WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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War Profiteers Prefer to Hide in the Shadows

By Andrew Dey

War is an obscenity, and so often when we see it taking place, we feel powerless to stop it. When we set out yet again to march against another war, we are, in a sense, too late – the bombs are already falling. But war doesn't come from nowhere, and it need not have such an inevitability about it. There are lots of opportunities for disrupting the preparation for war. We can challenge the underlying structures of war, wherever and whatever they are. One means of doing this is by challenging so-called war profiteers, the industries that both profit and support ongoing cycles of war and violence.

If the world were a theater, then wars would be performed center stage, where they are visible to everyone in the audience. Integral to the set would be soldiers and tanks, bombs falling from the sky, politicians on televisions, and of course death and destruction. When we go to a play, we focus on the performance onstage. It is less common to think, much less talk, about everything that happens behind the scenes, where we would find engineers, piles of equipment, and the finances that allows the spectacle to run. They are difficult to see, but if it wasn't for these structures and systems, then the drama of war couldn't be staged in the first place.

It would be easy to ignore the role of gender in our analysis of war profiteering, instead letting our attention fall on the structures of capitalism and neoliberalism that drive the wheels of violence in the arms trade, extractive industries, and colonization and occupation of land. However, to ignore gender would be to ignore a critical facet of both the causes and the impacts of these structures. It would also deprive us from learning how we can work to challenge and undermine them.

The impact of war profiteering is inherently gendered – existing in the world are an estimated 650 million handguns[1], half of which are held in private hands and most of which are in men's hands. Still, gender relations and patriarchy also play a critical role in creating the context where men sell weapons to men. This structural and cultural violence is what makes war profiteering possible, namely, by legitimizing the violence of the arms trade and other forms of war profiteering.

Behind the Scenes

When we talk about war profiteering, it is often what is going on behind the scenes that we speak of. War profiteers are those who consummate the violence of war in the first place and then 'clean up' after the big show is over and most people have gone home. It is they who benefit financially from the business of war. The activities of war profiteers could happen years before or after any physical violence happens.

Compared to the violence of war, war profiteering in our society is inconspicuous. It provides less dramatic photos, and sometimes we wouldn't even link any of its signs or depictions to violence or war. War profiteering is perhaps most visible in the arms trade. However, it can also be seen in many other scenarios: for example, when land is occupied and exploited (such as in the West Bank or West Papua), when extraction and mining companies exploit cheap, conscripted labor (as has been alleged by the UN in Eritrea[2]), when economies are ransacked by multinational companies[3] in postwar reconstruction, and when research groups take funding from arms companies. War profiteering makes war inevitable because the motivation for profit, and the power of the lobbies behind such industries, will more often than not overpower calls for peaceful, nonviolent solutions to conflict.

It is also important to note, as suggested by the aforementioned examples, profiteering happens not just during actual war, but also as part of other forms of militarization. War profiteering occurs when people profit from oppressive and violent contexts or relationships, such as when borders are militarized, when our police forces choose ever more violent means of crowd control, and when states take advantage of the natural resources of a land they have occupied.

The waste of war profiteering is very real. It extends beyond financial resources that could be used for more constructive activities or responding to other threats, such as climate change. The skills, labor, and intellectual capacity of human beings and the natural resources that are invested in violent machinery and systems are finite. And they are misspent when used to prepare for war. Yet, there are also significant social and symbolic elements to the violence being enacted. In a world where it is legitimate to militarize a community and deprive them of their land in order to exploit the natural resource their homes are built on, we are being taught to always look at the earth as something to exploit and capitalize on, not as something holding inherent value.

The values of feminism and a gender analysis can help us understand this violence and how to respond to it, particularly as we look for ways of building communities that refuse exploitation of both people and places. A 2014 meeting of feminists in Quito made the link between this type of violence and gender explicit in their statement against extractive industries in Latin America

> Our presence as women in socio-environmental struggles has gained prominence, allowing for the denunciation of oil and mineral extraction and the exploitation of women as two sides of the same coin. All of these forms of exploitation have a common root: a model of development which subordinates life to the accumulation of capital as expressed in the extractivism which devalues the conservation and care work which we women have carried out over the course of centuries in these rural communities. In addition to defending life, water, and the land, we watch over the health of our families and stand up for food sovereignty and the rights and defense of Mother Earth in the face of the capitalist system which is expressed in a plunderous extractivism and which is inequitable, unjust, overlooks women, and prioritizes the reproduction of capital over the reproduction of life.[4]

Violence

A useful tool for thinking about the violence of war profiteering is Galtung's typology of violence. Galtung said that 'violence' is more complex and sustained than physical acts of aggression in which people are being visibly hurt or killed – this type of violence is the tip of a bigger iceberg. Underneath this 'direct violence' are layers of much less visible 'structural violence' and 'cultural violence.' Structural violence is rarely visible: no one is obviously killed or hurt, no viewable violence takes place. Still, the economic systems and trade relationships enabling war should be thought of as a form of violence that facilitates and supports acts of direct violence. And war profiteering should be thought of as a form of structural violence that the direct violence of war relies on.

