

# WOMEN AGAINST FASCISM: NANCY CUNARD AND CHARLOTTE HALDANE

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Following the fruits of the second wave of feminism from the 60s into the 80s, the backlash has set in (cf. Susan Faludi), with texts such as Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* intensifying the reaction. Beyond the women's movement, we are witnesses to a growing sense of intolerance, made manifest in xenophobic attitudes and racist attacks.

In *The Nature of Fascism*, published in 1991, Roger Griffin spends his first chapter dwelling on the "conundrum" of fascism, so termed because of the lack of consensus as to how fascism might be defined. We do not propose to consider the complexities involved here but will make use of Griffin's working definition: "Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism." (Griffin 1991, 26). For our particular purpose, we wish to focus on the concept of palingenesis (from *palin* - again, anew; and *genesis* - creation, birth). Fascism promulgated the idea of rebirth: the movement would bring about "a new national community", one which would draw on, " - where possible, traditions which had supposedly remained uncontaminated by degenerative forces and whose cohesion was assured by new institutions, organisations and practices based on a new political hierarchy and a new heroic ethos" (Griffin 1991, 45). Women became conspicuous by their absence within the new phallogentric hierarchy. The new fascist man (*homo fascistus*) would be intent on sacrificing himself to the higher needs of the nation.

In *Male Fantasies* Klaus Theweleit drew on case-studies produced on a number of individuals who played an active part in German proto-fascism. Through access to memoirs, diaries and letters of several members of the *Freikorps* (one of whom, Höss, was to become commandant of Auschwitz) and to the literary expression of 'soldierly nationalism' as expressed in the work of Ernst Junger and Goebbels's novel *Michael*, he noted the presence of a particular syndrome:

... the process of separation-individuation had been disrupted in childhood, leaving the person trapped in a state of consciousness which precluded a healthy relationship between 'a whole ego and a whole other', so that psychologically speaking they were not yet - fully born. This induced not only an urge to turn their body into a (military) machine so as to tame the chaotic inner world of instincts and emotions but also a radical misogyny or flight from the feminine, manifesting itself in a pathological fear of being engulfed by anything in external reality associated with softness, with dissolution, with the uncontrollable. (qtd. in Griffin 1991,

198)

Theweleit further observes:

The texts of the soldierly males perpetually revolve around the same axes: the *communality of the male society*, non-female creation, rebirth, the rise upward to hardness and tension ... The man is released from a world that is rotten and sinking (from the morass of femaleness): he finally dissolves in battle. (qtd. in Griffin 1991, 198)

The new fascist woman would be freed from emancipation, her domestic and maternal commitments promoted. Neither Cunard nor Haldane could find sympathy for a movement which pursued white macho male bonding, defended 'creative nihilism' and denied women the power increasingly achieved in the West following the rise of the New Woman, independent and assertive, at the end of the nineteenth century. Fascist palingenesis constituted an abortive birth for these two women writers.

Charlotte Haldane's name is absent from most encyclopaedias and guides of literature. She is not even mentioned in the recently published guides to women's literature. Early editions of *Who's Who*, which do mention her husband, J.B.S. Haldane, strangely avoid any reference to Charlotte, yet offer information on his second wife, Helen Spurway. This exclusion seems odd in view of the fact that she was Britain's first woman war correspondent, and moreover wrote three autobiographies, over five novels, and translated from French and German into English.

Charlotte Haldane deconstructs the concept of 'truth'. In her first autobiography, *Russian Newsreel*, published in 1942, just after her second visit to the USSR, she writes that many books have been written about Russia and the authors of these books "claimed to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth [but she does] not believe that any one human being can tell the whole truth about anything" (Haldane 1942, 238). This book, she claims, will simply report on her visit to Russia during the war. Nevertheless, *Russian Newsreel* deliberately leaves out what her readers most wanted to know: why Charlotte Haldane, a committed Marxist, should leave the Communist Party after having "persevered in its service with masochistic devotion" (Haldane 1949, 238). The truth, or rather, her version of it, became the subject of her second autobiography, *Truth Will Out*, published after the war in 1949, when Haldane was fifty-five. Here she explains that members of the Communist Party "must be prepared to sacrifice their personal or professional standards of truth and honour in its cause, and they must be willing (whether cynically or ingenuously) to become its tools, whether for good or evil ends" (Haldane 1949, 306). In both autobiographies, Haldane makes it quite clear that she is not criticising communism as an ideology but Stalinism, and with Stalinism, fascism and capitalism.

