Nuclear Weapons Scholarship as a Case of Self-Censorship in Security Studies

— Source link ↗

Benoît Pelopidas

Related papers:

- Politics of Language

- The History and Theory of International Law

- Political science approaches to the far right

- Corruption and the media

- Some Experiments in Art and Politics

Nuclear Weapons Scholarship as a Case of Self-Censorship in Security Studies

Benoît Pelopidas

SciencesPo–Université Sorbonne Paris Cité

Security studies scholarship on nuclear weapons is particularly prone to self-censorship.[1] In this essay, I argue that this self-censorship is problematic. The vulnerability, secrecy, and limits to accountability created by nuclear weapons (Deudney 2007, 256–57; Born, Gill, and Hänggi 2010; Cohen 2010, 147) call for responsible scholarship vis-à-vis the general public. This need for renewed and expanded scholarly responsibility is especially pressing given current plans among nuclear-weapon states to "modernize" their nuclear arsenals, committing their citizens and children to live in nuclear-armed countries and, *a fortiori*, a nuclear armed world (Mecklin 2015). Despite this need, the existing reflexive literature in security studies—calling for greater scholarly responsibility (see Steele and Amoureux 2016; Waever 2015, 95–100)—has neither specifically focused on nuclear weapons nor explored the forms of self-censorship identified here as shaping a modality of responsibility. In making this case, I define self-censorship in nuclear weapons scholarship as unnecessary boundaries on scholarly discourse within security studies.

In this article, I identify three forms of self-censorship: an epistemological self-censorship that denies the normative foundations of nuclear studies; a rhetorically induced form of censorship that leads scholars to stay away from radical reorderings of the world (e.g., world government or the abolition of nuclear weapons) because of the joint rhetorical effects of the tropes of non-proliferation and deterrence; and, finally, a "presentist imaginal" form of self-censorship that leads scholars to obfuscate the implicit bets they make on their considered possible futures and their constitutive effects on the "present" they analyze. I do not claim that these are the only forms of self-censorship. I also leave aside the non-discursive structures of knowledge production and the institutional and political constraints on nuclear studies. However, as I show in the concluding section, these three forms of self-censorship result in an unduly narrow sense of scholarly responsibility, which does not meet the requirements of democratic politics in the age of global nuclear vulnerability.

One should not expect this problem to be solved by a disciplinary division of academic labor in which historians tackle the issue of responsibility while security studies scholars do not.[2] As a result, identifying these forms of self-censorship allows us to both expand the scope of responsibility and exercise it as security studies scholars. In the current configuration, we think of ourselves, at best, as responsible *managers* of the nuclear *present*, a present expected to be extended into the future. If we become aware of our self-imposed blinders, we could conceive ourselves as responsible *citizens* of a *future* in the making.

---

[1] I leave aside studies of nuclear weapons–related issues that would not self-identify as a subset of security studies in order to fit the remit of this forum. As a result, Jonathan Schell and E. P. Thompson, arguably two of the most influential nuclear weapons intellectuals who stretched the boundaries of what was imaginable, remain outside the scope of this study. The same is true for the fissile materials approach to nuclear weapons issues and the book *Unmaking the Bomb*, dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Schell (Feiveson et al. 2014).

[2] It is significant that in a 2014 joint effort between *H-Diplo*, a journal of diplomatic history, and the international security section of the International Studies Association celebrating the "renaissance" of nuclear studies (McAllister and Labrosse 2014), the notion of responsibility was barely mentioned, as if the issue was settled. Even more troubling, when it appears—only four times—it is in reference to variables and not to scholars and their mission. The general public as an audience is absent.

Epistemological Self-Censorship: Denial of the Normative Foundations of Nuclear Studies

Explicitly reflexive security studies scholars have not sustainably addressed nuclear weapons issues in spite of moments of engagement—that is, the post–Cold War, the Obama administration following the 2009 Prague speech, and the humanitarian impact initiative (Booth and Wheeler 1992; Burke 2009; Masco 2015; Peoples 2016; Ritchie 2012, 2013; Burke 2016a). As a consequence, Buzan and Hansen's (2009, 21) remark that "the majority of writings in ISS [International Security Studies] do not go to great length to discuss their analytical, normative, and epistemological assumptions" also applies to nuclear studies. Instead, the field reflects the primacy of a proclaimed quest for detached knowledge production, seen as a condition of objectivity, which is in turn perceived as a condition for the production of knowledge recognized as scientific (Douglas 2009, 46–47, 122–23; Oren 2003, 6). This is true of a majority of the recent English-language scholarship on nuclear issues, produced in and outside the United States.[3]

In such an epistemological context, it is worth following Robert Cox's (1981, 128) classical advice: "There is accordingly no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. When a theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine it as ideology and to lay bare its concealed perspective." It is not hard to find the purpose and normativity of nuclear studies. The field is fundamentally driven to avoid at least one form of nuclear war, the one in which no one survives. The variation is between those who implicitly see some use for nuclear weapons, up to limited nuclear war,

as acceptable and those who see any nuclear explosion as unacceptable (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 115).

