

# American Exceptionalism: The Gender Factor

Written by Bonnie Mann

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BONNIE MANN, MAR 23 2014

This January, Elizabeth Hasselbeck of Fox News interviewed Australian arch-conservative political commentator Nick Addams about his newest book, *American Boomerang*. Hasselbeck's central concern was that the "wussification" of American men by feminism was "affecting national security," because it compromised the ability of the United States to "be a strong presence globally." "That's exactly right," Addams said. While the Hasselbeck interview was roundly lampooned in the more liberal press, it is perhaps noteworthy that the point of Addams' book, and his career-long preoccupation as a political commentator and author, is to promote American exceptionalism as a kind of world religion. Hasselbeck's identification of the gender factor in Addams' program illuminates the obvious once again: American exceptionalism, sacred to U.S. liberals and conservatives alike, is a deeply gendered affair.

This means that it is important for anyone who cares about the effects of American exceptionalism internationally, feminist or not, to understand the gender factor. [1]The specter of U.S. "national manhood" is indeed a key structure of American exceptionalism, and as such a constitutive element of the foundational political orientation that justified the unlawful behavior of the United States in the U.S. "War on Terror" to U.S. citizens, and continues to justify the drone-enabled extrajudicial assassination program that is the hallmark of the Obama presidency (to name only two recent examples).

In *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*, I address the nexus of gender and nationalism in the U.S. from the perspective of another closely related concern, i.e. what has been referred to, in multiple publications in the last decade, as American *stupidity*. [2] This so-called "stupidity" manifests itself as the strange willingness among those of us who are U.S. citizens to go along with the criminal behavior of our government, even as it exacts huge financial and social costs on the country and the citizenry. What follows are selected excerpts from *Sovereign Masculinity*.

Whatever else the "War on Terror" is, it is fundamentally and primarily the most massive and successful robbery in the history of the world. It is a material operation... It destroys bodies, buildings, communities, histories, cultures, economic well-being, social stability and the public trust, and it creates profit. In fact, "War on Terror" is simply the name given to a world-historic money laundering operation. It names the material process by which 400 billion dollars in public monies (so far) are transferred into private hands through the money laundering agencies called the Pentagon, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security. The transfer is rather direct: the citizen's money is handed over through the vehicle of the private contract to the good people at Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and General Dynamics (Hartung 2012, 1).

The most privatized war in history resulted in more private contractors occupying Iraq, by 2003, than uniformed military personnel. Shrink-wrapped bundles of cold hard cash were handed out like candy, in the beginning, with no regulation, oversight, or follow-up to see that the services paid for were ever rendered (Hartung 2012, 4). Corporations with lucrative contracts billed U.S. citizens for buildings they never built, boats that didn't float (9), sewer systems that didn't work (5), weapons that weren't needed (7) and sub-contracted services with sub-contractors who didn't exist (4)... The "War on Terror" greased the hinges of the revolving door between government officials who influence the awarding of contracts and the corporations who engage in war profiteering. It made a small number of very rich people much, much richer. Meanwhile the results of the wars on the ground in Iraq and

# American Exceptionalism: The Gender Factor

Written by Bonnie Mann

Afghanistan are nothing short of catastrophic, with over 150,000 civilians killed, many more wounded and displaced, and appalling material and security conditions (Crawford 2011; Niland 2011). The U.S. economy crashed in 2008, seven years after the money laundering operations began—and while the housing-industry-profiteers have rightfully caught some of the blame, the war profiteers have received very little criticism. Both continue to profit, however, while average Americans continue to lose...

While many understood that oil profits were a key motivator in the conflicts, few people paid attention to the more direct profit-making mechanism, the one that didn't require building infrastructure, setting up markets or winning the wars. If Afghanistan and Iraq were to be opened up for private, western plunder, so were the pockets of the American people...

