BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Bousquet, Antoine and Grove, J. and Shah, N. (2017) Becoming weapon: an opening call to arms. Critical Studies on Security 5 (1), pp. 1-8. ISSN 2162-4887.

Downloaded from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/19141/

Usage Guidelines:
Please refer to usage guidelines at https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Critical Studies on Security (2017)

Becoming War: An Opening Call to Arms

Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove, Nisha Shah

To what date is it agreed to ascribe the appearance of man on earth? To the period when the first weapons were made.

Henri Bergson (2010)

War requires weapons. Such a statement will most certainly seem both banal and trite, a truism for the soldier, defence industrialist, international lawyer, arms control negotiator, and peace activist alike. And yet, it is precisely the self-evident acceptance of the weapon as a means to war that has most occluded the processes that give rise to weapons in the first instance and, in turn, animate their subsequent lives. Although loose talk of "weaponisation" abounds (Fattor 2014, Price 2016, Poole 2007), it almost always lacks any rigorous conceptualization of what constitutes a weapon, let alone how something becomes such.

What counts as a weapon? Rather than strive to settle once and for all the question of what a weapon is, this Special Issue seeks to outline a problematique, that of the becoming of weapons. An emphasis on process and relations marks this endeavour and serves to redirect debates away from what is in and out of the weapons box. Refusing to fall back on implicit common-sense notions of what is a weapon, we instead turn our attention to how objects, ideologies, practices, bodies, and affects get drawn into specific assemblages of violent intentionality.

No human artefact is intrinsically a weapon, be it a sword, an explosive, or a chemical agent. Conversely, a passenger airplane, a shard of broken glass, or a trained dog can perfectly well serve as a vector of bodily harm or lethality. An arrangement of things becomes a weapon through relational changes in intensity and context such that its motive force, density, potential energy, or mechanical capability comes to make events of

death and dismemberment. And beyond the immediate occasion of a weapon's terrible work lies a wider network of relations that condition its emergence and support its operation (Shah 2017). Systematically pursued, the tracing of such a network, will draw out dependencies that extend far beyond the immediate requirements of its material production or the political economy of its acquisition and circulation, revealing the long tail of weaponisation that runs through our contemporary societies.

Against the understanding of weapons as static material objects, the set of interventions contained in this Special Issue strives to consider them as technical beings in perpetual formation, transmuting in tandem with their ambient milieus (DeLanda 1991, Simondon 2016). The usages, operational mechanisms, semiotic, and somatic attributes of any given weapon are all susceptible to undergo more or less rapid modifications through the reconfiguration of their internal and external relations. That is not to say that the more successful incarnations of weaponry cannot attain greater durability when their adaptations make them singularly effective at filling particular niches in the ecology of war. Substantially unaltered over the past sixty years, the AK-47 assault rifle (aka the Kalashnikov) is exemplary of such a constant weapon design. Widely adopted around the world by state and non-state actors alike and uniquely iconic, the AK-47 accounts for twenty per cent of the estimated 500 million firearms in circulation, arguably rendering it the single most influential weapon today (Bousquet 2017). At the other end of the spectrum, the improvised explosive device (IED) that has featured so prominently in the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts presents a wholly non-standardized design cobbled together from a medley of repurposed objects and rapidly mutating in accordance with changing tactical deployments and the raft of counter-measures opposed to it (Grove 2016).

Another common thread running through this Special Issue is the rejection of a purely instrumental understanding of weapons that would see their design and uses emanating straightforwardly from purposive human intentions. Under this prevailing conception, the weapon is merely a means to an end, a materialization of the volition to do violence that is furthermore frequently apprehended through the sole lens of rational decision-making. Indeed, the treatment of national armaments typically adopts this

analytical standpoint: states acquire and employ weaponry because it is in their rational self-interest to do so (Waltz 1979, Vasquez 1993). Even exceptional weapons such as nuclear bombs that threaten to devastate not only entire societies but the planet's hospitability to human life altogether have to be placated by appealing to byzantine hyper-rationalist constructions of deterrence (Freedman 2003, Erickson et al 2013).

By placing particular emphasis on the making or becoming of weapons, we can begin to displace the fascination with the technical performance of destruction and instead query how weapons come to destroy in the first place. In so doing, we hope to break the deadlock between techno-fetishism and normative-polemical rejections of weapons, which together function as obstacles to a greater understanding of the significance of weapons in the making of worlds of violence and war.

