Greenham Common: An Exchange

Kate Sopev and Alison Assitev

On 12 December 1982, some 35,000 women congregated at the Greenham Common air force base near Newbury to create an 'event' unique in the history of anti-nuclear protest. On the following day, more than a thousand who stayed behind with members of the resident Peace Camp staged one of the most successful pieces of non-violent direct action seen in Britain of recent years.

Throughout its duration, the demonstration was headline news. Within hours of its ending, Parliament had been forced into holding an emergency debate on nuclear policy, in which the Women's Peace Camps and the Greenham Common activities were continual reference points. All the signs suggest, in fact, that the demonstration has inaugurated a period of new and more intensive questioning not only about the wisdom of the deployment of Cruise missiles in this country, but about our nuclear defence policy as a whole and the appallingly undemocratic manner in which crucial decisions affecting it have been made.

'Twelve hours after a 30,000 strong army of concerned housewives and grandmothers had gone home police had to battle with the mainly hard-core leftovers.'

That the Greenham Common protest should have captured the eye of the media and the imagination of the British public is not surprising. Visually spectacular, and sustained throughout by an extraordinary spirit of shared conviction, it was bound to prove moving even to those who merely observed it. For those who participated in it, it was a shaking and at times almost harrowing experience. Many seemed close to tears much of the day, and few of us, I think, had come fully prepared for the emotional power that was generated by the concerted display in public of our more personal and private sentiments. For while it had been tacitly understood by everyone that this was an occasion on which one proclaimed unashamedly and with total directness on behalf of life and against its destruction, no one could have judged before and quite what would be the effects of this collective throwing off of inhibition.

Thousands of intimate possessions, photographs of lovers and children, items of clothing, toys, poems and pictures were sacrificed in the course of the day to the nine-mile perimeter of wire fencing that surrounds the base. Its whole circumference was bodily 'embraced' by a human chain of demonstrators; large sections of it were knitted up with miles of wool; it was bedecked with streamers; it was hung with improvised wreaths and peace symbols made of bracken and grass and anything that came to hand.

As dusk fell, demonstrators moved towards the main gates leaving a ring of candles eerily lighting the day's contrivances - a fragile fringe of tributes to life in stark contrast to the substantiality of the mounds of earth and concrete construction that loomed behind it. At the gates themselves a ceremony was created ex nihilo, a relentless denunciation of war, that had all the solemnity of an ancient ritual backed by long years of tradition. Flanked by banks of candles embedded in the grass, and holding more brands and candles aloft, we chanted repeatedly and monotonously the most basic themes of peace and disarmament. Over several hours this litany continued, diversified only by the menacing collective whooping, rising and falling like a siren, that greeted every sign of movement by the personnel inside the base.

Here were women in their thousands warning the world off from the war-mongers at the door, and darkly hinting to the war-mongers themselves that there are wiles and stratagems that can undo the best laid plans of men.

But that the press and public should have responded to this remarkable dialectic of strength and gentleness, enigmatic imagery and blatant emotionality, is one thing. That it had so immediate and strong an impact in the political realm is another - and an effect all the more paradoxical given its very deliberate refusal to address itself to politics or to make use of standard political forms. It was a demonstration without leaders, without orders and almost without organisation. Above all, it was a demonstration free of the politicking normal on such occasions - (the one attempt at a shout of 'Thatcher out!' was snuffed out in a tirade of abuse against 'macho-
sloganising). That it should nonetheless have made itself so insistent politically must therefore surely go to confound those critics who are so kind as to approve the good intentions of the peace movement but profess themselves in despair over its 'apolitical' character. For just as out of our supposed weakness has come forth strength, so out of the a-political has come the political (and with it yet one more nail in the coffin of the old metaphysical principle that from like causes like effects!).

'Nor can it be dismissed as a protest of a radical minority. There were just too many respectable women there, and they far outnumbered the strident, loud-mouthed feminists.'

