

SHIFTING THE AXIS:

MINING MASCULINITIES IN THE CANADIAN MILITARY

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SUMMARY

'Gender' is a contested category of analysis. Not only is its internal construction contested, so are its constituents and its very existence. How does one inquire into the construction of a concept - or its constituents - if its very existence is disputed, and without assuming or using its language? This paper will present an account of the gender-related [gender-derived?] paradigm and methods used to trace the construction and reconstruction of gender in the Canadian Forces, with a particular emphasis on masculinity. It will begin with a brief review of the recent historical origins of the concept, its current usages, the conundrum currently facing its most avid advocates and detractors, and the value of 'depopulating' gender, as a means of exposing its construction in the Canadian military today.

INTRODUCTION

The military is an institution which enjoys little popularity or interest in Canada. Unlike the United States, where a well-nurtured nationalism caps a celebrated and entrenched military - newly vindicated and reinvigorated in the early 1990's by the Gulf War- the Canadian military has enjoyed little status or prestige, and has kept a particularly low profile (Coulon 1991). The reasons for this are numerous, among them: Canada's historic status as a junior military partner, dependent for its defence first on Britain, and then on the United States; internal national divisions; and the use of military troops for internal repression. The military may also be socially marginalized because Canadians consider themselves, debatably, to be an 'unmilitary' people (Morton 1992).

But why so little academic interest in our armed forces? Greater interest should at least be warranted by the sheer size of the Canadian Forces as the single largest formal organization in this country, and one which takes the largest bite out of the Federal Government's program budget. Yet, the military is conspicuous by its absence from both academic and popular discourse. Bercuson and Granatstein note that "very few [Canadian] academics have written about military history" (1992:17) and this, in part, because of a failure to recognize that "war is a major cata-

lyst for social, political and economic change" (Haycock 1995:3-4). Academic neglect of the military is also typical of another discipline, sociology.

This disinterest in the military and its low profile were abruptly reversed, however, with the eruption in 1993 of what has come to be known as the 'Somalia Affair'. The Canadian Forces were suddenly thrust onto centre stage with the revelation that in March of that year Canadian peacekeepers of the elite Airborne Regiment had killed two Somali civilians, one of them a teenager whom they beat and tortured to death, memorializing various stages of the killing on film. This disclosure, along with the later discovery and public airing of videotapes of Airborne hazing rituals involving the racially inscribed degradation of regimental initiates, was followed by the appointment (March 21, 1995) of a government inquiry into the Canadian peacekeeping mission in Somalia. This and other events made the news almost daily, and raised the military's public profile, exposing some of its inner workings, its goals and meaning systems. These events also exposed the secretiveness of the military at its highest levels, as well as some of the practices which the Forces has assiduously tried to shield from public view.

But as the Somalia Inquiry chipped away at the events surrounding the precipitating ones, and attempted to unravel the measures taken by top military leaders to conceal them, it drew closer to examining the very deaths it had been set up to investigate. Its spotlight on the Canadian Forces became too hot, and the government suddenly, and unceremoniously, shut it down. What was the government afraid to reveal? What about the military did it want to conceal? And what is the relevance of gender to this series of events, and to the operation of this institution? That is, how can an understanding of how the Canadian Forces conceptualizes gender, and constructs its personnel as gender-differentiated beings help us to better understand the Canadian military, its structure and constituent practices? This paper reports on one of the several challenges of researching gender in the military, namely the weaknesses in how gender is conceptualized, and argues for the relevance and importance of this concept for understanding the Canadian Forces. Finally, it also argues that gender is best understood as reflecting

the characteristics of social structures rather than those of individuals.

CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER

In the Western contemporary context, 'gender' comes to us 'ready-made', in a pre-existing set of fixed, dualized, biologically grounded denominations, with a sense of concrete materiality manifested in individuals - i.e. gender as 'men' and 'women'. In phenomenological terms, this conceptualization reflects the "incurable proposition" (Mehan and Wood 1975 in Kessler and McKenna 1978) or belief that the "world exists independently of our presence, and that objects have an independent reality and independent identity" (4). According to this belief, qualities like race and gender are constant. But men and women vary considerably within our own society, as they do historically and cross-culturally. Considering these variations -especially in the context of bellicosity- reveals gender's fundamentally constructed nature, and exposes the processes and parameters of this construction. Evidence that gender is a 'practical accomplishment', and insights into the interconnections between social constructions of gender and the social organization of bellicosity can both be garnered from the anthropological literature because students of small-scale societies have long been studying both gender and warfare.

WAR AND GENDER IN SMALL-SCALE SOCIETIES

A review of the ethnographies of small-scale societies suggests that, generally speaking, the degree and type of warfare has significance for the social construction of gender. Not only can warriors derive privileges and attain positions of dominance where a community is dependent on them for its survival, but the construction of gender is mapped onto war practices. Three examples illustrate this point. First, amongst the African Maasai cattle herders, warriors provide protection and engage in cattle-raiding. Warriorhood is a necessary step towards full adulthood, which means acquiring social autonomy and property rights in livestock, things, as well as people. This includes the right to use or alienate the labour, sexuality or reproductivity of others. But since only men can become warriors, women remain dependent wards who are permanently "transactable"—and particularly vulnerable if widowed without sons (Llewelyn-Davies 1981:341).

