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Gender, Violence, and Politics

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I am very honoured to be invited to speak at this important meeting, where we are considering the impact of patterns of social violence on women's and men's lives, the ways patterns of violence are institutionalised and systematised, and the important matter of how women, in particular, can organise and exert the political power they have in order to break the structures, transform the systems. In this address I want to consider how social science research intersects and interacts with political thinking and action.

The significance of violence against women, as such, needs no emphasis in this forum. It determines how boys and girls develop, it regulates our conduct as sexed beings - as men, as women - and it interacts with unequal distributions of benefits and burdens between the two sexes. It needs no emphasis here, but that is not to say that it needs no emphasis in universities and research centres in general, in social and political institutions like law and medicine, and in the agencies of government at state, city, and global levels. The last few decades have seen widespread acceptance of the insights that rape as a weapon of war, first really is a weapon of war, and second is not just any 'ordinary' weapon. There has also been wide acceptance, throughout societies, and states, that sexual harassment at work is serious. First, because of its pervasive psychological and emotional effects on recipients and on perpetrators; second because the joke or the flirtation is underpinned by and is liable to turn into aggression or assault. It is recognised, by scientists, by lawyers, by policy makers, governors and managers, that domestic violence is a public health issue. All of these impact on understanding of the complexities of rape and sexual assault as criminal. All of these underline how sex and gender, and the enforcement of particular standards of sexual conduct, are matters of the first political and legal, as well as cultural and social, importance. [1]

However, legal and policy responses to all of these as crimes, as torts, are unsatisfactory - we can venture to say that this is so in all states of the developing and developed regions. Administrative and governmental responses to injustice, oppression and exploitation based on gender power relations are patchy. Cultural norms are confused. Above all, there are entrenched

[1] United Nations 2006 for a summary of these developments across countries.

interests which seek to justify established, normative patterns of inequality, and even to justify established patterns of violence. [2]

As thinkers, as researchers, and as political activists, we have to acknowledge that the relationships between sex, gender, and violence are theoretically complex and subtle. On the one hand, it's all very easy - forms of violence are evils, which should be eradicated, and against which we must campaign. On the other hand, it's all very difficult. The forms of violence that have long concerned feminists - sexual assault, rape and murder, domestic abuse - are not confined to interactions between men and women, even if, as is invariably the case, the vast majority of perpetrators are men and the vast majority of sufferers are women.[3] The complication of the relationships between biological sex and society are addressed by the theoretical concept gender. This captures the social complexity and variability in the expression of sex - male and female - in the various masculinities and femininities that are lived in societies. Power, authority, norms, impact differentially and fatefully upon men, and upon women - no doubt. Inequalities and injustice in relations between the sexes have prompted feminist politics, led by women as women, in many social contexts and many historical periods. But the categories male and female, men and women, are inadequate, sociologically and philosophically, when we come to understand, and to explain, the mechanisms, the systematic workings, that underlie the phenomena we experience. They are even inadequate, in many contexts, to our experience of the phenomena.[4]

I am going to discuss, first, how sociological analysis, if it is to be phenomenologically and explanatorily adequate always requires social theory, philosophy. In particular, we cannot analyse sexual inequalities without analysing gender norms. Second, I am going to discuss how this social theory interacts with politics, with feminist politics in particular. That, third, turns our attention to questions of political ethics in relation to political power. In thinking about political power, including the power to change social norms and reconfigure social structures and relationships, we have to think, of course, about political violence, and about the possibility and nature of a non-violent politics.