In International Relations and Security Studies, the existing literature on weapons falls into, broadly speaking, three streams of inquiry. First, there is a line of work on the political economy within which weapons are produced and traded. Classic scholarly texts like John Stanley and Maurice Pearton's *The International Trade in Arms* (1972), Robert Harkavy's *The Arms Trade and International Systems* (1975) and Mary Kaldor's *The Baroque Arsenal* (1981) are joined by popular investigative texts like Anthony Sampson's *Arms Bazaar* (1977) and more recent texts like Andrew Feinstein's *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (2011). These texts follow an argument at least as old as Machiavelli's *Art of War* (1520) according to which the economic interests of arms manufacturers weigh upon the propensity with which wars occur. Robert Gilpin's canonical text, *War and Change in World Politics* (1983), briefly takes up these question of weapons in a chapter on "Stability and Change" but only in so far as wealth as a form of material power relates to the ability to develop and adopt novel weaponry. Keith Krause continued this research into the 1990s in his book *Arms and the State* (1995), adding a Marxist analysis to the complex dynamics between economies, weapons technology, and state formation.

The second stream of inquiry focuses on the instrumental use of weapons to serve the designs of states and enhance their power. An extension of the rationalist approach of

strategic studies, this literature was particularly galvanized by the advent of nuclear weapons (Brodie 1959, Schelling 1966). Prevailing questions focus on military strategies and their relationship to theatre dominance, changes in relative power, and the bargaining and persuasion that take place through the medium of conventional and nuclear deterrence.

A subset of this literature is concerned with the innovation and diffusion of military technology and their effects on the international system and its constituent states. Mainstays of security studies like Robert Jervis' *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (1990) and Martin Van Creveld's *The Transformation of War* (1991) have received subsequent updates in studies such as Michael Horowitz's *The Diffusion of Military Power* (2011) and collections edited by Emily Goldman on the innovation and diffusion of weapons and information technology (Goldman and Eliason 2003, Goldman 2015).

Lastly is the body of critical literature focused on the symbolic or discursive character of weapons (Gusterson 2004, Mutimer 2000, Price 1997, Weldes 1999). Classic early texts by Feminist International Relations scholars like Diana Russell's *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies* (1989) considered the way masculinity and sexualized aggression were invested in weapons themselves. Contributors to the collection like Carol Cohn (1987) underlined the frequency with which nuclear war planners employed sexual metaphors (from the "orgasmic whump" of a nuclear blast to a warhead's "penetration dynamics") and manifested an entirely un-ironic obsession with missile size. In a similar vein, William Chaloupka's *Knowing Nukes* (1992) considers the cultural texts that articulate the simultaneous affects of fear and sublime fascination associated with representations of the 'Bomb'. Shampa Biswas' *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (2014) advances the Postcolonial critique of nuclear weapons debates through an investigation of the significance of nuclear non-proliferation discourse in reconstituting the colonial divide between responsible (Western) states and irresponsible or dangerous states (their former colonies) (see also Stavrianakis 2011). In his recent book *War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice* (2013), Michael Shapiro devotes a chapter to the exploration of the

different ways in which weapons shape the phenomenological experience of the battlefield through a reading of cultural texts such as Philip K. Dick's novel *A Scanner Darkly* or the HBO miniseries *Generation Kill*.

While these existing streams of scholarship offer a purchase on weapons in terms of their economic drivers and ramifications, strategic and geopolitical effects, and symbolic investments, they end up saying very little about the weapon per se. A productive turn has recently begun to explore the agential power of weapons in and of themselves. But already presuming the circulation of weapons in varied theatres of operations leaves unexplored the dynamic configurations through which some 'stuff' comes to bear as weapons (Salter 2015, 2016). The articles contained in this Special Issue chart a novel path in the treatment of weapons and contribute a number of conceptual tools for expanding the research agenda further. In all of the contributions, the weapon offers a critical point of entry into the problem of war and lethal violence. More than a heuristic or discourse, weapons present the theorist with an entry into a veritable thicket of actors, relations, events, knowledges, and incipient transformations.

