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Towards a resilient political system

Suppose that a community aims to defend itself from outside aggression by using nonviolent methods. The first thing that an aggressor would think of doing is applying pressure to the leaders of the community, whether they are presidents, mayors, church figures, business executives or trade union officials.

It would be relatively easy to capture and torture these individuals, or even kill them. But, in some cases, this might only antagonise the rest of the population and make conquest more difficult.

Another strategy for the aggressor is to win the cooperation of the leaders. This could be by offering them bribes such as money or a powerful position, or by threats to them personally or their families and friends. In either case, if leaders cooperated with the aggressor, this might well confuse and demoralise the population and make resistance more difficult.

For these reasons, any social system with powerful or charismatic figures at the top is vulnerable to takeover. The more powerful the figures, the greater the vulnerability. This also applies to threats from within, and explains why military coups are most common in military regimes.

This vulnerability may be reduced—not eliminated—when leaders are as totally committed to the resistance as everyone else, and play a genuine leadership role. In most existing societies, though, leaders are unaware of the capacity for nonviolent strug-

gle, because they experience politics as a process of negotiation at the top. One of the sources of failure of the 1968 Czechoslovak resistance is that most of the Czechoslovak leadership was unaware of the power of nonviolent action and made concessions to the Soviet government that undermined the resistance.¹ This suggests that grassroots activists must ensure that elites understand the dynamics of nonviolent action.

Another reason why hierarchical systems are vulnerable is that people at the bottom, the “nonleaders,” have less scope for initiative. The more powerful and prestigious the leaders, the more likely it is that others will rely on them to act on their behalf. Therefore, the nonleaders do not develop the skills and experience in decision-making, strategy and action required to counter a sophisticated opponent.

A third reason why hierarchical social systems are vulnerable to aggression is that people are less likely to be committed to the system and less likely to be willing to defend it. I’ve often heard people—especially left-wing activists—say they wouldn’t want to defend Australian society because it has a small rich elite while many live in poverty. There is no real democracy since a small ruling class manipulates politics to serve vested interests; human rights are trampled on; and minority groups suffer enormously from discrimination and harassment. If this is the view of some Australians in a country which is far from repressive by world standards, generating commitment is likely to be much harder elsewhere.

So, ironically, hierarchical systems are vulnerable at both the top and the bottom: those at the top may be coerced or coopted to serve the aggressors, while those at the bottom do not have the skills or commitment to defend the community.

Hierarchies come in various shapes and sizes: political elites and masses; economic inequality; male domination; racial oppression. All of them make a society more vulnerable to subjugation or internal takeover. The process can be summarised by the familiar phrase “divide and rule.”

¹ Jaroslav Sabata, “Invasion or own goal?” *East European Reporter*, vol. 3, no. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 3-7.

For these reasons, promoters of social defence should be exploring alternatives to the standard hierarchical social systems.

Actually, it's pretty unlikely that social defence could be sustained in a society of the conventional modern kind, namely one with a central government, central law-making and central administration. The reason is simple. The government depends for its power ultimately on the military. Laws are enforced, if necessary, by the military. Government bureaucracies could be disobeyed if not for the coercion exercised on their behalf. In particular, taxation would be a precarious activity without the support of courts and police powers.

All this goes to the heart of the modern state, which sociologist Max Weber defined as a community based on a monopoly of "legitimate" violence within a territory. The state here refers to what is usually called the government, the legal and prison systems, the military itself, government bureaucracies and such operations as local government, state schools, welfare services and so forth. The whole thing would fall apart without the power to force acquiescence for the purposes of taxation and repression of challenges to dominant groups.

Nonhierarchical decision-making

To develop a stronger social defence system it is valuable to explore nonhierarchical social systems. Here I'll concentrate on the political system, namely the system for making collective decisions—the decisions that affect the entire community. A nonhierarchical political system means one without the state. This is a tall order, given the enormous power of states in the world today. The aim in discussing such alternatives is not to propose a sudden switch in which the state is abolished and immediately replaced by another system. Instead, the promotion of nonhierarchical political methods should be part of a process of transition to social defence, and vice versa.

Rather than propose a single model, here I note a number of possible directions, mentioning some of their advantages and disadvantages.

Smaller-sized units. Some of the greatest hierarchies and vulnerabilities are found in the societies with many tens of

millions of people. Undoubtedly, the political and economic power of populous states—such as the United States, Russia, Japan, India, China, Germany, France, Britain, Brazil—is enormous, and so is their capacity for aggression. One way to reduce this problem is to promote smaller units.²

With a single unified society, an aggressor can target the key individuals and then have an entire administrative apparatus available for use. If instead, the same society were divided into 10 or 100 smaller independent, self-governing units, this central vulnerability would be removed.