Most forms of discourse claim to possess the truth, and deny that this truth is

partial or that it represents particular interests. According to Althusser, it is the various discourses of the ideological state apparatuses that form the subject (Weedon 1987, 28). Although the subject may think she is in control of meaning, or that she is the author of her own subjectivity, she is not. She is constantly being interpellated by the various 'truths' of discourses that impose meanings of gender, race, class, religion, ethics, and so on, upon her. In spite of this, the subject does have some space in which she can resist these various discourses, especially if she has the prior knowledge of alternative discourses which undermine the dominant patriarchal discourses of the Symbolic Order. Subjectivity is a process, not a fixed state, no matter how hard dominant powers try to make it so. The resisters, or re-sisters, to the existing power relations in Europe up to the Second World War, Cunard and Haldane, wrote about their experiences and their convictions, and in doing so consciously formed their own subjectivities.

In 1925, the year that Cunard published her third book of poetry, Edith Sitwell passed the following judgement on her as a poet: "... she can hardly be regarded as a serious poet. Her work at its best is a bad parody of Mr. Eliot, and at its worst is without shape and without meaning."<sup>1</sup> I am not interested here in vindicating Cunard's poetic talent but I would like to focus on the crucial ideas in Sitwell's criticism with a view to understanding Cunard's anti-fascist stance, i.e. the poetry being a bad parody of T.S. Eliot, its lack of "shape" and "meaning", as Sitwell censures.

The title of the volume and one of the poems in Cunard's first published book of poetry *Outlaws* (1921) already reveals Cunard's pull towards what was beyond the established, which would materialise over her life into a rejection of the Symbolic Order. In the poem "Outlaws", Cunard speaks of "a woman that no fear might quell" (Cunard 1921, 7),<sup>2</sup> i.e. the sort of intrepid figure that she was to become. However, as long as she was subject to the poetic paradigm laid down by Eliot, she could only produce "a bad parody" of his writing and not achieve the required 'seriousness', as Sitwell saw it, a satisfactory "shape" and "meaning". There is no doubt that both the signifiers and signifieds of the Sitwell universe were at odds with Cunard's. Already in 1919, the year Cunard separated from her short-term husband, the quintessentially Establishment Sydney Fairbairn, she was possessed of a vision of the potential for liberation enclosed in the African Other, glimpsed through the Sussex dusk:

In the evening  
I lie in a large field and think of Africa  
Teeming with animals, dream of its spaces  
and  
mysteries, ...<sup>3</sup>

This "[thinking]" and "[dreaming]" of a world outside Western "civilization", abundant in a spontaneous species, tantalisingly holding out emptiness and enigma, becomes a metaphor of desire and a promise of fertility in

contrast to the western wasteland.

Into the 20s, then, Cunard begins to forge acts of transgression related to gender, race and class. Her transgression in terms of gender may be viewed semiotically by focusing on her bearing and dress, which came to break with the conventionally feminine. In the Cunard photograph collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, a studio photograph of 1916 shows a twenty-year old Cunard in a tailored, two-tone dress, darker cuffs and buttons tastefully contrasting with the rest. The belt has a discreetly clipped border along each edge. Cunard is wearing a string of pearls at her neck and looking demurely down. The contrast with the photograph taken by Barbara Ker-Seymer around 1930 is striking.<sup>4</sup> Cunard is no longer taking it looking down! She stares penetratingly and with a mouth set with resoluteness. The whole style is transformed: in the 1916 portrait, Cunard was placed against a bourgeois background, serenely perched on a gateleg table as she looked gracefully down at a book. In the Ker-Seymer study, she emerges Amazon-like. Neither hair nor lips are exploited as elements of a conventional feminine sensuality. The web-like net she sports over her bandeau across the upper half of her face contributes towards awarding her with an androgynous appearance (if the absence of hair on the head evokes the conventionally masculine, the total image of the masculine is deconstructed by her kiss curls!). The net is enigmatic, ambiguously emblematic of an emerging, yet hidden, identity, making her black and white, throwing into relief the animal senses: the nostrils, sensitive to smell, and the mouth which could open to devour - or speak a 'savage' discourse. The animal skin which hangs as a backcloth for the portrait, together with the collar on the cape or coat (which hardly shapes feminine contours) reiterate the savage note, as the piece at her throat may too, replacing the classic pearls. Ker-Seymer's photograph dates (c.1930) from the period during which Cunard ran *The Hours Press*, the small publishing venture begun at her home in Normandy in 1928 and subsequently transferred to Paris, where it existed up until 1931. Her fierce determination, then, was not limited to photographic pose but was also reflected in her penetrating the traditionally male domain of publishing at a period when the male stronghold was coming to be contested on the Left Bank; Sylvia Beach is another obvious case in point.

