

GEORGINA ASHWORTH

EDITOR



A Diplomacy of
THE OPPRESSED

NEW DIRECTIONS IN
International Feminism

Feminist Conflict Resolution

Judith Large

'War begins in the minds of men' is a commonplace in academic circles regarding international relations or the analysis of international conflict. An admirable quote, intended to steer the student's gaze away from purely military or strategic indexes to a clearer definition of the perceptions and psychology behind terms like 'the national interest'. But it does not go far enough: ('war begins in the minds of men') a logical conclusion to the sentence would say where war ends – in the bodies of men, women and children. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, those bodies accumulate. We live in complex, highly differentiated times; conflicts proliferate and spiral at a pace bewildering to numbed observers and fatal for their participants – usually residents of less developed countries. Yet the ways of studying international conflict and, more important, the ways of dealing with it are still largely confined to masculine thought forms, which will not be suitable for the next century.

It has been estimated that to date in this century about 100 million people have been killed in wars. In the First World War, 95 per cent of casualties were soldiers. In the Second World War, 56 per cent of the dead were civilians, mostly women and children.¹ With the proliferation of violent conflicts and internal wars since the end of the Cold War, estimates of civilian casualties now range between 86 per cent and 90 per cent of war deaths worldwide. But the human cost of war does not stop with death statistics. Refugees and displaced persons now number more than 20 million. The relationship between civil conflict and famine is painfully evident in countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan; severe malnutrition has devastated the population of Iraq, where prior to the sanctions maintained since the 1991 war, 70 per cent of all food was imported. The picture is not complete without those other consequences of armed conflict: destruction of the natural environment, and physical and psychological disablement of the human infrastructure.

Environmental damage may be blazing islands due to the US nuclear testing blasts. The disintegration of the human habitat – ruination of the essential social fabric, as in Beirut, Belfast or Basra – can mean: no personal security or livelihood; no basics, such as drinking water or sanitation; no provisions; no services; no resources; no shelter. Herein lies the completion of a vicious circle: it is amid such war-torn environments that the seeds of social conflict and the violence of despair take root.

'Conflict resolution' has implications different from those of judicial settlement or of one side subduing the other by superior violence. At its most basic, resolution attempts to deal with the issues in dispute at source, rather than looking to 'impartial' authority structures or resorting to a fight. Hence the reticence of one commentator on South Africa even to use the term, given the comprehensive levels of change implied, preferring the semantics of 'accommodation' or 'management'.² In resolution, the 'source' of a dispute is taken to lie in attitudes as much as in structures or institutions. This is a tall order, as anyone dealing with interpersonal or domestic violence will realise. It is in the personal sphere that resolution was first attempted – in counselling, affirmative action groups, non-adversarial divorce proceedings, or neighbourhood mediation schemes. It is the approach of this chapter that values must change in order to tackle the diverse structural sources of any given violent dispute. Violence itself cannot bring about change without generating emotions of hostility, even if it can shake up the structures involved. The same applies to the coercive halting of violence.

The domestic initiatives mentioned above were taken during and after the 1960s, a decade of social upheaval in much of the North, manifested in many anti-authoritarian demonstrations, and in the rise of the new feminist movement. One view of social psychology (backed by ancient myth as much as by modern empirical research) holds that co-operative and relational thought processes are classic feminine forms of consciousness while hierarchical and linear approaches are more masculine. ('Feminine' and 'masculine' are here seen as organising principles of thought; individual men and women are capable of either or both approaches.) Yet it would seem that neither academic nor practitioner in the field of international relations allows for any gender affiliation to conflict resolution theory.

John Burton, for example (a pioneer in challenging 'power politics' as a main analytic framework) acknowledges that, 'it was not until the early 1960's that there was any effective challenge to the normative and authoritarian approach of classical theory'.³ But he identifies the source of such a change as the sphere of industrial relations, and the incentive as increased productivity. Consider the following use of language as Burton describes new approaches to decision-making which 'focused

attention on the advantages of cybernetic or steering and reactive processes, rather than on unadulterated power and hierarchical approaches'.

