

Benevolent philanthropy, co-optation and identification

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“Take up the White Man’s burden/Send forth the best ye breed”. This is the exordium, the opening, of Richard Kipling’s well known poem, “The White Man’s Burden”, written in 1899. It was a response to the Spanish-American war and the heavy burden of Great Britain to save the world’s others. Since the end of the “cold war” this burden has mainly been the USA’s burden, manifested in an extreme manner after September 11th 2001. Today some few women too “have taken up this burden”. As part of a neoliberal project for global gender equality and gender security under Pax Americana? One may wonder.

The rhetoric of benevolent philanthropy discussed in this essay will consider how feminist ideas and strategies have created favorable environments for the introduction and development of new concepts of gender equality in general and when it comes to issues on war and peace in particular. This will be illustrated by an approach to the UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, born in October 2000, and after decades of pregnancy among millions of women. The text was described as “a watershed political framework that makes women — and a gender perspective — relevant to negotiating peace agreements, planning refugee camps and peacekeeping operations and reconstructing war-torn societies. It makes the pursuit of gender equality relevant to every single Council action, ranging from mine clearance to elections to security sector reform”.¹

The resolution was first and foremost meant as a challenge to the “womenandchildren” as-helpless-victims-construct in war/peace narratives. Women should now, *pace* this resolution, be seen as active agents in the peace building (public) arena. The women-as-agents-rhetoric in the text, would or could it become more than “mere rhetoric?” One year after the birth of the resolution, “the war on terror” — Operation Enduring Freedom — began, so did the Western “liberation of Afghan women”. The burqa, rather than the women as agents, became an integral part of the rhetoric. The spectacles of the veiling served to reinforce and bolster the “saving/liberating Afghan women” trope.² And the resolution as a “watershed political framework” thus seemed to be absorbed the day after its birth.

The rhetorical approach in this article is limited to only a part of the

¹ UNIFEM, 2002.

² See Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women really Need Saving? Anthropological reflections on Cultural relativism and Its Others”, *American Anthropologist* 104, 3 (2002): 783-790; K.J. Ayotte and M. E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil”, *I NWSA Journal*, 17, 3 (2005): 112-133; Berit von der Lippe, “Taushetens kjønnete retorikk”, *Materialisten*, 3 (2007).

Norwegian war rhetoric, dressed in benevolent philanthropy, at a time when the burqa as spectacle had disappeared and Operation Enduring Freedom had lasted five years. While the rhetoric in the USA had to balance between a neo-conservative and a liberal feminized rhetoric,³ Norwegian female representatives of the power elite were dancing on a different rhetorical tightrope. They had to reach a public characterized by equity feminism, i.e. a feminism focused on incorporating women into existing male-dominated (market) liberalist ideology.⁴ At the same time, they had to avoid identification appeals with president and “the commander in chief”, George W. Bush, in particular, and the US rhetoric in general.

The focus is on the rhetoric of the former Norwegian Minister of defence, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, and how she, after five years of the Western saving the world’s “others”, first and foremost Afghan women as “the others”, used Resolution 1325 as a vehicle for gender equality commitment in Afghanistan. Changes in the physical world often demand rhetorical changes, and various rhetorical strategies are needed. The aim is thus not only to indicate how a gendered rhetoric of benevolence is applied arbitrarily, but also how gendered war rhetoric is easily replaced by traditional “gender neutral” rhetoric. I will attempt to show, or more modestly, indicate, how difficult it is to avoid the hegemonic war rhetoric and how easy it is to mix the hegemonic war narrative with gender awareness.

The essay contains four parts. The phenomenon of co-optation is introduced in the first part, as a common discursive and rhetorical practice that easily absorbs the meanings of the original concepts to fit into the prevailing political priorities. To contextualize this phenomenon, Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of *doxa* will be included, supplemented by Kenneth Burke’s understanding of rhetoric and identification. In the second part I will outline some aspects of Norwegian and Nordic liberal feminism(s), thereby indicating the specific context of Norwegian war rhetoric and gendered liberation. Finally, I will question what is at stake at the global level when gender awareness is made visible, co-opted and/or silenced.

Rhetoric, co-optation and identification

According to Bourdieu,⁵ the *doxic* room is a room whose doors are never opened. It indicates “thoughts which are thought through”. For the political elites concerned with foreign policy rhetoric and public deliberation their

³ See T. Dubwryny, “First ladies and Feminism: Laura Bush as Advocate for Women’s and Children’s Rights”, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 84, 28, 1 (2005): 89-100; Laura Flanders, *The W effect. Bush’s war on women* (New York: The Feminist Press and the City University of New York, 2004).

