

# The Anti-nuclear Movement: ten years back

## Updating Nuclear Disarmament

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During the recent visit to Athens of Bernard Cassen, director of *Monde Diplomatique* and founding member of the citizens' movement ATTAC, to speak at the French Institute on "Social Europe" and its prospects, I had the opportunity to begin a discussion with him on such questions as the political careers of Jean-Pierre Chevenement and Charles de Gaulle, the French and British nuclear arsenals, the "new social movements" of the eighties and the elements of continuity between those movements and today's anti-war movement and movement against neo-liberal globalism. Given the renewed relevance of "weapons of mass destruction" in the debate preceding the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, I thought it might be appropriate to outline why it is that I believe the anti-nuclear-weapons concerns of the European "New Social Movements" of the 80s have their part to play in the project of a Social Europe today.

The great slogans of the non-aligned anti-nuclear movements of the eighties were, of course "A Europe Free of Nuclear Weapons", "A Nuclear-Free Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals". These are slogans which point to an anti-nuclear agenda different from that contained in the United-Nations-supported anti-nuclear initiatives such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Limited Test Ban Treaty, or indeed the bilateral arms control treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union like the SALT treaties and the now defunct ABM Treaty, an agenda for a nuclear-weapons-free Europe unrelated to the future which American governments and American citizens project for their own country's nuclear arsenal.

They are slogans predicated on the arguable view that it is not the task of non-Americans to dictate to the United States government the outlines of that country's nuclear weapons policy. This, *de facto*, is what United States governments – as indicated by their insistence on nuclear disarmament of countries such as Iraq and North Korea – are in any case already demanding, and it is a demand which probably enhances whatever legitimacy present-day United States "unilateralist" policies continue to enjoy in the eyes of a section of the American public.

I have been asked to explain why I – a non-American – have persuaded myself not to try to change the mind of Americans who insist on their own country's (but not other countries') "right" to possess weapons of mass destruction.

Ever since the Second World War the ruling elite of the United States has been playing a many-sided game exploiting the belief of a large American electoral clientele that nuclear weapons, like all other substantial questions of US domestic and foreign policy, are a matter for Americans and only Americans to make decisions about, and that to demand otherwise is to challenge American national sovereignty.

The Soviet Union, with its repeated calls throughout the Cold War for universal nuclear disarmament, challenged this conception of American national sovereignty. It did this while simultaneously developing its own nuclear arsenal, presumably because it thought this was the only way it could protect itself from the fate of the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Anti-nuclear movements outside the US and the USSR, particularly in Europe, throughout the fifties and sixties began to be attracted to the view that, whatever justifications were advanced for the “defensive” nature of Soviet nuclear weapons, the Soviet nuclear arsenal was as much a threat to humanity as the American nuclear arsenal. (“There are no good and bad nuclear weapons” was a popular slogan of the time.) I became a member of the non-aligned European peace movement from the early eighties onward, and this was the central plan of our politics. We were absolutely intolerant of the Moscow-controlled World Peace Council’s assertions that there was a qualitative difference between Soviet and American nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons policies.

After 1988 and the signing of the INF Agreement on intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe, the World Peace Council’s politics took a blow. Gorbachev was no longer asserting a principle of “balance”. Henceforth two standards were being applied: American nuclear weapons were to be judged by one set of criteria. Soviet nuclear weapons were to be judged by another set of criteria. Internal critics in the Soviet Union who were unabashedly hostile to Soviet (and only Soviet) nuclear weapons, irrespective of questions of “deterrence” of US nuclear weapons, began to be tolerated. Their views were even officially encouraged by the politicians of ‘perestroika’, with the calculation that they could be used to exert pressure on the Soviet military lobby.

To be consistent with their previous positions, at the time of the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev, the non-aligned peace movements should have demanded the complete abolition of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. There is much evidence that Gorbachev and even more so Yeltsin would have liked to see such a demand coming from the Western anti-nuclear movements because it would have strengthened their own hand against the Soviet military. But towards the end of the eighties the non-aligned peace movements started going quiet, and/or moving onto other concerns (such as racism and nationalism).

