A Woman's Place: Reflections on the Origins of Violence

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Ours is a time when the rise of feminism is causing most male-dominated fields to be opened to women. In view of this fact, does there exist a single field in which men are at a clear advantage and women will never be able to play more than a marginal role? This article suggests that such a field does exist, and that its name is violence. Whether we regard violence as the continuation of policy, as Clausewitz did, or as an expression of the human personality, as Nietzsche did, one of its functions is to clearly separate men from women.

A close look at the ongoing feminization of the police and the armed forces suggests that this phenomenon is an illusion. The more women there are in any branch of the police, the further removed from violence that branch is likely to be. The more women in any armed force, the less likely it is to engage in serious military operations. Yet no society can survive without either the use of violence or the threat of it. Therefore, complete equality between men and women will never be realized.

These women! give them a handle howsoever small,
And they'll soon outdo us in the manliest feats of all.
They'll build them navies and they'll come across the sea,
Come like Carian Arthemisia,¹ fighting against me.
Or they'll turn their first attention to cavalry fights,
If they do, I know the issue, there's an end of knights!
Well a woman rides on horseback; lo and behold
Where on Micon's² frescoes fight the Amazons of old!

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Shall we let these women, Oh my brothers, do the same? 
Rather first their necks we’ll tighten in the pillory frame.

Written twenty-four centuries ago, these lines from Aristophanes’ Lysistrata (adapted from Loeb Classical Library translation, 1979) remain as fresh today as they ever were. Women can do anything as well as men. Give them the opportunity to prove it, “and they’ll soon outdo us in the manliest feats of all”; or those feats will cease to be manly, which amounts to the same thing. Are there any exceptions? Yes, there is one. When it comes to violence, women are at a clear disadvantage in comparison with men. Does this fact have anything to do with the origins of violence and its persistence through human history? This essay suggests that it does.

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Why violence? An attempt to list all the answers that have been given to this question would almost amount to a history of civilization. In essence, though, those answers may be divided into two kinds: the instrumental (usually known as “realist”) and the expressive (usually known as “idealist” or “romantic”). The former holds that violence is an instrument for extending or defending one’s interests, i.e., the continuation of policy by an admixture of other means; the latter suggests that violence is an expression of the human personality in which men (more often than women) engage for its own sake. The former is perhaps most closely associated with Carl von Clausewitz and, in our own day, “neo-realist” strategic writers such as Thomas Schelling and Edward Luttwak; the latter, with thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Sorrel, and Ernst Junger.

At first sight, rational thought and passion are poles apart. In fact, however, the distance between them is not as great as one might think. On the one hand, the objectives of violence—the policy which it serves or is supposed to serve—are themselves pro-
duced by, and hence expressive of, the people who engage in it. Even among people who pride themselves on their reason, there is no such thing as a rational objective. There are only objectives that are more or less attainable on the basis of the available means. On the other hand, violence that is totally mindless and does not serve at least some kind of objective is almost inconceivable. The larger the scale on which it takes place, the more organized it is, and the longer it lasts, the truer this becomes.

Thus, even the man who enters a McDonalds restaurant and, using an assault rifle, opens fire on a random group of people and ends up killing himself, usually does not do so in a “blind” fit of rage. Instead he wants to achieve something, be it revenge, or attention, or escape from his problems; the same was true of Samson when he brought down the temple on his enemies and himself. Conversely, even the most “rational” policy will hardly ever find people prepared to fight and die for it if it fails to provide them with opportunities for self-expression as well. As countless wars show, if this is not the case then demoralization and defeat are almost certain (van Creveld, 1991, 161-178). However the proponents of the two views may look down on each other, the instrumental and the expressive are linked. They form but two faces of the same coin.

