

POSSIBLE PATHOLOGIES OF FUTURE SOCIAL DEFENCE SYSTEMS*

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Assume that at some time in the future, military forces throughout the world have been abolished and replaced by social defence systems; that is, systems designed to resist aggression or repression by the use of nonviolent action by the general population. There would be widespread education and training in strikes, boycotts and other forms of noncooperation, detailed plans for dealing with possible threats, and massive investment in appropriate infrastructure for nonviolent struggle, including systems for communications, production, transport, energy, food and health. The scale of training, preparation and investment might well be as great as what goes on today for military struggle.

With such systems in place, the prospects of warfare in the present sense – armed struggle involving armies – would be negligible. Violent warfare would be eliminated for all practical purposes. Instead, there would be, no doubt, a great deal of nonviolent struggle, some of it quite heated.

But would the abolition of military systems lead to an ideal world? It might seem that with the end of organised violence, remaining problems would be trivial by comparison. But this is not necessarily so. Many serious forms of exploitation can be maintained without the use of physical violence.

Here I outline some possible problems that may arise in a world converted to social defence. Four types of 'pathologies' are examined, relating to surveillance, neocolonialism, oppression and professional dominance.

For some people these possibilities must seem ridiculous, and indeed they would consider 'oppression without violence' to be a contradiction in terms. That is because they use a broad definition of the term 'nonviolence,' conceiving it to be a challenge to oppression. The resolution of this apparent paradox is that I use the term 'nonviolent' here in the narrow sense of not involving physical coercion against humans. So what is involved here is oppression, exploitation and inequality which are protected or enforced without *physical* violence. That means no military forces and no armed police forces.

An assumption underlying this analysis is that oppression may be organised under a variety of social systems, of which present systems are only one possibility. Today, military forces and associated social structures, such as the state and patriarchy, are responsible for much exploitation, death and suffering. But it is also possible to imagine exploitation, death and suffering even after military forces are abolished.

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Just as the elimination of slavery or Nazism (for the time being) did not mean the end of oppression, neither will the elimination of militaries. In each case, the abolition of a system of oppression may be considered an advance, but it should not be imagined that this will be the end of the necessity for social struggle to achieve a better society.

Before turning to the four types of pathologies in future social defence systems, it is worthwhile commenting on the process of attaining these hypothetical future systems. There are a number of possible paths to social defence. Some advocates believe that governments will switch to social defence once they are convinced of its efficacy.¹ Others argue that action by a range of community organisations, including peace groups, unions and churches, will be necessary to promote social defence in the face of opposition by ruling elites.² It is also possible to imagine that social defence will be adopted as part of a process of democratisation of society, in which nonviolent action plays a key role in the reshaping of social institutions.

For my purposes, the precise manner by which social defence is introduced is not crucial. I will assume, though, that the introduction of social defence involves and generates considerable action at the grassroots, even in those circumstances where governments play a leading role in promoting it. Since social defence demands widespread participation, it is only reasonable to expect that it is not entirely a matter for policy-making at the top.

It should be unnecessary to say that this discussion is not meant to be an attack on social defence. Quite the contrary. It is precisely because I believe social defence to be a crucially important method and goal that I think it is worthwhile examining possible future problems.

Possible Pathology 1: A Surveillance Society

In a world without military forces, there would be a high priority placed on preventing the production of weapons, especially weapons of mass destruction. The methods to do this would, of course, be nonviolent. Preventive measures might include refusal to produce or distribute materials that could be used for weapons and the inculcation of an ethic hostile to weapons. Certain types of research, with potential weapons spin-offs, might be branded unethical, in the same way that some experimentation on humans is treated today.

Such preventive measures might work in many cases, but what about 'renegades' who persisted in efforts to produce or stockpile weapons, perhaps in secret? One solution would be investigative operations, detecting illicit flows of relevant materials or suspicious activities in laboratories or factories.