⁴ Berit von der Lippe and Tarja Väyrynen, “Co-opting Feminist Voices for the War on Terror: Laura Bush Meets Nordic Feminism”, *European Journal of Women’s Study* (forthcoming 2011).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practices* (London: Cambridge, 1979).

strategy is to avoid a discussion of potential political themes; this they seek to achieve by elevating a part of the symbolic system to the correct opinion, and by preventing people with blasphemous views from having access to tools which might be used to contest existing definitions of “reality”. Bourdieu’s point is that in any society, there are topics never questioned because someone wants to present “something” in many cases the most important aspects of societal structures and the control of these — as something given and natural. A similar *doxic* room might also be present — in its absence (because often not perceived) — in organisations, corporations and institutions.

Co-optation is a fertile means to contain and maintain large areas of silences. It is a practice that both absorbs and neutralises the meanings of the original concepts to fit into the prevailing political priorities or the taken-for-granted. Because concepts, such as gender equality, allow for multiple conflicting interpretations, spaces are created for empty declarations. Gendered concepts can easily be co-opted and mixed with hegemonic discourses, hegemonic war rhetoric included, whereby they are used in ways not corresponding to the original goals of those who formulated them.⁶ In the co-optation process, the concepts (for example “gender equality” or “liberation of women”) are not necessarily rejected. Today most people pay lip service to gender equality as a fundamental principle of democracy and social justice. Co-optation becomes therefore all too likely and gender can easily be shrunk to the use and juxtaposition of “he” and “she” in official acts. Further, gender concepts are not just neutralized or absorbed, they might in fact also work against mobilization for real changes. It is difficult to mobilize for something already “being there”.⁷

According to Kenneth Burke, we are inclined to communicate and cooperate with groups who share or pretend to share the same interests, thereby achieving a degree of what he calls “consubstantiality”, an area of “overlap”, real or perceived, between individuals, groups, organizations or nations.⁸ When it comes to aspects of persuasion as are found in what Burke calls “the magic” of class relationships, ethnicity, religions, it might be evident that the classical notion of clear persuasive intent is not an accurate fit for describing the ways in which the members of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another. Competing interests are often more important than differences over beliefs or attitudes. Conflict is not the same as controversy or communicative breakdowns. I

⁶ Maria Stratigaki, “Gender Mainstreaming vs. Positive Action - An Ongoing Conflict in EU Gender Equality Policy”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 12, 2 (2005): 165-186.

⁷ Stratigaki, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 165-186.

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: Berkeley, University of California Press): 22-55.

therefore suggest that “magic” may be replaced by power and elements of coercive persuasion.⁹ Closely linked to power is the question of gender.

Striving to form ourselves in accordance with communicative norms that at least to some extent match the cooperative ways in the society, institutions or corporations, we are, in some way or other, acting upon ourselves persuasively. There is an apparent link between gender issues and the importance of issues during negotiation processes. Projecting one’s vision with sufficient authority may for women require some unlearning of former practices and a display of behaviours regarded as masculine.¹⁰ At another and more fundamental level, values and goals concerning security issues and strategies are seldom gender neutral; muscles and strength, force and aggressivity, control and conquest are seldom associated with female characteristics. Within organisations such as the UN, only when negotiations are bogged down and become boring, do spaces open for gender or “female participation” topics.¹¹ To raise gender related issues when negotiations are tense, is seldom a rhetoric appealing to persuasive identification.

There is “an outer voice” acting upon our (often) multiple “inside voices”, and the interests of the individual and the nation, group, corporation or organisation may often tend to overlap. We thereby may come to see our own reflection(s) in the social mirror of the collective.¹² One aspect of identification, as part of identification strategies, is the well known and often subtle workings of antithesis: When allies who would “normally” dispute among themselves, join forces against a common enemy — and the enemy is seldom gender neutral. Such application of rhetoric serves to deflect criticism, including issues of gender and power. When this inducement goes unnoticed, the power of identification is fulfilled.

Aristotle and his followers were not interested in offering advice to slaves and women on how they could agitate against their masters. Their rhetoric was mainly a rhetoric for “insiders” who shared values and interests, a rhetoric considerably less applicable to those seeking to penetrate “hostile circles”, circles some women today identify as theirs — “mirroring their own reflections?”

⁹ H.W. Simons “Persuasion in social conflict”, *Speech monographs/Speech Association of America*, 39 (1972): 227-247.

¹⁰ Su Olsson, “Gendered heroes: male and female self-representations of executive identity”, *Women in Management Review*, 17, 3-4 (2002): 142-150.

