Is the Military a Masculinised Expression of Society?

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MAYA LAHAV, MAR 10 2020

By utilising a post-structural feminist approach, this essay will engage in a gender-sensitive analysis of how gender is a way of structuring relational power beyond male-female relations and into security politics. This essay will answer the question: *In what way is security politics and policies a process and performance of masculinity?* To analyse this, the essay contains three main sections. First, it introduces the theoretical framework of post-structural feminism. By analysing how hegemonic discourse is seen as 'true' knowledge, the essay will argue that discursive power is the foundation for constructing a societal gender bias. Second, the essay will explore how international relations are constructed upon an unequal gendered hierarchy that privileges masculine attributes over feminine attributes. This value system translates into different aspects of security politics; the essay will utilise the United Kingdom (UK) and its nuclear identity as a case study. To support this, gendered language and metaphors in the White Paper (2006) are examined. Finally, this essay will focus on the feminised alternative to masculine thinking. It illustrates how contemporary policies have created a subordinate status for the de-masculinised and offer alternative frameworks to thinking about security politics. The objective of the essay is to denaturalise militaristic defence practices that are currently perceived as self-evident, and to present the centrality of gender in the fabric of security politics.

Discursive power

This section explores the conjunction between feminism and post-structuralism before applying the theory to the main argument, as is necessary to establish an operational theoretical framework.

Applying a feminist analysis to an issue is to ask whether things that pass as inevitable, inherent, or biological are in fact socially and culturally constructed (Enloe 2000: 3). Feminism believes that concepts of *masculinity* and *femininity* have been treated as 'natural' concepts; a form of social knowledge. This takes place within a 'natural' hierarchy that values masculine traits over feminine traits, which are often denigrated. Conventionally, attributes such as 'autonomy', 'strength', and 'rationality' have been assigned as masculine traits, whereas opposing attributes such as 'dependence/connection', 'vulnerability', and 'emotion' have been assigned as feminine traits (Baylis et. al. 2014: 260). These attributes have been societally associated with the biological male/female categories. The gender dichotomy dictates men as active and women as passive; men are the head of household and breadwinner; women are their dependents (Pettman 2005: 7). This hierarchal design has entitled men with more opportunities to accumulate money, control weaponry, and enter the professional field (Enloe 2000: 7). The male-dominated public sphere has thus become implicitly equated with masculine attributes such as sovereignty, objectivity, and control. Consequently, binary characteristics associated with femininity are less valued in politics (Woolridge 2015). One of the pivotal feminists in international relations, Cynthia Enloe, argues that the "élite men *may* let in a woman" but only do so when the woman "has learned the lesson of masculinized political behaviour well enough not to threaten male political privilege" (2000: 7). Thus, arguing that women who succeed politically often assume masculine attributes to gain entry into the male-dominated realm. For example, women like Margaret Thatcher or Jeanne Kirkpatrick arguably came into political power on the back of masculinised militaristic politics (ibid.). In sum, gender is a category that goes beyond the biological male/female dichotomy and into a socially constructed masculine/feminine category. These categories form a relational and unequal power hierarchy where feminine values are disadvantaged over masculine values. Finally, this symbolic system permeate society on all levels, including politics and warfare.

Within the extensive realm of feminist theory, post-structural feminism is a specific sub-category. The theory centres

around an understanding of gender identity based on the post-structural notion that power relations are historically and socially constituted through discourse. Discourse is the linguistic system through which we understand statements and concepts; it is never objective but always intersubjectively producing meaning (Foucault 1980: 71). In this way, post-structuralism understands state representations to be dually constructed, both through a self-identity and through its contrariety, i.e. the identity of the Other(s) (Baylis et. al. 2014: 178). For example, the construction of 'the Muslim' in Western European discourse has been repeatedly classified as a less 'real' European identity than others (ibid.: 179). As a consequence, debates on whether 'European' and 'Muslim' are compatible identities have intercepted the debate on a Turkish membership in the EU. There is no objective European identity, rather the European identity is being defined in relation to the Turkish membership application (ibid.). As such, some discursive identities are more desirable and powerful than others. This exemplifies how some discourses come to dominate and become hegemonic 'truths.' Post-structural feminism uses this theory to impose a gender analysis on international relations: because masculine characteristics are seen as better than feminine, global politics have been created on the basis of a specific value system that is discursively constructed rather than 'natural' (Enloe 2000: 12). Finally, it is important to emphasize that there is not merely one form of masculinity or femininity. Multiple versions of these ideas can vary across temporal, locative, and cultural boundaries, and multiple versions can hold hegemonic dominance in different places and times (ibid.: 13). However, each version of hegemonic masculinity can ultimately be defined by what it is not: the feminine (Woolridge 2015). This specific feminist analysis is relevant because it goes beyond the focus on women's rights or the call for social justice, and focuses on the naturalised, gender biased practices that shape high politics.