The break-ups of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union may provide greater opportunities for social defence. In Slovenia, for instance, there were strong initiatives to implement social defence on the withdrawal of Yugoslav national military forces. In the event, though, Slovenia set up its own military. The ruthless fighting in former Yugoslavia shows that, when it comes to war, small is not necessarily beautiful.

An even better model is the Swiss cantons, which are largely self-governing.³ They also exhibit a remarkable degree of citizen participation in the defence forces which, however, are armed. But the Swiss system of popular militias has many more similarities with social defence than does the usual system of a national army. (Social defence has been called the nonviolent equivalent of guerrilla warfare.⁴)

The obvious vulnerability of small units is that they are prey to large aggressors. But this handicap can be overcome with a network of mutual support and well-developed social offence.

Consensus. As a decision-making method, consensus refers to a fairly well-defined system of reaching unanimous or near-unanimous agreement by discussion, exploring disagreements and

² The case is given by Leopold Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) and Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980).

³ This model is advocated by Frances Kendall and Leon Louw, *After Apartheid: The Solution for South Africa* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1987).

⁴ Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack, *War Without Weapons: Non-violence in National Defence* (London: Frances Pinter, 1974), chapter 4.

proposing alternative courses of action.⁵ In a strict consensus procedure, just one person may be enough to stop a proposal for action and to force reconsideration. In a modified consensus procedure, a few people in a large group can block action. Consensus often leads to creative solutions because a majority cannot simply use its numbers to push through a decision. The strong objections of just a few must be listened to and treated seriously. The result is that when a decision is made, it has much greater support from the group.

Compare this to voting in a mass meeting, which can fall prey to demagogues, setting of agendas by those running the meeting, and disruption by vocal minorities. When a vote is taken, the losing side often has little commitment to the decision and may even leave the group.

Those who have been involved with consensus decision-making, whether in a group of 5 or 500, realise its strengths. But it has some limitations.⁶ Most importantly, consensus breaks down with large groups where there are strong and fundamental differences in viewpoint. Consensus with a group of 100 is hard enough. With 10,000 it is frighteningly difficult to achieve near-universal agreement.

From the point of view of an aggressor, a group using consensus is difficult to take over. There are no formal leaders, and decisions can't be forced on the group so long as there is a resolute minority. Experience with consensus gives people greater strength in expressing and standing up for their views. This is ideal for resisting outside control.

On the other hand, infiltrators could easily subvert the consensus process by simply getting in a group and blocking agreement. Frustrating and time-consuming deadlocks happen often enough even when all participants are apparently well-intentioned. A few

⁵ See for example Michel Avery, Brian Auvine, Barbara Streibel and Lonnie Weiss, *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making* (Madison: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981).

⁶ Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980) is a sympathetic critique. See also Charles Landry, David Morley, Russell Southwood and Patrick Wright, *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure* (London: Comedia, 1985); Howard Ryan, *Blocking Progress: Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-nuclear Movement* (Berkeley: Overthrow Cluster, Livermore Action Group, 1985).

people intending to wreck the process would face few open obstacles.

The greatest strength of consensus methods is their capacity to win over opponents by incorporating them in the decision-making process. Whether this could work against “consensus saboteurs” is unknown.

Delegate systems. A traditional anarchist model of society is a federation of self-managing groups. Each group, whether at the workplace, local community or whatever, would determine its own affairs and views in a participatory fashion. (The exact details of this “participatory fashion” are not tightly specified: it could be consensus methods or voting in a general meeting, for example.) That part is straightforward. The self-managing group can take care of itself.

Delegates are used for decision-making at a broader scale, involving larger numbers of people. A number of self-managing groups could join together in a federation. Each group would send one or more delegates to a decision-making body at the federation level. Delegates are supposed to be directly accountable to their group, representing its views rather than their personal views. Also, delegates can be withdrawn at any time that the group so decides. Decisions at the federation level would be advisory only, for consideration by member groups.

When dealing with very large numbers of people, a number of layers of delegates and federations would be required: federations of federations and delegates from delegate groups.

The power of this model is the autonomy of the self-managing groups and the skills and independence of the individuals in them fostered by the organisation of work and community life. Self-managing groups would be a nightmare for an aggressor, because many people, through their experiences in everyday life, would have the spirit, skills and solidarity to resist impositions.