¹¹ Torild Skard, “Gender in the mainstream – acceptance of women and gender equality in different United Nations organizations”, *Forum for Development Studies*, 36, 1 (2009): 155-192.

¹² Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 22-55; and see also George Cheney, “The Rhetoric of Identification and the Study of Organizational Communication”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 96 (1983): 143-158.

Norwegian liberal feminism(s)

Norwegian (and Nordic) feminism is largely characterized by equity feminism. Women are seen to be inherently similar to men, and gender equality has been the driving force for the feminist movement. Male dominance and power have been criticized and one of the goals has been women's equal participation in the domestic political sphere. The state ideology is that of a welfare state with strong labour unions and labour parties. Official feminism coincides to a large extent with that ideology.¹³ Safety nets and free health care are part of this ideology and are taken for granted.

However, the tradition is not without its fissures. The dominant Norwegian gender equality policy is also called a "balance equality" because of its focus on a 50/50 or sometimes 40/60 balanced relationship between women and men in power positions. Gender justice is mainly considered synonymous with this type of gender balance. It is the balance which is the main concern, and the question of equality with whom or with what (interests) is seldom raised.¹⁴

The notion of women's "responsible rationality" was also developed and used in Nordic feminism. Responsible rationality was pitted against men's instrumental rationality. It was argued that neither instrumental nor value rationality capture the specific women's approach to situations of conflicts of interest. Women have a tendency to identify with those in need of care, and thereby, develop responsible rationality. Women's everyday experiences drive them towards care that is a rationally developed standpoint rather than an emotional reaction.¹⁵ In short, there is a trace of difference feminism in Norwegian feminism, although the official feminist ideology is strongly geared towards gender equality. Nordic/Norwegian responsible rationality can, though, often take the form of "patronizing rationality" when it seeks to save "brown women from brown men".

Ideologically, the links between Norwegian foreign policy and NATO and the USA have been strong. <Solidarity>, <internationalism> and <multilateralism> have been the ideographs around which the foreign policy rhetoric has been established in the post-Cold War era and in whose name actions are performed. The foreign policy master narrative cherishes the idea that Norway, together with the other the Nordic countries, have a long standing tradition of participation in UN-led peacekeeping activities, conflict prevention through political dialogue, mediation and high levels of overseas

¹³ Marit Teigen and Hege Skjeie, *Menn i mellom. Mannsdominans og likestillingspolitikk* (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk Forlag, 2003).

¹⁴ Cathrine Holst, "Balansefeminismens begrensninger", *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning*, (<http://kilden.forskningsradet.no/c35640/artikkel/vis.html?tid=46684>)(2007).

¹⁵ von der Lippe, *European Journal of Women's Study* (2011).

development aid.¹⁶

What characterizes Norwegian foreign policy rhetoric is the story of remote geographical position which, according to the hegemonic narratives, has historically permitted the state to remain aloof from international engagement. The decision to enter into military alliances was taken after World War II, i.e., with Norway's NATO membership in 1949. Solidarity, internationalism and peace-keeping operations have been the ideographs around which the Norwegian foreign policy rhetoric has been established and in whose name actions are performed. According to this policy rhetoric, Norway never takes part in war or warfare; it happens, though, that the country takes part in military operations. The narrative cherishes the idea that Norway has a long-standing tradition of participation in UN-led peace-keeping activities, conflict prevention through political dialogue, mediation and overseas development aid on a large scale.

Benevolent philanthropy - co-optation and gender blind identification

The step from responsible rationality and benevolent altruism to patronizing rationality is a short one and easy to take. The rhetoric used by the Minister of defence from 2005 to 2009, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, may illustrate this. Her speech in Brussels 2006 to the European Union (EU) members on security issues serves as an illustration of promoting self-evident truths within an apparently harmonious security discourse. She had to balance soft and hard rhetoric carefully. In front of this audience her rhetoric may be called loyalty rhetoric, rhetoric similar to the rhetoric of a brave and trustworthy pupil addressing a group of highly respected teachers.

Underscoring the need to improve NATO-EU relations, NATO-EU cooperation and the value of the strategic partnership, she approaches security challenges and the complexities of peace-keeping and peace-building, paying specific attention to the war in Afghanistan: "First, the international community must coordinate civilian efforts in a better way. Today the civilian aspects of our engagements, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, are often fragmented and uncoordinated. This means that the overall results are less effective". Catastrophes for Afghan civilians are presented as insufficient coordination of "civilian efforts;" they are simply a coordination problem and the problem is so far "gender-neutral".

