

Review - Handbook on Gender and War

Written by Caroline Cottet

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CAROLINE COTTET, OCT 3 2016

Handbook on Gender and War
Edited by Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, and Jennifer Pedersen
Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016

Last year, the clothing brand Diesel launched a provocative advertisement campaign. One set of images, featuring two people in khakis, and three in other military-inspired clothing, claimed white on black: "no military experience required". Another poster from the same campaign featured two people embracing, both wearing the same pullover with a camouflage pattern, a star patch on one arm, five coloured stripes on the other, and two different animals on the wrists. The most easily identifiable animal of the two was a tiger, strangely reminiscent of the LTTE symbol. Next to the image, we are told that "this ad is gender-neutral". This juxtaposition of "neutral" gender identity next to heavily military-inspired clothing was unsettling.

Can such a blatant representation of militarisation, and by extension war, be gender-neutral? Contributing authors to the *Handbook on Gender and War* answer, no. In artfully piecing together the most recent contributions to the field of gender and war studies, the book demonstrates that all aspects of war are heavily gendered. From the conduct of war, to its aftermath, passing through its impact and resistance to war, those four themes constitute the sections into which the chapters are organised. Together, they build a fairly complete picture of the current state of the research area. More than that, the edited collection successfully displays the wealth of scholarship that feminist researchers in gender and war have built over the last few decades, hence making it no longer acceptable to think of war without its gendered aspect.

The *Handbook on Gender and War* is without a doubt a greatly welcomed anthology in the field. While the literature is growing at an increasing pace, the advent of a handbook cements the stature of gender and war as a respectable and independent research area in the academy. Ideal for students and researchers, the book covers a variety of subjects, all written about by leading researchers with great nuance. This includes well-known themes, such as gender and terrorism, gender-based violence in war, feminist antimilitarism, and gender and transitional justice, all building onto the existing scholarship while presenting the topics in a new light. Newer additions are also present, like gendered politics in private military security companies, gender in war reporting, and girl soldiers in demobilisation and reintegration processes. The handbook, therefore, demonstrates that research in gender and war is quickly evolving, and is keeping pace with the new trends in academia.

However this isn't the only way in which the *Handbook on Gender and War* is representative of the field itself. To begin with, the first part of the book overwhelmingly focuses on American and British armed forces, broadly speaking. This of course has to do with the disproportioned number of deployments in the last century; but it also mirrors the development of gender and war studies, which is usually considered to have begun in the 1980s with the works of Jean Bethke Elshtain (1987) and Cynthia Enloe (1983 and 1989), both American scholars. The field itself has sprung out of American, and then British, universities and institutes. Thus the field mainly looks upon the world from that point of view. Nonetheless, the scope broadens as the reader progresses through the book, to include a great variety of geographical loci in the sections three and four. This includes for example anti-war activism in Palestine and Israel (chapter 18), in Liberia (chapter 19), and in Japan (chapter 21). This progression interestingly mimics the spread of the field itself.

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Another characteristic of gender and war studies that is visible through the book is the use of innovative methodologies and sources. Pop culture is very much present, and serves as a backdrop to, for instance, Linda Åhäll's chapter on the narrative of women as killers in war (p.47). Conducting a comparative textual analysis of the film *Zero Dark Thirty* and the UK's ban of women in combat in 2009 and 2010 is a research method that is welcomed in feminist studies much more easily than in other areas. Åhäll's contribution sits right next to chapters relying on classic anthropological research methods, including participant observation, interviews of key informants with varying degrees of formality and focus groups, and collaborative research activities (chapter 9), on qualitative thematic textual analyses of news reports (chapter 14), and on a discourse analysis coupled with some quantitative data (chapter 3).

Finally, as many "women studies" departments changed their names to "gender studies" at the turn of the millennium, the meaning of "studying gender" changed and broadened. This also changed what a feminist agenda could look like. This is reflected in the handbook, with the inclusion of masculinities, though shy and mainly confined to the presentation of military masculinities. Although many parts of the book challenge the stereotypical roles played by women in war, and discourse around them, much fewer *explicitly* question those of men in war. For example, part three on gender and opposition to war could present a more nuanced view of masculinities by overtly including men who oppose war – as has recently been advocated by Rochelle Davis (2016) in her analysis of the war in Syria and male refugees who chose not to fight. Not to mention the history of conscientious objectors to conscription. Keeping masculinities, and particularly military masculinities, as a comparative other, against which the panoply of female roles is contrasted, doesn't sufficiently challenge the monolithic gender roles that are often imagined in war.

The *Handbook on Gender and War* is thus representative of the field with all its past glories and current challenges. A feminist agenda in war studies must also highlight varieties and fluidities in gender identities and their expression in war, beyond those of women. This isn't to shift away from women as the central point, which they ought to remain. Rather, it is to provide a bigger picture of the ways in which gender and war have been historically presented in a very particular way that does not necessarily correspond to lived experiences. Also, as an inclusion of a greater number of gendered identities is emerging in the literature, not limited to women and men, so the field will most likely diversify. The handbook remains nonetheless an important stepping stone for students and researchers, and successfully supports ongoing discussions in gender and war studies. It is an important read for anyone studying or working in the area; or those who are simply curious as to why a militarised pullover by Diesel cannot be considered gender-neutral.

References

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