



WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A STATE OF THE ART

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The analysis of women, gender, and terrorism has been sparse and riddled with **stereotypical thinking** about women's capabilities and motivations. Women are rarely associated with devotion to the cause and the longstanding belief that women assume passive and inherently less interesting roles in militant organisations is still very much alive across academic and political spheres.
2. The range and number of publications examining female involvement in militant organisations with a more critical eye has certainly increased since the 2000s. The punchiness and variety of **feminist theories** has led to the publication of some very interesting volumes over the past decade on the conduct and representation of violence and militancy carried out by females.
3. Reconsidering perpetrators' experiences is certainly a valuable research direction in order to improve our understanding of violence without falling into a voluntarist framework of action. It is also an interesting invitation to reconsider how "agency" implies a **processual and dynamic understanding** of the conflictual dimension of how one is perpetually negotiating and modifying his/her understanding of his/her own militant past.
4. The question of women and extreme violence raises fundamental questions about our ability as researchers to capture the **complexity** of sometimes very **unsettling experiences**.



INTRODUCTION

The analysis of women, gender, and terrorism has been sparse and riddled with stereotypical thinking about women's capabilities and motivations: revenge for a personal loss, submissive, passive unwitting victims, used, forced or tricked into violence by overly masculine organisations?

Women are rarely associated with devotion to the cause and the longstanding belief that women assume passive and inherently less interesting roles in militant organisations is still very much alive across academic and political spheres. With a certain consistency, women involved in armed subversion, crime and war are very often captured in mass media in storied fantasies¹, treated with curiosity, fascination or abnormality². While the participation and motivations of male combatants are

more generally taken at face value, female involvement is usually more romanticised and forcefully viewed through gendered assumptions³. This particular fascination with female combatants is certainly supported and reinforced in our western popular culture⁴. Morgan's radical feminist critique of women militancy⁵, in which she is venting her own disillusionment with the sexism of the male-dominated American New-left in the 1960s, paradoxically contributed to reinforce

“Women involved in armed subversion, crime and war are very often captured in mass media in storied fantasies”

ordinary and common hypersexualised stereotypes. Morgan's polemical argument could be summarised thus: the cause of female involvement in violent activities is essentially due to emotional and sexual attachment to a male counterpart. The suggestive title and the provocative argument deployed in *The Demon lover* contributed to eclipse other less vindictive monographs⁶.

1. NACOS, Brigitte L. 2005. "The portrayal of female terrorists in the media: Similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28(5): 435-451. ZWERMAN, Gilda. 1994. "Mothering on the lam: politics, gender fantasies and maternal thinking in women associated with armed, clandestine organizations in the United States." *Feminist Review* 47: 33-56.

2. STEEL, Jayne. 2007. *Demons, Hamlets and Femmes fatales: Representations of Irish Republicanism In Popular Fiction*. Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang

3. BLOOM, Mia. 2011. *Bombshell: the many faces of women terrorists*. London: Hurst.

4. BOURKE, Joanna. 2000. *An intimate history of killing: Face-to-face killing in twentieth-century warfare*. New York: Basic books.

5. MORGAN, Robin. 1989. *The demon lover: On the sexuality of terrorism*. New York: Norton

6. DE CATALDO NEUBERGER, Luisella and Valentini TIZIANA. 1996. *Women and terrorism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. ARETXAGA, Begoña. 1997. *Shattering silence: women, nationalism, and political subjectivity in Northern*



After a period of relative absence of work on the issue, the range and number of publications examining female involvement in militant organisations with a more critical eye has certainly increased since the 2000s. This increasing academic interest in women and terrorism is certainly consistent with a rise in public concern for the multiplicity of cases of female suicide bombers reported in the media⁷. It is also consistent with the steady development of a welcome feminist alternative literature in International Relations since the 1990s. Enloe and Tickner among others certainly contributed to focus our attention on gendered presumptions and to unravel the permanence of myths, stereotypes and narratives in politics, war and violence⁸. The punchiness and variety of feminist theories has led to the publication of some very interesting volumes over the past decade on the conduct and representation of violence and militancy carried out by females.

Ireland. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

7. VOGEL, Lauren, PORTER, Louise & Mark KEBBELL. 2014. "The Roles of Women in Contemporary Political and Revolutionary Conflict: A Thematic Model." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37(1): 91-114.