Her years at *The Hours Press* coincide with the period during which she enacted another major transgression, i.e. of colour and culture. It was in 1928 that she met Henry Crowder, in Fascist Italy, the Black American jazz pianist with whom she shared an intimate relationship up until the publication of her ambitious anthology *Negro* in 1934. *Negro* carried writing from a wide variety of serious and specialist sources, mostly Black, which Cunard was anxious to provide a vehicle for. When she produced a leaflet to ask for contributions, she expressed her desire to represent Black reality, making it clear that she did not intend to wax lyrical: "It will be entirely *Documentary*, exclusive of romance or fiction."<sup>5</sup> She also asserted that she was bent on having controversial views represented and on not excluding a wide variety of opinion:

I want outspoken criticism, comment and comparison from the Negro of the present-day civilizations of Europe, America and South America, the West Indies, African Colonies, etc. ... I wish, by [the] aid of coloured people to make it as inclusive as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Cunard's campaigning for Black rights was explosive and caused the definitive breach between her socialite mother and herself, recorded in the latter's essay *Black Man and White Ladyship* (1931). Here the rebellious daughter dwells on "the hysteria caused by a difference of pigmentation" (Cunard 1931, 2), attacking her mother for her prejudice and hypocrisy with regard to colour, class and gender and coming to classify her as "the most conscientious of ostriches and when she comes up again she hopes the onpleasant [sic] thing has disappeared" (Cunard 1931, 6); the emphasis is Cunard's.) Cunard follows the parodic attack on her mother by an exaltation of Blackness: providing a brief history of the oppression suffered by *Afro-Americans*, before alluding to the Scottsboro case, that of nine young Black labourers falsely charged "of attempted 'intimacy' with two white prostitutes" (Cunard 1931, 7), whose freedom she campaigned for. She ends her tirade by drawing her reader's attention to a perception which is central to Haldane, i.e. her awareness of the impossibility of absolute truth. Thus, she challenges her readers at the end of *Black Man and White Ladyship*: "... you must attack the root of all things and see where - if anywhere - lies truth. There are many truths" (Cunard 1931, 11).

Cunard would maintain her defence of Black peoples through her journalistic work when she reported over Abyssinia in 1935 and 1936 for the ANP and Sylvia Pankhurst's *New Times and Ethiopia News*. It was in the context of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia that her anti-Fascist activity began, to be continued intensely both inside Spain and in England during the Spanish Civil War. She got herself to Perpignan at the end of January 1939, as thousands of refugees poured over the border to escape General Franco's troops as they gained ground in Catalonia. She appealed to *The Manchester Guardian* to launch an appeal for funds for the refugees as well as doing as much as she could in a personal capacity. She would be responsible for editing *Authors Take Sides on the Civil War*, the questionnaire submitted to writers and published by *Left Review* in 1937 in which both men and women writers were invited to express their allegiance in relation to the Spanish Civil War and the reason(s) for the choice they had made.<sup>7</sup> Over the 30s, she came to align herself more closely to communism though she is usually seen as a fellow traveller, attached sympathetically rather than intellectually to the cause of egalitarianism. I would say that her connection with communism has been seen somewhat condescendingly and that her commitment was more intellectual than has been claimed. Over 1936 to 1939, then, Cunard crossed the boundaries of class to align herself with the underprivileged. In a poem produced by her in September of 1936 and dated in Valencia, she defined *fascisme* [sic] as "Fédération Assassine au Service du Crime International Section de Mort a l'Espagne" and ended with an appeal to resistance on the part of the people:

Peuple, debout!

