

# New Ethnic States and Population Policy

BY MARIA MIES

Mary O'Brien had crossed many boundaries in her lifetime, national and ethnic ones, of class and profession, ideological and epistemological boundaries. This crossing of boundaries can be a very liberating experience. You are able to look beyond the narrow horizon of your own personal perspective, your own land, class, time, and space. Mary O'Brien's work has been deeply influenced by this "going and looking beyond." It gave her the critical and analytical strength to identify the western intellectual mainstream as male-stream thought. The main structural principle of this intellectual tradition is separation and hierarchization.

This separation not only led to the "dualistic fixations and delusions of transcendence which are the staples of male-stream thought," but also to the commodification of knowledge and to the understanding, also shared by many women, that "the ruling sex will save us with technology." She criticizes that "technological determinism" is accepted whereas "biological determinism" is considered as old-fashioned black magic (O'Brien 1989, 53). What impressed me most in Mary O'Brien's work is her insistence on the continuity between biology and history and her feminist materialism. She states: "The process of reproduction stands in dialectical relation to the process of production as the material substructure of history" (O'Brien 1983, 197). Her rejection of any kind of idealism is very timely today, when post-modern feminists are dissolving women and women's bodies into mere ideological constructions.

Due to this idealism the discourse on identity and difference not only destroys the basis for a sense of history but, what is worse, of a sense of commonality and solidarity among women, among communities and people. The following essay deals with one of the dilemmas for women resulting from this discourse.

## Introduction

In the summer of 1993 I attended an international workshop in the Boldern-Academie, Zurich, to which some West-European women, but mostly women from Eastern Europe, had been invited, women from Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Rumania, Russia, the erstwhile Yugoslavia, from Slovenia and Croatia.

In one of the sessions I had to talk about the relationship between "Ethnic Identity and Women's Identity." I had not studied this problem very deeply, but I had shortly before read a study by a woman whose family had come from Estonia. She had written her thesis about women and the women's movement in Estonia.

After the liberation of the Baltic states from the Soviet empire she had gone to Estonia, which she knew only from the accounts of her parents. She wrote very enthusiastically about the new Estonian cultural movement, the revival of Estonian songs and their role in the resistance movement against Russian cultural and economic imperialism. Although she had not lived in Estonia before, she clearly was searching her ethnic and cultural roots during her fieldwork and she identified fully with her people in their search for ethnic

identity and their opposition to the Soviet or Russian state.

When she analyzed the present situation of women in Estonia, however, she found that many were losing their paid jobs, that they were sent back to "Kinder-Küche-Kirche" (children, kitchen, church), that the institutions which the Soviet state had created to facilitate women's entry into "productive labour," crèches, kindergartens, other benefits for women, like paid leave during illness of children, etc. were being dismantled and that the official family policy was to re-establish the old sexual division of labour in the family and society: paid jobs for the men, unpaid housework and taking care of children and old people as women's work.

These findings did not surprise me, because the same dismantling process was/is taking place in East-Germany (Mies and Shiva 116-131). But what struck me was her

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analysis and interpretation of the new population policy in Estonia. In Estonia, like in the other Baltic states, many Russians had settled—as workers, party cadres, military-personell etc. In her interpretation of this proportion the author defended the pro-natalist policy of the new ethnic state of Estonia. Because otherwise the Russian minority would again challenge the cultural

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identity of the Estonians. She was of the opinion that Estonians had to out-breed the Russians, otherwise there would be a Russian "*Überfremdung*." This pro-natalist population policy expresses itself in stricter laws against abortion, a new familist ideology aiming at reducing the number of women in gainful employment and reserving these jobs for men, and also in restoring a patriarchal image of womanhood.

When I pointed out to the author that this policy of "outbreeding the Russians" was basically not so much different from that of the new right in Germany and in other parts of the world who always try to mobilize women to "breed for race and nation," she answered, that one could not compare the situation of ethnic minorities from Africa, Asia, and other poor countries in Germany e.g. with that of the Russians in Estonia, who belonged to the powerful and dominant ethnic group

and state in that region.

