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**‘Why are *You* doing this to *Me*?’:  
identity, power and sexual violence in war.**

**Cynthia Cockburn**

In one report of a particular moment in the Vietnam war, men were standing in line for their turn to rape a young Vietnamese woman. One of the men later reported that she spoke to him, in English, and asked him ‘Why are you doing this to me?’ In thousands of similar instances reported in studies of rape in war, the woman has no recognizable character, she is silent. But here she takes the foreground, and she startles me, as she no doubt startled the men standing around her, by manifesting a sense of who she is, who her rapists are and whom they may see her as being. ‘Why are *you* doing this to *me*? Hey...why are you doing this to me?’<sup>1</sup>

Reading the by-now extensive literature on rape and other atrocities of war leaves me with a sense of voicelessness, the feeling that everything is being said, has been said, that nothing more can be said, and nothing will change whatever we say. But that young woman in Vietnam asked a question. I feel we owe her an answer. And in ‘identifying’ him/you, the violater, and herself/me, the violated, she seems to offer a clue as to some questions that might yet be asked. So here I try to bring to the issue of sexual violence in war a language and set of concepts that are very current in contemporary sociology, which I have found useful in other contexts. That is to say: identity and othering; power and positionality; and intersectionality. They are essentially sociological concepts and must surely be relevant to sexual violence in war, because war rape is characteristically collective, and being a soldier very much involves identification and ‘belonging’. Rape in war, like war itself, is nothing if not social.

Maybe, for clarity, I should start by spelling out the meaning I give to these concepts, since there are many possible differences in interpretation and emphasis. Identity I see as an ascription applied to and by individuals and collectivities to establish belonging and exclusion. It is helpful to use two separate terms to delineate, on the one hand, subjective identity (who I feel I am, where she thinks she belongs, who he feels affinity with) and, on the other hand, discursive, projected, ascribed identity (who they address us as, who we say they are, how ‘they’ should behave, what their entitlements are). I would use *sense-of-self* for the first, and *identity* for the second. Sometimes, of course, an individual takes on, lock-stock-and-barrel, an ascribed

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<sup>1</sup> This incident is reported by Joanna Bourke (Bourke 2007:5, 375, citing Baker 1981:149-50.)

identity. But more often we negotiate with ascribed identities and build them cautiously and provisionally into our sense of self.

Secondly it is important to clarify that I see sense-of-self and identities as changing over time, in continual interplay and development. Even if we experience authoritative appellation in various 'names', we do have some agency in constituting the self. I have been most persuaded in my reading on identity by Stuart Hall and others in that English cultural studies tradition (Hall 1996) but also by the American writer William Connolly, because I value his stress on variation in the way an individual or group may establish an identity. It will inevitably involve constituting an 'other', the one who is not the self. But, Connolly insists, there are different modes in which this may be done, and this is of huge political importance, as will become evident towards the end of this chapter (Connolly 1991).

Subjectivities, whether individual or collective, are necessarily articulated in terms of relations of power. Several are of key importance. First, take gender: to experience oneself as a woman, identifying others as 'women' or 'men', with all the social baggage those names carry with them, is to position self and other within a regime of gender relations, which feminist theory identifies as power relations. Ethnicities, or cultural groups, likewise are seldom related to each other in equality; they are more usually located in structures of dominance and subordination. As to 'race', scientific attempts to define mutually exclusive categories of human beings by phenotype and to prove inferiority or superiority among supposed 'races', have failed. Identities specified in phenotypical terms therefore are liable to be racist in motivation, such that they too reflect relative power and relative powerlessness (Miles 1989). Class, likewise, is by definition a matter of positioning relative to economic power. There are of course additional relations of power more relevant in some circumstances than others: age and ability, for instance.

The way I understand positionality derives from the fact that any individual or group may only be understood socially, that is in relation to another or others, by 'identifying' her, his or their positioning within relations of power. Is this a man? In this case we see him as advantaged, relative to women. Is he black, living in a predominantly white society? If so, we know he is positioned in highly unequal relations of racialized ethnic power, and, most likely, at the bottom of an economic hierarchy. And so on. Intersectionality I take to mean that the subjective sense of self, on the one hand, and identity--the categories in which others attempt to fix us--are neither simple nor singular. We experience ourselves, and are experienced by others, as being simultaneously positioned in relation to more than one dimension of power. As individuals, our multiple positionings shape our possibilities and our relationships, and condition a likely perspective over the social terrain around us. Identities are complex. Similarly, at source, in significant institutions and structures, the various dimensions of power themselves intersect, shaping each other. The military, or the Catholic Church, or the Vodafone company, are structures that combine, each in a unique way, economic, gender, ethno-racial and other regimes of power.

