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PEACE 'POLITICS'

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Introduction

PEACE 'POLITICS' is a concept which most political theorists will find bizarre. One reason for this is the close association between the idea of politics and the state. Since the state, in one influential usage, is defined as that formation which legitimately monopolises the agencies of force and coercion, 'peace' politics sounds an incongruous, even contradictory, notion. Another reason for the apparent oddity of the expression 'peace' politics is the oft-stated antipathy between politics and virtue. George Kennan is only the most recent exponent of this view in his comments about Václav Havel and other champions of the 'peaceful revolution' occurring in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. For Kennan, people like Havel, however admirable their integrity and sincerity, nonetheless display:

> ...a certain naiveté about politics generally... an obliviousness to the fact that politics is by its very nature, everywhere, even in the democratic setting, a sordid and messy affair, replete with disturbing moral dilemmas, painful compromises, departures of every sort from the ideal - yet necessary (Kennan, 1990, p.4).

In such a context, 'peace politics', with its ethical charge, will naturally smack of utopianism.

It is therefore of considerable interest to come across a book which promises to shed light on what peace politics might entail. That promise is only partially redeemed by James Hinton, the University of Warwick historian who has doubled since 1983 as a frequent Chair of CND's campaigns' committee. His book, however, invites the reader to think afresh the relationship between British peace movements and English nationalism, and in this it has indubitable value.[1]

The Legacy of 'Imperialist Pacifism'

By 'peace politics', Hinton wishes:

> ...to emphasise that peace movements involve not only protests and visions, but also political effort and intelligence in combining these and bringing them to bear on existing structures of power... (T)he constant goal of peace politics has been to build bridges between utopian thinking and effective action in the world as it is' (p.x).

Politics is about power. It is about influence. It is about the power to influence social life. Yet, curiously, *Protests and Visions* accords only a fraction of its pages to what might be deemed the political effects of British peace movements.

Indeed, from one angle (made explicit on p.205) Hinton's book is a record of the failure of those movements to realise their objectives (for instance, to stop the deployment of cruise missiles in 1983-4). That angle is partly a consequence of a book which demands that the peace movement face rationally its defeats and frustrations, but it is also a result of *idée fixe*: the concept of 'imperialist pacifism'.

Hinton's argument runs as follows. During the twentieth century, British peace movement activity has been characterized by a doctrine seriously detrimental to its capacity for strategic, European-wide action. The doctrine in question has admitted of a number of permutations but it has mostly turned on a grandiose sense of

Britain's special place in the world, its civilising mission, and the role of the native genius in creating a more harmonious international order. This 'imperialist pacifism'- Hinton uses the term pacifist mainly in its pre-1930s sense to refer to people who work to encourage peace and oppose war - is at root a legacy of the interpretation of British global uniqueness first articulated by Richard Cobden and John Bright, the great architects of British liberalism's golden age.

Victorian liberalism's commitments to Free Trade, individual liberty, and the emancipation of subjugated smaller nations are well-known. But these commitments were always conjoined with the wider view 'that Britain's destiny was to serve the universal interests of mankind' (Hinton, 1989, p.11). British naval influence - the mainstay of the Pax Britannica, and the martial instrument responsible for ending the Atlantic slave trade - was accorded a privileged position in this schema. Moreover, in one crucial respect, Victorian liberalism, and the Protestant, provincial middle-class opinion it mobilized, was far more seriously internationalist in outlook than key sections of the later British socialists. The doctrine of Free Trade was never simply equated with capitalist expansionism. It meant an erosion, through market forces, of artificial, political obstacles to the integration of Europe erected and perpetuated by a militaristically-inclined landed aristocracy. Their domination of foreign affairs was to give way to the enlightened diplomacy of commerce. It fell to Gladstone to reconcile this idea with Britain's older preoccupation with the Balance of Power, but Gladstone too was insistent upon placing Britain's future in the wider 'Concert of Europe'. Compared with 'Socialism in One Country' and its many variations, Victorian liberalism could claim, however Eurocentric or limited, an international vision and faith - albeit one indelibly marked by an imperialist pacifist outlook.

