

Denis Postle

IT'S OUR BOMB

In a park two families are enjoying a day out. They occupy a bench opposite each other. The sun is shining, the flowers are blooming, birds are singing. In each family people chat with each other, eat sandwiches, play games, read newspapers. One of the families is very reserved, rather formal, the children very obedient. The other family is more fractious, there is much vivacious talk and rivalry for attention.

In each family the man commands instant attention and deference. A closer look reveals that this may be partly because the man in each family has a loaded gun in his hand that is aimed squarely at the family opposite. From time to time park attendants come to check the guns, change the ammunition, and fit improvements. Each alteration leaves the guns a little bigger than before.

Occasionally a dispute breaks out between the families, abuse is shouted, hands reach forward and slip off the safety catches. After a while tension subsides and the conversation and eating resume. Shortly, another uniformed attendant comes up and whispers into the ear of one of the gunmen. Startled, he looks across at the other family and sees that his counterpart is taking another gun from an inside pocket and aiming at his **gun**. The uniformed attendant himself produces a gun which he slips into the head of the family's spare hand, helping him to aim it at the opposing family.

Of course history is more complicated than this but I have found **Q**his model of the nuclear situation (which came up while I was researching a film on the nuclear threat, about which more in a moment) to be useful for three reasons, one, that it gives me something on which I can hang my sense of the scale, the sheer size, of the nuclear threat. The 'ammunition' amounts to 1,600,000 Hiroshimas, enough for a Hiroshima a day for 3,500 years. Secondly it displays perhaps the most remarkable and dangerous aspect of the nuclear threat - how come we are so passive in the face of such enormous danger? We don't put our tongues into electric light sockets to see if they are live - how is it that we can concur in the design and construction of the last afternoon of civilisation? And thirdly, if we saw people actually behaving like the people in the park we would presume some sad but deep-seated pathology.

The program referred to above is **The Nuclear State** (1) a video made for transmission in the Crucible science and society series of books (2) and films on Channel Four. The series' starting point is a critique of the 'expert' approach of official science; (nuclear weapons may turn out to be the ultimate expression of this style of science. The program features part of a cooperative enquiry into nuclear weapons that was set up specially for it. Cooperative enquiry is a way of doing research in which people can meet together to look into something that interests them without having to defer to some external 'expert' who defines the terms or the outcome of the enquiry. The film speaks for itself, and I don't intend to take up much space describing it here. What does seem useful is to scan our experience of setting up and taking part in the program.

Why choose cooperative enquiry as a way of looking at nuclear weapons? The culture we live in tells us in a thousand ways to 'be tough,' ie that domination, competitiveness, control and manipulation are normal and even inevitable. The converse of this is that deference, a sense of inadequacy and failure, and powerlessness are the common experience for many people.

This domination and deference (and above all maleness) is an all pervading agenda concealed behind the 'objective' image of science. Because of this concealment we don't see the extent to which most of science is technocracy - science-in-the-service-of-power' ie military,

government, or commercial science (over half of all research and development in the UK is under military control and worldwide 60% of all scientists are estimated to be working on military inspired projects). In the nuclear weapons branch of 'science-in-the-service-of-power', 'how to' questions have been so completely separated from 'why' questions, the urge to command, control and manipulate has so swamped the capacity to love, to care, to feel and to cooperate, that at this very moment the means to end all life on earth has been designed, paid for, and deployed.

This relates to the question of setting up an enquiry into nuclear weapons in two ways. First it suggests that nuclear weapons are not some aberration, some malevolent creation of evil men but are the logical outcome of the acceptance of domination and bullying in our everyday lives as 'normal' and even, 'natural', and that to the degree to which we too are up to our ears in the fruits of technocracy (having grown up with domination and deference just as everyone has) we will be unwilling or unable to resist and set aside nuclear

weapons. Secondly, if we want to understand and eliminate the nuclear threat, we are in a peculiar difficulty in that science, one of the most effective ways of generating knowledge of our times, has given birth to nuclear weapons, and may be thought to be structurally incapable (due to its institution of separating thought from feeling and fact from value), of untying the knot it has made.

Because of the way that it offers modest possibilities of avoiding the sort of research that, whatever its intentions, is driven by the hidden agenda of technocracy - that is to say superiority, manipulation and control, cooperative enquiry is well suited to the search for a rational position on nuclear or other issues. Through empowering people to take charge of the generation of insight and knowledge for themselves, it contradicts the power of 'expertise'. Through its insistence on **experience** as the core of learning, it contradicts the ways in which we have come to separate thought from feelings. In so far as it is properly set up, it embodies a way of doing research into persons and their interests that is thoroughly scientific. Insofar as its most likely outcomes are seen in personal and social change, it is also (as we have lately been reminded (3) thoroughly political.