Clearly, there is no definitive answer to the question of what is a weapon. The different analyses collected here are a call to arms, as it were, joined by a shared purpose to address vital questions about weapons that remain unanswered: What actually makes a weapon? How do materials, social institutions, and discourses cohere to constitute a weapon? What are the specific conditions of emergence, principles of operation, and evolutionary trajectory of any given weapon? Far from merely being concerns best left to technical specialists or weapon enthusiasts, this Special Issue makes the case that these processes implicate our societies *in toto*, their scientific epistemologies and normative orders as much as their martial cultures and modes of economic production. Our gambit is that that a thorough engagement with these questions can unlock a deeper understanding of the ways in which weapons make worlds of war without falling prey to a myopic fascination with guns and bombs.

As a starting provocation, Ben Meiches's "Weapons, Desire and the Making of War" confronts us with what weapons want and demand of us. According to Meiches,

"weapons should be understood first and foremost as entities that operate on desire." Uncovering how weapons act to shape human desire, Meiches troubles the understanding of weapons as being merely products of human designs for control, domination, or even murder. Against a view of weapons as being subsidiary to human intentionality, Meiches speculates on the power of weapons to shape the human desire for violence – or better put, how an interaction with weapons has emotive force, an affective power to make the act of violence not just defensible but desirable. Meiches develops a theory that brings weapons to the forefront of the study of war and security with an "alternative figuration of the agencies at work in a historical process that might best be described as "the weaponization of politics," where weapons not only coexist with humans, but "are cared for, sought after, and treated as essential features of political life." No longer the mere conduits of human volition, weapons are agents with the formative power to "generate human conduct," to "incite" and "prompt" but equally "exploit fear, conflict, and profit to recreate the conditions of their regeneration." As weapons become, so do their users.

Yet when users are seemingly removed from the "weapon system" altogether, what becomes of the human-machine relationship? Katherine Kindervater's "The Technological Rationality of the Drone Strike" approaches the weapon as a human prosthesis that reveals the profound entanglement of modern scientific and technological practice in our contemporary ways of war. Kindervater's point of departure is the question of the distinctiveness of weapons as technologies. Situating the historical development of the drone and its contemporary potential for automated lethal warfare within the longer western history of scientific knowledge and technology development, she argues that modern weapons constitute the extreme expression of a violent rationality inherent to technology's bid to subjugate nature to its ends. Against a prevailing view that the conduct of war is migrating to machines, becoming automated and thereby post- or non-human, Kindervater finds the technological trajectory manifest in the "hunter-killer" drone aircraft to be all too human. Less a break with scientific control and technological rationality than its logical and aspired conclusion: "the emergence of lethal surveillance, with the merger of knowledge production and killing, is

not the consequence of a turnover of war to machines or a new era of post-modern war, but rather perhaps the realization of a dream of an early modern scientific project." The automation of killing is incipient to the technological rationality of the modern mind-set and its determination to track and eliminate everywhere human error.

Here Meiches and Kindervater stand somewhat at odds. Where Meiches delves into the ontologies of the "machines" of war, with technical objects and humans evolving in tandem, for Kindervater, "the drone strike embodies and reflects not just a powerful and lethal visual regime, but furthermore a fundamentally modern and violent *epistemological* construction of the human scientific subject." Humans do not become through their weapons. Rather, she submits that automation is in fact the ultimate human act of war in its fulfilment of the impulse to master and dominate space and the bodies within it. Paradoxically, the removal of fallible humans from the activity of war is the outcome of the headlong pursuit of a perfect realization of human command and control over the world, with its very destruction as the ultimate horizon. But this vision of absolute control inevitably in turn begs the question of the limits of control and of what happens when weapons fail.

The failure of a weapon – or more precisely, of weaponisation – is the terrain explored by Gitte du Plessis in "War Machines par Excellence: The Discrepancy Between Threat and Control in the Weaponization of Infectious Agents." In contrast to Kindervater, who highlights the logic of weaponisation as the ultimate expression of human control, du Plessis points to the inherent limits of technological attempts to make nature into weapons for human ends. Resonating with Meiches's post-anthropocentrism, du Plessis underlines how microbial agents of biological warfare ineluctably exceed attempts to harness and control their effects. du Plessis untangles a number of paradoxes, between the perceived threat of bioweapons and their actual dangers; between the development of biological agents as weapons and their scant use; between the hypothesized dangers of bioweapons from enemy agents and the actual dangers of biological weapons from agents of the state.

