

“Ask a Feminist”, *Signs- Journal of Women and Culture*, Special Issue: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right, Co-Editor with Susanna Walters and Agnieszka Graff (Spring 2019, Vol. 44, No. 3)

Ask a Feminist: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right

Cynthia Enloe, Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Walters

Suzanna Walters (SW): I want to introduce our wonderful guest, Cynthia Enloe—feminist, activist, writer, scholar extraordinaire, research professor at Clark University, author of over a dozen books, and someone who has really been in the forefront of forcing us to think about the relations between gender and militarism and imperialism, in a nut shell—and so much more. It’s such a treat to have you here. I’m Suzanna Walters, the editor of *Signs*. I am joined here by my wonderful coeditors of the special issue “Gender and the Rise of the Global Right,” Agnieszka Graff from Poland, and Ratna Kapur, who comes to us from Queen Mary University of London. The special issue will be out in spring of 2019, and this discussion with Cynthia is part of that. I should also say it’s part of our initiative at *Signs* called [Ask a Feminist](#), where we ask a feminist about pressing political issues of the day that the mainstream media generally does not ask feminists about. That is part of a broader initiative called the [Feminist Public Intellectuals Project](#), which is an attempt to bring new readers into *Signs* and to be very outward gazing in terms of the relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist activism.

So let me just begin with the broadest possible question, and then we’ll all jump in and have a discussion. Given that this discussion with you is part of the special issue “Gender and the Rise of the Global Right,” I wonder if you can give us some of your thoughts about the relationship between misogynist and gender-normative social movements at this moment and the rise of these imperialist, fascist (or neofascist), populist (or neopopulist) social movements that seem to be spanning the globe—and what you see as the relationship between gender politics and the way

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gender fits into those newly construed right-wing movements—and how we might move in analyzing that relationship.

Cynthia Enloe (CE): One of the wonderful things about this special issue, and about feminists generally, is that they always ask questions. They ask questions about socialist revolutions and gender; they ask questions about anticolonialist movements and gender. So asking, “Where are our ideas about masculinities and ideas about femininities? Where are our anxieties about women?”—in particular, “Where are they in any social movement?”—I think is always worthwhile. As we all know as feminists, you don’t know what answer you’re going to get when you look at the gender dynamics of a particular movement, but it’s always worth asking.

I’ll put it another way: one’s really likely to get a very *unreliable* understanding of any social movement if you haven’t seriously looked at where women are and where ideas about gender are in that movement. And in the global—well, let’s hold off on calling it the “global Right” because that sounds as though it’s more cohesive than perhaps it is. In fact that becomes a question: “How *global* is the current—not just conservative movement—but Right movement?” In any right-wing movement, inclination, tendency, whether it be in Poland or India, it is definitely worth asking not only how anxieties about masculinities play a role in fueling it. But the added question then becomes, for anybody who’s studying either Polish or Indian or US or Slovenian right-wing movements currently, “To what extent...” (We all work with graduate students, right? We all want to be sure that they know how to ask a question that’s researchable.) “To what extent are anxieties about masculinities simply being vacuumed up into a right-wing movement that we’re researching? Or, to what extent are they not just vacuumed up, if you will, but fueling it—at the beginning, in the middle, and at the later stages?”

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I’m very excited about this special issue because it’s going to answer a lot of these questions.

SW: I hope we will! Do you want to follow up on that, one of you?

Ratna Kapur (RK): I want us to almost flip the question a little bit, to ask the other end of the spectrum: We talk about the anxieties of masculinities, but what about the anxieties of feminism? You’ve spoken in your work really interestingly about the gendering of power. There are feminists, or women who are very powerful, and they can take the feminist discourse in a particular direction. For example, in the current moment in the context of the term we’re using, the “global Right” or “right-wing nationalist movements,” we’ve also seen a convergence of liberal feminist ideas with these right-wing nationalist movements, say, in campaigns against practices such as veiling all over Europe—in France, in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands. There’s a whole host of countries. And these bans have actually been supported in part by feminist agendas. So I’m curious about the role that feminism has played, or that a certain strand of feminism has played, in enabling some of these right-wing nationalist movements, or the “global Right” in specific cultural-historical contexts, and what your views are on that. Do you agree with that? Do you disagree with that? And if you do agree, how does feminism actually fix some of the problems or the messiness that we may have contributed to?

CE: Well, Ratna, this is a really great avenue to explore, I think. And I think you’re quite right, it needs to be done county by county, anxiety by anxiety, xenophobic movement by xenophobic movement. I think what is striking is that this obsession with the covered woman now is occurring in particular countries in Western Europe—for instance, what you are describing is not now prevalent in the UK, not in Ireland, not in Scandinavia. It’s particularly prominent in France and maybe in the Netherlands—so, it’s notably in very specific places. The question about

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religiously observant women adopting not just a headscarf but a full veil is very different in what kind of emotions it arouses. There’s been—and you know this better than I do—intense debate amongst feminists about how to respond to such a practice. And there are two things: There’s intense debate among French feminists. They are by no means monolithic; they have divided sharply with each other around these questions. In France, this debate is about secularism, which has a very particular history in French politics that it doesn’t really have in any other European country. The debates amongst French feminists over what were taken to be religious, observant symbolisms really were very sharp indeed. So there wasn’t *a* feminist response in France, I don’t believe. There was an intense intrafeminist debate. And I think it has a lot to do, in France, obviously, with racism, but also with feminism’s relationship to secularism in French politics.