Thus American official policy, which was for denuclearization of the Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus but not Russia, went unchallenged. The right of Ukrainians, Kazakhs and

Belarus citizens to live in nuclear-weapons-free states was respected, but the right of Russians was not. Yeltsin's most radical anti-nuclear proposals were ignored.

The policies of the non-aligned anti-nuclear movements were thus successfully subverted. The Cold War model of social mobilization through manipulation of enemy-image stereotypes (the non-aligned peace movement had accused both sides of the Cold War of manipulating enemy-image stereotypes) went unchallenged.

As a result, the model began to be extended. It was applied not just to Communists, but also to politicians deemed too nationalistic (or 'racist'), then to 'terrorists'. Now we also see experiments with the manufacturing of threats in the form of diseases (SARS), with the politicization of the medical profession [after the promising start made by Doctors without Borders] foreshadowing a Brave New World beyond the wildest dreams of Huxley or Orwell.

The American nuclear weapons/Star Wars lobby would have received a severe setback if the Soviet nuclear arsenal had been successfully abolished after 1991 at the initiative of the non-aligned anti-nuclear movements. Now, with recomposition of political-military collaboration long established in Russia, it is too late for such demands. The best one could hope for would be a bilateral European/Russian nuclear disarmament initiative on Brazilian/Argentinian lines, to serve as a model for similar Russian/Chinese, Indian/Pakistani, and Middle Eastern initiatives including Israel.

The only way there can be any hope for this spiralling politics of threat to be subverted is by tracing it all back to its origins, and to its prototype, which was the Cold War nuclear threat predicated on manipulating American fears that an enemy (whether Communists, the United Nations, the European Union or whatever) is going to try to deprive American citizens of their sovereign right to arm themselves in any way they judge necessary.

Who at the moment is addressing this problem at its roots? Not people who merely reiterate United Nations policies on WMD that seem purposely designed to arouse the paranoia of "patriotic" Americans that some hostile outside agency is going to try to take away their nukes.

Not Noam Chomsky, who in a recent interview with an Indian journalist said that following the occupation of Iraq there will be a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, because the lesson that has not been conveyed is that only states armed with nuclear weapons can be sure of not being attacked by the United States.

Will Chomsky be reminded of this interview if the United States attacks North Korea? No, he will not. No more than supporters of the nuclear disarmament or Iraq will ever ask

themselves why, if it was such a good idea for e.g. Iraq to be disarmed, they never demanded that the Soviet Union be disarmed.

At the beginning of his “Green History of the World” Clive Ponting tells the story of the people of Easter Island, which to me has great interest as a parable of the nuclear arms race. This remote Polynesian people had developed a technologically and culturally advanced mini-civilization on their island, centred on the ceremonial construction and erection of the stone idols that are the surviving emblems of this now vanished race. When the Polynesians came to the island it was apparently covered with dense forest. When Europeans encountered the degraded remnants of the Easter Island civilization in the seventeenth century it was bare of trees. They had all been cut down so that the logs could be used to roll the huge stone idols into position. The various mini tribes of the island had competed in the performance of the ceremony of constructing and installing the idols. When resources began to run out there was an acceleration in the construction and installation of the idols, as the idol ceremonial was apparently perceived as a potential solution to the ecological and social problems the islanders faced. There was also a permanent state of warfare as each tribe attempted to destroy the idols of other rival tribes. It is because of this acceleration in idol building and warfare towards the end of the Easter civilization that the island is strewn with the ruins of half-completed and destroyed idols.

It is time for the nuclear weapons debate to be reopened, as I attempted in Athens to reopen it with M. Bernard Cassen. And a very good idea for present-day anti-hegemonic citizens’ movements would be to take up the discussion where it was abandoned at the end of the eighties by the citizens’ movements of that time.

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