Although I had to admit that the two situations of "ethnic minorities" were not the same, I still pointed to the author the fundamental contradiction between the struggle of a people to get rid of cultural, economic, and political imperialism and the search for ethnic identity on the one hand, and women's struggle for liberation or identity, which could also be expressed as a desire for autonomy. Obviously, the struggle for self-determination for women and that for self-determination of an ethnic collective do not go harmoniously hand-in-hand. In fact, at the present juncture at least, they seem to contradict each other.

The author was puzzled when she was confronted with this dilemma. So were the women from the new ethnic states in Eastern Europe, who had gathered in Zurich, when I told them this story. Spontaneously women from Croatia and Slovenia said, that the same policy was pursued in their own countries. There, too, women were mobilized to breed more Croats and Slovenians to undo the ethnic "population"-mix which was the result of the socialist nationalities' policy in former Yugoslavia, which, as is known, was not really based on truly socialist internationalism, but gave privileges to the Serbs.

**The conflict between ethnic identity and women's identity**

The women from Eastern Europe were shocked and desperate when they realized that their identification with their own ethnic state, its history and culture was in contradiction with their own desire for autonomy as women, for freedom and self-determination. They had experienced the contradiction between a universalist socialist ideology and a political and economic practice which favoured certain ethnic groups or new elites who preached socialism to the people but were after all the consumer goods of the capitalist supermarket. But most

of these women were not feminists. They had never questioned the patriarchal sub-structure of either capitalism or socialism. They, like many others, had believed the rhetoric that decentralization, democratization were equivalent to equal access to the capitalist supermarket which, for Eastern Europe meant and means, catching up with the lifestyle and the economy of Western Europe and the hope of being accepted into the European Common Market, before it closes its doors.

In this situation of economical and political crisis, the re-assertion of their earlier ethnic, cultural, and historical identities, particularly of peoples who had been subsumed under a hegemonic socialist state, appeared as the only way out of the total collapse. This search for ethnic identity, for cultural roots, was all the more pronounced, where there had been a long history of religious or ethno-political warfare, as is the case with many of the new ethnic states in ex-Yugoslavia. It is, therefore understandable, that women, too, identify with these new ethnic formations. After all, women are not only women, they also belong to different cultures, nations, histories, languages.

But, if this search for ethnic reconstruction and identity results in the formation of new full-fledged nation-states—as is happening all over the world—then invariably women's lives, sexuality, and procreative capacities have to be controlled. This is the reason, why in all these new ethnic nation-states we find a pro-natalist population-policy. This is necessarily conservative and anti-feminist in the sense, that it has to re-establish the patriarchal family-ideology and sexual division of labour. Usually one of the first steps is a tightening of the abortion legislation—as is happening in Croatia with its Catholic history. The next step is the re-masculinization of the labour-market. This measure, it is hoped, will not only give the scarce jobs to men, but this new housewifization of women will also eventually result

in higher ethnic birth-rates. We should not forget that the birth-rates in former Eastern European states were some of the lowest in the world.

In any case, it seems women have to pay the price for the re-construction of the new ethnic states everywhere. Or, to put it otherwise, the new ethnic fatherlands, or ethnic nation-states are based on patriarchal control of women's labour and reproductive capacity. There is no place for women's liberation in these fatherlands.

### **Ethnic identity, the nation-state, and capitalist patriarchy**

The question, however, remains, whether this painful dilemma between the search for ethnic autonomy and the search for women's identity and autonomy is necessary and unavoidable. Must all groups, people, who want to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity necessarily be anti-feminist and pro-natalist? Or is this contradiction between ethnic and women's self-determination part and parcel of the structural foundations of capitalist patriarchy which is based on the principles of self-interest, permanent growth of goods and capital and on competition?