This perspective was more obvious in the early years of the nuclear age but became implicit and increasingly hidden as security studies disciplined itself as part of "International Relations" with a positivist understanding of science. For example, early debates about the possibility and utility of a pre-emptive or preventive war against the Soviet Union before it acquired nuclear weapons mostly took place among the RAND Corporation, US Air Force, and prominent public intellectuals (Goldstein 2006, 38), and was premised on the shared goal of avoiding a worse (nuclear) war (Trachtenberg 1991, 100–107).[4] Those who explicitly advocated for the use (or threatening advantage) of nuclear weapons wrote/spoke as if they regarded nuclear war as winnable so long as the Soviets were unable to retaliate. Those who were ambiguous about which capabilities the United States should use thought along similar lines as those that advocated for nuclear war. They either did not treat nuclear weapons as radically different from any other weapon (Cillessen 1998) or thought that conventional war would "avoid atomic war," as Bertrand Russell told the Royal Empire Society on December 3, 1947 (Perkins 1994, 137).[5] One finds a similar and striking commonalities between proponents of the manageability of limited nuclear war and escalation control, like Herman Kahn, and theorists like John Herz who saw the advent of the thermonuclear revolution as requiring radical change in the political organization of the world. Kahn clearly stated his purpose in *On Thermonuclear War* ([1960] 2010, 7) as "avoiding disaster and buying time." One can at least agree with him on the fact that "there seems to be some consensus on what we are trying to avoid even if we cannot agree on what we are for" (7). Indeed, Herz did not agree with this managerial approach, but clearly expressed that the ther-

---

3 While it is true that important reflexive voices, which think beyond the three modalities of self-censorship defined here and articulate a notion of responsibility, like Nick Ritchie (2009, 2012, 2013) and Anthony Burke (2009, 2016b) among others, are non-US nationals, this should not hide the fact that the three features of scholarship identified in this article can be found in most mainstream security studies scholarship written in English, even by non-US scholars. The writings of leading Russian and Chinese scholars (Arbatov 2012; Bin 2015; Zhang 2016) fit the three criteria set above, with one nuance to be explored further below. Quite tellingly, the most recent scholarship on the rise of a Chinese school of international relations does not indicate a significantly different approach to nuclear weapons issues and the attached responsibility of scholars (Zhang and Chang 2016).

4 This already touches on the constitutive power of the imaginary of the future and its potential as source of self-censorship that I will focus on in the third section.

5 My argument does not apply to the entire US preventive war planning community. The plans for preventive war against the Soviet Union (Pincher in 1946, Broiler in 1947, and Crankshaft in 1948) did not mention a goal of nuclear war avoidance and unambiguously advocated the preventive use of nuclear weapons (Rosenberg and Ross 1990). Such planning moved to considerations of a pre-emptive war but continued at least through the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations (Trachtenberg 1991, 132–46; Burr 2001). Thank you to Matthew Evangelista for forcing me to clarify this and helping me to do so.

monuclear revolution asked the scholar to take responsibility and to give up on the idea of disinterested (social) science. "The ideal of the uncommitted, ivory-tower researcher," wrote Herz, "had to be substituted by that of the '*homme engagé*, if not *homme révolté*'"(quoted in Sylvest and van Munster 2014, 539).[6] Overall, the normative goal of some form of thermonuclear war avoidance *explicitly* united nuclear weapons scholarship before the ideal of disinterested scholarship orchestrated its obfuscation.

The imperative of disinterested social science did not change the shared goal: it just made it *implicit* or led scholars to manifest it in less obvious ways. Campbell Craig's (2003) analysis of the intellectual itinerary of Kenneth Waltz, the most influential scholar in post–World War II international relations (IR) and security studies, strongly suggests this persisting foundation even after the rise of supposedly dispassionate and objective neorealism. Craig (2003) shows that Waltz's epistemological as well as theoretical inconsistencies can be explained by failing efforts to obfuscate and neutralize his normative goal of thermonuclear war avoidance. Epistemologically, he first tried to circumvent the dilemma of the thermonuclear age in the name of a quest for dispassionate scholarship in *Man, the State and War* (1959). Waltz ended up implicitly, but decisively, recognizing his fundamental normative commitment to great-power peace and thermonuclear war avoidance in the last chapter of *Theory of International Politics* (1979). This commitment also led him to a theoretical inconsistency, most visible in his 1981 essay on "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons." In it, Waltz retreats from the primacy of structural factors as causes of great power peace to emphasize the primary importance of nuclear weapons (Craig 2003, 117–65). Two more recent publications suggest the continued normative goal of thermonuclear war avoidance underpinning the writings on this subject: George Shultz and James Goodby's (2015) edited book *The War That Must Never Be Fought*, and Jeffrey Larsen and Kerry Kartchner's (2014) edited volume *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*. By referring to President Gorbachev and President Reagan's joint 1985 declaration that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought," the first book outlines an unconditional imperative of nuclear war avoidance (Shultz 2015, xii). The second book is positioned toward the other end of the normative spectrum: nuclear war is a possibility, so we have to reduce its likelihood or reach. However, even with those assumptions, the imperative of avoidance of some form of nuclear war remains. In the second book, contributor Jim Wirtz (2014) is as clear about this as Shultz is in the first one. He writes, "we especially want to avoid the occurrence of a desultory nuclear exchange involving a few score, or a hundred, nuclear detonations" (Wirtz 2014, 263). Wherever you stand on the debates about inevitability and acceptability of limited nuclear war or nuclear weapons use as a scholar, there is a form of nuclear war that you are writing to prevent. This unspoken normative goal of thermonuclear war avoidance paves the way to a rhetorical source of self-censorship that manifests itself most explicitly in the interplay between non-proliferation and deterrence.