Emblematic of Deleuze and Guattari's 'war machine', nomadic microbes are outside of state control in their resistance to weaponisation. If weaponry has traditionally been conceived as a disciplined creation of the state, one that is both produced by the state and instrumentally deployed towards the 'ends' of war, du Plessis exposes that "microbes continuously slip between the fingers of the state apparatus. Microbes don't respond to ideologies, they are very difficult to keep under surveillance, they are indifferent to any psychological threat, and they are impossible to incarcerate." And the very moment that they can be controlled (through the deployment of vaccinations, for instance), they cease to be a weapon. This makes biological weapons programmes futile, du Plessis contends, not because bacteria are not dangerous but precisely because they can be lethal in ways that cannot be known, foreseen, and disciplined within the military logics of state warfare. What comes to the fore here is "a fundamental difference between weaponizing living and nonliving matter." Bioweapons become not just difficult to defend against, but the exercise to deploy them as weapons becomes futile to the success of war. Ironically, the failure of weaponisation reveals here a microbial war against the human capacity for control. The war machine par excellence is not one amenable to becoming a machine of state warfare, du Plessis concludes.

The question of control features again at the heart of Antoine Bousquet's "Lethal Visions: The Eye as a Function of the Weapon". Rather than serve as a mere extension of human volition, weaponry comes to exert ever more dominance on its putative originator. Specifically, Bousquet charts the incremental imbrication of perception and the deadly implements of war in the modern era. Through an account of the successive orders of targeting constituted by aiming, ranging, tracking, and guiding, he shows how the eye and the weapon have been brought together into increasingly sophisticated and intimate articulation. For Bousquet, this intertwinement of eye and weapon is fundamental to the development of remote targeting and its increasing precision. The line of sight becomes the line of fire.

Whereas Kindervater approaches the same central issues of vision, rationality and control in war by reading them into the urtexts of scientific and philosophical modernity,

the approach adopted here instead focuses in detail on the operational principles of the specific sociotechnical assemblages of targeting that have instantiated and oriented the trajectory of modern war. Unlike Kindervater, however, this capability does not thereby denote the triumph of the modern subject's bid for human mastery, however. With the act of perception detaching itself from its corporeal embedding in measure to its rationalization, the entrainment of human vision within sociotechnical assemblages of militarised perception presents a troubling challenge to sovereign conceptions of agency and autonomy. In the final instance, it is not so much that "the weapon that has come to serve as a prosthetic extension of the eye than perception itself which has been caught up in an unrelenting process of becoming-weapon." Indeed, the historical arc traced by Bousquet concludes with the weaponisation of light itself as denoted by the advent of the laser, a directed beam of photons that achieves to bring perception and annihilation into full coincidence, and to which the human eye is, ironically, uniquely vulnerable. If there is an underlying desire intertwining bodies and machines of war here, it is that of a potentially fatal attraction of the former for the latter.

Moving beyond the question of how force is weaponised through instruments and routines of military power and control, Nisha Shah's paper "Gunning for War: Infantry Rifles and the Calibration of Lethality" extends the above analyses by asking how specific kinds of violence prevail in the deployment, design, and, ultimately, in the definition of which weapons come to count. In this way, Shah comes back to the central question that inspired the pursuit of this Special Issue: when and how is a weapon a weapon? In line with all the contributions in this issue, the argument does not presume that weapons are self-evident technologies. Specifically questioning how and why the infantry rifle has become a prosaic component of modern military arsenals, one responsible for the majority of deaths in contemporary warfare, Shah asks how lethality becomes legitimate. Tracing the development of the rifle as a tool of war, particularly in the period of the late nineteenth century in which it underwent major technological evolution, Shah draws our attention to the way killing in war is an art rooted in the design and development of weapons. Tracing developments in technological design that have the capacity for harm,

Shah excavates the production of an epistemology of weapons that is produced by and productive of an ontology of violence whereby certain technologies have more than the physical capacity for force, but are salient as weapons because their injurious or deadly consequences are ethically validated.

Weapons matter, from this perspective, not because they can kill, but in how they come to kill – the rifle is a 'conventional' weapon because of its specific modality of bodily harm and death. Shah thus reflects on the "calibration" of lethality as set of mechanical determinates through which violence is both regulated and legitimated. What appears mundane is actually the crucible of what can be monstrous in war. More broadly, there is an effort to draw attention to a genealogy in which the category or class of "weaponry" morphs to distil and instil different logics of killing as a principled practice in warfare. Coming full circle to Meiches, Shah issues a call for a greater "understanding of how the destructive power through which we are equipped to kill in war has become defensible, even desirable" within the normative order of war.

