

Civilian - Based Defense: News & Opinion

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Social Defence: Elite Reform or Grassroots Initiative?

By Brian Martin *

The idea of social defence — or nonviolent civilian resistance to aggression using methods such as strikes, noncooperation, demonstrations and alternative institutions, as an alternative to military defence — has so far remained just that: an idea. If social defence is to be introduced on a large scale, how will it come about? Will it be introduced by government and military elites who have become convinced that it is a better method of defence? Or will it be introduced by the initiatives of many individuals and local groups, often in the face of elite resistance?

These questions cannot be answered simply by referring to past history. There is yet no substantive example of a community which has systematically organised its members and its political, economic and technological systems to operate social defence. True, there are a number of historical examples which have been used by proponents of social defence to illustrate its feasibility. Strikes and noncooperation led to the collapse of the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920; the Czechoslovak people put up an impressive nonviolent resistance to the 1968 Soviet invasion. But all such efforts have been organised spontaneously. Preplanned social defence has yet to be organised on a major scale.

There are various names for nonviolent resistance as an alternative to military defence, including social defence, civilian defence, civilian-based defence and nonviolent defence. Whatever the name, the idea is relatively new. In the first half of this century there were some suggestive proposals for nonviolent resistance as an alternative to military defence, inspired especially by the Gandhian campaigns in India.¹ The first systematic presentation of the idea of

social defence was by Stephen King-Hall in his book *Defence in the Nuclear Age*² published in 1958. Following this, a number of writers, mainly in Europe, developed the ideas further by investigating past examples of nonviolent action, analysing the social conditions favourable for the implementation and success of social defence, and exploring the possibilities for nonviolent action against invasions and coups.³

Some members of peace groups,

mainly in Europe, argued the case for social defence in the 1960s and 1970s. But in those decades social defence mostly remained at the level of argument: little or no practical action to mobilise communities for nonviolent resistance occurred. One exercise warrants mention: a simulation on Grindstone Island in Canada in 1965, in which a group of Quakers role-played a military takeover and nonviolent resistance to it. The account of this exercise provides a number of lessons for potential resisters.⁴

Also in the 1960s and 1970s, a few European governments evinced a limited interest in social defence by sponsoring studies. Civilian resistance actually plays a small part in the overall defence systems in Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia.

In the 1980s there has been an upsurge of interest in social defence. This is mainly due to the worldwide resurgence of the peace movement and the consequent grappling by many people with the question, "If we disarm, how will we defend ourselves?". The prior studies and interest in social defence have enabled it to be put on the list of 'alternative defence policies'. A very important factor in the increased interest in social defence has been the increasing numbers of people involved in nonviolent action. Nonviolent action has a long and inspiring history⁵, but systematic training for this form of social action is relatively recent. It has been inspired especially by writings

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and sharing of skills from the Movement for a New Society⁴ in the United States and implemented in a major way in environmental campaigns in Europe and America since the 1970s, especially against nuclear power.

Social defence is at least on the peace movement agenda in many countries, though there are major exceptions such as the United States where it remains little known. There are also some political parties in Europe which have put social defence on their platforms, most well known of which is the Greens in West Germany. Nevertheless, social defence is still seen as an unorthodox and radical option even by many within the peace movement, and it is hardly known among the general public.

For those who would like to see social defence researched, developed and implemented, the question is, what is the best way to help this come about? Here I describe two general directions in which efforts for social defence might be channelled: elite reform and grassroots initiative. I argue that relying on elites to introduce social defence is both unreliable and also undercuts its potential to challenge the roots of war. On the other hand, promoting social defence at the grassroots provides a much sounder basis for long-term success, and also provides valuable connections with other social struggles which contribute to overturning the war system and related systems of power and exploitation.

Elite Reform

Some prominent proponents of social defence have pitched their arguments towards elites, especially state bureaucrats. Their aim has been to win over influential leaders by showing that social defence is more effective than military defence in attaining at least some of the explicit goals of governments and military establishments.

The arguments for social defence are good ones. For example, races to develop ever more devastating weapons for 'defence' decrease rather than increase people's security, whereas social defence, which cannot be used to launch deadly attacks, avoids this paradox. Military defence provides the basis for military coups and military dictatorships which repress the people who are supposed to be defended;

social defence avoids the dilemma of "who guards the guardians?" by turning the people into their own nonviolent guardians against both external and internal threats.

Gene Sharp is the best example of an advocate of social defence who aims his arguments at governmental and military elites. His recent book *Making Europe Unconquerable*⁷, which is an effective and valuable argument for social defence, seems to be aimed mainly at policy makers.

