

Nationalisms, militarisms and fundamentalisms: a view through a feminist lens

Cynthia Cockburn

Militarisms, fundamentalisms and nationalisms. The title of this session has three 'isms' in it and that already sounds too much. But I'm going to make things worse. In this talk of mine I'm going to add a fourth 'ism', *patriarchalism*. Because here we are a roomful of women, and we have eyes to see something about militarism, nationalism and fundamentalism that men mostly seem to be blind to – the gender order, the system of male dominance, which is intrinsic to all three of them, which is of their very nature.

Fortunately, we've got a good theory of our own for this purpose, a 'thinking tool' that's been developed for us by a lot of women over a lot of years: our very own 'ism': feminism. Feminism doesn't simply add something to our understanding of nationalism, militarism and fundamentalism. You actually *cannot* understand them without feminism. Feminism's inspiring the struggle that women all over the world are waging against militarism, fundamentalism, nationalism and patriarchalism.

When you hear a word ending in 'ism', this tells us something. We know that we're talking about a set of beliefs, ideas and values. The word *national -ism* implies a belief in the importance of a defined 'people', nation and statehood. The word *militar -ism* speaks of an ideology that gives high value to organized physical force. Religious *fundamental -ism*: that 'ism' suggests it's about a certain twist given to religious ideology. *Patriarchal -ism* is a set of beliefs that sees the differences between men and women as more important than the similarities; that sees men as having authority and rights over women (an authority ordained by god in some cases); and as having responsibility for women.

Ideas like this, belief systems, are enormously powerful, just in themselves, because they motivate people to act, to obey, to rebel, to innovate. But these 'isms' aren't just words. They're all backed up by, first, massive structures (institutional arrangements) that give the ideas they embody tremendous leverage over society. And, second, they entail practices, (doings and sayings, regulations, routines) that are capable of engaging thousands of individuals in living out the ideologies in their own lives, so that people come to identify with them and feel 'yes, that's me', 'that's what I stand for'.

Because I am taking seriously and literally the title of this session, the three 'isms', my talk's going to have three parts. Patriarchalism, the fourth one, I'm going to stir into the narrative as I go along. And let me say here: I'm drawing on the ideas of a lot of writers. Mostly I'm not going to quote them by name. For anybody who's specially interested in the subject there's a list of useful readings here at the end of my paper.

Let me begin with nationalism. Nationalism and nations. These are modern things – they've only existed since the late 18th century, and some people say that the earliest nationalisms were those rebellions within the Spanish empire in the Americas that produced countries like Venezuela, Mexico and Peru. What came about over the next two hundred years was a world system in which the nation state became the very corner-stone of international politics. As empires have broken up they've been succeeded by new nations reclaiming old memories of 'how it was before' – we've seen it only recently as the Soviet Union disintegrated.

In a way it's a competitive thing. Once nationalism's born as *an idea* (and it only needed to be born once in the world), once you have the concept that a 'people' is something actual, and can aspire to have its own state, populations begin to think and feel that way – they define themselves more clearly from 'others' who aren't them. A project may be born, usually in the mind of the élite of a particular cultural group (especially its males) to make a bid for autonomy and recognition (like those Creole leaders in South and Central America).

A campaign may be mobilized around a particular goal: say, the right to education in our own language (like the Kurds in Turkey today), or the right to control our holy places (like the struggle between Hindus and Moslems for the disputed site in Ayodhya in India). *Imagination* has a lot to do with it. In hard fact, ethnic groups merge into each other. People intermarry, they share customs. But people's imagination can be so fired, by speeches, newspapers TV programmes, that they come to believe in their own 'difference'. They get a sense of 'belonging' to a particular territory – worse, that the territory 'belongs' to them and only them. Soon they are ready to mobilize, and kill and die, for the nationalist idea - the myth of some heroic past they share between them (like the nationalist Serbs led by Milosevic in the break-up of Yugoslavia), or the dream of some future they believe they're destined to share (like the Zionist dream of some Jews).

The world system of nation states seems to be, at the moment, something we're stuck with. But we can ask ourselves questions. Is nationalism always a bad thing? Especially when it's strongly rooted in ethnic identity, nationalism does seem nastily exclusive: 'you're not us, and we're better than you'. But people who are experiencing oppression in a given 'name' may see little alternative but to mobilize in that name. More generally, some people argue that in present conditions the nation state is the only framework that even begins to offer the possibility of democracy and social justice. Some nations do successfully contain a diversity of ethnic groups, holding them together by a rather 'civic' ideology. We might feel fairly comfortable about living in a country like that, with open doors and human rights for all, and not even mind too much if it's called a 'nation state'.

Another question we can ask is: can the system of nation states be 'tamed' and 'civilized' by worldwide agreement and action – international institutions, laws, codes and treaties? Some people would say that's our only hope of surviving the dangerous era of nation states.

One way of evaluating nationalism is to take a look at its gender relations. And in this light it doesn't show up well. We see just how nationalism and patriarchy map onto each other.