Presumably the above applies to both women and men. Even the most extreme misogynists have never denied that people of both sexes are capable of formulating objectives and resorting to reason to pursue those objectives. Even the most extreme misogynists have never denied that people of both sexes want to express themselves and can find the highest joy in doing so. As feminists never tire of pointing out, how people of each sex express themselves, and which objectives they pursue, varies from one culture to another; even within the same culture this tends to change over time. Once upon a time—and not such a remote time either—women were supposed to stay at home, perform housework, and raise their children. Nowadays they are more likely to seek employment outside the home, both in order to make money and because of the greater satisfaction that working for strangers, on
tasks set by strangers, and at times dictated by strangers, allegedly offers. Not so long ago, home cooking was considered a second-rate occupation and done almost exclusively by women. Nowadays many men also engage in it and like what they do. As these and numerous other shifts show, there is scarcely a skill, trade, activity, profession, or occupation, which, at some time and place, has not been exercised by at least some women as well as men. Precisely because this is so, the question as to how men differ from women—or, which amounts to the same thing, what men are good for—has never ceased to bother humanity. As one biologist has noted (Diamond, 1997, 97), this is not as flip-pant a question as it appears at first sight. Instead, it has a sound basis in nature. A single male can usually impregnate a large number of females. If, for any reason he fails to do so, he is not needed; once he has done so, he is also no longer needed. From an evolutionary point of view it might be said that males are nature’s way of creating new females, and a rather wasteful way at that (Michod, 1998, p. 41 and Diamond, 1997, 46).

Male dispensability is perhaps most obvious in the case of the mantis and the black spider, whose fate is to be eaten by the females even as they copulate with them. Condemned to die immediately after the one and only opportunity they have to mate (which itself is likely to remain unfulfilled), the fate of male ants and bees is only marginally better. Elsewhere in the animal kingdom nature’s solutions are less radical and less deadly. Limiting ourselves to mammals as our closest relatives, the males of many mammalian species wander off after mating. Unless, and until, they can have another shot at impregnating a female, they take no further part in the propagation of the species. Quite often their low status relative to other males never allows them to mate in the first place, as among horses, deer, kangaroos, sea lions and other species that live in groups consisting of one dominant male, several females, and their offspring. Had they been human we would have said that they are poor bachelors leading an unfulfilled life. Whether male animals understand their own dispensability is unknown and unknowable; still, the fact that young males of
some mammalian species in particular sacrifice themselves to
defend the group against predators suggests that, at some level,
they do. Be this as it may, among humans the fact that “man is
the unfruitful animal” (Nietzsche) is evident to all. In many cul-
tures, it is also hammered in from infancy (Mead, 1949, 68, 72-
73). A girl has to wait only until, following in her mother’s
footsteps, she becomes a mother herself; but what are boys to
do? From time immemorial, the male response to the existen-
tial problem facing them has been to try and restore the balance
by reserving certain fields—feminists would say, almost any field
that matters—for themselves.

In deciding which fields should be so reserved, a certain role is
played by biological and anatomical differences between the
sexes. Thus, no great genius is required to see why men have usu-
ally ended up doing most of the hard physical labor (from the
Latin labor, “suffering”) as well as performing tasks involving long-
distance travel (from the French travaille, which carries the same
meaning). Conversely, why women have usually ended up doing
light work in or around the home is also readily understandable.
As I am writing these lines in the summer of 2000, the street in
front of my house in Potsdam, Germany, has been under repair
for almost a year. Asphalt has been ripped up, canals dug, sewers
installed, electric railway tracks removed and new ones laid, con-
crete cast, and pavement stones put in place in all kinds of
weather, from freezing ice and snow to hot sunshine; so polluting
is some of the work that merely to watch it for ten minutes suffices
to gives one a vile taste in the mouth. In this entire year, I have not
seen a single woman among the dozens of workers performing
the job. Now it so happens that Brandenburg has an unemploy-
ment rate of almost twenty percent. As far as I was able to deter-
mine, though, this fact has not caused a single woman to seek
employment with the construction crews.

