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# A Farewell to Arms... Manufacturing: Learning From a Landmine Producer Who Became a Deminer

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## ABSTRACT

Certain industries—labeled “dirty,” “sinful,” “stigmatized,” or “controversial”—are under public scrutiny because of the ethical, social, and environmental concerns that they raise. Previous research has typically focused on the industry or organizational level of analysis, examining how companies in controversial industries can enhance their legitimacy by reforming the way they operate, for example by means of specific CSR and communication strategies. This article challenges that approach by adopting an individual-level lens and presenting a life-story interview with the former owner of a company involved in the arms industry, specifically the production of anti-personnel landmines, who refused to reform his business to make it appear less controversial. After a difficult period, he decided to close the family business. He then redirected his technical expertise by joining the social movements supporting the global campaign against landmines and by working as a deminer, thus trying to act as an individual change agent and to repair the damage to which he had contributed. This heterodox individual-level analysis challenges the conventional wisdom that controversial industries should seek only incremental improvements, and it sparks provocative reflections on the possibility of exiting them and contributing to their outright closure.

*Italy repudiates war*

(Art. 11, Italian Constitution).

## 1 | Introduction

Despite the fact that an international mine ban treaty, also known as “the Ottawa Convention,” was signed in the 1990s and extended to most of the world’s countries, anti-personnel landmines continue to be used in many of today’s wars around the world. For example, at the end of 2024, Western public attention was shockingly redirected to the issue by news that the then US administration had promised to supply landmines to Ukraine to support its war effort against Russia. Furthermore, in early 2025, five European countries, including Ukraine, announced their intention to withdraw from the Convention (see Cursino 2024;

Birnbaum and Horton 2024; Górski 2025). In short, the continued global presence of landmines, their devastating impact on civilian populations, and their profitability make this an urgent topic of societal and academic concern (International Campaign to Ban Landmines 2024). In this regard, the interview-based case of Vito Alfieri Fontana, an Italian landmine manufacturer who became an anti-landmine activist and then a deminer, furnishes a unique perspective on the role of individuals in controversial industries.

Research on controversial industries has mainly conducted industry- and organization-level analyses, examining how firms engage in CSR initiatives to mitigate public scrutiny and enhance legitimacy (e.g., see Ban 2016; Choi et al. 2024; Dhandhanian and O’Higgins 2022; Mitchell et al. 2024). While these studies furnish valuable insights into corporate strategies

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and external legitimacy-building efforts, they largely overlook the experiences, moral dilemmas, and decision-making processes of individuals who work in such industries. There is a lack of studies that conduct in-depth qualitative explorations of individual actors, such as employees and managers, within these contexts (Jansen et al. 2024). Consequently, unexplored are the ways in which individuals can adapt to or, alternatively, challenge, resist, or exit from controversial industries, as well as the broader implications of their choices at the organizational and industry levels.

This article addresses the currently understudied individual-level complexities and ethical dilemmas associated with controversial industries. It does so by focusing on the arms industry, a sector often overlooked in business ethics and management research despite its far-reaching ethical, social, and economic implications (Vergne 2012; Durand and Vergne 2015). Within the arms industry, this article presents and discusses the particular case of an individual who owned a company that produced anti-personnel landmines, which can be considered as constituting an extreme and highly controversial category of weapons. Vito's life story provides an unprecedented inside-the-company view of a controversial industry from an individual-level perspective. It raises important questions about moral decision-making, the strategies with which to counteract stigma, and the capacity of individual actors to support social change. Furthermore, it challenges the dominant industry- and organization-level accounts by showing how personal circumstances and moral choices can give rise to radical decisions that override conventional motivations such as economic incentives and industry norms. Finally, by examining the interplay among personal values, organizational and societal pressures, and industry stigma, this article offers a more nuanced understanding of how controversial industries function at multiple levels of analysis. It reveals how factors at those levels may interact in a manner different from that which the extant literature has proposed.

