Whatever Happened to Social Defence?

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A potential alternative to military defence is nonviolent action by civilians, using methods such as protests, strikes, boycotts and winning over opponent troops. In the 1980s there were groups in several countries advocating and promoting this option, but subsequently it faded from view even within the peace movement. Meanwhile, nonviolent action has become a more prominent and acknowledged method, especially for challenging repressive governments, as illustrated by the events in Serbia, Georgia, Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. Why has nonviolent defence disappeared from the agenda while other uses of nonviolent action have thrived? One explanation is that challenging particular rulers is less threatening to the systems of state and corporate power than is an alternative that empowers the people. Converting military defence into civilian-based systems potentially undermines all types of rule and is thus far more radical.

Introduction

Imagine a country where the people decide to get rid of military forces. Instead, they organise themselves to defend their freedoms without any weapons, by using methods such as protests, boycotts, strikes and sit-ins. They develop skills in foreign languages and persuasion to be able to talk to any foreign troops and win them over. They develop secure communication systems to be able to interact with each other as well as internationally. They prepare factories and farms so they can be shut down if an invader tries to take them over. They adopt decentralised systems of energy and water so the population cannot be held to ransom. They make strong connections with anti-war and pro-democracy groups in other countries, encouraging them to prepare to oppose any aggressive actions by their own governments.

The idea of defending a population without using violence was sparked by examples of popular nonviolent resistance to oppression. In the 1850s and 1860s, Hungarians used a range of methods of noncooperation to resist domination by the Austrian empire, and eventually succeeded (Csapody and Weber 2007). From 1898 to 1905, Finnish people used nonviolent means to resist Russian domination (Huxley 1990). In the first half of the 1900s, Gandhi led struggles in South Africa and India that inspired people around the world about the possibilities for opposing oppression using methods of nonviolent action (Brown 1987; Dalton 1993). If government repression can be successfully resisted without violence, then why not defend against military attack using the same sorts of methods?

Bertrand Russell wrote about defence without violence in 1915, and others expressed similar ideas (de Ligt 1937). Beginning in the 1950s, several writers, researchers and pacifist groups developed these ideas more systematically (e.g., Boserup and Mack 1974; Ebert 1968; Galtung 1958; Roberts 1967). For example, Stephen King-Hall, a former British naval officer, proposed that Britain, to defend parliamentary democracy and the British way of life against a possible Soviet invasion, get rid of its own military forces and instead prepare to defend nonviolently (King-Hall 1958).

In the 1980s, in response to an increased threat of nuclear war in Europe, a massive peace movement emerged and became influential in much of the world. The nuclear threat also inspired greater interest in nonviolent alternatives to military systems. The Green Party in Germany took up the concept promoted by Theodor Ebert (1981) and made this part of its platform. Activist groups in several countries studied and promoted nonviolent defence. In the Netherlands, there were a dozen groups, some of them looking at specific contributions to resistance, for example by public servants. In the US, the Civilian-Based Defense Association promoted nonviolent alternatives to the military. In Australia, Canberra Peacemakers interviewed tradespeople, public servants and others about methods for resisting a coup or attack (Quilty et al. 1986). The Swedish and Norwegian peace movements were active on the issue (Johansen 1990), and the Swedish government included social defence as part of its system called 'total defence', which includes military, civil and psychological defence. Significant works were produced by writers such as Robert Burrowes (1996) in Australia, Antonino Drago (2006) in Italy, Johan Niezing (1987) in the Netherlands and Gene Sharp (1985, 1990) in the US, among others.

It seemed, during the 1980s, that the momentum towards finding nonviolent alternatives to military systems might continue to grow. But instead of growth, interest in such alternatives went into serious decline in the 1990s, along with the rest of the peace movement. Today, nonviolent defence is the primary interest of only a few researchers (e.g., Drago 2006) and activist groups (e.g., in Germany, Bund für Soziale Verteidigung). In Europe, where there was little prospect of military attack from neighbouring countries, those interested in alternatives have looked instead at nonviolent interventions and uprisings.