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[2] United Nations 2006 chIV; Davies (ed) 1994; Garcia-Moreno et al 2006; Vlachova and Beiason (eds) 2005; Watts and Zimmerman 2002.
[3] Dasgupta 2002; McHugh, Livingstone and Ford 2005; Swan and Snow 2002.
[4] Spelman 1990; Crenshaw 1991;

Research in the field of gender and violence has been exceptionally informative when it has focussed on the sociological relationships between male and female, income and wealth, health and employment, political participation and influence, legal rights and cultural norms. Distributions of benefits and burdens, between men and women, are systematically connected to different relationships to forms of violence. Men and women perpetrate different forms of violence, on different victims. They are rewarded and punished differentially for so doing. In particular, violence by men against women, in the form of domestic abuse, familial and social rape and sexual assault, organised forced prostitution, and the threatened violence that underlies sexual harassment in public settings, is correlated with the inequalities between the sexes of income and welfare, political power and cultural authority. Forms and rates of gender violence correlate also with the other great sociological structures of class and status. Sociologically, researchers are concerned to quantify the incidence of different forms of violence, to analyse these correlations, and to consider the matter of cause and effect with a view to evaluating possible policy and political interventions for change. [5]

This political and sociological research programme is not possible, though, without careful and subtle enquiry into the meanings of and contestations over violence in the relevant context. [6] How are blows, the use of weapons against the body, understood and valued by perpetrators, recipients, and their audiences? Are they understood as violence as such, or are they interpreted in terms of other interpersonal transactions? What emotions are engaged in experiencing, and in remembering, them? Are they understood as good, or bad, or neutral? In particular, are these meanings clear, or are they ambiguous? are reporters certain and sure of their experience, or are they ambivalent? I am posing all of these as questions - because one thing only is sure, and that one thing is that meanings of violence are variable, from setting to setting; often they are contested or ambiguous. Emphasising this variability and ambiguity is consistent with emphasising harms and negative effects of practices of intimate partner assault, rape in war or in civil society, or coercion into marriage, childbearing, or particular occupations.

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[5] Davies (ed) 1994; Johnson and Ferraro 2000.

[6] Stanko (ed) 2003.

Meanings and understandings are themselves norms of course: correctness in grammar, the appropriateness of metaphors, or adjectives, the rightness of descriptions, are matters of convention. Norms both describe appropriate or correct language or conduct, and also, in part, explain it. The norms governing sexed and gendered conduct - norms of femininity and masculinity in a setting - are key factors in the explanation of rates of violence. Many political traditions, but perhaps feminism in particular, focus on norms as both a necessary factor in the explanation of structures and systemic stability, and as a critical, political, mechanism, for social transformation.[7] Of course, what counts as normal, right, and good, in any context, follows from the material distributions of wealth, productive capitals, and exchangeable currencies. But, how might these material goods be redistributed? Not directly by force, nor by legislation. The norms have to change before force can be effective, or before legislation can be possible. Challenging what counts as normal, arguing for new standards, is both a strategy of action, in feminist politics, and also a proper mechanism for reconstruction.[8]

Theoretically, feminism is concerned with norms on several levels. Given male and female social sex roles, how are privileges and burdens distributed between men and women? What norms and standards govern and justify these distributions? This is the first level. But, second, gender itself comprises a grammar. We think of 'gender' not as a thing, but as a series of rules that govern behaviour and order. Critically, though, we argue that behaviour is not fixed; the rules are not immutable. A system of grammar, as in natural languages, can change. Feminism, the politics that seeks to transform the system of gender related violence, seeks to change gender itself - seeks to change the norms that regulate the conduct of men and women.

Third, norms, rules, anyway change all the time, in visible and empirical processes of subversion, innovation, diffusion, establishment and enforcement. It is important to understand the deep negotiability of norms and standards, which are always contestable, always, therefore,

[7] The concept norm is of course complex and itself contested; my usage is indebted to the Durkheimian tradition of social expression and enforcement of what is normal; and on accounts of the emergence of norms such as James Coleman's; Durkheim 1982; Coleman 1990.

