appeared in 1989. One was Cynthia Enloe’s 1989 *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*. In it she asserted that, although nationalism has ‘typically [...] sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculine hope,’ nationalist movements cannot be understood apart from women’s experiences.¹³ Enloe argued that the calculus of nationalistic aggression – military, social, and economic – often overlooks women, who are enormously impacted by it. She showed how powerful national and transnational economic and political forces have constructed ‘third world’ women’s labor ‘cheap,’ and how sexuality supports the international order through women’s roles as tourists, diplomatic wives, and sex workers around foreign military bases.

The second important work on women and nationalism that appeared in 1989 was a volume of essays edited by Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Antias

entitled *Women-Nation-State* containing ten essays by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, who attempted to systematically explore how nations and nationalism have been gendered concepts.¹⁴ Setting the stage for the essays that follow, the editors located five major ways in which women participate in ethnic and national processes – as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectives, as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, as participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture, as signifiers of ethnic/national differences, and as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. These five categories are overlapping, and the authors did not claim that they were definitive. Indeed, Sylvia Walby added two missing categories – the gendered division of labor, and women’s work in maintaining boundaries in social hierarchies and between different ethnic and national groups within the state.¹⁵ Elaboration on these themes has since remained fertile ground for gendered studies of nationalism.

Rich scholarship surrounds the attempt to understand the meaning behind gendered national myths and the way that nations choose to represent themselves with symbols that are recognizably coded as either feminine or masculine. Lynn Hunt, for example, analyzed the familial imagery adopted by French revolutionaries constructing their nation as a brotherhood.¹⁶ Such family imagery has proven both appealing and powerfully useful in nation-building projects. Lauenstein has illustrated, for example, how familial language is incorporated into national anthems in ways that reinforce social hierarchies, prescribe social roles, and reify social phenomena as biologically determined.¹⁷ According to George Mosse, women are most often used as the national symbol, ‘the guardian[s] of continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability’ which is to be guarded by the male hero/soldier figure.¹⁸ Others have demonstrated that the nation as female may be figured either as a mother or as a lover.¹⁹ But the soldier-

heroes are not always male, and the gendering is not static and sometimes ambiguous.²⁰ Nationalists often use notions about ideal masculinity, femininity, and gender relations to claim their superiority over other groups, including patriarchal assertions that 'we treat women better than they do'.²¹ Scholars have also shown how normative western ideals of masculinity and femininity have been invoked as putative justification for denying the fitness of colonized peoples for self-government as, for example, in Mrinalini Sinha's *Colonial masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*.²²

Women's role as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic or national groups is likewise manifested in numerous ways. Women's penetrable bodies have been seen to represent the boundaries between groups. This may have a positive function as women (and, less often, men) leave their natal group to marry and thereby strengthen diplomatic relations or cement alliances between groups. However, out-marriage can also threaten the security of the group and it leaves the interloping individual vulnerable to suspicion of disloyalty by both sides when the two groups quarrel. Hence, more ethnic, religious, cultural, racial groups and nations espouse endogamous marriage and sexual practices.²³ Sexual mores are nearly always stricter against women having relations outside the group – which may introduce 'alien blood' into the nation – than they are with men. This is seen, for example, by the persistence of states defining citizenship according to the husband's nationality.²⁴

Although their meanings vary to some extent by culture, wartime rapes and other sexual tortures committed by men against women represent a literal breach of national boundaries on the bodies of the victims. They also commonly include the intent to humiliate and emasculate enemy men who are unable to protect their property, family, and ethnic bloodlines. Speaking of systematic Serbian war rapes in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1990 and 1995, including organized rape

camps where women who survived were deliberately impregnated and then held until it was too late to abort their fetuses. Maria B. Olujic explains:

In war individual bodies become metaphoric representatives of the social body [. . .]. War rapes reinforce the cultural notions of cleanliness and dirtiness associated with sexuality and ethnic affiliation. Through forced pregnancy resulting from rape, aggressors can 'purify the blood' of the attacked group by creating 'ethnically cleansed' babies belonging to the group of the invading fathers.²⁵

