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Feminism and the critique of violence: negotiating feminist political agency

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ABSTRACT *The acute sensitivity of feminism to violence, in its many different forms and contexts, makes it a particularly interesting case for the examination of the relationship between politics and violence in theory and practice. Our purpose in this paper is not to adjudicate the normative question of whether feminism implies a commitment to pacifism or to the use of non-violence. Rather, we are interested in examining how the relation between feminist politics and violence is construed as feminists struggle to develop a politics in which opposition to patriarchal violence is central. We begin with the feminist critique of violence, and move to examine how particular articulations of that critique shape and are shaped by practices of feminist political agency in specific contestation over the goals and strategies of feminism. We use the well-known case of feminist debates over the Greenham Common Peace Camp in the UK in the 1980s to demonstrate how negotiating women's political agency in relation to opposition to male violence poses problems, both for feminists who embrace non-violence and prioritize the opposition to war, and for feminists who are suspicious of non-violence and of the association of feminism with peace activism. In both cases, the debates over Greenham demonstrate the fundamentally political character of the ways in which the relation and distinction between violence and politics are conceptually and practically negotiated.*

Introduction

Violence as a theme is theoretically and practically central to the history of feminism.¹ Importantly, feminist thinkers associate violence in personal relations, in particular in marriage and household, with violence in public life, in particular in state punishment, accepted modes of social conflict 'resolution,' institutions

like armed service and, of course, inter- and intra-state wars. The idea of a 'continuum of violence' recurs in feminist thought and theory.² It is emphasized differently, of course, in different strains of feminism, but it seems that any analysis of the forms, varieties, transformations and contestations of feminist political thinking will always feature somewhere an analysis of, and opposition to, violence, in relation to sex and gender, exploitation and oppression, economy, culture and/or polity (state). The acute sensitivity of feminism to violence, in its many different forms and contexts, makes it a particularly interesting case for the examination of the relationship between politics and violence in theory and practice.

Our purpose in this paper is not to adjudicate the normative question of whether feminism implies a commitment to pacifism or to the use of non-violence.³ Rather, we are interested in examining how the relation between feminist politics and violence is construed as feminists struggle to develop a politics in which opposition to patriarchal violence is central. We begin with the feminist critique of violence, and move to examine how particular articulations of that critique shape and are shaped by practices of feminist political agency in specific contestation over the goals and strategies of feminism. We use the well-known case of feminist debates over the Greenham Common Peace Camp in the UK in the 1980s to demonstrate how negotiating women's political agency in relation to opposition to male violence poses problems, both for feminists who embrace non-violence and prioritize the opposition to war, and for feminists who are suspicious of non-violence and of the association of feminism with peace activism. These problems illuminate two theoretical and practical difficulties for political struggle against violence: first, the problem of how to recast the relation between violence and political agency in ways that are consistent with opposition to violence; second, and relatedly, the problem of how to determine the boundary between violence and non-violence. In both cases, the debates over Greenham demonstrate the fundamentally *political* character of the ways in which the relation and distinction between violence and politics are conceptually and practically negotiated.

Feminist critiques of violence

We have said that traditions of feminist thought and action more or less centrally feature critiques of violence. But within feminist politics there are profound lines of disagreement on the topic. Many of the disagreements are strategic. They focus on the appropriate programmatic place for analysis of and action on violence within a wider range of issue and policy matters, and on the theoretical and practical implications of various forms of focus on violence. Bound up with these strategic questions are divergent understandings of the ontology and the aetiology of forms of violence, and there are also disagreements about the significance or the value of violence. For some political thinkers violence belongs in a cluster of greatest evils; for others it does not have this negative quality. Indeed, in some varieties of feminism, thinkers come close to celebrating violence, and to

prescribing women's exploration of their own capacities for violence and for other forms of transgression.

In October 1888, at the height of the scare about 'Jack the Ripper' in London, the *Pall Mall Gazette*—a London evening newspaper which under the editorship of W.T. Stead from 1883 to 1889 campaigned about social issues, including poverty and child prostitution, and which covered the East End murders in some detail—quoted a letter from Florence Fenwick Miller, the suffrage campaigner and author of a study of Harriet Martineau, to the *Daily News*:

Week by week and month by month, women are kicked, beaten, jumped on until they are crushed, chopped, stabbed, seamed with vitriol, bitten, eviscerated with red-hot pokers and deliberately set on fire—and this sort of outrage, if the woman dies, is called 'manslaughter': if she lives, it is a common assault.⁴

Fenwick Miller is here participating in an already long tradition of discourse of (about) violence against women, about its ubiquity, its deadliness, the lack of seriousness with which it is viewed by the dominant culture, state authorities and the law, and the ambivalence of culture, laws, perpetrators and victims alike about responsibility and wrong. We find this kind of passage in the works of Wollstonecraft and her feminist contemporaries in the 1790s, in the work of the socialist feminists Anna Wheeler and William Thompson in the 1820s and those by Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill in the 1850s and 1860s.⁵

