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War, Peace, and "the System": Three Perspectives

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Social workers have sometimes seen war as part of a larger system and as linked to other forms of violence or social evil. This article considers three kinds of analysis which identify different systems (capitalism, patriarchy, and exterminism), see the links in different ways, and lead to different practical conclusions. Each perspective is examined in terms of its capacity to explain the phenomena it describes and to identify a social change strategy that can eliminate them. It is suggested that social workers may be professionally predisposed to select among these perspectives for reasons other than their explanatory power or strategic utility.

One of social work's claims to professional distinctiveness, as compared with other therapeutic occupations, is its concern with the links between private troubles and public issues, between person and environment, or between different system levels. Professionally concerned with the private violence of family life as well as with the institutionalized violence that is reflected in differential infant mortality rates and life expectancies, social workers have sometimes turned their attention to questions of war and peace. From Jane Addams to the Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament Committee of the National Association of Social Workers, they have brought their professional experience and way of looking at the world to bear on this vital question of public policy.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find the chair of the aforementioned committee, Dorothy Van Soest (1988, p. 4), challenging her colleagues to "make the connections between public and private violence and between peace and social justice." "Of necessity," she argues, "this involves self-assessment in relation to our own contributions to violence and to injustice. This means examining social work structures, paradigms, and processes to determine where they might contain and maintain the roots of
inequality and, therefore, violence.” In what follows both aspects of this challenge are taken up. In the first place, three ways of making the connections between war and other forms of violence or social evil are examined in terms of their capacity to explain the phenomena they describe and to identify an effective social change strategy. Secondly, a sub-theme is developed concerning the ways in which professional ideology may predispose social workers to select among these perspectives for reasons other than their explanatory power or strategic utility.

To put the question simply, if war is part of a violent system and linked to other forms of violence, what is the system and how is war linked to it? Among those who accept the assumption that war and violence are intrinsic to the system, at least three different systems have been identified—capitalism, patriarchy, and exterminism. In discussing these as three broad approaches there is a danger of amalgamating distinct positions and losing some shades and subtleties of argument within each, as well as of failing to do justice to attempts to combine different approaches, such as “socialist feminism”. Nevertheless, by presenting the positions in their strongest forms, we may bring most sharply into focus their respective assumptions and strategic implications.

In view of the short trajectory and lack of demonstrable success of most large peace movements, the question of how we identify the system that gives rise to war and how we seek to modify or transform it assumes considerable practical importance. Different answers to this question also imply different assessments of the prospects for the present reduction in military conflicts and tensions, and indeed for any lasting peace on the basis of existing economic and political arrangements. The issue also has implications, as Van Soest’s challenge suggests, for every area of social work practice and theory.

The most recent wave of the peace movement, that of the early 1980s, arose in a context of massive increases in arms spending and a rising level of political conflict between the superpowers. It had already ebbed well before the present reduction of tensions and cuts in planned military spending, which in turn evaporated most of what remained of the movement.
By reflecting upon the analyses and strategies that came to the fore in the early 1980s, we may take advantage of the present interlude in the hope of ensuring that the next movement can learn from the last.

All three perspectives discussed here offer ways of looking at and responding to the threat of nuclear annihilation, which was the primary concern of the last anti-war movement. Since the question of whether there can be a useful theory of war-in-general is a point at issue, the present article will focus primarily on the main wars of the twentieth century and on the threat of global nuclear war, leaving aside wars of earlier periods and their links to earlier systems.

Capitalism

The classic account of modern war as part of a larger system and as linked to other forms of social evil is that developed by marxism, primarily in the period before and during World War I. This is the most rigorous and sophisticated analysis, the product of some of the greatest minds (and fighters for social change) of their period. The more recent accounts discussed here represent in part reactions to, or efforts to improve upon, their work.

The task of clarifying the relationship between war and "the system" became especially urgent after the main socialist parties abandoned their internationalist principles upon the outbreak of the First World War. Those who had more or less explicitly rejected a revolutionary perspective, and who looked for a gradual and peaceful transition to socialism through parliament, provided an essential prop to their national war machines. These advocates of peaceful change supported and facilitated the mobilization of millions of workers for the defense of their national state, and for their mutual slaughter on the battlefields of Europe.

The gulf between reformism and classical marxism only became fully apparent with the outbreak of war and the collapse of the Second International (Kirby, 1986; Schorske, 1955). The revolutionary minority, who opposed their own states and their war machines, were faced with the challenge of reconstructing a scientific theory that explained the relation between capitalism
and war, and that showed the links between the struggle against the state and opposition to militarism. This resulted in both a brilliant series of polemics by Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and others on the socialist attitude to war, and in an important development of the theory of imperialism, above all by Bukharin and Lenin (Riddell, 1986; Bukharin, 1972; Lenin, 1964).

