

Being Able To Say Neither / Nor

Cynthia Cockburn

A group of us in London co-ordinate occasional actions as 'Women in Black' (footnote). Although I am actively involved I do not speak 'for' Women in Black London. What follows is no more than a few personal thoughts. Just as Women in Black has no formal membership or spokes-people, neither can it really be said to have a line. But from all the occasions women have demonstrated together under this name on the streets of many different countries it is possible to work out what we are standing against and standing for.

First, Women in Black is against the whole continuum of violence, from male violence against women, to militarism and war. It is for justice and peace. It is clearly for multi-ethnic democracy. It is for non-violent, negotiated, means of resolving differences. And there is an implicit analysis that a certain kind of masculinity fuels and is fuelled by militarism and war, and that this is harmful not only for women but also for men.

At the time of writing, as the ethnic aggression intensifies in Kosovo/Kosova and as NATO bombing shows no signs of ending, a situation has arisen in which there is very little space indeed for this kind of politics by women. Even less than usual. The little space that is sometimes there has closed right down, not just in Yugoslavia, but in the UK too.

What is happening is polarization, a kind of 'either/or' politics. Take, for example, the big demonstration on Sunday April 11 called by the Committee for Peace in the Balkans, largely framed by the Socialist Worker Party, at which the speakers included many well known names from the British Left. Some of us took the Women in Black banner along. Many of the Women in Black network in London want to oppose NATO bombing.

Our opposition (I feel safe in saying) is not to protect Serb nationalist extremism but precisely because we would see the bombardment as strengthening not weakening it. For that reason we have been holding vigils in London.

But, on April 11, even as the march assembled on the Embankment, I was feeling uneasy. Because there was this ocean of pre-planned Socialist Worker placards that simply said 'stop the NATO bombing'. Any messages opposing the ethnic aggression of the Milosevic regime were overwhelmed by this uniform and singular demand.

Then we reached Downing Street, where the march was joined by a strong contingent of Serb nationalists and their supporters. We were surrounded by the Serb national flag, the characteristic three finger salutes, and many people wearing the new 'target' symbols that have been adopted in Belgrade since the bombing. At the bottom of Trafalgar Square things got very confrontational. To the left, held back behind barriers, was a militant Kosovan counter-demonstration supporting the bombing. And shouting back from 'our' side of the road were angry Serb nationalists, some of them carrying a scaffold with an effigy of Clinton.

At that point I took down and folded up the Women in Black banner. It seemed the wrong place to have it. Some of us women decided that we wanted to go and meet people on the Kosovan demonstration. We wanted to find out whether they were all Kosova Liberation Army, to see what other groups might be represented there behind the macho front, and talk with them. We wanted at least to let them know that there were some people on the main march who, although you wouldn't know it, not only opposed bombing, but also opposed Milosevic and what his regime was doing in Kosovo.

The police tried to stop us crossing to the other side of the road. And one of them said 'You can't change your mind now, you chose this

demonstration, you've got to stick with it. Don't you know which side you're on?'. That seemed to epitomise the situation. We went over there anyway.

What was worse, though, was that the same kind of message we were getting from the police was also coming across from the speeches in the Square. It was clearly a difficult situation for the speakers to deal with, addressing an audience in which the thing mainly visible was Serb flags. One woman speaker on 'our' platform did criticize Milosevic. She got booed by the crowd. Perhaps this warned off the other speakers. I did not hear the word Milosevic mentioned again. The impression given was that there was one 'enemy' and that was NATO. People spoke of 'the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo' but, since Milosevic was not named, the implication could have been that it was the result of the bombing. Nobody that I heard speak acknowledged the presence of the Kosova demonstration across the road, or expressed any discomfort in being separated in this way from the victims of 'ethnic cleansing'. Instead, the speakers dwelt on the bombing, referring to the Second World War blitz of London and to our wartime alliance with valorous Serbs.