By contrast, that doesn’t come up in Sweden. You don’t hear—and I’m working with Swedish feminists these days because of the rise of militarism in Sweden—but you don’t hear this debate in Sweden. In fact, I was just at a big Swedish meeting that brought together a lot of progressive groups from all over the country, including hundreds of Swedish feminists, and it was intensely pro-immigrant rights. Intensely.

So, I think you’re quite right that the question needs to be asked. And I think it needs to be asked country by country, feminist movement by feminist movement, and feminist by feminist. There are some people who declare themselves feminist and come out against women adopting the veil, and they are then challenged immediately by other women in that country who call themselves feminists. This is the great advantage, I think, of *Signs* and other communities of scholars and researchers: we ask questions. We don’t make sweeping statements, any of us. We don’t always know how to follow up on our sharply posed questions, but that’s why we all work with graduate students and undergraduate students, because we need other people to answer the questions. But

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we do ask the questions, and then we want investigations that are reliable, that come up with sometimes quite surprising and oftentimes quite uncomfortable findings.

Agnieszka Graff (AG): I was just at a symposium about the antigender movement in Brussels, and we had a quite intense debate about this very issue: what was called out as the complicity of feminism in enabling some of these movements by creating this image of the veiled woman as a threat, a threat to women’s rights and to security at the same time. The discussion went in the direction of, “What do we exactly mean by complicity? Do we mean causality, or do we mean coincidence? How much influence do we have?” And I’m willing to agree with the idea that some strands of feminism have been complicit, and some have been co-opted. I don’t think there is a causal relationship for the simple reason that those movements have been doing this much longer, and I don’t think they listen to feminists that much. Which is not to say that we don’t need to worry about homonationalism or racism within feminism. I think that there is a difference between acknowledging that certain things are uncomfortably close to each other—or that we didn’t catch certain patterns early enough—and blaming ourselves. And I think some of those feminist debates have gone in the direction of saying, “Oh my gosh, it’s our fault, we were neoliberals, we didn’t notice this....” Maybe because the Polish Right is so strong, I don’t think feminism has as much influence on it, frankly, as some of these arguments suggest.

CE: No, in fact I think you’re right, Agnieszka. One of the things that is so stunning is how the Right in many countries today in fact makes feminists look more influential than they are, as a scare tactic. They blow us up to eight times our normal size because it makes us look like more of a threat.

AG: And then they name themselves defenders of women.

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CE: Absolutely.

SW: Would that we were that powerful!

CE: I think this conversation is just exactly the conversation to have. And, as I say, it does call for research. It’s the only way that we can actually sort this out.

SW: So let me go back to something you said originally, before we flipped it. I’d like to re-flip it because this big question—and we’ve been talking about this in terms of the special issue—not that misogyny ever went away, let’s be clear, and not that patriarchy ever went away—but the question of the resurgence of new and evermore disgusting forms of masculine domination and control, etc. The way you phrased it: whether it’s “vacuumed up” by these other movements that use it in an instrumental way, or whether these resurgent forms of toxic masculinity and woman hating (because there’s no other way to put it, I think) are actually central to many of these newly resurgent forms of neopopulism and right-wing movements. And it is of course a research question, but in your own research, have you come to some conclusions about where and when those things are vacuumed up, and where and when they’re central?

CE: One of the things that I’m watching, and that you each are probably watching as well, is when the movement tries to turn itself into a political party. Two things: What are the gender dynamics when they are not parties? For instance, in the US, this is when they are militia movements; and in India and Eastern Europe, they are oftentimes movements before they are parties. Alternatively, what are the gender dynamics when the Right starts off as a political party? And this really matters, whether or not a right-wing organization is an electoral party. One of the things that is really stunning is that when a right-wing movement takes the form of militia movements, it tends to be highly masculinized. It doesn’t mean that Rightist militiamen

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ignore women, because sometimes there are women in their families that they have to bring along when the husband or father or brother becomes a gun-wielding militiaman. But when a Rightist movement turns into a political party, and in fact if they have aspirations to win something like semi-open elections, its strategists have to find some way to appeal to women as voters. And that’s often through some idealized notion of the family that’s combined with a demonized notion of ...

AG: Of the femocrats...

CE: Yes, the femocrats (that is, feminists serving within government) and feminists. And that Rightist political party electoral appeal usually becomes deeply misogynist. It really encourages a lot of women to become misogynist themselves, in the sense of their fearing feminists, fearing women who allegedly are breaking down the family, fearing women who allegedly disparage marriage.

I remember there was a wonderful feminist years ago, the sociologist [Pauline Bart](#), who said to me—I was really early in my feminism, and she shook her finger at me and she said, “Don’t you ever give a talk without saying the word ‘misogyny.’” I hardly knew how to spell “misogyny”! But I’ve always remembered Pauline’s warning. This was in the mid-eighties, and she was doing mainly work in the US. But Pauline said, “Always keep your eye on misogyny. Don’t mistake ‘misogyny’ for the broader ‘patriarchy’ or for the more diffuse ‘sexism.’ Make sure you know what you’re talking about. But never take your eye off misogyny.” And I think what is interesting at this point in so many countries’ politics is that a lot of people have learned how to spell “misogyny.” Thanks to her, I began to actually try and look at it and say it when I found it. But now, “misogyny” is being referred to in journalism without italics, without quotes around it.

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It’s out there as if you can’t understand what’s going on in a country’s political life unless you are at least curious about misogyny. I think this is a new moment in our political understanding.

