

## Making an honest buck on war<sup>1</sup>

A biographical understanding of a legal “lord of war”, his banality, and the aspirational society

Mit dem Krieg ehrliches Geld verdienen. Über das biografische Verstehen eines legal operierenden „Lord of War“, dessen Banalität und die Fallstricke der strebsamen Gesellschaft

Arms dealers are considered morally corrupt and pure evil, often referred to as ‘merchants of death’ that exploit conflict, war and overall suffering, making money by selling arms and ammunition. This article is based on a biographic study of a legal arms dealer that has revealed there are often banal reasons at play to financially benefit from warfare legally (Eski 2022). A short criminological imagination of the arms trade in relation to war and state crimes shall be provided, followed by a concise methodological explanation of why criminological biographies matter, and why it should matter more in criminology. Then the biographee’s choices and motivations to be a professional arms dealer will be discussed, which revealed deeper narratives on current society’s “biography”, specifically the aspirational society’s. Finally, the conclusion on the interplay between an arms dealer’s biography and that of the aspirational society will be given.

**Keywords:** Arms dealers, war crime, banality of evil, the aspirational class, emancipatory violence

Waffenhändler werden zumeist als moralisch korrupt und als das pure Böse verstanden. Oftmals lassen sich Darstellungen wie „Händler des Todes“ finden, die Konflikte, Kriege und Leid ausnutzen, um Waffen und Munition zu verkaufen. Dieser Artikel stellt, basierend auf einer biografischen Studie mit einem legal operierenden Waffenhändler, die banalen Beweggründe vor, die Menschen dazu motivieren, von Kriegshandlungen finanziell zu profitieren. In diesem Kontext wird eine kurze „kriminologische Imagination“ des Waffenhandels im Verhältnis zu Krieg und Staatskriminalität vorgestellt. Dabei wird auch erörtert, warum ein entsprechender Ansatz in der Kriminologie vielversprechend erscheint. Anschließend werden die Lebensentscheidungen und Motivationen hinter der Entscheidung, als Waffenhändler tätig zu werden, diskutiert. Die dabei zum Vorschein kommenden Ergebnisse verraten etwas über tiefere Narrative und „Biografien“ in kapitalistischen und „strebsamen“ Gesellschaften. So wird abschließend auch auf das Zusammenspiel der Biografie eines Waffenhändlers mit den Strukturmerkmalen gegenwärtiger Gesellschaften eingegangen.

**Schlagwörter:** Waffenhandel, Kriegsverbrechen, Banalität des Bösen, emanzipierende Gewalt, strebsame Gesellschaft

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1 This contribution is based on and has significantly made use of chapters 1, 2, 9 and 10 from *A Criminological Biography of an Arms Dealer* (Eski 2022).

## Introduction

In Summer 2022 during the early stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War there was a discussion about a potential prisoner swap between the Russian illegal arms dealer Viktor Bout, known as the “Merchant of Death”, and the United States (US) Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) star Brittney Griner and former US marine Paul Whelan, who both were detained in Russia. Griner was sentenced to nine years in prison in Russia on drug charges, which US President Joe Biden called “unacceptable” (Reuters 2022). After a couple of months of “quiet diplomacy under way” (ibid.), on Thursday 8 November 2022 a prisoner exchange took indeed place between Griner and Bout at Al Bateen executive Airport in Abu Dhabi (Kirby 2022). Whelan, however, is still being held captive in Russia, on suspicion of espionage. It is an accusation he himself has always denied and claimed he was framed for by the Russian security service (NOS 2022).

