
DEFINING MOMENTS

Pink Diplomacy: On the Uses and Abuses of Breast Cancer Awareness

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The photograph features seven women. They are seated on rectangular pink cushions placed atop a semicircular white bench. In the middle of the group is Laura Bush. She is dressed in a cropped beige pantsuit, wears a broad but practiced smile on her face, and clasps her hands and feet tightly together. Evenly placed on either side of her are six women, of whom all but one—whose face is framed by a pale pink headscarf—are dressed in black from head to toe. These women seem more relaxed than the then-First Lady: Their bodies are less rigid; they look at one another, apparently in conversation; one stares steadfastly into the camera. Three women have their faces fully exposed, two reveal only their eyes, and one woman's face is completely covered by her burqa. Behind the group hangs a floor-to-ceiling silky pink curtain adorned with two columns of pink ribbons—the ubiquitous sign of breast cancer awareness in the United States and, increasingly, the world.¹

I have been studying the social dimensions of breast cancer for over a decade now and thought I had lost my capacity to be surprised by the kinds of political, economic, and cultural agendas to which it gets harnessed, but this image, and the story that accompanied it, struck me as a defining moment in the recent history of the disease. I had drawn a number of loose symbolic associations between U.S. militarism and the American public's apparently insatiable appetite for consumer-oriented breast cancer fundraising in earlier work (King, 2006). But the occasion for this photograph—the October 2007 visit by Bush to the Middle East with the dual purpose of promoting

breast cancer education and improving the image of the United States in the region—revealed a more direct and concrete set of connections at work.

In what follows, I offer one version of how it is that breast cancer, until just 20 or 30 years ago a highly stigmatized disease kept largely out of the public eye, came to be seen as a desirable vehicle through which to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East. I also offer my perspective on why this particular trajectory in the story of the breast cancer movement represents not cause for celebration, as its promoters would have us believe, but a new and troubling set of concerns that reach far beyond the realm of breast cancer politics narrowly defined.

THE TYRANNY OF CHEERFULNESS

In the past two decades, breast cancer has become an unparalleled philanthropic cause. During this period, corporate marketing strategies, government policies, and the agendas of large foundations have worked in concert to construct the disease as an individual challenge that can be overcome by shopping, exercising, and what Ellen Leopold (1999) calls a “tidal waves” approach to research funding (p. 19). Closely linked to this history is the transformation, since the 1970s, of the meaning of breast cancer from a stigmatized disease and individual tragedy best dealt with privately and in isolation, to a neglected epidemic worthy of public debate and political organizing, to an enriching and affirming experience during which women with breast cancer are rarely “patients” and mostly “survivors.”

In the latter of these three configurations, the breast cancer survivor has emerged as an archetypal hero who through her courage and vitality has elicited an outpouring of individual and corporate generosity—a continued supply of which, we are led to believe, will ensure that the fight against the disease

¹A number of different versions of the image (for example, with three of the women cropped out) are available online. The particular image I discuss here can be viewed at <http://bagnewsnotes.typepad.com/misc/laura-bush-dubai.jpg>.

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remains an unqualified success. Moreover, the new image of the woman with breast cancer that has emerged with the pink ribbon industry—youthful, ultrafeminine, slim, light-skinned if not white, radiant with health, joyful, and proud—leaves little room for recognition that people still die of the disease (that, in fact, roughly the same number of people die as they did before the pink ribbon juggernaut took hold), that some women are not in a position to live the all-to-familiar restitution narrative, or that happiness and individual striving, in the words of Audre Lorde (1980), cannot “protect us from the results of profit madness” (p. 74).

Lorde was referring here to what she viewed as the deleterious effects of the capitalist system, in general, on women’s breast health and the well-being of the population more broadly. She could probably not have envisaged that three decades after she penned these words, corporations large and small would be clamoring to tie their names to the disease, taking advantage of the destigmatizing work of early breast cancer activists and newly enthralled with cause-related marketing as a way to sell products to women. Nor would she likely have imagined that they would spend millions of dollars identifying and packaging the next product to be stamped with a pink ribbon and sold to consumers with the promise that a percentage of the sale price will be donated to what is often referred to, vaguely, as “the cause.” Nor, given Lorde’s concerns about the links between environmental contaminants and breast cancer, might she have foreseen that it is often the corporations responsible for selling products most closely linked to deaths from cancer that have been most successful in linking their brand image to the disease.