Not new for misogyny, by the way—

SW: But new for the public discussion of it.

RK: I again want to follow up. This engagement of gender and the global Right is such a complicated one, and I think our questions are struggling with how do we have specific discussions with a title that’s so big and means different things in different contexts? That’s why I want to keep asking questions back to you in response to some of your answers, for example, on masculinities. The question was around toxic masculinities, but those very toxic masculinities are targeting other types of masculinities. And that’s also a question of gender. Whether they’re black masculinities, whether they’re migrant masculinities, whether they’re the demonization of the Muslim man, in my context, in India. The story of masculinities within the context of gender and the global Right is an incredibly complicated one, and I’d like to hear more about your views regarding why a particular understanding of masculinity has become so attractive and has actually managed to seize power, not in nondemocratic contexts, where they may already exist, but in *liberal* democratic contexts. How did that happen? I think this also relates to that “[surprise](#)” question which you like to ask. Suddenly, after all this effort—three decades or more of engagement with gender—look who’s at the top of the food chain again: this kind of toxic masculinity. It’s managed to crowd out the “new man” and other forms of masculinity. I’d love to hear your views on this.

CE: Yes, I mean that one of the great contributions of feminist research, at least for the last thirty years, has been to look at the ways in which efforts at feminization are played out between men.

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Men play this game with each other. It’s quite a serious game. They play it with each other all the time. And they play this patriarchal game with each other sometimes when they’re off camera, and sometimes when they are in the public eye. Men try to present themselves as more legitimate, more reliable, stronger, more logical, more rational than the other man by trying to claim that the other man is feminized. So feminization as a process—the weaponization of femininity—is many (not all) men’s attempts to feminize other men in order to delegitimize those other men. And that only, of course, works in a patriarchy. The feminization game played by men against men works because in a patriarchal society, which most of our societies are, the feminized man is the less legitimate man, is the less reliable man, is the less logical man, is the less electable man. So that, Ratna, I think, goes way back—obviously it’s been played for decades and generations. Taking it to an extreme is what perhaps we’re seeing now.

It’s one of the reasons why Justin Trudeau is so interesting as an electoral phenomenon. I have Canadian friends who flew to Canada in order to vote Liberal, and they’d never voted Liberal in their lives. They’d always voted NDP [New Democratic Party], which is more to the left. But in 2016, they voted Liberal to get (Conservative) Stephen Harper out and to get Justin Trudeau in. And everyone in Canada realized that there was a feminization game going on between the male-led Canadian Conservatives and the male-led Canadian Liberals in the last national election.

Feminization goes on also in closed-door meetings. I remember hearing from a person who was inside one of those elite closed-door meetings, in national security circles. Somebody brought up the question of wounding (which I’m very interested for other reasons) because of a certain weapon that was being proposed to be used in a certain military conflict. It was an all-male group around the table, and another man in the room delegitimized him, or tried to, by essentially—he didn’t say out loud the word “woman,” but he essentially said, “You’re being a weak sister.”

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Spoken by a man to a man. And that’s about choice of weapons in a national security debate in a closed-room setting.

What you’re pointing to is really worth looking at—that is, the ways in which women and men as voters assess different kinds of manliness. The current prime minister of Ireland is a man who has both white Irish and Asian Irish parentage, as well as being gay. And he managed to lead a country—although he wasn’t the main leader, that was feminists—to the historic [overturning of their antiabortion constitutional amendment](#). I am interested too in the Viktor Orban phenomenon in Hungary. But that’s not identical with France’s Emmanuel Macron phenomenon, and it’s not Canada’s Trudeau phenomenon. So the question becomes: How are male and female voters assessing what kinds of manliness are most appropriate for addressing their particular anxieties? And this raises the question of India’s Narendra Modi, of course: How did he appeal to Indian voters as a state premier before he ran to be the country’s prime minister? What did he appeal to among Indian male voters and among female voters?

This then brings us to gender gaps—and now we’re getting down to really “Government 101” kind of questions, but they’re not irrelevant, even if they aren’t the kind of questions that most of us ask most of the time. That is: “What has been the voting gender gap (if there is any) in each of these national elections in which right-wing parties have made substantial gains?” There have been, I think, gender gaps in a number of these elections in which the Rightists are contesting as political parties. I haven’t seen any Slovenian data from the most recent national election, maybe some of you have seen some. What I have seen is that only 25 percent of the total Slovenian electorate this past week voted for the right-wing party; still, that, alarmingly, gave it the most votes among the multiple competing parties. But I haven’t seen any gender data yet from that dismaying election. I do know, by contrast, that in France’s recent national voting there was a

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significant gender gap among those French voters who voted for the right-wing National Front presidential candidate, even though, still, a lot of women did vote for the National Front.

So in the presentation of masculinities, there have been demonizations, as you say, Ratna, of certain kinds of masculinities, as if there is this thing called “black masculinity,” which of course is a total myth. There’s no “black masculinity,” there’s no “Muslim masculinity,” there’s no “Latino masculinity,” there’s no “Slovenian masculinity.” But the attempts at this sort of racialized and ethnicized masculinized demonization do raise a question for us to carefully explore in all sorts of electoral systems: First, how have women and men—each—come to trust or to distrust certain formations of masculinity? Second, how do women and men each act on those gendered trusts or distrusts? I think that’s really interesting.