On the other hand, the way the fields are selected, as well as the
ways in which the separation between the sexes is carried out,
often has nothing to do with the capabilities of the two sexes.
Thus the hands of women are more delicate than those of men;
but this does not explain why, in most traditional societies, men were the goldsmiths and women the seamstresses. Similarly there is no physical or mental reason why, in Judaism, men should pray and women weave the prayer shawls. Indeed, so arbitrary is the division of labor that in many cases it has to be upheld by elaborate fictions. For example, Australian aborigine women were not allowed to look at certain mountains, the assumption being that this would cause them to abort their babies. Women of Papua Guinea and the Amazon Forest had to pretend not to know that the noises emanating from the men’s house were produced by their husbands blowing specially made instruments rather than by some supernatural creatures. Here and there the fictions apply even to fields that are themselves imaginary, as when the fifteenth century authors of the *Hammer of Witches* explain that female witches are more numerous than male ones because their religious faith is weaker to begin with.

To the extent that it is artificial, the division of labor between the sexes is inherently unstable. Even where it is rooted in biological and anatomical reality, technological progress by supplementing, or modifying or eliminating some kinds of physical work can lead to change; the same is even more true of economic, social, and cultural developments. As a result, sooner or later most female-dominated fields will be penetrated by males and male-dominated ones, by females. For example, in China as well as almost everywhere else, making cloth was originally a task performed by women inside the home for the members of their own families; however, by late imperial times technological developments had turned weaving into a field that was exclusively masculine (Bray, 1997). A somewhat similar process took place in Europe during the early modern age. As spinning and weaving became increasingly market-oriented, they were undertaken mainly by men, with perhaps, women and children assisting them.

Throughout most of history helping women give birth was the province of other women, but starting in the eighteenth century it was increasingly taken over by men. Conversely, during the last
hundred years or so we have seen numerous fields that used to be the exclusive preserve of men (such as administration, book-editing and pharmacy) penetrated by women; usually with the result that the prestige and income of those fields collapsed (Reskin and Roos, 1997, 11-15), but that is another story. These and countless other examples of changing social mores show how hard it is for men to follow Aristophanes’ advice and definitely mark off any field as their own in order to assert their masculinity. And, of course, the more mobile a society and the faster it develops, the harder doing so becomes.

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In view of the above, does there exist any field which women—or, at any rate, the vast majority of women—can never enter? One in which men’s biological and anatomical qualities, particularly their greater physical strength and hardihood, are not just important (as they are in almost all occupations, including the most sedentary ones) but decisive? And which is not affected by technological, economic, social, or cultural change? Again, one does not need to be a genius to see that there is such a field: namely, violence, in all or most of its forms. This is because there is nothing like violence to penalize weakness. It does so quickly; it does so in the most unpleasant way imaginable; and it does so with results which, all too often, are irrevocable.

The fact that women’s bodies are much less suitable for engaging in violence or defending against has, of course, been long understood. All that modern research on the subject, much of which owes its existence precisely to the ongoing feminization of the militaries of the advanced countries, has added are the details; and the details are as follows (Data summarized in Mitchell, 1998, 141-142). The average U.S. female Army recruit is 12 centimeters shorter, 14.3 kilograms lighter, has 16.9 fewer kgs. of muscle, and 2.6 more kgs. of fat than the average male recruit. She has only 55 percent of the upper body strength and 72 per-
cent of the lower body strength of the average male. Since fat mass is inversely related to aerobic capacity and heat tolerance, women are also at a significant disadvantage when performing aerobic activities such as marching with heavy loads and working in the heat. The aerobic capacity of a twenty-year old female is equal to that of a fifty-year old male; at high altitudes, so great is a woman’s handicap that it may affect her ability to reproduce (according to Diamond, 1998, 375). Even when the experiments were controlled for height, it was found that women possessed only 80 percent of the strength of men. Overall, only the upper 20 percent of the women could do as well, physically speaking, as the lower 20 percent of the men.

Thanks to the “superior ability of men to add muscle to their bodies,” (Zorpette, 1999, 48) intensive training, far from diminishing the physical differences between the sexes, tends to increase them still further (Tuten, 1976, 247-248). After eight weeks of such training, male plebes at West Point demonstrated 32 percent more power in the lower body and performed 48 percent more work at the leg press than female ones. At the bench press, the men demonstrated 270 percent more power and performed 473 percent more work than the women. One biologist claims that, if the hundred strongest individuals were to be selected out of a random group consisting of one hundred men and one hundred women, then ninety three would be male and only seven female (Morris, 1977, 239-240). Another has calculated that only the upper five percent of women are as strong as the median male (Presidential Commission, 1991, C-74).