Fenwick Miller is making several moves here that are familiar from radical political discourse throughout the modern era. First, there is the argument that moral panics about the so-called exceptional incidents or events are quite out of place in a public culture which is oblivious to, in denial about, the systematic nature of the conditions and causes of similar daily phenomena which, just because of their systematicity and dailiness, count as normal. Second, it is argued that it must be recognized that normalization is the outcome of a convergence of legal, cultural, interpersonal and economic logics that govern actions. Individuals are positioned as they are because of laws and constraints, resources and opportunities and the lack of these; and from those positions they engage in unequal encounters, running particular sets of risks. Third, patterns of violence predictably follow the great social cleavages of class, race, sex and generation. Suffering the psychological and physical injuries of violence is overwhelmingly more likely for the relatively powerless, and the perpetrators of their suffering are overwhelmingly likely to come from the counterpart relatively powerful groups—children from their parents, blacks from whites, slaves from masters, women from men. This is quite consistent with fears that run the other way (as white fear of black people's violence), and with prominent public and discursive attention to counter-examples—wives killing their husbands, violent and uncontrollable children, or robberies perpetrated by poor people against the relatively rich. Indeed, the record shows that legal and other penalties (including the fury of public opinion) are much more severe in these cases than in the cases where the perpetration of violence runs from (relatively) powerful to powerless. Fourth, though, political reconfigurations are possible. We see organized effort to prevent

children suffering death or serious harm at the hands of carers—with the founding of campaigning and working organizations like the NSPCC in the 1880s and 1890s.⁶ Particularly famous killings like the ones in 1888 can concentrate focus on legal or cultural double standards, or police inaction, or economic constraints, incentives, risks and snares. Prostitute workers can protest that ‘violence is not part of the job description.’⁷ Academic research, and activist interventions like Mrs Fenwick Miller’s, publicly articulate new analyses and understandings of daily reality.

As with all political actions and interventions, the results can be paradoxical or contradictory. The extent to which intended consequences actually transpire is highly doubtful, even if there are clear and agreed intentions among the collective political actors to begin with. The politics of the organization and action itself can seem to squeeze out the pursuit of the original cause. Large bureaucratic organizations—like the NSPCC—find their charitable and their campaigning aims in tension. Nevertheless, this and countless other organizations effectively politicize relationships and social phenomena that were hitherto unchallenged. Henceforth, assertions about the cultural and discursive status of violence against women have a politically paradoxical quality.

Another reason for paradoxical or contradictory results of political action against violence against women lies in sheer disagreement. The identification of ‘feminism’ as a distinct ideology involves negotiation between subjective self-articulations by self-styled identifiers, the characterization of positions by critics and rivals, and diverse articulations of a theoretical or historical voice. To add to this complexity, in the case of women’s movements, in particular but not only in the final third of the 20th century and after, the claims of an ‘autonomous women’s movement’ are caught in a struggle between the logics of purity and schism, and the logics of coalition and loss of principle.⁸ Historically, it is clear that there are, and can be, political moments at which feminist aspirations can be articulated in settings whose participants have shaken free from pre-existing commitments to other party and programmatic positions. For example, the late 20th century saw women in Western Europe and North America organize independently of labour movement and left civil rights structures. Immediately, though, the women’s movement with its programmatic demands for equal pay, equal education and work opportunities, reproductive rights in contraception and abortion, free childcare, sexual self-determination, legal and financial independence, and freedom from sexual coercion and violence based on gender had to enter into relationships with socialists, liberals, participants and formations from other radical social movements such as environmentalists, peace activists, gay movements and finally into relationship with governments from a variety of positions on the party political spectrum. The relativity of such ‘autonomy’ from pre-existing political contexts, and the reality of subsequent negotiations, makes sense of the subsequent inevitable diversity in analyses of violence. From diverse political contexts, diverse forms of violence become politically salient—the susceptibility of sex workers to beatings or murder, the liability of children to violence at home or at school, the risk to daughters of kidnap or forced marriage,

the risks to wives of legalized forced sexual intercourse, the bullying of soldiers or police officers or practitioners of the professions.

Feminists disagree about the centrality of the theme of violence to their political projects, about the nature of violence and about its causes and consequences. Within feminist theory in the large the concept violence signifies a wide and heterogeneous range of phenomena and actions, and contentions within feminism are in part contentions over its proper analysis and use. In our analysis, the problem in specific cases is often that parties to disputes focus on different dimensions or levels of the concept and theory of violence. Our tabular scheme (see Table 1) represents our effort to make sense of debates within feminism about violence and non-violence, focussing mainly on the period of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁹ It is important, methodologically and substantively, to be clear that this is not a scheme of positions held, as such, by the theorists and thinkers whose work we have analysed. It is, rather, a scheme of analytically distinct dimensions along which contributors to debates, according to our analysis, are ranged. We do not imply that the parties to disputes themselves articulate their positions by reference

Table 1. Analyses of the *ontology* and *aetiology* of violence, by its value *significance*, and by *political strategy*.

1. Ontology	2. Aetiology	Significance		
		3. Greatest Evil	4. Insignificant	5. Positive value
Phenomenology: grounds of violence	(c) Fundamental (generative)	(f) <i>Pacifism 1: Maternalism (spiritualism; environmentalism).</i>	(n) <i>Ignore/accept.</i>	
		(g) <i>Pacifism 2: Maternalism.</i>		
	(d) Fundamental (maintenance of sex-gender system)	(h) <i>Focus on violence against women; Anti-pacifism; against coalition.</i>		
		(j) <i>Develop/explore women's violence.</i>		
	(e) Epiphenomenal (other social structures are generative)	(k) <i>Political coalitions: Anti-capitalism etc.</i>	(p) <i>Anti-victim/ critique of puritanism</i>	(q) <i>Sexual libertarianism, s&m etc;</i>
(m) <i>Socialism first/Legal reform first: → sexual egalitarianism; hope for end to violence.</i>				

to these dimensions. In particular, it is not implied that we can fit named contributors to the debates into any single cell in our table. Rather, the dimensions and the cells are a means for us to try to specify exactly where points of disagreement, and uncertainty, are. They are also a means for us to see how theorists and thinkers negotiate coherent positions *vis-à-vis* their critics.

In this scheme we distinguish several analytically independent dimensions of disagreement between feminist analyses and positions. First (Column 1), there is disagreement between contrasting understandings of the basis of violence. Schematically, we can identify a range of understandings in this connection, from thinkers who understand violence as a matter of human, or animal, physiology or biology (a), to those for whom the nature and workings of violence in social life are socially made and rooted (b). We should add that this cannot be a clear binary scheme: psychoanalytic accounts of the place of violence in social and psychic life, for example, can participate in either a physiological, or a socially materialist, understanding or more usually in some combination of these.

