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What kind of feminism does war provoke?

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In the last fifteen years I have been engaged fulltime in researching women's antiwar movements of various kinds in a heap of countries and regions. It is due to these travels, and the many conversations I have had with women in the scores of groups, organizations and networks I have met and studied along the road, that I conclude we may confidently use the words 'feminist peace activism', 'feminist antimilitarism' or 'a feminist analysis of war'. But what kind of feminism are we talking about here?

Those who keep a sceptical distance from feminism and the women's movement often make a particular double supposition about women's relationship to peace movements. They suppose that women are, in disproportionate numbers, drawn to peace movements; and that this must derive from some primordial instinct. Women are 'by nature intended' to be mothers, nurturers and carers. They are 'natural peace makers'. Some celebrate the idea: 'Women are better than men. They can save the world.' But more often the trope 'women oppose war on grounds of women's life-giving role' is part of a critical anti-essentialist discourse: biology determines nothing.

Experience has shown me that this to-ing and fro-ing about 'women's peaceful natures' is no more than an excitable bubble of argument out of touch with facts on the ground. It is often, on both sides, inspired by anti-feminism. In the first place, it provocatively overstates women's presence in peace movements. Women are many, it is true, but they seldom outweigh men. In the second place, I have found very few women who, while camping outside military bases, lobbying politicians or demonstrating for peace, are invoking women's life-giving natures. Some, it is true, are enriched by a personal history that has socialized them in nurturing and caring skills. But

most of them have (unfortunately) seen too many women soldiers, abusive mothers and belligerent women political leaders to think either nature or nurture can guarantee an antiwar impulse in women. Besides, to believe the best of women is to believe the worst of men: that they are irremediably violence-prone. If women believed human beings dichotomous and fixed in their natures, they would see no sense in campaigning for change. Antiwar activists are necessarily social-constructionists.

So I have found it more productive to leave aside this argument about pre-birth and post-birth influences on women and approach women's antiwar organizing with a different set of questions. I ask women activists instead: what's your analysis of violence and war? why do you choose to organize as women? what does gender have to do with it? what's your activist strategy? And the answers I hear add up to a kind of feminism – that is to say not a set of genes but a set of ideas, a political ideology.

But here again we have to be careful, because feminism takes many forms, and an unhelpful practice of dividing and labelling them has damaged the movement in the past. In particular, in the so-called second-wave feminist movement of the late nineteen sixties and seventies, three varieties of feminism, supposed to be mutually exclusive, were tagged 'radical', 'socialist' and 'liberal'. Seeking to identify the kind of feminism that is shaped in response to the violence of militarization and armed conflict I found traces of all three traditions necessarily present, not in competition but intertwined.

For a start, experiencing war, whether at first hand or on our TV screens, we can hardly ignore the way women are oppressed and exploited through our bodies, our sexuality and our reproductive capacities. War dramatically enhances men's authority. It exacerbates the sexual violence women experience from men in times of so-called peace. Prostitution and trafficking are frequent side effects of militarization. So antimilitarist feminist is bound to be 'radical' feminism in the sense that it sees men and masculinities (socially shaped) as sources of women's oppression.

Then again, antimilitarist and antiwar feminism has a far wider range of concerns than the gender system alone. Capitalism, economic exploitation

and the competition for global resources and markets are one unmistakable cause of war. Likewise war is often caused by, or exploits, politicized difference, of national identity, religion and ethnicity. In class and race, these two significant fields of human relations, antiwar feminism notes the working of gender relations, and is alert to how they intersect. We are necessarily 'socialist' and 'anti-racist' feminists.

Fine - so antiwar feminism is necessarily a strong combination of radical and socialist' feminism. But surely, at least, it is not 'liberal' feminism? Wrong again. If the concept of 'women's rights had not been invented, antiwar feminists would surely have invented them. Opposing militarism and war we have had to campaign for 'women's rights as human rights', for the development of a system of international justice, for rape to be defined as a war crime. We have had to campaign for such liberal principles as women's equal treatment and fair representation in political systems. How else to describe our struggle to achieve UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security* with its call for the proper inclusion of women in peace negotiations and peace-keeping operations?

As I have encountered it, antiwar feminism has yet more characteristics that transfer usefully into other aspects of our individual lives, and our cultural and social struggles for gender transformation. It involves a critique of the meaning and operation of power itself – women often choose to organize in prefigurative ways that exchange 'power over' (domination) for 'power to' (capability). It is necessarily a transnational feminism, for our movements are in touch with each other over many borders. And it has a healthy old-fashioned respect for the reality and significance of structures and systems of power – a lot of antiwar feminists refuse to drop the concept of 'patriarchy'. Male power lives, they say. We experience it at first hand, no kidding. As I see it, it is a pretty holistic feminism that is forged in the crucible of war.

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