The profit madness seemed to reach new heights just a few weeks ago, when I came across an advertisement for a breast cancer gun: a black Smith and Wesson 9mm pistol with an awareness ribbon engraved on its slide and an interchangeable bubble-gum pink grip. The gun is part of the Julie Goloski Championship Series and sold with the claim that a portion of the proceeds will be donated to “a breast cancer awareness charity” (<http://www.juliegolob.com>).² The “saving lives by taking lives” logic of the pink ribbon pistol that critics quickly seized upon seems only slightly less mind-boggling when one considers that over the past two decades millions of women have become enthusiastic consumers of a slew of potentially harmful pink ribbon products ranging from automobiles to cosmetics to household cleaning products. Under what I call the “tyranny of cheerfulness” that infuses the marketing of these items, it has become increasingly hard to think of the disease as an injustice to rally against rather than an enriching and affirming experience. Indeed, breast cancer has become the consummate “free market feminist” cause, to use Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) term. Like all good practitioners of free market principles, state agencies, foundations, and large

corporations have recently begun to pursue breast cancer fundraising initiatives in new geographic locales, as they seek to expand their markets for breast cancer treatments, the fruits of pharmaceutical research, and pink ribbon products.

Major players are involved: AstraZeneca, the maker of the chemotherapy drug tamoxifen and the creator of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, launched its first transnational campaign in 2004 with the goal of “reaching previously inaccessible audiences across the globe.” The Komen For the Cure Foundation now has overseas chapters and an office devoted to international affairs. And since 1999, Estée Lauder has pursued its Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative for which buildings and monuments are bathed in pink lights during the month of October. To date these sights have included the Taj Palace in Mumbai, India; City Hall in Sulas, Honduras; the Taipei Tower in Taiwan; the Burj Al Arab in Dubai; and the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy.

The U.S.–Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness was created in 2006 and marked the U.S. government’s first foray into international breast cancer policy. By 2008, the partnership included the Komen Foundation, the Avon corporation, M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, Johns Hopkins University, and a variety of cancer care and business organizations in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Palestine. The campaign is a subproject of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), launched on December 12, 2002 by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. The official mandate of the MEPI, which operates out of the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, is to “advance democratic reform and vibrant, prosperous societies in the Middle East and North Africa” (<http://mepi.state.gov/mission/index.htm>). To date, the MEPI has focused on encouraging the development of public–private partnerships in providing “greater opportunities” in the region (<http://mepi.state.gov>).

PHILANTHROPIC CITIZENSHIP

The public–private mandate of the Partnership Initiative is key here since one of the most prominent manifestations of the shift toward neoliberalism within the United States in the past quarter century has been a renewed emphasis on the social promise of volunteerism and philanthropy, in the wake of the near blanket consensus that the era of “welfare government” is, and should be, at an end. Under this new ideology, public–private initiatives and individual and corporate giving are promoted as morally and economically viable means through which to respond to societal needs, in lieu of the state’s role in mitigating the social effects of capitalism. In this context, at the same time that Barack Obama (following George W. Bush) has undertaken massive fiscal

²Goloski is an international action shooting star and an employee of Smith and Wesson.

interventions in the economy, his Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, which allows government appropriations and tax benefits for church-based services, is only the most recent example of work undertaken by four previous administrations to substitute general tax collections with voluntary revenue enhancers, and to devolve responsibility for functions previously administered by state agencies to individuals and nonprofit and for-profit organizations.

Participation in giving—of time or money—is viewed not simply as a preferable way to fund public services, but as a vehicle for instilling civic and self-responsibility in the American people. Unlike the allegedly divisive and apathy-inducing technologies of welfare regimes, donning a brightly colored silicone bracelet, buying a pink-ribbon-themed frozen dinner, or participating in a leisurely 5K stroll on a Sunday afternoon is thought to help rekindle America's "traditional" culture of personal generosity. These acts are viewed not so much as ends in themselves, but as ways to produce citizens who are personally responsible and benevolent toward those who are deserving of such generosity, like the breast cancer survivor, the epitome of innocent and virtuous white womanhood. Breast cancer survivorship is both a product of and vehicle for this increasingly privatized "public" sphere in which civic commitment is properly expressed by the purchase of products and not by critical engagement with environmental racism, access to health care, or poverty, to name just three conditions that are directly implicated in breast cancer incidence and mortality.

