

A FAREWELL TO DR. STEVE WRIGHT (1952-2019)

by Hendrik Bullens



First and foremost I would like to pay my heart-felt condolences to Steve's beloved ones upon this more than saddening loss: my personal condolences and also those of his friends and colleagues from the European Peace Research Association (EuPRA) and IPRA.

I have lost colleagues and friends before, which is always a painful incision in life. But I have still found no proper answer to why it was of all people Steve's passing away that hit me like nothing else before – still leaving me with almost indescribable feelings of deep grief and loss – but also anger.

Maybe it was because of his, in the literal sense, exceptional and unique personality: as a cutting-edge conflict and peace researcher, an esteemed teacher, a political adviser and persisting activist, a true intellectual with an enormous knowledge and sharp mind, a gifted and witty speaker and writer – and a warm-hearted, dearest friend.

Probably it is a mixture of all, which was suddenly, though not quite unexpectedly, and irrevocably taken away: brutally reminding us of our utmost vulnerability and our very, very limited time: time that we often waste so thoughtlessly, as if we had a second life in the basement.

Hence, all who are present here today will understand and share the feelings of loss and sorrow – but anger? Why anger?

Because Steve's passing away, much too early, also confronts us with one of life's deep unfairnesses. Why did it hit *him*: the modest, empathetic, caring one with his contagious love for life and labour, with a vitality as if he was not in his late 60s and without any sign of travails of age: 'a man in full' in the best sense of the word. Why *him* and not one of those Machiavellian mega-ego machos, you name them, who presently are polluting and poisoning politics and people?

At first sight such a reaction may seem unreasonable and over-emotional. However, from experimental psychology – matching everyday experience - we know that people who care about others and share their burdens are, physically and mentally, more vulnerable than those who only care about themselves – not always of course, but in a statistically significant manner.

It was at the very beginning of the 1990s, right after the end of the Cold War, now almost 30 years ago, that our ways crossed for the first time.

What brought and kept us together as 'two-of-a-kind' was a direct result of the political revolutions and East-West détente of that time. 'New Thinking', Glasnost, Perestroika and the Gorbachev-Reagan summit finally lead to the end of the decades-long, extremely dangerous and costly Block-confrontation, the opening of the 'Iron Curtain' and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the nuclear arm race, disarmament treaties and substantial troops demobilization; but also to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the subsequent dissolution of the Warsaw Pact followed by Germany's re-unification – verily historical milestones.

The elder among us will remember that unprecedented spirit of optimism, invigoration and confidence in a better and more peaceful future, which was shared by many. For the younger generations, not having experienced these promising changes personally, catchwords indicating the high hopes, great expectations and new political ground of the time may be recalled here: cuts in military budgets; disarmament and demilitarization; destruction of conventional and mass destruction weapons; downsizing of the defence sector thus creating a peace dividend for arms industry conversion towards civilian purposes; common non-violent security, sustainable development and global peace.

However, Steve and I rather belonged to the small group of people who had difficulties in sharing this downright euphoria (notably among the peace research community) of which we were very skeptical. Both of us had been working on the Military Industrial Complex (MIC) and we realized its unbroken power and kraken-like networks, against which President Eisenhower in great foresight had warned in his farewell

speech. While particularly peace research more and more focused on (mostly short-mid-term) resolution of internal conflicts, Steve and I preferred to look at the bigger picture: Steve in terms of the interplay of neo-liberalism, militarism, arms- and repression-technologies; while I dealt with adaptation strategies of the state and the Military-Industrial Complex in those times of (temporary) budget cuts. At the time I was a convener the Security & Disarmament Commission published 4 or 5 books on these topics in the 1990s - with Steve mostly on board.

To us the growing discrepancy between the dumping of outdated and obsolete ordnance (sold to the public as 'disarmament') and the skyrocketing investments in new so-called intelligent weapons, military- and other security-technologies which were needed in a changed security landscape for what was called 'low-intensity conflicts and internal wars'- was too obvious. These new types of armed conflict were, as Steve wrote

"...largely fought with light weapons and small arms" [...] "Correspondingly the international arms trade is changing with a decline in the overall value of large weapon systems transferred, but with analysts forecasting quite large increases in the production, trade and transfer of low-intensity warfare equipment, training and technologies" (Wright 1997, p. 93-94).

