

Shoot The Women First

A Reflection on the Gender Politics of Targeting

“‘Shoot the women first’ was reputedly an instruction given to recruits to West Germany’s armed anti-terrorist squad, and also the advice offered by Interpol to other European squads. I have spoken to several members of these organisations, and though none of them would confirm they had ever been given such an instruction, they considered it to be a damn good piece of advice.”

(Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot The Women First*)

“The spirit of arrogance most definitely makes you shine. It paints a bright red target on your own forehead.”

(Criss Jami, *Killosophy*)

How is a target defined? The idea of the “target” in discourses of activism, terrorism, anti-state political violence, and state violence is double-edged. The “target” describes both the chosen object of attack by an outlying group or individual and that same group or individual when the attention of state agency focuses on them as suspected perpetrator. So the one initially doing the targeting becomes, in turn, targeted. And the one initially doing the targeting may, of course, have acted in the first place precisely from the conviction that their identity or interests have already been violated or targeted by the powerful. A “target,” then, by necessity, moves.

The ability to see a target *as a target* (rather than as another human being or group with a different perspective) depends on the extent to which we – culturally, collectively – have been facilitated to sympathize with the interests of the designated other. Throughout history and culture, certain groups have found themselves targeted as objects of suspicion or enemies of the establishment and denied any legitimate power of rejoinder. In asking: “Who becomes a (cultural) target?”, the answer “The other – who threatens the powers that be and the interests of the status quo” suggests itself. But the answer may equally, and just as accurately, be: “The other – who threatens *to articulate the injury against them carried out by* the powers that be in the service of maintaining the status quo.” This can be seen in both situations of terrorism/ political violence and in the everyday violence of hierarchal

structures that position differently sexed and raced subjects as “lesser than” the bastions of white male heteropatriarchy. So it is that those who have recently pointed out in the mainstream media and online the odious persistence and sheer volume of everyday sexism and male violence against women in so-called progressive societies have found themselves – in a cruel and beautiful example of proving precisely the point they set out to make – targets of further hatred, abuse, and (sexualized) threats. It is the thematization of Tacitus’s words: “*proprium humani ingenii est odisse quem laeseris*” – it is human to hate the one we have harmed.

In the first critical study of the phenomenon of female terrorists, *Shoot the Women First* (1991), author Eileen MacDonald rehearses the (unconfirmed) claim that it was common advice to European police forces that, in a terror situation, the armed response unit should dispatch the women first, following the familiar hackneyed line that “the female is more deadly than the male”. MacDonald attempts to account for the instruction by extrapolating that the especially violent zeal of women terrorists issues from a displaced maternal feeling: the political or national cause stands in for the child that the woman should be protecting. The reason that female terrorists appear more dangerous than their male counterparts may, however, have more to do with this flawed received wisdom that the “nature of women” is universal, one-dimensional, and *animal*, than with any female terrorist’s actual intentions or motivations. By asserting herself as exceptional or individualistic – whether through violence or excellence – a woman sets herself up as a target, precisely because women are supposed to be plural and collective, undifferentiated, a group, a class.

Second-wave feminists defined the status of women in patriarchy as “the sex class” – the class of the to-be-fucked; the class designated to bear children and care-take them. So it is that the iniquitous sexist logic identified by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* manifests itself: he is singular and individual; she is plural and generalizable. When a woman is vocal, defiant, violent, murderous, she commits a category violation and she becomes doubly other: first, as a woman, she is already othered as “less than” and different from the male-masculine “one”, and secondly as a woman who does not obey the prevailing stereotypes of what a woman is and *is for* (nurturing, passive, non-competitive, non-violent, concerned with caring and collectivity), she is further othered from the category of (tolerable) woman.

Thus, the true identity of the “extra danger” that MacDonald’s reported instruction to police forces suggests is revealed: it is not a matter of female psychology, instinct, or

motive; the violent woman is perceived as *more violent* simply by dint of the exceptional effort of violating so completely the category to which she has been coercively assigned. It is thus that the woman becomes the first and most urgent target for annihilation: she refused to be what she was told she was.

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