## 2 | The Orthodox Research Approach to Controversial Industries

Certain industries, such as those associated with alcohol, tobacco, gambling, pornography, and firearms, are subject to societal scrutiny due to ethical, social, and environmental concerns about their core business or production processes. For this reason, those industries have been called “controversial,” “dirty” or “stigmatized”, and “sinful” by extant research (Cai et al. 2012; Thomson and Grandy 2018). Since different perspectives have been developed to define and examine these industries, here we adopt the conceptualization recently propounded by Jansen et al. (2024), which assumes the existence of three possible foci of controversy: (1) product-related, because companies produce controversial products or services (e.g., the extant literature has cited adult entertainment, alcohol, fast food, gambling, tobacco), (2) value chain-related, because companies' value chains raise controversial issues at certain points (e.g., the literature has cited in this regard mining, nuclear energy, palm oil, oil, and gas), and (3) event-related, when controversies are related to temporary crises and issues in a company or industry (e.g., the literature has cited Boeing's airplane crashes, Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal, Exxon's Valdez oil spill, Lehman

Brothers' insolvency, UNICEF's donation scandal, Volkswagen's Dieselgate manipulations). While it can be argued that there are differences among these industries and cases in terms of the source of the controversy and the nature of the stigma affecting them, extant research has treated them as a unitary phenomenon, producing several influential literature reviews on them and developing a common research agenda on industries (or companies within them) affected by some type of controversy (see Cai et al. 2012; Thomson and Grandy 2018; Jansen et al. 2024).

Within this stream of research, business ethics and business and society scholars have shed light on three important issues related to these industries. First, research has evidenced that companies operating in controversial industries make constant efforts to improve their public image and reputation (Byrd et al. 2017). For example, empirical evidence shows that companies within these sectors, when compared to less controversial industries, exhibit a greater inclination to engage in CSR initiatives (Grougiou et al. 2016; Koo and Kim 2025; Vollero et al. 2019). This demonstrates a propensity to adopt transparency tools and employ richer CSR communication strategies (Conte et al. 2023), particularly in relation to customers (Abdollahi et al. 2024; Austin and Gaither 2017).

Second, the available evidence shows that these efforts actually have positive results for the social legitimacy of the companies operating in those industries. Indeed, when CSR efforts are directed at mitigating or eliminating the most controversial impacts, companies in controversial industries can effectively enhance their reputation (Aqueveque et al. 2018; Ulke and Schons 2016). For example, it has been found that companies in the US fast-food industry, which is socially stigmatized as one of the major drivers of an obesity epidemic in that country, have enhanced their reputation by including in their CSR communications to their consumers and other relevant publics specific messages about nutrition and health (Ban 2016).

Third, research has explored the types and key features of corporate initiatives that could more effectively boost the social legitimacy of companies. For example, research suggests that companies operating in controversial industries could enhance their legitimacy by downplaying their extrinsic instrumental motives for engaging in social and environmental causes (Jahn et al. 2020), by acknowledging potential harm and striving to reduce the harmful effects of their products and processes (Marshall et al. 2023), or by actively engaging in concrete practices aimed at improving their overall operational standards (Dhandhanian and O'Higgins 2022).

In summary, the existing literature on controversial industries mostly adopts an industry-level or an organizational-level lens through which to investigate the phenomenon. Furthermore, ongoing research is generating a large amount of actionable knowledge about the practices, often framed within CSR policies and initiatives, that companies within these industries should adopt to improve their public legitimacy status, and about how those companies should communicate those practices.

On the other hand, there is a dearth of studies at the individual level that explore how actors in different positions navigate

the complexities of involvement in a controversial industry. In particular, in their recent review, Jansen et al. (2024) have highlighted that the voices and perspectives of employees and other internal and external stakeholders are underrepresented. The few existing studies on individual actors in controversial industries are mainly oriented to theory-testing, and they are accordingly based on quantitative research designs which typically focus on a few selected employee outcomes (De Roeck and Delobbe 2012; Fatma et al. 2019; Tarigan et al. 2021). This theory-testing orientation may fail to develop new theories and conceptualizations which could better account for the depth and complexity of the everyday challenges and moral dilemmas that confront individuals in such industries. Jansen et al. (2024) thus exhort researchers “to generate inside-the-company views” (p. 16) of controversial industries.

We argue that such in-depth engagement with individual actors in controversial industries is useful and relevant for several reasons. First, because the general stigma literature has only recently focused on the interactions among different levels of analysis (Zhang et al. 2021). This literature, in particular, highlights how industry- and organization-level approaches to managing stigma influence and constrain individual actors, limiting their possibilities for action when dealing with legitimacy and reputational threats (Mitchell et al. 2024). In contrast, recent studies adopting a systems change perspective have disputed this “structuralist” approach. They argue that significant change in the way social and environmental issues are addressed can arise from individual actors, and from their interactions with other individual-, organizational-, and institutional-level actors (e.g., Badgett 2022; Delmestri and Schuessler 2025). Accordingly, research on the so-called “micro-foundations of CSR” and broader social change has highlighted the crucial role of individual insider change agents who can, for example, push companies to “walk their talk” and comply more robustly with social and environmental regulations, rather than making only symbolic and superficial efforts to do so (Girschik et al. 2022; Heucher et al. 2024). In controversial industries, such as the arms and defense sectors, gambling, and branches of the extractive industries, the role of insider change agents can be even more critical. Given that these sectors are not comprehensively covered by regulatory frameworks—such as the EU-level Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)—they may require and benefit from alternative, bottom-up processes to achieve more substantive, rather than just symbolic, social, and environmental change.

