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Revolutionary
social defence

Background

So far, no method of promoting social defence has had any notable successes. Only a few governments have shown interest in social defence, and none has taken major steps toward replacing its military forces by nonviolent popular resistance. (There have been inquiries in, for instance, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, but with little continuing consequence.) Similarly, no community has trained itself in nonviolent resistance in a way that poses a comprehensive alternative to military defence. Given this lack of obvious successes, the discussion of prospects for social defence relies heavily on theoretical arguments, analogies and interpretation of historical struggles, most of which were not consciously linked to nonviolence.

Here I further examine the promotion of social defence, proceeding by looking at the problem of formulating a convincing scenario. My assessment is that no scenario has been presented which is persuasive both to advocates of elite reform and to advocates of grassroots initiative.

The main problem with the reformist approach, according to its critics, is that it does not deal with social structures, in particular with the vested interests in present military systems. It can be argued that most arrangements in society are based not on the logic of human needs (such as security) but on the interests of social groups in power, wealth and status. According to this view, the

present military systems are in place because they serve the interests of national elites, military elites and corporate elites. Some government leaders may have the best of intentions to change the system, but they are unable to overcome powerful commitments to military systems that keep them in power. Any scenario, such as the social defence reform scenario, that ignores this issue is unrealistic.

This argument against social defence via convincing elites is very similar to the critique of disarmament negotiations. Analysts such as Johan Galtung and Alva Myrdal have argued that government disarmament negotiations are basically a facade, giving the illusion of possible progress while leaving the underlying war structures untroubled.[1] The same could easily apply to social defence negotiations, should things ever get that far. The advocates of the reform approach have not explained how they expect to avoid this fate.

The grassroots action approach to social defence suffers a different problem in terms of scenarios. There are many examples of dramatic popular nonviolent action which seem to hold the potential for a power equivalent to the military. But, according to critics, the results of such action are often pitifully weak or disastrously misguided.

For example, the Czechoslovak resistance to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, although initially highly successful, was eventually crushed. Czechoslovakia became one of the more repressive Eastern bloc states for two decades afterwards.

The struggle for the independence of India, led by Gandhi, is one of the classic stories of nonviolent action. Yet some critics would say that India has not been decidedly less violent or a better place than many countries that obtained independence by other means. There was massive communal violence after the partition of India in 1947; the government of India developed nuclear weapons; the emergency of 1975-77 was a massive blot on the democratic process; the West Pakistan military assault on Bangladesh is one of the

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[1] Johan Galtung, "Why do disarmament negotiations fail?" *Gandhi Marg,* nos. 38-39, May-June 1982, pp. 298-307; Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

century's major genocides; poverty, inequality and corruption remain extremely serious problems. Gandhi's positive programme, though supported by many resolute activists,[2] has made little headway in the face of Western-style development. Critics would conclude that the legacy of nonviolent struggle in India is not the most encouraging.

In the Philippines, the 1986 popular outpouring against the military regime of Ferdinand Marcos and in defence of Cory Aquino fulfilled one of the visions of the supporters of nonviolence: the triumph of nonviolent mass protest against threatened military attack. Yet the Aquino government was not a great improvement over Marcos: the war against "rebels" continued; landowners were defended against the poor; corruption persisted.

In each of these cases, the message concerning popular nonviolent struggle has been mixed. Nonviolent action seemed to be successful in the short-term, immediate struggle, but the subsequent history provides little indication of any permanent success. In none of these cases has nonviolent action become the standard means of struggle, nor has political development towards a nonviolent society ever seemed more than a distant prospect.

It is important to note that only in India was nonviolent action a conscious part of a long-term programme to change society. In the other cases, nonviolent action was used tactically and hence offered little prospect for institutional change.

The 1989 events in Eastern Europe involved far-reaching changes in political systems brought about, for the most part, without violence.[3] These events give great hope to the supporters of peace and freedom, but they do not fundamentally affect my argument. Although nonviolent struggle certainly played a crucial role in the Eastern European events, it was not waged against either a foreign military aggressor or a military government (except in Poland), the classic cases for evaluating the potential of nonviolent action for the purposes of social defence. In addition, further research is

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[2] Geoffrey Ostergaard, *Nonviolent Revolution in India* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1985).