What is most astounding about this world-historic moment is the lack of protest here at home. The robbery proceeds smoothly, publicly, and without arousing the ire of a proud and democratic people... Here the material interests of the people must be put out of play, for the people. The images and the stories that unlink our sense of existence, as Americans, from our own material interests, require a massive machinery of production, itself material, institutional, economic...

What will pit American's sense of existence as Americans against their own material self-interest is the style of national manhood in which they imagine themselves... exemplified in the overwhelming spectacle of power that is the... "Shock and Awe" campaign. If you want the citizens to pay for all this expensive stuff that the country clearly doesn't need, you have to appeal to their sense of existence as Americans in a way that shuts down cognition, undermines conscience, and displaces legitimate interests in the material/social well-being of our communities.

In other words, the success of government and corporate decision-makers in conducting these operations depends on the production of American "stupidity" through appeals to American exceptionalism. These appeals work (in the sense that they are productive) in large part because they mobilize viscerally held gender commitments that are deeply imbricated in personal, social and national identity.

In *Sovereign Masculinity*, I follow the phenomenon of gender as it circulates between viscerally held and deeply personal identity commitments and the life of the nation. I offer a political phenomenology of gender which reveals that it is, most fundamentally, an operation of *justification* which links our most intimate experiences, the intersubjective lifeworld, the defining discursive formations of a people and the material operations of power in the life of the nation. I provide a detailed account of the life of sovereign masculinity in its American manifestation at four levels: 1) The level of lived experience. A feminist phenomenological analysis allows us to give an account of gender that is both socially constituted and ontologically "heavy". Gender accrues ontological weight in the life of the individual over time, and comes to be a central structure of personal identity in which the very worth and survival of the self is at stake. 2) The level of the social imaginary. Gender and gendered meanings organize an individual life in relation to a social order, allow one to envision one's life as fitting together with the lives of others in particular ways, including national life. Sovereign masculinity in its American manifestation is developmentally linked to experiences of social shaming and abandonment. It is linked to redemptive, hyperbolic displays of agency as a vehicle for re-establishing social belonging. 3) The level of discourse. Linguistic "frames" allow gendered meanings to be "charged" in particular moments and in relation to particular events. Gendered language functions to assign worthiness and unworthiness, it operates as praise and reprobation on a pre-reflective level of awareness that is most effective when not consciously grasped. 4) The level of material relations of power. Gender functions, as it always has, to organize material relations of dominance and subordination and exploitative divisions of labor. Further, gender is produced materially through funding decisions, institutional operations, medical and legal practices, and government actions. In the use of torture, for example, gender is material in the sense that it is both the effect of material and institutional power operations over time, and a material operation on the bodies of detainees. Gender fuses with race in sexualized torture to undo the gender of the prisoner while producing the gender of the nation.

The justificatory nature of gender is evident at each of these four levels of existence, and is what ties them together. This is to say that dominant forms of gendering are processes of establishing and assigning worth or merit. Put too simply, they are personal/social/material processes which produce the stigmatization and abjection of women or

# American Exceptionalism: The Gender Factor

Written by Bonnie Mann

those made to occupy the social position of women, as well as a social recognition and exaltation of men or those who occupy the social positions of men.

Sovereign masculinity, as a particular form of gender, is distinctive in that it is *self*-justifying. The self-justifying operation of sovereign masculinity is at the heart of developmental aspirations to manhood in the life of the individual subject. The manhood of the regime is spectral, which is to say always fictional and unstable. The regime keys into the aspirational life of the masculine subject through stories of humiliated manhood redeemed by hyperbolic displays of agency, and through spectacles of such agency. The nation then “borrows back” a sense of the reality for its “manhood” from the people. National manhood is produced as the justification that keeps the population on board, at least on board enough, to allow the robbery to proceed. What follows is another excerpt from *Sovereign Masculinity*.

