

Gender and Nationalism

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Abstract

Nationalism has long been understood to be a deeply gendered phenomenon. This article provides an overview of some of the key concepts and literature in the study of gender and nationalism, including women; gender; the nation and the intersection of sexuality, race, and migration; and gender within nationalist imaginations. It offers some future research agendas that might be pursued in work on gender and nationalism—namely the gendered dimensions of populism or “new” nationalism.

Keywords: gender; nationalism; sexuality; ethnicity; women

Introduction

In Poland in May 2019, a 51-year-old woman was arrested after posters of the Virgin Mary appeared with her halo in rainbow colors around the central city of Płock. In response to her arrest, the leader of the ruling right-wing Law and Justice political party, Jarosław Kaczyński, declared, “We are dealing with a direct attack on the family and children—the sexualization of children, that entire LGBT movement, gender ... This is imported, but they today actually threaten our identity, our nation, its continuation and therefore the Polish state” (*The Guardian*, May 6, 2019).

In France in 2016, several seaside town mayors banned the wearing of the burkini, a swimsuit for women that covers most of the body, typically associated with Islamic dress. Pictures emerged of three French policemen surrounding a woman on a beach in Nice as she removed part of her clothing, apparently at their behest. Then prime minister Manuel Valls defended the bans, saying that a burkini was “not compatible with the values of the French Republic” (*The Guardian*, August 17, 2019).

In these two brief examples, we can see the centrality of gender to nationalism. For Kaczyński, “that entire LGBT movement, gender” is over *there*, not *here* in Poland—gender and sexuality act to define the boundaries of the Polish nation and what its values are. Similarly, in Valls’s description, the (Muslim) female body becomes a signifier on which what is and is not French can be understood. Gender, and its intersection with the body, race, sexuality, and religion, acts as a marker by which nations represent themselves, assign value, and provide symbols around which to rally.

This article provides an overview of some of the key concepts and literature in the study of gender and nationalism. In the first section I look at the dominant trends in gender and nationalist studies, focusing specifically on work that addresses women, gender and the nation. I then address the ways that gender intersects with violence, sexuality, race and migration in nationalist understandings. I close with some future research agendas that might be pursued in work on gender and nationalism—namely the gendered dimensions of populism or “new” nationalism.

Women, Gender, and the Nation

In the words of Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, “discussions on nationalism have been primarily by *men about men*” (2013, 806, emphasis in original). As a result, they have seen little difference in the way that men and women understand nationalism or the distinct situation of women as nationalist subjects (Thapar-Björkert 2013, 806). National understandings and identities have thus “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope” (Enloe 1990, 44) that treat the male experience as universal and marginalize women’s specific role in the creation and sustenance of national identities.

From the late 1980s onward, feminist scholarship began to challenge this accepted maleness of nationalism studies. Preliminary interventions focused on the role that women have had as both agents and repositories of collective national identity and in bringing to light this silence around women’s positioning vis-à-vis the national project. In their introduction to their path-breaking collection, *Woman–Nation–State*, editors Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1989, 7) theorize five ways that women constitute the national project:

1. as biological reproducers of the members of national collectives
2. as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations)
3. as active transmitters and producers of the national culture
4. as symbolic signifiers of national difference
5. as active participants in national struggles

Although the third and fifth categories suggest a more active role for women, the rest suggest a largely passive and conservative position. While men “represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic)” (McClintock 1993, 66), contrastingly “women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and women’s proper ‘place’” (Nagel 1998, 243). These often reflect traditional notions of femininity and women’s role within a male-headed, patriarchal family unit. A striking example of such a conservative understanding of women’s situation within nationalist sentiment can be seen in a well-publicized letter that appeared in the London *Morning Post* in 1916, signed “A Little Mother.” The letter’s author declared that the “mothers of the British race ... play the most important part in the history of the world, for it is we who ‘mother the men’ who have to uphold the honour and traditions not only of our Empire but of the whole civilised world” (quoted in Elshtain 1987, 192). In dramatic terms, this language illustrates a central tenet of the literature on women and nationalism. Women exist as the standard-bearers of national identity through their position as wives or mothers, with these roles being vitally important in the transmission of national values, particularly to the next generation (Basu 1996; Hansen 1994; McClintock 1993; Nagel 1998).

This extends from practical roles within the family unit to broader discursive and visual symbolism. We might think of references in language to the nation as the *Motherland* (for example, describing India as the *Bhārat Mātā* in nationalist discourse), or women representing the nation in images, cartoons, and propaganda (in, among many possible examples, Soviet-era state publications, the depiction of Lady Liberty in the United States, or the Marianne in France [Mosse, 1985, 91–93]). Sexual violence by men against women during conflict is also a means through which women and their bodies come to symbolically represent the nation (Hansen, 2000), which is reiterated in language referring to particularly destructive episodes within conflicts (the taking of Nanjing by the Japanese in the Second World War was long referred to as the “rape of Nanjing”). Rape represents a “militarized, masculinized nationalism, and it is on a woman’s body that the politics of the nation are mapped” (Thapar-Björkert 2013, 811; see also Peterson 1999, 48).

