

Making connections: finding common cause among movements for peace, justice, democracy, and an ecologically sustainable society

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I am old enough now to have lived through the latter part of one long cycle of high political mobilization and large, sustained social movements, followed by three decades of low political mobilization in which significant movements were few, at least in the country I live in.

Doing social change work is quite different in those two kinds of moments. Periods of low political mobilization are characterized by single-issue, professionalized, interest-group advocacy-style politics. Conventional professionals focus on effects rather than causes and offer technical, legal, and short-term political fixes for the problems that the dominant order of things systematically generates. In contrast, sustained, broad-based social movements can change not only the boundaries of the politically possible but the terrain of argument and interpretation.

Social movements are one way complex societies learn. They are the settings where new forms of social relations and new visions of justice are experimented with and developed.

I believe that we are at the beginning of another wave of movements now. The profound nature of the overlapping crises we face requires movements that are deep and broad enough to make structural changes in the order of things.

Large scale social movements open up the possibility of a more expansive discourse about the kind of society we need and want. So it is time for a rethink. We need to re-evaluate the kinds of programs we have been pursuing for decades in the low-mobilization wilderness.

Against this background, I will talk a bit first specifically about nuclear disarmament work, and then offer some tentative thoughts about the relationship of peace and disarmament work to the kinds of movements that are emerging.

It is not news that the social contexts in which we work affect the way we think, and the kind of language we use. In the long absence of peace movements that could sustain a discourse of their own, most discussion about nuclear weapons is from the perspective of governments, or those who advise governments, or those one someday would like to advise governments.

A starting point for discussion as we try to build a new peace movement should be to try to talk about nuclear weapons in ways that reflect the realities of power. Even disarmament activists who live in nuclear-armed countries often talk about “our” nuclear weapons, and talk about countries as if they were individuals that speak with a single voice. But the vast majority of people in nuclear armed countries have no role in decisions about “their” nuclear weapons. The decisions by governments to acquire nuclear weapons are in every instance among their least democratic. They have been made by small numbers of powerful people, acting for the most part in secret.

Rulers who are willing to risk war among nuclear-armed countries must have an enormously inflated sense of their own significance. They must consider it worth risking the annihilation of the People to preserve the State, to defend the order of things in which they rule.

It was no coincidence that the most intense moment of resistance to nuclear weapons during the Cold War was the Euro-missile crisis of the 1980's, the movement opposed to the missiles eventually banned by the INF treaty. The inhabitants of NATO countries hosting U.S. nuclear missiles faced the possibility that a nuclear war could be fought on their soil without even their own government's consent.

This raises a question too seldom asked by inhabitants of nuclear-armed countries: Whose nuclear weapons are they, really? Whose interests do they protect?

This question leads naturally to others. As E.P. Thompson, a founder of European Nuclear Disarmament, asked in 1981,

“Is nuclear war preferable to being overcome by the enemy? Are the deaths of fifteen or twenty million and the utter destruction of the country preferable to an occupation which might offer the possibility, after some years, of resurgence and recuperation?”

and finally, “Are we ourselves prepared to endorse the use of such weapons against the innocent, the children and the aged, of an ‘enemy’?”¹ The people of every nuclear-armed country should be asking these questions.

Some of the same dynamics are at work today on the Korean peninsula—and with the collapse of the INF treaty may come into play again in Europe. South Koreans find themselves trapped between nuclear-armed adversaries, one an ally.

The mass media in the United States portray the crisis as a confrontation between North Korea and the United States, and the efforts to resolve it mainly as a matter of personalized negotiations between Trump and Kim. South Korea is virtually invisible in this media frame.

But it has been the government of South Korea that has taken the lead in seeking a diplomatic breakthrough that could end the immediate crisis, and that might lead eventually to a more lasting peace on the peninsula. Even more important, the current government there was brought to power by a very large and determined democracy movement—one that rejected the long legacy of authoritarian governments closely tied to the United States.

It likely will take movements of that magnitude or greater in many places if we are to reverse the slide into a dangerous new arms race. So we need to be thinking about both short-term measures to avert disaster and long-term strategies to address the causes of arms racing and war.

