

Review - Sexing War/Policing Gender

Written by Federica Caso

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Sexing War/Policing Gender: Motherhood, myth and women's political violence

By: Linda Åhäll

Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2015.

Sexing War/Policing Gender explores how female agency in political violence is made sense of through the myth of motherhood. Last of the World Politics and Popular Culture book series at Routledge, it is yet another publication that sheds light on the complex interaction between politics, violence, and the most mundane acts of everyday life. Linda Åhäll analyses British – and to a lesser extent US – cultural productions (those being both news stories and fictional shows) from 2001 to 2009 to demonstrate how female political violence is understood to be enabled by ideas of motherhood. The book begins with the consideration that, although in the last decade we have witnessed the precipitous increase of women involved in warfare and political violence ranging from female suicide bombers to women in combat positions in national armies, cultural representations are mostly governed by the metanarrative of motherhood. Such frames simultaneously enable certain subject positions while foreclosing others.

Historically women have been associated with the peace movement, setting them in opposition to the construction of the military as a masculine institution. These gendering practices have relied on the naturalisation of women as life-givers by virtue of their reproductive capacities, and of men as protectors and life-takers. As life-givers, women are rendered unintelligible as life-takers and killing warriors. These associations have also instantiated the gendered dichotomy that links women and femininity to passivity, and men and masculinity to agency. It also puts women at odds with political violence, a masculine/life-taking activity. When involved in political violence, women tend to be depoliticised by making their political goals invisible, often through the metanarrative of motherhood.

Åhäll argues that this is clearly noticeable in the ways that female political violence is communicated and represented in popular culture. She identifies three main tropes: women as victims; women as heroes; and women as monsters. These signify female political agency in relation to motherhood and childlessness. The first two tropes respectively write women as passive and emotional, and protective and heroic mothers or potential wannabes. Thus the first trope negates female political violence on the basis that women cannot take others' lives because they gave or can give life, and therefore killing is against their nature of life-givers and nurturing beings. The second allows political violence on the grounds that women are naturally prone to protect or seek revenge for their harmed family. The third trope writes female political agency in antithesis to motherhood, whereby women become life-takers because they have exceeded their normative gender, that being by having irregularities or 'abnormalities' in their sex lives, showing unwillingness to sexually please men, or being unable to fulfil their reproductive capacities. This casting of some women outside of the heteronormative framework that inscribes women as mothers and wives, marks them as abject and less human, features on the basis of which women are intelligible as life-takers.

Starting from these premises, the book sets out to explore the cultural representations of female political agency in order to provide a grammatical, rather than material, understanding of agency, that is, not why women choose to engage in political violence, but the dynamics of power that make the conditions for the intelligibility of agency. As Åhäll puts it "I study the grammar with which ideas of gender, agency and political violence is culturally communicated" (p. 26). Therefore, it is also important to note that the book is not referring to 'actual mothers', but to the cultural association of the female body to a naturalised life-giving identity. Åhäll argues in this book that the *idea*

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of motherhood is a foundational grammar for making and communicating war, and for disciplining female political agency – hence the title *Sexing War/Policing Gender*. A note on agency is in order. Åhäll follows a Butlerian understanding of agency that refers not to individual will, but to the ways power/discourse produces subjects. While this might seem an oxymoronic passive approach to agency, insofar as there is little agential capacity from the part of the individual in the production of subjects, Åhäll explains that she is concerned with the construction of subject positions rather than with subjectivities, ie, how a subject is written within discourses rather than the construction of the self. Therefore, “subjects should not be confused with individuals” (p. 39). It is the intelligibility, or how a subject is understood and made sense of in a particular socio-historical moment, that Åhäll explores, and how certain ideas become common sense, normative, and disciplining.

The major concern with this conceptual approach is that it risks flattening subjectivities, and therefore missing agency altogether. Åhäll is well aware that “[a]nalyses of agency are sometimes seen as an uncomfortable fit with poststructuralist analyses”, yet she adds that “this is only a problem if one uses an action-based, material understanding of agency linked to political subjectivity, how individuals act” (p.39). Reading visual culture as texts, Åhäll reads how popular culture writes subjects. Methodologically this is achieved with a grammatical method, whereby predication – or how nouns endow the subject with certain properties – presuppositions – or the taken for granted background against which a subject is constructed – and the subject-positioning – or how a subject is linked to other subjects and objects – construct reality. Obviously, this approach presupposes an “idealised viewer” (p. 41). Thus, within this type of analysis we have two subjectivities that are potentially flattened, that of the agent protagonist of story that is narrated, and that of the viewer. While the analyst who comes from a pure Foucauldian and/or Butlerian viewpoint might find this approach to non-agential agency convincing, the primacy that the book bestows to language, that being verbal or visual, at the expense of matter forecloses the link of the ideational/cultural to the material. For, if the book is not concerned with how women are actually involved in political violence, neither with what viewers bring in when reading the cultural artefact, the referent of the grammatical approach is lost in the analysis, as it risks becoming self-referential.

