

# COMMENT

## Nuclear Disarmament

Kate Soper

*The Editorial Collective regards nuclear disarmament as an extremely important issue at the present time. It therefore decided that the following piece by Kate Soper should be given prominence in Radical Philosophy 27. The views expressed are Kate's: they do not represent the unanimous opinion of the Collective.*

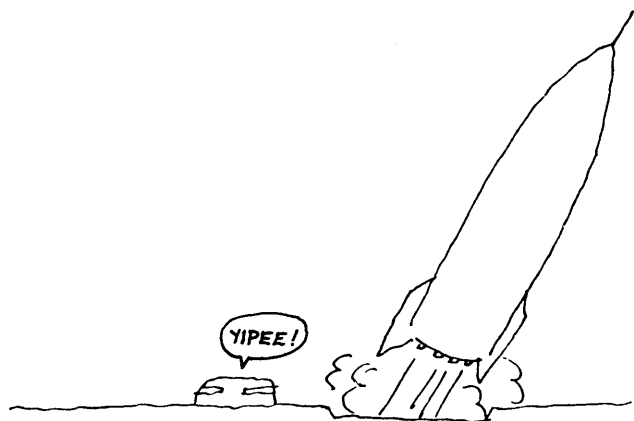
While millions of people go hungry, the rulers of the world double, treble, quadruple their destructive capacity. In terms of explosive yield, their nuclear arsenal is now equivalent to a million Hiroshimas, or, put in personal terms, to three tonnes of TNT for every man, woman and child inhabiting the globe. In an afternoon they will spend on arms the sum required to finance the entire anti-malaria programme of the World Health Organisation. In Britain, for the cost of one Trident submarine, we could build and equip four hospitals, or spare each family £4-5 per week. As unemployment passes the two million mark, the Prime Minister offers her brilliant remedy: increased exports to the Third World of weaponry tailor-made for its 'needs'. Meanwhile, production of the most basic foodstuffs for home consumption in the countries of the Third World steadily declines because of the forced increase in production of luxury goods for export to earn the foreign exchange needed to pay their arms bills.

One could continue indefinitely to cite the statistics of arms escalation, to pile

paradox upon paradox, to let the facts themselves state morals that there is no need to make explicit.

But we are already too aware of the horrific inversion of values that the arms race represents. We know that the nightmare we might have assumed it had to be, is not a nightmare, but the material context of our lives, concretely realised in the hardware that stands waiting in the silos, and in the queues that wait for Oxfam hand-outs. Unbelievable as it may seem, this insanity is our daily existence.

The Left has steadfastly exposed and opposed the causes that have brought about this situation, and has never ceased to express revulsion for their effects. That, in a very general way, is what the Left is about. And it is where Radical Philosophy has always belonged. As far as disarmament is concerned, it is doubtful whether those who read and write for Radical Philosophy have ever been anything but ardent supporters of the cause. Many of us, no doubt, were members of CND in the 1960s, marched from Aldermaston, participated in direct action of various kinds, took heart in what appeared for a brief period to be the movement's very real chances of success, were both comprehending of and despondent over the divisions that afflicted it, and came to regard its eventual decline as almost inevitable. Responding to conjunctural forces, we turned our attention to other political issues (most notably Vietnam), to writing books, to producing Radical Philosophy... In the meantime, the Vietnam war has come and gone. The Non-Proliferation Treaty has been signed by 112 countries, and the arms have continued to proliferate. The hypocritical warnings of the major powers on the horizontal spread of nuclear weapons have all come true: China, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Israel, Iraq, either already possess missiles or will shortly do so. We have been subjected to new strategies and new concepts - 'limited nuclear war', 'theatre war', and new weapons to back these imagined scenarios - Pershing, Cruise, the SS-20s,



the neutron bomb, MX, Trident... And now, as a groundswell of protest surges again, the theorists of the Left find themselves anxious, pondering the terms of their analysis, the goals of action, the correctness of their tactics. This is not said in criticism: against the background of the experience of the 1960s and 70s, the concern is healthy. It is arguable, in fact, that one of the less obvious advantages of the resurgence of consciousness on the nuclear issue is that it will restore the Left to a better perspective upon the divisions by which it is riven, and lead to a more realistic and sensitive appraisal of its analyses, the language in which these are conducted, and thus to some needed changes in the ways it talks and thinks about the goals and conditions of social change. If the issue of disarmament presents in these respects something of a crisis for the Left, it is also an issue that can allow it to realise in full its powers of sanity and reason, and to acquire new strength, as it did in 1960.

The condition of this, however, is that we try to avoid certain kinds of impasse. In the first place, we must avoid getting bogged down in assignments of blame for the existence and expansion of nuclear forces. We do not have to decide and agree upon our exact interpretation of Afghanistan, on whether it is 'better' or 'worse' than Chile, or in any way comparable, before we condemn policies of nuclear expansion whether hatched in the Kremlin or the Pentagon. We do not have to pronounce on who in the US and the USSR is guilty of more imperialist aggressions, before we can denounce the preparedness of both to (as Adrian Mitchell recently put it) 'skin a baby with a blowtorch' in the interests of their respective causes of defending the 'free world' or protecting socialism.