**What exactly does sexual violence in war mean?**

How can we use this kind of thinking to approach sexual violence in war? First, we may need to spell out a little more clearly what is meant by sexual violence in this context, because there is a prevalent ‘minimal’ understanding of rape, an idea that it is ‘just’ forced coitus, which can seem a relatively mild transgression. Since many women after all routinely experience coitus in everyday life, rape just adds the qualifier ‘unwanted’.

On the contrary, sexual violence involves attacks against the person ranging from acts intended to intimidate and shame, such as denuding in view of others, to those that cause physical harm and death.<sup>2</sup> The penis is used as a weapon, in vaginal, oral or anal rape, which may be carried out by an individual acting alone, or by a pair or group of men, serially raping one woman, or raping a group of women. Rape often occurs in the context of various kinds of physical or psychological coercion, such as threat of violence to the victim herself, or her child. It is sometimes performed in public, in view of the community or in front of parents or children of the victim, and sometimes, under extreme coercion, by a relative, typically the father or brother of the victim.

It may involve aggravated sexual assault: eg. electric shock applied to sexual parts; penetration of the vagina by bottles, sticks, weapons and tools, or mutilation and wounding by violent penetration, cutting, stabbing or burning, usually of sexually significant parts of the body. This may lead to subsequent disablement or death. Attacks are sometimes specifically targeted on pregnant women and the unborn child, and may involve disembowelling and excision of the foetus. Girl children, older women or homosexuals of both sexes may be targeted. Women and children are frequently abducted, detained, and forced into concubinage and marriage, or held as sex slaves for the servicing of military men. Rape often culminates in murder of the victim, characteristically by strangling, suffocation, stabbing, shooting or vaginal impalement. And death, while it may be the end of the suffering, is not necessarily the end of the aggression, since corpses are also subject to rape and mutilation.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the damage inflicted in the acts themselves, sexual violence has long-term physical and social effects on women’s lives. It can cause prolonged pain, illness and disability; infection with sexually transmitted disease including HIV/AIDS; disabling mental trauma; or the loss of an unborn child. A significant proportion of rapes result in an unwanted pregnancy. If a woman chooses abortion, legal or illegal, this itself

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<sup>2</sup> In this article I focus only on sexual violence against women. Sexual violence is visited on men in war too, though less frequently than on women. The perpetrators in this case too are overwhelmingly males. Sometimes the aggressors do not directly abuse their male enemies but force them to abuse each other (Zarkov 2007). The social and psychological damage inflicted on men can be severe, but does not of course have the same repercussion in terms of pregnancy. We may note in passing that the aim in perpetrating sexual violence on men is to demonstrate a masculine will ‘reducing’ them to the status of women.

<sup>3</sup> This summation of acts termed ‘rape’ or ‘sexual violence’, and that of effects below, is compiled from an on-line reading of Amnesty International reports on actual documented incidents between 1998 and 2007.

may harm her. The psychological and social effects of rape are long lasting. A woman may lose the ability to conceive, or the will to engage in consensual sex. She may be blamed and rejected by husband and family, be stigmatized, excluded and punished. A woman often becomes unmarriageable, and may as a result fall into destitution (or prostitution). In certain circumstances she may be forced to marry the rapist or a member of his family.

If these are some of the acts and their consequences, then, what are the places and conflicts that have involved significant or even epidemic sexual violence? My reading has produced the following list of significant cases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is certainly far from complete. In World War I (1914-18) rape was widespread, most notably on the part of German forces in Belgium and France in 1914. In World War II (1939-45) rape was extensively practiced by German forces on both Western and Eastern fronts, notably in Russia; by the Free French army (Moroccan and Senegalese troops) in Italy etc.; by US troops during the invasion of Europe; by Soviet troops during invasion from the East; by the Japanese in China (notably Nanking, 1937); and by Australians and New Zealanders, among others, during the last months of the Pacific war.