### 3 | A Conversation With Vito Alfieri Fontana

In light of the lack of in-depth, individual-level studies on controversial industries, this heterodox research account explores the personal moral quandaries and difficult life choices that an individual can face when navigating a controversial industry on a day-to-day basis, also considering how the consequences of individual choices may reverberate at the company and industry levels. It does so through the personal life story of Vito Alfieri Fontana, an Italian engineer who has had two distinct lives marked by a profound transformation.

Initially, he managed his family business company, founded by his father, which at the time designed and produced lethal anti-personnel mines. Then, in a bold move, after failing to convert production to civilian goods, Vito decided to close down the company, and he started to actively support the global campaign against landmines. The success of the campaign led to the 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, commonly known as the Mine Ban Convention. Following a period of unemployment, Vito decided to become a head deminer in the Balkans—a European region ravaged by war in the 1990s and, as a consequence, still plagued by the pervasive threat of these insidious weapons. Vito’s narrative has garnered extensive coverage in the media propelled by the release of a documentary film in 2015 on his experience as a deminer, and the publication of his 2023 autobiographical book. For further details as regards the contextual and methodological background of the following account, refer to the Appendix A of this article.

#### When Did Landmines Enter Your Life and How Did You Learn to Live With Them?

The story of our family business has not always been connected to landmine production. When my father founded the company in 1958, it was initially dedicated to the manufacture of electrical power systems and their components. It also produced cast iron valves for aqueducts. It was a small plant with a foundry and a molding shop, employing around 50 people. But it wasn’t easy, because competition in the sector was fierce. The opportunity ... that ultimately led to the dissolution of the company... came in 1960 when the Italian Ministry of Defence issued a call for tenders to improve the production of its anti-tank mines, which had several defects. My father saw the opportunity and his project won the tender: he was a man of action and never liked to discuss things. That is how we entered this very peculiar business.

In the next few years, the production of components for the mines grew rapidly until it accounted for 40% of the company’s total turnover. In 1963 the company received the first order from the Ministry of Defence for the production of an anti-personnel mine. Everything was perfectly legal and in plain view, with the formal approval and official stamp of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior. In the following years, as the demand for anti-personnel mines increased due to the many conflicts around the world during the Cold War, the company grew and expanded its business through partnerships and mergers with other companies in the arms industry. However, my father always retained majority ownership of the family company. In 1977, I officially joined the family business as an engineer in charge of product quality control, becoming directly involved in the design and manufacture of anti-personnel mines.

#### How Did You Feel When You Were Designing and Producing Anti-Personnel Mines?

I had developed a sort of structural hypocrisy that distracted me from the actual content of my products. So, when I was designing new mines, I stopped myself from thinking about the person who would trigger the mine. My goal was to design something that could pierce a metal plate, 50 cm by 50 cm and 5 mm thick,

because product testing was performed on this type of material. But in reality, the target was a man, a child... the victim. Nevertheless, we never used mannequins during testing, only plates. And then there was the challenge with myself. Designing anti-personnel mines felt like being a cat playing with a mouse, getting meaner over time. From designing a mine that targeted soldiers, we moved on to creating one that also blew up the engineer trying to defuse it. We ended up designing really sophisticated mines. At some point, customers started urging me: "Engineer, if you make sure the target activates the mine for at least four seconds, we'll be sure they are holding it when it explodes." And I did it. I designed that mine because I had to meet that challenge. And then customers pushed further: "Why not design a mine that explodes with six kilograms of weight on it instead of twenty or thirty? Soldiers can crawl, so we need to hit them even if they touch it with an elbow while spreading their weight on the ground." And we managed to design and produce that type of mine as well. Achieving these results felt good because it made me feel more powerful compared to the weakness of the other side, of the victims. Like the cat and mouse: you do this, I do that. Sometimes you even feel part of the war because the bad Russians invaded Afghanistan, so you have to help "the good guys" by designing mines that destroy the bad guys' tanks. There's this sense of power, especially in the rush to counter the opponent's moves with your counter-move. At that moment, there's an excitement you can't imagine: "We have to get them, we have to get them!," we'd say.

