

Jonathan Schell & Robert S. Boynton

People's power vs. nuclear power: a conversation

ROBERT S. BOYNTON: When did you first start thinking about the idea of cooperative power and people's war?

JONATHAN SCHELL: In the late 1980s, shortly before the collapse of Communism. I'd been a reporter in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, an experience that had led me to reflect on the extraordinary power that local peoples have to expel invaders wielding superior military

force. The United States won almost all the battles, but it didn't matter. It won itself to defeat. The process was observable on a day-to-day basis. The fighting, with its indiscriminate destruction, was driving the population into the hands of the adversary. You didn't have to be a geopolitician to see it. In fact, geopolitics got in the way of seeing it.

Then, in the early 1970s, I got to know some Polish folks, Jan and Irena Gross, who had been driven out of their country in 1968 for protesting censorship by the Communist regime. They were sending care packages – practical articles, including consumables, plus subversive literature – to their high school friends in Poland who were continuing to oppose the regime. Over the years these friends became some of the intellectual leaders of the Worker's Defense Committee, the predecessor to Solidarity. Among them were Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuron. So, through that personal connection, I gained a vicarious experience of the events in Poland. At the time, I had little inkling of the global importance of what was afoot. It was only later that it became clear that these more or less accidental personal experiences had opened up a small window for me on what turned out to be a pivot of late twentieth-century history, namely, the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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In 1985, I was invited by Irena Gross to write an introduction to a wonderful collection of essays, called *Letters from Prison*, by Michnik. That introduction gave me my first chance to reflect on people's movements more generally. By now, I had had a taste of imperial defeats in two parts of the world. The empires – American and Soviet – were very different, and so were the movements, but they had something in common: the power of politics was beating the power of superior arms. In Vietnam, even as I admired the spectacular courage of the resistance, I did not admire the one-party system they seemed bent on establishing and did establish. In Poland, where the resistance was democratic, my admiration was unreserved.

Both experiences also gave me occasion to reflect on the relationship of imperial control to nuclear arms, something that had become a strong interest of mine. In Vietnam, the whole concept of 'limited war' had been born out of the paradoxical requirements of nuclear strategy. The idea was that although you could not fight a 'general' – i.e., nuclear – war, you could fight a 'limited' war. When it came to Poland, it seemed to me that perhaps it was because of nuclear paralysis that enough time was available for the slow process of nonviolent resistance to take root and succeed. These events made me wonder whether, if other totalitarian regimes, including Hitler's, had not been smashed by military force, they might also eventually – unlikely as it may seem – have fallen in the face of a people's movement. We'll never know.

RSB: *The Unconquerable World* does seem to alternate between your long-standing concerns over nuclear weapons, and your exploration of the role of people's movements in history. Would it be too

much to say that, perhaps, one was the condition for the fruition of the other?

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JS: The two were especially close in the trajectory of the cold war. Of course, the nonviolent people's movements of the twentieth century got going long before there was any nuclear standoff, or even before the start of either of the two world wars. So you can't really say that the people's struggles *depended* on the nuclear standoff, but the two phenomena did seem to intersect in ways that are still not clear to me and that are worth thinking about.

For example, in both the revolutionary theater of people's movements and the geostrategic theater of nuclear war, violence seems to be transcended. It falls into a certain irrelevance. That is, it loses its deciding character, its historic role as the 'final arbiter.' In people's struggles violence doesn't decide because it's overmatched by other positive expressions of popular will, often called political. In nuclear war, violence can't decide anything because nuclear war blows up everything that people might fight about. In both cases, there occurs what I call a dematerialization of power. But why power should have lost its material basis in these two very different ways at the same time is not clear to me.

All I can suggest is that the fantastic rise in the twentieth century of violence to a point where it defeated itself created a need for something else, and that something turned out to be political struggle. The colonized peoples of the great Western empires were faced with an awesome disparity in power. People like Gandhi realized that they weren't going to win against the empire if they tried to do it with an army. So the question of how to act in what we today call an 'asymmetrical situation' was present as soon as Western imperialism was

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launched upon the world. In these settings, the people's movements began as a solution to the problem of the overwhelming material power – military and economic – of the imperial states. The colonies responded by developing the immaterial power of people's will expressed politically.

RSB: So nuclear weapons were less the condition for the possibility of a people's war than they were the circumstances under which people's war found its most potent expression?

JS: I believe so. At that point, force became self-paralyzing, and therefore the invitation to make something happen in this world through other strategies became stronger than ever. The remarkable thing is that these strategies were found.

RSB: You chart the various waves during which people have assumed their 'rightful stations': following the American War of Independence, from 1905 to the mid-1970s, and then 1989 to the present. Do you believe that the emergence of what you call cooperative power is something historically foreordained, or do you believe history is simply "one damned thing after another"? Do you believe, like Francis Fukuyama, that a tendency toward freedom is working its way through history in a Hegelian manner?

