

BOOK REVIEWS

A Very Special Life Energy: The Logic of Women Peacemakers Globally

Zohl dé Ishtar

Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, Zed Books, 2007.

From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis by activist-academic Cynthia Cockburn is deserving of the highest acclaim. Cockburn proves once again that her reputation as an outspoken proponent of the global campaign to eradicate gendered violence, oppression and exploitation has been well earned.

A feminist researcher, sociologist, and peace activist, Cockburn is an inspiring writer with nine previous books to her credit. From her earliest book *The Local State: Management of Cities and People* in 1977, she began to examine gender relations and technology. Her 1991 book, *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations*, investigated gender relations in organizational environments. By the late 1990s, Cockburn's focus had widened to include violence, resulting in *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* in 1998 about Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Bosnia/Herzegovina, *The Postwar Moment: Militarities, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping* in 2002, and *The Line: Women, Partition and the Gender Order in Cyprus* in 2004.

The current book delves even deeper. It involved her travelling 80,000 miles over a two-year period and visiting 91 feminist groups or organizations in fifteen countries, where she "stood" on the frontline with 250 women to learn what war and violence looked like from where they were standing: their standpoint, their point of view. She endeavored to step into their footprints. Actively participating with women who are opposing militarism and war, she set out to learn about their issues, their campaigns, their logic and aspirations. She wanted to answer the question: "Standing among the activists, how does war look? Why does war persist? Why ... do we step towards the horror time after time? Why is war still thinkable?" [p. 232.]

+

Cockburn invites readers to join her in standing *with* these women. She imbeds her readers in a topography in which women peacemakers engaged in diverse campaigns around the globe explain themselves: their lives, their actions, their dreams. Providing brief snapshots of various national and international campaigns, she explores the issues confronting women of specific countries and contexts, making the histories of oppression and of resistance personal.

Making these histories real is central to Cockburn's project. In an unprecedented acknowledgement, she presents name after name extending for over ten pages. This is more than a statement of gratitude. It is an instrument creatively constructed to undermine the very thing that Cockburn identifies as being at the core of all violence: "othering." Her remarkable research methodology is equally characterized by a rare sense of relatedness and responsibility. Cockburn's communications with her colleagues—for they are clearly more than informants—were transmitted back to them, individually and collectively. She constructed, drew on, and built upon her network as she travelled. She set up a website where she posted profiles on the various regions and groups she visited, and she emailed full transcripts of the interviews to all her interviewees and invited them to comment

on the drafts of the book. As a result, the final book is the product of all of the women named in the pages, and many more besides. All of these factors combine to make one thing indisputable: Cockburn writes according to the world she wants to create. It is a world which celebrates diversity and recognizes that: “For things to be equal you have to specifically include me, the collectivity I belong to, my different experience.” [p. 123.]

Cockburn identifies “coercive othering” as a transgression against humanity that lies at the root of militarism and war. “[W]ar violence” is not the “epitome of destructiveness,” she declares. [p. 256.] Rather, war and militarism are productive, in that they manufacture the coercive power relations of othering that give rise to the three systems of power: “the laborer, the stranger and the woman.” Cockburn explains that women become the “property” of men, “their value residing in their labor power, reproductive power and sexuality”; the laborer is “perceived as different, inferior and exploitable”; and the stranger “belongs to another territory, another culture, embodying racialized difference.” [pp. 253-254.] Militarism “affirms men and masculinity in a powerfully effective mode. It produces woman as prize and possession, as baggage and as slave.” [p. 257.]

This scenario is exemplified in the notion of Cockburn’s “*woman slave*.” It is from the woman slave’s perspective that one most clearly perceives that:

The struggle no longer seems to be against war itself, or rather not against war alone. War is the most violently coercive form taken by othering, the space in which differentiation becomes lethal. Its means, the means of coercion, are fearful in the extreme. But it is othering itself that is the problem. Assuring the self by objectifying, excluding, diminishing, confining, oppressing and exploiting an other—there’s not much you can teach the woman slave about these things. Her project, and perhaps our project therefore, doesn’t stop at opposition to militarism and war, and goes beyond even the positive search for peace. It’s a project of liberation. Liberation from what? From fear. Because the slave fears her ruler. But even more because the rulers too are afraid. I am afraid of whomever I cast out and down.” [p. 258.]

