Drugs, crime, terrorism and war are all serious problems. What should be done about them? How about declaring war on them? Yet the war approach hasn't fixed any of these problems but instead seems to have made things worse.

The wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war can be understood as persistent panics. They each share features with what are called moral panics, as well as features of long-lived public scientific controversies. Despite being dysfunctional and damaging, the wars continue. They thrive by exaggerating threats, creating enemies, hiding more serious problems, building empires and fostering supportive belief systems.

Brian Martin analyses these four wars, showing similarities and commenting on ways to end the panics. He doesn't offer solutions but provides ideas for those who care about the heavy toll of persistent panics.

Brian Martin is emeritus professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of 22 books and hundreds of articles on nonviolent action, dissent, scientific controversies and tactics against injustice, and is vice president of Whistleblowers Australia.

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Brian Martin

Persistent panics

IRENE PUBLISHING

Terrorism

NO!

JUDGES WAR ON CRIMES AGAINST MORALS

STOP NOW!

Brian Martin

WE MUST ACT NOW!

URGENT!!

Persistent panics

The wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war

HIGH ALERT

DRUGS KILL YOU

War on danger

Terrorism

Terror

URGENT WAR

WAR ON WAR

NO!

WAR ON TERROR

Immediate danger

URGENT!!

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Persistent panics

The wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war

Brian Martin

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Over my lifetime, I've learned an enormous amount from a wide variety of sources. A few of them are cited in the text but most are not, yet all have contributed to my understanding, though some perhaps to my confusion!

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1
Introduction

In 1991 in Los Angeles, police pursued a speeding motorist through the streets and, in the process of arresting him, beat him badly. This would have been little known except that a nearby resident, aroused by the noise around midnight, recorded the beating on his new videocamera. Later broadcast on television, it triggered enormous outrage. One outcome was a legal action against four of the twenty officers involved in the arrest.

A year later, the jury's verdict was announced: not guilty. This triggered days of rioting in south-central Los Angeles, with over 50 people killed and nearly a billion dollars of damage. The man who had been beaten, Rodney King, made a plea for calm. His words became famous: "Can't we all just get along?"[1]

Though these words may be considered simplistic or naive, they point to a major issue concerning human behaviour. The world's productive capacity is more than enough to provide for everyone on earth.[2] It would be sensible to ensure that everyone's basic needs are satisfied

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1 Actually, what he said was, "People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along?" This is remembered and widely quoted in a more cogent form, "Can't we all just get along?"

2 This is a big claim! See for example J. W. Smith, *The world's wasted wealth 2: save our wealth, save our environment* (Cambria, CA: Institute for Economic Democracy, 1994).

and that the environment that sustains life is protected. It shouldn't be hard to do.

But it is. The world's militaries are ready to use deadly weapons to kill other humans. The economic system is set up so some individuals become insanely rich while others live in poverty. Instead of cooperating for the common good, many people are driven by greed, envy and jealousy,[3] which help maintain inequitable social systems and are exacerbated by them.

My interest is in just one aspect of these general issues: the systems that cause war, terrorism, crime and destructive drug use. The systems are especially noxious because responses to these problems often make them worse. In every case, humans treat other humans as dangerous, as enemies.

Each of these problems is longstanding. Major efforts have been made to deal with them, but so far with no lasting solutions. Here, my aim is to point to some common features of the usual methods of dealing with these problems, to see what can be learned.

Moral panics

In 1952, in a suburb of Chicago, I was five years old and walked on my own to kindergarten. There was a much bigger boy, at a house down the street, who liked to verbally harass me on the way home. My father explained how I could walk home via a different route and avoid the bullying. My mother tells me that I came home all smiles.

3 Joseph H. Berke, *The tyranny of malice: exploring the dark side of character and culture* (New York: Summit Books, 1988).

The other boy was waiting but was disappointed I never went by.

By the 1990s, things were very different in suburban Chicago and many other places. Many parents were no longer willing to let their young children go out alone. There was publicity about child abductions, and great concern about "stranger danger." Statistics told a different story: the streets were no more dangerous than before. Furthermore, it was always true that the biggest danger to young children was not from lurking strangers but from family members and acquaintances.[4]

The alarm about stranger danger is an example of a "moral panic." People suddenly become alarmed about something. It could be teenage pregnancy, youth gangs, the drug ecstasy, or porn on the Internet. Media reports raise the alarm and soon the issue becomes so big that authorities feel the need to take action. These sorts of panics are called "moral" because they involve some sort of threat to the moral order, namely the way people think society ought to operate.

4 Aimee Wodda, "Stranger danger!" *Journal of Family Strengths,* vol. 18, issue 1, article 3, 2018. My idea to write about walking to school as a child was inspired by a passage in Johann Hari, *Stolen focus: why you can't pay attention* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 235: "In the 1960s, in a suburb of Chicago, a five-year-old girl walked out of her house, alone. It was a fifteen-minute walk to Lenore's school, and every day she did it by herself." Hari then tells about Lenore's experience in the 1990s allowing her young son to go out alone, writing an article about it and being widely condemned for putting her son at great risk.

In typical moral panics, alarm rises suddenly and then, after a while, dies away. Persistent panics are different: they don't go away.

A key word in some persistent panics is "war." Whenever there is a war, there has to be an enemy, and alarm is useful for mobilising support and garnering resources to confront and vanquish the enemy. But maybe vanquishing the enemy is not all that desirable, because without an enemy there would be no need for continued preparations for and expenditures on war-making.

My interest is in persistent panics, ones that seem to continue indefinitely, and that seem to resist solution. In particular, I'm going to look at the war on drugs, the war on crime, the war on terrorism, and war more generally, against foreign military forces. In each case, it's possible to argue that the alarm is disproportionate to the danger. More importantly, in each case there are other ways to address the problem besides using harsh measures to defeat the enemy. Persistent panics divert attention from alternative paths.

There has been a huge amount written about each of these wars. Strangely, though, in this vast outpouring of words, there is relatively little about how to bring them to an end. In part, this is because many of the panics are ongoing. If one of the panics could be made to go away, it might be a model for others. So it's worth looking at anti-panic efforts—campaigns against the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war—to see what looks promising.

Some themes

In each one of these panics, there is a real threat. Crime does occur, some drugs are dangerous, and terrorism can kill and destroy.

What makes something a panic is that the alarm is exaggerated. Crime does occur, but the response can be too great, misguided or counterproductive. In addressing panics, it is therefore important to acknowledge the problem and to focus on the shortcomings of the solution.

Each of these issues is incredibly complex. There are all sorts of things going on: different causes of the problems, different diagnoses and different groups vying to provide a solution or to hide the problem. There can be cultural differences. Because the issues are so complicated, it's a challenge to make sense of them. Any particular way of looking at the issues is bound to be partial and limited. Nevertheless, it's possible to provide insight, from different angles. My approach is to begin by thinking in terms of moral panics that have become persistent, seeing what commonalities there are between several of these persistent panics. This may provide a useful perspective, but it cannot pretend to be a comprehensive or all-encompassing one.

In each of the wars, there are groups with an interest in continued alarm. In the case of crime, this includes police forces, prison systems and some politicians. Identifying groups with a stake in the panic is vital.

As the panics become established, systems are set up, for example funding and training of the police, building and maintaining prisons, and the arrest and prosecution of criminals. The way society is organised changes: the re-

sponse to the problem shapes political, economic and social arrangements.

Overview

In the next chapter, I tell about moral panics and scientific controversies, as background to discussing the four persistent panics. Moral panic theory offers a good start for looking at the four wars, but is inadequate precisely because the panics are persistent. For additional insights, I use ideas from studies of controversies over nuclear power, fluoridation, pesticides, climate change and other such long-running issues. These controversies reveal some of the features of never-ending disputes, but are not normally analysed using moral panic theory. The combination of the two frameworks—moral panic theory and controversy studies—points to several features characteristic of persistent panics. I added one or two features myself.

Chapters 3 to 6 look in turn at the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war. I cannot pretend to be an expert on all these topics, or even on a single one. Many dedicated researchers and campaigners spend their entire careers learning about just one aspect of one of these wars. My approach is to step back from the details and look at features covered in chapter 2, using a few details to illustrate points. These four chapters follow much the same general framework, with variations depending on the war addressed and my own experience studying it.

Chapter 7 is an attempt to offer insights about what can be done about persistent panics. Given that the four wars are so long-lasting, there is not likely to be any quick fix. Indeed, part of the challenge of campaigning against the wars, or in building alternatives, is to come to grips with the likelihood that effort over several decades is unlikely to make a huge difference. This chapter ends on a somewhat pessimistic note.

While writing chapter 7, I had a thought. I could use my framework for understanding tactics against injustice to look at campaigning against the four wars. This is covered in chapter 8. It's the best I could do to suggest some options for campaigners. It has the advantage of suggesting directions, including one that seems counter-intuitive. Make of it what you will!

Learning from experience?

How is it possible for me to write about persistent panics when I have little or no experience in any of them? Many types of experience could provide insight. Being a drug addict, a criminal, a terrorist or a soldier offers first-hand involvement of one sort, and being an anti-drug campaigner, a police officer, a counterterrorism analyst or an army general provides a different sort of involvement. These and other direct experiences lead to powerful emotional and cognitive impacts, and certainly can make a difference to one's understanding.

However, with language and communication technologies, it's now possible to learn a lot about a topic without direct personal experience. It's possible to read interviews with terrorists, memoirs of soldiers, social analyses of the criminal justice system and scientific studies of the effects of drugs. The challenge is not a shortage of knowledge and insights but rather the overwhelming volume of potentially relevant information. It might be important to learn about

what goes on in prisons in different parts of the world, how policies are developed and implemented, what happens when a loved one is caught in a terrorist or anti-terrorist crusade, or the thinking behind research and development of new types of weapons.

Another source of information is campaigns to legalise specific drugs, abolish prisons and promote alternatives to terrorism and war. In learning about persistent panics, it's also valuable to have ideas about ways to oppose them and to promote ways of living together without them. Again, no one person can have every sort of relevant experience, but nevertheless it is possible to learn a great deal by reading and sharing ideas.

There is one aspect of persistent panics that is almost impossible to avoid: the portrayal and advocacy for these panics in popular media, including both news media and entertainment. There are news stories about seizures of drugs, television series about police, alerts about terrorist dangers, and annual holidays commemorating the sacrifices of soldiers. Most of this material gives a standard picture of the issues, from the perspective of those fighting against the bad guys. One of the biggest challenges in thinking about persistent panics is getting beyond the usual portrayals. This means questioning the standard pictures while avoiding the tendency to automatically reject them.

2
Moral panics and scientific controversies

I can't remember when I first heard about the idea of a moral panic. It might have been through reading the work of Stanley Cohen, who developed the idea in his 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics.* It might have been through the writings of others who applied the ideas. In any case, I became familiar with the idea.

Simply put, a moral panic is when people become alarmed by some threat to the moral order, in other words to their sense of right and wrong and what is proper. Cohen referred to the object of the panic as "folk devils." Cohen's examples were two counter-cultural groups in Britain in the 1960s called the Mods and the Rockers. The folk devils weren't actual physical threats to people; their threat was to values, to people's sense of what is proper and acceptable. By today's standards, the Mods and Rockers were pretty tame, but at the time there was concern about their threat to social values. Later, other issues were identified as the subject of moral panics, for example AIDS, stranger danger, child pornography and asylum seekers.

The term "moral panic" started within sociology, where it was widely adopted in studies of crime and deviance. Unlike most social-science jargon, it eventually caught on with the wider public. Journalists used the

expression in their writings and before long it was used by people who had never been near a sociology textbook.

It can be useful to look separately at the terms "moral" and "panic." As noted, moral panics involve a perceived threat to the moral order. A panic is an alarm, suggesting a serious alarm. An individual suffering a panic attack feels extremely anxious and has physical symptoms of fear, whereas collectively a panic brings images of people fleeing a cookie monster. The word "panic" is probably too strong. Something like "concern" or "hostility" might be better. Too late. "Moral panic" became the accepted label.

Once I grasped the idea of a moral panic, I looked at the world with a slightly different lens. This is like many ideas. They do more than describe the world: they encourage us to think of the world differently. Ideas—everything from democracy and freedom to paradigm and sexual harassment—help to organise what we observe and know in particular ways. Ideas that resonate with people tend to be adopted and spread. There's a word for this too: "meme," which is an idea that spreads, analogously to the way that a gene propagates itself genetically. "Moral panic" has become a relatively successful meme because so many people find it expresses something they think is worth paying attention to, and the availability of the idea makes people, when they look at the world, receptive to the possibility of seeing a moral panic in action. That was how it operated for me.

As you read about my exploration of the concept of moral panic, you might find it useful to think about an issue you are familiar with that has features of a moral panic. This might be one of the issues that I address in later chapters,

such as crime or terrorism, or something you've observed personally where some segment of the population becomes alarmed about "what the world is coming to," for example tattoos, Internet addiction or graffiti. You might also consider one of the big public issues, such as climate change or pandemics, and think about whether the public alarm could be called a moral panic.

Back to my journey. For years, I had little reason to think about moral panics. They seemed to be cultural oddities, like the Mods and Rockers of Cohen's day, suggesting a conservative alarm about the way society was changing. When rock music came on the scene, it was shocking to some people. Rock's loudness and sometimes offensive or suggestive lyrics and performances challenged the staid culture of the older middle classes. It was associated with rebellion and was banned in some countries. You could say that concern about rock was a moral panic, one that faded before long because rock was too successful, becoming both popular and commercially lucrative.

The thing that made me start thinking about moral panics was studying the Australian vaccination debate. Vaccination is normally thought of as a scientific or health issue. However, before long I saw elements that made me think of moral panics. This was long before Covid and the huge increase in awareness about vaccination issues.

Most people support vaccination and ensure that their children receive most or all recommended vaccines. That's fine with me. Some people are critical of vaccination. A few oppose their children having any recommended vaccines. More common is having their children receive some but not all vaccines or having them spaced out in time rather than

given at the recommended ages. That's also fine with me. My interest in vaccination is about free speech.

Observing the Australian vaccination debate, in particular the ways that some groups tried to silence critics, made me think of moral panics. In the mid 1990s, a citizens group critical of standard government vaccination policy, called the Australian Vaccination Network (AVN), was formed. It didn't seem to have much impact on the government, but it did have lots of members and gained a fair bit of publicity. In 2009, another citizens group was set up that called itself Stop the Australian Vaccination Network or SAVN. SAVN's stated aim was to shut down the AVN. It used a variety of tactics, including making a huge number of complaints to government agencies, making abusive comments about the AVN on Facebook and blogs, and seeking to stop AVN public meetings and stymie media coverage giving the AVN's perspective. Some individuals linked to SAVN or inspired by SAVN set up a website naming and shaming advertisers in the AVN's magazine, made threats to the AVN president and sent pornography to some AVN members.

I thought this was extraordinary. I had been studying scientific controversies for decades, controversies over nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation and other issues.[1] Lots of unsavoury tactics are used in controversies, but never before had I heard about a campaign like SAVN's aimed at stigmatising and silencing a citizens group whose

1 "Publications on scientific and technological controversies," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/controversy.html

main activities were presenting information to members and the wider public.

There was more. Others joined in SAVN's agenda, including government agencies, politicians and sections of the mass media. Within a few years, there was a full-throttle campaign to silence anyone who made public criticisms of vaccination. The government introduced legislation to pressure parents to have their children vaccinated by reducing their welfare payments.

Curiously, many mainstream figures in medical and health fields did not support this legislation. They cited figures showing that vaccination levels among Australian children were high and stable.[2] In other words, there was no pressing need to penalise parents whose children were not fully vaccinated. Furthermore, proponents of vaccination argued that a better approach was making it easier for parents who supported vaccination to have their children vaccinated. Cutting payments to families, especially poor families, might hurt the welfare of their children, with worse consequences than any benefit from higher levels of vaccination. It seems, though, that the government, in bringing in its legislation, did not consult mainstream professionals in the field of public health.[3] This made me

2 For example, Frank H. Beard, Brynley P. Hull, Julie Leask, Aditi Dey and Peter B. McIntyre, "Trends and patterns in vaccination objection, Australia, 2002–2013," *Medical Journal of Australia,* vol. 204, no. 7, 18 April 2016, pp. 275.e1–275.e6.

3 Julia LeMonde, "An Australian newspaper campaign and government vaccination policy," *Prometheus: Critical Studies in Innovation,* vol. 37, no. 2, 2021, pp. 137–154.

think that some sort of panic was involved, indeed more than one sort: a panic about anyone publicly criticising vaccination and a panic about parents and children who were not vaccinated.[4]

It's one thing to say, "This seems like a moral panic" and another to develop a careful argument about it. This might seem easy enough, but in the academic world things are usually complicated and often contested. Moral-panic theory is no different.

The complications arise in part due to the dynamics of research. To make a name for yourself in the scholarly scene requires making a noteworthy contribution to knowledge in the field. You can't do this by saying, "Cohen's idea about moral panic is a good one." It's usually necessary to do something different, which might be applying moral-panic ideas to a different case study, for example teenage pregnancy, noting what this reveals about the issue. Even more promising is to say something original about the theory, for example that it needs correction, reformulation, adaptation, updating, melding with some other theory, or any of manifold other intellectual considerations. Study of a panic about teenage pregnancy might show the need to rethink aspects of moral-panic theory.

In the early days of a new theory, when there are many angles worthy of further investigation and comment, making an original theoretical contribution is relatively easy. However, as developments and debates about the theory

4 My analysis: "Alarm about childhood vaccinations: a persistent panic?" *Journal of Controversial Ideas,* vol. 2, no. 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/3weY38f.

evolve, more effort is required to get on top of the various perspectives. You need to read and digest a lot more material before you're in a convincing position to propose a new idea. All this is just the regular way that intellectual work proceeds, with scholars trying to contribute to knowledge and obtain credit for their contributions. The credit, which is most obvious by being recognised as the author of articles and books, aids in obtaining jobs, research grants, promotions, invitations to give keynote speeches, and recognition in the field. Without this sort of credit, few scholars would bother.

My purpose was not to obtain recognition for a contribution to moral-panic theory but to show how it applied—assuming it does—to the Australian vaccination debate. The first step is to turn to "the literature," namely what has been written about moral panics, with special attention to the writings about moral panics considered most important.

It turns out that a good place to start is with Cohen's original formulation of moral panics. The paragraph opening his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* offers a wonderful summary. It has often been quoted, and here it is again.

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their

> diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.[5]

With this description, it's possible to make an assessment of any particular issue or social concern. One feature is that a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges." This implies that either it—the condition, episode, person or group—didn't exist before or that it existed before and has newly become a source of alarm. An example would be the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. This event is easily identified as an "episode" that suddenly was defined as "a threat to societal values and interests." Of course, the 9/11 attacks were an actual physical threat to lives and property, but they were more than this: they were interpreted by "editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people" as a threat to the American way of life. As many said at the time, "everything changed," meaning that people's understanding of the world changed, with the threat of terrorism suddenly thrust into prominence.

The next question is whether, as Cohen says, "the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible." Unlike the other features, this

5 Stanley Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics* (London: Routledge, 2002, third edition), p. 1. Originally published in 1972.

doesn't seem to fit terrorism. The condition—terrorism—didn't disappear, submerge or deteriorate. Well, perhaps it did: there were further terrorist attacks in various parts of the world, such as the Bali bombing in 2002, but no more attacks of the scale or dramatic impact of 9/11. Cohen's final phrase, "becomes more visible," is peculiar. How would a condition disappear or deteriorate and simultaneously become more visible? If I had been reliant solely on Cohen's formulation, I might have searched *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* for the answer. No need. So many researchers took up the idea of moral panic that the details of the description were taken out of Cohen's hands.[6]

My next stop was a book by Kenneth Thompson titled simply *Moral Panics.* Written 25 years after Cohen's pioneering book, Thompson summarises ideas about the topic and, like any good scholar, adds his own perspective. For my purposes, Thompson's summary of the stages or features in Cohen's picture was useful.

1. Something is defined as a threat to values or interests.
2. Media provide a convenient portrayal.
3. Public concern rapidly builds.
4. Opinion-makers or authorities respond.
5. The panic either declines or leads to social change.[7]

6 For an overview of moral panic analyses, see Sarah Wright Monod, *Making sense of moral panics: a framework for research* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

7 Kenneth Thompson, *Moral panics* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 8.

This summary can be used as a checklist. Using what you know about an issue, does it pass through each or any of these five stages or, in other words, contain each or any of these five features?

Stages 2, 3 and 4 are about three groups: media, the public and authorities. Stage 1, on closer inspection, seems not to have an agent. Who exactly defines something or someone as a threat to values or interests? This vagueness is actually appropriate because panics can start in various ways, driven by sections of the media or members of the public. It's also possible to imagine that panics can be driven by opinion-leaders and authorities, who do more than just respond. This thought is relevant to persistent panics.

It's useful to bring in another idea about how panics gain momentum. Thompson refers to the work of Howard Becker, who discussed the role of "moral entrepreneurs."[8] The figure of the entrepreneur is familiar: a businessperson, especially one who takes initiative to develop new products and reach new markets. A moral entrepreneur does this not with products or services but with ideas about what is right or wrong, in other words issues of morality.

Someone who campaigns against abortion or in favour of women's right to choose might be called a moral entrepreneur. The abortion debate is longstanding, so perhaps talking about moral entrepreneurs adds little insight.

8 Howard S. Becker, "Moral entrepreneurs: the creation and enforcement of deviant categories," in Nancy J. Herman (ed.), *Deviance: a symbolic interactionist approach* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), pp. 169–178.

However, for other issues it may be useful. Examples might be those who say balancing a government's budget is a moral issue, or similarly for teaching children to read using phonics. Trying to trigger a moral panic is a great role for moral entrepreneurs.

What motivates moral entrepreneurs? Money or power sometimes, but there can be psychological driving forces, especially the belief that they are helping others and otherwise doing good by getting people to conform to their viewpoints.

Returning to Thompson's summary of elements in Cohen's picture, stage 5 assumes that a panic rises and falls: it is a short-term phenomenon. Who today remembers the Mods and Rockers? No one, except perhaps sociologists who read Cohen's book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*! When panics subside, the implication is that there was nothing really to worry about. A short time frame is implicit in Thompson's stages 1 through 4, which suggest that the threat to values or interests was defined and emerged rapidly.

Stage 5 doesn't apply to alarms that persist. The panic continues indefinitely. There might well be social change, but moral entrepreneurs continue their efforts to maintain concern in the media, the public and authorities. It might be said that there is indeed a social change, namely an institutionalisation of panic-fostering practices. I will come back to this, as it is one of the most important aspects of persistent panics.

There is an assumption underlying studies of moral panics: that panic is not really warranted by social conditions. In other words, there is no significant danger to

people's lives or livelihoods. This is suggested by stage 1: something is defined as a threat to values or interests. If there were a physical threat, then presumably there would be little need to define it as a threat. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that the Mods and Rockers were running through streets throwing bombs into people's residences, and hundreds of people were dying. This would be a threat to people's lives that would warrant public alarm, so it wouldn't be accurate to call it a moral panic, because the threat is not to values and interests, or only secondarily to them. This can be contrasted to the Mods and Rockers running through the streets, quietly, wearing peculiar clothes (something they didn't do, by the way). Any public alarm about this would be closer to a moral panic. On the other hand, people might not be alarmed by these crazily-dressed passers-by but instead find their antics amusing, pointless or just something that happens now and again, like visits from Seventh Day Adventist missionaries.

If, in studying moral panics, it is assumed that people are overreacting—in other words, that there is no serious danger posed by the folk devils—then it is important that this assumption is justified. In some cases, a casual observation of the activities of the folk devils is sufficient. The Mods and Rockers weren't physically threatening others, so the alarm about them can be assumed to be due to their threat to values.

Consider another topic in the study of moral panics, teenage pregnancy, which has been a concern in the US but, in many other countries, invisible as an issue. Young mothers do not pose a physical threat to others; the most that might be said is that they represent a burden on the

community, though even this is questionable. So if there is an alarm about teenage pregnancy, it is plausible that it is due to a threat to values, such as being a symbol of youthful sexual activity.

Deciding whether public concern constitutes a moral panic might seem like an academic issue, but there is something deeper at stake. Sometimes there are major responses to public alarms, costing large amounts of money and adversely affecting people's lives. Think of the alarm about terrorism or Covid. Are the responses by authorities proportionate to the danger, not enough or excessive? If the responses are excessive, this might suggest that a moral panic is involved, or at least that moral elements are involved.

The study of moral panics thus requires the study of proportionality, in other words whether the threat justifies the response to it. This includes both the level of public alarm and the changes instituted by authorities. In some cases, this is easy. In 1954 in the US state of Washington, there was a mystery about pitting of car windscreens: it seemed to be happening quite a lot, and the reasons were mysterious.[9] The issue fitted the stages of a moral panic—even though it might better be described as a mass delusion—including the final stage: the concern died away. The whole issue was a false alarm. A routine occurrence was brought to people's attention and seized upon as

9 Linton Weeks, "The windshield-pitting mystery of 1954," *NPR History Dept.,* 28 May 2015, https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/05/28/410085713/the-windshield-pitting-mystery-of-1954.

evidence of something weird or sinister. Media coverage led more people to notice windscreen pitting and the issue expanded—until it deflated.

Most studies of moral panics are by social scientists, especially sociologists. They seldom carry out their own studies of natural phenomena, such as statistics about windscreen pitting, teenage pregnancy rates or infectious illnesses, though sometimes they rely on studies by other social scientists, such as criminologists. Moral panic studies rely on experts to help determine whether alarms are appropriate responses to social conditions. This is straightforward in the case of windscreen pitting, when experts agreed there was nothing special happening in Washington state in 1954. But in other cases, experts disagree. What then?

The easiest option is to accept the views of the dominant experts. This is all very well when the science is straightforward, when scientists are independent and when there are few biasing influences on scientific research. For example, in studies of windscreen pitting, it seems unlikely that there would be any major influences on researchers. Repair shops might have an interest in getting drivers to notice pitting and have windscreens replaced, but this is hardly a big money-spinner.

Consider research on the health hazards of second-hand smoke. The science is complicated. Some scientists are funded by tobacco companies, so they are not independent. Furthermore, some companies do studies in-house, and may not release findings to the public. More generally, there has been a long-running struggle between tobacco companies and anti-smoking campaigners, which means

there are few dispassionate assessments of research on second-hand smoke, and furthermore it is hard to judge whether some research areas have been neglected. All this makes it difficult to say whether the response to second-hand smoke represents a moral panic. Is a ban on smoking in restaurants a reasonable response to the demonstrated hazard to workers and patrons, or an overreaction driven by excessive anti-smoking zeal?

Pulling together ideas so far, here are several key features of persistent panics that can be drawn from moral panic theory.

- A group or set of ideas defined as a threat to the community
- Widespread condemnation of the group or ideas
- Attacks or criticisms of the group or ideas by some politicians and media
- Alarm disproportionate to the danger

It's worth noting some other developments in moral panic theory. In classical moral panics, most people without personal knowledge of a topic obtained their information from the mass media, and usually the folk devils—the sources of alarm—had no easy way of getting journalists to cover their perspective. Stoking fear by reporting fear about an alleged danger to the social order is a better media angle than "This group may be different but actually there's nothing to worry about."

In several of the articles I read about moral panics, reference was made to an article by McRobbie and

Thornton.[10] They looked at Cohen's work and noted several factors he had not addressed, in part because circumstances had changed. Most importantly, folk devils, namely the groups seen as threatening to the moral order, can fight back.

Social media have changed the communication landscape, partly equalising opportunities for presenting perspectives. Beyond this, so-called folk devils have agency. They don't have to passively accept whatever is said about them. They can get together, think strategically, change the way they present themselves, recruit allies and mount campaigns. Social media can make it easier to coordinate resistance to stigmatisation and marginalisation. There can still be a moral panic, keeping in mind that the folk devils can speak, build alliances and resist. This presents the possibility of seeing the panic as a form of struggle, though in many cases the struggle is one-sided.

Projection

There is a connection between Cohen's folk devils and a psychological process called projection. The process involves a person taking a part of their own psyche—a part they dislike and reject—denying its existence and attributing it to others. In other words, they attribute part of their own mental operations to others: they "project" part of themselves onto others.[11]

10 Angela McRobbie and Sarah L. Thornton, "Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds," *British Journal of Sociology,* vol. 46, no. 4, December 1995, pp. 559–574.

11 My favourite source on projection is Philip Lichtenberg, *Community and confluence: undoing the clinch of oppression,* 2nd edition (Cleveland, OH: Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, 1994).

All people have what are typically seen as "masculine" and "feminine" aspects to their psychology, in different degrees. Some men, due to their upbringing, are afraid of and hostile to their feminine side: they see themselves as entirely masculine and reject their feminine impulses, which they feel are disgusting. They then attribute these feelings to gay men, as well as women. Sometimes they are so frightened by these impulses that they feel the need to attack them, so they attack gay men, verbally or physically.

The idea of projection is a way of understanding human psychological dynamics. If it helps make sense of human thought and behaviour, then it's worth considering further. And it definitely helps when it comes to folk devils.

Folk devils represent a threat to the moral order. If we imagine that people contain within themselves impulses for both conformity and rebellion, to different degrees and in different ways, we can also imagine that some are afraid of their rebellious impulses. Challenging the usual ways of doing things can endanger one's place among family, friends and the wider community. Rather than acknowledging and accepting one's own rebellious side, it can be projected onto others. This is where folk devils provide a useful psychological function, by serving as symbols of rebellion or some other threat to the moral order. It is convenient for those in the mainstream to condemn or even attack the folk devils. In this way, people can demonstrate their social conformity and psychologically deal with their own impulses to rebel. It might even be said that the level

of hostility to folk devils in some way reflects a person's need to hide and deny their own nonconformist impulses from themselves.

Responses to folk devils have to involve more than this, because the responses are social. The media play a key role and authorities may take action. This is more than a matter of the psychology of individuals. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the media and authorities find a positive reception due to resonance with projection by individuals. If, when informed about some non-conforming behaviour, everyone went "Ho hum, no big deal," then media stories would fall flat and actions by authorities would not attract support. The interaction between psychological and social dynamics is what makes moral panics so potent.

SCIENTIFIC CONTROVERSIES

At this point, I felt I had gone about as far as I could using moral panic theory to understand persistent alarms. After all, the theory was typically applied to alarms that faded away and didn't provide guidance for alarms that continued for decades. So I turned to a different body of theory, about public scientific controversies, controversies like those over nuclear power or pesticides.

One of the things the targeted group can do is present evidence and arguments to support its position. This is more important when the issue contains a scientific component, so research on scientific controversies is relevant. But there was a more important reason why I thought about using ideas about scientific controversies: I knew some of them lasted a long time.

In 1976, I joined Friends of the Earth in Canberra. The group's main focus was uranium mining and nuclear power. As well as participating in activist activities such as organising rallies, I joined the public debate, for example by writing letters and articles for the *Canberra Times,* and clashing with two prominent pro-nuclear scientists, Sir Philip Baxter and Sir Ernest Titterton. The issues debated included reactor accidents, long-lived radioactive waste, energy needs, economics of power production, Aboriginal land rights (because much of Australia's uranium reserves are on Aboriginal land), and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Because Australia has large reserves of coal, nuclear power was never a serious proposition, so much of the debate was about uranium mining.

As well as participating in campaigning against uranium mining and nuclear power, I read about the arguments pro and con, and along the way came across some social-science studies about the nuclear power debate. It struck me then that these studies didn't say much that wasn't already obvious to active participants, but nonetheless the studies sensitised me to the possibility of social analysis of a scientific controversy.

Later, I started reading about controversies in which I wasn't personally involved, including ones about which I didn't have a strong view. These included the public debates over pesticides, repetition strain injury (in collaboration with Gabriele Bammer), fluoridation, nuclear winter, the origin of AIDS, and vaccination.[12]

12 "Publications on scientific and technological controversies," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/controversy.html

In the 1970s and 1980s, the field commonly called science and technology studies (STS) developed rapidly. This included the history of science, philosophy of science, sociology of scientific knowledge, politics of technology and economics of innovation. STS was basically studying the nature and dynamics of science and technology by using one or more perspectives from the humanities and social sciences. One of the important areas in STS in those early decades was the study of scientific controversies. Some of the studies were of controversies internal to the scientific community, such as debates among physicists about gravity waves. Others, though, were about what can be called public scientific controversies, which typically involved scientific disagreements and campaigning by various groups outside the scientific community. These sorts of debates interested me the most.

My studies involved reading a vast range of material by partisans in the debates and by commentators, corresponding and meeting with participants and, in some cases, interviewing partisans. Often, after writing articles about a controversy, knowledgeable individuals would contact me, and I would learn even more.

After studying several of these public scientific controversies, I developed a feeling for their typical features. There are remarkable regularities. There are several features that I observed and could reliably anticipate would be present in controversies about which I was less familiar. Among the features most important for understanding the persistence of controversies are polarisation, the role of vested interests, suppression of dissent, the limited impact of new evidence, and the sidelining of alternatives.

Polarisation

In many debates, there are two main positions, and everyone lines up on one side or the other: the two positions are polar opposites. Despite being familiar with several scientific controversies, I hadn't given much thought to polarisation until I started interviewing partisans in the Australian debate over fluoridation.[13] The issue was whether to add fluoride to public water supplies in order to reduce tooth decay in children. In the late 1980s, I set out to interview prominent figures in the promotion of fluoridation and prominent figures in the opposition. There were no prominent figures in the debate who didn't take a stand. That should have been a clue, but when I started the interviews, my plan was to undertake a history of fluoridation in Australia. After the first two interviews, with pioneering proponents of fluoridation in Sydney, I realised interviews weren't much help for writing a history, because the memories of these eminent figures were so sketchy. But the interviews gave me another idea: I would look at the way that views of fluoridation partisans were "coherent," either profluoridation or antifluoridation in every dimension of the issue.

Those not involved in campaigning might be indifferent or not even know what the issue is all about. But as soon

13 Brian Martin, *Scientific knowledge in controversy: the social dynamics of the fluoridation debate* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), chapter 3.

as someone starts getting involved, they usually line up on one side or the other. It's somewhat like fans at a sporting match. Most support one team or the other, and many are passionate. Not so many don't care who wins.

In a polarised scientific controversy in which several issues are disputed, campaigners line up on one side or the other on every one of the issues. Supporters say fluoridation greatly reduces tooth decay and has no significant adverse health effects, whereas opponents say tooth decay benefits are exaggerated and that there are some worrying adverse health effects, for example skeletal fluorosis. What's important here is that hardly anyone sits in the middle, saying that the benefits are huge but there are some serious adverse health effects, or that the risks are almost zero but the benefits have been oversold.

Then there are ethical arguments. Proponents say fluoridation is ethical because it benefits everyone, including people who cannot pay for dental treatment. Opponents say fluoridation is unethical because it is compulsory medication at an uncontrolled dose. Views on ethics nearly always line up with views about benefits and harms. Those who advocate fluoridation tout the benefits, dismiss the risks and say it's ethical; opponents do the opposite. Hardly anyone says, for example, that fluoridation is unethical because it is compulsory medication, yet the benefits are so great that it should be supported.

There are reasons why the views of partisans line up so consistently across benefits, risks, ethics and politics. Anyone who sits in the middle is likely to come under strong pressure from at least one side, and sometimes both. Supporters don't want anyone on their side making a

"concession," because they don't want to give opponents any advantages. Any supporter of fluoridation who "admits" that it might be unethical or risky or not as beneficial as commonly claimed will be seized upon by opponents and quoted ad nauseum. Alternatively, someone who refuses to cooperate with either side may be just ignored.

Polarisation cements campaigning into camps, with each camp discouraging deviations from its standard line. The result is that those with complex positions are given little support. They may decide to join one side or the other or to drop out of the debate altogether.

Interests

The word "interest" has quite a few meanings, from a return on investment to a fascination with some topic. In the study of controversies, it refers to a stake. If you work for a pesticide company, let's say a multinational like Monsanto, you have a stake—or an interest—in your job and, indirectly, in greater sales of pesticides. The higher up in the company you are, and the more shares in it you have, the greater your stake. It's also possible to talk about the entire company as having a stake in acceptance and use of pesticides. For a company like Monsanto, this stake is enormous and is commonly called a vested interest.

In a scientific controversy, a common assumption is that it's all about "the science." However, when interests are involved, things get more complicated. Powerful groups influence what research is funded and publicised, so the scientific side of the debate is no longer just a matter of different results and interpretations. Powerful groups can

offer jobs and careers, so many individuals have a stake in one side of the debate. Powerful groups have resources for publicity and lobbying, with the capacity to influence public opinion and politicians.

Nearly all the scientific controversies I studied involved powerful groups with vested interests. In the nuclear power debate, it was the nuclear industry and governments. In the pesticide controversy, it was the chemical companies that produce pesticides. In the fluoridation controversy, it was the sugary-food manufacturers that benefited from assigning responsibility for tooth decay to the absence of fluoride.

The impact of interests on research is highlighted by what is called the funding effect: when research is funded by a group with a vested interest, the findings are much more likely to favour the group than when research is carried out independently.[14] For example, when a pharmaceutical company sponsors research into a drug—either by having its own scientists do the research or by providing funding for university researchers—the results are far more likely to favour the drug than when research is carried out by independent scientists, who receive no funding or other support from the company. This may not seem surprising, but it makes assessment of the scientific side of controversies far more difficult. It means you shouldn't automatically trust research findings, even those published in the most prestigious journals.

14 Sheldon Krimsky, *Conflicts of interest in science: how corporate-funded academic research can threaten public health* (New York: Hot Books, 2019).

In lots of scientific controversies, the view held by most scientists is the one backed by powerful groups. This has been the pattern with nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation, genetic engineering, microwaves and quite a few others. There are two prominent exceptions: smoking and climate change. In each of these, the weight of expert scientific opinion is on one side and powerful groups with a strong interest are on the other.

It's possible to say that a public scientific controversy such as the one over fluoridation actually is two simultaneous controversies. One is epistemological, a debate over knowledge, and the other is social, political and/or economic, a power struggle. To separate the science from the social dimensions might seem plausible, but in practice these dimensions interact. There are several reasons why.

As already mentioned, the funding effect means that the side with more power to fund research influences the findings. This means that you can't just say, "Let's examine what the science says," and assume such an assessment can give a balanced or definitive answer. The problem is that the findings are potentially biased. To see what sort of bias is most likely, you need to look at the social side of the controversy.

Another important impact on the findings is called "undone science."[15] This refers to research that could be done and is called for by citizens or campaigners, but isn't funded or carried out—or perhaps it is carried out but never

15 David J. Hess, *Undone science: social movements, mobilized publics, and industrial transitions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

published, instead being stored in the bowels of some corporation or government body. In the case of smoking, tobacco companies had carried out their own research but not published findings that showed hazards.[16]

The idea of undone science was developed by my friend and collaborator David Hess, an anthropologist who has worked in departments of STS and sociology. David was familiar with debates on a variety of issues, ranging from cancer treatments to parapsychology. He noticed that in quite a number of health and environmental issues, citizen campaigners wanted research to be done, typically about potential hazards, but the groups with the resources to fund and carry out the research—most commonly governments and large corporations—resolutely refused to do so. You might think that independent scientists might fill the gap, but there are few independent scientists with lots of spare cash to pursue projects of their choosing. Many university scientists depend on outside funding for their labs and staff, and much of this outside funding comes from governments and corporations. Furthermore, there are other pressures on scientists, which I'll come to shortly.

The implication of undone science is that an examination of published research may not give a fair picture. Think for example about the treatment of pests in agriculture. Chemical companies fund a vast amount of research into pesticides, with an orientation to developing ones that will be big sellers. They are not likely to fund much research

16 Stanton A. Glantz, John Slade, Lisa A. Bero, Peter Hanauer and Deborah E. Barnes, *The cigarette papers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

into the hazards of pesticides and have no incentive to fund research into organic farming or any alternative that reduces or avoids use of pesticides.

The phenomenon of undone science, combined with the funding effect, means that evaluating an issue by assessing the available scientific research is inadequate. Basically, it means that the research available for assessment is an unrepresentative sample of all the potentially relevant research that might be carried out, and furthermore that the studies in this unrepresentative sample may themselves be biased.

The role of undone science has an important advantage over some other forms of critique: it does not depend on questioning the objectivity of scientists, nor does it rely on questioning whether there is such a thing as scientific truth. Objectivity and truth are essential elements in the way most scientists think about their enterprise. Social scientists who question these elements have come under attack, being labelled as relativists and other less complimentary terms.[17] But even if you adamantly defend objectivity and truth as foundations of the scientific enterprise, this does not get rid of the problem of undone science.

Suppression of dissent

In the late 1970s, I worked at the Australian National University (ANU) in the Department of Applied Mathematics. Separately, I was involved in the environmental movement and got to know members of the Human Sciences Program

17 There is a body of writing about the "science wars" dating from the 1990s.

at the ANU, which offered courses on environmental issues. Back in those years, this was considered radical. Senior scientists at the university had tried to block the establishment of the program and remained alert to its alleged heresies.

The program was quite small, so it was a matter for concern when a key figure, Jeremy Evans, came up for tenure—and the tenure committee ruled against him. Jeremy's teaching was lauded, while his research output was modest but not all that bad for his rank. In Australia at the time, most academics in tenurable positions obtained tenure without difficulty.

Jeremy had a lot of supporters, including many students and quite a number of figures from the ANU and beyond. The suspicion was that his tenure had been denied because of opposition to the program. A campaign was launched, and I joined in.[18]

During the years of campaigning over Jeremy's tenure case, I learned about other cases of scientists involved in environmental teaching or research who had encountered obstacles in their careers. Jeremy told me about John Hookey, who had pioneered teaching of environmental law at the ANU. He had been told he would not gain tenure. There was a government scientist, Peter Springell, highly productive, who was not allowed to submit articles on environmental topics to journals using his work affiliation. There was a university zoologist, Clyde Manwell, who

18 I wrote about this campaign in *Suppression stories* (Wollongong: Fund for Intellectual Dissent, 1997).

wrote a letter to the newspaper about pesticides, leading to an attempt to dismiss him from his tenured position.

After learning about several such cases, I noticed a pattern, and discovered more cases. I called these attacks on environmental researchers and teachers "suppression of dissent."[19] Gradually I learned about ever more examples from a range of fields. Partly this was by reading about cases—sometimes I would write to obtain more information—and partly by people who, after reading my articles, contacted me to tell me their own stories.

