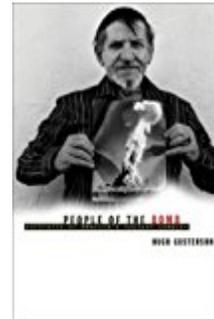


Hugh Gusterson. *People of the Bomb: Portraits of America's Nuclear Complex.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xxvi + 314 pp. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-3859-8; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-3860-4.



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The Specter of Militarism: Nuclear Weapons and American Identity

In November 2001, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, headed by Lynne Cheney, the vice-president's wife, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, published a report entitled "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It." The report castigated Hugh Gusterson, an MIT anthropologist, and other scholars for failing to respond to the September 11 attacks with proper jingoistic fervor. After declaring that "America and Western civilization" are "under attack," the report tagged academics like Gusterson who "invoked tolerance and diversity as antidotes to evil" as part of the "Blame America First" crowd. The report had little effect; indeed, the about-the-author blurb on Gusterson's *People of the Bomb: Portraits of America's Nuclear Complex* boasts of Cheney's disapproval.

In 1996, Gusterson published *Nuclear Rites: A Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War*, an ethnography of nuclear weapons scientists at Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Laboratory. Gusterson's new collection of essays provides greater context for his previous work by aiming "to understand on a broad canvas the functioning of American military ideology, particularly nuclear ideology, during the cold war and the turbulent

decade or so following the end of the cold war" (p. xvi).

Using the methods of history, media studies, science and technology studies, women's studies, and anthropology as his tools, Gusterson has assembled an insightful collection of essays that show the influence of nuclear weapons on vastly different areas of thought. He introduces the concept of "securityscapes"—"asymmetrical distributions of weaponry, military force, and military-scientific resources among nation-states and the local and global imaginaries of identity, power, and vulnerability that accompany these distributions"—as a way to see the contemporary world (p. xxi). *People of the Bomb* places under a microscope members of the securityscape: weapons scientists, politicians, scholars, media, and diplomats.

Those familiar with the literature on nuclear weapons and culture might compare *People of the Bomb* to another excellent collection, Paul Boyer's *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (1998). Boyer's essays discuss various aspects of culture that nuclear weapons have influenced, from museum displays to movies to activism. Both collections argue that the bomb has shaped our iden-

tity, though they differ in timeframe and disciplinary approach. While Boyer surveys the past, Gusterson looks at America's continuing encounter with nuclear weapons, arguing that nuclear weapons loom as large in the post-Cold War era as they did in the past.

People of the Bomb also shares much with Spencer Weart's *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (1988). Weart, like Gusterson, takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining psychology, biography, anthropology, sociology, and history. The two differ in their conclusions, however. Gusterson argues that militarism and nuclear weapons have directly influenced American thought and identity. Weart essentially argues the reverse: that culture and identity, rather than facts, have shaped the way people view nuclear weapons.

Gusterson organizes his essays into five thematic groups in order to show different realms that have been altered by the nuclear complex. Although this organization has its strengths and weaknesses, each essay, considered on its own, offers unique and at times priceless insights.

First, Gusterson begins with a section that brings to life the bomb's power to define "The Other." The essay "Becoming a Weapons Scientist," based on anthropological observations of and conversations with a Livermore scientist, explores the socialization process of nuclear weapons scientists. The weapons labs create a community and mindset allowing scientists of all political persuasions to see themselves as working for peace. A weapons scientist's job is to make weapons to deter international aggression, and deterrence, in their minds, reduces the likelihood that the weapons will be used. Thus, scientists can see their work as preventing nuclear war even as they build nuclear weapons.

