

Why (and which) Feminist Antimilitarism?

Cynthia Cockburn

In women's organizations opposing militarism and war we often ask ourselves 'Why are we a women's organization?'. Often, without answering this question, we move onto another: 'Are we feminist?'. We are looking for a rationale for what we do. One good reason for getting it clear is that it might shape our strategies for action and our choice of words. My aim in this article is to think aloud about possible answers.

'Genes' or 'life experiences'?

There's a short answer to 'why women', which is also dangerous one. And that is to say 'it's in women's nature to be peacemakers, we're naturally empathetic and caring, it's in the genes, it has something to do with childbearing'. The reason this is a dangerous notion is, first, that evidence continually belies it: for every woman in the peace movement, there's another who's cheering on the troops. To expect women to be naturally unaggressive is a recipe for disappointment.

The second reason it's dangerous to say women are natural peacemakers is that it is essentialist. That is to say, it reduces 'women' (who really are all pretty varied) to 'woman', something foundational, given by God or nature, her qualities and her role inevitable and incontrovertible. Essentialist explanations of difference are a bad thing not only in questions to do with men and women but wherever they occur. Ethnic identities that are said to be about 'blood and genes' are equally dangerous. In fact, definitions of identity that invoke 'origins' are never the true stories they claim to be, but political projects.

The longer answer to the question 'why is there's such a thing as a women's peace movement' relies on the concept of gender, as opposed to sex. The notion of 'gender' sounds bland enough. But in the long span of history the idea that by far the greater part of the difference between the sexes is not genetic after all, but socially produced, has been revolutionary. In the cultures we live in, a huge amount of

unremitting work, in the home, at school, in the marketing departments of companies producing shampoo and automobiles, is invested in producing women and men in a particular mould: as complementary, two halves of a couple, rather than as similar. Fortunately some of us escape from this process – enough anyway to see that as individuals we could all be pretty different one from the other in interesting ways.

As both cause and effect of this gendering process, women and men have rather different experiences of life. We could pick out just four dimensions ... domestic life, work, war and the experience of disadvantage. Domestically, it's obvious really, most women spend more time than most men sustaining domestic life. In most cultures we're the ones who nurture and rear children, shop and cook, wash and clean, look after the sick and old, and deal with health system, the school system and social welfare system on behalf of our families. And we acquire the skills and attitudes fit for carrying out those responsibilities.

Doing different paid jobs, too, shapes different interests and abilities. In economic life, despite changes in technology and job markets, there's still a pronounced sexual division of labour. A lot of women perform for pay the kind of labour they also do unpaid at home. They predominate in service work, including personal care work. In academic life, more women specialise in languages, the humanities and social sciences. And there are fewer women than men in those ranks of business, politics and the state that involve competitive and sometimes aggressive cultures.

Third, and particularly relevant to us, there's a sexual division of war. For a start, fewer women than men are recruited to military and paramilitary forces. Women do sometimes perpetrate violence, but not characteristically. Certainly there aren't many women standing on the heights from which war policy's made and armies are commanded. So it makes sense to assume that women may have less invested in militarist thinking.

Finally, women in most social classes and most countries experience disadvantage and inequality as a sex, and that sometimes brings them together. One aspect of this is that women often experience personal sexualized violence perpetrated by men. So women get to see a connection between violence, militarism and certain masculine

cultures in which men learn violence and bond together as men around disrespect for women.

All this gender-differentiated experience, the gender specificity of life as we live it, is enough to explain differences between women and men both of opinion and culture. Opinion: take the skewed statistics we see in opinion polls, like the recent ICM Guardian poll that shows only 23 percent women in favour of an attack on Iraq, against 38% of men. Culture: men and women often seem to generate different subcultures - witness the fact that women so often say they like working in women's groups so as to be able to 'do things our way'.

So, to summarize, I think that an essentialist belief in women's difference is invariably unhelpful. On the other hand, thinking in terms of differences of experience, gender-specific life trajectories, can be helpful.

Finding common ground

For instance, it's the explicit basis for particular kinds of women's activism for peace. In many countries women on different 'sides' in armed conflicts have formed working alliances with each other through finding needs they have in common as women. A well-known example is women of Northern Ireland. Ten or fifteen years ago women in working class inner-city Belfast began to get together and set up women's community centres within their mainly Catholic or mainly Protestant neighbourhoods. The common ground they found between them was the hardship women experienced rearing families in poverty, beset by domestic violence, badly served by local government, harassed by police and army, and with the continual fear that their teenage sons will be caught up in the paramilitary organizations that controlled their neighbourhoods. Eventually, as a second step, some of these women's centres found this same common ground was enough to enable them to build a bridge between women of the nationalist and unionist neighbourhoods. My research has found examples of women's alliances across conflict lines in Bosnia, Israel and Cyprus – and I'm sure they exist in a lot of other countries.