Incidents of mass rape in subsequent decades occurred in India, during the Partition of 1947; in Korea during the war of 1950-53; in the Vietnam war of 1959 to 1975. There was a notorious outbreak in the intra-Pakistan conflict of 1971 that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. Among Latin American wars, the long struggle in Guatemala is noted for its many rapes, particularly during the early 1980s. Rape occurred in Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War, and, much more widely reported, in the 'ethnic' wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-95), Rwanda (1993-4) and Kosovo (1998-9).

In addition, high levels of abuse of power by state security forces (eg. sexual torture in detention) have occurred in contexts of political repression, for example in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. In recent years we have been, and still are, surrounded by massive sexual violence. Among countries that have caused concern to human rights organizations since the beginning of the new millennium are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, India (Kashmir, NE States, Gujarat), Iraq, Liberia, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia/Ethiopia/Eritrea, Sudan and Uganda.

### **Positionality and the perpetrator**

Lisa Price titled one of her articles 'Looking for the man in the soldier-rapist' (Price 2001) and in this article I follow her example. Or rather I look for the multi-dimensional male, because I would argue that being a man is only one dimension of the rapist's identities. It is sometimes suggested in the case of rapes in peace time that some are committed by men who are clinically insane, who cannot be held responsible for their actions and about whom it does not make sense to ask sociological questions. In war, however, the rapists are men enlisted in, and operating effectively in, armed forces. This suggests a certain level of social and psychic

competence. Besides, it is usually a group activity. So we must take it that sexual violence in war is performed by knowing individuals, who have a verifiable subjective sense of self, enabling and indeed requiring conscious processes of identification and dis-identification with others, processes that are reinforced by military training and indoctrination. Lisa Price says ‘the perpetrators of war rape are not madmen or devils but ordinary men acting out of comprehensible motives’ (Price 2001:212). So, yes: meaningful questions can be asked about who they think they and their victims are, to what collectivities they see themselves and their victims as belonging, whether they experience aspects of their positionality as relatively empowering or disempowering, as valuing or devaluing others, as affording or denying entitlements.

Lisa Price focuses on gender and ethnicity. However, I believe to these we must add class, race, and the military system. In this context the military system and its hierarchy should be considered as a distinct dimension of power with its own positionalities. A military is a formidable structure of power - power derived from the destructive capacity of its weaponry and manifested through a disciplined hierarchy in which authority is transmitted from political decision-makers, through the senior command and the middle ranks to the squaddie at the bottom. Hierarchies however have their contradictions. We know that ordinary soldiers in the US Army, for instance, especially on active service, often resent the top brass and the politicians. The level at which their loyalty and belonging is most effective may be to the immediate fighting force, the company, the unit. But that identification is passionate. Part of their bonding may come about in complaining about the command system, scorning and flouting its regulations. But a huge sense of power and of entitlement also comes from moving, as a group, among a mainly unarmed civilian population, carrying a weapon.

The intersectionality between the hierarchies of the military and of patriarchy has been written about exhaustively by feminists (Altinay 2004, Cockburn and Zarkov 2002, Dudink et al 2004, Enloe 1993, Theweleit 1987, 1989). The cultures in which masculinity has been shaped as militarized, and the military has been masculinized, are by now well understood. Hegemonic masculinity and its many questionable subcultures endow a man with entitlement to women’s domestic labour power, access to their bodies – and to their love (Jonasdottir 1994). Intersecting masculinity with ethnic, racial and economic power, whether from a position of superiority (that invites despising and devaluing) or inferiority (that provokes rage and resentment), makes it potentially violent. Intersecting again with the military system makes it lethal. To illustrate, I shall limit myself here to one quotation, which encapsulates it well. Though it deploys the language of feminism, the writer is a particularly articulate ex-Marine. In the culture of the ‘boot camp’ in which US Marines are trained,

... good things are manly and collective; the despicable are feminine and individual. Virtually every sentence, every description, every lesson embodies this sexual duality, and the female anatomy provides a rich field of metaphor for every degradation. When you want to create a

solidary group of male killers, that is what you do, you kill the woman in them.  
(Gilder,1973:258-9, cited in Bourke, 2007:367).

