

Responsibility: Personal and Global

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As an American citizen, if you're not armed you're not responsible.
Michigan Militia Man, in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*

Lesbians have always known men are not responsible.
Anti-uranium march placard, Melbourne, 1980.

In writing about responsibility, I am drawn to thinking about the analogies between how humans behave in small personal contexts and how humans behave in large-scale international political and economic contexts.

Susanne Kappeler (1995) in her book, *The Will to Violence*¹ gives a cogent analysis of the way in which the psychotherapeutic professions work to develop a culture of irresponsibility in personal relationships. Such ideas, not only as they are expressed by the therapists whom clients listen to ardently, but also through the impact of best selling self-help books, television sit-coms and a zeitgeist that encourages the search for causal elements of one's behaviour have a profound effect on ordinary people. Kappeler describes this as a 'spiral of infinitely regressing responsibility' (102). Let's take the example of the five characters in Judy Horacek's cartoon².



The scene is a domestic setting, home to a woman and a man. The woman has been beaten and is slumped in the corner of the room with a black eye and possibly a stab wound.

The husband on the other side of the room is seated at a table being comforted by two people, presumably either relatives or members of the caring professions.

Back with the slumped woman, another woman stands nearby and says, 'Tell us about your husband's troubled childhood'.

The cartoon, represents visually – and with great clarity – the infinitely regressing spiral of causality. The implication is that violence has its source in circumstances, and those circumstances allow one to shake off responsibility for one's actions.

The problem which Kappeler identifies is that it leads to an acceptance of irresponsibility as a cultural norm. Susanne Kappeler suggests that what we need to do is to begin to think in terms of decision-making and of political will.

Have you noticed how conservatives often complain how political everything has become? The conservative interprets the critic as suggesting that something was done with intent, with the power of decision-making. The conservative would like to resort to the argument that the behaviour is natural. Under the rubric of this argument men are not responsible for their level of aggression; white people can't help it if blacks just can't get ahead; mothers and fathers can't help themselves if they misuse their power over children; and under the survival of the fittest, if the poor or the disabled or the chronically ill can't make ends meet, can't get their act together, then it's all their fault. The conservative would prefer the world to be simple, natural and apolitical.

Kappeler argues that the misuse of power is a matter of will. It is a matter of politics. Or, as feminists have expressed it, the personal is political.³ What this means is that one's personal behaviour has political content and political intent, that is, it is a matter of will and of decision making. Many feminists have struggled to unlearn their social conditioning and have developed strategies for supporting their changed behaviour. Attitudinal shift, as I have argued elsewhere,⁴ is a very stable form of power, and it is one that could be used to change masculine behaviour. For if women are capable of change, so are men.

Let us for a moment take this scenario into the realm of international politics—that realm where men are so active and women so rarely have a part to play. The USA-

Iraq conflict-to-be [at time of writing (eds)] is a case in point. It is significantly more complex than the scenario in the cartoon, but shares many of its elements.

Saddam Hussein comes to power in Iraq in 1979 during a time when relations between Iran and Iraq are at a very low point. The US administration is unhappy about the deposing of the Shah and the growth of anti-western feeling in an Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The US administration begins to support Saddam Hussein. After some diplomatic difficulties between the USA and Iraq in the early 1980s, by the middle of the 1980s, Iraq is being supported by the United States who even provide Saddam Hussein with satellite intelligence which gives Iraq significant advantage over Iran militarily.⁵

Saddam Hussein is given support by western powers who don't like the politics in Iran. If Saddam Hussein has more and better weapons, does that mean he should use them? Is it a responsible act? Is it just natural that a man should use weapons if he has them? At this point – the late 1980s – the USA is supporting Hussein's use of weapons against Iran. Although Iraq wins the war against Iran, it has cost him a lot of money and he is now short of funds. Kuwait looks like a good source with all its oil wells. The wish to conquer and dominate another nation – or another person – is part of an ideology of domination that is supported by the myth of natural masculine aggression. It is further buttressed by the politics of capitalism that Saddam Hussein used in gaining benefits from the USA.

Enter George Bush senior. After the August invasion of Kuwait the UN imposes a total trade embargo on Iraq and on 16 January 1991, the USA and its allies begin

'Desert Storm' with a huge aerial bombardment of Iraq resulting in a ceasefire in February. Over the next decade the US air force would bomb the Iraqis many times over.

On September 11, 2001 the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington are attacked by hijackers flying planes into the buildings. George W. Bush soon begins his war on terrorism, attacks Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, and in late 2001 refers to Iraq, Iran and North Korea as the 'axis of evil'⁶.

Saddam Hussein, he later says, is 'the guy who tried to kill my dad.'⁷

Circumstances here have provided both Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush with the excuses they need to engage in violent action.

