

## Interview with Cynthia Enloe

*Susan Comfort*

**Susan Comfort:** The topic for this special issue of *Works and Days* draws its inspiration from feminist scholarship, especially yours, on the significance of gender, an often neglected key aspect of war and imperialism. Your concept of “feminist curiosity,” in particular, is a powerful tool for generating feminist inquiry into the invisible politics of gender that surround geopolitical conflict. How did this concept evolve for you? Also, how can it help us now to understand the ideological and socio-economic dimensions of the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan?

**Cynthia Enloe:** I think I started using “feminist curiosity” as I was being invited to give more and more talks at colleges and universities around the U.S. and in other countries, especially during a series of talks in Tokyo in 2003. I felt so responsible. If I didn’t somehow manage to persuade the students and professors that feminism made sense—and could be useful to them in their own efforts to make sense of this complex world—then I’d really let down the splendid Women’s Studies faculty who had invited me. So I began talking with audiences about the practical, down-to-earth value of looking at this world—their schools, their sports teams, their families, their workplaces, the headline news—afresh. I tried to give specific examples to show how they could make themselves smarter by asking better questions, by no longer taking so much for granted. And that meant asking feminist questions, always asking out loud how ideas about manliness, ideas about feminine respectability shaped politics and economics.

Employing a feminist curiosity means asking questions about things that others hoped they would just take for granted. I always talk about my own years of not asking feminist questions, years when I didn’t have a feminist curiosity—and all I had missed!

**S.C.:** How can we exercise “feminist curiosity,” then, to seek out the reasons for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan? In what ways can “feminist curiosity” help us to decipher the dominant explanations for the wars?

**C.E.:** Using a feminist curiosity to get a more accurate explanation for the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan would entail launching a

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feminist investigation into why the Bush administration, with the backing of many within the executive branch's national security agencies, with the support of a large majority of Congress and a majority of the American public—all three, but in sequence—each adopted a militarized approach to the events of 9/11.

As a start, I think a lot about why the Spanish government and Spanish public did not launch a military attack on Morocco after the deadly Madrid train attacks. Proportionately, they were as awful for the Spanish as the 2001 attacks were for Americans. And yet the Spanish chose to adopt a policing and judicial response to the Madrid terrorist attacks. Thus, one wonders why it is that so many—not all—Americans in government and in the general public seem to leap to a militarized solution, or a militarized response to a trauma. Not all countries do; why do we?

I think it has a lot to do with the emerging, not historically static, belief among many Americans and their elected representatives that the sort of masculinized response apparently offered by militarized action is the most effective and also the most likely to earn respect. There seems to be a widespread fear among many Americans in the late 20th century and early 21st century of appearing unmanly in the international arena. This anxiety may be most intimately felt by many (not all) men, but it is a national anxiety that can be felt by women too: "We'll show 'em. Nobody is going to get away with pushing *us* around!"

This set of fears and beliefs didn't spring up overnight. They weren't absent on September 10th and were suddenly in full bloom on September 11th. It takes years for these particular ideas to take root, to become widely held, to seem a natural part of the national fabric. And these ideas—ideas about collective shame and respect, about vulnerability, about masculinized decisiveness, about militarized solutions—are nurtured or resisted not only in the White House and on the floor of Congress; they are planted and watered—or challenged and uprooted—in kitchens, classrooms, boardrooms and locker rooms, around coffee machines, in beauty parlors, and on talk radio. That is why seeking the explanation for why the U.S. government, with such broad public support, responded to the attacks of September 11, 2001, in a manner so dramatically different than did the Spanish four years later, requires a feminist curiosity.

**S.C.:** Your work has broken new ground in linking rising militarization with global capitalism. Your example of the "militarized global sneaker" is particularly memorable. Could you comment on why it is imperative that these connections be made? Can similar connections be made in earlier eras of global capitalism?

**C.E.:** Yes, I do like thinking about how militarization can creep into the most unlikely places—such as the making of sneakers. So often militarization is imagined to be just about militaries: if there are no soldiers or heavy weaponry visible, we don't have to be curious about militarization being at work. Militarization also is imagined too often to be just about government militaries, whereas even anti-government movements can become militarized, with serious im-

plications for the relationships between women and men inside those movements.