It is from this logic that Cockburn sets out to convince us that before we can hope to eradicate militarism and war, we must first divest ourselves of the triad of othering: economic exploitation, racism and gender/sexism. Noting that the first two factors have long been taken up by the anti-military campaign, she urges us to comprehend the equally central role of gender violence. She stresses that a “gender analysis is an indispensable addition to the miserably inadequate tool-kit with which we currently strive to dismantle militarism and interrupt the cycle of war.” [p. 12.] For Cockburn, “war cannot be explained, as it normally is, without reference to gender.” [p. 8.]

The author unpacks her argument in a precise and considered manner, drawing on the collective wisdom of the women peace activists whom she met throughout her journey. In Chapter One: “Different Wars, Women’s Responses,” she uses conflicts on three continents, Colombia, India and Sierra Leone, to show how militarism has affected women’s lives. Documenting the horrendous violations against humanity perpetrated in each arena, she focuses our attention on the strength and ingenuity of how women both individually and collectively have responded to this violence. Exploring the respective strategies of Colombia’s largest women’s peace organization *La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* (Women’s Peaceful Road for the Negotiation of Conflicts), India’s International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat, and Sierra Leone’s Mano River Women’s Peace Network, she draws out the different initiatives they have taken to eradicate war and conflict.

In Chapter Two, “Against Imperialist Wars: Three Transnational Networks,” she shifts from national to international networks and focuses on corporate capitalism and U.S. militarization around the globe. She is a long-term member of Women in Black, which began in Israel in 1987 and is now active in at least 30 countries and more than 300 locations. Next she introduces Code Pink, the women’s network which began in Washington, D.C. after 9/11 and has since extended to 250 different locations in the U.S. and globally. Finally she examines the East Asia-U.S.-Puerto Rico Women’s Network Against Militarism.

The following two chapters highlight women’s defiance of ethnic othering by their refusal to be defined as each other’s enemies. In Chapter Three, “Disloyal to Nation and State: Antimilitarist Women in Serbia,” and Chapter Four, “A Refusal of Othering: Palestinian and Israeli Women,” we see women crossing boundaries defined by militarism to unite in their efforts to address the racism, oppression, and gender violations inherent to armed conflict within the war-zones of the former Yugoslavia and Palestine/Israel.

Chapter Five, “Achievements and Contradictions: WILPF and the UN,” studies global institutionalized feminism *par excellence*. Here we see the world’s oldest women’s peace organization, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, take on the United Nations’ Security Council and achieve Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. According to WILPF’s Felicity Hill, who was instrumental steering the Resolution through the UN, the Security Council as “the last bastion of gender-free thinking in the UN,” had fallen. [p. 143.] Cockburn describes Resolution 1325 as “the most remarkable institutional achievement of women’s anti-war movements to date.” [p. 138.]

All of the issues covered by the UN’s Security Resolution 1325, and many more, are covered in this far-reaching book. The concerns the author repeatedly draws out as being at the core of the matter are the need to “protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict” (UN, 2000: Clause 10). The reader is encouraged to agree with the resolution, which calls for eliminating all acts of “genocide, crimes against humanity, [and] war crimes including those relating to sexual violence against women and girls” (*idem*, Clause 11). Other issues covered by Resolution 1325 which are covered by Cockburn include the need to encourage the increased contribution of women in the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict, including peacekeeping and peacebuilding measures; increase financial, technical and logistical support for gender-sensitizing efforts, local women’s peace initiatives, and indigenous conflict resolution processes; increase the employment of women in United Nations’ field operations and as special representatives and envoys; increase HIV/AIDS awareness training for military and police; and for all parties in armed conflict to respect the humanitarian nature of refugee camps.