If there is a consensus to be drawn from the diversity of articles contained here, it is that weapons cannot, both in concept and practice, be reduced to an understanding of them as mere tools. What these papers demonstrate is that the task of constraining or unmaking weapons requires attention to how they are created by and even commissioned for the programmatic exercise of war as a distinctive act of destructive force, one that is both the result of rational calculations and moral injunctions. The geological strata of humanity's passage on this planet will most certainly be shot through with countless fossils of our implements for war and killing. Should we thereupon leave it to a future species of archaeologists to ponder the role these artefacts played in the constitution of our own being and the unfolding of its brief history? This Special Issue is a plea for the importance of such study in the here and now and hopes to make a small contribution to a greater understanding of our becoming weapon, and with it of our becoming war.

We would like to thank all of the contributors and especially the anonymous reviewers and the editors of Critical Studies on Security for making this possible.

References

Bergson H. 2010. Creative Evolution. New York, NY: Dover.

Biswas, S. 2014. Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Bousquet, A. 2017. "A Revolution in Military Affairs? Changing Technologies and Changing Practices of Warfare" In Technology and World Politics: An Introduction, edited by D R. McCarthy. London: Routledge.

Brodie, B. 1959. Strategy in the Missile Age. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chaloupka, W. 1992. Knowing Nukes: The Politics and Culture of the Atom. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Cohn, C. 1987. "Sex and Death in the World of Rational Defense Intellectuals." Signs 12(4): 687-718.

DeLanda, M. 1991. War in the Age of Intelligent Machines. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari. 2003. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. New York, NY: Continuum.

Erickson, P et al. 2013. How Reason Almost Lost its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Fattor, E. 2014. American Empire and the Arsenal of Entertainment: Soft Power and Cultural Weaponization. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Feinstein, A. 2011. The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade. New York, NY: Picador.

Freedman, L. 2003. The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Goldman, E and L. Eliason. 2003. The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goldman E. 2015. Information and Revolutions in Military Affairs. London: Routledge.

Gilpin, R. 1983. War and Change in World Politics. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Grove, J. 2016. "An Insurgency of Things: Foray into the World of Improvised Explosive Devices." International Political Sociology 10(4): 332-351.

Gusterson, H. 2004. People of the Bomb: Portraits of American's Nuclear Complex. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Harkavy R.E. 1975. The Arms Trade and International Systems. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

Horowitz, M. 2011. The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jervis, R. 1990. The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft of the Prospect of Armageddon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kaldor, M. 1981. The Baroque Arsenal. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.

Krause, K. 1995. Arms and the State. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Machiavelli, N. 1521 [2001]. Art of War, trans. N. Wood. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press.

Mutimer, D. 2000. The Weapons State: Proliferation and the Framing of Security. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner.

Phillips, G. 2002. "The Obsolescence of the Arme Blanche and Technological Determinism in British Military History" War In History 9 (1): 39 -59.

Poole, S. 2007. Unspeak: Words Are Weapons. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Posen, B. 1983. The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Price, D. 2016 Weaponizing Anthropology. Petrolia, CA: Counterpunch.

Price. R. 1997. The Chemical Weapons Taboo. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Russell, D. 1989. Exposing Nuclear Phallacies. New York: Pergamon Press.

Salter, M. 2015. Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion. Minnesota, MN: Minnesota University Press.

Salter, M. 2016. Making Things International 2: Catalysts and Reactions. Minnesota, MN: Minnesota University Press.

Sampson, A. 1977. The Arms Bazaar: From Lebanon to Lockheed. New York, NY; Viking Press.

Schelling, T. 1967. Arms and Influence. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shah, N. 2017. "Death in the Details" Organization. 24(4): in press.

Shapiro, M. 2013. War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

Simondon, G. 2016. On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing.

Stanley, J. P. and M. Pearton. 1972. The International Trade in Arms. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.

Stavrinakis, A. 2011. "Small arms control and the reproduction of imperial relations." Contemporary Security Policy, 32(1): 193-214.

Van Creveld, M. 1991. The Transformation of War. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Vasquez, J. 1993. The War Puzzle. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Waltz, K. 1979. Theory of International Politics. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Weldes, J. 1999. Construction National Interests. The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.