In their studies of imperialism, Lenin and Bukharin showed that, as capitalism had developed into an integrated world economy, the forms of competition had changed. As capital became concentrated in larger blocks, and centralized in fewer, the state and economy tended to fuse. Competition occurred increasingly between whole national economies, was organized by the state, and increasingly took nonprice, and nonmarket forms, including those of diplomacy and war. For example, as German capital expanded, it not only came up against British firms in its search for markets and raw materials, but also confronted tariffs and trade barriers erected and defended by the British state and its armed forces. States, like firms, were locked into a global system of competition from which they could not escape and which operated independently of their will. "The anarchy of world capitalism," as Bukharin put it (1979, p. 66), "...is expressed in the clash between state organizations of capital, in capitalist wars."

Both Lenin and Bukharin were concerned to refute the argument advanced by the leading German socialist, Karl Kautsky, that the war was not an expression of the logic of capitalist competition in the period of imperialism, but a mistake (Kautsky, 1970). It was quite possible, in Kautsky's view, for the leading imperialist powers to arrive at a position of peaceful coexistence, or "ultra-imperialism," in which they agreed to exploit the colonies cooperatively. Militarism could thus be detached from capitalism and ended, even while the economic system continued.

For Lenin and Bukharin, on the contrary, such an arrangement could not for long survive the pressures of competition. Any given partition of the world could only be temporary, because different national economies grew at different rates, and a large disproportion between economic and political power would lead to demands for a larger share of the world to go to
the later but more rapidly developing powers. Periods of peace, Lenin (1964, p. 295) argued, "are inevitably nothing more than a 'truce' in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars." This did not mean that every military conflict could be reduced directly to the economic interests of the protagonists. Military competition had a logic of its own, so that strategic considerations—the military or political importance of a territory to a rival, for instance—could lead to war even when no immediate economic advantage was at stake. The requirements of military competitiveness, furthermore, imposed demands on the economy, in particular for a heavy industrial base and for the technology that could support a sophisticated war machine. Lenin's and Bukharin's argument was, rather, that capitalism in its latest, imperialist phase was organically linked to war. Wars, both between the imperial powers for the division and redivision of the world, and between subject peoples and their colonial oppressors, were inscribed in the very logic of the capitalist system.

Two very important political conclusions followed from this analysis. the first was that the achievement of peace was inextricably linked to the struggle for socialism. The links that had to be made were to the everyday struggles in which workers confronted their employers or the state. Linking these struggles with the fight against every form of national, racial, and sexual oppression required, as the most consistently anti-war socialists came to see, a break with earlier forms of organization. As Chris Harman (1980, p. 22) has put it,

Until 1914 opposition to the different aspects of capitalist society tended to flow into different channels. There was a trade unionism that was concerned chiefly (when it even did that) with the wage rates and working conditions of workers with particular skills. There was a 'political' socialism that only concerned itself with making propaganda and collecting votes. There was a pacifism that only made ineffectual protests against participation in wars. There was a feminism which restricted itself to fighting the legal disabilities facing women.
None of these "movements" withstood the test of war. Not only were they unable to stop it. They typically suspended their struggles for the duration or even supported the war effort.

What international socialists learned from the Russian Revolution was the need to create a new kind of party, one that was rooted in the workplaces and in the day-to-day struggles of workers, but also one that would go beyond workplace issues. Such a party "would educate, agitate, organise within each of these wider movements for the connections to be made, for the strikes against food shortages to become strikes against the militarists, for the demonstrations against the war to be demonstrations against the system that created the war" (Harman, 1980, p. 22). The need was always to link the specific issue around which people were organizing to the wider fight against the system, and to root that fight, not in the ballot or the terrorist act, but in the working class's own activity.

Another aspect of the analysis of war as an inevitable product of capitalism was the rejection of a peace strategy based on peaceful coexistence and understanding between the major powers, or as Kautsky called it, ultra-imperialism. Not only do such understandings necessarily break down, as the long history of arms limitation treaties attests, but to pursue them is typically to apologize for the crimes of the opposing imperialists and militarists and to deny solidarity to those who are fighting against them within their territories.

A second point that emerges from the classic marxist approach is the need for the concreteness in treating wars of different kinds and periods. From this perspective, a general theory of war, not to mention of violence, is probably of no more use than a general theory of holes (MacIntyre, 1978, p. 260). The violence of the oppressor, aimed at keeping a subordinate people on its knees, is not the same as the violence of the oppressed who are struggling to get up off their knees. A civil war fought for the abolition of slavery, or a war of national liberation, may be progressive and necessary, "despite all the horrors, atrocities, distress and suffering that inevitably accompany all wars," as Lenin (1950, p. 9) puts it. In contrast, a war like World War I, which he described (1950, p. 13) as "a war between the biggest slave-holders for the maintenance
and consolidation of slavery," was completely reactionary on all sides. General statements against war in principle, from this perspective, offer neither an understanding of any particular war nor a guide to what attitude to take toward it. "We Marxists," Lenin (1950, p. 9) observed, "differ from both pacifists and anarchists in that we deem it necessary to study each war historically (from the standpoint of Marx's dialectical materialism) and separately."