[3] For a useful analysis, see Michael Randle, *People Power: The Building of a New European Home* (Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 1991).

required to determine the exact role of nonviolent action in the political changes.

In most of the countries, the military did not intervene overtly to oppose democratisation. (The complex events in some countries, such as Romania and Yugoslavia, may qualify these comments.) Therefore these experiences cannot be cited as examples of nonviolent struggle succeeding, in a lasting fashion, against military opposition.

Most importantly, there have been no moves to eliminate the military in any of the Eastern European countries. In fact, the concept of social defence is far less known there than in the West. In Eastern Europe, nonviolent struggle was a key method used to bring down oppressive regimes, but nonviolent struggle has not been institutionalised in the new political-economic systems. Rather, most of the new governments have proceeded to rely on military forces in the usual way. (In a few cases, such as Lithuania and Slovenia, there has been strong official or unofficial interest in social defence.)

It may be that 1989 signalled the end of the Cold War, but that does not mean it has meant the end of the possibility of mass warfare, any more than 1815 signalled the permanent end of continental warfare in Europe. As welcome and significant as the 1989 events may be, they do not eliminate the problem of war. Therefore the issue of how to promote social defence remains a vital one.

In each of the examples above I have given only a brief sketch. It is not my aim to provide a political critique of nonviolent struggle. Rather, my point is that history so far has provided no clear-cut example of how a grassroots challenge to the military, leading to its replacement by social defence, might occur.

The rise of mass warfare

To provide the motivation for such a scenario, I turn to a different history: the rise of mass warfare and the modern state system. In this schematic history, my aim is not to provide political, economic or military detail, but rather to highlight some general changes in the nature of warfare which can be used to suggest the possibilities for social defence in the future. The key concepts here are participation, professionalisation and specialisation.

In feudal Europe, warfare was the preserve of a small minority. The bulk of the population, the peasantry, was rarely involved or indeed even affected by fighting. Soldiers were professionals, usually mercenaries.

The feudal relationship of warfare to society was connected to political and economic arrangements. Most economic production was for local use, and political power was decentralised (though quite unequal). There was no ready means of extracting economic surplus to support large standing armies. Hence the usual procedure was to raise a mercenary army for particular campaigns.

The feudal system was superseded by the modern state system. The military played a key role in this transformation, as it provided the basis for the gradual acquisition of greater power by the crown at the expense of the nobility. To support military expenditures, a larger portion of the economic product of the developing capitalist economies had to be extracted. To achieve this, tax collections and bureaucracies to handle them were required. The growth of the military and the state went hand in hand.

A key event in this process was the French Revolution, a revolution that strengthened the state and bureaucracy and incorporated mass support. The Revolution was seriously threatened by the surrounding traditional states and so, in order to avoid being crushed, it had to expand. This expansion took a populist, military form: the French revolutionary armies represented the first modern mass mobilisation of men for warfare.

The French revolutionary expansion in its turn triggered similar processes of state-building in neighbouring countries in order to defend against the French armies. This greatly accelerated the formation of modern states, with their political centralisation, bureaucracies for taxation and services, secret police, standing armies and centrally regulated economies.

The era of mass participation in warfare continued into the twentieth century, notably in the world wars. Large numbers of young fit men have been directly involved in armed forces. In the era of total warfare, other parts of the population have supported war efforts, especially through economic production; they have also been the targets of military attack, as in aerial bombing.

Mass participation has been associated with low professionalisation. Most soldiers in wars have been volunteers or conscripts.

Similarly, there has been a relatively low degree of specialisation. The rifle is a mass weapon, readily used by the ordinary soldier.

By contrast, in recent decades there has been a strong trend in industrialised countries towards low-participation, highly technological warfare. Modern weapons systems such as aircraft, submarines and guided missiles are exceedingly complex and require many more technicians and support personnel than front-line fighters. In the United States, one of the countries where this trend is most advanced, the army is largely made up of professionals, a large proportion of whom are technical specialists.

If the French Revolution symbolises the rise of mass participation in warfare, challenging the feudal pattern of small and temporary mercenary armies, then the nuclear arms race symbolises the return to warfare characterised by low participation, high professionalism and high specialisation. It is from this starting point that I turn to a scenario for the introduction of social defence, in analogy with the French revolutionary process.