**DAILY EXPRESS**

In explaining the achievement of Greenham Common some may want to put the emphasis on the fact that it was so exclusively female, meaning by this that women, by virtue of their good behaviour (less violent, more patient, etc.) and their womanly interests (i.e. in children, not politics), are able to elicit these solid, respectable bourgeois sympathies that the more aggressive and disreputable style of male protest only serves to alienate. There may be an element of truth in this, but it does not do justice to the complexity of feelings that animated the demonstration (and which, of course, included resistance to any straightforward identification of ourselves with standard female roles and values even as we tactically exploited them). Nor, to my mind, can it explain the seriousness with which it has been taken. A better explanation of its success may lie in its absolute refusal to compromise with the language of the opposition. To disdain to talk of anything but life, love and peace is to create a language fortress against which the other 'realist' language of 'deterrence', 'balance of forces', 'parity' and 'multilateralism' can only rail in vain, and from which in the end it is bound to retire baffled and morally defeated. And today in Britain we have a very high level of moral repugnance to nuclear weapons combined with a very high degree of awareness of how much in fact is dangerous fantasy that is argued for in the name of sober 'realism'. In pointing the finger so directly at the combined obscenity and absurdity of the arms race and its latest spirals, the women of Greenham Common expressed the feelings and frustrations of a much wider public increasingly disaffected with what is going on in the name of its protection, and ever more doubtful of the sanity of those responsible for it.

It is, of course, too soon to pronounce definitively on the significance of Greenham Common (how, in any case, does one assess historical significance?). But this at least, I think, one can say of it already, that it has ensured that the Womens Peace Camps will become the main focus of anti-Cruise activity over the coming year, and the site of increasingly massive exercises in non-violent direct action. Thanks primarily to those who are still huddled in their squallid settlements around the gates of the bases up and down the country, and secondarily to those who went to Greenham Common in December to support and celebrate their initiative, a new style of protest, powerful, resilient and unpredictable in its consequences, has been put on the map of British politics. Firmly established now for further use in the future, it is something which all of us, women and men, who are committed to the struggle against militarism, may find ourselves increasingly involved in as we move into the Eighties.

**Kate Soper**

**Reply to Kate**

Kate Soper offers a vivid description of the moving and powerful demonstration by thousands of women at Greenham Common on 12 December. She portrays the significance of the demonstration for those who observed it and - more so - for those of us who participated. And she points to the impact of the women's action on Parliament in this country.

The focus of her piece lies in the effect the women's action has had upon the course of negotiations over the deployment of Cruise Missiles in this country. It is surely vital, however, for women to comment on the images of themselves that were exploited at Greenham. Women presented themselves as wives and mothers. We drew, in the protest, on qualities which have traditionally been ascribed to women, often by men: nurturance, pacificism, on concern with morality, peace and life as against war and death. Kate says that there was resistance to the identification of women with standard female roles. Nonetheless without in any way denigrating the demonstration as an immensely powerful portrayal of the peace movement; indeed, at the moment, a leading
source of inspiration for it, we must recognise that
the images of women we presented lent encouragement
to some of the press reports that appeared during the
following week. Some of them - for example those in
the Daily Express of 13 December - exhibited the fear
of people in the centres of political power in this
country of the influence of the resistance movement.
The Daily Express needed to portray the women as 'the
unwitting dupes of Russian propaganda'. However,
many newspapers quoted women demonstrators themselves.
One newspaper reported a woman saying: 'I am not a
fanatical women's libber or a horny professional
demonstrator'. Though there was some divergence in
the press' emphasis on the extent to which the women
were the 'dupes' of Russian propaganda, the papers
unanimously attached importance to the fact that most
of the women were 'ordinary' women and not feminists,
lesbians and 'professional demonstrators'. And we
must admit that these reports were not contradicted
by the demonstration itself.