The marxist analysis that modern war is an inevitable product of a compulsively irrational system, capitalism, points to a strategy for avoiding nuclear holocaust, not by blurring morally crucial distinctions between different kinds of violence, or by symbolic protests, or by changing child-rearing practices, but by showing that such a catastrophe "can only be avoided, in the end, by striking the nuclear weapons out of the hands of the ruling classes—by revolution" (Hallas, 1982, p. 6). In its avoidance of abstract and ahistorical categories of explanation, involving biological or psychological reductionism, it is clearly an advance on previous theories of war, as well as their recent variants.

But how well could this approach guide us in the period since World War I, and in particular in a situation of nuclear rivalry between two superpowers, one of which called itself socialist? Although there have been more than one hundred wars since 1945, none has been between the advanced capitalist powers of the West. There have, on the other hand, been wars between "socialist" states, such as Vietnam and China, Vietnam and Kampuchea, as well as massive military deployments on either side of the Sino-Soviet border. The nuclear arsenals of the major powers, furthermore, held out the prospect not of a new redivision of the world but of its total destruction, an outcome that could not correspond to any capitalist interest. Such considerations led less frequently to the development of theory and analysis within the marxist tradition than to alternative accounts which identified in quite different terms the system which gave rise to the threat of nuclear war.

Patriarchy and Violence

According to one such view, associated with a more or less sex-segregated women's peace movement and with such
activities as the peace camps at Greenham Common in England and Senaca Falls in New York, war is one of many expressions of a male drive to power. From this perspective, which has gained considerable ground among social workers in recent years, what links the threat of nuclear war to rape, wife-beating, and destruction of the environment is a system of male domination, patriarchy. In some versions, based on a dualistic view of human nature as comprising masculine and feminine principles, patriarchy results from the domination of the former (McAllister, 1982). As one "handbook for women on the nuclear mentality" (Koen & Swaim, p. 6) puts it,

What is played out on the psychological level as domination of the animus over the anima, and on the social level as the domination of men over women, becomes on the political and economic level the domination of science/technology and capitalistic product-orientation over nature/nurture and humanistic process-orientation.... When the intellect and the dominating, controlling, aggressive tendencies within each individual are defined as the most valuable parts of their being and those same attributes are emphasized in the political and economic arena, the result is a society characterized by violence, by exploitation, a reverence for the scientific as absolute, and a systematic "rape" of nature for man's enjoyment. This result is patriarchy.

This radical feminist view assumes that women, by virtue of their feminine "essence," are naturally peace-loving, nonviolent, and nurturant, while men are naturally aggressive, dominating, and misogynist (Sayers, 1982).

A variant among women peace activists, basing itself on the psychoanalytic perspectives of Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, explains male violence in terms of the effects of mother-dominated child-rearing on the psychosexual development of male children (Dinnerstein, 1976; Chodorow, 1978).² Boys develop their sexual identity through separation from the mother, and develop a character structure that values objectivity, rationality, and the exploitation of nature and others. They confirm their uncertain masculinity through aggression, com-
petitiveness, and the hatred and domination of women and nature.

Whether the origins of these masculine propensities lie in an essential human nature or in specific child-rearing practices makes a difference in terms of what role men should be encouraged to play in rearing children. But both views see militarism and war as expressions of those tendencies, and in that way linked to other forms of male dominance. They both attribute to women a special place in the politics of peace, by virtue of their non-violent, non-competitive, and nurturant personalities, and both advocate the separate organization of women in opposition to a male system of power.

Views which employ a theory of patriarchy to identify the systemic causes of war and its links to other forms of violence or social injustice are, however, open to objection on empirical, theoretical, and political grounds. We briefly discuss each in turn.

Given the division of labor in most societies, in which men specialize in warrior functions and women in child-rearing, the evidence for female nonviolence is surprisingly weak. Although the family household is undeniably the setting where male dominance most freely takes the form of violence against women, and where women are most subject to physical assault, and even though they are much more likely than men to be injured as a result of violent incidents in the home, it does not follow that women themselves abjure (or should abjure) violence, whether in self-defense, retaliation, or preemptive strikes. This is also the setting of most violence against children, and much of that is at the hands of their mothers (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus; 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, 1983; Berk, Berk, Loseke, & Rauma, 1983).

Outside the home men are much more involved in violence, both as perpetrators and victims. It is also true that in wars men usually do the actual fighting and are trained to acquire the necessary skills and attitudes for this function. It is not clear that women have been less enthusiastic supporters of war, however, whether as political heads of nations or as private citizens. Nor, as the experience of the women’s movements in Germany, Britain, and elsewhere in World War I clearly shows,
is it the case that even feminist women have consistently opposed war (Evans, 1976; Thonnessen, 1973; Mitchell, 1966; Cliff, 1984; Elshtain, 1987).