This sense that nationalism is a masculine terrain in which women have little agency is also seen in the difficulties that female voices and feminist demands have when attempting to be incorporated

within nationalist identity or struggles. Women's rights are often understood to be second in line to the bigger picture of national struggles. In Cynthia Enloe's description, "Not now, later' is the advice that rings in the ears of many nationalist women.... It is advice predicated on the belief that the most dire problems facing the nascent national community are problems which can be explained and solved without reference to power relations between women and men" (Enloe 1990, 62). This can be seen, for example, in the fight for abortion rights within Irish nationalism in the 1980s. The dominant ideology of the Irish nationalist political party Sinn Féin at this point was polarised between "a traditionalist and probably even patriarchal tendency" and "a radical voice which was seeking change and recognition" (Maillot 2005, 111). As one activist from this period described the situation regarding discussion of abortion, "We gradually found that this was damaging the overall struggle, which was more important... If it damages our struggle, then it will have to wait" (quoted in Maillot 2005, 114; see also Thomson 2019). As a result, feminist demands were dampened, with the emphasis remaining on the national question.

As this overview of the literature suggests, and reflecting broader trends across the social sciences, there has been a steady movement from seeing *women in* nationalism to *gender and* nationalism (although the two terms have often been, and continue to be, conflated [Nagel 1998, 243]). This perspective has focused less on where women as individuals are within nationalism and more, as shown in the literature summarized above, on where symbolic ideas of men/masculinity and women/femininity exist and what impact these ideas are having. As such, there has been a turn toward considering the role that men and masculinity play within nationalisms and the types of male identity that are valorized within national projects (Anand 2007; Banerjee 2006; Mosse 1985; Nagel 1998; Sperling 2015).

Nationalist discourse often incites particular types of masculinity, many of which encourage violence. Men can be exhorted to act as "noble warriors" (Elshtain 1987; see also Banerjee 2006) to protect the nation. Indeed, "militarization of ethnic nationalism often depends on persuading individual men that their own manhood will be fully validated only if they perform as soldiers" (Enloe 2004, 108). This often results in misogynist violence carried out on those who are imagined to be "others." In a consideration of the systematic use of rape in the Bosnian conflict and a concurrent discussion of Christopher R. Browning's work on Nazi Germany (2001), Enloe (2004) argues that a particular type of homosociality occurs in nationalist conflict, which acts to bond men together and make certain types of violence acceptable to them.

Simultaneously, much work has explored how women create an identity and work together *as women* in the face of nationalist violence. In many contexts, a feminist identity has emerged in opposition to nationalist violence and as part of a fight for peace. Cynthia Cockburn (1998) explores women's peace activism during conflict in Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Israel-Palestine (see also Deiana 2015; Fearon 1999; Shadmi 2000). However, in focusing on this type of activism there is a danger of reifying an essentialist understanding of women as inherently peaceful (El-Bushra 2007). Indeed, as the letter from "Little Mother" illustrates, women can also incite and encourage violence from within their position as conservative nationalist tropes. Women have played key roles in the violence of the Indian Hindu nationalist movement, including partaking in it themselves (Basu 1996; Hansen 1994; Menon 2011; Sethi 2002; on gendered understandings of women's violence more broadly see Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Furthermore, developing research also considers men as victims of violence (including sexual violence) in nationalist conflict [Dolan 2018]).

The diversity of work outlined in this first section understands that nations and nationalisms always "depend on powerful constructions of gender" (McClintock 1993, 61). These may vary across context, but they are based on "sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*" (McClintock 1993, 61, emphasis in original) and specific understandings of men's and women's roles within the nation. Although this interpretation is given little credence outside of scholarship that focuses on gender, it has underpinned work on gender and nationalism for almost thirty years.

Beyond Gender Alone

Reflecting this turn from women to gender, much scholarship looks beyond the single category of gender. Instead, it understands that gender is “intermeshed in concrete social situations with other social divisions such as ethnic, racial, class, age and sexuality” (Yuval-Davis 2004, 28; see also Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). This understanding of the intersectionality of identity construction originates in African-American feminist thought, from a “need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.” (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). Below, I consider the intersection of gender with sexuality, race, and migration in the context of nationalism.