Rape and sexualized violence against men during war, although less common, also assaults potent cultural self-definitions of masculinity, honor, shame, and kinship. At the same time, propaganda during both war and peace often focuses on the purported 'deviant' sexuality of enemy or 'other' nations. Wendy Bracewell, for example, claims that a pre-existing crisis of Serbian masculinity created by a stereotype of Albanian rapists contributed to the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia and the sexualized violence that accompanied it.²⁶

One of the most controversial issues in the gendered study of nationalism, first raised by scholars in the 1980s, concerns the relationship between nationalistic particularism and an international feminism that sees itself engaged in a universal struggle for women's emancipation and liberation. If, as Enloe first claimed in 1989, 'when any nationalist movement becomes militarized [...] male privilege in the community is likely to become even more entrenched', why do many women participate, sometimes even in the most masculinist of projects as shown, for example, by Claudia Koonz in Nazi Germany?²⁷ Numerous studies have established key roles that women have played in nationalist warfare, including both sides of imperialist and revolutionary anti-colonial struggles. Scholars wrestle with the questions of whether some

women gain from national projects, and whether, or to what extent, women's participation in nationalist projects can be empowering. In other words, is a 'feminist nationalism' possible, as Ranjoo Herr claims it is?²⁸ The conclusion of the authors of studies on sixteen revolutions in Africa, Asia, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Latin America, for example, concur with Enloe in asserting that, although women's participation in violent national liberation and reform movements is critical, their interests are generally subordinated and their activities go unrewarded.²⁹ Another important collection of studies published in 1997 found more mixed results.³⁰ Women's motivations and experiences as active participants in nationalist movements is an ongoing subject of debate; it provides the focus of a number of studies in the 2018 collection of articles on gender and nationalism edited by Jon Mulholland.³¹

In many countries, women's presence in positions of political power has increased significantly, if slowly, over the last several decades. A 2005 Occasional Paper authored by Amrita Basu for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development reported on the status of women in relation to political parties and social movements in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. It asked what kinds of leadership roles women have played in those organizations and in elected office and what, if any, benefits have accrued to women individually or generally as a result of their participation. It noted that nationalist parties – most of which are ethnically and religiously based, were especially effective at mobilizing support through gendered appeals – especially through women's symbolic presence.³² Updates on these countries and similar studies around the globe that examine how women in public and elective office might be affecting definitions of nation and national belonging would be welcome additions to the literature.

In 1995, sociologist Cynthia Cockburn began a research project to study how two cross-ethnic/national women's organizations were created and maintained by watching women interact within and between the

Women's Support Network in Belfast (an array of Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist community organizations addressing women's needs) and the Medica Women's Association in Zenica (a medical and psychosocial project responding to the needs of Bosnian Muslim, Serb, and Croat women raped and traumatized by the 1992-95 war in Bosnia). She found that women in these groups could cooperate with each other while accepting varying attachments to nationalism in each other. However, all of the women who either did not reject nationalism outright, or actually identified themselves as nationalists, defined the term in an anti-essentialist, democratic, liberal and inclusive, way. Interestingly, many of these women claimed that theirs was a distinctively feminine type of nationalism that differed from men's.³³ More recently, Jill Vickers has begun a project of testing theoretical hypotheses about the possible outcomes of affiliations between feminist and nationalist movements against actual case studies. She finds change over time within countries as well as differences between them and concludes that there are some instances where women's affiliation with national projects has facilitated feminist goals, and warns of the dangers of relying on the Euro-centric biases of 'modernist (i.e. equality as opposed to difference-based) feminisms'.³⁴ These cautions are extended and theorized by Leela Fernandes' work on transnational feminism in the United States.³⁵ The project of understanding the relationship between feminism and nationalism is on-going, but seems to underscore the fact that both terms are historically and geographically contingent and diverse

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Endnotes

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