The First World War brought about the (temporary) eclipse of liberalism as an economic doctrine. Liberal capitalism was being replaced by a social formation in which the state assumed ever more importance. Thereafter, the old links between liberalism and a socialism which had once been so strongly influenced by Cobdenite, pacifist ideas declined. After 1918, 'socialism and internationalism, the two basic components of Labour's ideology' would begin 'to pull in opposite directions'(Hinton, 1989, p.74); the domestic requirements of a strong state to control productive property, resolve the problem of unemployment, and later to wage war once more, became inconsistent with a view of Europe and the world as prefigurative of a pacific, transnational civil society. The inconsistency was resolved in favour of state collectivism.

However, though liberal capitalism expired, liberal pacifist ideas endured, even if in admixtures that would have surprised Cobden. Increasingly separated from the Labour Party's mainstream political culture, they were transmitted by a host of twentieth century social movements. Peace mobilisations during the Great War, (the Union of Democratic Control, the No-Conscription Fellowship, and the Scottish based Women's Peace Crusade for example), were precursors of subsequent movements seeking to combat militarism and most evinced a familiar reluctance to shed their imperialist pacifist skin. Be it the League of Nations Union, responsible for organising the phenomenal Peace Ballot campaign of 1934-35, or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament of the late 1950s, early-to-mid sixties, and eighties, peace movements continued to believe in Britain's vanguard role as the pacific hegemon.

A Bifurcated Nationalism

To avoid parody, one should make clear what James Hinton is not saying. His argument is not that 'imperialist pacifism' has been the exclusive tendency in British peace politics. Analyses of 'Third Force' ideas in the 1940s, the New Left of

the 1960s, and the perspective of the European Nuclear Disarmament organisation in the 1980s, are all intended to show the countercurrents to imperialist pacifism. Rather his case is that imperialist pacifism has been the dominant trend in peace politics, a trend reincarnated in both waves of CND.

In addition, he seeks to show how both the Labour Party and CND remained committed to a deep-seated nationalism which influential sections of the Establishment had long discarded as inappropriate to Britain's post-war economic situation. Nationalism, in Hinton's account, is deemed the force responsible for many of Britain's ills as it infuses the culture with notions of grandeur which are hopelessly archaic and often racist. The Labour Party and CND, as much as those non-Labour party voters who support the retention of Britain's bomb, are represented as captives of this pervasive nationalism, lending it their own idiosyncratic interpretations. Hence Labour Party chauvinism, given a major boost by the Second World War itself, was witnessed in its desire to attain the Bomb in the first place - 'We've got to have the bloody Union Jack flying on top of it', was Bevin's notorious instruction (Hinton, 1989, p.147) - and then to keep it as the emblem of Britain's continuing Great Power status. Twice - in 1960 and 1982 - the Labour Party formally abandoned the nuclear totem. Twice the Party repented. In 1961 Gaitskell convincingly routed his neutralist adversaries; while on 2 October 1989, the Brighton Conference endorsed with a block-vote majority of 1,182,000 the defence component of the Party's Policy Review. Three of the four Trident submarines would now be retained; the Labour Party has reasserted its belief in Britain's 'independent' nuclear deterrent.

Equally, CND's nationalism has been evident in its desire to relinquish the Bomb, or rather in its attitude to that relinquishment. For founding figures like J.B. Priestley, a man 'as much the voice of England as was Winston Churchhill' (Smith, 1986, p.276), and A.J.P. Taylor (1983, p.291), abjuring nuclear weapons would provide the 'moral leadership' to the world so tangibly lacking in Britain's foreign policy since 1945. The idea that unilateralism would start an international chain reaction of peace was not restricted to the CND leadership. The motif of an early (1959) CND national campaign read 'Let Britain Lead', while demonstration banners often proclaimed with pride a faith in the exemplary power of British actions (Hinton, 1989, p.232, n.15; Rootes, 1989, p.89). A similar credo re-emerged with vigour in the 1980s to become the predominant, though by no means uncontested, canon of CND's second wave. What was indicated by this insularity was the crass failure to grasp that Britain's position as a middle-ranking power brought with it a very limited leverage on the behaviour of other nation states.

