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Keeping a feminist curiosity in critical military studies: In conversation with Cynthia Enloe

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Abstract

This conversation between Cynthia Enloe and Daniel Conway began in November 2022 for *The World Today* magazine and was continued and expanded in July 2024. Cynthia Enloe's fifteen books include *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2nd ed, 2014); *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000) and *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (2nd ed, 2016). Her latest book, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* was published in 2023. Enloe has won numerous awards and is one of the honourees named on the Gender Justice Legacy Wall at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Daniel Conway is the author of *Masculinities, Militarisation and the End Conscription Campaign: War Resistance in Apartheid South Africa* (2012) and has recently published articles exploring grassroots women's and LGBTQ+ organizing and Pride events in South Africa, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Shanghai and Mumbai in the journals *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Sexualities*, *International Affairs and Sociology*.

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D: You are a trail blazer for critical approaches to studying the military. What has most surprised you about the development of the field?

C: There were critics of militaries' racisms, atrocities and coups long before me, of course. Think of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, penned by her in 1938 (2019). What perhaps I did is come to the investigation of a wide range of militaries with a fresh curiosity, starting, first, by doing multinational research on the assorted racisms shaping a dozen militaries – that was for *Ethnic Soldiers* (1980) – then, as I began to develop (belatedly!) a feminist awareness, doing the investigation that became *Does Khaki Become You?* (1983). It's surprising that 'critical military studies' has become a widely recognized academic 'field'. That's thanks in no small part to Victoria Basham, Aaron Belkin and Alison Howell, who did the hard work of finding a publishing home for it and assembling transnational, multidisciplinary editorial boards for it.

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D: You wrote in the first issue of *Critical Military Studies* (2015) that we should be ‘sceptically curious’ about military recruiters. Last year, an undergraduate student in my class said that the Royal Navy had gone to her school and made them all apply to join the Navy. How do you think military recruitment has changed over the years and how can we challenge it?

C: Militarizers (civilian and uniformed) everywhere are hungry for young, usually male recruits. Your student’s account exposes the militarization of her civilian school authorities. I know scores of school principals who won’t let military recruiters get close to their school cafeterias and classrooms. Militarization is not unstoppable. I was talking recently in Stockholm to a young Swedish researcher who told me that, in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Swedish military was working hard to ‘soften up’ local townspeople so that they will accept new or expanded Swedish military bases nearby. But, she reported, she’s found that a lot of Swedes worry that a new military base will take over their prized open recreational land or jeopardize their local ground water.

D: What can asking ‘where are the women’ tell us about the current war in Ukraine?

In 2022, at the outset of the Russian-launched war in Ukraine, I was struck by the high percentage of Ukrainian households headed by women. I thought hard about the implications of this as I read the wartime reports from Ukraine. I also could weigh the impacts of – as a result of decades of Ukrainian women’s organizing – Ukrainian women and men in 2022 having almost equal rates of literacy with which to cope with Putin’s invasion (by comparison, there is a 10 percent gap between Sudanese women and men as they cope with their own current devastating war). I could think carefully about the ramifications of only 51% of Ukrainian women in 2022 having income from their own paid jobs with which to make the dire decisions as war overturned their lives. By comparison, a mere 5% of Yemeni women – versus 60% of Yemeni men – have paid work as they struggle with their own war.

D: Throughout your work you’ve always been interested in women’s hidden labour, as soldiers’ wives, secretaries, sex workers, cleaners and other staff on or near military bases. Have things changed now that there are more women now in armed forces and in more senior positions in the armed forces, than in the 1980s?

C: As government recruiters and their superiors have seen more opportunities to use women in their militaries’ ranks, I’ve listened closely to women, especially young women – heterosexual, lesbian and trans – as they explain what they think they will get out of military service, their reasons are similar to those I first began hearing in the 1980s. What has changed over the past decade, though, is that young women in uniform have become less willing to stay silent in the face of their male colleagues’ sexual abuse. I’ve learned that all of these women think. All of these women have their own relationships – within ethnic, regional, partisan and class social webs. A Fijian woman who signed a contract in 2008 to wash the laundry of American soldiers deployed to Iraq has stories of her own to tell. She might surprise us.

D: Your work has really helped us consider the complex dynamics of masculinities in the military. Can you talk more about how the reluctance to talk about the reality that

soldiers are likely to get wounded in conflict and what this tells us about the supposed invulnerability of militarized masculinity?

C: I was at a conference in Paris in the 1980s, and sitting next to the wonderful researcher, Michael Claire. It was a conference of civil society groups sharing knowledge about the barely regulated international trade in small arms – pistols and rifles. In the middle of it, Michael leaned over to me and said in a whisper, “Nobody is going say the word ‘wound’”. Michael was right. Nobody did. I’d been reading Ana Carden Coyne’s work. By chance, at the same time, I was reading Agatha Christie’s autobiography. In it, Christie describes being a young nurse during World War I. One of her duties was to carry wounded male soldiers’ amputated arms and legs from the operating theatre down to the cellar, where she deposited them into the furnace. Reading those two accounts simultaneously – you never know how reading two quite dissimilar things at the same time will shake up your curiosity, right? – made me think more carefully about the gendered politics of wartime wounds.