Similarly, a New Zealand academic visiting the international relations department at the University of Kent in 1990 presented a paper on the evolution of New Zealand's contemporary (holistic and enlightened) judicial and political policies on the environment, the nuclear question, and approaches to conflict. He was startled, but in complete agreement, when it was put to him that his complex graphs failed to account for value exchange between Maori and white women, followed by the women's movement's influence on male establishment outlooks. Maori women had passed on their own view of the earth as a living entity, with caring and nurturing as priorities over domination, mastery or control.

The problem of affiliation highlights questions of legitimacy and power. On a global scale the dilemma has been well described, in this case by a man, Lloyd Etheredge:

That international politics is a world of men is a central and probably consequential fact; one that may illuminate underlying sexual dynamics, and one that is important to the extent that males are more inclined than women to seek strength, power, activity, dominance, competitive achievement; such qualities make them more fearful of others and more predisposed to unleash violence. In truth I do not know if hope is a realistic stance. Men may have the capacity to be rational, generous, and mutually cooperative, but as we face a world in which nuclear weapons and conventional armaments proliferate, it is sobering to know that the world in which they proliferate is a world of men.⁴

There will be those who object that to divide thus by gender is too simplistic. They will point to Iranian women soldiers in the Iraq-based Liberation Army of Iran, to Tamil Tigress cells, or to US Army women fighting in the Gulf or helping to invade Panama. It may have been Margaret Mead who called warfare a social invention, they will say, but it was Margaret Thatcher who galvanised a cabinet into fighting a war with Argentina. Fair enough. But next to these points loom some very large normative questions.

Firstly, in two of the most collectively traumatic events for the Western world this century – the Nazi holocaust and the development and use of nuclear weapons for mass murder and destruction – project dominance and control by men is well documented.⁵ Secondly, both these events were enhanced by the overtly masculinised Western science which today gives us cluster bombs, Stealth, Cruise, Smart and instant images of technological domination. I am thinking of computer images of targets being hit, counterposed to nature. The former has been associated with masculinity and the latter with femininity. In each case

it has been claimed that human progress requires that the former achieve domination of the latter.

And the day to day world we live in is so permeated by scientific rationality as well as gender that to non-feminists and perhaps even some feminists the very idea of a feminist critique of scientific rationality appears closer to blasphemy than to social criticism as usual.⁶

So it is in the social sciences, where current paradigms create mechanistic frameworks: 'realism', 'structuralism' and 'pluralism'. From realism we have the classical reactive view of power politics. Structuralism lays bare the economic skeletons which pluralism fills out with the flesh of social organisation. While constructive as theoretical tools, each can become reified to the extent that we study the paradigm and not what is actually happening. The system will be identified but not the arms dealer, as lamented recently by J. K. Galbraith. He points out the relentless flow of weapons of destruction from affluent countries to poorer ones, and the subsequent slaughter and social dislocation. Economics as a discipline has 'rarely addressed itself to the military power; frequently this has been accepted as inevitable, a given factor'.⁷ The micro-economics of a particular firm is one thing, the use of its product for devastation three thousand miles away is quite another. We focus on results and end-products with a 'valuefree' view of processes. For fear of blame or complicity we fail to trace the thread of unintended consequences. For much of academia, proactive consequential thought is not considered rational enough. And even here, as in the scientific and political communities, a power structure emerges. Repressive tolerance meets the feminist voice.

If, however, we accept the proposition that gender-associated traits are acquired behaviour rather than innate tendencies, then there is also increased scope for change in learned methods and approaches to conflict. The *Seville Statement on Violence* (UNESCO, 1991) argues, for example, that the technology of modern war has exaggerated traits associated with violence both in the training of combatants and the conditioning of general populations. There is no genetic disposition towards warfare; it is not a feature of every society. Yet we take organised political aggression as given. The critical view does not deny severe conflicts of interest, nor opposing goals, but argues for a transformation of process away from destruction. Particularly in the post-cold-war context of increasing socio-political disintegration and the emergence of questions of ethnicity and identity, the utility of war must be sharply questioned. Historical grievance and conditions of scarcity can combine in volatile ways.

