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Laura Considine, University of Leeds

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the question of nuclear meaning

> *'We humans made nuclear weapons. We assigned meaning to them. We have the power to change that meaning.'*

This statement, set out in a blogpost of October 2017 entitled 'How We Persuaded 122 Countries to Ban Nuclear Weapons', was made by three prominent voices within the nuclear weapons ban movement and encapsulates the logic behind the idea of prohibition as a means to address the global problem of nuclear weapons (Fihn, Bolton and Minor 2017). The arguments made for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) are founded on two premises: first that it is the nuclear weapon itself that is the problematic object of nuclear weapons politics and so the solution must be one that focuses the weapon as object; and secondly, that the meaning assigned to the nuclear weapon is not fixed or predetermined but socially constructed and contingent. Campaigners have therefore endeavoured to establish the meaning of nuclear weapons as inherently inhumane weapons rather than as providers of stability and security. To do so, they have emphasised the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use as a basis for anti-weapons activism, thereby highlighting the questions regarding morality of both their possession and their use, and asserting their essential illegitimacy. They claim that the creation of an international legal prohibition places political pressure on nuclear-armed states and their allies and stigmatises nuclear weapons possession by creating an anti-nuclear norm that will grow over time (see Fihn 2017; Bolton and Minor 2016; Minor 2015).

The TPNW has provoked heated debate among both supporters and critics over its political viability and its implications for the existing global nuclear order, but it also highlights broader questions about how to think about nuclear weapons. The logic of the argument of prohibition as set out above is that we can change the meaning of nuclear weapons because this meaning is socially constructed. This raises the questions: what and where is the meaning of nuclear weapons?[1] If one accepts the prohibition logic, the answer to the first question is that the meaning of nuclear weapons is either as a provider of state security and object of status, or as an essentially illegitimate and inhumane weapon. Its answer to the second is that nuclear meaning is located in our shared understandings of the weapons themselves, so manipulating those shared understandings through stigmatisation and propagating anti-nuclear norms

changes the meaning of the weapon. In this way, the debate about nuclear meaning provoked by the TPNW is to a large extent framed through the 'moral ontology' of the weapon itself (Doyle 2010). Are nuclear weapons morally different from other weapons and so subject to particular censure? This is a debate that is, to put it mildly, worth having, particularly at this moment in international politics. Yet taking this particular approach to the meaning of nuclear weapons also raises some questions that illuminate the distinct challenges of applying the logic of prohibition to the realm of nuclear weapons politics. These include questions about the focus on the object of the weapon itself as the location of meaning, and about the assumption of that meaning as constituted by shared understandings of this weapon.[2] This short piece will look at the implications of the relationship between the approach to nuclear meaning assumed under the prohibition logic and the idea of nuclear exceptionalism.

The focus on the nuclear weapon as a distinctly and innately illegitimate object places the prohibition logic in an interesting position regarding nuclear exceptionalism. The classification of the nuclear as an exceptional realm accompanied nuclear weapons from their inception and was an immediate and central feature of early nuclear discourse, cemented during the years of the Cold War and continuing to this day (Weart 2012; Boyer 1985). From both nuclear proponents and nuclear opponents, there has generally been a clear distinction created between the 'nuclear' and the 'non-nuclear', in which the qualities of the nuclear bring with them exceptional powers and dangers. These have often been expressed in terms of the divine, for example in narratives of guilt and redemption and the development of nuclear weapons as a fall from innocence (Walker 2012), or through the nuclear as technological sublime (Ferguson 1984; Nye 1994). This exceptionalism has bestowed political power and status on nuclear weapons and also removed them from standard political processes and oversight. Authors such as Itty Abraham (2016) and Gabrielle Hecht have challenged this distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear and pointed out that although the nuclear is almost always treated as an 'exceptional and self-evident' realm (Hecht 2007, 100), it is a frequently contested and ambiguous category in practice.

Previous anti-nuclear weapons campaigns placed nuclear exceptionalism, in terms of the exceptional danger of nuclear weapons, at the core of their message. Nina Tannenwald has shown how it was early anti-nuclear weapons activism that helped draw the normative line

between conventional and nuclear weapons, making their use 'abhorrent and unacceptable' (2005, 5), thus contributing to the maintenance of the exceptionalism of nuclear weapons. Contemporary anti-nuclear weapons campaigners such as those who make up ICAN, whose background is often not in anti-nuclear activism but in prior humanitarian disarmament campaigns, are now attempting to erase this line. They have self-consciously endeavoured to move away from a nuclear exceptionalism that they recognise gives the weapons increased status in international politics and turn them instead into another illegitimate weapon, or as one activist described, 'just a big dirty bomb'.[3] This strategy attempts to make nuclear weapons both unexceptional – and therefore the same as any other inhumane weapon that has been previously banned – while also retaining their exceptionalism as 'potentially threatening the survival of humanity' (Humanitarian Pledge). As such, although campaigners are aware of the political limitations that come with the exceptionalism of nuclear weapons, the contemporary anti-weapons discourse struggles with the tension of how to de-exceptionalise nuclear weapons in order to remove their political status while relying on their exceptional and indiscriminate power – their distinct 'moral ontology' – as a source of their innate illegitimacy. It is therefore caught within a contradiction: the need for nuclear weapons to be simultaneously exceptional and non-exceptional, their meaning at once both fixed and mutable.

This contradiction is not an incidental or merely practical one but in fact illuminates the difficulty of asserting any straightforward meaning for something that has become so intertwined with our understandings of ourselves and the modern world as nuclear weapons have, as well as the complexities of locating that meaning within the history of nuclear exceptionalism. For, while the logic of prohibition concentrates on the weapon itself, nuclear exceptionalism can also be understood as residing as much outside the object of the weapon as in it, in wider structures of power, inequality and insecurity (Biswas 2014; Hecht 2014; 2007), in histories of Cold War excess and the institutionalisation of its security practices (Mutimer 2011) and in the relationships of nuclear colonialism (Endres 2009), in which these weapons have been developed and sustained. This in itself raises the question of if, as we are asked to accept by the logic of prohibition, the meaning of nuclear weapons is socially constructed, can we change the meaning of nuclear weapons without changing society? It is also difficult to satisfactorily mediate the tension between legitimacy and illegitimacy, between nuclear weapons as objects of status or as inhumane and indiscriminate weapons. This tension between legitimacy and illegitimacy is but one of several dualities that have been at the centre of the

discourse of nuclear weapons, as symbol of our mastery of nature and a universal power beyond our knowledge, as our salvation and our ruin, as sacred and profane (Hecht 2007 also Sylvest 2015). Dealing with nuclear weapons through changing nuclear meaning necessarily encounters the many complexities and contradictions, what Abraham has termed the 'struggle between exceptionalism and ambivalence' that have animated traditional nuclear debates (2016, 26).

Examining the implications of the prohibition logic behind the TPNW foregrounds the ambiguity of the meaning of nuclear weapons, their history and place in our world. In this way, the TPNW exposes not only the political fault lines of the current global nuclear order, but also some core theoretical concerns about nuclear weapons, global politics and modernity. Its call to change the meaning of nuclear weapons provides an impetus to think further and critically about what these weapons mean.

[1] There is no space in this short essay to go into the multiple ways in which these questions have been addressed across disciplines. This piece simply focuses on the particular answers assumed under the logic of prohibition in the nuclear ban process and their implications.
[2] Both of these questions deserve further attention in longer form and forthcoming work will address them.
[3] From author interview at the United Nations in New York, June 2017.

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