Revolutionary social defence

A revolution can be defined as a rapid, basic transformation of key social structures in a society, such as the state and class structures, linked to mass revolts from below.[4] A military coup is not a revolution, since the channels for exercise of political and economic power are unchanged. On the other hand, the French, Russian, Chinese and Iranian revolutions, among others, changed the entire framework of economic relations, as well as the political leadership.

The phrase "revolutionary social defence" has two facets. It refers to the use of social defence in a potentially revolutionary situation, for example to defend a significant change in social relations. It also refers to the intrinsically revolutionary features of social defence itself: a replacement of the military by popular nonviolent action implies that the state can no longer rely on a monopoly over the use of "legitimate" violence. Hence the survival

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[4] **Theda Skocpol,** *State and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* **(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).**

of the state and of social institutions protected by the state, such as private property and bureaucratic privilege, is jeopardised. The introduction of social defence does not *require* a challenge to and replacement of major social institutions currently backed ultimately by violence, but this is certainly a possibility.

One possible scenario for revolutionary social defence involves the introduction of social defence in a revolutionary situation brought about for other reasons. For example, a radical party is elected to government, and is threatened by a military coup (perhaps supported by a foreign power). Organised nonviolent action to defend the government culminates in a conversion to social defence. Alternatively, nonviolent methods developed to resist an invasion are used to bring about radical changes in the society itself, including dissolution of the armed forces.

The introduction of full-scale social defence implies complete disarmament of the military. In the reform scenario, this disarmament is a carefully planned operation. In a revolutionary situation, it is far more likely to be people's disarmament, undertaken without sanction by government or military leaders, carried out to stop the use of weapons against the population. In order for such people's disarmament to succeed, it would have to be supported by significant portions of the military forces. It would involve disabling weapons systems, taking over military communication systems and dissolving or superseding military command structures.

The revolutionary changes brought about in this situation are most likely to be in the direction of radical democracy, namely the challenging of systems of unequal power and privilege associated with monopoly capitalism, state socialism, bureaucracy, patriarchy and the military itself. Whatever system is brought into being, it must have substantial popular support in order to be defended effectively by social defence.

So far I have assumed that people's disarmament and the introduction of social defence take place in a particular area: a country or substantial region. These developments, both the revolutionary changes and the introduction of social defence, will undoubtedly be perceived as threatening to other governments and militaries. Thus, as soon as social defence begins to be introduced in a revolutionary situation, it is likely to be threatened by external invasion or serious destabilising operations. It may be that "social defence in

one country" is inherently infeasible or unstable, just like "socialism in one country." If the revolution does not expand, it is likely to be crushed or subverted from within by the supporters of military methods.

Instead of waiting to defend against an invasion, social offence could be initiated. In the case of revolutionary social defence, social offence means the active promotion of social defence in other parts of the world, especially where a threat to the revolution might arise.

A crucial aspect of social offence is communications, because the revolutionary society would almost certainly be slandered as corrupt and evil by its enemies, in order to justify attacks on it. Communicating the truth about methods and results would be essential.

The ultimate aim in social offence by the revolutionary society would be conversion to social defence in other parts of the world. If this failed, so might the revolution. But if it began to succeed, this could trigger a process of ever-expanding active disarmament, as "foreign threats" began to dissolve by people's actions.

In this process, there would undoubtedly be many bloody struggles and tragedies, as military and police forces were used to stamp out the revolutionary infection. Massacres might stop progress in some cases but they could also stimulate people's disarmament through the process of political jiu-jitsu associated with nonviolent action. It is even possible to imagine that some regimes might sponsor social defence themselves, in order to pre-empt revolutionary change.

Needless to say, this scenario is schematic. Any actual changes in this direction are likely to be long and drawn out, with surges and regressions over a period of decades. In the process, the results are likely to be far less than ideal. The "revolutionary societies" will no doubt turn out to be flawed in various ways; new forms of struggle, formally nonviolent but still manipulative, will develop to protect power and privilege; catastrophes and "excesses" will occur. Anything other than such an unstructured progression is wishful thinking. The reform vision of carefully planned conversion to social defence is certainly misleading, although that does not mean that chaos is desirable.

