

# Defence conversion: Dead duck or still a relevant object of study?

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## SUMMARY

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The *Working Paper* charts the evolution of Conversion Studies from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period and discusses some of the reasons for the demise of the discipline in the new millennium. Based on a consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of Conversion Studies in the past, it makes some suggestions on how conversion could inform a systematic field of academic inquiry in the 21st century. The propositions put forward to this end lean toward a comparatively conservative approach that pays close attention to the historical legacy of conversion as a concept. In sum, Conversion Studies should be a multi-disciplinary, critical and policy-relevant field of research that advocates social change based on analyses of political economies of violence, particularly in the affluent, industrialized and comparatively peaceful societies of the Global North. At the same time, it ought to abandon its past reliance on a simple civil-military dichotomy and, instead, engage with the more complex issues raised by a focus on organized violence. This includes a continual questioning and readjustment of one's own normative coordinates.

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## Main findings

### **Conversion Studies pro-actively advocates processes of transformation bent upon reducing the potentials of organized violence for wider social benefits**

It makes no sense to speak of conversion without a reference to some sort of desired or actual process of social transformation. A Conversion Studies of the 21st century would have to be an explicitly normative science that identifies and proposes reductions in the potentials for organized violence against the prevailing political *Zeitgeist*. Importantly, this entails clearly spelling out the expected benefits of any such reduction.

### **Conversion Studies particularly emphasizes the economic conditions of organized violence**

Conversion Studies needs to be more than a large container for accommodating any normative approach to reductions in organization of violence. The aim is not to convert hearts and minds and militaristic or aggressive attitudes. Instead, Conversion Studies ought to be squarely concerned with material resources, the political economy of organized violence: with capital allocation, manpower, weapons and the defence industry.

### **Conversion Studies goes beyond an exclusive concern with protracted violent conflicts and mainly focuses on organized violence in 'peaceful' regions**

The primary objects of Conversion Studies are material manifestations of organized violence in the comparatively affluent and highly industrialized societies of North America, Europe and East Asia—not (or, at least, not only) the violent conflicts of the Global South. Increasing investments into organized violence in 'peaceful' regions present problems of themselves—and quite regardless of whether they lead to violent conflict or not.

### **Conversion Studies bridges academic cultures**

Conversion Studies connects the 'soft', overtly normative and emancipatory agenda of 'peace studies' with the 'hard', positivist and quantitative approach of 'peace science'. It thus appears as an opportunity for both cultures in Peace and Conflict Research to communicate with each other, to find common grounds and appreciate differences.

### **Conversion Studies is both critical and policy relevant**

Conversion Studies brings criticality and policy relevance together—as two principles of research that depend upon each other in order to make a real change. Conversion Studies ought to be policy relevant precisely because it conducts (self-)critical research, not despite of it.

### **Conversion Studies is always also Post-Conversion Studies**

A Conversion Studies of the 21st century should go beyond the reliance of a clear-cut civil-military dichotomy. The objective is not to fully overcome or eradicate organized violence. Indeed, not every reduction of organized violence is necessarily desirable. In this sense, the normative agenda of conversion needs to be continually contested

## Introduction

Toward the end of the 1990s Michael Brzoska, at the time Director of Research at the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), observed in the *Journal for Peace Research* that “[c]oncepts, like fashions, come and go” (1999a, p. 131). If this is the case, then another eighteen years down the line, the concept of conversion appears to be something of an academic mullet. Between 1972 and 2013, the library catalogue of BICC lists a total of 1,415 publications that deal with defence conversion as their main subject. What seems fairly impressive at first sight gives way to a somewhat sobering insight on the second. 88 percent of this body of texts was published in the course of the 1990s. For the more recent period from 2000 onwards, the catalogue contains a mere 129 entries. Of these, again more than 80 percent cover the years 2000 and 2001 alone. Between 2006 and 2013, no more than three recorded studies took defence conversion as their principal object of inquiry. The diagnosis could hardly be clearer: Conversion has long outlived its heyday, both as an academic concept and as an economic or political process. Had the end of the Cold War prompted many states to significantly reduce their armed forces, certainly since the 9/11 attacks and the still ongoing global ‘war on terror’, the overall trend has shifted, once again, to massive rearmament in many parts of the world. States, generally speaking, are no longer interested in conversion. Why should academics be?

This *Paper* asks whether we, as a scholarly community that roughly identifies itself with Peace and Conflict Research, should let the concept of conversion rest in peace—or whether there might be something, some aspects to it, worth reviving. To give away the answer right at the beginning: It doubts that a full-fledged renaissance of ‘old-school’ Conversion Studies is an altogether realistic or even desirable objective. It does, however, argue that a couple of valuable lessons can be learnt by taking a closer look at its evolution following World War II, its further development and fanning out between the 1960s and 1980s, its ‘Golden Age’ in the 1990s and eventual demise in the new millennium.

The by far most publications on the subject appeared in the 1990s as a reaction to political decisions to downsize military capacities on both sides of the

Iron Curtain. BICC’s definition of conversion as ‘the operational process of demilitarization and the practical management of disarmament’ (Laurance et al., 1995, p. 5) sums up the more general take on the issue during this time quite well. Contrary to popular belief, however, Conversion Studies was not a child of the 1990s. Already well beforehand, it described a buzzing, diverse and ‘fashionable’ field of academic inquiry and critique, firmly established within the overall discipline of Peace and Conflict Research. In 1979, for example, Ulrich Albrecht published an extensive overview of studies on defence conversion, which boasted several hundred entries. If anything, the conceptual approach to studying conversion became decidedly narrowed in the course of the 1990s—and this narrowing might go some way in explaining why the study of conversion went out of style around the turn of the millennium.

If there are some relevant insights to be gained from Conversion Studies, then we must go back to the times predating the end of the Cold War. We need to ask ourselves: What were the motivations, interests, questions, standpoints, attitudes and objectives of Conversion Studies before there was an actual political demand for conversion? As it turns out, we find a contested arena of various inclinations, comprising a more economic and a more political branch, a more liberal and a more radical school, more narrow and very technical alongside broader, more encompassing approaches. There were those merely concerned with converting the assembly lines in a factory from the production of military to civilian goods. At the same time, a significant number of conversion scholars, often associated with the social activism and peace movements of the early 1980s, went beyond such limited aims and developed larger visions of how we might move from a world of war to a world of peace. In retrospect, it is certainly easy to dismiss their writings on the grounds of the often naive and idealistic assumptions that guided their analyses and do not withstand closer scrutiny today. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that these scholars made an effort to think against the grain of the arguably no less naive axioms of mainstream Security and Strategic Studies of the day. In doing so, they tried to formulate concrete normative visions of the future, never

content with simply describing the world as it is, but always motivated by a desire to change it. What is more, most agreed that this task required a deeper understanding of the political economy of organized violence in society, the causes and effects of investments into the military and security sector, and particularly the vested economic interests of the armed forces and defence industries. Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, it appears that this overall approach does not figure very prominently in current-day Peace and Conflict Research. A review of old-time Conversion Studies might be an occasion to discuss the validity of this neglect in the 21st century.

This *Paper* does not propose a new research agenda. Its purpose is comparatively modest, although still quite ambitious and challenging. Given the virtual absence of conversion as a relevant subject of Peace and Conflict Research today, it aspires to tell a brief history of Conversion Studies. This history, it argues, may partly inspire us to be more courageous when reflecting upon and disclosing our normative predispositions, to think about and clearly state what kind of world we are working toward in the research we do. It could also alert us to some empirical phenomena that we have neglected, although they remain relevant. Related to this, it might make us reconsider the widespread implicit assumption according to which a quantitative (and often heavily economic) emphasis on ‘facts and figures’ necessarily precludes more normative and emancipatory research designs. To revisit the rise and downfall of Conversion Studies equally draws attention to a dangerous pitfall: A discipline that all too easily abandons pro-active criticality for the sake of following the footsteps of political demand may find itself as all but water under the bridge once this demand has subsided.

There are, then, some good reasons to revisit the past. Yet, the concept of conversion is not without its problems. Its main shortcoming concerns the overtly simplistic dichotomy between the military and the civilian—or between war and peace—on which it commonly relied. In the complex world of today (but arguably also in the just as complex worlds of former times) things rarely come as clear-cut as that. The distinction can be rightfully called into question on

empirical as well as normative and conceptual grounds, in turn fundamentally challenging the core idea of conversion itself. Maybe a newly revived academic engagement with the issue at hand should understand itself as ‘Post-Conversion Studies’. That is to say: While explicitly situating itself within the tradition of Conversion Studies, and thereby not least retaining its critical, normative and emancipatory spirit, it would simultaneously always question the very parameters that render conversion a coherent and somewhat intelligible concept.

The *Paper* is organized into three main parts. The first begins with an inquiry into the meaning of the term conversion, before tracing the history of Conversion Studies from the end of World War II to the 1980s. It considers different definitions of and approaches to conversion within this field and alludes to some of the main arguments and debates put forward by conversion scholars, particularly as they relate to the causes and effects of militarization. Importantly, this first part suggests a basic distinction between two broad perspectives in Conversion Studies: The one conceives conversion as a largely technical undertaking reacting to an external political demand; the other places a stronger emphasis on an understanding of conversion as a pro-active political process.

The second part of the *Paper* analyzes how this distinction played out in the relocation of Conversion Studies as an academic field of inquiry after the end of the Cold War. Doing so, it identifies factors explaining the gradual demise of the discipline as a relevant scholarly subject within Peace and Conflict Research.

The third and final part explores the extent to which it may be worthwhile to resuscitate aspects of Conversion Studies in the new millennium. Can an argument be made that conversion is still a relevant analytical concept? Or is it better left dead and buried? The *Paper* concludes with six propositions that ought to be taken into account when answering these questions.

## Conversion: The basic idea

The etymological roots of the term conversion go back to the Latin noun *conversio*, which translates as ‘a turning round, revolving, revolution’, sometimes also ‘subversion, alteration, change’ or a ‘change of view or opinion’. A common modern dictionary defines conversion as ‘the process of changing or causing something to change from one form to another’. This, of course, is a rather broad understanding that invites a range of applications across various contexts. On the one hand, conversion has acquired numerous ‘technical’ connotations, for example in finance (the changing of one currency into another) or medicine (‘conversion disorder’) (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, pp. 16-17). On the other hand, many people associate the term with a religious meaning. According to Catholic dogma, conversion refers to the process whereby a ‘misguided’ individual abandons his or her ‘old’ belief and embraces the ‘true faith’ of the church (see Breitschwerdt, 1988/9, p. 10; Albrecht, 1979, pp. 17-18). This move may be voluntary; it may be enforced from the outside. In either case, the specifically religious appropriation of conversion points to an actively initiated process that differs from any more mechanical or neutral transformation in three significant ways. First of all, it does not presuppose the disappearance—or full-scale destruction—of the converted object. To convert is not to replace one thing with another, altogether different thing; it is to effect a substantive change within the internal composition of one and the same entity (or individual). Second, conversion seeks to align its object with the general and accepted norms of society; by way of contrast, the act of denouncing those norms and becoming an outcast could be characterized by its antonym ‘perversion’. Third, whoever becomes converted experiences a positive enhancement of his or her quality—not simply in the eyes of the community but also in terms of an independent and absolute truth. Conversion always denotes something desirable and good: The end of delusion and return to the comforting lap of the one and only, eternal order of things.