It seemed to me (although I know views are divided on this) that the organizers allowed the rally to be hi-jacked by Serb nationalism. You had the feeling they were thinking: 'One thing at a time. You can't oppose bombing AND oppose Milosevic in the same breath.' But all the time I was thinking: there must be people here in Trafalgar Square from the democratic opposition to Milosevic. There are sure to be some men here in the crowd who have deserted from the Yugoslav National Army. They, like us, must feel silenced by this atmosphere. What are they feeling?

Nor was the problem only one of polarization. There was a parallel problem of homogenization. In bombing 'the Serbs', NATO are effectively being racist about Yugoslavia. It is as if they think the 'pure Serb nation' is a reality in Yugoslavia in the way Milosevic would like it to be. Governments' failure to see beyond ethnicism is one thing, but the organizers of this

demonstration, called to oppose governments, seemed to fall into the same trap of talking as though the people beneath the bombs are 'Serbs'.

In reality, the Yugoslavia that Milosevic governs is not much more than 60% Serb. There are twenty other nationalities living there, Hungarians, Romanians, Croats, Sandjak Muslims, Montenegrans. There are people of mixed marriages and mixed parentage. Probably many of these were present in Trafalgar Square on April 11 too. What were they feeling about being addressed as if all of them were holding Serb flags?

By now I was full of doubt and confusion. We had folded up the Women in Black banner. But should we be here at all? I remembered a message I had a few days before from a (so-called Serb) woman friend living in Canada. She had written, 'The stage is set right now as if anti-NATO is for ethnic cleansing, Milosevic and radical nationalism. And that is very dangerous'. Because of this, she said, 'many people have problems with protesting'. I was beginning to see what she meant.

So if there was not any space for our politics here with the Left in Trafalgar Square, then where? And with whom? And I began to think about the women we work most closely with in Yugoslavia: the Women in Black group in Belgrade. They have demonstrated against the Milosevic regime, in rain and shine, in Republic Square once a week since 1991. Now what rains on them is bombs.

And I went home after the demo and read through the many e-mail messages we had had from them in the preceding weeks. I did it to recover a sense of direction and belonging. I remembered that during the equally dark days of the Bosnian war, when we had had difficulty unifying women in London (who were not only British but also from every Yugoslav ethnic group), the one thing we had always been able to agree on was supporting the women peace activists in Belgrade.

And what follows is what I read. I cannot use the women's real names, but I shall give a date for each of their messages.

First, I read how they have persisted, against increasing odds, in keeping in daily contact with our women colleagues in Pristina, Albanian Kosovans, and have tried to keep supporting them. March 28: 'My moral and emotional imperative (no matter how pathetic it sounds) is to spend hours and hours trying to get a phone line to Prishtina.'

They passed on to us news of how ordinary Serbs and Albanians there are still trying to befriend each other. April 1: 'In some buildings, in a few cases, neighbours speak, Serbian and Albanian. They have agreed: "If the police come we will speak up for you", say the Serbs who stay. And "If the KLA comes, we will speak up for you", say the Albanians.'

On March 27 I heard from a (so-called Serb) friend who has now fled the country. She was not thinking of her own situation so much as that of Kosovans. 'What disturbs and terrifies me most is the news that the most prominent Albanian intellectuals are being taken away and nobody knows what is happening to them... Is that how the NATO air strikes are supposed to protect the lives of innocent Albanian (and Serbian) civilians in Kosovo?'

April 9, more news from the women in Belgrade. 'I talked to 'X' two days ago (a women's human rights worker in Prishtina). She is in Skopje with her family, sixteen of them and they have gone through inferno for six days and six nights and now she is a little recovered and called me and told me some part of her story. And I told her that I am so thankful that she called because we were worrying every day. And she said "I knew you and 'Y' will worry. It was my duty to call you to tell you we are all alive and healthy". And I had tears on my face, because those words meant so much among the horrible hatred against Albanians that is going on in the last fifteen days, and much more than before. Thanks for support.'