This time around, I think we must have more effective “inside-outside” strategies. Those who work for arms control in centers of power must remember that large, mobilized movements calling for fundamental change are needed to really move the boundaries of the politically

possible. Those working for deeper, broader change must recognize that it will take a long time, and that more limited measures that stave off disaster also will be needed. We must be discerning about when to focus our energies on interim measures in a time when we need our main efforts to be aimed at building the social power to make real change, the kind of change that might make elimination of nuclear weapons possible.

In the near term, we will still need to push for the nuclear armed countries to attempt to negotiate arms control measures with their adversaries. Even when prospects for tangible progress seem grim, such negotiations have value. They allow the military and political leadership of the adversaries to better understand each other's intentions, and their fears. They build broader channels of communication between military and government bureaucracies that can be of tremendous value when tensions rise.

Single-issue campaigning to eliminate nuclear weapons, however, is unlikely to have much success. Without a far broader basis of social support it is difficult to make significant disarmament progress in countries where nuclear weapons play a systemic role in military policies, national security ideologies, and the increasingly insular top tier of national economies. And because we once again are in a period where the first priority must be preventing wars among the countries that have nuclear weapons, we need an approach that goes beyond single issue disarmament advocacy. We need to focus more broadly on the forces driving high-tech militarism and war.

A variety of movements are emerging as resistance grows in many places to authoritarian governments defending an order of things that is undemocratic, unjust, and unsustainable. We will find, I think, that the way to make issues of war, peace, and disarmament a significant strand in these movements is to explore the common causes of the dangers and injustices we are struggling against. The most influential campaigns against nuclear weapons in the past arose in times and places where there were movements of this kind. And a significant characteristic of those movements was reflection and discussion about the nature of the society that produced these terrible weapons, and that systematically generates the risk of wars in which they might be used.

The time is ripe for broad movements joined in an effort to understand the common causes of the dangers and injustices we have been struggling against separately up to now. The questions of peace, democracy, economic equality, and the ecological requisites for human survival never have been as inextricably intertwined as they are today. The ecological and economic challenges we face are both a cause and effect of the deteriorating political conditions that drive international conflict. The loss of varied, human-scale organizations in the social and political world, combined with the concentration of economic power in organizations of ever greater scale and scope, has left us vulnerable to authoritarian politics. The dynamic that drives the global economy—endless competition for material wealth and power—is straining the limits of the ecosystems we all depend on. Yet the main solution offered to us by governments is to gird for more competition and more war.

We must realize that we do not get to choose the terrain of struggle, and the focuses of conflict change from one historical moment to the next. Today, everywhere, refugees,

immigrants, and national minorities are on the front line. And the nationalist rhetoric of fear and hate that are employed to target them and to divide us from one another is the same kind that will be used to march our young people off to war, war that might well be the last. Defending the most vulnerable must be the first imperative. Hence much of the energy of the new emerging movements here in the United States has been focused on the immediate actions needed to do so, from the Muslim ban to the Trump administration's serial human rights abuses on the border to the latest wave in the long struggle against deeply entrenched racism.

Trying to understand the resurgence of extreme, "blood and soil"-type nationalisms might be one place to start the conversation among our movements about how the dangers and injustices we face are connected at the level of root causes. Here in the United States, understanding the so-called "populism" central to Trump's rise to power as a variety of extreme, identity-based nationalism allows us to begin to understand its connection to similar developments elsewhere. Starting there, we can begin to explore the relationship between work against militarism and war and the resistance here and elsewhere emerging from the experiences of groups who are being directly targeted. This allows us to see the same root causes in the global economic and political system driving similar nationalist forces in different places, and to recognize that ultimately the struggle against those causes must be global. It allows us to see where nationalist ideologies are being deployed in ways that may increase the risk of war. Finally, calling blood and soil nationalism by its name when we see it at home helps us to identify allies in struggles against the rise of similar nationalisms elsewhere, and to begin to construct the renewed internationalism we need, specific to this moment.

I want to close with a lesser-known passage from Martin Luther King, in which he brings many of these themes together. He said,

"A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will thingify them—make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military to protect them. All of these problems are tied together."ⁱⁱ

And this concept of thingification, of doing violence by objectifying, can be extended to our relationship to the natural world as well. If we are to have a humane future we must come to understand that we are all just stewards here, and not owners. And wherever we may live on planet Earth, we are all just passing through.

Notes

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ⁱ E.P. Thompson, "A Letter to America," in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds, *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981) pp. 3, 38.

ⁱⁱ Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Presidential Address, August 16, 1967.