

Cynthia Cockburn

The Space Between Us : Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict
(London: Zed Books, 1998, 247pp.)

“Maybe if women would only gain the determination to represent publicly what they have always stood for privately in evolution and history (realism of householding, responsibility of upbringing, resourcefulness in peacekeeping, and devotion to healing), they might well add ethically restraining, because truly supranational, power to politics in the wider sense.”

Erik Erikson *Identity, Youth and Crisis*

“Seeing with eyes that are gender aware, women tend to make connections between the oppression that is the ostensible cause of conflict (ethnic or national oppression) in the light of another crosscutting one: that of gender regime. Feminist work tends to represent war as a continuum of violence from the bedroom to the battlefield, traversing our bodies and our sense of self. We see that the ‘homeland’ is not, never was, an essentially peaceful unitary space. We glimpse this more readily because as women we have seen that ‘the home’ itself is not the haven it is cracked up to be. Why, if it is a refuge, do so many women have to escape it to ‘refuges’? And we recognize, with Virginia Woolf, that ‘the public and private worlds are inseparably connected: that the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other.”

With her gender aware perspective, Cynthia Cockburn studies three women’s groups working for peace in the middle of tense conflict situations, each with its own distinctive aspect. The Women’s Support Network in Belfast was formed to give women from the city’s poorer districts a unified voice to express their common interests in the wider political world. In Israel, Bat Shalom brings Jewish and Arab Israeli women together to take a public stand for peace and justice. Medica came into being in a time of brutal aggressions in Bosnia to provide social, psychological and medical support to raped and traumatized women and their children . *“But they are alike in having chosen cooperation between women of polarized ethno-national groups, contradicting the norm in their countries, where those identifications have been mobilized for war.”*

In times of tension and conflict, as Cockburn points out *“Nationalist rendering of the nation are highly selective histories that delete everything that does not contribute to the story of a unitary people (always already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time). The ‘people’ have a common origin, are like each other and different from others, march together along a given road, travelling toward a shared destiny. All the divergences and convergences of real historic social time, the departures of some and the arrivals of others, the mixing and splitting, the dryings out and the illegitimate births, are ignored.*

“Those who govern us use identity processes to do so. Dominant groups maintain hegemony for the most part by discursive means rather than direct force, mobilizing consent by inclining us toward particular identifications. But without doubt it is those social groups that drive competitive nationalist movements that are the master spinners of identity tales designed to make some of us feel part of their imagined community, and others quite clear we

are not so favoured. They fix, eternalize and essentialize the identities that are the vehicles of their control: our primordial nation,, man and women as nature intended.”

To go against this nationalist effort of an imagined national self, one needs a strong sense of personal identity, one that is deeper and more complex than the ready-made images which come out of nationalist moulds. As C.G. Jung has stressed in his writings “*If you lack a secure self, are caught up in inner conflict, you are likely to disown the hated or feared parts of yourself and project them onto the unknown ‘other’... Many (sometimes it seems most) identity processes are coercive. We are labelled, named, known by identities that confine us, regulate us and reduce our complexity. The subtleties in our sense of self are difficult to convey in the terms available to us. We often feel misunderstood and misrepresented. And these processes are the more painful because they exploit our irreducible need to belong, our happiness in belonging. When war breaks out between national collectives, extraordinary pressures descend on people that force them to rethink who they are in relation to collective identities.*”

Thus, one of the functions of groups and centers as those analysed by Cynthia Cockburn is to provide a ‘safe space’ in which to develop and strengthen a sense of personal identity. It is not that everyone in the groups will find the same identity but rather that each person will find the time and space to grow.

It is a pleasure to read the insightful analysis of these groups. At the end, Cynthia Cockburn summarises her findings in six aspects they have in common: the best tools they have, the tools they share, are identity processes.

“First, at their best, the projects affirm difference. They resist the temptation of erasing it, of collapsing mixity into mere heterogeneity or, worse, a pretended homogeneity. Sometimes, of course, they make the error of not acknowledging politicized differences openly enough. Sometimes (as in Bat Shalom) the differences are so clear cut that they structure the group uncomfortably into two halves. But it is an important principle in all these projects that difficult differences ‘don’t have to be left outside the door in order for us to work together.’

Second, an important corollary, the projects are on the whole good at nonclosure on identity. They do not essentialize identities and therefore do not predict what might flow from them.

Third, the projects have found useful ways of reducing polarization by emphasizing other differences. Of course, the single most important feature of their alliances is that by organizing around political interests shared with women, yet framing differences from men in nonessential terms, they reduce the significance of ethnic differences... They look beyond the divided community, putting communal boundaries into softer focus, by stepping outside and looking back at them from an international vantage point. In this sense, all the projects gained strength from their involvement in a global feminist movement and its networks.

The fourth tool that the projects bring to bear in alliance building is an acknowledgement of injustices. In none of these three countries are ethnic differences the differences of equals. These regions are not just sites of war between peoples who for some inexplicable reason hate each other. They are societies founded on terrible wrongs. Creating an alliance is therefore not just a matter of mutual opening. It involves a willingness to face

ethical issues, to dig deep into layers of advantage, exploitation and oppression. It is a painful process...Nevertheless, the projects operate well as alliances only when they do recognize and make explicit this ethical asymmetry. They cannot move any distance toward peace without facing issues of right and wrong.

A fifth and further way, the women put to use what they have learned about identity pain and identity work is in defining the agenda of the projects, those matters on which it is safe to engage with each other, those that should be avoided if the group is to hold together and, most importantly, those that become possible as the group gains in ability to deal creatively with difference, or cease to be possible as violence closes in.

The sixth and final tool is group process...to ensure that all voices are heard, that all are given equal weight and that decision-making is fully shared...In a situation where everyone speaks, in a safe context where defensive masks can be set aside, each person can afford to be more herself. Less projection occurs, and the group coheres.”

Many of the insights of Cynthia Cockburn’s study could also be true for mixed men-women groups. She is the author of a study which I have not read *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations* (Macmillan) so that she may have analyzed there some of the difficulties of popular participation and the creation of safe space in mixed organizations. *The Space Between Us* is very useful and merits to be widely known.

René Wadlow



Drawing: Cecile Wadlow