In the past 8 years, discourses that tie philanthropic activities to proper citizenship have only intensified: In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as the Bush administration made plans for a military reaction, "ordinary" Americans were told that they could best help the nation to recover by doing two things: shopping, and volunteering or donating (Bush, 2001).

THE MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP FOR BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

The breast cancer awareness partnership has resulted in the creation of a number of programs including the "Making it Our Business" campaign in Dubai. This venture has the dual aim of "saving lives" and "enhancing the concept of corporate social responsibility" by encouraging companies to launch awareness programs and to offer free screening to employees (despite the fact that Dubai already had in place a comprehensive free mammography service, which in line with many other aspects of its health care system is open to foreigners as well as locals with no identification or health care required) (Dubai Holding, 2009). Similarly, the "Train the Trainer" program, now operating in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Dubai, and Jordan, teaches employees of

multinationals to spread the message of breast cancer screening at work. Participating companies include General Electric (the largest manufacturer of mammography equipment in the world), General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, and Microsoft. Train the Trainer's official goal is to "mitigate the effects of breast cancer on participating companies' employees and customer base and demonstrate the importance of public-private partnerships" (Dubai Chamber, 2008). Workshops held in the past 2 years have focused, among other things, on how to conduct cause-related marketing.

During her first visit to the Middle East to promote the program, Bush spoke to a group of students about the project, "asked them not to believe everything they watch on TV or hear about the US," and expressed her hope that the partnership would illustrate for Middle Easterners the positive character of U.S. culture (Absal, 2007). She returned to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to further promote the program just 7 months later and gave a fairly lengthy interview to a press gaggle in which she spoke hesitatingly and somewhat awkwardly in response to questions about the particular importance of this program in the context of gender politics in Saudi Arabia (State News Service, 2008).

PINK DIPLOMACY: IS IT BAD FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH?

I am not in a position to make claims about how these programs are playing out in the Middle East. What I can discuss is the discourses through which global philanthropy campaigns are given meaning within a revitalized imperial context in the United States. Wars are always fought on multiple fronts and frequently justified through the rhetoric of white folks saving brown women from brown men under the guise of a universal femininity. The particular incursion that I have explored here was thoroughly embedded in such rhetoric and an accompanying vision of liberated American womanhood. Laura Bush's awkward interview about the meaning of Saudi women's responses to the program can be read as an effect of two competing forces: first, her need to abide by diplomatic protocol, which prevented her from making comments that could be read as critical of the host nation; and second, her responsibility to promote a program that is grounded in—and motivated by—the entrenched idea that women in the Middle East are unaware, repressed, passive, and victimized—an idea, as Zillah Eisenstein (2007) argues, that Bush herself had done so much to promote in the run-up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as the civilian-in-chief. The latter observation also points to the reason why breast cancer was chosen as the vehicle through which to rehabilitate the image of the United States in the region. Such a program would not have been viable had it not been for the cultural transformation of the disease

that has taken place in the United States over the past three decades. Pro-woman but not feminist, empowered but not enraged, sisterly but not collective, and thoroughly disarticulated from questions pertaining to sexual identity, racialization, or class dynamics, the culture of U.S. breast cancer survivorship represents a potent export in the current geopolitical climate.

Moreover, it is an export that is the subject of intense competition. As the lines between foundations and corporations become increasingly blurred, the big players in the Middle East Partnership—Komen For the Cure and Avon—are at the forefront of a battle not simply or primarily to fight breast cancer, but rather to promote their version of the history of breast cancer, alongside their solutions to the disease, and, most crucially, their products. As they do so, they work with the state to promote neoliberal values and practices, and largely with impunity on the domestic front as social norms place good intentions and charitable works beyond political reproach. Proponents of breast cancer awareness repeatedly claim that spreading the message of early detection and raising funds for research, education, and treatment are universal and inclusive practices, external to the realm of politics and transcendent of economic concerns, racial thinking, or gender norms. What I have argued, however, is that such renderings rely on the erasure of power relations that undergird awareness. In this context, it is vital to make visible the forces of inequality and exploitation that structure

awareness campaigns and the tyrannies of cheerfulness through which they are enabled.

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