While the first five chapters of *From Where We Stand* look at what militarism and war look like from the perspective of various feminist anti-war groups and networks, Chapter Six, “Methodology of Women’s Protests,” surveys strategies such as vigilling, ritual, silence, camping, and nonviolent direct action. Chapter Seven, “Towards Coherence: Pacifism, Nationalism, Racism,” analyzes these and other issues from the perspective of the women activists themselves and anchors the strategies of Chapter Six in the logic of the women’s peace movement.

But it is in Chapter Eight, “Choosing to be ‘Women’: What War Says to Feminism,” and Chapter Nine, “Gender, Violence and War: What Feminism Says to War Studies,” that Cockburn’s

analysis comes into full force. Here she unpacks the multiple dimensions of patriarchy with a keen dexterity that refuses any pretense to social scientific objectivity. Describing patriarchy as the “systemic power imbalances between the sexes,” [p. 239] the author explains how it is that the “enduring, adaptable, surviving structure of male power that generates and sustains the cultures ... in turn generate and sustain militarism and war...” [p. 229.] Patriarchy is the “expressions of male violence against women” which is generated by a “deep misogyny... a hatred of women and the feminine.” [p. 251.]

The author pulls no punches here as she trains her sights on the triad in which “Gender relations are inseparable from those of class and racialized ethnicity in all these violent power moves. They operate, are operationalized, in and through each other.” [p. 255.] But what she wants us to understand in the relationships between these power relations and militarism is that gender abuse stands out as distinct. She argues that,

... the three kinds of power relations can never be directly compared. They function in different ways in connection with war ... There has never been armed struggle by women against men over their collective interests. The heterosexual relation, the fragmentation of women as a collectivity within the family structure, and the grip of men on the means of coercion have always made that unlikely. [p. 255.]

In taking on patriarchy, Cockburn displays an audacity that is far too rare. It is to her credit that she refuses to shy away from challenging what she describes as the “M-words”: “men, masculinities, male violence, misogyny.” [p. 230.] It is equally refreshing to hear from an author who is not reticent in using the “F-word”—feminism. As a radical feminist, grounding her argument in the “lived experience” of hundreds of women who are creatively protesting on the multiple frontlines of extreme masculine violence—of militarism and war—she ensures that she has the full authority to do so. This is the purpose of her writing, for as Cockburn herself tells us, “the focus of this book is women actively opposing both patriarchal power relations and war.” [pp. 240-241.]

Cockburn writes that she and other women are concerned by “the terrifying upsurge of patriarchal militarism now dominating politics, pervading the media and swaggering in the streets.” [p. 85.] Patriarchy is everywhere and invades women’s everyday lives. She describes “a continuum of violence running from the physical to the cultural, administrative or juridical. Gender-based and sexualized violence by men against women is a thread linking the points along these continua.” [pp. 190-191.] This violence is

a continuum in terms of where it occurs—home, street, community, country, continent. ... it’s a continuum in time. Violence is present in the militarization of societies where open war has yet to break out, in war itself, while peace is negotiated, and in the disorder of post-war conditions. ... even where there’s no direct and overt violence, economic, social and political coercion may exist. [pp. 190-191.]

This interchange between militarism and war on the one hand and widespread social misogyny on the other is proven by the “kind of sexualized violence in which penises, fists and weapons are interchangeable and the purpose of the assault is not only the woman’s physical destruction but her social annihilation—‘dishonoring,’ insemination with the aggressor’s seed, infection by HIV/AIDS.” [p. 251.]

Cockburn’s primary message is that standing against this patriarchal juggernaut is “a small but persistent feminist movement resisting the repression and exploitation of women” and opposing war.

[p. 256.] This feminism has an “awareness of women’s oppression on domestic, social, economic and political levels, accompanied by a willingness to struggle against such oppression.” [p. 207.]

The women’s groups that make up this anti-war movement work concomitantly on three levels. Their first task is to

... inform and educate as wide a public as possible about the gendered nature of militarism and war and the suffering, courage and achievements of women in armed conflict. Second, they must challenge the militarization of their own societies, monitor and contest their policies on war, fighting, defense policy, immigration and civil liberties. But third, and simultaneously, they wish to foster communication, connection and solidarity between women divided by war. The spaces these lateral moves have to span are of two main kinds. The first is the physical and experiential distance between women in war-delivering and war-afflicted countries. The second is the rift opened up by war between women immediately involved, that is between those the authorities identify as “us” and those called the “other,” the “enemy,” whether they live beyond the national borders or inside them. [p. 9.]