We can certainly point to the lead that the US has in general enjoyed over the USSR in the arms race, and thus to the role it has played as 'initiator' of Soviet responses. And against the hysteria of the Right about the 'Soviet threat', we must continue to point to the overtures that the Soviet Union and her allies constantly offer the NATO powers for negotiations on arms reduction.

But at the same time, and more importantly, we must undercut the language of 'them' and 'us' in which discussion of the politics of disarmament tends to get conducted. We must resist any suggestion on the part of the nuclear strategists that the Soviet people can be represented by their Backfire Bombers and SS-20s, or that we for them can be personified in Cruise missiles and Trident submarines. We must begin to think in terms of a new European solidarity based on shared interests and oppositions. Whether we live 'here' or 'there', none of us wants to be fried, none of us wants to be held in thrall to the militarists.

The second impasse we must avoid is that of two opposite forms of fatalism. The first of these is the fatalism of psychologism. In the face of the monstrosity of the arms race and its paradoxes, there are some who will always want to speculate upon our 'will to death' or seek an explanation in the collective possession by the human race of some lemming instinct. This is a

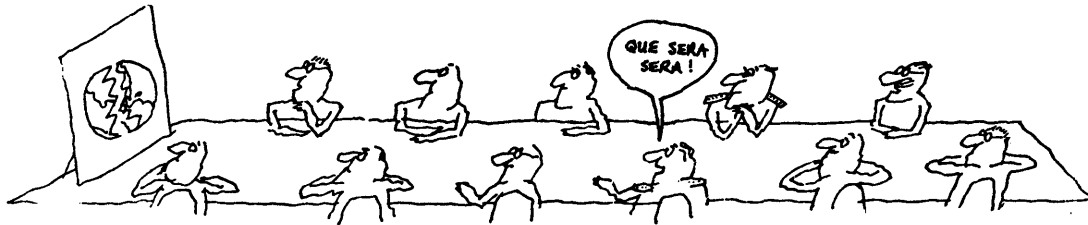
fatalism that is itself an effect of living in the context of possible nuclear holocaust; it is not the reason why we do so. It is not any simple aspect of human psychology that is responsible for a prospect that it is almost beyond our psychological capacities to contemplate, and though the end of the world, if it comes, will scarcely be anything but a singular event, it will have been the result of a multitude of causes most of which have little or nothing to do with psychology.

But the temptation to indulge in this kind of fatalism has never been very strong on the Left, and while the contemplatory Hegelian may occasionally toy with it, the materialist has little time for it.

Far more serious is another kind of fatalism to which we are invited by the very insistence upon the complexity and structurally integrated nature of the causes responsible for East-West policies of mutual extermination. There is nothing wrong with this insistence as such: it speaks a truth. But if this emphasis on the complex, infra-structural causes reflected in the phenomenon of nuclear escalation is allowed to proceed by stages to rejecting the urgency of the struggle for disarmament, it must be resisted. If, for example, it is argued that here, as always, a Marxist analysis shows us that we must attack at the roots and not at the branches; that we must therefore struggle against the social relations of production and social institutions that breed an arms economy and are sustained by it; that nuclear arms are a mere by-product of the socio-economic formation, must be revealed to be so, and must be countered at the level of class struggle; and that therefore, in the light of that, what matters and what we must concentrate upon, is revolution and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', and not upon the fact that the decision of a NATO subcommittee in Brussels means that Britain will be dense with US controlled Cruise missiles in 1983 - then, by the time it has reached its conclusion, the argument has simply become an excuse for inaction. That makes things rather more comfortable, of course, for those who employ it: having settled their conscience on the issue of nuclear war by dint of what their powers of analysis have shown them - namely that to seize upon the nuclear issue is to seize on the wrong end of the stick - they can settle back once again to await the moment when the 'proletariat' wakes up to the fact that it lies at the base of the pyramid of determinations and finally sets the authentic 'motor of history' rumbling along the path of social revolution.

Even as an analysis, the adequacy of such argument must be disputed. It cannot, for example, as it stands, be invoked as the single principle of explanation of the very





differing conjunctures presented by the Warsaw Pact countries on the one hand, and those of the NATO alliance on the other, or of the fact that, while the USSR and the US diverge considerably in their economic and social organisation they correspond rather closely at the 'phenomenal' level of their nuclear capacity, their development and export of arms, their commitment to the strategy of deterrence and their conviction of the 'need' for nuclear arsenals. Furthermore, even were the analysis to restrict itself to the capitalist economies, it is not at all obvious that an arms economy does follow automatically from the logic of capital accumulation and valorisation. The very fact that Marxist economists themselves debate the 'correct' analysis of arms production is significant in this respect. It is arguable that the production of products that are not valorized, but merely consume social value is less than consistent with the intrinsic requirements of a capitalist economy, and that the hoarding of value in the form of the stock-piling of missiles must be at least in part explained in terms of the 'interference' within the economy of political and ideological objectives. And if that is so, then a Marxist analysis itself implies an attack upon those objectives conducted at the level at which they operate.