SW: And I think part of what you’re saying, which we’ve been talking about as well, is how unbelievably uneven this is. Part of what Ratna was saying is that there is this element of surprise—maybe not for some—after these decades of feminist work. Particularly in the US, there’s a sense of “here we are on the cusp of having our first woman president,” and there are these feminist transformations spreading out into the public sphere in more and more popular ways—and then the revelation to many of us that those things we thought were transformed were in fact not transformed at all. I guess you can look at some of this as backlash, which I think is not in fact an accurate way to look at it. Or you can look at it as we had illusions about how far feminism had come in certain venues. Certainly in the US, I think that’s true—the illusion that we were in a postfeminist world and all of that.

CE: Was there a single feminist who thought that we—

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SW: Oh, I think, to get to Ratna’s point, there is a certain kind of liberal feminist that did believe that hardcore misogyny and that kind of stuff was largely a thing of the past.

CE: Oh, I don’t know...

SW: I mean, we didn’t believe that.

CE: There are always optimists in every movement. In every revolutionary movement, every feminist movement, every antiracist movement, there are optimists who think we have come further than we have. Speaking personally, I’m neither a cynic nor a pessimist, but I definitely never just lick the icing off the cake.

AG: I actually remember looking at [your book](#) (*The Curious Feminist*, with its opening chapter “The Surprised Feminist”) the day Donald Trump won the election, and I thought, “Yeah, I’m surprised.” And I had the same feeling during Brexit. I just couldn’t believe that this was happening. I have a lot of British friends who got themselves very drunk the day after. There was this sense of “this can’t be happening.” So my question is: you’ve been around, you’ve advertised curiosity—and surprise—as a good feminist thing, so were you surprised? Did you see this coming? I saw it coming in Poland, to some extent. But I didn’t see Trump coming at all.

CE: That’s very interesting. You should tell us how you saw it coming in Poland. First, about my surprise at the Brexit referendum result. In Brexit, just coming back to how people voted—to leave or to remain—there was (according to exit poll data) almost no difference between how British men and women voted. About as many women as men voted to leave. I live in the same bubble you do. All my British friends were in total dismay when the referendum’s results came in. And many of them have European passports, not British passports. Shortly before the

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referendum, I had been up in Bradford, England, for a conference, and I took a bus after the meeting with a woman who was South Asian British. It was a week before Brexit vote, and she said, “I am so worried. My family, my South Asian British family, is absolutely split.” She said, “My sister is going to vote Leave. I’m absolutely committed to Remain.” And I thought, “Oh boy.” I’d heard this also from other South Asian British friends of mine. They said that within the South Asian communities—and of course they are diverse, they are not all the same—there were real debates going on, some asking, “Were we the last good immigrants?”

And it happens in the United States, it happens in every country of immigrants, including Australia and New Zealand. To be of recent immigrant heritage does not mean you are all in favor of the next generation of new immigrants arriving. I think I had at least a tremor of worry before the Brexit vote. But, to tell you the truth, I was surprised too. I don’t think that I paid enough attention to the Leave campaigners. They seemed—talk about extreme versions of masculinities!—I thought that Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage presented themselves in ways that were just not credible.

AG: It was the “naughty boys” effect.

CE: That’s right. And I thought, “Who’s going to fall for this?” You look at the map afterwards, again based on actual returns, and see [how regionally distinctive the referendum results were](#). Northern Ireland voted to stay. Wales voted to leave. Greater London voted to stay. The northeast of England voted to leave. Scotland voted to stay. (These, of course, are majorities, not everybody in any region.) Britain’s regional map was, in this case, more stunning than its gender map, even though the Brexit campaigning was very gendered. So, surprised? Yeah, I was

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surprised. I wasn't flabbergasted. I was dismayed, which is not the same as being flabbergasted. I was dismayed, but was I caught completely dumbfounded? No. Pretty dumbfounded? Yes.

SW: And with Trump?

CE: With Trump's election, in the end, Hillary Clinton won 2.9 million *more* votes than Trump. It's really important not to mix up the US popular vote with the electoral college system's tally. That popular vote result doesn't give me any better-sleeping nights. But when we describe any election's result, let's be sure our sentences are accurate sentences. *The majority of American people who voted did not vote for Trump.* And, in fact, Clinton won 2.9 million more votes than Donald Trump did. Was I still surprised? I had a dental hygienist who, in the weeks running up to the election (I'm totally dedicated to dental hygienists. They're the ones who keep me from going through worse dental adventures.) So, I have my mouth open. There's a lot of stuff in my mouth. And my dental hygienist—this is a woman who's a recent immigrant—says, “I just really like Donald Trump.” All this stuff is in my mouth, right?

SW: You can't scream!

CE: But I was really interested. I didn't want to so much argue with her. Once I got the stuff out of my mouth, I said, “Why?” And her reply I think is about American discourse and about media, and this is why *Signs* is so important. She said, “Because he's honest.” And I thought in American public life today, including entertainment life, and news life, and political life, this conflation of honesty with rudeness, and honesty with crude bluntness, is important for me to grasp. As if bluntness is honest rather than just being blunt, or rude, or racist. I thought it was really interesting.

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But I was surprised when Trump won, to tell you the truth. We had a big party. Oh, it was awful. Everyone in the US now has their own 2016 election night story. But I think it’s really important to remember what the results were, and what they weren’t.

RK: If I can just add to that—I’m still not sure it’s going far enough, because even if he hadn’t won - right – and suppose it had been Hillary Clinton, would we have said that would be a feminist success story? I personally was still be so surprised at the numbers of people who voted for him.