8. ENLOE, Cynthia. 1989. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. London: Pandora Press. TICKNER, J. Ann. 1992. *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. New York: Columbia University Press. HUNT, Krista, and Kim RYGIEL, eds. 2006. (*En*) *gendering the war on terror: war stories and camouflaged politics*. Aldershot: Ashgate

RETRIEVING FEMALE POLITICAL AGENCY FROM GENDERED STEREOTYPES

Mothers, Monsters, Whores, contributed to opening the path to a feminist examination of the issues at stake by asking a rather straightforward question: what are the political consequences of reducing women to mothers, monsters and whores in the grip of irrationality⁹? In resuming the long and established legacy of feminisms' analysis of the question of politics, Sjoberg and Gentry's volume focuses on situations of proscribed violence and explores the way in which women's violence is articulated and ultimately how female political agency is denied. In four chapters dedicated to military women's violence at Abu Ghraib, suicide bombings in Iraq and Palestine, Chechnya and women who participated and led campaigns of genocide in Bosnia and in Rwanda, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* exposes and denounces the costs of rendering women's violence as anomalous, deviant and apolitical. With *Beyond Mothers Monsters Whores*, Gentry and Sjoberg offer a revised version of their well-received first edition¹⁰.

9. SJOBERG, Laura, and Caron E. GENTRY. 2007. *Mothers, monsters, whores: women's violence in global politics*. London: Zed Books

10. GENTRY, Caron E. and Laura, SJOBERG. 2015. *Beyond Mothers Monsters Whores. Thinking About Women's Violence in Global Politics*. London: Zed Books



They endeavour to take into account the comments and criticisms they received on the permutation of the three narratives of mothers, monsters and whores and on their use of the notion of agency¹¹, while asking a straightforward question: why when talking about women involvement in extra-legal political violence these disdainful and patronising narratives continue to have salience in global politics? Part of the answer is in their overview of the main theories of political violence. These theories very often carry with them implicit or explicit assumptions about men's violence and subsequently deny female agency. In order to circumvent their infamous prominence and to retrieve female agency, they suggest a different focal: to analyse how the stories told about women are read and consumed. This focus on how women's violence is portrayed informs the subsequent revised chapters. While the first edition was articulated around four empirical chapters, *Beyond Mothers Monsters Whores* opts for a transversal reading of the same case studies through the three main narratives. In their chapter 4, they put the emphasis on the variation in the mother narratives (nurturing or vengeful) and point to an interesting conclusion: the mother narratives are "a default setting for how women are constructed in global politics" (91). In their chapter 5 and 6 they respectively engage with the monster and whore narratives and underline how women's political violence is either devalued because of their alleged psychological handicaps or

vilified as sexual deviance. According to Gentry and Sjoberg, all these narratives of depreciation of women's violence, sometimes combined, converge in the same direction: the reaffirmation of gender subordination and the patronising denial or limitation of women's choice and agency. Women's political violence is read, consumed and signified as a maladjusted, broken or excessive femininity. Hence the necessity for the development of a feminist research programme on women's violence that would go beyond the mother monster and whore narratives and that would pay attention to the experience of people's political violence.

Reconsidering perpetrators' experiences and their "narrative accomplishments", is certainly a valuable research direction in order to improve our understanding of violence without falling into a voluntarist framework of action. It is also an interesting invitation to reconsider how "agency" implies a processual and dynamic understanding of the conflictual dimension of how one is perpetually negotiating and modifying his/her understanding of his/her own militant past. And it raises fundamental questions about our ability as researchers to capture the complexity of sometimes very unsettling experiences.

On the downside, the eagerness to engage with the issue of agency from the sole perspective of feminist literature is both this book's strength and weakness. Perhaps, the argument would have gained insight from engaging with narrative and cultural criminological framework analysis¹². But these are

11. ÅHÄLL, Linda. 2012. "Motherhood, myth and gendered agency in political violence." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14(1): 103-120

12. FERRELL, Jeff. 1999. "Cultural criminology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25(1): 395-418.



minor irritants in a book that is instilling critical attitude toward orthodoxies and provides an analytical framework to discuss gendered representation of violence.