Maybe we can see the same effect in our own activity in Britain. Here we're in a very different situation from women in Belfast, living in a country that has colonized other countries and often uses its economic and military power irresponsibly overseas. But we probably draw on this same discourse of 'women's shared experience of life' as the basis of solidarity work with women who are actually experiencing war – for instance Palestinian, or Afghan or Iraqi women.

Invoking feminism

I would suggest however that there's a point beyond which this discourse of 'women's commonalities' can't take us. First, the different experience women have doesn't necessarily lead women beyond 'women's issues'. It doesn't necessarily lead to a critique of the system that generates disadvantage. Furthermore there's no automatic step from women's solidarity to women's antimilitarism. They're related ideas, and a lot of women are into both – but they're not the same thing. At this point, in my view, there's no alternative but to invoke feminism. Feminism is a word that a lot of women, even activist women, feel uncomfortable with. I want to argue the case for feminist thinking, and I'll do so in two ways.

First, our discomfort with the F-word is partly because it's been turned into something negative, something ugly, by those who don't like to see women stepping out of line, claiming equality, behaving autonomously, creating a new politics. We have to admit that women's liberation does have its enemies. They've made feminism an unsayable word, a label that women in a lot of different social classes, ethnic groups and countries simply can't afford to pin on themselves. I personally think we need to be brave about this and reclaim it.

However, in reclaiming it we need to specify exactly what we mean by it. So the second way I'd want to make a case for feminism is by distinguishing feminism as an identity from feminism as a programme. The black American feminist bell hooks suggests we shouldn't feel obliged to put ourselves to the test of wondering 'Am I a feminist?'. At a pinch, we can do without feminist identity. What we can't do without is a feminist analysis and programme of action.

Choosing between feminisms

But which one? Because there's not one feminism, there are many, just as there are many versions of socialism. And perhaps of Christianity. And it's open to us, in each new political conjuncture, to distinguish between the different versions and choose the theory and the political practice that's relevant. We need concepts, thinking tools, that reflect our reality and serve our purpose. In our case, what we need is the feminism we can usefully yoke to antimilitarism.

Let's think first of some of the ways that 'feminism' has been used that I, for one, find unproductive. First, some women have given the name feminism to that essentialist theory of women's natural, biological, difference from men and superiority over men. Second, some women whose aim is to get equal by competing successfully with men in whatever sphere, in multinational corporations or even in the army, also call themselves feminists. This is an individualist rather than a collective project. It's 'liberal' feminism, in the sense that it's about climbing ladders, not about transforming our institutions. Women who see the way forward for women as a personal, upward path, tend also to see individual men as the problem. They might call them male chauvinists. They don't ask questions about the cultures in which individual male behaviour is generated, what interests those cultures serve, how they damage men too, and what men can do about it.

Third, the word feminism's used, often with the tag 'radical', by those who see gender oppression as the primary, or indeed the only, oppression. Radical feminism is immensely useful, in my view. We can't do without the insights it generates into the difficult realities of the body, particularly sexuality and violence. But we need a more complex analysis than this. Men as men are not the only source of women's oppression. We need to understand, for instance, the working of capitalist markets, the meaning of nationalist and fascist movements, and the reason for the growth of fundamentalism in religions. These can't be reduced to mere by-products of patriarchy.

A feminism for our purposes

And now I'm obliged to tell you what I think is a use of the word feminism that doesn't sell out in these various ways, a movement that many of us have believed in (though we've not always known how to name it), a feminism that both explains and is serviceable for women's anti-war activism. I fully recognise that what I'm really doing here is saying: this is what I mean by feminism, this is the thinking that works best for me, it satisfies my logic and serves my conception of progressive politics. But I'm putting it to you for discussion and argument.

First of all I would say the feminism we need goes beyond simply remarking on the difference between women's and men's life experiences, the 'complementarity effect', whereby men are everything that women aren't, and vice versa. It sees in that differentiation a process in which power and inequality are involved. Men in our societies have the power to define women as 'other' and in so doing to define them as of lesser value. Feminism sees this 'othering' process as having brought into being a structure of gender power.

