

Week Two Reading Guide: Nuclear weapons and gender

September 16, 2019

Beckwith, J. 2002, *Making Genes, Making Waves: A Social Activist in Science* (Harvard University Press), Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: On page 41, Beckwith describes “outsider values” in what we might today call cultural counterspaces, i.e., safe spaces in which members of marginalized groups find refuge from an oppressive culture. How did those spaces help him to succeed academically at Harvard?

Revisit the questions posed Sept. 9 for Chapter 2, in the context of political rather than scientific culture. What events and people influenced Beckwith’s political evolution? Why and how did Beckwith, as a junior professor, obstruct Harvard’s development of Mission Hill in Boston?

Do you think activists today are more likely to arise in some fields of science, than others (p. 52)? Why?

Oppenheimer, J. R. 1962, “War and the Nations,” Whidden Lecture at McMaster University, edited and reprinted in *Atoms and Void: Essays on Science and Community* (Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 133–142.

J. Robert Oppenheimer was not a science activist, in the ordinary sense. Nevertheless, he was a physicist of unusually broad humanistic knowledge and interests, a brilliant polymath. During World War II, he led the Manhattan Project that developed and tested nuclear weapons before they were used on Japan in 1945. He was a political liberal, perhaps socialist, with communist friends and relatives, and this caused him some difficulties later leading to the revocation of his security clearance. After the war he argued unsuccessfully for international control of nuclear weapons and technology. His writings show concern with issues of ethics, which he approaches intellectually, with surprising detachment.

The essay extracted here was one of the public lectures he delivered at McMaster University in 1962. He begins with an esoteric discussion of “complementarity,” a concept invoked by Niels Bohr, a founder of quantum mechanics, to describe the paradoxes of dualism (for example, how light can be both wave and particle). What are some examples he cites? Discuss physics and politics as a complementary pair.

Notice Oppenheimer’s use of passive voice: “The bombs were used against Japan.” Is there any significance to this? What ethical considerations does he use to justify nuclear weapons? What ethical stands did other physicists take, including Franck, Einstein, and Bohr? Why didn’t the US and Soviet governments follow physicists’ recommendations to share all information and put nuclear weapons technology under the control of an international body? In the end, Oppenheimer appears fatalistic about the nuclear arms race: “I have no counsel except that of sobriety and some hope.”

Ultimately, Oppenheimer is led by values (“what our duty is”). What are they?

Weisskopf, V. 1989, "Forty Years After: Thoughts of a Nuclear Witness," in *The Privilege of Being a Physicist* (W. H. Freeman and Co.), pp. 206–224.

Victor ("Viki") Weisskopf was an Austrian nuclear physicist who came to the US in the 1930s (one of many Jewish scientists who helped make the US a world leader) where he worked on the Manhattan Project and then became a MIT professor. He was a role model for me as a young faculty member. His essay, written about 25 years after Oppenheimer's, gives a somewhat different perspective on nuclear weapons. Weisskopf was a founder of the Federation of Atomic Scientists (later the Federation of American Scientists), an organization created in 1945 to alert the world to the danger of nuclear weapons.

What is Weisskopf's analysis of the reasons for the nuclear arms race? How did he try to stop it? What does he feel are the most effective methods for slowing the race? (Note that the epilogue to the article is written a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall and three years before the end of the cold war with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.)

Was Weisskopf an activist? Does he support activism? Although he does not list them as directly as Oppenheimer, what can one deduce about his values?

September 18, 2019

Today's readings develop some concepts from sociology and feminist theory that will help us later as we explore the relationship between activism, gender, race, and power. These concepts and some of the questions they raise arise in the study of people of prepare for nuclear war.

Gusterson, H. 1995, "Becoming a weapons scientist," in *People of the Bomb: Portraits of America's Nuclear Complex* (University of California Press, 2004), pp. 3–20.

Hugh Gusterson is an anthropologist who did his PhD thesis work studying nuclear weapons designers. This may be understandable given his own experience as a nuclear disarmament activist prior to his graduate studies. Imagine being an anti-gun violence activist and then studying people who work at the NRA or a manufacturer of semi-automatic weapons. Could you maintain perspective? Did Gusterson?

Describe Sylvia's feminism. Does it surprise you, or not? Gusterson uses the term "essentialism," referring to gender essentialism, the idea that women are fundamentally different from men. For example, according to essentialism, women are naturally nurturing and peace-making while men are naturally competitive and aggressive. According to such thinking, the variation in gender representation (nurses vs. physicists, for example) is due to essential differences between men and women. Second-wave feminism rejected essentialism with the recognition that gender is socially constructed. Gusterson appears surprised to discover his essentialist biases, including the idea that only right-wing men would design nuclear weapons.

Gusterson also uses the term "discourses," referring to the ideas introduced into sociology by Michel Foucault. Discourses are ways of thinking and communicating about people, objects, and society, that

guide and delimit our thinking. For example, many languages impose the concept of a gender binary through pronouns, articles, and verb constructions, making it difficult to conceptualize queer and trans identities. Discourses are learned, for example the idea that nuclear weapons prevent war. (Is there a similar discourse about guns?) Gusterson himself learned a discourse about anthropology that changed his fear of nuclear war. What does this mean to you?

How does Gusterson's article (especially pp. 11 and 15–17) exemplify the complementarity discussed by Oppenheimer?

Gusterson, H. 1999, "Feminist Militarism," *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 22.2, 17; <https://doi.org/10.1525/pol.1999.22.2.17>

This article focuses on the feminist themes Gusterson touched on in his earlier one. He begins restating the essentialist position and its opposition by feminists via "social constructedness." Second-wave feminism started with Simone de Beauvoir's idea that gender is constructed ("One is no born, but rather becomes, a woman") and extending to post-structuralist Judith Butler, for whom gender is a performance, potentially fluid, learned and practiced daily based on cultural norms and discourses. Gusterson is intrigued by the idea of feminist militarism as performance.

"If we weren't feminists when we went in [to the military], we were when we came out." What was meant by this? How does the military culture described in the article reflect gender essentialism?

On p. 22, Gusterson argues that the women's movement and the peace movement "remake their mythic narratives... through the tropes of revitalization." What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Is feminist militarism feminist? Does your answer depend on whether you adopt essentialist or constructivist reasoning?

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