The end of the Cold War has drastically altered the way U.S. officials view other nations by increasing anxiety about nuclear weapons falling into the hands of so-called rogue states. According to Gusterson, the most important essay in the book is "Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination"; this essay deconstructs the most prevalent arguments against proliferation, maintaining that they are informed by an Orientalist point of view. Here Gusterson uses Edward Said's construct of Orientalism as the West's tendency to view the East as its opposite: rational vs. impulsive, modern vs. retrograde, honest vs. treacherous. Gusterson identifies the most common arguments against proliferation: third world nations cannot afford nuclear weapons, deterrence will be unstable in the third world, and the third world

lacks the technical and political maturity needed to have nuclear weapons. Rather than representing an informed debate, the proliferation discourse reveals a mishmash of double standards and irrational assumptions. Gusterson rebuts these arguments by turning them against the United States. "Third World countries are often represented in the discourse on proliferation as countries lacking impulse control and led by fanatical, brutal, or narcissistic leaders who might misuse nuclear weapons," he writes in one rebuttal (p. 36). Gusterson turns this idea on its head by citing numerous examples of influential U.S. politicians and military officials who ceaselessly and seriously advocated use of atomic weapons (Curtis LeMay and Barry Goldwater, among others). Simply put, "in Western discourse nuclear weapons are represented so that 'theirs' are a problem whereas 'ours' are not" (p. 24). Like Weart, Gusterson recognizes that discourse about nuclear weapons is not based on facts about nuclear weapons. For Gusterson, Orientalist thinking drives the discourse; for Weart, it is salient cultural images.

Second, Gusterson turns his eye toward the mass media. In "Hiroshima, the Gulf War, and the Disappearing Body," he draws on the memoirs of scientists and media coverage to show how the state manipulates language and images of war in order to maintain its legitimacy. This process of manipulation, Gusterson argues, can be traced from its origins at Hiroshima to its perfection during the 1991 Gulf War. Looking at scientists' memoirs, he finds that analysis of the effects of the Hiroshima bomb took on a hyperscientific, rational tone. Bodies became "numerical aggregates" (p. 68) dismembered from actual people who suffered and transformed into "a set of components" (p. 72), allowing scientists to distance themselves from the human consequences of their work. Hiroshima, according to Gusterson, marked a turning point in the relationship between language and war, "whereby, even as the destructive power of weaponry has increased, there has emerged a sudden public discretion about the effects of these weapons on the human body" (p. 64).

Since Hiroshima, the media and government have adopted the rational-scientific manipulation of language to make suffering and death invisible. These changes culminated in the media coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, where the media and government broke new ground "for the extraordinary visual and thematic absence of dead, maimed, mutilated, strafed, charred, decapitated, pierced, or diseased human bodies in a heavily televised war" (p. 72). This discourse implies that the government believes the American people will support a war if evi-

dence of human suffering is erased.

In *Nuclear Fear*, Weart locates the first use of technical language to hide evidence of suffering somewhat earlier in World War II: at the development of strategic bombing campaigns, which turned civilians into military targets. Even before Hiroshima, the government and media framed the firebombing of Japanese cities as aimed at enemy industries and morale rather than living humans. Perhaps Hiroshima was a turning point for scientists, but the state already knew to hide the bodies.

In the third section Gusterson confronts the ideology of realism as embodied in the intertwined worlds of diplomats and international relations (IR) theorists. Much like weapons labs, this world makes up a highly influential and nebulous part of the securityscape. This section hardly mentions the bomb. Instead, it offers a jeremiad against the ideology of realism, nestled within a skillful analysis of an elite part of the securityscape. Gusterson first challenges the realist notion that a state's interests are self-evident. Instead, he argues, "national interests and identities are socially constructed through the functioning of dominant discourses" (p. 86). Gusterson then criticizes IR theorists, arguing that they suffer from a "blind spot" and exist in a paradigm of circular logic (p. 104). IR studies, he writes, "is a discourse that gives interpretive meaning to events but cannot be tested by them" (p. 120).