One's position regarding what we can think of as the ontology of violence in social life, is independent, logically speaking, from one's view of the explanatory importance of violence in social theory (Column 2). There is disagreement between feminists who understand violence to be explanatorily fundamental—fundamental to structures of advantage and disadvantage, and to distributions to benefits and burdens; fundamentally explanatory of social meanings and values (c and d). Critics (e) deny any such explanatory significance or power. For them, this kind of feminist explanation misunderstands the aetiology of the structures, distributions and meanings we inhabit, which are caused by, for example, capitalist exploitation, or by irrational value commitments. Thus, any focus on violence as such, or male violence in particular, mistakes effect for cause, an epiphenomenon for a causal reality. Yet another independent dimension of disagreement (Columns 3, 4 and 5) is over the value significance of violence. At one extreme, for many critics, violence is the great evil, if not the worst (f, g, h, k). For others, at the other extreme, it is either morally speaking insignificant (n), or if not insignificant then at least not the worst thing. A focus on violence can be criticized as a puritanical obsession (p). Or violence can be celebrated as transgressive (q). A number of theorists who resist the association of violence and gender, although they acknowledge the social construction of that association, argue that we need to explore the relationship between femininity and violence (j).

Commitment to a social-materialist basis of violence (b) is consistent either with the idea that violence is causally fundamental (d) or that it is epiphenomenal (e). Commitment to the fundamental causal significance of violence in social life (c or d) is consistent either with the view that it is also morally and politically very important, for good or bad, or with the view that violence is not of great, or the greatest, value significance. These positions on ontology, aetiology and value significance interact with perceptions of the possibilities for effective action. Strategic commitments and choices are frequently justified by reference to these explanatory and ontological levels. However, it is not the case that an ontological or causal analysis straightforwardly generates a strategic choice. As we shall go on

to see, disputes between feminists about the politics of violence are best understood as revolving around the nexus of ontology, explanation, value and strategy.

We cannot here cover all the feminist contentions that are encompassed by this analytic scheme. In what follows we focus on the series of engagements that are picked out in Column 3, and exemplified in the 1980s debates surrounding Greenham Common and the relation between feminism, anti-militarism and non-violence. In particular, we look at how feminist thinkers and activists whose politics was centred on action against violence against women (h) conducted a contentious engagement on two fronts. First, they opposed action that yoked feminism together with anti-nuclear pacifism and non-violence (f and g). Second, they opposed a series of feminist coalitions with socialism or liberalism (k and m). In both cases the understanding of violence, and the implications of that for resistant political agency (strategy and tactics), is at the centre of contention.

Feminist contestations over non-violence

The resurgence of the anti-nuclear weapons and anti-war campaigns and movements in 1980 was characterized by mass demonstrations across Western Europe and by the relatively novel tactic of permanent camps at military bases, which stood as a witness to wrong and a symbolization of right, and were the sites of direct resistance to state action.¹⁰ The questions of feminism and gender were immediately raised, in an acute way, as women participants in these direct actions and organizations had to negotiate the familiar matters of styles of organization and action, the sexual division of labour, domination and leadership, and questions of masculinity and femininity inevitably rose up the agenda. Many women activists and campaigners were already working both theoretically and practically on the relationship between feminism and pacifism, and on the matter of sex and gender in relation to political organization.¹¹

The Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group produced *Piecing It Together* in 1983. This co-authored work put forward a series of arguments representative of UK feminists of the time who saw feminism, the opposition to nuclear weapons and non-violence as necessarily connected.

It has become clear to us that resistance to war and to the use of nuclear weapons is impossible without resistance to sexism, to racism, to imperialism and to violence as an everyday pervasive reality. There is a profound relationship between the fact that individual women are commonly attacked and beaten up and that a nuclear war threatens the entire world.¹²

The analysis of this work is well exemplified by their argument that ‘resistance to war is impossible without resistance to sexism.’ State violence, in particular interstate wars, has to be understood in the context of everyday violence including of course sexual and domestic violence, as well as the interpersonal violences that are understood as a response to stress and aggression, and are best theorized in relation to the ‘systematic violences’ of poverty, hunger, racism and so on.¹³

Resistance to war, then, is the starting point for this group. An understanding of sexism, and of the gender system in relation to violence, makes feminism a necessary condition for this project. *Piecing It Together*, as with other sources reflecting a similar position at the time, relates the celebration and ‘fun’ of violence in popular cultural forms like film, to the socialization of children into gender roles, and to the enforcement of gender distinction in the labour market, in education, and in the state management of women as a ‘reserve army of labour’ in particular in times of war. Gender distinction is also symbolized in ‘man’s’ treatment of ‘nature.’¹⁴ In short, the ideologies of patriarchy, capitalism and the state interact, via the medium of violent institutions, to maintain and perpetuate familiar social relations.¹⁵ In response, political actors have to make decisions about strategy and tactics. Non-violence cannot protect resisters from violence; but uses of violence inevitably bring negative consequences.¹⁶ Critical insights of feminism include the principles that we should not mirror the behaviour and methods of the oppressive system, that all women can make changes in their own lives, and that ‘nothing that happens in personal life is without meaning in public life.’¹⁷ The women’s peace movement, and the peace movement more generally, are strands in a broader skein of intertwined movements for social change.¹⁸

There are several points to note about this analysis. First, it is what we are calling ‘socially materialist’ (cell b in [Table 1](#)). Sex differences, inequalities in distribution of resources and patterns of inequality and exploitation have to be understood as material, rather than as ideal, as reflective of some metaphysical order of reality. They are not to be thought of as ‘essential’ in any sense—quite the reverse, they must be thought of as contingent, accidental. But we must be clear about their interpersonal reality: exploitation is done by exploiters, oppression by oppressors, violence by violent actors. The concept ‘system’ is used in this analysis; but systems are emergent properties of concrete action and interaction, of distributions and their maintenance by interested parties, of decisions and their enforcements by the relatively powerful and authoritative. The materiality is social; it cannot be straightforwardly inferred from the level of biology or physiology.

