Nations and gender identities

Contemporary efforts at nation building have often taken their most conspicuous characteristics from the way in which they have drawn the relationship between men and women. At their most extreme, they have been heavily marked by violence and abuse against women. For example, the subjugation of women in Afghanistan was an important part of the attempt of the Taliban to build a fundamentalist Islamic regime, and also a key issue around which opposition to the regime was mobilised in the West. Similarly, the systematic rape of women by combatant groups in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda was a widespread means of asserting the dominance of one national grouping over another, and also a mobilising theme for their opponents. These extreme examples are both material and symbolic. They are brutally material in that they involve the infliction of physical and mental injury, and they are pointedly symbolic in that they involve the conspicuous demonstration of power and domination. Similar processes can be observed in other less extreme cases, where women have been compelled to undergo oppression or diminishment in various degrees as part of the process of building or rebuilding a nation during or after conflict. Several commentators have pointed out that there was a significant reduction in women’s freedoms in France at the end of the war, in contrast to the importance of their roles in the Resistance movements, and in contrast with their ostensible political emancipation, symbolised by the granting to women in 1945 of the right to vote. The re-emergent French state accumulated symbolic power through taking control of the ways in which national identity was constructed, subordinating all other
identities. The ways in which gender identities were constructed formed an important part of that process.

Feminist theory has long held that the subordination of women is a constitutive function of the state. The anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan and the socialist theorist Friedrich Engels, in the nineteenth century, argued that the state emerged at the end of the prehistoric era, as a result of the ‘historic defeat of women’, who had hitherto dominated human societies. This view became an integral part of Marxist theory in the twentieth century. From a different perspective, Simone de Beauvoir accepted this account of events, but considered that it failed to explain why the invention of bronze tools should have led to women’s subordination. In her view, the status of women as ‘the Other’ in the eyes of men must already have been established before the state was invented to embed it in law and political authority. More recent theorists have focused on whether the subordination of women is an inevitable part of the contemporary state. Catherine MacKinnon has argued that the state reflects the unequal power relations between men and women in society. It embodies this inequality in its framework of laws, where male norms implicitly define even the most general standards and rights. Pierre Bourdieu shared the same view, and suggested that masculine domination depended on a structure of symbolic violence, in which sexual inequality was constructed by social relations but presented as a fact of nature. He suggested that male domination had become a ‘doxa’, a form of discourse that seemed beyond challenge, was reproduced in all the institutions of society, and was internalised by individuals.

It is an open question whether male domination is a necessary condition for the existence of state power of any sort, or whether it is a contingent condition that can potentially be overcome. In either event, it seems clear that male domination is the de facto condition of states up to the present day. In these circumstances, it is likely, though perhaps not inevitable, that when the existence of a state is under threat, its defenders will seek to shore up its position by reinforcing the subordination of women. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence also suggests that the attitude of women is likely to be mainly acquiescent. Symbolic violence is the process by which individuals are impelled to defend the legitimacy of the field in which they are operating. They thereby reinforce the position of the dominant forces within the field, even though they themselves occupy a dominated position within it, and may be personally disadvantaged by maintaining it. Hence, women may rally to the defence of their state and institutions even though, in the process, they may be further subordinated to men.