In nearly every major public scientific controversy that I studied in some depth—nuclear power, pesticides, fluoridation, nuclear winter, origin of AIDS, vaccination, climate change—there were cases of suppression of dissenting experts. This was especially important in controversies where most of the credentialed experts were on one side: discrediting or silencing the few who publicly challenged orthodoxy changed the issue from a debate to a monopoly of expert opinion.[20] Meanwhile, citizen campaigners could usually be dismissed as uninformed.

My assumption is that in nearly every major public scientific controversy where something significant is at stake—money, power, status—there are likely to be cases

19 "Suppression of dissent" is the expression I eventually adopted. In early publications, I used other phrases, for example "suppression of environmental scholarship." See my publications on the topic at https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/supp.html.

20 This was the central argument in my article "Suppression of dissent in science," *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy,* vol. 7, 1999, pp. 105–135.

of suppression of dissent, most commonly against experts who question the dominant view through their research or public statements. Suppression is also found in disputes largely within the scientific community when challenges are made to orthodoxy. An example is parapsychology, the study of psychic phenomena, seen by some scientists as heretical or fraudulent.[21]

Suppression of dissent is important in understanding controversies. From the outside, it might seem that the evidence overwhelmingly supports one position, so it may seem irrational to consider any other position. But this apparent unanimity may be, in part, the result of silencing and discrediting critics.

New evidence

Over the years, I've talked with many partisans in many controversies. I forget how many of them have told me that they were hopeful that the tide would turn—in their favour, of course—by some new research finding or authoritative announcement. They expect that new evidence will make a big impact, forcing opponents to capitulate. The controversy will be over. Truth and the public interest will prevail!

The controversy over fluoridation of public water supplies got going in the 1950s. By the time I started studying it in the 1980s, the debate had been much the same for over 30 years and showed no sign of changing despite much new evidence. In most parts of the world where there

21 For example, Etzel Cardeña, "The unbearable fear of psi: on scientific suppression in the 21st Century," *Journal of Scientific Exploration,* vol. 29, no. 4, 2015, pp. 601–620.

are significant levels of fluoridation, the debate continues, and the issues debated are pretty much the same. This is despite numerous new publications and reports, many of them critical of fluoridation, and a string of court cases, nearly all of them supportive of fluoridation.

The reason many campaigners think new evidence will dramatically shift the debate seems to be that they think positions are adopted on the basis of evidence. They assume their own position is evidence-based, naturally, and that opponents will see the error of their ways when confronted with definitive evidence. This assumption is flawed in two ways. First, positions are adopted, in part, on the basis of values and interests. Second, evidence is evaluated in light of these values and interests.

An example of how this works concerns the onus of proof. Proponents of fluoridation believe the evidence of benefit is overwhelmingly on their side, so they require opponents to prove otherwise. In other words, they put the onus of proof on the opponents. In contrast, opponents raise doubts about fluoridation, in particular raising the possibility of adverse health effects, and expect proponents to prove them wrong. In other words, they put the onus of proof on pro-fluoridationists. If the expected level of proof is raised high enough, it is nearly impossible to achieve.

Due to these differing assumptions about the onus of proof, new evidence is underwhelming. If it is favourable towards fluoridation, it is unlikely to be definitive enough to sway antifluoridationists, and vice versa. Each side has its standard repertoire of talking points and supportive evidence, and the new finding finds its way into this repertoire on one side or the other, or is ignored by both.

The failure of new evidence to change the dynamics of a scientific controversy can be mystifying to outsiders, who assume that the debate is just about the evidence. Furthermore, they assume that the side backed by the overwhelming number of experts should necessarily win the day. As we've seen, these assumptions are flawed. The debate is not just about the evidence, and anyway the evidence is potentially compromised by the funding effect and undone science. The dominant experts might be right about the science, but if the science is compromised, then maybe so are the experts. Besides, dissident experts may be being silenced.

The failure of new evidence to make a difference is a feature of many long-lived scientific controversies. It is not the cause of a controversy continuing but rather a tell-tale symptom of underlying driving forces.

Alternatives sidelined

Controversies draw attention to themselves and, as a result, marginalise alternatives. In this, "alternatives" can refer to other ways to address the issue. It can also refer to other issues entirely, ones that may be more important but are overshadowed by the one debated all the time.

The fluoridation controversy is about whether to add fluoride to public water supplies. Usually overlooked in this debate are other ways to get fluoride to children's teeth: fluoride tablets, fluoride toothpaste, fluoride in table salt, fluoride in milk provided to school children, and fluoride treatments by dentists. Each of these has pros and cons. The point is that in countries where water fluoridation is a highly

polarising public issue, these alternatives are rarely mentioned.

Looking beyond fluoride, the wider issue is how to foster dental health, especially in children. Measures include oral hygiene (brushing and flossing), regular dental checks, having a healthy balanced diet and reducing the intake of sugary foods. All these are obvious and well known to be beneficial. Indeed, they are encouraged by dentists as well as supported by opponents of fluoridation.

Given that there are other ways, besides water fluoridation, to promote dental health, why have dentists and health authorities in some countries been so fixated on promoting fluoridation—especially given the persistent citizen opposition? When I interviewed leading Australian proponents of fluoridation, several of them noted that dentists had nothing to gain from fluoridation. After all, if it reduced tooth decay, that would mean less business for them. This was indeed a puzzle. Out of all the main ways to reduce tooth decay, why had fluoridation become such a mantra? If there were opponents, why not redirect effort towards a different obstacle?

Figuring this out required a bit of digging. The first observation is that even if tooth decay were completely eradicated, there would still be plenty of work for dentists. Training to become a dentist is arduous, and the government will not let just anyone set up a dental practice. The result that the supply of dentists is restricted, and there is more than enough work for all of them. Furthermore, technological advances and an increased public concern about appearance means there is ever more work in

retaining teeth (rather than extracting them), straightening them and improving gums.

Historically, dentistry was not seen as a high-status profession. Often barbers would pull teeth as well as cut hair. Fluoridation, as a dental intervention, added scientific mystique: its action required understanding of the biochemistry of the mouth, and measuring its effects required the skills of epidemiologists. Fluoridation added to the status of dentistry as a profession.

This was all well and good, but this still didn't explain why fluoridation would be a preferred path rather than, say, tackling sugary food, a challenge that also depended on scientific understanding. Here is where the role of interests came in. Manufacturers of sweets, soft drinks, breakfast cereals, biscuits and a host of other products have a strong vested interest in using sugar to make their products more attractive to consumers. Collectively, they benefit by making sweetness a feature and selling point.

Imagine that dentists and health authorities decided that they could do just as much for children's teeth by "desugarising" people's diets as by adding fluoride to the water supply. They might, for example, promote taxes on sugary foods, in the same way that taxes are applied to cigarettes, reducing consumption by driving up the price. Although a few dentists have argued along these lines, it has never been strongly promoted by dental or medical professions, unlike support for fluoridation.

My explanation for the dental profession's enthusiasm for fluoridation and relative neglect of other options is that this is the path of least resistance. Yes, there is opposition from citizen antifluoridation campaigners, but they can be

dismissed as uninformed. Contrast this with the opposition that would be mounted against any serious effort to tax sugary foods or otherwise restrict or reduce consumption of these foods. Imagine, for example, a truth-in-advertising law: for every advertisement for a food with added sugar, the government would fund equal time or space for a counter-advertisement about the risks of such foods. The opposition from the industry would be extreme. And here lies the big difference between these two paths: the likely opposition by groups with considerable power and money. Promoting fluoridation encounters only citizen opposition, not opposition from more formidable opponents.

There are other factors too, for example the benefit to the aluminium industry, a major source of toxic fluoride pollution, in having fluoride seen as beneficial to health. Having an industry onside is a bonus.

I've described at some length the complexities of explaining why the dental profession has supported water fluoridation with such vigour. A key takeaway lesson is that a careful analysis may be needed. For a persistent panic, it may sometimes be simplistic to adopt the most obvious explanations. As the fluoridation example shows, there can be deeper driving forces than the conscious motives of the protagonists in the drama.

I seem to have made a detour from the main point here, which is that in polarised controversies, it is common for alternatives to be sidelined. I found the same thing in quite a few public scientific controversies. For example, the debate over vaccination has become so all-encompassing that other routes to improved immunity to disease are overshadowed. Having adequate sleep improves your

immunity, but there is no campaign to address the features of modern life that cause people not to get enough sleep.

Another clue for explaining the marginalisation of alternatives comes from Robert Cialdini, a prominent researcher on the science of persuasion. His popular 1984 book *Influence* is a classic, telling about six key techniques that make something seem desirable.[22] One of them is social proof: if you see lots of other people doing something, especially people like you, you're more likely to think it's worth doing.

In his 2016 book *Pre-Suasion,* Cialdini addresses something even more influential: the way that focusing on something makes it seem more important.[23] As soon as your attention is drawn to a topic—an aeroplane crash, a murder, a soap powder—you think it is more important than it otherwise would be. In the same manner, public controversies seem important because so many people pay attention to them, spending time and effort debating the issues and criticising their opponents. Controversies are like powerful magnets, pulling attention towards them and making them seem crucial to nearly all those involved. A side-effect of this attention-attraction process is that alternatives are neglected—and because they receive little attention, most people think they are not very important.

In studying public scientific controversies, therefore, it is worth probing beneath the issues that receive lots of

22 Robert Cialdini, *Influence: how and why people agree to things* (William Morrow, 1984).

23 Robert Cialdini, *Pre-suasion: a revolutionary way to influence and persuade* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

attention, looking for alternative ways of conceiving the issue and alternative ways of addressing the problem. Indeed, sometimes there shouldn't be a problem at all, given that alternatives exist.

To the earlier list of features of moral panics can be added several features of long-running public scientific controversies.

- Polarisation of partisan positions into two opposing camps
- Groups with a stake in subduing opposition
- Suppression of dissenting views
- Failure of new evidence to affect partisan positions
- Marginalisation of alternatives

Conclusion

I started out with the aim of understanding some long-standing social issues, especially ones that are thought of as wars: drugs, crime, terrorism—and war itself. My experience with the vaccination controversy made me think of the theory of moral panics, in which alarm about a threat to the moral order suddenly arises. Moral panic theory nicely fits with several obvious features of these wars, except for one crucial feature: typical moral panics eventually fade away, but the war on terrorism, and other such wars, are persistent. Rather than fading away, they are continually stoked. There are active "moral entrepreneurs" who do what they can to ensure that alarm is maintained.

One key feature of moral panics is what Stanley Cohen calls "folk devils." These are the baddies, the supposed

source of danger, the cause for fear. Cohen studied the Mods and Rockers in 1960s Britain, which today are forgotten. Persistent panics are different: the folk devils are a category, like criminals or terrorists, who can be endlessly renewed.

Because moral-panic theory does not address all the typical features of persistent panics, I turned to another topic with which I was familiar: public scientific controversies. Some of these involve public alarm and, furthermore, they involve demonisation of opponents. Importantly, many of them are persistent. One of the striking features of many public scientific controversies is that new evidence has little impact. Partisans carry on just as before. It seemed promising to examine several characteristic features of public scientific controversies to see whether they also played a role in persistent panics on issues such as crime which, on the surface, are not all that much about science.

The four main panics that I examine—drugs, crime, terrorism, war—are enormous topics. My treatments are necessarily brief and hence selective: I look at just a few aspects of each issue. To guide my approaches, I picked out themes from the study of moral panics and scientific controversies, and added a few additional topics that came up along the way. Here's what I came up with.

The issue

• Description of the issue, including some history. This has to be a very brief history indeed.

• The nature of the real threat. In some panics—like the case of the pitted windscreens—the danger is imaginary or of no significance. However, in the cases of drugs, crime, terrorism and war, there are real threats. Things occur, like assaults and murders, that need to be considered.

Panic

• The way the threat is exaggerated, including the role of the media and the public. If there is no exaggeration, then the label "panic" isn't appropriate. I do not attempt to make a definitive argument that each of these issues involves a panic, but rather proceed on the basis that there are panic aspects to each one.

• Polarisation. In each case, there are supporters of the standard view and critics of it, with little room in between.

• Interests in creating and maintaining the threat. Some groups benefit from the panic, and among them are a number of "panic entrepreneurs" who foster public alarm.

• Stigmatisation. In each panic, there are folk devils: drug users, criminals, terrorists, foreign enemies. They are the baddies.

• Suppression of dissent and marginalisation of experts. The dominant, most powerful groups, the ones that have a vested interest in the panic, like their views to be seen as so authoritative that no others have credibility. In this context, dissident experts are a threat. Sometimes they can just be ignored because no one is paying them much attention. Other times, actions are taken against dissident experts to silence them. It is predictable that in each panic, there will be instances of suppression of dissent.

• Failure of new evidence to influence the debate. This is a feature of long-running public scientific controversies, so it is probably a feature of persistent panics of all sorts.

• Double standards. In many cases, the folk devils—those who are said to be a terrible danger—are not really so very dangerous. But meanwhile there is a much greater danger from some other group, sometimes from the very group raising the alarm. This is something I noticed in relation to drugs, crime, terrorism and war.

• How the panic transforms institutions. The alarm leads to policies, laws, investments, training and a host of other changes. In these ways, the panic becomes built in to society: it becomes institutionalised. This is important for making the panic persistent. It also makes it difficult to challenge and change.

Anti-panic

Analysing a persistent panic is relatively easy compared to figuring out how to challenge it and foster alternatives. In the study of moral panics, there is hardly any attention to campaigns against persistent panics. Likewise, in the study of public scientific controversies, there is little about how to resolve them, except capitulation by the side with less power. Therefore, I can only introduce ideas and initiatives that I've come across. There seems to be no standard anti-panic theory.

• Alternatives. It is useful to identify alternatives to the panic, especially alternatives that are submerged or subordinated.

• Opponents of the panic and supporters of alternatives.

• Possible constraints on the expansion or maintenance of the panic. One way for a panic to end, or at least be limited, is through some constraint. There are lots of possibilities, for example resource limitations and external threats.

• Strategies for change.

These are the topics I'll try to cover in each of the next four chapters. Not every topic will be relevant to every persistent panic. By trying to address these topics, and noticing additional features, my hope is that some useful ideas will emerge, especially about strategies for change.

3
The war on drugs

The idea of a "war on drugs" doesn't really make sense. The targets aren't so much drugs as the people taking them. But wait, nearly everyone takes drugs.

A drug is a substance that changes your mental functioning and sometimes your physical functioning. There are lots of them, many of them used daily.

Have you ever taken an aspirin? It's intended to reduce pain in the short term. It might have a long-term benefit for your heart. It might also cause damage to your liver.

There is no war on pharmaceutical drugs, the ones sold in pharmacies, some of them prescribed by doctors. Instead, some pharmaceutical drugs are heavily promoted. In the US, unlike most other countries, prescription drugs are advertised on television. Some of them have sales worth billions of dollars each year.

Do you ever drink coffee or tea? Or perhaps have a soft drink? If so, you're one of the 90 percent of people who use the drug caffeine. It affects the mind, and some people are addicted: they need it to function normally and have withdrawal symptoms without their daily dose.

Today there's no war against caffeine, nor against other drugs such as alcohol and tobacco. These are legal drugs. Companies spend a lot of money promoting them. Furthermore, they often become part of daily rituals, such as the morning cup of coffee or the glass of wine with dinner. It is less common for there to be elaborate rituals around substances that don't affect mental functioning so obviously, for example grape juice or sandwiches.

What's called the war on drugs is only about some drugs: ones that are illegal. The government makes using certain drugs illegal and takes drastic measures that are supposed to stop people using them. This includes arresting users, searching people for drugs and confiscating them, tracking down suppliers of drugs, prosecuting users and suppliers and sentencing them to long terms in prison, and destroying crops used to make drugs. The basic idea is to stop people using these drugs by using force, with police and prisons playing a major role.

There are other ways to reduce drug use, for example educational programmes, substitute drugs that are less harmful (such as tobacco patches), and counselling and medical support for people's physical and emotional pain. These don't count as part of the war on drugs but are seen as alternatives to the war.

Drugs do pose real dangers to users. By far the most dangerous drug, as measured by the number of people who die from it, is tobacco. After this comes alcohol, which causes immense harm not just to drinkers from cirrhosis of the liver and other diseases but also to others due to car accidents, fights and domestic violence. Then there are pharmaceutical drugs, which cause a great deal of harm.[1] The biggest harms are due to legal drugs.

1 See, for example, Peter C Gøtzsche, *Deadly medicines and organised crime: how big pharma has corrupted healthcare* (London: Radcliffe, 2013).

However, illegal drugs, including heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines, also cause much harm. They can damage the health of users and lead to dangerous behaviour. Driving while high on any drug is risky.

The question is not whether illegal drugs are dangerous—many of them are—but whether the war on drugs is the best way to deal with them. Critics say the war on drugs is the main problem.

Here, I don't plan to present the case against the war on drugs. Others have done this at great length. My aim is to illustrate that the war on drugs has the typical features of a moral panic as well as a polarised public scientific controversy. There are a great many similarities with the war on crime, the war on terrorism, and war itself.

I will proceed by looking at standard features of moral panics and scientific controversies, noting how the war on drugs displays those features. Then I'll look at "anti-panic": alternatives, critics and strategies. But first I give a few highlights from several books by critics of the war on drugs, to give a sense of some of the key ideas.[2]

2 See also James B. Bakalar and Lester Grinspoon, *Drug control in a free society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jeffrey Dhywood, *World War-D: the case against prohibitionism. A roadmap to controlled re-legalization* (US: Columbia Communications, 2011); Paula Mallea, *The war on drugs: a failed experiment* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014); Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: the true tale of America's opiate epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Chasing the scream

Johann Hari, a writer, spent three years searching archives and interviewing key figures about the origins and operation of the war on drugs. The result of his labours is his book *Chasing the Scream,* immensely powerful and filled with great detail.

Hari traced the war on drugs to Harry Anslinger, head of the US Narcotics Bureau. Anslinger had a racist agenda against blacks and immigrants, and promoted giant scares, meanwhile not pursuing white drug users.

> The arguments we hear today for the drug war are that we must protect teenagers from drugs, and prevent addiction in general. We assume, looking back, that these were the reasons this war was launched in the first place. But they were not. They crop up only occasionally, as asides. The main reason given for banning drugs—the reason obsessing the men who launched this war—was that the blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese were using these chemicals, forgetting their place, and menacing white people.[3]

Anslinger never funded any independent studies of drugs. Instead, he suppressed information. For example, agents were barred from reading a report by the American Medical Association criticising his claims. Anslinger also suppressed those he deemed "opponents." For example, he instituted surveillance on an academic who argued for

3 Johann Hari, *Chasing the scream: the first and last days of the war on drugs* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 26.

compassion for addicts, and provided false information about the academic.

Hari had personal and family experiences with the horrors of drug addiction. Much of his book is about the bad side of drugs. He exposes the double standards about alcohol versus other drugs.

His chapter on Portugal's decriminalisation of all drugs—more on this later—is valuable in pointing to the actual policy, which is more than decriminalisation: the key is redirecting resources from enforcement to support for users, and changing the culture of blame to one of support.

There is far more to *Chasing the Scream.* Most horrifying is the story of the famous singer Billie Holiday, including Anslinger's pursuit of her. Then there is Anslinger's huge hypocrisy: later in life, he supplied heroin to the fierce anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Drugs, crime, and violence

Howard Rahtz worked as a drug counsellor and then as a police officer. After retiring, he started writing about drug issues, including the book *Drugs, Crime, and Violence.*[4] Focused on the US, it is a straightforward account of the main issues concerning illegal drugs, covering the market, history, policy options, perspectives from other countries, drug abuse, addiction, drug treatment and future directions. Rahtz describes the damaging effect of the war on drugs, and how this war is failing.

4 Howard Rahtz, *Drugs, crime, and violence: from trafficking to treatment* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2012).

Rahtz sees the complexity of the issues. He says there's not a single drug problem but rather a variety of drug problems. Consider some of these. Tobacco kills more than all other drugs combined. Criminal violence linked to drugs is a major problem, and is most commonly linked to alcohol. Users and traffickers in crack, heroin and methamphetamine (ice) are small in number with disproportionate involvement in violence. Pharmaceutical drug diversion is a difficult sort of problem, much of it driven by cost issues. There is a need for a multi-faceted response based on evidence rather than emotion.

Rahtz says there is a need to distinguish between users causing no danger to others and addicted users who drive the drug market. The focus for enforcement, treatment and services should be on the latter.

One of Rahtz's key recommendations is that marijuana should be legalised, thereby depriving traffickers of much of their market. The main risk in using marijuana is violence associated with obtaining it via illegal markets. This also provides access to stronger drugs. The separation of the marijuana market from other drug markets will reduce harm.

Another key recommendation is trying to get as many addicts into treatment as possible. This is cheaper than prison and deprives traffickers of their market. He sees hope in moves in various US states to make medical marijuana available and to decriminalise personal use.

Rahtz lists policy goals re cocaine/crack, heroin and meth:

- Reduce the size of the market, cutting off funds to traffickers.
- Find many ways to divert users to treatment and health care.
- Focus policing on behaviours that affect neighbourhoods.
- Use harm-reduction measures (e.g., needle exchanges).

Rahtz offers an interesting history on US federal prohibition of alcohol, 1920–1933: it was stricter than some interest groups anticipated: wine and beer producers thought they would be exempted but they weren't, reducing public support for prohibition. A key argument in repealing alcohol prohibition was the 1930s depression and the government's need to bring in more income.

Rahtz says that public support is crucial to the success of drug control measures, noting the role of public support in controls over smoking and alcohol. Laws won't work effectively without public backing.

War on us

Colleen Cowles worked as an attorney, paying little attention to drug issues, until her two sons were arrested for substance use and she entered the nightmare world of the war on drugs in the US. She began investigating and was appalled at what she learned. In her book *War on Us*, she combines statistics with stories to paint a picture of an out-of-control prohibitionist machine that crushes all in its path with little regard for effectiveness, much less for compassion or rehabilitation. Cowles argues for legalisation and

government control, as anything short of this still enables drug-war operations.[5]

Cowles covers a wide range of topics, all demonstrating the damaging effects of the war on drugs. She questions the usual assumption that addiction is a choice, saying instead that it's a health issue. She supports harm reduction.

Some of the stories are horrific. Most drug-war arrests in the US are of users, many of them with small amounts. Once caught in the criminal justice system, they are on a downward trajectory that is hard to escape. Prosecutors threaten the harshest penalties to induce guilty pleas and avoid court cases. When convicted, the support given to users in many treatment programmes, according to Cowles, is one-size-fits-all that excludes some evidence-based protocols. Convicted users' criminal records follow them thereafter, making it harder to obtain jobs, housing and support, again making them more likely to relapse or turn to crime. Parents are penalised if they try to help.

Cowles points to another dysfunction. Many patients on pain medication find it hard to obtain prescriptions because doctors and pharmacists, if they supply needed painkillers, are afraid of being raided and charged with drug offences. What's going on here is the government's response to the opioid crisis, which is the same prohibitionist impulse, relying on criminal sanctions rather than medical judgement. Then there are drug courts, which seem

5 Colleen Cowles, *War on us: how the war on drugs and myths about addiction have created a war on all of us* (St. Paul, MN: Fidalgo Press, 2019).

to have the user in mind but are still part of the policing of users.

Cowles is critical of court mandates for undergoing 12-step programmes, used by Alcoholics Anonymous and similar organisations, which insist on abstinence. She points to the value of other sorts of treatments for addiction, some of which are forbidden by courts.

Probation and parole are other problems. The reporting requirements are so strict, and so dependent on the whims of officers, that it's easy to miss a report and end up in jail, sometimes with a longer sentence than might have been given initially. There are similar problems with bracelets to monitor prisoners at home. Sometimes the technology fails and prisoners are assumed to be violating the conditions for home detention.

Degradation and stigma feature in Cowles' account. She tells of parents being advised to let their children "hit bottom," thereby shaming parents for trying to help, although this advice is highly damaging. She gives attention to the racial disparity in arrests and imprisonment, an important feature of the US war on drugs that is more heavily emphasised in other studies.

Another facet is the confiscation of assets. Police can confiscate cars and houses if they find drugs. This possibility discourages parents from providing full support for their children: the parents may end up paying the penalty.

Prisoners are exploited, providing low-paid labour and having to pay for their incarceration and/or for their probation and treatment plans.

Cowles examines options to fix the problem. She looks at decriminalisation, which is a useful step to reduce

incarceration for drug possession, but points out that this doesn't address the cartels' control of drug supply. She argues for legalisation, so the government can regulate quality and sales, as it does with alcohol. She sees hope in the move to decriminalise use of cannabis.

She points to many insanities, for example restrictions on the availability of naloxone, used to counter drug overdoses, when it can be lifesaving. She continually points out the disparity between using a small quantity of illegal drugs and the horrific consequences, noting that the difference between those caught and those who are not is often just a matter of luck. She also points out the mammoth failure of the war on drugs, in the sense that drug use hasn't been reduced, while the number of people in prison has gone up tenfold.

This is a US-oriented book, with nearly all the stories and statistics about the US, with some mention of policy elsewhere, such as Portugal. This US orientation can be justified by the US government's key role in shaping international drug policy. The title, *War on us,* could also be *War on US.*

Here is Cowles' summary of the issues:

- The war has backfired.
- The consequences of the war are horrific: "Incarceration, criminal records, denial of medications, stigma, and loss of opportunities make it difficult to crawl out of a financial and emotional hole."
- The targets of the war experience isolation and trauma, which are leading causes of substance use disorder (the term Cowles prefers to "addiction").

• Overdose rates are increasing. "Funding is allocated to prosecution, incarceration, and supervision instead of treatment, and most of those who do receive treatment fail to receive individualized care based on evidence or medicine."
• Many end up on the streets because the system provides inadequate support and parents sometimes follow the advice to "let them hit bottom".
• The war enables drug cartels, with collateral damage.
• "For these results, taxpayers in the United States alone have spent over a trillion dollars on the War on Drugs since 1971. For that money, the United States has the highest drug use in the world, the highest incarceration rates in the world, and the highest overdose rates in the world."[6]

Why our drug laws have failed

James P. Gray has seen the devastation caused by the war on drugs in the US. He provides lots of evidence that prohibitionist drug laws are a failure. They are expensive, cause crime (when people steal to obtain money to buy illegal drugs) and harm people's lives in all sorts of ways. Prison populations have expanded and police continue to intercept drug shipments, yet more drugs are available at a lower cost. The vast amount of money obtained by manufacturing and distributing illegal drugs is corrupting: police, prison officials and judges succumb to monetary inducements. Battles over drug markets lead to violence.

6 Ibid., pp. 16–17.

Gray argues that there are many options between zero tolerance and legalisation. They include decriminalisation, regulated distribution, treatment and medicalisation, along with education. He says moralism should be taken out of the issue; problems should be rationally managed. In his book he writes,

> So what exactly is the current drug policy in the United States of America? Over the past several decades, our government has attempted to combat the critical problem of drug use and abuse with a program of massive prisons, demonization of drug users, and prohibition of debate about our options. This policy approaches drug use and abuse as a moral issue: "Drugs are evil, and if you take them, you are evil, and we will punish you." But decades of failed attempts to make this policy work have shown that we cannot effectively take a medical problem and treat it as a character issue. Unfortunately, because we tend to see issues of drug usage in moral terms, many people actively resist opening their eyes to the severe damage this policy is visiting on us and fail to consider viable alternatives.[7]

Gray's criticisms of the war on drugs are not that unusual, but Gray himself is. He was previously a federal prosecutor in Los Angeles and a criminal defence attorney for the US Navy, and then became a trial judge. He has seen up close the damage caused by the drug war and, unusually for a

7 James P. Gray, *Why our drug laws have failed and what we can do about it: a judicial indictment of the war on drugs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011, 2nd edition), p. 8.

sitting judge, decided to speak out. Among US judges, he is not alone. Throughout his book are numerous quotes from other judges expressing similar views.

PANIC

The war on drugs has many of the features of a moral panic. But it is a persistent panic, one promoted on an ongoing basis. Here I touch on several characteristic features of moral panics, plus some of those of public scientific controversies, as outlined in chapter 2. This is not a detailed argument but rather an impressionistic journey, giving a sense of what a more careful examination might reveal.

Threat exaggeration

How can we say that the threat from drugs is exaggerated? The easiest way is to make comparisons. Nearly every drug causes some adverse effects. The key here is to compare *illegal* drugs with legal ones. Why should there be a huge alarm about illegal drugs if legal ones cause greater problems?

By far the most damaging drug is tobacco.[8] The number of people who will die from smoking-related diseases is huge. Worldwide, this could even be as many as a billion people in this century, far more than any other cause except perhaps nuclear war and climate change.

8 Robert N. Proctor, *Golden holocaust: origins of the cigarette catastrophe and the case for abolition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

In some countries, campaigners against tobacco harms have made great strides. I can remember when smoking was permitted on airline flights. I always booked a nonsmoking seat, but sometimes this turned out to be in a row just behind smokers. Smoking was permitted on buses and trains. On trains in Sydney, every other car was nonsmoking, but some passengers lit up on nonsmoking carriages, and some of them were hostile when I asked them to put out their cigarettes. Smoking was permitted in office buildings and in the lobbies of movie theatres. In my view, one of the great social advances over the past half century has been the gradual reduction of places where smoking is permitted, making smoke-free living a much greater possibility.

However, during the entire struggle over smoking, there has never been an attempt to make it illegal. Even when laws are broken, for example when cigarettes are sold to ten-year-olds or someone lights up in an aircraft toilet, it is rare for harsh penalties to be applied. The pushers, namely tobacco company executives, have never gone to prison.

Compare marijuana with tobacco. This is a big topic. In terms of health hazards, marijuana is less harmful simply because smokers of nicotine cigarettes smoke more of them. Marijuana smokers don't need as much to get high. Or compare marijuana with alcohol. The big difference is that marijuana tends to make users easy-going whereas alcohol is more likely to trigger aggression, at least in some societies.

Have a look at a table of the number of deaths in the US attributed to various drugs.[9] Marijuana doesn't even rate a mention.

There's a counter-argument. If drugs were legal—namely, if currently illegal drugs were legalised—there would be a huge rise in drug-taking and a corresponding rise in the associated harm. However, this isn't what has happened in places where drug laws are different.

It can be argued that the war on drugs itself causes much of the danger from illegal drugs, because purity isn't guaranteed. Consider heroin. If used with clean needles in sterile environments, it's not all that dangerous, as shown by the doctors who regularly use morphine—which they can obtain in pure form—and carry on their lives and work without anyone suspecting their habits.

If illegal drugs were legalised, this doesn't mean they would be sold in shops along with cigarettes and alcoholic drinks. There could still be controls, educational efforts, social pressure and other methods to reduce unhealthy use, just as there are now restrictions on advertising cigarettes and smoking them.

Are the dangers of illegal drugs are exaggerated? A full investigation to answer this question would be a massive enterprise. Based on what I've read, the evidence is strong that the dangers of illegal drugs are real but they are also exaggerated, sometimes greatly, depending on the

9 This is easier said than done. In recent years, most sources about US drug-related deaths refer mainly to drug overdoses, mostly from opioids. Dying from a smoking-related disease is not called a drug overdose.

drug. The point here is that the alarm about drugs fits, in this characteristic, the usual pattern for moral panics.

Polarisation

The drug debate is polarised, in the sense that ideas and arguments mostly sit in two opposing camps. On one side are those who say (illegal) drugs are dangerous and thus should remain illegal, that drug use shows a defect in character and that drug users are criminals who need to be deterred or punished. On the other side are those who say prohibition causes more danger than drug use, that drug policy should be based on harm reduction and that drug users need compassion and support.

These contrary positions are usually in a package. Normally all illegal drugs are thought of as a group, with the one exception being marijuana, which is seen as less dangerous and a top priority for decriminalisation. It is hard to find anyone who says using heroin is okay but using ice is not. This is despite the considerable differences between the various drugs.

Another point of difference is over the legal status of drugs. Usually on one side are those who support criminal sanctions while on the other are those who support decriminalisation or legalisation. If you don't take a side about this but instead say, for example, that people need more information to consider the benefits and risks of specific drugs, then you're not part of the main debate.

About some aspects of the issue, views are likely to be one-sided. Think, for examples, of "drug pushers," who are portrayed in the media as dangerous and deserving of the harshest penalties. Importing huge amounts of cocaine is

one thing. Selling a joint to someone who turns out to be an undercover cop is another. Some of those closest to the issues have nuanced views, whereas those who rely on media coverage often have simplistic understandings.

Stigma

Drug users are fiends, degenerates, addicts, criminals. This is the picture encouraged by those prosecuting the war on drugs. Users and sellers are portrayed in the harshest terms. This refers especially to users of illegal drugs, through some users of legal drugs, notably alcohol, are also stigmatised.

Stigma is a central feature of moral panics, which are driven by alarm over some group or activity that threatens the moral order. Users of illegal drugs are seen negatively on two grounds: their association with drugs (which are themselves stigmatised) and their breaking of the law.

The idea of a "drug addict" can bring to mind a picture of an unkempt, shady-looking derelict injecting heroin in a dark alley. This sort of image helps avoid cognitive dissonance: if drug use is so terrible then those who are involved need to be seen as despicable, otherwise the harsh ways they are treated would seem unfair. It is for this reason that "drug addict" isn't usually associated with doctors and lawyers.

Media stories show the power of the stigma associated with illegal drugs. Although police usually don't pursue rich and powerful users, occasionally someone in a valued occupation—such as a former sports star—is arrested over drugs. This can bring a sudden loss of status.

There can be stigma from being known as a drug user, which is why even some who use legal drugs try to hide

their habits of heavy drinking or overuse of prescription drugs. There is even greater stigma from being arrested or imprisoned for involvement with illegal drugs. Rather than attracting sympathy, their treatment is widely considered warranted. Often only those who know the person think they might be better understood as victims.

The stigma associated with drug use can change. When President Bill Clinton admitted he had smoked marijuana (but didn't inhale), and when President Barrack Obama admitted he did inhale, that no doubt helped the gradual process by which personal use of marijuana is becoming both acceptable, tolerated and, in some places, legal. This suggests that examining the degree of stigma attached to a particular drug is a convenient way of determining the success of drug warriors.

Suppression of dissent

In the 1990s, my friend and collaborator Gabriele Bammer headed an investigation into the feasibility of prescribing heroin to addicts. This was in response to a call from an independent member of the Australian Capital Territory government to Bob Douglas, Director of the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, located in Canberra, the national capital, where Gabriele worked then, as she does now. The work was undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Gabriele is an amazingly thorough researcher. As well as studying the way heroin problems are addressed around the world, she systematically proceeded to involve all stakeholders in the feasibility research, which, after a five-

year investigation, recommended that a trial be undertaken to see whether the harms due to heroin use—harms to the user and to others from crimes committed to obtain the drug—could be reduced by providing heroin to users in a safe environment. After the thorough feasibility investigation, there was strong support for the proposed trial, nationally as well as in Canberra, from the medical profession, police, media, heroin users and many members of the general public. After majority approval by the federal government and Australian states through the Australian Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, it looked like everything was set for the project to go ahead. Then, following a campaign by the Murdoch press and two high-profile "shock jocks," the trial was vetoed by the prime minister and cabinet in an unprecedented move.[10]

The cancellation of the heroin trial meant the punitive approach to drugs could continue without being challenged by evidence. This illustrates what has been called "undone science," which refers to research that is not funded or carried out despite being called for by citizen groups.[11] Much undone science concerns environmental and health topics where corporations and governments do not support

10 Glenda Lawrence, Gabriele Bammer and Simon Chapman, "'Sending the wrong signal': analysis of print media reportage of the heroin prescription trial proposal, August 1997," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health,* vol. 24, no. 3, June 2000, pp. 254–264.

11 David J. Hess, *Undone science: social movements, mobilized publics, and industrial transitions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

research that might come up with findings that would throw their products or policies into question.

Another initiative in Australia was a safe injecting room in Sydney. Many injecting drug users are in danger due to dirty needles and overdosing. The safe injecting room provides sterile conditions, and personnel are present to treat any health emergencies. Though many die from drug overdoses, no one has died at the safe injecting room. So why not introduce more such rooms around the country? The answer, presumably, is that drug warriors do not want competition from any alternative approach. By analogy with undone science, this might be called "undone alternatives."

In my studies of scientific controversies, nearly always I find evidence of "suppression of dissent": adverse actions taken against campaigners on the other side, especially ones with expertise. For example, in the debate over nuclear power, there are numerous cases in which scientists or engineers critical of nuclear power have had research projects blocked, been censored or lost their jobs.[12] Suppression is so common that I expect to find it in nearly every controversy where one side has a significant advantage in wealth and power, and where one side has a near monopoly on scientific credibility.

Already I mentioned Johann Hari's book *Chasing the Scream,* which tells of the witch hunt against singer Buddy Holly. However, I haven't studied the drug issue in

12 Brian Martin, "Suppression of dissent in science," *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy,* vol. 7, 1999, pp. 105–135.

sufficient depth to discover whether there is a similar process that affects researchers and campaigners.

Threat entrepreneurs

A typical moral panic, for example about tattoos or pop music, rises suddenly and then falls away before too long. A persistent panic, on the other hand, by definition lasts for a long time, perhaps indefinitely. Therefore it is plausible to think there may be individuals or groups stoking alarm, for ideological reasons or for personal gain. They can be called threat entrepreneurs: their enterprise is generating fear in the community about some alleged danger.

The war on drugs depends heavily on threat entrepreneurs, especially in relation to drugs that give personal pleasure without causing harm to others. If someone wants to grow their own marijuana and smoke it themselves, why should anyone care, much less think that arresting them and throwing them in prison is a suitable response? Well, quite a few people think this is appropriate because they have soaked up the warnings about illegal drugs.

The top threat entrepreneurs in the war on drugs are government policy makers, especially politicians who campaign on being tough on lawbreakers. Once the war on drugs got going, all sorts of groups became part of the campaign. Police had easy targets for arrests. The prison-industrial complex, comprised of all the groups involved with construction and running of prisons and exploiting prison labour, thrived. The US military had a pretext to intervene in foreign countries.

Some media proprietors are themselves drug warriors, promoting alarms about illegal drugs. The campaign by

Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* against the heroin trial in Canberra is an example.

Even without editorial bias, the mass media can help raise the alarm about drugs simply by reporting on drug busts. Journalists are not necessarily supporters of the war on drugs, but just by following up stories that satisfy what are called news values—stories involving prominent people, local relevance, conflict and so forth—they reinforce war-on-drugs thinking. When police intercept a huge haul of cocaine and keep the media informed, it's a news story. For local news, it's news when a resident is arrested for growing marijuana or charged with burglary to support a drug habit, or when there is a murder linked to the drug trade. On the other hand, it's almost never news to report that police confiscations of large amounts of drugs do not affect the price of drugs on the street: a steady price (despite confiscations) is not newsworthy. Prices on the share market are regularly reported, at least in the specialist financial media, but not street prices of illegal drugs, for which there is no organisation with any interest in collecting the data and making it available.

This is an example of how the mass media, less by intent than by structural factors, serve as threat entrepreneurs. This is not surprising, given that bad news attracts interest more than good news: owners and editors learn what sells, and audiences would rather read about crime and criminals than about ordinary people obeying the law. To this can be added the efforts of drug warriors. Panic promoters in the police feed stories to the media, leading to stories that help to maintain funding for the police. Politicians promote themselves by making statements about

being tough on drugs; the media are their amplifiers, and stories are newsworthy because politicians are considered more worthy of being quoted than criminologists saying the war on drugs is misguided. The war on drugs helps generate good material for media coverage, and media coverage helps propel the war on drugs.

Many people receive their news via social media, but this does not change the dynamic greatly. News aggregators like Facebook do not rely on war-on-drugs critics in making choices about what stories to highlight. If you're an influencer on social media, with hundreds of thousands of followers, it would be risky to become a campaigner against drug policing, much less to highlight your own use of illegal drugs. You might be visited by the police, and if they didn't find any illegal drugs, they might conveniently plant some on you. Your arrest would be a big story!

Double standards

The drug war involves several massive double standards. The most obvious is the difference in treatment of users and promoters of legal and illegal drugs. Several legal drugs—tobacco, alcohol, pain killers—cause far more suffering and death than any illegal drug. This might seem to undermine the rationale for trying to stamp out drug use—but only of the illegal ones.

This is rather like saying tax avoidance is bad, so we're going to come down tough on tax avoiders—but only on ones who are poor, not on the rich. Or like saying, killing is bad, so we're going to come down tough on killers—but only on ones who kill just one other person, not on those who kill large numbers. Or like saying, nuclear weapons are bad, so we're going to come down hard on governments seeking to acquire nuclear weapons—but not on governments that have a lot of them. You get the idea.

If the drug war targeted all drug users, including everyone who smoked, drank alcohol, used pain killers or drank tea or coffee, it wouldn't get off the ground, because there would be too much opposition. The experience with alcohol prohibition in the US showed this. The only way the war on drugs can even begin to make sense is if the main targets are a relatively small group, or are poor and weak, or if only some users are targeted.

This points to the next major double standard in the war on drugs. A large number of people take illegal drugs at some time in their lives. Some try marijuana. Others occasionally use ecstasy. Some use morphine. But only some are ever penalised, mostly those with less money and power.

In the US, drug-law enforcement serves as a form of racial oppression. African Americans are arrested at a higher rate than whites and given heavier sentences. Drugs laws have become the prime means of criminalising the African American inner-city population, especially young males. In this regard, a notorious double standard was the big difference in penalties between two forms of cocaine: the penalties for crack cocaine, used mainly by poor African American men, were far higher than for powder cocaine, used mainly by affluent whites.[13]

13 Merrill Singer, *Drugging the poor: legal and illegal drugs and social inequality* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008), argues that poor people in the US are much more likely to be harmed by

It could be argued that double standards in relation to income and ethnicity are so fundamental that the war on drugs would never have gotten off the ground without them. It's fanciful to imagine a war launched with the prime targets being the rich and powerful, many of whom, it is not hard to discover, are heavy users of drugs.

New evidence

I've talked with campaigners on fluoridation and vaccination who think that the tide will turn, with change occurring—namely, victory for their side—within the next few years. What do they think will lead to victory? Most commonly, new evidence.

The trouble is that new evidence hardly ever makes much difference, for several reasons. One is that evidence can always be contested or just ignored. Another is that the controversy is not driven by rational evaluation of evidence and arguments. Ethical, political and economic factors are crucial.