The dichotomous framework in which patriarchy theory mirrors traditional stereotypes of masculine and feminine distorts the real experience of both men and women. On the one hand, as Johanna Brenner (1988) points out, most men have no wish to serve in the military and do so in most cases only under the spur of conscription or lack of civilian job opportunity. They are even less willing to fight. "To see war as analogous to rape does not capture its reality. Few men in battle fight in terms of the ideology of the military or of masculinity. As Platoon shows us, they fight terrified and miserable; the glory of battle disappears quickly in the muck of war" (Brenner, 1988, p. 100). Military discipline is sustained only with great difficulty. A recent study of the British navy (Neale, 1985) demonstrates vividly how crucial the press-gang, the lash, and prodigious quantities of rum were to that institution in the days of its greatest glory. Under fire, even sterner measures are necessary. Trotsky, for example, built one of the great armies of modern times, as he said, not on fear, but on the ideas of the Russian Revolution. He was unsurpassed in his ability to inspire demoralized soldiers (which he did by appeals, not to their masculinity, but to their self-respect and to the cause for which they were fighting). Nevertheless he considered the death penalty an indispensable part of any army's disciplinary arsenal. So long as there are armies and wars, he argued, "the command will always be obliged to place the soldiers between the possible death in the front and the inevitable one in the rear" (Trotsky, 1973, p. 411).

The psychological reasons individual men enlist may also be very different from those implied in recruiting advertisements. The army, after all, offers men a total environment where they can be much more subservient, passive, and dependent than is generally possible in civilian life. On the other hand, as Brenner (1988, p. 112) argues, "The logic/emotion, abstract/concrete, aggression/nurturance framework sentimentalizes women and trivializes motherhood." For one thing, it ignores the rationality, emotional control, and power (including the opportunities for aggression and violence) involved in motherhood.
Whether it looks to biology or child-rearing patterns, theory that sees war as an expression of a system of patriarchy and links it to other forms of male violence assigns an extraordinary explanatory power to the male psyche. There are two problems with this. (a) It takes for granted what needs to be explained, why society is structured in such a way as to privilege the male psyche over the female. (b) It is open to the same kind of objection as other forms of psychological or biological reductionism, such as explanations of war in terms of innate human aggression, territoriality, national character, or authoritarian personality. Such drives, instincts, traits, or personality structures cannot explain the social institutions that give form to them or how they change, and so leave all the important questions unanswered.

Why does aggression, whether human or specifically male, lead to intense soccer rivalries in one period, and world war in another? Why does Germany appear as a land of poets and thinkers in one century, and of authoritarian militarists in another? Why does mother-dominated child-rearing, whether biologically or socially constructed, produce misogyny and male domination in one society and rough equality of the sexes in another (for example, the much-cited Iroquois) (Brown, 1975; Leacock, 1981)? Such abstract and ahistorical categories are of no use in explaining actual events or social institutions. They cannot help us understand, for example, why World War I broke out when it did, what objective interests were at stake, what forces tried to prevent it and why they failed, why soldiers and workers rebelled, why war gave way to revolution and peace in Russia and Germany, or why the revolution succeeded in the former case but failed in the latter. But these are surely all questions of vital importance to an understanding of the forces that have driven the world to war in this century and of where the power lies to resist them.

The political strategy implied and adopted by this approach gives priority to symbolic actions by groups of women. If the fundamental division in society is between the sexes, and the roots of war lie in the male psyche, then it makes sense to try to build a peace movement of women. That is, adherents of this perspective organize on the basis of sex, rather than
class, and in preference to building a peace movement of both sexes.

The best known application of this approach to the politics of peace is the Greenham Common encampment in England, a permanent picket of a missile site by women, many of whom camped at the gates for months or years (Cook & Kirk, 1983). Indeed, a small contingent remained there even after the signing of an arms agreement under which the weapons would be destroyed (Raines, 1987). At its peak the action attracted widespread sympathy and media attention. As a strategy for opposing the system that threatens the world with nuclear destruction, it had from the beginning serious shortcomings. Not only did it exclude men, however strong their interest in or commitment to ending that system, but the nature of the action was such that only women who were able and willing to abandon their jobs, houses, and families could fully participate. In at least one case of the author’s knowledge, males among a group of trade unionists who traveled to the camp to express solidarity with the protesters were booed by them.