But what about the delegate system itself? Although delegates are different from representatives elected from a large and anonymous electorate, nevertheless delegates represent a potential vulnerability in the face of a determined aggressor. Each group is likely to select delegates who are the most articulate, knowledgeable and ambitious members of their groups. Such individuals, after all, are the most likely to promote the group’s interests. Once

people become delegates, their skills, knowledge and personal networks are considerably increased, as they routinely interact with others at the heady level of collective decision-making. As a result, inequalities in political influence are likely to increase between delegates and non-delegates.

This means that top-level delegates—especially those many stages above the self-managing groups—become obvious targets for aggressors. They could be coerced or coopted, just like conventional political leaders. This then is a potential weakness of federation-delegate systems so far as social defence is concerned.

This problem can be seen, in a mild form, in the evolution of the German Green Party. At first the elected parliamentarians from the Greens were expected to behave like delegates, for example to step down and be replaced by another individual in a policy of rotation. But as the party remained in parliament, these original intentions were subverted. Talented members insisted on staying in office, with apparently good reason because their high profile meant greater public recognition and support for the party. The accompanying change has been a transition away from a delegate role to a traditional politician role, including alliances with other political parties and compromises on issues in order to be “politically effective.”

Of course, the experiences of the German Greens are shaped by their immersion in a system of representative democracy which is fundamentally hostile to delegate functions, rotation and responsiveness to the grassroots. Nevertheless, the potential problem of delegates becoming de facto representatives, with accompanying weakness of autonomy at the grassroots level, is worth pondering.

Demarchy. “Demarchy” is the name given by philosopher John Burnheim to a political system based on random selection and functional groups.⁷ Burnheim decided that the word “democracy” is so commonly associated with systems of elected representatives that he needed a different word for his model.

⁷ John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985).

Burnheim started his analysis with a critique of the state and bureaucracy. He concluded that they must be abolished if there is to be truly participatory decision-making.

But he recognised that it's impossible for everyone to be involved in every decision. There simply isn't enough time for an individual to become knowledgeable about the details of education policy, transport, town planning, industrial policy, environmental issues and so forth. (Individual politicians can't do this either, even with the support they have from researchers.) So, in a large and complex society, what system can there be for all individuals to be involved in decisions about a myriad of issues?

The first part of Burnheim's solution is "functional groups." For each different "function" in a community, such as transport, education, health, industry and sport, there is to be a different decision-making group. In this model, a "community" is fairly small, perhaps on the order of tens of thousands of people, like a small town or a suburb in a city. Therefore, a decision-making group will be dealing with a local issue.

Remember that there is no government aside from these groups—that is, no state apparatus—and no bureaucracies to administer decisions. The groups *are* the government.

The other, second, part of Burnheim's solution is the method of choosing members for the functional groups: random selection from volunteers for a limited term on the group. Why random selection? Because it gives an equal chance to anyone who wants to be involved, and gives no special legitimation to the person chosen: they have not been selected by the people and have no personal or party mandate.

The combination of functional groups and random selection solves the classical problem of participation in a complex society. People can nominate for as many groups as they wish, and are likely to be selected at regular intervals since the size of the community is not large. Furthermore, they can still participate in "politics" in the community sense by expressing their views verbally or in print, lobbying, organising rallies and so forth. The decision-making groups are not remote politicians but members of the local community. Therefore, the potential for participation is great.

Because each decision-making group deals with a specific function, there is an opportunity for those selected to study the issues in

depth. They can listen to the views of experts and partisans and can discuss the technical and ethical issues with each other. Therefore the problem of informed decision-making is dealt with by dividing decision-making into functions. By contrast, a system of electronic referenda, where every individual can vote on every issue, would maximise a superficial, uninformed participation.⁸ A key to informed decision-making is dialogue and debate.

Both key features of demarchy operate to prevent the rise to power of ambitious individuals. Elected parliamentarians and executives are involved in making decisions on a wide range of issues, and thus have exceptional power. This does not apply to the groups in demarchy, which deal with functions. Secondly, with a system of random choice, an ambitious individual has no sure way of being selected. By the same token, the role of vested interests—industrial, professional, ideological—will be much less, because they cannot build up a system to patronise officials. Political parties become pointless, while lobbying becomes a difficult challenge when new faces appear at regular intervals. The limited term for membership in a group makes sense, since those selected have no mandate for office: they are there by the luck of the draw, just as in the case of a jury for a criminal case.