In former Yugoslavia, where this combination exploded violently, groups of citizens organised to attempt conflict resolution in the midst

of crisis. In practical terms (often following bombardment and the partition of land) this meant cultivating and applying skills in:

analysis of the parties in their locality and their stated positions and/or needs and fears;

communication, listening to individuals and groups, dispelling rumour and propaganda, enabling safe dialogue and confidence-building meetings;

negotiation and mediation for the process of civic organisation, viability and the building of a resource base; and

strategy for specific action or projects, particularly in the realm of human rights (for example sit-ins to prevent the eviction of minorities), relief work with refugees, educational and therapeutic work with veterans, the war-wounded, and children.

Such skills must be adapted to be culturally appropriate in any given context. In both eastern Slavonia (Croatia) and northern Vojvodina (Serbia) it has been seen as important to understand and counteract the emotive use of symbolism as an adjunct to the mentality of war.

Such groups cannot function in isolation (witness the tragic demise of comparable peace and multicultural initiatives in Sarajevo owing to external interference and war). Creative international networking is essential for moral and practical support. Essentially their work is about community building, responsible empowerment, and the transformation of a militarist culture into a culture of potential for active peace. The term 'active peace' (or positive peace) is drawn from work by Johan Galtung and Adam Curle, in which peace is not just the absence of war but a condition in which social justice and respect for human rights prevail. In negative peace may be found severe structural violence, inequality or social repression, even if no outright war is evident. Peace groups work on several levels – individual, grassroots, civic and regional. The backdrop to these initiatives are daunting state structures, often complicated by warlordism, protection rackets and criminal paramilitary activity.

Power structures require scrutiny if conflict at various levels is to be understood. They do not always entail coercive superiority or dominant strength, but may be intricate patterns of dependency. Say my wage packet depends on an arms contract. A foreign regime is dependent on those weapons for waging war and controlling its population. Firms in my country are dependent on the other state for natural resources, the other state depends on that market, or foreign imports, or credit. Meanwhile I depend or rely on management to take decisions, they in turn look in part to government policy. The cycle manifests itself in countless ways.

We may further break down the nature of power by looking at the social currencies or forms of influence at work here. Consider factors such as the holding of a particular expertise or desired skill, control of resources, shared goals or the building of a group identity. These apply to the example above as they might to personal relationships.

Power as a generally perceived term, however, incorporates a number of concepts such as force, legitimacy and authority. One feature of women's social position is that they may have a nominal political position (they vote; they pay taxes) but lack force, legitimacy and authority. To look at potential for conflict resolution it may be that we cease measuring by 'power' and 'role' and look instead at intersections between 'the social, economic, political and ideological spheres of social life in such a way as to build up a picture of women as particular kinds of social individuals within particular social formations'.⁸ Women are social actors involved in social strategies, with short- or long-term aims. Some of these strategies will be conscious, activist organising. Others may be unconscious or relatively subtle.

Conscious attempts at organising may include participating in struggles to overcome injustice or structural violence – conflict chosen as a means to a better end. 'The advocacy of revolt must be in inverse relation to the possibility of reform.'⁹ At various times in history the women of El Salvador, Vietnam or Angola, for example, have had far fewer options for bringing about social change than the women of the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. (No blanket judgement of individual or group strategies is intended here.)

Let us rather consider the scope of militarism as a culture in its own right, and the massive infrastructure involved: decision-makers, politicians, weapons designers and producers, the armed forces themselves – all these are social actors on whom we are meant to confer tremendous authority. Sometimes this authority is challenged: the Hague International Women's Conference of 1915, anti-war movements, the US 'sanctuary' movement for the sheltering of illegal refugees from violence in central America, the women's peace camp at Greenham Common in England, CHANGE, Cruise Watch or the Campaign Against the Arms Trade and related activism. But people-to-people initiatives and 'second track' diplomacy are seldom given any credit for change; we are meant to believe that the 'powers that be' are the only powers that are. Traditional first track diplomacy represents hierarchical political leadership and as such appears functionally to be both masculine and exclusive, for example Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan taking personal credit for the end of the cold war! The 'second track' (NGOs, special advisory groups, trade and business, professional/interest networks such as physicians, artists, mothers etc.) deals with nurtured relationships and is inclusive.

