
Introduction

By

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What can women's or feminist anti-nuclear movements and thinkers tell us about the politics of violence and possibilities of peaceful and just tomorrows? The essays in this special issue of *DEP* explore precisely this question, by delving into specific examples drawn from Western and global movements, organizations, and thinkers. *Disarming Women*, the conference that was the impetus for this special issue, was organized in the context of the UN 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Campaign in November 2018. The organizers asked presenters to reflect on anti-nuclear activists' motivations, strategies, and theoretical reflections. Following a long tradition of feminist thinking, they urged us to connect the micro-level, personal issue of GBV – which according to the UN refers “to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships” (UNHCR) – to the macro-level realm of international nuclear politics. “The personal is political” goes the old feminist adage. Or, in Cynthia Enloe's version, “the personal is international” (Enloe 2014: 343). The papers collected in this resulting *DEP* special issue thus take the connection between GBV and nuclear politics as their point of departure. But more than that, these essays highlight how women's and feminist anti-nuclear movements bared the multiple forms of violence inherent in nuclear politics, both in its military and its civilian versions. It is not only the dramatic, visible, and immediate violence of nuclear destruction or of nuclear accidents that concerned those activists and thinkers (as should concern us), but also the often hidden, more subtle, even “private” harms. While less spectacular, these violences are equally dangerous to human existence and human flourishing¹.

Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung (1969) famously posited the distinction between structural and personal violence. Where personal violence maims and kills directly, structural violence harms indirectly through its embeddedness into “patterned relationships among components of a social system” (Maas-Weigert 2008). In these structures, harm to others may happen inadvertently – without intention – as people perform “their regular duties as a job defined in the structure” (Maas Weigert 2008). Whereas personal violence is more easily visible, structural

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¹ The phrase “human flourishing” was popularized by Charles Taylor (2007).

violence is often invisible and may even appear natural or inevitable. While personal violence acts swiftly, structural violence is slow and works by erosion (Nixon 2011). Elsewhere, I have argued that these forms of violence are inextricably linked to gender: not only do they affect differently gendered people unequally; they also depend on, are sustained by, and are constitutive of ideas about gender (Confortini 2006). In the stories of women's and feminist anti-nuclear activists and thinkers these connections between gender and violence in its different forms come into sharp relief.

The direct gendered violence of the nuclear industry (both in its civilian and military embodiments) is perhaps the easiest to expose. Drawing on primary sources, as well as Amy Swerdlow's (1993) and others' first-hand accounts, Bruna Bianchi shows how the members of Women Strike for Peace in the early 1960s strategically deployed their socially ascribed gender roles as mothers to disseminate information on the contamination of children's milk with Strontium 90 and Iodine 131, as a result of nuclear testing. The ecofeminist movement in Benedikte Zitouni's account described in painful and graphic details the devastating potential violence and destruction of nuclear war.

The writers in this issue also highlight how the activists who are the subjects of their investigations also saw the gendered structural violence that came with the diversion of public expenditures from welfare and social security to the production and stockpiling of nuclear and other weapons. This is the case, for example of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which employed such arguments in its campaigns, starting from the mid 1960s (my essay, this issue). Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (WWNFIP) exposed the gendered and racialized violence of "nuclear colonialism:" the nuclear production process – whether for civilian or military purposes – not only disproportionately harmed indigenous women, WWNFIP claimed, but was also a form of domination and control that impinged on the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous people (Eschle, this issue).

Beyond the structural and direct violence of the nuclear industry – and indeed the nuclear era – these essays reveal another insidious form of violence, that of silence. We can call this violence epistemic, borrowing and extending the concept from Gayatri Spivak's original formulation. Famously, Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) argues that in the epistemic order created by colonialism and continuing after the formal end of empires, the colonial subject (the "subaltern") cannot speak with her own voice. In this order, her logic is situated outside the realm of intelligibility, and thus it cannot be articulated unless such episteme is expanded and disrupted so as to make the subaltern's voice comprehensible (see also Confortini and Vaitinen 2019). In the logic of the atomic era – where missiles "are called peacekeepers when they're aimed to kill," to cite Tracey Chapman's popular 1988 song *Why?* – anti-nuclear activists' voice is itself incomprehensible. Their actions, however, constitute the attempt to disrupt the nuclear epistemic order – thus they embody the possibility for a different future.

