VIOLENCE, GENDER AND WAR 1.

Militarized Gendered Political Agencies in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The article introduces the collection of papers presented at the strand "Violence Revisited: Security, War and Peace Narrated", which was a part of 8th European Feminist Research Conference that was held on May 17 - 20, 2012 in Budapest, Hungary. The central objective of all the papers selected for the current collection deals with the concepts of gender, agency and political violence. These concepts are defined, problematized and connected to each other and contextualized within contemporary feminist studies.

Key words: Gender, agency, political violence, identities, Eastern Europe, Russia

The idea of this collection came from the strand "Violence Revisited: Security, War and Peace Narrated", which was a part of 8th European Feminist Research Conference that was held on May 17 - 20, 2012 in Budapest, Hungary. These days five hundred feminists from all over the world gathered together to discuss the politics of location of gender. The editors of this collection considered the importance of publishing some of the papers that touched upon the issues connected to interplay between gender and violence as important due to an increasing interest to the topic. The authors of the papers chosen for the current collection provide thorough analysis of women's identities and violence during the 19th-21st centuries in different parts of the world, though mainly focusing on Eastern Europe.

The central objective of all the papers selected for the current collection deals with the concepts of gender, agency and political violence. Although the authors introduce these concepts in different historical and geographical contexts we see particular similarities in the way they are understood by the contributors of the current collection.

Judith Butler defines gender as "the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (1999:11). In other words, gender, according to this definition, refers to masculinities and femininities as cultural and social codes. It is important to mention here that construction of gender very much depends on the external context, which is the reason why different genders are lived by people throughout the world differently in different places, bodies and locations. That's why, in Laura Sjoberg's words, gender can be also introduced as a set of discourses that represent, construct, change and enforce meaning

Prof. Dr Andrea Pető DSc, Nadezda Petrusenko PhD doctorandus, Mimoza Pachuku

(2007: 84). The authors of the current selection of papers introduce constructions of femininities and masculinities that have been accepted in different societies, thus, showing how the meanings of being a woman or a man change in time and space.

The conceptualization of *agency* is a hotly debated issue in different fields of science, because of difficulties with definition. In most of the literature *agency* is defined as political subjectivity and, thus, refers to how individuals act and how historically specific relations of subordination influence this capacity to act (see, for example, definitions in Karp 1986: 137; Ahearn 2001: 112; Mahmood 2009: 9, 15; Shepherd 2012: 6). The idea of autonomy, the capacity to act independent of external constraints or coercion is, thus, central to the concept of *agency* (Shepherd 2012: 6). However, if we again turn to the works of Butler, who conceptualized *agency* in connection to feminist studies, we can see that to her *agency* is an effect of the operations of discourse-power through which subjects are produced. Accordingly "agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field" (1992: 13). In other words, Butler understands agency not as the action of individual actors but rather as an effect of the processes through which subjects are constructed. The contributors of the current collection do not always explicitly write about issues connected to the agency of the subjects, however, in each and every case gendered individuals are constructed through their capacity to act and make a change.

Even those brief definitions of the two central concepts of these papers show that the important thematic concern of both gender and agency is the concept of power. Studies of gender are concerned with power relations between the sexes, while theories of agency are often concerned with the power of the subjects to effect change. Moreover, engagement with political violence often involves investigating the power of subjects to influence or control events (Shepherd 2012: 3). That's why the definition of power is essential for understanding the way gender, agency and political violence interplay with each other in different situations.

The ideas on power introduced by French philosopher Michel Foucault in the late 1970s and early 1980s are still considered to be influential in different fields of humanities. Although critical of Foucault in some aspects, admit the influence of his ideas on their writing. That's why it is reasonable that the authors of this collection follow Foucault in defining power as a practice and not as an entity (2000: 340). According to the author, power produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourses (1980: 119). That's why power is the key concept when it comes to the question of deconstruction of gendered identities and agencies.

The concept of violence is also closely connected to the concept of power since, as Laura J. Shepherd defined it, violence can be seen as a specific relation of power, which may produce new possibilities to the subjects even as it closes off others (Shepherd 2012: 7).This idea can be finely illustrated by the example of typical subject positions in the situation of violence. Traditionally in the situation of violence a subject is expected to play a role of a victim or a role of a perpetrator of violence. Despite the fact that both men and women in the situation of violence can play any of these roles, i.e. be victims or perpetrators, traditionally men are considered to be more readily disposed to employ violence under particular circumstances while the female nature and appropriate female behavior are largely defined as peaceful (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 1-2). The main reason for this differentiated treatment lies in the still dominant 'patriarchal' framework that produces misconceptions about women in general (Steel 1998: 276). It is well-known that each culture creates its own meanings for the terms *female* and *male*. These meanings involve a series of expectations regarding how each gender

should behave. When exaggerated, these expectations become gendered stereotypes (Basow 1992: 2). Those stereotypes can refer to characteristics associated with each gender (Wharton 2007: 128). According to the stereotypical ideas about appropriate female behavior women are considered to be peaceful, and this assumption makes it difficult to accept a woman as a perpetrator, an agent of political violence.

