

Democratic Weapons?

“The great age of democracy and of national self-determination was the age of the musket and the rifle. ... But thereafter every development in military technique has favoured the State as against the individual ... The one thing that might reverse it is the discovery of a weapon—or, to put it more broadly, of a method of fighting—not dependent on huge concentrations of industrial plant.”

“Ages in which the dominant weapon is expensive or difficult to make will tend to be ages of despotism, whereas when the dominant weapon is cheap and simple, the common people have a chance. ... A complex weapon makes the strong stronger, while a simple weapon—so long as there is no answer to it— gives claws to the weak.”

George Orwell (1945) “Collected Essays: You and the Atomic Bomb”

Orwell wrote these passages at a time when the industrialisation and mechanisation of warfare had, for all intents and purposes, eliminated the possibility of a successful revolution or insurrection by citizens against a state supported armed forces. Although Orwell was staunchly anti-Stalinist (and I believe by corollary, anti-statist and anti-Communist) he was a devout Socialist and maintained his leftist leanings until his death. In light of this, his writing should be seen as anarchistic rather than individualistic. In fact, it is rather ironic that Orwell’s fear of oppression by the state was motivated by his experiences at the hands of Communists rather than from any right-wing government.

In the last 50 years there have been many advances in warfare; advances available only to the modern industrial state and which have undoubtedly been responsible for countless deaths. However, the weapon that Orwell was ultimately railing against – the atomic bomb – has not militarily claimed a single life since the time of Orwell’s writing. In fact, it is perhaps the arrival of the “democratic weapon” itself that has resulted in the greatest burgeoning of state controls and restrictions on the individual than anything else in recent history. What is this democratic weapon, you ask? Why, it’s modern terrorism!

I hope I have managed to convey to some extent my shock realisation upon reading Orwell’s Essays of how accurately his description (written in 1945) of “the democratic weapon” matches that of modern terrorist tactics. Orwell very accurately described modern terrorism, but for one minor omission. When describing a weapon not dependent upon industrial plant he forgot to include only two words: “your own”. If modern terrorism has shown us anything, it’s that terrorists are quite willing and able to use the technological innovations and industrial plant of target nations against them.

Given that complexity is not inherently related to strength, the only possible interpretation for Orwell’s “strong” is economic strength. His “weak” must therefore refer to the economically challenged¹. Given that a complex weapon depends upon a great many people, it is not necessary to consider solely individual strength, nor is it perhaps appropriate. As a rather farcical example, I direct readers to “I, Pencil: A Genealogy”². If something as ostensibly simple as a lead pencil requires such cooperation, consider what must be required to develop a nuclear device.

For this reason, it is possible (and in fact likely) that Orwell’s “strong” can instead be viewed as “aggregate strength”, such as that which informed citizens of western democracies wield through their elected institutions. Was Orwell concerned about the tyranny that the majority

¹ Never let it be said that I’m not politically correct.

² <http://www.cis.org.au/policy/Spring02/polspring02-11.htm>

might wield through their aggregate strength? Unlikely - the more plausible explanation given Orwell's disposition is that he was concerned about the power a totalitarian state, or an economic elite, might wield over the populace.

Unfortunately for Orwell, the political ideals he espoused are the very ones that have time and time again been shown to lead to totalitarian states. The denial of free enterprise is, first and foremost, the denial of freedom³.

Returning to the previous point of the "tyranny of the majority", we do not have the luxury to ignore such a possibility and must remain mindful of how the "aggregate strength" of the majority might be used to infringe an individual's rights. However, even the most *lassiez-faire* among us generally accepts the relegation of activities involving the use of physical force to the state. This said, as far as militarism is concerned we need only go as far as statistics to see why "democratic militarism" is better than "fanatical-fringe militarism". The larger the sample taken in any trial, the less likely it is that a statistically insignificant outcome will result. That is, unless we are inherently militaristic as a species (and I certainly don't believe this to be the case), then the larger the population involved in such a decision the less likely it is that the consensus would be to resort to military means.

By this I certainly don't mean to imply that every micro-action of a government must be put to referendum. Away from the ballot box, people as individuals inherently "vote" for certain activities simply by whether or not they choose to become involved in them. Governments don't build nuclear weapons, people do - but the easiest way for the state to achieve its own ends is to deny the populace the choice of how to freely apply their labour.

On the other hand a simple weapon, although insuring against the tyranny of the majority or the state, allows a single malcontent, or perhaps a small group under the influence of a firebrand leader, to infringe the rights of many others. I doubt there has ever been a society without its malcontents, but the point at which dissatisfaction can "simply" become militant dissension is the point at which democracy ends and anarchy begins.

In conclusion then, the best way to democratise a weapon is to make it as complex as possible - thereby necessitating the involvement (directly or indirectly) of as much of the demographic as possible. Simple weapons favour only those who would use them unjustifiably, whereas complex weapons are available only for such causes as warrant their use.

Sixty years later, as we hear daily of the global atrocities inflicted with "simple" weapons, the "complex" weapon sits safely in its silos...

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³ Feel free to quote me on this one.