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**Contesting Borders. Towards a Gender Analysis
of Secessionism. Historical and Political Science
Perspectives**

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Contesting Borders. Towards a Gender Analysis of Secessionism

Historical and Political Science Perspectives

Gülay Çağlar and Jessica Gienow-Hecht

ABSTRACT

The present essay asks how the principle of collective self-determination translates into imagined borders and identities. To this end, we examine, first, gender as an analytical category for border studies; second, the literature on gender and the history of separatism; third, two possible solutions, one historical and contemporary case studies, drawn from the US-American Civil War as well as Catalan separatism. We argue that self-defined minorities who present liberal projects pose a gendered challenge for liberal societies, and, often, threaten to turn the liberal script intentionally upon itself. That said, the historical record shows that this mechanism entails neither a destruction of the nation nor the script. Instead, gendered challenges have the potential to become an asset of strength, depending on how actors define, deal with and solve the plot.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

This essay reflects upon the question of how the principle of collective self-determination translates into imagined borders and identities. That research question is at the core of the project “Gender, Borders, Memory” (GBM), in which we analyse the specific case study of Catalan secessionism.

The desire for secession constitutes a profoundly nationalist project. Secessionist movements historically seek to redraw territorial borders and to establish self-determination within the new jurisdiction. This goes along with processes of othering – the demarcation of an “us” and a “them” – by which actors define and produce community

membership. Borders, then, were and are at the centre of nationalist projects, not only as lines of territorial demarcation, but particularly as markers of distinction. Both carry a great deal of symbolic meanings about membership and belonging (Newman 2011; Paasi 2011; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

Secessionist movements often mobilised (and continue to do so), “national identity narratives” (Paasi 2011: 23). They did and do so by drawing on repertoires of memory which foster a shared sense of history and identity, and which legitimise their cause for independence. The broader literature on secessionist movements addresses exactly this interconnectedness of territorial boundary and the politics of belonging. Authors probe the ways in which collective identities are constructed and emotions of belonging are mobilised. Studies typically focus on identity constructions along ethnic lines. Yet, as Maria Rodó Zárata (2020: 608) notes, “[d]ebates on nation, self-determination, and nationalism tend to ignore the gender dimension, women’s experiences, feminist proposals on such issues”. Indeed, when it comes to gender and the history and politics of separatism, the field remains markedly bare. We find this surprising because there is, after all, plenty of separation both in history and in the present. Regions, cities, and nations split up, secede, and divide all the time. What is more, gender politics frequently play a significant role in these processes.

We believe that Gender and Borders constitute principal if seemingly contradictory categories of

¹ We would like to thank Tobias Klee and Johannes Heß for their valuable inputs in synthesising the project results, which have been instrumental in the creation of this Working Paper.

the liberal script. The individual freedom to cross borders collides with the state's policy to manage, secure, and even shut down borders. Gender, in turn, encourages an understanding of borders that does not merely frame the same as lines to cross or block but as historical and contemporary areas and situations to live in, live with, and live around, as well as a way to examine narratives of belonging and un-belonging. Complicating the analysis of borders as immaterial and using the case of Catalonia's quest for secession, the project exposes how narratives linking borders, gender, history and liberalism have moulded and continue to shape both arguments for and against territorial and mental secession.

The project GBM asks how the principle of collective self-determination translates into imagined borders and identities. At GBM, we have come to believe that self-defined minorities who present liberal projects pose a gendered challenge for liberal societies at large. When they do, in a gesture to German poetry, the liberal script turns upon itself, so to speak – not coincidentally but intentionally. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1797 well-known poem, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice"'s panicked exclamation "The spirits that I summoned / I now cannot rid myself of again" often serves to connote a person who has invoked a tool, a mindset, or even an identity (magic in the poem) that goes out of control and eventually turns against him or her.

In this paper we aim to take stock of the project and show how gender, history, and memory can be conceptualised as analytical categories to be used in analysing secession. How can we make sense of secessionism as national projects from a gender perspective? What role did and does memory play? To this end, we provide examples from both the contemporary and historical secessions.