Such a strategy inevitably reduces the mass of women as well as men to the role of passive spectators. It cannot mobilize working people, men or women, in a struggle against the system, or connect with the day-to-day struggles in which they engage, but only substitute the actions of an heroic few for the activity of the many in their own behalf. Not only is it unable, therefore, to pose any serious challenge to the war machine; it also reinforces the passivity of those on whose labor that machine’s economic base depends and who, if mobilized, would pose a threat to it. These are the objections that Marxists have always raised to terrorism as a strategy (Trotsky, 1974). Although the symbolic acts in this case involved die-ins, dancing on missile silos, and decorating the base’s perimeter with baby clothes, rather than assassinations of ministers, they were no less an expression of powerlessness and a reinforcement of passivity. In such circumstances concern with real power to challenge the system inevitably gives way to a preoccupation with the feeling of empowerment. The personal displaces and corrupts the political.
Exterminism

Another, more direct, attempt to improve on the marxist theory of imperialism and war is that of British historian E.P. Thompson, the leading intellectual figure in the revival of the movement against nuclear weapons in Europe and North America in the early 1980s. He coined the term "exterminism" to describe the system that threatens us with a global nuclear holocaust, and drew the appropriate political and organizational conclusions from his analysis (Thompson, 1980; Thompson & Smith, 1981; Thompson, 1982).

The concept of exterminism refers to those "characteristics of a society which thrust it in the direction whose outcome must be the extermination of multitudes" (Thompson, 1980, p. 22). It is seen as the consequence of "the accumulation and perfection of the means of extermination, and of the structuring of whole societies so that these are directed towards that end" (p. 22). The actors and interests that sustain this thrust toward extermination are fragmented and obscure (Davis, 1982), but the picture that emerges from Thompson's account is of two rival elites locked in an irrational competition which neither can escape. Whatever the origins of this situation in the rational pursuit of their interests by particular capitalist or bureaucratic powers, the system of competitive militarism has assumed a dynamic of its own which is in the real interest of neither side. Culture, politics, and economics become infected with the exterminist cancer, and each reinforces the disease in the other. "The USA and the USSR do not have military-industrial complexes: they are such complexes" (Thompson, 1980, p. 23).

Although Thompson's argument is hard to pin down, it differs from the analysis of Bukharin and Lenin in at least two important respects. In the first place, Thompson, like Kautsky, sees the drive to war, or exterminism, not as intrinsic to the capitalist or any other mode of production, but as a kind of cancer that infects both East and West. The whole organism is infected, both in its physical functioning (economy) and in its thinking (ideology), but the process may be reversible. He sees his strategy as "initiating a counter-thrust, a logic of process leading towards the dissolution of both blocs, the demystification of exterminism's ideological mythology, and thence permitting nations in
Both Eastern and Western Europe to resume autonomy and political mobility” (Thompson, 1980, p. 30). In short, the disease could be excised, leaving the modes of production intact. First we need disarmament, then the “normal” processes of politics and social change (that is, the class struggle) can resume.

A second difference between Thompson and the classical Marxist theorists of imperialism stems from this implicit “stages theory” in which class struggle is subordinated or postponed until the nuclear threat is eliminated. For Lenin and Bukharin, militarism and war were class questions. Only an effective fight against capitalism could rid the world of the horrors of imperialist war; only the working class, because of its potential for self-organization and its strategic economic location, had the capacity to lead the struggle for peace to its necessary conclusion—the revolutionary overthrow of the system that generated war. Thompson rejects this position. Whereas the “patriarchy” view leads toward a movement of women and the making of links to other kinds of male violence, and the “capitalism” view leads to the building of a revolutionary party that links the movement for peace to the day-to-day struggles in the workplace, the “exterminism” perspective looks to a broad movement focussed on a narrow issue. It embraces both sexes and all classes, and discourages the making of links to other issues, especially where they might offend supporters or divide the movement.

Thompson's essay provoked considerable discussion on the left, not only in Britain but throughout the world. Much of the response had already been summarized by the editors of the New Left Review in their introductory remarks, when they said (New Left Review, 1980, pp. 1-2): “It may be thought that Thompson overstates the degree of symmetry between East and West... but he is surely right to insist that nuclear weapons, pregnant with holocaust, cannot simply be analysed in terms of competing class forces or social systems, but also possess a menacing dynamic of their own.” My view is the opposite. Thompson was surely right to insist that the USSR was and acted as an imperial power, albeit a weaker one than the United States, and that it could not be understood simply as a victim of Western imperialism. Indeed, the strength of Thompson's essay
is his portrayal of a world structured by military rivalry of the two blocs, both of them locked into a deadly competition that takes on a life of its own and threatens the economic and political interests, and even the survival, of both.

But Thompson was wrong to regard this as a break with the classic theory of imperialism. As Luxemburg (1967, p. 62) wrote in 1915, "Imperialism is not the creation of any one or of any group of states. It is the product of a particular stage of ripeness in the world development of capital, an innately international condition, an indivisible whole, that is recognizable only in all its relations, and from which no nation can hold aloof at will." Bukharin (1972) showed how the growth of a world economy in which there was a tendency for the competing units to be organized into "state capitalist trusts" was inscribed in the very logic of capitalist development. As state and economy tended to fuse, so competition tended to assume the form of war and the threat of war.

