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Extinction Politics

by Brian Martin

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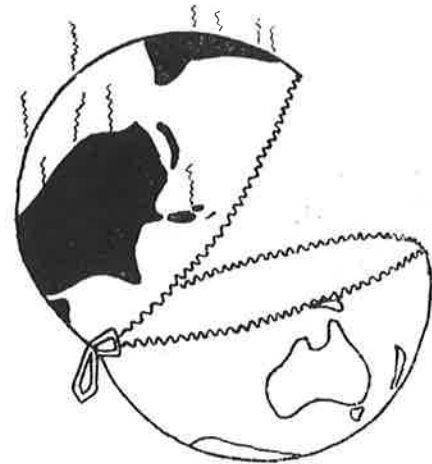
The possibility of massive death and destruction from war has long played a major role in thinking about war and peace. One theme has been that the increased destructiveness of weapons would provide an effective deterrent to war. Alfred Nobel thought that his invention of dynamite was a great contribution to the cause of peace, and many scientists have used similar beliefs to justify their own contributions to weapons technology. Prior to World War II, many observers thought that the capabilities of air bombardment were so horrific that war was virtually unthinkable. And since the development of nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence has become a standard plank of Western foreign and military policy.

The promotion of beliefs in massive death and destruction from war has been an important facet of the efforts of many peace movements. In the 1930s, British military planners estimated the effects of aerial bombardment by extrapolating linearly from the very limited experience of bombardments and casualties in World War I. On the basis of such assumptions, people such as Philip Noel Baker in the 1930s predicted the obliteration of civilization from war. But the experience of World War II showed that the 1930s military expectations of casualties per tonne of bombs were sizable overestimates ⁽¹⁾.

By the 1950s, a large number of people had come to believe that the killing of much or all of the world's population would result from global nuclear war. This idea was promoted by the peace movement, among which the idea of 'overkill' - in the sense that nuclear arsenals could kill everyone on earth several times over - became an article of faith.

Yet in spite of the widespread belief in nuclear extinction, there was almost no scientific support for such a possibility. The scenario of the book and movie *On the Beach* ⁽²⁾, with fallout clouds gradually enveloping the earth and wiping out all life, was and is fiction. The scientific evidence is that fallout would only kill people who are immediately downwind of surface nuclear explosions and who are heavily exposed during the first few days. Global fallout has no potential for causing massive immediate death (though it could cause up to millions of cancers worldwide over many decades) ⁽³⁾. In spite of the lack of evidence, large sections of the peace movement have left unaddressed the question of whether nuclear war inevitably means global extinction.

The next effect to which beliefs in nuclear extinction were attached was ozone depletion. Beginning in the mid-1970s, scares about stratospheric ozone developed, culminating in 1982 in the release of Jonathan Schell's book *The Fate of the Earth* ⁽⁴⁾. Schell painted a picture of human annihilation from nuclear war based almost entirely on effects from increased ultraviolet light at the earth's surface due to ozone reductions caused by nuclear explosions. Schell's book was greeted with adulation rarely observed in any field. Yet by the time



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the book was published, the scientific basis for ozone-based nuclear extinction had almost entirely evaporated. The ongoing switch by the military forces of the United States and the Soviet Union from multi-megatonne nuclear weapons to larger numbers of smaller weapons means that the effect on ozone from even the largest nuclear war is unlikely to lead to any major effect on human population levels, and extinction from ozone reductions is virtually out of the question ⁽⁵⁾.

The latest stimulus for doomsday beliefs is 'nuclear winter': the blocking of sunlight from dust raised by nuclear explosions and smoke from fires ignited by nuclear attacks. This would result in a few months of darkness and lowered temperatures, mainly in the northern mid-latitudes ⁽⁶⁾. The effects could be quite significant, perhaps causing the deaths of up to several hundred million more people than would die from the immediate effects of blast, heat and radiation. But the evidence, so far, seems to provide little basis for beliefs in nuclear extinction. The impact of nuclear winter on populations nearer the equator, such as in India, does not seem likely to be significant. The most serious possibilities would result from major ecological destruction, but this remains speculative at present.

As in the previous doomsday scenarios, antiwar scientists and peace movements have taken up the crusading torch of extinction politics. Few doubts have been voiced about the evidence about nuclear winter or the politics of promoting beliefs in nuclear extinction.