The explicitly normative aspects first encountered in the religious understanding of faith-conversion resonate with another, comparatively younger

and less well-known application of the term: military or defence conversion. The basic idea is not new, to be sure—and also a popular theme of Christian scripture. As the well-known passage in the Book of Isaiah sums it up, “and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). At the most general level, defence conversion may be defined as the transformation of something military into something civilian. Similar to faith-conversion, which relies on an initial distinction between the believers and the non-believers, it thus requires the separation between two social spheres: the civilian and the non-civilian or military. At the same time, conversion intimately connects these two opposing poles with each other, for it denotes the very process whereby the one morphs into the other. Hence, and just as faith-conversion does not burn the heretic at the stake, defence conversion suggests an internal transformation of the converted object, from military to civilian.

Two observations follow from this. On the one hand, conversion always involves a reduction, a shrinking of the military realm, whatever this may mean in a concrete case. For example, if a defence company diversifies its production portfolio and enters civilian markets, while nonetheless continuing to produce and sell military goods on the same scale as before, this would not count as conversion (see Dumas, 1995, pp. 18-19; Brzoska, 2000, pp. 134-35). As Southwood explained, it would need a “once-for-all re-employment of a firm’s defense resources to civilian use” (1997, p. 100). On the other hand, defence conversion ought not to be confused with arms control or disarmament. Restrictions in the procurement, stockpiling and transfer of military resources may help to prevent an arms race from spiralling out of control; yet, they do not necessarily transform the status quo between military and civilian resources within a given society (see Roberts, 1991, p. 77). And whereas an actual reduction in armament might create a certain potential for conversion—and is, arguably, a precondition for any such process to come about in the first place—the former may well proceed despite the latter (see BICC, 1996, p. 17). Brzoska noted



that disarmament and demobilization could conceivably even contribute to enhancing—rather than diminishing—defence capabilities, for instance by streamlining the military sector and thereby making it more efficient and effective (1999b, pp. 15–16).

Conversion, then, is not solely concerned with putting a lid on or downsizing the military forces and/or defence industry. Instead, it directs its main attention to the *civilian benefits* that any such measures need to entail. For example, it would not be sufficient to simply close down a weapons-producing factory and dismiss the workforce. The central question is how the freed labour could be put to an alternative, socially productive use. Swords are not beaten into scrap; they are beaten into *ploughshares*.

This broad conceptualization of defence conversion leaves a number of important questions unanswered. How does conversion come about? What is its scope? Can every decrease in military resources be translated into tangible civilian goods? Or should conversion rather focus on particular resources? And what is a ‘socially productive’ civilian good anyway? However, as Bjorn Møller pointed out, such questions are “probably more useful for specifying particular versions of conversion than for distinguishing conversion from something completely different” (1996, p. 10). They shed some light on Brzoska’s observation that “conversion is a contested concept” (1999b, p. 15). The academic study of defence conversion is anything but a homogeneous field of inquiry. Reviewing the relevant literature, it quickly becomes clear that there is—or, rather was—no such thing as ‘the one and only’ way to write and think about conversion. Conversion Studies encompassed a wide variety of scholarly dispositions, approaches and objectives. Most commonly, different understandings were distinguished regarding the scale of conversion (local/national/global) and/or the types of resources to be converted (see e.g., Laurance et al., 1995; Brzoska, 1999a; 1999b). And, of course, it makes a difference whether an effort at conversion is only concerned with, say, a single factory or military base, or whether it directs its attention to the military expenditure of a country or even the whole world.

Nevertheless, the main distinction I would like to propose here concerns not so much the conversion process in and by itself, but rather the academic study and engagement with conversion as a problem, that is the *problematization* of conversion. How does Conversion Studies position itself vis-à-vis the political and social agents and structures that it addresses? Does it problematize the presence or, on the contrary, the absence of conversion? It seems that publications on the issue can be situated along a continuum between two extreme positions: an economic and technical and a more pro-active, political approach.

## Economic conversion as a technical challenge

Many writings on conversion reacted to an external political demand, some decision to convert some parts of the military or defence infrastructure. In such cases, conversion poses—above all else—a technical problem or challenge to scholars. What kind of knowledge and techniques would such a process require? How can it be organized effectively and efficiently? As it happens, these were the principal questions on the mind of the American economists who popularly coined the idea of defence conversion as World War II was drawing to a close (see Boulding, 1983, p. 163). They were a very practical response to the straightforward problem that the US economy was facing at the time, namely an undesired surplus in military production and labour due to decreasing (political) demand for weapons and soldiers. A shock therapy of simply dismantling substantial portions of the defence industry and dismissing countless workers alongside armed forces' personnel was ruled out because this may have generated widespread unemployment and social unrest. The export of military goods and services to foreign markets was equally out of the question since the possible demand elsewhere could not have been met without undermining one's own foreign policy goals. Given these considerations, the notion of defence conversion appeared as an attractive third strategy to US government officials. It promised to reduce military capacities while at the same time not only averting unemployment but creating a number of social and economic benefits (see Albrecht, 1979, p. 9). As it turned out, the diligently planned and executed conversion of large parts of the US defence sector in the late 1940s was very much a success story that would be frequently invoked by later proponents of military downsizing (see Melman, 1974, p. 2.; Bischak & Raffel, 1992, pp. 2-3; Bischak & Yudken, 1993, pp. 174-75; Klein, 1993, pp. 18-19; Intriligator, 1996, pp. 8-10).

Publications concerned with the technical management of conversion processes continued to appear with some frequency over the following decades. The need for such expertise persisted, albeit on a much smaller scale than beforehand. For example, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara closed down

a number of military bases in the early 1960s, often with severe economic ramifications for surrounding communities. Similarly, cuts in the US space programme in the early 1970s seriously affected some parts of the defence industry (see Albrecht, 1979, p. 9).

Looking through the vast literature on defence conversion, published over a period of almost five decades, it quickly becomes clear that most writings adopted a very technical and economic focus. Theoretically, of course, the conversion of a military object could also include the transformation of militaristic attitudes, mindsets or perceptions. Yet, the civilian benefits of such processes would, arguably, be a lot harder to pin down than concrete material redistributions. As Seymour Melman insisted, the concept of defence conversion “pertains to the actual physical resources used for military purposes” (1992, p. 139). For this reason, it was, in fact, commonly characterized as ‘economic conversion’.

In the narrowest understanding, economic conversion applied only to the defence industry: to factories, assembly lines and, not least, human labour (see Gummet, 1997). Brzoska observed that this was very much “the focus of the debate in the 1970s and early 1980s” (1999a, p. 133). Sometimes also termed “industrial conversion” (Brzoska, 2000, p. 134) or “direct conversion” (Hartley, 1997, p. 93; Struys, 1999, p. 34), its concern was, quite simply, with shifts “from the production of military to civilian goods” (Brzoska 1999a, p. 133). Individual studies differed in terms of the scale they analyzed, which could range from global over national industrial transformations to very specific reorientations within only parts of a single production plant (see Brzoska, 2000, p. 134). Gummet and also Southwood distinguished between three major focal points in the literature. The first “attempts to change what is produced in an individual plant” (Gummet, 1997, pp. 35-36), sometimes also characterized as the “factory-based approach” (Southwood, 1997, p. 101) or “firm-level conversion” (Brzoska, 2000, p. 134). The second “attempts to alter the overall product range of a firm”, which may include several production facilities, possibly located in various places (Gummet, 1997, pp. 35-36). Southwood referred to this as the “company-based

**Table 1**  
*Typology of economic conversion*

DIRECT / INDUSTRIAL CONVERSION		INDIRECT CONVERSION
INTERNAL CONVERSION	EXTERNAL CONVERSION	\ CONVERSION OF MILITARY PERSONNEL ('REINTEGRATION')
\ FACTORY-BASED / FIRM LEVEL	\ COMMUNITY-BASED	\ CONVERSION OF MILITARY BASES ('BASE CONVERSION')
\ COMPANY-BASED		\ CONVERSION OF DEFENCE EXPENDITURE

approach" (1997, p. 100). The third "attempts to generate new foci of economic growth in a region" (Gummet, 1997, pp. 35-36). Such a "community-based approach" (Southwood, 1997, p. 102) need not limit itself to changes within one or more factories. It might even close down military production sites completely, as long as the workforce is relocated to a different facility to produce civilian goods. Whereas the former two types have been categorized as cases of internal conversion (i.e. taking place within a single plant or company), the latter is also referred to as external conversion, i.e. the transition of labour from one factory or company to another (see Dumas, 1996, pp. 140-41).

Although the defence industry was certainly an important focus of Conversion Studies, various scholars adopted a broader perspective (see Brzoska, 1999a; Hartley, 1997, p. 3). Besides the 'direct' conversion of industrial facilities and labour, conversion could also pertain more generally to military personnel, infrastructure or capital. In this case, it was sometimes distinguished from the former as indirect conversion (see Table 1). Again, however, the resource in question would need to be transformed to benefit or enhance non-military social goods: The successful reintegration of soldiers into civilian life and workplaces, the reconstruction of military bases, for instance for social housing schemes, or the redirection of a government's defence expenditures into, say, health or education budgets. As illustrated by the various definitions of defence conversion in Box 1, in the 1990s, this broad understanding—referred to by BICC as the "resource re-use perspective" (Brzoska, 2000)—was, while maintaining the economic focus, very much the consensus among scholars.

Economic conversion may address various types of material resources. Still, the focus on economic aspects lent itself to a rather narrow and limited academic perspective. Lisa Peattie wrote in 1988 that economic conversion was "most frequently thought of as a set of essentially technical projects" (p. 11). In this understanding, it is easy to imagine conversion as the reaction to a situational change that is brought about independently and thought of as somehow problematic. A defence corporation might be confronted with a sudden decrease in demand for the weapons it produces. A community might be faced with the closure of a military base in its vicinity, thus losing an important source of income for its local economy. In either case, conversion would be one among other options the affected actors could choose to pursue. The defence corporation may try to switch to the manufacture of civilian goods; alternatively, it may seek to enter new markets and sell its weapons abroad or even shut down production lines completely. The local community may attract investors to convert the formerly military buildings to, say, a holiday resort, thereby generating new economic opportunities for itself—or some of its inhabitants may simply migrate to different places with brighter prospects for making a living.

In all likelihood, actors will only opt for conversion if it appears as a viable strategy that promises a greater return than any of the alternative possibilities. Sometimes, divergent interests within the groups or institutions in question could lead to conflicts over whether or not to implement a conversion process. To stick with the example of the aforementioned defence corporation: Whereas the workers might

**Box 1****General definitions of economic defence conversion**

*[E]conomic defence conversion seeks to redirect military resources in such a manner that they are put to non-military, productive or 'civilian' use. It can refer to the reallocation of capital, public funds formerly invested into the defence sector, to the redesign of the means of production or the reorientation of human labour (Dumas, 1977).*

*Economic conversion refers to the process of moving labor, capital and other resources from the military to the civilian economy (Bischak & Raffel, 1992, p. 1).*

*Conversion is plain and simple—a shift from military to civilian activity using released personnel and facilities that were formerly devoted to defence production (Klein, 1993, p. 17).*

*Conversion reaches into the economy and redirects human and capital resources from military to civilian-oriented activity (Dumas, 1995, p. 6).*

*The problem of defence conversion is that of shifting defense production into non-defense civilian production. Of particular importance in the process of conversion is that of shifting labor and capital from military production to civilian production. Labor, in the form of armed forces personnel and defense plant workers, must be redirected to produce civilian goods. Capital, including both military bases and plant and equipment producing military goods and services, must be transformed so as to be able to produce civilian goods (Intriligator, 1996, p. 3).*

*The conversion challenge is to achieve a re-allocation of resources from the military to the civilian sectors of the economy (Hartley, 1997, p. 83).*

*[I]n its broadest sense, conversion is the allocation of military capacities to civilian use (Struys, 1999, p. 34).*

consider conversion an ideal means for retaining their jobs, the executive management may expect higher profit margins if parts of the workforce are simply dismissed. The important point to keep in mind is that for this kind of conversion to come about, its objectives need to be grounded in the economic self-interests of the affected constituents who initiate it. As such, and although potentially broad in scope, the scale of conversion usually remains small, concerned with a set of microeconomic challenges (and possible conflicts) encountered in a specific production facility or local community (see Møller, 1996, p. 9). This type of conversion is arguably apolitical, meaning that it serves no higher purpose than to secure the socio-economic *status quo* of a particular group. "Economic conversion" is often only about preventing "a loss of employment or firm closures" (Struys, 1999, p. 34). In some cases, it may even be "no more than a mopping up operation" and "part of the process of making the defence industry more efficient" (Southwood, 1997, p. 100).