The New Guinea Highlanders, a patrilocal people who practice endemic, lethal *internal* warfare, provide a second example. Here, women's economic role in gardening and pig husbandry is indispensable. But since women marry in from enemy groups, they are identified with the enemy and are unable to translate their economic pro-

ductivity into a source of countervailing power against the men who unilaterally appropriate and dispose of the products of women's labour, physically assault, rape and murder them. This extreme abuse results in a high rate of female suicide (Gelber 1986).

But warriorhood in itself does not afford men dominance. In the case of *external* warfare against distant enemies, residence patterns are generally matrilineal, grouping female kin who provision and run the community. Here, female solidarity acts to counterbalance the male dominance which could derive from warfare, as we saw above. Amongst the Iroquois and Huron horticulturalists, women owned the farmland and were both the primary producers and distributors of food for their households. Women could readily control delinquent men by starving them out, and could veto men's war plans by refusing to provision a war party (Brown 1975; also see Trigger 1985, 1976 on the Huron).

What these examples illustrate is that in small-scale societies which possess a war complex, gender is mapped onto the social structure of bellicosity and can therefore be accessed through it. But how does this structure come into being, and how do individuals become gendered members/participants in that structure? Kessler and McKenna refer to the process of *gender attribution* -- the complex process of deciding if a person is a male or female -- as "the method by which we construct our world of two genders" (1978:18). Thus, just as societies differ in their gendered social structures, so would they differ in their processes of gender attribution and therefore affiliation. This would support a concept of gender as potentially variable, transitional and even voluntary. Two examples of transitional gender attribution illustrate this point.

Amongst the traditional Inuit, a newborn child would receive a non-gendered eponymous name, and its gender assignment would correspond to that of this ancestor. If, at puberty, the child would begin to menstruate, and this diverged from her assigned sex, she would revert to her apparent birth-sex with a view to marriage and procreation; a boy would revert at the slaying of his first game, that is, at the first sign of his productivity (Saladin d'Anglure 1986).

A second instance of transitional gender attribution can be found amongst the Azande of the Nilotic Sudan, determined this time by social position within the military structure. During their long years of military service, young men were separated from their female kin and therefore deprived of their domestic services. As well, the combined practices of infant betrothal and polygamy amongst the ruling elite left few marriageable women. To com-

pensate, warriors would pay a brideprice for young 'boy-wives' who were publicly accepted as wives, referred to their older male partners as 'husbands', and performed wifely duties (Seligman and Seligman 1932). Upon completion of military service, ex-warriors could accumulate the brideprice for a female wife, and the boy-wives would, in turn, graduate into warriorhood (Martin and Voorhies 1975).

In sum, what these examples of gendered social structures and transitional gender attribution and affiliation illustrate is that understanding gender requires an understanding of the social structure onto which it is mapped, and that in other societies, gender identity, attribution and affiliation can change along with the individual's structural position. That is, gender, like social class through much of the West, is considered a largely achieved, not ascribed status: features associated with gender identity are not defined as immanent in it, carry no coercive force, are seen as circumstantial and flexible. This makes the simultaneous occupation of what in the West would be considered two opposing gender statuses understandable: an example of this is the African marriage form of 'female husband' in which a married woman with children - herself a wife and mother - could pay a brideprice for another woman, become her husband and the father of her children, with contractual rights in her productivity, reproductivity and offspring, just as her own husband had in her. Such an arrangement is possible because in many parts of Africa, numerous marriage forms exist which are not strictly procreative but are contracted around the obligations and rights over goods and persons. Anyone with sufficient resources can marry and thereby gain rights over a woman's labour power and offspring. By contrast, gender in the West is thought of as an ascribed and fixed status, equated with membership in either of what are deemed two mutually exclusive biological categories. Many gender-related features are seen as embedded in the *identities* of husband/father and wife/mother; these are considered *immanent* features and are therefore non-negotiable (Kopytoff 1990).

GENDER IN THE WEST

These comparative conceptualizations and practices around gender illustrate that there is more to gender than meets the eye, and that gender must be problematized, approached as a social artifact of human practice, a cultural fiction with a history that needs to be traced. Such a history is beyond the scope of this paper—I deal with it elsewhere. Suffice it to say that current conceptualizations of gender grew out of the identification by second wave feminists of their problematic as an oppositional relation-

ship between two naturally or biologically dichotomized populations: women and men. Regardless of political affiliation -whether liberal, Marxist, radical feminist or other- feminists shared a desire to explain and correct women's oppression by men or man-made institutions. This gender formulation assumes an essentialized duality, and a gender assignment at birth based on the appearance of the external genitalia, and hence fixed for life.

But conceptualizing gender along a binarized axis of opposition between men and women assumes the internal uniformity of each of these opposed categories. Riveting us to a dualized notion of naturalized difference blinds us to the differences *within* each of these categories, as well as to other conflictual aspects of gender arrangements such as the class, race and power relations between men themselves, as well as dimensions and patterns of resistance.