Of course this is one type of political propaganda.
The peace movement would gain nothing from a demonstra-
tion that projected itself as run by 'burly lesbians' (the Sun's characterisation of a minority
of the women there) or indeed by feminists and
lesbians. But we must remember this. Though concerned with the issue of Cruise Missiles, the demonstra-
tion was a women's action. Sunday's activity presented an image of women as 'normally' wives and
mothers, and only extraordinarily feminists, lesbians, political activists. We must not allow ourselves, in
our concern for the moral aspects of peace and not
war, to be taken in by these images of ourselves. Feminists, lesbians, etc. are not just eccentric out-
casts working outside 'real' politics in Britain.
Rather, feminists, recently, have done much to
challenge the assumption that women's role is
'naturally' that of wife and mother. And it is
consistent with feminist thinking that women should not stop at righteous moral indignation over the
horrors of nuclear weaponry, but rather that they
should arrive at a cogent reasoned perspective on
militarism and 'defence' policy. There is a danger
that women, in their proper concern with the horrors
of nuclear weaponry, will concur with the opposition's
desire to 'keep them in their proper place' as wives
and mothers. We must not allow ourselves to be
misled into believing that our only power at the
present time lies in projecting ourselves as nurtur-
ant and passive. We have other skills and aptitudes.
I don't believe that any of this detracts from the
power of the demonstrations at Greenham Common. On
the contrary, only by critically learning from our
past can we progress in the future.

Alison Assiter

Reply to Alison

My piece, product as it was of immediate post-
Greenham euphoria and written primarily as a news
item, was in many respects too uncritical. Alison's
comment is a needed corrective to it. Yet I think
there is more involved here than a balancing of
accounts and that our viewpoints are not entirely
complementary.

This relates in part to a difference in impressions
we received of the events at Greenham. Alison claims
that nothing of what she says 'detracts from the
power of the demonstration'. Yet its power in my
view would have been lessened had we gone simply as
'wives and mothers' or connived as straightforwardly
with anti-feminist sentiment as Alison suggests we
did. I felt that the majority of women at Greenham
were alert to the contradictory aspects of what they
were doing, and experienced quite complex feelings
regarding it. Many, who like myself are mothers, felt, I think, that this was an occasion on which to
draw attention to that side of their lives, and
resented the idea that they should be branded trait-
ors to feminism for expressing themselves in that
capacity. At the same time, we were wary about the
conclusions that might be drawn from it.
Of course, such nuanced feelings do not make good headlines, and in the eyes of the press we had to be either 'ordinary' women or feminists. The problem that this raises, as Alison herself more or less acknowledges, is to know how women should conduct themselves if they are not to 'lend' themselves to the manipulations of Fleet Street - unless it be by staying home 'in their proper place' quietly fretting about the bomb. It is the classic move of our media to attempt to undermine the solidarity of any massive display of resistance to State policy by emphasising what divisions it can find within its ranks.

Such difference in subjective impressions apart, however, there are one or two points where I disagree with the principle of Alison's remarks. I would want to challenge the predominant viewpoint of our culture that sees nurturing and childcare as an essentially 'passive' dimension of human existence - and this bears on what it was we thought we were doing at Greenham. I did not think I was representing myself in some 'natural' role as mother nor even simply the larger, and at the present time largely female, constituency of those who look after children. I saw myself as putting the point to society at large and on behalf of all of us, that there is something deeply wrong about a culture that sees itself as passive when most energetically bent on the production and preservation of life. For me, part of the function and originality of the demonstration was that it made the link so clearly between the demand for nuclear disarmament and the demand that we rethink that devaluation of the activities of child-raising. The point was to bring out the immensity of the contradiction between having nuclear weapons and all the day-to-day care that men and women, adults and children, bestow on each other.

Let me say, however, that I quite agree with Alison that moral repugnance is not in itself enough. It has to be made to work for us as part and parcel of a coherent and rational policy for achieving disarmament. What worries me, however (and more now than it did in December when the demarcation line between separatist and non-separatist initiatives was less firmly drawn and causing less abrasion in the peace movement) is that many women may come to see the politics of nuclear disarmament as exhausted in the politics of radical feminism. For that could prove to be not so much the construction of a cogent programme for peace as an evasion of it. I am worried, too, by the fact that some of the dafter (not to say more offensive) ideas currently circulating - for example, that it was some emphatic 'womanly' force that drew us to Greenham and not our own politics - are being voiced not so much by the ordinary wives and mothers, but by the self-professed 'feminists'.

Kate Soper