## The politicization of Conversion Studies

The more technical and economy-oriented perspective only describes part of conversion-related studies and research activities. In the course of the 1970s and, especially the 1980s, it is possible to discern an increasing politicization of Conversion Studies, accompanied by a broadening of issues beyond a mere concern with economic problems. In a 1988 special issue on defence conversion in the 'Bulletin for Peace Proposals', Michael Renner argued that conversion "ought to be more than just a mechanism to adjust for fluctuations and piecemeal reductions in military spending" (p. 138). As Peattie seconded, it should really be considered "a political movement that addresses the economic basis of what in international relations is known as 'the arms race' and in domestic politics can be thought of as 'militarism'" (p. 11).

Renner's and Peattie's proposal was not wholly new. A comparatively smaller, nevertheless still significant and influential strand of Conversion Studies had been doing just that for quite some time. Unlike the approaches discussed above, it was concerned with the absence of a large-scale conversion project behind the backdrop of what US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his famous 1961 farewell address, had warningly characterized as an emerging "military-industrial complex". Notwithstanding occasional problems in individual communities and industry sectors, US military spending as a whole had significantly increased over the Cold War period, sustaining an ever-expanding defence-industrial base, the social value of which was increasingly contested, especially during the economic recession of the mid-1970s. A popular critique of 'development' policy blamed high levels of armament in the donor countries—as well as the Third World itself—for the failure of the development-project to deliver on its promises (see Boulding, 1983, pp. 166–69). What is more, in the 1980s, the neo-liberal and conservative policies of Ronald Reagan and Margret Thatcher severely circumscribed spending on social welfare while maintaining (or even increasing) defence and military expenditure (see Breitschwerdt, 1988/89, p. 11). The politicization of Conversion Studies also neatly tied in with the concerns of new social movements advocating ecological sustainability and a world free of nuclear weapons (see Boulding, 1983, pp. 172–73).

If one conceives of conversion as a more political project, it becomes less a technical reaction to some shift in external circumstances, premised on maintaining some social and economic *status quo* (employment, turnover). Quite the contrary, conversion would seek to pro-actively transform existing social and economic conditions. Whereas this political take on the issue may still be concerned with a very limited scale or object, i.e. a single factory or local community, more commonly it assumed a broader perspective and addressed the problems of an entire country or even the whole world. In comparison to industrial and base conversion, the question of, for example, reallocating public expenditures on the military moved up on the agenda of Conversion Studies.

The questions and tasks differed from those writings that were merely reacting to some very specific requirements of the government. For a start, scholars needed to empirically demonstrate that investments in the defence sector were, by and large, a social and economic burden, not a benefit. At least throughout the 1970s, conversion scholars thus often remained clearly within the discipline of economic science, usually applying macroeconomic analytical frameworks (see Albrecht, 1979, p. 10). This included econometric models to quantify the opportunity costs of investments into the defence sector (e.g. Stone, 1973), substitution and trade-off analyses to calculate potential impacts of reduced military spending on other public budgets (e.g. Russett, 1970; Caputo, 1975), parametric cost comparisons of military and civilian enterprises (e.g. Clayton, 1972; Sivard, 1977), or more sophisticated methods for comparing the wider socio-economic effects of projected changes in defence expenditures to similar changes in, say, health expenditure (e.g. United Nations, 1977). The main purpose behind these studies was to highlight the anticipated benefits that would result from a reallocation of military resources (mostly in the form of capital) to civilian uses. Rather than being concerned with the particularistic economic self-interest of workers in a specific defence plant, scholars wanted to demonstrate the value of large-scale conversion for society as a whole.

Besides its continual leaning towards economic science, the politicization of Conversion Studies also attracted political scientists (see Albrecht, 1979, pp. 53-54). The focus of their questions was less on the anticipated effects as rather on the social conditions of conversion: Under what circumstances can we expect to realistically implement a conversion process? What is required for it to be successful? What sustains resistance to conversion? How can such resistance be overcome? Or, to put it differently: Why do we have such a thing as the 'military' sector? What arguments actually explain and justify armament and military build-up? And how is it possible to effectively counter these arguments?

Since it combines both an economic and a political outlook, the pioneering work of Seymour Melman, up to his death in 2004 professor of Industrial Engineering and Operations Research at Columbia University and one of the most well-known founding fathers of Conversion Studies, deserves particular scrutiny here. His overall objective was to unmask and delegitimize the "ideologists of military power" that advocated the "necessity of war economy" (Melman, 1974, p. 122). This required a critical engagement with a number of popular claims about both the causes and effects of militarization. The following section will look at both debates, which were highly influential within the political wing of Conversion Studies, in some more detail.

## Causes of militarization: The military-industrial complex

Up until the 1960s, peace researchers and the classical Realists in International Relations (IR) theory largely agreed in that inter-state rivalry was the principal factor explaining rises in defence expenditure and military build-up, the main disagreement being whether this resulted in more security or more insecurity for the parties involved (see Glaser, 2000). Investments in the defence sector, conventional wisdom held, were excited by geostrategic considerations, ideological differences, threat perceptions and the quest for security. However, in the course of the 1960s, and particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, various scholars began to question this viewpoint. In 1988,

Renner wrote that the arms race between the superpowers had reached "a self-sustained momentum with little real causal relationship to national security" (p. 129). Already a decade earlier, a comprehensive study had failed to detect any correlation between variations in inter-state conflict intensities and changes in military expenditure (see Senger, 1975). Some argued that increasing militarization, accompanied by the evocation of an Evil Empire instilling a permanent state of fear in people, was occasioned by domestic concerns over social fragmentation and civil unrest, a "means for inducing compliance and maintain the existing order" and "of keeping the citizenry in line" (Peattie, 1988, p. 12). Others emphasized economic motives. Mary Kaldor related rises in British and US military spending during the 20th century to efforts of governments to support declining industry branches in the wake of technological changes (1978, p. 324). Similarly, Dana Dunn stressed the importance of ensuring employment:

*[W]e need weapons contracts to provide jobs for defense workers. In order to produce the weapons, we must fund a massive defense budget or radically increase arms sales around the world. In order to justify such allocation of resources, we need a threatening enemy. Defense workers also require this socially constructed enemy in order to rationalize their work (1995, p. 40).*

Such arguments were closely related to a more general theory according to which military build-up was driven by the vested economic interests of certain coalition groups that were organized in what became known as the 'military-industrial complex' (MIC) (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, pp. 17-18; also Bischak, 1993, p. 133). Gaining popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, the MIC was a somewhat vague concept accommodating a wide spectrum of political inclinations and various theoretical and empirical assumptions (see Albrecht, 1978). The perhaps most comprehensive—and consistent—account of the US American MIC was provided by Melman. Having outlined its central elements in his 1970 book *Pentagon Capitalism*, he clearly spelled out its organizational characteristics four years later in *The Permanent War Economy* (1974).



Importantly, Melman argued that the political economy of the US defence sector significantly differed from the usual dynamics of civilian markets (1974, p. 54). Whereas, by all outward appearances, it mimicked some normal features of private capitalism, it ought to be regarded as “a full-fledged centrally managed industrial system” (p. 20) whose “top directorate is located in government” (p. 59). In this advanced MIC, which Melman labelled the “war economy” (p. 260) of “militarized state capitalism” (p. 299)—and later scholars would alternatively dub the “war machine” (Renner, 1988, p. 132) or the “welfare-warfare state” (Peattie, 1988, p. 12)—decision-making power was not dispersed between structurally differentiated positions of producers and consumers. Instead, both sides were collapsed within a single, more or less homogeneous body that joined “peak political and economic” leverage (Melman, 1974, p. 60). Just as Eisenhower had feared, the MIC represented “a concentration of power hitherto unknown in American experience” (pp. 20–21).

The crucial assumption was that the symbiotic relationships between government bureaucrats, the military and its defence-industrial base had become so intimate, uncoupled from both civilian economy and effective democratic control, that decisions over defence spending, military research and development and the acquisition of new weapons were less guided by some public interest (be it manifest in real or imagined security concerns and cost-efficiency) as by the personal interests of those that partook in the war economy and derived some (usually material) benefits and privileges from it (see Melman, 1974, p. 54). For Melman, the “post World War II American war economy was developed and sustained by political decisions” that “were rooted in an economic interest base of part of the economy” (p. 287) and affected only “a minority of American society” (p. 280; see also Huffschmid, 1977, p. 23).

This theory on the causes of militarization had significant consequences for formulating a politics of conversion. For a start, it was clear that any impulse to change or transform the present order would not originate from within the military-industrial complex itself. The vested interests conjoining public

administrators, militaries, defence-industrial managers and workers would drive these groups to resist any disarmament initiative and presented, in fact, the greatest obstacle to any such effort (see Melman, 1974, pp. 59–61). The arms race could not simply be ended by venturing out into the realm of international politics. The greater challenge was of an economic and domestic nature, namely to render the dismantling of the defence sector beneficial to the very people that profited from it—and thereby winning their support. Conversion, then, appeared as a lot more than simply the promise of an ‘added economic value’ to a process of disarmament, itself brought about by other means. Quite the contrary: *Economic* conversion became the *principal political strategy* necessary to realize disarmament in the first place (see Breitschwerdt, 1988/89, p. 11). Notably, this did not necessarily imply a break or conflict with the more limited and technical approaches to conversion outlined earlier. Indeed, much of the conversion literature in political science highlighted the potential of the concept to build bridges between different interest groups and form political coalitions, for example between trade unions and the peace movement (see Peattie, 1988, p. 15).

## Effects of militarization: The depleted economy

A central thesis of Conversion Studies was that militarization could be primarily explained by vested economic interests within the MIC rather than political concerns over (in)security. Conversion was thus the key to disarmament (instead of, for instance, establishing a system of collective security, which was also discussed at the time). Nevertheless, and even if correct, this claim did not expound why conversion and disarmament ought to be pursued in the first place. In fact, if the *real* driver behind militarization were merely economic self-interest—rather than the preparation for war—increases in armament may not have been as bad as critical IR scholars made them out to be when they pointed to the dangers of arms races and the “security dilemma” (e.g. Herz 1950). What is more, a popular argument

held that investments into the defence sector even yielded positive economic externalities for society as a whole. This view had been particularly popular during the 1940s and 1950s, where excessive military spending was commonly considered an effective means of averting economic recession. As Dumas summed up the general argument,

*the defence sector creates jobs and provides an additional source of demand to stimulate economic activity [...]. It drives the discovery of new technology with important application to civilian purposes, technology that ultimately results in rising productivity and better products. And by the threat it poses to other nations, a high level of military expenditure guarantees access to both needed raw materials and profitable product markets (1988, p. 1).*

Not all of these claims could be easily dismissed. Dumas himself acknowledged that some of them contained a grain of truth. Renner, just as Dumas an advocate of conversion, similarly conceded that various “criteria crucial to the development of the industrial system as we know it today—uniformity, repeatability, predictability, mathematical quantifiability, and command and control features—find their origin at least in part in the requirements of the military system” (1988, p. 131). The “war machine”, he went on, accelerated “the speed of standardization and mass production from the sixteenth century on” and has therefore been “central to industrial development since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution” (pp. 131–32; see also Mumford, 1977, pp. 504–06).