Exploring earlier eras of globalized profit-maximizing economics with a feminist curiosity about militarization will, I think, be very useful. For instance, take a look at the last 100 years of rubber. Look at how the British and the French and then the American companies developed rubber plantations in their early twentieth century colonies in Malaysia, Vietnam, and the U.S. neo-colony of Liberia. Asking the militarization question would mean asking when and how and with what consequences did Dunlop, Michelin, and Firestone either create their own armed militias or rely on state militaries to acquire the land for their large rubber tree plantations and to discipline their rubber workers. Of course, using a feminist curiosity, you would also ask about the varieties of masculinities that were constructed and you would ask where women were on these rubber plantations. And you would keep watching over time, alert to any shifts. You could ask these same gendered questions about militarization of the early decades of the international copper industry, banana industry, and tea industry. You can't be sure, though, what you'll find until you start digging. You always have to be ready to be surprised.

**S.C.:** Even as his rhetoric promises change, Obama is continuing to pursue many policies of U.S. imperialist aggression from the Bush Era. Among the most egregious are Obama's expansion of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, his refusal to open up investigations into illegal detention and torture by the Bush Administration, and, indeed, his recent proposal seeking "preventive detention" that would, in effect, perpetuate unlawful imprisonment. At the same time, his domestic policies, such as his support of the Defense of Marriage Act, lean more rightward than many of his supporters anticipated. What do you make of the contradictions between his rhetoric and his policies?

**C.E.:** Barack Obama is under tremendous pressures, and many of those are gendered militarizing pressures. What I mean by this is that anyone who becomes American president in the current era is immediately pressured to be taken seriously by the military, both the senior command and the rank and file. This is one of the consequences of the U.S. political system which makes the president the "commander in chief" of the armed services. But added to this in the current era of American political culture is the popular and media—not just the uniformed military personnel's—expectation that "commander in chief" will be not just one among several "hats" that a president wears, but the main hat. That understanding of the presidency is exacerbated, I think, by the ways that a certain model of masculinity is so entangled with militarism. The result has been, and still is, intensified popular pressures on any U.S. president—Democrat or Republican—to prioritize military roles. So I think that we, the citizenry, have to take some responsibility for generating these pressures on Obama. Secondly, Barack Obama is, as he has always said, a centrist. That is how he built his electoral career in Illinois and in the U.S. Senate. He genuinely believes in compromise.

I don't think the Obama administration is merely a continuation of the last Bush administration. Sonia Sotomayor never would have been nominated by George W. Bush. The "gag rule" (banning U.S. foreign aid to any health group which in any way counsels clients on contraception and abortion alternatives) would never have been lifted under the Bush administration. Under the Bush administration there would have been a triumphalist and disastrous effort to co-opt the independent post-election opposition movement in Iran. On the other hand, there are worrisome continuities. It will take a lot of civic stamina for those Americans who voted for Obama to keep up the level of mobilization necessary to assure Obama and his closest allies—and Congressional Democrats—that they are not going out on a lonely limb by resisting further militarization of Afghanistan and Pakistan, by pushing hard for fair and inclusive health care, effective financial market supervision, and serious environmental regulation. That level of mobilization, I think, will require building and sustaining broad-based alliances and a genuinely inclusive sort of civic connectedness. Cynicism isn't the answer.

**S.C.:** Do you think that the disappointments so far, especially with Obama's expansion in Afghanistan, can be attributed, in part, to the hesitation by antiwar activists to link war and militarization with capitalist imperialism? A few U.S. feminists have made these links, but how do you explain why this analysis does not seem to gel into a consistent critique?

**C.E.:** I think most Americans who are indeed very nervous and even dismayed at President Obama's policy of deepening U.S. militarized involvement in Afghanistan are, nonetheless, hesitant to voice their criticism in terms of imperialism, and this reluctance is largely due to the peculiarities of this country's historical discourses. Most Americans have not studied U.S. colonialism in their primary or high schools. The histories of U.S. colonization of the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii, Palau, and Puerto Rico do not figure in most Americans' understanding of where they come from, how they got here, who they are. This has made the introduction of the very concept of imperialism into everyday discourse—conversation with friends, press editorials, speeches at rallies, debates in schools, campaign messages—very difficult.