Masculinity in Global Politics

The post-structural feminist analysis in this essay is not a focus on the privileging of*men* but on the privileging of *masculinity*. It defines 'hegemonic masculinity' as a dominant understanding of desirable characteristics; in relational opposition to less valued feminine characteristics. One of the clearest ways to demonstrate intrinsic masculine values is through militaristic politics. First, the essay will introduce the inherent assumption that national security is inextricably linked to military security.

This assumption is founded on the prevalent theory of realism, which (in simplified terms) assumes that all states function within an anarchical international system wherein individual states develop military capabilities as a reaction to an inherent distrust of other states (Blanchard 2003: 1289). In this view, security is entrusted to the state with the assumption that it will protect the population from threats emanating from a foreign realm outside state boundaries (ibid.). As such, realism considers violence and conflict as endemic to the international system. Neorealists additionally view states as relatively rational actors focused on maximising and securing their relative power (ibid.). Yet, post-structural feminists have critiqued such a political view for basing the behaviour of states upon solely masculine experiences. Concepts such as 'sovereignty' and 'power' have been ontologically associated with the masculine and routinely inserted onto state behaviour (Tickner 1992: 18). This manifests a masculine model of agency derived from a context of unequal gender relations where states must mask any opposite attributes such as (inter)dependency or vulnerability (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 558). Consequently, international society is not objectively comprised of aggressive and egoist states, rather interstate politics are continuously constructed by the dominance of privileged masculinity. Furthermore, 'political autonomy' is a misconstrued concept that rests on unmentioned interstate dependencies. Countries, like the United States (US), who aim to be self-sufficient in their military needs still depend on international transactions such as oil from autocratic Persian Gulf states or weapons systems technologies from China (Cohn 2013: 60). As such, governmental independence is "an illusion of control" (Ruddick 1989: 73) that is, in fact, unachievable as national security is embedded in multidimensional forms of relations and alliances.

The theory of realism has long been the classifying explanation for understanding interstate warfare (Narain 2014: 191). The realist presumption that sovereign states must be 'war-capable' to ensure their autonomy, creates a security discourse which privileges war and conflict over other alternatives (Tickner 1992). This discourse constructs a framework where security is based on armed autonomy – both aggressive and defensive (Cohn 2013: 59). Post-structural feminist Ann Tickner argues that current political narratives are loaded with the realist perspective; that we live in a dangerous world and that the accumulation of power and military strength is required to ensure state survival

(1992: 18). An example of such a narrative is the US-coined "War on Terror" in the wake of the 9/11 terror-attacks. The US has framed their counter-terrorist strategy as a 'war', thereby creating a constant state of emergency against the intangible enemy of 'terror' (Crelinsten 2005: 76). Through this narrative, the state has justified bypassing ethical and political obligations in exchange for security. This includes a myriad of human rights violations ranging from mass surveillance and information gathering of civilians to the torture of illegal detainees (Robertson 2012). The rhetoric has furthermore created an us/them dichotomy that ostensibly dehumanises an out-group, i.e. Muslim terrorists, and strengthens the in-group (Crelinsten 2005: 76). As mentioned earlier in the essay, when such a dichotomy is generated, it prioritises certain identities over others. As such, national security interests have ventured beyond state borders into countries with activities labelled as 'threatening' (Cohn 2013:51). This is important in order to understand how political discourse can allow the US military to become a vital societal and global institution. In this role, militarism plays a fundamental part in upholding an intersectional hierarchy of power, gender, and ethnicity in society by perpetuating a specifically constructed reality. Understanding militarism from a post-structural feminist perspective, then, becomes relevant because it not only analyses the gendered *effects* but the gendered *assumptions* of the military and how those assumptions reinforce the notion that militarism in its current state is 'necessary' (Khalid 2014: 1).