Opponents of war, including scientists, have often exaggerated the effects of nuclear war and emphasized worst cases. Schell continually bends evidence to give the worst impression. For example, he implies that a nuclear attack is inevitably followed by a firestorm or conflagration. He invariably gives the maximum time for people having to remain in shelters from fallout. And he takes a pessimistic view of the potential for ecological resilience to radiation exposure and for human resourcefulness in a crisis. Similarly, in several of the scientific studies of nuclear winter, I have noticed a strong tendency to focus on worst cases and to avoid examination of ways to overcome the effects. For example, no one seems to have looked at possibilities for migration to coastal areas away from the freezing continental temperatures or looked at people changing their diets away from grain-fed beef to direct consumption of the grain, thereby greatly extending reserves of food.

Nuclear doomsdayism should be of concern because of its effect on the political strategy and effectiveness of the peace movement. While beliefs in nuclear extinction may stimulate some people into antiwar action, it may discourage others by fostering resignation. Furthermore, some peace movement activities may be inhibited because they allegedly threaten the delicate balance of state terror. The irony here is that there should be no need to exaggerate the effects of nuclear war, since, even well short of extinction, the consequences would be sufficiently devastating to justify the greatest efforts against it.

The effect of extinction politics is apparent in responses to the concept of limited nuclear war. Antiwar

activists, quite justifiably, have attacked military planning and apologetics for limited nuclear war in which the effects are minimized in order to make them more acceptable. But opposition to military planning often has led antiwar activists to refuse to acknowledge the possibility that nuclear war could be 'limited' in the sense that less than total annihilation could result. A 'limited' nuclear war with 100 million deaths is certainly possible, but the peace movement has not seriously examined the political implications of such a war. Yet even the smallest of nuclear wars could have enormous political consequences, for which the peace movement is totally unprepared⁽⁶⁾.

The peace movement also has denigrated the value of civil defence, apparently, in part, because a realistic examination of civil defence would undermine beliefs about total annihilation. The many ways in which the effects of nuclear war are exaggerated and worst cases emphasized can be explained as the result of a presupposition by antiwar scientists and activists that their political aims will be fulfilled when people are convinced that there is a good chance of total disaster from nuclear war⁽⁷⁾.

There are quite a number of reasons why people may find a belief in extinction from nuclear war to be attractive⁽⁸⁾. Here I will only briefly comment on a few factors. The first is an implicit Western chauvinism. The effects of global nuclear war would mainly hit the population of the United States, Europe and the Soviet Union. This is quite unlike the pattern of other major ongoing human disasters of starvation, disease, poverty and political repression which mainly affect the poor, nonwhite populations of the Third World. The gospel of nuclear extinction can be seen as a way by which a problem for the rich white Western societies is claimed to be a problem for all the world.

Symptomatic of this orientation is the belief that, without Western aid and trade, the economies and populations of the Third World would face disaster. But this is only Western self-centredness. Actually, Third World populations would in many ways be better off without the West: the pressure to grow cash crops of sugar, tobacco and so on would be reduced, and we would no longer witness fresh fish being airfreighted from Bangladesh to Europe.

A related factor linked with nuclear extinctionism is a belief that nuclear war is the most pressing issue facing humans. I disagree, both morally and politically, with the stance that preventing nuclear war has become the most important social issue for all humans. Surely, in the Third World, concern over the actuality of massive suffering and millions of deaths resulting from poverty and exploitation can justifiably take precedence over the possibility of a similar death toll from nuclear war. Nuclear war may be the greatest threat to the collective lives of those in the rich, white Western societies but, for the poor, nonwhite Third World peoples, other issues are more pressing.

In political terms, to give precedence to nuclear war as an issue is to assume that nuclear war can be overcome in isolation from changes in major social institutions, including the state, capitalism, state socialism and patriarchy. If war is deeply embedded in such structures - as I would argue⁽⁹⁾ - then to try to prevent war without making common cause with other social movements will not be successful politically. This means that the antiwar movement needs to link its strategy and practice with other movements such as the feminist movement, the workers' control movement and the environmental movement.

A focus on nuclear extinction also encourages a focus on appealing to élites as the means to stop nuclear war, since there seems no other means for quickly overcoming the danger. For example, Carl Sagan, at the end of an article about nuclear winter in a popular magazine, advocates writing letters to the presidents of the United States and of the Soviet Union⁽¹⁰⁾. But if war has deep institutional roots, then appealing to élites has no chance of success. This has been amply illustrated by the continual failure of disarmament negotiations and appeals to élites over the past several decades.

Just about everyone, including generals and prime ministers, is opposed to nuclear war. The question is

what to do about it. Many people have incorporated doomsday ideas into their approaches. My argument here is that antiwar activists should become much more critical of the assumptions underlying extinction politics.

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