The alternative discourses—of broken promises to Afghans, of following in the well-trodden paths of past British debacles, of wasted young American lives, of bull-in-a-china-shop cultural ignorance—become more effective in engaging with a broad range of Americans precisely because, even if resisted initially, each resonates.

Introducing a concept, which is shorthand for a distinctive patterned array of relationships, is itself a political endeavor. And it should be. For instance, it has taken a generation of American feminists to inch toward using the concept of *patriarchy* in public (and private) discourse. Yet still today one needs to use it sparingly and with respectful explanation for it to be meaningful and not alienating for most American listeners. Introducing imperialism as a concept entails showing listeners why it is useful and how it helps them

to make fuller meaning of their own world in ways that enable them to take part in it.

**S.C.:** In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has adopted military strategies that have had devastating consequences for women. For example, U.S. military rules of engagement have resulted in the killing of thousands of civilians, many of them women and children. The military's destruction of infrastructure that delivers water, food, fuel, health care, and education has made women's lives an untold nightmare. Rape and murder are now constant threats as a result of the insecurity created by U.S. military presence. How can we "make feminist sense," to use one of your salient phrases, of U.S. military policy and conduct?

**C.E.:** Yes, one always needs to investigate how any government's military strategy affects boys and girls, women and men. In Iraq, there has been less use of air power and more use of nighttime house raids and militarized checkpoints. Both house raids and checkpoints (now turned over to Iraqi police and army personnel, each trained by U.S. trainers) are gendered in their conduct and their consequences. Armed soldiers' nervousness, their official "rules of engagement," their weaponry, their likelihood of disciplinary actions, peer cultures within the companies and platoons, the workings of the chain of command, the American presumptions about "Middle Eastern men" and "Middle Eastern women"—each of these has worked with the others to intensify the gendered politics of the Iraq War.

Iraqi women have been organizing throughout this war, as they have been since the 1950s. Since 2003, these Iraqi women activists have had to strategize, against all odds, to handle—simultaneously—the masculinized politics of the American military occupation, the patriarchal dynamics of each of the Iraqi male-led political parties and their armed militias, the questionable aid projects of some Republican-connected American women's organizations, the loss of Iraqi women's jobs during not just the current war but the 1990s international economic sanctions, the rising distrust between women of different religious and ethnic affiliations, the intra-familial expectations for women's and girls' respectability, and the U.S. privatization of much of the Iraqi economy. Iraqi activist women have organized widows' groups, domestic violence shelters, and political lobbying campaigns to influence constitution-writing. It's impressive. Most of this has gone on without Americans having a clue. It is so much easier for many Americans to imagine Iraqi women as uniformly marginalized. In fact, they have scholars and analysts and strategists doing their own studies, making their own calculations.

**S.C.:** You include so much comprehensive detail about women in Iraq. If it were up to you, what would you want Americans to know about women in Afghanistan? Why do you think Americans don't have a clue?

**C.E.:** It is stunning to me how many Americans, especially women, have adopted *The Kite Runner* for their own book groups. At the

same time, the memoir of the American who built schools for girls [*Three Cups of Tea*] has been a best seller and been adapted as a children's book. So there does seem to be a widespread desire to learn more about "ordinary" Afghan women and men and boys and girls. That yearning isn't always fulfilled by novels and memoirs and movies in ways that give American readers and viewers an appreciation for the complex diversities of actual Afghan women's lives over the last three decades of war.

Too often, even if they do succeed in making individual Afghans "real," these books and movies can leave their readers and viewers with a reconfirmed impression that most Afghans are victims, needing outsiders' help and guidance. Reports such as those by Carlotta Gall, a journalist who has been reporting from different cities in Afghanistan for a decade, provide a different sort of picture, one of particular Afghan women strategizing, organizing, developing and debating their own analyses. This is what more Americans need to have ready access to. This is the sort of reporting that would help Americans shed their too comfortable assumption that they—and their soldiers—are benign helpers of a benighted people, an assumption that reinforces American popular masculinized militarism.