No pasarán!<sup>8</sup>

In January of 1937 Cunard was provided with a document in Barcelona which authorised her to travel freely between Barcelona and Valencia; she was identified as being a spinster and of no fixed address. These features were to determine the pattern of her existence for the future: she remained a woman on her own and with a nomadic lifestyle. As the war ended in Spain, she went off to Chile with Pablo Neruda and would go on to visit different parts of South America and travel to the West Indies as well as going back to Spain: ever restless, always with a sense of loss for what might have been (Neruda 1976, 176-80).

Cunard's last belligerent stand against fascism was during World War Two when she returned from Chile to work for the success of the allied war effort. During the Nazi occupation in France, her house in Normandy was raided. Much of the Black African art she had collected was destroyed and a portrait of her by Eugene MacCown (1923), where she is dressed in trousers, a waistcoat, a tie-cravat and sports her father's top hat (i.e., expressing a taking on of the male) was also bayoneted.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, may I draw your attention to the Philip Core portrait of Cunard and Brian Howard: "Nous Gens d'Espagne" (1983).<sup>10</sup> Core gave Cunard a dark cast to her face and she stares into space, as does Howard. They are depicted as dancing together yet they lack any vitality. They appear stunned and exhausted: their embrace is a dance of death. In an article published in 1986, Patricia Clements pointed out the extent to which Cunard's identity had been appropriated by her male contemporaries for their careers: Wyndham Lewis, Michael Arlen and Man Ray.<sup>11</sup> I celebrate the fact that a gay artist, another transgressor, should have devoted his aesthetic energies to reclaiming Cunard for the latter-day outlaws.

Charlotte Haldane's second autobiography *Truth Will Out* begins with a poem which she titles "Seeking" and ends with another, titled "Finding". Her autobiography reads like a Bildungsroman; what she seeks, and eventually finds, is her Self. Her first autobiography, *Russian Newsreel*, which she dedicates to "The Red Army and the Heroic Defenders of Moscow", and most of her second autobiography, are written in a patriarchal - and often rather arrogant - tone of voice. Although an ardent feminist, Haldane's feminism would be described today as liberal feminism. She becomes "one of the lads", and needs to prove to the reader that she is equal to them in both courage, perseverance, and efficiency. As a woman, and living in wartime Europe, there were few subject positions she could take up. She either had to move in a "man's world" and compete with them, or had to occupy the role of femininity laid down by the Symbolic Order. Haldane was aware that fascist ideology constrained women through its excessive familialism and patriotism. The strength of fascism lay in the polarisation of gender and race differences, and in the glorification of violence and masculinity. Communism, as Haldane understood it, promised equal rights for men and women in a classless society, but she did not question the fact that men were held up as the norm. On her first visit to Russia in 1928, she was impressed by what she saw. But on her second visit in 1941, as the first British woman war correspondent, her faith in the system was shattered. Nevertheless, her *Russian Newsreel* is devoid of criticism; it is even devoid of emotion

and opinion, and refrains from discussing the Soviet social, political and economic system in order not to "furnish the Nazis with gratuitous material for anti-Soviet propaganda" (Haldane 1949, 237). After the war, however, she discusses how and why she became involved with communism, why she became an active anti-fascist and she ultimately exposes how totalitarian ideologies, like Stalinism, are founded on false truths and lead to "spiritual selfmutilation" (Haldane 1949, 300).

