WOMEN AND PROTEST:
CODE PINK AND THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT
The paper explores the political activism of the feminist grassroots organization, Code Pink, the existence and functioning of which is based on giving voice to women who stand against American militarism, and advocate peace and peaceful coexistence around the world. It examines the nature of Code Pinks activism, its relationship with previous administrations, and how it was challenged during the American presidential elections of 2016 that led to Trump’s ascendance to the White House. President Trump’s discourse against United States (US) militarism, gained support among many Code Pink members, who failed to consider the potential for subsequent policy formulation and implementation by the Trump administration, including those of a xenophobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, misogynist, and racist nature (Patel & Levinson-Waldman, 2017). Although the Democrats, during the course of the presidential campaign, went to great lengths in reaching out to social categories often targeted and marginalized by Trump, such as the LBTQI+ community, Mexicans, Hispanics, and Muslims, the Democrats’ preoccupation with these and other social categories resulted in a failure to secure the votes of the majority of White Americans (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). We find the argument that Code Pink acted as a barrier to Trump’s 2016 presidential victory, despite its opposition to the underlying character of “Trump ideology,” unbefitting.

Keywords: Anti-war movement, global community, Iraq, militarized economy, protest, public mobilization

JEL Classification: F5

1. INTRODUCTION
Since December 2002, the American social movement composed of both women and men, known as Code Pink, has represented the voice of Americans opposed to United States (US) militarism, interventionism, and war. Code Pink emerged as a grassroots movement vehemently opposed the 2003 military invasion of Iraq by the US under the administration of former President George W. Bush. For well over a decade, the movement has been distinguished by its strong denunciation of violence and war in other parts of the world – including the US maintaining its military presence in Afghanistan – and has since been an important player within the anti-war movement present in and across the US. The creative acts of public mobilization and resistance have characterized Code Pink, which by playing a rather cheerful and playful rhetoric, have succeeded in gaining increasing attention...
from the public sector (Ortbals & Staudinger, 2013). The group’s campaigns have foremost addressed occasions in which US politicians up to and including those of President Donald Trump’s current administration, gaining visibility and to some extent popularity. Its anti-war character and attitude has resulted in the radicalization of people against the America’s political leadership, resulting in many occasions of public engagements, demonstrations, and debates.

Code Pink has also advocated international peace and the need to move beyond war as a principle instrument of foreign policy. The strong anti-militarist activism that characterizes Code Pink has helped the group to establish ties with social movements, particularly in and around the Middle East with the aim of providing financial support for those deeply and negatively impacted by the reality of America’s overseas wars and military ventures. Code Pink’s collaborative efforts with other groups including the National Organization for Women (NOW), United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), CorpWatch, the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), the Fund for Peace, the Global Policy Forum, Human Rights First (HRF), and Human Rights Watch (HRW) (Moghadam, 2012, p. 160; Jutta & Schneiker, 2015), have also focused on building strategies for countering American interventionism in all parts of the world. Despite many other chapters across the US and internationally sharing and directly supporting Code Pink’s short and long term strategic vision – support that has led to a global community of activists operating under the Code Pink banner – Code Pink’s activism has received relatively little attention. With the new US administration in place, and adhering strongly its pro-military, pro-interventionism, pro-war positions, there is a need to revisit the activities of Code Pink and assess the viability of the group’s “PINK Action Principles” and capabilities.

2. PINK, PROTESTS, AND PEACE

“Code Pink: Women for Peace” is a US left-wing social movement, founded in 2002 by Medea Benjamin, Jodie Evans, Diane Wilson, and Miriam Simos (also known affectionately as “Starhawk”), as a group of women involved in a process of mobilization against the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the former Bush administration’s distinguished anti-liberal and illegal responses to it (Moghadam, 2012). The Washington Peace Center (n.d.) describes Code Pink as:

[...] a women-initiated grassroots peace and social justice movement working to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, stop new wars, and redirect our resources into healthcare, education, green jobs and other life-affirming activities. CODEPINK rejects foreign policies based on domination and aggression, and
instead calls for policies based on diplomacy, compassion and a commitment to international law. With an emphasis on joy and humor, CODEPINK women and men seek to activate, amplify and inspire a community of peacemakers through creative campaigns and a commitment to non-violence.

