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When the Personal is Political: a review of three books: Islam and Equality, Searching for Life, & the Space between Us

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Islam and Equality: Debating the Future of Women's and Minority Rights in the Middle East and North Africa edited by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1999, 208 pp., $20.00 paper.

Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina by Rita Arditti. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 251 pp., $45.00 hardcover, $17.95 paper.

The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict by Cynthia Cockburn. New York: Zed Books, 1999, 247 pp., $65.00 hardcover, $25.00 paper.

The three books under review explore a diverse range of issues and a wide geographical area. In these pages, we find women as activists as well as women as subjects of states and international law. Despite the broad scope, a reader encounters overlapping ideas within the three. Of particular importance are the concepts of transnational organizations, public versus private domains, feminism, and identity. These terms emerge as central to understanding women in contemporary politics. A comparison and contrast of the treatment of these ideas in various settings reveals areas of debate and consensus surrounding women and their role in international

politics. Furthermore, throughout all three books, the reader is conscious of the link between the political and the personal, especially for women.

Islam and Equality is a transcript of a 1997 conference on international law, human rights, and Islam sponsored by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. In four sessions, presenters summarized papers that served as a basis for discussion. To fully understand the debate, I advise readers to start with the relevant appendix before reading each chapter. The papers presented, as well as the comments offered span a wide range.

This book is a fascinating exploration of the notion of universal human rights--especially those of women and minorities--as compared to the beliefs and tenets of Islam. A fundamental question at the conference was the complementary or contradictory relationship between the two. To answer this query, the participants examine theoretical aspects of Islam (what does the Koran say about relationships between husband and wife, etc.) as well as applied elements, such as standards and rulings of family law in Islamic countries (e.g., what are parameters about custody). Participants at the conference spoke of women as a unitary group. While there was sensitivity to national differences, discussants did not engage in an analysis that assessed class or race as a factor in Islam and women's equality.

Islam and Equality offers no firm conclusions or assertions, and disagreement exists among Islamists about the content and character of Islam. For instance, some argue an Islamic government could not outlaw polygamy, while others state that the Koran clearly indicated that polygamy should be regulated. Through the give and take of the debate, variations between Islamic regions (i.e., Maghreb and South Asia versus the Middle East) and traditions clearly emerge. Given this diversity, it is not surprising that no consensus evolved.

This book presents an excellent discussion of Islam and equality. Those with some background in Islam might gain more from the discussion then a novice, but even a relative stranger to Islamic theory learns much from a reading of the debates. Islam and Equality would be useful in a class exploring Islam or the comparative status of women.

Searching for Life investigates the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an Argentine non-governmental organization (NGO) related to the better-known Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Rita Arditti's book begins with a brief review of Argentine history, especially the 1970s and 1980s, which was the catalyst for the organization. The work of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo focuses on the fate of the children of the disappeared--those taken without due process by the Argentine military and usually killed. Sometimes when the adults were apprehended the security forces also seized small children. Likewise, pregnant prisoners (continuing to be tortured) were spared execution only until after the birth of their child. Then, typically, the stolen children were given to families loyal to the military regime. The Grandmothers try to identify those who are "desaparecidos con vida" ("the living disappeared") and restore them to their rightful families. In the process, the Grandmothers contribute directly and indirectly to international law, as in their contribution to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Arditti interviewed many of the Grandmothers while researching the book. She includes a biographical sketch of all the Grandmothers interviewed, but offers no analysis of the organizational composition of the Grandmothers as a whole. Likewise, the book provides no assessment of class and/or ethnicity as a factor in membership. However, Searching for Life does affirm that through their work these women, thrust into politics by the brutal actions of an

authoritarian regime, have made significant and lasting improvements to Argentina and the world.

Searching for Life is well researched and well written. Expertise in Latin America is not necessary for readers of the book; at the same time, it is not so general as to be uninteresting to Latin Americanists. In addition to Latin American studies classes, *Searching for Life* would be a good choice as an example of women activists in the national and international arena.

The Space Between Us also draws the readers into the world of female activists. Cynthia Cockburn investigates "how peace is done" through an in-depth study of three women's groups, which include women from ethnically diverse (and conflictive) countries. The groups are: the Women's Support Network in Belfast, Northern Ireland; Bat Shalom in Israel; and, Medica Women's Therapy Centre in Bosnia.

The author prefaces the study with an examination of key concepts such as people, nation, and feminism. This provides a strong foundation for their application in the research. Cockburn also offers a brief review of the situation in the areas where each group operates. This creates a meaningful frame of reference. The book concludes with an assessment of the similarities and differences between the groups, as well as thoughts on how these groups demonstrate "how peace is done." Cockburn emphasizes that the three groups demonstrate how affirmation of differences, strategic silence, and democratic procedures are essential to the creation of a diverse, peaceful community.

Throughout *The Space Between Us*, references to class, race, and sexual orientation can be found. The author notes these divisions are an example of differences within communities.

Likewise, examining how differences are handled gives insight into the group dynamics; for instance, in Northern Ireland the leadership of an openly lesbian woman is assessed as an example for valuing differences in action. Similarly, the common working-class roots of many of the women in the Network in Northern Ireland are identified as a shared bond that crosses ethnic divisions.

The Space Between Us is an outstanding evaluation of women from conflicting nations working in their respective situations. Peace is typically negotiated "from above" but must succeed "from below." The book shows how this can be possible. For students of international relations, as well as peace and conflict studies--not to mention Women's Studies--this book provides a window into the difficult task of peacefully linking conflicting societies. It would also be useful in feminist theory (do women "do politics" differently than men?) courses.

