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

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# What about the police?

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Let's suppose that the military has been abolished and social defence has been introduced. Would there still be police? Would they be armed? If so, couldn't they become an oppressive, military-like body? If not, how would unarmed people control crazy people with dangerous weapons?

These are difficult questions. Social defence writers have avoided them.

The first thing to point out is that there are great similarities and strong connections between the military and the police. They are the only two agencies of the state which are considered to have a "legitimate" right to use violence. So, in terms of social structure, the military and the police are complementary. They are two sides of the same coin: organised violence in support of the state.

This becomes obvious in a few circumstances. The police are regularly used to control internal unrest: to take action against "unruly" protesters, strikers and radical political groups. They engage in surveillance, disruption, harassment and beatings of political dissidents who might threaten the status quo. But sometimes the police are not strong enough for this. Then the military is brought in to break a major strike or to spy on political radicals.

On the other hand, the police sometimes start taking over the techniques of the military. They acquire powerful weapons for "crowd control," surveillance and even torture, and are trained in methods of attack and defence that are typical of an army. This is the militarisation of the police.

The similarities are many:

- surveillance using taps, bugs and spies, in order to acquire knowledge of “the enemy”;
- training in methods of dealing with collective violence (or simply “collective action”) by “the enemy”;
- prisons or prison camps for those who are captured;
- sharing of knowledge, trade in weapons and exchange of personnel between different allies (police forces in different regions or countries; militaries in allied states);
- an abiding interest in social control, usually to maintain the power of the existing government but always to ensure the existence of some sort of central government and the necessity for the police and military themselves.

My conclusion is simple. Getting rid of the military is not enough. It is also necessary to get rid of armed police forces.

This analysis applies also to the “political police,” otherwise known as secret police, spy agencies and “intelligence services.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever the name, they should be abolished.

Costa Rica is a country without an army—it was abolished in 1948. But police forces have been maintained and been used against labour and peasant revolts. For Costa Rica, getting rid of the army was only partial demilitarisation.<sup>2</sup>

Peace activists are acutely aware of the worldwide trade in arms. There is also a worldwide trade in the “technology of repression,” namely all the equipment and weapons used by police forces and militaries to repress opponents of the state. This includes surveillance equipment, riot-control weapons and implements for torture. The biggest exporters are familiar names: the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Plate and Andrea Darvi, *Secret Police: The Inside Story of a Network of Terror* (London: Abacus, Sphere, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Tord Høivik and Solveig Aas, “Demilitarization in Costa Rica: a farewell to arms?” in Andreas Maislinger (ed.), *Costa Rica: Politik, Gesellschaft und Kultur eines Staates mit ständiger aktiver und unbewaffneter Neutralität* (Innsbruck: Inn-Verlag, 1986), pp. 344-375.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Wright, “The new technologies of political repression: a new case for arms control?” *Philosophy and Social Action*, vol. 17, nos. 3-4, July-December 1991, pp. 31-62.

## **Towards nonviolent policing**

If the defence system is to rely solely on nonviolent action, then the police force, to be compatible, should also rely solely on nonviolent action.

Now, some people will say, “Why have police at all? They are inevitably oppressive.” My view is that any society, even one relying entirely on nonviolent action, must have methods for social control. Even without tanks and guns, there is great scope for undesirable action: murder, child abuse, exploitation, even savagery. For whatever reason, some people will sometimes do such horrible things that others will feel obliged to stop them.

A society in which anyone can do anything they want is impossible. It’s not a question of social control or no social control, but rather a question of what sort of social control. Who makes the decisions, who implements them and how? It may be that the word “police” is inappropriate, but the process of *policing* is necessary.

Military defence is said to be a way of defending against external aggression, but it’s also a way of maintaining order in society. The same can be said of social defence. The idea of nonviolent policing makes explicit and gives legitimacy to nonviolent action’s potential for maintaining order in society.

An unarmed police force is certainly possible. After all, it’s what Britain used to have, and many local communities still have. (Indeed, Britain’s police are still supposed to be unarmed, but a process of militarisation has long been under way.)

But although a nonviolent police force is possible,<sup>4</sup> it is not necessarily easy to move from armed to nonviolent police, especially when the trends are running the other direction. Indeed, it is exactly like the difficult problem of moving from armed to nonviolent defence. In my view, the same principles apply: the change must come from the grassroots and be based on nonviolence. General strategies include:

- exposing and challenging abuses by police forces;

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<sup>4</sup> There is a distinction between nonviolent and unarmed. “Nonviolent” implies using no violence by choice, whereas “unarmed” implies arms are simply not available but might be used if they were. For example, the *intifada* in Palestine is primarily an unarmed uprising, not a nonviolent one, a point nicely made by Andrew Rigby in *Living the Intifada* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

- developing and using community-based methods for maintaining social order, including mediation and conflict resolution techniques, nonviolent patrols<sup>5</sup> and community-based justice systems;
- formulating plans for conversion of police personnel, skills and facilities to nonviolent alternatives;
- pursuing programmes for social justice which eliminate many of the incentives for crime.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, is it really a good idea to have a separate *police force*, even if it is nonviolent? This might not be necessary if nearly everyone learned techniques of nonviolent action. There is a wealth of information on how to do this,<sup>7</sup> much of which can be applied to “policing.” Certainly, the more people who are skilled in nonviolent action, the smaller the danger that any formal nonviolent police can misuse their positions of responsibility.