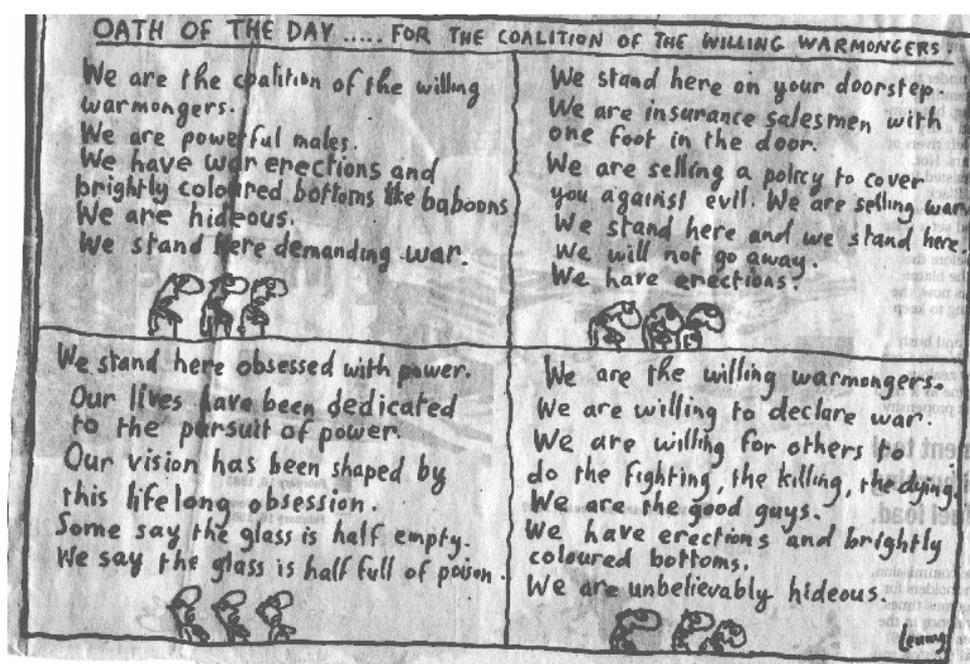
Responsibility seems to be in short supply in this chain of events. Did George Bush senior think about the consequences of supporting Saddam Hussein against Iran? A decade earlier, did Jimmy Carter think about the consequences of supporting Osama bin Laden and the Mujihadeen against the Soviets? Did the US administration ever really think about the consequences of its military actions against other nations? A nation or a person who does not think about consequences is not taking responsibility seriously.⁸

One of the reasons why it is so easy for the United States not to take responsibility seriously is that the government almost never feels the consequences of its actions. As Helen Caldicott⁹ has argued, when you bomb people from 40,000 feet you do not

have to confront the bloody consequences. At 40,000 feet you can even pretend that no one has died; that the building the bomb hit was empty, that it was a weapons cache and not a primary school or place of worship. This amounts to what Mary Daly has called ‘the total erasure of responsibility.’¹⁰ Kappeler also writes about this and points to the way in which the notion of the natural is used to avoid responsibility (105), while Daly points to ‘acting “under orders” or following tradition’ which allows the person ‘to commit acts which the personal/private self would find frightening or evil’ (132).

It strikes me as absurd that the most powerful members of society, and those least conscious of their responsibilities, are precisely the ones who are institutionally guaranteed the power to make decisions that have such life and death consequences on people and nations.

It is as Michael Leunig’s cartoon expresses: ‘We stand here obsessed with power.’¹¹



War and military violence are not the only places in which widespread irresponsibility is found. Globalisation has become a byword for irresponsibility as the very rich disconnect further and further from themselves and from the communities with which they have had connections. This is not an entirely new phenomenon, as colonisation was a rehearsal for many of the institutions and systems that have been fine-tuned in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

Taking two contrasting systems can show the connection between irresponsibility and the phenomenon of disengagement: the Indigenous system that fosters connection and responsibility and the western patriarchal global capitalist system that fosters disconnection and irresponsibility.

Indigenous cultures live close to the land and to the spiritual and material resources of those lands. Over millennia they have developed religious and cultural systems that create visible lines of responsibility as well as ways of engaging meaningfully with the ecological processes surrounding them.