The diversity of these books ultimately proves helpful. The investigations of these seemingly dissimilar topics (national conflict, authoritarianism, theology, and international law) all touch similar elements. Thus, when we remove these concepts and compare and contrast their treatment across the titles, it gives us a more comprehensive understanding of each of them.

One of the first concepts that comes to the forefront is that of transnational organizations. These entities (such as international human rights organizations, international environmental movements, or international women's groups) are frequently acknowledged as a growing force in international politics; all three books confirm the emerging central role that they can play. Furthermore, transnational organizations are often portrayed as the new saviors of the world, dedicated to resolving the world's ills (for instance, the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Doctors without Borders). Is this a common view, or are there other visions?

In *Islam and Equality*, several presenters spoke of the imposition of Western ideas through international governmental organizations (IGOs, such as the U.N.) and transnational human rights organizations. For instance, Abdelwahab El-Affendi argues that:

> [T]oday we have a situation where human rights organizations and the international community seem to direct the human rights discourse as a tool of foreign policy and to try and bring the nations of the [Middle East] region into following the Western camp, this will undermine human rights. (148)

At the same conference, though, others countered that cultural relativism was a convenient excuse for oppression. Missing in this discourse, however, was the recognition that Islam, and most major religions, are transnational.

Searching for Life reveals that links to transnational organizations are often a key component in the success of local NGOs. In the case of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, as the author notes: "the ongoing interest of international groups, religious communities, [etc] all over the world created a network that enabled the Grandmothers to amass resources and compile information, both greatly aiding their work" (66).

The Grandmothers also expanded the scope of their activity (i.e., UNCRC) through their international contacts. In contrast to Islam and Equality, Searching for Life emphasizes the collaboration that can beneficially exist between local groups and transnational organizations.

In *The Space Between Us*, a more nuanced view of transnational organizations emerges. All of the women's groups examined have ties to other groups, often outside of their borders, making

them part of the transnational organization landscape. Money, information, people, and power flow from these transnational connections. However, lack of sensitivity and awareness on the part of outsiders to the local dynamics can result in problems.

The three books reveal a complex picture of transnational organizations and their future. One concludes that while transnational organizing is a powerful tool for non-state entities, obstacles exist that are not solely due to state opposition. The impact for good by transnational networks can be balanced by negative consequences stemming from the lack of grounding in the local situation.

A second concept that varies greatly from location to location is the interpretation of public and private spheres. This is a perennial concern in Women's Studies not commonly addressed as such in political science. Typically, the terminology and focus are different; often phrases such as civil society or private sectors versus state or government are encountered in political science. These two spheres, and their perceived division and/or linkages, are highly relevant for all three books.

In *Islam and Equality*, all the speakers make a distinction between public and private domains. Most of the Islamists argue that at most the Koran identifies inequalities in the private domain. Some insist that inequality in the private domain results in inequality in the public domain, as well as the use of the public domain (such as courts) to uphold those private domain inequalities. Overall, though with some exceptions, the domains are treated as distinct. Furthermore, many argue for a continued separation between the two spheres.

In contrast, *Searching for Life* revealed a time and situation where public and private spheres collided. The Grandmothers searched for their grandchildren--a private domain relationship. Yet,

the separation was a consequence of state policy that took children of subversives and gave them to loyal Argentines. The state (public domain) tried to erase family ties (private domain); the Grandmothers used public protest, laws, and court proceedings (public domain) to restore families (private domain). In this story, the distinction between the two spheres was non-existent: the state's repression necessitated a public domain response.

A similar blurring is present in *The Space Between Us*. In Bosnia, rape is a policy of ethnic cleansing; in Northern Ireland, a link between political violence and domestic violence is noted. The two spheres are presented as having a fluid connection where changes in one (peaceful action among women in the private sphere) can spill over into the other (increased chances for successful peace) and vice versa (decreased political violence resulting in less domestic violence). Overall, these books reveal that the public/private debate is still highly relevant to women's lives and how they interact with the state.

Feminism is a third concept highly relevant to understanding women's lives. In some respects, the definition of feminism is central to the future of the women's movement. In my experience, opponents of feminism usually define it in ways that I do not. Of course, even among self-identified feminists, understandings of feminism differ. Within these books, how people understood feminism, as well as whether or not they considered themselves feminists, varied greatly. They reinforce the notion that control over definitions is a key challenge in politics. In all three settings, feminism suffered because of the negative connotations associated with it; the content of the belief system was never fully articulated and rejected. Indeed, the readings imply that one limit to a strong and vibrant international women's movement might be primarily semantical. A great need exists to reaffirm the positive qualities of feminism globally.

Identity is a fourth concept found in all of the readings. In particular, all of the books dwelled on a women's identity--as a woman, as a member of a religious organization, as a citizen of a country, as a mother and grandmother. Not surprisingly, both constructed and innate understandings of identity emerged, augmenting the view that identity is constructed. All three highlight the various components that go into identity construction: birth origins, family, personal experiences, religion, as well as individual choices and beliefs. They reinforce how explosive identity is as an issue. This quintessentially personal factor is greatly shaped by political forces.

These books make notable contributions to political science, Women's Studies, and related fields. One critical benefit is a fuller appreciation of essential concepts in political science. Transnational organizations, public versus private spheres, feminism, and identity are all important to understanding contemporary politics. Each of the books provides often-contradictory insight into each concept. Of course, the absence of certainty and consensus is a part of political science. Yet, another benefit is a reaffirmation of the link between politics and personal life. The books reveal not only how the personal political but also how the political is personal. They help us to remember the relevance of politics to personal well-being, especially for women.