The movement’s name comes from a play on the Bush Administration’s color-coded Department of Homeland Security (DHS) advisory system signaling the terrorism threat level against the US (Cockburn, 2007). In its own word, Code is defined as a “peace and social justice movement working to end US-funded wars and occupations, to challenge global militarism and to redirect funds towards education, healthcare and life-affirming activities” (NGO Monitor, 2014). As it is possible to understand from this succinct self-definition, Code Pink over the past many years has presided over America’s war economy with the movement asserting that war serves as the catalyst for scarcity, selfishness, competition, and separation. The group has also turned its attention to such issues as feminist humanitarianism as well as international solidarity (Moghadam, 2012, p. 159). Code Pink has incentivized and promoted a new peace economy model in which investment in the local community and the recreation of cultural, social, and economic models capable of cultivating respect and self-determination would constitute a fruitful means of departing from a militarized economy (Block, Brueggemann & McKnight, 2016).

Over the past decade, the internal structure and the intense activism of the movement has increased rapidly, transforming Code Pink, at the time of its creation, into one of the most important players within the US anti-war movement. Code Pink’s US-based approach against military intervention and militarism more generally, and commitment to its unique and peculiar way of dissent campaigning, distinguished it from other movements in the US. Born as a small group aiming to rebuild social justice while proposing a new economic model based on the local community, Code Pink’s member base has expanded over the years, counting over 250 active committees in the US across dozens of states and many more abroad (Eisenstein, 2015). However, an erosion of Code Pink’s support base can be observed over the past several years, particularly during the period of the Obama administration.

Given Code Pink’s opposition to all forms of war and support for war on all levels, intervening both in a domestic and international context, its opposition toward the US war economy and America’s interventionism vis-à-vis “peace missions” abroad have constituted the catalyst of the movement’s protest campaigns and the starting-point of its activism. Some of its most notable peace missions include the “Gaza Freedom March,” protests against the war against Iraq
in 2003, anti-drone protests, and various meeting with the leaders of Venezuela, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Nicaragua, and Bolivia (Tierney, 2006; Huff-Hannon, 2008; Patterson, 2010, p. 30; Ahmad, 2012; Eisenstein, 2015). Visits with leaders of these and other countries earned the organization the reputation of orchestrating an “evil dictator outreach” campaign. In its attempts to liaise with nefarious leaders of illiberal and authoritarian states, Patterson writes:

Evans doesn’t draw the line at snuggling up to some of the world’s vilest dictators and despots. She’s also forged close relationships with, and done the propaganda bidding of, murderous terror groups Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban, the Sunni insurgents in Iraq, and – the patriarch of all radical Islamic terror organizations – the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is the world’s largest Islamic promoter of jihad, inspiring, among other Islamic terrorist leaders, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the chief strategist of al Qaeda’s war with the United States and the West. (Patterson, 2010, p. 30)

Opposition to the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 has led Code Pink to mobilize thousands of people, uniting them in a common cause, most of them in front of the White House or during political committees, with the aim of capturing the media’s attention. In 2003, Code Pink activists presented PINK slips in front of the White House to pro-Bush and pro-Iraq War officials, using wordplay on its “PINK slips” given to employees as official notification of their job termination. In another demonstration, Code Pink activists, distinguished by their entirely PINK outfits, protested in front of the White House, having shouted, “We’re putting our bodies on the line, you congress people better get some spine! We say, stand back, don’t attack – innocent children in Iraq. We don’t want your oil war, peace is what we’re calling for!” (Tierney, 2007).