The drug war fits this picture. From the beginning, it has been driven by political considerations such as stigmatising and subordinating particular groups in the US, such as Chinese opium users in the 1920s. Evidence that using marijuana is not particularly harmful has been ignored.

smoking, alcohol, pharmaceutical drugs and illicit drugs. She also shows parallels between the legal and illegal drug industries and markets.

The best example of how new evidence makes little difference is the example of Portugal.[14] In 2001, the Portuguese government decriminalised the use and sale of small quantities of all drugs. According to the standard "drugs-are-dangerous" line, this should have resulted in an explosion in drug use, and furthermore should have made the country a magnet for drug users. The result was the opposite: the use of most previously illegal drugs declined, especially the most dangerous ones, eventually quite significantly. Accompanying decriminalisation, the government transferred the management of drug matters from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Health, which instituted numerous programmes to help drug users get off harmful habits and improve their health and welfare.[15]

The main role of the Portuguese experience has been to serve as an example by reformers who say, "Look at Portugal." But most drug warriors have just ignored the example, not even bothering to try to say why it doesn't apply more widely. It is safe to say that if drug use in Portugal had skyrocketed following decriminalisation, drug

14 See for example Artur Domoslawski, *Drug policy in Portugal: the benefits of decriminalizing drugs* (Open Society Foundations, 2011).

15 Hannah Laqueur, "Uses and abuses of drug decriminalization in Portugal," *Law & Social Inquiry,* vol. 40, no. 3, summer 2015, pp. 746–781, argues that the law change was not particularly significant in itself but should be seen as part of a process: "The statute did not encompass a major change in legal sanctions. But it reflected and supported Portugal's evolving shift from a penal to a therapeutic approach to drug abuse and this, in turn, appears to have had a much broader impact on court practices." (p. 749).

warriors would have said it proved the need for tough-on-drugs policies.

Research findings show that alcohol—more precisely, ethanol, the key drug in alcoholic drinks—is carcinogenic. The evidence has been mounting for years and has been endorsed by high-level scientific committees. For example, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), of the World Health Organization, reported in 2010 that carcinogenic effects don't depend sensitively on what sort of alcoholic beverage you drink, that studies show that ethanol causes cancer in experimental animals, and in conclusion that ethanol in alcoholic drinks is "carcinogenic to humans."[16] In short, alcohol causes cancer. This is a big deal. It's not just that drinking alcohol might be a factor in causing cancer, a "possible carcinogen": it's definitely one, at least according to bodies of experts. You might imagine that this would sound alarm bells, leading to major warnings, similar to those made about smoking, for example banning of alcohol advertisements. But no: the new evidence seems to not to have had a big impact on policies, much less on drinking.

There are plenty of other examples of new evidence not having much impact. One I especially like is reported in Dan Baum's book *Smoke and Mirrors.* In 1969, when the war on drugs was being launched, the argument was that marijuana was a "gateway drug," opening the door to the

16 International Agency for Research on Cancer, *Alcohol consumption and ethyl carbamate* (IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans, Volume 96) (Lyon, France: World Health Organization, 2010), p. 39.

use of stronger, more dangerous drugs, specifically heroin. When a police campaign cut the availability of marijuana in San Francisco,

> A doctor running the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic in San Francisco noticed a sudden increase in kids strung out on stronger drugs than pot and was furious. "The government line is that the use of marijuana leads to more dangerous drugs," David Smith told reporters. "The fact is that the *lack* of marijuana leads to more dangerous drugs."[17]

Baum interviewed over 175 figures involved in the war on drugs, beginning with the year 1969, when President Richard Nixon took office. *Smoke and Mirrors* is a year-by-year account of episodes in the war, sort of like the script for a soap opera, with scenes from different groups of people, including politicians, government employees, lobby groups, police and citizen groups. A few among these paid attention to research, for example findings that marijuana was not nearly as hazardous as heroin. Others, though, were driven primarily by other considerations: political gain, career benefit, organisational empire building, protecting employment. For example, in the 1970s, the targeting of marijuana, rather than heroin, was in part because heroin was not a big problem, so it didn't serve as well as a political weapon. Raising the alarm over marijuana was convenient because it linked to parents' concerns about their surly teenagers, behaviour that could be blamed

17 Dan Baum, *Smoke and mirrors: the war on drugs and the politics of failure* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), p. 24.

on drugs rather than culture in the country. The overwhelming impression from *Smoke and Mirrors* is that evidence did not drive the US war on drugs. Instead, the war on drugs served political purposes, and evidence was deployed or disregarded according to whether it served those purposes.

After Ronald Reagan took office as president in 1981, the war on drugs really got rolling and evidence became almost irrelevant. Institutional driving forces took over.

Institutions

Quite a few groups have a vested interest in maintaining alarm about illegal drugs, while remaining unconcerned about legal ones. The most obvious are politicians, police, prisons and the media.

Some politicians try to win support by raising the alarm about some danger, for which they have the solution, of course. In the United States and some other countries, politicians have learned that being tough on a stigmatised group or behaviour can win votes. The target can be foreign enemies, ethnic minorities, the poor—or drug users. When drug use is blamed on users, they become targets for harsh control measures, and some politicians see an advantage in raising the alarm about drug use and championing policing and prisons as the solution. Other politicians, who favour compassion and social justice, may not be able to win as much publicity and votes. This depends a lot on the circumstances. After a drug panic becomes established, as in the US, politicians try to outbid each other in being "tough on drugs" and the war becomes bipartisan.

The question arises: why is being tough on drugs a vote-winner? The answer is complex, but one factor is that

stigmatising a relatively powerless out-group makes some voters feel they need the government to protect them.

Government bureaucrats can be key promoters of a drug war. When politicians sign up to the war, they allocate more money for the effort, and astute players can build their careers by getting in charge of the money and the operations it supports. In the US, in the 1980s the "drug czar"—a federal government official—became enormously influential, driving priorities throughout agencies. After the channelling of money for drug-war operations becomes standard, there is a vested interest in maintaining and expanding the flow.

Much of the money goes to the police. Sensible commanders, who are concerned about serious crime and protecting communities, do not want to be bothered by searching for casual drug users. But when resources become available for this purpose, their priorities change. In the US, military equipment was offered to police departments, which set up teams to deal with terrorism and hostage situations. The teams ended up going after drug infractions, and small-time users were easier targets than criminal gangs.

In the US, the federal government pushed through forfeiture laws, so that property suspected of being used for criminal purposes could be seized by the government. Eventually some police departments found this a highly lucrative activity. They could raid someone's house, discover a small amount of illegal drugs—or plant it—and take possession of the house, cars, cash, and bank assets, and it would be enormously difficult for the owner to regain

possession. Police units involved in large-scale seizures have a vested interest in continuation of the drug war.

Then there are prisons. As arrests and convictions escalated in the US, and as laws for mandatory sentences became ever harsher, the number of people imprisoned for drug offences skyrocketed, and so did the building of prisons. Around the country, as jobs were lost to foreign production, local communities saw prisons as economic salvation, and competed for a new one to be built. It would contribute to the tax base. Prisoners were put to work, at rock-bottom wage rates, at producing goods, another money-spinner for prison authorities. What emerged has been dubbed the prison-industrial complex, a mutually reinforcing operation of government funding for prisons (some of them privately owned and run) and companies that build and maintain them.[18]

I grew up in Oklahoma at a time when alcohol was illegal in the state. Nationally, prohibition had been repealed in 1933, but it remained in some states and counties. Occasionally, my father would point out a car, saying it was probably used by bootleggers, conveying illegal alcohol. The back springs of these cars were jacked up so that when carrying a heavy load of alcohol in the trunk, they looked normal.

The bootleggers didn't want alcohol to be legalised because they made so much money. Some politicians were being paid off by the bootleggers. Other politicians, though, wanted alcohol legalised so it could be taxed. That is an

18 A widely cited treatment is Eric Schlosser, "The prison-industrial complex," *Atlantic Monthly,* December 1998, pp. 51–77.

argument used by those who want other drugs legalised. The point here is that drug traffickers, and those they bribe, can help perpetuate the drug war.

Belief systems

Panics are driven by beliefs: people are alarmed, even when you might think there's little or nothing to be alarmed about. Threat entrepreneurs may stimulate a panic and institutions maintain it, but they all depend on people—some people, anyway—being convinced there is a danger and something needs to be done about it.

The war on drugs has been highly effective in shaping popular understandings about drugs. Most people, in the US at least, believe some drugs are so dangerous that they need to be prohibited. Most people believe drug traffickers are especially dangerous and that they should be treated as criminals. The wonder is that these beliefs are so malleable. Sellers of alcohol and cigarettes are seldom thought of as drug traffickers, and pharmaceutical companies are definitely not traffickers. The most significant belief in the war on drugs is that when a drug is legal, it's okay, but when it's illegal, users and sellers are doing the wrong thing.

There is quite a bit of variation in people's beliefs. Marijuana users, for example, are likely to think marijuana is not particularly dangerous—indeed that it has health benefits—and personal use should be decriminalised or legalised. But they may favour criminal penalties for heroin and cocaine.

Beliefs are also malleable over time, especially through media coverage. In the US before the drug war was ramped up in 1969, drugs were not seen as an important

social problem. After the threat entrepreneurs got to work, alarm was built up over marijuana. Only later was cocaine touted as major concern. For some periods, media coverage about drugs would fade away.

The study of people's beliefs about drugs is a field in itself. There are many opinion polls and other investigations. Only some people become so passionate about drug issues that they take action themselves, for example to push for laws that are tougher or more lenient.

Beliefs are, to a considerable extent, a product of the war on drugs. When politicians denounce drugs, when the media report on large drug busts and when anti-drug campaigners call for stiffer penalties, this influences some people. They hear about the horrors of heroin and cocaine while thinking it's quite all right to have a glass of wine with dinner and light up while at a party. The influence of anti-drug campaigning is most dramatic in stories of youth who, after hearing a lecture, go to the police to report their parents for using marijuana, and in stories of parents who force their children into camps to break drug habits.

Beliefs about drugs are often tied up with beliefs about drug users and drug dealers. Social drinkers seldom think of themselves as drug users, nor do people who regularly take pharmaceutical drugs. Drug users are other people. People seldom think of tobacco companies or doctors as drug dealers, instead thinking of the foreign syndicates portrayed in Hollywood films. The images that "drug user" and "drug dealer" evoke reflect deep-seated beliefs that are hard to displace or overturn through logical thinking. The war on drugs may have shaped beliefs but, once they become established, beliefs keep the war going.

In summary, the war on drugs displays all the characteristics of a moral panic and an intractable scientific controversy. It is a dramatic example of a persistent panic, one egged on by a range of groups, eventually becoming a standard way of thinking. Much more could be said about the features of the war on drugs, but in this brief treatment it is time to turn to challenges to the war.

ANTI-PANIC

How can the war on drugs be restrained, reversed and turned into a rational, compassionate way of dealing with the real problems associated with drugs? Numerous researchers, campaigners and concerned citizens have addressed this question. Here, my aim is to highlight just a few aspects of what can be called "anti-panic," aspects that can be compared to similar efforts in relation to crime, terrorism and war. I address in turn alternatives, critics, constraints, and strategies.

Alternatives

Instead of prosecuting drug users and dealers, and trying to interdict the sources of illegal drugs, what is the alternative? The usual thought is to decriminalise or legalise drugs that are now illegal. Stepping back from this, a more generic approach is harm reduction.

Harm reduction is a medical or health approach to drugs. The idea is to respond to problems with drugs by adopting policies and practices that lead to lower harm to users and non-users alike. For example, when heroin is

illegal, users are likely to share needles, with the risk of spreading infectious diseases such as hepatitis. A harm-reduction measure is needle exchanges. Another is safe injecting rooms. Rather than stigmatising users, they are helped to use drugs safely. In addition, needle exchanges and safe injecting rooms can be opportunities to provide information on ways to overcome addiction.

Harm reduction is widely supported in many parts of the world, indeed in most places where the war on drugs has not taken over. Harm reduction is compatible with legalisation, controls on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes to minors, education campaigns and much else. It is seldom compatible with arresting users and trying to limit supply, because these produce greater harms, including the damage to lives of prosecuted users, the cost of policing and prisons, and criminal drug trafficking. An important part of harm reduction is protecting non-users. This might involve measures to reduce driving while intoxicated (with alcohol or marijuana) and to prevent alcohol-primed domestic violence.

An important part of harm reduction is tailoring responses to each drug. Rather than a single method being adopted—"Just say no"—there is a carefully calibrated response to each drug, depending on its characteristics and its role in society. For example, marijuana might be legalised and available for sale while cocaine is by prescription only.

Another important part of harm reduction is providing help to people who want to control or end their drug use. This applies to cigarettes as well as heroin.

The key to harm reduction is treating drug issues as practical health and behavioural matters, not as questions of morality. The drug war is largely premised on seeing illegal drugs as evil and seeing those involved in the drug trade as transgressors. The drug war, in this sense, is indeed a moral panic, a remarkably persistent one. The alternative is to end the panic—end the moralisation of drug use—and pursue practical measures to deal with the real problems associated with drugs and end the problems created and aggravated by the drug war.

This is easy to say but does not give much insight into what needs to be done to interrupt and reverse the drug war. There is a rational and humane alternative available, one that has many informed and caring supporters, but this has not been enough to stop the disastrous continuation of the counterproductive punitive approach.

Critics

Who are the opponents of the war on drugs? They are many. Criminologists and other researchers can see the shortcomings of the war. Many doctors favour a different approach. A great number of users would like their favoured drugs to be available in a safe form. Many families whose members have been caught up in the drug war—arrested, fined, imprisoned—desperately want something different. Some policy advisers recognise that legalisation, at least of some drugs, would reduce harms and increase tax revenues.

In many parts of the world, the drug war has never taken off, certainly not in the way it has in the US. Supporters of rational and humane policy making sometimes have

been able to counter threat entrepreneurs such as politicians and tabloid media organisations.

Logically, victims of the drug war should be prominent critics, but this is difficult because they are so stigmatised. Victims include those arrested and imprisoned for drug offences, and family and friends who see the unfairness of the process. Often the most influential critics are individuals with high status or in high positions who, through personal experience or familiarity with problems, take a vocal stand.

In practice, no single individual or group can bring about change on their own. Usually a combination of factors is involved. However, to say this provides little guidance for drug-war challengers.

It can be useful to study examples in which drug wars are deescalated, such as the end of alcohol prohibition in the US, the movement to decriminalise marijuana use or the policy changes in Portugal. But even with such knowledge, trying to halt the war on drugs seems an insuperable challenge, at least in the short term.

Constraints

Are there some inherent limits to seemingly out-of-control drug wars?

The expansion of the war cannot go on forever, because eventually most of the population will be in prison and most social resources will be devoted to policing of drugs. No drug war has yet approached this sort of scale.

Sometimes drug wars may be interrupted by competing threats, especially ones that generate a greater panic. In the US after the attacks of 9/11, terrorism became the prime

cause of alarm and the drug war had less visibility. However, this did little to reverse the drug war, which by 2001 was so entrenched that it seemed self-sustaining even when other threats loomed larger.

Could some external threat to society lead to ending the drug war? If all resources were needed to wage a fighting war, like World War II, then tracking down drug users might be seen as wasting precious effort that could be used to support the shooting war. However, a close look at cases of "total war" shows that there were still major inefficiencies in all major participants. For example, the US government locked up people of Japanese ancestry rather than drawing on their skills as part of the war effort, and Nazi Germany diverted huge resources to genocide.

Another possibility is that drug use might be found to have great advantages. So-called "smart drugs" could be used to increase intelligence. The best example here is medical marijuana: claims about the beneficial properties of marijuana for reducing pain and suffering for cancer patients and other sufferers have become a wedge to create a different image for the drug and to push for legalisation. This sounds promising but, because it concerns only particular drugs, is not enough to force a rethink of the drug war more generally.

What about a revolt? What if large numbers of people started openly using illegal drugs? Would this sort of mass civil disobedience be enough to reverse the drug war? Unfortunately, that's what is happening already. Large numbers of people use illegal drugs, but only some are arrested. The drug war only occasionally targets the rich and powerful; it is primarily a war against disadvantaged

and marginalised populations. The double standard is built into the war. We might as well imagine that widespread tax evasion would lead to an end to taxation.

Another possibility is some sort of policy revolution. Imagine that the US president decides to end the drug war and appoints sympathetic figures to key posts. That's fine, but what about Congress? There would need to be a strong majority in Congress to support the president and, furthermore, representatives and senators themselves would have to be willing to go along with the new agenda. This seems unlikely unless the change was part of an election platform, but if it was, this would give opponents a chance to mobilise. Then there's the problem that the federal government is not all-powerful, but has to contend with state governments, many of which have a stake in continuing the drug war. On top of all this is the incentive to politicians to be seen to be tough, at least tough against stigmatised groups. Being compassionate hasn't been a winner since the 1960s, before the drug war really got underway.

Policy revolutions aren't impossible, just improbable in this case. For issues such as this, politicians are often followers. They might have started and joined the war on drugs for political advantage, and few of them will risk their careers to try to reverse it. The key here is political advantage. If, at some point, politicians see an advantage in adopting a different drug stand, there might be change. And this depends on a different sort of revolution, a revolution in values.

Citizens think for themselves and help shape each other's views. Through personal experience, many have become partisans supporting the war on drugs, but others

see the war's harms every day. They see the benefits of medical marijuana or they see the harms of pharmaceutical opioids. They see the futility of locking up drug users and they see the violence triggered by drug trafficking. Could the intelligence and moral concern of citizens be a basis for deescalating the war on drugs?

Strategies

A strategy is a plan for moving from the present reality to a desired future. A strategy to oppose the war on drugs, or to supersede it, needs to be based on a clear-headed analysis of the present reality, to have a reasonably articulated vision of the future, and to identify steps that can be taken to move towards that vision.

Many critics spend much of their time saying what's wrong with the drug war, which is a good start. But then they conclude by saying what *should* happen. Drugs should be decriminalised, policies should be based on harm reduction, the government should stop locking up low-level drug users, and so forth. These sorts of recommendations are more like goals. They do not identify specific groups that can take action in particular ways as part of a programme for change.

The problem here is that the issue of "drugs" is way too big. To talk of a strategy is to incorporate concerns about everything from caffeine to mescaline. It is not obvious what any individual should be doing about drugs, because individual circumstances are so different. Despite this difficulty, it is useful to classify strategies into three main types.

A first general type of strategy is based on evidence and reason. It is based on the idea that if people understood how damaging it is to wage a drug war, this would be the basis for change. This rationality strategy is apparent in the great amount of writing showing the harms of the war on drugs and its continued failure. The rationality strategy puts great emphasis on education and, more generally, honest information. It also places hope on policy-makers who, when properly informed, will act on the evidence and move towards a more rational and humane approach to drugs.

Evidence and reason are vitally necessary, but they aren't enough. There are two main reasons. One is that the drug war is driven by moral concerns: it is a moral panic. New evidence seldom has any impact. Indeed, evidence seems to make almost no difference. Mustering evidence and logic is vital for those who are not enthralled by the panic, but not enough for those who are.

The other main reason why evidence and reason aren't enough is the role of vested interests, including politicians who want to appear tough on drugs, police departments addicted to property seizures and local communities clamouring for new prisons. More deeply, many people have adopted the beliefs underlying the war on drugs, namely that illegal drugs are evil and that the only way to deal with them is by harshly treating anyone involved in their production, trade or use. The words heroin or cocaine can trigger a set of associations that makes it well-nigh impossible to think rationally, for example to think in terms of harms or to make comparisons with cigarettes and alcohol. To get beyond this sort of intuitive reaction, evidence and logic are not enough.

A second general type of strategy is insider politics, which means trying to influence policymakers. Insider politics can involve lobbying, writing submissions to government inquiries and writing letters to politicians. This sort of effort can make a difference, especially when the efforts show politicians that there is a groundswell of public opinion. Campaigners can also appeal to decision-makers who are not on the panic bandwagon and who respond to evidence.

The limitation of insider politics is that those on the other side, pushing the war on drugs, are more influential in using the same methods. In the US, police have become addicted to drug operations and can gain the ear of politicians. Similarly for the prison-industrial complex. The media continue to report drug busts. The fundamental problem with insider politics is that it favours those with vested interests. There is no great money to be made from harm reduction policies.

Imagine for a moment a society in which marijuana is legal, regulated rather like tobacco. Several large companies have captured most of the market, and governments receive a large amount of money from taxing the drug. Any attempt to criminalise marijuana would run up against the power of the companies and governments dependent on the taxes. This, of course, is why it has been so hard to bring in controls on tobacco and alcohol. But when marijuana is illegal, these companies do not exist, nor do taxes on the drug, which means that there are no vested interests in changing the status quo. Insider politics inherently favours the way things are.

A third general type of strategy can be called grassroots action. It has two main components: challenging the drug war and building an alternative approach to drugs. It involves large numbers of people, as individuals and in groups, taking action to challenge drug laws and to promote a society with a different approach to drugs.

The challenge side of this approach might involve civil disobedience, for example with groups openly flouting drug laws. It might involve guerrilla clinics to help addicts by providing needles and safe injecting rooms.

The alternative side of this approach could involve groups of people modelling a sensible and supportive approach to drugs, including efforts to cut back on tobacco and alcohol while allowing experiential use of hallucinogenic drugs in safe situations. It might even involve a more reverent attitude towards altered states of consciousness, seeing them as a valuable part of human experience, to be cultivated in a careful way.[19] Rather than using alcohol in excess to blot out everyday consciousness, it or other drugs might be used occasionally in spiritual surroundings to heighten awareness.

All these sorts of actions have been advocated and undertaken. So far, though, they remain a marginal approach compared to the usual use of drugs in a casual and unthinking way combined with the usual punitive treatment of users of illegal drugs.

19 Marc Wittmann, *Altered states of consciousness: experiences out of time and self,* translated from the German by Phillippa Hurd (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

The grassroots action approach can operate in synergy with insider politics. When more people challenge the drug war, this provides support for inside operators, who can refer to a popular upsurge of support and gain strength from personal connections with activists. Grassroots action also has synergies with the use of reason and logic. Activists can cite careful studies and logical arguments to defend and promote their efforts.

While it's possible to lay out a plan to challenge and supersede the drug war, doing it is another matter. Even the best available plan may not be enough to make a great difference. Still, campaigning with a plan has a better chance than campaigning without one.

This analysis shows that the war on drugs can be understood as a persistent panic, sustained by a range of processes and resistant to new evidence. This is not an optimistic picture. Still, many people are doing what they can to make a difference. Things could be worse.

4
The war on crime

A standard view
Crime is a blight on society. Law-abiding citizens are vulnerable to criminals who steal, assault and murder. People need to be protected against crime and criminals. That's why we need police, courts and prisons. Without them, criminals would run rampant. Criminals need to be caught and punished: that's what stops them and protects society. For serious crimes, imprisonment is necessary, to teach criminals a lesson, keep them away from those they might harm, and send a message to anyone who might think of breaking the law.

A questioning view
Some actions, like causing someone's death, are harmful to society, but we have to be careful about calling them crimes. Context is important. The person who caused the death might be mentally impaired or have been the subject of abuse themselves. Or they might have acted in a moment of passion or rage. These people need help, and society will be safer if that help is provided early, so damaging actions are less likely. Prisons are expensive and often don't lead to rehabilitation. There are alternatives to imprisonment, such as restorative justice. Actually, tougher enforcement and longer prison sentences do not lower the crime rate; sometimes they make things worse. The focus on violent

actions by individuals misses far more damaging actions by governments and corporations.

These are two approaches to crime. They are examples of a wide range of perspectives.

Let's begin by considering what is considered to be a crime. Most people, hearing the word "crime," think of things like robbery, assault, rape and murder. But there are lots of things against the law, for example insider trading, extortion, sending images of minors, practising medicine without a licence, driving under the influence of alcohol, libel, slander, copyright infringement, patent violation, trespassing, serving alcohol to a minor, false advertising, income tax evasion and jaywalking. This is just a partial list. What's on it depends on where you live, as does how serious the transgression is, for example being categorised as a misdemeanour or a felony.

Given the enormous variety of illegal activities, how is it possible to say how much crime there is? The answer is that people break the law all the time but most of the time they are not detected, arrested, prosecuted or convicted. Consider for example laws against driving under the influence of alcohol. Many people do it but only a few are detected, fewer are arrested and even fewer are prosecuted.

In most countries, there is no attempt to determine how often people break the law, for example driving faster than the speed limit or cheating on tax. Only arrests or convictions may be recorded. As a result, the so-called "crime rate" is more a reflection of the policing and prosecution rate than an indication of law-breaking. This is an initial

reason to be sceptical of claims that crime is increasing or decreasing.

Another problem is bias in the criminal justice system: some individuals or groups are targeted more than others. For example, racial minorities may be subject to more intense scrutiny, arrested more often, be less likely to receive bail, be convicted more frequently and given longer sentences. This pattern is well documented for African Americans in the US.[1]

There is also a class bias in many criminal justice systems. Poor people are more likely to be charged with offences, whereas police will be lenient when an offender is rich or has rich parents. Wealthy defendants can afford expensive lawyers, who are specialists in finding ways to reduce the chance of conviction and in obtaining lesser sentences. There is also a class bias built into legal systems and popular understanding. Crimes against property, like petty theft, are castigated and prosecuted, whereas crimes of exploitation, for example underpaying employees, are less often seen as high priority. As the author Anatole France famously said, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal their bread."

The biggest bias in criminal justice is the difference between the treatment of individuals and the treatment of organisational leaders. Corporations and governments cause enormous damage. Only some of their actions are

1 Most prominently by Michelle Alexander, *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

deemed criminal and, even then, may not be prosecuted. Pharmaceutical companies have sold drugs even when many in the company know about dangerous side-effects from the drugs, knowledge they keep hidden. A famous example is the morning-sickness drug thalidomide, marketed by the German company Grünenthal. There were numerous reports of adverse effects on pregnant women who took the drug, but Grünenthal continued marketing it until a different side-effect was publicised, serious birth defects in their children. Subsequently, Grünenthal resisted any responsibility, fighting compensation claims in the courts for years.[2] The story of thalidomide might have provided a lesson to pharmaceutical companies. It did, in a sense: they keep marketing dangerous products, making huge profits and paying fines—sometimes billions of dollars—when brought to account. However, company scientists responsible for publishing fraudulent findings are never prosecuted, nor are executives who market drugs knowing their dangers. According to medical researcher Peter Gøtzsche, pharmaceutical companies are responsible for more deaths than so-called organised crime.[3]

Governments also undertake activities that can be considered criminal, for example selling illegal drugs, extorting money, imprisoning opponents, using torture and killing enemies. These are examples of what is called "state

2 The Insight Team of *The Sunday Times* (Phillip Knightley, Harold Evans, Elaine Potter and Marjorie Wallace), *Suffer the children: the story of thalidomide* (London: André Deutsch, 1979).

3 Peter C Gøtzsche, *Deadly medicines and organised crime: how big pharma has corrupted healthcare* (London: Radcliffe, 2013).

crime." A number of researchers have documented the extent of this sort of crime.[4] Genocide—mass killing of civilians—is a state crime. So is aggressive war. Perpetrators often escape accountability for state crimes because the justice system is run by the state and prosecutors seldom have the power or will to tackle government leaders.

The point here is that there is a serious bias in criminal justice. A small-time thief is far more likely to be arrested and appear in a court than a corporate executive or government leader. Furthermore, news and commentary give considerable attention to low-level crime. When prison populations expand, it is due to the imprisonment of poor people, often stigmatised minorities, rather than an influx of corporate executives.

In some situations, police have a great deal of discretion concerning whether to arrest someone and charge them with a crime. Sometimes, it is the police who do bad things, like beating suspects, and then the police charge the suspects with "resisting arrest." Police can lie, getting together to make sure their testimony is the same and then lying in court, a technique called "verballing." This technique works best when there are no independent witnesses. When police are filmed beating or killing people, and the films are made public, this can lead to popular outrage, most famously in the US after police officer Derek Chauvin was filmed causing the death of George Floyd in 2020. For every such publicised case of police abuse, there are

4 For example, Jeffrey Ian Ross (ed.), *Varieties of state crime and its control* (Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 2000).

hundreds or thousands that never reach public attention.[5] This is another reason to doubt that official statistics accurately represent patterns of serious inappropriate behaviour.

There is yet another reason to be sceptical of official figures: bias in the law. Consider tax laws. Some individuals and small businesses are prosecuted for tax evasion. However, rich people and big corporations have a different approach: rather than violating the law, they use their influence to make sure the law is biased in their favour. Rich individuals, who can afford expensive lawyers, benefit from tax loopholes that allow them to reduce the amount of tax paid. Multinational corporations can legally avoid tax by using tax havens.[6] They set up headquarters in a jurisdiction with very low tax rates and arrange the prices that national divisions pay each other so they make hardly

5 As described at the beginning of chapter 1, in 1991 Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles police in the course of his arrest. After a video of the beating was broadcast on television, it became the most famous case of police use of force in history—at least until the murder of George Floyd. In the outpouring of commentary about the King beating, some pointed out that police brutality was a much wider issue: Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., Mary Prosser, Abbe Smith and William Talley, Jr.; Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard Law School for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Beyond the Rodney King story: an investigation of police misconduct in minority communities* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

6 Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure islands: tax havens and the men who stole the world* (London: Bodley Head, 2011); Gabriel Zucman, *The hidden wealth of nations: the scourge of tax havens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

any profit in countries where the company tax rates are high. This is an example of the golden rule: those who have the gold make the rules.

In summary, there are lots of reasons to be sceptical of official crime statistics. The figures depend on what is labelled a crime and on levels of enforcement. Some actions called crimes are hardly ever penalised. Sometimes police arrest people for things they didn't do.

Table 1. Homicide rate, in murders per 100,000 population per year, for selected countries[7]

Country	Rate
El Salvador	61.8
South Africa	35.9
Costa Rica	12.3
Russia	9.2
United States	5.3
Thailand	3.2
Canada	1.8
United Kingdom	1.2
Australia	0.8
Norway	0.5
Japan	0.2

Despite these limitations, some figures can be used for comparisons. In a country using the same methods of policing, crime statistics can show changes over time. Some

7 The Facts Institute, "Countries by murder rate—ranked," https://www.factsinstitute.com/ranking/countries-by-murder-rate/. Most of the figures are for the year 2017.

types of crime are easier to measure. Murder is a good example because it is not easy to kill someone and hide the body. Despite biases in measurement, homicide statistics can be a reasonably accurate indication of the number of murders.

Another thing that can be measured fairly accurately is the number of people in prison. This may not be an indication of crime levels, but it is a vivid indication of the operation of the criminal justice system.

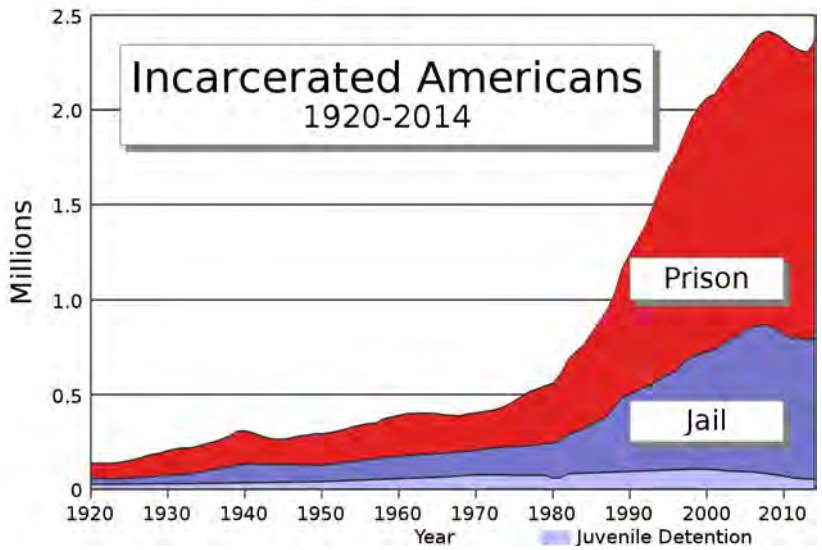

Figure 1. Numbers of people in prison, jail or juvenile detention in the US, 1920–2014.[8]

8 "United States incarceration rate," *Wikipedia* (24 June 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_incarceration_rate. Public domain image.

The most striking thing about the figures is how much they vary from country to country and over time. As shown in Table 1, murder rates vary dramatically between different countries. Among affluent societies, the US stands out as having a much higher murder rate. Then there is change over time. Focusing on the US, Figure 1 shows the enormous increase in the prison population over several decades. This evidence is compatible with there being a sustained panic about crime in the US.

PANIC

The so-called war on crime can be considered a moral panic. Crime is presented as a threat to the moral order, a threat so serious that significant efforts are needed to control it. Furthermore, these significant efforts are aimed at a particular group, criminals, who are stigmatised and treated harshly. In a persistent panic, this process builds momentum, leading to major investments. Let's consider some of the features of this particular panic, as discussed in chapter 2, focusing on the US, where these features stand in stark relief.

Threat exaggeration

The threat of crime was the justification for more draconian policies mandating lengthy prison sentences, sometimes for minor offences. However, during the massive expansion of the US prison population, crime rates in the US were not increasing, suggesting that the danger did not justify the tough-on-crime policies. The implication is that the threat was exaggerated.

Stigma

There is a great stigma in being arrested, tried, sentenced and especially in going to gaol. This continues after a sentence is served: the label "criminal" is hard to shake off.

Suppression of dissent

Are people who question the war on crime penalised in any way? I haven't studied the issue in enough depth to know the answer. It is plausible that people inside the system—police, prison officials, judges, government bureaucrats—would be reluctant to openly question the war on crime and possibly subject to reprisals if they do.

Double standards

I've already mentioned the focus on crime by those who are most marginalised and the neglect of white-collar crime, crimes by police, war crimes and crimes by governments.

New evidence

What evidence would be enough to show that the war on crime is failing? When the US crime rate increases, there are calls for tougher measures. When the crime rate falls, this can be interpreted as showing that the war on crime is succeeding. In the US, policies of being tough on (some) crime and putting more and more people in prison are

maintained despite evidence from other countries showing the possibility of other approaches.[9]

Belief systems

Politicians, the media, media audiences and the prison-industrial complex interact in various ways to encourage a particular perspective on what is called crime. All those involved assume crime is a serious problem and that the way to deal with it is through policing and prisons. This way of thinking infiltrates societies in various ways. In programmes known as neighbourhood watch, residents are encouraged to notice suspicious behaviours and report them to police rather than deal with them in some other way. Producers of television and films churn out endless dramas about policing. In some of these, the police are the good guys while in others they are villains but, in either case, the drama is framed around assumptions about crime and punishment. The producers of such shows obviously believe that "crime sells" as a form of entertainment. In contrast, there is not much interest in the media or among audiences for stories about peaceful forms of reconciliation between transgressors and victims or about societies with forms of mutual support that reduce the frequency and impact of mutual harms.

Most people seem to accept the usual way of thinking about crime and don't make a big fuss when tougher laws

9 This is a big topic. For an impressive cross-national analysis of US and French cities' responses to crime and disorder, see Sophie Body-Gendrot, *The social control of cities? A comparative perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

are passed and more people are put in prison for longer periods. When the media report on some horrific crime—a mass shooting, paedophilia rings—this can lead to calls for more extreme measures.

Threat entrepreneurs

The panic is stoked by a number of players, most of whom benefit by raising the alarm. Four are particularly important: politicians, the media, the general population, and the policing-and-prison-industrial complex.

Politicians play a crucial role. By being "tough on crime," they foster an image as leaders who will defend the community against a dire threat. The idea is that if citizens fear crime and criminals, they will turn to political leaders as saviours, as protectors who will deal with the threat with authority, meting out vengeance against wrongdoers. Politicians, in doing this, are usually careful to target groups too weak to fight back effectively, namely those who are poor or in minority populations. Most politicians know it is risky to tackle corruption in big business, the police, the military or among politicians themselves.

The media also play a crucial role in promoting fear of crime. Partly this is because the media routinely report on political events, giving more airtime to politicians than criminologists, irrespective of their understanding of crime. Just as importantly, the mass media give great attention to conflict and to transgressions. Things that are non-routine are newsworthy. For example, a passenger aeroplane that crashes killing a hundred people can be international news, but a hundred people dying from automobile crashes or cancer will not be. Violence is far more newsworthy than

peaceful activities. At a protest march involving thousands of people, if a few individuals scuffle with police and are arrested, this will be what is mentioned in the news, and the entire event might be called a violent protest. Given the criteria for what is considered newsworthy, it is no surprise that crime, especially crime involving personal violence, is regularly covered in the news. Some news organisations assign journalists to the "crime beat," but few assign journalists to report regularly on labour news or on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Media organisations report on crime in part because audiences are receptive. Many people are keen to hear about daring robberies and bizarre murders. Authors respond to this audience interest by writing murder mysteries. Why do so many people take an interest in the dark and transgressive side of human behaviour? One explanation is simply that, in evolutionary terms, the survival of human groups depended on being aware of threats, so more attention was paid to interpersonal violence than to routine interactions. A psychological explanation is that people are drawn to stories of bad things happening to others so they feel better about their own relative safety. The exact mix of reasons is less important here than the observation that crime news sells, which provides an incentive for media to report on crime, thus creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement.

In addition to politicians, media and audiences, another important driver behind the crime panic is what has been called the "prison-industrial complex."[10] It also includes the police. This so-called "complex" consists of people and organisations that gain their livelihood from dealing with criminals. This includes police, prison warders, companies that supply police with weapons and companies that build prisons—and everyone who provides goods and services to the core groups. When politicians respond to an alarm about criminals, a common response is to provide more funding for the police, which can mean more jobs, more equipment, and better pay and conditions. The police, seeing the benefit from a fear of crime, can then contribute to the panic by forming relationships with journalists to report on crime stories, stoking the panic. The prison part of the complex is also important. Funding for prisons means jobs for prison workers. Although most people would prefer not to live near a prison, nevertheless in parts of the US, local governments see prisons as a way to bring in local business, with employment for prison workers and for those who provide them with goods and services.

10 An accessible treatment is Eric Schlosser, "The prison-industrial complex," *The Atlantic,* 1 December 1998.

What do researchers say?

Criminology is the field that studies crime and all things associated with it, including criminal law and prison policy. Criminologists undertake research into crime, to learn more about every aspect of the social, political, economic and psychological factors that shape crime and responses to it. As well as those working in the field of criminology, there are many others who have studied crime, and the war on crime.

Among these researchers, there are diverse views on a range of topics. Some criminologists are employed by the

criminal justice system and thus are less likely to be critical of it. Therefore, of special interest are those who might be called independent researchers, who are less constrained in what they study and what they say.

Anyone who looks into research on crime will soon find many authors critical of practices standard through much of the world, and most extreme in the US.[11] Consider one of the standard claims made by politicians who argue for being tough on crime: that longer sentences will deter criminal activities, and more generally that putting more people in prison will reduce the crime rate. Actually, the figures do not support this claim. A prominent example is

11 Katherine Beckett and Theodore Sasson, *The politics of injustice: crime and punishment in America,* 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004); Nils Christie, *Limits to pain* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982); Nils Christie, *Crime control as industry: towards gulags, Western style* (London: Routledge, 1993); Joel Dyer, *The perpetual prisoner machine: how American profits from crime* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Victoria Law, *"Prisons make us safer" and 20 other myths about mass incarceration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021); Thomas Mathiesen, *Prison on trial: a critical assessment* (London: Sage, 1990); Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law, *Prison by any other name: the harmful consequences of popular reforms* (New York: New Press, 2020); David Scott, *Against imprisonment: an anthology of abolitionist essays* (Sherfield on Loddon, Hook, Hampshire: Waterside Press, 2018); Vivien Stern, *Creating criminals: prisons and people in a market society* (London: Zed Books, 2006); Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, *Crime is not the problem: lethal violence in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Not all these authors are criminologists by profession.

the US in the 1980s and after, during which the number of people in prison ballooned even though the official crime rate was stationary.

Researchers also point to discrepancies between different countries: ones with high prison populations do not, on average, have lower crime rates. This single finding is vitally important. It means that panics about crime, in which the solution is presented as being tougher on criminals, are fundamentally misguided. Put simply, the tough-on-crime approach does not work.

Of course, like any generalisation, there are always exceptions. For some individuals, keeping them in prison for a long time may reduce the number and seriousness of crimes they commit. Overall, though, many researchers say, putting more people into prison and keeping them there longer is not a sensible policy if the goal is to reduce crime.

Researchers point to another issue that is hardly ever mentioned by politicians and is seldom in the news: prison does terrible things to many prisoners. Indeed, things that are called crimes when done outside, like assault and rape, are commonplace inside many prisons. Some of these actions are committed by warders but many are by prisoners against each other.

When those who study a subject in great depth, in this case criminologists, reach conclusions dramatically different from those used in public policy, what should we think? First, this is a good indication that some panic dynamics are involved. Second, the rejection or neglect of the views of experts suggests interests are being served that are different from public rationales. This, perhaps, is just another feature of a persistent panic.

Moral foundations

Crime issues are sometimes analysed in terms of the political spectrum, from left to right. However, this doesn't offer much insight. In a traditional sense, this political spectrum refers to the struggle between labour and capital, with those on the left supporting workers and those on the right supporting owners and managers. The trouble is that this can be mapped onto crime issues in multiple ways. Police and prison staff are workers, so in this sense their interests align with the left. On the other hand, police and the criminal justice system are regularly used against workers—most obviously in breaking strikes—and thus might be considered to be on the right. Likewise, police and prisons are fundamental supports for private property, and thus linked to the right. However, sometimes corrupt business figures are arrested and imprisoned, so it is possible that police and prisons can serve workers in their struggles with employers. It is also worth noting that police and prisons have played a crucial role in dictatorial regimes of both fascist and state socialist hues. Again, right and left do not readily map onto crime issues. What is more common is that campaigners try to attach left or right labels to perspectives on crime not for the purposes of understanding but as part of partisan struggles.

A standard way psychologists think of the mind is that it has two components or aspects. Daniel Kahneman[12] calls them system 1 and system 2. System 1 is fast and automatic, requiring little or no conscious reflection. System 2 is slow,

12 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

careful and logical. It involves using reasoning powers to judge a situation. It's the part of your mind you use when reading complex information or trying to solve a problem.