If conversion were to be demanded and pursued, scholars needed to seriously engage with economic justifications for investing in the military. Dumas eventually concluded that they were gravely outweighed by a variety of additional factors “rather dramatically revers[ing] the ultimate conclusion” (1988, p. 4). Melman’s study of the American MIC suggests three interrelated arguments for the negative social and economic effects of armament and militarization. First, defence production usually does not measure up to its equivalent in the civilian economy. Since military–industry firms operate “in an insulated monopoly market”, they are prone to “poor productivity performance, to poor product design and poor

production managing” (Melman, 1974, p. 21). Any company that becomes part of a MIC works “under the assumption that indefinitely large capital funds are available for the military” (p. 65). This clearly differs from the expectations of agents in private capitalism; here, businesses need to compete against other companies over prices, keep costs to a minimum and learn to cope with “uncertainties stemming from unpredictable market behavior”, always threatened by possible under-consumption (p. 60). In the state-controlled war economy such nuisances do not exist. The money flows from a single source that tends to give the military and its needs “first place” in capital allocation (pp. 60–61). The “terms of competition are not price and efficiency, but grantcraft and lobbying” (Peattie, 1998, p. 12). Military corporations are “subsidy-maximizing firms” (Melman, 1974, p. 55). Instead of minimizing costs and maximizing profits, as in traditional market economies, they seek to maximize costs and maximize the subsidies they receive from the state (see p. 21; also Renner, 1988, p. 133; Dumas 1995, pp. 13–14).

Poor performance and a tendency to overprice might be worrisome features of the defence industry; by themselves they do not necessarily imply direct negative repercussions for the civilian economy, however. To make this argument, a second characteristic needs to be taken into account, namely “the basic non-productive” (Melman, 1974, p. 19) or even “parasitic nature of military economy” (p. 62; also Klein, 1993, pp. 15–16; Dumas, 1995, p. 8). This insight itself is anything but new. No one less than Adam Smith had contended in his *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, that the “sovereign” with

*all the officers both of justice and war who serve under him, the whole army and navy, are unproductive labourers. They are servants of the public, and are maintained by a part of the annual produce of the industry of other people. Their service [...] produces nothing for which an equal quantity of service can afterwards be procured (Smith, 2001, p. 221).*

In the same vein, Melman argued that the war economy does “not yield ordinary economic use-value”, that is, “usefulness for the level of living (consumer goods and services)” or “usefulness for further



production (as in machinery tools being used to make other articles" (1974, p. 19; also Dumas, 1988, p. 3). All resources that are spent on the military could have potentially been invested in productive civilian activities. The defence sector always entails opportunity costs for the larger economy that sustains it. It diminishes "productive capacities by withdrawing resources from civilian economy". As Melman had it, it "is, in fact, an anti-economy" (1974, p. 285). Or, in the words of Dumas, military spending "is an economic burden, not an economic boon" (Dumas, 1988, p. 4).

While this assessment is shared by economists from all persuasions (see Albrecht 1979, p. 76), it does not necessarily render all defence expenses undesirable. For Adam Smith, the doubtlessly parasitic quality of the military was justified, since it served the "useful" and "necessary" (Smith, 2001, p. 221) purpose of "defending the society from the violence and injustice of other independent societies" (p. 386). However, if one follows the parallel argument concerning the causes of militarization and accepts that military build-up and security policy have become largely uncoupled from one another, then the Smithian caveat no longer holds. The war machine drains resources from the civilian economy while delivering no public good in return (see Melman, 1974, p. 63).

This may not be too damaging, provided the defence industry constitutes only a small fraction of the overall productive capacities of society. Unfortunately, for Melman and other conversion scholars, the third characteristic of the US American military-industrial system was its "propensity to expand" (Melman, 1974, pp. 64-65). Again, Adam Smith had somewhat pre-empted this observation by pointing out that the military "grows gradually more and more expensive as the society advances in civilization" (2001, p. 386). And indeed, forever bent on the maximization of subsidies, by the late 1960s the US American war economy had eventually "become the dominant one as against the private capitalist economy in the United States" (Melman, 1974, p. 73). It dwarfed civilian economy in terms of "control over capital", "control over research and development" and "control over means of production" (p. 70).

*In no other country has there been a military economy that is comparable to the American one in size and longevity. Having endured for thirty years, it has occupied the occupational lifetime of millions of workers, technicians, managers and soldiers. Never before in American experience has the military establishment utilised so many industrial and other facilities, [...] constructed specifically for military requirements (pp. 226-27).*

Melman found that the defence sector had become "a major source of corrosion of the productive competence of the American economy as a whole" (p. 260). It is thus that the need for conversion was considered all the more urgent and imperative.

## Liberal vs. radical Conversion Studies

Melman's arguments on the causes and effects of militarization and armament influenced many of the more political writings in the field of Conversion Studies. Sometimes referred to as the "liberal school" (Albrecht 1979, p. 12), they placed the main emphasis on fostering economic growth. Disarmament was considered to be in the best economic interest of society—and conversion a means to install an "economic system unburdened by the debilitating effects of excessive military spending" and therefore "able to make greater strides in improving the material conditions of life" (Dumas, 1988, p. 7). The propositions of Melman, in particular, were commonly read as an attempt toward "making the American economy more competitive internationally" (Peattie, 1998, p. 17; also Albrecht 1979, p. 58). His perspective certainly differed from those more technical approaches that regarded conversion as nothing but the reaction of a defence plant or community to changes in the *status quo*. In opposition to the dominant Cold War ideologies of the time, calling for ever more military investments, Melman and other liberal scholars assumed a pro-active, political stance that advocated the transformation of military overcapacities. However, to their mind, the central economic, political and cultural coordinates of society ought to be left more or less intact. At no point, for instance, did Melman propose to completely abolish the military. As Dumas

put it, “[w]ithin the bounds of affordability, levels of support for the military should be based on what is needed to achieve the mission of securing the nation against real and significant external military threats” (1995, p. 5). Moreover, if Melman at one point dreamt of “the formation of a new, post-capitalist society” (1974, p. 299), he was only thinking of the micro-level of capitalist relations, manifest in the hierarchical decision-making structure of the factory. As is evident from his criticism of the US American MIC, Melman displayed a clear preference for competitive, free markets as opposed to a state-directed economy.

Not all advocates of conversion shared such sentiments for keeping the military and/or maintaining a capitalist macro-system. At least two divergent viewpoints, which Albrecht subsumed under the heading of the “radical school” in Conversion Studies, can be discerned here (see: Albrecht 1979, p. 12). The first, ironically, shared some common grounds with those that pointed to the ostensibly beneficial effects of military spending on society as a whole. As some Marxist scholars argued, non-productive investments helped to sustain productive capitalist relations. To their mind, the capitalist system relied on high levels of defence expenditure to remedy the structural problem of simultaneous overproduction and under-consumption (see: Sweezy, 1974, pp. 20–21). The following argument by Jörg Huffs Schmid illustrates this point well:

*Die eigentliche ökonomische Funktion von Rüstungsausgaben ist es, der Tendenz zu Überakkumulation von Kapital und Überproduktion von Waren dadurch entgegenzuwirken, dass ein Teil des gesellschaftlichen Gesamtkapitals aus dem normalen Verwertungsprozess herausgezogen und künstlich verwertet wird, wodurch gleichzeitig die ‚normale‘ Verwertung des anderen Teils des gesellschaftlichen Gesamtkapitals gewährleistet werden soll. Einschränkung von Rüstungsausgaben [...] baut ein den Krisentendenzen des Kapitalismus entgegenwirkendes Moment ab und verschärft daher diese Krisentendenzen (1977, p. 35).<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> It is the original economic purpose of defence expenditures to counter the tendency of over-accumulation of capital and overproduction of goods by taking out a part of the society’s overall capital from the normal recovery process and by recovering it artificially. At the same time,

Given the dependency of the economic system on military investments, any large-scale effort at defence conversion would need to be accompanied by a more general conversion of capitalist modes of production, exchange and accumulation (see Albrecht 1979, p. 58; Breitschwerdt 1988/89, p. 13). To be sure: This claim remained a minority position in Conversion Studies. Marxist writers themselves disagreed on the validity of the ‘under-consumption’ theory. Some demonstrated that economic crises had occurred despite military expenditure reaching peak levels (see Rothschild, 1956). Others pointed out that it simply no longer mattered in the nuclear age. As Renner observed:

*Even if war was ‘beneficial’ in the past to capitalist industry in the sense of serving as a ‘valve’ for over-production and over-accumulation, the tremendous and accelerating lethality of today’s weaponry has made major war antithetical to capitalism” (1988, p. 132).*

Moreover, the sheer magnitude of resources being poured into the MIC had long since surpassed any reasonable amount of non-productive spending required for—possibly—averting economic crises (which, by the way, could also be achieved through other wasteful expenditure). Even economists behind the Iron Curtain agreed that large-scale conversion could be achieved in the West without having to fundamentally transform its economic system (see Albrecht, 1979, p. 65). To argue otherwise, Melman noted, would only heighten broader social resistance to conversion and thereby play into the hands of those insisting on continuously high levels of military spending (see Melman 1974, pp. 289–90).

In any case, for most radical proponents of conversion, the main line of division was not so much the question of maintaining or overcoming capitalism. Instead, they took issue with the rather narrow focus of liberals on economic concerns and sought to reconcile the purpose of conversion with a comparatively broader—and often distinctly pacifist—agenda, as it was popular among many social movements of the time. Conversion, for them, ought to be directed toward ‘peace’ rather than only economic growth.

this is intended to guarantee the ‘normal’ recovery of the other share of the society’s overall capital. The limitation of defence expenditures [...] decreases the momentum countering the crisis tendencies of capitalism and thus exacerbates these crisis tendencies (own translation).

With this in mind, Brzoska distinguished what he called “qualitative” and “military-political” conversion from “quantitative” and “economic” conversion (1999b, p. 29). Of course, both objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Dumas, 1988, p. 7). Nevertheless, the former tends to considerably expand the agenda of Conversion Studies. Dieter Senghaas held that conversion efforts, even if narrowly conceived in economic terms only, needed to be “synchronized” with a range of additional, more encompassing political aims. In the final assessment, conversion ought to be guided by a desire for human “emancipation” (1974, p. 72).

Writings in Conversion Studies during the Cold War differed in whether they located this ambitious goal primarily on either a micro- or more macroscopic scale. Numerous scholars, including Melman, envisioned converted industry plants characterized by humane working conditions, workers’ participation in operative business decisions, considerations of ecological concerns and, most importantly, the production of “socially useful” objects (see Breitschwerdt, 1988/89, p. 12; Birckenbach, 1991, p. 5, Renner, 1992, p. 36; Bischak & Yudken 1993, pp. 167–68). A much-discussed model was the so-called Lucas Plan, developed in 1976 by workers at the defence company Lucas Aerospace in Great Britain (see Elliot, 1977; Smith, 2014). Although never put into action and rarely copied elsewhere, many hoped that democratically, bottom-up initiated conversion projects in small-scale working environments could lay the foundation for a “new kind of social, cultural and political coexistence” (Wulf et al., 1987, p. 281).