CE: I think one of the striking things is how few American voters are willing to vote outside their party affiliation. When we study Jamaican politics, for instance, we have learned that marriages often were thwarted if the members of the couple came from families affiliated with rival political parties. We have learned from West Indian political analysts, that is, that party affiliations in the past have sent their roots down into the sinews of family life and personal life. I don’t know if that is still true now in Jamaica. We don’t usually talk that way about political parties in personal and family life in the United States. But I think perhaps we should become more interested in this, because one of the things that was stunning in 2016 was the very high percentage of those people who identified as Republicans who could not imagine voting for anyone but a Republican. Now, it is true in American party politics today that there is a larger percentage of people than in the past who identify as “independent,” which just means they don’t register as either Democrat or Republican; in fact, the proportion of voters who have identified as “independents” is now higher than the proportion who are identifying as Republicans. So that is important.

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But it was really stunning to me how many people who identified as Republicans (when they registered to vote or when they were asked by a pollster) just could not imagine voting for anybody but a Republican. I remember talking to my father back in the 1990s. He was a lifelong Republican—this is all about masculinity. At one point, my father became very disenchanted with George Bush, Sr. My father was all about militarism, really meaning my father was quite a militarist. He got up to Election Day, and he was not going to vote for George Bush—I don’t know what he was going to do, but he just told me, his Democratic daughter, that he couldn’t bring himself to vote for George Bush. This was when Bush, Sr. was running for reelection. And then, at the last minute, my father said, “I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t vote for anybody but a Republican.” So now I think about the votes for Trump—I’m dismayed, obviously. Deeply dismayed that people didn’t take seriously his profound moral and political flaws. I’m deeply dismayed about that. But I’m trying to really dig deeper and see what’s going on there, including a possible deep personal attachment to a political party that I’ve been underestimating. Is it equally deep among American women as among the men in their own families? How does this party attachment send down its roots?

SW: Can I follow up on that, because it’s something we have been talking about and trying to get into the special issue because, of course, we all are miserably depressed about the current situation. I don’t know any feminist worth her salt who is sleeping well at this point. But if we are sleeping well at all I think it is because the resistance internationally has been so feminist and has been led by feminists everywhere, certainly in the US but the Women’s Marches were international. Certainly in Poland there is incredible resistance coming from feminists. Certainly some of what’s been going on in Latin America has been led by feminists. So I’d love to talk a little bit about this moment of feminist resistance to these particular forms of antifeminism,

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misogyny, and racism taking place. Why is the resistance so feminist? That’s taken me by surprise, frankly, in a wonderful way. And what can we imagine building on that to have that become more institutionalized? Not just marches—how do we turn the pink pussy hats into political power? I guess that’s another way of saying it.

CE: I think the resistance oftentimes becomes particularly and distinctly feminist when the Right that is being resisted really shows its misogynist colors. It doesn’t mean that feminists need to see blatant misogyny in order to see patriarchy. But there’s nothing like blatant misogyny to really bring women to a more feminist moment in their own activism, or to activism at all. So many of the right-wing movements have been so clearly sexist—so clearly sexist in their racism, so clearly sexist in their symbolism—and they’ve been overwhelmingly (though not uniformly—see Germany and France) male-led.

One of the things that has struck me is that the resistance to today’s Right is led by—is fueled by—women who see preventing the rollback of reproductive rights as crucial to their well-being and their daughters’ well-being, right? I think that’s really important—and reproductive rights are violated not just in the name of blatant misogyny but in the name of very conservative notions of women’s place, the domestication of women, and the goal of prioritizing motherhood in women’s identity for the sake of the alleged nation. And misogyny. Misogyny and conservative reproductive rights campaigns, though, are not synonymous. Certainly, one is supported by the other. In the January 2017 Women’s Marches, I think a lot of the resistance energy came from the blatant misogyny that so many women saw in the Trump campaign. In countries outside the US, it was that too, but also women’s resistance to the organized campaigns being mounted in their own countries to roll back women’s reproductive rights and women’s access to decent paying employment.

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Now (in mid-2018) we’ve got the #MeToo movement picking up on this and that’s about sexism and misogyny in workplace life. And that’s fueling the current anti-Right resistance as well. That wasn’t where we were in January of 2017. So the #MeToo movement is also bringing up what goes on in workplaces: What does misogyny look like at the water cooler? At the proverbial coffee machine?

SW: I wanted just to follow up with that, to ask if you feel that there is a moment here in the midst of all this horror to imagine a kind of feminist transnational politics that couldn’t have taken place in the past?

CE: Well, there are several places where it has been taking place. I’m now being educated by feminists who do a lot of work within the United Nations, and they have been building really interesting new alliances. For instance, probably many *Signs* readers or many feminist researchers don’t follow small arms trade (that is, international trading of guns and rifles), but I do. You know, I have a lot of perverse curiosities, unfortunately, but [the Arms Trade Treaty](#)—called “the ATT,” for those who don’t follow UN politics—was an enormous success, partly for feminists. Because what feminists managed to get into this UN treaty that was passed in 2013 (which, needless to say, the United States Senate has not ratified, and the Trump administration will never put forward for consideration in the Senate) was to align with other arms control advocates to point out that gun violence is a cause of the high lethality of domestic violence. You introduce guns into domestic violence and you increase exponentially the chances that the woman who is being targeted by an intimate partner will die. Knives aren’t good. Fists aren’t good. Guns are lethal.