If you see an object hurtling towards your head, you instinctively duck to avoid it. This is system 1 in action: it enables survival. Resorting to system 2 would require estimating the speed and trajectory of the object and deciding whether any response is needed. If the object is a brick, relying on system 2 could cost you your life. On the other hand, when the object causes no damage, you can use system 2 to figure out why not: the object was a shadow, or you were watching a movie in 3D.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt offers memorable images for these two mental systems.[13] He calls system 1 the elephant and system 2 the rider. The elephant, based on emotional responses, charges off in various ways. The rider likes to imagine it is in charge but actually it follows the elephant in many cases. People who are really smart can be just as carried away by the elephant—namely by their intuitive responses—as anyone else, and can be better at coming up with plausible reasons for their intuitively driven choices.

What drives the elephant? Haidt and his colleagues have found that six values play important roles: care, fairness, liberty, authority, sanctity and loyalty. These are called moral foundations. They shape people's intuitive responses to issues.

13 Jonathan Haidt, *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind* devotes a lot of attention to political differences between liberals and conservatives. Liberals tend to be motivated especially by the moral foundations of care, fairness and liberty, whereas conservatives are more equally motivated by all six foundations, which means that they are more influenced than liberals by loyalty, authority and sanctity.

However, when it comes to crime, it turns out that each moral foundation can be used in multiple ways, to support or oppose an expansion of tough policing and sentencing. Consider first care, which refers to the human propensity to support and protect others. The care impulse can be mapped onto crime in two ways: it can be care for criminals, seeking to enable their reform, or care for victims, imagined (however wrongly) as retribution for what was done to them.

Fairness is a deep-seated motivation in most people. Siblings can feel aggrieved when one of them gets a larger slice of cake. Workers are upset when someone gets ahead through personal connections rather than performance. What does fairness mean in relation to crime? It might mean that everyone gets their day in court, or that victims are compensated for losses, or that perpetrators are treated according to their transgressions rather than their social class. It might mean that judgements about transgressions are made by impartial panels (as in the inquisitorial system used in Europe) or on the basis of a battle between advocates (as in the US adversarial system). These and other ways of implementing the ideal of fairness thus do not automatically lead to a particular stance on crime.

Liberty, as a moral foundation, refers to a belief in freedom from arbitrary and unjust control. Liberty is the opposite of tyranny. A commitment to liberty might be used to oppose prison systems but also to support imprisonment because criminals are threats to the liberty of others.

Loyalty refers to support for others in one's reference group. We are familiar with loyalty to family members, sporting teams and political tribes. Loyalty helps to bind police together. More broadly conceived, it can be recast as support for everyone in a community, with the implication that transgressors should be integrated into the group.

Authority refers to a willingness to accept the direction of those in higher positions in some sort of hierarchy, based on ranks, experience or some other criteria. Reliance on authority can lead to support for police and courts, but can also lead to support for religious leaders, who might counsel forgiveness and reconciliation.

Finally there is the moral foundation of sanctity, which refers to purity in various domains. In some religions there are strictures against eating certain foods or having certain types of relationships, for example incest. A priority on sanctity might lead to antagonism towards criminals, whose transgressions are a blot on the purity of the law-abiding public. It's also possible that a priority on sanctity could lead to rejection of harsh treatment of criminals, because this is seen as compromising a vision of a compassionate human community.

The key point here is that humans can be driven by the elephant, whose direction is shaped by assumptions about the way the world ought to be—namely, moral foundations—and that these assumptions are then given a rational

justification by the rider. The intellectual arguments about crime usually make little difference because they appeal to the rider, leaving the elephant to reach the conclusions that the rider tries to explain, with whatever contortion of logic is required. Which way people's elephants turn is not preordained by their reliance on one moral foundation or another, whether this is care or authority or some combination of the six foundations, because each foundation can be applied in different ways. People who are keen to promote or impose their own views thus can seek to appeal to other people's elephants, in other words to the intuitive sides of their minds.

Governing through crime

Jonathan Simon in his book *Governing through Crime* provides a deep analysis of the role of crime, as a tool for political elites, in US society.[14] Simon traces the rise of this process to the federal Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968. This law opened the door to an ever-expanding obsession with crime throughout society.

The metaphor "governing through crime" has several angles. One is that crime becomes a legitimate way through which to address social problems, as a top priority. In education, for example, policy-making may emphasise security over learning. A second angle is that crime is used as a justification for policymaking on other issues. For example, US laws concerning assaults on pregnant women

14 Jonathan Simon, *Governing through crime: how the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

are linked with debates over abortion. Thirdly, crime and criminal justice become prominent in the way institutions operate. In universities, student plagiarism is treated as a transgression justifying surveillance and punishment rather than as a problem to be addressed by learning how to properly give acknowledgement to sources.

"Governing through crime" can be contrasted with other possible priorities for governing. Imagine, for example, governing through education, in which decision-making about investment, welfare, housing and other arenas would put a priority on fostering learning. In such a society, transgressions of norms—things labelled as crimes—would be addressed through the lens of promoting education, as a preventative or rehabilitation.

Imagine, as another example, governing through equality, in which social decision-making is driven by the imperative of fostering economic equality, again affecting investment, welfare, housing and other areas. The way to respond to transgressions of norms would be to address inequality as a putative cause.

In the US, governing through education or equality is in the realm of utopia, subordinated to alarm about crime. In practice, Simon argues, this is reflected in policymakers aligning themselves rhetorically with victims of crime, so any sympathy or protection of criminals is seen as opposing the interests of victims, which are identified with the interests of society more generally.

Simon traces governing through crime through a range of US institutions: the political executive, law-making, mass imprisonment, families, schools and workplaces. The political executive refers to the president, state governors

and elected district prosecutors in cities and counties. By being seen to be tough on criminals, they can increase their status and power. This has helped bring in ever more draconian penalties for crimes. Governors, for example, can show how tough they are by being committed to the death penalty and by refusing pardons or clemency for prisoners on death row.

Lawmakers join in the process, passing laws that always seem to side with the victims, who are assumed to revel in vengeance. Some of the laws restrict the judiciary's discretion in sentencing criminals, for example the three-strikes law in California that mandates 25-year sentences on a third conviction for a felony offence, no matter how trivial, such as stealing a few dollars' worth of merchandise.

In the grip of the war on crime, the US prison population expanded dramatically in a few decades. Simon calls mass imprisonment a warehousing model or a waste disposal model. Attempts to rehabilitate prisoners and enable them to reintegrate in the community as productive citizens have been sidelined. Instead, the purpose of imprisonment seems only to remove criminals from society. Again, this is supposed to side with the victims who are assumed to gain satisfaction from retribution.

Simon describes how the US war on crime has changed the family, which used to be a social space safe from state intervention. Now, government officials intervene to address domestic violence, for which the solution is assumed to be criminalising behaviours rather than funding the development of conflict resolution skills or improving support services. As well, parents now are alert to possible

transgressions by their children. What used to be treated as youthful indiscretions are now seen as criminal activities.

Schools, especially in the inner city, are also affected. Policies are sometimes driven more by increasing security than by improving educational outcomes; students are treated as either perpetrators or victims and less as learners. Similarly, workplaces are affected by the war on crime, with surveillance and punishment underlying management's approach to workers.

Simon's analysis of governing through crime in the US shows how social institutions, such as the political system, the legal system, families and workplaces, can be restructured by alarm about crime. This means the alarm is institutionalised: it cannot be simply shut off, because it has become part of the way society operates.

The end of policing

Alex Vitale, a sociology professor at Brooklyn College in the US, is the author of *The End of Policing*.[15] It is a systematic examination of the problems with policing in the US. Vitale looks at the policing of people with mental illness, homeless people, sex workers, drug users, gang members, asylum seekers and political dissidents. He identifies and illustrates serious problems with policing in each of these areas. This policing causes immense harm to individuals—for example, turning people who need medical support into criminals—and does not fix the problem the police are supposed to be solving. Aggressive policing simply causes harm without reducing crime.

15 Alex S. Vitale, *The end of policing* (London: Verso, 2018).

For each of these issues, Vitale examines reforms such as better training of police, use of body cameras, and prosecuting police who commit abuses. These are all well meaning but, Vitale argues, give only an appearance of addressing the problems without making significant headway into them.

Then Vitale looks at alternatives. They all involve getting to the causes of crime, many of which lie in disadvantage. For example, people with mental illness need compassionate support for their conditions, and homeless people need secure housing. More generally, communities with the most entrenched problems with street crime—inner city areas in US cities—need services and jobs. The money spent on policing, prisons and the legal system would be better spent on support services and job creation. Ultimately, many crime problems stem from economic inequality in US society.

Vitale offers a picture of the history of the police in the US which is contrary to the usual one. Police forces were established not to deal with crime but to maintain an inequitable social order, in particular to control threats when lower classes tried to organise and challenge their oppression. This continues to the present day, in which nearly all policing is directed at those who are most disadvantaged or who are otherwise a threat to elite power. Political policing is relevant here.

Vitale argues that the fundamental problem is policing itself. The roles of police have expanded to many areas where they have no special skills and where other forms of intervention would be more useful. Rather than more police, there's a need for more social workers, community justice centres, social housing and so forth.

The trouble with looking to police to fix problems is that turning social problems into matters of criminality simply doesn't work. It makes things worse for those targeted by the police and doesn't get to the root of the problems.

Vitale recognises that there are crimes from which people need to be protected. He just thinks throwing more police at the problems is not the real solution. The title of his book, *The End of Policing,* could refer to reducing the role of the police or to the purpose of policing. Both are relevant.

Crime as normal

In the 1980s, I read a book by sociologist Randall Collins in which he aimed to present insights from sociology that are not obvious.[16] I've sometimes heard people criticise social science studies by saying, "I knew that already. Why did they have to study it?" On the other hand, when research findings clash with expectations, the findings may be dismissed. But it is precisely when social-science findings are unexpected or counter-intuitive that they are most important. There is more to learn from them.

One of the chapters in Collins' book is titled "The normalcy of crime." He begins by outlining the usual approaches to crime. Conservative explanations focus on

16 Randall Collins, *Sociological insight: an introduction to nonobvious sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). See chapter 4, "The normalcy of crime," pp. 86–118.

the badness or genetic shortcomings of individuals, with the solution being punishment. Collins says this doesn't work, so the stance is a political position or moral philosophy.

Liberal explanations focus on cultures that foster crime, for example poverty, with the solution being rehabilitation. Collins says this explanation isn't satisfactory because many poor people aren't criminals and many rich ones are.

Radical explanations point to law-enforcement and the labelling of individuals as criminals, the production of convictions by the law-enforcement machinery, and laws that define crime, especially victimless crime. In these explanations, moral entrepreneurs try to enforce their morality, leading to creation of criminal cultures. Collins says this explanation doesn't work well for property and personal crimes.

Then there is the class-conflict model in which crime results from class relations, especially property. However, Collins notes, socialist societies still have crime and, furthermore, create new categories of crime.

Collins turns to a picture drawing on the ideas of the pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim. The rituals of crime and punishment serve as a bond for the rest of the community, or at least certain groups. In this picture, effectiveness is not the issue. Punishing criminals is a form of politics, namely conflict between groups in society. In a "stratified" society—in which some groups have more power and wealth than others—there is an ongoing struggle over who is going to be dominant over others. A stratified society is held together by ritual punishment of crime, with the ceremonies of punishment dramatising the moral

feelings of the community, bolstering group domination. The implication is that each society, with its own sets of relationships between groups, will have its own special forms of crimes.

In this picture, the punishment of criminals serves dominant groups by bringing the entire community together in solidarity against those who have transgressed. This picture also helps explain the popularity of novels and television shows about crime: readers and viewers are reassured about the security of the moral order. Collins says crime-and-punishment rituals appeal most to those who are tightly integrated into dominant groups. They are most concerned about victimless crimes that don't affect them, in order to assert their righteousness and feel part of respectable society.

This perspective helps make sense of the existence of crime in nearly every society or, more importantly, the existence of rituals of punishment that serve to hold society together. It is but a slight extension of this perspective to see a panic about crime as serving dominant groups.

ANTI-PANIC

Alternatives

Are there alternatives to policing and prisons? Are they viable?

The answers are straightforward. There are alternatives—a whole lot of them. No single alternative is a comprehensive solution, so it's necessary to look at a range of initiatives.

Let's start by considering societies where prison populations are much greater than they used to be. Remember what criminologists discovered: there's often little correlation between imprisonment rates and crime rates. So to reduce the prison population, just go back in time to see what was being done before. Usually the answer is to make fewer arrests, send a smaller proportion of convicted individuals to prison, and make the sentences shorter. For example, rather than sending someone who robbed a bank to prison for ten years, instead reduce the sentence to one year or make the penalty something besides prison.

This solution to expanding prison populations is obvious enough. It is so obvious that there is an easy explanation for why it hasn't been followed: a panic about crime fostered by politicians, media and others. The same explanation applies to nearly all alternatives.

The beauty of this alternative is that it counters the argument that it is idealistic, impossible or radical. It is, in essence, a conservative solution, returning to a previously satisfactory society. What is actually radical and idealistic is continuing with policies that maintain a large prison population in the belief that this will make things better.

Another way to reduce the reliance on policing and prisons is to examine common offences and, for each one, consider whether there are other options for dealing with them. A top priority in this process is to address actions that do not hurt anyone else. An example is laws against homosexual acts. These were, and still are in some countries, expressions of moral disapproval. Is criminal law the way to deal with this issue? Today many people say no. The same sort of scrutiny can be applied to other laws.

The big issue here is drugs. In the US, a huge police effort is devoted to trying to control the drug trade, and a considerable proportion of prisoners were convicted of drug offences. By decriminalising drug use and regulating the production and sale of drugs, what is called a criminal enterprise can be shrunk dramatically. This is addressed in the chapter on the war on drugs, which is a panic comparable to the war on crime.

For the sake of argument, imagine that you wanted to expand policing powers and increase the prison population. Easy. Just make smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol illegal. Why not? Every argument not to make them illegal can be applied to nearly all the drugs currently illegal.

Next consider crimes against property such as theft and burglary. Are there alternatives? Drug addicts commit some portion of these crimes; if drugs were decriminalised and made available in regulated ways, these crimes could be greatly reduced. Some crimes against property are driven by deprivation: poor people are desperate and steal to survive. However, in affluent societies, more theft is motivated by acquisitiveness. The media is filled with images of the rich and famous, fostering envy, while neighbours try to outdo each other with conspicuous consumption. Some theft is due to attempts to obtain others' desirable objects; some is due to resentment over others' possessions; some is due to lack of other, easier ways to obtain their own possessions.

There are various ways to reduce these sorts of crimes against property. One is to protect possessions with better locks, barriers and security guards. Another is to ensure that everyone has a secure basis for living, so there is no need

to steal for survival. Another is to challenge the culture of materialism, in which greater consumption is seen as everyone's goal, and those owning fewer possessions feel ashamed. When economic inequality is reduced, so is crime. Another alternative is to provide more collective goods and services. For example, free software and open access publications reduce copyright infringement.

Some of these alternatives, for example reducing materialism and providing more collective goods, involve major changes to society. They do not need to be implemented in a single dramatic switch. Instead, they can be seen as directions for making efforts to reduce property crimes. The focus is changed from thieves, and how to thwart or punish them, to ways to reduce the need or incentive to steal.

Consider another sort of crime: traffic offences. As a driver or owner of a car, it is very easy to break the law, for example by speeding, running a red light, driving under the influence of alcohol, or parking in a prohibited area. For parts of the world where car ownership is high, traffic offences are the most common way for people to come in contact with the police. So how could this arena for lawbreaking be modified?

One alternative is to provide more public transport. Going even further, urban bus and train travel can be made free, eliminating fare evasion, increasing patronage and reducing car use besides. This will reduce the need for traffic policing.

Support for those in greatest need can reduce crime. Some people have no home, and in some places it is illegal

to sleep on the street. Providing a place to live for everyone who needs it would reduce various sorts of crime.

Another way to reduce crime is to provide meaningful work for everyone who wants it. "Work" here means an activity that involves using skills and produces some product or service that is deemed, by at least some others, as worthwhile. Work can be paid or voluntary. Meaningful work gives purpose to people's lives, especially when the work involves helping others, being creative, or collaborating with others for a common goal. Doing meaningful work can easily become more important than material possessions.[17]

In contrast to meaningful work is unemployment or underemployment, in which many individuals feel a sense of hopelessness or rage, and bullshit jobs, being paid for doing something that is not useful to anyone.[18]

To explore other alternatives to arrest and imprisonment, it is useful to look at the most common responses to corporate crime. Corporations regularly underpay their workers, illegally fix prices, use false and misleading advertising, pollute the environment and sell products they know are dangerous. The most common response to such activities is to ignore them.

17 Studies of happiness are relevant here. For an accessible treatment, see Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The myths of happiness: what should make you happy, but doesn't; what shouldn't make you happy, but does* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

18 This was brought to prominence by David Graeber, *Bullshit jobs: a theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

Occasionally, the unfair and dangerous activities of corporations are challenged by workers, citizens and government officials. This can lead to another set of responses: small, symbolic penalties. A company that has been polluting a river for years might be fined, with the fine being a small fraction of profits. As well, the company might be asked to stop polluting the river.

So far, I've talked about reducing punishments and promoting measures that make crime less likely. But what about truly horrific crimes like murder? Prison might be a bad option, but what is better?

A whole category of options goes under the label "restorative justice."[19] In one model, an offender against some individual or the community is invited to attend one or more meetings with stakeholders, including victims and other community members. The offender hears about the impact of their actions and the entire group discusses what should be done in response. Usually the aim is "reintegration": enabling the offender to become a valued member of the community.

In practice, this sort of community justice system can be effective in many cases, but not all. Prison is still a possibility, but more common are forms of restitution: payments to victims, community service and efforts to create a new way of living. The money that would otherwise go into prison would be spent on support,

19 See for example the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, https://restorativejustice.org and Daniel W. Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, *Restoring justice: an introduction to restorative justice,* 5th edition (New York: Routledge, 2015).

including job training, emotional skill development, and involvement in networks of community groups.

The philosophy underlying this approach is apparent in the name "reintegration." It involves measures to embed offenders in one or more communities—families, neighbourhoods, ethnic or religious groups, sporting clubs and many others—that provide support and encouragement for positive behaviours.

Integration in this way is in stark contrast with the penal system, which is largely based on exclusion. Offenders are kept away from victims except in formal processes where they are set up as antagonists. Imprisonment is a serious form of exclusion.

Opponents of crime panic, supporters of alternatives

The idea of a "war on crime" sets up two sides in this supposed war: criminals on one side and police, politicians and others who take the lead in stamping out crime. Those who think this war is misguided and who think there are better alternatives are not part of the picture. By analogy, they might be thought of as opponents of war—as peaceniks or as sober counsels of responsible behaviour. Whatever the name, it is worth looking at some of the groups that have pushed back against the massive expansion of policing and prisons in the US and other countries in the grip of the war on crime.

An important group is conservatives concerned about the costs of dealing with crime and who are sceptical of

state power.[20] In promoting measures to restrain excesses in the war on crime, conservatives have a great advantage: they are hard to accuse of being "soft on crime" or being driven by sympathy for criminals. These are charges that conservatives have levelled against their opponents for many years.

Another important group is criminologists and others who undertake and are familiar with research on crime and punishment. They know punishment is not a very effective way to deal with crime and are aware of other shortcomings in the criminal justice system such as the one-sided arrest and prosecution of the poor, ethnic minorities and people with intellectual disabilities and mental illness.

Criminologists have two great assets: they are knowledgeable and have skills in writing and speaking. They have the credibility and capacity to contribute to policy debates. On the other hand, many of them depend on the criminal justice system for their jobs and hence are reluctant to campaign for major changes.

In many countries, policing targets particular groups, most commonly the poor and racial minorities. Some activists oppose this sort of unfair treatment and become critics of the police and prison system. In Australia, for example, a considerable proportion of the prison population is Indigenous men, even though they are a small fraction of the population. Outrage over the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody was great enough to trigger the setting up

20 For example, David Dagan and Steven M. Teles, *Prison break: why conservatives turned against mass incarceration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

of a royal commission.[21] It came up with many excellent recommendations but none were implemented. As the prison population expands, so does the number of Indigenous people incarcerated. Campaigners may oppose the racial bias in policing and sentencing and support alternatives to imprisonment.

Another group with concerns is families of prisoners. They often know the prisoner well, who might be their son, father, husband or other family member. While recognising the crime, their lives are torn apart by imprisonment. They see first-hand the damage that police brutality and imprisonment do to their loved ones, and see that little is done for rehabilitation. For visiting, they may have to travel large distances and go through humiliating screening processes. Many families of prisoners have reasons to oppose the system. On the other hand, they may be embarrassed by association with their family member. The stigma of arrest, conviction and penalties may discourage family members from becoming activists.

Finally, and crucially important, are campaigners, including those in what is called the prison abolition movement. Abolishing prisons and, even more generally, abolishing all methods of punishment, is obviously a long-term goal, but it indicates a direction and implies a fundamental critique and rejection of the prison system. The movement is not about reforming prisons but finding other ways to organise social systems. In the US, the

21 Peter Nagle and Richard Summerrell, *Aboriginal deaths in custody: the Royal Commission and its records, 1987–91* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 1996).

movement has never been large but it has had important effects in raising consciousness and encouraging questioning of social institutions.

Prisons were originally set up as humane alternatives to harsher punishments such as whippings, the stocks and execution. Like a number of other such institutions, such as asylums for the mentally insane, prisons took on a life of their own and, rather than being humane, became more oppressive, especially in a context where better alternatives existed.

In the US, a pioneering written contribution was the book *Instead of Prisons,* by Fay Honey Knopp and many others.[22] Having read an article by Knopp that cited this book, in 1994 I wrote to her. She was busy campaigning. This was at a time when the US prison system was massively expanding. Pushing for abolition during a period of prison expansion is especially difficult.

Another manifestation of anti-prison action was ICOPA, a biennial conference bringing together prisoners, former prisoners, citizen activists and criminologists with a common interest in alternatives to prisons. ICOPA initially stood for International Conference on Prison Abolition. For the third conference, in 1987, the name was changed to International Conference on Penal Abolition, "penal" here referring to punishment, which can take many forms besides imprisonment.

22 Fay Honey Knopp et al., *Instead of prisons: a handbook for abolitionists* (Syracuse, NY: Prison Research Education Action Project, 1976).

Coming out of one of the ICOPA events was a book titled *The Case for Penal Abolition,* which provides a convenient overview of the movement. One important facet is the arguments against prison and against penality (punishment) more generally. The editors, W. Gordon West and Ruth Morris, write about "the bankruptcy of Western penology." By penology, they refer to the system of punishing criminals, and by bankruptcy they mean that all the standard justifications for penal policies are inadequate. They write,

> Unfortunately, other than in a few show trials, imprisonment and penality have remained under the control of state powers without implementation of human rights, nor effective community control. Penality has been systematically utilized by the rich and powerful nations to oppress the poor and weak on a global scale.[23]

In relation to criminality, they note that the biggest perpetrators are governments and corporations, but the anti-crime apparatus focuses largely on individuals.

In a chapter about studying the penal abolition movement, Viviane Saleh-Hanna distinguishes three domains: a social movement, a theoretical perspective and a political strategy. Among many other observations, she notes that the media commonly present a false dichotomy between the rights of offenders and victims, seeing these as opposites. Actually, says Saleh-Hanna, policies that reduce the rights

23 W. Gordon West and Ruth Morris (eds.), *The case for penal abolition* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2000), p. 12.

of offenders do little for victims in terms of fostering security.

John Clarke contributed a chapter titled "Serve the rich and punish the poor: law as the enforcer of inequality." It is a hard-hitting exposé of the class basis of policing and punishment: prisons are used as warehouses for the poor and homeless, while corporate offenders escape sanction. Using revealing examples, Clarke concludes that

> Those who live in poverty or who act to challenge its existence must soon come to the stark realization that the Law has nothing to do with justice but, to the contrary, serves as a weapon in the promotion and extension of inequality.[24]

For me, the most intriguing and hopeful chapter is by Thomas Mathiesen, "Towards the 21st-Century: abolition—an impossible dream?" Mathiesen is one of the most insightful analysts of prison, and in this chapter, based on personal reflections about studying prison systems, he didn't disappoint. He tells the story of the Spanish witch hunts: for centuries, women were accused of witchcraft, tortured and executed by the Inquisition, an arm of the Catholic Church. This highly entrenched system was brought to an end in just a few years. According to Mathiesen, cultural restraint spread throughout the system, enabling a "liberal inquisitor," with approval from above, to abolish witch-burning. Mathiesen uses this example to offer hope for today's prison abolitionists.

24 John Clarke, "Serve the rich and punish the poor: law as the enforcer of inequality," in West and Morris, pp. 77–87, at p. 87.

Mathiesen thinks the most important vulnerability of the prison system is its irrationality. He examines the five stated goals of prisons—rehabilitation, deterrence, general prevention, incapacitation of offenders, and crime being balanced by punishment—and concludes that prisons achieve none of them. He notes that there have been numerous studies showing this failure of the system. As he puts it, "In terms of its own stated goals, the prison contributes nothing to our society and way of life. Report after report, study after study, by the dozens, by the hundreds, by the thousands, clearly show this."[25]

Mathiesen thinks that if people realised the true irrationality of the prison, this would strike at its core. He says the irrationality of prison is a carefully guarded secret, a secret maintained by co-opted administrators, silent social scientists and, most importantly, the mass media.

In emphasising the role of the media, I think Mathiesen has identified a crucial pillar in the penal system. Nevertheless, he may be relying too much on the power of rational argument to change systems. The clamour to punish criminals is driven more by emotion than an assessment of whether punishment is rational. The mass media certainly contribute to this emotional response, but the media couldn't do this easily unless people responded. The rise of social media, with Facebook groups and Twitter storms, shows that online mobs can be just as oriented to punishment as the proprietors and editors of mainstream media.

25 Thomas Mathiesen, "Towards the 21st Century: abolition—an impossible dream?" in West and Morris, pp. 333–353, at p. 339.

Making a difference

Suppose you become convinced that the police-prison-industrial complex is causing a lot of damage and there are better options. What can you do? Imagine that you're reasonably young, and think, "I'll become a judge. Then I can work as a key member of the criminal justice system, showing compassion towards offenders and trying to prevent more people going to prison."

This is admirable, but it's a long road before you can become a judge. You might need to do a law degree and practise law, impress peers and hope to be selected to be a judge. If you live in a country with lay judges, you might need to become sufficiently well respected in the community to be chosen for the role.

The trouble with this sort of plan is that it's extremely difficult to maintain ideals over many years working in the system. Despite rhetoric about the "long march through institutions"—supposedly a left-wing strategy for change—it is much more likely that institutions will shape the attitudes and behaviour of individuals than the other way around. You've decided you want to be a judge so you can offer compassion, but by the time you become one, your views might have changed and you might feel strong pressure to conform to prevailing norms. As a judge, every day you are exposed to stories about people who have done the wrong thing: you see the worst cases of human behaviour. Remaining compassionate can be difficult.

Suppose, nevertheless, that somehow you've become a judge and you try to help move the system in a desirable direction. However, you will be subject to pressures. If you're more caring than other judges, you might be called

lenient or soft on criminals. Some of your decisions might be appealed and overruled. Even worse, you might be denounced in the media for allowing dangerous criminals to harm the community.

There's another problem. As a judge, you know that you are supposed to base your decisions on the law. Sometimes the law requires a judgement that is harmful. As noted earlier, panic over crime has led to politicians passing laws that constrain the discretion of judges. That means you have little or no choice and might have to sentence someone to years in prison for a seemingly trivial offence. You might know that such arbitrary penalties do not discourage crime. But they do disrupt the community, require ongoing expenditure and seem to many, including yourself, to be grossly unfair.

Do you really want to be part of this sort of system? You started with high ideals but have been turned into a cog in a system, with little leeway to help foster better outcomes. Are there other options?

As a judge, or a former judge, you might tell your story: tell about people brought before the dock, many of whom have been ill-treated in their lives and deserve compassion and further chances, and how social services are so inadequate that you know whatever penalty you impose, or don't impose, will do little to make things better. Letting wrongdoers off with a light penalty means they have little incentive to change, because their capabilities and opportunities are so limited. Harsher penalties don't make things better either, because rehabilitation is secondary to punishment.

If you tell your story this way, you're letting people know about the practical implications of everything criminologists say about crime, with the insider perspective of the courtroom. You can explain that the day-to-day operation of most courts is nothing like what is shown in television shows.

Not many judges write exposés.[26] Why not? One problem is confidentiality: you are bound by the rules of the court about what you can say about individuals and cases. You may have to fictionalise the stories.

Even if you write this sort of tell-all memoir, who is going to read it? It can't possibly be as engrossing as media stories of criminal activity, much less measure up to crime as entertainment.

Rather than trying to offer your insights for a public audience, another option is to make contact with a group pushing for a different approach to crime. It might be a reform group such as Children of Prisoners, a justice group seeking reviews of false convictions, or a radical group seeking abolition of prisons. You might not agree with everything the group espouses, but on the other hand group members might not agree with all your views! The point is that you have some common interests and can learn from each other. You might learn a perspective different from the one common among judges, police, prosecutors and defence lawyers. Just as importantly, you can offer insights from the inside of the system.

Imagine that you link up with a prison-justice group. If you're retired from the bench, you can do this openly, but

26 An exception is James P. Gray, discussed in chapter 3.

if you're still serving as a judge, you might do it anonymously or in a low-profile way, by email or phone. You can tell group members about the way people think inside the system. You might suggest some actions—a petition, a rally, a humorous event in court—and then follow up with observations about the way your colleagues reacted to the actions.

By being willing to break ranks and interact with outside groups, you can offer a lot. And you don't need to be a judge to do this. You might be a police officer or prison warder.

Roads to change

How can the crime-panic system be changed, brought under control or toppled? It's useful to think of a wide range of possibilities. Most of them are improbable or impractical, but a few might stimulate ideas.

• Money and resources. It costs a lot of money to pay for police, courts, prisons and everything that goes along with them. There has to be a limit. Or does there? Perhaps most of the population could be put in prison, and prisoners put to work to pay for their incarceration. Slave labour camps are not new. Even a poor society can, in principle, be based on mass imprisonment.

• Competition for resources. The cost of the system serves more as an argument, in other words as a rationale, for keeping the size under control. Cost-conscious managers and politicians may want the money for other purposes.

• External threats. In a Hollywood fantasy, individuals with exceptional powers are locked away. When humanity

is faced with a dire threat, the superheroes are released to mount a defence.

It is conceivable that when a society faces a mortal threat, due to danger from enemies or disasters, then police and prisons might be seen as a luxury. Maybe the prisons will be emptied so everyone can contribute to the common defence. This will probably remain a fantasy, though, because in many societies those running the prison system would rather capitulate to enemies or disasters than release all the prisoners. Are there any historical examples to show otherwise?

• Revolts. Perhaps prisoners will rise up in resistance, like the slave revolts in history. In Haiti, a slave revolt succeeded, but few others did. It's far easier to prevent slavery than for slaves to overthrow it.

• Escapes. Prisoners—lots of them—might escape. In some countries, usually in wartime, there have been mass prisoner escapes, often facilitated by outside supporters. If society is in turmoil, with police preoccupied with other challenges such as a revolutionary war, then escapees might be able to meld into the population. Otherwise, though, escapes might just be a pretext for heavy-handed policies to clamp down more harshly on prisoners and to maintain and extend surveillance of the population.

• Conquest. A foreign power might take over and release many or most prisoners. This could be because the prisoners were political allies of the conquerors, or to save money, or even as part of a more enlightened penal policy. However, it seems unwise to expect conquest to be the means for greater compassion. It might, instead, be the

inauguration of criminal proceedings against leaders of the previous government.

• Leadership change. A new government is elected or otherwise comes to power with a policy that reshapes the penal system: criminalisation targeting the poor and disadvantaged is rejected, replaced by welfare policies and alternative ways of dealing with transgressions. This would amount to a revolution in criminal justice.

The most likely path for a leadership change with such a radical agenda is the overthrow of a dictator by popular action, in what is sometimes called a nonviolent revolution. Examples include the Philippines in 1986, East Germany in 1989 and Serbia in 2000. In each case, there was massive resistance to the government with rallies, strikes and other forms of noncooperation. In quite a few of such leadership changes, the trigger for protest was an election and allegations of massive voting fraud.[27]

So far, however, there is little evidence that nonviolent revolutions or other occasions for leadership change have led to drastic changes in criminal justice. This is worth investigating further. In any case, so far there have been no such revolutions in countries, such as the US, with representative governments.

• Value change. People throughout society start thinking differently about crime and criminals. They might think it is wrong for those who are poor and disadvantaged to be penalised further, or that support and compassion are

27 Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent revolutions: civil resistance in the late 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

a better approach, or that many forms of punishment, especially imprisonment, are cruel and unhelpful.

When values change, this can lead to changes in policy and practice. Sensitive policy-makers pick up on popular sentiment and try to lead the way to new approaches. Others see what's happening and follow, creating a snowball effect.

This sounds nice, but are there any examples of value change like this?[28] Movements against slavery and for women's emancipation provide precedents, but they didn't have rapid success. Progress was episodic, happening at different rates and in different ways in different parts of the world.

Value change is definitely needed if changes are to be sustained.

• Deliberative democracy. Imagine that citizens become decision-makers about important policy matters. This means they are directly involved, not just via electing representatives. Furthermore, imagine that the decision-making process involves deliberation, a careful assessment of facts, values and options in which people discuss options in a forum where consensus is the goal.

One deliberative mechanism is citizens' juries. Members of the community are selected randomly to serve on a panel that listens to experts and to partisans, studies submissions and then discusses the issues seeking to reach

28 The case of the Inquisition torturing witches, mentioned earlier, may be an example.

an agreed recommendation. This is somewhat like a court jury, except it deals with policy matters.[29]

A citizens' jury addressing the topic of crime would hear from criminologists and other experts, and might also hear from police and prisoners. It would consider alternatives. It is impossible to predict the outcome, but it is plausible that such a jury would be open to alternatives to a large and expanding criminal-justice system.

Which roads to pursue?

It is not obvious how to counter the crime panic. If there were a simple answer, then no doubt campaigners would be well aware of it. The idea of crime as a problem that needs to be addressed by controlling and penalising criminals is so deeply entrenched in thinking and practices that it is hard to imagine a fundamental change. It is well and truly institutionalised, with many groups having a stake in maintaining the system, whatever its costs, inhumanity or lack of underlying logic.

Campaigners for prison abolition were active in the US many decades ago. Despite their efforts, the prison system grew at a remarkable rate.

This might suggest that different strategies are needed, but this would be a premature conclusion. Instead, it might just be that no strategy had any chance of success and what's needed is following the most promising strategy with the hope that circumstances change.

29 See, for example, information at newDemocracy Foundation, https://www.newdemocracy.com.au.

Another possibility is to undertake experiments in campaigning. This would mean trying out different approaches and seeing what happens. For example, rather than using knowledge and logic about the ineffectiveness of imprisonment for reducing the crime rate, instead interventions might be tried out that appeal to people's moral foundations, including their senses of fairness, care and liberty. Perhaps most such interventions would fail, but there is much to be learned, perhaps especially from failures.

It is worth thinking about laying the basis for future change. That can include preparing materials, training in communication skills, building networks across different constituencies, and making plans for introducing alternatives. Although change may be unlikely, it is worth being prepared to take advantage of opportunities.

5
The war on terrorism

On hearing the word "terrorism," many Americans who are old enough will think of the events of 11 September 2001, commonly known as 9/11. They will visualise the famous video of a passenger plane crashing into one of the two World Trade Towers in New York. At the time, many Americans, as well as people from other countries, obsessively watched television news channels, often for days on end. As a result of the events, many began to feel in danger. US aeroplanes were grounded for several days and then, when they flew again, patronage was significantly reduced because travellers were afraid of being hijacked. To the extent that the 9/11 attacks terrified people, they truly warranted the label "terrorism" because for many people, including those far from the attacks, they caused a feeling of terror.[1]

My own response was different. I overheard people in the corridor talking about the attacks, and then I read about them in the next morning's newspapers.[2] On grasping what

1 9/11 triggered the launch of the "war on terror." Although this became standard terminology, I don't adopt it here because, taken literally, it is ridiculous. The enemy isn't terror. The counterterrorism response to non-state terrorism is better described as a war on terrorism or perhaps a war against terrorists.

2 I do not have a television and didn't see the famous video until more than a year later.

had happened, my first thought was "Oh no. This will be a disaster for social movements, in particular movements committed to using nonviolent means to promote social change." I had read quite a bit about terrorism and knew that terrorist attacks, even ones much smaller than 9/11, provided a justification for government crackdowns on dissent, including dissent not involving violence.

In 2001, movements for social justice had been going from strength to strength. In 1999, in Seattle in Washington state, there had been huge street protests over a meeting of the World Trade Organisation. The protesters challenged the role of the WTO in supporting transnational corporations and harming workers, especially those in poor countries. This was the most prominent action inspired by the global justice movement, more commonly but misleadingly called the anti-globalisation movement.

9/11 interrupted the momentum of the global justice movement, and many other movements as well. President George W. Bush stated there were only two choices: supporting "us," meaning the US government, or "them," the terrorists. His popularity rose to a record high and enabled the launching of a war in Afghanistan and the implementation of massive surveillance and control measures in the US and many other countries. Social movements were no longer on the ascendant: they were forced into defensive mode.

From the beginning, the invasion of Afghanistan seemed like a way to wreak vengeance rather than a rational response. Nearly all the 9/11 attackers were from Saudi Arabia. The group claimed to be responsible, al Qaeda, was headed by bin Laden, also from Saudi Arabia. So why

attack Afghanistan? Because al Qaeda leaders were thought to be there, protected by the Taliban, which controlled most of the country. But why not just go after al Qaeda, searching out bin Laden and his lieutenants? (It might also be asked, why did Western troops remain fighting in Afghanistan for a decade after bin Laden was killed in Pakistan?)

Richard E. Rubenstein wrote a book, published in 1987, that is a well-informed assessment of the driving forces behind terrorism, especially in relation to social revolution and national liberation.[3] He commented that the policy of retaliation is really about revenge, whatever it's called, and is reminiscent of the blood feud. He said the principle of collective responsibility—the idea that everyone in a group that terrorists claim to represent is culpable—is barbaric and strengthens those who want to widen the conflict, in particular terrorists and warmongers. He asked, rhetorically, whether if Iraq was implicated in terrorism, should Baghdad be attacked? Yet that is exactly what happened in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, justified by the false insinuation that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks. Rubenstein said few terrorists are simply pawns of their sponsors. When Rubenstein was writing, the Irish Republican Army was still involved in terrorism—and it had received support from Irish-Americans. Rubenstein commented that it would be foolish to stop IRA terrorism by bombing South Boston. That is a close analogy to the bombing of Afghanistan after 9/11.

3 Richard E. Rubenstein, *Alchemists of revolution: terrorism in the modern world* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

9/11 has become the model terrorist attack, the template for understanding what terrorism is. It does capture several key characteristics of the way terrorism is usually conceived. There is the use of physical violence, for example hijacking an aircraft, blowing up a building, or executing a hostage. The violence is against civilians and is carried out to send a political message: it's not an ordinary crime like robbery. The political message is sent to audiences well beyond the immediate targets. The point of terrorism is to send this message. True to its name, terrorism causes terror among the immediate targets and, when the message gets out, among many others.

9/11 had all these features. It involved physical violence to hijack four passenger aircraft, taking them over and flying them to targets where they were used as means of destruction, of the aircraft and the targets. The violence was against civilians, namely the passengers and the occupants of the targeted buildings (though occupants of the Pentagon included military personnel). The attacks were motivated by a political objective. According to bin Laden's "Letter to America," his main concerns included attacks on Muslims in Palestine, Somalia, Iraq and several other countries.[4] The attacks served to send a message to audiences who were not directly threatened. The targets were the World Trade Towers, symbols of US capitalism, and the Pentagon, a symbol of US militarism. Timed as they were, the attacks received saturation media coverage. The

4 "Full text: bin Laden's 'letter to America'," *Guardian,* 24 November 2002.

mass media thus served as the means by which the attackers were able to send their message.

The downside of terrorism

Violence against civilians for political purposes is damaging in many ways. The immediate targets suffer injury or death. Many survivors and witnesses are traumatised. Often there is substantial damage to property: terrorism causes economic harm.

Then there is the response to terrorism, which can be just as harmful. The war in Afghanistan is an example. According to some calculations, in the first few months after the attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, more civilians were killed in bombings than died in the 9/11 attacks.[5]

Terrorism poses a real threat of harm. But how serious is the threat, and how great is the harm? Should something be done to prevent and oppose terrorism? If so, what and how?

There are various answers to these questions. The standard answers are that terrorism is a major threat, that it causes (or could cause) immense harm, and that strong measures should be taken against the threat, including surveillance to detect and monitor potential terrorists, harsh penalties for terrorists, wars against governments harbouring terrorists, and suspension of civil liberties. These are

5 Marc W. Herold, "A dossier on civilian victims of United States' aerial bombing of Afghanistan: a comprehensive accounting," December 2001.

some of the measures involved in what are called anti-terrorism and counterterrorism.[6]

PANIC

In chapter 2, I presented several characteristic features of persistent panics, drawing on moral panic theory and studies of long-lived public scientific controversies. These all apply to the war on terrorism. Here, I give just a few comments and examples about each of the features.[7]

Threat exaggeration

Is the alarm over terrorism justified? In other words, is the threat exaggerated? This is a matter of debate.

6 Antiterrorism refers to efforts to prevent terrorist attacks, for example through surveillance, and to protect against attacks; it is primarily defensive. Counterterrorism involves identifying and capturing terrorists; it is primarily offensive. I usually use one term or the other, not both; the context should make clear when both are relevant.

7 For a useful analysis of the war on terrorism using moral panic theory, see Gershon Shafir and Cynthia E. Schairer, "The war on terror as political moral panic," in Gershon Shafir, Everard Meade and William J. Aceves (eds.), *Lessons and legacies of the War on Terror: from moral panics to permanent war* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 9–46. See also James P. Walsh, "Moral panics by design: the case of terrorism," *Current Sociology,* vol. 65, no. 5, 2017, pp. 643–662. There is an abundance of material critical of the war on terrorism. A good place to start is the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism.*

To begin, it is useful to compare the consequences of terrorism with other dangers in everyday life. Government pronouncements make it seem like terrorism is one of the prime threats. Comparisons tell a different story. Consider traffic accidents. In nearly every country, they kill and injure far more people than terrorism.