It follows then that conflict resolution theory itself can be turned into special techniques to be applied at special workshops organised largely by male 'experts' (yet another domain of male specialists). At the same time, at grassroots level, men and women caught in militaristic spirals attempt to find their own alternatives. They work out of their own indigenous cultures, sometimes with support from outside sources: Oxfam, the Mennonite schemes, Quaker Peace and Service – involvement by empathy. Like the eye of a storm, women may be seen making their own statements in the midst of severe repression and violence: 'Women in Black' in Belgrade, the Anti-War Campaign in Croatia; the International Women's Peace Initiative, formed after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, active during the Gulf war; Mothers of the Disappeared in Chile, Argentina, and Sri Lanka; the Mothers for Peace in Northern Ireland and the former Soviet Union. They seek in their own ways (citing a Quaker phrase) to 'speak truth unto power'.

At its simplest, militarism has two basic requirements: attitudes and armaments. Attitudes almost stopped the US Congress (in a close vote) condoning the use of force to compel Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. The continued existence of the cold war arsenal and newly developed high-tech weaponry (plus US strategic long-term interests in the Middle East) overrode any alternative tactics. The question of who built the Iraqi war machine in the first place is continually ignored in the light of renewed arms sales and exports to the region. It is difficult to imagine the long-pent-up pain and bitter memories of Serbs and Croats erupting into full-scale militarised violence without the easy availability of weaponry and hardened attitudes towards territory and ethnicity. The same may be said of Beirut.

Politicians, notably at the much-hyped 1991 G7 meetings in London, have made sweeping pronouncements on 'global' arms control; at the same time US dealers contracted to sell US\$4 billion worth of arms to Middle Eastern countries. Neither the politicians nor the dealers are current or prospective victims of these wares. It is time that these deals were perceived as overtly misogynistic. Where are the female exporters of sophisticated torture equipment to dictatorships the world over? Where are the groups of uniformed women, to be reductionist, who rape men?

While the above are not readily evident, there is female complicity in militarism. It goes beyond the level of girl soldiers to those personal intersections mentioned above. The arms dealer, the torturer and the general all have personal lives and many have female partners. Genuine agreement and support for a militaristic stance is one thing. But what of the residual effect of centuries of patriarchal dominance in the realm of defence and security? What of unconscious 'he knows best' attitudes and denial of tacit involvement? When do unconscious social strategies

have their own cumulative results? Put rather differently, given those centuries of (Western) male dominance, how many women have opted for strategies of conflict avoidance rather than challenging institutionalised violence? Compliance, like resistance, may be seen as a strategy – part of ongoing negotiations within class or gender relations: ‘Knowing when to give in is an integral part of knowing how and when to resist, if you happen to be poor and weak.’¹⁰

When women resisted the values of their men in Nazi Germany or in nuclearised America, as often as not the means were withdrawal of service rather than open political confrontation. ‘Not speaking’, refusing to cook or have sexual relations, withdrawing domestic labour – all have a limited utility, meant to put over a message without cost or harm to the messenger. In their own ways they are statements which defy dependency. There is increasing anthropological evidence to suggest that some women use withdrawal as a strategy for survival. Many choose to work around the state rather than to work with it:

... evidence suggests that women’s politics has often been concerned with evasion and avoidance, with complex strategies of resistance and compliance. Perhaps women have tended to work outside the state because they have always been marginalised within it.¹¹

Perhaps the state as a political form represents masculine values and a degree of mystified vested interest with which they choose not to compromise. The same withdrawal and side-stepping of official channels may be seen in other recent organising – notably that concerned with peace, the environment or human rights. On the one hand this bodes well for continued people-to-people contact, and for retaining qualities of empathy, listening and dialogue when dealing with differences. On the other hand it begs the question of authority structures as they stand. This raises the vital issue of appropriate forms of confrontation. The feminist believing in empowerment and social justice walks a tightrope between the compromise of an aggressive stance against militarism and the need to retain values that are proactive and healing rather than reactive and destructive.