Morphologically, too, women are less well adapted to violence. Thinner skulls, lighter bone ridges, and weaker jawbones provide them with less protection against blows (Morris, 230-232). Many women develop large, pendulous breasts that impede movement and require special protection; as of early 1999, it was reported that the problem of designing brassieres which would be both attractive and comfortable to wear was preoccupying the British Army (Israel Radio, 3/20/1999). Shorter arms make it harder for women to reach for their opponents and hold them, as well as
draw weapons from their scabbards, stab with them, and throw them; to say nothing of the possibility that a different brain structure renders them less adept at guiding or intercepting projectiles (Kimura, 1999, 27).

Women's legs are also shorter and, being set at a different angle, less suitable both for sprinting and for running long distances. Tests among ROTC cadets showed 78 percent of men, but only 6 percent of women, could run two miles in under 14 minutes (Presidential Commission, C-64); watching mixed training in his native Judean hills in 1998-99, this author was able to see first hand how female runners dropped so far behind that they lost touch with the rest of the group. Worse still, all the above mentioned tests and comparisons have been made on young, childless women. Once a woman has given birth, her breasts will almost certainly grow and the difference in her pelvic structure will become even more noticeable. The latter, in fact, is one of the characteristics that enable archaeologists and paleontologists to differentiate male skeletons from female ones.

During most of history, and with very few exceptions, these differences appeared too self-evident for women to participate equally in heavy military training and combat—"to strike down an enemy, to mount guard... to endure winter's cold and summer's heat with equal patience, to sleep on the bare ground and to work hard on an empty stomach," as the Roman writer Sallust, quoting his hero Marius, puts it (Sallust [1963], 120). Usually the closest women came to war was by acting as camp followers. Only a very small number ever participated in combat: whether openly, like Jean d'Arc, or while wearing disguise, as sometimes happened during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and down to the second half of the nineteenth. Even in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, only about 2-3 percent of Red Army personnel were female (800,000 out of 34,700,000; see Suvorov, 1994, 476). Among them, the vast majority served in administrative and medical positions behind the front, whereas others manned anti-aircraft defenses as they did in other countries. Only a small percentage actually carried weapons and fought, whether in the field
or as pilots, in the air. Many of those, looking back on the experience, agreed it had been much too hard on them and permanently harmful to their health (Aleksijewitsch, 1989, p. 161; Noggle, 1989, p. 94).

Similarly, when the U.S. military instituted mixed training during the late seventies, the results became obvious quickly enough—even though the standards set at the bases in question were by no means among the highest. Some standard training devices, such as monkey bars, proved too dangerous for women who did not possess the requisite upper-body strength and had to be taken off them (Rogan, 1981, p. 62). Women lagged behind on road marches and dropped out of group runs, with the result that the former had to be shortened and some of the latter canceled. They also failed to negotiate standard obstacle courses, later modified to make them easier, and were unable to climb a rope. The futility of trying to train women for participation in ground combat is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that most of them could not even throw a hand-grenade to the minimum distance—35 meters—necessary to ensure that they themselves would not be hit by flying fragments (Gutman, 2000, pp. 72-73); notwithstanding the likelihood that, in future urban warfare, grenades will be one of the most important weapons of all.

In trying to do all this, Army women in basic training lost their menstrual periods for months on end (Rogan, 65). At West Point during the early eighties, women suffered ten times as many stress fractures as did men. A 1988 Army study of 124 men and 186 women found that women were more than twice as likely to suffer leg injuries, and nearly five times as likely to suffer fractures as men. Injury also caused women to sustain five times as many days of limited duty as did men. At the Air Force Academy, women visited doctors’ clinics four times as often as men. They suffered nine times as many shin splits, five times as many stress fractures, and more than five times as many cases of tendinitis (figures from de Fleur et al., 1978, p. 615). The Australian Army too found that, even after physical training standards had been reduced, women continued to be injured twice as often as men. In the Canadian
Army only one out of a hundred women who entered the standard infantryman’s training graduated; the one who did graduate had worked as a timber hauler before she enlisted (Gutman, 266).