JS: I'm agnostic about it. It's conceivable that one day we'll look back and see that history was developing in a certain direction, but I'm rather doubtful about it. I certainly don't believe in necessity in history. It is one thing to detect a phenomenon that has developed over a very long period of time – I certainly see examples of that. Consider, for instance, the development of market economics

over some five hundred years or more. But it is quite a different thing to identify even a long-term trend as the working of History, as if history were a person that did things itself. The development of cooperative power does, at the very least, seem to constitute one of the very long-term trends. It is certainly striking how long that development has already been taking shape, if you date its beginning, as I do, with the American Revolution.

RSB: Your concept of people's power is very suggestive, especially when you use it to narrate an alternative history of the past few hundred years. Is it robust enough to help you understand those occasions in which people's power has been stymied, such as the 1989 uprising in Tiananmen Square?

JS: A people's movement is much more likely to work if it is directed against a foreign power, and less likely if it is a rebellion against an authentic, domestic regime, such as the Chinese government. It is hard to find many failures when the program has been to kick out the foreign invader. Foreign rule seems to be something that people find especially offensive, that galvanizes them into action, and that has an incredible staying power. It seems that domestic tyranny is harder to fight.

The Soviet Union is an interesting case in this regard. The movements were strongest in such places as Poland or Hungary or Czechoslovakia, where Soviet power was most clearly felt to be imperial power. And the movement was paradoxically the weakest in the so-called center, in Russia itself. The difference in the revolutions corresponds to a difference in the outcomes. The stronger the nonviolent resistance movement was, the more likely it was to produce a

democratic regime. For example, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland still have democratic regimes, whereas Russia seems to be slipping back in an authoritarian direction. And in Central Asia, where the anti-Soviet movements were perhaps weakest, you have many outright dictatorships. Resistance was present in Russia, but it wasn't like Poland's Solidarity, which had something on the order of 10 million members.

RSB: But doesn't the presence of an anti-imperial movement often lead to surges of destructive nationalism, which is a bizarre form of 'cooperative people's power,' isn't it? You could make the argument, then, that Yugoslavia was cursed by not having been sufficiently under the boot of the Soviet Union – the result being that their rebellion was against itself, not the Soviet oppressors.

JS: I think that's right. If you look at the American Revolution, you see that it was both a democratic movement and a movement for independence and, therefore, a nationalistic movement. In that respect, there can be a dark side to these movements. Nationalism hasn't always been a positive force, to put it mildly. I was dismayed to discover that many of the techniques for acquiring power that were deployed by democratic movements – techniques such as creating parallel structures of governance – were also used by Hitler before his takeover in 1933.

RSB: You make a provocative argument that contrary to the common understanding of the revolutions of the past few hundred years – the French, the Russian – the rebellion phase actually came off with very little violence and the founding phase is when violence actually occurred. Why do you think this is?

JS: I'm not sure how to understand it, but it is a historically observable fact that the storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the initial moments of the Bolshevik Revolution involved relatively little violence. Yet, in both cases, the revolutionaries then brought to power were quite willing to shed rivers of blood. Of course, in neither case did they have any philosophical commitment to nonviolence. Quite the contrary: When Trotsky was masterminding the Bolshevik takeover, Lenin was actually disappointed to see so little violence occurring. How could it really be a revolution if it didn't spill blood, he wondered.

It seems that the following stage, where the factions of the new regime fight with one another to define the new arrangement, often becomes the occasion when the blood starts to flow most copiously. Certainly, Lenin saw to that in the Russian case.

One fascinating study would be to investigate why certain nonviolent revolutions produce violent regimes while other nonviolent revolutions produce comparatively gentle, peaceful regimes. You'd certainly want to look at the Iranian Revolution. There was very little violence at the time of rebellion, but once in power the new government unleashed oppression against its opposition in the French and Russian style.

Another paradox that struck me was the fact that the people in power when revolution is developing – even those with a history of violence – often fail to fully unleash the violence at *their* disposal. That was true of the Tsar's regime and even of the Shah of Iran. Most notably, it was true of the Soviet Union, which had more violence at its fingertips, perhaps, than any regime on the face of the earth, yet did not unleash it.

It is a great moral and intellectual puzzle how a system as violent as the Soviet

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government was capable of producing a man like Gorbachev, who exercised such remarkable restraint. There must have been something that we misunderstood about that system that prevented us from seeing that such a man and such an act were conceivable.

RSB: The peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union seems like the paradigmatic act of nonviolent people's power for you. How do you respond to critics who say that this analysis gives insufficient credit to the military expenditures pushed by the Thatcher and Reagan governments, which allegedly crippled the Soviet economy?