Rhetorical Self-Censorship: How the Interplay of Non-Proliferation and Deterrence Delegitimizes Transformative Ideas

(Non-)proliferation and deterrence are central notions in security studies focused on nuclear weapons. They are problematic and too often accepted as neutral analytical categories (Mutimer 2000; Pelopidas 2011). As I will show in this section, their articulation in the security studies literature fuels rhetorical self-censorship because it delegitimizes transformative thinking as unrealistic or dangerous.

Conceptual innovation in the nuclear conversation most often occurs within the boundaries set by these two categories.[7] For example, innovations are often about an adjective or a prefix: the most recent innovations would be *winter-safe*, *tailored*, or *cross-domain* deterrence; similarly, the 1990s imagined *opaque* proliferation, then *counter*-proliferation. One might argue that the notion of proliferation is actually in debate. However, the debate focuses mostly on its consequences instead of questioning the diagnosis, or the concept itself. Academics who want to go beyond the debate about the effects of the spread of nuclear weapons agree that what is happening in the

---

6 Herz's statement was typical of the classical realist tradition, which was fully aware of the impossibility of the disinterested scholar. For instance, Morgenthau (1948, 7) wrote in his classic *Politics Among Nations; The Struggle for Power and Peace*, "no study of politics and certainly no study of international politics in the mid-twentieth century can be disinterested in the sense that it is able to . . . pursue knowledge for its own sake."

7 Once again, there are a few exceptions within security studies like Itty Abraham's (2006, 2016) notion of nuclear ambivalence, and a few fruitful conceptual innovations outside security studies like Gabrielle Hecht's (2006) notion of nuclearity.

world can be defined as proliferation even if definitions are inconsistent (Knopf 2002; Gavin 2012; Kroenig 2009; Robinson 2015). One could even say that the opposition to nuclear proliferation was one of the few early agreements between the otherwise opposed traditions of peace research and strategic studies (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 115). The concept of deterrence does not have any rival in the nuclear conversation. It has been under attack (McGwire 1985, 2006; Mueller 1988; Ritchie 2009; Wilson 2008, 2012; Avery 2012) but remains an unavoidable category. As Jeff Knopf (2009, 44) explains, "in a situation in which there is no effective defenses against ballistic missiles and good reasons to doubt that either disarmament or a first strike knock-out blow would be successful, most [US] leaders came to the conclusion that deterrence was the only feasible strategic option." Most English-language security scholarship has shared this mindset, debating which capabilities would best serve this strategy. Deterrence has been a "centrist compromise" between proponents of a nuclear first strike and proponents of disarmament (Knopf 2009, 44–46). The writings of some Chinese security studies scholars are noteworthy exceptions; they accept the category of "non-proliferation" but question the utility of deterrence by noting that threats presented to deter can actually have a compelling effect (Bin 2015, 358–59). Other Chinese scholars, however, still use the category of "minimum deterrence" (Zhang 2016). In sum, the central categories of deterrence and non-proliferation are presented as unavoidable subordinate goals to nuclear war avoidance.

Speech and writings based on the central concepts of proliferation and deterrence do double work and, as such, contribute to rhetorical self-censorship. Both proliferation and deterrence appear as purely descriptive categories, but they intend to be part of a self-denying or self-fulfilling prophecy. They describe the world, and at the same time, they act on it, with a very specific expected effect. In a context in which the spread of nuclear weapons is almost unanimously considered an undesirable outcome (contra Gallois 1961; Waltz 1981), announcing proliferation is a calling for urgent non/counter-proliferation action. It is a practice intended to prevent proliferation from happening. As such, the prophecy of proliferation intends to be self-denying. Similarly, talking authoritatively in public about the efficacy of deterrence intends to give credibility to the deterrent threat and therefore to strengthen its effect. Saying "deterrence works" is intended to help it work better. It is meant to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a consequence, for these statements to be able to work better, and to serve better as instruments of nuclear war avoidance, their authors have to deny their intention to produce an effect. They have to appear authoritative as descriptions (and nothing more) in order to have the intended effect. This is why I claimed at the end of the previous section that the unspoken normative goal of nuclear war avoidance is paving the way for rhetorical self-censorship under the concepts of non-proliferation and deterrence. Keeping the normative goals of nuclear weapons policy unspoken is perceived to be a condition for achieving them.

This double work of statements based on proliferation and deterrence opens two avenues for self-censorship. First, the descriptive ambitions of those statements open the way to self-censorship to avoid an accusation of being unrealistic—that is, incompetent, utopian, or naïve. Since these authoritative statements are presented as objective descriptions of the nuclear world, contrary statements could only be derived absent a sense of reality. In a field in which institutional recognition and specialized knowledge confer an entitlement to deference, such criticism can be particularly damaging. Second, statements expressing concerns with non-proliferation and deterrence can be stigmatized as dangerous. A scholar would be suspected of jeopardizing deterrence and compromising non-proliferation efforts by questioning their efficacy or the reality of the diagnoses of proliferation and deterrence.

In sum, once (non-)proliferation and deterrence are both accepted as valid descriptions of the world and desirable outcomes, questioning these categories as diagnoses appears unrealistic; questioning the actual effects of prophecies appears dangerous. It is true that the commitment to disinterested scholarship explored above makes it harder, in a scholarly setting, to acknowledge that the statements based on proliferation and deterrence have intended effects, which in turn limits censorship explicitly based on the suspicion that questioning non-proliferation and deterrence policies would be dangerous. At the same time, this limitation may give more authority to the statements about proliferation and deterrence since, as suggested earlier, denying their intention to produce an effect is required for those statements to possibly have such an effect. As a result, lack of realism is a more frequent base for censorship than suspicions of danger of such statements, but the latter are implicitly empowered by their inability to be expressed. Overall, both of those categories assume a world made of nation-states, thermonuclear weapons, and no world government. Therefore, in a scholarly conversation within the boundaries set by those categories, and as a result of this rhetorically induced censorship, such a world appears as the only conceivable one.

