

## **PUBLIC POLICY AND THE THREAT OF MILITARISM**

### *SPEECH TO*

### *THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES*

*Hyderabad, India, January 8, 2000*

Dear Sisters and Brother,

First of all, I wish to express my deep gratitude to the organisers of this Conference for the opportunity being provided to me to speak on the topic of militarism, on the threat that is being posed to the lives of women and men by the exceedingly large production of armaments in the world. As an activist involved in the European peace movement of the 1980s, I initiated research on the implications of US arms' production for the world economy. Subsequent theoretical and historical research on military production and economic theory has decidedly convinced me that state procurement of armaments generally belongs to the very most crucial arenas of public policy making. Hence, I am pleased that the theme has been put on the agenda of this Conference which headlines *'Women's Perspectives on Public Policy'*. I find it highly significant that this Conference focuses **public policy** at a time when the ideology of globalisation appears to be at its peak.

Given the fact that economic theory tends to 'overlook' the most central facts in the history of the capitalist world system, it is necessary, I believe, to stress that public policy historically finds its very origins in the formation of centralised armies, and in economic policies designed to gather the financial means for the waging of wars. The British dynastic rulers, for instance, through the 15th and 16th centuries had to wage a prolonged political struggle to convince the country's parliamentarians that taxes could be raised for other purposes than for the waging of war. Again, in the 17th century, as Britain was busy establishing its worldwide colonial empire, public spending was overwhelmingly geared towards supporting, supplying and paying for the country's armed forces. And in the next, the 18th century, Britain faced the problem of an almost continuously increasing public debt, which debt was exclusively caused by the loans the state incurred to cover the costs of waging war with competing European colonial powers. Without any exaggeration it can therefore be stated that both state taxation and state borrowings have their roots in militarism.

Further, to gauge the impact which the manufacturing of armaments has on the contemporary world economy, it suffices to refer to the way the US, the hegemonic power in the world system, relies on arms' production as a 'pump primer' for its business cycles. This public policy has, by and large, been upheld from the Second World War and through the subsequent business cycles of the second half of the previous, the twentieth century. The policy implied that 'defence' purchases formed a major share of the US's Gross National Product (GNP) - 10.3 percent in 1975 eg, as compared to no more than 0.7 percent in

1929. And the military procurements occurred not only at the expense of welfare provisions for the poor in the US itself. In the 1980s, in particular, the world economy was unmistakably drained of financial resources attracted through the US government's high interest policy. American production of the means of destruction was and is sustained at the expense of the eradication of poverty in Southern countries too.

The burden that the US, which according to Sipri is responsible for roughly half of military production in the world, today imposes on the world's population, should be measured through concrete figure. The country's military budget for 1999-2000 amounts to 267,8 Billion Dollars, which is perhaps tenfold the entire Gross National Product of a country like Bangladesh! At the very time when NATO was waging its air war to undermine Yugoslavia's independence, US manufacturers of military planes were engaged in a bitter struggle to obtain the Pentagon's order for construction of at least 4000 new war planes, which according to present calculations will cost over 500 Billion US Dollars. When will the world's poor nations rise up and jointly charge the United States for this extraordinarily massive wastage of economic resources, undertaken to support the profit interests of (mainly American) corporations, and to ensure the US's world dominance? When will the United Nations construct the means to sanction the US for this criminal neglect of humanity's basic human rights?

For citizens in South Asia it is also important to keep in mind the threat which US-imperialism poses to peace in the Asian continent. On the very eve of the new millennium the Clinton government and Congress have agreed on building an anti-ballistic missile shield, presumably as a defence against a potential attack by an 'emerging nation'. The plan is a revival, in a new jacket, of former president Reagan's notorious StarWars-programme. In October last, the Marshall islands in the Pacific have already been misused as launching pad for the first, practical test. Three of the main nuclear weapon states, and foremost China, have protested that the US-plan constitutes a violation of commitments which the US has previously made under international law, precisely to reduce the danger of a worldwide nuclear holocaust. Where is the guarantee that a shield against ballistic missiles will not be used by the US to enable it to launch a war - with or without nuclear arms - against an emerging nation in Asia?

The urgent need to make common cause to force the United States to fulfill its obligations under international law, is clearly underlined by the US Congress decision not to ratify the CTNT (*Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty*). To recall: the treaty was drafted towards 'first tier' nuclear nations in exchange of commitments that other states had previously made to oppose the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The treaty includes a provision stating that it will 'end the development of advanced types of nuclear weapons'. In refusing to ratify the CTNT, by plotting to build an anti-ballistic missile-shield and in devising a novel, earth-penetrating nuclear bomb, the US openly paves the way towards an intensified nuclear arms' race. To be frank - I fear that the United States sooner or later will find the

breaking out of a major war in Asia an option that suits its own interests. Hence, I believe that the time has come to build anti-militarist people's alliances across the continent of Asia, so as to alert the public and our governments against the war-postering of the US.