Two other elements of Bukharin's argument are of particular importance in understanding the phenomena which Thompson describes as "exterminism". The first is that the tendency to state organization of national economies in no way overcomes the irrational, compulsive, and unplanned character of capitalist competition. It merely translates these features to the international level, and thereby intensifies them and makes them more dangerous (Bukharin, 1979). From this perspective, the irrationality of "exterminism", of which Thompson makes so much, is not a new development, but an expression of the fundamental nature of the capitalist mode of production.

Secondly, the militarization of capitalism affects every aspect of society, and in particular structures the economy so that it serves the needs of military competition. Modern war requires a heavy industrial base to support a sophisticated military machine—requires, in short, a "military-industrial complex" that shapes the whole national economy (Bukharin, 1979).

The tendencies to state capitalism and to the militarization of capitalist competition that Bukharin identified are especially important because they provide the basis for an understanding of how the Soviet Union fits into the picture. In its fusion of state and economy, its organization of the whole national
economy to meet the requirements of military competition, its integration into a world system of competing capitals, including state capitals, the Soviet Union carries to the farthest degree the tendencies Bukharin saw as central to imperialism. More recent marxists have developed the theory of state capitalism to explain the course of Russian development after the isolation of the revolution and the disintegration of the working class as a political force in the 1920s (Cliff, 1974; Binns, Cliff & Harman, 1987; Harman, 1984a; 1988; Haynes, 1985). It was precisely the threat of war, they argue, that forced the pace of industrialization, dictated the concentration on heavy industry, and led to the final consolidation of power in the hands of a state bureaucracy that constituted a collective capitalist class. Because of its backwardness and its need to compete militarily with industrialized rivals, the Soviet economy was organized even more, and more ruthlessly, than that of most countries around production of the means of destruction. In short, it was through the medium of military competition that capitalism’s compulsive drive to accumulate reasserted itself in the Soviet Union and reintegrated the former workers’ state into the capitalist world economy. From this perspective, the militarism of the Soviet Union provides, not a refutation, but the strongest confirmation of the intrinsic link between capitalism and war.

If we see that the Soviet Union and similar societies are not fundamentally different in mode of production from the West, then we no longer need a concept of exterminism to refer to a dynamic that characterizes, or infects, different socioeconomic systems but is intrinsic to none. Thompson is led to make this unnecessary conceptual innovation by an impoverished understanding of imperialism on the one hand and by his view of the Soviet Union as noncapitalist on the other. He thus fails to recognize that the very phenomena that he sees as distinguishing exterminism—the irrational and compulsive character of the rivalry, the structuring of societies to ensure their capability for mass extermination, and so on—are those which the best theorists of imperialism identified seven decades ago as intrinsic to capitalism.

In short, the elements that Thompson saw as entirely new were the very things that classic marxist theory explained. The
further development of that theory in the direction indicated by Bukharin's analysis, encompassing a theory of state capitalism and the militarization of competition, offers a coherent framework for analyzing the underlying dynamics and forces at work in the system that generates the threat of nuclear war. By rooting the phenomena of "exterminism" in the structures and contradictions of capitalism, it enables us to explain what Thompson only describes.

The Politics of Peace

Both the Thompson strategy of a broad movement around a single issue, and the women's peace movement that looked to a theory of patriarchy, contained elements that appealed to social workers. By class position as well as professional ideology they are inclined, C. Wright Mills (1943–44, p. 171) argued in 1943, to be limited by a "professionally trained incapacity to rise above the level of individual cases." That assertion is too strong, as the long history of social workers' involvement in social activism attests. When social workers do "rise above" that level, it might be more accurate to say, they are likely to do so in certain specific ways. One of these is support for reform movements that take up a single issue or cluster of issues. Dealing with the effects of the larger social system as they manifest themselves in individual lives, social workers are more likely to see discrete social problems than the structural mechanisms that generate them. They typically work at the "level of appearances," of what Erik Olin Wright (1978, p. 11) calls the "immediately encountered social experience of everyday life."

Affirming the importance of this level, Wright (1978, pp. 11–12) observes, "People starve 'at the level of appearances,' even if that starvation is produced through a social dynamic which is not immediately observable. The point of the distinction between appearances and underlying reality is not to dismiss appearances, but rather to provide a basis for their explanation. . . . If we remain entirely at the level of appearances we might be able to describe social phenomena, and even predict those phenomena, but we cannot explain them." Social workers, in short, are more likely to put their efforts for social change into a famine relief campaign or even an economic
development project than into a political strategy based on an analysis of the dynamics of world capitalism and of the social forces with the capacity to overthrow it. (The latter approach, that of Marxism, may of course also dictate participation in single-issue movements, but always keeping in mind the relation between the immediate struggle for reform and the revolutionary goal.)