The rise of nonviolent action

Although interest in nonviolent defence has dwindled, interest in the methods underlying it — namely, nonviolent action — has skyrocketed. In 1986, massive numbers of citizens went to Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Manila in the Philippines to protest against the authoritarian government of Ferdinand Marcos, eventually leading to him vacating office. This anti-government uprising was called people power, a new term for nonviolent action. In 1989, Eastern European communist regimes — previously seen as impregnable to anything except force — collapsed in the wake of sustained protest. In the same year, students challenged the government of China in dramatic pro-democracy protests. Although the movement failed, it showed the huge capacity of citizen protest in the face of a powerful regime.

In 2000, Serbia's ruler Slobodan Milošević tried to remain in office by using electoral fraud, but was ousted by protests, strikes and a massive mobilisation of citizens from around the country in Belgrade. This road to change was repeated in the so-called colour revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Lebanon. Then in 2011 came the Arab spring, in which the longstanding dictators of Tunisia and Egypt were overthrown using people power,

Terms Used in Social Defence

Terms referring to nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence

Note: each term has slightly different connotations

Civilian-based defence

Civilian defence

Defence by civil resistance

Nonviolent defence

Nonviolent popular defence

Social defence

Terms referring to rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and other methods of social action that are non-routine and do not involve physical violence

Civil resistance

Nonviolence

Nonviolent action

People power

Satyagraha

Passive resistance was a commonly used term until the early 1900s, when it was rejected and replaced by satyagraha and then other terms.

Civil defence means protection against military attack, especially bombing.

while those in several nearby countries were destabilised.

Behind the scenes in most of these major events, activists had been preparing the groundwork for years. For example, in the Philippines prior to the 1986 people power revolution, nonviolence trainers had been running workshops. Following the toppling of Milošević in Serbia, activists from the opposition group Otpor distilled the key ideas behind their campaign (Popovic et al. 2007) and took them to post-Soviet states and elsewhere. The US-based International Center on Nonviolent Conflict has also played an important role in disseminating ideas about nonviolent struggle in many countries.

Rapid and dramatic instances of regime change captured increasing media and popular attention, and also led to greater interest in nonviolence by researchers. Indeed, nonviolence research, previously a narrow and marginalised area, has been growing rapidly. Of many significant contributions (e.g., Nepstad 2011; Schock 2005; Stephan 2009), the study with the greatest impact has been the book *Why Civil Resistance Works* by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011). It provides statistical evidence that nonviolent struggle is more likely to be successful against repressive regimes than armed struggle.

Meanwhile, with less media attention, there has been a significant shift within social movements in western countries, with supporters of violence increasingly marginalised. For decades during the Cold War, supporters of Marxist parties mainly used parliamentary and conventional protest methods but sought to gain state power to promote socialism. In their view, overthrowing the capitalist state might require violence, if only in defence, and hence many Marxists were not receptive to ideas about nonviolence. Even within the peace movement, many socialist activists were more opposed to capitalism than to violence.

The rise of the feminist and environmental movements led to a different emphasis, in which armed struggle seemed implausible as a road to liberation. Understandings of oppression have broadened and now encompass patriarchy, racism, domination of nature and other systems of exploitation and unequal power.

A new context for nonviolent struggle

After 1991, the Soviet threat dissolved, and with it much of the perceived danger from global nuclear war that had been used for decades to justify western military systems. Many people expected a 'peace dividend', namely a decline in military expenditures and a concomitant increase in expenditures on human needs, but this did not occur. Military and security organisations floundered to find a new enemy to justify their existence. The attacks of 11 September 2001 provided an ideal pretext: terrorism became the rationale for the military-industrial complex. Although non-state terrorism, unlike nuclear war, provides neither a serious threat to the survival of populations nor any realistic prospect of overthrowing governments, it offered a plausible justification for a vast expansion of the security state.

This is the context for understanding the trajectory of nonviolent struggles. Challenges to authoritarian states are sometimes welcome to western governments, especially when, as in former Soviet states, people power movements usher in neoliberal economic systems and representative governments. On the other hand, some anti-authoritarian-government movements are less welcome to western governments, such as those in the Philippines in 1986, Indonesia in 1998 and Egypt in 2011, where longstanding strategic alliances were threatened.