How could a democratic people be so stupid as to comply, or at least comply enough, when their leaders march them into wars recognized by the entire world as wrong, devastating to the populations of the countries under attack and destructive to our own lives, economy, and nation? Why is it that so many thousands of Americans will watch their country bear the cost, and exact an extraordinary cost from others—of opening up the resources and markets of other people’s lands, of opening our own pockets—for a handful of corporations? Certainly many factors come into play in creating a populace like ours, one that is at once extraordinarily passive, extraordinarily ignorant, extraordinarily idealistic, and extraordinarily willing. Cultural obsession with wealth, sports, leisure and consumer products, long work hours with less remuneration than our European counterparts, a broken education system, the lack of a public intellectual life; the list could go on and on. But at the heart of all of these aspects of contemporary American life is a deeply entrenched, viscerally lived fascination with sovereign masculinity. The point here is not that sovereign masculinity is embraced by the entire population, but that it has such cultural purchase in the United States that it is central to both dominant modes of public discourse and, for many of us, for enough of us, private and personal strivings.

American exceptionalism is the nationalist version of the exceptionalism in which sovereign masculinity cloaks itself. Just as the sovereign man obeys no law but his own, enjoys an entitlement to act that is unabridged by the rights of others—which is, in fact, the source of meaning for others—America is the uniquely privileged nation, beholden to no one, and at the same time the center of the world’s aspirations.

If we are to consider it in its content, American exceptionalism is a cluster-concept, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, which includes the conceits that the U.S. has the best political system in the world, that it provides unprecedented avenues to extreme economic success for those who are willing to work, and that laissez-faire capitalism is the correct and necessary economic model for the entire world (2007, 24)... Add to this Puar’s claim that the U.S. sees itself, also, as a site of “sexual exceptionalism,” sexual advancement or excellence, in which sexual diversity is tolerated or even celebrated, and the justificatory narrative takes on yet another dimension (2007, 94).

But the “beliefs” that collect under the umbrella of “American exceptionalism”... are the kinds of declarations that grip and constitute the national imaginary in moments when we are called on to explain ourselves to ourselves. Exceptionalism is not about facts about the country that justify some unique world-responsible and world-shaping role for the nation, exceptionalism is a key manifestation of the hyperbolic agency which structures American national manhood.

Nick Addams urges a return to “American self-belief as a force of nature.” He reminds his audiences that “weakness is provocative,” and “America wins respect in the world when it displays who it is.” This drive to self-display is the fundamental structuring drive of sovereign masculinity, also operating at the level of the individual subject who is schooled in the aspiration to manhood in its particularly American form. Violent self-display is *redemptive*, especially in the face of experiences of shame or humiliation. Empirical research shows that shame is an affect that shuts down higher cognitive function, that incapacitates moral concern for others, and that mobilizes survival-level reaction formations (Nussbaum 2004, 2001; Tangey et. al 2002; Tomkins 1995). This structuring element of sovereign masculinity allows the nation access to the inner life, the pre-reflective drives, the life or death urgencies of individuals; to the social imaginaries, the longings and sense of belonging of the people; to the extraordinary powers of language which mobilize ready-made sets of values, moral commitments, and meanings. Violent national self-

# American Exceptionalism: The Gender Factor

Written by Bonnie Mann

displays (the “shock-and-awe” campaigns, the torture photos, the drone assassinations) show “who we are.” “Who we are” is not the sort of thing one argues for or against. Reasonable objections and the moral claims of victims are powerless to undo what are essentially manifestations of American existence. Sovereign masculinity is, then, a primary mechanism of the production of the infamous “stupidity” of the American people. In order to undo the conceit of American exceptionalism, we have to undo the power of sovereign masculinity, the hold it has on the nation, the seduction it exercises on the U.S. left as well as the right.

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# American Exceptionalism: The Gender Factor

Written by Bonnie Mann

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[1] Of course many other feminists have come before me in trying to understand the relation between nationalism and gender, and I am indebted to their work. I refer the reader especially to the work of Cynthia Enloe, Carol Cohn, and Dana Nelson.

[2] The publications that lament American stupidity are many. They include recent book-length treatments by Pierce, Shenkman, Nadin and Giroux (see bibliography).

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