IN DEPTH

Transversal Politics: A practice of peace

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In the mid-1990s, a group of feminist activists living in Bologna, Italy, began travelling to war-riven countries, seeking to support women there. They called their programme 'Women Visiting Difficult Places'. They began using the term '*politica trasversale*' to describe both their own border-crossing practices and the efforts they witnessed of women in conflict zones to work co-operatively across conflictual divisions. Nira Yuval-Davis then translated the Italian term as 'transversal politics' and, in her book *Gender and Nation*, published in 1997, introduced it into English usage (Yuval-Davis 1997: 125 et seq.).

The following year, acknowledging these sources, I took up the concept when writing up research on three women's organizations in contexts of ethno-national armed conflict, each of them an alliance across national differences. They were Bat Shalom, in the north of Israel; the Women's Support Network in Belfast, Northern Ireland; and Medica Women's Therapy Centre in central Bosnia-Herzegovina[1]. The women of these three organizations were not themselves using the term transversal politics to describe their activity. I wrote that my aim had been to try 'to fill the container "transversal politics" with content. I wanted to see what exactly is involved in the doing of it' (Cockburn 1998: 9). My project eventually developed into a series of international border-crossings, as we raised funding to enable representatives of each organization to visit the others, further applying their communication skills in making understandable to each other the challenges of working across conflict lines in their particular contexts. My action research process culminated in a conference at Gresham College in London in January 1999, titled *Transversal Politics and Translating Practices*. Here women from the case study organizations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Israel Palestine were able to compare

experiences not only with each other but also with women engaged in cross-communal activism in the UK[2].

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It will be clear, then, that towards the end of the nineteen-nineties there had been developing among certain feminist women, concerned politically and theoretically with violent conflict in relation to gender and ethno-national identities, a practice in search of a name. Lynette Hunter and I understood that practice to be one of 'creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicized differences'. We said of the term 'transversal politics', 'It seems as if it has fallen, clunk, upon a meaning that has been waiting for a signifier' (Cockburn and Hunter 1999:88)[3].

Practising transversal politics

So what exactly is involved in the practice of 'transversal politics' (TP)? It has been summarized by Nira Yuval-Davis, drawing on the accounts of the Italian activist women, as 'a mode of coalition politics in which the differential positionings of the individuals and collectives involved will be recognized, as well as the value systems which underly their struggles' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 25). Elsewhere she calls it 'a model of feminist politics, which takes account of national as well as other forms of difference among women, without falling into the trap of identity politics' (ibid: 5). Furthermore, she writes, it is 'based on knowledge acquired by dialogue carried out by people who are differentially positioned' – adding that transversal politics should be 'the political guidelines for all political activism, whether at the grass-roots level or in state and supra-state power centres' (ibid: 92).

Let us take as an example the activities of the Women's Support Network in Belfast, one of the three organizations studied in the project The Space Between Us (Cockburn 1998). As I observed them sustaining their difficult alliance across conflictual differences of "name" in a situation of armed conflict I noted a number of strategies in play.

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First, they carried out what I came to call 'identity work'. Rather than denying or dissembling significant historic, cultural, religious and political differences between them (between Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Loyalist), they acknowledged and affirmed them. However, they were at pains not to 'jump to conclusions' from given 'names', inferring too readily an individual's sense of herself. Instead they delayed 'closure' on identity, remaining open to hearing, over a period of time, the account of 'self' given by the 'other', individual or group. Thus a 'Protestant' might reveal she actually means by that 'name' a practising church-goer, or on the contrary a secular member of the Protestant community. It might be a name she feels 'stuck with', or one she has actively substantiated, culturally or politically.

Secondly, the women tended to transcend dichotomization and polarization between the primary conflictual identity groups by stressing a multiplicity of differentiations – thus a 'Catholic' might not only 'be' a nationalist or otherwise, she might also be 'from the South' of Ireland, 'from the North', or even from Britain. Besides, in Belfast live other 'ethnic minorities', migrant Chinese for example, and African communities. The women included these in their thinking about community.

Third, the participants in the Women's Support Network did careful work to establish shared values, because it is only on such a basis that differences can be transcended. Such a value might be non-violence, perhaps, or equality. One was certainly justice: the

women of the Network saw that it was necessary to recognize injustices done to all sides in the conflict, but particularly the injustices currently impeding its peaceful resolution. Wrongs had to be admitted, but without ascription of collective guilt – no blame by 'name'.

Fourth, the women intelligently limited the agenda of their working alliances to what could currently be agreed upon at any given moment.