In the weapons world, it's crucial to produce what are called "combat-proven" devices, demonstrating that they perform satisfactorily in the field. My company was great at that and had an impressive track record. We could show we'd sold mines to many countries for use in significant military operations. It's disgusting to admit, but our communication to many of our competitors was brutally simple: our mines killed more than theirs did. Looking back, I can't understand how I did it, but at the time it was as if I was anesthetized. I remember as if it were yesterday when two of our workers, who were Jehovah's Witnesses, quit after a few days because they didn't think it was ethical to make mines. I looked at them like they were aliens, partly because I found their decision completely inexplicable given our high salaries, and partly because I was already thinking about how to replace them to keep production going. But at a certain point, it all became clear to me, and I stopped.

### **Why and How Did You Decide to Stop?**

It was a long process, partly unintentional. In my book, I call it "the offensive of my conscience." It all started in 1993 during a car ride with my then 8-year-old son. Out of the blue, Ludovico asked me what landmines were and what they were used for. I answered him honestly. "So, you make weapons, Dad," he said. I replied that if I didn't, someone else would. But he shut down the conversation with a simple yet devastating statement: "But why you? Dad, you're a murderer." Meanwhile, the anti-landmine campaign in Italy was gaining momentum, and I started receiving letters and anonymous packages from activists—some containing fake prosthetic limbs, others with single shoes.

Then, in 1994, I received two phone calls that changed everything. The first was from a doctor, Gino Strada, the founder of

an NGO called Emergency, which runs hospitals in war zones. He was also the national coordinator of the anti-landmine campaign. Speaking in calm yet firm tones, he told me: "You're causing a complete shambles with these mines. I see it every day in our hospitals. You can't waste any more time." Up until that moment, the campaign had seemed like a broad social movement against an entire industry. But after that call, it became personal. Then, some time later, I got another call, this time from Don Tonino Bello, a pacifist Catholic bishop. He invited me to a public discussion about landmines and reassured me with a touch of irony: "Don't worry, doctor. This is a topic no one cares about. There will only be a handful of people." As a practicing Catholic, I could not refuse his invitation. But he never made it to the event—he passed away just a few days before it—but when I arrived, I found a huge crowd. At the end of the discussion, a young conscientious objector stood up and, in front of everyone, asked me: "What do you dream about at night? Do you hope for another war so you can make more money? What kind of life is that?" That question hit me hard, as if Don Tonino himself had asked it.

Another defining moment came in 1995. I received a call from my main contact in the Egyptian army—my biggest client. He wanted to know if I was available to produce 600,000 landmines. To put that into perspective, in the entire 15 years before 1995, my company had produced 1.3 million mines in total. We both knew this was an extraordinary deal. When I refused, firmly and without hesitation, we both understood it would be the last time we ever spoke. My father was there when I said "no." He was deeply upset—he didn't agree with my decision. Saying "yes" would have made our company one of the biggest players in the market. But from that moment on, my company never again produced another landmine.

### **What About the Persons Around You, How Did They React?**

Facing the reaction of those closest to me was without a doubt the hardest part. In 1996, after I had already stopped producing landmines, an international scandal broke out: mines manufactured years earlier by my company were found in Rwanda—a country I could never have legally sold them to. Suddenly, everyone started doubting me. Newspapers wrote that I was lying, that I had only stopped producing landmines legally and had moved into illegal arms trafficking instead. The story eventually had a good ending. A few months later, it became clear that the truth was on my side: the mines found in Rwanda were ones I had legally sold to Egypt, which had then illegally resold them—without my knowledge—to several embargoed countries. But those months were brutal. For the first time in my life, I even thought about suicide. I was up against my own family, especially my father, who accused me of destroying the company he had built over 40 grueling years. At the same time, I also felt the deep distrust of those fighting against landmines. Many of them questioned my sincerity and the real motives behind my decision. With my employees, things were more nuanced. Some supported me, thanks in part to the trade union, which had backed the anti-landmine campaign and helped them understand my reasons. Others, however, saw me as nothing more than a failed businessman—someone who had let the company collapse and put their jobs at risk. In short, those were incredibly tough years,

marked by extreme loneliness. Without the support of my wife and children, I might have actually followed through on my darkest thoughts.

### **When You Decided to Stop, What Concrete Problems Did You Encounter?**

As I said, deciding to stop was a really painful process. That's when the problems started. First of all, from then on, I lost the support of my professional network. When we used to meet as arms manufacturers, we'd form a group, often mocking those who opposed us. We'd often joke about pacifist ideas: "Ah, if the pacifists see us," "Engineer, you're bad," and lots of laughs. We'd pump each other up.