Strøm-Erichsen, after panegyrically embracing all Western-dominated institutions, somewhat surprisingly turns to the UN Resolution 1325, she concludes by first praising the EU decision to promote "gender equality and gender mainstreaming in crisis management, in line with UN

¹⁶ Christine Ingebritsen, "Norm Entrepreneurs. Scandinavia's Role in World Politics", *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37, 1 (2002): 11-23.

Resolution 1325". She then assumes the role of the teacher and tells the audience: "This is important progress. Norway puts great emphasis on the UN resolution and has adopted a national action plan to promote gender issues". A complete harmony is at last established as she urges the EU members to conform with Norway and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, emphasising that operations should be gender-sensitive at all levels. Her ethos now seems taken for granted, representing a country known for its gender equality policy.

This rhetorical use of this resolution may be seen as a subtle form of feminist co-optation, constructed along the following reasoning: Norway participates in Afghan peace operations. The UN Resolution 1325, stressing the importance of women as participants in peace-building, the Norwegian authorities thus tend to avoid any question relating to warfare and killings as part of all wars. Norway is therefore always participating in peace-building and establishing gender equality in general, as well as for Afghan women in particular. The Norwegian Minister is promoting both gender equality issues and the Norwegian interpretation of participation in warfare. This rhetoric is also a subtle way of silencing the voices of Afghan women. The gender mainstreaming is so main-streamed that the UN Resolution easily fits into most war stories, no matter what is referred to.

The danger of co-optation is greater in large organisations and particular if there is a high level of normative legitimacy for the general principle underlying the original policy goal. "Today", Stratigaki notes, "European politicians of all parties pay lip service to gender equality as a fundamental principle of democracy and social justice".¹⁷ In the long run co-optation can even produce a counter-effect and a negative impact. Co-optation works against mobilization and pressure by interested parties and individuals by using the original as well as the transformed concept as an alibi. Or, as Stratigaki writes: "It is difficult to mobilize against a claim that appears to be one's own even if it no longer is used to mean what one intended".¹⁸

The co-optation outlined above, is also indicative of her rhetoric in public deliberation and seemed for some time to be rather successful. The necessity to keep dancing on the feminist rhetorical tight rope, has, however, been a real challenge, at several levels. One such challenge has been the identification aspect, and simultaneously a non-identification with the Bush regime. In an article titled "Why do we send soldiers abroad",¹⁹ she writes: "We who every day are working with foreign issues, we know why we are in Afghanistan. For us it is thus easy to forget that it might not necessarily be so for others". Her ethos is now somewhat threatened and she has to stand up as one-who-knows-better-than-others, which is seldom the way to success.

She continually reminds us, as she does in this article, that "... we

¹⁷ Stratigaki, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 165-186.

¹⁸ Stratigaki, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 165-186.

¹⁹ Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, "Hvorfor sender vi soldater utenlands?" *Dagbladet* 3.18 (2007).

take part, not in war, but in military engagement”, because “we want to contribute to peace and conflict resolution”. This is, she continues, “a moral duty and a natural part of our tradition of peace building and stabilisation in the world”. Norway’s aim is to “prevent weapons of mass destruction to come into the hands of terrorists”.²⁰ The humanitarian rhetoric, rhetoric of democracy and freedom, is the red-cross-thread here, running together with traditional gender neutral or gender blind rhetoric. Marginalization of the feminist rhetoric is probably a must since hearts and minds after years with warfare are difficult to reach by an explicit interpellation to “hearths and minds” by a rhetoric of “saving and liberating Afghan women”.

In rhetoric antonyms often become synonyms: the transformation of peace into war — peace means war and war means peace — is common and nearly classical in all war rhetorics. Norwegian peace rhetoric is upheld despite a non-traditional Norwegian foreign policy — NATO’s and Norway’s out-of-area-warfare. “Together with 25 other members of NATO Norway has promised to take part in security and peace building in Afghanistan. Thereby we will also strengthen our common freedom, culture and civilisation”,²¹ Strøm-Erichsen also tells us in this article. Her eulogy is thus not only foregrounding an identification between Norway and NATO, but also identification with an almost homogeneous and benevolent Western culture and civilisation as such. Doing this rhetorical manoeuvre, she is able to include the USA, without, though, explicitly including the superpower in her panegyric of “our engagement”. The invisibility of Afghan women is compensated by an increased focus on NATO; a NATO, apparently independent of the USA, and closely linked to the abstractions of freedom, security and peace building; thus an implicit reference to the UN Resolution 1325.