After 9/11, many people were afraid to fly and instead chose to drive. However, flying is, on average, far safer than driving, so the 9/11-induced fear of flying led to an increased death rate from traffic accidents. One calculation found that this increased death rate from a switch to driving may have caused as many fatalities as 9/11 itself.[8] Yet this finding received little media attention, nor was there a massive increase in government spending to reduce traffic accidents. Indeed, just reducing the speed limit saves lives. During the oil shock in the 1970s, when the price of gasoline in the US jumped, the government reduced the maximum speed limit from 65 to 55 miles per hour, causing the number of annual traffic fatalities to drop by approximately 5000.[9] Later, the speed limit was increased to its previous figure.

8 Gerd Gigerenzer, "Dread risk, September 11, and fatal traffic accidents," *Psychological Science,* vol. 15, no. 4, 2003, pp. 286–287.

9 Charles T. Clotfelter and John C. Hahn, "Assessing the national 55 m.p.h. speed limit," *Policy Sciences,* vol. 9, 1978, pp. 281–294. As with all such issues, the effects of the speed-limit reduction have been debated. See for example Stephen R. Godwin and Charles Lave, "Effect of the 65 m.p.h. speed limit on highway safety in the U.S.A. (with comments and reply to comments)," *Transport Reviews,* vol. 12, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–14. For a bigger picture, see

After 9/11, a simple security measure was introduced by airlines: doors to the cockpit were secured. This meant hijackers could no longer take over the flying of the aircraft. This one change meant a repetition of 9/11 was not feasible. Yet all sorts of other security measures were introduced, including screening of all passengers for guns, knives and fluids. Many of these measures have remained in place despite there being only a very few terror-related incidents in the following years.

Imagine that you are willing to sacrifice your life for your cause, and to gain the greatest amount of media attention you decide to kill as many people as possible or to cause as much damage and disruption as possible. What might you choose to do? One option is to drive a truck full of explosives next to a building and detonate it. You might even avoid getting killed yourself, as did Timothy McVeigh after he exploded his truck outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. For some reason, few other terrorists have chosen this option. If they had, there might be checkpoints in every street, with inspections for explosives.

To cause maximum disruption, you might strap explosives around your body and detonate them while sitting in the crowd at a highly popular sports event. Even if you killed only a few people—aside from yourself—this would generate a massive scare. Ever after, all patrons at sports events might need to be screened, causing immense disruption. This is an obvious terrorist option but it hasn't been particularly popular. Perhaps terrorists are not very creative: they prefer to stick to what most others have done before. Or perhaps there are simply not very many people who believe killing others is a sensible way to make a political statement.

Tammy O. Tengs et al., "Five-hundred life-saving interventions and their cost-effectiveness," *Risk Analysis,* vol. 15, no. 3, 1995, pp. 369–390.

In the United States, there is a curious way of thinking about threats of violence. What is called terrorism warrants government alarm. Even a few teenagers talking about an attack can be enough for extensive surveillance, arrest and prosecution. On the other hand, millions of citizens have guns, most of them legal, and a small percentage of gun-owners use their weapons to kill others or, just as commonly, themselves. However, this usually isn't called terrorism. Most attention is on a certain category of actual or potential uses of violence, and draconian measures are taken to prevent them. The curious aspect is that the alarm is over uses of violence that are rare, whereas much more common uses of violence—gun-related violence—do not trigger an equivalent alarm.

This discrepancy is highlighted when there is a bombing or a mass shooting and the reason is initially unknown. In many cases, after some investigation the authorities announce that the event is "not terrorism-related." That seems to offer some relief. The underlying assumption seems to be that if the event constituted terrorism, there would be much more to worry about.

Polarisation

In the aftermath of 9/11, President George W. Bush made a statement, often quoted thereafter: "Either you are with us,

or you are with the terrorists." In this statement, "us" refers to the US government or the US people, treated as identical. In presenting these stark alternatives, he was denying the existence of any middle ground. In his picture, it was not possible to be both against the terrorists and against the US government.

Note that in this picture, two separate things are conflated, namely assumed to be one and the same: actions and who did them. Being against the terrorists is assumed to be against them as people, as enemies, and against their actions. Being with "us" is assumed to mean being a citizen of the United States and supportive of its actions against terrorists.

Polarisation occurs in many controversies, everything from abortion to vaccination. Partisans who take a strong line dominate the public debate, and often the partisans on the two sides—almost always there are just two main sides—set the terms of the debate. If you have some middle or moderate position, partisans are not interested in what you have to say. On the other hand, if you accept one of the positions whole-heartedly, then you will be welcomed into the fold. It's a choice of being an insider in one camp or the other, or an outsider ignored or shunned by all.

In relation to terrorism, it's easy to spell out a range of positions different from Bush's two options. To start, you could be opposed to both the terrorists and to the US government, or you could be opposed to the actions of the terrorists and to the counterterrorist actions of the US government. You might think the terrorists are misguided in their methods but their goals are laudable. You might think the US government should oppose terrorism in different ways, for example by trying to address the grievances that motivated the terrorists. Or you might think that a more humane and understanding response, rather than a vindictive one, would show the way forward, win more supporters and undercut the appeal of terrorism. You might note that some methods of counterterrorism, for example drone assassinations, can cause hostility and lay the foundation for more terrorism.

Another non-standard option is to say that terrorism does not warrant so much attention. If the media paid less attention to attacks, the terrorists would not receive the publicity they are seeking. If instead the media paid more attention to genuine grievances and measures taken to address them, this could change the agenda.

If Bush's way of thinking is accepted, then adopting a non-standard option means not supporting "us" and instead supporting the terrorists. Because governments have far more power than terrorists, and shape the way people think about terrorism, this means that many people think any option different from the usual counterterrorism methods means being soft on terrorism, or even sympathetic to terrorists. This is the way polarisation works. Those with non-standard positions receive little support in public debates and hence are more likely to drop out of the discussion.

Stigmatisation

To be called a terrorist is seldom a compliment. You can't even joke about it, especially not at an airport. To be a terrorist is, in many people's thinking, worse than being a criminal. A criminal knows there are rules and tries to get

away with breaking them, preferably without anyone noticing. A terrorist, in contrast, seems to glory in breaking the rules. It's fair to say that "terrorist" is one of the most stigmatising labels available.[10]

Strange to say, the word "terrorist" originally applied to governments that used violence against opponents. Somewhere along the line, governments managed to turn the meaning around so it applied exclusively to their opponents.

Examples abound. During the war in Vietnam, the US government labelled those on the other side—the National Liberation Front, commonly called the Viet Cong—as terrorists. In South Africa under apartheid, the government called the African National Congress terrorists. The Israeli government calls Palestinians, the ones using violence, terrorists. The British government called Irish nationalists terrorists. The Philippines government refers to guerrillas, fighting in the south of the country, as terrorists.

There's no doubt that in these and other examples the challengers used violence. The strange thing is that so did the governments. In the Vietnam war, for example, the US military dropped bombs with greater explosive power than all the bombs dropped during World War II. Yet this massive onslaught was not given the label "terrorism."

10 On how terrorists are framed linguistically, see Marco Pinfari, *Terrorists as monsters: the unmanageable other from the French Revolution to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), who also analyses why some terrorists seek to be seen as monsters.

For many years I had been vaguely aware of the problems with the terminology of terrorism. Then I read a short book by Conor Gearty in which he critiqued the content of the term "terrorism," showing that it had evolved from its origins as state terror to an incoherent expression of condemnation.[11] By "incoherent," Gearty meant that the meaning of the term can't be pinned down. Indeed, it keeps changing.

Strange as it may seem today, Gearty, writing in 1997, was especially keen to criticise the term "age of terrorism" that was common at the time. This is not an expression much used any more. Gearty said there was no age of terrorism because what was called terrorism was subversive violence in relatively peaceful times (for the West), but this violence is fairly low level in comparison with other uses of violence, especially by governments.

A second point made by Gearty was that "terrorism" is meaningless or, perhaps more accurately, its meaning keeps changing depending on the circumstances. Notoriously, there have been dozens of different definitions of terrorism and no consensus. Gearty noted many different usages before the term was narrowed to nonstate subversive terror. But then the US government expanded the meaning to state-supported terror, which referred to just about any government not doing what the US government wanted.

11 Conor Gearty, *The future of terrorism* (London: Phoenix, 1997). See also Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining terror: how experts invented "terrorism"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

A third point made by Gearty was that governments—especially Western governments—turned the term "terrorism" into a tool for their own political purposes. In particular, they used the danger of terrorism as a pretext for instituting controls over the population, especially over dissent. This extended to labelling nonviolent dissent as terrorism, for example in the term "ecoterrorism." Remember that in making this point, Gearty was writing before 9/11 and the massive expansion of state surveillance and control over dissent.

Others have written about the lack of precision in the term "terrorism," the way it is mobilised against challengers to governments and the double standards involved (more on this later). For the time being, the main thing to note is that "terrorist" is a label applied to those considered to be bad guys, to make them be seen as enemies, moreover enemies who are fundamentally evil.

Punishing the iconic terrorist

In chapter 2, I told about the idea of psychological projection, in which a person rejects a part of their psyche and attributes it to others. Typically, the rejected part is what a person thinks is bad about themselves, for example an impulse to hurt others. By projecting this impulse onto others, two things occur. The first is that the person becomes purer, being psychically freed of the bad impulse. The second is that the others, the recipients of the projection, become bad. They might be seen as dangerous, so they should be attacked.

Christiana Spens has developed a sophisticated analysis of people's response to terrorists, in which projection

plays a role. In her book *The Portrayal and Punishment of Terrorists in Western Media,* she focuses on what she calls "iconic" terrorists, for example Osama bin Laden, whose images become familiar as they are reproduced in the media.[12] She shows eerie parallels between the images of several iconic terrorists of the 2000s and images of the punishment of scapegoats in Western history, in particular witches in the 1600s, Guy Fawkes[13] and black men who were lynched in the US in the late 1800s and early 1900s. All were seen as bad, even evil.

These target groups were subject to collective punishment. For example, the witches were burned alive, often after having been tortured to give confessions. There are images from these episodes in Western history, for example paintings of the burning of witches and postcards showing lynchings.

Spens argues that each of these groups—witches, Guy Fawkes, lynched black men and today's terrorists—served as a part of a ritual. The stigmatised groups serve as scapegoats, being the carriers of sins. In essence, the rest of the population projects its own dark side onto these groups, thereby becoming innocent, free of sin.

There is another process, an important one: the punishment of the scapegoated group. This is satisfying psychologically, as the sinful one suffers a deserved fate.

12 Christiana Spens, *The portrayal and punishment of terrorists in Western media: playing the villain* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

13 Guy Fawkes, 1570–1606, was a British soldier involved in a plot to blow up the parliament building in London.

The punishment serves to complete a narrative, a story in which the bad are punished and the good, namely "us," are absolved of guilt and are relieved of the danger from the scapegoated other.

Spens emphasises that this process refers only to iconic terrorists. As icons, or symbols, they are different from and greater than their actual persons and actions. The actual deeds of terrorists are bad and have harmful human consequences, but seldom so bad or so dangerous that they warrant the huge mobilisation of resources to hunt and destroy them.

Double standards

In 1979, a book by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman was published. Its title was *The Political Economy of Human Rights,* and it came in two volumes.[14] I read it not long after it was published and was hugely impressed. I recommended it to a variety of correspondents.

Chomsky and Herman argued that the US government was a sponsor of horrific human rights violations around the globe, sometimes through direct military action and more commonly through support for repressive regimes. The most obvious direct military action was the Vietnam war. (The Vietnamese called it the American war.) A little bit of history is relevant. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

14 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The political economy of human rights—Volume I. The Washington connection and Third World fascism*; *Volume II. After the cataclysm: postwar Indochina and the reconstruction of imperial ideology* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

were ruled by French colonisers from the 1800s. During World War II, these countries were conquered by the Japanese military. In Vietnam, patriots fought the Japanese. Then, after the war, the French military sought to reassert colonial control, so the Vietnamese nationalists fought the French military. The French had help: the US government subsidised the French effort. But the Vietnamese nationalists defeated the French military in 1954. After this, the US government supported an anti-communist government in South Vietnam and prevented a vote on unification of the country. The US government fought a gradually escalating war against the North Vietnamese government and its supporters in the south; the war expanded to Cambodia and Laos.

In the US, it is often remembered that more than 50,000 US soldiers died in the war. It is less often remembered that two or three million people died in Indochina, a large proportion of them due to US bombing. Part of the US military effort was the Phoenix program, which aimed at "neutralising"—kidnapping, torturing and assassinating—thousands of civilians considered to be part of the "infrastructure" that supported opposition to the South Vietnamese government.[15]

Now to talk about terrorism. In the war, the US military called its opponents terrorists. But the biggest terrorist was the US government itself: it was responsible for vastly more death and destruction through saturation

15 Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix program* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

bombing, a covert assassination program, defoliation and other means.

Another side to the US government's role in human rights abuses was supporting repressive regimes. Chomsky and Herman gave many examples from around the world. One of them was Indonesia. In 1965–1966, there was a genocide in the country. Claiming there had been a coup attempt, the army went on a rampage against anyone deemed to be a communist, with perhaps a million people killed, and many more tortured and imprisoned.[16] If anything can generate terror, this sort of country-wide massacre can. The number of victims was greater than all the terror attacks ever carried out by non-state groups across the whole world. Yet, said Chomsky and Herman, the response of the US government was minimal. Some officials expressed support.

Chomsky and Herman call this sort of killing benign terror—that is, benign to Western government leaders. They only get upset when the terror is by their enemies rather than their allies. (At the time, any opponents of communists, no matter how bloodthirsty, were considered allies.)

16 Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta method: Washington's anti-communist crusade & the mass murder program that shaped our world* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020); Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian killings 1965–1966* (Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990); Saskia E. Wieringa and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, *Propaganda and the genocide in Indonesia: imagined evil* (London: Routledge, 2019).

As well as offering the concept of benign terror, Chomsky and Herman have another way of pointing out the contrast between government-sponsored terror and government-challenging terror. They call them wholesale and retail violence. Wholesale implies that large amounts can be obtained at a low price. That is the sort of killing that Chomsky and Herman said was being carried out by US client states.

I thought Chomsky and Herman's *The Political Economy of Human Rights* was a brilliant critique of the usual way of looking at US and Western government activities. Predictably, though, it had little impact outside of left-wing circles. It was not reviewed in mainstream US media.

Once alerted to the huge double standard concerning terrorism, I looked out for similar work and soon found a small body of scholarship using the concept of state terrorism, referring to terrorism by governments. Michael Stohl was one of the key researchers, and over the years there were a number of others.[17] There is much that could be said about this research but, for the present purposes, one point

17 Ruth Blakeley, *State terrorism and neoliberalism: the North in the South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Frederick H. Gareau, *State terrorism and the United States: from counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2004); Alexander George (ed.), *Western state terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *The state as terrorist: the dynamics of governmental violence and repression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *Terrible beyond endurance? The foreign policy of state terrorism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988).

is clear. By any reckoning, states have been responsible for far more terror than non-state groups, "far more" meaning something like a factor of one hundred. Yet the alarm is nearly always about non-state terrorism. The small-scale operators get nearly all the attention. This is a clear double standard.

An apparent contradiction

For decades, I've been studying whistleblowing. After 9/11, I came across several instances in which employees raised concerns about terrorism risks—and were penalised for speaking out.[18]

Thomas Bittler and Ray Guagliardi worked for the US Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In 2003, while serving as training coordinators at Buffalo Niagara International Airport, they noticed numerous violations of regulations for inspecting baggage, for example, inadequate inspections following alarms. They reported their concerns to their boss, to no effect, so they wrote to TSA headquarters. They lost their jobs two months later, officially due to a staff restructure. However, "both men say TSA officials told them that they should never have complained. According to Bittler, one supervisor said, 'If you people would just learn to shut your mouths, you would still have your jobs'."[19]

Richard Levernier was a nuclear security professional with 23 years' experience. After 9/11, he raised concerns with the Department of Energy about the vulnerability of US nuclear power plants to a terrorist attack, for example pointing out that contingency plans assumed terrorists would both enter and exit facilities, therefore not addressing the risk of suicide attacks. His security clearance was withdrawn and he was relegated to a basement office coordinating departmental travel; his career in nuclear security was over. Levernier went to the Office of Special Counsel, the body responsible for US federal whistleblower matters. Four years later, the OSC vindicated Levernier and ruled that the Department of Energy's retaliation was illegal—but the OSC had no power to restore Levernier's security clearance, which remained revoked.[20]

Teresa Chambers was chief of the US Park Police, like a municipal police department but with responsibility for national parks and monuments, mainly in the Washington, DC area. It had over 600 officers. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Park Police were given additional antiterrorism responsibilities, but no additional funding. Chambers spoke regularly to the media; it was part of her job. In December 2003, she spoke to a *Washington Post* journalist, saying antiterrorism duties meant less services in regular park

18 The next three paragraphs are adapted from my chapter "Whistleblowing: risks and skills," in Brian Rappert and Caitriona McLeish (eds.), *A web of prevention: the life sciences, biological weapons and the governance of research* (London: Earthscan, 2007), pp. 35–49, at pp. 35–36.

19 Michael Scherer, "Flight risk," *Mother Jones,* July/August 2004, pp. 15–17.

20 Government Accountability Project, "OSC vindicates nuclear security whistleblower," media release, 13 February 2006.

functions and calling for a larger budget to cover all the Park Police's tasks. Soon after, she was stripped of her gun and badge—a tremendous humiliation—and put on leave, and later fired.[21] She was finally vindicated many years later.

There seems to be a contradiction in cases like these. Terrorism is touted as a dire threat to people's lives. Yet when loyal employees raised concerns about security, they were the ones who paid a penalty. You might think that if terrorism was really such a serious threat, then warnings would be investigated and any inadequacies addressed. Indeed, such concerned employees should be rewarded for their diligence.

How can we understand this apparent contradiction? One explanation is that the terrorism threat is exaggerated. Another is that employees who expose shortcomings in preparedness are deemed a greater threat. Higher management seems more worried about people becoming aware of their lack of concern than they are about terrorists. What this suggests that senior figures within organisational hierarchies in the US are more concerned about their power and position than about the effectiveness of the organisation to achieve its ostensible purposes. This is a wider issue than just terrorism. It suggests that many of the measures to deal with terrorism are more show than anything else.

21 Bill Katovsky, *Patriots act: voices of dissent and the risk of speaking out* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2006), pp. 231–244.

Marginalisation of experts

The late Edward S. Herman, an economist, worked at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Rather than the field of economics, he is far better known for his wide-ranging critiques of US foreign policy and the US media. Among other topics, he made a special analysis of US government policy on terrorism. In 1982, his book *The **Real** Terror Network* was published.[22] In it, he made a crucially important point. The US terrorism experts who had the most influence and who received the most media coverage were the ones who had the greatest conflict of interest. They should have been the ones whose views were treated most sceptically.[23]

There is a vast amount of research on conflicts of interest. A central finding is that a person with a conflict of interest is likely to be biased. If you are a judge in a music performance competition, you are likely to be biased towards your own students, compared to performers you don't know. If you are employed by a pharmaceutical company and carry out a study of your company's new drug, you are more likely to obtain favourable results than if you are employed by a university that receives no drug

22 Edward S. Herman, *The **real** terror network: terrorism in fact and propaganda* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

23 See also Edward S. Herman, "Terrorism: the struggle against closure," in Brian Martin (ed.), *Confronting the experts* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 77–97.

company money.[24] Conflicts of interest can be financial, organisational or ideological. Those who want fair-minded evaluations try to prohibit or otherwise reduce the influence of conflicts of interest.

Except, said Herman, when it came to US terrorism policy, conflicts of interest were treated as a source of credibility, not bias. Figures given prominent media coverage were those with ties to the US government and who had a stake in existing policies. In contrast, independent experts, such as Herman himself, were marginalised in public discourse.

The reason was straightforward. The conflicted experts, the ones who were feted, were saying what policy-makers wanted to hear, whereas Herman and other independent experts were criticising government policy. In fact, Herman was saying the US government was the biggest terrorist.

Fast-forward twenty years and the situation had hardly changed. In the aftermath of 9/11, most governments implemented antiterrorism legislation. Who did they consult? Certainly not the legal experts who counselled that existing laws were sufficient. More generally, after 9/11 anyone in the US who deviated from the government line was vulnerable to charges of being a terrorist supporter. Or they might just be ignored. No terrorism expert who argued that the attacks should be treated as criminal acts, not as acts of war, had much influence on the policy-making process.

24 Sheldon Krimsky, *Conflicts of interest in science: how corporate-funded academic research can threaten public health* (New York: Hot Books, 2019).

Think of the men captured and imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay. If they were deemed to be criminals, they would have to be brought to trial. The US government didn't want that because the prisoners had been tortured, so the evidence against them was tainted. If, on the other hand, they were deemed prisoners of war, they should have been treated according to the Geneva Conventions. Instead, to justify indefinite imprisonment without trial, US officials dreamed up a fantasy designation, "enemy combatants," to which legal conventions supposedly did not apply. Who were the experts used to decide on the status of the prisoners? Certainly not legal experts, most of whom condemned the entire Guantanamo operation. Indeed, many legal experts condemned the US-led war in Afghanistan, given that the pretext for this operation was counterterrorism. The war continued for twenty more years, with the original rationale long forgotten.

Threat entrepreneurs: governments

For governments, terrorists are the ideal enemy. With few exceptions, they are not a serious threat to government power and control. They don't have nuclear weapons or other massive military power and thus have no prospect of seriously threatening a well-established government. However, for state elites to justify their power and authority, it's convenient to have an enemy that can be painted as fearsome. An enemy seen as hostile and implacable, as the epitome of evil, can be used to foster popular support for the government itself.

Governments extract resources from the population, mostly via taxes. In exchange, governments promise,

implicitly or explicitly, to benefit the people and protect them from harm. Partly this is through services such as pensions and schools; partly it is through police and the military. Despite this implicit bargain, many citizens are resentful and fearful of the government, especially when it uses its powers in arbitrary and self-serving ways. Therefore, governments whose legitimacy is potentially under threat find it convenient to find or create enemies. These enemies provide a justification for the government and its exercise of power.

Some enemies are foreign military powers. As recounted in the chapter on war, the foreign military threat is regularly exaggerated in order to justify military expenditures. Terrorists provide a different sort of enemy, one that is quite convenient, because terrorists are almost never actual threats to government power. Instead, they provide the perfect rationale for strengthening government power over its own citizens. Concerns about taxation and unfair policies are submerged in the manufactured fear of terrorists. So it is not surprising that governments are key terrorist threat entrepreneurs.

There's another angle here. Some counterterror policies actually foster terrorism. When in 2001 Western governments launched an attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan, the killing of civilians outraged the local population, leading to greater recruitment into the Taliban. When in 2003 the US government led an invasion of Iraq, this generated enormous antagonism throughout the region and laid the basis for the emergence of Islamic State some years later.

Threat entrepreneurs: the media and others

In 1983, I read an important book by Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf titled *Violence as Communication.* Published the previous year, it opened my eyes to a different way of thinking about terrorism.[25]

Many people believe that the aim of terrorists is to kill, destroy or otherwise harm their targets. After the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush said the terrorists hated America. Schmid and de Graaf presented a different view: the aim of terrorists is communication. They use violence—kidnappings, bombings and the like—to get people to pay attention to them and their demands. So the ultimate aim of terrorists is not to cause harm to their immediate targets but rather to send a message to wider audiences, the people who pay attention to the terrorists because of the violence. This isn't the only factor but Schmid and de Graaf argued it is a crucially important one.

In getting people to pay attention, the media play a crucial role. If campaigners beat up a family in a remote farming community, no one else will know about it. If they beat up a family on national television, lots of people will pay attention.

25 Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as communication: insurgent terrorism and the Western news media* (London: Sage, 1982). See also Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-mediated terrorism: the central role of the media in terrorism and counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Joseph S. Tuman, *Communicating terror: the rhetorical dimensions of terrorism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

The 9/11 attacks involved the most effective use of the media by any terrorists ever. The attacks had worldwide impact because the mass media gave them headline coverage. For days, there was nothing else on television. The video of a plane flying into a World Trade Tower was played over and over.

You might think that the 9/11 attacks were so serious that they were bound to attract attention, even without the media coverage. Maybe so, but this isn't true for many other attacks. Think of the gruesome beheadings carried out by Islamic State, recorded on video and broadcast online. Without the video, few people would know about the beheadings, and there would be little point in carrying them out.

The media serve as amplifiers of the message. Without them, terrorist violence would have far less impact, and there would be less incentive for the violence in the first place.

When Schmid and de Graaf wrote *Violence as Communication,* the so-called mass media—newspapers, radio and television—played the dominant role in communicating to wider audiences. Since then, with the rise of social media, terrorists can spread their message via photos and videos online.

The media serve as threat entrepreneurs, though largely as a side effect of the way they generate news. The mass media choose what counts as newsworthy—what they think should be covered—by relying on a number of "news values" such as prominence, locality, drama, personality and conflict. If the president yells and screams, that might be news, but if you or I yell and scream it won't be.

Negatives are more newsworthy than positives: a robbery is more newsworthy than dozens of good deeds. That's because humans are wired to notice negatives more than positives,[26] and journalists and editors rely on the interest generated by negatives to attract audiences. As one aspect of the focus on negatives, violence is almost guaranteed to receive more media coverage, especially sudden and dramatic violence. Aeroplane crashes are newsworthy; airline safety is not. Murders are newsworthy; good neighbourly relationships are not. As journalists say, "If it bleeds, it leads."

Terrorists tap into this preference for reporting violence. It is the basis for Schmid and de Graaf's analysis of terrorism: the Western news media serve as the conduit for terrorists to gain attention. And not a passive conduit, but an active, eager one. Journalists flock to terrorist incidents, knowing that stories about them, especially with visuals, will be taken up by editors and eagerly received by audiences.

Imagine this antiterrorism strategy: all media organisations agree to give terrorist attacks as little attention as possible. Instead, they agree to give priority attention to humorous stunts. Campaigners who had been using violence as communication would soon learn that they should

26 Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Bad is stronger than good," *Review of General Psychology,* vol. 5, no. 4, 2001, pp. 323–370; Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, "Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion," *Personality and Social Psychology Review,* vol. 5, no. 4, 2001, pp. 296–320.

develop their skills in humorous stunts because in this new hypothetical media environment the key to communication is humour.[27] By changing the choice of what to cover, the incentives for terrorism would be changed.

Most media organisations would not be responsive to such a strategy, or at least not enough to make it work. Why not? Because audiences are responsive to news about terrorism. Media organisations that curbed their coverage would lose audience share and advertising revenue, and their journalists would lose breaking stories.

Given the massive amount of media discussion about terrorism over the years, why has there been so little attention to research showing that the media themselves are a vital part of what makes terrorism attractive? The answer is obvious. Imagine a major media organisation reporting on research by Schmid and de Graaf's work and by later researchers along the same lines and then saying, in effect, "Research suggests that our coverage offers an incentive for terrorism, but we're going to continue with the same coverage anyway, because it attracts a bigger audience."

The audience is another link in the terrorism-alarm process. Many consumers of the media are drawn to stories about terrorism. Their interest in hearing about political violence contributes to news values that prioritise violence, thus contributing to the alarm about terrorism. In a sense, governments drive the alarm, terrorists play their part, media organisations amplify the terrorists' message and audiences lap it up.

27 Majken Jul Sørensen, *Humour in political activism: creative nonviolent resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Are there any other terrorism-alarm entrepreneurs? A number could be named: companies selling relevant equipment and training; authors writing books and articles highlighting terrorism; Hollywood scriptwriters who portray terrorists as the bad guys.

Finally, of all the threat entrepreneurs, an essential and peculiar role is played by terrorists themselves. Without their actions, there would be no threat and so it would be harder for governments to raise the alarm and for media to run stories about the danger. This would not rule out alarmism, because threats can be imagined even when they don't exist, but in the case of terrorism there is an actual danger. Terrorists thus are crucial figures in the process of terrorism panic.

When a powerful group does something that observers see as unfair, dangerous, contemptible or horrible, this can generate public outrage. Think for example of the torture and abuse of prisoners by their US jailers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, revealed to the world in 2004 by the release of photos. This caused an enormous outcry and seriously harmed the reputation of the US government and military, especially in Arab countries. It's important to note that the US government did not release the photos. Instead, it tried to keep its treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq out of the public eye. After the photos were released, US officials used various ways to reduce public outrage, including calling actions "abuse" rather than torture, saying the perpetrators were rogue operators so higher commanders would not be implicated, and taking reprisals against soldiers who spoke out about the torture. The US govern-

ment, as a powerful perpetrator of unjust actions, used a variety of methods to reduce public outrage.[28]

The same methods can be observed in all sorts of other areas, for example in police beatings, massacres and genocides. Powerful perpetrators regularly use a variety of methods to reduce public outrage.[29]

Contrast this with non-state terrorists. In using violence against civilians, they do not try to reduce public outrage, but instead try to maximise it. They do not hide their actions but instead seek media coverage. The trouble with this approach is that the terrorists' messages are overwhelmed by another message: the message implicit in their methods.

According to what is called correspondent inference theory, audiences assume that someone's motives correspond to their methods.[30] If you approach a baby with cooing sounds and outstretched hands, people assume you are sympathetic to it, whereas if you shout and raise your fists, people assume you might do the baby harm. Appearances often correspond to intentions but sometimes are misleading. You might be approaching the baby sympathetically to feed it cyanide and you might be shouting and showing your fists to scare away a threatening dog.

28 Truda Gray and Brian Martin, "Abu Ghraib," in Brian Martin, *Justice ignited: the dynamics of backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 129–141.

29 "Backfire materials," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html. See chapter 8 for an application to persistent panics.

30 Max Abrahms, "Why terrorism does not work," *International Security,* Vol. 31, No. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 42–78, applies correspondent inference theory to terrorism.

What was the motivation for the 9/11 attacks? Whatever bin Laden's motivations, and whatever the motivations of the hijackers, they were completely misinterpreted by nearly all observers, especially those in the US. President George W. Bush said the terrorists hated America.[31] He, like most others, focused on the deed and assumed the motivations of the perpetrators must correspond to it.

In summary, terrorism—the sort that seeks publicity and uses the media as a tool to amplify its message—can be very effective in attracting attention but counterproductive in its messaging.

There are many studies about the motivations of terrorists. A strategic motive is to provoke retribution that stimulates greater support for the terrorists. Individual terrorists can be motivated by ideology, belief in the effectiveness of violence, a quest for glory, hatred of targets and/or group identity. However, it is not necessary to determine motivations in order to observe that terrorists serve as part of the process that makes them seem to be threats to the social order. And it is precisely their willingness to commit atrocities openly, indeed to draw attention to them, that makes it so easy to exaggerate the threat they pose.

31 For an analysis, see Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why do people hate America?* (Cambridge: Icon, 2002).

New evidence

An alarm has been raised about terrorism: populations have been alerted and preparations made to thwart attacks. What does it take for the alarm to be turned off?

After 9/11, there was a great fear of copycat attacks. Steps were taken to prevent further hijackings of aircraft. This included screening all passengers for objects that might be used for hijacking. Initially in the US this included knives and cuticle scissors. My sister joked about the headline that might have followed a failure to confiscate every possible weapon: "Airliner hijacked by five-foot librarian with nail file."

Some critics have argued that the bigger danger is from terrorists infiltrating the flight crews, which means that screening of crews is far more important than screening of passengers. Yet despite hijackings being extremely rare, passenger screening procedures continue. It is hard to find any statement by authorities about how low the threat has to be before prevention measures are changed. In this sense, new evidence is irrelevant.

Antiterrorism has become a paradigm: it is a way of seeing the world. Evidence conflicting with the antiterrorism picture, in other words anomalies in relation to the paradigm, is either ignored or explained away. When there are few or no attacks, this is taken as evidence that measures are effective. When there is an attack, this is taken as evidence that even stronger measures are warranted. So it doesn't matter what actually happens: security measures will be either maintained or increased.

George W. Bush, in launching the "war on terror," gave no end date. It was to be a perpetual war. This is a perfect articulation of what it takes to maintain a persistent panic. The enemy can never be vanquished, so it's necessary to continue the war indefinitely.

Another sort of evidence is about how counterterrorism measures, such as drone killings, can radicalise members of the target population, leading to greater support for and participation in future terrorist attacks.[32] In other words, counterterrorism can be counterproductive. This evidence, if taken seriously, would cause a re-examination of the model. This hasn't happened yet.

Institutionalisation

The 9/11 attacks represented the greatest failure in the history of US intelligence services. The FBI, CIA and other agencies had received warnings but either ignored them or didn't act on them. So what do you do when agencies, which had billions of dollars in funding and well-established procedures, are found to be seriously deficient? The answer was to give them lots more money.

When non-state terrorism is seen as a pressing problem, governments may put more resources into their antiterrorism efforts. This means hiring staff, setting up surveillance systems, creating new organisations, assigning chains of command, funding research and a host of related activities. In these ways, antiterrorism is institutionalised, namely turned into a regular, semi-permanent way of doing

32 For example, Jeremy Scahill and the staff of *The Intercept, The assassination complex: inside the US government's secret drone warfare programme* (London: Serpent's Tale, 2016).

things, with dedicated staff, procedures, training and facilities.

Having put money and resources into dealing with the issue, it becomes difficult to reverse the process. When organisations are created, staff are hired and processes become routine, this means there are now vested interests in continuing. Agencies are filled with people who value their jobs and become committed to their mission. If cutbacks are on the agenda, agency members can engage in lobbying and fear-mongering to increase the likelihood that funding will continue. Because they focus on terrorism threats all the time, to them the importance of antiterrorism is self-evident. Who are they to suggest that antiterrorism receive a lower priority, or that entirely different approaches be used?

Institutionalisation helps panics become persistent. There are two main aspects to the institutionalisation of antiterrorism. The first is the obvious one: all the agencies, laws, practices and ways of thinking that are specifically directed at dealing with terrorism. The second is less obvious: the state, which gains power and legitimacy by dealing with an enemy—real, exaggerated, manufactured or otherwise—and seeming to protect the population from this enemy. As long as states exist, government leaders will have an incentive to unite the population behind them by raising an alarm about an enemy. While it might be possible to reduce the panic about specific terrorist threats, especially ones that are non-existent, government leaders will continue to be attracted by singling out certain groups, calling them terrorists, dehumanising them and turning them into convenient enemies.

Belief systems

Many people believe that terrorists pose a major threat to society. If you have been personally affected by a terrorist attack, you have reason to fear, but most people have no such personal experience. They hear about terrorism through the media, and maybe through the screening processes at airports. Threat entrepreneurs have been extremely effective, at least in some countries, in getting people to believe that surveillance and harsh measures are needed to counter the terrorist threat.

This belief system is remarkably resistant to information about how little danger terrorists pose compared to dangers such as traffic accidents, heart disease, being hurt falling down, and being struck by lightning. Beliefs about terrorism and terrorists help enable continued spending to deal with the threat. Beliefs help maintain the panic.

ANTI-PANIC

Alternatives

Rather than respond to terrorist attacks with violence against the perpetrators, there are various alternatives.

Decentralisation So far, there have been relatively few attacks on vital facilities such as dams, power stations and fertiliser plants. If a group wanted to create maximum disruption, these sorts of targets should be attractive: they are vital nodes for systems crucial to much of the population. The standard way to deal against potential threats to vital facilities is to protect them, to make them “hard

targets." There is another option: making a transition to less centralised facilities. Instead of large dams for power generation, an alternative is lots of small dams, called microhydro. Instead of large power stations, an alternative is local small-scale solar and wind power. Instead of large fertiliser plants, an alternative is organic farming.

There have been books written about the potential dangers from terrorists attacking nuclear power plants, gaining access to nuclear weapons or even building their own nuclear weapons. The alternative is to get rid of nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Bingo: no more terrorist threats. So far, no one has claimed there is any danger from terrorists attacking rooftop solar panels. Local small-scale power generation simply does not provide a useful target for terrorists.

The reason why these alternatives have not been pursued by those who raise the alarm about terrorism is that they strike at sources of social power. Large centralised facilities are linked, in several ways, to systems of unequal economic and political power.[33] Antiterrorism is useful to frighten the public and create support for political and military leaders, but these leaders do not want to change the system in any fundamental way.

Intelligence operations One of the ways to deal with terrorism is to collect information about possible threats. This can involve monitoring social media, having agents

33 This is easy to say but not easy to justify, at least not briefly. I discussed this in "The vision of Aldous Huxley," *Technology for nonviolent struggle* (London: War Resisters' International, 2001), pp. 1–5.

join suspicious groups, following up tips from the public and intercepting digital communications. Most of this effort is carried out by what are called intelligence organisations but might be better be described as spy organisations. Colloquially they are known as spooks. In the US, the most well known are the FBI, CIA and NSA.

One of the problems is that these organisations acquire enormous power and overstep their reach, violating privacy. Also, they can start serving their political masters and directing their efforts against groups not posing any threat of terrorism. There is a long history of agencies monitoring peace groups, anti-racist groups and the like. Is there any alternative for collecting information about threats of violence?

In 1993 during a visit to the Netherlands, I met Giliam de Valk. We shared interests in social defence, an alternative to military defence based on nonviolent community resistance. Giliam started a PhD in this area looking at intelligence operations, but then changed his topic to a critical analysis of intelligence agency reports. He looked at the gathering of information about a particular topic: the boycott of South African oil. Until the 1990s, South Africa was ruled with a racist system called apartheid in which the minority white government ruled over the majority black population, involving many human rights abuses. There was opposition to apartheid within South Africa and internationally. As the opposition gained in strength, one of the international measures was a corporate boycott, to apply economic pressure on the South African government. A key part of the boycott was a United Nations ban on supplying oil. However, some shipowners tried to get around the ban,

because there were profits to be made. These shipowners did not want to be named and shamed. This is where information became important. If companies supplying oil to South Africa could be identified and their identity publicised, this would effectively deter them.

Back to Giliam and his PhD. Based in the Netherlands was a group named the Shipping Research Bureau. Modestly funded, it collected information about ships that broke the boycott. It relied on informants, maintaining their confidentiality. The unusual thing it did was publish reports naming the boycott-busters. Sometimes it got a few things wrong, in which case it received and published corrections. Giliam studied this unusual investigative operation and compared it to the Netherlands intelligence agencies. His conclusion was that the Shipping Research Bureau produced higher quality information.

Later, I collaborated with Giliam to write an article about this alternative to the usual intelligence operations.[34] We couldn't use the name "open intelligence" because that term was already in use, referring to information gathering from public sources such as social media. At Giliam's suggestion, we called the alternative "publicly-shared intelligence," which indicates its most important feature, that findings are published and thus subject to scrutiny and correction. This contrasts with the usual government intelligence operations that keep their methods and findings secret. Giliam's idea was that there should be several

34 Giliam de Valk and Brian Martin. Publicly shared intelligence. *First Monday: Peer-reviewed Journal on the Internet,* vol. 11, no. 9, September 2006.

competing agencies that publicly share their intelligence, thus making them all try harder to offer the best findings.

I think this is a great idea, but it hasn't caught on. Indeed, it has received almost no attention. Why not? My guess is that governments are not interested in improved intelligence if it requires that they no longer have a monopoly over the information and collection methods. Publicly-shared intelligence is simply too participatory. It would remove key elements of the secrecy that gives so much power to government antiterrorism operations.

Media As discussed earlier, terrorism can be thought of as communication amplified by violence. The crucial amplifier is the media, both mass media and social media. Another crucial role is played by audiences receptive to messages highlighting violence. Terrorism would be greatly dampened if media coverage was limited and audiences uninterested. This is hard to imagine but nonetheless worth considering as an alternative.

Social justice A crucially important alternative is to promote social justice—fairness, equality, human rights, freedom—and thereby remove the grievances that motivate terrorists. What this means depends a lot on the group involved. In the case of al Qaeda at the time of 9/11, social justice might have included freedom for Arab peoples suffering under repressive governments (many of them supported by Western militaries), removal of US troops, and a just resolution of the situation of the Palestinian people. Not easy! When injustices are deeply entrenched and there seem to be no prospects for change through conventional channels, terrorism can be attractive because at least people become aware there's a problem.

I've mentioned "conventional channels": these are the officially sanctioned ways to promote change. In many countries they include running for office, voting, lobbying and campaigning. In addition, in many countries it is possible to organise rallies and other forms of protest. However, when action through conventional channels is made difficult or seems to make no difference, using violence can seem to be a better option. The implication is that by making it easier for challengers to express their views and have an influence on policy, the incentive to use violence will be reduced.

Nonviolent action Yet another alternative is to promote nonviolent action—the use of methods such as strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and creation of alternative institutions—as means for promoting a more just and equal society or, in other words, for challenging repression and oppression. Nonviolent action is used by numerous social movements, for example the feminist movement and the environmental movement, and has been used to bring down dictatorships.[35] To the extent that nonviolent action is seen to be a powerful and satisfying way to foster social change, terrorism will seem less attractive.

Consider the five alternatives I've just discussed: small-scale decentralised technological infrastructure, publicly-shared intelligence, media boycotts, social justice and nonviolent action. Why hasn't there been more effort to

35 The now-classic reference is Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of nonviolent conflict* (Columbia UP, New York, 2011).

promote them? The answer is easy: each one is a threat to groups with a stake in the way society is currently organised, namely in systems of unequal power and wealth.

• Small-scale decentralised technological infrastructure is a threat to groups with a stake in large-scale centralised technologies. Furthermore, the vulnerability of these centralised technologies offers a justification for military defence and government protection.

• Publicly-shared intelligence is a threat to government intelligence agencies and to governments that gain some of their power and mystique from access to secret information.

• Media boycotts of violence threaten the freedom of the press, including the freedom to make money by pandering to audiences attracted by media stories about violence.

• Social justice is a threat to groups that benefit from injustice.

• Nonviolent action is a threat to groups backed by organised violence, including governments and large corporations.

Looking at things this way offers insight into why the usual approaches to terrorism never seem capable of succeeding: they assume the continuation of society organised the way it is, with all its oppression and inequalities, and this way of organising society is fundamentally implicated in the attraction of terrorism.

Then there is state terrorism, which is entirely forgotten in most discussions of the problem of terrorism. Not only is state terrorism far more damaging than non-state terrorism, it is also a crucial instigator of non-state terrorism. The two types of terrorism feed off each other. Break-

ing this symbiotic interaction by trying to stop just one of the types is never going to work.