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These UN-focused feminists managed to create this very broad transnational gender-conscious coalition working to roll back the international trade of guns. Specifically, they managed to get into the ATT’s Article 7 the requirement that every government that is an exporter of small weapons now be responsible, if they ratify the treaty, for at least asking whether the guns they are allowing to be exported from their country are used in violence against women in the importing country. And they got into the ATT the phrase “gender-based violence.” The Vatican had a fit. The Vatican lobbied very hard against this phrase being in the treaty, and the Vatican’s very big in the United Nations. You know this, Agnieszka. But these feminist campaigners still managed to get the word “gender” in over the Vatican’s stiff resistance.

So, is there a new transnational feminist effort? I think there is a lot of learning that has gone on in the last thirty years, especially coming out of the 1985 UN meeting in Nairobi at the end of the Decade for Women. That was a big turning point. We talk about the 1995 meeting in Beijing, but the meeting in Nairobi was really important because it was the first time that women from wealthier countries, not all of whom were wealthy themselves, really had to take on board what women in poorer countries had as their main priorities, as well as their main analytical findings and understandings. Beijing built on that. But it really has transformed what a lot of international, transnational women’s organizing is all about. It’s not as good as it should be. And no transnational activist I’ve ever worked with thinks we’ve somehow hit a good point yet, but there’s definitely awareness that wasn’t there before 1985. That means that the international resistance is much more conscious, for instance, around immigration rights. That really does help. But also internal racist and sectarian politics are much more on people’s agenda when they think about feminist organizing. Good enough? No. Better? Yes. It’s tough, though.

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You’ve just got to—well, I don’t have to tell you three, you’ve *done* it—you have to stay awake longer than you want to. You have to stay in awkward meetings longer than you want to. You have to listen to people who are dressing you down more than you want to. It’s not easy to really develop transnational feminist coordination. In the ATT movement, for instance, activist women from Mali were absolutely crucial. Activist women from Brazil were absolutely crucial. They were the ones who really gathered data about how guns were used disproportionately in violence against women. And they helped make the ATT campaign a truly transnational feminist effort.

SW: I think what you’re getting at, too, is this question of what constitutes a feminist issue. That’s been some of the shift that we’ve been seeing all over. We certainly have seen it in the Women’s March, which had a platform that was as pristine and intersectional as one can imagine. We see it in your example of small arms trade, thinking it through the lens of gender and making clear its feminist principles and its feminist engagement. And of course we’re seeing it now in the US with the issue of school shootings and the fact that school shootings are done almost exclusively by young white men. And these men are often motivated by their sense of their own exclusion from the privileges of heterosexuality, labeling themselves “incel” or talking about “red pilling,” which we have some work on in the special issue. But thinking of shootings as a feminist issue, and of course immigration—that seems to be a huge shift internationally within feminist organizing.

CE: To give earlier women’s rights efforts—women’s movements and liberation efforts—credit, if one goes back and looks at women’s earliest self-conscious organizing as women, it was also about property, it was about marriage, it was about the nature of the family, it was about migration, it was about war. So it’s not as if earlier women’s movements didn’t try to understand, “Where does oppression occur?” And, “By what means does oppression occur?”

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And then try to address it. But it is true that today we ask, “Where is women’s oppression?

Where is the privileging of certain narrow forms of masculinity occurring?” We are more likely (not inevitably!) to be both intersectional in the broad sense and to search for diverse women’s shared interests and liberation and its deprivation. You can’t take on everything. It is really hard.

I think this is why the local grounding of any movement—the Malian women’s movement for gun control was localist, and that’s what made it really useful in transnational organizing. We go back to the local-global relationship. It’s not a tension; it’s a necessity. You cannot, I think, have really effective transnational feminist organizing unless everybody’s feet are on very specific grounds.

AG: If I may step in here, my own sense of the Right is that it has been winning in part because it has been able to mobilize the idea of the local as conservative. There’s a very strong right-wing discourse about the global liberal elite that has been colonizing, depriving people of their true voice. And of course if feminist organizing happens at a high level of abstraction around universal human rights, you can end up arguing yourself into a corner where you are antagonizing people who you supposedly want to liberate. I don’t actually believe this idea that international human rights is a universalist discourse and therefore oppressive to women locally. But you have to ask them. You have to hear it from them. You cannot tell them that they will be liberated. And the struggle now is with the Right, which has been claiming that we are colonizing people locally. Eastern Europe has been having this dynamic with Western Europe. In both in Hungary and Poland, the rise of the populist Right has in part consisted of this resistance around the idea of dignity: “Polish dignity has been somehow hurt by the liberal European effort to tell us what to do with our women, or by shaming us by telling us that we are homophobes.” And you cannot respond to that by sending yet another letter of complaint to the European

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Union. You have to have the voices of local feminist or local gay movements being mobilized, which leads me to what I really wanted to ask you about: Where do you stand on the universal human rights language as an effective language for women’s rights? It’s a long, ongoing debate that you cannot avoid if you are interested in transnational women’s rights. Is this a discourse that has gone bankrupt, or do we actually need to revive it now that the Right has been organizing so effectively at the UN? What’s your stand on that?