Imaginative Self-Censorship: Obfuscation of the Role of Possible Futures

If one adds the requirement for policy recommendations and predictions among the leading journals in the field of security studies (Keylor 2015, 12; Walt 2005, 31–34; Ward 2016, 84–87) to the unspoken normative foundation of nuclear studies and the rhetorical straitjacket of non-proliferation and deterrence, the scope of possible futures that nuclear weapons scholars consider becomes a third potential locus for censorship. Knowledge claims about the future are constituted from the possibilities of the present world—a world in which no one has experienced nuclear war or a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence (Mallard and Lakoff 2011; Connelly et al. 2012). As a matter of fact, the future is expected to play a role in the concluding section of policy-relevant scholarship. But it is not any kind of future; it is a bounded set of possible futures derived from patterns that a positivist research program should have identified in the past and that the scholar is expected to extend into the future (Williams 1993; Berenskoetter 2011, 657–60; Waever 2015, 95).[8]

The existing presentism in security studies (see Buzan and Little 2000, 30) invokes modalities of the future that, in turn, constitute a third form of self-censorship: "imaginative self-censorship." There are instances in which scholarly conceptions of the future frame how we treat the world today (Baylis and O'Neill 2000; Masco 2015; Mueller 2013; Sylvest and van Munster 2014, 2016; Zwald 2013). Consider, for instance, discussions of a world government by Craig (2008) and Deudney (2007). Craig is a useful break from imaginative self-censorship but, as suggested above, is premised on an explicit recognition of the normative purpose of nuclear scholarship and a strong critique of the boundaries imposed by the rhetoric of non-proliferation (Craig 2003, 2008; see also Craig and Ruzicka 2013). The best studies of the constitutive force of the future remain outside the scope of security studies, or do not engage with nuclear weapons related problems (see Andersson and Rindzeviciute 2015).

The constitutive effect of our imagined future can be presented as follows: the further you locate the catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence into the future, and the least destructive you imagine it to be, the easier it is avoid problematizing the existing combination of nation-states, thermonuclear weapons, and no world government. Therefore, to illustrate this claim about the role of imagined nuclear futures in the boundaries of what scholars can think about in their analyses of the contemporary world, I use the two above-mentioned features: the *expected chronology of future events* and the *expected consequences of deterrence failure*.

In terms of expected chronology of the future, I consider the four following events: a radical technological change making nuclear deterrence less problematic; a non-nuclear-related disaster, the outcome of which would not be more acceptable than a nuclear weapons disaster; the advent of an existential threat against which the use of nuclear weapons are imagined to be indispensable; and a failure of nuclear deterrence with catastrophic consequences. No one can know whether those events will unfold or, if so, in what order; it is ultimately speculative, and informed by the ethical and political preferences, as well as the imagination, of the person who makes the ordering.

Similarly, since we have no experience of failure of nuclear deterrence leading to a nuclear explosion, one cannot know for sure what the consequences of such an event would be. We can determine the humanitarian consequences of an explosion from a given device with a given yield at a specified altitude and under certain wind conditions, but the ultimate assessment of those consequences depends on speculative bets on escalation, escalation control, and the resilience of the society that might survive it. Both the ordering of those types of events and the expected effects of a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence are outside the realm of the knowable, but they affect the way we think about the present.

Two expected chronologies of future events facilitate the acceptance of the status quo: (1) nuclear weapons are needed, or (2) a large-scale non-nuclear disaster hits before deterrence fails catastrophically. The first one is based on the idea that humanity will face an existential threat against which nuclear weapons are indispensable before deterrence fails catastrophically. In the existing literature, this existential threat takes two forms: a large asteroid on a collision course with planet Earth, which could only be destroyed or deflected by the use of nuclear weapons against it, or an aggressive regime that can only be deterred by nuclear threats (de Groot 2004, 259; Colby 2013, 67).[9] In sum, claiming that nuclear weapons

---

8   Jenny Andersson (2015) has shown how the second generation of "futurists" after World War II around Johan Galtung called upon human imagination to generate alternative futures and to resist the colonization of the future by existing orders via the claims of prediction, forecasting, and modeling. They would definitely not label themselves as "security studies" scholars, though, so I leave them out of this article.

9   For accuracy's sake, one has to recognize that NASA has been developing alternatives to asteroid-busting nu-

are irreplaceable to face a threat that has to be addressed, and is expected to appear before a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence, would considerably ease the acceptance of the nuclear status quo. Similarly, a large-scale, non-nuclear, extinction-level event that is expected to happen before a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence will simply make the concern about an unacceptable failure of nuclear deterrence irrelevant, and the nuclear status quo more acceptable.[10]

The second feature of scholarly imagination of the future that has an under-recognized impact on nuclear weapons scholarship has to do with assumptions about the consequences of a failure of nuclear deterrence in terms of compared acceptability. The most optimistic of nuclear optimists may claim that nuclear deterrence will always fail in ways that do not cause catastrophic disaster. For instance, an attempted launch, resulting from an accident or a misperception, which fails due to a technological problem, is acceptable since there would be no catastrophic consequences. This is tantamount to endlessly delaying the catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence, which in turn makes it more acceptable to limit the scholarly conversation to possible futures with nuclear weapons and a plurality of political entities.