After I stopped making mines, things got harder and harder, to the point we had to shut down. Banks that used to welcome me with open arms started denying credit. We had cutting-edge know-how, skills, and equipment, and research centers of big companies often asked for our support. But those assets were quite specialized and weren't of much use in other fields. Even so, most of the workers in my company managed to find other jobs in other manufacturing companies, while for others, perhaps five or six people, it was a bit harder. As for public support for my workforce, the government treated my case like just that of any other business struggling to stay in the market, so the workers got a few months of unemployment benefits but nothing beyond that.

Not to mention that the arms industry was one of the most profitable in the world. Switching the strategy of the organization to other sectors meant drastically reducing the company's margins, which drove everyone away. Not just banks and investors, but also institutions. My company was a pillar of the "made in Italy" brand worldwide, and at a certain point, deciding to stop hurt the Italian economy, according to some people. I think my current pension clearly illustrates this contradiction: 82 euros of my pension come from the contributions I paid in 18 years as a deminer, the rest from the years I was a mine producer. I remember in 1977 I earned about 150,000 euros a year, which today would be around 1,700,000 euros. And then there's the social aspect: as I said, stopping mine production made me lose friends and alienated colleagues and especially relatives, starting with my father, who for years accused me of destroying the family business.

### **Despite These Difficulties, You Stuck to Your Decision. But in Those Years, Many Mine Producers Tried to Make More Publicly Acceptable Devices. Why Didn't You Try That Too?**

I never believed in it. These so-called sustainable mines were supposed to deactivate after a set time. What mine producers were working on back then were devices that stopped functioning after a certain amount of time... like 2 years! But it was a completely hypocritical attempt because we all knew most deaths and injuries are caused by mines within the first 2 years. And I don't know any soldier who trusts a deactivated mine, who keeps walking forward just because his officer says, "Go ahead, it's definitely been two years, now the mine's switched off." Civilians are the only ones that typically make that mistake.

And I never believed in it, also because I knew the prices customers were willing to pay for a mine. A timer to deactivate the mine after 2 years, even if a safe one could be designed, just wasn't in the budget. A mine with a timer costs 10 times more than one without. No one, neither customers nor suppliers, ever really believed in it, but we pretended to try. Besides, the anti-personnel mine sector has a long history of lobbying and a very lax approach to regulations, which prevented any substantial form of self-regulation. Sustainable, or even "ethical" mines as they called them, were all talk.

### **After You Stopped Making Mines, You Got Actively Involved in the Anti-Mine Campaign, Eventually Becoming a Leading Deminer in Kosovo. Why Did You Do It?**

As I write in my book, at a certain point, I started to feel severe distress: a deep discomfort that I, considering myself a normal person, couldn't bear anymore. That's when I realized the damage I had caused. After I stopped, I was contacted by the international campaign to ban anti-personnel mines, which had a big problem at the time. They needed to propose a draft for an international treaty to ban mines at a conference in Oslo. So, they reached out to me for help. In Oslo, I felt joy at being useful to the cause because my technical expertise assisted the drafting of a rigorous text that helped to ban devices that were essentially anti-personnel mines and which the diplomatic delegations of arms manufacturers had subtly tried to exclude from the negotiations. I worked closely with Jody Williams, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. But it was really tough. When I arrived, the people in the anti-mine campaign at first didn't want to shake my hand. I was struck by how many of them had lost a limb to a mine. "Repentant, repentant... repentant my ass," they said. I remember when Jody Williams joined the meeting. Finding all of us already around the table, she said, "Is Fontana here? Yes, well, give him a round of applause and put him to work."

That experience, the successful approval of the Mine Ban Convention, in the following years led me to work as a deminer in such a dangerous place as Kosovo. It was a long process, because for a person with my name it was very hard to find such a job. But in the end I found a job thanks again to my technical expertise. So, feeling cold, being far from home, and economic hardship became my life for several years. But it had also become a personal matter. For me, just saying I was sorry for what I had done as a mine producer wasn't enough. Frankly, who do you save by just saying "I'm sorry?"