The fact that the military is such an integral political and economic institution in many countries is an important reflection on the masculine orientated institutions that organise society (ibid.: 7). In Israel, for example, the military has an extensive influence on state policies that far exceeds defensive strategies. Nearly all foreign policy communication between Israel and Arab states are handled by the military. High-ranking officers function as advisors to the Israeli government and a considerable number eventually become cabinet ministers (Kapland 2015). As such, the military and political elite are socially linked. Furthermore, the army operates one of the largest radio stations in the country, two popular magazines, as well as press censorship through the office of 'Military Censor'. During their compulsory military service, soldiers participate in educational seminars on Jewish history and the State of Israel, and retired Generals are known to head state-owned corporations and agencies. As such, the Israeli army is generally perceived as a 'nation building' institution of national identity and unity (ibid.). Consequently, the Israeli military is able to legitimise, valorise, and normalise a specific dominating discourse within society. Thus, the language, ideas, and relationships associated with militarism manifest themselves in the seemingly mundane and apolitical in everyday life (Enloe 2000: 2). This essay argues that by doing so, the general logics of military defence (that violence and conflict is inevitable and necessary) become socially acceptable in non-state arenas. As such, the veneration of war (re)produces the privileging of aggressive masculinities beyond the institution itself.

The following section will use the UK as a case study to exemplify how a specific expression of masculinity has shaped nuclear strategic thinking and the consequential effects on nuclear policies. The essay bases this analysis in the White Paper to demonstrate a discourse of masculine-coded language and symbols.

Nuclear Custodianship

In 2006, the Ministry of Defence published the White Paper on the renewal of the UK Trident nuclear programme (ibid.). The foreword opens with the claim that "the primary responsibility of any government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens" (White Paper 2006: 5). This essay finds that throughout the White Paper such statements are utilised to establish the UK national identity as a 'protector' of its citizens. The government performs a recognised masculine function as a 'defender of liberation' against an unknown out-group. The association with male-dominated security institutions as the protector role manifests certain meaning and status through its "privileging over those who are feminised as vulnerable" (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 553). The concept of 'vulnerability' is the exact condition security policies try to avoid. US authorities famously metaphorized their militaristic defence as an "impermeable shield around the US" (Cohn 2013: 55). On an inter-relational level, the US-coalition partly justified the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan as a 'heroic intervention' to save helpless Afghani women. In turn, the Taliban narrative was to protect those same women from outside forces (Tickner 1992: 269). This framework of patriotic soldiers saving Afghani women arguably places binary attachments of masculinity and femininity onto the male and female bodies, and permit women's bodies to become another battlefield. It places women in the subordinated position of dependence from the protector, i.e. the man. To the same extent, if a state is allowed to adopt a protective stance, the citizens will occupy a similar subordinate status. The state will thus exert an authoritarian and *paternalistic* state power

(Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 553). This identity also serves to delegitimise any disarmament strategy from the beginning; to render the vulnerable, feminised population without a masculine, strong protector would be irresponsible and "lacking in crucial masculine-associated traits" (ibid.: 555).

Based on the narrative of the UK being a 'protector of its people', the discourse in the White Paper propagates the continued use of nuclear weaponry in three specific ways: abstractions, axioms, and sexualised metaphors. Specialised language, also termed *technostrategic* discourse, is a way for the male-dominated defence community to remove the emotional reality behind the consequences of nuclear weaponry (Pearlman 2019). Euphemistic terms such as "collateral damage", "clean bombs", and "peacekeeping missiles" are examples of inverted meanings that obfuscate the reality of war (Cohn 1987: 33). The White Paper states that "we need to make a judgement on the minimum destructive capability necessary to provide an effective deterrent posture […] we believe that our existing capability to deploy up to 48 warheads on the submarine is sufficient" (2006: 23). This account sounds rational, restrained, even ethical, however, 48 warheads have the combined explosive power of more than 1,400 times the Hiroshima bomb, which killed 140,000 people (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 551). As such, the sanitation of militaristic language both in and outside of a military context serves to minimise the perceived effects of militaristic violence and raises the bar on societal acceptance towards militaristic strategies (Khalid 2014: 5). Additionally, the statement above is an example of an axiom; an assertion of fact that is taken as self-evident. The statement arguably fails to explain, and consequently justify, the need for 19 megatons of explosive power (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 551). Such axioms are visible throughout the White Paper, perhaps most clearly pronounced in the claim that "fundamental principles relevant to nuclear deterrence have not changed since the end of the Cold War, and are unlikely to change in future. […] Nuclear weapons remain a necessary element of the capability we need to deter threats from others possessing nuclear weapons" (White Paper 2006: 17).