Members of the movement can be characterized by a certain degree of hybridity, an aspect that makes it possible for its diverse membership to come together as a single entity, despite their age and diverse if even discordant backgrounds. Code Pink principles has mainly attempted to engage the so-called “Baby Boomers,” those who were born after the Second World War during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and attempting to attracted predominantly women who already belonged to anti-war movements in the past (Millward, 2015). Two groups among those that that Code Pink attempted to engage can be distinguished. The first group includes former activists who directly and openly challenged the government against America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. The second group includes younger women who became politically active/involved after
9/11 and the implementation of what was perceived of as offensive US foreign policy in the face of perceived terrorist threats by al-Qaeda and other groups around the world (Goss & Heaney, 2010).

Despite the hybrid composition of Code Pink’s membership, most of its active members are Caucasian, educated, and socially/economically privileged women (i.e., mothers or sisters of US army soldiers) with very personal or intimate encounters with the effects of and experiences of war. Code Pink’s founders and some of its most active members were former members of radical leftwing and pro-socialist groups, and continue to find new members from the more familiar leftist territory. Medea Benjamin was previously affiliated with various Marxist groups and held contacts with extreme left-wing movements in Central and Latin America, while many of the movement’s leadership supported the Sandinista regime – both a political and military organization – in Nicaragua during the 1980s (Tierney, 2007). If, on one hand, the political affiliation and the support of left-wing groups and governments constitutes in this regard a sort of common ideological point of reference for a part of Code Pink’s activists, reliance on cohesive values such as sisterhood, motherhood, femininity, and equality, on the other hand, arguably conserves a central role in the movement’s cohesive hybrid strategy.

3. OPPOSING WAR

Code Pink activism – formally composed of women almost exclusively – resulted in a series of misaligned political interpretations, mostly related to the binomial of being a “woman,” typically associated with femininity, reproduction, and peacefulness by nature, and at the same time by a deprecating anti-militarist attitude. The movement, contrary to other protest movements, chose to make explicit their feminist and femininity identity, as something that falls behind its anti-war mobilization (Eisenstein, 2015). As noted previously, female members’ opposition to war corresponded with direct and personal experiences with war and the effects of violence in war as, “the desire of women to protest the war as mothers is still powerful; many mothers of soldier have become activists as a result of the Iraq war, fearing for their children’s lives” (Featherstone, 2004). Emphasis on motherhood and sisterhood resulted in a series of solidarity and support activities with Palestinian and Israel women’s peace groups, protesting against Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, and for the construction of the security barrier that presently divides the West Bank and Israel. Code Pink addressed a letter to the US Senate, requesting that a vote be held against supporting Israel’s construction of an anti-terrorist “security wall” in the West
Bank on the grounds that the construction of such a barrier, what was labeled the “illegal ‘Apartheid wall,’” stood as an egregious violation of the civil and human rights of all Palestinians (Hughes, 2010).

Similarly, in 2003, right after the US invasion of Iraq, a group of activists led by Jodie Evans, one of the movement’s founders, traveled to Baghdad in an effort to establish ties with a local group of women. Her aim was to break down social barriers, and cultivate a culture of mutual understanding, based on the shared experience and understanding of womanhood. Immediately after her trip, Evans released a stinging critique of Washington’s intervention, explicating that:

[...] what the Americans did was destroy any form of infrastructure that could have held the country together. There isn’t an Iraqi you meet who doesn’t feel that they’re being disrespected, that this is being done on purpose. It’s made them hate the American government. They just think it’s stupid and cruel and mean and thoughtless and everything you can think of. What’s cool about the resistance is that the Iraqis don’t back down. (Evans, 2003, n.p.)