This criticism is soon smoothened when considering how Åhäll turns – and encourages other IR scholars to do likewise – to the politics of emotions and abjections, concepts that are intrinsically relational ones, and therefore contrast criticisms of solipsism. Visual culture is strictly intertwined with the politics of emotions and identification. Åhäll argues that emotions spatialize and ‘interpellate’ (a concept that in the book is dissociated with its traditional Marxist connotation, and used in the context of identification with and naturalisation of certain representations), that is, create borders between what is inside and is acceptable/emotionally cherished, and what is not, and call the subject to abject what is not. In the context of the myth of motherhood in the cultural representations under analysis, Åhäll contends that, having become naturalised it sparks certain emotional reactions that tend to defend the myth, and simultaneously interpellate to abject what runs against it. The emotional communication of motherhood, therefore, upholds the myth and polices its borders – which are also borders of gender as a norm.

This communicative process that relies on emotions and naturalisation, Åhäll explains, is drawn upon Barthes’ work. Barthes conceptualised the idea of obtuse meaning which is about emotional evaluation, “what one loves, what one wants to defend” (Barthes quoted in Åhäll, p. 43). This is better understood in relation to how Åhäll converts Barthes’s *Mythologies* into an approach to discourse analysis, or what she calls a Barthesian discourse analysis using “a postmodernised Barthes” (p. 39). This is used to explain how myth renders culture *natural*, and therefore essential and apolitical. Thus, once entered into the realm of myth – as motherhood understood as a defining feature of womanhood has – a concept gets ascribed to the domain of nature and rendered ahistorical. The conceptual oddity of this methodology stands out in the way it combines structuralist linguistics and poststructuralist discourse analysis. Åhäll justifies this by arguing that, contra canonical semiological approaches, Barthes’ is political, and his mythology shares common ground with poststructuralism because both explore the working of power. While the tension between Barthes’ semiology and poststructuralist discourse analysis is discussed, and presumably overcome, the author pays lip-service to the incompatibility between ideology, traditionally a Marxist concept, and discourse analysis, a Foucauldian concept. In fact, Foucault (1980) was rather critical of the concept of ideology, instead preferring terms such as *knowledge* and *regimes of truth*. According to Foucault, ideology is superstructural and repressive, and thus pertains to the dominant class and stands in opposition to something that is supposed to count as truth. Thus, when Åhäll argues that “because we do not realise we hold unconscious ideologies or use them

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to make sense of our world, we very rarely interrogate them” (p. 36-7), she seems to reproduce the elitist and top-down approach to power that Foucault rejected in favour of a network-like understanding.

Overall, the book presents interesting case studies and an eclectic methodology. The case studies are: Faye Turney, British marine held captive in Iran; *Female Agents*, French-British film; Janis Karpinski, first female US General to command soldier in a combat zone; Lynndie England, involved in the torture at Abu Ghraib; Nasima, female character of the TV series *Britz*; Ulrike Meinhof & Gudrun Ensslin, main characters in the German film *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*. The way Åhäll draws from different theorists, including Barthes, Foucault, Butler, and Kristeva, from a number of concepts ranging from abjection, to interpellation, and myth, combines poststructuralism, semiology, and visual discourse analysis, and ties all in the politics of emotion, provides an innovative approach, as well as fresh insights and experimentations. The book is well structured, the conceptual connections are made easy to follow and are well linked to the case studies. In the presentation of the case studies, the bolding of key words and sentences helps the reader navigate the text and intuitively understand the salient points of the reported speeches and representations. The objective of the book to show “how when it comes to representations of female agency in political violence, we are talking about a particular, heteropatriarchal, dream that is valuing female subjects through ideas about motherhood” (p. 145) is successfully achieved, thus making the book highly recommended for students and scholars interested in gender and political communication, visual culture and the politics of emotions, Barthesian methodological approaches to the discipline of international relations, and the relation between world politics and popular culture.

References

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