Public outrage and critique followed, targeting the Biden Administration for not having succeeded in retrieving both Griner and Whelan back, as well as questioning why an “evil” arms dealer like Bout, who has been “convicted by a New York jury on four accounts which included conspiring to kill American citizens” (Stening 2022 – online source) and is seen as “probably the highest-profile Russian in U.S. custody” (Hopkins/Yuhas 2022) was freed and returned to Russia? Moreover, initially both Griner and Whelan together would be swapped for Bout, but Russia seemed to have thought that a “two for one”-deal would have been unfair, leaving both Whelan and his family behind in continuous daily fear and anxiety (NOS 2022). Above that, there were general concerns about plans to exchange prisoners with Russia, and thereby supporting hostage diplomacy. It would, perhaps, motivate the Kremlin (even more) to continue arresting foreigners to use as assets in exchange for captured Russians; an accusation Moscow denies (ibid.). In fact, ever since Bout was captured during the “Big Bangkok Bust” in 2008 (Weiser/Moynihan 2012), the Russian government has made several attempts to repatriate him from the US, which failed each time until now. For years now, Russia insisted on Bout’s innocence and narrated a self-justifying story of how it prioritizes their “bring back to the motherland”- and “we won’t abandon ours”-campaigns, in which Bout played a symbolic role (NOS 2022) as Russia’s “most worthy citizen”. Bout’s wife too fulfils a “heroic” role in that story, as the loyal wife who waits for her husband in celibacy and who persistently kept on claiming that her husband is innocent, like during an interview with *Der Spiegel* (Thielke 2010).

There were and despite the decision for the prisoner swap there probably still are many worries in the US government regarding Viktor Bout, because of Bout’s relationship with the Russian armed forces and secret military intelligence, the GRU, and that he may have served as a Russian spy whose cover-up was that of being a rogue arms dealer (Schmidle 2022). He may very well possess vital information about allegedly illegal, secret foreign op-

erations by the US and United Kingdom (UK) (Global Policy Form 2016), in which the CIA may have been involved (Eski 2022: 187), and in which Bout may have played a key role. Expectedly, Putin's government now would have access to the supposedly sensitive information about these US and UK activities that could be used to make the US and UK look bad.

Whether any of this is true or not, in these times of ongoing hybridised war in Ukraine that is becoming more violent and internationally felt stronger each day, is still to be seen. Equally unclear is how the two great powers Russia and the US will use their reclaimed nationals after having celebrated their heroic return as the "innocent black queer basketball heroine" Griner and as the innocent Russian patriotic "comrade" Viktor Bout? They might very well be weaponised into geopolitical pawns by Russia and the US to wage their ongoing "disinformation wars" with one another. All the while innocent individuals have suffered, like Griner, and are still suffering, as Whelan still is.

What does become apparent from the Viktor Bout case of accusations and denials, of smoke and mirrors, is that there is much vagueness, secrecy and sensitivity involved in arms dealer cases. It has to do with the fact that as an audience, we tend to shy away from the fact that particularly in wartime, arms dealers and manufacturers play a key role in providing arms to warring parties, as well as that war is vital for dealers and manufacturers themselves. Arms dealers are needed. The Russo-Ukrainian War has led to billions of newly generated financial gains by global arms manufacturers such as *Lockheed Martin* and *Raytheon* (Phillips 2022). What is perhaps difficult to realise, or at least wonder about, is how arms dealers themselves are not necessarily interested in the end-result of wars, but rather in the perpetuation of wars. War sells. However, we know nothing about motives and interests from arms dealers themselves directly. Why do they do what they do?

In having studied a legal arms dealer biographically those often banal reasons of making money over warfare legally, revealed themselves (Eski 2022). His choices and motivations to be a professional arms dealer revealed deeper narratives on current society's "biography", specifically the aspirational society's. In this contribution, that interplay between an arms dealer's biography and that of the aspirational society shall be discussed. But first, a short criminological imagination of the arms trade in relation to war and state crimes shall be provided, followed by a concise methodological explanation of why criminological biographies matter, and why it should matter more in criminology.

## **Arms trade, war and state crimes: a short criminological imagination**

To criminologically imagine something, someone or a group, means to adapt Mills' sociological imagination (2000 [1959]), geared towards an understanding of crime and control that includes awareness of dominant percep-

tions about crime and control, and what these perceptions tell about society (Yong 2011). A criminological imagination requires neither to get lost in theory nor in empirical-statistical detail, but should remain somewhere in between, which enables criminologists to see the context of contestation, diversity and unequal power relations in which “human subjects are creative actors” (Karpiak 2013: 390). To criminologically imagine the arms trade, war and state crime, it is about disciplining theory – focusing on crimes of the powerful (Tombs/Whyte 2003), especially on globalized and globalizing crimes of the powerful (Barak 2015) – by considering (biographical) facts while remaining attentive to the meaning-giving and identity, and, eventually, to the intrinsic humanity of those who could be considered “evil” or “deviant” (Young 2011), such as arms dealers. The brokering role of arms dealers must be addressed in the wider global context of the arms trade and public-privately run military and security industrial complexes, otherwise, as Barak (2015: 113) keenly observed before on crimes of the powerful sustained and amplified by globalization processes,