Second, violence is here identified as key to the maintenance of the sex-gender system (cell d), and to patterns of interstate and interpersonal and social conflict. Violence is absolutely central to social and political reality, on this view—it is fateful for individuals and causal in system maintenance and enforcement. The normalization and celebration of violence, as a means for ‘conflict resolution’ and as a badge of identification with social roles and hence with social norms that govern hierarchies of prestige and inequalities of resources, is a factor both in the socialization of individuals into gender and other political identities, and in the enforcement of those roles and distributions. Asymmetrical uses of violence are thought of, in these cultures and systems, as rightful: police officers rightfully win in battles with criminals (or vice versa in the genres of fiction that celebrate the criminal as hero); states win rightful wars (or lose them with right on their side). Orders of sexual, class or ethnic identification and difference are enforced both by members of the counterpart group—as with the enforcement of exclusions such as

those in the labour market or in culture, and by members of one's own group as with girls' policing of each others' attire and appearance, conduct and aspirations. That is, the normalization of violence in interpersonal relations is a necessary condition of the normalization of the established, socially approved, patterns of those relations and the concomitant distributions of resources, allocations of individuals to places in the hierarchy.

Personal violence reflects the systematic violence of our society. The organised violence inflicted on people in the context of a war is an extension of that inflicted on one person by another, and of the violence of a system which pretends that everyone is equal whilst discriminating openly, though its schools, media, police and legal system.¹⁹

Third, this role of a normalized violence is associated with masculinity, in complex ways. The asymmetrical and 'socially rightful' enforcement of a gender hierarchy, whereby men as a group get more money, property, political power, social prestige, calories, valuable jobs and so on, is done to a greater degree by man to woman violence than it is by woman to woman violence (although the latter is not unimportant); and it is done to a vanishingly small extent by woman to man violence (although, of course, female parents visit quite a lot of violence on boy children). The perpetration of aggression, enforcement, exclusion by men is attributed to propensities of men to these forms of violence. In *Piecing It Together* and other such texts, the explanation is a socially based one of enforcement and maintenance of the system, which requires violence by those who are dominant in, and benefit most from, it. Domination has a return to the dominator, not just quantitatively (getting more of scarce resources) but also positionally (by decreasing the pool of competition for these scarce resources, and due to the pay-off of positional dominance itself in sense of esteem, of security and hence of investment in the *status quo*).

For the authors of *Piecing It Together*, an important element of feminist critique of violence is the focus on the self-defeating, self-negating, nature of assertions of male superiority. The association of masculine violence and war-making with fantasy is captured both in slogans like 'take the toys from the boys' and in more sustained analyses of militarism.²⁰ On the one hand, fantasy is responsible for the fantastic excess in violence, and in domination. It deletes reason and rationality from male violence. On the other, however, as violence operates to shore up male dominance, it undoubtedly tracks material interest. It operates to rule out possibilities of egalitarianism or reason-based moves to justice in the social order.

Fourth, on this account, this material and ideological context has a number of effects on women's political agency. It raises the stakes, and generates reasonable fear. A good number of words in the sources analysed emphasize fear as an impetus to action.²¹ Further, it generates the demand for responsibility: responsibility not to mirror the actions of the oppressor, responsibility for the well-being of future generations, responsibility for one's own actions in concert with others.²² These feminist principles of political theory, strategy and tactics then mesh with the principles of non-violence and resistance to war which have evolved in the pacifist and feminist-pacifist traditions, and in particular in the

practice of non-violent resistance and direct action. For many feminist pacifists in 1981, this analysis of violence, social structure and political agency was sufficient justification for separate organization.²³

The authors of *Piecing It Together* offer an analysis that identifies feminist ideology and politics with non-violence and anti-militarism, and represents the Greenham Peace Camp as one form of exemplary feminist political action. At the same time, however, feminist scepticism and hostility towards Greenham were growing in intensity, especially after the very large mass gathering and blockade of the base in March 1983.²⁴ The criticism on which we here focus was articulated in various texts, and the arguments of these critics were brought together in another multi-authored feminist volume *Breaching the Peace*. It identified a number of problems with the Greenham movement and the feminist theory that was inferred to underpin it. For the authors of *Breaching the Peace*, the women's peace movement was engaged in the wrong kind of political coalition, pursued the wrong kind of feminism, was centred on the wrong kind of femininity, offered the wrong kind of resistance and focussed on the wrong kind of violence.

We see the women's peace movement as a symptom of the loss of feminist principles and processes—radical analysis, criticism and consciousness raising.²⁵

The contributors to *Breaching the Peace* begin with a different fear from the fear of nuclear annihilation and a bleak future for their children that animates members of the women's peace movement. They fear the loss of feminism. Feminism has in the past lost out to peace movements, and it looks as though it might happen again.²⁶ The coalition with pacifism is not a widening, but a liberalization of feminism that threatens the decline of the autonomous feminist women's movement.²⁷ Coalition means co-optation.²⁸ It means—as coalitions with socialism, and with liberal strategists, always have—that the demands of the late 20th century autonomous women's movements: equal pay, employment and education, for reproductive and sexual freedom, socialized childcare and freedom from violence would be put on the back burner, again, while feminists wait for peace (or socialism).