What about actual weapons produced? In some cases, efforts at persuasion might work to convince possessors of weapons to allow them to be dismantled. In other cases, boycotts of crucial materials might be sufficient to stop the activity. But when society contains significant weapons, with the potential to kill many people, there would be an argument for 'direct disarmament': people's action to dismantle or destroy the weapons. This would constitute

1. Gene Sharp with the assistance of Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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

violence against property (non-sentient objects) but might be considered acceptable by exponents of some conceptions of nonviolent action.

The transition to social defence must involve some dismantling or destruction of weapons. Some scenarios for this transition portray disarmament as a fully planned operation initiated willingly by governments or other authorities; other scenarios include direct disarmament as a people's initiative in the face of resistance by some governments and militaries. In either case, there would be people with skills in 'decommissioning' weapons systems.

Presently, the knowledge of how to produce nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, as well as many deadly conventional weapons, is widely dispersed. As long as this sort of knowledge is widely available, a social defence system would need to have a well developed process of inspection to prevent or detect illicit weapons production. Laboratories and factories would be prime targets for inspection, but the scrutiny might go further than this, depending on experience with renegade weapons producers.

The negative side of this process of 'inspection' is a potential threat to privacy. To put it another way, completely stopping weapons production might require a formidable surveillance operation. Conceivably, it could involve visits to personal dwellings, monitoring of meetings and communications, and 24-hour watches over particular individuals. In short, there might be a powerful apparatus of surveillance, justified in the name of preventing the production of armaments.

In small, face-to-face communities (such as tribes, extended families and small villages), few actions of individuals can remain unobserved by others. The sort of scrutiny found in such communities is often a powerful force for conformity. With the rise of cities and the increase in travel, the possibilities for escaping such community scrutiny have increased. Anonymity has become a possibility, often at the cost of isolation and anomie. But the rise of the mass society has also seen an increase in mass surveillance, greatly facilitated in recent years by computers. Most people in industrialised societies today are monitored when they drive cars, use banks and register with schools and government services. (This is not to mention what is more typically thought of as surveillance, namely monitoring of criminals by police and 'subversives' by spy agencies.) Countries such as Germany and the United States have been dubbed 'surveillance societies.'³

Surveillance, then, is nothing new. Indeed, it might be argued that surveillance of some sort is necessary for a stable society. The questions are, what sort of surveillance, who carries it out, who benefits and who makes decisions about it?

In a society with social defence, some sort of surveillance is likely to be necessary to prevent production and use of weapons. The exact nature of the surveillance would depend on the structure of the society. In face-to-face

3. David H. Flaherty, *Protecting Privacy in Surveillance Societies: The Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, France, Canada, and the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Oscar Gandy, Jr., *The Panoptic Sort: Towards a Political Economy of Information* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); David Lyon, *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

communities, direct observation and peer pressure would provide the primary obstacle to weapons manufacture, but perhaps accompanied by the familiar oppressiveness of such communities. On the other hand, a mass society might require more anonymous forms of surveillance. In either case, there seems to be a trade-off: the creation of a society without weapons capable of mass killing seems to imply a sacrifice of some of the privacy or anonymity that is valued by many people today. What is the appropriate balance between these two priorities? Or, alternatively, is there some resolution to the apparent dilemma?

Possible Pathology 2: Neocolonialism without Physical Violence

Military systems today play a key role in the generation and maintenance of economic inequality. This applies within countries, where military force provides the ultimate protection for private property (in capitalist systems) and/or bureaucratic privilege (in socialist systems). It also applies between countries: military regimes throughout the third world act to protect first world investments and to perpetuate dependency relationships.

Suppose that all these military systems are abolished and replaced by social defence systems. Does economic inequality disappear too?

First consider 'noninterventionist social defence.' Each country or region would develop nonviolent methods to defend itself, without much consideration of what is going on in other parts of the world. (This model leaves unexplained why social defence would spread throughout the world, but that issue can be set aside for the time being.) In other words, social defence would be seen primarily as a defence of the societies that adopt it. There would not be much concern about what goes on in other societies.

With such a noninterventionist world system, present-day exploitation of third world peoples would be replaced by a sort of 'benign neglect.' Poor communities would not be overtly repressed, but neither would they be given a great deal of outside help. The result could well be economic inequality that persists because there is no action taken to redress it.