[8] Stanko (ed) 2003 pp.11-2 for significance of norms and meanings in patterns and standards of violence; Klein 2012 for social mechanisms for political change; Fabian 2007, Elgstrom 2000, for focus on norm change in state and inter-state politics.

ambiguous, never wholly certain. [9] There are gaps, sometimes chasms, between the norms endorsed in state law and those embodied and lived in society and by social groups. There are gaps between people's understandings and articulations of norms, and their actual conduct. There are clashes between the norms endorsed by different social groups. There are divergences between dominant cultures and sub-cultures, between those who enjoin conformity to the social standard and those who dissent, or deviate, from it. The justifiability of norms is a matter of philosophy and political ethics. The gap between law and norm, norm and practice, is a matter for social analysis, and for political action. [10]

Feminist theory and politics has always critically analysed the norms that govern the conduct and uses of violence in societies. The idea of a continuum of violences has been significant in feminist thought since the eighteenth century. The continuum runs through several domains. Certain patterns and practices of violence are pursued, enjoined, or tolerated, by states. Practices and norms of violence pervade society and culture. Within interpersonal and intimate relationships of kinship, friendship and family, finally, physical and psychological forms of violence are significant.[11] Feminist theory looks at the threads that maintain all of these as a coherent system, and finds gender running through them in complex ways.

First, all these forms of violence both contribute to, and draw upon, the gender system. So, military training invariably draws on and deploys ideologies of gender in motivating and disciplining soldiers. Where women serve or even are conscripted alongside men, as occurs from time to time, the negotiation with the normative gender system becomes complicated.[12] However, the basic structural equation of masculinity with aggression and violence, and femininity with that which must be protected, is sustained. So also is the ambivalent attitude to femininity - both that which must be protected, and also that which must be denigrated and held in contempt. It is that which every soldier is told he, or she, must not be.

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[9] This emphasis on the indeterminacy and negotiability of norms owes a good deal to Wittgenstein's emphasis on the indeterminacy of rules: Wittgenstein 1958 Ss142-155.

[10] It is also a matter for philosophical analysis, of course; Habermas's work on power and legitimacy is relevant here: Habermas 1996.

[11] I think we can read Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of culture through this frame: Wollstonecraft 1994 esp chs 1, 2, 9, 13; for recent feminist use of the idea of a continuum of violence Kelly 1998.

[12] Goldstein 2001.

Second, feminist analysis shows how ubiquitous this basic structure is - the identification of weapons with phallus, the effeminacy and the rapability, of the enemy. Third, feminist analysis also links this basic structure, this basic ambivalence, to patterns of violence in culture and society, whatever they are: fights in and around pubs, inter-club violence around football, subcultures like bikers or skinheads, the civilised and sporting pastimes of the rich. In such forms, masculine and feminine conduct tend to be highly normalised.[13] We must mention here the violence of police and civil authorities, where society meets state on a daily basis, in constitutional settings, and where, frequently, conduct of police and conduct of those who oppose them reflect and refract one another. As with military violence, research invariably reveals gender discourse and practices bound up with uses of force. In the tensions of gender norms, and in the context of this deep tie between state, society and embodied individuals, all violence, and in particular familial and intimate partner violence, will be understood, and rationalised, and practiced, in distinctive ways.

The identification, and the study, of these continua and connections, serve to politicise violence in a way that cannot occur if domestic violence, war, and forms of social violence, are understood as separate, separately intelligible and explicable, phenomena, each to be understood, and perhaps tackled, in its own terms. For gender norms, ambivalently understood and enforced, run across these forms of violence and, indeed, lend them intelligibility. So the politics, here, is that tackling social violence, in gangs for instance; or opposing state violence - in prisons, say; or attempting to diminish the incidence of rape in marriage, can hardly be thought of without thinking about norms of masculinity and femininity, and the tensions and relationships between them. That involves redistributing goods - status, authority, right, as well as material things like income - between the groups men and women. This kind of redistribution can, of course, occur by natural, or accidental historical, means. But where a need for it to happen is identified, where there are groups who stand to gain, and lose, more and less, by its coming about, and where social and state power as well as individual bargaining and exchange, are identified as strategically important to bringing about the change - there we have a political situation.