A second position on that scale, which eases the acceptance of the nuclear status quo, assumes that nuclear weapons will be used in a limited but acceptable fashion. One scenario is the detonation of a small number of nuclear weapons, which causes limited damage and does not lead to nuclear retaliation. For instance, Quester (2014, 180) argued that the deliberate use of nuclear weapons in high space for anti-ballistic purposes would not necessarily result in the death of any human beings. Anti-submarine warfare is also an example where nuclear weapons could be used in a limited and acceptable fashion, with arguably little concern over an escalation to nuclear war (Quester 2014, 180). However, recent research on the humanitarian impact of even a small nuclear war problematizes this viewpoint. Even limited nuclear war

---

clear weapons (Adams et al. 2007). Thanks to Daniel Deudney for pointing me to this article.

10 One should note that it does not follow from this bet on the timing of disaster that one *should* accept the perpetuation of a nuclear status quo, simply that it would be easier. Acceptance does not follow because one might engage in a struggle for change in nuclear weapons policy while addressing the disaster expected to take place earlier, and other critiques in terms of legality, morality, and cost of nuclear weapons are not affected by this bet.

could lead to a "nuclear winter" and widespread famine. In order to perpetuate the nuclear status quo, the threshold of acceptability of casualties would need to be significantly high (Xia et al. 2015).

The conventionalization of nuclear weapons (Jervis 1984, 57) and the potential for ballistic missile defense, as an alternative to nuclear deterrence, combine the above-mentioned features of an imagined nuclear future—that is, the expected chronology of future events and the expected consequences of the failure of nuclear deterrence. According to these features, the nuclear status quo is less problematic because technological change will reduce the consequences of a catastrophic failure of deterrence before it happens, and might even postpone it. Conventionalization reduces the effects of a deterrence failure, and a ballistic missile defense is expected to do so too. If a missile defense system intercepts all the warheads launched as a result of a deterrence failure, it would not only reduce the effects of a deterrence failure, but it would also postpone the potential for a catastrophy.

Both the chronology of future events and the expected consequences of catastrophic failure of nuclear weapons are beyond the realm of the knowable and affect the way scholars conceive present challenges, where nation-states, thermonuclear weapons, and no world government act as implicit boundaries of an imagined nuclear future. As such, they operate as implicit blinders and instruments of self-censorship.

Conclusion: Countering Self-Censorship and Broadening Scholarly Responsibility

In the age of global nuclear vulnerability, the technicality, secrecy, and limited accountability that surround nuclear weapons systems demand a better understanding of the responsibility of security studies scholars in democratic societies, as individual intellectuals and as a community. In this context, self-censorship matters because of the limitations it imposes on the way scholars implicitly or explicitly think about their responsibility.

The three modalities of self-censorship identified above unduly narrow the definition of scholarly responsibility. If scholarship has to appear non-normative, to engage with nuclear weapons politics only in terms of deterrence and non-proliferation, and does not have to recognize the limiting effects of its imagined futures on the way it engages with the present, the notion of responsibility that follows from it is skewed toward accepting thermonuclear weapons, separate nation-states, and no world government. Since such a world appears as the only possible and acceptable one, all we can and need to do is manage it. In such an arrangement, scholars are primarily responsible

vis-à-vis *managers* of the nuclear *present*, a present expected to be extended into the future.[11]

If those boundaries became part of the conversation, scholars would become responsible vis-à-vis *citizens* of a *future* in the making that has already started. This future involves everyone on this planet since nuclear war is an act of omnicide—potentially removing any trace of human existence. If scholars targeted these loci of self-censorship, they would not only immediately broaden the scope of their responsibilities, but they would also redefine them. If scholars were explicit about their normative commitment to some form of nuclear war avoidance, they would start being more critical about the boundaries of the futures they allow themselves to imagine. Nuclear managerialism becomes problematic once the following becomes clear: (1) the commitments to some form of nuclear war avoidance, (2) the censoring effects of the categories of non-proliferation and deterrence, and (3) the implicit assumptions made about the future that result in the illusion of postponing and containing nuclear disaster. It loses its obvious, inevitable, and seemingly apolitical character. Scholars would then have to rethink the trade-offs they make when they accept such boundaries and to imagine alternatives. The many scholars who have adopted this reflexive attitude tend to neglect the problems of nuclear weapons and should re-engage.

As suggested in the last section, the coexistence of faith in endlessly avoiding thermonuclear war with the continued practice of managerialism is premised either on the idea that extinction will take place before a nuclear weapons disaster or on one of the following forms of technological utopia: (1) the conventionalization of nuclear explosives that makes their use acceptable in a way that does not trigger escalation; (2) a technological fix for the condition of nuclear vulnerability (e.g., the shield the US Missile Defense Agency has been developing over the past five decades at a cost of billions of dollars); and (3) the faith that human misperceptions or errors will be compensated by providential technological failure, leading only to the desirable outcome of no nuclear explosion. This is where the normative imperative of nuclear war avoidance meets a democratic imperative of unearthing the implicit assumptions of managerialism and opening up possible futures beyond non-proliferation and deter-

rence. Policymaking elites and the general public would then gain a broader set of choices than continuing to explicitly or tacitly support policies that overstate their abilities to avoid future nuclear weapons use. The point is not to reject the possibility of speaking to the elites, but rather to emphasize the need to inform citizens and, if one speaks to elites, to do so beyond their stated needs and their terms of the debate (Neumann 2008; Pelopidas 2014).