Finally, the White Paper is propagated through masculine-saturated codes that hold sexual subtext. The argument that nuclear weapons are linked metaphorically to masculine sexuality is not a trivial one. Sexual metaphors generate gendered and sexualised associations that generate excitement and interest in the weapons – and thereby the political institutions that hold them (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 548). Missile-names in the White Paper like *Resolution*, *Swiftsure*, and *Vanguard* underline the masculine-coded prestige of the government (ibid.: 549). Masculine prowess is portrayed through phallic iconography of submarines emerging from foaming water and missiles being fired into the air (White Paper 2006: 9, 11), all serving as a promise of sexual domination (Cohn 1987: 988). Security rhetoric is embedded with sexual metaphors such as "vertical erector launches", "thrust-to-weight ratios", and "deep penetration" (Cohn 1987: 687). In 1998, India detonated five nuclear devices with the words: "[we] have to prove that we are not eunuchs" (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 548). In fact, Indian journalists have commented on the striking advertorial similarities between Viagra and bombs, which both boast equally of "superior strength and potency" (Roy 1999: 136).

In the context of this rhetoric, developing nuclear weapons demonstrate a state's masculine sexual capability. During the Cold War, superpowers even displayed their nuclear weapons like "monumental phalluses" (Cockburn 2001). A more explicit example is when a military advisor to the US National Security Council referred to a bombing as "releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump" (Cohn 1987: 688). Besides the connection to masculine virility, this rhetoric also, once again, serves to minimise the seriousness of nuclear warfare; by converting deadly consequences into "locker-room rivalry" (ibid.:693). The valorisation of masculine-saturated codes serves to devalue that which is associated with the feminine; a response to the emotional reality and bodies affected by nuclear weapons (Duncanson & Eschle 2008: 561). Finally, the close connection between a masculinized military state and the sexualization of weaponry can impact the potential disarmament of nuclear weapons; if disarmament is emasculation, how can any 'real' man consider it (Cohn 1987: 693)? In this way, gender is heavily interconnected with security politics.

Feminised security

The essay has until now portrayed how different militaries establish masculine values as self-evident truisms. The remainder of the essay will discuss the undervalued aspect; the feminine, how it is affected and impacted by the current security politics.

Because masculinity is societally linked to the man, males are often assumed to have an inherent predisposition towards warfare (Ehrenreich 1999: 118). This essay would argue that equating aggressive male impulse with the complex and highly organised institution of warfare is a logical fallacy. Certain biological leanings may explain individual instincts, but it is a large step to then assume an intrinsic predisposition to "ritualized, socially sanctioned, institutionalized group warfare" (Kahlid 2014: 8). Furthermore, there are various examples of men protesting war and eluding conscription. Consequently, to assume a male innate instinct would be essentialist (ibid.). The assumption is, as always, relational to its binary opposition. As men are associated with defending the state, and thereby participating in the highest forms of patriotism, women have traditionally been excluded from war and placed in the domestic realm of nurturing roles, such as mothers, teachers, and nurses (Narain 2014: 189). Within that sphere, the woman can perform her own acts of patriotism. In Serbia, for example, the mobilisation of motherhood has become a defining security strategy through a narrative of a nation defence dependent on rising birth rates (Bracewell 1996: 30). As such, women create soldiers and sacrifice their sons for the good of the state, thus becoming ideological and symbolical pillars of national security in their own right (Steans 2008: 171). Naturally, women are also ostensibly able to participate and enlist in the military to the same degree as men in many places in the world. However, feminists have critiqued this female presence as a false symbol of equality within a hyper-masculinised system. Women participating in the military do not undermine the values of the institution, rather they participate in the masculinised worldview that violence and control is necessary to ensure security (Khalid 2014: 6). As such, women's growing presence in armed forces does not change nor challenge the masculine nature of militarisation. If anything, it serves as a more thorough female integration into a militarised culture (Enloe 2000: 271).