There are many other things that could be said about demarchy, such as the evidence from trial juries, the promising experiments in Germany and the US with randomly selected groups for decision-making on controversial issues,⁹ the idea of “second-order groups” to deal with policy issues such as the specification, size and relations between groups, links with workers’ self-management,¹⁰

⁸ F. Christopher Arterton, *Teledemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy?* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

⁹ P. C. Diemel, *Die Planungszelle: Eine Alternative zur Establishment-Demokratie* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1978; second edition, 1988); Ned Crosby, Janet M. Kelly and Paul Schaefer, “Citizen panels: a new approach to citizen participation,” *Public Administration Review*, vol. 46, March-April 1986, pp. 170-178; Ned Crosby, “The peace movement and new democratic processes,” *Social Alternatives*, vol. 8, no. 4, January 1990, pp. 33-37.

¹⁰ F. E. Emery, *Toward Real Democracy and Toward Real Democracy: Further Problems* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Labour, 1989); Merrelyn

and the unanswered questions about how decisions would be implemented. But I set these aside here, since my purpose is to comment on the implications for social defence.

The first and obvious point is that in a demarchy there would be no formal leaders of the community: no one who through formal office is in a position of overall authority. Therefore an aggressor would have a difficult time selecting out prominent individuals to coerce or coopt. Those who are currently members of groups have no special mandate; if they were arrested or killed, a replacement of equal legitimacy could readily be chosen—by random selection. (Only the brave need volunteer!) Nor is there any easy way to infiltrate the system, since the only legitimate way to become a member of a group is through random selection. (In consensus systems, by contrast, infiltrators can enter with no special hindrance.)

A second point is that demarchy encourages participation in the areas that are most crucial to its members, and this means that knowledge and skills are developed where they are most needed. If, for example, you have a special interest in education, you are likely to follow the debates, write letters, attend meetings, talk to members of the education group, and perhaps nominate to be a member of it. If you have no particular interest in fisheries policy or building design, you are likely to be happy to leave those issues to those who *are* interested—unless they seem to be doing something outrageous, in which case you may well decide to become involved. So, the more controversial the decisions, the more likely that those who are affected will join the debate. The upshot of this process is that, on any particular issue, there is likely to be either general agreement or informed debate. All of this implies an active political system in which there is active participation which is greater in the more controversial areas. The population is thus ideally prepared to resist aggressive impositions based on divisive appeals, such as ideology or ethnicity.

Another relevant point should be mentioned here. One problem might be that certain categories of people—men, the well-educated, certain ethnic groups—nominate for groups more

frequently than others. It is easy to overcome this simply by requiring that those chosen be statistically representative of the population in any way desired. For example, half the members of a group might be selected randomly from the women who nominate and half from the men. In systems of elections or bureaucracy, quotas are often considered unfair. They are perceived as a deviation from the alleged fairness of open competition. But random selection is not a competition, but a process for selecting people who are representative of the community. Statistical specifications are entirely appropriate.

There is a final and fundamental connection between demarchy and social defence. With demarchy there is no state and therefore no military. That means that there is no armed force to back up decisions that are made by the groups. The power of the groups therefore comes entirely from the legitimacy of the process of random selection, analogous to the greater legitimacy of a jury compared to a judge as being representative of community opinion.

Occasionally groups will make unpopular or even outrageous decisions. Those who don't like the decisions can simply refuse to cooperate. This is ideal training for nonviolent struggle.

Indeed, because demarchy has no state, it must rely on either social defence or partisan warfare (an armed citizenry). In either case, the structural vulnerability to outside aggression is minimal. What is there to choose between social defence and partisan warfare? A social defence system is less vulnerable to internal takeover since, without rigid controls, a system of arms production and training holds the seeds for repressive power.

Conclusion

Rather than just trying to introduce social defence into existing political systems, there needs to be a parallel effort to explore alternative political structures that can serve to make social defence stronger—and which are desirable in their own terms. Hierarchical systems are inherently vulnerable to takeover by aggressors, external or internal. Nonhierarchical systems are better. Smaller units, delegate-federation systems, consensus and demarchy each have their advantages and disadvantages. Each is worthy of further exploration.

A nonhierarchical political system is not a *prerequisite* for social defence. If it were, social defence would indeed be a remote dream. Neither is social defence a prerequisite for a nonhierarchical political system. Rather, it makes sense to develop initiatives and campaigns that move towards both these alternatives simultaneously.

Campaigns for nonhierarchical political alternatives can include a nonviolent defence policy, and campaigns for social defence can include methods for participatory decision-making. So far, efforts in both these areas are sufficiently small that they can get by with consensus in small groups. The challenge is to develop the alternatives to be able to handle mass participation. If social defence is ever to become a mass movement and a practical reality, it must include a method of decision-making that is compatible with it, namely a participatory method. Otherwise, it is likely to be subverted by the very forces it was intended to overcome.