Its proximity with peace groups in the Middle East, and in the Arab world more broadly, illustrates Code Pink’s commitment to movements abroad, particularly in that region, justified mainly through its aim of building ties with Middle East through community development (Democracy Now, 2004). In this regard, Code Pink has been sponsored and funded by the Iraqi National Dialogue Front (INDF), a coalition guided by Saleh al-Mutlaq, a Sunni man who favored joining the Iraqi armed insurgency, who demanded the release of all Iraqi war prisoners, and who opposed the new post-war Iraqi constitution because it guaranteed the establishment of an autonomous region for Shi’ite Muslims. George Soros is another notable financial backer of Code Pink’s activities. But not all of the movement’s donors are notable or even traceable (NGO Monitor, 2016). The majority of donors and funding sources remain faint, demonstrating little transparency and accountability in Code Pink’s financial activities. While Code Pink received funds and donations from a diverse range of groups, the movement has been active in fundraising efforts and campaigns, and raising funds destined for humanitarian and reconstruction overseas. Donations collected for groups that have felt the negative effects of US military intervention were often destined for groups who expressly support terrorism, as in the case of some Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGO). Overt tension in Code Pink’s anti-war and anti-violence objectives surfaced, causing much room for criticism.
4. VOICE TO THE VOICELESS?

In 2004, Code Pink established the Iraq Occupation Watch (IOW) NGO, as an instrument for monitoring US government abuses and potential violations of human rights, during the reconstruction of Iraq (Tierney, 2006). The creation of the NGO supported Code Pink’s aim to build a network of American soldiers acting as conscientious objectors. Accordingly, the NGO conducted a strong counter-recruitment campaign, to prevent young men and women to enlist in the American military, by proliferating information in schools and promoting other fields as alternative careers to those in the military. The strong anti-war critique conducted by Code Pink, continued into and throughout 2006, when a delegation of the NGO traveled to Amman, Jordan, together with a group of members of the Iraqi parliament (Moghadam, 2012, p. 159). During the meetings, what emerged was the desire to see the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, the release of payments and funds to rebuild Iraq, and the absence of a permanent US presence in the country (Libit, 2009). Code Pink extended its anti-US positions even further, advocating for the dismantlement of militias, providing indulgences for prisoners and armed groups, revising the Constitution, and preserving the “unity” of Iraq.

Code Pink’s collaboration with the former president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, in 2007 and Code Pink’s support of different anti-American groups, and its engagement with Venezuela’s former president, Hugo Chavez, illustrated an intriguing political dynamic and capacity of the movement for establishing a network aimed to counter US foreign policy actions. Its closeness with anti-Israel and pro-Hamas circles were also consolidated in 2009, when Code Pink led an international delegation of anti-Israel leftists to Gaza, where they made major donations for humanitarian purposes. During a trip to Gaza and Egypt that same year, Code Pink representatives endorsed the “Cairo Declaration to End Israeli Apartheid,” penned by pro-Hamas leftists who likewise gathered for the “Gaza Freedom March” supported by former Senator John Kerry (Taylor, 2010). The declaration called for a wide-ranging boycott of Israeli economic, travel, academic, and cultural affiliations. Between 2008-2010, the organized numerous trips to Egypt, intent on campaigning against the government, which was considerably pro-Israel at that time and involved in the enforcement of the blockade against Gaza. Equally noteworthy is Code Pink’s presence during the first protests in Egypt in 2011 – the beginning of the so-called “Arab Spring” – protesting against the autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak, and raising funds for the Egyptian regime’s diverse range of opponents (Trzupek, 2011).

During the “Arab Spring,” it became clear that Code Pink was more than a voice in the defense of human rights and injustices stemming from Washington’s
“9/11 wars” and interventions in many parts of the world (Patterson, 2008). As the US extended its security and intervened in various regions, with the aim of combating terrorism and violent extremism, and in pursuit of its political, social, and economic, interests, Code Pink also greatly expanded its area of operations exemplifying that as the US extended its battlegrounds so too would this growing movement. From the movement’s stalwart opposition toward the Bush administration since 2003, to its tentative boycott of the war in Iraq on the domestic level through public mobilization at home and abroad, to funding and supporting groups that oppose many of America’s post-2001 policies and national security goals, Code Pink in effect declared its own counter-war against the America’s violent foreign policies. Code Pink’s inherent anti-militarism has progressively resulted in a mobilization, if not radicalization, of positions against the American government since shortly after the events of 9/11, with the movement having debated and manifested its dissent policy both deeply and broadly.