These courageous women are rejecting and “negating othering in many practical ways, working towards alliances across differences exploited by others for war. All these phases of activism led them to aspire to transnational and even global connectedness between their local movements.” [p. 202.] They engage on personal, political and spiritual levels through whatever creative means are available to them. Often non-violent, their repertoire of tools and strategies includes research and analysis, ritual and celebration, music and chanting, drama and puppetry, use of or breaking of the law with political intent, staging judicial and pseudo-judicial tribunals, vigilling and camping, workshops and consciousness-raising, lobbying the United Nations and other international fora, travelling and woman-to-woman pilgrimages, and providing refuge to military draft resisters and deserters.

In most instances the women activists presented in this book engage in women-only organizations, groups, and activities. This may be because they perceive that the masculinities that they strive to eradicate persist even in mainstream anti-war movements. But in any circumstances, where the choice is made to work only with women, this decision often has little to do with men. As María Eugenia Sánchez of Colombia’s *La Ruta Pacífica* says: “It’s a political choice to be a women’s organization, it’s not exclusion.” [p. 20.] Women might choose to be active within a women-only group, because this was the most congenial environment for the “autonomy of women’s thought and their freedom to choose methods and means of action” and/or because it provided “a safe space for the expression of personal distress ... [where the] [d]ifference of experience and values between and among women could more confidently be accepted and explored.” [p. 216.]

These women protest against militarism and war, because wherever they look they see

... an exploitative system that generates despair, violence and self-hatred. ... Looking in this direction things look very bad. ... [and because they] share a love of land and life, sturdy connections of women and men, opening space for change—of hearing, imagination, creativity, connection and courage. Looking in this direction there is hope. [p. 78.]

That is why they are working together with the shared objective of “consciously deconstructing the pervasive symbolism of violence and war” and why they choose to achieve this by “substituting a new visual and textual language, with creative rituals and other practices that ‘recover what women have brought into the world.’” [p. 22.]

Women peacemakers have a greater project than simply stopping war. Their ambition is to create an alternative social reality. Cockburn quotes Colombia's *La Ruta Pacifica* as describing their resistance as being one which "redeems the sacred value of life and thence of the 'everyday,' of sensibility, the respect for difference, solidarity and sisterhood." [p. 19.] This sentiment is expressed by activist María Isabel Casas of *La Mesa Mujer y Conflicto Armado* (Working Group on Women and Armed Conflict) when she explains of Colombia that

everything that's beautiful here is being killed. What we're defending is a very special life energy. ... We're losing our vital energy. And what's being killed isn't just bodies, it's all the wealth of a diverse culture. [p. 23.]

These women are intentionally fashioning environments that "permit the recovery of hope and the process of reconciliation" so that the triadic gender/class/race power system may be diminished and eventually be dissolved.

The book is a call to action. Yet even as she makes her challenge, Cockburn charts a map for us to follow. She invites us to join the indomitable sea of women (and men) who, in every country around the world, have chosen to face their fears and, taking courage from each other, work together to re-create a world in which we are all free. They are fashioning a world in which the notion of Cockburn's "female slave" is incongruous, where war *is* unthinkable. It will be a world in which there is no possibility of abuse, exploitation or violation of human life or dignity on any basis—including class, race, or gender—and from which, therefore, militarism and war will have been finally eradicated.

This is the take-home message of Cockburn's book. *From Where We Stand* insists that an honorable world is possible. But, Cockburn warns, this is only achievable if the "world would pay a little more attention to the gender-specific impact of armed conflict, the undervalued capabilities of women for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building, and their potential for being active agents in peace and security." [p. 38.] We all need to take urgent heed of her maxim: "a theory of war is flawed if it lacks a gender analysis." [p. 257.]