Among the Kaytej women of central Australia every member of the society is involved in rituals of sustenance and maintenance of the land in particular stretches of country. The rituals have a social and religious function, and they have an economic function as well. They predispose every member of society to be actively engaged with and responsible for the well-being of the land. Which areas of land they hold

responsibility for is determined by a complex set of relationships handed down through a person's parents and kin.¹²

This system is in stark contrast with the predominant western system of land that allows for ownership at a distance providing a person has the money to purchase the land. Once a deed of title has been legally established, questions of responsibility are rarely raised. Through shares, equities and superannuation funds, one can own property without even knowing about its location. The disconnection from knowledge about land, or simply a disconnection created because the owner has not walked the land or seen its changes over many seasons, or because the period of tenancy is too short to create any sense of connection: all these factors contribute to the loss of a sense of responsibility.¹³

I am suggesting that the high mobility and disposability mentality of contemporary western culture predisposes the members of this society to a careless residency and use of resources. With disposable, short-term products and high access to new and upgraded products, our habits change and we take much less notice of the effects of our behaviours, in part because we have moved on before the effects kick in.

On a global scale, the move to offshore production in countries far away from where most of the products are sold, has a similar effect. Consumers cannot see the impact of low wages, of little regard for environmental consequences, of poverty and violence that are endemic in the export processing zones of the poor countries and regions. But the T-shirts, the designer shoes, the computers, the aviation parts, are readily consumed by the western consumer whose lifestyle now includes not one T-

shirt or pair of shoes but a rainbow of colours and styles for every occasion, the latest computer with the newest program and frequent flyer miles for a high mobility lifestyle. This variety is equated in the company advertising with the satisfaction of inner needs, needs created by the advertisers themselves. As Susanne Kappeler argues:

...representing the acquisition of consumer goods as the satisfaction of needs exonerates both the producers from the responsibility for their products – since they are merely supplying a demand – and the consumers from the responsibility for deciding to consume or acquire them. (217)

The demand has been created by a cultural rootlessness that has arisen out of a loss of meaning and a loss of location in the world. I am not suggesting that we should all sit still for the next thousand years, but I am suggesting that we pay more attention to where we are in the world, why we are there, what we can give and what we are taking from it. There have always been travellers, and it is useful to look at what is the purpose of the massive mobility of contemporary peoples. A major one is war and the consequent refugee status of many people; at the other end of the scale is the executive traveller with frequent flyer miles; and in between are the tourists some seeking leisure and excitement, but there are others who exploit those whose shores they visit through sex tourism¹⁴ and exoticised cultural consumption.¹⁵

The west's disconnected system of economics is an integral part of the overall increase in systemic irresponsibility. For example, the cost of externalities is not included in the frequent flyer calculations, for if they were no airline could afford such programs. Externalities would include the cost of the impact of aviation fuels on the environment – from extraction to final pollution; it would include the social cost of building and maintaining airports, including the displacement of people for the

space, or the displacement of biodiverse ecological niches such as marshlands that are often deemed suitable locations for airports. These and other factors are not accounted for in standard economic systems.

In the coming years there will be more and more discussion of responsibility for the dire state of water shortages. Australia, as the driest continent, is beginning to feel the effects of mass water shortages. The Murray Darling basin has become a major site of widespread salinity because of misuse of water. And who feels the final effects? It is the Ngarrindjeri people of Kumarangk and its environs in the Coorong region. In 1996 when Ngarrindjeri elder Doreen Kartinyeri and other Ngarrindjeri women were attempting to stop the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge,¹⁶ few took their claims seriously. Although the Ngarrindjeri women have now been deemed right, the Australian public remembers only the false claims of the developers. The Ngarrindjeri women saw themselves as responsible for the health of their culture and of their ecosystem where the salt and sweet waters meet. At the Marina on Hindmarsh Island, they now also have salinity problems. An example of an extremely irresponsible and disconnected from reality proposal was that of Farmhand, during 2002. John Laws and others fantasised about turning Australia's rivers around so that the water would flow to the driest areas and therefore create the possibility of massive irrigation schemes in central Australia. One only has to look at the long-term impact of irrigation in similar ecological regions to realise just how irresponsible this suggestion is. Proposals of this kind assume that only economic interests should be taken account of and as Shiva points out 'that a river is wasted if it is not dammed'¹⁷ (79). It was thinking like this that gave us the tragedy of Lake Pedder in Tasmania.

The responsibility for a major river system is a big task. The Indigenous communities who lived on these water courses each took care of the river as it passed through their lands, so the community downstream was not adversely affected. With centralisation of river control, with bureaucratic disconnection from the river and its life, those who are responsible don't know enough on a day-to-day basis to respond adequately to crises that arise, so all responses come too late. Instead of a system that would be alert to changes, we are facing more and more privatisation of water and river resources and this trend towards privatisation will increase under the proposed General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) through the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It will also come under threat if the latest move in free trade goes ahead, the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA). The AUSFTA will give corporations from the United States early entry to the Australian market and provide potentially lucrative contracts for already well-established US utility companies.¹⁸

The result is further disconnection from the life of the river. What American corporate executive is going to care about the level of salinity in Australia (which doesn't have voting rights in US Congress) if profits are moving up?