Nationalism and Sexuality

As the second category of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) suggests, there is a long-standing acknowledgment that “sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent” (Thapar-Björket 2013, 810). Joane Nagel (2000, 107–108) describes a US army photograph taken during the liberation of France in 1944. It shows two French women who had been accused of conducting sexual relationships with Nazis during the occupation. They have been stripped to their underwear, their heads shaven, shoes removed, and foreheads tattooed with swastikas. Similar practices were seen in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, where women accused of relationships with British soldiers were tarred and feathered in public. As Nagel writes, these practices represent “an opportunity to reinforce and reestablish sexual, gender, and nationalist hegemony. By disciplining women collaborators, proper sexual demeanor and approved ethnosexual partners were publicly proclaimed” (2000, 109). The idea of the nation is linked to ideas of sexual purity—often, as in the above cases, a sexual purity that is written on the bodies of women.

In his history of the growth of nationalism in the long twentieth century in Western Europe, George Mosse describes nationalism as a force that “helped control sexuality, yet also provided the means through which changing sexual attitudes could be absorbed and tamed into respectability” (1985, 10). In this sense, nationalism has been understood as heterosexist, in that “correct heterosexual masculine and feminine behavior constitutes gender regimes” that often lie at the heart of national self-understanding (Nagel 2000, 113; Peterson 1999).¹ V. Spike Peterson (1999) reworks Anthias and Yuval-Davis’s (1989) five categories of gender and nationalism to highlight the ways in which heterosexism operates within each. She notes most especially the ways in which women’s social and biological role as reproducers of nationalist ideology is intimately linked to their role within the heterosexual family unit and the control exerted over women’s bodies with regards to reproduction, sanctioning pro- and anti-natalist policies for those populations whom the nation deems to be desirable or not (1999, 44–45). Indeed, such heterosexist policies can be seen in contemporary pro-family and pro-natalist policies in Hungary (see Hammond 2018).

In such nationalisms that are profoundly heteronormative, homosexuality is understood and presented as an aberrant other. In Mosse’s historical exploration, nationalism in the early twentieth century was fundamentally centered on notions of “respectable” heterosexuality and “abnormal” homosexuality: “any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and lack of control” (1985, 16). Similarly, in contemporary contexts, homosexuality can be viewed as threatening or antithetical to nationalist sentiment because it not only “threatens the homosocial male bonding required to forge the nation and defend it militarily” (Mole 2016, 107), but also ideas about the centrality of the heterosexual family and reproduction to the future of the nation. Furthermore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights and identities are often cast as Western, foreign, and potentially corrupting to the nation. Across the African continent, homosexuality has been decried in various countries as being “un-African,” tapping into complex nationalist and postcolonial sentiments (for example, McAllister 2013, on Botswana; Vincent and Howell 2014, on South Africa). Similarly, in Eastern Europe and Russia, “nationalist politicians use the EU’s more liberal position towards LGBT rights to draw a boundary between the ‘decadent West’ and ‘traditional East’ for their own social and political purposes” (Mole 2016, 100; see also

Ayoub and Paternotte 2014) For many nations homosexuality remains a marker of difference—a line in the sand, as in the story that opened this article, where the nation defines what counts as “us” and “them.”

For others however, “‘gay-friendliness’ becomes a key factor in assessing a country’s modernity” (Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016, 2–3). More recent work has addressed the ways in which homosexuality can be incorporated into national identity. Looking at the contemporary United States in particular, Jasbir Puar (2007) argues that there has been a “transition... in how queer bodies are relating to nation-states... from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families)” (xii). She argues that “homonationalism” can now be seen in the ways that the United States, among others, embeds homosexuality within its nationalist practices. As C. Heike Schotten paraphrases her argument, “homosexuality has become complicit with and is now part of the nation” and homonational discourse and practice “both sanctions homosexuality and produces it in sanitized forms, normalizing queerness into patriotism, marriage and consumption, while queering racialized threats to the nation and national security as (for example) terrorist” (2016, 354). Puar’s coining of the term *homonationalism* has been hugely influential, and a wide body of work now addresses the ways in which homonationalism plays out in different contexts (for example, Hartal and Sasson-Levy 2017, 2018, on Israel; Smith 2019, on Canada).

Nationalism and the Intersections of Race, Migration and Gender

Much debate about immigration and multiculturalism in a Western context has often centered on women and their position within the nation state, as in the burkini incident from France noted above. While there has been a long-standing debate within feminist theory about the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism,² more contemporary work explores how discussion of immigrant women’s rights are taken up within nationalist discourse. This conversation often pitches women’s rights as the “good” West versus the rest: “natives are already gender-equal, whereas migrants from non-Western countries are accused of oppressive behavior in terms of such categories as gender and sexuality” (Siim and Stoltz 2014, 247). Sara Farris (2017) advances an understanding of “femonationalism” as explicitly placed at the intersection of gender, the nation, and migration. For her femonationalism is both “the attempts of western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality” but also “feminists and femocrats... framing... Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture” (2017, 4). Farris explores the way in which women’s rights discourse has been used by right-wing political parties in the Netherlands (Partij voor de Vrijheid), France (Front National), and Italy (Lega Nord), in terms not only of “native” women against the “other” immigrant male, but also of immigrant women who are “victims to be rescued, injured and exotic subjects lacking autonomy to whom western countries promise shelter and liberation” (Farris 2017, 102).