Developing skills in nonviolent struggle contain the seeds of wider transformation. If people learn about their own agency to collectively challenge repression, then what is to stop them using their skills and commitment against other targets, such as neoliberalism?

This has been the agenda of the global justice movement, which gained worldwide visibility through protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999 and at subsequent meetings of economic leaders. It has also been the agenda of the occupy movement that has highlighted economic inequality and popularised the idea of the 99% who need to challenge systems and policies that mainly serve the wealthiest 1%. Groups such as Food Not Bombs — providing free food to the needy with a political message — show how challenges can be made to multiple forms of oppression (Crass 2013).

In the face of this threat to neoliberal hegemony, governments have been bolstering their surveillance and coercive powers, under the guise of protecting the population against terrorism. Governments have adopted a seemingly strange combination of welcoming (at least in retrospect) popular challenges to autocratic governments but cracking down on grassroots action within western societies. The neglect of social defence can best be understood in this context.

Implications for social defence

Getting rid of the military, and instead preparing the population to be able to defend against external threats, would help empower citizens with the understandings and skills to tackle oppression at home. Furthermore, getting rid of the military means removing the ultimate defender of the state.

If workers are able and prepared to shut down their workplaces against an external aggressor, they can use their capacity equally against an exploitative employer. If community members are able and prepared to survive a cut-off of oil, electricity or water supplies — something an aggressor might threaten to force compliance — then they are better able to resist government demands. If people can communicate easily without being subject to surveillance, they are better able to organise against government oppression. If government employees are given training in refusing unjust orders that an occupier might issue, they will be better able to refuse unjust orders by their own political leaders. Every capacity that can be used to deter or resist a foreign occupation can be used against employers and governments.

The radical potential of social defence suggests why it has been neglected. Governments do not want to empower their own citizens in ways that might be used against governments themselves. Corporate leaders would have similar concerns, and military commanders do not want to be made redundant. There seems to be no major government, corporate or professional organisation that has a particular interest in promoting a people's alternative to the military.

Thinking of social defence as empowering people to be able to challenge unjust rule helps explain the trajectory of nonviolent movements. Skills in nonviolent action have a radical potential. How can an empowered population be controlled, if at all?

It is useful to identify four crucial features of nonviolent action.

1. Nonviolence. Not threatening or using physical violence is of course a defining feature of nonviolent action. It is important for several reasons, including respecting the opponent, minimising harm, fostering changes in loyalty by opponents, and enabling greater participation.

2. Participation. In general, the more people who participate in nonviolent campaigns, the more successful they are likely to be (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Participation also has an empowering and democratising effect. People, when they join an activity, become more committed to it.

3. Direct involvement. In nonviolent action, members of the public are directly engaged in the action: they do not depend on leaders or representatives to act on their behalf.

4. Nonprofessional. In nonviolent action, most or all of those involved are unpaid and unsponsored. They participate voluntarily, without obligation or inducements. This is unlike military forces, in which members are coerced or paid for their services.

These four features, when combined, involve a significant challenge to the usual operations of dominant political and economic systems. Looking at the four features helps to identify ways that current campaigns have limited the potential impact of nonviolent action.

Nonviolent action is sold as a means of challenging governments *somewhere else*: against oppression in other countries. This has been an emphasis in attention to people power movements since the 1980s. It is like saying 'Nonviolent action is okay when it is used against those nasty rulers. They are the bad guys. We are the good guys, so you don't need to use it here.'

The emphasis in people power movements is on changing governments. People stay on the streets until the ruler resigns, but then return to their homes as if the country's problems are solved. Essentially this means that direct involvement is only for the purpose of regime change, not in subsequent negotiations, campaigning, elections and high-level machinations. It is like saying, 'You've done your job, now leave government to the professionals'.

Direct involvement in political and economic activities is commonly called participatory democracy and workers' control. It can take many forms, for example citizen involvement in local budgeting, popular assemblies of citizens, workers' councils and randomly selected citizen representatives on policy-making bodies. Participatory processes can be seen as extensions or parallels to nonviolent action: they are direct, participatory, and involve non-professionals.

What often happens in people power movements is along the lines of saying to citizens, 'Thank you for overthrowing the dictator. Now go back to your homes and jobs and leave the business of running the country to the new leaders. We'll let you know when it's time to cast a vote.' In such scenarios, people power is seen more as an event than as an ongoing process.

