

Nuclear Freeze Strategy Stalled

Freeze Nuclear Weapons? Freeze the Industrial System

Rudolf Bahro

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“What the powerful call utopia is now in fact the condition for human survival.”

—C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three*, 1958

“What the [peace] movement offers that is positive and alternative is not something to be attained within the system, but in opposition to it...and there is no Archimedian point within the existing institutions which could be used to bring about even the smallest change of course.”

—Rudolf Bahro, West German green movement activist, 1982

We have come to this 40th anniversary memorial for the victims of the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an act of solidarity and community both with them and with all people, despite differences in politics and philosophy, who are compelled by our common humanity to remember those events. And while it is certainly a moment for quiet reflection, it is also appropriate that we ask some hard questions about our own resistance to the nuclear plague.

Specifically: why has the Nuclear Freeze failed to realize its objectives? Why has it remained stuck in an endless quagmire of voting, lobbying, and appeasing those who maintain dangerous illusions about the nature of the U.S. State? Could it be that by concentrating on the consequences of all-out nuclear war, the Freeze confuses the symptoms for the disease? And that by fetishizing hypothetical wars in the future, it blurs the causes of war as well as the present total state of war?

Let us remember that the victims we memorialize today are not the only victims of the modern state and its military machine, not the only victims of the US Empire; more people died in the fire bombings of Tokyo than in Hiroshima; and in the genocidal war waged by the U.S. against Indochina, more bombs were dropped on that small region than during all of World War I and World War II combined.

Yet the Nuclear Freeze movement has studiously avoided confronting the character of this total war and the garrison state which lives by it, instead remaining on the terrain of lawful lobbying, technological debate with “experts,” and the farce of “arms control negotiations.” It has never considered the historical and social context within which nuclear weapons were developed—an imperialist war to control markets and redivide spheres of influence. Nor has it considered challenging the premises of U.S. imperial power, “national security” and “national defense.”

This lack of historical memory and the subsequent allegiance to “defense” for either ideological or tactical reasons serve to prop up the Empire which controls the doomsday machinery and the vast megamachine which develops and deploys it. The assumptions of empire have led the Freeze activists, like the Democratic Party politicians they fetch for, to push the supposedly “pragmatic” policy of bilateral negotiations, which plays along with a decades-old “arms control” numbers game that keeps each population captive behind its political-military leaders who bargain endlessly while continuing to prepare for war. The Freeze engages in absurd technical debates, including how to

keep “frozen” weapons in working order while their longed-for negotiated “build-down” occurs. They even argue that a nuclear freeze would be more cost-efficient and effective in strengthening “conventional” forces.

The Freeze also mobilizes to passivity millions of people who have expressed an explicit desire to resist war. It organizes to lobby politicians to vote for a fig-leaf non-binding resolution, while these same politicians continue to vote in new weapons systems and to, jockey for “defense” contracts in their districts. Time and time again, the Freeze urges people to vote for politicians (“Vote As If Life Depended On It,” they told us last year at election time) such as Fritz (“Quarantine Nicaragua”) Mondale and other cold war liberals who have proven to be the most servile water boys of war hysteria when the generals rattle their swords. (“God bless you, Mr. President,” Tip O’Neil told Reagan when he was informed of the Grenada invasion.) But these politicians and the formal institutions they represent are too trapped within the system to change, and they will never change dramatically enough to make a difference in the drift and thrust towards all-out war.

Underneath the “pragmatism” of the Freeze strategy is the ideology of national security and “legitimate American interests” abroad that must be defended by some, if not necessarily nuclear, military might. This lie is fundamental to the maintenance of the Empire and has nothing in common with a desire for peace. By refusing to recognize the connections between nuclear arsenals and the rest of the military machine, the Freeze can only succumb to the logic of war and the needs of the state when the marching orders come down from above. It has no answer to the propaganda of the power apparatus and the fear of the “enemy,” be it Russia, Nicaragua, or Iran.

Worst of all, the Freeze passes off a crisis in civilization as a political problem which can be resolved through legislation and technofix by the very forces which are most trapped in the exterminist logic of nuclear-industrialism. This is why it appeals to liberals who will not recognize that the entirety of modern technological capitalism has brought about the nuclear threat, and that this threat is only the most dramatic and devastating element of a total ecological-cultural catastrophe facing humanity and nature. The Freeze does not begin to suggest what is becoming obvious, that it is the “American Way of Life” itself—mass production, rape of the earth, technological-industrial development, imperial conquest, and work-commodity culture—which is the real foundation for this catastrophe. And not only nuclear weapons, but the entire state/corporate apparatus—the military, the technological institutions, the media, the political bureaucracy, the police—protect its insane accumulation of wealth and power here and everywhere.

This exploitative system cannot exist without the markets, cheap labor and raw materials it competes for with contending empires throughout the world. It is this economic interest, not its hypocritical lip-service to freedom, which compels it to make nuclear threats and to send in mercenaries and Marines wherever it deems necessary.

This explains why the people of Central America, for example, do not worry about nuclear holocaust—they suffer holocaust daily. Over 10,000 Nicaraguans have been murdered by the U.S.-invented contra war. Some 10,000 Salvadorans are killed each year by U.S.-backed military and paramilitary death squads. In Guatemala, Indian communities are being massacred and forced into concentration camps. Throughout the region, napalm, phosphorous and other horrible anti-personnel weapons are being unleashed to stop a social upheaval which would only potentially deprive U.S. corporations of their obscene profits.

Let us reflect on these victims as well, and upon tomorrow’s, as the Imperial State creates new Vietnams, Salvadors, and Hiroshimas as expediency dictates. It is the American empire which lies behind these massacres, and thus it is on this empire, on all nation states and empires, on the totality of the world industrial system, that we must focus our attention and our outrage.

A few years back some of the radicals who went to work for the Freeze insisted that the rest of us must be patient, work within the system, be careful not to alienate “mainstream America” with threatening and unrealizable demands and desires.

The idea was to concentrate efforts to avert nuclear war, which would make all “secondary” questions irrelevant. This road led nowhere, and it was the Freeze itself, mired in the legalistic rituals of the political-bureaucratic system, which became irrelevant.

Now it is time to go in a new direction; There are no liberal shortcuts to confronting the Empire that will work. Most important is a willingness’ to openly challenge the nature of the capitalist-technological state, to recognize the bloody history of the American Empire since its inception for what it is: a slaughter of human communities and a desolation of the land. We are not blaming anyone for trying strategies which failed, and we haven’t got all

of the answers. But an imaginative leap is necessary before even the first faltering steps toward a world of genuine peace and freedom can be made.

“Let us withdraw more than just our vote from the Great Machine and its servants. We must completely cease playing along with it whenever this is possible. We must gradually paralyze everything that goes in the old direction: military installations and motorways, nuclear power stations and airports, chemical factories and big hospitals, supermarkets and education works. “Let us consider how we can feed ourselves, keep warm, clothe ourselves, educate ourselves and keep ourselves healthy and independent of the Great Machine. Let us begin to work at this before the Great Machine has completely regulated us, concreted us over, poisoned us, asphyxiated us and sooner or later subjected us to total nuclear annihilation.

“We must live differently in order to survive!”

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