The context of Sweden has also been of particular empirical interest given both the stated commitment to feminism on the part of the current liberal government (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016) and the rise of nationalist right-wing politics in the context of the EU-wide migrant crisis. Maja Sager and Diana Mulinari (2018) argue, similarly to Farris, that there is an antagonistic relationship between feminism and racism in the Swedish context. On the one hand feminism is vilified by far-right nationalists but “at the same time, feminist-inspired concerns about gender equality and women’s safety are often mobilised and appropriated for racist and anti-immigration arguments” (2018, 155). Likewise, Ann Towns, Erika Karlsson, and Joshua Eyre argue that, in the context of the right-wing Swedish Democrats party, “our Swedish gender equality” is celebrated “when discussing migration and multiculturalism [but] fiercely contested in all other contexts” (2014, 245). The Swedish case study thus highlights an inconsistency (Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer 2014) seen elsewhere in other right-wing employment of women’s rights discourse. While feminism is to be rejected in terms of the challenge it poses to the heteronormative

understanding of the nation, women's rights are also used as justification for racist arguments for exclusion. Within the context of migration and right-wing politics here—as with homosexuality, as described above—the boundaries of “us” and “them” depend on national context, but gender remains a key marker.

Gender and Nationalism: Future Research Agendas

Considerations of the gendered nature of nationalism are therefore well established, even if this research remains ghettoized within nationalism studies. No other topic is exciting more interest in contemporary political science and international relations than the growth of populism. An overview of these debates is beyond the scope of this article, but populism is clearly linked to an idea of the nation and who merits inclusion within it (Brubaker 2019). The gendered dimensions of this “new” nationalism have yet to be fully considered. While there is a body of work on the gendered breakdown of votes for populist parties and (the absence of) women within them (Immerzeel, Coffé, and Van der Lippe 2015; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017; Mudde 2007; Zaslove, Mügge, and de Lange 2015), there is much less work thinking about the gendered nature of the ideologies that they are espousing as parties and movements. Furthermore, while there has been much recent consideration of anti-feminist and anti-gender equality movements and their global growth (Ahrens et al. 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Norocel 2010, 2018; Verloo, 2018; Verloo and Paternotte, 2018), for the most part this is discussed within a context of the global right and transnational movements.

There has been less thinking about the work this type of “antigenderism” (Korolczuk and Graff 2018) is doing in specific contemporary nationalisms, many of which are largely referred to in the language of populism, and the concepts that nationalism studies might provide to think through them. In the current climate, future case studies abound: President Trump and the United States' move to remove the word *gender* from UN documents, as well as the national discourse around reproductive rights; President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and his rise to power on the back of homophobic lies and misogynist public speech; Hungary's president Orbán and the country's natalist and anti-immigrant policies. I argue, therefore, similarly to Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), that language around the “Global Right” can be too diffuse, and that there needs to be an injection of national, contextual understanding to thinking about how nationalism infects pushback on women's and LGBT rights.

Conclusion

As this overview of some of the key ways in which gender creates, sustains, and underpins nationalism has illustrated, there is a long-held understanding within the literature of women's role within nationalism—most especially as biological and symbolic reproducers of the nation and as vessels in which cultural value and collective aspirations are projected. Yet the literature has also moved beyond an understanding of women *in* nationalism, to gender as a socially constructive force, and the ways in which masculinity and femininity shape roles and ideas within nationalism. The article has also explored how gender works in conversation with other social categories to create national identities, with its intersections with sexuality and migration particularly highlighted here. Future considerations of gender and nationalism will continue to approach the issue beyond a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw 1989, 139) to look at the ways gender works with sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class to construct nationalisms.

We are currently living, as the ancient Chinese curse would have it, in interesting times for the academic study of nationalism. New (and old) varieties of nationalist sentiment are (re-)emerging around the globe. Gender is fundamental to understanding these, and a consideration of it merits greater attention within nationalism studies. The literature outlined here represents key ideas for interested scholars to begin with, as they help to explain and explore how gendered nationalisms continue to shape our world.

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Notes

- 1 Although less focused on nationalism, Adrienne Rich's term "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980) is instructive here.
- 2 This debate, initiated in Susan Moller Okin, Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (1999), has often been seen as presenting a simplistic view of Western society in which women are fully emancipated, versus a backward, patriarchal "Other." An overview of the debate can be found in Baukje Prins and Sawirti Saharso (2013).

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