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FINDING THE RIGHT TRANSLATION FOR "PEACE" IN A LAND OF WAR

ABSTRACT

This article explores the capture of the notion of "protection" by the State and its institutions – police, army, and the law – and its weaponization by carceral feminism. It means first studying how the terms "war" and "peace" have been weaponized by imperialism and the State, then addressing antiracist, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist and feminist decolonial politics of protection. In other words, how discourses about war and peace, and their implementations, have been deployed to justify a protection that rests on the criminalization and incarceration of those who dissent, on military interventions, creation of armed militia, legitimation of police violence, militarization of public space, and surveillance.

KEYWORDS

feminism, state,
surveillance,
decolonialism

To address the topic "The Politics of Translation: Translation, Nation, Gender," I will make remarks about the notion of "protection," its capture by the State and its institutions of the police, army, and the law, as well as its weaponization by carceral feminism.¹ This means exploring how the terms "war" and "peace" have been weaponized by imperialism and the State, before addressing antiracist, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist and feminist decolonial politics of protection. In other words, how discourses about war and peace, and their implementations, have been deployed to justify a protection that rests on criminalization, incarceration, military interventions, creation of armed militia, legitimation of police violence, militarization of public space, and surveillance. Who is protected by the State and who is not? How does the law protect the State and its institutions from being challenged about systemic racial and sexist violence? What kind of protection do the oppressed, the subalterns,

1 On carceral feminism, used as a critical term targeting such feminism that preaches increased prison sentences for gender violence as a solution, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carceral_feminism (editor's note).



the black, indigenous and brown communities, migrants, refugees imagine and practice against systemic racial and sexist violence? Rethinking protection is made urgent by, on the one hand, the increasing gap between the multiplication of laws and measures taken by the State and international institutions to protect children, women, "nature," and the capitalist economy of extraction and exhaustion that is fabricating, literally, an irrespirable and uninhabitable planet for the many, and, on the other, the role of carceral feminism in the multiplication of criminalizing laws in the name of protecting the vulnerable.

What could explain the growing gap between technological and scientific progress, or the state of feminism's instrumentalization of protection? Was it a question of translation? Of words misused? Or, the capture by racial capitalism of what challenges its regime of extraction, exploitation and dispossession? I do not think it is a question of translation, nor of the polysemy of words but rather, as many have shown, that depending on the position we take, we mean different things even though the same words are used. I am not saying anything new, what interests me here is how do deploy a constant pedagogy on vocabulary, why we need to engage in a repetitive pedagogy of clarification because the meaning of words is either distorted or commodified. The process through which capitalism appropriates and commodifies words of struggle has accelerated, and I have noticed—I am speaking here from my experience as an activist especially in the last decade—confusion, a sense of powerlessness, and a repeated demand for a new vocabulary. Though I understood that demand, I wonder why we thought that *that* new vocabulary would escape the avidity of neoliberal capitalism which, to survive, needs to colonize everything: words, images, sounds, and human and non-human experiences. Translation would then be clarification and practice, whose content must be specified in relation to the context.

In what sense am I using the term protection? There is the State protection of the interests of private property, patriarchy, corporations, and racial capitalism. There are the protections won by the struggles of social and political movements and unions to hinder brute exploitation, theft, censorship, and repression, the rights that corporations and States either seek to slow down or strike down. There is community protection, the practices developed by communities (indigenous, black, brown, BIPOC² women, poor) to protect their land, their memories, their knowledge, from being stolen, expropriated, erased. There is the protection that a newborn needs to survive, the protection offered to the elderly, the non-valid, the wounded. There is the armed protection to defend the land, the forest, the rivers, from being stolen, contaminated, exploited, destroyed. Here, I will be speaking of protection as understood by the State and capitalism, and by carceral feminism, before presenting an antiracist decolonial feminist politics of protection. I will not discuss these questions from an academic point of view, from philosophy or psychology of protection – although I consider them important, indeed, they nourish my thinking – but

2 BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (editor's note).

from the discussions I have had as an activist. When I was discussing my book *A Feminist Theory of Violence. A Decolonial Perspective* (Vergès 2022), the idea that the term “protection” could be saved from its contamination by patriarchy, racism, and imperialism was seen as impossible. I argued that there was no reason to leave the notion of “protection” in the hands of carceral feminism and imperialism.