### **Your Story Was First Told in a Film and Then in a Book, Both Very Successful. In Addition, You Keep Giving Public Speeches to Many People, Especially Youngsters, Who Find Your Story Valuable. Why Do You Think This Story Resonates So Much With the Public?**

For me the problem is that people nowadays believe more and more in what they think are certainties. Public communication is full of such false certainties. If someone is convinced we didn't go to the moon, even if you can prove it, they won't change their mind. I think the public sees me in this story like an exotic animal in a zoo: they watch someone who really changed his mind. The story shows that change, even radical and unthinkable, is possible

if you want it, if you're willing to make sacrifices and suffer humiliations, because I suffered those as well. Who would have thought that a mine producer would join Jody Williams at the diplomatic conference in Oslo and work side by side with her? There's a lot of desire for change, but maybe it's seen as impossible. My story constantly tests me... every time I give a speech, it's like, and pardon the phrase, picking up a shovel, covering myself in manure, and then saying "here's how I cleaned the manure off." But it's heavy and you never get used to it because it's not a novel: it's my life. I have to remember things I wish I hadn't done and would like to forget, but I'm not allowed to forget: I have to live those things again and again because I want them to become public so that they trigger reflections, especially in young people. Indeed, my story recounts a change that, though difficult—still today at presentations, someone will ask: "didn't you quit just because you make more money as a writer than as a mine producer?" – but it is possible. I think that's why the book and film are successful, and why young people are so interested in my story.

#### 4 | A Heterodox Individual Perspective on Controversial Industries

Research on controversial industries has so far focused on the industry or organizational level, neglecting the individual experience (Jansen et al. 2024). This has left a significant gap in understanding the strategies that individuals operating in those industries use to cope with stigma (Mitchell et al. 2024), or their agency in contributing to organizational and social change (e.g., Badgett 2022; Delmestri and Schuessler 2025; Heucher et al. 2024). Our article has started to address this gap by shifting the focus to the individual, and specifically by examining the lived experience of Vito Alfieri Fontana, a former owner of a landmine manufacturing company. In what follows we detail the contributions of our heterodox study and propose a novel research agenda. This agenda supports the integration of the individual perspective, challenging the more orthodox, firm- and industry-centric views and paving the way for a more holistic understanding of controversial industries.

The first contribution of the narrative presented concerns the type of change pursued by our interviewee within the controversial industry in which he operated. The extant research suggests that companies in controversial industries commonly adopt various lobbying and counter-communication tactics in order to mitigate social criticism of the sector (Mitchell et al. 2024; Zhang et al. 2021). They also develop CSR initiatives in order to improve their social and environmental performance (e.g., Ban 2016; Choi et al. 2024; Halpern and Snider 2012). In extremely stigmatized cases, such as the arms industry, secrecy and discretion appear to be viable alternatives, as are temporary divestments in response to media attacks and widespread public scrutiny (Durand and Vergne 2015). Even within their sample of all multi-business companies (i.e., ones not operating exclusively in the arms industry), Durand and Vergne (2015) found that complete divestment is never practiced because of sunk costs, asset specificity, and the risk of losing future opportunities in the sector.

Contrary to these findings, Vito Alfieri Fontana did not engage in incremental product change, such as sustainable mine production—which other manufacturers have attempted—nor did

he pursue a temporary divestment strategy. Instead, he chose to exit the business completely and, as a consequence, the industry in which his company operated, despite the high personal and organizational costs involved. Shifting the analysis from the industry and organizational levels to the individual level thus reveals a greater diversity of actions that can be undertaken in controversial industries not yet considered in the traditional literature.

The second contribution of this article pertains to how individual actors' choices in controversial industries can contribute to broader social change. Research on change agents has argued that these individuals (or groups of individuals) constitute the micro-foundations of social change because they make local moves aimed at achieving a broader impact. Importantly, their actions both differ from and complement the pressures typically examined in macro-level studies of organizational and social change. Furthermore, they do not act in isolation; it is essential for them to participate in larger networks and build coalitions with a variety of insider and outsider actors. In all industries, including controversial ones, they work as enablers who trigger action that can catalyze organizational and social change by connecting with other "small wins" and aggregating into larger initiatives (Heucher et al. 2024).

In this sense, the type of change agency embodied by Vito Alfieri Fontana in 1993–1994, when he was still in charge of his family business but decided to exit landmine production, is reminiscent of what the institutional literature on systems change has recently termed "quixotic institutional work." This construct, inspired by the literary figure of Don Quixote, embodies a commitment to noble causes despite apparent its futility or absurdity (Delmestri and Schuessler 2025). It follows a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequences, meaning that quixotic institutional workers act in alignment with their intrinsic moral values rather than considering the likelihood of success or failure. Prompted by his son's poignant questions and subsequent invitations from several public figures, including activists, journalists, and religious leaders, Vito Alfieri Fontana embarked on a difficult and painful journey to convert production, though he ultimately did not succeed. At the same time, he actively collaborated with the growing movement that supported the approval of the Mine Ban Convention in 1997, contributing his technical expertise and long-held knowledge of the industry, as is typical of other insider change agents (Heucher et al. 2024).