“it is very hard to imagine how any other kind of tinkering will alter the negative trends of unsustainable [arms trade] capital development or make any kind of dent in the volume of, let alone, in the driving forces underpinning the crimes and victimization of the powerful.” (Barak 2015: 113)

To do so means, to begin with and in relation to state and war crimes, as the Russian war in Ukraine testifies to, acknowledging that the delivery of arms to Ukraine by NATO countries is celebrated (Hernández 2022). So, criminologically imaginatively, one would expect that the moral engagement of the public toward Ukraine especially, would also change the public attitude towards the production and selling of weapons, and thus to the arms dealer as well. Meaning, they would, at least, be not as demonized as before anymore and not be considered as part of the crimes of the powerful machine.

However, and despite arms and ammunition scarcity of the Ukrainian army that require fast delivery of weapons, concerns are growing about private arms dealers that can provide such fast-delivery services. There are worries that these arms dealers (illegally) benefit from loosened (legal) control on their small arms and light weapons sales to Ukraine (Scheck 2022): Elias Yousif, a researcher with the Stimson Center, a Washington research group that studies the arms trade, [said:] “You encourage this entire economy that exists in this gray space across borders and with people of questionable motives” (ibid. – online source). The cited is but one of the numerous instances in which – whether legal or illegal – arms dealers are stereotyped as exploiters of war and conflict that merely benefit themselves, which is a typical demonization of arms dealers that is often heard. Since the 1960s, the public imagination of the arms dealer is that of being morally corrupt, pure evil and as merchants of death (Bauman 2016; Bromley/Cooper/Holtom 2012; Farah/Braun 2007; Hornaday 2021; Mac Cormick 1965; Maitland 1998; Orlovsky 2005; UN Security Council 2019; Wechsler 2016).

Much like strippers (Thompson/Harred 1992) or executioners (Osofsky/Bandura/Zimbardo 2005), for example, or any “deviant work” for that matter (Miller 1979), the profession of arms dealers is often despised, but they are still required in certain situations, especially for states (Stockmarr 2015). In fact, they are considered to be indispensable cogs in the wheel of the international arms trade, because of their ascribed stealth and invisibility. Arms dealers together form an essential part of international security that makes and solidifies alliances, influences governments, and benefits economic stability, as much as that they play a key role for countries’ national security, brokering arms deals to sell and supply weapons to and from military and police forces, as well as for civilian use (Stohl/Grillot 2009). Arms dealers broker arms deals and set-up “conventional weapons transfers [that] are not as visible or concerning to a general audience” (ibid.: 185), which is useful for states to operate in the shadows of the wider military- and security-industrial complex (Dunne/Sköns 2010).

Arms dealers, war (crime) and state (crime) are in that sense a part of a “complex sets of cross-state economic and political linkages that move outside formally recognized state-based channels”, where the “illegal” and “legal” blur, and activities “cross various divides between legal, quasi-legal, and downright illegal activities” (Nordstrom 2004: 34). Arms dealers in their role in states waging war (crimes), operate on the “thin line between criminal traffic and government-inspired trade”, as Castells (1998: 178) put it. Through war (crimes), arms dealers “move goods and services worldwide [in] networks that broker power comparable to, and in many cases greater than, the power of some of the world’s states”, and are especially visible in warzones (Nordstrom 2004: 107). Criminologically imagining the role of arms dealers in wars and state crimes means there must be an understanding created about their role in “rules of exchange, codes of conduct, hierarchies of deference” (ibid.). They are part of a network of international actors that have formal and informal bonds between “corrupt commercial elites, religious leaders, international agency personnel, as well as international racketeers and their middlemen, smugglers, money-dealers, pirates, and slavers and abductors, not to mention soldiers in the warring armies and foreign troops” (ibid.: 108). So, (il)legal arms dealers cannot be easily disaggregated from wars and state crime, as seen in the war between Russia and Ukraine. As a matter of fact, they can also not be separated from other criminal flows of illicit goods, or from the power structures of shadow networks in which these (state and war) criminal activities take place. They come in many forms and formats, brokering between producers and/or between states as customers, as well as private entities.<sup>2</sup> However, how do arms dealers see themselves (in these shadow networks of war and state powers)? This is a controversial biograph-