Constraints

Let's now look at possible constraints on the size and influence of the antiterrorism enterprise: the companies, the government agencies, the training, the jobs, the processes, the infrastructure, the mindset. What might lead to some control over this massive system?

• Money and resources. Eventually, if expenditures become too great, there will be pressures from other groups, with other priorities, to rein in the enterprise. However, compared to other players in the competition for resources, antiterrorism is not that big, so this factor is unlikely to be crucial.

• Competing threats. If there's some other threat, such as war or ecological collapse, then terrorism will be seen as less important. The trouble is that some other threats, especially war, are symbiotic with antiterrorism.

• Revolts. Perhaps some personnel within the antiterrorism enterprise will decide they are doing the wrong thing, that there are better ways to make a living, or that antiterrorism is a dying industry that should be replaced. Rather than just leaving, they decide to undermine the industry from within, exposing its sordid underbelly or, more usefully, providing crucial information about the industry's weaknesses to outside critics. This sounds nice but so far there is little evidence of even the slightest prospect of this scenario.

• Escapes. Perhaps terrorists in custody will escape. So what? That will just make people think counterterrorism is even more necessary.

• Collapse of the target. Imagine that there's no more terrorism, at least of the non-state variety. Social justice campaigners realise that using violence provides a justification for counterterrorism. This is fanciful but is worth considering for the sake of argument. How long would it take before supporters decide that funding of counterterrorism is no longer necessary? The answer is probably forever.

It's now over 20 years since 9/11, with no major plots for a similar attack having been revealed during this time, yet security operations around airports and aircraft remain much the same. The collapse of the target—namely, the disappearance of the terrorist threat—might be taken as evidence of the continued need for vigilance.

Then there is the problem that counterterrorism creates its own enemy, by its murderous methods. Another problem is that the counterterrorism net can be expanded to include all sorts of other threats so that, for example, nonviolent protest is treated as terrorism.

• Revolution. Perhaps there will be a nonviolent revolution that spreads across the world, causing governments to collapse and government-funded security operations to be transformed into people's security operations built on principles of compassion, social justice, restorative justice and participative resistance against violence. So far, there is little to indicate that such a revolution is looming. Indeed, it is likely that if popular support for such a transition began

to coalesce, it would become a prime target for national security managers, including counterterrorism.

• Revolution in values. Perhaps there will be a transformation of values worldwide, bringing about a humane understanding of both the need for social justice and for why people resort to violence. Rather than seeing terrorists as the evil "other," they would be treated as ordinary people who should be addressed with consideration. This sounds all very nice but is totally implausible. Dominant groups—governments, corporations, mass media—have a major influence on people's values. How values could change without institutional transformation is not obvious.

Looking at these various possible constraints on the terrorism-panic system gives little hope that things will change fundamentally in the foreseeable future. An alarm about terrorism is too useful to too many influential groups to offer much hope for change simply by processes within the system.

Stigmatising individuals as terrorists, and conceiving of them as embodiments of evil and as threats to the very existence of society, is a convenient way to get people to join together in support of governments and see them as society's protectors. This might be called a psycho-institutional process that ties mass psychology to hierarchical ways of organising society.

Describing things this way makes the problem seem intractable. But these processes can be challenged, and many campaigners do. Furthermore, among the population there are many sceptics about the terrorism threat, who see antiterrorism measures such as airport security measures as

mostly a sham. Some people do not get excited by the news of the latest alleged terrorist threat or attack. Some wonder why 9/11 remains such a poignant memory whereas the hundreds of thousands of Afghans, Iraqis and others who have died as a result of the war on terrorism are not equally remembered.

There is undoubtedly a constituency for a different approach. But what could be the way forward? One way to think about this is to look at the possible constraints on the expansion of terrorism panic, just surveyed, and see which ones can be turned into long-term programmes of action. Restraints due to money and resources do not provide much basis for action, nor do competing threats. Here I'll consider three possibilities.

Change in media culture If the media stop giving so much attention to terrorism, and to violence more generally, there will be less incentive to engage in these activities. This applies to both mass media and social media. In what is called "peace journalism," the focus is changed from isolated incidents involving violence to a broader picture of causes and conditions of social problems.[36] Fostering peace journalism, and other alternatives to the sort of journalism that makes terrorism such an attractive spectator sport, is definitely worthwhile. So far, efforts along these lines have made little headway. One problem is that the consumers of media continue to find terrorism stories of interest. Although a few campaigners seek to help people break their obsession with the latest news and change their news

36 Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, *Peace journalism* (Stroud, UK: Hawthorn Press, 2005).

preferences, this seems to have little prospect of becoming a mass movement.

Social justice Promoting greater equality and fairness, and opposing exploitation and state violence, have the potential of addressing the grievances that in some cases are motivations for terrorism. Many people are involved in campaigns to alleviate poverty, empower local communities, reduce exploitation, promote greater economic equality, address racism and sexism, oppose war and war preparations, and a host of related issues. There is a lot being done to promote social justice, though in quite a few areas this seems like an uphill struggle, with some of the problems seeming to be intractable or getting worse.

A key part of promoting social justice is opposing state terrorism. However, it seems extremely difficult to put state terrorism on the public agenda. The very concept is unfamiliar to the public, so the prospect of alarm about state terrorism supplanting alarm about non-state terrorism seems remote. But perhaps this is too pessimistic. Campaigners against war and against economic inequality, among others, are in essence confronting the sources and manifestations of state terrorism.

Nonviolent action One hope for reducing the attraction of terrorism is offering an alternative. Instead of bombings and killings, what if would-be terrorists were convinced they could be more effective by organising rallies, strikes and boycotts? This is not just hypothetical. A number of armed insurgent movements around the world have switched to nonviolent methods.[37] As activists improve their understanding and skills, the nonviolent alternative may become even more attractive.

Conclusion

I was unsure of how to finish this chapter. A traditional approach is a summary of the key ideas followed by some implications. On a topic like terrorism, the implications would be about what to do, preferably giving some cause for hope. I could do this, noting the rise in awareness and use of strategic nonviolent action over the previous century. But, on the other hand, the previous century has also seen the continuation and expansion of antiterrorism and counterterrorism, with the panic about the terrorist threat stoked in ever more effective ways, along with the creation of a massive bureaucratic and military apparatus seeing its justification in a continued alarm about the terrorist threat. So it seems unrealistic to end on an optimistic note.

Perhaps it is more realistic to think that scares about terrorism will continue for the indefinite future and that systems for surveillance, control and killing will become ever more sophisticated and entrenched. In this pessimistic scenario, campaigners need to realise they need a long-term strategy that may not see significant progress, indeed may be simply warding off things becoming worse, for

37 Véronique Dudouet (ed.), *Civil resistance and conflict transformation: transitions from armed to nonviolent struggle* (London: Routledge, 2015).

decades.[38] This is not a rosy picture and is hardly likely to inspire enthusiasm. Sometimes, unrealistic hope might be needed to keep going at what seems a futile task.

38 For a useful survey of academic, activist, legal and cultural resistance to the panic over terrorism, see "Resisting the politics of counter-terrorism," a chapter in the forthcoming second edition of Richard Jackson et al. (eds.), *Terrorism: a critical introduction.*

6
The war on war

Two aliens in their spaceship have been studying the planet Earth. One says to the other, "There's a species down there that has developed satellite-guided intercontinental nuclear missiles."
"Do you think it's an intelligent life form?"
"No. They've aimed them at themselves."

This is one of my favourite jokes about warfare. From the point of view of an outsider, it seems completely irrational for humans to fight each other with grim determination, aiming to maim, kill and destroy. This might make sense if survival were at stake. But no, when humans cooperate, there is more than enough for everyone's needs. It's actually war that threatens survival, certainly more than peace.

Yet for those involved, war is deadly serious. It is a matter of pride, of not succumbing to the enemy, of emerging victorious, of allegiance to a noble cause, of being committed to one's allies.

Even when there's no active war, there are preparations for war, under the label "defence." Scientists apply their intellects to making better weapons and to training soldiers; arms manufacturers tout their products to buyers across the world; and militaries train to be ready to repel aggressors, or to intervene in conflicts in faraway places.

The urge to prepare for war seems to be a persistent panic. It certainly fits the features of persistent panics that are found in the wars against drugs, crime and terrorism. Originally I titled this chapter "War." However, I was dissatisfied with the lack of symmetry with the other chapters, which were all "the war on" something or other. Eventually I realised that the issue can indeed be cast as "the war on war." The standard response to the threat of war is to prepare for and, in some cases, to wage war. Just as the wars on drugs, crime and terror preclude or overshadow other ways of responding to real problems, so does "defence," which takes the lion's share of resources and captures most thinking about what to do about the threat of military attack.

War has spawned innumerable military metaphors, including the wars on drugs, crime and terror. It is fitting to bestow the metaphor on war itself, indicating a one-dimensional and often counterproductive approach to a social problem.

My friend and co-author Jørgen Johansen has repeatedly pointed out that war is not the same as conflict. Instead, it is just one way of engaging in a conflict. Other ways include discussion, negotiation, arbitration, protest, noncooperation and withdrawal. War happens to be the most destructive option, yet far more resources are poured into preparing for war than into other conflict-resolution options. Jørgen wrote me that if conflicts between states are thought of as a sort of sickness, then war as a remedy usually causes more harm than the disease, and that even the pharmaceutical industry would not allow such a noxious remedy on the market. Well, maybe that depends on how much profit is involved. Jørgen also noted that it's hard to see how preparations to kill and destroy can be a good way to promote things most people believe are important, like education, health, respect, mutual aid and human rights.

When I came to write this chapter, I found it strangely difficult. Eventually, I realised it may be because I've been involved with the issues for such a long time and have read too much, or at least understand things in a way that makes it difficult to see them differently. So I will begin by telling about my own formative experiences leading up to writing the book *Uprooting War.* Then I'll briefly address the features of persistent panics as they apply to war against enemies and finally return to some reflections on *Uprooting War,* in particular how my analysis today, several decades later, might be different.

Uprooting war

In early 1969, I was the final year of my undergraduate degree at Rice University, in Houston, Texas. The Vietnam war was raging and I knew that as soon as I graduated, I would be called up for military service.

I didn't want to go into the army. This wasn't about being sent to fight in Vietnam; I assumed the army would deploy me stateside because of my computer programming skills, rare at the time. I wasn't even opposed to the war, but I was opposed to conscription. It was a compulsion incompatible with a free society.

I developed a health problem and saw a doctor. He said that it might disqualify me from military service, so I took the opportunity to undertake an early "physical"—an evaluation by the army for suitability to serve. There were

IQ tests and physical examinations. I passed easily; my health problem was deemed irrelevant. I remember one of the other young men there. He had a big scar down the middle of his chest: he had had open heart surgery. He was approved for service.

My experience at the physical convinced me that the army was not for me. The authoritarian, contemptuous attitude of the personnel running the physical gave me a sufficient taste of what army life would be like. I felt intuitively there was some sensitive part of me that probably wouldn't survive two years in the army. I decided to leave the country to avoid military service.

Because I wanted to study cosmology, I chose to go to Australia. I expected never to be able to return, because there had not been an amnesty for draft dodgers since the Civil War. As it turned out, President Jimmy Carter, as one of his first actions in 1977, pardoned draft evaders, so I could visit the US legally.

By this time, my views had changed considerably. In Australia, while working on a PhD in theoretical physics, I read on all sorts of other topics: politics, education, psychology—and the Vietnam war. I came to understand the horror of war, including the millions of people who died in Southeast Asia, the environmental destruction, the degradation of ideals of freedom, including the harm to US soldiers and politics. This was the beginning of my quest to understand war or, more precisely, strategies to promote alternatives to war.

After finishing my PhD, I obtained a research assistant position at the Australian National University. Moving to Canberra in 1976, I immediately became involved with

Friends of the Earth. Its main campaign at the time was against nuclear power. Because there were no serious plans for nuclear power plants in Australia, the main focus of the campaign was against uranium mining. Australia has huge uranium deposits; mining them would contribute to the nuclear industry in other countries.

One of our main arguments was that using nuclear power to generate electricity provided both the skills and technological infrastructure for making nuclear weapons. Indeed, in Australia some key figures behind an unsuccessful early push for a nuclear power plant wanted the plant so it would provide the basis for making nuclear weapons.[1] In the anti-uranium movement, we said that Australian uranium sold to other governments could end up contributing to nuclear weapons capabilities.

There were movements against nuclear power in countries around the world. In most of them, the main arguments were about risks from nuclear accidents and from long-lived radioactive waste. In Australia, though, the risks from nuclear proliferation, referring to more governments developing the capacity to make nuclear weapons, loomed large.

This meant there was a strong connection between the movement against nuclear power and the peace movement. Every year on 6 August, the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, Friends of the Earth—and, later, Movement Against Uranium Mining—organised a rally. There was no peace group in Canberra at the time.

1 I wrote about this in *Nuclear knights* (Canberra: Rupert Public Interest Movement, 1980).

In 1979, a friend and I set up Canberra Peacemakers. With half a dozen members, we joined in rally organising, became involved in nonviolent action training, and started promoting social defence, an alternative to military defence based on popular nonviolent resistance. Over the next few years, involvement in these activities intersected with reading and discussions about how to oppose war. I started writing articles and then the book *Uprooting War.*

My starting point was that rational argument was not enough to end the problem of war. Many writers seemed to assume that if government leaders realised that in war (especially nuclear war) there are ultimately no winners, they would take steps to disarm. Alternatively, if popular movements applied enough pressure on governments, they would disarm. I thought knowledge and logic were important, and so was pressuring governments, but that this wasn't enough. After all, for decades peace campaigners had been presenting information about the rationality of moving towards peace and putting pressure on governments to do so, but this had never been enough.

I read analyses of social movements, for example Nigel Young's book on the new left.[2] I concluded that appealing to elites was inadequate as a strategy. But what was the alternative?

In *Uprooting War,* I had chapters early in the book describing several alternatives that could be turned into strategies. The first was social defence, a people's defence system based on strikes, boycotts and setting up alternative

2 Nigel Young, *An infantile disorder? The crisis and decline of the new left* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

institutions. This wasn't my original idea. There was a small body of writing about how this could work and what was needed to bring it about.

The second alternative was peace conversion, which refers to converting military production into civilian production, for example converting a factory making military vehicles to one making civilian ones. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were a few groups around the world promoting peace conversion, also called economic conversion.[3] It was not a new process. After every major war, for example World War II, there was a demobilisation process in which factories retooled for civilian products and workers reskilled accordingly. The challenge was to initiate this process during a period when there was no active war. It meant demobilising from the "permanent war economy."[4]

The third alternative was "self-management." This refers not to self-discipline but rather to groups of people running their lives without bosses. It means workers collectively deciding what to produce and how, and local communities collectively making decisions about budgets, housing, transport, garbage disposal and everything else. In the early stages of the Spanish revolution, beginning in

3 Seymour Melman, *The demilitarized society: disarmament and conversion* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1988); Peter Southwood, *Disarming military industries: turning an outbreak of peace into an enduring legacy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991). Southwood is sceptical of peace conversion, arguing for community conversion motivated by economics.

4 Seymour Melman, *The permanent war economy: American capitalism in decline* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

1936, workers took over factories and made decisions without bosses. Similar outbursts of direct democracy occurred in the Paris Commune of 1871, the early stages of the 1917 Russian Revolution before the Bolsheviks took over, and numerous other occasions. These episodes show the capacity of people to organise and run their own lives without authorities telling them what to do. There are also examples of self-management in everyday life. I told of my experience playing amateur music in a woodwind quintet. We made decisions for ourselves, without anyone being in charge. There are some orchestras that do the same. Another example is writing free software, a process without bosses. I didn't use that example, since it hadn't started in the 1980s.

In a society built around self-management, there is no need for the state or corporations: there are no systems of formal hierarchies in which those at the top have power by virtue of their position alone. Radical? Yes. But grounded in historical experience and present activities.

Self-management means that there would be no militaries, at least not of the familiar sort based on ranks and strict obedience to superiors. In this way, self-management is compatible with social defence, at least the form of social defence organised by communities rather than introduced and directed by governments.

Having laid out my picture of alternatives to the war system, in *Uprooting War* I then had chapters on what I thought were the key social institutions underlying that system: the state, bureaucracy, the military, patriarchy, science and technology, and state socialism. These are the roots of the war, the things that need to be uprooted. For

each of these institutions, I described its operation and role in the war system, and then told about grassroots challenges to it.

I started with the state because I saw it as the most important institution underlying war. This related back to what I had written about self-management, which is a potential alternative to the state, namely a society without government.

Rather than thinking that protesting against war and appealing to government leaders based on rational arguments would be enough, I was saying that some deeply entrenched social institutions needed to be challenged and replaced. But perhaps this was not quite as radical as it sounds, given that the state system is only a few hundred years old, and likewise bureaucracy, modern military forces and the institutionalised use of science and technology for war are all fairly recent developments, indeed associated with the rise of the modern state system. Only patriarchy has been around much longer; it is linked to war but is not, on its own, sufficient to explain the war system as we know it today.

In *Uprooting War,* I didn't promise any solutions but rather suggested directions for action, namely social defence, peace conversion and self-management, along with challenges to the state and other institutional roots of war.

The book was published by Freedom Press, a long-standing anarchist publisher based in London, and was mainly distributed through anarchist channels. This was before the Internet, so people had to buy hard copies, usually by ordering them from Freedom Press or a distrib-

utor in the US or Australia. Only a few bookshops stocked copies. The book was a small contribution. Nevertheless, I have heard from readers who liked it a lot.

It was published near the height of the global mass mobilisation against nuclear war, a mobilisation of protest and direct action that began in Europe at the end of the 1970s and gradually spread to other parts of the Western world. Some participants saw the huge increase in peace activism as something that would continue to grow until it had major impacts, leading at least to nuclear disarmament. I didn't share this optimism. Having read about the rise and fall of earlier peace movements, I expected the current one to fizzle out before long.[5] Therefore, it was important to put energy into long-term projects for building alternatives such as social defence.

My expectation that the movement would decline turned out to be correct. By the mid to late 1980s, the global movement was far less active. Then came the events of 1989. With the collapse of the Eastern European Communist regimes, the Cold War came to an end. With the apparent end of the danger of nuclear war, peace movements went into hibernation.

Most peace groups—especially the groups against nuclear weapons—either closed down or continued with only a few dedicated activists. Large-scale peace protests reappeared sporadically, for example against the Gulf War of 1990–91 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This activism

5 Nigel Young, "Why peace movements fail: an historical and social overview," *Social Alternatives,* vol. 4, no. 1, March 1984, pp. 9–16.

was important but it was reactive: it depended on something that triggered concern among Western audiences.

After the end of the Cold War, the world's deadliest wars were in Africa, especially in the Congo where perhaps five million people died. Few of these wars generated attention in the media or led to major anti-war campaigns.[6] Meanwhile, although nuclear arsenals were reduced in number, they were also "modernised," namely made more reliable and accurate. A few campaigners continued their vital efforts against preparations for fighting nuclear war.

From my point of view, ongoing efforts were admirable but they mainly followed the approach of appealing to elites, in particular by trying to persuade governments to do the right thing. One of the greatest achievements of these efforts was the passing in 2020 of the treaty to ban all nuclear weapons. The trouble was that none of the nuclear states signed it. The treaty was symbolic, and important as a symbol, but not enough to dislodge the driving forces behind war-making.

If I could go back to the early 1980s with what I know now, I might write *Uprooting War* a bit differently. In other words, I've revised my ideas. More on this later. But first, I'll present an analysis of war in terms of moral panic theory and controversy studies. This will use the same sort of framework as for the wars on drugs, crime and terrorism.

6 Virgil Hawkins, *Stealth conflicts: how the world's worst violence is ignored* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

PANIC

Many people have tried to understand war and many have tried to stop it. Many different perspectives can be used to analyse war, for example international relations, political economy, feminism, Marxism and evolutionary biology. Each offers insights. Assuming that the goal is a world without war, or without preparations for it, perhaps more important than explanations for why war occurs is guidance for how to move beyond war. Even with astute guidance, another challenge is bringing together a critical mass of people to pursue the most promising path, or indeed any promising path.

All I can do here is offer a perspective concerning this overwhelmingly important issue. So far as I know, moral panic theory and controversy studies have not been used to analyse war. Perhaps they offer some useful insights. Perhaps not. But it's worth exploring a range of possibilities and not just relying on perspectives and methods used before, ones that have not been enough to seriously challenge the war system.

In the following, I go through the typical features of persistent moral panics and scientific controversies, as outlined in chapter 2, noting how they apply to war, or rather the war on war. To reiterate, in referring to the war on war, I'm referring to preparations for war, which encompass military establishments and much besides. Preparations for war are the best evidence of a continuing alarm about enemies.

Exaggeration

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the US, pitted against Richard Nixon. One of the issues debated was nuclear preparedness. Kennedy claimed that the Soviet Union had superiority in missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, and used this supposed "missile gap" to attack Nixon and the Republicans. Nixon had been vice president for the preceding eight years. But the missile gap was a myth: actually, the US had overwhelming superiority in deliverable nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Kennedy had been briefed about this information, but made the claim anyway.

This is an illustration of how politicians can exaggerate the danger from enemies for political gain. In many countries, it is a political advantage to be seen as tough and as defending citizens from dangers, while portraying political opponents as weak. Sometimes political parties compete with each other in claiming the existence of a foreign danger necessitating military preparedness.

One of the most notorious exaggerations was in 2002 and 2003 when US President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and others claimed that the Iraqi government had weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, the threat was portrayed as so serious that an invasion was warranted. To talk of "weapons of mass destruction" was a code for nuclear weapons, though nominally biological and chemical weapons were also included in this label despite having little potential for mass destruction. The hypocrisy of the WMD claim was breathtaking given that the US had thousands of nuclear weapons.

There is an easy way to understand this hypocrisy. The enemy is a bad guy, so their weapons are dangerous and needed to be defended against. We, on the other hand, are good guys. Our weapons are for defence and for the good of the world. Alternatively, the enemy's weapons are a danger to us, and that warrants alarm and action. However, our weapons are to defend us.

What's missing in this picture is the obvious point that "our" weapons are threatening to "them," so the more weapons we have, the more likely they are to want even more weapons. This is the driving force behind arms races or, more generally, military races. It is rare for a government to declare, "We're going to reduce our arsenal to reduce the threat to other countries, so they will reduce their arsenals and we'll all be safer and be able to spend more money on things other than military preparations."

For many decades, peace activists have argued against war and preparations for war. They call for disarmament, namely cutting back on military establishments. Campaigners against nuclear weapons have called for reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear arsenals. In Britain, one of the most influential peace organisations was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Calls for disarmament directly confront the problem of threat exaggeration. To disarm suggests being defenceless against attack—even when the risk of being attacked is negligible. Consider New Zealand, also known as Aotearoa, an island country far from any likely aggressor. Why not disband the country's military? This possibility is off the agenda. There are multiple reasons. One of them is the

ease by which the threat of possible enemies can be invoked.

In some parts of the world, there is no need to exaggerate the threat from enemies, because it is real and present. Yet these places are the exception. It is far more common for militaries to be used to repress the population. Think of military regimes, and regimes where the military has played a leading role. In Indonesia, for example, the military played a crucial role especially from 1965 to 1998, during the period of the Suharto dictatorship. But the military was not defending against foreign enemies. It began this period by perpetrating genocide against communists and a host of others, fought a war to deny East Timor's independence, and repressed movements in Aceh and West Papua. Defending against foreign enemies is, in places like this, a pretext.

The United States is a special case, given its extraordinary military power and the lack of any credible threat of being invaded. There would seem to be no justification for such a massive level of military preparedness, at least if it is intended for defence. US governments seem to have adopted a policy of achieving de facto world domination, with military bases in countries throughout the world and a practice of demonising any sign of resistance.[7] The actual targets of military attack seem almost random, ranging from Grenada to Afghanistan, while covert action against foreign

7 See for example William Blum, *Rogue state: a guide to the world's only superpower* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2000) and *Killing hope: US military and CIA interventions since World War II* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

governments includes targets such as Chile and Iran. The point here is that any alleged threat to US interests—interpreted as the interests of US political and economic elites—is treated as a threat. A movement against dictatorial rule in Nicaragua can be treated as a threat to US interests. Exaggeration plays a key role both in wars and in justifying military forces at other times. After all, there might be a threat arising in the next 15 or 20 years, so it's necessary to bolster military preparedness now. Never mind that when "we" spend more on our military, others will see it as a threat to them.

Polarisation

Imagine that you live in a conflict zone, for example Afghanistan during one of its wars, 1979–2021. If you live in a government area, declaring your support for the insurgents is exceedingly risky, whereas if you live in an insurgent-controlled area, declaring your support for the government is equally risky. If you are armed, the risk will be even greater.

In wars more generally, there are great pressures to be on one side or the other. Anyone who is not on "our" side is deemed a traitor. The safest position is to be openly enthusiastic for "us."

The Cold War, which lasted from about 1947 to 1989, was not a shooting war but rather a confrontation between the Soviet bloc and the US bloc or alternatively between socialism and capitalism. The label used reflected a position. The leaders of the US bloc called themselves the Free World, though some of the governments in this group—Indonesia, Egypt, South Korea—were dictatorships. Anyway, the polarisation between the two sides made it difficult to develop an intermediate position, for example supportive of a less oppressive socialism or a more egalitarian capitalism. In the US, "socialism" became a dirty word, used to discredit policies that promoted greater equality. The Soviet government sponsored official "peace" organisations, thereby tainting the word "peace."

Polarisation is perhaps most pronounced when it comes to the troops. Those on "our" side are heroes whereas those on the other side are the enemy. To criticise our troops—for example to suggest that they are foolish or dupes of the government—is heresy. Even peace organisations in the US are careful not to criticise the troops.

In Australia, 25 April is Anzac Day, celebrating war veterans. The day commemorates Australia's greatest military defeat, at Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915, during World War I. In Canberra, Australia's national capital, there is a march every year on Anzac Day. In 1980, a group of women joined the march carrying banners decrying rape in war. This was treated as an abomination. Several of them were arrested, condemned by the judge and fined or imprisoned. How dare they say anything critical about the heroic men who travel to far lands and sacrifice their lives for their country?[8]

Polarisation is obvious when it comes to saying anything negative about those on "our" side and saying

8 This account is drawn from articles and letters in the *Canberra Times.* Copies available on request. For a summary, see *Ruling tactics* (Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2017), pp. 213–215.

anything positive about the enemy. It makes those with intermediate or complex positions almost invisible.

The creation and maintenance of "us"

In war, and preparation for war, it is necessary for people to identify with us against them. Who exactly are "us"? Most commonly, it is a state, such as Germany or Peru. Sometimes it is a nation, a group with a common culture that is not a state, such as the Kurds. One of the crucial requirements for war is getting people to think of themselves as part of the nation or state and to think that this nation or state is something of transcendent importance, something worth defending to the death, our death or theirs.

Benedict Anderson, a scholar who studied nations, called them "imagined communities."[9] Even in a relatively small nation like Nepal or Norway, there's no way you can know everyone in the "community." Why should you care about those outside your immediate circles? Anderson's brilliant thought is that people share the idea of the nation. This means the nation wouldn't really exist except for people believing in it. Sure, for many nations there's a geographical area and people living in it, but dividing the world this way is an arbitrary exercise, sometimes done by drawing lines on maps.

In the archipelago called Indonesia, there is a small island, Timor. A line has been drawn down the middle of it. The west half was colonised by the Dutch and later became

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991, revised edition).

part of Indonesia, whereas the east half was colonised by the Portuguese. When in 1974 the Portuguese left, leaders in East Timor declared themselves independent. Indonesian rulers didn't like this and launched an invasion that eventually caused the death of one third of the population due to killings and famine. The East Timorese continued their struggle, which was successful many years later.

All this was over an arbitrary division of a small island. Indonesian soldiers were willing to risk their lives, and willing to kill, so that the Indonesian "we" would encompass all the island, while East Timorese guerrilla fighters were willing to fight so that the East Timorese "we" would constitute the eastern half of the island. East Timorese civilians also risked their lives, joining peaceful protests in the towns that sometimes were met by beatings and deadly fire. The imagined communities were influential enough for people to make great sacrifices on their behalf.

A geographical area is real enough, but that is not enough alone to generate an imagined community. Indeed, if you were born in Nigeria or Korea but live somewhere else, you may remain part of your birth cohort, even though you know few people in your birth country and few of them know you.

These imagined communities, in which people identify with an abstract concept rather than knowing very many of the people, do not happen by accident. A lot of effort goes into getting people to think of countries—or states or nations, whatever term you prefer—as real and as

significant, and to think of themselves in terms of their country.[10]

The media play a role in this process. Many stories are about what goes on in particular parts of the world, divided up into countries. There might be stories about Israel and Palestine, or about China. Every mention of a country reinforces thinking of the world as divided into countries, in each of which people have some commonality of interests.

In most media within a country, a lot of the news is about local or national events, or things that have local or national relevance. If there's a plane crash, Dutch news will likely focus on the Dutch passengers on the plane, while Japanese news will focus on Japanese passengers. During the fighting in Afghanistan, national news focused on soldiers from their own forces, whether those from Germany or Britain.

In school, children are taught history, and it's nearly always from a national perspective. They learn about the great accomplishments of their forebears, about the wonders of their country, about the stature of their leaders and the sacrifices of their soldiers and sometimes about historic animosities. Much of this is factual or at least could be, but the significance of national education is that it

10 I addressed this in *Ruling tactics.* See also Sinisa Malesevic, *The sociology of war and violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), who argues that the idea that war promotes in-group solidarity is suspect: unity in wartime is not automatic, otherwise government leaders would not need to make calls for patriotic duty.

comes with a point of view and a set of assumptions about how the world is organised.

Stigma

In war, the enemy is perceived as bad. They might be seen as powerful and evil, or perhaps sub-human.[11]

There is a long history of demonising the enemy. This is a convenient psychological process that helps build commitment to war-making. It is far easier to justify hurting and killing an evil, ruthless opponent than one who is just like us, who loves family and friends and would rather not be fighting.

Those who see the enemy up close, who know them personally, are more likely to recognise them as humans just like us. For this reason, governments use propaganda to denigrate the enemy, highlight their crimes, manufacture fear and encourage blood-lust. Those on the front lines often have a more realistic view of the opponent than those on the home front who are subject to propaganda without the benefit of first-hand knowledge.

It is psychologically easier to commit an atrocity if the target is low in status, even sub-human. It is easier to kill a soldier you think is a ruthless killer responsible for degrading his own family than one you think might be a doctor who has been pressured to join the army and loves his family.

11 Sam Keen, *Faces of the enemy: reflections of the hostile imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

In war, there is a collective projection of everything bad about "us" to "them."[12] By seeing the enemy as evil, our own bad side is made invisible, because we have projected it onto them. We are good, they are bad, and so we are justified in what we do to them.

I remember visiting the US in late 1980 and early 1981 and seeing lots of people wearing yellow ribbons on their lapels. The yellow ribbons were to show solidarity with the US citizens held hostage in the US Embassy in Tehran by Iranian students, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. In the US, this was the biggest political issue at the time. The hostage episode contributed to Ronald Reagan's landslide victory over Jimmy Carter for president.

I thought to myself, "I don't support taking hostages, but it seems self-righteous to carry on about the actions of the Iranian students." Didn't US citizens know that the CIA had helped engineer a coup in Iran in 1954, overthrowing the democratically elected government? Didn't they know that the US government had faithfully supported the new ruler, the Shah of Iran, who repressed dissent ruthlessly? Didn't they know about SAVAK, the feared political police, that used torture in the prisons? Didn't they know that the Iranian revolution was inspired by opposition to the Shah's brutal methods?

These are all rhetorical questions. Most US citizens knew nothing about what their government had been doing in Iran. They gained their information from the mass media, which presented the US government's perspective without question. Iranian leaders were the baddies and of course the

12 See the discussion of projection in chapter 2.

US hostages were the goodies. Any bad things done by the US government were forgotten, ignored or trivialised.

There was no sense, in US public discourse, that the Iranian people had the same human interests in justice and freedom, and that the student hostage-takers, while acting counterproductively, were a reaction to the terrible things done by the Shah's regime, which was backed to the hilt by the US government. That would be too complicated. It was much easier to see the Iranians as evil.

Stigmatisation of the enemy is an outcome of group loyalty, of thinking of the world as us versus them. In this binary picture, loyalty is the highest value. You might be a thief and a murderer, but if you commit crimes on our behalf, you might be forgiven or even applauded. An example is the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which US soldiers murdered hundreds of defenceless Vietnamese villagers, most of them women, children and old men. Only one of the soldiers, the commander William Calley Jr, was tried. Many Americans supported Calley, seeing him as a hero.[13]

Adaptable enemies

In George Orwell's famous novel *1984,* the world is ruled by three dictatorships: Eurasia, Eastasia and Amerasia. The

13 Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, "Assignment of responsibility in the case of Lt. Calley: preliminary report on a national survey," *Journal of Social Issues,* vol. 28, 1972, pp. 177–212; Edward M. Opton, Jr., "It never happened and besides they deserved it," in Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock (eds.), *Sanctions for evil: sources of social destructiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 49–70.

novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, lives in London, in Eurasia, which is at war with Eastasia. Except that suddenly, the government announces, it isn't. Instead, it's now in an alliance with Eastasia and at war with Amerasia. The government regularly rewrites history so the present confrontation seems like it always existed.

Orwell wrote *1984* in the late 1940s, and he drew on recent events for his fictional portrayal of world politics. In the 1920s and 1930s, Communist parties in various countries were fierce opponents of fascists. After Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, he repressed the German communists, who had been his opponents. Hitler was bitterly opposed to Communism and obviously a military threat to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Stalin, the dictator of the Soviet Union, was worried about the fascists, and communist parties in other countries continued to oppose them.

Then in 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact. The erstwhile opponents were now apparently okay with each other. Communist parties outside the Soviet Union suddenly changed their tune, no longer being mortal enemies of fascists, including Nazi Germany. In 1940, Hitler's military conquered France and other countries in Western Europe. But then, in 1941, Hitler unleashed a massive attack on the Soviet Union. Communist parties, which took their bidding from Moscow headquarters, had to change their position again.

During World War II, the governments of Britain, the US and the Soviet Union were allies, with their leaders Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin meeting to make decisions about the post-war world. It was not long after the end of

the war that these allies became opponents. In the Cold War, which began in the late 1940s, the Soviet Union became the enemy of Britain and the US.

Orwell died in 1950, far too early to see the continuation of his vision. During the 1970s and 1980s, the US government supported Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, including during the long war against Iran during the 1980s. But then Saddam ordered an invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Saddam had misinterpreted diplomatic signals, thinking that he had US government approval for his invasion. Suddenly Iraq became the enemy, not an ally.

Orwell's insight was that governments find it convenient to have enemies, or rivals, as this helps to build support for the government itself. When there is polarisation, you're either with us or with the enemy, so having an enemy helps to keep "us" unified. However, it doesn't matter so much who the enemy is. The important thing is that there is one.

Suppression of dissent

Questioning the military and war-making can be risky. It is especially risky in the military itself, where dissent can be met with harsh measures, including imprisonment or execution. In countries with conscription, those who refuse to serve in the army may be imprisoned.

During wars, it is especially risky to question the government or military. A misjudged comment suggesting you support the enemy can lead to abuse, assault or imprisonment.

Even in so-called liberal democracies, where human rights are supposed to be protected, wars are an exceptional time. Freedom of speech and assembly may no longer be

guaranteed. Arbitrary searches, arrests and imprisonments may be carried out. During wartime, governments become authoritarian.[14]

Threat entrepreneurs

Who does the most to raise the alarm about dangers from foreign enemies? Two groups are often prominent: politicians and the media.

Politicians can benefit from perceptions of enemy danger, because the government presents itself as the defender of society. When it is us versus them, the government is commonly seen as the representative of us.

This works best when the actual danger is low or non-existent. The government thus runs no risk of being exposed for not preparing for a genuine threat. Meanwhile, opposition politicians can challenge the government by claiming not enough is being done to protect the country.

To say that politicians are threat entrepreneurs is a sweeping generalisation. There are many exceptions. Nevertheless, it is striking how seldom any politician raises an alarm that too much money is being spent on defence

14 On the dilemmas for liberal democracies during emergencies, see Carl. J. Friedrich, "Constitutional dictatorship and emergency powers," in *Constitutional government and democracy: theory and practice in Europe and America* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell, 1968, 4th edition), pp. 557–581; Frederick M. Watkins, "The problem of constitutional dictatorship," *Public Policy,* vol. 1, 1940, pp. 324–379. On repression during wartime, see for example Eric T. Chester, *Free speech and the suppression of dissent during World War I* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020); M. C. Setalvad, *War and civil liberties* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1946).

and that it is urgent to reduce military preparedness. More commonly, declines in military expenditure are allowed to happen quietly, without fanfare.

The media are also leading threat entrepreneurs, often publicising possible dangers and lack of preparedness. Some journalists, editors and owners are strong supporters of military strength, but quite independently of this, the dynamics of news reporting encourages fear-mongering. Alarmism about possible threats is far more likely to be reported than a view that there are no particular dangers on the horizon, or that "our" military preparations are creating greater dangers by causing potential enemies to arm.

A single politician or senior government official who warns of foreign dangers could be the basis of a news story: this involves the news values of prominence and conflict. A citizen or a peace group saying there's no need for current levels of military spending is less likely to generate a news story: there's no prominence and no conflict.

Politicians and journalists often operate together as threat entrepreneurs. Politicians are prominent and therefore intrinsically newsworthy, at least when they say something controversial or disturbing. Shrewd politicians know how to work the media, or have staff who do. When they want to drum up alarm about a foreign threat or the need for military preparedness, they can provide access to their preferred journalists or feed them confidential information. Meanwhile, journalists obtain material for stories likely to be published, adding to their reputations.

This sounds conspiratorial, and sometimes it is, but it is mainly a process of mutual benefit. The value of enemies to both politicians and journalists is a common factor.

Politicians benefit from the existence of enemies because it is the government that is supposed to protect the population from threats. Journalists get in on this by being seen as essential messengers.

Imagine this: a journalist receives inside information from a peace organisation that is pushing for disarmament. There are breathless stories about the benefits of less military spending, on transition plans to civilian production and on ways to build harmonious relations with foreign groups. Why does this sound strange? Because it never happens. More commonly, peace groups are desperate for media coverage. Journalists seldom come looking for material and often ignore media releases. So peace groups organise protests, and even then they may not receive much media coverage. It's not often that generals are out on the street protesting for more funding.

Double standards

In war and in preparations for war, there are different standards for "us" and "them." *Their* weapons threaten the peace whereas *ours* are for defence. *Their* military exercises are aggressive whereas *ours* are defensive.

A classic instance of double standards was in World War II. The self-styled Allies adopted the practice of bombing of civilian targets in both Germany and Japan. In the post-war Nuremburg trials, German military and civilian leaders were tried for crimes against humanity, but there

were no trials of the leaders who implemented bombing policies that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians.[15]

Attitudes towards nuclear weapons involve a double standard. The leaders of the major nuclear weapons states—US, Russia, Britain, France, China—get very excited when some smaller government acquires or just might acquire nuclear weapons. There was a tremendous alarm about North Korean nuclear weapons, not to mention a war justified by the possibility that Iraq had nuclear weapons and an extended blockade justified by the possibility of Iranian nuclear weapons. The double standard is obvious enough: our nuclear weapons are good, theirs are bad. We are responsible, they are dangerous. Ours keep the peace, theirs threaten war.

In recent years, Western governments have started organising against China's military ambitions. China has the second largest military budget in the world, yet has only one foreign military base.[16] The US has a military presence in over a hundred countries. From the US government's point of view, the Chinese are expansionist and need to be kept under control. Again it's a case of our behaviour is good, theirs is bad, even when their behaviour is a mirror image of ours.

15 Eric Markusen and David Kopf, *The Holocaust and strategic bombing: genocide and total war in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995).

16 This at least is the figure for 2020 given by Rayan V. Bhagwagar, "China's overseas military bases," *Modern Diplomacy,* 31 August 2020.

New evidence?

Many partisans in public scientific controversies—think fluoridation, pesticides, genetic modification, vaccination or climate change—think new evidence will make a huge difference, that it might actually lead to the end of the debate, with their side winning, of course. What actually happens in longstanding scientific controversies is that when new evidence emerges about hazards or benefits or the role of vested interests, whatever —nothing changes. If the new information supports your side, hurray, but if it doesn't, then it's not important, or indeed it is probably wrong.

The issues involving war and peace are a bit different from public scientific controversies, but evidence plays a similar role. Partisans present evidence as if it's definitive, but it never is. Indeed, it usually makes little or no difference.

One dramatic instance involves nuclear winter, a possible consequence of nuclear war. It is widely accepted that nuclear weapons cause death and destruction through blast and heat from the explosion plus death from radioactive fallout deposited downwind of the blast. In the early 1980s, scientists discovered another possible consequence. Nuclear explosions can loft dust into the upper atmosphere, and urban firestorms from nuclear attacks can insert huge volumes of smoke into the upper atmosphere. Once the dust and smoke—basically tiny particles that are too light to fall back to earth quickly—are in the stratosphere, they can stay there a long time, months or years. During this time, they reflect incoming sunlight, which means less light reaches the surface of the earth. The result can be an artificial

winter: a so-called nuclear winter. Temperatures will drop and growing seasons might be lost for one or more years, potentially leading to mass starvation as well as devastation of animal life.

One of the leading proponents of nuclear winter science was Carl Sagan, an astrophysicist and prominent science communicator. He used his visibility to warn about the dangers of nuclear armaments.[17] After all, it is irrational to plan for a nuclear war if there's a significant possibility of mass extermination on earth.

The consequence? It's hard to say. President Ronald Reagan reached important agreements with the Soviet government to de-escalate the nuclear arms race. But were nuclear winter concerns responsible? In the early 1980s there was a massive worldwide mobilisation against nuclear war, and that, arguably, was the crucial influence on Reagan and other national leaders.

Anyway, the risk of nuclear winter did not go away. Atmospheric scientists continued to come up with results showing major effects from even a limited nuclear war.[18] Their results were contested, but no one said nuclear winter is impossible. Yet there have been no significant steps to eliminate nuclear arsenals. The new evidence about nuclear

17 I discussed this and other facets of the nuclear winter issue in "Nuclear winter: science and politics," *Science and Public Policy,* vol. 15, no. 5, October 1988, pp. 321–334.