How does co-operative enquiry work? In **the Nuclear State** began through one member of another, year-long, enquiry into 'intimacy' and 'power', hearing of the plan to make a film on Nuclear weapons and suggesting that the 'intimacy' enquiry take it up as a project. Seven people from this group coopted eight others into setting up the nuclear weapons study. We met at one of the group members homes for about sixty hours over five weeks prior to the recording of a week-end workshop, and twice a week for eight weeks during the editing. During this time we decided how to approach the topic and very important, using home video equipment, became acclimatised to the video recording process. We discussed how we would make decisions (by consensus), and we decided to have no defined facilitator or leader. We made sure everyone had internalised the cooperative enquiry method.

Running parallel with the task of coopting new people was the work of defining the area of the enquiry and setting its limits. Early work included comprehensively listing the range of prevailing attitudes to nuclear weapons; deciding what main question to focus on - this eventually emerged as what it would mean to fully experience the reality of nuclear weapons, generating a long list of activities or exercises that seemed pertinent to an enquiry into our responses to nuclear weapons. In all of this , including the coopting of new people, we followed the basic cooperative enquiry cycle that starts

with a **proposition phase**. ie questions and discussion, followed by an **action phase**, in which the enquiry members all participate in experiencing one of these exercises or pieces of work, moving on for a **review phase** in which the group's experiences are shared and evaluated. The enquiry proceeded through a series of these cycles, each review phase leading to a new or altered action phase - that in turn was reviewed and so on until the group decided to stop.

We rapidly accumulated a long list of activities - those recorded for the film included: role playing what it would be like to be in the 'government', 'the police', 'the anti-nuclear movement', 'the military', and in 'the earth' (representing the interests of the planet as a whole) (It was quite striking to discover the degree to which the apparent 'powerlessness' of the antinuclear position was experienced as very comfortable compared with all the other positions). Another piece of action involved choosing where we would be in the event of a nuclear attack - one place in the room was designated the epicentre of the explosion, implying instant vaporisation - choosing to be further away from this centre meant a choice of more time to live and/or less injuries.

The main structure of cooperative enquiry as we have been doing it revolves around the research cycle of **proposition-action-review**, but equally important are the series of procedural checks that give the enquiry depth and rigour.

These procedural checks ensure that:-

- there is just balance between action and reflection.
- that there is enough divergence in the choice of action, ie a wide enough and different enough range of actions are undertaken
- that there is enough convergence, ie enough time is devoted to considering whether the overall direction of the enquiry is meeting people's needs and is staying within the terms of the initial agreement.
- that the distress and tension generated by both the process and topic of the enquiry are not denied and buried but are dealt with as they arise.
- that consensus collusion is always suspected, looked for, and if found is dealt with, ie what are we avoiding? what are we not saying to each other?

- that the enquiry is really cooperative - that everyone has fully internalised the method.

What sort of outcomes arise from Cooperative Enquiry? Research ususally produces a thing, an object, or an image or a text. Cooperative enquiry does not exclude these possibilities but it is more likely that its outcomes will emerge as changes in members' personal and social life, the reorganisation of work, the development of skills etc. The experience of the enquiry, together with the changes and insights that arise from it, are what matter.

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The enquiry set up for '**The Nuclear State**' program had a lot of different outcomes. Obviously the program itself - as a statement made by the group - is the main one. My own estimate of what would count as significant runs something like this.

- The scale of the nuclear threat is unimaginably vast. We came to appreciate that the economic penetration of the whole military industrial complex was very deep. The transistor, the microchip, cybernetics, robotics are all derived from 'defence'-driven research. And that pays a lot of mortgages.

- Nuclear war is happening **now**. We gave less attention than might have been expected to the Bomb going off, through a deepening realisation that the weapons are in use now - a loaded pistol pointed at your head. It may suit power block leaders to keep our attention on the Holocaust because it diverts attention from the destructive effect nuclear weapons have on the social fabric, both through secrecy, their huge cost, and the sense of despair and hopelessness they appear to engender.

- It makes a lot of sense to see nuclear weapons as just as much directed at the populations of the countries they are supposed to be protecting as the Enemy. That governments use the nuclear threat as an important element in social control of civilian populations.

- We felt that we were inundated with information about the bomb: discussions, news reports and documents on Tv, newspaper and magazine articles and pamphlets etc. (In a way these are the Bomb because the object itself is never seen: it's always out of sight.) Yet all the discussions goes on at the same level of rational, logical, analytical argument, through fact and counterfact - experts in strategy and tactics defend and justify and oppose nuclear weapons always appealing (as we do here) to a higher order of rationality. We eventually came

to see during the Nuclear State enquiry that this 'rationality' that public debate or nuclear issues is based on, almost entirely excludes affect and feeling, that 'value' and 'meaning' appear as 'national interest' and 'patriotism'. The dimensions of this web of technocratic logic and analysis have become for me quite shocking as they became clearer and clearer, and increasingly I personally see the expression of this kind of 'rationality' as more of a threat than nuclear weapons themselves.