Therefore gendered dichotomous framing of political action often ascribes political violence in masculinized terms (Cunningham 2005: 76). Subsequently, in the cases of political violence women are usually represented as passive victims whereas men as aggressors—victimizers (Wood 1999: 313). In other words, in the situation of violence women are denied their agency and are seen as totally agentless while men are considered to be the wholly agentic individuals. Therefore if a woman acts as an agent of political violence it is considered to be an extraordinary and rare phenomenon which needs to be explained. The acceptable stories about women's relationship to the military/violence are: a) women are in need of the protection that the military can provide them, women are defined as Beautiful Souls (Elshtain 1987; Elshtain 1992); b) women are seen as resources that militaries use to win wars (Moon 1997): some of them sustain economy at home while men are away at war; others serve the men fighting those wars – as nurses, entertainment and prostitutes. However, conflict can create spaces for breaking down patriarchal structures, creating new spaces for gender renegotiations and configurations (Gonzales Vaillant; Kimmel; Malekahmadi; Tyagi 2012: 55). This creates a situation when female participation in violence doesn't fit the acceptable stories, and their participation in violence than is usually explained with the help of gendered stereotypes. According to Swati Parashar, that is the reason why female participation in violence is always analyzed from the point of view of the women's motivations and subjectivity, and the assumption is that those motivations always have personal and non-political character, while female participation in political violence is the consequence of patriarchal manipulations (2012: 166).

Contemporary feminist authors claim that between the two ends of victimhood and agency there are stories of survival, hope, and fulfillment and of the politics of subversion and purpose (Parashar 2012: 178). In other words, instead of looking for simplistic explanations by framing the subjects as simply "victims" or "perpetrators", the feminist scholars encourage to look for more complicated explanations in the fields of gender, agency and violence, thus, creating a more complicated picture of the processes going on. The debate about agency and victimhood serves to treat women like objects of discursive practices as we discuss politics "on" them and not "by" them (Parashar 2012: 174). An agent, for example, may also be a victim. And victim as well can possess a certain degree of agency. The reason for it is that both agency and victimhood, as aspects of subject-positioning, are ascribed through practices of power which are inevitably gendered (Shepherd 2012: 11). Moreover, the gender aspect is important since although men and women can be both victims and perpetrators of violence, they possess different resources, which has an impact on an individual's degree of agency (Gonzales Vaillant; Kimmel; Malekahmadi; Tyagi 2012: 56).

The papers in the current section are placed in a chronological order, which helps show the changes in the interplay between gender, agency and political violence in historical perspective.

Nadezda Petrusenko's article is focused on the gendered representations of politically violent women in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Having taken as an example the

Prof. Dr Andrea Pető DSc, Nadezda Petrusenko PhD doctorandus, Mimoza Pachuku

figure of Maria Spiridonova, a female terrorist member of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries, the author shows the way Spiridonova's gender was constructed by her contemporaries who belonged to different political camps. The gendered representations of Spiridonova show different strategies that were used by the authors in order to avoid showing her as an agent of political violence.

The question about representation of violent female agents is also present in **Irina Rebrova's** article. The author discusses the case of women soldiers from Russia who participated in the World War II, who were represented as "decent" heroines who helped defeat the enemy in the public discourse and collective memory of the war and never had a chance to talk about the other side of the story. Analyzing the interview with the 90-year-old former soldier, the author reveals the traumatic experiences and forms of violence women in the army of Soviet Union went through. The discourse the respondent uses, explains the complex gender relations between women and men in the army with the survival prostitution dominating most of these relationships.

Olena Petrenko's paper also highlights the differences between the rhetoric around the female teachers from Eastern Ukraine who were sent to work in the Western Ukraine by the Soviet authorities.These women found themselves between observation and pressure from the Soviet power and punitive actions by Ukrainian nationalists of the Western Ukraine. Petrenko shows that while the Soviet authorities saw these women as agitational-ideological agents of power, the Ukrainian insurgents represented them as "enslaved" because of their work and subsequent inability to become "good mothers". However, the violent actions directed towards these women shows that they were perceived by the insurgents as political subjects as well as the male representatives of the Soviet regime.

Galina Nelaeva's article lays the ground for a thorough analysis on the question: how important and necessary is the existence of international courts to ensure justice (for women whose rights were violated) despite the challenges and difficulties to create and maintain such institutions. Drawing on examples of violent events in Bosnia and Rwanda during the 90's, the author discusses the achievements and failures of prosecuting rape and sexual violence since the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia and the one for Rwanda. In the focus is the view on women as "typical" victims of gender-based crimes.

Unlike the other papers in this collection, that focus predominantly on gender issues during conflict and post-conflict contexts, **Analee Pepper's** study suggests patterns of analyzing gendered identities in pre-conflict contexts. She considers gender dynamics as crucial in shaping conflict and post conflict societies, since they help prevent future conflicts and they provide reconstruction efforts in post conflict societies. She suggests *Constructivist IR Feminism and Quantitative Relationship Testing on the relationship between gender and conflict* as two approaches that provide grounds for future deliberations and pragmatic examples for testing it on the ground. If gender equality is considered as a risk assessment tool in Conflict Early Warning Systems (CEWS), then not only conflicts are prevented but also women's empowerment is achieved.

The selected papers in this section share one common point: they are all warning us how important it is to analyze the complex intersection of gender, agency and political violence.

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Prof. Dr Andrea Pető DSc, Nadezda Petrusenko PhD doctorandus, Mimoza Pachuku

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