The paper is structured as follows: We first start with introducing gender as an analytical category.

Second, we reflect upon the literature on gender and the history of separatism. Third, we discuss what we perceive as a solution to the evident research gap that our project can fill, by drawing both on two case studies, one historical and one contemporary: divorce discourses during the US-American Civil War and gendered discourses of Catalan separatism. These case studies show case how gender and memory can be utilised as analytical categories for analysing secession. Finally, we reflect upon what the meaning of the interplay of gender in the history of separatism, and what such an introspection can do for us at GBM, in the Research Unit Borders and in the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)".

2 GENDER AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

The topic of nationalism, Jill Vickers (2006: 85) states, seems to be rather an object of "fear and scorn than of systematic study". Feminist scholars emphasise the negative repercussions of nationalism on women. The predominant view is "that [nationalisms] deny women agency, use them as reproducers, and manipulate them as boundary markers between nations controlled by men" (Vickers 2002: 250). In this context, there are important scholarly contributions on the constitutive character of gender in the construction of nationhood. This literature particularly focuses on the role of gender in, for instance, the biological, cultural, and symbolic reproduction of the nation (Anthias/Yuval-Davis 1983; Yuval-Davis 1996). What is missing is a systematic inquiry of gender/nation relationships and a thorough examination of secessionism through a gender lens.

In response to our research question outlined above, we put forth the argument that our analytical gaze changes depending on the ways in which we theorise and conceptualise the category of gender. That means, the object of analysis

and the questions we ask in regard to secessionism change depending on how, exactly, we employ gender as an analytical category. We want to introduce three ways of conceptualising gender as an analytical category – that is gender as an empirical category, gender as a structural category, and gender as a process category. Our aim is to illustrate how we might use each of these conceptualisations for making sense of gender/nation relationships and to systematically analyse secessionism.

First, using gender as an empirical category basically seeks to make women or (feminist) actors visible. Such analyses are descriptive in character and focus on adding women into the picture. There is some literature referring to gender dynamics by explicitly focusing on women as actors, for instance, within movements of national liberation in the Global South (Herr 2003; Kwiatkowski/West 1997). In these studies, women do no longer constitute mere passive subjects in secessionist movements and victims of violence. Rather, they are active agents who challenge larger political systems of inequality and struggle for liberation. Using gender as an empirical category here, is valuable on a descriptive level, though it does not explain the gendered patterns of secessionism.

Second, conceptualising gender as structural category means to account for “gender [as] a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and [as the] primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986: 1067). Understanding gender as a structural category means placing gender relations as a relationship of inequality at the centre. The assumption here is that the category of gender as a social construct “shapes the formation and institutionalisation of all social relations” (Dölling 1999: 20; own translation) and always produces gender-specific hierarchies. This means that the category of gender is regarded as

a principle of social order or as a “factor that generates inequality” (Dölling 1999: 20; own translation), which justifies the social marginalisation of women as a social group. Analysing secessionism by using gender as a structural category aims at explaining the reasons for and the structural conditions of gender inequalities and oppression inherent in secessionism. Another important aspect of a structural analysis is to examine the conditions under which women engage in nationalist projects. Important questions in this context are, for example: What connects feminist projects and nationalist projects at a structural level? What do these projects identify as oppressive and what kind of power relations do they fight against? In other words, here the attention shifts from a description of how women engage in national projects to the analysis of structural conditions for women’s engagement in national projects and secessionist movements.

Third, gender as a process category focuses on processes of becoming and meaning-making. This entails the ways in which we become gendered subjects and how gendered meanings find themselves assigned to political objects. The focus in regard to secessionism is the focus on the constitution of a shared national identity as well as gendered representations of secession and national identity. Much of the work to date is based on constructivist and post-structuralist theories. Understanding gender as a process category means not simply assuming gender-specific asymmetries as given, but getting to the bottom of how they are created. The focus here is on questions about the construction of gender and the discursive production of national identities as gendered identities. Such analyses therefore probe the ways in which gender identities are produced in the course of national projects.