There is a long history of organizing protection from enslavement, racism, sexism, exploitation, and dispossession, with the deployment of a great diversity of weapons: escape, marooning,³ armed defense, using liberal laws against those who voted for them, going underground, building refuges and sanctuaries, strikes, writing, and publishing. But as I said above, the multiple assaults on the conditions of living on the planet have made the question of protection and of its translation into a vocabulary of refusal, struggle, and confrontation with power more urgent.

Protection as a state of permanent war

In the state of permanent war in which we live, a state that has never been the exception for the peoples in the Global South, protection is not a universal right. Despite being framed as such by international agreements, protection must be fought for. By saying “we,” I mean all those who have been targeted by racism, extraction, violence, and dispossession. The modern world did not invent war but made it inseparable from its conception of peace, commerce, and profit. The slave trade was war being waged against Africans, colonization was war against indigenous peoples, exploitation is war, extraction is war. War is understood here as the ways in which extraction, exploitation, and Western national economic growth and political domination are ensured. War is not just bombing and shooting but economic, commercial, industrial war, ecocide, police violence, the politics that legitimate murder and premature death. I take war as a central question, we need to look at what causes war, what historical and historical-economic conditions give rise to it, what is called “peace” in that world order and hence who, in that world, deserves to be protected from harm. In that context, a better translation for peace should be “ceasefire.” Peace is the short interlude between two wars, or the indication that war here is being displaced over there. Peace is another word for rules of domination.

In Europe, a continent where peace, we are told, not only was inseparable from its making but also had naturally prevailed for decades, two events fully brought back a problem of translation. The first one was in 2021 when thousands of refugees were caught in a “no-human” land on the Belarus-Poland border by the armies of both countries. Women and men of all ages and stages of validity, children and babies were doused in ice water by the Polish army, beaten

³ *Marooning* is the word used to describe the act of fleeing the slave plantation. It is now used in the Caribbean and the islands of the Indian Ocean to describe the construction of autonomy and withdrawing from the coloniality of power.

by Belarus police, left without food, water, and housing, chased and hounded into the forests, all in sub-zero temperatures. Their presence was weaponized by both governments, they were transformed into a mass of bodies, without identities, emotions, needs and desires. Many lost their lives, their corpses left to animals when they were not found and buried by Poles who had organized solidarity. Solidarity was criminalized, as it had already been elsewhere. The Polish government accused Belarus of practicing “hybrid warfare” by pushing migrants towards the European bloc’s borders in an attempt to “destabilize” it. The European Community took up the expression, expressed its support for the far-right Polish government and financed the construction of a 186 km wall between both countries (Euronews, 2022).⁴ Though reports in February 2023 continued to denounce pushbacks of refugees at that border, the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armies erased the brutal abandonment and killing of brown and black refugees.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, peace, we were told, which had long reigned in Europe, was shattered. That idea, deeply anchored in Western Europe, erased already in Europe the military dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974), facilitated by British imperialism, the fascist dictatorship in Portugal (1933-1974), and the fascist Francoist dictatorship in Spain (1939-1978), and the war in Yugoslavia (1991-1999). But importantly, it rested on the negation of the fact that the price of European “peace” had been bought through constant, incessant, and interminable wars, either waged by European armies, by proxy armies, or provoked and encouraged by Western imperialism in the Global South. When, in 2012, the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, it was said to be a “*fitting endorsement of the extent to which Europeans have turned their backs on violence and conflict in their relations with each other. In the world, they have turned their backs on centuries of colonialism and wars of conquest*” (SciencesPo, 2022). Wars were then being openly waged in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and politics of State repression and murder were launched by Israel in Palestine, in Pakistan, Lebanon, Burundi, and many other parts of the planet. In Europe, though anti-migrant and anti-refugee politics were by that time regularly denounced, European institutions lamented that the “*escalating migration crisis is testing the European Union’s commitment to human rights and open borders*” (OECD, 2014; Park, 2015).