[13] The analysis in Stanko (ed) 2003 is concerned to emphasise variability, contextuality, and particularity in meanings of violence, to emphasise the instability of norms, and the importance of desisting from a priori understanding of how violence is organised and what it is; some constructions of violence - eg parental violence to children - are explicitly 'gender neutral' and it may be that there are no sex differences or specificities in the experience and understanding of some forms of violence. See Hazel et al 2003 - although analysis of sex differences is not even canvassed in this research report. But many cultural forms of violence are sex specific, or normatively associated with one or other gender, for instance Cameron and Frazer 1987.

So we speak of the politicisation of questions of violence in state and society. But we need to consider the more general, classical, question, of how violence is related to politics. In the tradition of sociological analysis, violence is understood as the distinctive means of politics. Max Weber understands political authority as the legitimated capacity to govern a territory and all the people and goods in it. [14] Political authority in the form of this territorial state monopolises the legitimate use of violence (and groups or parties become political authorities by achieving this monopolisation). This violence, or at least its threat, is used both for the enforcement of social order in the society, and for the defence of the state against external forces.

In this framework, violence and politics are deeply intertwined. In constitutional democracies, governed by the rule of law and the procedures of electoral competition to secure the power to govern, competing parties compete exactly for the right to exercise and maintain the monopoly power over the legitimate uses of violence. In other systems, violence and force themselves are central means by which parties and factions can attempt to secure domination over state, society and territory. In revolutionary traditions of thought and action, the very monopolisation of force by the state, and the uses of state violence to maintain social order, are said to legitimate, to necessitate, violent action by those who challenge police or military. Where the competition is between social fractions - between competing social groups - assertion of presence in the public spaces, and hence domination of the society, can also be thought to lead inevitably to the exertion of physical force. Because this competition for dominance is a political competition, and violence is the means of politics.

This construction of political power and violence, though, is by no means uncontested. In an older tradition, politics, political power, is understood as public in its manifestation and premissed on a process of conciliation of all the parties present in the public.[15] Conciliation, crucially, cannot be achieved by violence. Violence can achieve domination, oppression. Conciliation requires treatments without violence. These include debate, deliberation, compromise, bargaining, agreement. Violence will tip any resulting settlement into a state of domination. This is the

[14] Weber 1978 pp 54-6.

[15] An influential version of this argument is by Crick 1992; the position can be associated with Aristotle, and also later republican traditions.

conception of politics that tends to dominate liberalism as a tradition of thought and philosophy; most recently it is associated with the thought of Jurgen Habermas. [16] (We should note that it can be criticised for overlooking the susceptibility of the forms of conciliation to contamination by domination and violence).

Hannah Arendt takes a distinctive approach. For her action in concert, the exertion of power in common to achieve a deliberate world, is what is distinctive about politics.[17] This action in concert allows constitutions to be made, social orders to be maintained. In particular action together holds open the political world in which social and public life can go on. Power, in this vision, is antithetical to violence.[18] Violence is instrumental, and exceedingly short term instrumental at that. Violence uses weapons, against others. It is always destructive. Power is our effort, to act, to use energy. It is wrong to think of our acting in pursuit of designated ends, for that is too instrumental a way of putting it. The making of a world, a political society for us to live in, is open ended and endlessly creative, rather than designed and manufactured. Where violence is, politics is over, exhausted, defeated. Those who act violently, are acting anti-politically.

In current work co-author Kim Hutchings and I are analysing accounts of the relationship of violence to politics, in the canonical works of political theory. In particular, we seek to understand how political thinkers and activists justify uses of violence and non-violence, whether on the part of states, or within societies, or by organised political actors against the state.[19]

Justifications are frequently instrumental, based on causal theories of the outcomes, or consequences, of actions. For many thinkers, violence is understood to be a bad thing, but its use can be justified by the good ends it serves. A problem with this form of justification, of course, is that the outcomes of violence are quite uncertain - at best. Uncertainty about the good effects of violence, and distrust of empiricist causal metaphysics, has led many theorists to value violence irrespective of its outcomes. The twentieth century featured many instances of this, from the

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[16] Habermas 1995, and see the reply from John Rawls 1995. Of course, this very compressed account skates over complex differences as well as continuities between liberalisms, republicanisms. amd the idea of politics as public conciliation.
[17] Arendt, Hannah, 1958; 1973 fp 1963; Frazer and Hutchings 2008;.
[18]Arendt 1969; Frazer forthcoming.
[19] Frazer and Hutchings 2007.

existentialist celebration of transgression, to associations from both left and right of violence with cleansing and hygiene. From an instrumental justification of violence, that is, thinkers and activists turn to an aesthetic one.