In our project, we are interested in both the gendered meanings that are assigned to secession and the factors that link feminist projects and

national projects. The first employs gender as a process category and is exemplified by the historical case of the US-American Civil War. In the case of the US-American South during, we can retrace the impact of both female actors as well as divorce-related discourses on visions of secession. The latter focuses on gender as a structural category. Scholars such as Ranjoo Sedou Herr (2003) distinguish between national projects that rely on exclusionary visions of ethnic homogeneity and national projects that are emancipatory liberation struggles, for instance in post-colonial contexts. Vickers, in turn, shows that “[w]omen are more likely to organise to insert feminist goals into national projects if the project is open and pluralistic, than if it is committed to militarism/fascism” (Vickers 2006: 95). The case of Catalonia (see below) is particularly interesting in this context. Feminist activists employ an emancipatory frame when arguing for independence from the colonial and patriarchal oppression of Spain. Thus, they envision Catalonia as a gender equitable and just nation.

3 RESEARCH REVIEW

Research into the interplay of gender and separatism in history and memory studies has concentrated upon specific areas or separatist movements, particularly in a post-colonial context. Most prominent, it seems to be, are three regions: Africa, India, and the Balkans. The way in which they are being dealt with, however, is very different. For Africa, much of the literature focuses on the nationalist trope of patriotic motherhood in separatist movements in a postcolonial context (Makana 2017). Another strand of research examines how women contribute to political “cohesion” in secessionist movements (Mougoué 2018).

Even more prominent in the literature appears to be India: a dissertation from 2008 looks at the intersection of social transformation and

the militarisation of a secessionist movement in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir by drawing on women’s subjective experiences. Seema Shekhawat (2014) outlines how Kashmiri women supported the movement even though they were not at the frontlines; She argues that although military conflict can alter gender norms for a limited amount of time, it does not necessarily revolutionise them. Others have explored Tamil separatism and how women try to reshape gender politics in a secessionist context (Ramaswamy 1998). Recently, comparative research has emerged that draws attention to similarities in different locales, such as, for example, Indian and Irish separatist movements in the context gender analysis (O’Halpin 2023).

A great deal of literature has also been produced on the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the 1992 to 1995 war in Bosnia. Some of it focuses on narratives of feminised victimhood in a male political environment, yet also how these notions have been challenged by women themselves (Helms 2013). Others have focused on women’s resistance to nationalist agendas (Stojsavljević 1995). Julie Mostov (1999) focuses on gender in a more abstract form and argues that the ethnocentric politics of national identity “eroticise” the nation yet also employ strategies to uphold repressive gender norms and a patriarchal culture.

What these projects have in common is that eventually, the focus is typically more on nation-building than the secession itself. What divides them are the way gender is addressed here: In Africa, we find much research on symbolic motherhood; in India, the focus is on women’s militarisation; in Yugoslavia, in turn, historians have been more experimental when applying theories of gender to local conflict.

4 CASE STUDY: THE US-AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

We start by exemplifying the role that gender plays in assigning meaning to secession and national identities. One of the most prominent separatist conflicts in world history interweaving gender and the nation, is the US-American Civil War, from 1861 to 1864, often titled the “War of Secession”. It pitched the Confederacy (the South) that sought to secede against the Union (the North). Its central contention regarded the expansion of slavery to western territories that were newly admitted to the territory of the United States.