These essays recount how easy it is, in the context of such order, to underestimate or outright dismiss women's and feminist anti-nuclear activism, because of how far it resides outside the nuclear episteme. Whereas nuclear speak was (indeed

still is) uttered in abstract euphemisms (see Cohn 1987 and 1993), these movements' strategies were embodied, their claims and knowledge based on lived experiences. Many drew on their lives as mothers and caretakers, and viewed their bodies and those of their children as sites of knowledge about atomic power. Ecofeminists explicitly displaced the disembodied and abstract claims of nuclear intellectuals with "descriptions of deformities, malformations, and diseases." They were motivated by the utter panic of constant nightmares about total annihilation, feeling this panic in humans' interconnected flesh (Zitouni, this issue).

In her seminal work *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick observed that "[p]eace, like mothering, is sentimentally honored and often secretly despised," (Ruddick 1995:137). When these movements strategically and sometimes subversively employed motherhood, they were likewise despised – albeit not so secretly -- for linking mothering and peace. Their strategies and maternal ethics were brushed off, rather than being engaged with seriously and thoughtfully. Bruna Bianchi gives us a glimpse of how utterly pervasive the masculinized logic of the nuclear era was when she describes Italians' dismissal of WISPer's visit to the Pope. The Italian Communist women's review, Bianchi recounts, described WISPer in caricatural and belittling tones, disregarding their appeals to solidarity. Except for poet and Gandhian follower Lanza del Vasto and his wife, Italy as a whole – including the Italian section of WILPF – ignored the "homemakers ambassadors of peace" (Bianchi, this issue). The home, after all, could not be a site of politics and knowledge in this view.

Whereas politics was seen as the masculinized realm of the public and home a private feminized space, women brought the home outside and politics inside. The women's peace encampments of the 1980s were spaces that transgressed that fictional divide: they were the quintessential political and public homes, both figuratively and practically, Eschle and Zitouni remind us. Women disrupted the nuclear order's illusion of rationality by playing with emotions, the arts, the absurd, and the tragic, like when during Pentagon Action (Zitouni, this issue), they marched with giant colored puppets that symbolized grief, rage, and power (theirs as well as the warmakers').

But these essays also remind us that the possibility of epistemic violence exists as well within the movement. If, in fact, we see epistemic orders as multiple, smaller ones existing within larger ones, each community, locale, social and political space has in it its own "conditions of possibility" (Foucault 1994) of knowledge. In this case, the possibility of epistemic violence exists within movements as well as outside of them and against them. It is this possibility that my article and Catherine Eschle's consider. Is it possible, for example, that the activists of WWNFIP reproduced in their actions the very forms of power that they sought to dismantle, by reproducing racialized hierarchies between Western and Pacific women (Eschle, this volume)? Eschle's preliminary analysis claims that feminist scholars might have underestimated the degree to which Western feminist anti-nuclear activists struggled and were reflexive about their own boundaries and limitations in regard to race (as were WILPFers in my essay). But their internal struggles also serve as a reminder about the need to be always vigilant about how, in our actions and thoughts, we might in fact reproduce what we are trying to dismantle.

Silvia Camillotti's essay on a short and little-known transcribed speech on the nuclear issue by Elsa Morante may seem an outlier among the other articles in this issue. After all – and perhaps not too surprisingly for those who know Morante's work well – in this speech the author situates herself outside of politics all together. In fact, however, Camillotti's reading of *Pro o Contro la Bomba Atomica* asks us to reflect on our role as writers, not merely as academics. Why are we writing these pages? Why are we retelling these stories about women's and feminist anti-nuclear movements of the past? Morante's answer is that the writers' role is to “to sincerely question real life, so that it may give us its truth in response” (cited in Camillotti, this issue). Morante's speech becomes our own self-reflection: through Camillotti's lucid analysis we are called to express in our “art” (and I call our profession “art” with the awareness of our smallness as writers when compared to novelists and poets, especially giants like Morante herself) the need for “vigilance about the facts of the world” (Morante, cited in Camillotti, this issue). For Morante, writers as artists bear the tremendous responsibility to “prevent the disintegration of human conscience” (Morante 1965). In this call we find the echoes of anti-nuclear movements' strategic deployment of artistic forms, which expressed a life-affirming and embodied logic in antithesis to the logic of destruction embodied in the nuclear bomb (Zitouni, this issue). This is ultimately what the writers in this special issue attempt to do: in our own work of remembering we declare ourselves outside the nuclear logic, because “Writers cannot exist within the system” (Morante, cited in Camillotti, this issue). It is from this outside only that we can “unmask the cheating” (Morante, cited in Camillotti, this issue).

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