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2 For a more detailed account of specific functions and forms of arms dealer and dealing, please consider in chapter 6 of “A Criminological Biography of an Arms Dealer” (Eski 2022).

ical question that has been answered by me recently (Eski 2022), and one that is necessary to critique, or at least to contrast, often narrow-minded, demonising stigmatisations of arms dealers.

## **Towards a biographical ‘verstehen’ of an arms dealer**

Although my criminological biography of an arms dealer (ibid.) is on a “legal arms dealer”, implying there is nothing criminal or legally deviant about the arms trade, still, whenever the figure of the arms dealer pops up, the connection is made with violence, war and state crime; themes that have received criminological scrutiny (Green/Ward 2000; Jamieson 2017; McGarry/Walklate 2019; Slapper/Tombs 1999; Walklate/McGarry 2015).

However, that criminological scrutiny seems to have forgotten about biography as method, which is perfectly fitting to understand arms dealers, war and state crime. This has to do with the fact that a criminological biographical “verstehen” (cf. Ferrell 1997) allows for the study of one person’s life that made a career in the legal arms trade; a profession that monetizes on weapons with which people cause conflict and often lethal harm. The biography allowed for an interpretative understanding of the connection between personhood, profession, legality and violence, thus making this biography criminologically relevant.

That understanding somewhat problematized the public opinion about arms dealers. Because instead of being evil “creatures” exploiting death and destruction (Ironelle/Mérand/Foucault 2015), biography unpacks an arms dealer as a banal, normal human being, doing a legal job with very understandable motivations, through which is acquired “a set of viewpoints that are simple enough to make understanding possible, yet comprehensive enough to permit us to include in our views the range and depth of the human variety” (Mills 1959: 133). I have thus aimed for a biographical *verstehen* of the arms dealer Constantine and his “personal troubles and problematic behaviours within their socioeconomic and political contexts” (Barton et al. 2013: 210), to let him speak for himself, and what his self-image in relation to the public image of arms dealers may inform us about.

If anything, applying the biographic method as a criminologist, made me as biographer let

“go of our comfortable beliefs that we already know who is resisting war and militarism and how they are doing it and be brave enough to remain open to alternative possibilities from people and places we least expect.” (Brownfield-Stein 2017: 68)

In this case being, an arms dealer himself. It is about his story, and what that story tells about (stigmatising) narratives, stereotypes and demonisations about arms dealers.

## Constantine, the moral chameleon

By using a criminological imagination (Young 2011) of a certified arms dealer and based on various in-depth interviews, the biographic study (Eski 2022) showed that Constantine – the arms dealer’s pseudonym – sees himself as a self-reliant human being and not an evil creature that feeds off of human suffering in war and conflict.

His life was one of adversity and of adventure, of danger and of dullness, of professionally making money out of war and of personally embracing peace and quiet. Considering his childhood, it became clear he had a very problematic relationship with his parents, specifically his father. Although his childhood was filled with physical and mental abuse, Constantine did not speak in those terms about it and actually put it into perspective. So, although he somehow understood how he was treated – and indirectly his father – he would never become the same though, which is one of his life lessons.

In his teenage years, he went to boarding school, where he was more often than not subjected to bullying and violence, while being far away from home – a home that was not any better. The traumatic experiences in boarding school have affected him in his adulthood, including stress related disease, difficulty in establishing and sustaining meaningful (intimate) relationships, but also becoming a workaholic to the point of burnout, serious health issues, and drug and alcohol misuse (Duffell 2000). All of which, to lesser or greater extent, happened to Constantine. He was also defiant against the boarding school regime, making Constantine, albeit indirectly, resisting the dominant hegemonic structures of society, which testifies to his own notion of himself being anti-establishment. It makes him proud to have been a critique from within which is something he also wanted to be in university.