5. CODE PINK IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Many milestones, controversies, speculations, and assumptions that followed the relationship between Code Pink’s activism and Donald Trump’s presidential campaign have yet to be fully clarified before the American public. Code Pink’s political activism was once oriented toward criticizing and opposing poignant American policy centering foremost on militarism, and without hesitation, on many occasions displayed public disobedience. Code Pink activists routinely defamed American presidential activities, and demonstrated a continued practice of opposing both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates during public speeches and other events. Initially, Code Pink opposed the Bush administration’s military invasion of Iraq, and demonstrated their solidarity and empathy for the women of Iraq. Its efforts to counter American intervention abroad, increasingly questions concerning military operations intricately connected to the “War on Terror” – what was eventually renamed the “Overseas Contingency Operation” (OCO) – continued into the period when Obama occupied the White House. As prospects for peaceful engagement appeared to diminish during the Obama administration, Code Pink’s criticism of Washington’s foreign policy became increasingly voluble. That voice has carried forward again into the new and uncertain era of Trump politics.

Code Pink’s founder appeared jubilant during a Trump’s on February 13, 2016, demonizing former President Bush for nearly a decade of political and military folly in the Middle East. With accusations flying against Bush’s policies,
most notably the illegal invasion of Iraq and the exorbitant spending on military operations, most notably those of Afghanistan and Iraq – adding nearly $2 trillion USD to the national debt – after about a decade and a half, Code Pink identified a president who at least in part shared their view. In Trump’s words, “Bring our war dollars home,” Code Pink realized a unique opportunity for enhancing the movement’s visibility and having its voice heard (Code Pink, 2015).

The curious, if merely ostensible, bond between Code Pink and Trump cultivated a whole host of question marks about the potential for further and possibly even long-term alignment between the two. Even piecemeal optimism over their questionable bond immediately gave way to the reality of the two actors’ political and ideological discordance. In other words, while the two may have shared common ground on at least a few issues, it is difficult to identify any stable foundations on which to construct a cooperative partnership. Trump’s subsequent public appearances were accompanied by speeches consistently rife with xenophobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, misogynist, and racist rhetoric, which contributed to the abrupt dissolution of hope for a positive relationship between Code Pink and the Trump administration. Trump therefore played a key role in further radicalizing Code Pink members, accordingly to Sobiesky (2016), and compelled would-be activists to the frontlines of the movement.

6. BUILDING BRIDGES?

Code Pink promotes itself as a movement prepared to take action in areas that are closely aligned with the ideal of a democratic and liberal-minded America. The movement’s leadership has long been convinced that Code Pink has the capacity to channel community grassroots democracy to where it is needed the most (Goss & Heaney, 2010). Code Pink’s leadership and much of its membership recognized that America is precisely where the movement’s efforts are needed most, especially with nascent political challenges cropping-up on nearly every level of society across the America. Part of Code Pink’s political activism is rooted in promoting the type of president they would like to have as America’s leader. What has become evident through Code Pink’s most recent activities is the realization of a president not seen in the White House for nearly two decades – a president dedicated to multilateral cooperation and engagement, demonstrating an overtly anti-militaristic posture, exhibiting unwavering respect and support for the human rights throughout America and around the world, irrespective of gender, sex, race, political, and economic status.