Charlotte Haldane describes her childhood as "insecure". Her mother was American, her father a German Jew. She both worshipped and hated her father, who she describes as an "alien and unfamiliar person of the masculine sex, who was the controller of [her] destiny" (Haldane 1949, 303). Born and brought up in London, she spent five years in Belgium but returned to England at the age of sixteen. At this age, she describes herself as an atheist and ardent feminist. When she entered her twenties, she became a socialist and a member of the trade union of journalists. Her literary career began in 1926 with the publication of *Man's World*, a scientific dystopia. This was followed by a book exalting motherhood. In 1926 she married the scientist and geneticist J.B.S. Haldane (the brother of the Scottish writer, Naomi Mitchison). In 1928, she and J.B.S. Haldane both visited the USSR and by 1937 had become open supporters of the Communist Party. In that same year, she started writing for the Communist paper, the *Daily Worker*, and disgusted by the apparent fraternisation of the Chamberlain government with the German Nazis and Italian Fascists, and by the Government's policy on Spain, she accepted an offer by the British Politburo to go over to Paris for three months on a top-secret mission: to recruit members for the International Brigade. She writes: "I was proud to belong to the Party and the movement that was dedicated to freedom and liberty under the banners of Marx, Engels and Lenin" (Haldane 1949, 101). In the later months of 1937 she went to Spain herself, and on her return to Britain campaigned for aid for Spain. She was then approached by the women's section of the Comintern to help in the organisation of the International Women's Congress Against War and Fascism. This congress took place in May, 1938, in Marseilles. There she gave talks in German, English and French about the "heroism and stoicism" of the women of Spain. These talks in turn led to an invitation to travel through China, which she did alone, later that same year, also giving speeches, sometimes to audiences of over two thousand people. When she returned from her China trip, her campaign on behalf of Chinese women failed to receive the support she had hoped for. There were other matters of a pressing importance on people's minds. Europe was moving towards another major war.

The unrest in the political sphere mirrored the unrest in Haldane's personal life, especially where her marriage was concerned. On her return from China she considered divorcing her husband, J.B.S. Haldane, but was prohibited from doing so by the British Communist Party who would not tolerate a divorce between two comrades. Then, Hitler and Stalin signed the Nazi-Soviet pact in August, 1939. Although Charlotte Haldane maintained her loyalty to the Party, she was now fully aware that Communists were no longer "expected to be the defenders of liberty, freedom, democracy", but had to "follow the lead of Moscow; blindly, in the sole interests of Soviet power" (Haldane 1949, 181). Following Communist directions, therefore, she became a member of the Labour Group

on the South West St Pancras Borough Council, in January 1940.

In June 1941, Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, and Charlotte Haldane immediately desired to go to Russia as a war correspondent. The responsibility for being the first ever British woman war correspondent must have been great. Indeed, many newspapers turned down her offer to report on the war for them. Eventually, however, she received the appointment from the *Daily Sketch*. The tone of her discourse in her autobiography becomes intensely patriarchal and patriotic:

I was in a state of immense political exaltation. I was wholeheartedly devoted to the cause. I had only one desire, to get to Russia as quickly as possible, and to begin my job of arousing the passionate sympathy of my fellow countrymen for the glorious fighters of the Soviet Union. (Haldane 1949, 194)

Her visit to Russia brought what she described as her “masochistic devotion” to an abrupt end (Haldane 1949, 238). She saw that Stalinist Russia had little to do with Communism as she understood it: there was no freedom of expression, either religious or otherwise; society was hierarchic: a new elitist class was being established by the senior officers of the Red Army and their families. Women certainly had more equal opportunities than they did in most other countries but they had to cope with a double load of work both inside and outside the home. The wives of senior Red Army officers, on the other hand, employed domestic help and did not take up a paid job at all. Both “Stalinism and Hitlerism”, Haldane writes, “have blended into an unholy union of opposites” (Haldane 1949, 326). She dwells especially on two scenes which disturbed her to the quick. One was the sight of a procession of many starving men and women, dressed in rags. Haldane and her companion, Margaret Bourke-White (the American photo-journalist), asked the Russian officer who had accompanied them on an early morning drive for an explanation. He refused to supply them with any information but did state that they were neither refugees nor prisoners of war. The other scene depicted a funeral of a two-year-old child, who lay on its mother’s lap in a cardboard box. The child, Haldane discovered, had died of starvation.