Let me make it clear that I think that Gene Sharp's scholarship and writing is extremely valuable. I routinely recommend it to many people. But that does not provide any reason to refrain from 'friendly criticism' of some of his underlying assumptions.

Sharp assumes that the reason for present military policies is that people, both policy makers and the general population, lack knowledge or awareness that there is a viable alternative defence policy without the extreme dangers of nuclear deterrence. Sharp gives hardly a hint that there might be other reasons for the reliance on military means than the perceived need to defend against the 'enemy', which he takes to be the Soviet government and military.

In my view⁸, military establishments are created and sustained for other purposes than just defence and security. Military establishments and associated industry and government bureaucracies have a strong organisational and economic interest in their continued existence even in the absence of external threats or the presence of superior defence alternatives. More fundamentally, the state is premised on the monopoly over what is claimed to be legitimate violence within a territory, within a system of competing states. It is not feasible to dismantle the military system of organised potential for violence without also undermining the dominant power structures within states, including the power of capitalists in the West and of communist parties in the East.

So it is really out of the question to expect state elites to introduce social defence simply by convincing them

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that it is logically a better system for the interests of the people. In most cases, the beliefs of state elites reflect the power structures in which they operate. Knowledge and logic alone can do little to undermine these structures.

Sharp says that if European countries became more militarily self-reliant through social defence, the United States government should respond with "relief and gratitude"⁹. This hardly seems likely considering the way the US government has browbeaten its allies to accept cruise missiles and the way it has reacted to the New Zealand government's cautious steps away from nuclear weapons.

Elites might well give more consideration to social defence if popular pressure became greater. Some advocates of social defence indeed favour development of popular support for social defence as a way to influence elite decision-makers to take it more seriously. From the point of view of elites, popular pressure might make social defence more attractive as an elite reform. Sharp recognises this when he suggests that governments might adopt social defence measures to "mollify" a strong peace movement.

If governments brought in social defence as a reform, it would almost certainly be done in those ways most compatible with existing institutions. What would this mean for social defence?

First, social defence would be seen as a contribution to national defence, supporting the interest of a particular state within the existing framework of competing states. Sharp does not deal with social defence except as national defence.

Second, social defence would be organised in a relatively top-down fashion. Although popular participation

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is intrinsic to the operation of social defence, participation can be either organised and designed by those participating or manipulated and controlled from above. Elite-sponsored social defence could well be organised and run by a professional corps of experts and leaders, with the populace entering in according to the plans and directions of the professionals. This sort of social defence would be relatively undemocratic. It is even possible to imagine conscription for social defence service, which would be a travesty of nonviolent action.

Third, elite-sponsored social defence would be integrated with other methods of defence, including continuation of military defence. Instead of becoming a replacement for military defence, social defence would become a supplement. Sharp sees this as the most likely path for introduction of social defence (although elsewhere he gives many examples of the dangers of mixing violent and nonviolent resistance). This would preempt more radical initiatives for popularly organised social defence. In terms of infrastructure — communications, transport, factory production — social defence would depend on the existing facilities which are geared to control by elites.

Social defence which is organised by professionals for national defence as a supplement to military defence could actually serve to contain popular action for social change. The military establishment, through its influence over social defence plans and knowledge of avenues for popular action, might find itself more able to control the populace. Since the elite-sponsored social defence would be oriented towards external enemies, it would be harder to use against domestic repression. Finally, because of the top-down control, it would be relatively easy for elites to reduce overall commitment to social defence. In essence, power over the development of social defence would have been put in the hands of the elites.

In summary, elite-sponsored social defence would have a minimal impact on dominant institutions. The state system and the necessity for its defence would remain a central premise. Popular participation would be under the control of elites and professionals, and the military system would not be challenged in any fundamental way. This sort of elite reform could coopt social defence in the same way that demands for workers' control have been partially coopted by limited forms of worker participation, and demands for women's liberation have been partially coopted by promoting some women into high positions within otherwise unchanged institutions.

It should be clear that I do not see attempts to convince or apply pressure to elites as the only or best way to promote social defence. If any headway in this direction is made at all, it is likely to achieve a form of social defence lacking its most important democratic features and providing no real threat to established institutions which underlie the war system.

Grassroots Initiative

Another way to promote social defence is through grassroots initiatives. This means that groups of people in suburbs, factories, offices, schools, churches, farming communities and military forces would take action themselves to prepare for social defence.