Influential political scientist Francis Fukuyama also critiqued a growing female participation in the military, however on a fundamentally different principle. Fukuyama warns against the consequential female military presence as a consequence of growing gender equality. He argues that the world requires "tough" and "aggressive" international politics which will inevitably be undermined by women (Fukuyama 1998). Firstly, the assumption illustrates that national security involves both an external threat and the construction of state-identity, i.e. a strong and antagonistic national self – just like the aforementioned UK 'protector' identity (Khalid 2014: 7). Secondly, the argument latently assumes that security is driven by competing masculinities that are threatened by the feminine. Once again, men are essentialised as the key to militaristic success while women are viewed as less valuable production of gender practices (Blanchard 2003: 1303). Fukuyama is an example of how deconstructing a seemingly fixed military identity threatens realist hegemonic masculinity and imposes a devalued, feminised position of vulnerability onto state security (Cohn 2013: 53). This division of gender roles underwrites the gendered state.

The prevalent understanding of war as a masculine, male domain creates a national identity that becomes paternal in nature; the role of a strong protector. Had this identity instead been maternal in its value system, what influence could it have had on security policy and practice? In current security discourse, vulnerability is considered a weakness to be exploited by other states. The mere concept of vulnerability is by and large discussed in a technostrategic context of weapons and communication systems, and human vulnerability is often euphemized into 'collateral damage' (Cohn 2013: 51). Maternal preservation towards a child or, in this metaphor, towards a citizen body might understand human vulnerability as a constant, inherent human condition; not a problem to be solved but rather a potential (Fineman 2008: 8). Maternal thinking might emphasise the protection of human rights, humanitarian assistance, and ethics of care over the current primary focus on counterterrorism measures, which pursues invulnerability (Cohn 2013: 53,57). Maternal discourse might also redefine the concept of state autonomy. Valuing interdependence could shift the focus from absolute sovereignty onto the creation of more inter-state militaries and differently formed alliances. Influential states might encompass other characteristics than military dominance. In such a case, nuclear weaponry might become less attractive. "Soft powers" might be construed as a more legitimate mechanism (on this point there is much to say, but due to the focal points of the essay it will remain a source of further study). As such, maternal political thinking might redefine privileged attributes in security discourse.

Naturally, this is a radical hypothetical. Having a maternal political foundation would present its own issues, one of them being the unequal power relations between the nurturer and the nurtured (as between mother and child). Countries with a colonial history, for example, have had a discourse of 'paternal caring', arguably, in order to claim moral or material superiority (Narayan 1995: 135). These unequal relations are not solved through 'maternal caring' (they might even be furthered) although the connotations between the two are different (Cohn 2013: 50). Hence, re-

gendering global politics could create novel power imbalances. What this theoretical example can illustrate, however, is that politics of international security is not a 'natural' state, rather it has the potential to look significantly different. Although we should not simply substitute one practice with another, maternal thinking can denaturalise dominant forms of security thinking. In sum, analysing the gendered discourse of armed forces is an important step towards understanding the reasoning and motivations behind current high politics and aid in alternative policies and responses to security issues.

Conclusion

The essay has argued that security politics are based on the general understanding that militarism is the ultimate security measure. The military is based upon a realist understanding of state actors within a masculine-saturated framework. Consequently, military politics manifest unequal dichotomies such as in-group/out-group, protector/protected, and aggressive/passive that exceed military boundaries and naturalise such discourse in everyday life. The UK identity as a nuclear state is a specific example of how a state utilises hegemonic masculinity through an ideal of rational, ethical leadership and through aggressive and phallic connotations. Finally, the valorisation of such values is continuously in relation to femininity which opens up the possibility of alternative constructions of security.

In conclusion, masculine militaristic behaviour is not objectively and self-evidently necessary, rather, it is a naturalised societal process through the normalisation, legitimisation, and valorisation of hegemonic masculinity (Woolridge 2015). Through a post-structuralist feminist analysis, this essay has examined the gendered nature of the discourses that constitute our current socio-political reality.

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Written by: Maya Lahav
Written at: Edinburgh University
Written for: Richard Brodie
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