The analogy between the French Revolution and the scenario of revolutionary social defence should be clear. In both cases there is a dramatic increase in participation in social struggle, in armed struggle in the first case and in nonviolent struggle in the second case. (Social defence potentially involves a much *greater* mobilisation for struggle, since even those excluded from military service can participate.) In both cases the changes in participation in organised struggle are linked to revolutionary changes in social arrangements. In both cases, expansion of the revolution is the method of defending the revolution. In both cases, the original goals of the revolution may be lost, and new ways of exercising power may develop .

The aim in outlining the scenario of revolutionary social defence is not to foretell the future, but rather to stimulate thinking about strategies in the present. Revolutionary social defence is but one possible development, and as such is worthy of discussion and planning. Therefore, I now turn to the implications of this possibility for action today.

Some implications

1. The key to social defence may be its link with those social movements with the potential for promoting revolutionary change in social structure. Most important here are movements that pose a challenge or alternative to military and state power, especially movements for various forms of participatory democracy and workers' control. This category includes anarchist groups, the sarvodaya movement and portions of feminist, peace and environmental movements, and the green movement generally. None of these currently seems to have the potential to bring about change quickly, but appearances can be deceptive. The events in France in 1968 and in Eastern Europe in 1989 suggest the potentialities.

In practice, many social defence activists are also active in a range of social movements. The trouble is that social defence is commonly seen as something to do with unlikely invasions and coups, divorced from day-to-day social struggle. The challenge is to promote social defence in a way that integrates it with society and a broad perspective on security and development, rather than separating it off with a narrow orientation to invasions and coups.

Perhaps the initial step is simply to lay the groundwork for the rapid expansion of nonviolent action; when a suitable occasion arises, social learning can be extremely rapid. This can be aided if even a small number of committed individuals have prepared information sheets, tried out methods of organisation and decision-making, and organised communication channels.

2. In some circumstances, the survival of social defence may depend on the capacity and willingness for undertaking "social offence," the concerted use of nonviolent techniques to undermine potential aggressor regimes. This requires a somewhat different orientation than the usual idea of social defence, which is taken to imply preparing in one's own society to defend against attack from the outside.

Perhaps one reason why social offence has not been prominent in the studies of social defence is an association with military offence. In many circles, military offence is castigated but military defence is considered acceptable; the difficulties in separating these are glossed over. Another reason why social offence has been neglected is that it involves violating the "sovereignty" of another state; the invocation of sovereignty has long been a mainstay of governments and peace movements alike, despite inconsistencies in practice. In any case, social offence is much more interventionist than defensive social defence.

Social offence is not greatly different in form from much activity that goes on routinely. Telephone messages, radio broadcasts, visitors, diplomatic relations and commercial transactions are all standard ways of interacting between countries and between groups and individuals within them. Social offence simply puts a different content in the interactions. Like any other interaction, social offence is open to abuse, most obviously in the form of cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, it is based on action using nonviolent methods, which is quite different from military offence.

3. The introduction of social defence may be accompanied by extensive direct disarmament by popular action. This means disabling everything from guns and tanks to intercontinental ballistic missiles. It does not take much skill to remove bullets from guns or disable computers, but in some cases knowledge and care is required for direct disarmament.

The important point here is that almost no effort has been put into spreading knowledge and skills for direct disarmament. Numerous scientists and engineers have devoted their energies to constructing weapons, but few have developed simple ways for disabling and disposing of them.

The group most able to carry out direct disarmament is the military itself. This suggests that social defence advocates should make every effort to communicate with and organise within the military forces.

4. The promotion of social defence should not be the preserve of any particular group or orientation. Although I have presented here a scenario for the revolutionary adoption of social defence, it is not the only nor necessarily the most likely way that social defence will be implemented.

Furthermore, it is not clear how best to promote even the specific aim of revolutionary social defence. A strategy emphasising revolution may alienate some potential supporters and be partially counterproductive; on the other hand, such a strategy may provide such a threat to governments that they move in a measured way towards social defence. Conversely, the careful arguments for social defence by those favouring the reform path may, ironically, provide the best way to lay the groundwork for revolutionary social defence: the credibility of the careful scholars and lobbyists may actually serve better to spread the ideas of social defence.

These are simply cautionary comments. It is wise not to be overly committed to generalisations in this area, because no research has been done on the relative effectiveness of different methods of promoting social defence, nor are the criteria for evaluating different methods even spelled out, much less agreed upon. Because there has been so little experience in promoting social defence, and so little overt progress towards it, it is premature to rule out any method that seems compatible with social defence itself.