Military training is intended to instil in the recruit not only identification with manhood but with the nation, the people, and its armed forces: a pride in belonging. Like other selves, the military self is defined or delineated, by marking out, excluding and putting down, an 'other'. The other in this case is the civilian, paradigmatically the civilian that may be harbouring the enemy. Gender intersects here. In his study of fascist militarists Klaus Theweleit says that such men (and perhaps it is all soldiers to some extent) see 'the civilian' as feminine (Benjamin and Rabinbach (1989) 'Foreword' in Theweleit 1989).

### **What is 'social' about episodes and epidemics of sexual violence?**

We might take some instances and episodes of sexual violence in war to illustrate their sociality: to demonstrate identity, power, position and intersectionality at work.

#### *Darfur*

Imagine a group of armed men approaching a village, where an episode of rape is about to occur. They may be wearing the uniform of state security forces. They may belong to some militia allied with the state. They may be an insurgent group, guerrilla fighters. How would any one of these men define himself, identify himself? What or who does he think he belongs to, does he want to belong to?

One of the things most likely to matter to him is the name of those he thinks of as his people, his culture, his religion. In short, *ethnicity*. Let us say the men in this particular group are Sudanese, and Arab, they are a unit of the Janjawid militia fighting a surrogate war in Darfur for the Sudanese government. All of them, riding towards the village on their horses and camels, consciously bear this identity and everything that goes with it. It gives them a clear common belonging. They can take a great deal for granted about each other. Above all, their ethnicity powerfully defines those who are outsiders. The group is approaching a village of a different name, let us say Masalit – though they might equally be Fur or Zaghawa. One thing is clear, to the soldier, they are *not us*; they are foreign, they are 'worthless', worth less. He despises them. His group despises them. That, for a start, makes it easy to think of abusing them.<sup>4</sup>

Religion is part of the ethnic differentiation this soldier feels. The Masalit are not Muslims. Race is a factor too. The people in this village look different from him, they are black-skinned, and are collectively and pejoratively known to the Arabs as

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<sup>4</sup> In constructing this imagined episode of sexual violence by Janjawid in Darfur, Sudan, I draw on Amnesty International reports AFR 54/076/2004, AFR 54/125/2004, AFR 54/087/2006, and AFR 54/043/2007, together with Human Rights Watch reports A1605 and A1606 of 2004

‘Africans’ or ‘Nubas’. Most of the Masalit men will have fled this village already, to join the rebel forces. Mainly women and children remain. We know these warring ethnic groups are both extremely patriarchal societies. Case studies by human rights organizations suggest that the prevalence of sexual violence in war is directly related to the status of women in the gender regime of the perpetrating and the victimized societies. Sexual violence is more likely if the men carry with them a patriarchal sense of super-ordination relative to their ‘own’ women. But sexual violence works very effectively as a weapon in war when women in the enemy society are known to be viewed as patriarchal property. Patriarchal communities know where each others’ weak points are.

Some of the things that will be said by the Janjawid militiamen in the coming episode of mass rape, as revealed later in testimonies, verify the above identifications: ‘Omar al Bashir told us that we should kill all the Nubas. There is no place here for the Negroes any more.’ ‘You, the black woman, we will exterminate you, you have no God.’ ‘Slaves! Nubas! Do you have a god?...You blacks, you have spoilt the country! We are here to burn you! We will kill your husbands and sons and we will sleep with you! You will be our wives!’<sup>5</sup>

The episode that is about to take place will include (we know this from the subsequent testimonies) almost all known kinds of sexual violence. They will cut out the foetus from the belly of a pregnant woman. And there will be a few inventive additions, such as pulling out finger nails, and breaking the bones of fingers and legs. And, as one woman will later give evidence, they will appear to take pleasure in what they do. ‘They are happy when they rape. They sing when they rape us.’<sup>6</sup>

Ethno-racial identification, operational as it is in this episode, is not the only dimension of power and difference at work in wartime sexual violence. Ethnic differentiation and adherence varies greatly from one instance to another. As Jan Pieterse has suggested, it can be seen as being on a spectrum from the casual (for instance, reduced to mere differences in cuisine) to the fiercely differentiated and nationalistic (Pieterse 1997). In time of war ethnicity is likely to be acutely experienced. Indeed a war is sometimes fought precisely to forge or deepen ethnic identification through shared suffering, guilt or hatred. This has indeed been the case in recent years in Sudan, where ethnic difference has been politically manipulated in response to another factor: a struggle for resources. So we need to look here at that a further dimension of power: economic power, identification based on *social and economic class*. There is an issue of territorial ownership in this part of the Sahara. The Janjawid (who represent nomadic groups) want the land that is cultivated by the settled black villagers. The group approaching the village see themselves as belonging to an economic group that have an entitlement to land occupied by an ‘other’. And it is this very same Masalit (or Fur or Zaghawa) people, their ethnic and racial ‘other’. We talk about intersectionality: these villagers live it, and many are about to die for it. They are experiencing themselves, in relation to their invaders, to be of the wrong