This sort of action has only begun to appear in the past several years. Canberra Peacemakers has taken a number of initiatives in investigating how social defence might be promoted at a community level¹⁰. There is a community social defence network in the Netherlands¹¹, and a number of other groups and individuals are active in various parts of the world.

There are many possible things to do. In factories, for example, workers might teach each other how to use equipment and also how to disable it so far as outsiders were concerned. They could plan decision-making procedures for crisis situations and organise communications networks for coordinating their own efforts with other community groups. To make these preparations would of course require considerable self-education about social defence. The process of developing a social defence system

would itself be an important component of the education process. Once preparations were underway, they could be tried out in role-playing exercises, and eventually with large-scale simulations in which the factories were shut down to prevent use by aggressors, or in which the factories were used to produce other products of relevance to a wider social defence programme.

In the somewhat longer term, factory workers could begin pushing for changes in the social and technological infrastructure. Greater use of job rotation and shop-floor decision-making would develop the skills of the workers and make them more effective in resisting aggression. Flattening wage differentials and reducing management prerogatives would help reduce inequalities and antagonisms between sections of the workforce which might be used by aggressors to undermine worker solidarity. Decentralising production and converting wasteful or harmful production to production for human needs would increase the value of the workers' labour for community needs, and in many cases reduce its value to aggressors, as in the case of converting military-related production. Developing wider communication and decision-making forms, such as workers' councils, would provide a solid organisational basis for social defence.

This example of what a grassroots initiative for social defence might be like illustrates several features different from the likely direction of elite-sponsored social defence. First, the orientation would be much more to defence at the community level rather than only at the national level. Since the state is a key feature of the war system, this community focus is much more suitable for putting social defence into a wider antiwar strategy.

Second, the grassroots initiative approach would lead to a form of social defence which is much more democratic and self-reliant. Because people would be involved themselves in developing social defence, they would also be much more committed to it. The defence would be stronger because it would be less reliant on professionals and official leaders. Also, to the extent that reorganisation of social and technological infrastructure occurred, the basis for warmaking by political and economic elites would be undercut.

Third, social defence developed through grassroots initiatives would be much more potent against attacks by state elites. Self-reliance developed at the grassroots could be better mobilised against a repressive government or against a coup supported by government leaders — a situation only poorly addressed by Sharp.

Finally, and most importantly, many more links would be made with other social movements. For example, the methods of nonviolent resistance could be used by workers against oppressive employers as well as against outside aggressors. Similarly, promotion of social defence among women could be linked with campaigns against rape and other male violence. The making of such links would help the social movements concerned by providing them with tools for their own struggles. And by providing an independent reason for practising nonviolent techniques, the involvement in social defence would be much greater than possible through elite sponsorship.

The grassroots approach to social defence implies that social defence is not just a desirable goal, to be implemented in whatever way possible. Rather, social defence would become an organising tool. Organising of communities could be based around the development of social defence skills and preparations, since this would require promotion of increased local democracy, self-reliance and participation.

There are many obstacles to social defence organised from the grassroots. Factory workers promoting greater shop-floor decision-making power will be strongly opposed by employers, by associated state bureaucracies, and also by many trade union elites. Historically, elite opposition to strong workers' movements has relied ultimately on military force. Specifying the array of forces that would oppose grassroots initiatives for social defence highlights the close connections between the war system and other systems of political and economic inequality and exploitation. The grassroots approach to social defence can only succeed if it is part of a wider challenge to oppressive institutions such as patriarchy, capitalism and the state. The strength of the grassroots approach is that it can tap the support of all those people oppressed by such institutions.

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There is a long way to go before social defence becomes adopted as an organising tool in very many places. But once teething problems are sorted out — and this will take quite a few years, if not decades — there is no reason why rapid expansion in the use of social defence could not occur. Certainly this is what has happened in other social movements in their use of nonviolent methods, such as the labour movement and the black civil rights movement. The dramatic use of nonviolence against repressive regimes in Iran, Poland, Argentina and the Philippines in recent years is a hopeful sign. Once such grassroots initiatives get going, they will be much harder to stop than any elite-sponsored systems.

Gene Sharp says that serious consideration of social defence “is more likely to be advanced by research, policy studies, and strategic analyses of its potential than by a ‘campaign’ being launched advocating its immediate adoption”¹². Sharp’s view is flawed on two counts. First, activists who campaign for social defence do not demand its “immediate adoption”, but rather foresee a gradual but punctuated process, just as Sharp does. Second, and more serious in its implications, is Sharp’s view that research is more useful than ‘campaigns’. Sharp clearly wants to distance himself from the peace movement, and indeed he hardly mentions it in his book. His concern is with policy studies and policy-makers.

