Secessionism and Separatism Monthly Series: "Gendering Secession" by Jill Vickers

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H-Nationalism is proud to publish here the sixth post of its "Secessionism and Separatism Monthly Series", which looks at issues of fragmentation, sovereignty, and self-determination in a multi-disciplinary perspective. Today's contribution, by Professor Jill Vickers (Carleton University, Ottawa), deals with the link between gender and secession. Please feel free to participate in the discussion by commenting on the piece.

The high cost in human lives and resources of wars involving nationalist separation may make my focus on women's participation in separationist projects in this text puzzling. Most narratives portray women as passive victims of male violence and few consider women's active participation in separatist projects. But some gender scholars' (Walby 1997; Vickers 2008) theorize that it is precisely such participation that established women's claims to citizenship and facilitated their political agency in unexplored contexts. Women's invisibility in mainstream nationalism theories reflects the field's preoccupation with violent separatism[1] and 'gendered'[2] assumptions that women invariably avoid violence. Their absence from nationalism theories parallels women's long exclusion from public affairs in Euro-American nation-states. Even when their absence is noted, women's experiences of nation-state making are assumed to be the same as men's and so no separate account is needed. But a growing gender/nation literature overviewed by Walby (2006) shows that women's experiences differ from men's in Euro-American nation-states and also vary in other contexts. The universalization of the Euro-American context led to the assumptions that: all women are alienated from all nationalist projects; feminism and nationalism are ideologically incompatible; and women who participate in nationalist projects are 'dupes'. But the Euro-American pattern isn't experienced everywhere or at all times. Such insights promoted much empirical research about how nationalist phenomena are 'gendered'.

Women's participation in separationist projects also has been invisible because theories and narratives focus on the Europe's dominant *state-nations* that historically excluded women from public affairs. The liberal model of the modern nation divided society into public and private spheres and privatized women by denying them access to public affairs, citizenship and the right to transmit their nationality to their children or spouses. This is first evident when 'legislators of the new French Republic defined popular national sovereignty in terms of masculine citizenry' (Sluga 1989, 90). Moreover, the duration of women's exclusion – from the late 18th century to the 1970s – produced historical legacies that still marginalize women in national politics. In her 1997 survey of gender/nation relations in Europe, Kaplan found that women were excluded and remain alienated from most Euro-American nationalist projects. However, Hroch (2006) identifies a second path to nation-statehood and women were active participants in the separationist projects in Europe's smaller, peripheral nations that gained independence by separating from the dominant state-nations and empires. To succeed, such projects had to mobilize whole communities, including women, who participated in hopes of better lives for themselves and their children. Their participation gained women citizenship simultaneously with men. Many anti-colonial struggles also often mobilized whole communities albeit with more mixed outcomes. Indeed, Byzdienski (1992) concludes that more

women are mobilized by nationalist movements than any other form of politics.

The basic claim this text explores is that nationalist projects are 'gendered' – i.e. women experience them differently than men. Separationist projects are also 'gendered' and their impacts on the sex/gender regimes that govern family power relations differ from those in state-nations. In state-nations, the political exclusion and the legal and economic privatization of women often was imposed by passage of new, repressive family law e.g. the *Napoleonic Code* (1802/4) that sanctioned women's inequality and men's dominance. In state-nations, liberal nationalist ideology made both nationality and citizenship essentially male (Walby 2002).[3] But in the nations that followed Hroch's (2006) second path to nation-statehood, participating in separationist movements let organized women use the citizenship they gained to reform discriminatory family law and achieve long-term positive outcomes as in Finland and Norway. However, while participation in anti-colonial projects to separate former colonies from empires often won women the vote simultaneously with men (Jayawardena 1986), other outcomes were more varied. This was especially the case when modernizing nationalisms were replaced by anti-modern nationalists determined to impose 'authentic' culture through control of women's bodies and behaviour.

While some scholars consider 'gender' purely discursive, it also has material aspects. Nationalist projects are 'gendered' *if and to the extent* that they affect women differently including the impact of women's organizing capacity. Consequently, how separationist projects are 'gendered' is an empirical question. Walby (2006: 118) theorizes that 'gender' and 'nation' 'each…constitutes the other' through the 'economic development' she believes drives changes in (sex) gender regimes. But other variables also play a role, especially whether the nationalism involved is modern or anti-modern.[4] Sex/gender regimes range from very restrictive to egalitarian and often vary between majority and minority populations. Since it is well established that political agency requires sexual and reproductive freedom, geographic mobility and occupational choice, it is clear that agency depends on the extent of women's bodily integrity and personal autonomy. Hence, the vote isn't the watershed between 'traditional' and 'modern' sex/gender regimes many gender scholars (e.g. Walby 1997) assume.

