Gender and revolution in Europe from the 19th-20th century

Gender and Political Violence

19™-20™ CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

The recourse to violence for political reasons combines political engagement, political action, and penal transgression. In the case of women, these elements are accompanied by the transgression of gender norms during revolutionary outbreaks, whether or not they enjoy the same political rights as men. Bringing into tension penal and gendered norms, political violence enables the women who exercise it to assert themselves as political subjects. Revolutionaries, socialists, anarchists, communists or patriots, these women came up against the permanence of gender norms—regardless of the period or the causes that guided their political engagement—as well as the impact of the collective imagination which made the political violence of women into a genuine social enigma.

The barricade at Place Blanche defended by women (May 1871). Lithography, France, nineteenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The barricade of the place Blanche defended by the Parisians.

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Following the work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), political violence has generally been defined as an illegal form of violence, in contrast to legal violence, which is the monopoly of regalian power through police and military forces. To this effect, fighting—in the literal sense of the term—for ideas and engaging in de facto illegality has three dimensions, those of political engagement, political action, and violation of penal rules. In the case of political violence exercised by women, the transgression of gender norms is also present.

The exclusion of French women from full citizenship during the Revolution distanced them from the legal political space (exclusively male suffrage and eligibility, expulsion from the military, closing of feminine political clubs in 1793). This was true despite the demands of Théroigne de Méricourt (1762-1817), who wanted to see women bear arms in the defence of the nation. During the nineteenth century, this prohibition, which was justified by naturalist and moral arguments, was confirmed throughout Europe by the consecration of the strictly masculine model of an armed citizenry. It reinforced the illegitimacy of women’s taking up arms or participating in the revolutionary episodes of the nineteenth century, notably during the People’s Spring of 1848.

However, female republicans, socialists, and anarchists resorted to violence against the established political power by participating in street combat on the barricades alongside men, or by perpetrating attacks. In doing so, they asserted themselves as political subjects, even though the law denied them this status. For example, during the Commune and most particularly during the Bloody Week of May 21-28, 1871, “women fought like lionesses” to defend the Parisian insurrection, sometimes by wearing the male outfit of the federates, as Louise Michel noted upon her return from being deported to New Caledonia (La Commune, histoire et souvenirs, 1898).

In Russia, the female militant nihilists of Narodnaia Volia (The will of the people) increased attacks from 1879 until the assassination of Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881), in which Vera Figner (1852-1942) and Vera Zassoulitch (1849-1919) notably took part. The British suffragettes of the Women’s Social and Political Union, which was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) in 1903, resorted to direct action in the name of feminism by increasing material destruction. Emily Davison (1872-1913) died after deliberately throwing herself in front of the hoofs of the horse of George V (1865-1936), a spectacular and dramatic way of demanding the same rights as men. Political assassination was also a form of action claimed by French militant anarchist women, such as
Germaine Berton (1902-1942), who shot Marius Plateau (1886-1923), the leader of Action française and Royalist supporter, a crime for which she was acquitted. Whatever the diversity of causes and forms of action, these committed women all legitimized the use of political violence in the struggle of both sexes against the oppression and violence of the state, even as they were deprived of political rights. This was theorized in Reform or Revolution? by Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), the Polish socialist who became a naturalized German in 1898, as well as by the Russian anarchist Emma Goldman (1869-1940).

World War Two confirmed the weight of gender norms: although female members of the resistance used arms against the occupier, they often saw themselves assigned to logistical tasks. Although the second half of the twentieth century gradually gave women access to legal violence—by feminizing the military and police—other women who were deprived of civic rights chose political engagement through arms. The struggle against European colonial powers is particularly illustrative of this. The ranks of the Algerian FLN (Front de libération nationale) included numerous female mujahideen (female combatants), including Zohra Drif (born in 1934), Djamila Bouhired (born in 1935), and Djamila Bouazza (1938-2015), who were sentenced to death for committing deadly bomb attacks, and then pardoned at the end of the conflict. The 1960s also saw the return of revolutionary violence on the European continent, against both authoritarian (Spain, Greece) and democratic (Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, France) regimes. The appearance of the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Freedom, 1959) in Spain, the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion, Red Army Fraction, 1970) in the FRG, and the Brigate rosse (Red Brigades, 1970) in Italy, along with the reactivation in 1969 of the IRA (Irish Republican Army), marked the ascendency of mixed armed groups of the radical left, whether they fitted into an independentist or revolutionary perspective.

The female militants of these organizations were generally the subject of very particular media attention, both for their participation in deadly attacks and their theoretical production justifying violence. In the 1970s, West German authorities worried, for example, about the fact that “one terrorist in two was a woman.” The feminine presence in the ranks of these violent groups was seen as the symptom of a disturbing radicalization. Often referred to as “Amazons of terror,” the women who were engaged in these organizations embodied the fantasy of confusion between the masculine and the feminine, and even of a war between the sexes. The social disorder engendered by violent acts was thus aggravated by the involvement of women. The actresses of political violence were of course ceaselessly confronted with the permanence of gender norms, and the impact of the collective imagination which circulated archetypal figures existing only in feminine form: fury, “red virgin” or “black virgin,” pétroleuse, passionaria and especially Amazon were systematically invoked as so many female figures of disorder.

The political violence of women was nevertheless constantly presented as a novelty. This denial of reality was accompanied by their political awareness: they were “influenced” or psychologically fragile women—as the Irishwoman Violet Gibson (1876-1956) was called after her attempted assassination of Mussolini in 1926—or they were followers in love, such as the partner of Jean-Marc Rouillan, Nathalie Ménigon (born in 1957), who was nevertheless the founder of French revolutionary group Action directe. The political engagement of these women was thus made for reasons other than ideological commitment, and without acting independently. This sentimental relativizing was a classic tool in depoliticizing feminine political violence, which in the twenty-first century is still seen as a social enigma, and remains the subject of differential treatment from that of men.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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