The women of Women in Black Belgrade are opposed to the bombing, but they have it in perspective. April 1: 'All those bombs don't bother me so much because I see the problem of it in smaller terms than the Kosovo problem.' They see the bombs as bad not because they are an aggression against Serbs but because they weaken the opposition to Milosevic. April 1: 'The bombings are installing Milosevic as king for life, not just president. Kosovo will, with a large amount of victims, get an international protectorate or state. But Serbia will be in shit for the next thirty years. That's what pisses me off and what I can't deal with. Talking to other activists these days I realized that some of them are frustrated that their whole work, life project, whole peace orientation is falling apart.'

The atmosphere in Belgrade is getting more and more sexist and misogynist. The women write that there are many placards on the streets saying things like 'Fuck you Chelsea' (of Clinton's daughter), and endless references to Monika Lewinsky, calling 'Come back Monica', so that Clinton might 'screw her instead of Serbs'. And so on. The little space there was for active and autonomous women is narrowing down, along with tolerance of any other kind of counter-culture.

March 28: 'This conspiracy of militarism – global and local – dangerously reduces our space, and soon there won't be this space. How to denounce global militarism if we don't denounce the local? How to denounce bombing if we don't denounce the massacres, the repression? With the horror the people of Kosovo are living through with this NATO intervention, they are paying a price even greater than before. NATO in the sky, Milosevic on the ground'. The writer added, 'At the moment our human ghetto functions well, with mutual support. Your support strengthens us, it means a real lot. I embrace you with the deepest friendship and tenderness.'

As the bombing ended its second week, things were clearly getting tougher for women and other peace activists in Belgrade. On April 9: 'Our problem here is that we cannot say a word anymore, all human rights are

suspended. Only anti-NATO appeals can be published. So Women in Black Belgrade have decided not to make any appeal, at least for the time being, because we cannot as well state that we are against Milosevic... So I live with a mask on my face, if I talk to other people. Everything changed here, and fear is everywhere'

But here in London we do not have to wear that mask. We can speak out both against the bombing AND against the Milosevic regime without any kind of risk or fear. On the demo on Sunday April 11 that was not happening. One statement had been allowed to silence the other. And I really think we have to keep both clearly there together. Even if it seems contradictory. There is a saying that 'the first casualty of war is truth'. I am feeling that another casualty in this war, right now, is the willingness to live with ambiguity and contradiction, to say 'not this (not ethnic cleansing), but not that (bombing) either'.

Another casualty is the ability to say 'I don't have an answer'. Preparing for Women in Black vigils in London we are having a lot of difficulty just now knowing what positive demands we can put on our banners and placards. But maybe we have to admit that we can't have very concrete answers at this moment, because the mistakes were begun years ago. There are political principles we can suggest, of course. The trouble is these things do not translate easily into short, snappy slogans. I have felt the temptation to sloganize too. We have sat up all night wondering how on earth to write, all on a couple of pieces of cardboard, 'work through the United Nations, support genuine international peacekeeping and strengthen independent monitoring'.

But the thing I most feel I want to do is just keep listening to the women who are there, the ones who are taking the risks, and whose political judgment we have by now got eight years of knowing we can trust. And the things they do clearly model for us is: keep talking, keep the channels open, cherish mixity, believe we can live together, refuse military solutions. And

choose a way of doing things that ridicules and counteracts all the sexist, masculist posturing that goes with militarism on every side.

FOOTNOTE: Women in Black was started in Israel in 1988 by women protesting against Israel's Occupation of the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza. It was they who established the characteristic form of action, of mainly silent vigils, by women standing alone as women, wearing black, in public places, at regularly repeated times. There are Women in Black groups now in many different countries, and an e-mail network is developing in Spanish and English (the address in Spain is roal@nodo50.ix.apc.org and, in the UK, jane@gn.apc.org). In recent years Women in Black London have demonstrated against bombing and sanctions in relation to Iraq and the Gulf War, against US/British bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan, and against ethnic aggression in the former Yugoslavia. To be included in the WIB London mailing list please send your street and e-mail addresses and phone number to WIB c/o The Maypole Fund, PO Box 14072 London N16 5WB.

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*Cynthia Cockburn
Dept of Sociology
City University London
And Women in Black London.
c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.uk
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