- Nuclear weapons are the logical outcome of those basic attitudes that favour a competitive scramble for power. The degree to which we are all implicated in the social structures that have given rise to nuclear weapons was, I suspect a striking outcome for most of us. The degree to which we defer to expertise, to which we consume the fruits of technocratic science and technology, give us a stake in these social structures which have given rise to nuclear weapons, that make it very difficult to resist them. It has been very hard to take on board the realisation that nuclear weapons are not some creation of evil and malevolent men, but that so far as our behaviour at home, at school, in the office, at work, anywhere, is based on domination and defence, they belong to us. It's our Bomb.

- The passivity which appears to be the most common response to nuclear weapons increasingly came to seem to be a symptom of ~~terror~~ terrorisation both by our own and the Enemy's weapons, and a general position we all appeared to share was that, though we might know quite a lot about nuclear weapons, we didn't **feel** endangered.

- If the risk is taken to try to move from the terror to find out what we do feel about nuclear weapons, then what comes up is cold **fear**, fear not so much of the Bomb going off, as fear of what it will mean to do something to stop it. Doing something about nuclear weapons means resisting the most deeply entrenched attitudes favouring authoritarian, hierarchical power relations in ourselves and in others and that, we found, is very frightening. Resisting nuclear weapons means going against the grain of the way we've been brought up: it seems unavoidable that the resistance will seem to others like going a little crazy.

Personally I am not in any doubt that if, in trying to generate knowledge and action on nuclear issues, the way in which the action is organised does not successfully avoid reproducing the social relations of domination and defence, its main outcome however unintentional, will be to reinforce the status quo. (One important outcome from the enquiry is that several people are preparing to offer workshops which a)

continue the enquiry into nuclear weapons and b) teach people how to set up and run cooperative research for themselves (4).

- A very sharply defined outcome for me from both the enquiry and the editing of the film was the vital role of what I could call 'emotional competence' (a developed capacity to be able to recognise and acknowledge the way that personal distress breeds with the legitimate distress arising from both the topic and the process of enquiring into it). I believe now that any research into persons, let alone nuclear weapons and our responses to them, will be distressing to some extent, and that if the distress is denied or occluded then it will deform the research process and seriously affect outcome of the enquiry itself.

I'd like to end with a way of verifying some of what appears here, it's one of the strategies that Harvey Jackins uses to get at the feelings behind nuclear issues. Make a list of positive assertions about the people and places and things that you care about most in the world.

eg

- babies smile so sweetly

- honeysuckle smells so delicious

- the sky is such a beautiful blue

and then add this one:

- we can really trust Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Yuri Andropov.

Now, adopting a light confident charismatic tone, try them out as ways of completing the sentence..... Nuclear war will never happen because.....

Notes

1 **The Nuclear State** 52 minutes colour A Central Television Production for Channel Four. Produced by Denis Postle, Edited by Christopher Spencer, Cooperative enquiry Group:- George Goudschmidt, Mary Corr, Betty Griffiths, Ken Knight, Jean Hopwood, Michael Hopwood, Jill Anderson, Denis Postle, James Nicholl, Steve Potter, Dick Saxton, Anne Whitwell, Dave Sherman, Terry Walbe, Joel Kovel.

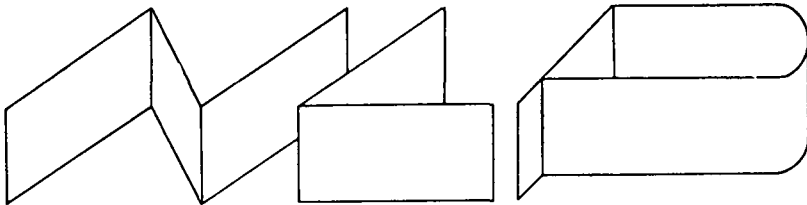
2 **Against the State of Nuclear Terror** By Joel Kovel, a Crucible Science in Society/Channel Four book in association with Pan paperback, £3.95. This book elaborates some of the ideas expressed here, and argues among other things in favour of 'affinity groups' as a way forward in nuclear issues. Available from Free Association Books, 28 Freegrove Road. London N7 9RQ

3 at time of writing (early July) the program has been taken out of the Crucible series by Channel Four for reasons which appear to amount to straightforward political censorship. Viewings can be

arranged through the Science and Society Research unit (see below) or by contacting enquiry group members.

4 Further information about workshops on the nuclear issues and cooperative enquiry can be obtained from the Science and Society Research Unit 26 Freegrove Road London N1 01 - 809 0507. A course in New Paradigm Research at Surrey University, Guildford, features the theory and practice of cooperative enquiry. For dates and times tel. 0483 571 281 ext 559/636 Recommended reading:-
Human Enquiry: A Source of New Paradigm Research by John Rowan and Peter Reason

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