D: To quote a chapter title from your recent book ‘getting men to fight is not so easy’ (2023). We live in a world where there’s still military conscription in many societies and you will have no doubt seen Rishi Sunak’s pledge in 2024 to bring it back to the UK in his (unsuccessful) re-election campaign. Does this surprise you?

C: In practice, it takes some combination of the law, humiliation, masculinized myth-making, patriotism, money, pardons, deceit and physical oppression to fill the ranks – and to keep men and (a few) women in those ranks. Being curious about that mix motivated me to devote one of these twelve chapters to exploring how that mix plays out in particular countries at specific times.

D: The most striking change in armed forces in Europe and North America since you started writing about them in the 1980s has been the decriminalization and encouragement of LGBT people to serve. What should we make of this and how we should we respond?

C: Yes, it seems quite a remarkable turn-around. Misogyny is still alive and well in most countries’ militaries. That means, I think, we need to stay wary of presuming that LGBTQ is a sufficient category for a realistic study. More useful, perhaps, would be to ask: ‘Under what circumstances do racially and ethnically diverse lesbian, gay male and trans-military personnel have identical experiences of life inside this military, and when do they not?’

D: You are at heart, I think, an anthropologist and your ethnographic methods and curiosity in the mundane and the everyday, has informed your approach and also our understanding of what distinguishes feminist approaches to international relations and security studies, from the more traditional approaches. I still get frustrated that some International Relations professors consider ethnographic research as lying ‘outside’ the ‘real’ discipline of IR and Security Studies. Do you share these frustrations, or do you think the discipline has fundamentally changed?

C: I was never trained as an anthropologist or an ethnographer. Alas, I entered University of California at Berkeley as merely a Political Scientist, in the sub-field of Comparative Politics, with a regional specialization in Southeast Asian Politics.

It's that combination that, I think, made me from the start open to a multi-disciplinary approach to politics. As a suburban New York white kid, I knew nothing about Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, Thailand or Philippines, much less Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. I didn't know any of their pre-colonial or colonial histories

I had to learn everything. I couldn't afford to be a narrowly disciplined political scientist. It would have been downright foolish, even for greenhorn me, to have imagined I could have made sense of the 1948–1960 war in Malaysia – what the British called 'The Insurgency' – looking at it through the lens of 'National Security' concepts hammered out in the US or UK academy.

D: Academic researchers are often encouraged to make an 'impact' on government and state institutions and to influence policy. As gender scholars, should we co-operate, should we be selective in our co-operation and when should we refuse such requests?

C: Yes, how far into the Belly of the Beast should we go in order to have influence? Feminists have asked this question for generations. Australian feminists in the 1980s tackled it directly, calling themselves 'Femocrats'. It's now trickier because many governments have adopted their own 'National Action Plans' for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 'Women, Peace and Security', while a handful of governments – or, rather, several parties when in government (in Germany, Mexico and Canada – Sweden's recently elected conservative party has abandoned their predecessor's commitment) – have publicly identified themselves as having adopted a 'feminist foreign policy'. Feminists must ask: 'Are we losing touch with our grassroots members by spending so much time in the corridors of power?' Then: 'Are we ourselves being militarized through the back door?'

D: You write about Ukraine in your most recent book (2023) and following its publication we've had the terrible conflict in Gaza. How should we navigate the complex dynamics of the issues raised by this conflict, particularly in our own institutions and academic communities, where there may be restrictions on what we can say and do?

C: I keep searching the torrent of coverage of this horrific violence in Gaza for descriptions of Gazan Palestinian feminists' history and their recent efforts, ideas, and debates (though I don't expect Gazan feminists to candidly share their own debates widely in these perilous conditions). I wish I knew more about Gazan feminists' decades of experiences making alliances with West Bank Palestinian women's advocates, with Egyptian feminists. I know that Gazan women and men have close to equal rates of literacy and school attendance. I wish I knew more – this is, of course, my own failing – about Gazan women's experiences with paid work, with marriage, inheritance and divorce laws. I know I'm ignorant about different generations of Gazan women activists' experiences working with UNWRA (the gender dynamics of UNWRA have been significant in Gazan daily affairs), their experiences over the years with the Israeli military, with Gazan police, judges and Hamas officials (both in its armed wing and in its less militarized wing) on different areas of policy. Might framing our critiques of war in feminist terms (esp. the toll in Gaza) allow us to be more critical of the role of Israel in the ongoing carnage?

D: What are you working on now and what do you think the priorities of critical military researchers should be?

C: Here in my own cluttered study, files are bursting with scribbled notes, references, clippings and articles describing the changing gendered politics as wars drag on. I'm struck by how the intersectional gendered dynamics marking early months of an armed conflict seem unlike those characterizing the end of the war's first year, how the thirtieth month of war can be quite different in their gendered politics than its fifteenth month. This calls for feminist exploration.

Disclosure statement

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