GENDERED (SELF-) REPRESENTATIONS OF VIOLENCE

How are women, gender and political violence performed, received and portrayed? The question and the inherent epistemological and methodological issues at stake is at the centre of the renewed feminist research agenda on violence and numerous publications have tackled the problem since. Among some notable recent publications, it would be worth highlighting the work of Rajan¹³ and how she analyses the discourses surrounding women who carry out suicide attacks. Rajan describes how the narratives of women suicide bombers actually embody not only predominantly western patriarchal values but also a series of lingering colonial prejudices towards the populations of former western colonies. This empirically-grounded volume is quite laudable in its contribution to the

“Challenging the enduring perception that the status and roles of women in the Arab and Muslim world boils down to a strict battle between tradition and modernity”

necessary analysis of gendered representations of female suicide bombers and of women as agents of political violence. However, it does not always succeed in challenging the enduring perception that the status and roles of women in the Arab and Muslim world boils down to a strict battle between tradition and modernity.

This point is actually well highlighted in Vince’s monograph dedicated to the Algerian women who played major roles during the struggle to end French rule in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s¹⁴. Based on interviews with women who participated in the war in a wide range of roles, from urban bombers to members of the rural guerrilla support network, the volume explores how female veterans viewed the post-independence state and its multiple discourses on “the Algerian woman” in the fifty years following Algerian independence in 1962. Key to the structure of Vince’s monograph is to

chronologically and carefully investigate what these female veterans remember about their past involvement and how they accept, compose or reject official discourses

about them. Following the literature on contested past and collective memory, she shows how war-time is inexorably revisited through complex frames involving more or less precise family histories, local contextualisation and grand narratives about war,

KATZ, Jack. 1988. *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books

13. RAJAN, VG Julie. 2011. *Women suicide bombers: narratives of violence*. London: Routledge

14. VINCE, Natalya. 2015. *Our Fighting Sisters. Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012*. Manchester: Manchester University Press



independence, endurance and commitment to the cause. Each of the 26 interviews she conducted shows how recollection follows lines of resistance, resilience and accommodation as much as it involves forgetting and recreating memories. With *Our Fighting Sisters*, it is not about official memory versus a vernacular one but rather the careful investigation of how dominant frames and particular moral readings influence the different individual accounts of these female veterans.

Vince's approach is a sensible and sensitive one; an ethnographic account of women's recollection of their past, the way they frame it, understand it, cope with it and finally live with it. She does not show surprise or fascination for the enthusiasm and the various moments of delights expressed by her interviewees. On the contrary, she verifies using various abundant written sources, challenges and analyses the coded political statements, and explains the euphemisms and structuring metaphors used by her interlocutors. As such, she avoids many traps including perhaps the most important one in this particular Algerian context: the narrative of political legitimacy and its upshot, the narrative of revolutionary authenticity.

All these women contributed to the war of independence and they all have something to say about it. Some of them are rural and illiterate while others are urban and well-educated. But these determining factors do not preclude easy conclusions on who lives better with her past involvement. The pages dedicated to the national heroine Djamila Bouhired are simply moving: *"the symbol had consumed the individual,*

limiting her choices to a politically and socially acceptable path". It was a socially acceptable path that in the 1960s and 1970s was formulated within the limits of a gender-neutral citizenship (being Algerian rather than a woman) as a product of two convergent moralising views: social conservatism and an official discourse on the purity of nation, putting the war of independence and its heroes on a pedestal. According to Vince, this particularly constrained narrative lasted until the heated debates around the 1984 Family Code. How this policy opened the possibility to another self-representation of some of these women is a fascinating point; many of her interlocutors moved away then from this heroic state-sponsored understanding of their past and contributed to the realisation of new versions of the nationalist genealogy.

Our Fighting Sisters is an extremely rich and well documented monograph but perhaps not always straightforward for someone who would have a limited prior knowledge of Algeria and its messy colonial and post-colonial history. Furthermore, while Vince uses different autobiographical materials to corroborate her interviews, investigating these sources in the context of ongoing disputes over how to interpret Algeria's past could have been pushed even further. Finally, the transmission of these women's stories – and especially the rural ones – is less documented in Vince's monograph. Perhaps this point could constitute the basis of another work. But these are minor criticisms. At the crossroad between feminism, nationalism and memory studies, *Our Fighting Sisters* offers an intriguing and salutary work on how individual women's memories



intertwine, disrupt and corroborate Algerian State-sponsored narratives of the war, nation and women. It is also an excellent reminder of how the act of remembering and talking through one's past is never done outside pre-existing forms of social organisation and marks of respect, resentment, nostalgia and reputation.