The history of social movements shows that popular action is the key to social change, not the logical arguments of experts with the ear of elites. The anti-slavery movement would never have made much progress simply by trying to convince slave-owners that it was more economically efficient to have a free labour force, nor would the

women’s movement have made much progress simply by trying to convince individual men that sexual equality was more in keeping with the highest precepts of human civilisation. Similarly, all the available evidence shows the futility of relying on governments to abolish the war system¹³.

Undoubtedly, it is important to popular movements for there to be intellectuals who argue their case, and often these intellectuals prefer to set themselves apart from the movements which use their material. Sharp’s writings are immensely valuable to social activists, who will continue to read and refer to his work even if he does not consider their activities worthy of mention. That’s all a part of the typical dynamic of social movements and intellectuals.

A similar process occurred with the energy debate in the late 1970s. Amory Lovins provided a powerful indictment of conventional energy planning and an eloquent case for a ‘soft energy path’ based on energy efficiency and an increased use of renewable energy technologies¹⁴. Lovins argued his case in terms of physics and economics and eschewed arguing on the basis of social and political grounds. Like Sharp, Lovins argued in terms of pragmatism rather than morals or social action. But as the ‘alternative energy movement’ encountered the enormous difficulties of opposing entrenched interests and became partially coopted into government programmes, the impetus towards the soft energy path faded. Many improvements in energy efficiency have been made, but the basic infrastructure of energy-intensive society has hardly been scratched. Lovins seemed to hope that changes in energy systems, introduced on pragmatic grounds, would lead to desirable social changes. Unfortunately, the political and economic ‘logic’ of vested interests in dominant energy systems have so far prevailed over the more intellectual logic of the soft energy path¹⁵.

It is understandable that Sharp, a researcher, should advocate more research. But there is not really such a great disjunction between research and action as implied by Sharp. Sharp’s writings are actually effective tools in nonviolent struggles against oppression and war. On the other hand, many campaigns are very effective

research tools. Sometimes the best way to obtain knowledge is to become involved in social action rather than waiting on the sidelines for it to occur.

One of the difficulties with 'alternative defence' options such as non-alignment, armed neutrality and 'defensive defence' is that they depend on governments and state bureaucrats for implementation. Social activists are reduced to applying pressure on elites. One great advantage of social defence is that immediate steps can be taken on the local level to study, promote and implement it. Social movements often have come to grief when reliance has been put on 'people in power' to implement policy. Activists cannot afford to wait for research and action from the top. It would be especially ironic if social defence, which by its nature is ideally designed for grassroots initiatives, were to become another captive and casualty of elite policy-making.

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NOTES

- 1 On some of the intellectual antecedents to social defence, see Gene Keyes' 'Strategic non-violent defense', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 4, June 1981, pp. 125-151.
- 2 Stephen King-Hall, *Defence in the Nuclear Age* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958).
- 3 Anders Boserup and Andrew Mæck, *War without Weapons* (London: Frances Pinter, 1974); Johan Galtung, *Peace, War and Defense. Essays in Peace Research, Volume Two* (Copenhagen: Christian Ejlers, 1976); Gustaaf Geeraerts (editor), *Possibilities of Civilian Defence in Western Europe* (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1977); Adam Roberts (editor), *The Strategy of Civilian Defence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); and Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1980).

- 4 Theodore Olson and Gordon Christiansen, *Thirty-one Hours* (Toronto: Canadian Friends Service Committee, 1966).
- 5 See Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski (eds), *The Power of the People* (Culver City, California: The Power of the People Publishing Project, 1977); and Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).
- 6 See especially Virginia Coover et al., *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981).
- 7 Gene Sharp, *Making Europe Unconquerable: The Potential of Civilian-based Deterrence and Defence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Ballinger, 1985).
- 8 Brian Martin, *Uprooting War* (London: Freedom Press, 1984).
- 9 Sharp, *op. cit.* note 7, p. 82.
- 10 Jacki Quilty et al., *Capital Defence: Social Defence for Canberra* (Canberra: Canberra Peacemakers (GPO Box 1875, Canberra ACT 2601), 1986).
- 11 The international contact for the network is Liseke Schakenbos, Utrechtseweg 29A, 3704 HA ZEIST, The Netherlands.
- 12 Sharp, *op. cit.* note 7, p. ix. See also p. 64.
- 13 See for example Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
- 14 Amory Lovins, *Soft Energy Paths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
- 15 Brian Martin, 'Soft energy hard politics', *Undercurrents*, No. 27, 1978, pp. 10-13.

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