18 For example, Michael J. Mills, Owen B. Toon, Julia Lee-Taylor and Alan Robock, "Multidecadal global cooling and unprecedented ozone loss following a regional nuclear conflict," *Earth's Future,* vol. 2, 2014, pp. 161–176.

winter served as a rhetorical tool in debates, but seemingly did not provide a sufficient basis for nuclear disarmament.

A different sort of new evidence is relevant to the question of whether countries need military forces—for defence, anyway. In 1948 in Costa Rica, following a civil war, the new government decided to disband the country's army. It was a dramatic step considering the tensions in Central America. Yet not only has Costa Rica survived as an independent country, it has thrived, with good economic performance, lower child mortality, longer lives and in general a better quality of life. The contrast with its neighbours, such as El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama, is stark.

Doing well without an army, indeed doing better, offered strong practical evidence and should have provided the stimulus for other governments to follow suit. But the example of Costa Rica seems to have had little impact. Indeed, it is hardly known outside peace movement circles. It is not taught to school children worldwide. Few governments send groups of experts to visit Costa Rica and report on how its model can be reproduced. If medical authorities reported, "We've eliminated cancer," experts would be flocking to see the evidence. But when the message is, "We've found out how to thrive without an army," it seems few show any interest.[19]

Another example of the failure of evidence to alter the war system concerned deterrence theory. The idea of

19 Costa Rica is just one of the many countries without armies: Christophe Barbey, *Non-militarisation: countries without armies* (Åland, Finland: Åland Islands Peace Institute, 2015).

nuclear deterrence is that by having a significant arsenal of nuclear weapons, enemies will not attack because they face destruction in a retaliatory strike. Throughout the Cold War, deterrence was the rationale for maintaining US and Soviet nuclear forces.

However, there's a fundamental flaw in deterrence theory, at least in the way it is deployed in practice. If deterrence is so effective in preventing nuclear war, then surely it would be better for more governments to have nuclear weapons. This would constrain attacks. In practice, though, the major nuclear powers are very keen to prevent others obtaining their own deterrent forces.

Imagine that in 2003 Saddam Hussein actually had had a nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. Deterrence might have worked! But it seems deterrence was not the goal, at least when it comes to the US government being deterred.

The arguments about deterrence have continued for decades, and can become long and involved. What is clear is that, in application, powerful states justify their own arsenals by referring to their need to deter enemies, but they don't like to be deterred by the arsenals of other states. When was the last time you heard a leader say, "We'd like our enemy to bolster its capacity to strike us with nuclear weapons. That way, we'll be deterred from striking them with ours."[20]

20 For detailed and devastating critiques of deterrence in theory and practice, see David P. Barash, *Threats: intimidation and its discontents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Philip Green, *Deadly logic: the theory of nuclear deterrence* (Ohio State University Press, 1966).

Institutions

In long-running public scientific controversies, almost always there are powerful groups—government bodies, corporations, professions—with a stake in the outcome. This is most obvious in the debate over the health hazards of smoking, where the tobacco industry makes billions of dollars by selling cigarettes. It is also obvious in the debate over climate change, where fossil fuel companies would like to keep selling coal, oil and gas. There are also powerful groups involved in debates over pesticides, nuclear power, genetically modified organisms and microwave radiation, among others. These groups, which have a strong stake in a particular outcome of the debate, are sometimes called vested interests.

In the case of war, the role of powerful groups is crucial. Indeed, listing all of them is a challenge. There are military forces, arms manufacturers, governments, media, spy agencies—and even enemies. The military has an obvious stake in continued alarm about dangers from attack. If there were no danger, then the whole operation could be closed down and everyone involved could do something not related to organised violence. Within the military, some individuals and groups have a greater stake than others. Career soldiers, especially those in command positions, are more likely to be committed to maintaining military strength.

Then there are industries that benefit from military expenditures. Arms manufacturers are the most obvious, but also relevant are firms that supply uniforms, build facilities, supply food and so forth. Military establishments can become mini-economies in which participants all have a stake in maintaining the flow of resources to the sector. There is also a thriving arms export industry.[21]

As a side note, the military mini-economy is socialist and/or monopolist in nature. It obtains nearly all its resources directly or indirectly from the government, and there are no competing militaries in the same country that might be the basis for a market in defence-against-enemy services. There can be competition between services, and there's a lot of writing about inter-service rivalry, but this is competition for purchases from the same buyer. In recent decades there has been a shift to private contractors, especially in the US, but still nearly all the money comes from the government. This feature of militaries helps explain the massive corruption in the sector, with vast cost overruns for weapons projects, excessively priced equipment and facilities built in locations providing the greatest bribes. This sort of corruption can occur within a country—there's lots of documentation for the US—and in arms sales to foreign governments, where bribery is routine.[22]

21 For example, Andrew Feinstein, *The shadow world: inside the global arms trade* (New York: Picador, 2012); Rachel Stohl and Suzette Grillot, *The international arms trade* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

22 On excessively elaborate weaponry, see Mary Kaldor, *The baroque arsenal* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982). On corruption in weapons procurement, see A. Ernest Fitzgerald, *The Pentagonists: an insider's view of waste, mismanagement, and fraud in defense spending* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

There are various ways to understand the vested interests involved in the military system. The best known is the "military-industrial complex."[23] This refers to the interlinkages between the military and industries supplying and dependent on the military, such as aircraft manufacturers. The MIC is most prominent in the US, and most of the writing about it concerns only the US. Some of the features of the MIC are corporate lobbying for military expenditures, a "revolving door" between the military and associated corporations—so that, for example, retired generals take lucrative jobs in the corporate sector—and military procurement aimed at giant weapons projects that reward key corporations. Tied in with this is the political system. Corporations make donations to individual members of Congress who sit on committees that influence military expenditure.

In his farewell address in 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned about the influence of the MIC. This warning has been quoted ever since, mainly by critics of the MIC. Eisenhower's statement was especially influential because before becoming president he had achieved fame as a general during World War II. As a military man, his concerns held more weight than those of

23 Gregory Hooks, *Forging the military-industrial complex: World War II's battle of the Potomac* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Paul A. C. Koistinen, *State of war: the political economy of American warfare, 1945–2011* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012); Nick Turse, *The complex: how the military invades our everyday lives* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

scholars who had studied the issues in depth. Sociologist C. Wright Mills' book *The Power Elite,* published in 1956, analysed the role of political, business and military elites in the US. It was the precursor of numerous more detailed studies in the following decades.[24]

Of the various ways of understanding the MIC in the US, one I find especially useful is Seymour Melman's analysis, epitomised by his book titled *Pentagon Capitalism.*[25] Rather than focusing on the companies, Melman looks at the Pentagon, namely the source of funding for the military, as the driving force. This is in contrast with Marxist-inspired analyses that try to find a profit motive. Melman's title *Pentagon Capitalism* is, in a way, a parody on the usual picture of capitalism in which there is a market and some degree of competition. In Melman's picture, the only sort of market is companies jockeying for political and bureaucratic influence so they can obtain lucrative contracts from the government, often cost-plus contracts that guarantee profits with no risk. Melman might just as well have titled his book *Pentagon Socialism,* but perhaps did not because "socialism" is a term of abuse in many US circles. However, since Melman wrote, neoliberalism has transformed economies, with corporations gaining ever more

24 C. Wright Mills, *The power elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

25 Seymour Melman, *Pentagon capitalism: the political economy of war* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). See also Seymour Melman, *The permanent war economy: American capitalism in decline* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

influence, so the Pentagon may now be more the pawn of the war industry rather than the other way around.[26]

There's no need to delve into debates over the MIC. Yes, it could operate differently in different countries, and even the name is questionable. What no one denies is that there are strong connections between political, industrial and military circles. This becomes more obvious by contemplating the non-existence of what might be called the deMIC: a complex of influential groups pushing to ensure and maintain demilitarisation. The deMIC exists, to some extent, in countries without a military, serving to prevent the rise of a military system. But otherwise, the deMIC is conspicuous by its absence.

It's worth mentioning some other groups that have been brought into the institutionalisation of the military. Scientific researchers are a key group: the military sponsors research in a range of fields, from oceanography to social psychology, influencing the topics studied and the frameworks used to study them.[27] Historians pay far more attention to war than peace. Videogame designers develop military-oriented games in which the challenge is to kill the enemy, often portrayed as fiendish. Communication systems are geared for military purposes.

In some cases, enemies are needed to justify continued war-making. David Keen in his book *Useful Enemies* provides a fascinating and disturbing account of wars in

26 For a comprehensive examination, see Christian Sorensen, *Understanding the war industry* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2020).

27 I addressed this in *Technology for nonviolent struggle* (London: War Resisters' International, 2001).

which the warring parties have an incentive to perpetuate fighting or at least the appearance of fighting.[28] Keen draws on observations, interviews and others' research from various conflict sites, especially Sierra Leone, plus Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Vietnam, Congo, Sudan, former Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Pakistan and the US.

Waging war can be useful for maintaining a flow of funds from external players, as in the case of the US in relation to the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars. The external money is siphoned off by corrupt local commanders, who thereby have an incentive to ensure that is sufficient alarm about the enemy. Meanwhile, they underpay their troops who become resentful and resort to extortion of the local population. Corruption occurs on both sides in some wars, with international aid used as a tool. Keen's chapter on the US military machine shows the immensity of the MIC and its penetration into all aspects of US society.

Even religions can be brought into the support network for the military system. But the religious contribution is more symbolic than material, which leads into the next section.

Belief systems

The existence of organisations of professional soldiers whose official task is defending a community from attack by foreign enemies is so commonplace as to be unremarkable. It is easy to forget that contemporary-style military

28 David Keen, *Useful enemies: when waging wars is more important than winning them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

systems are quite new, historically speaking. Only a few hundred years ago, the modern state system did not exist. The formation of modern states and associated bureaucracies went hand in hand with the formation of military systems.[29] The existence of large standing armies, even in so-called peacetime, is even newer. Then there are recent changes including the outsourcing of military roles to private contractors and companies.

Despite the recency of the modern military system, most people take it for granted as the way things have to be. As Margaret Thatcher said, "There is no alternative." Not many people think about alternatives. Sometimes there are massive protests against particular military adventures (think the 2003 invasion of Iraq) or particular weapons (think nuclear), but the system of military "defence" as a whole retains a remarkable monopoly over most thinking.

In nearly every Australian church more than a century old, there are plaques on the walls of the chapel with names of soldiers from the congregation who lost their lives in World War I, and sometimes later wars too, though they were less deadly for Australians. In World War I, called at the time the Great War, Australian men volunteered to go to war, and usually ended up in the trenches in Europe

29 Bruce D. Porter, *War and the rise of the state: the military foundations of modern politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Charles Tilly (ed.), *The formation of national states in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1992).

where millions of troops lost their lives. It was supposed to be the war that ended all war.

Over a century later, those Australian men who died in the war continue to be commemorated. The ones who survived can choose to remember those who didn't in a special ceremony every year, on 25 April, Anzac Day, a public holiday. To some, this seems anachronistic and patriarchal, but it illustrates how military thinking infiltrates rituals and associated beliefs. There is no similar celebration of those who opposed the war.[30]

The belief systems surrounding military systems are aided by language. In many countries, the military is run by what is called a department of defence. "Defence" is now the standard term for the military. In many countries, it is a euphemism or misnomer, because the army is used primarily for intervention in other countries or for subjugating the population. This is most pronounced in the United States, where the military hasn't been used for defence since 1814 but has been regularly deployed in foreign wars, ranging from the war against Mexico to the occupation of Afghanistan. The US Department of Defense would be more accurately named the Department of Foreign Intervention.

Also worth mentioning are colonial wars. When British troops and convicts arrived in Australia in 1788 and

30 The closest parallel is Hiroshima Day, 6 August, the anniversary of the atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945, the first nuclear weapon used in warfare. Hiroshima Day events remember the victims of war rather than those who opposed war, though these events have a strong anti-war sentiment.

took over the land, the indigenous people had no military. They were the ones who needed defence against attack.

Another relevant belief is in the power of violence. Most people assume that the only way to resist violent attack is through being prepared to use violence. A country without an army is therefore unthinkable, hence disarmament is unthinkable. The fact that superior violence does not always triumph—think of the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan—is conveniently forgotten, or somehow twisted with the claim that if "we" had used all "our" full firepower, "we" would have won.

Beliefs about war, militaries, defence and violence are both a product of the war system and important props for maintaining it. They help sustain a persistent panic about the danger posed by foreign military threats, or the need for military intervention to protect against the emergence of dangers.

Pause to sum up

So far, I've outlined a number of features of the war system: threat exaggeration, polarisation, stigmatisation of enemies, suppression of dissent, the role of threat entrepreneurs (those who raise the alarm about threats), double standards, the failure of new evidence to induce change, the role of institutions such as the military-industrial complex, and the role of belief systems. Several of these features of the war system have strong parallels with the features of moral panics, and several others have strong parallels with the features of public scientific controversies. Together, these features are typical of what I've called persistent panics.

They are the same features found in other persistent panics, including the ones over drugs, crime and terrorism.

Does this analysis provide any clues about how to go about challenging and replacing the war system? Certainly, it provides some insights into the nature of the problem, especially how deep-seated it is. The failure of new evidence to make a difference, along with the key role of belief systems, suggests that trying to convince people—politicians, generals or farmers—is not likely to be very effective. But perhaps this is too pessimistic. Just because the war system has the features of a persistent panic does not mean it is impossible to change.

It is useful to note that war, namely what I've called war against war, the sort of war with soldiers and guns, is the model for other campaigns called wars, such as the wars on drugs, crime and terrorism. War is the model in the sense of offering metaphors. As we've seen, though, there are more parallels than just ways of thinking. In any case, it might be possible to learn from challenges to some of the so-called wars, for example the war on drugs, for how to challenge the original model, preparing to wage war as the solution to the problem of war.

A less warlike world?

Some authors have argued that, so far as war is concerned, today's societies are safer than ever before.[31] The first half

31 Steven Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined* (New York: Viking, 2011). For a critique, see Edward S. Herman and David Peterson: *Reality denial: Steven Pinker's apologetics for Western-imperial violence* (ColdType, 2012).

of the 1900s were especially deadly with the two "world wars," but since then there have been no such far-reaching wars. It's possible to calculate the percentage of the world's population that dies each year in violent conflicts, and this figure seems smaller than ever. Yes, millions have died when you add up the casualties due to fighting in the Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Angola and other deadly venues, but even so the overall percentage is in decline. In most of the world, you are more likely to die from a traffic accident or suicide than from organised fighting.

Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens* gives a big-picture view of human history.[32] According to Harari, *Homo sapiens* survived and thrived while other human species, such as the Neanderthals, died out. Furthermore, Sapiens spread across the world, wiping out big mammals. Then, through a series of revolutions, which Harari calls the cognitive, agricultural and industrial revolutions, Sapiens managed to increase its numbers dramatically, subordinating other species to its service. Harari says Sapiens—those we usually call humans—seem to have found the secret of peaceful living.

The claims that societies are becoming less prone to war and that death rates from war are in a long-term decline should be taken seriously, but can be questioned. The first limitation is that we don't know the future. If a global nuclear war occurs, by accident or design, it will change the calculation dramatically. Until nuclear arsenals are eliminated, claims about a continual transition to a less deadly world seem premature.

32 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: a brief history of humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

Harari notes that famine and infectious disease, which used to kill large numbers of people, have largely been brought under control. Rather than being natural calamities as in the past, because no one knew how to overcome massive crop failure or disease vectors, now they are political calamities: how to deal with famine and infectious disease is known, and only political machinations enable them to kill large numbers of people.

Medical skills, plus knowledge about dealing with famine and infectious disease, also make war less deadly. Injured soldiers are less likely to die because doctors can use advanced techniques to save their lives and restore their bodies. Wars are less likely to lead to famines because of humanitarian operations. Soldiers and civilians are less likely to die from infectious diseases. I'm not sure how much these factors have brought down death tolls from war, but they may contribute to the apparently reduced lethality of war.

There's another reason why I'm sceptical of the optimism implicit in saying that contemporary war-making is less deadly, on a per capita basis, than in the past. Military researchers continue to apply their skills to developing more effective weapons, as well as ways to defend against opponents' weapons. This includes chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, as well as more exotic possibilities such as weather modification and mind control. That there have been no nuclear wars since 1945 may be due more to luck than deterrence, and likewise it may be a matter of luck that no biological weapon has been unleashed or

accidentally released that has led to a pandemic.[33] On the other hand, military researchers have developed a host of "non-lethal weapons," such as rubber bullets, electroshock batons and paralysing agents. They might be better called less-lethal weapons because they can kill but they do reduce the risk. The question is whether they are replacing deadlier weapons or supplementing them.

Over the past few decades, there have been fewer cases of international aggression, involving invasion of a foreign country. But there continues to be a lot of fighting within countries, in what can be called civil wars or insurgencies. The main rationale for military establishments is international aggression, not civil war, but there is no sign that militaries are being downsized because external threats are in decline.

Then another related consideration. If wars are less deadly due to governments becoming more sensible or because military conquest makes less sense in a world in which knowledge workers are more valuable than territories, why do military systems persist? What purpose is there in continually raising alarms due to allegedly inadequate defence spending or preparedness? One answer is that the real enemy, from the point of view of those with the most power and wealth, is a change in the social order, one in which there is greater popular participation in decision-making and greater economic and political equality. The enemy is not out there, in some other country, but

33 The question of whether Covid-19 was due to an accidental release from the Wuhan Institute of Virology remains contentious.

here at home: a nonviolent revolution bringing greater equality and local control.

ANTI-PANIC

Alternatives

In 1981, when I was active in the group Canberra Peacemakers, we were contacted by a fellow named Idris Evans. He claimed to have discovered the secret behind war, but didn't want to tell us, at least initially. I politely listened to him on the phone, but didn't play his game of trying to guess what he believed was the secret. Eventually he became tired of asking me to guess his secret and told me his answer: arms manufacture and sales.

I thought, "Arms manufacture and sales are certainly part of the war system, but they are not the key. Indeed, there isn't a single key." Anyway, the implications were not obvious. Even if we decided that arms manufacture and sales were the most important driving force behind war, what then? Were we supposed to try to stop the arms industry by lobbying corporate leaders or protesting at the gates of factories?

Idris Evans was an old man when he contacted us and now, forty years later, I'm one myself. The problem hasn't gone away, and there continue to be many people with ideas about what to do about war, and what should replace it. These include world government, improved diplomacy, social justice, peace communities and a host of others. I'm not going to try to canvass all the available ideas and

initiatives. It may be useful, though, to categorise alternatives to war into some broad areas.

Some alternatives are based on organising the world in a different way. These options include world government, smaller-sized communities (such as the Swiss canton system) and socialism. The question is how to get there. Disarmament might fit in here. Getting rid of weapons will enable people to live together differently, or just as before except without war.

Other alternatives are based on changing people and their behaviour. These include peace education, promoting inner peace, and conflict resolution techniques.

Yet other alternatives look to modifications of or replacements for the military. These include using only defensive weapons systems, arming the population, and social defence.

When talking about alternatives, it's useful to remember what they are alternatives to: the military, which is widely seen as the only really effective solution to the problem of war. The idea is to maintain current military forces to deter aggression and, if necessary, defend against it. Many of those in the military are peace seekers too.

My argument has been that the military "solution" is the driving force behind war and repression. It is a central cause of the problem it is supposed to solve. And it continues to be used, despite the underlying contradiction—some would say insanity—that the military solution is the cause of the military problem. It is what can be analysed as a moral panic, a war on war.

Challengers

War is so terrible that it is not surprising that many people have tried to oppose, restrain or otherwise control it. The list is long. It includes diplomats who try to defuse tensions, commanders who counsel politicians to refrain from aggression, religious leaders who denounce fighting, activists who try to prevent arms shipments, conscientious objectors who refuse to become soldiers, local communities that shelter deserters and parents who instil anti-militaristic values in their children.

It would be possible to nominate a wide range of figures who have taken courageous and exemplary stands against war and who have tried to build societies based on cooperation and harmony. It is worthwhile to look to opponents of militarism as an inspiration for achieving a different sort of world. But, it must be asked, why have all these efforts been inadequate to restrain the continued build-up of armies and weapons systems and the continued glorification of military values?

One answer is provided by philosopher and psychologist Steven James Bartlett, who undertook an in-depth study of human evil, seen in a non-religious sense as a willingness to inflict major harm on other humans or nature. In his book *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil,* Bartlett examined the fundamentals of disease, the ideas of key writers about the causes of human evil, and the behaviour of people in terrorism, genocide, ecological destruction—and war.[34]

34 Steven James Bartlett, *The pathology of Man: a study of human evil* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2005).

One common feature of human behaviour is the willingness of many individuals (mostly men) to be soldiers and be trained to kill, and the willingness of many others to play supportive roles in the war system, for example designing weapons, working in arms factories, supporting military expenditures and cheering on the troops. Actually, Bartlett says, it is not just willingness: people can receive deep-seated gratification from being involved in systems for killing. To my mind, one of Bartlett's most important observations is that most people do not want to end the war system. They are happy to tolerate or support the continuation of military establishments, training and preparedness rather than putting the slightest amount of effort into moving towards a world without militaries. Peace activists learn this very quickly: it is difficult enough to gain support to oppose particular wars or particular types of weapons, and vastly more difficult to gain support for transitioning to a world without militaries at all.

Bartlett's assessment is that humans are afflicted by highly destructive pathologies. They are subject to a mental pathology that affects their thinking and enables behaviour that is highly damaging to human wellbeing and to the environment. Bartlett's view is pessimistic. In *The Pathology of Man,* he even says optimism is part of the problem, because it means people aren't willing to face the dangerous fundamental flaws in human thought and behaviour.

After reading Bartlett's book, I wrote several articles applying his ideas to different domains, including whistleblowing, technology and social institutions.[35] This was a fascinating experience of trying to mesh a seemingly fatalistic perspective with my interest in strategy against injustice. One of Bartlett's main points is that most people refuse to accept how deeply embedded are the impulses that drive evils such as war, terrorism and genocide. He provides ample evidence that most of the perpetrators are psychologically normal. In other words, the worst manifestations of human behaviour are not due to psychopaths or other deranged mentalities but to individuals, like you and me, who would be found normal or typical according to standard psychological tests.

In Bartlett's picture, it is abnormal to be a pacifist or to otherwise make strenuous efforts to challenge the war system. It is abnormal to go against the dominant ideas and practices in society. It is more common to join in the condemnation or persecution of those who question military preparedness or who dare doubt the nobility of being a soldier.

Fortunately, there are many who are so committed that they are willing to go against the normality of the war system and who believe there are better ways to deal with the problem of war than by preparing for it.

Non-pacifistic anti-militarism

Having studied and thought about social defence for decades, it's not often that I come across a perspective that

35 For example, Brian Martin, "Evil institutions: Steven Bartlett's analysis of human evil and its relevance for anarchist alternatives," *Anarchist Studies,* vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, pp. 88–110.

adds a fresh insight. In 2021, I read Ned Dobos' book *Ethics, Security, and the War Machine,* in which he describes "non-pacifistic anti-militarism."[36] What does this mean? Let's start with pacifism, which is a principled rejection of organised violence. Pacifists reject all wars, no matter how well justified.

Many people assume that if you're opposed to having military forces, you must be a pacifist: you must be against all wars. Dobos says, "Wait a minute, there's a different option." He argues that you might agree that some wars are justified but still, all things considered, it's better not to have a military establishment.

Military forces are usually justified by the need to defend against foreign aggression, and indeed they are sometimes deployed for this purpose. But, Dobos notes, having military forces also has some negative consequences. One of them is the risk of a military coup, in which soldiers are deployed against a country's own people, not against foreign enemies. Dobos argues that coups are a risk, perhaps small, even in countries that are supposedly coup-proof. Then there are other downsides to having a military, including degradation of moral values among soldiers and, via a sort of social contamination, in the wider society, in business and education. This is not to mention the economic cost of the military and its environmental impact.

Dobos says most discussions of ethics and war assume the existence of the military, and thus accept without questioning all the associated downsides. He argues that on

36 Ned Dobos, *Ethics, security, and the war machine: the true cost of the military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

purely pragmatic grounds—non-pacifistic grounds—the pros and cons of having a military establishment need to be considered. But this is hardly ever done. If you do decide that the cons outweigh the pros, you become a supporter of anti-militarism, of non-pacifistic anti-militarism.

Once you open questioning about whether it's worthwhile having military forces just in case of foreign aggression, then the door is open to other options. One is simply getting on with life, as in the many countries without militaries, such as Costa Rica. Another is social defence.

One of Dobos' examples I especially like. He draws an analogy with torture. He notes that one position is to reject torture in all circumstances but another is to accept that there may be rare occasions when torture can be justified morally, for example when there's a ticking time bomb and torture is the only way to extract information to prevent it exploding. He says that's reasonable but it isn't enough to justify setting up an entire torture system, a torture-industrial complex, advanced research and training in carrying out torture, or promoting torture values in the wider society. No one seriously argues for a torture system just because it might someday be used for a good purpose. By the same logic, we should question the need for a military system.

The failure to even start this sort of questioning shows the deep-seated nature of the persistent panic over war. The fundamental premise of the panic—that the danger of foreign aggression is sufficient to justify having a military establishment—is hardly ever questioned.

Constraints

Are there constraints on the expansion and perpetuation of the war system? Yes, indeed, and it is revealing to think about them.

Militaries require major investments in time, money and resources. When these are needed for other purposes, there can be pressure to cut back on military expenditures. Only a few centuries ago, standing armies were rare and most soldiers were mercenaries. Even a century ago, armies and arms production could be maintained for a major war—think, for example, of World War I—but after the war there was a dramatic demobilisation. It was only after World War II that in the US and some other countries the military became institutionalised in what is euphemistically called peacetime.

War-making is expensive, but due to advances in weaponry and training, and due to improvements more generally in economic productivity, it is possible to maintain highly potent military forces with expenditure of only a few percent of a society's economic output. Just as it is possible to feed populations with relatively few people working on the land, it is also possible to sustain a deadly military apparatus.

Peace activists often point out that reducing military expenditures would make it possible to make great strides in satisfying human needs, for example addressing poverty. This is true enough, but this argument has a flaw. Even while maintaining militaries, there are plenty of resources to address human needs, but there is insufficient willpower to deal with economic inequality, exploitation, corruption, conspicuous consumption and many other social problems.

Rather than diversion of resources, the role of military expenditures is crucial in a different way: militaries help maintain inequitable social structures. Even if militaries cost nothing, they would still be disastrous for human wellbeing.

Another idea for ending military rivalry is an external threat that unites humans in defence of the planet. This is the stuff of science fiction and Hollywood movies. Alien spaceships loom over cities, threatening to obliterate humanity. In response, humans in previously hostile groups start cooperating to resist a common enemy.

This is a fantasy. There are already two major threats to billions of human lives: nuclear war and climate change. These threats don't come from some alien invader but are caused by human activity. There is little sign that either one is causing an end to military rivalry.

It's also worth looking at past wars. They sometimes have led to greater cooperation to defeat the enemy, but there is a seamy side to most war-making efforts. During the US Civil War, the Union side suffered from corrupt business operators who provided defective military equipment and adulterated rations, leading President Abraham Lincoln to bring in a whistleblower protection law. Profiteering during wars is the rule rather than the exception. During World War II, the German military machine diverted considerable resources to genocide rather than defeating the external enemy.

Although the idea that a common danger might unite humans is attractive, it is inherently implausible, at least when the danger requires humans to fight, as in so many alien-invasion films. This is not a promising way to bring

out the best side of human behaviour. Could we imagine a danger that required humans to join together in helping each other become more kind, cooperative and compassionate?

A related idea is that military competition could be replaced by a different sort of competition, namely sports. The Olympic Games were conceived in this spirit. Alas, the evidence doesn't support the idea that competitive sports replace other forms of competition.[37] Think of soccer hooligans, where spectatorship can become toxic. More promising is a different sort of sporting activity, a cooperative variety.[38] However, despite being promoted by some visionary advocates, cooperative sports have never caught on like competitive sports, some of which are modelled on fighting. Watching gladiators, even metaphorical gladiators in tennis or football, is unlikely to be the basis for a peace-loving society.

What about a revolution to bring an end to the military? As noted earlier, in Costa Rica in 1948, the government was overthrown in a revolt and the new leader decided to get rid of the military. However, Costa Rica's alternative trajectory is simply ignored, or at best treated as a curiosity. There does not seem much chance of an anti-military coup anywhere else.

37 John Hoberman, "The myth of sport as a peace-promoting political force," *SAIS Review,* vol. 31, no. 1, Winter-Spring 2011, pp. 17–29.

38 Terry Orlick, *Winning through cooperation: competitive insanity—cooperative alternatives* (Washington, DC: Acropolis, 1978).

What about a revolution in values? Is it possible to imagine that people of the world will begin to find violence so repulsive that they demand disarmament? This sounds as implausible as people all learning to love one another and live in harmony ever after.

Nevertheless, there have been some dramatic changes in values over the past few centuries that are relevant when thinking about war. It was not so long ago that executions were public spectacles, with crowds gathering to see criminals, witches or traitors tortured and killed. Today, in most parts of the world, this is unthinkable. Most governments have outlawed capital punishment. Torture still occurs in many countries, but it is almost always hidden from public eyes. There is far more resistance to openly and legitimately hurting other people.

On the other hand, people are exposed to far more images of violence, in films, video games and the daily news. Before today's communication technologies, most people would see violence only when it was near to them. Today we can watch real violence at a distance and watch vast amounts of simulated violence. What this is doing to people's values and their acceptance of military systems is not likely to help in creating a world without war.

The key point is there have already been revolutions in values, which shows that further change is possible, for better or worse. The question is, what can be done to promote values that help support creation of alternatives to the war system and, more generally, alternatives to systems of rule ultimately relying on violence? This leads into the question of strategy.

But first, a recap about constraints on war. There don't seem to be any fundamental ones. It seems quite possible that military systems will continue for the indefinite future, causing death and misery and helping maintain inequitable political and economic systems. Even if there is a global nuclear war killing billions of people, there is no automatic reason why survivors will decide that military methods are not such a good idea. More likely, they—or rather, rulers—will decide to prepare for future wars.

Strategies

A strategy is a plan to get from a present reality to a desired future. The plan should take into account the nature and dynamics of the present reality, the features of the desired future, and identify who can do what to foster the change.

In most discussions about war—think of the news, novels, films, etc.—the most common assumption is that militaries are needed to protect the peace. In this dominant way of thinking, the desired future is one in which the militaries of the good guys, who are assumed to be either non-warlike or to use force to oppose bad guys, protect the world from danger. This is the mindset that sees militaries as necessary and inevitable, and perhaps war too, but war for a good cause. This mindset is fundamental to the moral panic about enemies, in other words to the war against war. The strategy associated with this mindset is more of the same, namely continued military preparedness, except to do it better.

Within this dominant way of thinking, there are innumerable variations involving different spending priorities, alliances, weapons, training and decisions about whether

and how to be involved in particular conflicts. Debates about these topics can be important—getting rid of nuclear weapons is an example—but need not detain us here because they do not involve any fundamental change in the assumption that militaries are necessary.

To get to different strategies, it's necessary to have a different goal. Consider the goal of a world without war, and furthermore a world without militaries. Again, there are many variations, everything from people living in harmony to a world government that controls the population through brainwashing and happiness drugs. To discuss strategies, it's not necessary to fully agree on the desirable future except that it has less war and enhances human wellbeing. With this level of agreement, it's possible to think of what can be done to move in this direction, without having a plan for the full journey.

I find it useful to think of three general types of strategies for moving towards a world without war: logical argument, conventional politics, and direct action.

Logical argument is a common approach. It is the assumption behind the many assertions that war is incredibly damaging, military expenditures are a burden, and there are better ways to ensure security. Evidence and logic are important but they are not enough to end military systems, otherwise there would have been universal disarmament long ago. Imagine the leaders to two governments getting together and saying, "Wouldn't it be sensible if we each disarmed. We'd save a lot of money and wouldn't threaten each other. Once we get started, we'll show what's possible and convince others to join us."

When peace campaigners provide figures showing the positive outcomes of redirecting military expenditures to funding for human needs, they're using knowledge and logic. So are they when they highlight the devastating consequences of nuclear war. If this approach was enough, nuclear weapons states would have dismantled their bombs decades ago—or never built them in the first place.

A second general type of strategy is to use conventional political methods, including lobbying, diplomacy, voting and pressure-group politics. The idea is to use the accepted methods of political persuasion to bring about change. Inside the government, this means pushing for more funding for diplomacy, maybe even setting up a peace institute. Outside, it means lobbying politicians. At election time, it means getting peace candidates to run for office and supporting their election campaigns. And it means protesting in the streets against wars.

This approach has made a huge difference. Insiders have prevented war-making on many occasions, and public protest has helped to prevent wars and to end them. Lawrence Wittner wrote a massive history of popular action against nuclear war.[39] He found that governments responded to public pressure, though they never openly admitted doing so. According to Wittner's analysis, it is plausible that citizen protest has been instrumental in the world avoiding nuclear war since 1945. Yet, despite the power of protest, it has not been enough to make much

39 Lawrence S. Wittner, *The struggle against the bomb,* three volumes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993–2003).

headway in dismantling and replacing the war system. Militaries seem to be permanent fixtures.

A third general type of strategy is grassroots action. In addition to insider efforts and pressuring decision-makers, grassroots action refers to people directly making changes. This could be boycotting military goods, refusing to pay taxes for war, setting up community decision-making processes, and workers taking over the running of their enterprises. If you start exploring, you can find examples of this sort of action across the world, in all sorts of domains, from education to housing.[40] This sort of action has the potential of undermining or superseding the systems of power that sustain war. But there is a long way to go—a very long way.

This leads me back to my 1984 book *Uprooting War.* It was basically an argument for grassroots action as the road to challenging and replacing the war system. Within this general framework, I identified several key areas that seemed most promising: social defence, peace conversion and self-management.

Social defence, as I conceived of it back then, is nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence. It involves people in neighbourhoods, factories and other contexts organising themselves to be able to resist aggression using protests, strikes,

40 For example, Glenda McGregor, Martin Mills, Pat Thomson and Jodie Pennacchia (eds.), *Alternative educational programmes, schools and social justice* (London: Routledge, 2018); Alexander Vasudevan, *The autonomous city: a history of urban squatting* (London: Verso, 2017).

boycotts and a host of other methods not involving physical violence. Many advocates of social defence saw it being introduced by governments, but I thought this was unlikely and instead argued for social defence being promoted by grassroots action.

When I wrote about social defence in the early 1980s, there were local or national activist groups promoting it in several countries. There were perhaps a dozen different groups in the Netherlands, for example one organising among government employees, another within education and so forth. There were also groups in Sweden, Germany, Italy and elsewhere, and even a little government interest. I had helped set up Canberra Peacemakers, and by 1981 our main focus was social defence.

This activity was in the context of the massive growth of the global movement against nuclear war, which peaked in the early 1980s. Because of the mobilisation against nuclear war, there was greater interest in alternatives. However, social defence never became widely known, much less a mass movement. By the late 1980s, the antiwar movement was in decline, and then with the end of the Cold War—the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—the movement against nuclear weapons faded away. And so did interest in social defence.

In 2019, Jørgen Johansen and I wrote a book titled *Social Defence* in an attempt to introduce the ideas to a new generation.[41] But so far there has been little interest.

41 Jørgen Johansen and Brian Martin, *Social defence* (Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2019).

Jørgen recently commented to me that social defence has a deterrent effect, but this depends on the opponent knowing about and understanding the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance. However, few government leaders have even heard of social defence, so how could they possibly be deterred? Even if leaders decided to encourage preparations for social defence, would they tell potential adversaries?

In the past thirty years there has been a tremendous boom in the awareness and use of nonviolent action in social movements. Key ideas, including the consent theory of power, the methods of nonviolent action, and strategic thinking, have become mainstays in training of activists in movements to challenge repressive regimes, in climate change activism and many other social movements. Armed struggle is no longer seen as necessarily more effective or more radical. The key debates are not about whether campaigners should be armed but whether property destruction will help or hurt movements.

In 2000, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević was toppled following a campaign inspired by the group Otpor. The campaign creatively used nonviolent-action methods, with a heavy leavening of humorous stunts. After the success of this campaign, seasoned Otpor activists helped to train activists in several other anti-regime campaigns.[42]

42 Srdja Popovic, Slobodan Djinovic, Andrej Milivojevic, Hardy Merriman and Ivan Marovic, *CANVAS core curriculum: a guide to effective nonviolent struggle* (Belgrade: Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies, 2007); Srdja Popovic, Andrej Milivojevic and Slobodan Djinovic, *Nonviolent struggle: 50*

These campaigns have not always been successful, but they seem far more likely to be effective than armed resistance, and certainly far less deadly, and the new governments are more likely to protect human rights. But there is one limitation of the campaigns: the new governments continue to rely on militaries, which are potential sources of repression. The Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was ousted in 2011 following a short popular campaign that inaugurated electoral politics. But the period of electoral democracy was short-lived. The military took power just a couple of years later. The campaign to end the political dictatorship did not get rid of the military.

For me, the enormous expansion in the understanding and use of strategic nonviolent action is the most promising development in efforts for a better society. Social defence is basically the application of the principles and methods of nonviolent action to defending communities from aggression. The strange thing is that the boom in strategic nonviolent action has hardly ever been directed towards challenging and replacing the war system. There have been major campaigns against particular wars—notably the invasions of Iraq in 2003 and of Ukraine in 2022—and against particular weapons. But the war system, more fundamentally, has not been a major target.

Uprooting War also had a chapter on peace conversion, the process of converting military production to civilian production or, more generally, production for human needs. If war systems are to be dismantled, peace

crucial points (Belgrade: Centre for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies, 2007).

conversion needs to occur somewhere along the line. My vision included grassroots conversion, carried out by citizens rather than by governments. In the 1980s, there was an active conversion movement in California, and the example of Lucas Aerospace workers' alternative plan was still recent, and inspiring. Little did I know that conversion efforts would soon fall by the wayside. So far as I know, little has happened along these lines since the 1990s.

Then came a chapter on "self-management," which refers to people—workers, neighbourhoods, local communities—running their own lives, without governments or other social institutions controlling them. Self-management happens routinely in some voluntary organisations in which members reach mutually agreed decisions on what to do and how to run things. As well, there is a dispersed movement towards participation in local decision-making, for example in municipal budgeting and town planning.[43] Self-management in workplaces is also called workers' control.[44] In politics it is closely aligned to direct democracy or participatory democracy, and linked to deliberative democracy.

"Self-management" is a term for anarchy, the practical realisation of the philosophy of anarchism. *Uprooting War* was published by Freedom Press, a longstanding anarchist publisher in London. The trouble is that the word "anarchy"

43 Colin Ward, *Anarchy in action* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

44 Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini, eds., *Ours to master and to own: workers' control from the Commune to the present* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011).

is widely used as a synonym for chaos or mob-rule. Few people understand that anarchists, ones who understand the history and philosophy of anarchism, favour order, not chaos. The order is one based on people cooperatively running their own lives, without bosses or rulers.

Why did I see self-management as an alternative and challenge to the war system? My analysis of contemporary war is based in a number of interlocking social institutions, especially the state, the military and patriarchy, tied in with the administration of science and technology. The remainder of *Uprooting War* was an analysis of these institutions, pointing to their features and efforts to challenge them. My idea was that getting rid of the war system required transforming the institutions underpinning it. In other words, trying to end war while leaving unchanged other systems of power, such as the state and patriarchy, was futile.

Most books about the war system spend most of the time addressing the problems and then have, at the end, some comments about what should be done. I reversed this, instead putting my ideas about alternatives—social defence, peace conversion, self-management—towards the beginning, followed by an analysis of the roots of war.

That was all very well. However, just because I foregrounded solutions did not make them any more effective. The practical matter is that there seem to be few hopeful signs of the rise of any movement with a prospect for transforming the roots of war. Even if my ideas were on the right track, they are stillborn if there is no constituency for change. My criticisms of conventional antiwar methods—knowledge and logic, and conventional politics—also apply to my own preferred approaches.

Let me set aside this gloomy reflection and return to what has changed in the world since the publication of *Uprooting War.* I've commented on the rise of nonviolent action as the preferred method of struggle for many social movements, which I think is the most promising development in the past century and the best hope, some time in the future, for building a world without war. As well as this, there have been some other major changes, with more ambiguous consequences.

Since the 1980s, there have been fewer wars between states and more wars within states, whether you call them civil wars, insurgencies or liberation struggles. When writing *Uprooting War,* I was thinking mostly about wars between states. If I were writing the book today, I would emphasise more the crucial role of preparing for war, namely building and maintaining military establishments, as maintaining systems of power, irrespective of whether there's an actual fighting war. This is what I call the war on war: seeing military strength as the solution to the problem of war.

In the 1980s, it was possible to be optimistic about progressive social change. It was not so long after the surge in new social movements beginning in the 1960s: the student movement, the environmental movement, the second wave of the feminist movement, and the movement against nuclear war, among others. These movements promised a different sort of society, one in which systems of domination were challenged and transformed.

The 1980s also was when neoliberalism emerged as a major force. Neoliberalism is a particular manifestation of capitalism in which states outsource many of their functions

and enterprises—banking, media, energy, even planning—to corporations, often monopolies that run platforms hosting markets, like Uber. For individuals, there are fewer opportunities for lifelong employment. Instead, they become sole entrepreneurs selling their labour in the so-called "gig economy." Under neoliberalism, economic inequality increased and people's lives became less secure. Market relationships penetrated ever more aspects of life.

How does the rise of neoliberalism relate to the war system? That's not so clear. In most countries, militaries continue to be run by states, but in some countries, notably the US, there is a move towards use of private military forces, commonly called contractors and historically called mercenaries. In military privatisation, the state seems to be outsourcing its core role in holding a monopoly over the use of force within a territory. This is theoretically fascinating in relation to sociologist Max Weber's definition of the state as a community based on a monopoly over legitimate violence within a territory.

In *Uprooting War,* I assigned capitalism to the "other" category. It was part of the war system but not as central as the state, military, administrative class, patriarchy, or even state socialism. Unlike Marxists who saw war as a manifestation of capitalism or class struggle, my assessment was that capitalists were willing and helpful tools in the war system. When states are doling out money to produce weapons and train soldiers, entrepreneurs will line up to do whatever is they can be paid for, and try to make extra profits along the way. Corporations are an integral part of the military-industrial complex, but if there were no government spending on militaries, companies would be

unlikely to try to make a profit by running their own private armies. They would be more likely to seek profits in peacetime pursuits. With no cost-plus contracts from the Pentagon, aircraft manufacturers would just rely on civilian aviation rather than trying to become viable as self-funding air forces. Just imagine Boeing trying to make a profit from a private fleet of military aircraft and crew.