Of course, a political community can choose to wait for an early non-nuclear disaster or a technological solution; it can even choose to wait for nuclear extinction or hope it will never happen. A strong commitment to democracy does not allow the scholar, the expert, or the public intellectual to negate those choices or delegitimize them, provided that they are based on an informed debate. Such a debate would note the cases in which humankind avoided nuclear disasters out of luck (Lewis et al. 2014; Pelopidas 2015, 14–17), the organizational features of nuclear weapons that make such complex and tightly coupled systems bound to fail in the long run (Perrow 1999; Sagan 1993, 2004), and the fallibility of the theories, judgments, and assumptions of engineers building those weapons (Downer 2011). It would also mobilize the largely forgotten categories of non-offensive defense, cooperative security, and other alternatives to non-proliferation and deterrence that do not require a world government. However, if one chooses to bet neither on technology nor on the conventionalization of nuclear weapons, nor to wait for extinction with the "hope" that it will predate a large-scale nuclear disaster, scholarship has to give them a way of engaging with the coexistence of nation-states, nuclear vulnerability, and a managerial approach.[12]

My claims are based on an imperative of imagination that I call the "utopian imperative." Indeed, the practice of utopia as a method and imaginative process (Levitas 2013), and the encouragement to spread such a practice, can "fulfill an important function in IR theory through the imagination of alternate 'better' worlds, however so conceived" (Brincat 2009, 582). This should be the case even if "IR theory remains reticent to re-evaluate utopianism based on its earlier rejection of the tradition by classical realism" (Brincat 2009, 604). The argument is not that moving away from self-censorship is moving away from realism and toward utopia. Instead, it is that while non-managerial change is often portrayed as uto-

---

11   This is one of the core problems of this mainly American scholarship that tends to define policy relevance as relevance to the US policymaking elites of the day on their own terms (Pelopidas 2014; Waever 2015, 91, 94–96).

12   In that respect, the responsibility of a nuclear scholar does not depend on their actual capacity to produce policy change.

pian, continued reliance on the nuclear status quo is premised on bets on the future, which are equally utopian, even if these utopias are more dependent on technological changes (Pelopidas 2015, 5–8).[13] In that respect, utopia, as a method and an imperative, should be accepted as counter to self-censorship, as a contribution to knowledge in nuclear studies, and as a much-needed way of broadening the responsibility of scholars in democratic societies under the nuclear shadow.[14]

Acknowledgements

---

13 The bet on the future relying on conventionalization is utopian about technological as well as political change: it assumes that the existing arsenals have been dismantled, are safely monitored, and that a rearming race will be kept under control before the conventionalization of nuclear weapons and before a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence.

14 Paradoxically, if the legacy of Kenneth Waltz had to remain front and center of security studies scholarship, that might be an invitation to rethink the democratic responsibility of scholars in line with his too-little-noticed efforts at arguing against the elitist inclination of classical realism writing for the foreign policy elites (Bessner and Guilhot 2015; Williams 2009). Alternatively, reclaiming Robert Gilpin as another founding father of realist thought in the 1970s and 1980s would allow us to reopen the questions of change, predictability, and possible futures (Wolfworth 2011; Kirschner 2015, 157fn3, 160–61, 164, 178). Thanks to Zia Mian for this insight.

References

Abraham, Itty. 2006. "The Ambivalence of Nuclear Histories." *Osiris* 21(1): 49–65.

——. 2016. "What (Really) Makes a Country Nuclear: Insights from Non-Nuclear Southeast Asia." *Critical Studies on Security* 4(1): 24–41.

Adams, Robert B., Jonathan W. Campbell, Randall C. Hopkins, W. Scott Smith, William Arnold, Mike Baysinger, Tracie Crane, et al. 2007. "Near Earth Object (NEO) Mitigation Options Using Exploration Technologies." *National Aeronautics and Space Administration; Marshall Space Flight Center*. Accessed June 24, 2016, http://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/20070019778.pdf.

Andersson, Jenny. 2015. "Midwives of the Future. Futurism, Future Studies and the Shaping of the Global Imagination." In *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics. Forging the Future*, edited by Jenny Andersson and Egle Rindzeviciute, 16–37. London: Routledge.

Andersson, Jenny, and Egle Rindzeviciute. 2015. *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics. Forging the Future*. London: Routledge.

Arbatov, Alexei. 2012. "The Dialectics of Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation." In *Nuclear Reset: Arms Reduction and Nonproliferation*, edited by Alexei Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin, and Natalia Bubnova, 349–62. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center.

Avery, John. 2012. "Flaws in the Concept of Nuclear Deterrence." *Cadmus* 1(4): 87–92.

Baylis, John, and Robert O'Neill. 2000. *Alternative Nuclear Futures: The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the Post–Cold War World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berenskoetter, Felix. 2011. "Reclaiming the Vision Thing: Constructivists as Students of the Future." *International Studies Quarterly* 55(3): 647–68.

Bessner, Daniel, and Nicolas Guilhot. 2015. "How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism." *International Security* 40(2): 87–118.

Bin, Li. 2015. "China and Global Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament." In *The War That Must Never Be Fought*, edited by George Shultz and James Goodby, 5–55. Stanford, CA: Hoover Press. 355–376.

Booth, Ken, and Nicholas Wheeler. 1992. "Beyond Nuclearism." In *Security Without Nuclear Weapons*, edited by Regina Cowen Karp, 21–55. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Born, Hans, Bates Gill, and Heiner Hânggi, eds. 2010. *Governing the Bomb: Civilian Control and Democratic Accountability of Nuclear Weapons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brincat, Shannon. 2009. "Reclaiming the Utopian Imaginary in IR Theory." *Review of International Studies* 35(3): 581–609.