JS: I don't think the Soviets were spent into bankruptcy by the Reagan military buildup. In fact, if you look at the figures for the Reagan period, you find that the rate at which the Soviets increased their military spending stayed constant. Still, there is an element of truth in this analysis. The technical success of the West – economically and militarily – provided a devastating point of comparison for the Soviet people and government. They saw that they were losing both races, and that was very important to them. Not to mention the lure of Western consumer culture for people who had so much less than we did. Soviet leaders were certainly unnerved by Reagan's Star Wars project, and would have gone to considerable lengths to stop it. Yet even before Reagan left office, they concluded that the system would not work, and could be countered easily and inexpensively.

RSB: Now all we have to do is overcome *our* belief in it!

JS: Yes, we have to learn the same lesson the Russians learned twenty-five years ago.

RSB: In *The Unconquerable World* you quote Lawrence Freedman as saying, "The Emperor Deterrence may have no clothes, but he is still emperor," in making a convincing argument that the threat of nuclear weapons has created a situation in which all-out war is virtually unthinkable. This position, though not identical to the theory of nuclear deterrence that shaped the cold-war period, is certainly compatible with it. How would you distinguish your position from the traditional deterrence argument?

JS: The question is very complicated. First, it is indisputable that the presence of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the great powers gave them a tremendous, perhaps a decisive, reason not to go to war. The whole deterrence doctrine is a sort of a fantastic overelaboration of the elemental fact that two countries with nuclear weapons are unlikely to fight each other for fear of annihilating one another and even the whole world. When you consider that today tiny little North Korea with its putative nuclear arsenal can probably deter the mighty United States, you can see the power in the idea of nuclear deterrence. So I do think that there is a solid core of truth in it.

The question, rather, is whether it's a good plan to constantly threaten annihilation, more or less in perpetuity, as your means of avoiding conventional war. My answer is that the bargain is a senseless and terrible one. It commits even the most supposedly civilized countries to executing genocidal policies, in the strict definition of the term, in certain circumstances. Surely there has to be a better – shall I say, a more civilized – way of assuring civilization's survival than living with the unremitting threat to pull the trigger on that same civilization. And, human beings being what they are, it

must one day fail. For that reason alone, deterrence cries out to be replaced by a better system.

RSB: What about the Cuban missile crisis?

JS: It is easy to see that a war could have broken out. I believe that both Khrushchev and Kennedy were keenly aware of the danger, and for that reason both pulled back. On the other hand, the Cuban missile crisis was caused in the first place by nuclear weapons!

RSB: In this case one might say about nuclear weapons what Karl Kraus said about psychoanalysis: that they are a disease for which they pretend to be a treatment.

JS: Yes, that was exactly the situation in the Cuban missile crisis.

RSB: You do an excellent job of showing how nuclear weapons have supplanted conventional war. Nonviolent people's wars are one by-product of this state of affairs, but isn't terrorism as well?

JS: Yes, although I think you have to draw a very sharp distinction between terrorists who actually represent a mass movement, which is the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the less serious case – despite all the damage they can cause – of terrorists who are, essentially, out there freelancing. Bin Laden may be in that category. For all his popularity in certain parts of the world, you can't point to any specific population whose interests he represents.

RSB: In *The Time of Illusion* you describe the increasing role of "appearance" both in politics and in nuclear politics partic-

ularly in the 1970s. Is "appearance" more or less important in politics today?

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JS: Well, terrorism, for one, is a form of warfare that depends utterly on appearances. Think of September 11. It was an attack designed for the maximum spectacle. It was almost an enactment of what you might see in a disaster movie, and it was picked up by television stations all over the world. In a sense, the United States, and the whole world, fell into a trap that bin Laden deliberately laid, and invested what he had done – which of course has a terrible intrinsic importance – with an *apocalyptic* importance that neither he nor his deeds actually have.

The United States waged actual war in Vietnam for the sake of the credibility of American power – in order to create an appearance that would be so fearsome to other countries that they would do what we wanted them to do. Terrorists are involved in the same thing in the sense that they, too, are using violence to send a message. It seems to me that this is another sense in which violence in general has become dematerialized: people are using it to create a psychological impression more than to actually blow up objects or kill people. The real power of bin Laden was not to defeat the United States – which would be absurd – but to precipitate something like a large-scale transformation in the way the U.S. government and its political system works, which is happening. That is real power: to be able to change radically the behavior of the most powerful country in the world.

RSB: Liberals are often faulted for having an insufficiently developed sense of evil. That isn't something one could say about you because of your fixation on the dangers of nuclear weapons. What

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is the role of the nuclear threat in your thinking?