If we have a closer look at what is meant by "ethnic identity" or "ethnic self-determination" we realize that these concepts are not associated with the idea of self-reliant, self-supporting ecological and economic regions in which communities keep control over their resources. When the new ethnic states talk of self-determination they mean on the one hand political autonomy and freedom from foreign hegemony. But on the other hand they want to become equal partners in the capitalist world market through "catching-up-development." Most people do not yet realize, that this global capitalist super-market is based on inequality. Only as long as there are ethnic groups, regions, cultures, religions, races, genders who are not treated equally, who are placed in a hierarchical order of valuation, can the profit-

growth-oriented economic machine go on. These differences become antagonistic oppositions within a system based on permanent growth and competition. Capitalism is not reconcilable with the demand for universal equity.

It is precisely because of the contradiction between the proclamation of universal human rights as political demands and the need of capitalism to maintain economic inequality that the nation-state became necessary. This nation-state, which emerged at the same time as the modern industrial capitalist and colonial system, has to regulate the conflicts between the different categories of people within a certain territory who, in spite of political equality, which most constitutions legally guarantee, have neither equal access to resources nor to incomes between different territories.

The nation-state was particularly necessary to regulate and control the procreative behaviour of people, which basically means of women. From the seventeenth century onwards all contraceptive knowledge in the hands of women was systematically destroyed because the new absolutist nation-state had to make sure that the emerging industry got sufficient labour-force (Mies 1999; Mies and Shiva 1993). Therefore, if now, after the collapse of the socialist states in Eastern Europe, new ethnic states are reconstructed as nation-states within the framework of an overall capitalist world-market-system we can expect that these new states will try to control women's work and procreative capacities in order to establish "pure" ethnic territories.

The case of Bosnia shows clearly that this new policy based at the same time on ethnicity and the globalization of capital not only leads to new civil wars, but moreover to a new phase of patriarchal violence against women, to increasing militarization and brutalization of men and the breakdown of what used to be called "civil society." The mass-rapes and tortures of Muslim

women in Bosnia by young Serbs cannot be explained only by pointing to the "age-old" enmities between these two ethnic groups. The Chetnicks who committed these crimes against Bosnian women expressed clearly an ethnic pro-natalist population policy, when they said these raped women should give birth to "more young Serbs."

It is important to understand that these brutalities are not just irrational and inexplicable acts of young warriors. They are in fact part of a systematic policy of "ethnic purification"—aiming at establishing "pure" ethnic nation-states through control over women. And this control is ultimately based on the control over weapons, it is based on violence against women.

### **Conclusion**

It is very difficult for women to find a way out of this dilemma between women's identity and ethnic identity. One first step is to understand that not ethnic (or racial, or cultural, or religious) difference is our problem, but the growth-oriented, economic system based on competition, self-interest, and profit which turns all cultural and ethnic diversities, which is our human wealth, into a universal war of all against all. As Mary O'Brien has stated: "... the problem is to move

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from the war against nature and against life to policies of integration with nature and with life. It is not at all surprising that feminism finds allies among pacifists, among conversationists and among the neo-Luddites who resist the technology for technology's sake thrust of capitalism ..." (1983, 201).

A second necessary step would be to work towards a new feminist and ecological internationalism, an internationalism that respects and celebrates ethnic and cultural diversity. Such a feminist internationalism, however, cannot be based on the neoliberal politics of capitalist globalization. It can only work if new non-exploitative relations are being established between people and nature, women and men, different countries, regions and cultures. In the grass-roots-movements and international feminist networks in many parts of the world such new feminist and ecological internationalism is already emerging (Viezzler; Mies and Shiva). O'Brien states: "The harmonization of people with nature, and the accompanying transformation of consciousness, presents

a possibility of a challenge to the rape of nature in the name of corporate profit" (O'Brien 1983, 210).

The international network "Diverse Women for Diversity" (DWD) which was founded on May 1st, 1998 in Bratislava in the context of the UN Conference on Biodiversity, is one of the more recent examples of such ecofeminist internationalism.

This new internationalism is based, on the one hand, on a solid feminist materialism, which, as Mary O'Brien stressed, has its roots in our bodies with their reproductive capacities, but it also goes beyond the narrow, individualistic perspective of some western feminists, who are only concerned with their own body. For Diverse Women for Diversity the biological as well as the cultural diversity is not a threat but a great wealth which has to be preserved and celebrated. Because the continuation of life on this planet is based on this diversity.

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