Ethnic or cultural identity is the seed that sometimes grows, or is manipulated, to become a national movement. The cultures of peoples who think of themselves as distinct ethnic groups (the Tutsi, let's say, or the Pashtun or the Welsh) always include a specification of gender relations. There are proper ways of being a Pashtun man and a Pashtun woman. As nationalist ideology grips a people, gender specifications get re-worked. Difference is often re-emphasized and the importance of manhood, in relation to leadership, is reinforced.

But nationalist ideology pays attention to women and femininity too. Feminist writers like Nira Yuval-Davis have given us a helpful perspective on this. First, male leaders often appeal to women as mothers, to produce more children, for the survival of the nation. Second, women are valued as guardians of the traditional culture – the ones who tell the children those tales of 'who we are and where we came from'; the ones who know the right way to cook 'our' food; the right way to bury the dead.

But women and women's bodies are often used and abused in nationalist ideology. Symbolically they may be honoured – the nation is often represented as a woman, liberty, 'La France'. *La patria esta forjando la unidad*. Sounds positive. But that a woman's body is important to the nation is bad news for women. It means men's honour gets invested in it. We'll be liable to be raped or enslaved or prostituted by the enemy to destroy our menfolks' honour.

In some circumstances women may rebel against these problematic national roles, but very often, especially if they believe 'their people' are in peril, they throw themselves fiercely into nationalist womanhood. So women are sometimes active participants in nationalist struggles. Some may even take up arms. In some kinds of national struggle, especially revolts against ruling

powers, the ideologists embrace the idea of sexual equality because drawing women into the struggle can double their forces. But this emancipation usually doesn't last. In a book about post-colonialism in Asian countries Kumari Jayawardena shows how the 'new woman' evoked for the anti-imperialist struggles was re-educated, after independence, for traditional roles.

Let's move along quickly now to the second 'ism', militarism. The ideology of militarism means giving high value to rule by force, and to military qualities and behaviours. As with nationalism, underpinning this set of beliefs there's a social structure of enormous power. Think of the nation state with all its institutions, from the national assembly down to the local municipality. Think of its personnel from the president and prime minister down to the humblest clerk. Think of its practices - collecting taxes and deciding what to spend them on; passing laws (like immigration laws to say who can come into the country and who can't); administering education (writing the history curriculum that teaches children who they're supposed to be).

Then add the apparatuses of militarization – armies, airfields, tanks and helicopters. And the trained personnel - like nationalism, militarist thinking has lots of people at its command: from the general down to the child soldier. Its practices are discipline, imprisonment, propaganda, policing, war-fighting.

In a militarized society, a significant percentage of the population specialize in armed force – legal or illegal. Militarization turns up in history well before nationalism. Since the second millennium before the Christian era, in the Eastern Mediterranean, rulers have guaranteed their own survival, seized wealth and extended influence by the use of standing armies. The boundaries of empires were the lines beyond which the emperor's soldiers couldn't march.

But militarism and militarization today are very closely linked to the nation state. The competitive nature of the system of modern nations has made it very difficult indeed to imagine one without armed forces. (Is Costa Rica the only one?) When a nationalist movement is still aspiring to freedom from

domination, as in Nicaragua in the 1970s, the army may be loved and respected, a people's army. When a nation's forces are struggling to police a restless population or control its neighbours they will be hated. But the good and bad of armed force is a difficult one for feminists. Some, a few, countries are trying to redefine their militaries as purely peacekeeping units for humanitarian interventions: the Netherlands is one. Women in England just now are divided on whether British soldiers should be sent to protect the people of Darfur.

We have to include in our evaluations that modern industrial capitalism has changed the nature of militarization, first because production of weapons and other things for military use has become a very significant element of total global scientific research, industrial production and foreign trade; and second because the destructive capacity so produced is millions of times greater than it was a century ago. But still we have to remember that militarization can go on very successfully, I mean managing to kill a lot of people and deform the lives of lots more, with nothing more than machetes.

Now it goes without saying that militarism and militarization are deeply gendered phenomena. Given the dependence of most national movements on military mobilization, the ideal man is not only a responsible father and head of household (and by extension, head of state, patriarch of the official religion) but is a military man, willing to bear arms bravely to defend his family, and by extension, defend the people. Men as human beings are every bit as exploited and deformed in these 'isms' as women.

There's a very useful book coming out soon by the Turkish feminist Ayse Gul Altinay. It's called *The Myth of the Military Nation*. It shows how in Turkey, from the time of the nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk but even today, the very identity of a Turkish male is a military identity. The bonding of man /soldier /Turk is achieved partly through compulsory conscription of young males, and also a compulsory element of military and nationalist education in the schools.

By and large, though, it's not a matter of compulsion. These effects come about through more subtle identity processes, such that you lose self-respect if your sense-of-self differs from what the prevailing discourses have in mind for you. You can see it in Israel, in Cyprus, wherever militarist nationalism prevails, how a mother and father are encouraged to be, and mostly really are, proud to see their son off to his military service, how they're ashamed of the son who's a conscientious objector, refusing this idea of manhood.