For rhetoric to be successful, the audiences must experience that their autonomy is upheld and simultaneously experience identification with the rhetorical interpellation. There are indeed multiple rhetorical tightropes to balance. Identification is about being equal and different, unified and separated. Identification with the USA was difficult to establish with George W. Bush in power. Identification with NATO, ISAF and UN is on the other hand strong.

Identification and the rhetoric of silence

There are many silences, particularly in war rhetoric, and I concur with who writes: “Just as we use words to obfuscate meaning or to buy time, we use silence, sometimes productively, sometimes not — just as we use speech”.²²

²⁰ Strøm-Erichsen, *Dagbladet*, (2007).

²¹ Strøm-Erichsen, *Dagbladet*, (2007).

²² Cheryl Glenn, “Silence: A Rhetoric Art for Resisting Discipline(s)”, *JAC* 22, 2 (2002): 261-92.

The question is not only whether speech or silence is the most productive, effective or appropriate. Rather, the question is about a rhetoricity of purposeful silence when it is self-selected or when it is imposed. When silence is imposed on us, it may be professional suicide, and for some, it may be a question of life and death. Some Afghan women broke the silence years before the terror attacks of 2001, knowing they put their lives in danger. But nobody listened. For a short period after September 11, a rhetoric of protecting and liberating Afghan Muslim women (and children) was a suitable rhetoric for the hegemonic discourse.²³ Co-optation thus occurs at different levels.

The authority of the dominant group and its silences are, as outlined above, not always imposed by force on individuals, but offered to them in subtle ways. The authority in this case was forcibly imposed. It was not offered to Afghan women (or men) in any subtle ways. The twist is that hegemonic discourses, according to Gramsci,²⁴ are offered as something you already agree with, as a reflection of your own desires, needs and wants, and in which you can effortlessly recognize yourself. Hegemony thus seems to offer what you already want anyway. Gramsci is, in his way, adding aspects of power to the Burkean “magic”, and in a subtle manner he also indicates how the phenomenon of co-optation may occur.

The common benevolent philanthropy indicates that it is often easier to identify with oppressed women than with strong and potent women — women who also might be in need of support; support based, however, on solidarity as equals. A mirroring of oneself as benevolent philanthropist and liberator seems to be an identification appeal which men and women alike easily embrace. Potent Afghan women speaking themselves about needs and aspirations based on their own experiences might have raised problems for the benevolent rhetoric of feminist co-optation.

In 2010 president Barak Hussein Obama has declared the end of “war on terror”. Gender neutral “overseas contingency operations” have begun and the terrorists have become “violent extremists”. Today the identification with USA is easier. The ethos of president Obama, commander in chief and receiver of the Norwegian Nobel peace price in December 2009, is in Norway extremely strong. And he is “brown”. The actual Norwegian female Minister of Defence, Grete Faremo, has an easier rhetorical work to do than Strøm-Erichsen, the former Minister. The gendered rhetorical tightrope balancing has disappeared. Norway, ISAF, NATO and the USA are now cooperating towards a “gender neutral” stabilisation and democratisation in Afghanistan. A nearly “pure” communication, based on an identification apparently exempt of the Burkean segregation, the “human need” to overcome division from each other, characterizes her rhetoric. Faremo’s body seems to have become unified with the body of the new president.

²³ C. A. Stabile & D. Kumar, “Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan”, *Media, Culture and Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2005): 755-782.

²⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence, 1978).

As burqa-clad Afghan women are made invisible in the war discourse, their voices not listened to, and any reference to the UN Resolution 1325 is avoided, the “gender neutral stabilization” rhetoric seems in Norway not to be challenged. The burqa-clad women have, however, reappeared in other public discourses, partly as a threat to Western liberalism (sic) and partly as fascinating spectacles or sexual objects in magazines. Co-optation does indeed occur at different levels. And the burqa as metaphor for the war rhetoric may be more repressive than the literal burqa.

The rhetoric of benevolent philanthropy is contained — and remains — within a frame of protection scenario. Gayatri C. Spivak’s “saving brown women from brown men”,²⁵ with both Western genders as protagonists, is these days transformed into a gender blind rhetoric of “stabilization and democratization”. When Richard Kipling in his poem more than hundred years ago also wrote “Go bind your sons to exile/To serve your captives' need”, Western men and women today advise both their sons and daughters to serve “our captives need” — in the name of gender equality and sometimes in the name of liberating women as “other”. Afghan women, who, once upon a time (2001 seems so long ago), and whose need “we” should serve by liberating them from “brown men”, might today perceive more of the Burkean “consubstantiality” (necessary for any identification) with these “brown” men, than they do towards their Western protectors, be they males or females.

²⁵ Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in L. Grossberg & Cary Nelson, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988).