Nor has it simply a question of meeting arbitrary training standards. Already the very first U.S. Service woman to participate in combat (in Panama), Captain Linda Bray, ended up by leaving the Army owing due to stress fractures in both legs. During the 1991 Gulf Crisis, 207 American female soldiers had to be evacuated from the theater because of orthopedic injuries, and two of them suffered amputation (Presidential Commission, 7/13-15, 1991). Since then, the vulnerability of women both to orthopedic trouble and to amenorrhea (which if it persists can lead to sterility and osteoporosis) has been recognized by the world’s most advanced female medical authorities (Colson et al., 1996). Other female health experts have emphasized the connection between women’s participation in many different kinds of competitive sports and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Festle, 1996, 270ff). This author personally knows one woman who, ignoring physical limitations and training to keep up with her fellow officers in the U.S. Army during a forced march, lost her ovaries as a result.

The above facts should suffice to make even the most determined feminist understand why, during most of history when violence was conducted either with bare hands or else with the aid of edged weapons, women were excluded from it. Whether as individuals or in groups, whether fighting alongside men or against them, women simply stood no chance—with very few exceptions, they would be hacked to pieces. At most women would be made to fight each other to provide a particularly titillating form of entertainment, as sometimes happened in the Roman games. During the Middle Ages, when women sometimes took part in juridical combat, this led to attempts at equalization; for example, the male fighter might be immobilized by being chained to a stake or else put inside a barrel up to his waist.

What applied in the age of edged weapons is only a little less so in the age of firearms. To be sure, a woman with a handgun who
is faced by a man with a handgun is just as capable as he of pulling the trigger—although, men’s larger hands and stronger arms are more suitable for handling heavier, more powerful, weapons. Such situations, however, are rare exceptions. Real-life violence is generally not a duel in which the opponents are carefully positioned, handed identical weapons, and told to use them upon a given signal; in the vast majority of cases, the moment when the opponents confront each other is preceded by some kind of maneuvering. Unless one of them is killed or badly wounded, more maneuvering will almost take place after the shot or shots have been fired. The larger and heavier the arms used, the more ammunition they require; and the more prolonged the violence, the greater the importance of sheer physical strength—and thus, accordingly, men again have an advantage over women. When violence is conducted in the open, in all sorts of weather, and in the absence of creature comforts (as in war), the advantage becomes immense; given that, for women, simply spending any amount of time without access to proper sanitary facilities is an invitation for diseases of the urinary tract and, possibly, sterility.

These considerations explain why, whether in the form of crime—which is simply another name for illegal violence—or war—which is the name violence acquires when it is conducted under the aegis of the law—violence always has been and still is being used mainly by men. It also explains why women, when they do resort to violence against men, often act when the latter are drunk or asleep. Yael could never have killed Sisra, nor Judith Holophernes, if they had not been put to sleep first—no more than Lorena Bobbit could have cut off the penis of her husband John. More important from the present point of view, these considerations may help explain why violence exists and persists in the first place. Regardless of any other functions it may serve, violence is perhaps the single most pointed characteristic that men have to set themselves apart from women; or, which amounts to the same thing, violence permits them to express themselves as men.
If the above interpretation is correct, then what are we to make of the ongoing efforts to feminize the security forces—including both the military and the police—of the most advanced countries? Are we to conclude that the feminist revolution is making headway and that women are now starting to invade "the last bastion" of male control of, and superiority over, females? (See Feld, 1978; Meier, 1996; Enloe, 1983). Or perhaps that violence itself, since it is becoming less useful for differentiating men from women, may be on its way out? While the first of these interpretations has at least some credibility, the second does not. One does not have to study criminal statistics in order to conclude that illegal violence is not about to disappear—in many countries, including some of the most developed ones, it is actually on the increase. The same applies to legal violence; though it may be true, as I have argued elsewhere (van Creveld, 1999, 352-353), that the line between the two is shifting.