While women played a key role in the conflict, curiously, there is very little research on women on the side of the Confederacy. What there is appears somewhat predictable: In DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook’s book “They Fought like Demons. Women Soldiers in the American Civil War” (2002), the authors question the notion of women as non-militant contributors on both sides of the Civil War. According to them, in numerous instances, women disguised themselves as men and picked up weapons to fight themselves. Marilyn Mayer Culpepper’s book “Trials and Triumphs. Women of the American Civil War” (1991) more broadly covers women’s experiences of the Civil War and how their roles changed due to the war effort. Yet, there is little research into how women’s experiences of the Civil War and how their roles changed due to the war effort. Finally, there is little research done relating gender to race and the nation. Jennifer Fluri and Lorraine Dowler (2004) have examined women’s agency in white separatist movements in the United States. They study, in particular, the Ku Klux Klan since the 1920s and women’s role as “reproducers of the white nation” (Fluri/Dowler 2004: 69).

To conclude, the literature concerned specifically with women and their roles in separatist movements is scarce. Most studies are concerned with

a certain area or conflict but, as yet, there seems to be no overarching theory of women’s roles in separatist politics or movements in general. Connections between similarities in movements are also frequently missing. Some, more generalising ideas can be found whenever the literature about secessionist movements intersects with discussions about nationalism and nation-building, yet these are generally more broadly applied.

Our research so far, left us puzzled. Why, we thought, is there so much research done on gender and the nation in history yet so little on gender and separatism? Thus, we decided to change the parameters and look for related themes and topics. Inspired by our research on the history of Catalan separatism, we became interested notably in the juxtaposition of separatism, divorce, and the family as a metaphor for the nation.

In “The Divided Family in Civil War America”, Amy Murrell Taylor (2005) looks at something we have often taken to be mere rhetoric, i.e. the idea of the Civil War as a war of relatives turning against each other. The War, Taylor (2005) argues, turned husbands against wives, daughters against fathers, brothers against sisters. She argues that for participants, this imagery was meaningful because it transformed the conflict from something abstract into something very real and tangible. Tellingly, Taylor (2005) studies more than 200 families in five different border states (borders between abolitionist states and slaveholding states): Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri. What she finds is that the ambivalent and often contrasting national loyalties of men and women challenged the corner stones of the very foundations of what marriage and family in the United States, in the 1860s, were all about: Authority. Emotion. Honor. Hierarchy. Deference.

The surprising find is this: On the one hand, there were family ties and loyalties that simply broke because they could not withstand the pressure of

divergent political views. In the majority of cases, however, marriages and families did not break up. In fact, these “ligaments”, as Taylor (2005) calls them, were able to resist the pressure of political separatism over many years. What is more, and in many cases, they even served to reconcile political opposition.

And there was something else: the image of divided marriages and divided families became a metaphor for Civil War-Americans to make sense of a completely unprecedented era and a set of truly overwhelming questions: How could a nation be one if it was cut into two? How could citizens of one and the same country turn against and kill each other? How come that US president Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” – title of an address delivered in June 1858 – became such a powerful metaphor for parties on both sides of the divide? We know from newspaper accounts and popular literature how Unionists in the North and Confederates in the South repeatedly used the imagery of marital dysfunction and family scandal to project themselves as a nation state that was divided and, at the same time, still united.

In the context of our project, we found this one of the most important insights: Family historians have pitched and continue to portray marriage and the family as something very meaningful but also very private. Take any Wikipedia entry regarding a prominent person, and you will see how authors and editors always distinguish between “early” and “personal” life on the one hand, and professional career, accomplishments, and legacy on the other. That is even more true for historians writing in the nineteenth century than for those who focus on the 20th century. It is curious, indeed, most of all because none of us function in that way, least of all prominent historical actors.

The meaning of this for our research at GBM, then, is this: What we can learn from the history and memory of divided marriages and families in the

US-American Civil War is that in times of secessionist desire, gender and family metaphors craft a common language that help individuals, couples, families steer their way through the maze of meanings related to separatism, belonging, and loyalty. Put differently, gender norms, marriage norms, and family norms have the potential to be the nexus between both the very symbol and the reality of the world that people live in. In other words, the Gender gaze makes separatism and conflict, its challenges, its confrontations, real and tangible and comprehensible.