Novel modes of coexistence could be equally imagined on an international or global scale. As an example for “qualitative” conversion, Brzoska alluded to a shift from offensive to defensive military doctrines, in turn requiring a certain restructuring and, in all likelihood, downsizing of forces (1999b, p. 29). Conversion would be less a matter of promoting economic growth and/or improving the quality of working conditions; it would be a “strategy for international peacebuilding” (see Southwood 1997, p. 103). Ultimately,

it may even strive towards the “establishment of a just and lasting peaceful order” (p. 100). If it is understood to serve such a broad objective, Brzoska noted that conversion loses “its economic focus” and, instead, needs to take account of “all kinds of economic, psychological, cultural and political changes” (1999a, p. 133). Economic conversion would be combined with what he called “societal” conversion, that is, efforts to convert and reduce “the influence of the military” and “militaristic thinking on societies and minds, for the purpose of ‘civilianization’ ” (1999b, p. 29). In line with such a pacifist agenda, a radical variant in Conversion Studies promoted full-scale disarmament toward a “post-military order” (Boulding, 1983) as a “comprehensive alternative to the war system” (Renner, 1998, p. 134). Any such undertaking, the proponents realized, required a fundamental transformation of how human collectives were presently organized. Conversion Studies, Peattie wrote, ought to critically “engage central institutional and intellectual arrangements of our society” (1988, p. 12).

Similarly, Senghaas contended that a conversion effort concerned with “destructive hardware” (i.e. weapons) alone would be short-sighted (1974, p. 71). Any transition from a war economy to a peace economy needed to be “characterized by more than the (momentary) absence of war and war-related production” (Renner, 1988, p. 129). Senghaas called, more broadly, for a transformation of the entire “political, military and socio-economic context” that enabled any kind of armament in the first place (1974, p. 71). Reminiscent of Johan Galtung’s concepts of “structural violence” and “positive peace” (see Galtung, 1969), Renner argued that the prime objective of conversion was “the absence of fundamental social, economic, political, and ecological conflicts”, a world free of “conflicts between nations, along ethnic, gender, and class lines, and between humans and their natural environment” (1988, p. 129). To achieve this noble goal, we ought to proactively work toward the transition to a “non-destructive, non-alienating, democratically-structured, and environmentally benign economy” (p. 138).

## Conversion Studies after the Cold War and the establishment of BICC

As the Cold War came to an end and the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact began to significantly reduce military spending and cut the size of their armed forces, the grand visions of both liberal and many radical conversion scholars seemed close at hand. While some commentators remained sceptical and pointed out that conversion had so far been “unblemished by success” (Adelman & Augustine, 1992, p. 26), euphoria initially prevailed. All of a sudden, Conversion Studies faced a widespread and very concrete political demand for practical advice on transforming military and defence resources. “Disarmament”, Adam Roberts wrote in 1991, “is no longer a distant vision, safely confined to a utopian future, but a reality” (p. 71). An annotated bibliography of conversion-related studies, compiled by Brzoska in 2000, shows a sharp rise in the number of publications over the first years of the 1990s. In 1991, Jonathan Feldman, Program Director at the newly established National Commission for Economic Conversion and Disarmament in the United States, proposed a “comprehensive conversion and disarmament program” (p. 234) that would involve “several fundamental changes in the structure of political and economic decision-making and institutions” (pp. 229–30). One year later, the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development, the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Institute of Environmental Protection Policy (INFU) of the University of Dortmund organized a large ‘International Conference on Conversion’. One of the speakers at the event, Kofi Annan, at the time Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, claimed that the “world is looking forward [...] towards the establishment of a new system, perhaps of a new order, in which peace, co-operation and the rule of law will prevail” (Brunn et al., 1992, p. XXVIII). Conversion, the conference participants agreed, would pave the road to this goal. The North Rhine-Westphalian Minister of Higher Education and Research, Anke Brunn, demanded that while “[o]nly a few months ago, conversion [...] seemed to be a mere academic concept, a utopia”, it “must now become a reality, worldwide” (p. XX). Johannes Rau, then Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, seconded her plea:

*“Swords to ploughshares”—today, this biblical theme is no mere dream but a justified hope for many people. With the end of the Cold War, we may assume [...] that it will be possible in future to use more sensibly the finance that has been wasted on weapons and armies in the past... to fight starvation, sickness and need, to safeguard the natural basis of life. Conversion—originally a concept by experts for experts—might well become a keyword of the decade (p. XXIII).*

Echoing many of the more radical voices in Conversion Studies, he went on to suggest that the “unwritten agenda” of conversion was

*“nothing less than the global implementation of the human right to an existence in peace and liberty, the human right to a life free of hunger and the human right to a clean and non-poisoned environment” (p. XXVII).*

The spirit of the days and the high hopes associated with expected disarmament also found their way into academic definitions of conversion, for instance as the “realignment of national priorities to reflect the lowered defence needs of a new era in international relations and to address important domestic needs” (Bischak & Yudken, 1993, p. 167). However, although the time may have been ripe for conversion, it was less so for the scholarly field of Conversion Studies. This held, in particular, for the more political—as opposed to technical—approaches to the subject. For at the same time that a utopia was preparing itself to become reality, many of the theories, which had been hotly debated only a couple of years earlier, had become irrelevant. The question as to whether conversion necessitated an overcoming of the capitalist system lost much of its appeal as many were celebrating the triumph of free markets, even pondering the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). More significantly, the end of superpower confrontation could not be explained by the once popular assumption that the vested economic interests of the MIC had been the principal drivers of the arms race (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, pp. 18–19; Birckenbach, 1991, p. 6). Conversion could no longer claim to represent the most viable strategy for initiating a process of disarmament.

The coincident political demand for conversion and (partial) academic bankruptcy of Conversion Studies provides the contextual backdrop surrounding the establishment of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) in 1994—a direct consequence of the Dortmund conference two years earlier. Receiving its core funding from the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and initially headed by Herbert Wulf, who had been much involved in conversion-related debates in the 1970s and 1980s, its mandate remained rather open, namely to use “applied science and research to deal with questions and problems arising from conversion”. Conversion itself, the document continued, “aims to reduce and/or prevent the preparation, threat or use of military or war-like violence in all its forms through the process of a comprehensive transformation”. Interestingly, this formulation suggested a decisively broad understanding of its subject that did not preclude a pro-active and political approach to the problem. The reference to a ‘comprehensive transformation’ even seemed to situate BICC on the more radical end of the conversion-continuum. This was not the direction that the institute would pursue, however. Instead, it was the additional remark that BICC ought to “optimize” conversion “in the practical implementation of disarmament” that contained a first clue as to where the institute would be heading (BICC Mandate/ Gesellschaftsvertrag, 1994, Section 2a).

BICC published a detailed account of its “concept of conversion” in the first volume of the Conversion Survey in 1996. Notably, it refrained from articulating conversion within a larger theory that could have replaced—or adjusted—the outdated axioms concerning the MIC. The disengagement from causal explanations for armament-dynamics allowed BICC to address conversion issues as they presented themselves across a wide spectrum of military resources. The MIC-perspective had prompted many earlier writings to focus on the defence industry (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, p. 20). Untroubled by any such predispositions, BICC regarded post-Cold War disarmament as “a multi-faceted process that releases various types of resources” (BICC, 1996, p. 22). This is not to say that it followed in the footsteps of those that

had called for a fundamental ‘societal conversion’, the far-reaching transformation of people’s hearts and minds. By restricting itself to material and physical objects, BICC certainly remained squarely in the well-established tradition of most conversion scholars. As for Brzoska, it ascribed to a “narrow concept”, which was “closely related to the quantitative side of disarmament” (1999b, p. 17). At the same time, BICC emphasized that conversion could refer to all “resources that become available for civilian use through reduced armaments, demobilization and demilitarization” (BICC, 1996, p. 18). This “resource-reuse” perspective (Brzoska 1999; 1999b, p. 17) was applied to altogether six possible types of convertible military resources: 1) the reallocation of public defence budgets; 2) the reorientation of military research and development; 3) the restructuring of the defence industry; 4) the demobilization of soldiers; 5) military base closure and redevelopment; 6) the scrapping of surplus weapons (see Laurance et al., 1995).

In each of these areas, BICC viewed conversion as “a process of managing the resources freed from the military sector for the greatest long-run benefit to society” (1996, p. 22). The faint resonance with previous debates concerning ‘social utility’ did imply a certain normative orientation, to be sure. Yet, the practical turn of BICC also signalled a departure from those earlier approaches that had perceived conversion as a pro-active political movement. As the Conversion Survey acknowledged, the concept has “been transformed from a largely utopian project into a combination of practical problems and potential opportunities” (p. 16). BICC did not want to advocate “the full transfer of resources to civilian use”, for “thus far, complete conversion has rarely occurred”. Instead, conversion could always only be a “partial” process (p. 20). A possible synchronization of conversion efforts with other fields—after all, a central concern of many writings in the 1980s—was neither required nor was it thought to be particularly helpful:

*For practical reasons, the analysis of the dynamic aspects of conversion cannot be extended too far. The further one moves from the original resource transfers, the less insight can be gained from viewing such*



*processes as specific conversion problems. Conversion becomes indistinguishable from other issues, relinquishing its link to the original military resource use (p. 20).*

In other words: Precisely because BICC lacked an overall theoretical framework that could have contextualized conversion vis-à-vis wider social phenomena, it needed to limit itself to addressing clearly identifiable problems as they presented themselves to policymakers. This focus on practicality also meant that conversion denoted more than transformations in only the defence industry. As the BICC-publication had it: “We do not advocate a specific approach to conversion but rather are guided by the search for the optimal use of resources freed by disarmament” (p. 16).

Arguably, then, the concept of conversion proposed by BICC in 1996 leant heavily toward the side of what was described earlier as the more technical and reactive or ‘problem-solving’ approach. In an article for the *Journal of Peace Research*, which was published one year earlier, Julian Cooper had put it even more explicitly. To his mind, in the post-Cold War world, the “problematic of conversion requires its own conversion” (1995, p. 132). That is to say: “A concept of conversion heavily freighted with ideological overtones is no longer appropriate” (p. 132). Conversion Studies ought to, instead, embrace the “new spirit of realism and pragmatism” and support the concrete “task of undertaking military downsizing with a minimum social cost” (p. 132). Already in 1992, Linda Forcey noticed that despite the skyrocketing number of publications concerned with practical conversion problems, a “major debate or discourse within the peace research community over ways in which a ‘peace dividend’ should (1) be forthcoming and (2) be distributed [...] does not appear to be happening” (p. 215). This was also due to a certain degree of disappointment among scholars. Although many states were indeed dismantling parts of their defence sector, the extent of disarmament was nowhere near the dimensions of what either the old ideologists in Conversion Studies or, for that matter, the keynote speakers at the Dortmund conference had

anticipated and hoped for. Three years before the founding of BICC, Hanne-Margret Birckenbach published an almost prophetic paper arguing that post-Cold War disarmament was largely a sham and most talk about conversion purely symbolic. Conversion Studies, she feared, was very much in danger of becoming “complicit” with a political discourse that loudly paraded peace, yet in reality sought to “re-legitimize” and “conserve” the military system (1991, p. 5). In doing so, it was about to strip itself of “difficult” theoretical baggage, not least due to its reliance on state funding:

*Wie alle anderen können auch die KonversionsforscherInnen verstehbare Gründe dafür anführen, das Erkenntnisinteresse nicht allzu deutlich zu formulieren. Sie liefern z.B. Gefahr, potentielle Geldgeber zu irritieren. Insofern gleichen sich FriedensforscherInnen und die militär- und rüstungsabhängig Beschäftigten. Mittäterschaft verbindet [...]. Erst wenn die KonversionsforscherInnen für sich selbst einen Ausweg finden und in der Lage sind, die Erkenntnisinteressen zu benennen und trotzdem Forschungsmittel zu erhalten, werden sie in ihren eigenen Praxisbezügen glaubwürdig (p. 11).<sup>2</sup>*

In the 1990s, Conversion Studies would simply ‘manage’ the smooth reduction of surplus weapons, soldiers and capital—avoiding the pertinent questions, much discussed by pro-active and political conversion scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, as to who defines this surplus and why (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, p. 19). What is the military for? How much military is needed? On which assumptions does any such claim rest? And how can these assumptions be deconstructed? The opportunity to seriously re-engage these questions at the end of the Cold War—which would have also necessitated critically revisiting some of the apparently flawed and one-dimensional theories of Conversion Studies—was clearly missed.