CE: First of all, just to address the really interesting lead-up to your question: nationalism has always been, not automatically patriarchal, but right there on the table to be picked up by patriarchs, right? It’s no wonder that so many women, even women who have thrown their own efforts, often at great risk, into nationalist movements, have oftentimes become very, very wary of who uses nationalist rhetoric and nationalist symbolism for what patriarchal causes. What we’re seeing, and you’re dealing with this directly in Eastern Europe, has a long legacy. A lot of Filipina feminists, perhaps, should come and hold seminars with you in Poland. I really mean that. And that’s true of Korean feminists too. Korean feminists have dealt with the trickiness of nationalism far longer than many of us. I oftentimes think, “Who should be advising whom?” And I would send Filipina feminists around the world to advise us all; maybe they should be joined by Korean feminists to help us all take up how you deal with the question of sovereignty, the question of nationalism, and this notion of “our women.”

And you’re absolutely right: that does raise the question of how to talk about human rights and women’s rights. In all my work, and of course I’m still learning, thankfully, I’ve always been wary of abstractions. We’re all teachers, and I think it’s mainly because as a teacher you always watch the kids in the back row slumping down. The ones who are skeptical from the minute you say ... anything, really. It’s a healthy skepticism, but it is skepticism. As a result, I am both

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always eager to talk about broad concepts, including concepts of rights and what it means to have human dignity, and always simultaneously determined to try to localize it, to ground it really quickly. Your word of warning is a political word of warning as well as a philosophical word of warning. This was true of the antislavery, abolitionist movement—in the nineteenth-century antislavery movements (in which women were crucial actors), to be persuasive, you had to be able to talk about not only human dignity but what it meant to be an enslaved person and what it meant to be an enslaver. So I actually see declarations of human rights as having been very powerful and empowering for a lot of people. It’s one of the reasons why [CEDAW](#) [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women] has real meaning in Japan. CEDAW has real meaning in Indonesia. CEDAW has real meaning in Brazil. Because it says, “We have rights because we are women and humans.” So I don’t want to throw it out because it’s been abused and misused. But I do think that for it to be politically effective it has to always be in connection with trying to understand what this means in terms of the everyday lives of women, of men, and of people who don’t want to choose between the binaries. That’s not a very helpful answer in some ways.

SW: No, it is very helpful actually.

AG: I don’t have a solution myself. I think we need to complicate the question and see the various dangers that come with holding on to this concept but also with abandoning it. I’ve always been very troubled by listening to Western feminists tell me that human rights are a colonial discourse, where human rights are really the only argument we have when trying to discipline our government. Poland has signed CEDAW. Poland has signed all types of treaties. And if we stop believing that these treaties are binding, then we’re completely up in the air. These are useful tools for women in those countries that are supposedly oppressed by

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international human rights. I think the self-blaming of some currents of Western feminism has actually worked against those who are supposedly being hurt. But on the other hand there is a problem with universalism. And there is yet another problem now with the Right being so good at creating a new universalism. And they're really effective at it, maybe because they're fresh at it. This whole idea of natural rights being an unquestionable, obvious thing: they don't mention God; they say it's natural law. The World Congress of Families has, from our point of view, a really despicable way of thinking and talking, but it's quite fresh and energized in a way that feminism hasn't been since the seventies. The ball is really in their court, and I think we need to be able to respond to that with equal energy. I'm just wondering where feminist language is most vibrant, and I'm not so sure anymore.

RK: Agnieszka, your question's really an incredibly important one. And I think you're right that we can't choose between embracing human rights and abandoning human rights. Neither of those are real options. But I want to go back to something that was asked earlier about transnational feminism or global human rights. Anything that's transnational or global is received with skepticism in large parts of the world because they are still linked with the histories of colonialism that continue to inform postcolonial present. And that's not just a Western feminist stance. That's a postcolonial feminist, healthy critical position, that asks “What's the real agenda being advanced under what looks like a progressive project, whether it's a transnational feminist project or a global human rights project? What other agendas are being advanced here, and are they racial, are they religious, are they hegemonizing projects that are designed to open up new spaces for the neoliberal market to enter?” So I think it's a really important skepticism to take on board; to know that human rights have been used for progressive and nonprogressive agendas. And we do really need to take that on board— just to say “I'm on

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the side of human rights” doesn’t make you a good guy or a good feminist; it just doesn’t. We see how states have taken on antitrafficking agendas and how this has hurt certain constituencies it was meant to help, whether its sex workers or its migrants. We see, and we talked about this earlier, how taking on agendas that are about removing the veil under the guise of gender equality—arguing using CEDAW language—has actually hurt certain constituencies and in fact further alienated them and made them even more suspicious of so-called progressive agendas. So I think we are walking on eggshells. This is a really, really difficult space in which to intervene because there are such polarized positions on it. And that’s why I also want to come back to, Cynthia, if I may, an important moment when the skepticism around the global and the transnational really hit a peak, which was after 9/11. You’ve probably been asked a lot of times about the 1960s and your time at Berkeley, but I want to fast forward to 2001 and 9/11, and ask how that perhaps influenced your own thinking about feminism in transnational contexts, as well as your own work on international relations. How did it shift or change your position or thinking about feminism?

CE: Which? The sixties at Berkeley or 9/11?

AG: 9/11. Because I do think something big happened after 9/11.

CE: Well, first of all, the Berkeley movement in the sixties was highly patriarchal. So, I don’t glorify that. I mean, I was there. I was at the bridge table that fateful noontime next to Mario Savio. But what became the Berkeley Free Speech Movement was definitely a prefeminist movement. I learned a lot from it. I went on strike, but I didn’t go on strike with any feminist consciousness, alas. We all learn, right? We all learn. It’s really important to always fess up to what you didn’t know when you didn’t know it and then to say clearly who taught you.