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<sup>5</sup> Published by Amnesty International, report AFR 54/076/2004.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International report AFR 54/076/2004.

ethnic group, the wrong race, the wrong religion, the wrong economic class group (the hated agriculturalists), and on top of all that, mere women. The attack on these people, including extreme sexual violence, is shortly going to drive the villagers off the land to join the 2.2 million others in refugee camps.<sup>7</sup>

### *Colombia*

In another theatre of war, the other side of the Atlantic, ethnicity is scarcely a factor at all. It is true that in Colombia ‘first nation’ women are abused rather more often than women of the colonizers, but that is the case in many countries, and in peace as in war.<sup>8</sup>

The war in Colombia began more than forty years ago. It is essentially a class war, having started as a movement for democracy and land reform by leftwing groups challenging the country’s appallingly unjust distribution of land and resources. It has become a three-sided war between the government forces, the guerrilla and rightwing paramilitary groups funded by the landowners. The guerrilla movement began in the 1950s as leftwing, motivated, identified with the poor. The strongest group, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), formed in 1966. But the guerrilla have lost their political way over the years. There is little idealism in the movement today. What counts most here is wealth. Colombia’s hugely profitable coca crop produces heroin and cocaine for international drug trade and generates wealth that is a resource for the armed forces of all three sides and a reason for continuing to fight. So part of the sense-of-self of an armed man in one of these armies is of belonging to a collectivity that knows how to extract or extort resources, that has liquidity, that can give its soldiers cash to spend, in a population where most have none and many are hungry. Poor peasants and shanty town dwellers are the economic groups that suffer most in Colombia's conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the absence of ethnic identification in this Latin American context, the extent and range of sexual violence in Colombia is no less than in Africa, whether in Sudan or Uganda, Congo or Sierra Leone. The atrocities make no less hideous reading. The warring sides abduct and enlist children of both sexes. There are an estimated 11,000 child combatants. Only Myanmar and Congo currently have more. Positionality in relation to military power however is very significant in the self-identity of the rapist in the Colombian war. It is an important factor in his sense-of-self that he is armed, and part of the military or paramilitary apparatus. However, this conflict in Colombia actually involves rather few actual gunfights. Instead, it is fought on, in and through civilians, both rural and urban populations, whom the fighters implicate in their war, as informers, civil patrols and so on. Individuals and communities assumed to support one of the three sides are the principal target for the others. This identification with a

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<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International report AFR 54/ 043/2007.

<sup>8</sup> See reports on the appalling current rates of violence against Native American women in the USA and Canada, Amnesty International reports AMR 51/059/2007, AMR 20/003/004.

<sup>9</sup> I have drawn in this account of Colombia’s war and its sexual violence on Amnesty International reports AMR 77/072/2004 and AMR 23/046/2004.



militarized system, in the mind of those who belong, has its entitlements. They feel entitled to act as vigilantes, to police, constrain and punish, in an extraordinary tyranny over everyday life within their domain. The sexual violence is exemplary, to terrorize individual women and their communities into compliance with the politico-military agenda. *La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres*, an activist group of Colombian women opposing militarization and war, campaign explicitly against the trashing of everyday life by all parties to the conflict (Cockburn 2007).

### *The US/Vietnam war of 1959-75*

For a third exploration of identification, positioning and intersectionality in the context of wartime sexual violence, let's travel to Asia, specifically to Vietnam, in the late nineteen-sixties or early seventies, where that group of American soldiers is taking turns with a young Vietnamese woman who speaks English. We know a good deal about the identification of the US soldier in Vietnam because he has been the subject of endless films, novels, studies and autobiographies. We may suppose that any one of those men who are going to rape the Vietnamese young woman will feel he belongs, will identify with, a certain ethno-nationalism: he was born under the stars and stripes. We can multiply that by his perception of this woman as a slant-eyed Oriental, racially inferior. Times that by the fact that they are military and she is a mere civilian. And again by a factor of economic class: he has the power to outspend her, to buy her, a thousand times over. For his other sense of belonging is within a structure of economic power and powerlessness. He knows that for a dollar he could buy sex, but why should he pay? These multiple positionings build into a massive discrepancy of power between him and her. So many reasons to despise her. She is worth so little.

