Expanding the Study of the Nuclear Taboo
Cross-National and Multi-Dimensional Perspectives

ISA Catalytic Research Workshop Report

Date: Tuesday, March 26, 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM
Location: Pine East, Sheraton Centre Toronto

1. Budget

Total authorized: $9,255
Hotel costs: $1,826.53
Per Diem: $1,425
Transportation: $3,350.29
Meeting space rental: $250
AV setup: $270
Coffee service: $170

Total Expense: $7,491.82¹
Savings: $1,763.18

2. Participants

Conveners:
Michal Smetana (Charles University)
Carmen Wunderlich (University of Duisburg-Essen)

Other participants:
Maria Rost Rublee (Monash University)
Anne Harrington (Cardiff University)

¹ A detailed report on expenses concerning the accommodation and travel costs of individual participants is attached on a separate sheet.
Jeffrey S. Lantis (The College of Wooster)
Rebecca Davis Gibbons (Bowdoin College)
Virginie Grzelczyk (Aston University)
Michal Onderco (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
Benoit Pelopidas (Sciences Po)
Brian Rathbun (University of Southern California)
Nick Ritchie (University of York)
Marek Vranka (Charles University)

Guests:
Charli Carpenter (University of Massachusetts-Amherst)
Christopher Daase (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt)
Alex Montgomery (Reed College)

3. Description of Workshop

Prior to the workshop, the participants were asked to prepare short presentations of ongoing work related to the nuclear taboo, which were presented in the first half of the workshop. These included a first session covering theoretical perspectives on the subject matter, i.e. “The Social Construction of the Nuclear Taboo” (Maria Rost Rublee); “Norm Cluster Resiliency: The Nuclear ‘Taboo’ and Norm Contestation” (Jeffrey S. Lantis & Carmen Wunderlich); “Nuclearism, the ‘Taboo’ and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons” (Nick Ritchie); “The Stopping Power of Law? Public Opinion, Treaty Norms and the Nuclear Taboo” (Charli Carpenter & Alexander H. Montgomery).

Session 2 covered survey studies and experiments on the nuclear taboo, i.e. “Public Attitudes towards Nuclear Weapons in the 1980s” (Michal Onderco); “Atomic Attitudes: A New Survey of the Public’s Preferences regarding Nuclear (Non-)Use” (Benoit Pelopidas); and “Greater Good, Lesser Evil? Morality and Attitudes towards the Use of Nuclear Weapons” (Brian Rathbun). Another scheduled presentation on “Moral Foundations of the Nuclear and Chemical Weapons ‘Taboo’: New Evidence from Experimental Surveys” (Michal Smetana & Marek Vranka) could not take place because the presenters arrived late due to a flight delay. Some of the presentations were backed by papers, which were distributed in the weeks before the workshop.

The paper/research project idea presentations were followed by intense discussions and exchange of views with regard to the shortcomings and conceptual peculiarities/difficulties related to studying the nuclear taboo. All participants welcomed the opportunity to engage in an open and deep discussion, which also
prepared the basis for the second half of the workshop. Since there were many issues to discuss, the schedule was adapted to reserve more time for deep discussions.

The third session was geared towards discussing future collaboration and research projects. Therefore, prior to the workshop, the conveners had prepared a research project proposal that identified several gaps in the study of the nuclear taboo and which was supposed to lay the ground for the discussion. The conveners presented their ideas to the whole group for about 15 minutes and then a discussion took place for about 20 minutes in order to answer questions and give some clarifications. In the final session, we spent about 30-40 minutes in a wide-ranging open discussion, and 30 minutes discussing possibilities for publishing and follow-on workshop/conferences.

From the first session, it became very clear that the study of the nuclear taboo is undertheorized and that there is a need for more conceptual work on the nuclear taboo. Two major issues emerged with regard to the conceptualization of the nuclear taboo. The current debate on nuclear weapons (non-) use, particularly in the United States, is largely shaped by a rationalist understanding. Therefore, it seemed necessary to add a more constructivist perspective and to theorize to what extent the (non-) use of nuclear weapons understood as a social construction can also be explained with reference to the logics of appropriateness and emotions.

Another issue that arose much debate was whether we should speak of a “taboo” at all and to what extent the anthropological origin of the concept with its deontological underpinning applies. E.g., does the nuclear taboo have the same qualities as other known taboos, such as incest? Some also questioned the value-added of talking of a taboo rather than a norm. Those who were skeptical whether the concept applied to the phenomenon at hand suggested to speak of a norm of non-use instead. Yet, several questions emerged in that regard: To what extend does the definition of a norm apply to the (non-)use of nuclear weapons, particularly since nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states do not share a common identity – a prerequisite for speaking of a shared norm. When does a norm become a taboo? What are the policy implications if one would speak of a norm of non-use rather than a taboo? While participants were split with regard to the question whether the concept of a taboo should be used at all, all agreed about the necessity to further study the micro-foundations of the taboo/norm of the non-use of nuclear weapons.