Fourth, Gusterson examines the activism and debate surrounding nuclear weapons that has centered on nuclear tests. The antinuclear movement of the 1950s demanded a test ban; the first major nuclear arms control measure banned above-ground tests in 1963, and the Clinton administration agreed to a comprehensive test ban (CTB) in 1996. At the same time, weapons scientists—even those who support arms control—have steadfastly opposed test bans. In "Nuclear Weapons as Scientific Ritual," Gusterson finds that scientists want tests to continue because they act as powerful rituals that reinforce for scientists the ideology of deterrence and shape the social structure of the weapons labs. Consequently, the 1996 CTB threatened to upset the social, political, and economic life of the weapons labs. In "The Nuclear Weapons Laboratory in the New World Order," based on interviews with government and weapons lab officials, Gusterson describes how the labs came to accept the drastic upheaval of the CTB. Instead of traditional tests, the labs were offered "virtual testing," an intricate and expensive system of computer-simulated tests. The sophisticated equipment needed for virtual tests guaranteed U.S. su-

periority in weapons development, since few other nations could afford such a program, while the \$5 billion for "science-based stockpile stewardship" (p. 168) secured the labs' cooperation.

The fifth and final section looks at the way the nuclear establishment has influenced the lives of those who work and live in and around weapons labs. Fundamental to these lives are the efforts of the state to control knowledge about and perceptions of nuclear energy. In "The Death of the Authors of Death," Gusterson shows how the state erases scientists' identity in the name of national security. Weapons scientists are rarely allowed to publish, literally removing them from the academic, historical, and scientific record. Scientists do not receive credit for their work, and their intellectual achievements become the property of the state.

While the state controls knowledge inside the labs, the meaning of nuclear energy is highly contested on the outside. "How Not To Construct an Incinerator" shows how local opposition in Livermore, California, from 1998 to 1990, prevented Livermore Laboratory from building a nuclear waste incinerator. Gusterson, a witness to the struggle, recounts how activists countered the lab's positive discourse about nuclear power and halted the incinerator project. Gusterson sets himself apart from analyses of the antinuclear movement that see (as Weart does) fear of nuclear power as merely a displaced fear of nuclear weapons. Instead, he frames the fight as the new class division over who shall bear the burden of risk in society. His discussion is based on Ulrich Beck's vision that as industrial development increases, so does environmental risk (e.g., pollution). According to Beck, future class struggles will be waged not over the distribution of wealth, but over the distribution of risk (i.e., which groups will have to live closest to the toxic byproducts of industrialization).

Gusterson concludes with a pointed postscript on the George W. Bush administration's "radical shift" in the discourse about nuclear weapons (p. 221). The Bush administration has surprisingly adopted the rhetoric of antinuclear activists, including the claim that deterrence and arms control do not make the world safer. Instead of the utopian vision of the peace movement, however, the Bush vision has subverted these arguments to justify calls for a new generation of nuclear weapons (bunker busters) and defenses (a missile shield). But this tactic is not as new as Gusterson argues. When millions of Americans demanded a Nuclear Freeze in the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan essentially agreed with them, saying that

deterrence created instability. Instead of advocating a freeze, however, he escalated the arms race by introducing the Strategic Defense Initiative. Given the number of Reagan administration veterans still in Washington, one should not be surprised that the government has again co-opted peace rhetoric.

Aside from the five thematic sections of the book, Gusterson mentions several other themes, including the power of language to make weapons seem safe and erase suffering, the national security state's ability to define reality, and emotion and reason in war discourse. Furthermore, the securityscape is the new great divide, but so also is the class division of risk.

Gusterson uses plenty of jargon, although most of it is explained clearly. Those unfamiliar with anthropological writing might be peeved by Gusterson's frequent use of the first person and personal anecdotes—at one point he even discusses his own nightmares. Yet these asides

never seem irrelevant. At any rate, Gusterson spends plenty of time explaining his methods. He also writes in a lively and engaging style, despite a weighty theoretical approach.

People of the Bomb is “intended to help bring the profound influence of militarism on our lives back into focus” (p. xxvi). It succeeds on multiple levels because of Gusterson's wide-ranging interests, vast knowledge, skillful readings, and unique perspective. Gusterson wants these essays to show how the bomb has become “our identity,” though they fall a little short of this ambitious task. Gusterson's focus is on elites: the only time we read about the general public is in the final essay. The book does not have as broad a canvas as some readers might like; for instance, the economy is ignored, and popular culture is discussed only briefly. Still, Gusterson has offered an eye-opening investigation of the intellectuals, media, politicians, and scientists who control the birth, public face, and use of the bomb.

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