My initial understanding of how separationist projects are 'gendered' came from observing Quebec. While the anti-modern nationalism dominant before 1960 excluded women, after 1960 many women participated in the new modernizing separationist project despite its early propensity for violence. Some women formed 'feminist-nationalist' groups (Leclerc and West 1997) linking demands for the reform of Quebec's civil code with the nationalist-separatist cause. That is, modernizing sex-gender regimes and supporting women's political agency, i.e. demands for gender equality, became part of nationalists conception of Quebec's 'distinct society'. Further, de Sève (2000) maintains that women's active participation steered Quebec's separationist project away from violence. By the second referendum in 1995, the Quebec Federation of Women (FFQ) was promoting independence on feminist grounds that it would enhance gender equality. So, while Euro-American women see feminists as internationalist and pacifist, many Quebec feminists are nationalists and support separation believing an independent Quebec will improve their lives. Indeed, women's participation has produced a more feminist Quebec with programs such as low-cost childcare not available in the rest of Canada.

Similar feminist-nationalist alliances focused on separation also exist in a dozen other cases, e.g. Catalonia and Scotland. Moreover, many successful democracies began with separation (Chapman

and Roeder 2007: 687).[5] Walby (1997) theorizes the moment of nation-state formation offers women the best opportunity for gaining citizenship and despite its dangers,[6] separation is the point when women became able to use their political agency. But *when* nation-state formation or separation occurs matters because it affects women's capacity for organizing and influencing the creation of new institutions. So, women are more likely to gain political rights when their participation is needed for separationist projects to succeed. But to gain political agency, they must be well organized and to shape new political institutions, women must participate in them. Many polities in which women are now best represented as legislators originated in nationalist-separationist projects in which women participated.

Walby theorizes that women only support national projects when they see them as promising better lives. I extrapolate that *women are more likely to support separationist projects if they think more rights and a more egalitarian sex/gender regime will result*. Moreover, relations between feminism and nationalism are 'crucially mediated by militarism, since men and women often…have a different relationship to war' and 'militarism is often…an integral facet of a national project' (Walby 1997:196). But the prospect of violence doesn't necessarily discourage women from participating: women fought for Greek independence (Vickers and Voloukos 2007) and on both sides in Finland's struggle for independence from Russia (Vickers 2006). Women aren't inherently pacifist, but their experiences with war and militarism differ from men's. For example, in the Euro-American state-nations, women's exclusion from military service denied them eligibility as citizens. Violence is a risk factor that affects women's willingness to participate in separationist projects. Although women used force to protect their families in many circumstances, they rarely participate in formal military organizations. Finally, militarism is usually anti-feminist.

In democratic separation projects, winning votes is necessary to persuade both the encapsulating power and international agencies. In the movement to separate from Sweden, Norwegian feminists organized a women's referendum despite the fact that women lacked the vote. Feminist-nationalists in the Philippines used a similar strategy. This helped legitimize both the separationist project and women's participation in it. More recently, however, communities seeking autonomous nations face opposition from those who think globalization makes national decision-making less important because important political issues must be handled internationally. But globalization *disadvantages most women* and *minorities* (Druhvarajan and Vickers 2002) making women more suspicious of it than many men. While men migrate to cities, and other countries for work, most women must stay at home to care for children, elders, the sick and disabled. Often separationists are seeking self-determination for local communities distant from the center of state-nations or empires that lack the resources to contest power at the center. This may give women good reasons for supporting separationist projects to create smaller states in which they *can* participate**.** Even when such projects don't gain full independence as in Scotland and Quebec, women's participation influences policies and restructures political institutions.

Separationist projects with high risks of violence may offer little opportunity for women to develop their political agency. But opportunities often are no better in state-nations or empires held together by force. Anderson (1983) maintains that liberal theorists of nationalism exaggerate the violence involved in separationist projects and ignore the violence dominant state-nations and empire use to defend their territory against minority nations' efforts to achieve self-determination. Marx (2000) documents the violence and ethno-religious 'cleansing' civic state-nations use to eliminate diversity.

Moreover, the privatization of women and the long disassociation of citizenship and the public sphere from gender and minority values also characterize state-nations. This makes it important to consider the opportunities separation projects offers to women in the diverse contexts of nation-state formation and change.

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[1] I use the neutral term *separation* because secession and separatism usually imply violence.

[2] 'Gender' is often a synonym for 'women', but here it signifies activities associated with each sex.

[3] My work (Vickers 2006; 2008) builds on Hroch's (2006) analysis. I include white settler colonies, e.g. in Latin America, Canada, the US, etc. to form a composite Euro-American model.

[4] Vickers and Voloukos (1997) document how, after separation, Greek nation builders first adopted the French 'civil' model then added the 'ethnic' model resulting in an unstable hybrid.

[5] None of the 'separatism literature' pays any attention to 'gender'.

[6] Those who oppose separationist projects usually have their own states and 'civic nations'. Those who wish to separate from state-nations are condemned for their 'ethnic nationalism'.