An alternative scenario involves 'interventionist social defence.' In this model, an integral part of the capacity of any community to defend itself would be the capacity to intervene (nonviolently) in other communities, for example to prevent the development of hostile groups. This nonviolent intervention could involve direct communications (for example using radio or the post), nonviolent interveners (like Peace Brigades International today), boycotts, and campaigns through cross-community organisations and forums (such as transnational corporations and nongovernment organisations today).

One scenario for introducing social defence is through the necessity for a community, having adopted social defence for itself, to intervene against potentially hostile regimes, especially to overthrow military systems and thus prevent invasion.⁴ The social defence systems resulting from such a process are quite likely to be interventionist in nature.

The danger with interventionist social defence is cultural imperialism: pressure to adapt local practices to the practices of the intervening group. This

4. Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change*, pp.75-78.

could, conceivably, help to maintain economic inequality. For example, interveners might promote nonviolent market systems (if these could be organised) as being allegedly superior to collectivist economic systems. Another possibility is the use of nonviolent action to protect economically privileged communities from refugees, who would be refused entry in the name of local autonomy, self-reliance and community solidarity. My view is that the replacement of military forces by social defence will provide a great boost for struggles for global economic justice. But those struggles are not guaranteed to succeed, and it is possible to imagine economic inequality emerging or persisting in a world system based on social defence, justified and defended by a different set of rationales and methods than today. Indeed, the very question of what economic equality means and whether it is desirable or attainable is something that will continue to be debated, hopefully by nonviolent means.

There is no simple solution to the problem of designing a social defence system and avoiding the issue of economic exploitation or inequality. Whether interventionist or not, social defence has implications for economics. Of course, this is no different from military defence.

Possible Pathology 3: Oppression without Physical Violence

Would the end of military violence signal the end of oppression? Almost certainly not. Oppression is quite possible in social systems in which there is neither the threat nor the reality of physical violence. This is apparent by examining most state or corporate bureaucracies, or voluntary organisations such as churches and trade unions. In all such organisations, there can be great differences in power and privilege enforced almost entirely by tradition and belief systems. Violence can be a valuable tool of oppressors, but it is not essential.

Possible pathology 2, 'neocolonialism without physical violence,' is one important case of a more general possibility that can be called 'oppression without physical violence.' (This is closely related to Johan Galtung's concept of 'structural violence.')

In the guise of defending against aggression, various systems of inequality and exploitation can be maintained. For example:

- A local currency or credit scheme is established in a cooperative fashion. Everyone appears to agree. But it provides power and privilege to those whose skills are given high credits. Nonviolent action is used against those who seek to challenge the scheme.
- Well-off communities use nonviolent action to oppose entry of 'immigrants' from neighbouring communities.
- Systematic consensus procedures are established for all decision-making in a community. Those with special skills in the method of consensus and in arguing their case – those who might be called 'consensus experts' – use their skills and networks to oppose any change in the process.
- Discriminatory policies, cloaked in the guise of 'politically correct' views, are implemented by the concerted efforts of likely beneficiaries.
- Workers in strategic sectors of the economy, such as computer specialists, use nonviolent action to oppose challenges to their privileges.

There are many other possibilities along these lines; these examples should give an indication of the sort of processes involved.

But why would people put up with oppression if no violence were used against them? There actually are many reasons, including belief systems, tradition, lack of skills to mount challenges, and difficulties in communication and mobilisation. Even today there is a lot of 'oppression without physical violence,' most clearly in voluntary organisations. Most churches today, for example, use no violence against members, and members are free to leave, at least in societies where the church has no strong alliance with the government. But many churches are hierarchical, exploitative and oppressive, something that is clear by examining the struggles of women for equality within many of them. If voluntary organisations such as churches can be oppressive without violent sanctions against dissenters, then surely oppression is possible after military and armed police forces have been superseded by nonviolent alternatives. Military and police forces are certainly responsible for much oppression, but they are not the only 'forces' making oppression possible.

