

Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy

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Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy

Ray Acheson

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In 2017, 122 states voted in favour of a treaty to ban nuclear weapons. This vote was monumental, not least because it symbolised the triumph of humanitarian arguments against the existence of nuclear weapons over dominant—and patriarchal—deterrence narratives that have necessitated their existence for over 70 years. This vote demonstrated to nuclear proponents that a significant section of global society no longer bought into the ‘patriarchal notion that violence is strength’ (288). It represented an historic normative shift.

But precipitating normative change is not easy. This is made plain by Ray Acheson in *Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy*, an exploration of the path towards this treaty. Acheson, a ‘feminist, antimilitarist disarmament advocate’, represented the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF) on the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons’ (ICAN) steering committee during the campaign (4). Their book provides an insider’s account of how, why, and by whom the ban was spearheaded. Its chapters take the reader on a journey through the campaign, from its theoretical underpinnings through to the treaty’s creation. And while not written for historians, it points to the historical precedence set by feminist and anticolonial movements in shaping discourse and activism against nuclear weapons.

Acheson’s own activism, and the seeds of the ban treaty, are placed in conversation with the feminist literature of Carol Cohn, Cynthia Enloe and Sara Ruddick. These scholars have demonstrated the entanglement

of patriarchy and militarism, enacted through nuclear weapons. Acheson shows how these entanglements have been strengthened by the historic fetishisation of nuclear weapons as patriarchal objects of pride, power and prosperity. Opponents of nuclear weapons are made to appear emotional or irrational in juxtaposition to rational and legitimate nuclear-armed states. In order to ban the bomb, Acheson and their colleagues were required to smash—or at least expose—the patriarchy.

To do so, ICAN and its individual proponents took ‘lessons from feminist movements, queer politics, and civil rights initiatives’ (107). One such lesson was to challenge *who* can produce knowledge about nuclear weapons. The introduction of survivor testimonies to the campaign was, as Acheson suggests, a game changer. Not only did this precipitate greater engagement with the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, but it also gave space to perspectives different from those held by nuclear-armed or nuclear-supportive states. ICAN’s campaign to ban nuclear weapons was predicated upon the notion that ‘the very act of contesting and challenging dominant narratives helps to ‘splinter’ them, ‘opening up space for change to take place’ (77).

But, similar to social movements of decades past, the ban campaign suffered shortcomings. Notably, Acheson admits that ICAN ‘continues to suffer from white, Western dominance’, especially within the organisation’s permanent staff (142). While some diverse voices were embraced, other activists admitted ‘feeling the burden of not being white’ (143). This is an uncomfortable point that Acheson addresses, but from which they quickly move on.

Despite the campaign’s shortcomings, Acheson contends, it achieved its goal (at least on paper). Acheson shows that, by highlighting the effects of nuclear weapons upon people, those in support of a nuclear weapons ban injected a new discourse into the mainstream. The ‘gaslighting’ and ‘bullying’ of nuclear proponents ultimately proved insufficient to prevent this (215). In fact, Acheson argues that the determination of nuclear-armed and nuclear-supportive states to undermine the efforts of ICAN and others within the United Nations demonstrated just how much was—and remains—at stake.

Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy is, ultimately, ‘the story of individuals working hard to change a well-established norm of political power and international security’ (278). Despite having been written for

an academic audience, it doubles as an uplifting manifesto for activists determined to enact normative change. Amongst the detailed descriptions of international treaty negotiation, Acheson reveals important lessons about humanity, collaboration, persistence and diversity. It also leaves its reader with the pertinent reminder that—irrespective of the efforts of antinuclear activists and their supporters both in this campaign, and earlier ones—the fight is not yet over.

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