In the 1860s, marriage and family both served as a metaphor and a reality, that showed the entanglement of culture and politics, the public and the private, the separation and its consequences, on the level of the home and on the level of the nation. Here is an example: The state of Kentucky was a slave state on the border to the South. Kentucky chose to remain in the Union (one reason was that Abraham Lincoln himself was from Kentucky and that the Republican Party had been on the ballot in Kentucky in 1861). We know today that women in Kentucky had quite unique ideas about nationalism and slavery. We know that their *Weltanschauung* was very much framed by race order but that it was also very much tied to patriotism, the nation, and the cause of the Union – a nation undivided. Many Kentucky women were reluctant to go to war and convinced that a compromise could somehow save the Union. One could even argue that they thought they could have the cake and eat it, too: act like a separatist and simultaneously exhibit state loyalty to the union.

When the Civil War was over, when slavery was abolished, when a new post-slavery economy kicked in, Kentucky women were extremely disappointed. Above all, they felt betrayed by the Union’s postwar strategy and what they regarded as injustice. The memory and long-term ramifications of this perceived betrayal were significant: After the Civil War, the vast majority of Kentucky

women began to identify more and more with the South, with the “Lost Cause”, and with utter resistance to all things northern. Families remained divided for decades. One feud, between the Hatfields and the McCoys, became legendary, received national attention, and eventually landed before the Supreme Court in 1888. Which is another way of saying: Kentuckian women and Kentuckian families became and lived the separatist cause after the war of secession had been lost (Willet: 2008).

5 CASE STUDY: CATALAN NATIONALISM AND THE CATALAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT²

Conceptualising gender as a structural category, we now turn to the case of Catalonia. After Spain had lost its last colonies to the US in 1898, Spaniards experienced anxieties about losing their manliness (Cleminson/Vázquez García 2007: 176–177). Parallel to the fears surrounding the collapse of the empire arose the fear of national disintegration. Emergent Catalan nationalism was the main object of these fears (Miguélez-Carballeira 2017: 110). The proposed solution consisted in the reinvigoration of Spanish masculinity (Miguélez-Carballeira 2017: 113). Such a masculine reinvigoration necessitated, of course, a strong leader who would preserve national unity. This ideological climate eventually gave rise to Franco. Spanish fascism represented an overcompensation both for the loss of empire and the loss of masculinity.

The memory of this loss of masculinity is still very much present in Spain today. The Spanish constitution, result of a negotiated transition with Franco’s military and ideological elite, affirms the indissoluble nature of the Spanish nation (*la*

indisoluble unidad de la Nación española). It also recognises its internal diversity only as “nationalities” (*nacionalidades*), clearly subordinate to Spain (Guibernau 2014: 12). When the Spanish Constitutional Court rejected the redrafted Catalan Statute of Autonomy, in 2010, the descriptor “nation” for Catalonia emerged as one of the most prominent sticking points (Guibernau 2014: 16). Although the use of masculinity as a shorthand for power appears less overt now, the images continue to be present, especially on the Spanish right. VOX, the most radical party on the Spanish right, likes to style itself as the virile, masculine defender that stands against the invading forces of gender, communism, and, crucially, the Catalan independence movement (Enguix Grau 2021: 232). While it may be the most overt voice of anti-Catalanism, VOX is certainly not the only one: the *Partido Popular* (PP) was part of the legal challenge of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy. In short, to Spanish conservatives, possession of Catalonia is an integral part of Spanish identity.

While Spain maintained a discourse over the loss of its masculinity at the end of the 19th century, Catalan nationalists created their own notions of masculinity. After 1898, Catalans gained a new self-confidence, according to which Catalonia could provide precisely the masculinity Spain was lacking (Krauel 2013: 148). Catalan intellectuals formulated a new version of nationalism, charged with raw Catalan virility. This nationalism styled Spaniards as less European, therefore racially inferior to Catalans, thus problematising migration to Catalonia from other parts of Spain (Domingo 2012: 17–19). At the same time, Catalans sought to detach themselves from the shameful memory of failed Spanish imperialism, presenting themselves as the spearhead of a new, Catalan-led Iberian empire (Krauel 2013: 159–160). This particular recipe for nationalism very much resembled that of other patriarchal European nations, notably those with a history of imperial decline.