The problem, then, is that the women's peace movement represents the wrong kind of feminism. Critics focus on the arguments, explicit, and also symbolically articulated, that displace political demands for women's rights to women's fears for their children, or concern for the planet. Whatever the virtues of concern for future generations, there is a political concern that it effectively displaces feminist concern.²⁹ A particular trap awaits those who pursue this line of argument: the undoubted rhetorical power of women with children in buggies calling for an end to the threat of nuclear weapons comes at the cost of foregrounding the political identity of women as mothers. Ruth Wallsgrove argues that, paradoxically, this parade of personal and intimate concern as a political demonstration has had the opposite effect from what we hope for from the feminist principle that 'the personal is political' (and which, as we have seen, is at the heart of the reasoning of members of the women's peace movement). The problem is that the organization, events and actions of 1981–1983 had allowed participation, and personal change

for many of the women involved, without immediate accountability and without hard thinking.³⁰ This is because, according to these critics, the calls for ‘peace,’ or ‘disarmament,’ or to ‘save the planet’ are overly general to the point of vacuity.³¹ They are cheap calls to make, because there are no difficult negotiations, choices, sacrifices, trade-offs.³² Greenham, in particular, afforded an opportunity for some women to make personal changes in their family lives—to escape the family home, essentially—but not to take public political responsibility for the pursuit of the social change that would make that a political possibility for society.³³

This wrong kind of feminism is connected with the wrong kind of femininity. The actions of ‘holding hands around the base,’ it is argued, conduces to an idea of spirituality, and presents an attractive image of women, that does not have any transformative implications for daily life and systems.³⁴ The mass demonstration of ‘ordinary women’ is entirely unthreatening politically, because this public event will be followed by the disappearance of the participants back into their private and personal lives. The atmosphere of carnival, addressing the police with songs and clowning, has the effect of presenting the state itself as benign.³⁵

The entire project, then, centres on the wrong kind of resistance. First, these mass events give an ‘illusion of the power of the crowd,’ and the appeal to the ‘power of numbers’ is a very straight and conventional appeal.³⁶ There is a deep scepticism about participation in absolutely conventional democracy as usual—marches, petitions, chain letters, ‘standing up to be counted.’ All of these add up to the making of requests, and endorsing a model of representation, when feminists know full well (or should do) that ‘governments do not represent our interests.’³⁷ As a contributor to *Trouble and Strife* argues in an article about policing and violence, the problem with the ‘practice of democratic freedom’ in the style of marches and demonstrations is that it ignores the ‘deep entrenchment of the state in Britain.’³⁸

For the feminist critics of the women’s peace movement, the focus on the intergovernmental level of events, such as the deployment of Cruise missiles in Europe, exactly misses the point, or rather several points. First, the idea that ‘war is the ultimate male violence’ reinforces conceptions of the state and masculinity which feminism should challenge. The authors of *Breaching the Peace* resist the idea of the state as ‘ultimate,’ ‘sovereign,’ ‘transcendent,’ etc. ‘The state,’ rather, is a process and institutionalization of a particular kind of entrenchment of structures, legally, administratively, fiscally, socially and ideologically (in education, health, etc.) that is all around us in our daily lives. It is not a superstructure, up there high above us, bearing down. ‘The state’ in this sense pervades social, cultural, interpersonal and intimate relations. The point of politics, on this view, is to work against those aspects of state power that are oppressive to individuals and to try to transform social power.³⁹ Second, the idea of a ‘hierarchy’ of male violence participates in exactly the same kind of error: male violence is pretty awful, in whatever guise it turns up. War—and rape in war, etc.—is not worse just because it is in war. A particular case might be worse, but that is because it is worse in the ordinary quantitative and qualitative measure by which we judge assaults and injuries to be worse and less worse. From this point of

view, there are good theoretical reasons for saying that the violence of daily life, in the streets and in the home, is 'worse.' At least, there are very good reasons for thinking that these are the violences that need to be tackled politically: 'Let's make it plain that men are the perpetrators of violence in all spheres and stop now the thoughtless clamour to promote peace as the only worthwhile goal.'⁴⁰ Third, it follows from this theory of state and violence that 'non-violent tactics' in the women's peace movement will be a problem. That women only demos minimize violence is 'untrue': police will, of course, attack women.⁴¹

We have here set out the arguments of *Piecing It Together* and *Breaching the Peace* as two opposed and distinct positions. The contributions to both volumes in fact take a more dialogic form, as contributors respond to points made by others, although attempts to minimize differences and to emphasize common ground, on matters of ontology and explanation, are less striking than is the continued gulf on matters of appropriate political action in terms of strategy and tactics. The accusation that the actions of Greenham women are feminine rather than feminist, and are invested in female stereotypes, for instance, is responded to by several who, like Lynne Jones, emphasize the bodily transformation from conventional femininity that is required in participation in direct action in confrontation with military and police, and by participation in the camp more generally.⁴²

Questions of coalition became fatefully prominent among participants in the feminist anti-nuclear peace movement. First, dispute between those women at Greenham who were committed to new age spirituality and related varieties of environmentalism, and those who were more materialist in their political and social theory, issued in public disagreements, and a heterogeneous range of plans, actions and attitudes in the complex phenomenon of 'Greenham.' Participants at the camp dealt with disagreement by way of a commitment to individual responsibility and a kind of anarchist tolerance. But critics saw this strategy as evidence of the wrong, and confusing, kind of coalition.⁴³ Second, disputes, and recriminations, developed between women at the camp who emphasized links with socialism and anti-racism, and those who were critical of the involvement of prominent activists from marxist and socialist traditions. These sectarian divides were exacerbated by allegations, freely made by government and police, about USSR control of the peace movement in general, and of CND and Greenham women in particular. These accusations were soon mirrored by suspicions about CIA infiltration of the camp.⁴⁴ From the standpoint of our analysis of the dimensions of contention on these issues of violence and feminism it is not surprising that these divisions—about coalition with other political movements and parties—were severe, and that rehearsal of them tracked and accompanied the decline of this chapter of action in the women's peace movement. For they turn on deep disagreements about whether forms of violence are fundamental or epiphenomenal. The divisions at Greenham were divisions between women committed to forms of pacifism, non-violence and maternalism that we have located in cells f and g of [Table 1](#), and activists committed to political coalitions against the state (cell k). Activists defended the continuing strategy and tactic of harassment of state authorities, in particular in the years that followed when

participants in the continuing camp at Greenham persistently tracked and attempted to disrupt the weapons exercises.⁴⁵