Another aspect of the way in which social workers tend to relate the personal to the social is by moving analytically from the individual or the small system to the larger society. Society is seen as playing out on a bigger scale the timeless battle of the sexes, or as reproducing the family drama at the level of social conflict. Patriarchy theory, as we have seen, is characterized by just this sort of psychological or biological reductionism, and has a strong appeal to social workers because of the way it corresponds to professionally trained ways of looking at the world. Indeed, it was anticipated in certain respects by Jane Addams, who believed that women and men were essentially different, and that women could, by participating in public life, further the cause of peace and social progress through the application of their feminine qualities (Addams, 1907; Addams, 1922).

Similarly, social workers have traditionally sought to "bridge the gap between the classes," not to heighten class struggle (Addams, 1893). It has even been claimed that good casework is "the only real antidote to Bolshevism" (Charity Organization Society, London, 1927, cited by Woodroffe, 1962, p. 55). Approaches to the issue of peace and nuclear disarmament that ignore or deny the significance of conflicting class interests, as both patriarchy and exterminism do, are likely to be more consonant with professional perceptions and values.

But a "natural" appeal, resulting from harmony with social workers' class position and professional ideology, does not necessarily mean either an accurate perception or a serious strategy for achieving peace. We have already examined some of the weaknesses of the women's peace movement approach to the politics of peace. Thompson's strategy differs, and appeals, by virtue of its inclusiveness in relation to people and its
narrowness in relation to issues. Let us all join together on this one question of over-riding importance, it suggests, and leave aside for the movement the things that divide us, such as class or (the question raised by Boston feminists in the peace movement) abortion rights (Levene & Magid, 1983).

Building a movement that will mobilize masses of people necessarily requires a focus on the issue that brings them into motion. At their height in the postwar period, peace movements involved hundreds of thousands of people, and mobilized some of the largest demonstrations in modern history. They attracted individuals of different classes, ages, and sexes, appalled by the horror of the nuclear threat that hangs over all humanity. They made some gains in terms of party resolutions (in Britain) and even of party formation (the Greens in Germany). The problem was that they were unable to connect to a social force capable of challenging the system they saw as driving the world toward war. That drive continued more or less unchecked as movements grew, flourished, and declined all in the space of a few years.

For Thompson, we have seen, nuclear disarmament was not a class issue and not to be linked to other issues. Although nuclear weapons threaten members of all classes, marxist critics of Thompson argued, some have an enormous stake in the system which produces them, and others have the interest and capacity, due to their location in the economy, to organize against it (Harman, 1980). From a marxist perspective, "exterminism," the systemic tendency to nuclear holocaust, is a class issue both because it is rooted in a class system and because people vary by class in their will and structural capacity (Callinicos, 1987b) for thoroughgoing opposition to that system.

This raises the question of the links that need to be made to other aspects of the system—exploitation, poverty, unemployment, national and sexual oppression—and to the possibilities in a given period of making those links. In World War I Germany, while anti-war activists outside the factories were isolated and crushed by the military and the police, socialist workers slowly built up a movement in the factories that linked the struggle over wages and conditions to the war. Even then, it took four years of work and the experience of attacks on
living standards and union rights *directly caused by the war* to build a force that could topple the government and end the war (Müller, 1924).

The failure of the peace movements of recent decades to mobilize a social force that could pose a serious threat to the war system, however, was only partly a failure of their leaders to see nuclear disarmament as a class issue. It also reflected the distance between the immediate issues that organize workers—fights over wages and working conditions—and the nuclear threat. In the postwar boom of the 1950s and 1960s, real wages grew rapidly, unemployment was low in most countries, and the welfare state expanded even as military spending was sustained at levels unprecedented in peacetime. The two aspects of the warfare-welfare state complemented each other. (The same considerations, of course, limited the capacity of the movement against the Vietnam War to appeal to workers, and so to realize the revolutionary aspirations of many of its participants.)

By the mid-seventies this was no longer the case. Economic crisis on a world scale brought attacks on workers' living standards—on wages and the social wage. The new cold war intensified the pressure on social consumption. The new weapons systems competed directly with the welfare state and with the wages, working conditions, and union protections of workers. This situation presented the possibility of making the links between the different aspects of the system, generalizing from the immediate issues that drew workers into struggle and the larger political issue of military spending and the threat of war. However, the crisis produced, not renewed working class militancy, but a long downturn in struggle. Strikes were fewer, longer, less successful, and more tightly controlled by union bureaucracies. Union membership declined as a percentage of the workforce in some countries, notably the United States, and labor leaders looked to public relations and other alternatives to struggle, to rebuild declining unions (Goldfield, 1987; Moody, 1988). The revolutionary left largely disintegrated in Europe and North America. The exceptions to this pattern were dramatic—above all working class upsurges in Poland and South Africa, but also in South Korea, Brazil, and elsewhere—but the general trend made it much harder to link the resurgent peace movement of
the early 1980s to the working class, or even to see the need for such a link.

Yet the need remains. For obvious reasons the future can hold no three or four year nuclear war in which working class opposition develops and the old regime disintegrates.

