

# Discussion

## Goodbye to Detente?

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The main merit of John Cox's article on the peace movement, detente and the USSR (*Marxism Today*, September 1980) is that it takes issue with those whose participation in peace campaigning is based on an unswerving faith in the Soviet Union, guided by the view that the peace movement is or should be a solidarity campaign with the USSR. Accordingly, he can expect several tons of bricks to land on his head from that quarter, and perhaps from others less devoted to the USSR but dissenting from the nuances of criticism in his 'sympathetic but critical' view of Soviet policy.

However, sympathy with the position he is in does not mean that the arguments can be allowed to rest where John Cox left them. In this article, I propose to put the heat on a little from the other side.

The major weakness of his article is that it does not communicate the urgency of the issue. Whatever else the peace movement does, we must emphasise the urgent need to find a way of stepping off the twin paths the world now seems set on, towards nuclear proliferation and towards nuclear war. However, I disagree with those who believe the task is urgent because international politics have taken a sudden turn for the worse. In my view the past several years have seen a drift towards nuclear confrontation, developing a momentum which has gone unchallenged for too long. Understanding this

momentum and the factors that sustain it is essential, so that we know what we are up against and can identify the necessary counter-strategy.

### 'Limited' nuclear warfare

An important factor in the development of this momentum has been the adoption, with increasing emphasis as time has gone by, of strategies of 'limited' nuclear warfare by the USA and NATO. A major landmark here is the Schlesinger doctrine (named after the US Defence Secretary of the time) announced in January 1974. The doctrine concerned the targeting of US strategic nuclear forces and was developed sometime between Nixon becoming US president in 1969 and the date of its announcement.

The Schlesinger doctrine marked a decisive move away from nuclear deterrence as most people still seem to understand it, and introduced limited nuclear war into the USA's official strategic vocabulary. No longer was the idea merely to deter nuclear aggression through the maintenance of a mutual balance of terror; now the president would have a range of options, including hitting first and including selective and limited nuclear strikes. Previously, the official position was that the point of having nuclear weapons was never to use them; now it was argued they could be used to the USA's advantage. Thus nuclear war became more 'thinkable' — in an international crisis it would be one of the President's options. And thus also it became more likely. There is, of course, no guarantee that the war would remain 'limited', and only reluctant admission of how destructive that limited war (or 'sub-holocaust engagement' as the jargon has it) would be. Presidential Directive 59, leaked in the summer of 1980, does little more than confirm that the Schlesinger doctrine remains the guiding concept of US nuclear strategy.

This mutation of nuclear deterrence seems to be an attempt to reinvest nuclear weapons with political and strategic utility, removing the passivity of a strategy based solely on retaliation. In part, it seems to be an effort to compensate for the constraints on the use of non-nuclear forces which the USA discovered during its war in Southeast Asia.

### The new cold war

A second crucial factor is that the USA has launched a new cold war in recent years. Detente was already being strained in 1977 and 1978 by increasingly hawkish attitudes, by the NATO decision to increase military expenditure by 3% annually in real terms, and by a series of nigglingly offensive actions in East-West relations to which the USSR

contributed its niggling piece.

Although this was legitimated by reference to the Soviet military build-up and Soviet activity in Africa, the main reason for it lies elsewhere. It seems clear that Soviet forces were steadily strengthened in the 1970s, although the extent of this was wildly exaggerated in the West, and NATO's own military build-up was usually conveniently ignored. But a more convincing explanation lies in the ideological and political requirements of NATO states in the context of gathering social, political and economic crisis.<sup>1</sup>

The USSR has also played a role in the drift towards confrontation. Three issues can be mentioned here. Firstly, it was hoped that detente would lead to greater cultural and political openness between the blocs as a basic necessity for developing detente further. It is not only the USSR's fault that this hope has been disappointed. But continued Soviet inability to permit even relatively unorganised dissent *within* its own society, together with the shameful treatment of 'dissidents', carries a heavy burden of blame. It has eroded the foundations of further detente and reduced popular support in the West for the policies associated with it.

Secondly, it was a widely accepted argument that political detente required a military corollary. International politics today prove the validity of this argument. And while it is the USA which has suspended ratification of the Strategic Arms Limitation agreement (known as SALT II) signed in summer 1979, the USSR's own armaments programmes, like NATO's, have contributed to blocking the development of this military corollary.

Thirdly, there is Afghanistan. As John Cox says, the Soviet invasion is 'inexcusable', and not only because of what it has done to Afghanistan, but also because of the gift it handed to Western hawks. The USA's suspension of SALT II ratification cannot be justified as a response to the invasion, but even the most superficial glance at American politics in 1979 would have shown how it would be exploited. One must conclude that either the Soviet leadership did not foresee this inevitable reaction, or, more likely since they are not stupid, and more worryingly, they foresaw it and decided they did not care about the harm that would be done to world peace.

So the drift towards war results from policies and behaviour in both East and West. What I wonder is whether this inescapable conclusion puts me in that school of thought which John Cox summarises as believing 'US=USSR' and which he believes is 'dangerous for the peace movement'.

### What does equivalence mean?

If the '=' sign is to be taken seriously, to indicate an analysis which comprehensively and in detail equates the two superpowers, then I am not in that school, but nor are many others. Indeed, if '=' is seriously meant, I think John Cox is referring to Aunt Sally. I have hardly come across that view at all, and its influence in the peace movement seems to me to be minimal.

It is, incidentally, misleading to attribute support for this school of thought to the ultra-left without differentiation. When *New Left Review* carried Edward Thompson's article on 'exterminism', the editorial notes carefully distanced the journal from what was described as Thompson's overstatement of the symmetry between East and West.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the IMG's participation in the peace movement emphatically reject the merest hint of 'symmetry', but in some places it has entered unholy alliances with those staunch defenders of the USSR from whom John Cox can expect more than a few harsh words.