The view that violence is fundamental, however, also supports an inference to position (h), exemplified by the authors of *Breaching the Peace*, which is explicitly 'anti-pacifist,' and committed to a feminist political project of fighting back against male violence, and related exploitation and oppression. These feminist critics criticized the materialist maternalism position (g) because it blurred into a more radical maternalism based on a different account of sex differences—one which easily took up positions, and strategies, that emphasized 'spirituality' (both conventionally religious and counter-cultural), and a related kind of environmentalism (f). From the point of view of the anti-pacifist critics, because goals were impossibly vague, appealing across a very wide range in a very general way, they could never put their defenders to the test of political commitment. The strategy and tactics of mass public action set up an opposition between this form of public life, and an unaffected private life, to which participants exhausted by the public actions would inevitably return. Confrontation with these particular symbolic and material institutions of the state—the police, the military, subsequently the magistrates and the prison authorities—was bound to fail. Feminist critics were particularly concerned that the specific goals and demands of feminism would be lost to those of anti-nuclear pacifism.⁴⁶

Nuclear arms are a symptom of the madness of patriarchy not the cause of our oppression. The suffragette movement's energies were coopted and effectively dispersed by a great call to either fight for the country at war or to fight against the war for peace.⁴⁷

These critical, negative, arguments are coherent and cogent. But they obviously beg the question of what feminists should do instead. Within the direct criticism of the women's peace movement some clear alternatives are articulated. First of all, it is absolutely necessary to live differently—the everyday as the starting point is a repeated motif in *Breaching the Peace*.⁴⁸ This does not mean living in a tent. Perhaps it means—not living in a tent, but living in the world of work, and school, and sociability, and political effort. It does mean not consenting to or acquiescing in the structures that deprive women of rights and freedoms. This entailed a degree of withdrawal from public popular and political culture. It also meant avoiding collusion in work and professional life. Further, it meant engaging in positive campaigns and actions to support women who are attempting to oppose oppression, exploitation and violence in the context of kinship, work and social life. So strategically the focus is on mid-range action, engagement with state and society at the level of the everyday and an engagement with male violence in particular, with an analysis of its role in system and structure maintenance. The emphasis there is on small to mid-scale projects, of a decidedly practical kind—help lines, refuges, training—and the networks and connections between these, including solidarity with similar projects in settings such as Soweto, West Africa and Bangladesh.⁴⁹ This political effort is underpinned by critical analysis of popular culture—film, sport, alcohol—and analysis of the fates of women's campaigns and women's history. There is an emphasis on the propulsion of new

analyses through public political discourse, and through action and employment, into state organizations. As we have seen, there is scepticism about the tactics and strategies of ‘non-violence’ in this political context. The question of women’s willingness to use political violence, though, and the relationships between violence, gender and feminism are live ones and are by no means settled.

Violence and politics

All parties in the debates and disagreements analysed earlier agreed that feminism should be fundamentally concerned with opposing patriarchal violence and that the central case of ‘violence’ is the infliction of physical injury, using weapons including parts of the body as weapon. Campaigns for more just and effective recognition of rape and sexual assault in culture, society and law, and campaigns for the removal of Cruise missiles from Western Europe were as one in this respect. Theoretically, violence was considered important because it was system maintaining. Normatively, all these activists considered that violence is a grave harm: as well as physical it causes psychological harm; the harms of violence are transferred through social networks—the friends and kin of victims are also harmed, and relationships can be destroyed.

The significance of symbolic violence was more contentious within and between these groupings of opinion. Given that the injury of bombing and shooting, sexual assault or beating was harmful and socially fateful, what should be said about the proliferation of symbols and representations that served to communicate the threat and reality of bombing, shooting, sexual assault and beating? Was symbolic communication of a threat—an obscene gesture to a woman, or a joke that turned on the rightfulness of domestic violence—itself an act of violence? How much difference did the symbolic integration, in military practice and discourse, of sexual violence and war make to those evils? Was girls’ policing of one another with regard to dress, demeanour and actions, ‘violent’ in the way that state policing was? Was a structure or system understood to be maintained, in part, by violence, itself violent? There is disagreement—and not just between feminist thinkers of course—about these inferences, with some emphasizing the violence of inequality and hierarchy themselves. These complications in thinking about the nature of the harm in violence interacted with concerns about responsibility and with the question of how to approach the matter of women’s and/or feminist violence or non-violence.