Although he did not want to study IT, his father pushed him to, to which he eventually gave in. It was at university though, where he soon realised he did not fit in. For him, his academic studies were a time of doing drugs and becoming religious, as well as embracing his working class background. Once he finished university, he had a variety of professional careers: a diving instructor, training dogs, social worker, government consultancy and even counter-proliferation of illegal arms. In all of those jobs he wanted to excel as a professional non-conformist. Eventually, he got interested in legal arms dealing.

As an arms dealer, Constantine explained, he was and still is motivated by a certain will to firepower consisting of enjoying arms aesthetically and dealing with logistical challenges. He also enjoyed the fast but unhealthy life involved. Whereas before he would physically go to clients, he does not do that anymore. Neither does he keep his arms and ammunition physically. He considers himself a small businessman and craftsman, who is “not just a gun runner”, and most definitely not an illegal arms dealer, as that would be professional suicide. In selling not just arms and ammunition, but also

tailor-made solutions, consultancy and other services, including risk-assessments and geopolitical analyses, and training courses, he strives for the delivery of a unique customer experience of his arms dealing craftsmanship. His end goal is to create brand loyalty of his customers.

This is for him especially important, because the global arms trade has become a trade that is dominated by multinational arms manufacturers, untrustworthy clients and a couple of small-scale arms dealers. Constantine will only invest his time and energy in brokering deals that comprise clients that are in an ongoing conflict and perpetual war. In case of perpetual peace, if you are in policing and security in which arms and ammunition are required for training purposes, then Constantine is also interested. As long as it is consistent and perpetual; that is what provides a stable income that he wants the most of all. And of course, clients must be able to negotiate an End User Certificate (EUC). Then it is legal. He often said he would even sell to both parties if both would have an EUC.

In his interaction with clients, large arms manufacturers and small-scale arms dealers, to broker arms deals, he must adhere to international laws, but does not see any worth in them. For him, it is about finding and using loopholes in the bureaucracy of the – he considers – over-regulated international governance of arms. But that is only interesting for him when he reaps the benefits from licenses, the EUC system and weapon embargo sanctions. If the regulations are not assisting him, he becomes critical of the power politics behind arms treaties, laws, licences and embargoes. He then is urged to uncover the hypocrisy of arms control and its governance.

Finally, regarding his life's story, he portrayed himself as a loving family man. He is a different person at home compared to being "at work" as an arms dealer. This is an interesting contrast: he brokers arms deals so that someone purchases arms to kill with, deals over which he makes money that allows him to take care of his family and himself to live their lives. To commoditise people's ambition for death and destruction in order to sustain the life of your loved ones and yourself; a most fascinating contradiction. However, for Constantine it is a way of life.

It is a way of shifting, manoeuvring and some sort of everyday (moral) shuffling. And in that sense, he is a Jack of all trades yet master to none, acting as a broker not only in arms dealing, but having to do so in all aspects of his entire life.

"You ever heard of something called the chameleon syndrome? That's me. I'm your original chameleon. [...] The chameleon syndrome is where I'm in a strange environment and when I have to fit in with the others, then I fit in. I make myself unseen. I do not draw attention to myself, that's what I meant by chameleon." (Constantine)

He is a "moral chameleon" that can "modify or abandon previously avowed principles in order to placate others" (Benjamin 1990: 47) and can play out many roles as "social chameleon" which can be seen as risking to compromise

the sense of an obdurate, core self as Harter (1997: 87) put it. For Constantine nonetheless, that compromising *is* his core self. Meaning, his identity is to be chameleonic, maneuvering through resistance and compliance. He has embraced that identity and professionalized it as well. For Constantine it is not about being a fast-life, mischievous arms dealer, as Nicholas Cage's character in *Lord of War* depicts (Niccol 2005). It is also not about being just a serious businessman interested in logistics. Nor about trusting and being trustworthy on the one side or distrusting and being untrustworthy on the other. Neither does it matter for his identity to play by the rules of the game or hating the game for the rules. As much it is not about being an arms dealer only or just being a husband and (grand)father. Moreover, it is not about life or death. No, it is about accepting that he is all of it and none if it – he is somewhere in between. He is an original chameleon, an identity he has fully embraced.