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But for me, the 9/11 moment, in some ways—how to make it not sound like I’m saying “I told you so”? Because I don’t mean it that way. But the thing is, I’d been tracking militarism for twenty-plus years. I really started tracking militarism before I was a feminist. I spent about seven years looking at the workings of racism inside militaries all over the world. I hadn’t really conceptualized militarization at that point, but I was following militaries and racism. I started really thinking about militarization and all the forms it takes, all its nooks and crannies, not just in national securities settings, from 1981. I think I can almost date it to 1981, which was about the time I also was becoming more consciously a feminist.

So when “9/11” (and that’s a shorthand for a lot of things) happened, and particularly post-9/11—that’s really what matters, right? I mean, before September 2001, there had been many awful killings in many different settings, and they didn’t turn into something called “9/11.” It’s the post-9/11 justification for ramping up a much more diffuse kind of militarism that is most significant. All regimes anywhere that have wanted to legitimize increased militarization now have had a new tool for it. It doesn’t mean that Indian regimes hadn’t been militarized before—e.g., Indira Gandhi’s administration—or that militarization hadn’t been embraced by the French and the Dutch as colonialists and by the Chileans under Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s and in Argentina under the junta. It certainly had been. What the distinctive post-9/11 discourse, policy, and political economies of weapons together did was give regimes that wanted to ramp up their own internal militarization a new language of persuasion and a new set of allies (primarily the US, of course).

This latest phase of militarization was gendered. Each historical phase of militarization has been distinctly gendered in each place. Before 9/11, I was already perverse enough in my curiosities that I was keeping track of all kinds of militarizations in the late eighties and through the

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nineties. In the wake of 9/11, I now had to be even more energetic about it. And I had to rely on a lot of researchers I hadn't read before or listened to, before to really take on militarization's new forms. But for me, 9/11 was a ramping up of something I'd been watching and alarmed about for a long time. And in that sense, when your alarm increases that qualitatively does change you, you know? You're right.

SW: I think we have time for maybe one more question. Do either of you have a final question?

AG: I'm curious about your sense of the motivations and gratification that women get in right-wing movements. I had a conversation yesterday with a woman from Cyprus who's doing anthropological work with right-wing women, and one thing she told me—and it sounded a lot like what I'm hearing from a doctoral student who's researching militaristic groups in Poland—is that there are lots of women there now. That these movements are much more keen to recruit women and that these women get a sense of dignity from, for instance, learning to shoot, and they believe that feminists are wimps. That they are the hearty women. There's a kind of sturdiness. But this took me by surprise, because I always thought that to be a right-wing woman is to cherish a certain traditional version of femininity and to be part of that package of “women and children.” But, no, this seems to be a new muscular version of femininity. I don't know if you've come across this at all and whether it's just a coincidence or there is a pattern emerging.

CE: Well, the thing is, a number of state militaries have been playing on this aspiration of a lot of women—because we're talking about particularly young woman—at least since the late 1970s. State militaries have really honed their skills appealing to seventeen-, eighteen-, or nineteen-year-old women to shoot, to take risks, to do things that are dangerous, that are

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physically demanding. So, they were there first. But it also is, I think, a maturing (if one can use that word) of various right-wing militarized movements now to be appealing to young women.

AG: They’re keeping up with the feminist spirit in those girls?

CE: Well, you can try to patriarchally co-opt anything. You can co-opt universal human rights, you can co-opt women as physically capable—things that feminists have promoted. But the state, or, in this case, insurgent right-wing movements, can also use them. And it is true that if you interview women who’ve joined state militaries around the world, one of the things that appeals to these seventeen-, eighteen-, or nineteen-year-old women (not all, but a lot—and it’s evident in the appeal of sport, as well) is the notion of women having physical capacities that have been underestimated by their fellows and their parents and whoever they think the grownups are. And this is their chance to show them. When they’re being recruited, as you say, into Polish militias, it may be new for the Polish right-wing militias, but it’s not new out there in other settings. As you say, right-wing movements, wherever they are, are thinking about gender all the time. And they don’t think about gender in just their own stereotypic ways. There’s a new book out by the American social historian Linda Gordon [on white women in the Ku Klux Klan](#) in the North, not just in the American South. So we have a long history of wonderful feminist historians looking at women in what seem to be patriarchal movements, antifeminist movements, women against women’s suffrage—the wonderful book by [Elna Green on women’s antisuffrage clubs](#).

What I think you’re bringing up is really important, and that is that physicality matters. Not only for young women, but especially for young women who are resentful when they feel physically capable and yet are shunted into paths that don’t acknowledge their physical capability.

Sometimes it means they go and play soccer, right? Other times it means they are at least

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susceptible to these sorts of recruitment by right-wing militias. It’s absolutely necessary for us to be curious about, for sure.

AG: Thank you.

SW: It’s such a depressing note to end on! We can’t end on women in militias!

[laughter]

CE: No! We’re not depressed!

SW: Really, give me something else!

CE: If we get depressed, they win. Right?

SW: This is true. There. That’s much better. We can’t. For all of us here, I want to just thank you so much, Cynthia. This was fabulous conversation, and illuminating, and exciting, and empowering, and I think we’ve all learned from each other and from you. And from *Signs* and the whole community, I thank you. And thank you all. Thank you and good night.

CE: This was great. Thanks a lot.