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

15

Postscript: Power tends to corrupt, even social defence

While I was visiting Troy, New York in April 1991, there happened to be an amazing story in issue after issue of the local newspaper, *The Times Union*. The story was about the Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for Nonviolence, which had been set up by the state government and funded generously with millions of dollars. As the name of this institute would indicate, it was supposed to be studying and promoting nonviolent alternatives.

The story was triggered by a draft report by the Inspector General of the state of New York into the affairs of the institute. The report alleged that there was gross mismanagement and other improprieties in the institute. For example, senior managers were said to use institute funding for improper purposes such as staying in luxury hotels, flying their families to conferences, treating themselves and their families to gourmet meals and purchasing personal goods. Some officials were said to run their own businesses during work time. As well as financial mismanagement, the institute was said to have abysmal staff relations. Well-paid jobs were given to family members and friends without adequate qualifications; the atmosphere was one of “anger, mistrust and frustration”; and there were cases of sexual harassment.

It is not my intention to make a special example of the Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for Nonviolence which, no doubt, has

accomplished some excellent things. I use this example as a warning. Being involved with nonviolence or some other excellent cause is no guarantee against abuses, power plays and corruption.

Virtually every cause presents itself as noble, and yet how seldom are the ideals achieved! Christianity is based on a creed of love, yet the Christian church has been responsible for numerous brutal wars, millions of deaths at the hand of the Inquisition, and crucial ideological support for countless murderous regimes. Socialism promised a world without exploitation but state socialist regimes instead oppressed the workers and murdered millions. And, of course, military systems are set up to “protect the peace” but are responsible for war and torture.

Is social defence going to be any different?

There is a conspiracy of silence surrounding abuses within “progressive” social movements, just as there is surrounding the seamy activities of other institutions. Yet a few stories leak out.

- The left-wing Democratic Workers Party, based in San Francisco, had the highest ideals, with progressive policies, multiracial membership, female leadership and dedicated activists. All this hid an autocratic centre, where top officials gave themselves privileges while exhorting the rank and file to work to the point of exhaustion. Critics within the party were ruthlessly attacked while policies were changed and contorted to reflect the whims of the leadership.¹ No doubt such experiences are common in parties operating under so-called “democratic centralism,” but seldom is the inside story told.

- Environmental organisations are not exempt from the dangers of power. These include decision-making by a de facto elite, some of whom have ties with governments, creating positions for high-paid administrators and lobbyists at the expense of local campaigning, and the dismissal of activists.²

- The United Nations, an organisation with wonderful ideals, was corrupted from the very beginning by a secret agreement

¹ Peter Siegel, Nancy Strohl, Laura Ingram, David Roche and Jean Taylor, “Leninism as cult: the Democratic Workers Party,” *Socialist Review*, no. 96, November-December 1987, pp. 59-85.

² See articles by Hazel Notion, Timothy Doyle and Lorna Salzman in *Philosophy and Social Action*, vol. 16, no. 3, July-September 1990.

between the Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, and the United States government, which enabled US spy agencies to vet applicants for UN jobs. The UN was packed with people picked by national governments rather than on the basis of merit. Top officials were given exorbitant salaries. Kurt Waldheim was supported for the post of Secretary-General although the major powers undoubtedly knew of his Nazi past, because he could be relied upon not to challenge national prerogatives.³

How can social defence end up any differently? Basically, the creation of a new organisation, a new bureaucracy, must be avoided. Here are some suggestions.

1. Ensure that social defence operations are decentralised, autonomous and locally controlled. There should be no central administration or coordinating body. (Think, if you were in the CIA or KGB, how you'd go about infiltrating, controlling, manipulating or disrupting a social defence organisation. The very easiest way would be infiltrating or corrupting the people at the centre of the organisation.) Coordination can be done on the basis of networking.

2. Run social defence organisations democratically, whether this is by consensus, demarchy or whatever. Don't set up a bureaucracy, with hierarchy, division of labour, formal procedures and so forth, in which some people have much more knowledge than others and some people give orders to others.

3. Build social defence practices into people's lives—into their thinking, personal relations, everyday behaviour and the physical infrastructure of local communities. Social defence should be something that seems natural to everyone, rather than something handled by a special professional organisation. Once it is seen as someone else's responsibility, the opportunities for misdirection and corruption dramatically increase.

If social defence is an organisation, it can readily be subordinated to the military, government and other vested interests, kept under control and turned into a caricature of itself. Even turning social defence over to social defence professionals is a prescription

³ Shirley Hazzard, *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* (New York: Viking, 1990).

for misuse.⁴ The solution is to make social defence part of people's daily lives.

Do you agree? Well, if so, how would you respond if a government or large corporation offered to generously fund a large number of positions to do action research on social defence in local communities? If you refuse, someone else, less scrupulous than you, will take up the offer. Certainly, it's an offer that is hard to refuse.

So, what do we do when the rich and powerful come to take over social defence? They haven't come yet, and may not for quite a long time. But it would be nice to have an answer if and when they do.

⁴ On professionals as a powerful interest group, see Charles Derber, William A. Schwartz and Yale Magrass, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of a New Mandarin Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).