

Cynthia Enloe

*The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy*  
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*Reviewed by Amy R. Baehr, 2018*

**Amy R. Baehr** is a professor of philosophy at Hofstra University. Her work on feminism and liberalism has appeared in journals including *Law and Philosophy*, *Ethics*, *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, and *Hypatia*; and in anthologies including *The Philosophy of Rawls: A Collection of Essays* (ed. Henry Richardson), *Feminist Interpretations of John Rawls* (ed. Ruth Abbey), and *The Original Position* (ed. Timothy Hinton). She is editor of *Varieties of Feminist Liberalism* and author of "Liberal Feminism" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). She is currently working with Asha Bhandary on an edited volume, *Caring for Liberalism: Dependency and Political Theory*.

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*The Big Push* is the most recent addition to the impressive body of feminist work by Cynthia Enloe on gender and national and international politics. It's a short book, but it makes its own distinctive contribution. Readers may want to read it against the backdrop of Enloe's larger oeuvre dedicated to exploring politics as if women matter, and taking women seriously as actors on the national and international scene. One might begin with the celebrated *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1990, updated 2014), proceeding then to *Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises as If Women Mattered* (2013), *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (2004), and *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000).

Some of *The Big Push's* chapters stand on their own as essays, but they are profitably read as a group. A main concern of Enloe's is that although it is important to celebrate the formidable successes of the women's movement (which Enloe understands as a transnational movement opposing patriarchy), it is equally important to recognize that those successes were not inevitable (48). They were the result of the vision, collaboration, bravery, and hard work of feminist activists whose stories she is interested in telling. Women in New Zealand "won the right to vote;" "Chinese women won the right to divorce" (160); anticolonial Algerian feminists resisted the "re-entrenchment of men's domination" in the family and in public affairs; "Rwandan women won the right to inherit their husbands' property;" "domestic workers successfully lobbied the International Labor Organization to declare that paid domestic workers had labor rights" (161). This list of feminist accomplishments is just the tip of an iceberg, of course. And enforcement of these rights remains an ongoing challenge. But Enloe encourages us to always acknowledge the feminist activism we have to thank for such achievements.

This message is particularly important to take into the classroom. Philosophers are not trained in history, let alone the history of feminist activism. All too often we face students who are repelled

by activism--by its boisterousness, its irreverence. But these same students often endorse states of affairs activism has brought about. We would do well as feminist philosophy teachers to be able to tell the story about how women's lives have been transformed for the better by activists, and not by some inevitable march of progress. We should be able to tell the story of the movement for African American civil rights (which inspired the women's movement), as well as the story of the labor movement (the folks who brought you the weekend!). We must not give in to "the sanguine notion that time itself creates positive change" (48). As Enloe suggests, understanding that beneficial change is the result of human effort just might lead to more of it! This is a key concern of Enloe's: to encourage readers to take the next steps necessary to eradicate patriarchy.

The awareness that feminist successes are "human-made" must be matched, Enloe believes, by an awareness that patriarchy itself is "human-made" (160). That it is human-made is why it is "vulnerable to challenge" (160). I couldn't help but think of Marx when I read this passage. How empowering to recognize that oppressive arrangements are someone's doing! What's done can be undone. Enloe explains: "It is a sign of supposed worldly maturity" to think that patriarchy is "an inevitable element of the human condition," and supposedly a sign of naïveté to think that it can be "effectively uprooted" (160). But Enloe will have none of that. On Enloe's telling, patriarchy is sustained by "deliberate actions by specific individuals who are seeking to protect their own interests or the interests of the institutions they serve." The work of feminists is to hold "accountable all sorts of decision-makers for their choices--including their choosing neglect, denial, and inaction" (119).

To challenge and ultimately uproot patriarchy, we need to know how it works. Enloe tells us that patriarchy changes and adapts in the face of feminist successes; it updates itself. So feminist activists must vigilantly exercise what Enloe calls "feminist curiosity;" they must do "feminist detective work" (147) to find the changing manifestations of patriarchy, many of which will be "local" (140). As patriarchy changes, so women's movements have to as well (21). This feminist "sleuthing" has been accompanied by the crafting of "new feminist concepts" (167, see also 127 and 142). New feminist concepts enable us to pull back the blinders and mount a challenge. To illustrate the power of concepts, Enloe recounts the first time she heard the expression "sexual harassment" (126) (and lists a number of other concepts feminists have introduced, including "domestic violence" and the "feminization of poverty" [127]). It was a revelation to finally have a label for what many women were experiencing--and for one way that patriarchy works--as Enloe explains, and being able to name sexual harassment as a form of power led to further questions: "We are still trying to understand how patriarchal power works and the masks the wielders of it don to escape accountability" (127).

Parts of *The Big Push* are intellectual memoir. Younger scholars especially, who were not there during the early years of second-wave feminist scholarship, may find these parts of the book particularly interesting. Enloe explains that at least part of her family "sailed to the New World in the 1630s" (113); she describes her privileged upbringing on racially segregated Long Island of the 1940s and 1950s, and her education at the all-women Connecticut College. Despite the many accomplished women professors she studied with as an undergraduate, Enloe learned next to nothing about women. In graduate school, she tells us, she didn't notice the lack of women on the faculty, nor did she notice the lack of attention to gender in the graduate curriculum. In the

first years after finishing her PhD, Enloe focused on comparative politics, "studying upheavals" in east and southeast Asia--"exploring the workings of racism and ethnocentrism" (124)--without being at all "curious about women participants in, or the gendered ideologies propelling, either revolutions or nationalist movements" (123). By the 1980s, Enloe had joined the growing ranks of feminist academics, exercising feminist curiosity, doing feminist detective work to explore the gendered dimensions of politics both national and international. This autobiographical material is part of a story--being told by others as well--about how feminist activists brought the serious study of women to the academy. This is yet another way to not give in to "the sanguine notion that time itself creates positive change" (48).

