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Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State : A Feminist Critique of the British Government's White Paper on Trident

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Les images d'angelle

This paper enquires into the connections between gender and discourses of the nuclear weapons state. Specifically, we offer a feminist analysis of the ways in which gender operates in the White Paper published by the British Government in 2006 on its plans to renew Trident nuclear weapons. We argue that the White Paper mobilises masculine-coded language and symbols in three main ways. First, although it draws less than might have been expected on a masculine discourse of technological potency, it nonetheless evacuates the concrete, embodied reality of nuclear weapons, and clings to the masculinised status that nuclear possession brings with it-albeit juggling this with more ethically based claims to leadership. Second, the White Paper is based on an understanding of security which assumes that invulnerability is achieved through technology rather than through relationships, and which privileges the masculine protector over the feminised protected-although it remains unclear who we are being protected from and there is an apparent reluctance in taking on the protector role. Third, the White Paper is underpinned by a view of the state-as-actor which has a strongly masculine character in its emphasis on a narrow rationality and on independent action-although there is an implied contrast here with more aggressive forms of masculinity and significant tensions with regard to the more multilateral and dependent relations glimpsed in the text. Taken together, these three gendered logics function to construct a masculinised identity for the British nuclear state as a 'responsible steward'. However, this identity is one that is not yet securely fixed and that, indeed, contains serious internal tensions that opponents of Trident (and of the nuclear state more generally), should be able to exploit.