Cultural violence is even more insidious. It renders the violence of war profiteering 'invisible' by making it appear legitimate. Cultural violence can occur in an array of ways: for example, through sponsoring certain institutions (schools,[5] for instance), through 'legalese' (think of the defensive refrain "I'm not breaking any laws..."), through exploiting connections with politicians, through dual-use technology (equipment that can be used for both military or civilian purposes), through donating to certain charities.[6]

Our framing and understanding of gender is critical to our cultures, so it is no leap to realize that patriarchy is a founding pillar of cultural violence. Its narratives maintain male dominance. Cynthia Cockburn described the violence of these gender relations as "the insistent shaping of masculinity, the ideal, preferred, form of manhood, as mentally competitive and combative; psychologically ready to use coercion; and physically equipped to prevail through force."[7]

Another form of cultural violence-as-war profiteering can take place right in front of us, in our own lives. For example, when we go to the supermarket and buy fruits and vegetables grown in the soil of occupied territory, we may end up supporting companies that profit from war and violence. Through the violence of occupation, some companies are able to keep their prices down, gain access to illegal child labor,[8] and use resources such as land and water that occupied communities do not have access to. Cultural violence happens at the point we forget it's war profiteering and allow ourselves to go along thinking: "It's just shopping."

Activists involved in boycott initiatives would not be surprised, but for many in affluent countries not directly experiencing armed violent conflict, war is something that happens elsewhere. This attitude, however, masks our own participation in preparation for war. For many, it is simply easier to not look, to avoid the question. A pervasive tool of militarism is the move from large-scale active participation in the work and tools of war (for example, conscription for men and nationalized work in munitions factories for women during World War Two) to encouraging passivity and criminalizing dissent. Nowadays demands little more than our silence.

The Arms Industry

An example of how all these forms of violence intersect – and are made so invisible – is found in the story of the workers at Remington Arms. The US arms company built a rifle that was used during the infamous 2012 school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut. After the shooting, one of the company workers told a journalist: "Nobody wants to think they had a hand in making the Newtown gun."[9] For the individual who built that rifle there may be a sense of direct complicity, but to only blame the hand that built the gun misses the point – the worker was only thinking of the immediate direct violence, neglecting all the structural violence that allowed that gun to exist in the first place. He *didn't* say: "Nobody wants to work for the company that profited in making the Newtown gun." Nor did he ask: "What is it that makes the production and sale of weapons a legitimate industry?" The structural and cultural violence of the arms industry facilitated the direct violence that occurred in the school.

Looking at violence through the lens of war profiteering sharpens our sight. It forces us to look beyond the immediate responsibility of the individual actors in war and to see the structures that support it: the arms manufacturers, extraction companies, banks, pension funds, and research institutions that directly and/or indirectly facilitate it.

Conclusion

At the time of writing an early draft of this article, activists in London were taking nonviolent direct action against the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair, one of the world's biggest trade shows for the weapons of war. Day after day before the event had officially begun, activists sat and stood in roads, impeding vehicles loaded with weapons and supplies from entry to the fair. The protests were organized in a non-hierarchical manner, with differently themed days allowing for a lot of creativity and different types of action.

One of the most powerful images from the protests is of two women and a man spilling and kneeling in what is meant to look like blood. Positioned across the entrance road to the fair, they are blocking traffic, which has since mounted up behind them. Their very human bodies and the grace with which they seem to place the red paint provides a sharp juxtaposition to photography taken the next day by activists inside the fair location. In the latter images, we see the angular, brutal tools of war being assembled for purchase by the next week's fair visitors, 30,000 people – the vast majority men.

Pax Christi UK, http://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LCW-Nora.jpg

The DSEI fair was not stopped. Though if not for the presence of these activists, its setup would have gone on unhindered. The whole event would have remained 'invisible,' and the accompanying narratives – that the arms trade exists for our security and that we must rely on extreme, highly technologized violence to remain safe – would not have been disrupted. Instead, the wounds inflicted by the arms trade were laid bare and the scale of the arms trade, made visible. How it lives and works in and among our communities was exposed. As this single event showed, the role of campaigners and activists is to make things that most people fail to notice much more visible. It is to get to the root causes of problems. It is to demand that we not only look at the most immediate and appalling violence, but also take action against the structural issues that surround the violence in our world.

Against Arms Trade, https://www.caat.org.uk/images/pictures/caesar-howitzer-dsei-2015.jpg

Notes

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[3] Paul Bignell, "Secret Memos Expose Link between Oil firms and Invasion of Iraq," Independent, December 21, 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/secret-memos-expose-link-between-oil-firms-and-invasion-of-iraq-2269610.html

[4] "Women's Declaration on Extractivism and Climate Change," War Resisters' International, October 30, 2014, http://www.wri-irg.org/node/23903 ; originally published in Spanish as "Encuentro de mujeres frente al extractivismo y al cambio climático," Miradas Criticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, October 15, 2014, http://territorioyfeminismos.org/2014/10/15/encuentro-de-mujeres-frente-al-extractivismo-y-al-cambio-climatico

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[6] AWE, "Community Giving," http://www.awe.co.uk/our-responsibilities/community-giving

[7] Cynthia Cockburn, "World Disarmament? Start by Disarming Masculinity," openDemocracy, April 30, 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/cynthia-cockburn/world-disarmament-start-by-disarming-masculinity

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