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Encounters at the Gate

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It's nearly lunchtime on a warm and sunny September morning, and Professor Kimberly Hutchings is giving her keynote address from a bus stop next to Canning Town station in the London borough of Newham. Around twenty-five audience members cluster about her, making an earnest effort to pay attention while, in truth, being distracted by the events taking place in the road just a few paces away. There, an articulated lorry transporting a large tank has come to a halt in front of a small group of activists and academics who have sat in the road and refused to move. The lorry is attempting to deliver the tank to the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair, which is to take place next week at the nearby ExCeL centre; the activists are trying to stop it.

Police officers remonstrate with those in the road, threatening arrest if they refuse to move and allow the lorry and tank to pass. Now lying down and covered in a banner, which reads 'Stop the Arms Fair', they ignore the police and try to listen to Hutchings. It is difficult to hear her over the sound of sirens and the sheer absurdity of the situation, but those present try anyway; her paper, entitled 'War and Moral Stupidity', could not be more pertinent. As Hutchings discusses the ways in which just war theory has attempted to differentiate between morally good and morally bad forms of violence, the police drag the protestors out of the road and into handcuffs, clearing the way for the tank to be delivered and exhibited.

How did we get here?

The DSEI arms fair is one of the largest in the world. It takes place in East London every other September, bringing together over 1500 arms companies and military delegations from more than 100 countries. The UK government invites military delegations from countries including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and Egypt, connecting them with potential suppliers. On display at the fair is everything from crowd control equipment to machine guns, tanks, drones and even battleships. It is an important event in the business of the international arms trade, and cements Britain's place as a major player in the industry. As such, it also attracts significant opposition. Ever since the fair began in 2001, anti-militarist activists have attempted to disrupt it. Examples of their attempts include greeting arms dealers at City Airport and giving them false directions, registering fake companies as exhibitors in order to gain access and cause chaos inside, and attempting to prevent a battleship from being exhibited by using canoes to block its passage through the Victoria Canal.

In 2015, activists worked to obstruct the setup of the arms fair by holding a week of action ahead of its opening date. A coalition of groups called Stop The Arms Fair prepared a series of themed days, which would both generate criticism of the exhibition and make life difficult for the organisers. Crucially, these different days would each call attention to particular socio-political contexts and struggles marked by and concerned with militarism and the arms trade. Themes included migration, climate change, religion and faith, and Palestine. One day was to focus on the militarisation of education. It was within this framework that some colleagues and I decided to organise an academic conference at the gates of the arms fair.¹

British universities are deeply enmeshed with more conventional militarist institutions (such as the Ministry of Defence, the armed forces and arms companies); significant connections exist with respect to research, teaching, investments and student careers services. In terms of research, both the MoD and arms companies engage in a wide range of partnerships with university departments (primarily science and engineering), providing much-needed funds in return for channelling research priorities in the direction of military production (Stavrianakis 2006: 142-143). Such relationships also affect teaching, as student placements and

¹ These colleagues include Aggie Hirst (City University), Lucas Donna Hedlund and Alister Wedderburn (King's College London) and myself.

projects are directed towards these research priorities. The role of the British military in university education has also increased dramatically over the past ten years, with one university even launching an entire degree programme in 'Armed Forces'. Both individual universities and the country-wide Universities Superannuation Scheme pension fund invest heavily in the arms trade, and university careers services regularly invite both the military and arms companies onto campuses to attract the next generation of creative and innovative minds into careers directed towards military production.

British universities therefore play an important role in legitimating, sustaining and entrenching militarism. Just as campaigns concerned with the 'militarisation of everyday life' have focused on identifying and challenging militarism in schools, public institutions and churches, so should we work to demilitarize our universities. Such a task can be situated alongside a range of other struggles being waged for the political soul of higher education in the UK, of which the most notable in recent years have been those fighting to protect the public university and those calling for the decolonization of university curricula, architecture and more. These struggles have focused attention on the effects of neoliberalism and colonialism, both of which are intimately intertwined with contemporary processes of militarisation. Our sense in setting up the conference, then, was that a move to focus on the (de)militarization of British universities was one which interconnects with other important campaigns.

There is a rich tradition of scholars being practically involved in anti-militarist social movements, the clear influence of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp on many feminist academics' work being one notable example (Cockburn 2012: 27-28; Sylvester: 2002: 260-261; Enloe: 1989: 79). We took more direct inspiration, however, from a particular event that took place in 2007 as part of 'Faslane 365', a year-long rolling blockade of the Faslane Naval Base in Scotland (Faslane being the home of Britain's nuclear arsenal). There, a group of scholars staged an academic conference which doubled-up as a blockade of the facility. Sitting in front of the main gates of the base, participants presented papers on the ethics, politics and science of nuclear weapons while physically obstructing their use, thirty-two of them refusing to move until arrested. As two of the participants reflect:

This is a beautiful form of action, one in which our words and deeds are aligned, one in which our theoretical discussion is our political practice, one in which we literally pit our bodies and our profession against the weapons of mass destruction. (Kenrick and Vinthagen 2008: 155)

The blockade closed the gates of the base for six hours, while providing the opportunity to form friendships, share ideas, and reflect on the politics of academic practice. Like many academics involved with social movements and political activism, we as the organisers often find ourselves struggling to find those points of intersection between our two worlds which are most creative or provocative. The Faslane 365 action, with its unusually sharp manifestation of theory and/as practice, is a potent example from which to think through such problems. We sought to recreate something of its spirit in our conference.