But, it's not just armies and not just men who are enlisted into the militarized nation. Women and feminine gender identity are written into the script too. Of all feminist writers, Cynthia Enloe has done most to show us how perceived military needs profoundly shape the behaviour that's seen as proper for women as well as men – women as military wives, as sex workers for the soldiers, as the ones who go to the shops to buy war-toys for their sons.

And in recent times something contradictory's happened *inside* the military. A few women in the past have often been drawn into war fighting. But today women are being recruited to modern militaries in quite some numbers – because military planners can't recruit enough men, and because some women need a job. The contradictions are showing up in certain painful facts. A lot of women soldiers get raped and harassed by their male colleagues. The training they get makes them adapt to masculine cultures and adopt masculine values. Some of those values are good – women show they can be brave and strong. Some are bad – women share with men that arrogance that lets you abuse the weak. There's a lot of disturbance over this development. My hunch is that a few women acting in unfeminine ways can be tolerated by patriarchy. What matters most to military leaders, the bottom line for patriarchy, is that men continue to be proper men, that their discipline and manliness are not affected by the turmoil.

And what about fundamentalisms? Religious fundamentalisms, like those other 'isms', are sets of beliefs, ideologies. And as with nationalism and militarism, the ideas are underpinned by institutional structures: churches, synagogues, temples and mosques that have broken away from the more

tolerant mainstream of their religion. They too have their personnel: particular clerics and priests, rabbis and imams. And their practices: new readings of old texts, papal pronouncements, *fatwas* and punishment.

Until a few years ago we had an organization in London called Women Against Fundamentalisms (WAF). For several years we published a journal. The way we saw fundamentalism was: *not* as religious observance, the practice of believing and of collective worship. That's a matter of individual choice. Rather we defined fundamentalisms as modern and essentially *political* movements which use a selective version of the religion as a basis for an attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control. In WAF we weren't ourselves religious, but we were a group of women from all kinds of religious background. So while most of the world was talking about fundamentalism as if it was only a peculiarity of Islam, we were seeing it as a conservative trend in several religions, particularly in Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism.

Most critics of fundamentalism consider it to be simply anti-modern, reaction, 'harking back'. They fail to see that gender is a key factor in it. What we said in WAF is 'at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the *control of women's minds and bodies*. All religious fundamentalists support the patriarchal family as a central agent of such control. They view women as embodying the morals and traditional values of the family and the whole community.'

Trends in capitalist production and consumption, combined with feminist movements, have led to a disruption of patriarchal order – not to its overthrow but to shifts in how it's manifested. Some women, in some economic circumstances, have acquired education and an independent income - capitalism needed them as workers and consumers. They've shed some of their clothing, they've questioned things about marriage, they've refused male authority. Fundamentalism is patriarchal panic about women slipping the leash. From Alabama to Rome and Iran they are striving to put the lid back on the family.

We can see then that these 'isms', nationalism, militarism and religious fundamentalism have something important in common. It's their *male-dominant gender power relations*. Sometimes I think of it like this: that patriarchy, nationalism and militarism are a kind of mutual admiration society. Nationalism's in love with patriarchy because patriarchy offers it women who'll breed true little patriots. Militarism's in love with patriarchy because patriarchy's women offer up their sons to be soldiers. Patriarchy's in love with nationalism and militarism because those two systems produce unambiguously masculine men and, on the whole, keep women in their place.

Can we add religious fundamentalism into this little love nest? I'm not sure. Religious leaders don't *necessarily* love nationalism and militarism. Some are spiritual, some distance themselves from national projects as ungodly, some oppose all violence. But the more religion takes on a political colouring, the more it militates to enforce social conservatism, and especially the more it's fired by the idea of re-establishing patriarchal control over women, the more it may find useful partners in certain nationalist politicians. All fundamentalist movements are militant. Only some are explicitly military: they are crusades. There's an interesting tension, I believe, between religious fundamentalism, nationalism and militarism that we could do to think more about.

Finally, after this long and sorry tale, I hope it becomes clear why feminism is absolutely, irreducibly necessary not only to our struggle for a better life for women, but to our struggle to end racism, inequality and war. It's not to do with women being less nationalistic or militaristic or fundamentalist than men – some of us are, but some of us aren't. It's not even to do with women having an experience of subordination and oppression we can usefully learn from – although it's true, we do. It's that *only feminism*, among all the political ideologies we can choose from today, has a critique of male domination, the socially-reinforced tendency to violence in masculine cultures and the unspeakable damage this does to humankind. Feminism alone has the critique of patriarchal power that gives us the conceptual tools to begin dismantling militarism, nationalism and conservative religious politics, and inventing a different tomorrow.

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Cynthia Cockburn
 Department of Sociology, City University London
 and Women in Black against War
 <c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.uk>

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