So there are many legitimations for aggressing the Vietnamese woman. But why rape? Why bring sexuality into it? The man in the waiting line perhaps more than anything else feels himself to be empowered by being a man in a male-dominant *gender system*. This too has been a crucial dimension of power in the other three cases cited. So one reason for rape is that, as a man he wishes to be unequivocally identified as such by others. Sexual performance is an important measure of manhood in such a cultural context. A shared engagement in group rape can be an important bonding mechanism between men. A second is that rape is an effective gender strategy for demoralizing the enemy. An aggressing army can profit by the fact that in many cultures women are seen as embodying the honor of the men to whom they 'belong' (as wife or daughter), so that a sexual attack on them is an attack on the honor of men, family and community (Siefert 1995). This is not limited to a few archaically patriarchal societies. Reading through the human rights reports it is astonishing (almost more shocking than the violence itself) in how many societies a women feels she must hide or deny the assault she has suffered in order to avoid being rejected by her husband and ostracized by her community.

So here, in gender power relations, is the sociological legitimation of the sexual element in the aggression anticipated by that bunch of Janjawid approaching the Masalit village, or the squad of Americans confronting the Vietnamese woman.

Patriarchal proprieties and priorities explain many of the details in a multitude of scenarios. They explain why the male participants in Colombia's armed conflict attack, rape and kill women who are not actually enemy combatants at all, merely girls in their teens who cheekily step out of line by wearing crop-top T-shirts and drop-waisted jeans that expose their pierced belly-buttons. They explain the murder of homosexuals. In some situations where sexual violence in war is endemic it seems that masculine identification, men's positionality in relation to gender power, is ultimately the *only* operational dimension of othering involved in sexual violence. It explains anomalies such as the rape of women on one's own 'side', in one's own military. In one study of 558 American women who had served in Vietnam and subsequently elsewhere, half had experienced sexual violence from male servicemen. Thirty percent of them said they had been raped (Bourke 2007: 364).

### **The difficult question of desire**

Clearly mass sexual violence in war depends on opportunity – it is not every phase of every war that brings potential perpetrators and victims together in a time and place that potentiates rape. And, as argued here, an examination of the social relations of war-time sexual violence suggests that the power differential between perpetrator and victim is significant in inciting or permitting it. However, if the explanatory power of this sociological analysis, emphasising identity and power, is to stand up it has to be able to answer additional, deeper and more difficult, questions. Can it explain this particular construction of sexual desire?

Feminists writing on rape at the beginning of second-wave feminism were obliged to correct a popular misconception, and then to correct themselves. Rapists used to be popularly seen as acting out unbridled sexual desire, they were 'sex maniacs'. Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will* published in 1975, was one of the earliest to assert that rape is *not* about sexuality, lust. It is an act of aggression. It does not manifest desire, but despising and hatred (Brownmiller, 1975). This was a paradigm shift, it drew attention to misogyny, and it was of great political importance. But, in turn, that dictum has had to be modified because, of course, it leaves to be explained *masculine arousal* at the prospect of forced sex. It is only penile tumescence, an erection, that turns a penis into a weapon.

A second and related question is whether and when violence itself is experienced as erotic. If it is, in the context of what social/power relations does that occur? Women in the wars I have mentioned were being sexually violated, but they were also being sadistically killed. The story of the young Vietnamese woman is, unfortunately, not yet finished. A participant in her rape continued the story as follows:

After we raped her, took her cherry from her, after we shot her in the head, you understand what I'm saying, we literally start stomping [on] her body. And everybody was laughing about it.  
(Unnamed soldier, in Baker 1981:149-50 cited by Bourke 2007:375.)

Men too, people in general, are subjected to atrocities in war that are so appalling as to suggest that a kind of sadistic eroticism is at work. Think of Sierra Leone in 1998 when the AFRC and RUC rebels launched their 'Operation No Living Thing', as they called it (Abdullah 2004). What kind of excitement - a kind of lust? - can explain thousands of men engaging in months of frenzied amputation? Using machetes they cut off the arms, legs and ears of tens of thousands of men, women and children. Four out of five of the victims are thought to have died from their wounds.<sup>10</sup> Yet today it is striking to any visitor how amputees are to be seen in villages and city streets.