Defence by civil resistance is normally presented as national defence, against a foreign invader. For example, in Gene Sharp's books advocating civilian-based defence, he argues for replacing military defence systems with civilian-based ones (Sharp 1985, 1990). The implication is that decisions about this process will be taken by government and military leaders based on their judgement that civilian-based defence is more effective. However, this approach to promoting civilian-based defence does not take into account the commitment of government and military leaders to their own power and positions. Rational argument is unlikely to get anywhere.

Implications

It might seem that because people can use nonviolent action to topple a repressive ruler, it can be used for just about anything. In a general sense this is true, but history shows that toppling repressive rulers is easier than dissolving and replacing the systems of organised violence — namely military and police forces — that protect and sustain rule in general. To be sure, it is a great advance to replace a dictator with an elected leader, but this is only a partial step in the struggle to create a world without organised systems of violence.

Social defence, namely defending a community using nonviolent methods, is unlikely to be introduced or promoted by governments, because governments use police and military forces to maintain their existence. From an activist point of view, social defence needs to remain on the agenda so that nonviolent action retains its radical edge, its vision of a different world, both as method and goal (Martin 1993).

An important implication is that nonviolent campaigners need to think beyond immediate goals, such as policy or regime change, to long-term empowerment of the population. This means building understanding, motivation and skills to use nonviolent action against all forms of injustice. Regime change is a worthwhile goal, but activists also need to find ways to retain popular involvement in political decision-making, rather than assuming representative government is the end-point. Gandhi's constructive programme, namely building just political, economic and social systems, needs greater attention (Chabot and Sharifi 2013).

None of this is likely to be easy. Government and corporate power depend on police and military forces, and the police and military themselves have considerable power. Not least, a large proportion of the population believes in the need for systems of organised violence: they believe they need to be defended by professionals in the use of violence against external dangers — namely against other such professionals.

Social defence is one way of thinking about alternatives. It implies new ways of organising security systems, economics and politics. It deserves to be reinserted on activist agendas.

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Making Peace with the Earth

A war fought by oil pollution,
by aluminium sludge,
by exhausting rivers,
plundering seas and forests
is the 'carbon for ever', 'oil not soil'
barrage from those who believe
theirs is the infinite progress.

As dawn comes, awareness grows
that love for life
means respect for the planet,
and with it a wisdom
to fight back instead of gearing up
to drive faster and faster
towards extinction.

Some visionaries are sharing
their conserving-preserving
future fuelled by power
to produce fewer casualties,
no more monuments for extinguished species
or dead life systems,
and so easily achieved
by making peace with the earth.

Stuart Rees,
Sydney, NSW

from breaking – 1918

- after Virginia Woolf

talk of peace

a tremor of hope cries to the surface
subsides then swells again. one may wake
to find the covered murmur proclaimed
from all the papers. but another infernal
wet day & home to tea alone. now i fear
my fire is too large for one person.

ice

walking across the park a troop of horses
run from one side to the other. the gilt statue
is surrounded by a thin layer of ice which i break
with the tip of my umbrella. through the windows
i see great vellum folios full of italian history
an image which wont survive tea at atkinsons.

suffage bill

the pipes burst in the sudden thaw
from sharp frost to mildness in an hour
so now no baths. then comes the news
that the lords have passed the suffrage bill.
i feel important for a moment but then
the printer takes me for an amateur. finally
a round by the river & home to cold tea.

the war effort

one small joint of beef to last a week
no fat to be had
no margarine
& no butter
sunday dinner
of sausages
& bread
& dripping

dogs of war

no hope of peace this month. policies
have taken a run in every directions
like the dogs near the river
on a vile windy day

armistice day

then, watch as rooks
fly slowly in circles, or
how a cloud spreads itself
towards the horizon in wisps.
travelling into the city
for lunch with a friend,
factory walls rise
sheets of grey. & how
sirens hooted on the river.
smoke
toppling heavily
over
to the
east.

so far neither bells nor flags
but the wailing of sirens & intermittent gunfire.

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Mark Roberts,
Sydney, NSW