Despite systemic war, Europe remains the name for peace, as the argument for a series of conferences in 2023 at the Collège de France (Paris) made explicit:

It is common to consider the political idea of Europe as inseparable from that of peace. This age-old project of pursuing a peaceful European (and then world) order, notably through law, should interest us at a time when the discourse of Europe as a power is asserting itself in a context of rebalancing of powers in the world and when questions of security and defense are regularly invited into European debates, notably in France.

4 See also: HumanRightsWatch, 2022; Valcárcel, 2022; ECRE, 2022.

Through their history, we will unroll a ‘red thread’ that links the ideals of the Enlightenment to those of the European Union, through the European Concert of the 19th century and the League of Nations, despite the wars that have regularly upset the continent. We will see how the idea of peace (as a goal and value) shaped the idea of a politically unified Europe, long before the construction of Europe and even before the era of nation-states. (Ghervas, 2023)

The fact that a sentence such as “*The idea of peace (as a goal and value) shaped the idea of a politically unified Europe, long before the construction of Europe and even before the era of nation-states*” could be uttered in 2023 says a lot. It goes further. Peace is not simply ceasefire and war a permanent state, but both are racialized, as we observed in the differential treatment of refugees at the Poland/Ukraine border.⁵ Reports showed that European States and societies mobilized very quickly to house Ukrainian refugees, offering housing, jobs, education, social services while black, brown and Roma refugees were stopped at the border with Poland, denied rights, and profiled. “*If you give a lift to a refugee at the Ukrainian border you are a hero. If you do it at the Belarus border you are a smuggler and could end up in jail for eight years,*” said Natalia Gebert, founder and CEO of Dom Otwarty, a Polish NGO that helped refugees in 2022 (Euronews, 2022). While Ukrainians enjoyed more lenient entry requirements, easier travel within the EU, and free public transportation and phone services, could enter Slovakia and Poland without papers, non-white refugees encountered hostility and racism. Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, who described migration as a “poison” in 2016 targeting Syrian refugees, declared that Ukrainian would be welcomed as “friends” (Esposito, 2022).

Revolutionary feminists, leftist organizations, anti-colonialists, and anti-imperialist Marxists have written on war as colonial aggression and as the protection of the interests of the weapons industry, extractivism, dispossession, imperialism, and exploitation. As Rosa Luxemburg has written, war is “a competitive struggle amongst fully mature capitalisms for world domination, for the exploitation of the remaining zones of the world not yet capitalistic” (Luxemburg, 1915). The last ten years the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, the armed order and chaos in Myanmar, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Horn of Africa, Sudan, the Sahel region, Lebanon, Yemen, the Israeli colonial occupation of Palestine with its daily violation of human rights, showed how much the idea of peace has been weaponized and emptied of any kind of meaning related to peaceable, bloodless social organization.

In a 1911 text written by Rosa Luxemburg, I happened to stumble upon her notion of “armed peace” which I found illuminating for clarifying the distinction between peace as war by other means and peace as living in peacefulness (Luxemburg, 1911). In “Peace Utopias,” Luxemburg discusses the difference between peace as “partial limitation of armaments” and peace as the end of capitalism which means the end of “militarism in both its forms – as war and as

5 See: AIDA, 2023; Ratecka, 2022; Lacy & van Houtum, 2022; Limbong, 2022.

armed peace" since militarism "is a legitimate child, a logical result of capitalism, which can only be overcome with the destruction of capitalism" (Luxemburg, 1911). She adds, "A little order and peace" is, therefore, just as impossible, just as much a petty-bourgeois Utopia, with regard to the capitalist world market as to world politics, and with regard to the limitation of crises as to the limitation of armaments" (Luxemburg, 1911). Following her remark, I propose that the state of permanent war has two forms: war with the sound and use of bombs, chemical weapons, rape, torture, tanks, and contamination of land, rivers and humans and nonhuman species by the afterlives of war, censorship, dispossession, destruction, and armed peace with drones, surveillance, criminalization of dissent, chemical pollution, dispossession, exploitation, extraction. Under armed peace, there is a form of order, the regime can claim to guarantee harmony and propriety. Today, it is even possible to hide the physical presence of the police thanks to other forms of surveillance and absorption of rules of discipline by the population. In some states, hiding violence has been perfected. In the United Arab Emirates, the motto of the State "order and harmony" conceals censorship and violence. There and elsewhere, surveillance capitalism has perfected through new technologies, the accumulation of personal data, and predictive algorithms have made the politics of armed race even more powerful but weapons still kill. For decades now, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has been monitoring the ceaseless increase of arms production and of their sophistication, an industry that the war in Ukraine has boosted.