This shift from causal reasoning is mirrored, interestingly, by pacifists and those committed to non-violent action.[20] Sometimes they emphasise the negative effects of violence. The harms to perpetrators as well as victims, in the form of trauma, and mental and emotional damage, transmitted through networks and across generations, are so significant as to outweigh any possible good that might come of violent action. The inheritance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the prospects for the twenty first, with generations of damaged children inadequately or badly parented by traumatised adults, evidences the damage that cultures and contexts of violence do. On the other hand, in the face of the greater evil yet, as even Mahatma Gandhi admitted - the depredations of the Nazis, as compared with the oppression and exploitation of the older European colonialisms and empires - non-violent action, let alone pacifism, would have been hopelessly ineffective. But, any such causal or consequential failure of non-violence does not affect its symbolic and aesthetic quality. In acting non-violently, according to those committed to non-violent action, one is asserting values, meanings of good, right, and beauty. Such assertions and statements are philosophically valid irrespective of their outcomes.

This work is historical, and theoretical. But it is significant for the thinking of participants in this conference in several ways. This conference, and the wider political context of which it is a part, itself marks a great progress that has been made in mainstreaming understanding of the wrongs of gender based violence and constructing a response to those wrongs in human rights institutions. This institutionalisation of women's rights as human rights, and of sexual and domestic violences as matters of public health and of justice, is both a terrific achievement, and also the opening of a new stage in the struggle. Because, of course, this institutionalisation, and the theory of gender and justice on which it is based, are both strongly resisted by entrenched interests and ideological opponents. Global resolutions are insufficient to bring about social change. Law at the international or state level might be necessary but is not sufficient. Change has to occur at the cultural, normative, level, and the process of change has to be political. Social scientific research is

[20] Frazer and Hutchings 2013.

one platform from which this political process can be pursued. Political organisation, in civil society groups, and in and against parties, is another.

But this takes us back to the need for clear and subtle thinking about gender, violence, and politics. The politics of violence against women, obviously, is in some tension with political action on gender-based violence.[21] Feminist politics and feminist theory arises to deal with the claims of women to physical and social security. The language of women's rights, and the critiques of violence against women, signal an analysis, a diagnosis, and also a political project of sexual equality and the liberation of women. However, it can be politically and strategically expedient to put women's claims into the discourse of human rights, and to speak of domestic violence, or intimate partner abuse - that is to neutralise the sexual claims. The theory of gender, to which we need recourse if the mechanisms by which sexual inequality is entrenched and maintained, resolves the tension between these two strategies.

There really is a tension, as numerous commentators have observed. Women's rights, violence against women, are categories that reflect the statistics. However, statistics and probabilities are not all of reality - women's violence too is a phenomenon of human life. [22] The discourse of women's rights and violence against women can seem to map gender too straightforwardly on to sex, equating femaleness with femininity with subordination. On the other hand, the discourse of human rights, and domestic violence, neutralises the statistical facts, turns our attention away from the critical materialist question 'who whom?', and eclipses the structure of sexual division in state and society. Both sex and gender are depoliticised. We can find ourselves enmeshed in discourses of the symmetry of domestic and sexual violence, which effectively degenders violence. Or, we focus on the implicatedness of all parties to violent relationships in their continuation – which distributes responsibility to victims as much as to perpetrators.