Vito's decision to actively join social movements and NGOs directly opposed to the landmine sector is an outcome that only an in-depth, individual-level perspective could have captured. Indeed, unlike companies and entire industries, which are obviously reluctant to embark on a full exit strategy (Durand and Vergne 2015), individuals have greater freedom to adopt an activist stance. They can align themselves with ethical visions that reject the business-case logic, amplify the voices of political actors that corporations tend to ignore, and join explicitly social movements (Girschik et al. 2022). In addition, Vito's "second life" as a deminer exhibits another facet of quixotic institutional work, namely "repair-focused" courses of action that may be helpful in stimulating change initiatives by other actors at different levels, including the organizational and institutional ones (Delmestri and Schuessler 2025; Crawford et al. 2024),

especially given the ample media resonance his story has subsequently achieved. This type of personal testimony is particularly eloquent in times of war and terrorism, during which external shocks such as the ongoing war in Ukraine can induce relevant institutional actors and the general public to reconsider their positions, even concerning highly stigmatized industries and product categories (Vergne 2012; also see Górski 2025).

The third and final contribution of our article concerns the possibility to explore the complex and interconnected factors influencing an individual's decision-making within controversial industries. As the literature on the micro-foundations of social change has started to show, change agency does not arise from nowhere; rather, it is embedded in a variety of personal, social, and contextual circumstances (Heucher et al. 2024). Accordingly, several key dynamics emerge from the case of Vito Alfieri Fontana: the role of emotions, given the non-rational nature of his decision-making process (Ashkanasy et al. 2017); the social context, which, in Vito's story, simultaneously provided resources for achieving his ideal (e.g., activists and religious figures) and obstacles against it (e.g., his family, particularly his father) (Gond and Moser 2021); and the identity dissonance experienced by individuals in controversial industries navigating conflicts between multiple affiliations, such as loyalty to a business or family legacy, versus loyalty to a religious or ethical commitment (Meyerson 2008). Again, this case illustrates that the decision-making processes among individuals in controversial industries that may or may not lead to action are profoundly shaped by social and personal-psychological factors which the traditional literature tends to underestimate because of its analytical focus, and which therefore deserve further attention.

Beyond these three primary contributions, we identify two further avenues for future research related to the limitations inherent in the story presented that add to the novel research agenda delineated above. Firstly, our analysis focused on an individual who performed an owner-manager role, and who therefore had a "privileged role" (Heucher et al. 2024) in a company operating in a controversial industry. Future studies could examine the perspectives and initiatives of other types of individual actors working in and around organizations operating in controversial industries and who have varying degrees of influence over those contexts. This aligns with the call for more individual-level studies by Jansen et al. (2024). Secondly, this article has focused on a single actor and a single level of analysis, but it also suggests that the interaction with actors at different levels is crucial (in Vito's case, mainly journalists, activists, and humanitarian organizations). Future research could explore multiple actors and examine how they cooperate within different contexts to effect change in controversial industries and organizations. It could integrate multiple levels of analysis to understand the interactions among individual, organizational, and industry-level actors.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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## Appendix A

### Case Background and Methodology

Our interview-based study is based on a case from the arms industry. Although it is often explicitly listed among the controversial industries in the literature (e.g., Cai et al. 2012; Jansen et al. 2024), that industry is largely ignored by business ethics, management and organizational studies. This may be surprising given the obvious ethical implications of the arms industry and the fact that it has a history of more than 4000 years and is estimated to account for around 2.5% of global GDP (Vergne 2012; Durand and Vergne 2015; SIPRI 2024). Notably, it is a constantly growing industry: in 2023, global military spending increased for the ninth consecutive year, surpassing \$2.4 trillion, with a global rise of 6.8% that appeared similar across all regions of the world (SIPRI 2024). In the literature on controversial industries, the arms industry has been categorized as an instance of the first type of controversy i.e., related to the very product or service it produces or commercializes, a category also referred to as "sinful" or "morally corrupt" (Jansen et al. 2024; Cai et al. 2012). It has also been argued that the arms industry is particularly significant because within this category it represents an extreme of "legal but distasteful" industry (Durand and Vergne 2015, 1206). Despite its extreme position, it appears to be following the same trends identified in the literature for other controversial industries by investing in CSR-related initiatives and dedicated communication strategies (see Halpern and Snider 2012).