Peace Politics, Nationalism and Unilateralism

For James Hinton, then, the development of British peace politics has to be understood within the wider history of English nationalism. The thesis is provocative, and partly convincing, but there are facts and arguments - both in regard to English nationalism itself and to the unilateralist peace politics it has supposedly informed - which are not always consistent with his analysis.

Thus, one study of British political attitudes reveals that support for genuinely independent British nuclear weapons, as distinct from their retention as part of a Western defence system, actually declined in part of the period that Hinton records: from '40 per cent in 1964 to 26 percent in 1970' (Berrington, 1989, p.23). Berrington's survey also indicates that while the early to mid-1980s did indeed witness an upsurge in 'British Gaullism', this was due less to heightened nationalist sensibilities, than to loss of confidence in American diplomacy. The erosion of American credibility as the guarantor of peace, a consequence of a bellicose, blundering Administration, together with the widespread view that deterrence has

been effective since 1945 in preventing a European war, are factors that need to be considered when explaining why the mass of the British electorate are in no hurry to get rid of the Bomb. (Only very rarely since 1958 has unilateralism been supported by more than a third of those polled). It is also not obvious how Atlanticism relates to British nationalist sentiment. Britain's 'special relationship' with America is one of geo-political subordination, as most people recognise but have been willing to accept.

It would also have been helpful to have had a more sustained discussion of the varieties of unilateralism, because without one the elective affinity between unilateralism and 'imperialist pacifism' looks stronger than it actually is. It is true that unilateralism was historically a politics of exemplary action. It is also true that some attempts to advance beyond the exemplar model have ended-up looking casuistical (see Ruddock, 1987; Thompson, 1989, on 'reciprocal unilateralism'). Even so, unilateralism is not quite the mind-set which the thrust of Hinton's thesis could lead one to believe. It was justified by many in the CND of the 1980s, not primarily as an extrinsic objective, but as one coherent in its own right applicable to the domestic arena. Its rationale included: breaking free from US client status, dismantling the domestic nuclear secret state and affirming environmentalism. Hinton's discussion touches on this dimension. His concluding programmatic chapter supports independent nuclear disarmament as one aspect of acting 'where we are', and putting our 'own house in order'. He has also recently criticised support of Labour's defence review as unimaginative, lacking credibility, and feeble in its refusal to tackle the stubborn issue of English identity (Hinton, 1989a, p.32). Yet without some substantial analysis of the benefits of unilateral action, the thesis adumbrated in *Protests and Visions* is ironically capable of a sympathetic reading from Neil Kinnock himself. Kinnock could claim that Labour's break with unilateralism at Brighton amounted to just that rejection of archaic nationalism still defended in some quarters of the peace movement. He has already said as much. Addressing members of the National Executive Committee on 9 May 1989, he remarked that the defence review document: was 'predicated on getting a nuclear-free Europe, a nuclear-free world, not only a nuclear free Britain' (Kinnock, 1989).

Peace Politics, Peace Movements

Once Hinton decided to centre his account of British peace politics around 'imperialist pacifism', it had to follow that his narrative would concentrate on recording its pernicious effects. In consequence, the more creative aspects of peace movement activity, particularly in the 'second wave', are downplayed significantly. Not all these aspects are easy to measure. 'New' social movements operate mainly in the sphere of information and culture: they contest the prevailing codes, rhetorics and conventions of the societies they inhabit (Melucci, 1989, pp.75-77, 88, 204). However, there are other aspects of social movements which are more tangible, and which allow us to gauge their political impact on international events.

Take, for instance, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the culmination of the Washington summit meeting in December 1987 between Mr Gorbachev and President Reagan. To be sure, that Treaty only reduced the world nuclear stockpile by about four per cent, but by agreeing to eliminate around 2,000 nuclear weapons, and, more significantly, by agreeing to eliminate a whole sub-category of nuclear weapons - land-based missiles with a range of 500 to 5,000 kilometres - it was a breakthrough in Superpower talks. It involved disarmament, as opposed to arms control.