There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that to some men, in some circumstances, engaging in, anticipating or reflecting on hand-to-hand fighting is sexually arousing. Joanna Bourke, in an earlier book, *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999), presented some disturbing autobiographical accounts of blood-lust narrated by ex-combatants. Barbara Ehrenreich too wrote about this in *Blood Rites: The Origins and History of the Passions of War* (1997), where she explores the feelings war excites and which contribute to its perpetuation, 'the way it digs its talons into us', as she puts it. This notion that bloodletting is erotic may seem to require us to understand soldiers as monsters. But Ehrenreich suggests the soldier's psychic condition need not always be like the ghastly imaginings of Klaus Theweleit's fascist soldier-novelists (Theweleit 1987, 1989), or the horror of Sierra Leone's rebel gangs (Abdullah 2004). The motivations of war, the feelings that are inculcated in the soldier, are, as she puts it, 'among the highest and finest passions humans can know: courage, altruism and mystical sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves' (Ehrenreich 1997:238). It is in this context too that an eroticization of violence can occur. It may be that these questions about the fighting and fucking body, eroticism and violence, can only be addressed through evolutionary biology or psychology. Yet if we believe that sexuality is socially constructed, and that the erotic resides in the head more than the erogenous zones of the body, sociological analysis using concepts of subjectivity and othering, positioning and power relations, should be able to contribute to an understanding of these things (Caplan 1987).

### **Why not? The possibility of moral inhibition**

Returning to that young Vietnamese woman's question - the narrative above tells us something about who is the 'you' that is going to rape, and the 'me' that is 'your' victim. It provides us with a set of dispositions and likelihoods. But it does not tell us why, occasionally, rape is absent from an army's repertoire. Elizabeth Wood and Robert Hayden are two authors who have suggested it may be productive to enquire, in such cases, into the mechanisms of inhibition (Wood 2006, Hayden 2000).

Sometimes those in authority, alert to the possible political repercussions of an episode of mass rape, attempt to prevent it by disciplinary means. My reading to date suggests that threat of punishment has rather little effect. For example, in World War II, rape under US military law incurred the death penalty. Quite a number of US servicemen were indeed executed after court martial for rape. Far more were tried and acquitted, but received lesser sentences. Yet for many thousands of American GIs

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<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International AFR 51/022/1998.

billeted in the UK, and later advancing through Europe as an army of liberation, these sanctions were not a disincentive to rape, as Robert Lilly shows in a retrospective study (Lilly 2007).

There is however some evidence that a moral ideology, when it enters deeply enough into soldiers' identity, their collective sense-of-self, may inhibit rape. Even when the opportunity for rape presents itself, a moral mind-set may constitute 'the other' in a particular way, or change the meaning or operability of the prevailing power imbalance, so that a given militarized group desists from rape, asserting 'we shouldn't do this'. My research brought two examples to light.

First, the occupation of the Palestinian territories by the Israeli Defence Forces, now in its fourth decade, offers ample opportunity for Israeli soldiers to rape Palestinian women. The perceived power differential here, along the axes of gender, ethnicity and religion, race, economic class and militarization, is striking. And research has shown that the IDF do commit atrocities against Palestinians. Nufar Yishai-Karin, in the Department of Psychology at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, made a study that revealed extremely brutal and indeed criminal practices against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories as an accepted part of the job on the part of many soldiers. Carried out in the 1990s, it involved 21 interviews with Israeli soldiers, one of whom said of his service there, 'The most important thing is that it removes the burden of the law from you. You feel that you are the law' (Karpel 2007 citing Yishai-Karin 1998). Yet among the acts of brutality by Israeli Jewish soldiers in the context of the Occupation, rape of Palestinian women appears to be infrequent, and when it occurs it is not dismissed as part and parcel of war but seen as a scandalous exception to a well-understood prevailing norm.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the records of rape maintained by member groups of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel suggests that *intra-communal* rape is not uncommon in Israel (3182 rapes and attempted rapes were reported in 2007, and a further 2998 'sexual assaults', including 131 attacks by male on female Israeli soldiers).<sup>12</sup> Why, then, is there so little Israeli rape of *Palestinian* women in the course of the Occupation?