Political actors frequently put forward instrumental reasons for the uses of violence, in the tradition of proposing (bad but justifiable) means for (good) ends. However, equally frequently, and often because uncertainty made such instrumental reason dubious, expressive symbolic reasons, based on the aesthetics, or meanings, of violent energy, were proposed. The same dilemma between instrumentality and expressivity is evident in reasoning about non-violent action. [Table 2](#) shows in a schematic way four positions in relation to political violence: expressive and instrumental justifications for the uses of violence and for commitment to non-violent action. Of course, this simplification conceals

numerous intermediate and combination positions. In the context of debates between the women's peace movements and their critics, for example, the absence of commitment to non-violence, which was articulated by many critics of Greenham, did not imply a willingness to use violence as such.⁵⁰ Attitudes to political violence ranged from the undecided and uncertain, to the ambivalent. Second, it is notable that expressive, symbolic, moves in justification were more or less ubiquitous in the sources analysed here, often joined together with instrumental, means-end, reason. For example, Gwyn Kirk argues that the instrumentality of violence is either unquestioned, or exaggerated (scepticism about instrumentality). She also argues that peace cannot be achieved through violence (instrumentality).⁵¹ Such reasoning is obviously open to the instrumental challenge that peace would not be achieved through the non-violence of the women's peace movement either. But women's use of singing and wailing is not only a strategy of assertive, non-violent, confrontation; it also symbolizes a particular identity and set of values.⁵² This combination of a symbolic and a causal analysis of non-violence is repeated in Jones' account of how sitting down in front of state authorities 'works,' and in analyses of what it means for women to resist non-violently.⁵³ But as we have seen, critics offer a mirror image of Jones' argument. Scott argues that the non-violent strategic practices characteristic of Greenham are self-defeating because they enact a version of femininity that reinscribes and also incites patriarchal violence.⁵⁴ These practices reinscribe violence because they model women's identity in passive terms (symbolic), and they incite violence directly through creating opportunities for (mostly) men (soldiers and police) to exercise violence against women (instrumental).⁵⁵

All sides to the debates we have analysed agreed that the maintenance of clearly differentiated sex and gender identities and roles, and the association of men with violence and women with nurture, non-violence and/or passivity were to be understood in something like socially constructive and historical terms.⁵⁶ They disagree on what follows from this in terms of feminist political agency. On the one hand, it can be argued that the social relationship between femininity or femaleness and non-violence can be used strategically in order to expose and potentially to transform the violence of the state, of men or subsets of men as a group, of popular culture, etc. That is, the social reality of the structure allows the immanent critique of one half of the structure by the opposition in pursuit of the deconstruction and transformation of both sides. On the other hand, of course, the historical facts of social construction mean that any identification of women

Table 2. Violent strategy and justification.

	Willing to use violent strategy/tactics	Commitment to non-violent strategy/tactics
Instrumental, means-end reason	a.	c.
Expressive, symbolic reason	b.	d.

with non-violence and men with violence is suspect; and a space is opened up for the (suppressed) reality of women's violence.

In the debates here analysed women's violence is fully acknowledged, although the ethical and political dilemmas thus raised are hardly resolved. For instance, the Feminism and Non-Violence Study Group's *Piecing It Together* includes discussion of the need for judgement with respect to violent resistance; the question of the role of self-defence and assertiveness training in feminist political action; the significance of militant action against violence against women and the social facts of women's brutality and violence and its social construction in a variety of forms such as depression, child-beating, etc.⁵⁷ At the same time, the authors of *Piecing It Together* are strongly resistant to the idea of any way of describing feminist resistance in terms that could be seen as 'an open invitation to escalate female-initiated aggression.'⁵⁸ Some of the first person accounts of the Greenham movement and actions emphasize ambivalence, ambiguity and difficulty in the practice of non-violence.⁵⁹ The disputes between women at Greenham over questions of coalition and strategy, of course, were suffused with experiences of aggression and questions of the significance of non-violence in contexts of mutual hostility and recrimination.⁶⁰

Scepticism about non-violence rests in part on such ambivalence and ambiguity, as well as the strategic disagreements about peace campaigns against the state discussed earlier. The ambivalence and ambiguity stem from the identification of varieties of violence against women as symptomatic of male dominance of state, society and culture, while being the key instrument for the maintenance of that dominance. Strategically, feminist politics must focus on that theoretical and practical centrality, using a variety of strategies of autonomous organization, dissent and opposition, engagement and challenge. As we have seen, contributors to *Breaching the Peace* were sceptical of the values and likely outcomes of strategies and tactics of non-violence. This is not to say there was any straightforward commitment to violence or force in political tactics—rather, reservation about ruling it out and calls for serious judgement prior to any decision to rule it in.

Opposition to patriarchal violence was central to the feminist analyses and prescriptions gathered in *Piecing It Together* and *Breaching the Peace*. The fault lines between the positions of those endorsing the women's peace movement as exemplary feminist politics and those accusing it of being anti-feminist are not wholly derivable from fundamentally different analyses of patriarchy, of the meaning of patriarchal violence or from different understandings of gender justice—even though there are a diversity of understandings at play. In both cases opposition to patriarchal violence, in all its complexity, meant that effective feminist political agency depended on its divorce from that violence. Critiques and disagreements, as well as many instance of self-reflective ambivalence about appropriate forms of action, continually circled around the concern that feminist activists, wittingly or not, were actually reproducing the patriarchal violence to which they were opposed. Each party to the arguments outlined earlier needed to resolve the question of how to distinguish between feminist politics and violence.

The proponents of *Piecing It Together*, in order to do so, needed to draw a line between violence and non-violence. Their critics needed to draw a clear line between male violence, and the feminist political struggle. In the case of those identifying feminism with non-violence and opposition to war, this meant a divorce of feminist politics from all violence. But attempts to repudiate violence altogether were haunted by the return of violence in the sense that feminist non-violent political action could be suspected of actually reproducing the patriarchal violence to which it was opposed. This was also the case for the feminist critics of pacifist and non-violent feminism. In their case, the refusal to endorse the priority of peace, and (in some cases) an emphasis on ‘fighting back’ against violence against women, opened them to the same suspicion that their tactics and strategy were failing to break out of the structures and systems of gender-based violence.