Once that in-betweenness, or liminality, is understood by us as everyday citizen, it becomes possible to see the arms dealer Constantine as neither the one nor the other, yet whose life somehow denotes all of those simultaneously while also distinguishing between them, without actually doing so (Thomassen 2016: 103). His identity is – also in his arms dealing “reality” itself – shaped and shifted in different directions (ibid.: 104). Therefore, he should be understood as someone who is not truly committed to leave such chameleonic situation, but might only simply pretend to leave it (ibid.). As a matter of fact, Constantine is just fine with preserving the confusing (moral) ambivalence he has while mimicking a certain charisma of being resistant and rebellious.

## Constantine's biography as if it's society's biography

To really understand his ambiguous character implies to give in to a certain “scepticism that refuses to treat at face value the categories, assumptions and self-understandings that make up ‘common sense’ about [arms dealing – YE] and its control” (Loader/Sparks 2010: 130). Let us leave from Vaihinger's (1935) philosophical assumption “as if” it is possible not only to biographically understand his life as a story of being ambiguous, but also to subtract *from* his life a story about our ambiguous society. In doing so, we perhaps may be able “to provide an instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world” (Vaihinger 1935: 15). Meaning, his textual afterlife should be seen *as if* it reveals the wider, macro socio-cultural forces that a normal, everyday legal arms dealer and all of us are subjected to. So, his biography in its most humble form forms a critique on society and its nature (Restivo 2018). Constantine's biography tells us something about his and life's overall all too human liminality, ambiguity and its contradictions that we may find hard to acknowledge, as it would mean we can relate to him and his life (choices). That frightens us, because it means he and all of us are not that different; we resemble the arms dealer that we commonly demonise.

It echoes what Hannah Arendt observed on Nazi official Adolf Eichmann (2006) and how understandable his actions were, and what that says about all of us. We are all able to commit evil. Still, when Arendt's report on Eichmann as an ordinary man was published...

"...Arendt's phrase about the banality of evil outraged people because it removed from monstrous crimes the depth and darkness to which we usually consign them; it gave them no depth but merely surface. To say that evil is banal has the consequence of taking the supposed depth and profundity out of it and levelling it: it is then supposed to be widespread, commonplace." (Donoghue 1979: 283-284)

Eichmann was a desk murderer (Maier-Katkin/Mears/Bernard 2009) who obeyed orders and seemed to have been compelled to do so, implying there was a choice to make other (moral) decisions. Constantine, however, willingly and voluntarily entered the arms trade. Still, whoever really has full freedom of choice? Whoever feels truly free in their choices to do what they do? Sociohistorical and cultural dimensions always influence our choices (Viale 2021), to a very banal level, which means there is no clear good and evil, no clear dark and light, but something grey in between. As said, something liminal and all too human altogether (Nietzsche 1878). The same may go for Constantine's life: his choices actions are not fully (ir)rational or (im)moral, but all and none of it. And perhaps that is why we do not want to relate to arms dealers as banal evil, as it is hard for us to deal with the idea there is no specific darkness of an arms dealer to be found. Because if there does exist evil and it is commonplace, we therefore may all possess it. Maybe we could have become an arms dealer ourselves, were we to have been taken in a direction through life like that of Constantine's. That would also imply that Constantine's biography is, to an extent, a biography of us all. The stories he shared in the biography, that of having had a problematic youth, resisting teachers and classmates, having career ambitions, wanting to excel at his job, loving his wife and children, despising exes, and being ill – these are all stories about rather banal and recognisable life experiences and their consequences.

## Whose demon? Who's the demon?

If we are not that different from Constantine and in recognizing that his arms dealing and entire life is ordinary, this should make us wonder why we demonise arms dealers at all. Because, why do we see arms dealers as extraordinary sinful geniuses, moral degenerates, key drivers of human suffering, merchants of death and all in all evil incarnate (Bromley/Cooper/Holtom 2012; Hornaday 2021; Theodoulou 2009; UN Security Council 2019; Wechsler 2016)? What does that demonization tell us about ourselves?