<sup>2</sup> \ Like all others, conversion scholars can give reasonable grounds for the fact that they do not specify their research interest too much. They would, for instance, risk to irritate potential donors. This is where peace researchers and those employed in the arms industry are alike. Complicity unites [...]. Only when conversion scholars have found a way out for themselves and are able to name their research interests and still receive grants for their work will they become credible in their own practical relevance. (p. 11) (own translation).

By the mid-1990s, the euphoria—so palpable at the Dortmund conference—had largely waned. Delivering a paper to the Proceedings of the NATO Advanced Study Institute on Defence Conversion Strategies in 1995, Philip Gummet remarked that “[i]t is unclear where all this activity will lead” (1997, p. 40). Some pointed out that we could not expect conversion to produce any immediate positive outcomes: “[D]isarmament resembles an investment process involving short to medium term costs to achieve long-run economic benefits in the form of greater output of civil goods and services” (Hartley, 1997, p. 92). Others conceded that “there are very substantial uncertainties about the effects of military expenditure on the economy”, mainly due to “the lack of a good theory of economic growth and how military expenditure influences the determinants of the growth rate” (Smith, 1996, p. 357). Dumas, next to Melman a key figure from ‘old school’ Conversion Studies, still suspected a “classic case of a set of vested interests” behind the apparent failure of conversion to deliver tangible goods (1995, p. 5). In 1996, he felt that a tipping point had been reached and warned that there was a “danger of side-tracking the process of international demilitarization” (1996, p. 148). As he went on, conversion scholars “must stop making excuses for our reluctance to move into the future” (p. 149), for—and still clinging to the hopeful spirit of the early decade:

*These are times of truly historic significance. We are poised on the brink of a new era in international relations. What we do now will set the pattern for the next century, perhaps for the next millennium. Human beings have long dreamed of a more peaceful, less militarized world. Now we stand at the threshold of that dream. Instead of anguishing over all the reasons why the dream might fail, it is up to us that it does not (p. 149).*

Now, twenty years later, it is safe to say that Dumas’ dream remained just that—a dream. Only one year after the founding of BICC, Cooper noted how the term conversion had lost its hold on political discourse. At the same time that Dumas was almost desperately trying to reinvigorate the vision of the Dortmund conference, he soberly diagnosed a

“post-conversion situation” and suspected “that in time the very word may fall into disuse” (1995, p. 131). And, indeed: “Perhaps the time has come to abandon the term altogether” (p. 132). Global levels of military expenditure began to consistently rise again by 1997. Conversion’s short-lived day in the sun was over almost as quickly as its sudden dawn in 1991 and 1992.

BICC, however, remained. Taking stock of post-Cold War conversion, researchers at the Center showed a somewhat mixed track record toward the end of the decade (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, p. 21). Brzoska acknowledged that industrial conversion had not provided the degree of economic stimulus expected by Melman (2000, p. 140). Discussions of “socially useful goods” and increased worker participation in decision-making had hardly played a role (see p. 140). By the end of the decade, many workers who had previously been employed in defence corporations were still looking for a job (see Brzoska, 1999a, p. 137). However, Brzoska took issue with assessments according to which conversion had been a complete failure. As he noted

*expectations were simplistic and overoptimistic and could only be frustrated. They took little or no account of the wider political and economic environment shaping the shift of resources from the military to the civilian sector, underestimated the cost and speed of adjustment and assumed shifts in political decision-making parallel to large-scale disarmament which would have to occur (1999a, p. 131).*

At a closer look, the “balance sheet” was “not negative, nor even zero”. Indeed, “a good measure of transformation of resources has been achieved” (p. 137). The success rates differed from region to region, with economically weak countries, especially in eastern Europe, facing the most difficulties. The “peace dividend”, meanwhile, did not go into increased social or development expenditures, as many had hoped, but into deficit reduction and the balancing of budgets (see Dedek, 1997; Krause, 2000, p. 18).

But with decreasing political demand for conversion, what was to become of Conversion Studies in the 21st century? Or, even more poignantly: What about the future of BICC? Keith Krause discussed this

question in an article for a BICC brief in 2000. Reflecting upon the past decade, he effectively suggested a return to a more pro-active and re-politicized take on conversion. In the final analysis, the experiences of the 1990s had “call[ed] into question the basic idea of conversion” (p. 19). Not only had a degree of worldwide disarmament been completed, but the actual importance of conversion to that very process was more than doubtful. In most cases, the defence industry had restructured itself without relying on too much input from “conversion advocates” (p. 20). To the extent that conversion had been talked about at all, it was largely considered “a ‘clean-up’ process that follows the transformation of political-security relations as essentially a technical and managerial task” (p. 19). It was “turned—intentionally or not—into a [...] tool for dealing with the consequences of changed security relationships” (p. 21). Conversion would only be a relevant topic of political and scholarly discussion if there were an external demand for it. All the while, the older field of Conversion Studies seemed, at least at first sight, to have little immediate appeal to any future-oriented research agenda. If it was “inextricably linked to the Cold War problem of the military-industrial complex or to unjustifiably high levels of defence spending”, then it “cannot easily be transferred or adapted to new contexts” (p. 20).

Given these challenges, Krause encouraged BICC to consider the “logic of the core concept of conversion” (2000, p. 21). For him, this implied, on the one hand, a “concern with the economic dimension of military expenditures and related activities” (p. 21). On the other hand, it meant to install “a focus on the potential of conversion activities to transform the role and weight of institutions of organized violence in social, political and economic life” (pp. 21–22). This latter observation was crucial. It served as a reminder that conversion was not simply a technical reaction to ready-made political decisions; instead, it “can play a role in the transformation of political-security relations themselves” (p. 19). As to most of BICC’s work during the 1990s, Krause noted that “the transformative potential has been almost entirely left aside, perhaps simply because the practical problems

of dealing with disarmament after the Cold War warranted greater attention” (p. 21). Now, however, was the time to develop a more daring and political agenda, lest conversion—and Conversion Studies—should become fully irrelevant. Krause suggested a concept of what he called “preventive conversion” for this purpose; that is:

*The pro-active development and timely implementation of conversion policies to prevent the escalation of protracted conflict relationships [...] into violence, to diminish or avoid the accumulation of excessive and destabilizing quantities of arms or the waste of economic and human resources, and to reduce the militarization of social, economic and political relations (within societies and between states) (p. 22).*

The thematic emphasis of “preventive conversion” would remain on the “efficient reallocation of resources from military purposes to other ends” (p. 24). Importantly, however, Conversion Studies could directly intervene and partake in—highly political—debates surrounding the prevention of violent conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction. When Krause published his text, these were certainly the up-and-coming themes high on the agenda of international policymakers. The time was ripe to re-fashion conversion as a “crucial element” of those broader peace- and security-building activities in many places in the world (and particularly the Global South) (see p. 24).

At least from 2000 onwards, BICC reoriented itself very much in line with Krause’s proposal. With its new director Peter Croll, who was appointed in 2002 and had previously worked in development cooperation, the working focus shifted from a concern with the post-Cold War conversion of defence industries, military personnel, R&D, bases or capital in western and eastern Europe to applied research and policy advice on, among other things, demobilization on the Balkans, small arms control in Sub-Saharan Africa, ‘security sector reform’ in Afghanistan and the reintegration of former combatants following violent conflicts in Liberia, Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While BICC was certainly successful in securing third-party funding from various sources



(mostly public) and published numerous studies dealing with issues of crisis prevention, 'early warning, early action' and post-conflict reconstruction, the idea of 'preventive conversion' got lost along the way, that is, it rarely served as an explicit reference point in any of BICC's publications in the first decade of the new millennium. Somewhat more nuanced and encompassing theoretical reflections informing popular concepts such as peacebuilding or conflict transformation effectively overshadowed it (see Heinemann-Grüder, 2006, p. 24). Conceivably, also, the complexities underlying many of the so-called new wars did not allow for any easy and straightforward solutions and answers to which an updated concept of conversion could have normatively attached itself (as in the past, where the vested interests in the military-industrial complex became posited as the root of all evil). As one critical commentator pointed out, BICC's research was not as agenda-setting or transformative as Krause had hoped for with his reconceptualization of conversion (see Bayer, 2012). Just like its work in the 1990s, the reliance on funding from public donors continued to put BICC into a position in which it largely responded to already made policy decisions—rather than pro-actively contributing to the development of alternative policies.

## Conversion Studies today? Six propositions

In the new millennium, academic or, for that matter, any writings on conversion have been scarce, to say the least. Neither is there a major political demand (as in the 1940s or 1990s), nor does the concept appear to adequately address what is widely perceived as the main problematics of security and defence policy in the 21st century (as it did in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s). The final part of this *Paper* makes six propositions that might guide a more concrete understanding of what Conversion Studies could mean in the 21st century. The argument is not necessarily a call to revive a dead duck and restore the study of conversion to its former 'glory'. It merely holds that if one wanted to do such a thing, then one would be well advised to take the propositions suggested here into consideration. They are inspired in part by an acknowledgement of what Conversion Studies did in the past, particularly by the debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, the study of conversion today cannot simply copy and paste the past into the present. It has to adapt old theories to fit new realities, all the while critically reflecting upon outdated axioms and thereby noticeably advancing the field along normative, conceptual and empirical-analytical trajectories.

As a final caveat, this exercise should not be mistaken as a proposal for a new, different or more specific research agenda for BICC. Parts of the *Paper* have considered the evolution of BICC since its founding in 1994. This attention was justified since BICC played an important part in the conversion debates of the 1990s and remains today the only academic institute that carries the term conversion in its name (at least that I know of). The purpose of this *Paper* is not to make recommendations on how the Center should continue to develop in the future. Of course, parts of BICC's future work might take aspects of Conversion Studies on board (and, in fact, BICC already does that in many regards). Importantly, however, Conversion Studies would appear as a larger sub-discipline within Peace and Conflict Research that runs through various institutes and crisscrosses scholarly communities of different methodological and normative inclinations.