Conclusion

The arguments of the 1980s feminists analysed earlier, and their attempts to draw, and to hold, the lines between violence and non-violence and between politics and violence in their own political practice, demonstrate that there is an irreducibly *political* dimension to attempts, in theory or practice, to draw and sustain these distinctions. The contributors to *Piecing It Together* and *Breaching the Peace* shared a great deal in their feminist critiques of violence and patriarchy. Their critiques of each other reflected opposing political judgements about the practice of feminist politics. Some of this opposition can be traced back to theoretical positions outlined in [Table 1](#). Some of it is traceable to the practical alternatives available to specific feminist actors at specific times and places. But a crucial part of the story is the active delimitation of perspective essential to any political action. In other words, in both cases theorists and activists had to override their own ambivalences and ambiguities about resistance to patriarchal violence in order to engage politically in that resistance. What we see in their contentions and reflections is the *production* of distinctions between politics and violence and between violence and non-violence. A production that is irreducible to prior theoretical commitments or practical constraints.

The feminists of *Piecing It Together*, in identifying non-violent feminist action in pursuit of peace as exemplary, actively obscured (though not without reservations) the violence of enacting ‘feminine’ values as a way of overturning the gender order. In effect, they practiced one way of producing a distinction between (non-violent) politics and violence, one that made sense in terms of their broader ideological commitments, but could also be seen, from the point of view of an alternative delimitation, as undermining those commitments. By contrast, their critics produced a different distinction between feminist politics and patriarchal violence, one that, from the point of view of the pacifist delimitation, was troublingly close to the very violence that it disavowed. For us, looking back, the self-reflectiveness of feminist thinkers and activists engaged in these debates about the question of violence, brings the process of producing the difference between violence and political agency to the surface and reveals both the necessity

and difficulty of successfully negotiating this difference for a politics defined by its opposition to violence.

In the decades since the debates over Greenham in the UK the question of the relation between feminism, non-violence and peace politics has resurfaced in a variety of contexts, in organized feminist pacifist resistance to wars, in contentions over the role of women in the military or terrorist movements, in the association of women with peace in the 2002 UN Resolution 1325 and theoretically in debates about the possibilities of a feminist just war.⁶¹ Feminists continue to disagree and to seek a stable solution to the question of the relation between feminist political agency and goals and the practice and aims of non-violence. Looking back on the 1980s debates, what they tell us is that there is no view from nowhere to determine which of the protagonists of this particular set of feminist encounters read the runes of resistance to patriarchal violence correctly. The debates are interesting not for what they resolve but for what they exhibit in terms of the slippery and always contestable *political* production of the relation and distinction between politics and violence and between violence and non-violence.

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 34. Green, *op. cit.*, Ref. 27, p. 8; Alderson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 29, pp. 11–12.
 35. Bradshaw and Thornhill, *op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 133; Boyd, Parker, and Manny, *op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 127. On Greenham and carnival: T. Cresswell, 'Putting women in their place: the carnival at Greenham Common', *Antipode*, 26 (1994), pp. 35–58; Young, *op. cit.*, Ref. 10, p. 36.
 36. Green, *op. cit.*, Ref. 27, p. 10.
 37. Scott, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31, p. 27.
 38. H. Brown, 'A day in the city: women, policing and violence', *Trouble and Strife*, 8 (1986), pp. 10–14.
 39. Scott, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31, p. 30; response from Finch *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 95.
 40. M. Shildrick, 'Getting out of Greenham', *Breaching the Peace*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 40; Scott, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31, p. 30.
 41. Alderson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 29, p. 14.
 42. Jones (Ed.), *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 93.
 43. Harford and Hopkins, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 31, 96; G. Kirk, 'Our Greenham Common: feminism and non-violence', in Harris and King (Eds.), *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 115–130.
 44. For both contemporaneous and reconstructed accounts of these disputes from the point of view of the women committed to socialist coalition, Junor, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9; from the non-socialist Greenham women point of

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45. Junor, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 107–139; Kirk, *op. cit.*, Ref. 43, p. 17.
 46. For acknowledgement of this point and responses: Jones (Ed.), *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 3; Harford and Hopkins, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 96.
 47. Bishop, *Breaching the Peace*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31.
 48. Longdon, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26, p. 17; Scott, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31, p. 30.
 49. *Trouble and Strife*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, Nos. 23 (Summer 1992); 24 (Winter 1992); 26 (Winter 1993).
 50. For example, Brown, *op. cit.*, Ref. 38, p. 14.
 51. Kirk, *op. cit.*, Ref. 43, p. 119.
 52. Kirk, *ibid.*, p. 120; Kirk, *op. cit.*, Ref. 44, p. 277.
 53. Jones (Ed.), *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 93; Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 26, 39.
 54. Scott, *op. cit.*, Ref. 31, pp. 26–27.
 55. For an extended discussion of this dilemma: Deming, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 175; see also quotation from G. Boothin Harford and Hopkins, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 37–39.
 56. For instance, Cook and Kirk, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 86.
 57. Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, pp. 27, 38, 41, 49.
 58. Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, *ibid.*, p. 42.
 59. For example, Booth, *op. cit.*, Ref. 55, pp. 37–39.
 60. See Junor, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 97; Kirk, *op. cit.*, Ref. 44, p. 267ff.
 61. See, for example, L.A. Lorentzen and J. Turpin (Eds), *The Women and War Reader* (New York/London: New York University Press, 1998); K. Hutchings, 'Beauvoir and the ambiguous ethics of political violence', *Hypatia*, 22(3) (2007), pp. 110–132; B.O. Bat-Ami, 'Forum on the war on terrorism', *Hypatia*, 18(1) (2003), pp. 157–231; L. Sjoberg, *Gender, Justice and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); L. Sjoberg and C. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007); C. Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London/New York: Zed Books, 2007); C. Cohn, 'Mainstreaming gender in UN security policy: a path to political transformation?' in S. Rai and G. Waylen (Eds), *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); N. Pratt and S. Richter-Devroe, 'Critically examining UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13(4) (2011), pp. 489–503.