I have now come to say a few words about India and Pakistan. As we all know, both countries' governments in May of last year undertook nuclear weapons' tests, defying the international public opinion that had meanwhile been built against such tests, and signalling they are determined to be admitted to the 'nuclear club', i.e. the selected group of nations which holds humanity at ransom. While I do feel hesitant as a white man to question the wisdom of India's overall state policies, I do nevertheless feel that the logic provided for these tests, the logic of *nuclear deterrence*, is both faulty and exceedingly costly. There has not been a larger wastage of resources in history than that involved in building piles of nuclear weapons and transmission vehicles in the 1950s and 1960s, sufficient to destroy humanity hundred times over. Some will argue that nuclear deterrence in the past has been effective in preventing a nuclear war between the then superpowers, the US and the USSR. However, I believe that ultimate sanity was primarily preserved thanks to the scientists and other public opinion builders, and the millions of demonstrators in the US and Europe, who protested against the production and stockpiling of nuclear arms.

As an admirer of India's rich civilisation and extraordinarily diverse and powerful cultural traditions, I am saddened to see that the Indian state is following Western capitalist prescriptions, and increasingly so, in terms of its defence and industrial policies. While the scale of India's defence expenditures is incomparably smaller than those of the US, - with fully one quarter of the annual budget being devoted to the military, an amount equal to about 4 percent of the country's GNP, this budgetary policy surely complicates the country's efforts to eradicate the massive undernourishment and poverty that still exist. Even more saddening I find the fact that there is hardly any public debate on the wisdom or ill wisdom of nuclear production, almost half a century after India started building its own nuclear reactors. Given the huge risks to human health, the proven dangers of accidents, and the unsolved problems of storing nuclear waste, - nuclear energy production has meanwhile been discredited internationally as the most controversial form of technology that Western science has ever produced. Do we have to wait till the occurrence of a Tokaimura-style accident, or a Chernobyl, for the intellectual community to act?

Let me now express why I believe it essential that women's studies programmes do address themselves to the thematic of military and nuclear production. My reasons, you could say, are partly of a negative kind: male dominated economic science through its evolution from the 18th century has shown very little inclination to evaluate the role which armament production plays in capitalist economies. Too often capitalism has been projected as an autonomous market system, though throughout the historic rise of capitalism states have played a

pivotal role in building warships and manufacturing ordnance. A most telling example of a deceptive economic theory is that of Keynes: in advising modern states to rely on fiscal and monetary policies to regulate the business cycle, he conveniently ignored the actual correlation between such state economic policies and the military sector which had existed for long. While Keynesian prescriptions can and are used to facilitate the implementation of militarist designs, the theory has officially been able to keep the high ground of a theory aimed at 'full employment'.

On the positive side, - it is women who throughout the twentieth century have most determinedly questioned militarism and state preparations for war. The Polish economist and activist, Rosa Luxemburg, was perhaps the first Marxist thinker to have theorised militarism as a new and attractive 'province of accumulation. She, along with other leading personalities of the then German proletarian women's movement, most energetically mobilised against militarism in the years before and during the 'First' World War. Perhaps the most inspiring role in the European movement of the 1980s against the danger of nuclear annihilation was played by the women who set up a permanent peace camp near the Greenham Common base in the United Kingdom. To my knowledge it is in the writings of women academicians that one finds the most conscious reflection on the contemporary world economy's dependence upon production and exports of arms. Clearly, they all saw and see opposition to militarism as necessary for the protection of women's life interests.

Let me end by expressing some hopes. One of my hopes is that through the debates and discussions at this National Conference on Women's Studies, the theme of military production and economic theory will be more firmly anchored in the women's studies programmes of the universities. A second one is that research be promoted into the health and environmental consequences of nuclear production. To the governments of India and Pakistan I express my hope that they will join the efforts of other nations, aimed at pressurising the US so as to ensure that it will fulfill its commitments towards dismantling nuclear arms, made under international law. And lastly, I sincerely hope that vigilance about US war preparations will soon become a common preoccupation of women academicians in India and other countries of Asia. Thanks for the opportunity to raise all these points at your Conference!

Dr. Peter Custers  
c/o BPSC  
P.O.Box 40066  
1009 BB msterdam  
The Netherlands  
tel/fax: 00.31.320.6937681  
Email: [bpsc@xs4all.nl](mailto:bpsc@xs4all.nl)