FEMALE ACTIVISM, ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

The potential promise of gender equality among ethno-nationalist and revolutionary politics has been subject to intense discussions within feminist studies.

Hamilton's work¹⁵ is a serious contribution to our understanding of radical Basque nationalism. Drawing on a unique body of oral history interviews, archival material and published sources, Hamilton shows how women's participation in radical Basque nationalism has changed from the founding of ETA in the 1950s to the present. By focusing on gender politics Hamilton's volume offers new perspectives on the history of ETA, including recruitment, the militarisation of radical Basque nationalism, and the

15. HAMILTON, Carrie. 2007. *Women and ETA: The gender politics of Radical Basque nationalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

role of the media in shaping popular understandings of 'terrorism'. These arguments elegantly deployed in Hamilton's work are directly relevant to the study of women in other insurgent and clandestine movements. Alison's monograph¹⁶ is also interview-based and provides some interesting elements on what being a woman means when part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka or of the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

In *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl* Melzer¹⁷ investigates the alleged convergence of feminist goals and violence in the case of the well-known German *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Faction, RAF), along with brief references to the less known *Rote Zora* (Red Zora, RZ), at a time when in the late 1960s the debate on political violence was propelled by a plethora of revolutionary writings and when anti-imperialism and international solidarity were at the forefront of the new radical outlook. She shows how violence was quite extensively discussed within the autonomous women's movement and underlines the diverging positions among feminist politics between two main poles: the rejection of violence as masculine and the acceptance of violence as the only effective way of resisting patriarchal domination. Finally, she examines the connections and compliant discursive strategies on the use and justifications of violence

16 ALISON, Miranda. 2009. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National conflict*. London: Routledge.

17. MELZER, Patricia. 2015. *Death in the shape of a young girl. Women's political violence in the Red Army Faction*. New York: New York University Press



between feminist politics and leftist armed women.

In five chapters, Melzer sheds light on the historical discussions of the formation and political trajectories of revolutionary groups in the 1970s and how the German public was troubled by the high percentage of women in radical movements. She astutely draws on archival material, prison letters and interviews with former female militants to depict a more complex image of the debates around women, violence and the fight against fascism and patriarchal and conservative society, reconnecting with a perhaps forgotten debate around praxis, identity and solidarity.

Melzer's monograph is well documented and demonstrates the stimulating insights gained by employing a historical perspective in this field of political violence and gender. What might be less clear or unresolved in Melzer's monograph is how West German feminist politics also owed much to the permeation of society by new ideas, including ideas and practices coming from other movements such as the French feminist movement – also caught in some similar discussions about violence at the time – and women's groups from various national African liberation struggles. It would have reinforced the point made, especially in relation to her analysis of Tiedemann's prison letters for instance. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Melzer's monograph focuses on the very iconic female members of the RAF at the expense of many other women who were also involved in radical German feminist politics. Engaging with the biographical trajectories and post-involvement

attitudes of women such as Astrid Proll, Monika Berberich or Silke Maier-Witt would have perhaps disturbed the argument. Having said which, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl* is a timely addition to a long list of recent publications studying *the connections between the varieties of dissident attitudes at a time of generalised outpouring of protest against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the turn by some from verbal violence to direct action*¹⁸. Within this new academic interest¹⁹, Melzer's volume is a welcoming contribution to a growing literature tackling the issues of gender and radicalism in 1960s and 1970s West Germany in particular and across Europe more broadly.

These different volumes have certainly contributed to the infringement of the patriarchal representations and gendered sightlessness of contemporary terrorism research. They offer substantive and welcoming contributions that disrupt common assumptions about and representations of women's motives, conduct and agency. They have also helped highlight how and why processes of social change and transformation do not follow a neat and linear path to some tangible form of progress.

18. GUITTET, Emmanuel-Pierre. 2016. "West German radical protest in the long 1960s." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9(1): 150-158

19. BUGNON, Fanny. 2015. *Les "Amazones de la terreur": sur la violence politique des femmes, de la Fraction Armée Rouge à Action Directe*. Paris: Payot



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