It is important to emphasise that saying that both sides have contributed to the drift towards war does not necessarily mean either equating their contributions or going on to assert a more general equivalence. While a precise equation of the USA and the USSR may mean accepting 'many of the anti-Soviet assumptions which are used to justify increased defence spending', it should be added that there is no reason why one must avoid stern criticism of the USSR where appropriate in order to show up NATO's propaganda about Soviet military strength and intentions for the mythology that it is. And while that precise equation of the two may offer 'no hope for peace campaigning', a position which makes differentiated criticisms of both the USA and the USSR is an important basis for understanding that the hope for peace campaigning lies in breaking out of the impasse established by US-Soviet rivalry and their hold on European politics.

This position might be summarised as the 'plague on both your houses' tendency, noting that the plague may be wished on each in different degrees of intensity and for different reasons. John Cox himself seems to be a candidate member of this tendency, since he writes: 'Implicitly, the mainstream of peace campaigning is against military associations with either the USA or the USSR, since neither, in practice, has shown much respect for the independence and traditions even of its allies in the past two decades.' It is then all the more surprising that John Cox's article gives so little attention to the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament, and appears to be quite dismissive

of it.

The problem here begins with the carefully nuanced axioms from which the article starts. There are four them, on one of which I shall not comment.

### The arms race

Of the others, the first states the USA has always been 'the pacemaker in the arms race', posing a threat to which the USSR has responded with forces 'at the level perceived necessary for defensive security'. This neither endorses nor criticises Soviet perceptions, but it is important to take an attitude. The Soviet response has been a response *in kind*. One must first ask if that is good enough, and if the conclusion is that it was forced upon the USSR (and that is arguable), one must then ask whether the response need have gone so far. With apparent approval, John Cox quotes at length the view of Robert McNamara that in 1968 the USA already had more than enough weapons to destroy the USSR and thus assure nuclear deterrence. McNamara said 400 would do, whereas the USA then had 2,200. Although the precise calculation of how many warheads are required to destroy a country is not only macabre but also complex and dependent on numerous factors, in principle the argument should extend also to the USSR, which now has 6,000 strategic nuclear warheads. Both sides are equipped with nuclear overkill. Further, although the arms race is largely a story of the USSR attempting to catch up with the USA, it is now clear that the armed forces and arms industry have considerable power in Soviet society and politics, acting in a way that is similar to what in the West we call the military industrial complex, with similar effects.<sup>3</sup>

The second axiom states that while the USA and its allies sustain reactionary regimes around the world, the USSR seeks to undermine such regimes except where its own state interests dictate otherwise. In fact, the USSR is not attempting, and there is no evidence it has thought of attempting, to undermine the vast majority of the world's nastiest regimes. More importantly, one wonders how this axiom might go down in Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere.

The third axiom is that the USSR does not use military forces to anything like the same degree the USA has. The precision of the formulation ducks two critical points. The first is that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is different in kind from the invasions of either Hungary or Czechoslovakia and may signal a new Soviet attitude about the use of its own forces outside what is internationally accepted as its sphere of influence. Secondly,

Soviet military strength has been the basis of the USSR's hold on Eastern Europe for thirty years.

### END

John Cox's article builds logically from these inadequate axioms. The disagreements I have with them and the argument as a whole would be less important were it not for my feeling that it is this starting point which leads the article inexorably to a massive failure of focus in its concluding section. The brief mention given to the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and the dismissive reference to its appeal to the 'US=USSR' school and 'transparent efforts to be even-handed' are evidence of a major problem.

There is nothing really very new about the idea of nuclear-free zones, in Europe or elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I have been told that John Gollan concluded the Communist Party's 1966 election broadcast on television with this very proposal. But there is something new about END which makes it not just a useful idea but a major new direction for the peace movement.

The idea has been given much greater force because of NATO's development of limited nuclear war doctrines in which 'limited' means 'only Europe'. END is the necessary popular counter-strategy to NATO strategy.

Secondly, it strengthens the case for unilateral nuclear disarmament by Britain by placing it in a political context, of a mass movement for a nuclear-free Europe, where it can mean more than improving the security and safety of the British people. It offers a practical internationalism in which to encase national initiatives.

Third, precisely because (like CND) the appeal for END opposes Soviet as well as US nuclear weapons, and because it then links nuclear disarmament with political liberties, it introduces a dynamic new element. It poses the task of developing an all-European movement against nuclear weapons, campaigning around issues and in ways in which we can all unite. It thus offers the potential of

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this see Dan Smith & Ron Smith, 'The New Cold War', *Capital & Class*, December 1980.

<sup>2</sup> E P Thompson, 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization', *New Left Review* 121, May/June 1980.

<sup>3</sup> See David Holloway, 'War, Militarism and the Soviet State', in E P Thompson & Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive*, Penguin, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> The principles and history of nuclear-free zone proposals are discussed by Ken Coates, 'For European Nuclear Disarmament', in *Protest and Survive*, *op cit*.

breaking the stifling political effects of militarism in East and West Europe, both in the process of developing the movement and as a consequence of success.

Of course, END is a massive task, and as an idea it is undoubtedly in need of further refinement. A European convention on END will help both that refinement and the construction of the movement.

But at this time the crucial point is that END has to be a campaign to free Europe from subservience to the superpowers. That is our one road to a more secure future. This means that one cannot fudge on the issues of Soviet policy. The axioms which form John Cox's starting point and many of his ensuing arguments do fudge, and they are therefore inadequate in the construction of this movement. He and many others in the Communist Party have been my close comrades in working for disarmament over several years. If the significance of END is lost to them, the peace movement can only suffer. •