The appropriate political response to these political moves, I argue, cannot be to rely wholly, or even primarily, on quantitative claims, no matter how striking, in any context, the data are. There is nothing to be gained by denying that women are violent, or denying that their violence matters. But there is a further difficulty with the normative and theoretical understanding of

[21] Berns 2001; Kelly 2005.
[22] Alison 2009; Chandler et al 2010; McHugh et al 2005

women's violence. In terms of the binary gender system that associates men with aggression and women with nurture, women's violence is pathological, a violation of nurturing maternal practice. Alternatively, our theory of gender can insist that masculine and feminine traits are not divided clearly between males and females perfectly, but rather are shared. Then, women's violence might be thought as a sign of women's participation in masculine identity, in exactly the same way that men can participate in feminine - ie maternal - practice when caring for young children. Obviously, there are drawbacks to both of these theoretical moves. Both are socially common. For instance, women's violence has often been punished more severely than men's by criminal courts.[23] Women who are associated with so-called masculine characteristics, such as public authority, are accused of acting like men, so the wrong of their violence is compounded by the deviance of their gender or sexuality. We need the concept of gender, and the idea of the sex-gender system, if we are to understand how phenomena like rape in war, or domestic abuse in the context of marriage, operate. But any binary model of gender leaves us in a conceptual and explanatory bind when it comes to the understanding of and response to practices that escape the gender norms.

In my view, our theoretical task is to drop the binary model of gender, and trace, instead, the forms of masculinity and femininity that are possible, that are endorsed or enjoined, that are proscribed. It is important to analyse, for all these forms, their relationship on the one hand to the dominant constructions of biological femaleness and maleness in the context, and on the other hand their relationship to dominant norms of masculinity and femininity. Our expectation, crucially, is that dominant norms will not be uncontested, nor unambiguous. We might expect that there will be social class, status, ethnic, etc variations in what counts as properly feminine conduct. For many individuals their experience of being a man or a woman will be in negotiation with the norms of which they are aware, that they feel themselves to be subject to, and judged by, in their local cultural and material context.

Rather than beginning from a binary scheme of sex and gender, and consequently finding deviance or compliance, confirmation or confusion, we should acknowledge that societies, cultures, politics, pscyhological contingency and circumstance, allow many negotiations with the sexual and gender options that face us. Of course, in research, we will find accounts of binary sex-gender

[23] For instance, Smart 1995.

schemes, and the enforcement of them, in daily institutions. But these are discoveries, not presuppositions or a priori frameworks for analysis. We must, in short, seek an understanding of how forms of violence intersect with and interact with forms of femininity and masculinity, and with other social categories such as class and status. Only by way of such theoretical enquiry, together with measurement, can we begin to understand the causes and consequences of violent practices.

Let us be clear that this is very different from the older programme of empiricist social research which managed somehow simultaneously to normalise, rationalise ,and also ignore sex differences and inequalities. This understanding of gender possibilities, and the critique of distributions and patterns is political at the outset. That is to say, this social theory sees violence as embedded in the sex-gender order, and as constitutive of that order. Feminist organisation in opposition to established norms and rates of violence against women, and in pursuit of redistributions of power and reconstruction of structures, has to face the matters of political strategy and tactics. This means that feminism must consider the question of its own relationship to state power and violence.

There are good ethical reasons to be sceptical of arguments, whether by governments or social actors, that the good aims of or outcomes of violence can justify it, can make it a bad but justifiable means to a good enough end. For, as I have remarked, the outcomes of violence are never certain in advance, and anyway we know enough about the intergenerational transmission of trauma to understand that the effects ramify through space and across time. We need to focus not on what violence is for, or what it does – that is, not on instrumental reasoning. Ethically and politically we need to focus on what violence is: what, in particular, is involved when a person enters into a practice of violence, whether that is hitting their child, or raping a prisoner, or beating up a migrant. What is involved, that is, for them themselves, as well as for the network of relationships in which they are enmeshed, and for the victim. Only such a truly sociological focus can guide us in political action. I believe that such a sociological focus, such a critical approach to practices of violence, ethically justifies a political stance that takes non-violence to be a default position, and turns our political energies to dismantling structures of violence wherever they rule men's and women's lives.

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