There are certain concepts that can be useful to describe this set-up. They came into use in academic work first, but they're good for prompting some very practical questions. Some women use the term 'patriarchy' to describe the kind of man-dominated 'gender order' we currently live in. It's useful to have such shorthand terms to remind us that it's something big and systemic we're dealing with here. Of course, the gender order is always intertwined with a social class order, an ethnic order and other facets of power in society. In addition, there's a neat term: 'gender regime'. It means the gender arrangements in any given institution. It prompts us to ask useful questions like: how does gender power work in the boardroom of multinational? or, what are the gender relations of my child's secondary school? We'd expect all these to have interestingly different gender regimes. Gender regimes, even the gender order, can be challenged and changed.

Bob Connell has also suggested the notion of a 'patriarchal dividend'. By this, he means the advantage that men as a whole gain from living in a patriarchal gender order. But of course patriarchal systems don't involve only hierarchical relations between men and women. They also involve massive hierarchies ranking men themselves, greatly to the disadvantage of some of them. Think of an army, where

men in the ranks may be treated as little more than cannon fodder. Not all men receive the same share of the patriarchal dividend. All the same, the concept can usefully prompt men to some self-questioning.

This feminism that I'm suggesting we need, being anti-essentialist, sees gender as lived in many different ways, so that it makes sense to talk about masculinities and femininities in the plural. It sees identities, including masculine and feminine identities, as being fluid and changeable, varying from one time and place to another. Being a collective feminism, it measures success not by how high a woman can climb, but by the condition in which most women remain.

Tangling with nationalism and militarism

So a feminism of this kind sees, and tries to understand and above all to challenge the patriarchal gender order. That's what it's for. But I want to take one step more now and carry this feminism, that we've carefully defined, out beyond the struggle with patriarchy, into an engagement with two other systems, both of them deeply implicated in war: nationalism and militarism.

Nationalism and militarism are both ideologies (mindsets), and practices that flow from them. Now if you think about it, the inequalities and distortions of gender in a patriarchal society are very characteristic of social systems we call militarist and nationalist. They are kind of 'brother' ideologies, and have very similar scenarios for women and men, for gender relations. They model an active, aggressive, public kind of man and masculinity. This 'real man' is sharply differentiated from the proper woman, whose femininity features passivity, domesticity and loyalty. In all three of these mindsets, the male (father, patriot, soldier) is ascribed much higher value than the female. Many women play their traditional part proudly enough in cultures like this. After all they're crucial to the continuity because they reproduce both the population and the culture. But they are valued as wives and mothers, not as autonomous beings.

Sometimes I think of it like this: that patriarchy, nationalism and militarism are a kind of mutual admiration society. Nationalism's in love with patriarchy because patriarchy

offers it women who'll breed true little patriots. Militarism's in love with patriarchy because its women offer up their sons to be soldiers. Patriarchy's in love with nationalism and militarism because they produce unambiguously masculine men.

If these things are true, we have to see a particular form of gender relations as being an intrinsic part of the system that gives rise to wars and keeps them going. And feminism, in challenging patriarchy, challenges the other two 'isms'. Feminism's theory, our thinking tools, which are purpose-made for tackling patriarchy, are very useful tools for unscrewing militarism and nationalism.

'Humanitarian wars'

There is, however, a problem of appearances we need to address here. It's sometimes confusing that the wars the USA or Britain launch today don't seem on the face of it to be done in the name of the ideologies of nationalism and militarism. Of course, the actual purpose of US war talk and war making remains just the same as it ever was: political dominance for economic control. US business interests are acted out by the US state. The Bush/Blair 'special relationship' is about Britain's national ranking in the world.

But in recent years Western countries have jettisoned old-fashioned nationalistic talk and substituted a discourse of humanitarianism and security, which is currently more acceptable to the world's voters. The new discourse represents the old discourses as backward. Patriarchy – that's what the mediaeval Taliban do to women. Nationalism – isn't that what the murderous Serbs were up to? And militarism? That's not us, that's Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction. The United Nations is manipulated into the picture – so war projects come to appear internationalist not nationalist, humanitarian not militarist.

Also certain pressures in Western cultures today have made politicians adopt superficial changes. Some of them indeed have come from women's own demands – for instance incorporation of women into the military, even in combat roles nowadays. The result is the military doesn't any longer look quite so patriarchal. It even seems to

have lost a bit of its militarist valor: public opinion doesn't want dead American soldiers.

