

Editorial

Intervention: Elsevier, critical geography and the arms trade

In 2001 and again in 2003 and 2005, London hosted the world's biggest weapons fair at the Docklands ExCel Centre. Around 1000 exhibitors sell everything from battleships and attack helicopters to cluster bombs and machine guns to delegates from a third of the world's countries. In September of 2005, among the buyers' delegations invited to attend the Defence Systems & Equipment International (DSEI) at the Excel centre in London's Docklands were seven countries on the UK's list of the twenty most serious human rights abusing regimes.¹ These seven countries included China, which is currently subject to an EU arms embargo, and Colombia, where the security forces have been involved in extra-judicial executions and where there is ongoing evidence of collusion between paramilitaries and the security forces (Amnesty International, 2006). All the world's main producers of modern weapons systems were present at the 'Arms Fair'. Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon of the US, Britain's BAE Systems, and Thales of France were 'present with mock-ups of missiles, warships, and military aircraft, variously described as "battlefield management systems" and "mission packages"' (Norton-Taylor, 2005a). The Israeli company 'TAR Ideal' openly promoted torture equipment including electric-shock batons, stun guns and leg irons, all of which are banned for export under British law (Norton-Taylor, 2005b). Despite assurances from the organisers that cluster bombs were not on sale Denel, the South African company, confirmed to a journalist from the *Independent* that it made and supplied these weapons (Shah, 2005).

'Arms fairs' are sites which are integral to the functioning of the global arms trade. The aggressive promotion of weapons at these events and the active courting of governments with bad human rights records as potential customers would seem to have very little to do with the 'refined' world of academic publishing. It would seem to be divorced from the journals where critical geographers seek to publish their work and to debate issues such as human rights, corporate social responsibility and the politics of violence. It might be assumed that the only way it would infringe on our lives as geographers would be as something we might condemn. Or we might consider it appropriate to support the civil society mobilisations which have taken place at every fair since 2001 and to express solidarity with the community activists in Newham who are trying to ensure that there is no arms fair at the ExCel Centre, or anywhere else, in 2007. Various groups have launched permanent campaigns to highlight the effects of the arms fair (see Disarm Dsei www.dsei.org, and the Campaign Against the Arms Trade www.caat.org.uk).

¹ These countries were China, Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

The DSEI is in fact organised by a subsidiary of Reed Elsevier, which owns many key geography journals. Reed Exhibitions and Spearhead Exhibitions organise the DSEI and a number of other international arms fairs. Reed Elsevier publishes many of the key journals in the discipline including *Political Geography*, *Geoforum*, *Journal of Historical Geography*, *Applied Geography*, *Geographical Abstracts: Human Geography* and *Geographical Abstracts: Physical Geography*. It is also the publisher of major forthcoming ventures such as *The International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*. Reed Elsevier is a lucrative concern: its interim results for 2005 point to adjusted profits before tax of £395m (up from £387m in 2004) (Blomley, *in press*).

In September 2005 *The Lancet*, the prestigious medical journal owned by Reed Elsevier, published a letter signed by public health care professionals from five continents which highlighted the involvement of *The Lancet's* publisher in the global arms trade. It prompted *The Lancet's* editorial board to issue a scathing condemnation of Reed Elsevier which called upon the company 'to divest itself of all business interests that threaten human, and especially civilian, health and well-being' (Lancet, 2005: 868). In March 2006, on the eve of the London Book fair a group of international authors including A.S. Byatt, Nick Hornby and Nadine Gordimer noted that the London Book fair 'has now become connected to an equally global trade that fundamentally undermines peaceful internationalism, fuelling conflict and impoverishment in the world's poorest regions. Its organizer Reed Exhibitions, owned by the publisher Reed Elsevier, has since 2003 accumulated a portfolio of arms fairs which grease the wheels of the global weapons trade'. They called 'upon Reed Elsevier to end its involvement in a dirty and damaging business; and upon our colleagues to encourage Reed Elsevier to take the book trade out of the arms trade' (Byatt et al., 2006).

The public response of Reed Elsevier to these criticisms has been to stress that organising such events is an entirely legal business practice. They have argued that the 'defence industry is central to the preservation of freedom and national security' and is necessary for the 'preservation of democratic values' (Cowden, 2005: 869). We feel that this defence is inadequate and untenable. It fails to engage seriously with concerns about the ethical status of the global arms trade. Further, it fails to address how Reed Elsevier's involvement with the arms trade can be squared with the company's status as a signatory to the UN Global Compact, a global corporate social responsibility standard. Principle 1 of the compact states that 'global sourcing and manufacturing means that companies need to be fully aware of potential human rights issues both upstream and downstream. Promoting best practice in human rights will allow business to select appropriate business partners' (United Nations, 2000). It is unclear how Reed Elsevier's involvement in the arms trade and its soliciting of clients from countries on the UK's list of the twenty most serious human rights abusing regimes can be commensurate with signing this compact.