### What about prisons?

Conventional prisons, which lock criminals away with little prospect of rehabilitation, are symbolic of the repressive power of the state. Locking up a person is a form of violence. Would there be such prisons in a society relying on nonviolent action for social control?

Before addressing this question, let me first respond to the fear that prisons are essential to prevent a massive crime wave. First, it is well documented that prisons actually promote criminality: people locked away are more likely to learn the ways of crime than be encouraged to give them up.

Second, a large fraction of prisoners pose no danger to society. Drug users and drug sellers are not really dangerous in themselves, but are a product of the illegality of certain drugs. Many murders

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<sup>5</sup> A useful discussion is Edward Elhauge, “San Francisco’s Queer Street Patrol,” *Ideas & Action*, #16 [1992], pp. 24-30.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott Currie, *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981); Martin Jelfs, *Manual for Action* (London: Action Resources Group, 1982). The most important sources of information are skilled nonviolence teachers. They have many skills that cannot be explained in writing.

and assaults occur within the family; the individuals responsible usually pose no particular danger to people outside that family. Then there are the large number of people in prison basically because they are poor, uneducated or stigmatised because of race. They may be arrested because of vagrancy, drunkenness or petty stealing, or simply be harassed or provoked by police. Prison becomes a repository for the outcasts of society. Prison is the least suitable way to respond to this problem with society.

If such groups were kept out of prison, there would be a mere fraction remaining. This is completely clear when imprisonment rates in different countries are compared. The fraction of the population imprisoned in the United States is ten times greater than, for example, in Ireland. People in Ireland are in no more danger from berserk criminals who should be in prison than are people in the US. Indeed, quite the contrary, since US laws and police policies help create the very problem they are supposed to control.

The police probably cause more crime than they prevent. Criminologists know that the crime rate has little connection with the level of policing or imprisonment. Most prisons breed crime, and most police forces breed corruption.

If everyone in prison were released in the next few years, it would make very little difference to the level of crime in a community. It is salutary to remember that most crime is never punished, because the crimes are either legal or carried out by groups that are not brought to justice. This includes regular and severe beatings of prisoners by police and prison warders, production and sale of legal drugs such as cigarettes, recruitment of ex-Nazis and other murderers by spy agencies, sales to Third World countries of dangerous goods that are banned in their country of production, and fraud and embezzlement by corporate executives.

Most of the world's governments have supported the most repressive of rulers, including mass killers. The list includes the Indonesian military regime, which came to power with the killing of perhaps half a million people, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, who were responsible for political murders of perhaps a million of their own people. What is the point of putting local thieves in prison if mass murderers are wined and dined? Social control, of

course. It all goes to show that it is not those in prison who are the main danger!

Most of all, the military system is itself a criminal operation. After all, what is war except organised crime controlled by governments? In the words of sociologist Charles Tilly, “If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest examples of organized crime.”<sup>8</sup>

Now, to return to the question that I postponed answering earlier: “Would there be such prisons in a society relying on nonviolent action for social control?” My answer is “certainly not!”

Thomas Mathiesen has examined the evidence and concluded that prisons don’t work: they don’t rehabilitate, they don’t prevent crime and they don’t provide justice.<sup>9</sup> He argues that prisons should be phased out and abolished.

But how can a society without prisons be brought about? It won’t be easy! Mathiesen says that a massive information campaign is essential to counter the ideology of prisons, plus initiatives from a socialist government to phase out prisons. I agree with the information campaign, but suspect that few governments, socialist or otherwise, will be willing to forego the prison as a means of social control. A more grassroots-based approach would include:

- moves towards a more just and egalitarian community, in order to remove poverty, racism and exploitation, which are common causes of some types of crime;
- challenges to patriarchy, in order to reduce male violence;
- moves for nonviolent policing, in order to reduce crimes committed by police;
- struggles by prisoners and their supporters, in order to stop crimes against prisoners and reduce the function of prisons as “schools in crime”;

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Tilly, “War making and state making as organized crime,” in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169-191.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mathiesen, *Prison on Trial: A Critical Assessment* (London: Sage, 1990).

*What about the police?* 95

- **social defence, in order to build skills in nonviolent action and help defend the social struggles listed here.**