Burke, Anthony. 2009. "Nuclear Reason: At the Limits of Strategy." *International Relations* 23(4): 506–29.

——. 2016a. "Nuclear politics: beyond positivism." *Critical Studies on Security* 4(1): 1–5.

——. 2016b. "Nuclear Time: Temporal Metaphors of the Nuclear Present." *Critical Studies on Security* 4(1): 73–90.

Burke, Anthony. 2016a. "Nuclear politics: beyond positivism." *Critical Studies on Security* 4(1): 1–5.

Burr, William, ed. 2001. "First Strike Options and the Berlin Crisis, September 1961." National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 56. Accessed July 7, 2016, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB56/.

Buzan, Barry, and Lene Hansen. 2009. *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Buzan, Barry, and Richard Little. 2000. *International Systems in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cillessen, Bret J. 1998. "Embracing the Bomb: Ethics, Morality, and Nuclear Deterrence in the US Air Force, 1945–1955." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 21(1): 96–134.

Cohen, Avner. 2010. *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Colby, Elbridge. 2013. "Why Nuclear Deterrence Is Still Relevant." In *Thinking About Deterrence*, edited by Adam Lowther, 51–73. Maxwell: Air University Press.

Connelly, Matthew, Matt Fay, Giulia Ferrini, Micki Kaufman, Will Leonard, Harrison Monsky, Ryan Musto, Taunton Paine, Nicholas Standish, and Lydia Walker. 2012. "'General, I Have Fought Just as Many Nuclear Wars as You Have': Forecasts, Future Scenarios, and the Politics of Armageddon." *American History Review* 117(5): 1431–60.

Craig, Campbell. 2003. *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz*. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 2008. "The Resurgent Idea of World Government." *Ethics & International Affairs* 22(2): 133–42.

Craig, Campbell, and Jan Ruzicka. 2013. "The Nonproliferation Complex." *Ethics & International Affairs* 27(3): 329–48.

Cox, Robert W. 1987. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 10(2): 126–55.

de Groot, Gerard. 2004. The Bomb; A Life. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Deudney, Daniel. 2007. *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Douglas, Heather. 2009. *Science, Policy and the Value-Free Ideal*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Downer, John. 2011. "'737-Cabriolet': The Limits of Knowledge and the Sociology of Inevitable Failure." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(3): 725–62.

Feiveson, Harold, Alexander Glaser, Zia Mian, and Frank von Hippel. 2014. *Unmaking the Bomb. A Fissile Material Approach to Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation*. Boston: MIT Press.

Gallois, Pierre-Marie. 1961. *The Balance of Terror: Strategy for the Nuclear Age*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gavin, Francis. 2012. "Policy, History and the Ivory Tower–Policy Gap in the Nuclear Proliferation Debate." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35(4): 573–600.

Goldstein, Lyle. 2006. *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hecht, Gabrielle. 2006. "Nuclear Ontologies." *Constellations* 13(3): 320–31.

Jervis, Robert. 1984. *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kahn, Hermann. [1960] 2010. *On Thermonuclear War*. New Brunswick, NJ: Princeton University Press. Reprint, London: Transaction Publishers.

Keylor, William. 2015. "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History." *H-Diplo* 126. Accessed June 24, 2016, http://tiny.cc/E126.

Kirschner, Jonathan. 2015. "The Economic Sins of Modern IR Theory and the Classical Realist Alternative." *World Politics* 67 (1): 155–183.

Knopf, Jeffrey. 2002. "Recasting the Proliferation Optimism-Pessimism Debate." *Security Studies* 12(1): 41–96.

Knopf, Jeffrey 2009. "Three Items in One: Deterrence as a Concept, a Research Program and a Political Issue." In *Complex Deterrence. Strategy in the Global Age*, edited by T. V. Paul, Patrick Morgan, and James Wirtz, 31–56. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kroenig, Matthew. 2009. "*Beyond Optimism and Pessimism: The Differential Effects of Proliferation.*" *Working Paper, Managing the Atom Program*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Larsen, Jeffrey, and Kartchner Kerr, eds. 2014. On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Levitas, Ruth. 2013. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Lewis, Patricia, Heather Williams, Benoît Pelopidas, and Sasan Aghlani. 2014. "*Too Close for Comfort: Cases of New Nuclear Use and Options for Policy.*" Chatham House Report. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Mallard, Grégoire, and George Lakoff. 2011. "How Claims to Know the Future Are Used to Understand the Present: Techniques of Prospection in the Field of National Security." In *Social Knowledge in the Making*, edited by Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michèle Lamont, 339–77. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Masco, Joseph. 2015. "Nuclear Pasts; Nuclear Futures, or Disarming through Rebuilding." *Critical Studies on Security* 3(3): 308–12.

McAllister, James, and Diane, Labrosse, eds. 2014. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons."

H-Diplo/ISSS. Accessed June 24, 2016, https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf.

MccGwire, Michael. 1985. "Deterrence: The Problem Not the Solution." *International Affairs* 62(1): 55–70.

———. 2006. "Nuclear Deterrence." *International Affairs* 82(4): 771–84.

Mecklin, John. 2015. "Disarm and Modernize." *Foreign Policy*, March 24. Accessed on June 24, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/24/disarm- and-modernize- nuclear-weapons-warheads/.