Let us begin, then, with the police. By definition, the police are that organization within society that has been constructed and authorized to use violence for internal purposes. American statistics show that one in twenty contacts between the police and the population will involve the use of physical force, and that in each given year one in ten police officers is likely to be assaulted (Bayley, 1944, 71-72).

These facts have not prevented the police forces of most advanced countries from being compelled to employ women since 1970 onward. Following a period of adjustment (while numerous logistical issues were hashed out in the courts), those women are now given training that in most respects resembles that of men; they serve under conditions identical to those of men, and, in theory at least, face the same career prospects as do men. Various Equal Opportunity Acts have not, however, succeeded in eliminating the physical differences between women and men. To the extent that recruiters accept small, weak, women
who would have, had they been men, been rejected, those women are inherently less suitable for violent action than their male-counterparts.

In practice, not all branches of the police are being feminized to the same extent. The place where policewomen are most likely to be found is in support, whether in administration, in communication, or in logistics. Next, many of them, particularly those who are trained in law, accountancy, or the forensic sciences, occupy “white collar” positions; they investigate fraud, carry out laboratory tests, and the like. Here and there women are found in traffic control, whereas others join their male comrades in patrolling the streets and maintaining order. Surveys, though, show that both policeman and policewomen agree that women are less suitable for tasks likely to involve violence. This may explain why they are often assigned to the less dangerous beats; and also why patrols made up solely of women are virtually unheard-of. Women’s relative physical handicap in the face of violence is one reason why most policewomen, when asked about their preferences, say they would rather team up with a man than with another woman. Conversely, men whose experience included joint patrols with women were less willing to repeat the experience than those who had not.

Meanwhile, there seem to be no women in the highly-trained commando units that deal with hostage-related matters. Whenever there are armed criminals to be flushed out, or a hijacked aircraft to be broken into, those who undertake the job consist almost exclusively of men. Considering the equipment that they carry—helmets, bullet proof vests, high power weapons (perhaps with telescopic and infra-red sights added, which considerably increases their weight), and ammunition...this is not surprising; to say nothing of the athletic feats that they are often asked to perform. Many ex-commandos suffer from damaged knees as a result of jumping out of helicopters, descending walls while suspended from ropes, and the like. In cases where women have been asked to perform similar feats, then surely the greatest beneficiaries have been the orthopedic hospitals.
What applies to commando teams applies equally well to the related, but different, kind of police forces that specialize in controlling demonstrations, dispersing crowds, and the like: be they known as National Guard, or Riot Police, or Grenzschutz, or Marechausee, or Carabinieri. More than most police jobs, these tasks require physical strength both because of the nature of the work itself and because the equipment used, much of which is reminiscent of the age of edged weapons, is heavy and cumbersome. Just to wear protective clothing can be wearisome enough, especially if the weather is hot and the exercise violent; simply to prevent soldiers from discarding it often requires special disciplinary measures. To wear it while also wearing a helmet and carrying a shield constitutes heavy work indeed. For this reason alone, rare is the woman who joins such a force; those who do join rarely stay in them for long.

Even to the very limited extent that women are to be found among riot police, they are there not because their numbers are needed but because they are to deal with other women. For good or ill, the idea that women are best dealt with by policewomen—indeed that for a woman to be dealt with by a policeman itself constitutes “harassment”—is one of the most important outgrowths of the modern feminist movement. As a result, those branches of the police whose task it is to deal with female criminals as well as crimes involving women, such as rape, are disproportionately staffed by women. The same, incidentally, is true of the branches that look after juveniles; when U.S. Marshals captured six-year old Elian Gonzales in April 2000, the authorities took care to point out that he had been carried out in the arms of a female officer (CNN, April 22, 2000). Briefly, even within the most modern police forces the ancient link between women and children has not been broken. On the contrary: in them, as in so many other places, all that has taken place is the creation of female ghettos.