The discussion in the second session centered on the usefulness and adequacy of using survey data in order to assess the “strength” or “weakness” of the nuclear taboo. Participants debated whether public opinion polls were appropriate to assess the robustness of the norm of non-use of nuclear weapons at all since the decisions to launch nuclear strikes are made by governmental elites/state leaders. Some pointed to flaws in the design of surveys and unintended consequences, e.g. priming effects. We also discussed difficulties in designing global surveys or cross-national surveys, e.g. with regard to changing the meaning of questions through translation and comparability. The group came to the conclusion that some of these difficulties could be remedied by supplementing experimental studies with qualitative analysis, i.e. focus group interviews and contextualizing cultural peculiarities, yet there remained
some skepticism with regard to the usefulness of surveys for assessing the strength of the norm of nuclear non-use. To add to this problem, some participants warned that survey findings indicating a decline or weakening of the nuclear taboo could even have undesired effects, i.e. undermining efforts to strengthen normative constraints.

Several of the presentations focused on a study that had been conducted by Sagan, Press and Valentino in 2013, which found that at least in the United States, the “atomic aversion” is significantly lower than one would have expected under the taboo proposition (Press, Sagan and Valentino, 2013; Sagan and Valentino, 2017). Participants took issue with that study on several grounds, e.g. the difficulty to extrapolate from public opinion to decision-making (just because the public says it would hypothetically use nuclear weapons doesn’t mean elites would do so); the insufficient acknowledgment of psychological factors (such as fear) and of constructivist concepts (such as socialization, learning). Some participants (Carpenter & Montgomery; Smetana & Vranka; Rathbun) had conducted replication studies of Sagan et al with adaptations in the design of the survey, e.g. framing effects and historical analogies, which generated important additions, such as the role of normative priming.

The conceptual discussion helped to stretch out issues for further research and framed the discussion in session three on the research proposal. The participants welcomed the shortcomings identified by the conveners (cross-national & cross-cultural perspective; (neuro-)psychological perspective; gender perspective; public-elite perspective; generational perspective; military culture perspective; comparative perspective), and they agreed that it would be worthwhile to tackle these gaps in future research. What seemed to be of particular concern to the group was a rigorous theorization of the nuclear taboo/non-use of nuclear weapons with a particular focus on further studying its micro-foundations. Participants also agreed that further research on the concept would be necessary to come up with policy recommendations on how to strengthen the likelihood that nuclear weapons will never be used, e.g. through engaging in nuclear weapons education. There were mixed reactions with regard to the issue of seeking to conduct global surveys analyzing the perception of the nuclear taboo across countries and cultures. Reasons for this were a general skepticism with regard to the appropriateness of public opinion poll, as well as difficulties connected with conducting such polls (costs, feasibility, etc.).

4. Future Publishing and Follow-on Workshops/Collaboration

Most participants expressed interest in further pursuing collaborative projects and expressed their interest in being part of a scientific network on the study of the nuclear taboo/norm of non-use of nuclear weapons. Michal Smetana and Carmen Wunderlich, the conveners, will seek to apply for funding (German Research Foundation), in order to be able to hold regular meetings and conferences. The conveners will also explore several options with regard to more specific grant project proposal to fund future research efforts.
Some of the follow-on activities include:

- **October/November 2019**: Scott Sagan expressed his interest in holding a follow-on workshop at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University.

- **ISA 2020 panel(s)**: The conveners will propose joint panel(s) for the upcoming ISA convention to explore the research agenda further and maintain momentum.

- **Journal Special Issue**: The conveners will approach several journals with regard to a special issue on the nuclear taboo, e.g. *Contemporary Security Policy* and *International Studies Perspective*. If a proposal is accepted, the conveners would write an introductory paper together outlining the state of the art on the nuclear taboo and identifying major research gaps. The remaining 5-6 papers from workshop participants would explore conceptual questions related to the nuclear taboo. We would aim for publication in 2021.

- **Edited volume**: The conveners will seek an edited volume contract in 2019. The University of Georgia Press has already indicated interest in an edited volume on the subject matter. We would aim for publication in late 2020 or 2021.

To conclude, the workshop has provided us with the opportunity to bring together scholars working on the nuclear taboo and related issues, thus laying the ground to revive research on an issue that seems to be pressing today. Meeting scholars with similar interests has allowed us to establish professional relationships that we hope will lead to further collaborations in the future.

Michal Smetana and Carmen Wunderlich