Possible Pathology 4: Social Defence Evangelists Run Rampant

The introduction of social defence is not likely to be a calm, passionless process. Like any other major change in society, it will require articulate and committed supporters and will encounter determined opponents. A look at the struggles against slavery, for women's equality and for protecting the environment gives some idea of how the process will throw up high-profile leaders and have to confront entrenched resistance.

Some of the proponents of social defence undoubtedly will be 'true believers,' so committed to the idea that no evidence will convince them otherwise. True believers are essential to any visionary social movement; otherwise, the whole operation might fold up at the first serious setback.

Similarly, some proponents will see social defence as part of a wider process of change in society, linked to changes in politics, economics and so forth. This also may be essential to success, since social defence has links with and implications for so many aspects of society.

Combining these two categories gives what might be called 'social defence evangelists,' namely proponents who are totally committed to social defence as part of a reformation of society.

To call someone an evangelist is, in many circles, to apply a negative connotation. The word can imply a single-mindedness that is not open to contrary ideas and is insensitive to the lives and circumstances of other people. During the centuries of imperialist expansion from Europe, missionaries played a key role in breaking down indigenous cultures in the name of Christianity's (and Europe's) 'civilising mission.' But, as mentioned before, evangelising seems almost an essential part of any significant challenge to and transformation of entrenched systems of power.

If social defence is ever to be introduced, social defence evangelists will be part of the process. But it is a simplification of reality to talk about social defence being 'introduced,' because there is unlikely to be an obvious and

agreed-upon point at which conversion of a community to social defence can be said to be complete. Consider for example, the following possible changes:

- demobilisation of all military forces;
- training of all volunteers in nonviolent action;
- conversion of all teaching in schools to emphasise the role of nonviolent action;
- revamping of communications systems to maximise the potential for nonviolent resistance;
- decentralisation of all energy systems, with maximum possible reliance on renewable energy;
- encouragement and subsidies for learning languages spoken by peoples of potential aggressor states;
- redesign of transportation, agriculture, housing, water supplies and other such systems to maximise self-reliance;
- participation in training and simulations expected of everyone;
- expectations or requirements that all leaders of significant social organisations be trained in nonviolent action;
- transformation of economic and political systems to make them more resistant to aggression (e.g. moves from large-scale capitalist liberal democracy to community-based participatory alternatives).

Each one of these changes, it might be argued, can improve the capacity of a society to wage nonviolent struggle. But how many of these changes are essential to an effective social defence system? Of course, there is no clear-cut answer to this question.

Some social defence evangelists may want to push ever onwards in the transformation of society with the justification that this will strengthen social defence. The motivation is hard to criticise. After all, the elimination of war would be an enormous advance. But does this goal justify a fundamental restructuring of society?

This question should be vexing even for those people who agree with many of the sorts of changes outlined above. Since social defence requires participation by a large fraction of the population, then social changes made in the name of social defence should also be arrived at on the basis of some participatory process.

Conclusion

There may seem little point in speculating about these possible pathologies of social defence systems, but thinking about future problems can provide cautionary lessons for today's struggles. There are many different ways to promote social defence today, and it makes sense to choose ways that either minimise future problems or, perhaps more effectively, keep open the options for future struggles to improve society.

One lesson from these possible pathologies is that social defence should not be seen or treated as an overriding priority. Instead, it should be promoted and developed in tandem with struggles against other social problems. In the case of inspection against weapons, the problem of surveillance must be addressed

also. Likewise, various sorts of oppression need to be opposed, whether or not they are backed up by violence.

Another lesson is that close attention needs to be paid to the skilled users of nonviolent action, so that they do not become a new elite. In developing social defence, currently privileged groups may be the first to develop and use skills in nonviolence in order to protect their own situation. Social defence sounds good in the abstract but it is necessary to ask, who will do the defending and what sort of society will they be defending?

A final lesson is that social defence or nonviolent action should not be imagined to be a magical solution to social conflict, oppression and the like. By abolishing some sources of suffering, new arenas for social struggle are likely to be opened up. Social defence should be seen as part of an ongoing process, not as an end product.