Ivan Karamazov, one of the main characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's last novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1992), explained something about evil to his younger brother. He said to him that to imagine people as evil is wrongful, because it

would distance the demonizer away from the imagined demon – as if the demon is not inherently human itself. At least, that is the point Dostoevsky makes, along with that as soon as someone dehumanises someone else into being evil or the devil, evil is actually created in their own image. Calling something evil reveals something about our self, our society – the process of dehumanization or demonization, who does it, and who is subjected to it reveals a story about ourselves, or, our Self (Said 1978), without necessarily learning about the demonized person or phenomenon itself. We do not want to learn because we require evil to herald ourselves, to romanticise and idealise our lives. According to Nietzsche (1974: 282), we desperately need an enemy to escape the real world of the sometimes violent nature and horrific history that accommodates pain and hostility, into an alternative, imaginary reality. In fact, Constantine argued something similar when he said that as a society we need “moral pick-me ups” by demonizing arms dealers, because then “you feel a bit more refreshed so you don’t feel so bad what they’re responsible as well through their consumer lives.”

All in all, by demonizing arms dealers for moral pick-me ups, as a society we are enabled to re-establish what the sociologist Émile Durkheim referred to as a collective conscience of society (Durkheim 1982: 98-102). He argued how such a conscience keeps a society together.

## **The aspirational society and aspirational evil**

“Maybe forcing things to be bright just makes the darkness underneath even darker.” (Abed Nadir, Community season 3, episode 10 “Regional Holiday Music”)

Durkheim based his sociology of cohesion on the industrial, capitalist society and its culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1964). We live in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century though. An overly digital age, in which various societies exist with each their different and merging cultures, and one in which an aspirational class or society emerges, striving towards inclusion, diversity and overall cosmopolitanism (Currid-Halkett 2017; Hochschild 2016). This means that our collective conscience is thus one of aspirationalism: we all want world peace, end global hunger, eco-friendly and green, becoming more tolerant, more diverse, more virtuous and thus more emancipatory. These are all in and of themselves “bright” things.

However, in that collective aspirational striving toward cosmopolitanism, we actually and hypocritically continue the very conflict, prejudice, bigotry, monoculturalism and inequality we want to eradicate. It is a specific type of (invisible) emancipatory evil that is preserved by the aspirational society that aspires to fight concrete violent evil such as war and arms dealers. However, it feeds invisible, structural violence that goes behind that concrete evil, such as the defence industry and its economical role in society (Bauman/Donskis 2016; Currid-Halkett 2017; Hochschild 2016; Žižek 2009).

Why? The aspirational hegemony tells people to be educated and it requires people to strive towards a more egalitarian, cosmopolitan version of status, but that is only possible if you can afford it. So, aspirationalism is enabled by inconspicuous consumption, residing in the “top echelon of the new world order [...] reliant on acquisition of knowledge, not birthright, not property held for generations” (Currid-Halkett 2017: 17). Nevertheless, at face-value there is actually nothing wrong with the aspirational society across the global West, because there seems to be a genuine cosmopolitan interest to “save the world”. However, that aspirationalism puts on moral blinders and makes people ignorant of the growing inequality itself, without blaming themselves (ibid.: 22-23). In fact, it has been argued that aspirational decision-making and establishing of norms have a far more malicious impact on society than previous elites had (ibid.: 185). Hence, aspirationalism may look like it embodies the morality of global righteousness, social justice and cosmopolitanism. The opposite is truer: aspirationalist people improve their own quality of life and upward mobility, while they are stratifying themselves further from the real, everyday hardships of the middle- and lower-income strata (ibid.: 186-189). The aspirational society risks becoming unable, or perhaps willingly stays comfortable numb and will not “imagine (let alone solve) the pervasive problems of their poorer fellow citizens” (ibid.: 189). That kind of collective conscience keeping society together then is to stay “willfully ignorant that many of these [aspirational] decisions, veiled in morality, [that] are practical and realistic outcomes of socioeconomic position” (ibid.: 196).

That means that aspirationalism keeps intact an invisible but structural evil violence that is forgotten about due to visible aggressive acts of crime, terror and war (Bauman/Donskis 2016; Žižek 2009). It is hard for us to look at ourselves and our structural role in the arms dealing business. For example, investments in the arms trade are made by large (healthcare) insurance companies we are insured at, such *Aegon*, *Allianz* and *NN Group* (PAX 2020). Instead, we prefer to merely distance ourselves further from the invisible systemic violence brought upon society, of which Žižek says that...