Conclusion

In contrast to the marxist theory of imperialism, which analyzes the drive toward war as integral to the capitalist system, the theories of patriarchy and exterminism shared many features in common. Both detached the phenomena they described from any organic or intrinsic link with capitalism. Both pointed to the purportedly noncapitalist nature of the Soviet Union, with its oppression of women and its subordination of every aspect of economic and social life to militarism, as evidence of a separate dynamic. Both posited a distinct system, coexisting with the socioeconomic systems of East and West, with a logic of its own. Neither credibly identified the contradictions and oppositional tendencies that could threaten that system.

It is not clear that either perspective offered an advance from classical marxism in any respect, despite the confidence with which both were offered as such. Neither is able to match marxism in offering a clear, theoretically coherent, account of the system, the central dynamic of which produces the threat of nuclear war as its most terrible expression. Marxism, furthermore, is able to explain the links between war and the other issues of social justice, of oppression, hunger, and poverty, with which social workers have traditionally been concerned, and to show how capitalism has created the preconditions for resolving these problems, but only through its own destruction. And it offers a strategy that goes beyond moralism and the expression of outrage, to locate the social force on which the system depends and to which it is ultimately mostly vulnerable.

Do nuclear weapons, however, give the threat of mutual ruin they pose to all classes, render the analysis obsolete? It may be enough in this connection to recall the prescient words of Rosa Luxemburg in 1915, at the beginning of the "period of world wars." Writing from the prison cell which her revolutionary opposition to World War I had earned her, she recalled
Engels’s comment that capitalism presented humanity a fateful choice between socialism and barbarism. She wrote (1967, p. 9):

We have read and repeated these words thoughtlessly without a conception of their terrible import. At this moment one glance about us will show us what a reversion to barbarism in capitalist society means . . . . The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence. Thus we stand today, as Friedrich Engels prophesied more than a generation ago, before the awful proposition: Either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery; or, the victory of Socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism, against its methods, against war. This is the dilemma of world history, its inevitable choice, whose scales are trembling in the balance awaiting the decision of the proletariat. Upon it depends the future of culture and humanity.

Despite the increased relevance of these words to the nuclear age, the analysis of imperialism developed by the great marxists of the early twentieth century cannot simply be taken over wholesale. As we have suggested, the rise and decline of Stalinism, of the so-called socialist countries, as well as growth of modern warfare-welfare states, has necessitated a development of Bukharin’s analysis of state capitalism and the world economy (Adams, 1988; Adams, 1990; Callinicos, 1987a). The collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the consequent reduction of military threat to Western powers, renders the classic marxist analysis in certain respects even more clearly apposite. The view of world politics as a conflict between two rival power blocs, one capitalist and the other anti-capitalist, is, after all, decreasingly credible. Instead, we see a realignment and redivision of a single, and increasingly integrated, capitalist world, a breakdown of the *pax sovietica* and *pax americana* that for four decades imposed order on the world system and limited the conflicts within it. There is a new instability in the world order—in short,
a situation more closely resembling that which confronted the analysis of imperialism in the years preceding World War I than any since World War II.

On the other hand, however, there is not at present the correspondence of military and economic competition that Bukharin and others identified in the earlier period. Thus, Japan represents the main economic threat to U.S. capital but is no military threat at all. Scientific analysis of the world system in its present state, and of the extent to which a tendency to nuclear annihilation continues to be inherent in it, is an urgent task. It cannot simply be read off from the texts of the great theorists of imperialism, but requires the same kind of historically specific inquiry that those writers brought to their project. My argument is that the tradition within which they worked, and which they developed, continues to offer the best hope of understanding and transforming "the system."

References


Notes

1. Socialist feminism is a variant of feminist thought which identifies two distinct systems, patriarchy and capitalism, neither of which is explicable in terms of the other. Mimi Abramovitz (1988) provides a brief but representative exposition of this view, presenting it as an advance on marxism. Marxists have criticized the approach as a theoretically incoherent attempt to square the circle (Harman, 1984b; German, 1989), to combine two different and incompatible kinds of explanation, and two different class positions. Socialist feminists themselves have become increasingly conscious of the problems and contradictions of their position (Hansen & Philipson, 1990; Ramazanoglu, 1989). Some have rejected patriarchy theory in part or whole, while still attempting to straddle socialist and feminist traditions (Rowbotham, 1989; Segal, 1987). Insofar as they accept a version of patriarchy theory, however, and use it to explain war, socialist feminists are open to the same objections as those raised here with respect to feminists in general. A separate discussion of this tendency unfortunately cannot be pursued within the confines of this already lengthy article. Marxism and feminism, of course, offer conflicting theories and strategies in relation, not only to war, but also to women's oppression and liberation. This dispute, too, is beyond the scope of the present article.

2. See also Gilligan (1982). For a representative application of these perspectives to questions of war and peace, see Reardon (1985).