We therefore believe that geographers should follow the lead of these writers and *The Lancet*. We cannot accept a situation whereby our work is being published by a company with links to the aggressive promotion of the arms trade. We believe that Elsevier's involvement in the arms trade is incompatible with the role of publishing international academic journals, particularly those whose reputation is based on publishing critical material.

Debates around critical geography have drawn key distinctions between activism outside the university and struggles within the academy. Noel Castree has argued that "rather than worrying over their apparent failure to connect with constituencies 'out there'" "geographies leftists need to recapture something of the radical geographical spirit of action and engagement in order to contest changes occurring 'in here'" (Castree, 2000: 955). Writing in the aftermath of an

acrimonious industrial dispute in the UK university sector, it might seem perverse to argue against Castree's stress on the importance of focussing our activities on life within universities.² But it is crucial to understand how our position as workers within the increasingly neoliberalised university sector is subject to the same precariousness and compromises as in other sectors of the economy. This is a situation which has been building quietly for some time. E.P. Thompson neatly summarised it in his book *Warwick University Ltd* back in 1970 (Thompson, 1970). He argued of Warwick University in the 1970s that:

Dominant elements in the administration of a university had become so intimately enmeshed with the upper reaches of consumer capitalist society that they are actively twisting the purposes and procedures of the university away from those normally accepted in British universities, and thus threatening its integrity as a self-governing academic institution.

(Thompson, 1980: 13)

It is necessary to consider how academic practices are produced through particular relations of power. The battlelines of the neoliberal assault are drawn outside and inside the university. No longer does the university provide a retreat from corporate restructuring. The recent hard line taken by Vice Chancellors in the 2006 strike in the UK, attempts to red-circle academic-related staff and sidelining research staff through non-submission to the Research Assessment Exercise are all ways in which labour is being restructured and disciplined through the corporate restructuring of universities. While the links between university research and big business are well documented (see for example Muttit, 2003), what is now being documented are how academic practices are increasingly enmeshed with capitalist social relations through their links with, and dependency on, multinational publishing companies.

Many recent articles and interventions in geography journals have brought into question various aspects of the power geometries of the international publishing industry and how this impacts on the discipline. There has been timely discussion of the continued Anglo-American bias in publishing (Simonsen, 2005). Blomley has queried the inflated prices charged by publishers for journals (Blomley, in press). Hughes and Reimer have related the attempts of a publisher's legal department to silence critical accounts of corporations in a book they co-edited. They have argued that we need to interrogate the 'increasingly influential role played by multinational publishing houses in the dissemination and commodification of knowledge' (Hughes & Reimer, 2005: 275).

Major publishing houses such as Elsevier make significant, and it would appear increasing profits, which as Blomley has recently emphasised depends on the unpaid labour of academics in various forms. We are committed to performing the unpaid labour of refereeing papers for journals. We think this is an integral part of producing the 'commons' of academic knowledge. That it should continue to be unpaid is also something we would adhere to. We feel, however, that such unpaid labour comes with conditions. One of these conditions is that the ethics of the companies we do this work for should broadly reflect the ethics and values of those who do this work and those who publish in journals like *Political Geography*. Elsevier's links to the arms trade are a clear breach of such conditions.

² There have been some important achievements in this regard notably the successful campaign to make Queen Mary's, University of London, a 'living wage' campus, see <http://www.livingwage.org.uk/education.html>, accessed July, 19th 2006.

This situation represents a challenge to the geographical community. Are we as critical, left leaning academics willing to accept a situation whereby some of the most significant journals in the discipline are owned by a company which aggressively promotes the arms trade? Are we willing to read, publish in, and to referee for journals that are owned by a company which engages in practices which are in such extreme breach of our notions of justice and which actively encourage abuses of human rights. This does not seem to us an acceptable situation.

Beyond this Editorial, we therefore will refuse to publish in Elsevier publications or to referee papers for Elsevier journals until the company divests itself of links to the arms trade.³ As such a divestiture is unlikely, one option may be for these journals to find friendlier homes in the publishing world. We are also calling for the wider geographical community to take action against this situation. Different kinds of action are possible. Individually, as we have mentioned, we can refuse to referee papers for Elsevier owned journals or to submit papers to such journals. We are also calling on editors and editorial boards of Elsevier journals, and those producing books with Elsevier, to follow *The Lancet's* example and to condemn Reed Elsevier's activities in the arms trade. We are aware and encouraged that editors of Elsevier geography journals have made representations of their concerns to the publishers, but we feel a more public and forceful campaign is necessary. There is no place for companies with major interests in the arms trade in publishing internationally renowned geography journals.

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³ We have both previously published with and/or refereed for a number of Elsevier journals including *Political Geography*.

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