An answer is suggested by Israeli researcher Tal Nitsan of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, also in the Hebrew University. She conducted a study involving in-depth interviews with twenty-five male soldiers aged 23 - 32 years who had served between 4 and 14 years in the Occupied Territories, in the 1990s and early 2000s. Nitsan heard from these men in uninhibited detail of many atrocities in which they had been involved. But not one of them mentioned a rape. Why? When she questioned them directly about rape, they told her it was inconceivable - the idea was

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<sup>11</sup> In developing this understanding of the Israeli case I benefited from e-mail correspondence with Tal Nitsan, Lior Yavne, Orna Sasson-Levy, Hilary Rantisi, Hagar Lipkin, Hedva Isachar, Nadera Kevorkian, Tirza Waisel, Einet Rubin and Gila Svirsky. I would like to thank them for their help and advice but stress that I alone am responsible for the conclusions as formulated.

<sup>12</sup> Data from the Association's website <[www.1202.org.il](http://www.1202.org.il)> accessed 1 July 2008.

both mentally and physically repulsive to them, because they perceived Palestinian women as disgusting, untouchable. A comrade engaging in rape, the men told her, would be outcast from the group, would himself become no better than ‘Arab’ in their eyes. Thus the male bonding function of rape in other armies is here reversed. It seems that while Israeli Jewish soldiers operating in the Occupied Territories do not feel constrained by the laws of the state, they do feel constrained, in the case of rape, by moral ideology. Judaism has given them a deeply internalised a moral code, shaping a version of individual and national identity in which racial purity associated with the body is a key value. If Israeli soldiers find it scarcely possible to envisage raping Palestinian women it is, in Tal Nitsan’s words, because of ‘society’s ability to penetrate the individual’s body and design his or her desires in accordance with society’s needs’ (Nitsan 2007).

A second example of rape abstention is that of the Vietcong, the National Liberation Front of Vietnam, combatants in the US/Vietnam war of 1959-75. In their case too rape seems to have been inhibited by a moral ideology, though one with profoundly different social meaning. It was widely reported during and after the war that the NLF, in contrast to the US and South Vietnamese armies they fought, seldom used rape as a weapon in their military campaign (Pike 1966, Tanham 1967, Brownmiller 1975, Henderson 1979). If rape occurred it was (as Tal Nitsan termed it in the case of Israel) *symptomatic*, not systematic, rape. It was the practice of the Vietcong to execute the perpetrator and publicise the execution (Brownmiller 1975:90). The moral injunction in this case derived not from religion but politics. General Vo Nguyen Giap, longtime commander in chief of the NLF, wrote of this ‘people’s army’ of workers and peasants, that it was structured and conditioned to operationalize a Communist ideology based on the Marxist-Leninist principle of ending exploitation of the poor by the rich (Giap 1974:63). The Party and its cadres controlled the Army, right down to the three-man battle unit in the field. While the NLF did not hesitate to conduct brutal executions of the enemy leadership, it inculcated a morality of respect for those whom it envisaged as the ‘masses’ of a post-war Communist Vietnamese society. Rape was highly unlikely among men whose very identity was invested in ‘respect for the people’, the belief that it was wrong to steal even ‘a needle and thread’ from the villages through which they passed.

These two examples of abstention from military rape show similar cultural mechanisms at work shaping men’s identities, constituting a self in relation to an other. We saw above that William Connolly in his work on identity and ‘difference’ stressed that an individual or group, though it inevitably constitutes an other in constituting the self, may do so in very different modes. At one extreme, defining the self may be to constitute an other who is utterly alien and inimical, who must even in some cases be annihilated if one’s self is to survive. The Israeli/Palestinian instance approaches this extreme. At the other, the self may be constituted in relation to an other conceived as an individual or group whose existence validates one’s own, even complements it (Connolly 1991). The imagined relation of the ‘people’s army’ to the ‘masses’ approaches this case. It suggests that a productive approach to reducing sexual violence in war might be to work at a cultural and political level, through education and moral reasoning, engaging group approbation and social sanctions, with the aim of reshaping the self-identities, and the associated beliefs and behaviours, of

militarized men, in such a way that they come to question and renegotiate the relations and operations of power in which they are caught up.

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