Above all the issue must be reclaimed by women – one need only look back to the 1915 publication, *Militarism versus Feminism* to realise that from the outset conflict resolution has been a feminist concern. Popular myth would have us believe that the vote, contraception or equal pay have been sole traditional aims. Our social histories need to rediscover individuals like Berta von Suttner, whose campaigning work and 1889 book, *Die Waffen Nieder* (English title, *Lay Down Your Arms*), launched the debate on de-militarisation in Central Europe and was instrumental in the establishment of the Nobel Peace Prize and subsequently the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Traditionally allocated the tasks of nurturing and caring, women's scope for contributing to attitude-formation is considerable, if it could be valued as such. And the more these tasks are shared by men (for their own education), the better. Armaments and lethal hardware have their origins somewhere. The intellectual divide between their manufacture and their potential use is the same divided thinking that divorced the split atom from any responsibility for Hiroshima. What Jonathan Kozol refers to as Western schizophrenic 'fragmentized reality'¹² can be overcome. A women's group in rural Gloucestershire, for example, refuses to accept 'Islam' and 'the West' as towering entities external to their lives. They invite Muslim women from the nearby city for discussion and dialogue and sharing. They are anticipating possible conflict arising from differences, and are working against this in a proactive way. It is a small, local initiative. In both the short term and the long term it may matter a great deal.

'Top-down' peace-making procedures (Versailles, Camp David, Lancaster House conferences, etc.) involve power elites and the promise and delivery of resources or rewards by the mediator. They can deliver new institutional frameworks, sometimes, but they only scratch the surface of feelings, ideologies and conditions which motivated the violence originally. Personal advocacy for reconciliation, moral and physical support for the rebuilding of lives, and new definitions of 'security' are essential for genuine conflict resolution. Some contribution is within the reach of every feminist, of every individual, who chooses to be involved.

Not many of us have the opportunity to mediate directly in militarised disputes. Most of us have the scope for questioning how one social context adversely affects another, through political interference, domination, exploitation or neglect. We also have immediate surroundings which reflect wider issues on a personal scale – be they race relations, housing, environmental management or domestic violence. Withdrawal as strategy is one thing, but passivity is quite another. Feminist conflict resolution will entail challenges – confrontation, discourse, caring, even conflict itself, to ensure that the world's victims of militarised disputes receive the attention they deserve. In one way or another we are all part of the whole. Arms and wealth have brought diplomatic recognition and status in the past; only the feminist approach will ensure a future diplomacy for the oppressed.

Notes

1. Frank Barnaby (ed), *The Gaia Peace Atlas* (London, Pan Books, 1988), p. 98.
2. H. W. van der Merwe, 'South African Initiatives', in Mitchell and Webb (eds), *New Approaches to International Mediation* (New York, Greenwood, 1988), p. 184.

3. John Burton, 'The History of International Conflict Resolution', in Azar and Burton, *International Conflict Resolution* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf, 1986), p. 44.
4. Lloyd Etheredge, from 'A World of Men: The Private Sources of American Foreign Policy', quoted in Brian Easlea's *Fathering the Unthinkable* (London, Pluto Press, 1983).
5. See Easlea, op. cit., and Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1987).
6. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press), p. 19.
7. J. K. Galbraith, 'At the Mercy of the Military', the *Guardian*, 6 August 1991, p. 17.
8. Henrietta Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988), p. 134.
9. Keith Webb, 'The Morality of Mediation', in Mitchell and Webb, op. cit., p. 27.
10. Moore, op. cit., p. 180.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
12. Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America* (New York, Plume Books, 1985), p. 191. See also Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, (London, Zed Books, 1989).