Of particular interest to Enloe is what she calls "militarization," a process that, on her telling, is inescapably connected to "ideas about femininities and masculinities" (128). She recalls, for example, that in *Does Khaki Become You?* (1983) she explores the specific roles women play in military strategy, and the particular perspectives of diverse women on international politics (129). In writing *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, she explains, "I wanted to make visible women surviving on the margins of international politics. By giving them the attention they were due, myriad forms of gendered power used to shape the international political system could be revealed" (130).

As a philosopher, I found myself wanting a more precise account of what Enloe takes patriarchy to be; after all, exposing and challenging patriarchy is the book's main aim. To be sure, we are told that "patriarchal systems" are "dynamic webs of beliefs, values, and relationships" (21) that privilege "particular forms of masculinity over despised masculinities and over all forms of femininity" (22). But I would have preferred more meat on those bones. Enloe provides many examples of patriarchal beliefs, patriarchal values and relationships, and the privileging of masculinity over femininity. But some of the examples left me worried that *patriarchy* can become a mere epithet, a name for whatever we don't like. For instance, Enloe tells us that the "assumption that the new is always liberating" is "patriarchal" (160); she asserts that it's patriarchal to "prioritize family over all other sorts of commitment" (18); and she claims that authoritarianism is patriarchal (20). It seems clear that each of these could be deployed in patriarchal ways, but I'd need more argumentation to be persuaded that each of these is patriarchal.

Another example of patriarchal thinking Enloe offers is the idea that "different races are naturally ranked in a hierarchy" (17). My tendency would be to say that to think that there is a natural racial hierarchy is racist, not patriarchal; and to point out that, in fact, feminism hasn't inoculated people against racism. There may be rhetorical reasons for saying racism is patriarchal--it might increase antiracist commitment among feminists. But doing so seems to gloss over the facts about the role racism has played in women's movements. Enloe seems to be claiming that we do not properly understand patriarchy until we understand that racism is patriarchal. This would imply that women's movements marred by racism have misunderstood their proper aim. This is an interesting and important claim, but Enloe doesn't explore it explicitly or give us reason to accept it.

I also found myself noticing a tension in Enloe's account of how patriarchy endures, and thus of how it can be uprooted. Enloe tells us that patriarchy is sustained by "deliberate actions by

specific individuals who are seeking to protect their own interests or the interests of the institutions they serve" (119). She doesn't qualify this claim; she makes it plain and simple. This makes the sustaining of patriarchy seem transactional--some people benefit from it, they know they do, and when they act to promote their interests they sustain patriarchy. This is, arguably, an empowering way to think about patriarchy. (And as I suggest below, one main aim of the book is to empower activists.) It suggests that people whose interests are not protected by patriarchy should be, quite naturally, opposed to it and willing to do what it takes to uproot it. It gives activists a clear path. But what people in fact take their interests to be is determined, at least in part, by predominant beliefs and values, including those Enloe would call patriarchal. The statement quoted above notwithstanding, Enloe appreciates that patriarchy is not sustained merely by those seeking to promote their self-interest. She tells us that patriarchy is a web of beliefs and values. It is in this context that she recommends feminist "sleuthing" and the creation of new concepts. Sleuthing and the creation of new concepts are not necessary if it is obvious whose interests the system serves. But Enloe doesn't engage in the discussion--which has so dominated feminist philosophy--concerning how we are to understand what women's interests are, given their embrace of beliefs and values entwined with their own marginalization and disadvantage.

It seems to me that a main aim of Enloe's book is to pump up the reader, to motivate the reader to make the big push necessary to eradicate patriarchy. She warns against a kind of pessimism--she calls it feigned "worldly maturity"--that says that patriarchy is a fixed feature of human societies so feminist efforts can only tinker around the edges. Her worry is that such pessimism can take some of the wind out of feminist sails. After reading Enloe's book, and writing up some of my philosophical thoughts about it, I can't shake the feeling that feminist philosophy, though not essentially pessimistic, might sometimes take some of the wind out of feminist sails. In the foregoing two paragraphs, I've called for more attention to the philosophical complexity of the women's movement; I've asked for a clearer definition of *patriarchy* and for some treatment of the issue of women's adaptive preferences. Might it be the case that calls for attention to philosophical complexity like this are examples of feminist scholasticism contemplating how many angels fit on the head of a pin?

The philosopher in me immediately responds to myself by pointing out that a social movement must work with clear concepts, and its aims must be justified--and that's the work of the philosopher. That's the work that made me a philosopher. Philosophers can protect social-movement actors from making conceptual mistakes; they can evaluate the normative claims social movements are making--maybe philosophers can recommend new aims. Are we sure that's right? Being a philosopher reviewing *The Big Push* has made me really want to know what the relationship has actually been between feminist philosophy (scholasticism and all) on the one hand, and feminist activism and feminist gains on the other.