But even if this form of argument were itself beyond dispute, that would still not guarantee the conclusion it implies - that the correct starting point in theory is the only point that you can or should intervene in practice. In politics, whether we like it or not, we may have to act wherever we look to prove effective, and that means campaigning on whatever issue seems most likely to galvanise a mass movement of resistance; it means reacting to any occasion of breakdown of public compacency, and to the fears, resentments and suspicions that are actually experienced in relation to government. And there is a very high degree of public concern at the present time about our defence policy and its implications.

Those who argue that the issue of disarmament cannot be treated in isolation are absolutely right. But if this truth becomes the reason for not treating it at all, or for withholding political energy from it, the Left may well compound its political impotence, and in doing so lend itself to the forces leading us towards annihilation. The point about the non-isolated nature of the disarmament issue is that the small successes in that area - the delaying of the deployment of Cruise in Britain, for example - must have immediate social and political effects, if only because forcing government policy on such and such an issue must heighten political consciousness and help to persuade people of their powers of self-determination. And were such small achievements to lead to larger ones - to the

cancellation of Cruise and Trident and eventually to unilateral disarmament, the range and importance of their social and political effects will be correspondingly greater and must go hand in hand with significant economic changes. The outcome of any successes will certainly be disruptive and in a sense dangerous, which means that while we engage in the struggle for disarmament we must continue to think beyond it and to be realistic about its general social implications.

Likewise, on the international plane, we should not underestimate the disruptive effects and the dangers of a reversal of British defence policy. Disturbing the equilibrium of the NATO alliance is no laughing matter, and the US establishment is already nervous about the extent to which Denmark, Holland and Belgium are stepping out of line in resisting the Cruise deployment and refusing to comply with NATO defence budget requirements. And, of course, any fissures that appear in the NATO alliance have seismic effects upon the Warsaw Pact. If we are already anxious about the effects of cracks appearing in that monolith, and where they will lead, we must be prepared for a period of even greater anxiety about the effects both within the USSR and upon her allies of continual mounting pressure for disarmament in the West. We shall disarm in Britain and in Europe only at the cost of major upheavals in the balance of forces in Europe and in the forces that govern its politics, and there are severe risks attached to any such upheaval. None of them, however, can be comparable to the risk of nuclear obliteration that Europe currently faces.

And finally on this issue, to whatever extent the disarmament movement may offend some in presenting itself, or wanting to present itself, as capable of embracing all classes and every spectrum of opinion, let us not kid ourselves about the actual, de facto, nature of its support, which is basically coming from those committed to socialist policies in general. It is the left of the Labour Party and of the TUC that are denouncing Cruise and Trident, seeking to moderate the hysteria about the 'Soviet threat', spelling out the connection between public expenditure cuts and arms, between the needs of the Third World and the consumption of the developed countries - and in doing so at least giving the appearance of breaking out of the narrowly economic perspective that has for so long dominated their political programmes. The motion on disarmament was carried overwhelmingly at the TUC this year, the only dissent to it being on grounds that it should have been even less equivocal about its unilateralism. The exact commitment of the Labour Party will become clear only after its Conference this year, though it is true that its past record must make us sceptical of any pledges it makes. But the fact that campaigners for

unilateral disarmament are now twice shy of the Labour Party may be the very reason why it will be very difficult to bite them again.

It is not only along these lines, however, that we must counter opposition to campaigning on the issue of nuclear disarmament; we must do so without any anxieties about our 'humanism' on sheer moral grounds. It is wrong even to contemplate the use of weapons of such destructive power, and there can be no justification based on the 'realities' of the current world situation that can even begin to undermine the strength of the ethical objection to the possession of nuclear weapons. It is true that appeals to the immorality of nuclear arms, and graphic descriptions of the horrific effects of their use, will not be sufficient to dis-mantle the arsenals. If that were all what was needed, imagination would have preempted their construction in the first place; but any political action that hesitates in stating its ethical motivations, must reduce its sphere of influence.

#### **Bibliography on Nuclear Arms and Nuclear Disarmament**

- Professor Michael Pentz, *Towards the Final Abyss?* 25p. Especially relevant to the debate on the Soviet/NATO force levels.
- Dan Smith and D. Griffiths, *How Many More?* 30p. Specially detailed on the international nuclear power/nuclear weapons link-up.
- SIPRI Brochure 1980* - annual summary of work of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.
- E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive*, 45p. This is to be reissued shortly, together with other articles, as a Penguin Special.
- Philip Bolsover, *Civil Defence: the cruellest confidence trick*, 40p.
- John Cox, *Overkill*, Peacock Books, £1. Survey of the development, testing and use of nuclear and anti-personnel weapons, and account of the contemporary situation on nuclear arms and disarmament.
- E.P. Thompson, 'Notes on Exterminism, the last stage of civilisation', *New Left Review* 121, August 1980.

All the above are available from CND, 29 Great James Street, London WC1 - add 15p for postage.

*Newsletter of the Arms and Disarmament Information Unit* - available free (but send 15p for postage) from ADIU, SPRU, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, Sussex. NB: This unit, which provides an absolutely vital research service, will be forced to close shortly if funds are not forthcoming.

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