### **Conversion Studies pro-actively advocates transformation processes bent upon reducing the potentials of organized violence for wider social benefits.**

The beginning of this *Paper* demonstrated that the term conversion immediately evokes a process of social—or spiritual—change from one state of existence to another. What Krause referred to as the transformative potential of the concept applies equally to its original usage in Catholic dogma ('faith conversion') as it does to 20th-century Conversion Studies with its focus on reusing formerly military resources for civilian means. Any reference to conversion and Conversion Studies in the 21st century ought to stay clearly attached to this tradition. It makes no sense to speak of conversion without a reference to some change. The essence of studying conversion is to either advocate or analyze a desired or actual process of social transformation. Not all conversion scholars actively called for change, to be sure. Particularly post-Cold War Conversion Studies—but also the first writings on converting military overcapacities following World War II merely reacted to changes already taking place (and quite irrespective of whether they had been demanded by academics or social movements). At times, these conversion efforts were very successful (as in the late 1940s), at others a rather more mixed picture emerged (as in the 1990s). Yet, and regardless of the outcome, once the transition had been completed, the need for conversion-related expertise quickly diminished. Hence, if Conversion Studies wants to be anything more than an occasional response to political demands for technical solutions, it ought to pro-actively advocate change itself—as did those either liberal or radical scholars during the Cold War.

As it happens, in the year 2017, the world resembles the Cold War period to the extent that nearly all of the major military powers are either implementing or anticipating significant increases to their defence budgets. Conversion Studies in the 21st century would have to be an explicitly normative science that

critically analyses the *status quo* and, on this basis, identifies and proposes relevant social transformations against the prevailing political *Zeitgeist*, especially concerning the on-going build-up of military capacities in many places of the world.

Generally speaking, it ought to work toward reducing the potentials for organized violence. Organized violence, in this understanding, refers to any collective social structure established for the express purpose of exercising direct, physical violence against human bodies. Militaries and adjacent defence industries—the core objects of traditional Conversion Studies—are the first such structures that come to mind. However, while the term organized violence certainly captures them, it also expands the possible focus to include police and paramilitary forces, private military and security companies or non-state armed groups such as militias, rebels or even ‘terrorist’ networks. The primary scale of Conversion Studies would no longer be national and/or local; rather, it would need to take into account how various scales become connected through transnational and trans-local networks, as they have, for instance, been theorized in the concept of “global security assemblages” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011).

Just as in the past, there would be no need to agree on how much potentials for organized violence ought to be reduced. Whereas there is a likely consensus regarding those ‘terrorist’ groups, things will probably get a lot more complicated when it comes to regular armed forces and, even more so, the police. The point here is not to prescribe a benchmark that everyone in Conversion Studies needs to abide by but to emphasize this question as an explicit topic of contention. A certain degree of organized violence may well be deemed necessary if we want the police to fight crime and, by extension, militaries to stop genocides and mass murder. It follows that the reduction of organized violence, depriving certain groups or institutions of their abilities to exercise violence effectively, is not per se a desirable outcome. Although some conversion scholars might push and argue for a pacifist agenda, Conversion Studies is not—and never has been—a pacifist science in the sense that it

deems all organized violence an evil to be eradicated. Quite the contrary: Instead of simply assuming that disarmament is always somehow good, a conversion perspective requires us to spell out the expected (civilian) benefits it would entail at a particular time and place—which also includes weighing these benefits against possible harms. Needless to say that these benefits and harms are again open to interpretation and debate. Still, any piece of writing in Conversion Studies would thereby distinguish itself by following a certain grammar, namely how changes in one area (reductions of organized violence) affect either positive or negative changes in another.

### **Conversion Studies particularly emphasizes the economic conditions of organized violence**

The question of how to organize violence, and what the either positive or negative outcomes of such an organization would be (or are), underlines many publications in Peace and Conflict Research. And even if such writings develop concrete recommendations for social change, there is no apparent need to re-label them as part of Conversion Studies. Designations such as peacebuilding or conflict transformation could be used with equally good reason—and they are. Moreover, the deeper issues this question raises arguably constitute the defining core of IR (the international organization of violence) and traditional political theory (the domestic organization of violence) more generally. Consider, for instance, the highly popular concept of ‘securitization’. It shows how certain speech acts represent social problems as existential threats and thereby justify exceptional—and usually violent—military actions (see Buzan et. al., 1998). Would a reverse process of ‘de-securitization’ already count as an instance of conversion? And what about those no less frequent proposals from numerous studies on ‘security governance’ and ‘security sector reform’, making recommendations for improving the regulation of military and police forces in accordance with widely shared principles of democratic accountability (‘good governance’)?

If it wants to delineate a fairly concrete and specific field of inquiry within the broader context of Peace and Conflict Research, Conversion Studies needs to be more than a large container for accommodating *any* normative approach to changes in the organization of violence. Looking back at the history of the discipline, and especially to the influential work of Melman, it is clear that the primary focus of the more pro-active and politico-normative scholars was on economic causes and effects of militarization (itself understood as mainly an economic process of resource allocation). As argued, this goes some way in explaining why Conversion Studies gradually went out of style. For example, the much-debated question concerning the relationship between military expenditure and capitalism—and whether defence conversion ought to go hand-in-hand with overcoming the capitalist macro-structure—no longer seemed relevant once the only surviving economic system was taken for granted. And even the liberal positions put forward by Melman were somewhat overrun by the sudden end of the Cold War, which ‘vested interests’ in the American MIC obviously failed to prevent (as Melman had thought they would). Today, whoever talks of such a thing as a military-industrial-complex would immediately be suspected of leaning to conspiracy theories (and in most cases probably rightly so).

With the benefit of hindsight, the central problem of Conversion Studies in the 1970s and 1980s consisted in a certain tendency to search for linear causalities (‘causes’, ‘effects’), in turn prompting an often very one-dimensional overemphasis on certain economic factors at the expense of appreciating the complexities warranted by a broader analytical perspective. Crucially, however, this does not already disqualify investigations into the political economy of organized violence. There is, indeed, a well-established body of literature in historical sociology that does precisely this. Already quite some time ago, scholars such as Charles Tilly (1992) or Michael Mann (1988) produced impressive, macroscopic accounts on how, not least, economic conditions informed modern state-building. Recent studies, more directly associated with Peace

and Conflict Research, described the micro-level economic incentive structures guiding the behaviour of non-state armed groups in civil wars (see e.g. Kalyvas, 2006; Schlichte, 2009; Chojnacki & Branović, 2007). One of the realizations underlying many of these approaches is that variations of organized violence connect different strategies of capital accumulation to contingent forms of political order (see Boemcken, 2013a). Or, to put it in simpler terms, the political economy of organized violence matters, be it for understanding the behaviour of individual actors, the mobilization of groups, or the composition of entire social collectives. Second-generation research at BICC has even resuscitated the old discussions surrounding ‘vested economic interests’ in regular military forces (see e.g. Brömmelhörster & Paes, 2003; Grawert & Abul-Magd, 2016). In doing so, it has produced original findings and policy recommendations without falling into the trap of relying on overtly deterministic causal explanations.

In sum, a Conversion Studies of the 21st century would be well advised to remain faithful to its roots and install its analytical focus on the political economy of organized violence. To delimit Conversion Studies in this way not only has the advantage of further specifying its distinctive contribution vis-à-vis other—and just as relevant—approaches to the subject. As suggested earlier, Conversion Studies also pushes normative objectives of social transformation, highlighting benefits resulting from reductions in the potentials of organized violence. Hence, the broader the scope of analyses, the broader and more encompassing the conversion process it advocates. By framing Conversion Studies as, first and foremost, a narrow-concern with the material resources and political economy of organized violence, it is less likely to become a project pursuing a comprehensive and far-reaching agenda of ‘social engineering’, of converting peoples’ hearts and minds—a valid criticism that applies to the more radical approaches of the 1980s as much as it does to many current efforts in peacebuilding and conflict transformation (see e.g. Duffield & Waddell, 2006; Pupavac, 2005).

## Conversion Studies goes beyond an exclusive concern with protracted violent conflicts and mainly focuses on organized violence in 'peaceful' regions

The vast majority of academic writings on the political economy of organized violence concerns itself squarely with protracted civil wars in the Global South. This is much in line with an overall shift in Peace and Conflict Research over the past two decades, which seems to have discovered those 'new wars' as its primary field of inquiry. At the same time, political discourses in Europe and North America have increasingly presented these conflicts in so-called fragile or failed states as 'safe havens for terrorists', hubs of transnational criminal networks, disruptions of global trade routes, catalysts of migration flows and thus threats to their own security. Research on such issues thus follows a certain political demand for developing recommendations on how these conflicts may be ended or, at least, contained. Krause's original suggestion for a concept of 'preventive conversion' was also intended to adapt Conversion Studies in such a way that it could tap into this prevailing trend.

While certainly a worthy and relevant area of study, especially for Peace and Conflict Research, an argument can be made that contemporary Conversion Studies should avoid the obvious temptation of all-too-readily joining into the chorus of what, in effect, has become 'Conflict Research' and remodeling conversion as, for instance, a synonym of 'post-conflict reconstruction'. For a start, Krause's proposal for installing the term conversion as a popular pillar of research and action on violent conflicts did simply not work out. The legacy of Conversion Studies as a discipline concerned with somewhat different topics appears to have been too strong. The term could not easily be moved from addressing one theme, namely the possible reuse of Cold War military resources held by the major powers on both sides of the Iron Curtain, to another one (the civil wars of the South). This lesson needs to be taken seriously. Conversion Studies was never primarily about violent conflicts. If it is to gain any wider and renewed

attention in the future, it should not only remain concerned with normative social change and political economy, but also with manifestations of organized violence as they appear in comparatively affluent, highly industrialized and usually 'peaceful' societies. As conversion scholars of the past have forcefully argued over and over again, these present problems of themselves—and quite regardless of whether they lead to violent conflict or not. Organized violence already shows itself in any social structure that collects and invests resources for the purpose of acquiring the necessary capabilities to effectively exercise physical force. In purely quantitative terms, it is thus most immediately apparent in the Global North and parts of East Asia. US defence expenditure still constitutes, for example, almost half of all global investments into the military. By way of contrast, the resources devoted to establishing and maintaining structures of organized violence in those conflict-ridden and 'fragile' states of the South are comparatively minimal, even when considered in relation to the overall economic performance of these societies (see Boemcken, 2008).

A quick scan of publications from Peace and Conflict Research in the new millennium, including studies on the political economy of violence, reveals a clear bias in favour of analyzing violent conflicts. There appears, then, to be a certain niche that Conversion Studies could occupy—and rightfully so, given the history of the discipline. The rationale would decidedly differ from the early 1990s, of course, where the world was caught up in a widespread process of disarmament. In a way, present-day Conversion Studies would much more closely resemble the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, global military spending has reached a level comparable to that of the Cold War. The myth according to which defence and security spending has a beneficial impact on the wider economy, spread by lobbyists from the arms industry and taken up in official documents of states, is once again gaining popularity (see Brzoska, 2013). For the time being, the European defence industry still has significant over-capacities (Mehrens & Wilke, 2009, p. 40). Yet, instead of instigating a renewed discussion of industrial

conversion, these have so far only resulted in increased arms exports to states outside of NATO and the European Union (see Moltmann & Boemcken, 2012). Finally, and despite all the theoretical shortcomings, many of Melman's observations regarding the inefficiency of the defence industry remain as accurate today as they were in the 1970s—just think of the many procurement scandals that regularly make the headlines. Conversion Studies can pose many of the same critical questions it did in the past—and the answers might not be that different in many cases (see Mehrens & Wilke, 2009).