Mainstream media in America has habitually labeled Code Pink a social and political instigator, a movement with a history of crashing GOP conventions and stirring the masses regarding overly idealistic and impractical worldviews
(Medina, 2016). Having publicly interrupted a speech being made by former President Obama’s during GOP convention on May 23, 2013, Code Pink experienced a decline in its member base in addition to increased support for the president (ibid). This is yet another tradition that the movement has carried forward into the Trump era. Code Pink, along with its associates, has publicly demonstrated on more than one occasion, clearly depicting their unwillingness to support Trump’s political agenda and political promises. On September 12, 2016, Code Pink, as a part of the “Answer Coalition,” presented its position in which the organization overwhelmingly opposed racism and Islamophobia, as intrinsically un-American values, and promoted their message: “Build a Wall against Racism and Bigotry” (Answer Coalition, 2016). However, their demonstrations against Trump has not had the same negative impact on its member base nor has there been a noticeable correlation between Code Pink’s anti-Trump rhetoric and activity, and increase support for President Trump.

Code Pink may not have learned from its past mistakes. The movement again miscalculated the outcome of demonstrating against Trump mid-speech. In July 2016, Code Pink members disrupted Trump’s acceptance speech during the fourth day of the Republican National Convention. Code Pink protesters gained access to the “VIP” box where then Indiana Governor Mike Pence was seated and unfurled an anti-war banner that read, “End the War” (Women in the World [WITW], 2016). The infiltration and disruption played a role in buttressing Trump’s popularity prior to assuming office. Code Pink’s founder, publically demonstrated her antipathy to the presidential candidate, referring to Trump as a potential danger to America. Rather than encouraging his supporters to shut her down, Trump appears to have estimated the situation somewhat cleverly and in archetypical Trump fashion. In response to Code Pink’s disruption, Trump allowed the public, by pronouncing the country’s name, to oppose Medea’s statement and her presence in the Republican-crowded hall (Democracy Now, 2016). Only a small part of the American public identified with Benjamin’s message to American voters. Following the convention, she stated:

I had read the speech beforehand, so I knew exactly when I wanted to interrupt: when he said, “I am your voice.” And I wanted to get up then and say, “You are not my voice. Your voice is one of hatred and anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobia and misogyny. And we need someone who will build bridges, not walls.” (ibid)
7. CONCLUSION

In a relatively short period of time, Code Pink activism has gained monumental support, capturing the attention of the media and politicians, for its unorthodox approach to advocacy in America and the relationship it has fostered overseas. Code Pink succeeded early on in impacting public opinion, and in creating a social conscience against war and American interventionism. Nevertheless, this situation has progressively deteriorated following after Obama was elected president in 2008 – open contestation and public protest, rapidly procured minor support for the NGO as a result of Obama’s soaring popularity.

Code Pink activism against Trump has served as neither barrier nor accelerator for his political success, whether during the election campaign and during his relatively short time in office. Nevertheless, Code Pink’s anti-Trump rhetoric and public demonstrations, at least to some extent, has indirectly contributed to increased support for Trump. Code Pink members bewildered the American electorate with their supportive messages about Donald Trump’s powerful words against George W. Bush’s polices and decisions in the lead up to and during the War in Iraq. Initially they did not hide their affection for the Republican political candidate who declared his aspirations and readiness to remake America and build a “new” American future – one that would not rely on militarism and the use of force overseas.

Medea Benjamin gained enormous significance when she interrupted Trump’s speech in Cleveland. However, by allowing her to publicly criticize Trump’s anti-LGBTQ+, sexist, and anti-migrant polices, Trump sent the clear message to the American public that he believes in American’s sharing their views, expressing their opinions, and casting criticism against public officials. Code Pink’s anti-Trump campaign and its fights for the protection of vulnerable aspects of American society has only incentivized Trump to present himself as a representative and promoter of White American voters. Acting impulsively on its political perspectives, Code Pink, failed almost entirely to cast its criticism and make its voice heard against Trump’s presidential profile, which could have resulted in Trump losing his the presidential election. Rather disconcertingly, that muted voice has carried forward into the Trump presidency.
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