When she returned to Britain, she severed all ties with the Communist Party. This decision brought her inevitable consequences. She not only lost her job, and all her comrade friends, she also fell under the suspicion of MI5 who suspected she was faking her anti-Stalinism. A ‘smearing process’ began and rumour had it that she had been dismissed from the Party because she had become a Trotskyist or that she had left the Party of her own free will because she was embittered at not being able to find a single man in Russia willing to become her lover.

Her divorce from J.B.S. was naturally now granted. Legally described in her passport as ‘Feme Sole’ [sic], she embarked on a period of self analysis from which she emerged a few years later as “I, a Lone Female of no public importance” (Haldane 1949, 327). These words take on a special meaning when compared with her description of professional communists who become Promethean superheroes:



The professional Communist is imbued with self-love, self-assertiveness, a conviction of his personal superiority to his fellow-men and fellow-workers, conceit and vanity above the average. He wants not only to destroy the existing environment, but re-model it in order that it shall become a fitting framework for himself and his activities (Haldane 1949, 293).

No longer desiring to be "one of the lads", Haldane's subjectivity underwent a deep change, and with her new-found individualism, her language became less propagandistic, more emotional. She continued to write fiction and also wrote articles for a women's magazine (which she does not name) on "world and domestic affairs" (Haldane 1949, 267). In 1944 she took over from George Orwell as Talks Producer in the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service and very slowly began to rebuild her life. Her long struggle against fascism and her experience of Stalinism brought her to compare the two and to realise finally that both ideologies demanded a blind devotion from their supporters which would eventually annihilate their individualities. This was too high a price to pay. Charlotte Haldane, like Nancy Cunard, deserves at least a mention together with the more famous women who took a stance against fascism, such as Ethel Mannin, Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson and Rebecca West, to name but a few.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A letter from Edith Sitwell to Allannah Harper, dated 31 December 1925, in Edith Sitwell's correspondence in the Sitwell Family Archive, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (to be referred to as HRHRC from now on), University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to Richard Greene, currently working on an edition of Edith Sitwell's correspondence, for bringing my attention to the letter I have quoted from here.

<sup>2</sup> "Outlaws" is a poem in VII stanzas. The quote is from I.

<sup>3</sup> From the poem "Myself", dated August 1919 at Turks Croft, Sussex. In MS in the Nancy Cunard Archive, HRHRC.

<sup>4</sup> The photograph was taken by B. Ker-Seymer, not Cecil Beaton as has been understood (see the cover of Chisholm's biography of Nancy Cunard.). In the exhibition "A Second Look: Women Photographers from the Collections of the HRHRC", held on the Seventh Floor Gallery of the HRHRC from 22nd March - 25th July 1993, the portrait was attributed to Ker-Seymer. The 1916 portrait may be found in the Nancy Cunard Photograph Collection, HRHRC, Box LF 957: 038: 018n - 115; File 957: 038: 039.

<sup>5</sup> "Documentary" carries a capital "D" and the whole word appears in italics in the original. The Leaflet is in the Nancy Cunard Photograph Collection, HRHRC, Album 253, 957: 038: 595.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cunard has seldom been given recognition for the work she did on *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* as "editor or instigator of [the] project." (Chisholm 1985, 317). In *British Writers of the Thirties* Valentine Cunningham claims that "We [sic] know that some massaging of responses [to the questionnaire set up in *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*] went on" (Cunningham 1988, 28) He also asserts: "The LR compilers did fiddle their results a little," (Cunningham 1988, 438) but provides little in the way of documentary evidence for such affirmations.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Cunard Archive, HRHRC. In a note it was explained that "No pasarán" was the anti-Fascist cry.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Sue Beauman Murphy, Curator of the Art Collection at the HRHRC, for enabling me to see the MacCown portrait in August 1993, when it was not on public display.

<sup>10</sup> The painting is now the property of the HRHRC and is exhibited as "Nancy Cunard and Brian Howard at

Claridge's Ballroom", 1983.

<sup>11</sup> P. Clements, "Transmuting Nancy Cunard", *Dalhousie Review*, Vol.66, nos.1 and 2, 188-214. I am not sure the career chase was the male artists' priority on every count and, if it was, I wonder to what extent it was one-sided.

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