Thus the presence of women in police forces, so far from changing the near monopoly that males have always exercised
over violence, merely shows that those forces are themselves replicating the structure of modern society. The less violent the duties of any branch, the greater the number of women that it employs. The more violent the duties, the fewer the women. At the cutting edge—the place where people kill and get killed—there are hardly any women at all. The few exceptions who do show up owe their position not so much to their ability to confront men as to the perceived need to provide women to deal with other women. Although police forces are now supposed to be equal-opportunity employers, these facts are reflected in the promotion system. Physical limitations explain why the more senior a policewoman, the less likely she is to have anything to do with violence of any sort. Since the task of the police is to contain violence by exercising it if necessary, this also helps explain why out of some 15,000 U.S. police departments only one (in Atlanta) is headed by a woman.

If the police are that organization which is authorized by society to employ violence within its own territory, the armed forces receive the same authorization in respect to the territory of others. In them, too, there has been an influx of women. And in them, too, the result has been not so much to increase the involvement of women in violence as to replicate the structure of modern society as whole. In all armed forces that take women, they are heavily concentrated in the support services; the fact that some of those services are currently being privatized (Segal, 1993, 92) merely emphasizes the point of my argument. Consequently, the closer one comes to the cutting edge, the fewer women one is likely to meet. Nor is this surprising. In theory, a woman is as capable of firing a tank gun, or operating its wireless, as a man. In practice, given that tanks tend to shed their tracks and that each link weighs around 50 kilograms, a female crew-member would be a clear liability to the repair work, and an all-female crew a near impossibility. And this is only the beginning: the pack of a modern infantryman, like the arms and armor of an ancient Roman soldier, weighs around 30 kilograms.12
Very often, these facts are reflected by the formal structure of the forces. To take the U.S., for example, at the end of 1998 there were a total of 1,410,100 military slots. Of these, 221,000 were male-only, whereas the remainder—1,180,000—were open to people of both sexes. Soldiers in male-only slots performed difficult and dangerous jobs, mainly in ground combat and in small unit action behind enemy lines. Soldiers in mixed slots often had little to do with war at all. At best they might fire cruise missiles at unresisting Serbs hundreds, or even thousands, of kilometers away. At worst they worked in an environment that is as safe as, though a good deal less uncertain than, most civilian ones; as a Norwegian friend of mine once put it, “the reason why I like the Air Force is because I hate uncertainty”. In fact the stability that many military jobs provide is one major reason why women are attracted to them in the first place; in particular, no other employer offers such comprehensive housing arrangements, child-care facilities, medical insurance, and the like. As repeated surveys have shown, the last thing enlisted women in particular want is to see violent action.

To rephrase my argument, the idea that women, by entering the military, are beginning to take violence out of the hands of men is almost entirely illusory. It is made even more illusory by the fact that those armed forces that do take women are, virtually without exception, those of the most developed Western countries. Thanks to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which has caused the link between victory and survival to be cut, it is now over half a century since any of the forces in question has fought an opponent even remotely equal to itself. In most cases, indeed, so small and weak were those opponents that they could hardly even be found on the map; good examples being the warlords whom the UN forces faced in Somalia and the Albanians and Serbs whom KAFOR is currently trying to bring to heel in Kosovo. As the head of one such country, Jacques Chirac, put it while trying to justify the switch from a conscript force to an all volunteer one: For the first time in a thousand years neither France nor any
of its allies are facing an enemy within a thousand kilometers of their borders (*Le Point*, 2/24/1996, 50).