Against this background, we have chosen to examine the life-story of a former entrepreneur and manager of a family business that produced anti-personnel mines. It can be argued that landmines constitute a niche sector of the arms industry which has been significantly reduced by international agreements that have banned their production and use in many countries. At the same time, they remain a deadly threat currently affecting 61 countries around the world. The countries most affected by mines in 2023 in terms of casualties were Myanmar and Syria, followed by Afghanistan and Ukraine. In 2024, the Landmine Monitor report stated that at least 28,957 people had been killed or injured by

mines between 2019 and 2023. In 2023, at least 5757 landmine casualties were recorded (1983 killed and 3663 injured), with the vast majority (up to 4335 or 84%) being civilians and 37% (1498) children. Landmines today represent a profitable industry, as the data reported in the 2024 Landmine Monitor report show. Of the 33 states that are not party to the Mine Ban Convention (including Russia, China, and the USA), as many as 30 hold vast stockpiles of anti-personnel landmines, amounting to more than 50 million devices worldwide. Therefore, it is not surprising that their production remains an attractive business, also in light of the recent declaration of withdrawal from the Convention by a group of European countries (Górski 2025). Today, 12 countries are engaged in the production of landmines (Armenia, China, Cuba, India, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam), 6 of them producing mines without officially declaring it (India, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russia, and South Korea). We argue that in light of these facts and figures, the production of landmines can be still seen today as an extreme and profitable business within the already extremely controversial arms industry (Durand and Vergne 2015).

Methodologically, extreme cases are well suited to challenging assumptions in the literature, and to supporting the development and refinement of theories that can be extended to more typical cases (Patton 2014). We came to know the story of Vito Alfieri Fontana and his past experience as a landmine producer at the end of 2023 thanks to the public resonance given to it by the Italian media, in particular through newspaper articles and TV and radio interviews, following the publication of his autobiographical book entitled “Ero l’Uomo della Guerra” (translated as “I was the Man of War”), co-authored with the journalist Antonio Sanfrancesco (Fontana and Sanfrancesco 2023).

Initially, we approached the study of the case by consulting the various sources freely available online on Vito Alfieri Fontana and the company he owned. These included a number of newspaper articles and blog posts, as well as podcasts, radio and video interviews, and a 2015 documentary film entitled “Il Successore” (translated as “The Successor”). A selection of these sources is listed at the end of this Appendix A. All of these, in combination with his autobiographical book, informed our understanding of Fontana’s story and constituted significant and diversified sources for data triangulation (Patton 2014). Subsequently, in April 2024 we conducted a semi-structured interview with the protagonist of the story. The interview lasted 116 min and resulted in 8486 words of full transcription.

Our interpretive analysis of the empirical documentation followed a narrative, life-story approach, since this is considered a privileged way to access the individual dimension (Atkinson 1998; Riessman 1993). In particular, it focused on the key “turning points” of Fontana’s personal life-story, their meanings and consequences according to the protagonist, in accordance with previous studies that have highlighted the salience of such personal life moments from an individual perspective (e.g., see Gotlib and Wheaton 1997; Hemingway and Starkey 2018). Accordingly, the account presented in the article is a reconstruction of Vito Alfieri Fontana’s life-story and its main turning points. It is based on the live interview with him, which has been shortened and supplemented for the sake of readability with further information reported in his autobiography and in the other materials consulted for this study.

## Sources

Most of the journalistic sources consulted are in Italian, with some exceptions, for example, the following:

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2024-01/producer-of-landmines-becomes-leading-deminer.html>.

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Bosnia-Herzegovina-Death-of-a-Deminer-43996>.

[https://en.ilsole24ore.com/art/anti-human-mines-from-former-arms-manufacturer-to-activist-why-zelensky-means-total-war-AHpKOeWB?refresh\\_ce=1](https://en.ilsole24ore.com/art/anti-human-mines-from-former-arms-manufacturer-to-activist-why-zelensky-means-total-war-AHpKOeWB?refresh_ce=1).

Other sources include video and radio interviews, such as:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgrE7h82leI> (with automatically-translated English subtitles).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azgUYEkzR1w> (with automatically-translated English subtitles).

<https://www.raiplaysound.it/audio/2025/07/Fahrenheit-del-01072025-925c9f67-9973-4891-8e8c-47aeaf720b54.html> (initial 13 min, only in Italian).

The documentary film “The Successor,” directed by Mattia Epifani and released in 2015, is publicly available, with English subtitles, through various pay-per-view online streaming services.