JS: It is at the center of a stream of thinking that started with the Vietnam War. When I returned from Vietnam, I started looking at the question of why America had gotten involved in Vietnam, and why it was having such trouble getting out. I came to understand that the answer to both these questions was deeply bound up with nuclear policy. Vietnam was conceived as a limited war; and limited war was the alternative to general war, which meant nuclear war. The policymakers at that time were beginning to realize that nuclear weapons were not the instruments of power they had hoped they would be at the beginning of the nuclear era: nuclear weapons paralyzed war rather than enabled military action; they, in fact, bound you hand in foot. In their search for usable military instruments, people like Henry Kissinger and General Maxwell Taylor hit upon the idea that the United States still had freedom of action on the so-called periphery, in places like Vietnam.

But the solution had unexpected costs attached to it. First, it pushed the United States into the buzz saw of the anti-imperial movement, as we discussed. But, second, just because 'limited war' was an alternative to nuclear war, it was caught up in the obsession with the 'credibility' of American power that bedeviled nuclear policy. The problem was that if limited wars like Vietnam were the only ones you could fight, then you *had* to win them because you had staked the whole credibility of American power on them. Therefore, no matter how crazy your war turned out to be *in itself*, no matter how costly, no matter how worthless the specific objectives might be on the ground, you felt you had no choice but

to persist, in the name of the credibility of American power.

There is another, more elemental way that Vietnam led me to think about nuclear weapons. I got to Vietnam when I was twenty-three, and like all of us I had seen the apparatus of American economy and life used largely for ordinary beneficial purposes: taking kids to schools, putting food in the supermarkets, and so forth. When I got to Vietnam I saw all that wealth and power turned to a senselessly destructive purpose. I came to understand that a few bad decisions could turn the world upside down, that all powers and talents could be systematically devoted to absurd or evil ends. The experience opened my mind to the idea that the disposition of nuclear arms might be equally misguided, equally perverse. That is what I came to believe and still believe.

RSB: Do you think Americans have come around to your way of thinking about nuclear weapons since, say, 1982, when you published *The Fate of the Earth*?

JS: No, on the contrary. I was just reading Adam Michnik's essay, "The Ultras of moral revolution," on the dangers of the extremes of the left and right. Those dangers are real enough. But what strikes me most forcibly now is the extremism of the center. Consider global warming. It is the product of business as usual, yet it threatens a slow devastation of the only planet we know of that is fit for human habitation. You don't have to do anything 'extreme' or 'fanatical' or 'crazy' to ruin the planet; you only have to go on living the life that is set before all of us.

Nuclear arms are in the same category. The idea of abolishing nuclear arms is called 'extreme.' But these weapons

themselves have conducted us all to the brink of the utmost extreme – the annihilation of cities, nations, even the species. Yet, today, the nuclear-armed nations, including the latest ones in South Asia, consider nuclear weapons entirely normal, as if they were just one more appliance in the home, like a dishwasher or a toaster, something that every self-respecting nation should possess.

Another example is the war in Iraq, which, from my point of view, was from the very outset an outlandish, fantastical project, doomed from the start to failure and worse. I feel entitled to say this now because I said it all before the war even began. Note, by the way, that the war is a product of the untenable global double standard regarding nuclear weapons. It is a first application of the radical new Bush policy of using force to oppose proliferation – a reversal of fifty years of American policy that cannot possibly succeed and, indeed, has already failed. Today, support for nuclear arsenals is a centrist tenet, rarely questioned, even though those weapons threaten us with our complete annihilation.

The ‘center’ is extreme in another sense. Almost wherever we look, it seems to me, we are seeing new concentrations of power – joining political power, money power, military power, and media power into huge combines that are proving more and more difficult for ordinary people to fight. You see this concentration of power – the very thing the checks and balances of the Constitution were designed to prevent – in one form in the United States, and you see it in another, more entrenched form in Russia and China. Italy’s Berlusconi, fortunately now out of office though his influence remains great, personified this trend. These concentrations, so dangerous to freedom, likewise are not the product of fanaticism of right or left or

any other enthusiasm. They, too, grow quietly out of business as usual.

RSB: Do you see any possibility that the neglect of nuclear danger will end?

JS: I do. Whereas in the 1990s the issue was forgotten completely, it has now at least moved back into our consciousness. If you stop and think about it, you realize that nuclear danger – and, more broadly, weapons of mass destruction – has been at the center at least of the *declaratory* policies of the Bush administration. We went into Iraq to head off ‘a mushroom cloud over an American city.’ And the entire Bush Doctrine built up about September 11 really put the danger of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction at its center. And most of the crises – with North Korean and Iran – have to do with this. So it has once again returned to the center of policy.

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