Protection and Carceral Feminism

All over the world, women are disproportionately affected by systemic, gender-based and sexual violence, by the lack of access to land, by discrimination and exploitation in the labor market. Every day in the world, on average, at least 137 women are killed by a man known to them, over a third by a current or ex-husband or partner. The analysis of gender-based and sexual violence cannot be dissociated from an analysis of the profound transformations that have produced the world we live in today: acute inequality, wealth concentrated in the hands of the very few, the ever-faster destruction of living conditions, and politics of murder and devastation. Separating the situation of women from a global context of the naturalization of violence perpetuates a divide that benefits patriarchy and capitalism, the question becoming that of identifying and punishing "violent men," and naturalizing the violence of the few without dismantling the structures that generate abominable violence.

Based on notions of dangerousness and security, carceral feminism is an ideology that calls for courts to judge more severely and to hand down longer prison sentences, or for an increase in measures of surveillance and control. Feminist protection from systemic violence adopts a binary female victim/male perpetrator approach, in which the role of protector is entrusted to the male, rapist State, femicides being "the ultimate expression of a continuum of power which begins with the pervasiveness of social and economic inequalities,

sexual harassment, sexual violence, and the sexist representations that structure the social imagination and public space” (Dorlin, 2019). This politics of protection has become an enormous, militarized business where experts boast their products’ performance and their surveillance tools’ ability to detect “abnormal or suspect” behavior: a person who stumbles, a pickpocket who can be tracked from one camera to another in a shop or town. Ignoring the impact of these technologies of surveillance and control, which are mainly dominated by white heteronormative males, simply perpetuates the chronic violence that goes with these measures. Combatting violence against women without taking into account the militarization of protection, the construction of dangerous classes and races, legitimizing recourse to evermore surveillance and control by private companies subcontracted by the State, or by the State itself, is to be complicit in the prevalence of violence as protection. Carceral feminism is asking for widespread armed peace where non-white, working class men are automatically suspicious, where racially and class-based segregated public space is advocated in the name of the protection of women and girls. Appealing to the criminal justice system, and thus encouraging detention, is to perpetuate “the idea that prisons are necessary to democracy and that they are a major part of the solution to social problems” (Davis, 2005: 65).

Peace as living in peacefulness on the planet

In December 2018, in Mantes la Jolie, a working-class neighborhood near Paris, where many families of migrant origins live, the French police forced young Arab and Black schoolboys to kneel in rows in silence for hours, their hands behind their heads or backs, eyes down, their bookbags on their backs. Their mothers immediately organized as the “151 Mothers and Women of Mantes-la-Jolie and Mantois” declaring: “We, mothers of the projects, mothers of the neighborhoods, mothers of the kneeling children of Mantes-la-Jolie, we no longer accept this state of permanent injustice. We want only one thing: Peace.” Peace is peacefulness, seeking to resolve conflicts away from turning to the police and the prison. It means bringing disorder to an order that brings destructive chaos.

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Fransoaz Veržes

Pronalaženje pravog prevoda za „mir“ u zemlji rata

Apstrakt

Ovaj članak istražuje prisvajanje pojma „zaštite“ od strane države i njenih institucija – policije, vojske i zakona – i njegovo oružavanje kroz karceralni feminizam. To znači da je najpre potrebno proučiti kako su pojmovi „rat“ i „mir“ bili oružani od strane imperijalizma i države, a zatim se osvrnuti na antirasističke, antipatrijarhalne, antiimperijalističke i feminističke dekolonijalne politike zaštite. Drugim rečima, kako su diskursi o ratu i miru i njihova sprovođenja korišćeni da bi se opravdala zaštita koja se zasniva na kriminalizaciji i zatvaranju onih koji se protive, na vojnim intervencijama, stvaranju naoružanih milicija, legitimizaciji policijskog nasilja, militarizaciji javnog prostora i nadzoru.

Ključne reči: feminizam, država, nadzor, dekolonijalizam