² We want to thank Johannes Heß and Tobias Klee for the synthesis of the project which is the basis of this Working Paper.

With the loss of the Spanish Civil War, Catalan nationalism found itself defeated. The Franco dictatorship suppressed the Catalan language and Catalan organisations. Many Catalans (and others who had fought in the Spanish Civil War) were executed or went into exile (Guibernau 2004: 50; Lladonosa 2013: 91). The modern Catalan independence movement often commemorates this history of suppression in the same breath as previous historical instances of Spanish violence against Catalan identity, such as the Reaper's War (from 1640 to 1659), which figures prominently in the region's national anthem; or the Siege of Barcelona during the Spanish War of Succession (from 1701 to 1714), nowadays the Catalan national holiday. These two emblematic symbols both focus on Catalan defeat as well as loss of autonomy. They do, however, not actively recall nor venerate the imperialist origins that allowed Catalan nationalism to flourish at the beginning of the 20th century. In many ways, such a position is emblematic for the selective memory of nationalisms. As Ernest Renan noted in his 1882 treatise "What is the Nation?": memory as well as forgetting are both key for the forging of a nation.

This dual structure of remembrance and forgetting is crucial for explaining the positioning of feminist and LGBT+ actors within the contemporary independence movement. Notions of gendered power have long formed the basis of how Catalans and Spaniards conceptualise their relationship with each other. The memory of suppression allows the Catalan nationalist movement to ally with feminists who see in "machos" Spain's suppression of their region, a parallel to their own suppression as women at the hands of the patriarchy. In recent years, other liberatory struggles, such as LGBT+ groups, have also allied with the pro-independence camp, for the same reason. The language of emancipation from a masculine oppressor unites feminist and nationalist groups and allows Catalan pro-independence feminists

to conceive of their oppression in intersectional terms (Rodó-Zárate 2020: 17–18).

The case study shows that memory and gendered notions of the self and the other lie at the heart of nationalist movements, and, in doing so, legitimise the existence of the nation as a community. For much of the 19th and 20th century, the images underwriting this legitimacy were masculine in nature (Nagel 1998: 249). Today, stateless nations seeking statehood must find new ways of legitimising their claims (Arrighi 2019: 293), far away from the lingering imagery of imperial masculinity. Feminism, LGBT+ rights, and other progressive policies may constitute a powerful tool to that effect. But each one requires amnesia – forgetting the nation's masculine past in order to draw in those movements who desire a genuine transformation of society.

6 CONCLUSION

What do the findings mean for the interplay of gender, memory and separation, in both history and the present? Oxana Shevel (2011) has studied the challenges of memory in divided societies, very much along the lines described above for the state of Kentucky. Shevel (2011) compares the Spanish case post-Franco with the Ukraine post-Soviet Union and asks to what extent a nation state requires a unified national memory. Her findings in respect to Spain are quite remarkable because what she finds is that the Spanish state refused to craft a common historical memory for Spanish society. Instead, it officially recognised the pluralism of personal and family memories: a "democratisation of memory". The important part here is this: Shevel's (2011) concerns are both theories of nation building as well as social realities of commemoration. Her plea, and one that we share, is that based on the historical record national unity often assumes but, really, does not need a shared collective memory nor even a

cultural nation. Unity in a liberal democracy, that is, can be built on many other foundations (Shevel 2011).

This echoes the key argument at which we have arrived in our project. We do believe that self-defined minorities who present liberal projects pose a gendered challenge for liberal societies at large. And when they do, the liberal script turns upon itself, so to speak – not coincidentally but intentionally. At the same time, the historical record shows that this does not yet entail a destruction of the nation nor the script. Gendered challenges can be an asset as much as a force of destruction and it is up to the actors on the scene how they define, deal with and solve the plot.

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