### Conversion Studies bridges academic cultures

Conversion studies also has the potential to combine largely distinct academic disciplines and cultures. On the one hand, it is an openly normative discipline: It is all about change and 'making the world a better place'. In this sense, Conversion Studies clearly belongs to what has sometimes been labelled the soft and emancipatory agenda of peace studies, commonly associated with notions of 'structural violence', exploitation and class struggle, gender inequalities and racism. On the other hand, however, its more specific concern with military resources, such as defence spending, situates the discipline very close to the so-called hard and positivist approach of 'peace science', focusing on issues of arms control and armament. Linda Rennie Forcey observed that the history of Peace and Conflict Research—or rather: peace studies/ peace science—is very much a story of opposition between these two distinct strands (1992, p. 217). As she went on, Conversion Studies calls "both for the scientific, technological, quantitative skills of peace science, and for the normative, activist, future-oriented skills of peace studies" (p. 225). It is thus an "excellent meeting point at which the two cultures may come to appreciate their interconnectedness and appreciate their differences" (p. 216).

In the 21st century, the study of conversion could incorporate and combine both hard macroeconomic and softer micro-sociological approaches. BICC's

annual Global Militarization Index (GMI) already builds on former approaches in Conversion Studies by comparing levels of military expenditure in various countries to social spending on health or education. One pertinent issue concerns the modelling of scenarios outlining the expected wider consequences when either increasing or decreasing defence expenditures to any significant degree. Keith Hartley noted in 1997 that the "regional and local economic impacts of disarmament", particularly on labour markets, are an "under-researched field" (1997, p. 96). This observation remains valid twenty years down the line.

Whereas many economists continue to address a range of rather "esoteric problems" with little bearing on the actuality of collective social life, the "profession [allocates] relatively few of its [scholars] to study the theoretical, empirical and policy questions raised by" armament and disarmament (Hartley 1997, p. 979). What effects, for instance, would the dismantling of the overcapacities in the European defence industry have on employment levels? How do the qualifications of workers in the defence industry prepare them for finding jobs in civilian sectors? These are very pertinent and highly policy-relevant questions, which would make significant contributions to ongoing debates (see Boemcken, 2013b).

Conversion Studies should not be left to economists alone, however. Social scientists ought to complement their findings and ask how violence ought to be organized in any given society and how much resources would be necessary to this end (an issue somewhat neglected by earlier writings on conversion, see Cooper, 1995). This question, in turn, could greatly benefit from situated micro-level analyses of the actual networks that structure the political economy of organized violence in very concrete settings—examples include Hugh Gusterson's study of the "securityscapes" of workers in the American defence industry (2004) or Didier Bigo's "field analysis" of security professionals in Europe (2007; also Bigo & Jeandesboz, 2010). Although this and similar work partly resonates with past interests in 'military-industrial-complexes', it jumps to no hasty conclusions and is based on thorough empirical field research.



Conversion Studies could build upon such findings by combining them with results from other disciplines for the purpose of formulating concrete ideas for social change, not—or not only—in areas of violent conflict but in those regions where by far the most resources go into organized violence.

### **Conversion Studies is both critical and policy relevant**

Criticality implies a perspective that is not content with simply accepting a given state of affairs, in this case the particular organization of violence at any given place or scale. This was certainly true for the more political conversion scholars of the Cold War period, who wanted to unmask the ostensibly false assumptions put forward by the warmongering ideologists of the arms race. Melman, for instance, explicitly positioned himself in the intellectual tradition of critical realism (see Melman 1974, pp. 146–57), perhaps most famously represented by Noam Chomsky (who, himself, heavily relied on Melman's work in his analysis of war economies, see e.g. Chomsky, 2004). Of course, a critical academic perspective can come in many guises and mean different things (an 'uncritical' academic work is, arguably, not academic at all). Nevertheless, to understand Conversion Studies as a critical discipline is to set it apart from those clearly technical studies, which essentially regarded conversion as what Southwood called a 'mopping up' exercise, executing rather than reflecting upon political decisions and suggesting alternatives. As the earlier argument had it, the predominantly reactive stance of Conversion Studies in the 1990s partially accounts for the demise of the discipline as worldwide military expenditures increased again towards the end of the decade. By way of contrast, a critical approach to organized violence does not so much wait for things to happen but rather goes out and engages with things as they are.

To be critical also means not to settle for overtly simplistic and one-dimensional causal explanations, thereby neglecting the multiplicity of factors and

intricate complexities driving social phenomena. A critical Conversion Studies would therefore—also—have to be self-critical, that is reflect upon some of the shortcomings of the (critical) theories developed during the Cold War, which constitute a further reason underlying the irrelevance of the discipline today. Whoever attributes, for instance, current dynamics in armament and militarization singlehandedly to 'vested interests' in 'military-industrial-complexes' will hardly be taken seriously. The same goes for those demanding a world without weapons and the complete abolishment of all armed forces. Research can only expect to have an impact if it can self-critically demonstrate its explanatory power to make a difference. And it is, in fact, quite understandable that the conversion scholars of the 1990s quickly relieved themselves of difficult theoretical and normative baggage, distinguishing a 'utopian' past from a present 'reality' in which practical responses to an already ongoing development promised to bring about more concrete changes than Conversion Studies had ever actually initiated beforehand.

This is not to say that criticality precludes policy relevance. To argue that Cold War Conversion Studies was critical but not policy relevant, whereas post-Cold War Conversion Studies was policy relevant but not critical would be an assessment bordering on caricature. Think of the—very practical—deliberations of conversion scholars in the 1980s to conjoin the interests of workers in defence plants with those of popular social movements to build broad coalitions whose voices would be heard by those holding political power. Or consider the critical assessments of researchers at BICC in the late 1990s on the success and failure of various conversion efforts. The point here, however, is that both old and new Conversion Studies rarely, if ever, brought criticality and policy relevance together—as two principles of research that communicate with each other on an equal footing. That is to say, Conversion Studies ought to be policy relevant precisely because it conducts (self-)critical research, not in spite of it.

## Conversion Studies is always also post-Conversion Studies

Can, then, an argument be made for a renaissance of Conversion Studies? As demonstrated on the previous pages, it has a lot to commend it. Nevertheless, some critical comments are also in order. In particular, an argument can be made that Conversion Studies today ought to understand itself as 'post-Conversion Studies'. Post-conversion is not meant here in the sense suggested in 1995 by Cooper, that is, as referring to a period 'after' conversion in which the concept has become more or less obsolete. Rather, post-conversion draws attention to the need to question and self-critically reflect upon the basic parameters that render conversion an intelligible process. The beginning of this *Paper* showed that all previous definitions of defence conversion relied on drawing a clear distinction between the military and the civilian sphere. This dichotomy, moreover, presented one side as bad and the other as good. In effect, previous writings in Conversion Studies conceptually and normatively opposed the civil to the military; both were regarded as distinct and unrelated conditions that endured in, by and for themselves. For this reason, the idea of conversion ultimately harbours an almost eschatological fantasy of 'overcoming', which goes back to the theological origin of the concept. At the end of days, the military will give way to the civil. And even if conversion scholars conceded that this goal might be practically unattainable for the time being, it continued to linger in any thought and argument that presented the civilian sphere as the somehow better, more true and worthwhile, state of social existence.

Yet, is it possible to imagine a civil condition without its military anti-thesis? Does not any identification of civility depend upon a simultaneous move of designating that which is uncivil? If this is the case, then Conversion Studies needs to acknowledge that the civil and the military do not exist in isolation from one another. On the contrary, they constitute a dialectical symbiosis. It follows that any conceptualization of conversion relying on a clear-cut dichotomy between the two poles would be deeply flawed, if not

paradoxical and impossible. Civility is always already perverted. The more we insist on a civil space of peace and harmony, the sharper and more pronounced the contours will spring into view that distinguish it from a dangerous and militarized borderlands (see e.g. Caygill, 1993). Conversion could only be reasonably thought of as a transformation that actually *collapses* this distinction between the military and civil or, by extension, war and peace. Only, the question is whether such a process would be, indeed, desirable?

As it were, there is reason to believe that precisely such a conversion is currently taking place (if, in fact, the clear distinction between the two sides ever really existed, see Neocleous, 2010). For example, policy discourses are beginning to call the strict demarcation between military and non-military security practices into question. Concepts such as 'homeland security' evoke a broad spectrum of risks that ought to be engaged in concerted efforts by both military and civilian agents (see Hayes 2009, pp. 72-73). Bigo observed an increasing "de-differentiation" of the "inside" and "outside" (2008), and Derek Gregory argued that contemporary wars can often no longer be spatially confined, and thus clearly distinguished from zones of peace (2011).

For Conversion Studies, this blurring of boundaries is anything but a merely abstract and theoretical problem; it shows itself very concretely in what has always been the principal concern of the discipline: The defence industry. Already in the past, many conversion scholars noted that modern weapons systems are increasingly made of dual-use components, which can be used in a military and a civilian context (see Altmann, 2000; also Roberts, 1991). Even more poignantly, many defence manufacturers no longer concentrate on the production of military weapons alone but seek to enter the growing civilian markets for security technologies (see Marti Sempere, 2011; Mawdsley, 2013). As early as 1999, Wally Struys characterized the industry therefore as a "civilian-military complex" (1999, p. 40). Besides weapons, it develops, produces and sells, for example, sophisticated border control and surveillance technologies, often to civilian customers. Yet, if such 'civilian' products can cause



potentially just as much harm as military ones—and are often indistinguishable from them—then an understanding of conversion that relies on a civil-military dichotomy can no longer serve as a useful guide for formulating normative objectives.

Not least for this reason, the final part of this *Paper* proposed to conceptualize conversion in relation to organized violence. Unlike all former approaches and definitions, this avoids drawing a distinction between a military and civilian sphere. Organized violence should not be regarded as one side of a dichotomy that opposes it to something altogether different ('peace'). There is nothing external to it, organized violence is everywhere, neither essentially good nor bad. Conversion Studies thus ought to recognize that—while its potentials can certainly be reduced—organized violence itself cannot be overcome, but always only re-organized over and over again: It is in this sense post-Conversion Studies (or perhaps also 'Perversion Studies'). A normative orientation toward social change ought to continually motivate conversion scholars, to be sure. Only, this orientation cannot be sought along a straightforward and ready-made linear or even teleological trajectory. Instead, the precise normative agenda of conversion needs to be continually contested.

## Conclusion

The *Paper* set out to chart the evolution of Conversion Studies from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. It then discussed some of the reasons explaining the demise of the discipline in the new millennium. Based on a consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of Conversion Studies in the past, the final part made some suggestions on how conversion could inform a systematic field of academic inquiry in the 21st century. The propositions put forward to this end lean toward a comparatively conservative approach that pays close attention to the historical legacy of conversion as a concept. In sum, Conversion Studies should be a multi-disciplinary, critical and policy-relevant field of research that advocates social change based on analyses of political economies of violence, particularly in the affluent, industrialized and comparatively peaceful societies of the Global North. At the same time, it ought to abandon its past reliance on a simple civil–military dichotomy and, instead, engage with the more complex issues raised by a focus on organized violence. This includes a continual questioning and readjustment of one’s normative coordinates.

In the contemporary world, an increasing amount of resources is directed into the organization of violence. It goes without question that this trend needs to be accompanied by critical scholarship. Given the potential of Conversion Studies to conjoin otherwise distinct scientific approaches and traditions, a possible revival of the discipline might be worth discussing. Yet, and although the Paper concluded by identifying some relevant topics, which deserve closer attention in Peace and Conflict Research, there is no compelling reason to assemble, say, all critical analyses of the European defence industry under the heading of Conversion Studies—even if they come up with concrete recommendations for resource re-use and social change. Quite possibly, the patient is beyond all help. Nevertheless, this does not make the need for more and systematic research on these and similar issues less relevant. Regardless of whether a future field for studying the political economies of organized violence in a pro-active, critical and policy-relevant manner explicitly evokes the term conversion or not, it can arguably learn a lot from the looking back into the past of Conversion Studies.

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