Under these circumstances, with 'gender' a contested category of analysis, can one inquire into its construction without assuming or using its language? Has gender, and the categories 'woman' and 'man', lost their value, or is there value, as Scott suggests, to working within the tension points between assuming women and men as natural categories, and abandoning them in favour of their historical variability and therefore acknowledged fiction (1996:5)? Should we consider the possibility that gender may have little to do with men and women at all, but with "other domains of social action and experience" for which characteristics associated with men and women may be models (Shapiro 1988:1), metaphors for how we think about significant social issues, experiences or preoccupations? In this sense, gender may operate as a totemic cultural device to metaphorically represent the social world using the (essentialized) natural world as a logical model. Categorical oppositions between abstract/concrete, self/other, culture/nature, male/female would then "map onto one another and become mutually defining" (8).

GENDER IN THE MILITARY

With these thoughts and debates in mind, I would like to use the remaining time to discuss the social construction of gender in the military, specifically how gender operates as a principle of its social organization. Far from exhaustive, the following discussion is designed to whet the audience's appetite and interest in the military as a key institution in Canadian society. The three areas which I would like to note are military masculinities, gender as a vehicle for legitimating violence, and gendered military meanings. All of these are interrelated, and despite local variations, are features characteristic of military systems world-wide.

In his film, 'War: Anybody's Son Will Do', Gwynne Dyer portrays the induction process of raw recruits into the gendered structure of the U.S. Marines. Basic training, a common proving ground of militaries everywhere, has as its object the transformation of adolescent boys into trained killers ready to act automatically against the enemy so-designated by their superiors. The foundation of masculinity set down in this phase of military training pits military manhood against 'the boy', 'the homosexual' and 'the woman'. Entering as boys, recruits must prove themselves as men through gruelling tests of physical endurance, psychological and physical abuse. Internalizing the military's value system also includes prizing heterosexual violence. Recruits are taught not only to differentiate themselves from women, but to fracture the category 'woman' into at least two species: the virtuous -the mother, sister or, girlfriend who keeps the home fires burning and for whose protection military training is designed- versus the slut/whore, 'Suzy Rotten Crotch' (Ev-il temptress) who is deserving of the soldier's contempt, and callous, exploitative, often violent treatment. In the context of this misogynistic atmosphere, it is no wonder that male soldiers have difficulty accepting their female military counterparts as equals. Being objects of abuse and callous treatment themselves, it becomes easy for soldiers to treat others in the same way.

Onto this foundation of hegemonic masculinity are grafted several internally differentiated masculinities corresponding to the military's institutional requisites. Robert Connell (1992) identifies three:

- 1) the physically violent masculinity, subordinate to orders;
- 2) the dominating and organizationally competent; and
- 3) the professionalised, calculative rationality of the technical specialist.

Carefully and rigorously separated and preserved by boundaries of hierarchy (rank), these internal divisions between men are masked and discursively underwritten by what is expected to keep soldiers together: a shared violent, heterosexist masculinity.

David Morgan speaks about the legitimization of violence through its gendered normalization and "its position and practice in the sexual division of labour" (1987:183). Everything from boys' play to artistic portrayals of battle scenes serve to associate violence with the masculine, and thereby normalize both the relationship and the violence itself. In the same vein, Joan Scott speaks of "The legitimizing of war -of expending young lives to protect the state..." (1996:173) through gender metaphors: appeals to manhood, manly duty, and associations of masculinity and national strength.

And beyond the misogynistic exhortations of male military recruits to dissociate themselves from the feminine, and identify with the "manliness of war", the latter idea in the Western tradition,

goes deeper than the idea that it is manly to defend the weak. The masculinity of war is what it is precisely by leaving the feminine behind ...what femaleness symbolically represents: attachment to private concerns, to 'mere life'. In leaving all that behind, the soldier becomes a real man, but he also emerges into the glories of selfhood, citizenship and truly ethical, universal concerns. Woman-kind is constructed so as to be what has to be transcended to be a citizen (Lloyd 1987:75).

This would explain the vehemence with which many dispute the inclusion of women in combat occupations, and the insistence on retaining what are effectively ill-defined and disintegrating boundaries between front and rear, combat and near combat. It would also explain differences in dress code and patterns of ornamentation permitted men and women in the armed forces, differences which serve to mark the gender boundary rather than mask it.

To conclude, this paper has had several intentions, among them:

- 1) to introduce the audience to the idea that gender is a relevant concept for understanding the military;
- 2) to suggest that comparative gender constructions in small-scale societies are useful for understanding gender conceptualizations in the West, and specifically in Western militaries;
- 3) to propose that in studying the military, there is value to shifting the gender axis from the oppositional construct -men versus women- to the multiple axes dispersing and opposing men to each other, as well as to the organizational practices by which the military attempts to sustain or reproduce the male/female gendered opposition.

In sum, I am suggesting that in order to understand the Canadian military, it is useful to employ the concept of gender, not to describe its material manifestations in men and women, but as a principle of social organization and collective social practice.

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