These are serious questions that will affect all our lives in the coming century. If we don't take responsibility seriously at the personal level, how on earth are we going to achieve it at the local, regional, national or global level?

To return to the most personal level of responsibility, the question we must all ask ourselves is what are the consequences of my actions? Do I try to avoid responsibility for my actions? If I don't feel the effects of my actions, who does? Are they less

powerful than me? What can I do to ameliorate negative effects? Have I ever responded by saying that it was just natural? Violators of children and women often claim it is natural, for example, that men's sexual drives are so powerful they cannot be controlled. Have I ever avoided responsibility by blaming circumstances? Perhaps the circumstances are a result of other people's actions but those people now being dead can no longer be held accountable. In such a case, no one is responsible, just as no bureaucrat or corporate executive is ever responsible for disasters. Responsibility is something that each and everyone of us have to engage, without sliding out from under our circumstances; without evading our own sense of accountability.

On the corporate level, irresponsibility is built into the system, since the proprietary limited company has all the power of a citizen but none of the responsibility. An individual can be imprisoned for illegal behaviour, but it takes a great deal to find a corporate executive guilty and accountable for irresponsible acts with criminal outcomes. The latest figures on the world's 100 largest economic entities¹⁹ shows that twenty-six of them represent nations and seventy-four of them are companies. Even if all the countries had perfect democracies, this means that three quarters of the most powerful entities in the world are institutionally irresponsible. A democratic nation can vote out an irresponsible government, but while companies are making profits, how many shareholders will vote to change the direction of company actions?

Contemporary western profit-driven society has become what Kappeler calls 'organized irresponsibility' (10). It is underpinned by a mobile and disconnected population whose first interest is the satisfaction of created needs. When these needs become disorganised an individual is sent for therapy that in turn validates the needs

of the patient and opens up the possibility of a ‘spiral of infinitely regressing responsibility’ (102).

The individualised version of this is then moved into the global sphere and corporations who are counted as citizens but have none of the responsibilities of citizens are not only allowed to behave in similarly irresponsible ways, but the global institutions are set up to make it even easier for them.

¹ Kappeler, Susanne. *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1995.

² Horacek, Judy. *Life on the Edge*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1992. 27.

³ The slogan, the personal is political was apparently first used by Robin Morgan.

⁴ Hawthorne, Susan. *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalisation and Bio/diversity*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2002. 85-86.

⁵ Tripp, Charles. *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000. 240.

⁶ Bush, George W. State of the Union Address. 29 Jan. 2002.

<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>

⁷ John King (CNN) ‘Bush calls Saddam “the guy who tried to kill my dad”.’ 27 Sep. 2002. <<http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/27/bush.war.talk/>>

⁸ For a longer discussion on consequences and responsibility in relation to Afghanistan see Hawthorne, Susan. ‘Fundamentalism, Violence and Disconnection’ in *September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives*. Susan Hawthorne and Bronwyn Winter, eds. Melbourne: Spinifex, 2002. 339-359. See especially 344-347.

⁹ Caldicott, Helen. ‘George Bush’s Military Industrial Complex and the War on Terrorism’. Paper presented at *The War on Terrorism: Democracy Under Challenge*. Law School, Victoria University, Melbourne, 9 Aug. 2002.

¹⁰ Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon, 1978. 132.

¹¹ *The Age*, 30 Jan. 2003:14.

¹² Bell, Diane. *Daughters of the Dreaming*. North Melbourne: Spinifex, 2002.

¹³ For a longer discussion of these matters see Hawthorne, *Wild Politics*, 2002, especially Chapters three and four.

¹⁴ Hughes, Donna. ‘The Internet and the Global Prostitution Industry.’ In Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (eds.) *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*. Melbourne: Spinifex, 1999. 157-184.

¹⁵ Hawthorne, Susan. ‘The Politics of the Exotic: The Paradox of Cultural Voyeurism’. *Meanjin* 48:2 (1989): 259-268.

¹⁶ See Bell, Diane. *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A World That Is, Was, and Will Be*. Melbourne: Spinifex, 1998 for a thorough treatment of the issues around Hindmarsh Island.

¹⁷ For further discussion of water resources and privatisation see Shiva, Vandana. *Water Wars*. Boston: South End, 2002. 79.

¹⁸ For a longer discussion see Hawthorne, Susan. 'Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement: Free Trade or Free Access for US Companies?' *Arena* 63 (2003).

¹⁹ Sheehan, Paul. 'The World's 100 Largest Economic Entities'. *Sydney Morning Herald* 18-19 Jan. 2003: 41.