Morgenthau, Hans. 1948. *Politics Among Nations; The Struggle for Power and Peace.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mueller, Harald. 2013. "Icons Off the Mark: Waltz and Schelling on a Perpetual Brave Nuclear World." *Nonproliferation Review* 20(3): 545–65.

Mueller, John. 1988. "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World." *International Security* 13(2): 55–79.

Mutimer, David. 2000. *The Weapons State: Proliferation and the Framing of Security.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Neumann, Iver. 2008. "The Responsible Intellectual: Adviser and Critic." *International Studies Review* 10: 174–77.

Oren, Ido. 2003. *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries in the Making of Political Science.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Pelopidas, Benoît. 2011. "The Oracles of Proliferation: How Experts Maintained a Biased Historical Reading That Limits Policy Innovation." *Nonproliferation Review* 18(1): 297–314.

———. 2014. "Nuclear Scholarship for Whom? Rethinking Policy Relevance and the Responsibility of Nuclear Scholars." *H-Diplo.* Accessed June 24, 2016, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/32070/%E2%80%9Cwhat-we-do-and-why-it-matters-response-fks%E2%80%9D-response-h-diploissf#reply-36400.

Pelopidas, Benoît.. 2015. "A Bet Portrayed as a Certainty: Reassessing the Added Deterrent Value of Nuclear Weapons." In *The War That Must Never Be Fought*, edited by George Shultz and James Goodby, 5–55. Stanford, CA: Hoover Press.

Peoples, Columba. 2016. "Redemption and Nutopia: The Scope of Nuclear Critique in International Studies." *Millennium* 44(2): 216–35.

Perrow, Charles. 1999. *Normal Accidents. Living with High Risk Technologies.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Perkins, Ray Jr. 1994. "Bertrand Russell and Preventive War." *Russell: Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives* 14: 135–53.

Quester, George. 2014. "The End of the Nuclear Taboo?" In *On Limited Nuclear War in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Jeffrey Larsen and Kerry Kartchner, 172–91. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ritchie, Nick. 2009. "Deterrence Dogma? Challenging the Relevance of British Nuclear Weapons." *International Affairs* 85(1): 81–98.

———. 2012. *A Nuclear-Weapons Free World? Britain, Trident and the Challenges Ahead.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

———. 2013. "Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons." *Contemporary Security Policy* 34(1): 146–73.

Robinson, Todd. 2015. "What Do We Mean by Nuclear Proliferation?" *Nonproliferation Review* 22(1): 53–70.

Rosenberg, David Alan, and Steven T. Ross, eds. 1990. *America's Plans for War Against the Soviet Union, 1945–1950.* New York: Garland Publications.

Sagan, Scott. 1993. *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

———. 2004. "The Problem of Redundancy Problem: Why More Nuclear Security Forces May Produce Less Nuclear Security." *Risk Analysis* 24(4): 935–46.

Shultz, George. 2015. "Preface." In *The War That Must Never Be Fought*, edited by George Shultz and James Goodby, i–xv. Stanford, CA: Hoover Press.

Steele, Brent, and Jack Amoureux. 2016. *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique and Practice.* London: Routledge.

Sylvest, Casper, and Rens van Munster. 2014. "Reclaiming Nuclear Politics? Nuclear Realism, the H-Bomb and Globality." *Security Dialogue* 45(6): 530–47.

———. 2016. *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution.* London: Routledge.

Trachtenberg, Marc. 1991. *History and Strategy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Waever, Ole. 2015. "The History and Social Structure of Security Studies as a Practico-Academic Field." In *Security Expertise. Practice, Power, Responsibility*, edited by Christian Bueger and Trine Villumsen-Berling, 76–106. London: Routledge.

Walt, Stephen. 2005. "The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations." *Annual Review of Political Science* 8: 23–48.

Waltz, Kenneth. 1981. "*The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better.*" *Adelphi Paper 171.* London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Ward, Michael. 2016. "Can We Predict Politics? Toward What End?" *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1(1): 80–91.

Williams, Michael. 1993. "Neo-Realism and the Future of Strategy." *Review of International Studies* 19(2): 103–21.

———. 2009. "Waltz, Realism and Democracy." *International Relations* 23(3): 328–40.

Wilson, Ward. 2008. "The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence." *Nonproliferation Review* 15(3): 421–39.

———. 2012. "Continuing to Question the Reliability of Nuclear Deterrence." *Nonproliferation Review* 19(1): 69–74.

Wirtz, James. 2014. "Limited Nuclear War Reconsidered." In *On Limited Nuclear War in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Jeffrey Larsen and Kerry Kartchner, 263–71. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wolfworth, William. 2011. "Gilpinian Realism and International Relations." *International Relations* 25(4): 499–511.

Xia, Lili, Alan Robock, Michael Mills, Andrea Stenke, and Ira Helfand. 2015. "Decadal Reduction of Chinese Agriculture After a Regional Nuclear War." *Earth's Future* 3: 37–48.

Zhang, Hui. 2016. "Chinese Position on Disarmament and Regional Security." In *Global Nuclear Disarmament: Strategic, Political and Regional Perspectives*, edited by Nik Hynek and Michal Smetana, 251–67. London: Routledge.

Zhang, Yongjin, and Teng-Chi Chang, eds. 2016. *Constructing a Chinese School of IR: Ongoing Debates and Sociological Realities*. London: Routledge.

Zwald, Zachary. 2013. "Imaginary Nuclear Conflicts: Explaining Deterrence Policy Preference Formation." *Security Studies* 22(4): 640–71.