Today this shift may have been balanced or even reversed, particularly since the Trump administration, but it was typical for the first decade after the end of the Cold War - and this became Steve's main area of research. Behind all this was the fact that although the armed wing of the Military Industrial Complex, NATO, had lost its 'communist-arch-enemy-in-the-East' and therefore actually also the justification for its existence, there was no iota of questioning the continuation of its political *raison d'être*, let alone its dissolution - on the contrary. A saying of yore had it that if the Taliban and other terror group had not emerged, Western rulers and the MIC would have invented them; today we know that this is very close to the truth.

Accordingly, we saw in 1991 the US-led invasion of Iraq, followed by the NATO-directed wars against Yugoslavia. and the military disaster in Somalia. From there on a host of further Western, military interventions led to the catastrophic situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen or sub-Saharan Africa of today. Instead of the promised 'Partnership for Peace' with Russia, disarmament, conversion, more civil society and more peace, this period brought the world an aggressive East-extension of NATO and EU resulting in a return of the Block-confrontation and arms races, new arms-, control- and other military technologies used in the new wars and against (mainly self-created) 'new threats'- based on a globally extended 'out-of-area' NATO doctrine and enabled through an unprecedented global arms spending of \$1,82 trillion in 2018: more than at the peak of the Cold War.

It was these stirring developments that undoubtedly shaped Steve's professional eye-marks and career. With a grade in Conflict and Peace Studies and a PhD on 'New Police Technologies and Sub-State Conflict Control' he was definitely the right person to become head of the Manchester City Council's Police Monitoring Unit in 1985 where he gained and applied first experiences. In 1989 Steve moved to The Omega Foundation as its new director.

In this capacity he worked with the UN Register of Conventional Arms, UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), UN Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), the European Commission, Amnesty International and other NGOs engaged in Human Rights violations and torture. Steve's innovative contribution dealt with the production, sales and trafficking of weapon-, torture-, execution- and surveillance-technologies, respectively with finding new sources, ways and techniques to collect and analyze hitherto widely missing data. These activities resulted, for instance, in the set-up of the OMEGA Data Base Project and his report on 'Technologies of Political Control' for the Science and Technology section of the European Parliament (STOA). Notably the latter led to political debates in Europe about the dangers of mass surveillance by the US NSA - long before the Snowden-leaks.

This work also needed a new type of investigation methods, as Steve wrote:

"...research on light weapons if it is to be accurate requires a newer and more risky kind of field research, entering the market place and the murky world of arms dealers, black markets, arms fairs and physically monitoring the often interchangeable trades in arms, drugs, and even toxic wastes" (ibid.).

As said earlier, these were Steve's research topics when we met for the first time at the beginning of the 1990s. It was on the occasion of conferences and sessions of the European Peace Research Association (EuPRA) and IPRA's Security and Disarmament Commission where I was a convener - one in Budapest, another in Malta, as far as I remember - when our cooperation and friendship had their beginning. At that time, I guess, power point presentations were not existent or very rare and Steve used a slide show which he orally explained - always in free speech, I never saw him with a written paper.

What he presented was the exciting state of affairs in a field research project on the tracking of MG 3, a light machine-gun, produced and traded by the Germany-based company Heckler & Koch; millions of these guns have found their way, legal and illegal, all over the world; as a matter of fact mostly in conflict regions. In an engaging and virtually furious way he depicted and pictured how he had been tracing the illegal trafficking of thousands of MG3 – from the arms fair and the company to an arms dealer, transported via secret distribution ways and dark middlemen to the final customers. Steve recounted how he was verbally and physically intimidated by Heckler & Koch representatives; how difficult it was to trace down the deal and that he had received numerous anonymous phone calls threatening him if he would not stop the project.

I also remember, as if it were yesterday, that all SDC participants were enthusiastic rewarding Steve's work with a big applause.

Note: In 2019 Heckler & Koch was sentenced to pay Euro 3.7 million because of the illegal export of 5,000 semi-automatic guns, rifles and according ammunition to crisis-ridden Mexico to be used in regions of counterinsurgency; Heckler & Koch employees involved received prison sentences.

It was, by the way, also through such talks and discussions that I learned Steve's own interpretation and wording of Karl Marx' concept of dialectical contradiction. In discussions about the question whether the then-changes in the arms industry rather quantitative decreases or qualitative increases through improvements were, he used to answer:

"It's never 'either-or' – but always both and more"

Another, rather anecdotic detail, I recall was his special pronunciation of the letter *l* like in Leeds. When he, for instance, referred to his Beckett university in Leeds, it sounded something like *lrrreeds*. I have never thought of asking him whether he did that on purpose, or if it was something else. For me it just became Steve's exclusive own linguistic brand.