**S.C.:** The global economy is now at a turning point, and neoliberalism, or the ideology of free markets, is now deeply in crisis. It remains a question, however, whether an adequate challenge from the Left or Progressives will emerge to resist the disastrous privatization of public wealth and outright plunder of neoliberal capitalism. What can feminists, especially feminists who battle militarization, do to formulate challenges to reorganized forms of aggressive capitalism? Which feminist organizations do you think are doing promising work?

**C.E.:** Feminist economists just had a big conference here in Boston. Many of them came from Asia and Africa. They shared ideas about the financial crisis, about the care economy, about migration, about international donors, about micro-credit, about economic reconstruction in the aftermath of wars. The journal *Feminist Economics* is a good place to go to learn how these smart observers of local and globalized economies are making sense of the present crisis. Feminists—some of whom are academic scholars, others of whom are activist analysts—have been revealing the gendered workings of national and international economics for decades: Filipinas analyzed the 1980s international "debt trap," British feminists critiqued Thatcherist efforts to dismantle the welfare state. Today Indonesian feminists are charting the steps towards women factory workers' independent unionizing, Vietnamese and Burmese feminists (many in exile in Thailand) are investigating the expanding "bride trade" into China. Mexican, Chilean, and Canadian feminists have been carefully mapping the consequences for women of their governments' free trade agreements with the U.S. Indian feminists have been revealing the subtle impacts of neoliberal policies as those impacts affect women of different classes (and rural and urban women) differently: not every woman is making more money by working in

a call-center. At the same time, Irish and Icelandic feminists have offered us trenchant analyses of the sort of masculinized banking cultures which brought down their economies.

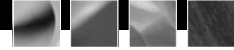
So my chief suggestion is that we here in the U.S. look to feminist analysts/activists here in the U.S., such as Heidi Hartmann and her Institute for Women and Policy Research, but especially we need to pay close attention to feminist analysts/activists in other countries to see them as our tutors. They are the ones who know best how this current crisis came about and how it is playing out in the lives of women. We in the U.S. need to listen and learn.

**S.C.:** One of the goals of this special issue of *Works and Days* is to bring together feminists from different disciplines in order to connect issues of war and imperialism, especially those structured by gender, class, and race, which are often perceived separately. In your experience, what are some of the challenges and limitations of interdisciplinary efforts? What are some of the fruits borne from such efforts, particularly in your field of international relations? And, finally, what remains to be done?

**C.E.:** Patriarchy—that is, a system of relationships that relies on the emotional and physical labor of diverse women and yet privileges certain forms of masculinity—works at many levels simultaneously. It takes the perpetuating of racialized and classed gender stereotypes, it calls for propping up certain structures of local and international political authority, it needs particular kinds of economic exchanges, it rests on the silencing of some memories and the celebration of others, all the while legalizing certain familial forms while stigmatizing others.

It's precisely because patriarchy is so dynamic and so malleable—it can and does thrive in countries as disparate as the U.S., Brazil, Iran, Australia, and Kenya—that we need a host of skills to chart it and to expose its appeals, its causes, consequences, and changing patterns. I'm a humble political scientist, so I've had to become a lot more historically conscious. I've had to learn the basics of geographic and ethnographic analysis and to be tutored by students of popular culture just to make sense of any given armed conflict. Because, as hard as we try, no one of us is going to be able to be skilled in art history, international trade, and cartography. Thus, we need to both be developing interdisciplinary skills and creating networks of sharing with other feminists equipped with skills we lack.

If there is a caveat that should accompany interdisciplinarity, it might be that we risk constantly feeling that we need to know more, prompting us to hold off coming to clear conclusions or making sharp etched recommendations. I think that the antidote to this risk is, while we make our own findings crystal clear—no fudging—and the recommendations they generate sharp, we stay open to new research, remain alert to new approaches. This seems a very feminist way to live our thinking and activist lives.



## Interventions

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