



wonderfully presented

Dr. Mian writes “In many ways, the battle of ideas has been won. The world understands the danger of nuclear weapons.” I would argue, and my question would also, that understanding the danger as an abstract concept is insufficient. Can people truly understand the danger without understanding the cost of a technology?

As a parallel example, consider the handgun (for simplicity’s sake, consider only a semi-automatic pistol with a twelve-bullet magazine). I think most people understand the danger of handguns. The bullet from a gun can seriously injure or kill a living creature and using an entire magazine can kill many creatures. This is an unambiguous and undebated danger of a gun. Taken on its own, this danger seems, if not small, at least contained. The dangers of a gun, many say, are proportionate to its uses - security from wild animals, protection of private property.

There is a clear difference between the objective danger of an individual with one gun, and the potential cost of being a society that permits gun ownership. There are many countries that permit individuals to own guns¹, and the cost of private gun ownership will be different in each country; but there are some common potential costs - the potential that citizens, individually and in groups, will use guns for offensive rather than defensive purposes. In the United States, the dangers of guns are the same as in any other country permitting private gun ownership, however, the *cost* is much higher. In 2017,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estimated_number_of_guns_per_capita_by_country

there have been "154 mass shootings, 6,880 gun-related deaths, and 13,504 firearm injuries"²

When we talk about individuals understanding the dangers of nuclear weapons, I don't disagree. However, how many people understand the cost of every country having nuclear weapons? Or the cost of beginning a battle fought with nuclear arms? I would guess that not many people really do understand. While we have dystopian futures depicted in science-fiction movies and books, they are filled with fantastical and extreme images that enable the viewer to disconnect from the possibility that their home could also look like a barren, toxic wasteland.

If the battle of ideas had truly been won, would the arms race still continue? Would we have a Limited Test Ban treaty instead of a complete ban on all things nuclear? Would defense intellectuals use abstract and gendered language to discuss the results of nuclear impact?³ My gut says no - lacking a palpable understanding of the ways that our world will be (and has already been) impacted by the presence of nuclear armaments, we continue to engage in battles and displays of potential force. People - both scientific and lay - have not protested on a scale commensurate with the potential danger or the potential cost. The battle for ideas, then, still continues.

I would also throw into the mix of going from an idea to instantiating it in some concrete social change. Think "civil rights" and "equality" to

<http://fortune.com/2017/06/14/steve-scalise-mass-shooting-2017/>

³ Cohn, C. (1987). Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals. Signs, 12(4), 687-718.

the Voting Rights Act, or Civil Rights Act.