But the hard underlying reality is that patriarchy, nationalism and militarism are still right there, as structures and as cultures. Pride in military service, the national honour and manliness are deep in 'modern' societies. It's there in the pro-war segment of the population in Britain today. Recently, when we were on the street opposing war on Iraq, a man passing by shouted angrily 'you're cowards, that's what you are!' Also, think of the role in the USA of fundamentalist Christianity, and the gun culture, and ceremonies around the stars and stripes. It's only because that kind of culture still flourishes that political actors like Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld can bring a majority of the population along with war plans.

So what I've been trying to do is show how feminism, as theory and practice, can be an important contribution to antimilitarism and to opposing nationalist political projects. And not just as an add-on. I really think, because they are deeply gendered social structures, because gender is intrinsic to them, you can't wholly, fully, understand militarism or nationalism without a feminist analysis. And you could go further and say you can't effectively challenge them without a feminist practice.

Racism and war

Having thought about how our understanding of militarism and nationalism improves by looking at them through a feminist lens, I want to end by turning this on its head and thinking about how our understanding of women and men (gender relations, patriarchy) is the better for bringing into play a critique of nationalism.

I went to an event in the north of Israel last September, organised by Bat Shalom. They're a group of women, both Israeli Jew and Israeli-Palestinian women, who are active against the occupation. They'd organised the meeting around the theme of racism. I have to confess I thought, beforehand, 'That seems rather an understatement of the problem, given the appalling attacks being carried out by the Israeli military in the West Bank'. I was wrong. It was a very useful focus. It took us back to square one, making us acknowledge the racism implicit in the Zionist project.

It exposed to view the relationship between two things: Jewish racism inside Israel (against its second class citizens, the Misrahi Jews, and its third class citizens, the Israeli Arab Palestinians); and the reduction of the Palestinians the other side of the Green Line to subhuman status. The internal racism legitimates the brutality of the Occupation, and the conflict in the Occupied Territories legitimates racism at home.

Just after the attacks in New York and Washington on September 11 2001, it was this kind of political thinking that led a lot of us to realize that those terrible events were going to affect us not in one way but two. The USA would undoubtedly take revenge against the so-called 'terrorists' wherever they might deem them to be. There would certainly be war and we'd have to resist that.

But secondly, also, there'd immediately be an increase in racism and oppression towards 'Muslims' and other 'foreigners' within our own societies. There would be a threat to their civil liberties (and ours) in the name of 'security' against 'terrorism' and we would be obliged to resist that too. We would have to refuse to be named and divided as Muslim, Jew or Christian. We'd have to say that in our movement we're all of these things and none of them. We'd have to refuse to see cultural difference reduced to religious difference, and religious difference racialized.

And I'm proud now that some of us quickly formed a kind of ad-hoc coalition of a handful of women's organizations and networks, some of them working against war and others working against racism. They were the Women in Black against War, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Women against Fundamentalisms, Southall Black Sisters and Act Together (a group of Iraqi and other women in the UK). Together we've organized two events now, which we've called 'teach-ins'. And this is an accurate name for them because we brought several different, clearly situated, kinds of knowledge to those meetings, and I feel we really have learned something from each other that has shaped our politics since.

Making political choices

The kind of feminist antimilitarist and antinationalist, or antiracist, thinking that I've been trying to model here is continually put to the test. We're necessarily part of the bigger movement of opposition to war, such as the present Stop the War Coalition. But a movement against any given war is made up of a variety of elements, whose politics don't entirely coincide. In fact the overlap may be quite small – just “no to this war”. There'll be leftwing groups on a demonstration, or even on the platform, whose class politics condemns a gender analysis and women's self-organization as diversionary. There'll be fundamentalist religious political movements represented, and not only Muslim ones, that have a highly oppressive future in mind for women. There'll be people of a nationalist or even a militarist turn of mind that support whoever it is (Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden) that the USA and Britain have defined as ‘the enemy’, on the ground that my enemy's enemy is my friend - a disastrously simplistic formula.

A women's movement for peace with justice, opposed to militarism and war, has to make continual, daily, choices about its positioning and its allies. What kind of action will best fit our politics: humorous/defiant? wordy/physical? local/overseas? mentioning men and masculinity/or not? with other groups/on our own? We have to choose our discourse intelligently. Think of the painstaking thought we give to the slogans we paint on our placards, the words we type in our leaflets, the press releases we issue in our campaigns. I believe we can't get these choices right, in ever-shifting political situations, without a feminist analysis to help us.

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*Cynthia Cockburn
Department of Sociology
City University
London EC1V (HB)
c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.*