“...[t]he exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on.” (2009: 23)

So, our aspirational evil is not dressed as “grey and uniformed Orwellian ‘totalitarian’ bureaucrats, but [as] enlightened, democratic administrators, cultured, each with his or her own ‘life style’” (ibid.: 24). We remain comfortably numb in our celebrated and expressed aspirationalism, which dims actual passionate commitment to truly do something tolerant and maybe even having to sacrifice our life (ibid.: 25). The “endorsement of emancipatory violence” as Žižek refers to it (ibid.: 174) consists of a fight against visible, sporadic violence, such as wars and

evil-doers, like arms dealers. All the while we sustain the invisible structural violence and evil that drive war and the arms trade. Aspirational evil is therefore a liquidized evil, hard to catch, floating and flowing around, posing a considerably more dangerous and venomous threat than its earlier versions (Bauman/Donskis 2016). Aspirational evil has the quality of disguising itself “for recruiting human – all-too-human – concerns and desires to its service under false – yet exceedingly difficult to debunk and falsify – pretences” (ibid.: viii).

We are not only hypocritical towards the arms trade, arms dealers, war and our own role. Think for example about the creation of online communities about awareness of *Facebook's* privacy rights violations, on *Facebook* (Hull 2015). Or what about online crowdfunding to support projects that help refugees who fled ongoing war crimes and human rights violations by, for example, armed militia in the Democratic Republic of Congo who control one of the world's largest natural resources of cobalt and coltan and the involved mining industry (Henleben 2020). Cobalt and coltan are vital components in manufacturing mobile phones, computers and other electronic equipment (Danso 2021); the very equipment via which we are enabled to donate online to such crowdfunding.

We all take part in aspirational evil (unconsciously) that silently slithers through our collective aspirational consciousness (perhaps collective delusion). The fact that we take part in that is revealed – and with it our hypocrisy – whenever arms dealers appear. Because, as Constantine's biography showed, he is not unlike any of us. Still, to acknowledge that is to admit we are part of such aspirational evil – something we do not want to be confronted with.

And that is the reason we must demonize arms dealers, and anyone who reminds us of that hypocrisy and its evil. Therefore, aspirational evil reflects to an extent Arendt's banality of evil (Arendt 2006), but it manifests itself “so much neater, smoother, more trouble-free [...] and more proficient”, while “disabling moral resistance against the committing of immoral deeds” (Bauman/Lyon 2013: 82). By (actively) denying it, we as a society are kept together by a collective conscience that veils aspirational evil, also by continuing to appear moral, cosmopolitan and emancipatory.

It was Nietzsche (1911) who considered such ideological veiling as widespread ignorance of the often self-destructive tendencies of deeply-rooted structures of society itself. Being aspirational leads to our collective conscience that ignores *and* detaches itself from those structures, whereas instead we should acknowledge and embrace them as a symptom of our own “sickness”. It would be interesting for criminology to consider aspirational evil as itself *criminal* or *criminogenic* for the structural violence we bring about while thinking – or pretending – we are fighting “evil”. So, there lies a task to venture criminologically more often into studies that comprise a *criminology of society*,<sup>3</sup> which is possible through a biography of one single individual, as Constantine's biography shows.

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3 At this time of writing, *google* gave one result for “a criminology of society”.

His biography is a mirror to widespread aspirational hypocrisy and its evil. Or, as Constantine himself said so eloquently, “when this [biography] comes out, there is going to be a shit storm in certain circles.” So, in seeing how the arms dealer is a cue of how we all do not live in a world of perpetual peace, love and harmony, we are reminded that in our aspirations of trying to get to that blissful state of being, we actually sustain the very wars, hate and evil we want to escape from. The arms dealer is thus the perfect enemy of the aspirational society as he reminds us of how we are our own worst enemy in the most mundane and banal aspects of our aspirational lives.

Constantine’s biography could – and should – therefore be considered another biographical report on the banality of evil (Arendt 2006), specifically about the banality of aspirational evil of us all. The more we try to structurally distance ourselves from arms dealers and consider them evil, the more we uphold the very aspirational evil structures. Also, the ones that are currently enabling and keeping alive the war in Ukraine.

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