Against this background, it is no wonder that the French armed forces, like all others, have been feminizing fast. On the other hand, the French unit that is most likely to see action, i.e., the Foreign Legion, remains as closed to women as it has ever been. What is more, in places where there are still wars—as in many so-called developing countries—women are no more taking part in violence than they ever have. For example, out of the thirty-three Tamil organizations that fight the government and each other in Sri Lanka, only one permits women to carry arms (Nordstrom, 1991, 2). The various Serb, Croat, and Moslem militias that from 1992 to 1996 turned Bosnia into a hell on earth included few, if any, women. There were no women among the Serb special police forces that carried out ethnic cleansing in Kosovo in 1999, or the Russian units that attacked and captured Grozny early in 2000. When the Israeli *Knesset* opened all military positions to women in January of the same year, this did not lead to the sudden appearance of women in the bunkers of Southern Lebanon; if anything, it heralded the fact that Israel was admitting defeat and preparing to withdraw from that country. In many places such as Sierra Leone, recruiters who are not bound by the political correctness found in developed countries prefer even 13-15 year old males to women. Thus it might almost be said that those armed forces which fight do not include women, whereas those which include women have long since ceased to fight.

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As should be seen from the above, the near monopoly that men have always exercised over violence is alive and well. With respect to crime, the overwhelming majority of violent acts continue to be committed by—and against men. In both the police and the armed forces, the more women there are in any given slot the less
likely that slot is to have anything to do with violent action of any kind. At most, women have increased their presence in supporting positions such as administration, communications, logistics, and medical services. However, even this is doubtful; given the fact that women have always acted as camp-followers (Manson and Wraghham, 1987, 3-4). As far as operations are concerned, the fields where policewomen in particular have made the greatest inroads are investigating white-collar crime on the one hand, and dealing with women (and juveniles) on the other. In any modern society, both of these activities are important and well-worth performing. By definition, though, neither involves much, if any, violence.

This brings us back to our original question regarding the origins of violence and the reasons why it persists. Violence, I have suggested, is engaged in either for instrumental purposes, to achieve some kind of objective, or as an expression of the self. Either way, it is the method *par excellence* by which men seek to solve their existential problem; in other words, justify their own existence both in their own eyes and, which is as important, in those of women. If this line of reasoning is indeed correct then it helps explain why violence exists and why, notwithstanding thousands of years of history, it persists. What is more, it provides a near-guarantee that violence will always be with us. Or, at any rate, so long as women give birth whereas men do not.

Since violence does not stand on its own but is carried out in society, this fact has important implications for the position of women. From the beginning of history, probably no human society has relied solely on violence to restrain its members and maintain order. And from the beginning of history, probably no human society but has relied at least partly either on violence or on the its threat of violence to accomplish these goals. The near monopoly that men exercise over violence thus serves to ensure that women should not stray too far from their appointed place—which feminists claim has always been subordinate to men. This is true even if the iron fist is concealed in a velvet glove, even if it
is seldom used, and even though it is most often directed by men against other men. Indeed, one suspects that the fear that results from the spectacle of its being used by men against men is one reason why it has to be used much less frequently against women. As Nietzsche, who as usual needed only one sentence to say what others say in ten, put it in Also Sprach Zarathustra: "man was born to war, woman to breed warriors; all the rest is nonsense."

Notes

1Queen of Halicarnasus. According to the anonymous Tractatus de Mulieribus, 13, she joined Xerxes in his invasion of Greece in 480 B.C and successfully commanded a fleet at Salamis.

2Micon was the painter who decorated the Parthenon. He did a painting of Amazons on horseback, which became famous.

3For these and other examples of nature’s treatment of the males see Kevles, 1986.

4One reason, however, may be because some of the materials used by goldsmiths, such as mercury, were known to have a bad effect on women’s health.

5If, at one time, East German female athletes seemed to be approaching male performances this was because they were males; Tagesspiegel, ZDF Radio (Germany), 5/4/2000.

6In fact, for fear of them being attacked, even in the most “progressive” modern military very few women stand guard.

7On warrior women in disguise see above all Dekker and van de Pol, 1989.


9For details concerning Roman female gladiators see Briquel, 1992.

10This and the next two paragraphs are based on Jones, 1986.

11This particular piece of information pertains to the U.S. and comes from Lunneborg, 1989, p. 26.

12For data about the soldier’s load, ranging from classical times to the early twenty first century, see Junckelman, 1991; Duffy, 1988; Greider, 1998.


References


Le Point, 2/24/1996, p. 50.