Although capitalism doesn't need war, and war systems can thrive in non-capitalist economies, capitalism is easily adaptable to war. For years after completing *Uprooting War,* I pondered how ideas about nonviolent struggle, including replacing the military, could be applied to anti-capitalist struggles. A key thought was that any alternative to capitalism had to be one without militaries, because militaries (or armed police) are needed, ultimately, to protect private property. This ruled out state socialism and even social democracy and led to a few options, including anarchism and Gandhian-style village democracy. This is another story.[45]

What struck me is that visions of a world without war, and without militaries, are not just utopian, but extremely far from most thinking about how people could organise their lives. The rise of neoliberalism, a particularly damaging form of capitalism, simply makes the task of moving towards humane alternatives more difficult.

Let me return to what has changed since the 1980s, in addition to the expansion of nonviolent action and the rise of neoliberalism. The spread of digital communications is

45 Brian Martin, *Nonviolence versus capitalism* (London: War Resisters' International, 2001).

undoubtedly of historical importance. It promised to enhance freedom by enabling horizontal processes of communication and coordination, reducing the power of hierarchical political and economic systems. This potential has been realised to a considerable extent, but governments and corporations have found ways to use digital systems for surveillance and control. Social movements have new opportunities and face new threats. Some struggles have moved online. There is a lot that can be said, but so far there is no sign that digitised societies are distinctly freer, and no sign that militaries are fading away.

A major omission in *Uprooting War* was the emotional dimension of war and the social institutions underpinning war. Of crucial importance is bonding with one's own country, called nationalism, patriotism or just country-centredness. More generally, most people think of the world in terms of countries and less so in terms of social classes, bioregions, social networks or occupations. When people identify with their country, it means that governments have a much easier time justifying their militaries and drumming up fear of outsiders, whether these be foreign enemies, terrorists or others.

Prior to World War I, socialist movements were powerful in many European countries. Socialist leaders had the hope that workers would refuse to go to war against other workers, in other words that class solidarity would be a bulwark against war-mongering. The war showed that identification with states and governments was far more powerful than class allegiance. Workers willingly joined armies to fight workers just like themselves, in a mutual mass slaughter.

The influence of country identification remains just as powerful today.[46] Governments can easily raise the alarm about immigrants, spies, foreign expansionism, and dangerous ideologies. The choice of what should be feared doesn't matter too much. Many citizens are susceptible to this thinking, and quite a few become even more nationalistic and bellicose than their governments. How to counter everyday nationalism, which serves to sustain militaries, is a challenge that movements have not figured out how to do.

Furthermore, military ways of thinking have penetrated many aspects of everyday life. Competitive sport is often described in warlike terms, as one team battles another to win a stirring victory. (And war is sometimes described with sports metaphors.) In business, leaders lead the charge against the enemy, or inspire their troops to do whatever is required to get ahead. Aggression is seen as a positive attribute.

With this sort of thinking, peace, or rather a peaceful approach, is seen as weak and defeatist. Jesus may have advised turning the other cheek, but in most manly, competitive contexts this is seen as weak rather than courageous.

For advocates of nonviolent action, one of the challenges is countering the perception that it is weak, and that the only true sort of strength is violence. In 1900, what we call today nonviolent action or civil resistance was called passive resistance. Gandhi thought this gave the wrong impression, so he sought a new name and came up with satyagraha. Later, the word "pacifism" became associated

46 Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

with acquiescence in the face of aggression. Then, after the word "nonviolence" became associated with pacifism, Gene Sharp preferred "nonviolent action" to emphasise that it is a form of action rather than nonaction. More recently, scholars have favoured "civil resistance," avoiding the connotations of "nonviolent action."

The point here is that alternatives to violence come up against a widespread and persistent assumption that violence is powerful, so to defend the country, it is intuitively obvious that armed force is necessary.

In writing *Uprooting War,* I criticised the assumption that knowledge and logic would ever be enough to convince citizens and leaders to halt the war system. But I made my own assumption that knowledge and logic could lead at least some activists to pursue alternatives such as social defence. Well, perhaps I didn't make this assumption, but rather didn't examine the emotional underpinnings of the war system, which are tied to implicit beliefs about violence and strength, which in turn are tied to assumptions that the world is inevitably divided up into countries, each of them needing to defend itself against enemies external or internal, and that defence against enemies has to be organised and run by governments. There are powerful forces continually reinforcing these linked assumptions.[47] How to find cracks in this system of vested interests and beliefs is a great challenge.

In writing *Uprooting War,* I never had illusions that it would have a great impact or that I had come upon the

47 Brian Martin, *Ruling tactics* (Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2017).

solution to the problem of war. It was more about me working out how to think about the issues in a systematic way, based on my experiences and reading, and expressing them. If this resonated with others—as it did with some—that was a bonus.

At the time, I thought military systems were so highly entrenched that to challenge and replace them was a very long-term struggle. Today that is still true, and there are few signs that things are changing in fundamental ways.

I've argued that the war system, the system premised on preparing for war as the solution to the problem of war, has all the usual features of a persistent panic. Military systems are deeply entrenched in society, in the form of weapons, troops, training, research and activities, and in terms of people's conceiving of the world as a place of danger in which preparing to use force is a logical and sensible way of dealing with the danger. This system is tightly tied to inequitable patterns of political and economic power. To put this another way, the persistent panic that maintains military systems also helps to maintain governmental systems in which a few people at the top have extraordinary power, and economic systems in which a few people have extraordinary wealth. Dismantling the war system would make it far harder to maintain political and economic inequality.

7
Panic lessons

The four persistent panics considered here—the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war—have many features in common. In each case, there is a real danger involved, and it is rational to take action against the danger. The problem is that the approach of waging a war can perpetuate the danger, or even help create it. The focus in each case is on the danger and not on the role of the assumed solution in causing and aggravating the danger, and not on alternatives.

In each of the four panics, there are striking double standards. The alarm is about a relatively small issue, while a larger issue is made invisible. The war on drugs is about illegal drugs, while legal drugs—especially tobacco, alcohol and pharmaceutical drugs—are exempted from the war framework. The war on crime mainly targets the little guys, while white-collar crime and state crime, which are vastly more damaging, are let off the hook. The war on terrorism stigmatises small-time terrorist activities, while state terrorism, whose victims are far more numerous, is seldom labelled terrorism. The alarm about enemies, the ones used to justify military systems, obscures the damage caused by these military systems in propping up authoritarian regimes and thwarting popular movements for freedom and justice. To call these differences double standards is of course to make a value judgement based on an analysis of

the issues, the sort of analysis seldom raised in popular discussions.

There is also a value judgement in using the word "panic." I've shown that each of the wars has several characteristic features of moral panics, including seeing a group or activity as a threat to community values and stigmatising and attacking it. However, these four wars are different from typical moral panics in being remarkably persistent. To further understand them, it is useful to draw on insights from the study of long-lasting public scientific controversies, including polarisation, suppression of dissent, marginalisation of experts and the failure of new evidence to resolve the controversy. That is apparent in each of the wars. Persistent panics seem to be driven by deep commitments, based in assumptions and emotions not susceptible to challenges based on reason.

The keys to persistence

Having looked at these four panics, here is one way to understand their persistence in terms of several interlocking processes. The first process is othering, in which a dominant in-group identifies and labels an out-group, which is stigmatised and attacked. The out-group can be drug users and dealers, criminals, terrorists or enemies. Usually there is little sympathy or empathy for the out-group: they are dehumanised.

The next process is institutionalisation: the creation and maintenance of institutions to deal with the out-group. This can include police, prisons, laws, weapons and training. Institutionalisation means jobs and occupational

identity, so there are segments of the population with an interest in continuing the alarm.

Then there are belief systems, in particular beliefs about the seriousness of the danger posed by the target and the need for a war-like response. These beliefs are taken up in the population, providing support for expenditures and actions.[1]

Finally, the entire process has a strong link to power systems. In particular, key power systems are reinforced by the process of othering and institutionalisation. The war on drugs mainly targets poor and marginalised populations; the war on crime is mainly against small-time criminals; the war on terrorism is against non-state terrorists; and the war on war mainly serves those in charge of militaries, which protect governments from internal as well as external challenges.

The link to power systems is most apparent in the double standards central to each of these panics. The rhetoric of each war disguises its one-sided application. Imagine a war targeting rich people who use drugs, or targeting executives in companies profiting from tobacco, alcohol and pharmaceuticals. Imagine a war on high-end

1 For an intriguing perspective on institutionalisation and beliefs, see Butler D. Shaffer, *Calculated chaos: institutional threats to peace and human survival* (San Francisco: Alchemy Books, 1985; Ocala, FL: Llumina Press, 2004). Shaffer presents a radical critique of institutions, seeing them as the source of social problems. He explains the way people identify with institutions, becoming their servants at the expense of their own wellbeing. He argues instead for doing without institutions, first and foremost in one's mind, and then living life via cooperative interactions.

criminals, including government leaders who break international law. Imagine a war on leaders of governments that terrorise populations.

These four persistent panics can be thought of as ways to mobilise the use of force to maintain power systems. In each case, police or military forces are central players, ostensibly deployed to deal with some danger, but in the process perpetuating the danger and justifying the need for ruling groups to wage the war and maintain their power to do so.

Inequality and enemies

Is it possible that economic inequality contributes to persistent panics, making them more likely or more serious?

In their classic book *The Spirit Level,* Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett provide evidence that greater economic equality is correlated with a whole range of measures of better social functioning, including better mental and physical health, better educational performance, less violence, lower imprisonment and greater social mobility.[2] Inequality could be directly contributing to dysfunctions or it could be an indicator of other, deeper social problems. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that equality is better for the rich as well as the poor.

Inequality affects people psychologically. In a later book, *The Inner Level,* Wilkinson and Pickett show *why* more equal societies are better off in a whole range of ways.

2 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

They cite a wide range of research on the way inequality affects people's behaviour and thinking. It makes people more status-sensitive, fosters materialism and makes relationships more difficult. As they put it:

> The reality is that inequality causes real suffering, regardless of how we choose to label such distress. Greater inequality heightens social threat and status anxiety, evoking feelings of shame which feed into our instincts for withdrawal, submission and subordination: when the social pyramid gets higher and steeper and status insecurity increases, there are widespread psychological costs. Status competition and anxiety increase, people become less friendly, less altruistic and more likely to put others down.[3]

When economic inequality is extreme, what's stopping the masses from revolting against those with power and wealth? Think of the French Revolution, led by middle and lower classes against the aristocracy. Think of revolutions in many other countries against rulers who were extracting billions of dollars through corrupt operations.

To prevent revolutionary thoughts and actions, what could be better than diverting people's envy and resentment towards some convenient target, an out-group, an enemy? The wars against drugs, crime, terrorism and war each construct an enemy that is the epitome of evil. These enemies are all conveniently different from the wealthy and

3 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The inner level: how more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone's well-being* (UK: Penguin, 2019), p. 56.

powerful within society: they are either stigmatised internal groups, such as street criminals, or foreigners. When there's a war going on, the rich and powerful are let off the hook, at least when the war is not against them.

Back to *The Spirit Level.* Of all industrialised countries, the United States has the greatest economic inequality. As Wilkinson and Pickett show, the US also rates at the bottom for nearly every measure of social functioning, from crime rates to mortality rates. To this we only need to add that the US is where the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war are the most extreme, being waged longest and hardest, not to mention being exported to the rest of the world.

Is there a connection between inequality and enemies? It seems plausible on the surface, but more investigation would be needed to probe this possible link.

Interactions

Aside from their similarities, there are connections between the four persistent panics. Most obviously, by making certain drugs illegal and running campaigns against dealers and users, the war on drugs becomes an integral part of the war on crime.[4] Then there is the war on terrorism, waged not against armies but "terrorists," who might otherwise be considered criminals. When governments spy on their own populations and imprison individuals who are allegedly

4 Jonathan Simon, "War on! Why a 'war on cancer' should replace our 'war on crime' (and terror)," *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* vol. 11, no. 3, 2008, pp. 351–369, draws connections between several types of wars.

planning terrorist acts, this is what otherwise would be called crime prevention, not literally a war. In some wars involving military action, drugs have played a crucial role. Notoriously, the CIA has been involved in the drug trade as a way of financing some of its activities.[5] The so-called "narco wars" involve an interaction between the illegal drug trade, criminal syndicates, counterterrorism and guerrilla warfare.

If there are connections between these panics, are they interdependent? One way to assess this is to look for counterexamples: places or times where only some of the panics hold sway. Portugal, for example, has taken a different path on drugs, opting out of much of the drug war, but still retains its military forces. Norway has a more compassionate approach to criminals than most other countries. A more thorough analysis would be needed to determine the precise relationships between these four panics in different places and different times. A preliminary assessment is that connections often exist but not always.

Other panics?

Besides the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war, are there other persistent panics worth investigating? An obvious candidate is foreigners, a panic closely linked to racism and xenophobia. There are alarms about asylum seekers,

5 Alfred W. McCoy, *The politics of heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). A second revised edition was published under the title *The politics of heroin: CIA complicity in the global drug trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America, Colombia* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003).

immigrants, immigrant communities and the like. In some places and times, immigrants are welcomed, even sought, whereas in other places and times they are treated suspiciously, and even become scapegoats. Unlike the other four persistent panics, there has never been an officially designated "war" on immigrants and asylum seekers. Nevertheless, this is perhaps the best candidate for being added to the list of persistent panics.

What about the war on poverty, famously declared by US President Lyndon Johnson in 1964? It has some similarities with the other wars, but is fundamentally different in that it aims at inclusion rather than exclusion, at validation rather than stigmatisation.

In 1971, US President Richard Nixon signed a bill launching a "war on cancer." Of the many deadly diseases, cancer generates a special fear, and perhaps the attention to cancer could be likened to a panic. But is the fear of cancer disproportionate to the danger? This is not so obvious. Perhaps we should be more afraid of heart disease and less afraid of cancer. More significantly, the metaphor of war may contribute to the emphasis on excising and killing cancerous cells via surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and a neglect of preventive strategies.[6] It would be fascinating to explore the war on cancer using the framework of persistent panics.

What about Covid-19? Many critics say the response to the pandemic is excessive, even counterproductive. Certainly, Covid control measures, at least in some places,

6 See for example Devra Davis, *The secret history of the war on cancer* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

can be assessed as having features of a moral panic. Whatever one's judgement about this, it is too soon to say that responses to Covid represent a persistent panic. Perhaps in a decade or so, if control measures continue, they might be said to reflect a persistent panic. We await analyses of a Covid-industrial complex!

What to do?

Based on examining common features of four persistent panics, each configured as wars, are there lessons that can be used to inform struggles to move towards a more rational, compassionate world? Greater understanding is nice, but is there any practical value in the analysis?

I wish I could point to some simple solutions, but if there were any, they would have been discovered long ago. The fact that these panics are so persistent suggests the immensity of the challenge of creating a different way of thinking and acting. Despite this pessimistic assessment, it can still be useful to identify the sorts of efforts likely to be effective—or not effective. Easiest to identify are negative lessons: things not likely to work.

Many campaigners believe that once people understand the evidence, they will change their minds. The lesson from long-lasting scientific controversies is that evidence and logical argument are not enough. Persistent panics are driven by emotional roots and vested interests, which make it extremely difficult for knowledge and logic to bring about change. Evidence is important, to be sure, but something more is needed.

It's also possible to learn from most of the other characteristic features of persistent panics. Whenever these

features are apparent, they might signal the development or existence of a panic.

• When there's an alarm about something, check the evidence. Is it really a cause for fear and loathing?

• When a group is stigmatised, be sceptical. It might be a convenient target for an alarm. The stigma might be about a long-standing out-group, such as an ethnic or religious group, or it might be about hackers, psychopaths, conspiracy theorists or purveyors of disinformation.

• Check out what critics of orthodoxy are saying, and see whether there's something about it that makes sense. If possible, find out whether any of the critics have come under attack, including being censored, threatened, stigmatised or penalised. Suppression of dissent is a characteristic feature of one-sided scientific controversies.

• Be alert to double standards. When a deviant group or viewpoint is attacked, see whether the powerful attackers are guilty of the same thing.

• Pay attention to threat entrepreneurs, those individuals and groups drumming up alarms. See whether these alarm merchants have something to gain from making people afraid.

• Be careful of relying too heavily on media coverage. Journalists are more likely to report on what's exceptional rather than what's routine, and can easily be influenced by threat entrepreneurs. Similarly, watch out for social media influencers.

Evil?

Consider Steven Bartlett's analysis of human evil, discussed in the chapter on war. Bartlett delved into a range of studies of evil, conceived not in religious but secular terms as humans acting to cause major harms to other humans and the environment, as in genocide, war and ecological destruction. His conclusion is that there are deep-seated pathologies in human thought and behaviour. Most of those afflicted are psychologically normal. One manifestation is that few people care enough to want to do something to oppose war or create a peaceful world. This is not news to peace activists who know how difficult it is to organise protests, much less to organise a movement to push for alternatives to military defence.

Bartlett's analysis of human evil, and most people's indifference about or support for systems that enable cruelty and oppression, applies to each of the four persistent panics. Is this a reason for despair, for giving up? Not so. Bartlett offers no hope, but that doesn't mean there is no hope. The reason he does not end his book *The Pathology of Man* with optimistic recommendations is that he believes optimism can get in the way of appreciating that the source of problems lies deep within the psychological and biological constitution of the human species.

A dream

Just before waking on 7 August 2021, I had a dream. It was located outside the university in a contemporary location I didn't recognise. Bob was there, and he said things hadn't changed much. He was referring to research on numerical modelling of diffusion, which was the subject of my PhD

thesis. Back in the early 1970s, Bob co-authored a couple of articles with me on this, my first papers, but he didn't stay in the field, so there's no way that he could have known what was going on, certainly not half a century later. No matter. A dream doesn't need to be logical.

Immediately as I woke up, I had a thought related to a puzzle concerning my PhD research, a puzzle I had never solved.[7] Instead of answering the question as I had posed it, I needed to explore a different question.

Shortly after this, I thought, maybe I should do the same sort of thing concerning the problem of war. Rather than seeing the problem as one of discovering how to challenge the war system, maybe the problem is in humans. Well, this is nothing new. Indeed, it's just what Bartlett argued.

My next thought was to turn around the slightly larger issue of persistent panics, in which a key theme is mobilising against an enemy. What does it mean to turn this around? Instead of looking for an answer in terms of logic or policy or even campaigning, as trying to counter the panic, perhaps again it's worth looking at human proclivities for group formation in opposition to actions by others. Perhaps the way to go is to examine ways to deal with othering.

7 If you really want to know, my thought when I woke up was that the reason I couldn't figure out how to use my moment-fitting method to numerically solve the diffusion equation in two dimensions was due to problems with empirically derived eddy diffusion coefficients and that I needed to turn the problem around by studying the way the coefficients were derived.

This still didn't get me very far. But then I thought, perhaps it's useful to write about this exploration into a different approach. Even if it reaches a dead end, it might encourage others to pursue a variety of paths.

In the spirit of Bartlett's analysis, it's valuable to recognise that panics over drugs, crime, terrorism and war are persistent. Once established, they are unlikely to be constrained and turned around quickly. Activists need to be aware that the struggle has to be long term. And this is a real challenge, because most activists need to feel they are making a difference. It can be demoralising to think that despite your best efforts, the problems will continue or even get worse, or to think that campaigning will be needed for ten, twenty or fifty years, and then not be enough.

I remember the early 1980s when the worldwide movement against nuclear weapons was at its peak. There were huge marches in many cities. Public opinion in the US was strongly in favour of a "nuclear freeze," a limit on the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons by the US and Soviet Union. This unprecedented public mobilisation did make a difference: there were arms agreements that seemed to reduce the risk of nuclear war.

However, the movement was unsuccessful in its larger aim of eliminating nuclear weapons. By the end of the 1980s, the movement was a shadow of itself, for a combination of reasons, including the arms agreements that gave the appearance of dealing with the danger, loss of media interest and the natural life cycle of many social movements. The end of the Cold War in 1989 meant concern about impending nuclear war almost disappeared, but the movement was moribund before this.

Over the years, I've known many activists. They are my heroes. They make enormous sacrifices for the common good. Most of them work as volunteers or for a small and precarious income. Many of them develop superb skills in organising to take action. They build valuable networks and become highly knowledgeable about the issues, the arguments and what works and what doesn't.

But there's a problem. It's not easy to maintain a high level of commitment over a long period of time. Most activists feel a sense of urgency. They know people are suffering, the environment is being destroyed, abuses are occurring, and they feel they must act now. This is a perfect scenario for activist burnout. A few campaigners keep going year after year, decade after decade, but they are a minority. If you look into movements for fundamental change, for example prison abolition or economic equality, there are few who continue to be involved over a long period. That's partly because movements themselves have ups and downs. When movements are weak, being an activist is extra difficult because it's hard to get others to join. When was the last time you heard about a campaign to end the war on terrorism and build a better path?

Despite this, movements make a difference. By focusing on the problems and their seeming intractability, it is easy to forget that things could have been worse except for the efforts of innumerable people. Some of them are prominent campaigners, the ones like Martin Luther King, Jr who receive so much attention. Others work behind the scenes, helping movements without seeking or receiving

glory. Then there are countless others who in quiet ways resist injustice and try to build a more compassionate world. This sounds like a motherhood statement, a cliched ode to the human spirit, and at one level it is. Nevertheless, it is useful to remember two things that seem contradictory.

Damaging panics persist because many people join in or don't resist, yet at the same time there is a lot of resistance, which often makes a difference. The challenge is to learn from these two seemingly contradictory things.

One way of resolving the tension is to accept that campaigns against panics are bound to be long term and to try to figure out how to make efforts today compatible with building an alternative. This sounds promising, but what does it mean in practice? It's not obvious.

It might mean promoting ways of living that model a future society not driven by a particular panic, that sees those stigmatised by panics, such as criminals and foreign enemies, as part of "us." Many groups do this already, but they seldom receive much media attention, which is more likely to focus on conflict and separation.

A campaign that combines long-term vision with action today might target the key drivers of panics—othering, institutionalisation, belief systems, links to power systems—and find ways to challenge them, including by building alternatives. Again, many groups do this already.

Another angle is to support campaigns that target the other side of the double standard. This includes promoting sensible policies and practices concerning legal drugs, reining in white-collar crime and state crime, challenging state terrorism, and opposing home-grown militarism rather

than just foreign militarism. Even just exposing double standards is hard enough, and worthwhile.

Yet another angle is to take action against systems and conditions that enable and foster panics. For example, economic inequality is implicated in all four panics, which benefit those with more wealth and power by mobilising concern about groups that can be stigmatised and marginalised, in part through othering processes.

It's hard to be specific about what campaigns would look like because we don't know what, if anything, will be effective in halting and reversing persistent panics. One implication of this lack of knowledge is that it is worthwhile to experiment with a diversity of initiatives and perspectives. Sometimes movements emerge quickly—think of Occupy and Black Lives Matter—and changes in energy and perspective can occur when there is a model to follow.

Finally, it's worth thinking about how to make campaigning satisfying, even fun. If you and some friends decided to take action, and you knew that your efforts might not make any major difference and that the problems would be just as great in ten or fifty years' time, how would this affect your thinking about what to do now? You can't guarantee to make a difference but, while doing what you can, at least you can have a good time.

More than this, being involved in action for change can be deeply rewarding. Having a sense of purpose and joining with others in collective efforts can be amazingly satisfying and empowering. Add in insights on how to be effective and the result can be powerful.

8
Tactics against persistent panics

Gene Sharp was a pioneer researcher on the topic of nonviolent action. In his book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action,* published in 1973, he lists 198 methods of nonviolent action, including symbolic actions such as petitions and rallies, a wide variety of strikes and boycotts, and interventions such as fasts and creating alternative social institutions. For each method he identified, Sharp provided historical examples.[1]

I first read *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in the late 1970s, and it greatly influenced me. Sharp documented and explained the enormous power of noncooperation. The methods he described could be used for social change without organised violence. Sharp wasn't the first to point to the power of nonviolent action, but he made great strides in showing how it could be a pragmatic approach to political struggles, not relying on moral rejection of violence but rather choosing nonviolent means because they are more effective.

Over the years, I have been what might be called a sympathetic critic of Sharp. He thought he could convince

1 Gene Sharp, *The politics of nonviolent action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). In paperback it is sold as three separate volumes, corresponding to the three main parts of the book.

military and political elites to switch from military defence to nonviolent defence—which he called civilian-based defence.[2] I argued instead that a more promising approach was to promote nonviolent defence through grassroots action.[3] Later, I wrote a critique of Sharp's theory of power where I pointed to theoretical weaknesses but affirmed its value to activists.[4]

In the early 2000s, I was grappling with an issue and again being inspired by Sharp's ideas. In part 3 of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*—the largest part, yet the least frequently discussed—Sharp presents what he calls "the dynamics of nonviolent action." This refers to a set of aspects or stages of a nonviolent campaign, beginning with "laying the groundwork" and concluding with "the redistribution of power." One particular stage fascinated me: "political jiu-jitsu."

Jiu-jitsu is a sport in which you try to use the opponent's strength and momentum against them. For example, they rush at you and by deft action you toss them

2 Gene Sharp, *Making Europe unconquerable: the potential of civilian-based deterrence and defense* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1985); Gene Sharp with the assistance of Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-based defense: a post-military weapons system* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

3 "Social defence: elite reform or grassroots initiative?" *Social Alternatives,* vol. 6, no. 2, April 1987, pp. 19–23; also, in revised form, "Elite reform or grassroots initiative?", in *Social defence, social change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), pp. 27–37.

4 "Gene Sharp's theory of power," *Journal of Peace Research,* vol. 26, no. 2, 1989, pp. 213–222.

to the ground. By analogy, political jiu-jitsu refers to using the opponent's actions against them. Sharp looked at instances when police or troops assaulted peaceful protesters with a seemingly perverse outcome. The assaults were designed to subdue the protesters and intimidate other campaigners, but instead many people were outraged by the brutality and by the unfairness of using violence against non-resisting, unarmed civilians. As a result, many more members of what Sharp called the grievance group became active, third parties (those previously uncommitted or unconcerned) became sympathetic, and even some on the side of the authorities wavered in their commitment.

Sharp gave quite a few examples of political jiu-jitsu, including the massacre of protesters during the 1905 Russian revolution and the 1960 shooting of protesters at Sharpeville, South Africa. These episodes did not immediately lead to the overthrow of repressive systems, but they undermined national or international support and laid the basis for eventual change.

So far, so good. In collaboration with colleagues, I was studying events in Indonesia, including the genocide during 1965–1966, in which perhaps half a million people were killed.[5] This seemed like an occasion where political jiu-jitsu should occur: there was no armed resistance to the killings, indeed relatively little resistance at all. I asked myself, "Why didn't political jiu-jitsu occur?" Gradually I

5 Brian Martin, Wendy Varney, and Adrian Vickers, "Political jiu-jitsu against Indonesian repression: studying lower-profile nonviolent resistance," *Pacifica Review,* vol. 13, no. 2, 2001, pp. 143–156.

found an answer. The killers did things to reduce public outrage.

Eventually I developed a model. There are five types of methods that powerful perpetrators commonly use to reduce public outrage from their actions, specifically actions that people might think are unfair.

- Cover up the action.
- Devalue the target.
- Reinterpret the events by lying, minimising impacts, blaming others and reframing.
- Use official channels to give an appearance of justice.
- Intimidate or reward people involved.

An example I often use is the 1991 Dili massacre. Dili is the capital of East Timor, which was a Portuguese colony. In 1975, shortly after independence, troops from neighbouring Indonesia—the same Indonesian regime that had committed genocide a decade earlier—invaded. In the subsequent war, perhaps a third of East Timor's people died, most from starvation. In the 1980s, the East Timorese resistance changed strategy: it downplayed armed resistance in the countryside and encouraged peaceful protest in urban areas. In Dili in 1991, there was a funeral procession that became a protest against the Indonesian occupation. As the mourners entered Santa Cruz cemetery, Indonesian troops, which had accompanied the procession, suddenly opened fire, killing many of the mourners.

Here's the interesting thing: there had been many previous massacres in East Timor, none of which generated

much attention. They had all been covered up, so few people outside of the country knew anything about them. There was no documentation except for eyewitnesses who were East Timorese and thus lacked the credibility of being independent of the struggle.

The Dili massacre was different. Western journalists were present. They witnessed the massacre firsthand. Some of them took photos. Given the possibility of exposure, the Indonesian government did what it could to reduce outrage.[6]

• *Cover up the action.*
Indonesian authorities, with the assistance of Australian authorities, attempted to confiscate a video of the massacre.
• *Devalue the target.*
Indonesian officials made derogatory comments about the East Timorese protesters.
• *Reinterpret the events by lying, minimising impacts, blaming others and reframing.*
Indonesian authorities lied that the protesters were carrying weapons, said the number of people killed was smaller than the actual numbers, blamed lower level soldiers for the killing and claimed the attack was needed to restore order.
• *Use official channels to give an appearance of justice.*
A few low-level figures were charged, convicted and received modest prison sentences.
• *Intimidate or reward people involved.*
Indonesian troops increased their assaults on independence supporters in Dili.

6 Brian Martin, "Dili," in *Justice ignited: the dynamics of backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 23–33.

Even though the Indonesian government had total military control over the population in Dili, it still took all these measures to reduce public outrage. But it wasn't enough. The eyewitnesses, photos and video, once out of the country, were enough to mobilise concern in several countries, including the United States, Australia and Portugal, and greatly increase international support for the East Timorese independence movement. East Timor became independent in 2002.

This framework of tactics is sort of like a close-up examination of the processes that help determine whether political jiu-jitsu will occur. To distinguish this framework, I called it the backfire model: when the methods of reducing outrage fail, an attack may backfire on the perpetrators. It can also be called the outrage management model.

I think the most valuable feature of the model is that it provides guidance on how to increase outrage. It's a matter of countering each of the five types of methods.

• Expose the action.
• Validate the target.
• Interpret the action as an injustice.
• Avoid or discredit official channels; instead, mobilise public support.
• Resist intimidation and rewards.

These methods seem obvious enough except for the advice to avoid or discredit official channels. This seems counter-intuitive. Surely it's a good thing for Indonesian authorities to charge those responsible for the massacre. In practice, though, this serves to reduce outrage. Many people think that because authorities are investigating, justice will be done. But when the perpetrators are powerful, often this gives only an illusion of justice. Meanwhile, because official processes proceed slowly, involve legal and other technicalities, and require experts such as lawyers, the urgency of public concern fades. This explains why, after some highly publicised atrocity, governments so often set up inquiries or refer matters to existing agencies.

Through delving into events such as the Dili massacre, I learned more about the tactics of outrage management, and gradually elaborated the model. Through reading and conversations, I also learned something else, something crucially important. The same types of techniques are also used in a wide range of injustices. Over several years, I and others applied the model to sexual harassment, employee dismissals, police beatings, climate change and genocide.[7] This was another reason why I chose a new term, backfire, to distinguish it from political jiu-jitsu.

If the backfire model applies to all sorts of injustices, then why not persistent panics? Remember that these panics involve a double standard and hence a double injustice: a disproportionate alarm about one danger and an insufficient alarm about another.

7 "Backfire materials," https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html

A sketch of a backfire analysis of terrorism

To illustrate a backfire analysis of a persistent panic, consider terrorism, or rather the war on terrorism. This involves an exaggerated alarm about cases called terrorism, nearly always referring to non-state terrorism. At the same time, there is silence about state terrorism, which is far more damaging. It's easiest to begin with tactics used by perpetrators of state terrorism, which includes actions by militaries and police to bomb, imprison and torture opponents, both foreign opponents such as in drone strikes and domestic opponents such as in surveillance, imprisonment and torture of "enemies of the state." Because of the diversity of targets of state terrorism, consider just one example, drone killings.[8]

Drones hover over target areas, collecting information. When a target is identified and confirmed, a missile is released to destroy it, ideally with "surgical precision." Both the strikes themselves and the surveillance create fear among those in the area, never knowing when they and their loved ones might be incinerated. This is the epitome of striking terror into a population, but the drone killing programme is never referred to, by its perpetrators or sympathetic media, as itself being terrorism.

8 There is a lot written about drone killings. See for example Afxentis Afxentiou, "A history of drones: moral(e) bombing and state terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism,* 11(2), 2018, pp. 301–320; Hugh Gusterson, *Drone: remote control warfare* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Jeremy Scahill and the staff of *The Intercept, The assassination complex: inside the US Government's secret drone warfare programme* (London: Serpent's Tale, 2016).

• *Cover up the action.*
Few drone killings are announced. For years, the entire US programme was a secret.
• *Devalue the target.*
In personality strikes, for example on insurgent leaders, the name of the victim is announced, as a sort of trophy. These victims are labelled terrorists. In "signature strikes," based on analysis of data streams, the identities of the targets are unknown; these victims are dehumanised.[9]
• *Reinterpret the events by lying, minimising impacts, blaming others and reframing.*
Many official statements give false information about the danger posed by targets. The killing of civilians, called collateral damage, is minimised. Civilian casualties are blamed on mistakes rather being acknowledged as an inevitable part of the process. The drone programme is framed as a response to terrorism rather than being terrorism itself.
• *Use official channels to give an appearance of justice.*
Former president Barack Obama used to falsely claim that drone strikes were only approved when there was "near certainty" from a real-time review process that the targets were legitimate. When strikes go obviously wrong, for example when they kill children, and there

9 On personality and signature strikes, see Gusterson, *Drone,* pp. 93–103; Hugh Gusterson, "Drone warfare in Waziristan and the new military humanism," *Current Anthropology,* vol. 60, supplement 19, February 2019, pp. S77-S86.

is some media attention, the US military may set up an internal investigation. Otherwise, though, official channels are seldom used to reduce outrage.
• *Intimidate or reward people involved.*
The drone programme is intimidating to its potential targets, obviously enough. There are rewards for those participating in its execution (or executions), including the drone pilots who do not risk their lives and the politicians who can wage war, and terrorise entire populations, without accountability.

If the tactics to reduce outrage are unsuccessful, in some cases the attack can backfire on the perpetrators, generating greater attention to the killing programme and stimulating greater resistance. After the drone killing of Anwar al-Awlaki—who as a US citizen should have been entitled to a trial before being executed—a writer in the *New York Times* stated, "In fact, Awlaki's pronouncements seem to carry greater authority today than when he was living, *because* America killed him."[10]

In addition to reducing outrage over the killing programme, there is another side to perpetrator tactics: increasing outrage over the targets of the programme, the alleged terrorists and the threat they pose. To understand the tactics involved in this, it's necessary to turn our thinking around and imagine that the US government, US troops and the US people are vulnerable targets in great danger, a danger so great that alarm is warranted. Rather

10 Scott Shane, "The lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki," *New York Times,* 27 August 2015.

than trying to reduce outrage, for this the aim is to increase it. The tactics, as described above, are mostly the opposite.

• *Expose the action.*
For every terrorist attack, or attempted attack, or potential attack, there is maximum publicity. The 9/11 attack received saturation coverage and continues to be brought to consciousness. Subsequently, there has been no terrorist attack causing anything like the same damage, but nonetheless those that occur are publicised extensively, for example the 7 July 2005 London bombings. Then there are thwarted attacks, some only in the planning stage or seemingly just idle speculation, that are discovered and given extensive media attention.
• *Validate the target.*
The targets—people and governments in the West—are assumed to be innocents. In some accounts, they are the bearers of civilisation.
• *Interpret the action as an injustice.*
Terrorism—the non-state variety—is treated as the most hideous, unconscionable assault on everything good in human society. After 9/11, US leaders asked, "Why do they hate us?" thereby denying any rational motivation for the attacks.
• *Avoid or discredit official channels; instead, mobilise public support.*
Non-state terrorists do not have any sympathetic official channels in the countries of their attackers, so there is no need to avoid or discredit them.[11] In this context, the war on terrorism relies centrally on public support for counterterrorism.
• *Resist intimidation and rewards.*
There was never any question that targets would acquiesce to the demands of terrorists. Bin Laden's demands were little known and there was never any inclination to openly capitulate to them. Non-state terrorists have limited capacity to offer rewards to those launching and supporting attacks against them.

This analysis illustrates how panic entrepreneurs use two sets of tactics. First, they use a range of tactics to increase outrage over the focus of the panic, in this case non-state terrorism. Second, they use a different set of tactics, mostly the exact opposite, to reduce outrage over a much bigger danger, in this case state terrorism. It's a remarkable achievement:

• Raise the alarm about non-state terrorism and reduce the alarm about state terrorism.
• Raise the alarm over less dangerous drugs and reduce the alarm over more dangerous ones.
• Raise the alarm over street crime and reduce the alarm over corporate and state crime.
• Raise the alarm about foreign military threats and reduce the alarm over the threat posed by the military at home.

11 They do have their own elaborate media apparatus which they use for recruitment and shaping opinion. Here, though, we're talking about mobilising public support for the drone programme.

Quite a few people see through this process of selective outrage, but many go along with it. After all, when most people accept the laws, follow cues from leaders and hear the same things from the media, it requires effort to go against the usual way of thinking. But for those who do question any of the panics, is any guidance provided by this analysis of tactics? Yes, indeed, and it's quite straightforward. It's a matter of turning around the tactics.

Consider again the tactics regularly used to increase alarm about some danger.

- Expose the action.
- Validate the target.
- Interpret the action as an injustice.
- Avoid or discredit official channels; instead, mobilise public support.
- Resist intimidation and rewards.

Each of these methods can be applied to the wars on drugs, crime, terrorism and war: expose the harms caused by the wars; validate the targets of the wars; interpret them as injustices, and so forth. This is a guide to techniques for challenging persistent panics. An important point here is avoiding or discrediting official channels. Rather than putting in complaints or going to the courts, if you want to increase the alarm about the damage caused by a persistent panic, put your effort into mobilising public support.

There's another matter, and it's more complicated. What about the real dangers from drugs, crime, terrorism and war, the ones trumpeted by those supporting the associated wars against them? Should there be an effort to

reduce alarm about these dangers? If so, then the usual techniques could be used.

- Cover up the action.
- Devalue the target.
- Reinterpret the events by lying, minimising impacts, blaming others and reframing.
- Use official channels to give an appearance of justice.
- Intimidate or reward people involved.

The first item in this list, "cover up the action," sounds wrong. Suppose would-be terrorists plan to explode a bomb on a busy street. In the war-on-terrorism approach, this plan is treated as a dire threat that warrants surveillance and the harshest penalties, and information about the plan is headline news. The counter-tactic to increasing outrage is to reduce outrage, and this implies covering up the action, which literally means hiding information about the would-be terrorists. However, we can treat "cover-up" slightly differently, seeing it as giving this event less attention than it would receive otherwise. Indeed, given that terrorists use violence to get the media to communicate their messages, less attention would make terrorism less attractive.[12]

The second item, "devalue the target," also sounds wrong. It suggests that targets of terrorist attacks should be treated as having less value, at least less than normally attributed to them by proponents of the war on terrorism.

Reinterpreting the events might mean explaining the rationale for terrorist attacks. This also can sound very

12 See the discussion in chapter 5.

wrong, but let's consider it anyway. Terrorists aim to send a message. Schmid and de Graaf say terrorism is violence as communication, typically using Western media to convey concerns.[13] Normally, the interpretation is that anti-Western terrorist violence is an expression of irrational hatred, or of hatred of Western values. A reinterpretation is that this violence is a response to Western government policies and practices, for example conducting wars against Muslim populations. In other words, terrorists are responding to actions by Western governments, and hence these governments, and the people who elected them, are in some way responsible.

Shortly after 9/11, prominent US intellectual Susan Sontag commented along these lines, and was lambasted for it.[14] For those on the receiving end of terrorism, it is inconceivable or unpalatable that there could be some justification for it.

Another way to understand this is to turn it around and think of state terrorism, the terrorism of governments against their own people and in foreign wars. If the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are thought of as state terrorism, then the rationales for these wars are exactly analogous to the rationales for non-state terrorism.

Continuing with the techniques for reducing outrage from (non-state) terrorism, we come to using official

13 Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as communication: insurgent terrorism and the Western news media* (London: Sage, 1982), as discussed in chapter 5.

14 Susan Sontag, contribution to "Tuesday, and after: *New Yorker* writers respond to 9/11," *New Yorker,* 24 September 2001.

channels to give the appearance of justice. This method is a non-starter because terrorists—the non-state variety—have little access to official channels in target countries. Likewise, they have relatively little capacity for intimidation except through further terrorist attacks.

These outrage-reduction techniques don't work well for terrorists, which isn't surprising because non-state terrorism is designed to increase outrage. So step back from thinking of terrorists using these outrage-reduction techniques and think of another group that can use them: those who challenge persistent panics. They also have little capacity to use any of the methods except one facet of reinterpretation, namely reframing, as discussed above.

I've laboured through these methods for a small outcome: when challenging persistent panics, it's better not to buy into the usual techniques of hyping alarm over the folk devils, including drug pushers, criminals, terrorists and foreign enemies. Instead, give them less attention and perhaps explain why they are acting the way they are.

Conclusion

Persistent panics cause immense damage. They mobilise resources that could be better used in constructive ways, involve gross injustice and foreclose humane options. They do all this while capturing the popular imagination, as if they are dealing firmly with dangers and protecting society, all the while ignoring their own contribution to the dangers and ignoring bigger ones.

Despite all this, and despite the committed efforts of generations of campaigners, these panics are not going

away soon. They are deeply entrenched, organisationally and ideologically. There are no easy and obvious solutions.

Analysing outrage management tactics, as outlined here, is one way to help think about directions for action. The general insight is that in a persistent panic, various tactics are used to increase outrage over the targets of the panic, the folk devils in Stanley Cohen's terminology, specifically illegal drugs, low-level criminals, non-state terrorists and foreign enemies. At the same time, opposite sorts of tactics are used to reduce outrage over non-targets that cause more danger and damage, specifically legal drugs, high-level criminals, state terrorists and military systems. These two processes operate in tandem, maintaining a remarkable double standard in which a real but relatively small danger is blown out of proportion, putting a bigger danger in the shade.

Does this analysis of tactics provide guidance for action? That is for others to decide. All I can say is that doing something—from engaging in conversations to organising mass campaigns—is worthwhile as long as damaging alarms continue. This promises to be a very long time, so be prepared!

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