
Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change*
(London: Freedom Press, 1993)

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Elite reform or grassroots initiative?

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 suggestive historical examples such as the Kapp Putsch and Czechoslovakia 1968. But all such efforts have been organised spontaneously. Planned social defence has yet to be organised on a major scale.

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 approaches for introducing social defence: elite reform and grassroots initiative. I argue that relying on elites to introduce social defence is unreliable and also undercuts its potential to challenge the roots of war. By contrast, 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 very 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 books *Making Europe Unconquerable* and *Civilian-Based Defense*,¹ which are effective and valuable arguments for social defence, seem to be aimed mainly at policy makers in government and the military.

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, are not aware that there is a viable alternative defence policy without the extreme dangers of mass warfare. 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.”

¹ Gene Sharp, *Making Europe Unconquerable: The Potential of Civilian-based Deterrence and Defense* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1985); Gene Sharp with the assistance of Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

In my view,² military establishments are created and sustained for purposes other than just defence and security. Military establishments and associated industry and government bureaucracies have strong organisational and economic interests 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 capitalist and bureaucratic elites.

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

If military defence were really there to defend against “the enemy,” the US and other Western governments would be *massively* reducing their arsenals and expenditures in the wake of the collapse of state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It is safe to predict that this will not occur. New excuses for maintaining military strength will be conjured up, such as “instability” due to resurgent nationalism, newly demonised dictators such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the drug trade, or internal unrest and subversion.

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.

² Brian Martin, *Uprooting War* (London: Freedom Press, 1984).

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 administered from the top. Although popular participation is intrinsic to the operation of social defence, participation can be either organised and designed by those participating in it 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 participating in accordance with 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 he gives many examples of the dangers of mixing violent and nonviolent resistance). This would pre-empt 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. Because of the top-down control, it would be relatively easy for elites to reduce overall commitment to social defence. Finally, elite sponsorship, by giving the *appearance* that social defence is being officially promoted, would reduce

initiative from below. In essence, power over the development of social defence would have been put in the hands of those most likely to oppose its radical potential.

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 don't see attempts to convince or apply pressure to elites as the best way to promote social defence. If any headway in this direction is made at all, it is likely to be 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 the initiative to prepare for and implement social defence.

Small steps in this direction began in the 1980s. There are groups and individuals active in various parts of the world, such as Australia, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands.

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.

For workers to make these preparations would 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 under way, they could be tried out in role-playing exercises and, eventually, with large-scale simulations in which the factories were shut down to prevent aggressors using them or, instead, used to produce products useful to the nonviolent resistance.

In the longer term, factory workers could begin pushing for changes in the social and technological systems. 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 a grassroots initiative for social defence 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, a grassroots approach would lead to a much more democratic and self-reliant social defence system. Because people would be involved themselves in developing social defence, they would 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 systems occurred, the basis for war-making 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 developed by workers to oppose outside aggressors could be used against oppressive employers. Indeed, nonviolent action is regularly used against employers, and this provides the best motivation for developing workers' skills and experience in nonviolent struggle. Other links are treated in chapters 8-14.

A 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 allied state bureaucracies, and also by many trade union elites. Historically, elite opposition to strong workers' movements has relied ultimately on military force. Specifying this array of forces highlights the close connections between the war system and other systems of political and economic exploitation. A 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.

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 many 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. One hopeful sign is the dramatic use in recent years of nonviolence against repressive regimes in the Philippines, Palestine, Eastern Europe and elsewhere. As more grassroots initiatives get going, they will be much harder to stop than any elite-sponsored systems.

Two approaches to the promotion of social defence

	<i>Elite reform</i>	<i>Grassroots action</i>
<i>Implementation</i>	Governments	Mass action
<i>Key target audience</i>	Governments and military officials	Social movements
<i>Domain of defence</i>	National	Local, national, transnational
<i>Social context</i>	Social defence as a functional alternative	Social defence as part of wider social change
<i>Key promoters</i>	Academic researchers	Community activists
<i>Argument, justification</i>	Rational superiority of social defence to military defence	Commitment to non-violence, participation, social justice

Reservations about research

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.”³ 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 books. His concern is with so-called policy studies and policy-makers, the word “policy” here referring only to government-level activity.

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

³ Sharp, 1985, p. ix. See also p. 64.

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 system.

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.

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. Conversely, many campaigns are very effective research tools. Usually the best way to obtain knowledge is to become involved in social action rather than waiting on the sidelines for it to occur.

Reservations about voting

In Switzerland in 1989, a citizens' initiative to abolish the army obtained more than one third of the vote. This was an astounding performance considering the limited resources of the group Switzerland Without an Army and the active opposition of the government. The proponents of the initiative hope that eventually armies may be abolished by popular mandate.

This approach is based on persuading people that armies are counterproductive and unnecessary, and using the mechanism of the citizens' initiative to bring about institutional change. The advantage of this approach is that it brings the issues to the general population and puts decision-making power in their hands. But it has several disadvantages.

First, only some countries make provision for citizens' initiatives. Second, a campaign to get people to vote a certain way does not give them skills or experience for undertaking direct action. Third, and most importantly, there is no guarantee that even a majority vote will lead to actual abolition of the army, since there is no force,

aside from the law, to make the government obey the vote. Popular direct action would be needed to implement a vote to abolish the army. How better to promote the capacity and preparedness for such action than through preparation for social defence?

One of the difficulties with promoting many of the “alternative defence” options, such as “defensive military defence” and armed neutrality as well as citizens’ initiatives to abolish the army, is that they depend on politicians and state bureaucrats for implementation. Social activists are ultimately reduced to applying pressure on elites.

Combining methods

In practice, opponents of war use a variety of methods: community organising, lobbying elites, working through political parties, total resistance to military service, peace education, research, mediation, conflict resolution, voting, direct action and many others. Complete reliance on any single method is a mistake.

If *everyone* focussed on the grassroots, then a bit of lobbying of lonely elites would be called for. But this is pretty unlikely! In my view, the main priority should be grassroots initiatives. Relying on elites is easy, familiar and filled with traps. Grassroots methods need more development. Who will take the initiative? Can grassroots activity be organised on a regular and sound basis without being captured by new elites? What is the motivation for initiatives: enemy threats or local problems? These are difficult questions. The answers can only come through experience with grassroots initiatives.

Concluding comment

Sharp says that social defence should be “transpartisan”: “no peace or pacifist group or radical political organization should identify itself as the prime advocate of civilian-based defense.”⁴ I agree that social defence should be developed by a range of organisations and not tied to one tendency. But neither is it likely, à la Sharp, to be a neutral technique that can be taken up by just anybody with equal ease and value. Popular nonviolent action has

⁴ Sharp, 1990, p. 124.

much more in common with grassroots democracy than with government and military hierarchy.

Sharp says that social defence should be “presented on the basis of its potential utility—without ideological baggage.” Sorry, Gene. Your approach is ideological too.

Social movements have often come to grief when reliance has been put on elites 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 suited for grassroots initiatives, were to become another captive and casualty of elite policy-making.