What role did the peace movement, including the British peace movement, play in INF? INF was made possible because a combination of factors united to produce it, and many of these were amply rehearsed in the media at the time. They included: the parlous state of the Russian economy; a General Secretary gifted with the determination and willingness to make compromises (it is hard to imagine a Brezhnev or Andropov or Chernenko signing such an agreement); an embattled President desperate for, and in the end seemingly genuinely committed to, a peace accord, spurred-on by a wife whose *eminence grise* role continues to fuel speculation; the dynamism of Mr Schultz in the arms negotiations, and so on. All these factors, though necessary, were not sufficient to conclude the deal signed in Washington on 8 December 1987 INF unfolded against a general background much influenced by peace movement activities since 1980.

To begin with, the peace movement played a major educative role in publicising the dangers attendant on nuclear 'modernisation'. The massive European and North American demonstrations, the acts of civil disobedience, the flood of writing on peace themes, placed the deployment of Cruise and Pershing II in the public sphere, where matters can be subject to relatively open discussion. And they were discussed. Nuclear war-fighting strategies came under scrutiny; so did nuclear deterrence. People suddenly felt less secure.

Next, and relatedly, the peace movement provided politicians with an incentive to make or support the deal. This incentive could take the form of the stick rudely applied to Mr Kohl, when the dire electoral consequences of intransigence over the Pershings for the Christian Democrat-led coalition prompted him to perform a speedy 'U-turn' on this issue; or it could take a more subtle form. Western politicians again came to recognise, and desire, the prestige that accrued from disarmament, prestige due in no small part to the campaigning successes of the movement they so publicly deplored and often outmanoeuvred. Western politicians could also find themselves victims of their own propaganda. This was the case with Reagan's 'Zero Option', an attempt to meet the anxiety of Western opinion with a radical peace proposal. NATO chiefs looked on in horror when Gorbachev responded to that proposal as if it were a serious offer. But by then the damage of the 'Zero Option' had been done. A total retreat from it had become politically impossible (Mackenzie,1989).

Significant too is the type of weapons that were eliminated by INF. A process dictated principally by arms control logic rather than by political considerations might have reasonably begun with short-range nuclear weapons. Alternatively, an American side concerned above all with its own security, might have pressed first for a strategic arms agreement. But INF covered theatre forces. It did so because these were the forces that had become most contested. They had become the most contested forces as a result of peace mobilisations against them.

Finally, the peace movement, through its specialist writers on alternative defence, helped in a small way to provide the Soviet side with a language, a set of symbols and understandings - a discourse - which enabled it to see and present the deal as rational and self-interested. This discourse, now well documented, was one which replaced the notion of nuclear parity with that of sufficiency, which took seriously the insanity of overkill, which spoke about 'non-offensive defence' and raised 'utopian' questions about total nuclear disarmament (see Holden 1987-8: 1989 for the many other influences on this discourse; Soper 1987-8, p.12). It provided a bridge of compromise which allowed the Soviet team to cross from one set of conventions and definitions, frozen in Cold War rhetoric, to another set commensurate with the new thinking, and to do this without obvious humiliation.

Concluding Remarks

Protests and Visions is a valuable book in making sense of some continuities in British peace politics, in documenting the elegiac refrain in unilateralism, and in offering a critique of the insularity it encourages (see also Bloomfield, 1987). In addition it provides a thoughtful interpretation of Labour's debates over nuclear weapons. Yet, arguably, unilateralism was rejected in October 1989, not because of nationalism but because compromise on this issue afforded the most potent symbol of a reformed, responsible and hence electable Labour Party. One can recognise the British peace movement's achievements, whilst also acknowledging that the responsibilities assumed by social movements are very different from those imposed on political parties by the disciplined imperative to garner votes. The Labour leader chose to compromise. He acted with a sense of calculation about what his party could achieve short-term. This is not self-evidently irrational or immoral or chauvinistic.

Note

1 James Hinton, *Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in Twentieth Century Britain.* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989.)

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