Steve also oftentimes addressed the need and chances for a substantial and true conversion of the arms industry, or more precisely: how these chances were not used and even mis-used. In the same paper he referred, for instance, to what I had earlier dubbed '*Pseudo-conversion*' (today, in line with the 'post-truth' rhetoric, I might have named it 'fake-conversion' or 'alternative conversion'). That was at that time the prevailing form of civil product-diversification in the arms industry - but without replacing and decreasing the military share of the product-line and turnover. He wrote:

"... Indeed, many of the major arms companies also run parallel police/internal security equipment manufacturing operations and much diversification is already taking place. Such cross-fertilization of technologies is creating a policing revolution and speeding up the process of para-militarising the police whilst disguising the nature of the overall process [...] if Heckler & Koch sells variants of their submachine guns to police forces rather than the military, the official record indicates a diversification towards civilian purposes whereas in reality it is nothing of the sort. This masking of the trade in weapons for internal control has led to the current Omega project..." (ibid.).

A later important impact of Steve's work was the 1998 European Commission's ban on export of torture- and execution-technologies from the EU. Later, he was actively engaged in the International Committee for Robot Arms Control (ICRA). In 2009 Steve became a Reader in Politics and Applied Ethics at Beckett University, Leeds, UK. There he was, along with his main fields of expertise, teaching Conflict and Peace Studies; together with colleagues he also set up the MA program 'International Human Rights Practice'.

In a recent blog '*Going full circle...*' Steve looks back on his – hardly to believe – 50 years of experience with the UK's arms-, surveillance-, security-industry and the MIC. As a young boy he worked at an arms factory (!) which employed some 25,000 workers. Because of decreasing Ministry of Defence orders, the owners and government were considering conversion towards producing powerhouses and other forms of energy instead. But the idea was finally dropped in favour of the full-automated production of modern battle tanks; at the cost of huge job losses with a remaining workforce of a merely 100 people. His blog concludes:

"The same engineers making tanks have vast experience in marine engineering and are situated in a region which has the densest concentration of wind energy in the UK. So much could be achieved if only we had more joined up thinking and political leaders with vision and ambition"

(<https://leedspage.wordpress.com/2016/03/11/going-full-circle/amp>)

At our 2014. and 2015 conferences in Istanbul and Norway, Steve impressed with his predictive knowledge: lively presentations on current developments in surveillance-, repression- and border control-technologies: now not only used in upheavals or mass-protests but increasingly against the millions of

refugees fleeing war or hunger. He demonstrated the use of so-called non-lethal weapons which oftentimes could severely injure and even kill people. He showed how (killer-)drones and micro bio-robots, infra-red cameras and even gene-technological surveillance devices are used to distinguish and identify protesters according to gender or ethnicity (e.g. take 'blacks' only).

Until the very end Steve and I were in close contact: at conferences, workshops and per email. In 2016 I had set up a panel titled 'Peace Research and Peace Activism' at the 'DISARM!' Conference in Berlin organized by the International Peace Bureau. Unfortunately, Steve was not able to participate but gave his support by sending his co-worker April Humble.

The same happened this year when EuPRA had a workshop in Paris, France: as his replacement came Steve's student: Craig Brown. And in a way it was through Steve's engagement that Craig participated in the 2019 EuPRA conference in Catania, Italy, where he was elected as a new board member. He is the very one reading this obit here. This time it was me who could not come to the ceremonies, as much as I would have wished to do so – still being too afraid to lose my countenance and hoping you may understand.

Then, some half a year ago, came the shocking news: Steve wrote to me about his diagnosis, the therapy and his survival chances which he considered with a mix of realism and moderate optimism. He never gave up; he was in contact with Palestinian protesters whom he advised on how to deal with the repression- and control-tools of the Israeli military and police, as well as on tactical issues of resistance – even still during his hospitalization and chemotherapy.

My dearest friend, time has come to say 'Farewell'

You leave a big gap. We are missing you already.

We will never forget you and continue your work and mission in your sense to the best of our abilities.

But we are also deeply grateful for the time and work we could share with you. As scientists we know that

"From the stars we come
To the stars we go"

Hence, sooner or later we will meet again: as stardust, in which shape ever...

Until then, rest in peace.

As always

Hendrik Bullens

and all your friends and colleagues from EuPRA /IPRA
Istanbul, December 13, 2019