As much as was possible, we tried to replicate the form and aesthetic of an academic conference. Ahead of the event, keynote speakers were invited, workshop themes were chosen, and a call for papers was drafted and circulated. We appealed for papers, presentations and performances that focused on aspects of warfare and militarisation, alongside those that engaged the politics of protest and resistance. The day itself was divided into themed panel sessions, with groups of speakers followed by time for questions in a manner familiar to academic audiences. These hallmarks of university culture merged with others more traditionally associated with activist spaces: bullhorns, banners, a small Occupy encampment and a heavy police presence. The participants in the workshop, of whom there were about fifty, reflected this blurring, comprising activists taking part in the week of action against DSEI alongside academics, NGO workers and members of the public.² In this interstitial space, on a patch of grass outside the arms fair, we held our conference.

² Notwithstanding the fact that plenty of the participants fitted into two, three or indeed all of these categories.

For much of the day, the schedule ran as expected. Panellists gave papers on topics including the contemporary relevance of pacifism, the political dynamics of the ‘Help for Heroes’ charity, the Israeli Army’s militarisation of ethics, and Britain’s complicity in the Saudi-led coalition’s crimes against humanity in Yemen. The second keynote slot was filled by John Horne from Bahrain Watch, who used his talk to introduce the new #RiotID app – a civic media project which helps people to identify and record the use of riot control weapons against civilians.³ Building on this more practical intervention, the day ended with a workshop run by ForcesWatch, who invited participants to think about ways in which they can work to challenge everyday militarism within universities.⁴ Nonetheless, and despite the conference proceeding ‘as normal’, one could not participate without being aware of the specific and highly unusual political and physical context in which it was taking place. The sight of the ExCeL Centre looming in the background, and the regular punctuating roars of lorries moving equipment into the fair, made clear the political stakes of the discussions underway. We were denied the comfort of abstraction; that equipment was the same equipment being used in checkpoints in Hebron, in the skies over Yemen, and which would soon be used by British forces in Syria. At no point was this sense of urgency more dramatically emphasised than in the vignette with which I started this piece; towards the end of the first panel session some of the activists who had been keeping watch spotted the lorry carrying the tank and tore after it, heading it off at the bus stop fifty metres down the road and lying in front of it. We moved the conference down the road and allowed these academic and activist spaces, roles and discourses to dissolve ever further into one another.

It is, of course, important to not become too enamoured by the pleasure of collapsing worlds, or the subversive ironies at play in these stories. In order to mark the potency of theory in this context, we surely also have to acknowledge its (and our) shortcomings: no matter the elegance of the critiques mobilised, or the eloquence of their articulation, the arms fair took place anyway. Militarism is clearly no respecter of deconstructive élan. That said, the conference made important interventions. Most prominently, it resisted the enclosure of academic ideas behind paywalls, and the prevailing sense that academic labour is valuable only insofar as it contributes to league tables, Research Excellence Framework scores and income generation. This was ‘research impact’ not measured in terms of policy influence (the gold standard of neoliberal knowledge production) but as a practice of critical political encounter. It was an assertion of radical ideas as political projects, and a reclaiming of space; as our universities are ever increasingly marked by and moulded in the service of militarism, this was a small opportunity to turn the tables and, albeit in transitory fashion, determine ‘their’ spaces.

This reclaimed space was used in a manner that ensured that its effects would resonate beyond the eight short hours of the conference. Connections were formed between academics working on similar topics and between academics and activists working towards common goals. Together, we reflected on different strategies for challenging the militarisation of universities and on new ways to break down ivory tower walls that are as much our own construction as anything. We challenged ourselves to do more, to think creatively and urgently beyond the conventions of academic practice, to find fresh ways to reconfigure our labour as a form of resistance, and to build solidarity with others struggling against global militarism. Where these conversations develop remains an open question. DSEI will return in September 2017, and plans have already begun...

Kenrick, J. and S. Vinthagen, 2008. ‘Critique in Action: Academic Conference Blockades’, in A. Zelter, ed., *Faslane 365: a year of anti-nuclear blockades*, Glasgow: Bell & Bain Ltd.

³ <https://bahrainwatch.org/>

⁴ <http://www.forceswatch.net/>

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