And, finally, I observed them to have developed skilled group processes, ways of relating, speaking and writing, especially where decisions and strategies were concerned, that facilitated clear and confident expression of differences, yet careful negotiation of identities and values. None of these strategies was easy to accomplish, and the Women's Support Network did not always achieve the cohesion its members sought. But its participants were conscious and articulate about what they were attempting, even when they failed.

Values, power and the uses of imagination

The practice and the theory of transversal politics, by definition progressive (i.e. not 'conservative'), are both predicated on a notion of developmental change. And perhaps, more than in other forms of politics, the potential for change is understood not as dependent upon macro historical processes but rather as involving the subjective sense of self. Marie Mulholland is a Republican nationalist feminist, a colleague and friend, whom I had the privilege to watch 'doing' transversal politics in the Women's Support Network in Northern Ireland.. I asked her how she stayed in a working relationship, not just with women of different 'name' ('Protestant', 'Catholic') but of names distinguished by differential power (ruling, ruled), and, albeit with some shared values, nursing some pretty sharply opposed concrete political aspirations. Her answer was that it was possible, and only possible, because she and they could believe that at some future time, beyond some dimly perceived horizon, she and they will have become different. She meant, I believe, that, moved on from today's rocky places, they might have a subtly different standpoint and perspective, might have constituted each other freshly, reshaped in each other a slightly new sense of self. So transversal politics is a politics of the future perfect tense, 'will have become'. It envisages a place in the future

from which one will have looked back and seen that change has happened. But it also contains a cautious conditional tense: if. We 'may have become'.

" Transversal politics has to involve shifting, standing on the Other's standpoint "

The belief that you and I will be different ten years from now, and that our circumstances will allow different practices, demands imagination. So we cannot do transversal politics, we cannot even make the first steps, without a leap in the dark. Our politics must not just allow space for, but actively generate, flights of fantasy, dreams of possibilities. The traversing is thus not only lateral, it is also traversing into the future (yours and hers).

This recognition of the mobility of imagination helps overcome what is an apparent contradiction in transversal politics. The Italian women activists, and those who have adopted their language, talk of 'rooting' and 'shifting'. Transversal politics has to involve, first, a rooting in one's own subjectivity. I understand this to mean fully recognizing, reflexively acknowledging, being comfortable with our own sense of self, and understanding its relation to the names with which we are hailed. At the same time it has to involve shifting, to see from the Other's perspective. This I take to mean getting right into the other's embodied self, standing on the other's standpoint (in her shoes), listening carefully to her account of self, seeing with her eyes. But this has clearly never been a 'real' possibility. It would be facile to attempt to 'go and live as one of them', because we cannot do so without negating our own identifications. Identities, belongings, are more intractable and more dangerous than this implies. The differences transversal politics deals with are differences for which we kill, torture and die – on British housing estates, on Irish streets, in Bosnian villages and Palestinian refugee camps. But the imagination can enable us to travel – in space (between standpoints) and in time (between moments in a trajectory).

Imagination, then, becomes itself a political practice. Indeed, the imaginary may be the strong card, the joker in the pack. Perhaps the potential of small groups, such as the Belfast Women's Support Network, Medica in Bosnia, or Bat Shalom in Israel Palestine, inventing and practising their transversal politics, is to release imagination and spark off new possibilities, putting them into play more widely. Perhaps they can change the popular sense of what is possible and lift the vision of politicians beyond their bounded horizons, so that failed political mandates are withdrawn and rewritten, and new routes open towards peace.

1. The book *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* was my reporting of what had been a project of action research, involving studies of the communicative practices within each organization, theorizing about the way they handled conflictual identities and 'situatedness' in the social 'space' they had knowingly chosen to inhabit together (Cockburn 1998).

2. The proceedings resulted in a thematic issue of the journal *Soundings* In that volume, Nira Yuval-Davis explained the concept succinctly in her piece 'What is "transversal politics"?' (Yuval-Davis 1999).

3. I went on to carry the concept of transversal politics into further research. In 1999 and 2000, with Bosnian colleagues I explored the difficulties encountered by local cross-ethnic women's projects in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, and their potential contribution to an emergent women's movement and to the pursuit of democracy in the new state (Cockburn 2001). I then went on to observe transversal politics in action in a women's bi-communal initiative across the partition line that divides the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot populations of the island of Cyprus (Cockburn 2004).

Photography : Cynthia Cockburn – *Jewish and Palestinian women of the Bat Shalom Project, residents of northern Israel, cooperating for equality and rights for Palestinians in the Israeli state, as well as justice and statehood for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories –*