

Building Alternative Global Institutions  
Through Transnationalism

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Jon Johanning

The Transnational Collective of MNS helps link MNS with sister nonviolent organizations in countries outside the United States by assisting world-wide travel and communication among members of these organizations and MNS members, distributing MNS literature and newsletters abroad, etc. This is obviously necessary work, and enables us to meet many fascinating people from all over. But where is it going? What are the ultimate purposes we are aiming towards? I think we can at least begin to clarify these purposes by seeing how our activity contributes, in at least a small way, to building world-wide institutions which will be alternatives to those which presently exist, and which rest on the nation-state principle.

George Lakey's theory of "living revolution," as we know, includes "intervention and parallel institutions" as the last of the five stages in the development of nonviolent revolution. As I understand this theory, this stage is in many ways the key element in creating a revolutionary movement that can sustain itself and persist through the immensely long time that will be required to reshape today's violent world in a thorough way. Separate, limited nonviolent campaigns emerge time after time, forge active organizations, accomplish real but limited goals, and break up. We will know when a real revolution is afoot by seeing that a large number of these campaigns and organizations, in many parts of the world, are coming together and supporting each other so reliably that they do not need to fade back into disorganization, but can feed their strengths to each other.

Alternative or "parallel" institutions will be the solid basis of such cooperation. Something "in place," something that is there day after day, on which people can build reasonably secure lives, is obviously a must if revolutionary movements are to attract more than the relatively few adventurous souls who can live dangerously for indefinite periods. But this constant something must also be responsive to people at the most grass-roots level, not to small elites who concentrate power into their own hands. Therefore, we need stable institutions, but ones which are alternatives to the existing institutions.

In the world-wide aspect of the nonviolent revolution (which is only one aspect of it, but a crucial one), it seems to me that several such institutions can already be seen in early stages of development. Contrasting them with existing nation-state-based institutions will help to bring out their characteristics more clearly.

Nation states maintain embassies and ambassadors in each other's territories for many reasons, but one could say that their chief purpose is to advance what the home government sees as its interests within the "host" country, by all possible means short of war. (When a government can no longer accomplish what it wants with diplomatic moves, it closes its embassy in the other country, and war is often the next step.) Although diplomats often feel that they are "makers of peace," as contrasted with the military branches of their governments, they actually operate on the same basis of separate, actually or potentially hostile, nation states as do the military forces of the various countries. Indeed, the State Department often seems more eager to intervene in "hot spots" around the world than the Pentagon, which of course has to do the actual fighting and dying.

Let's try to think of the nonviolent organizations in each country--not just the "peace groups," but all nonviolent social change groups--as "alternative embassies" of each other, or of the world nonviolent movement as such (not a very large or well-organized force today, but capable of development), and let us think of ourselves, the nonviolent activists in each country, as alternative "ambassadors" to each other. Of course, just as nation states don't send all their government personnel around the world, but appoint representatives who specialize in such work, we too have to rely on the efforts of activists who are particularly called to transnational work. But unlike conventional diplomats, our "diplomats" don't take orders from home "governments," and work to serve those governments' interests whatever the cost to the host countries to which they are sent. We try to serve each other's interests, that is, to build up the transnational nonviolent movement itself.

Just because nonviolent movements within particular countries are nonviolent, they cannot ultimately recognize any barriers or conflicts of interest between themselves and sister movements in other countries. We may suffer from cultural biases, linguistic lack of understanding, and profound gaps in material ways of life and spiritual outlooks, just because we have been born and raised in various parts of the world in different cultures, but if we are committed to nonviolence we must realize that these barriers are forms of violence in themselves, and work constantly to overcome them. As we do this, we will be transforming our organizations into genuinely "transnational" ones, and ourselves into "nonviolent ambassadors," whether we physically move around the world, correspond with counterparts in other countries, or simply maintain an active curiosity and openness toward what is happening beyond the borders of our native lands. The point I want to emphasize is that since nonviolence by its very nature must be, to some extent, "ambassadors" to each other even if they never leave their home towns.

### Alternative Peace Brigades

I think of this "alternative diplomacy" as the fundamental parallel institution we are developing. But there are other kinds of alternatives as well. For example, much has already been written and said about nonviolent civilian defense as an alternative to military institutions. This aspect of transnational work is certainly

in its infancy (or maybe even still in the womb!) today, but the current Peace Brigades International and Witness for Peace work in Central America is obviously a step in this direction. The plan to cooperate with the Contadora countries in peace-keeping is a particularly fascinating example of how alternative nonviolent approaches can mesh with the best efforts and intentions of governments which are often handicapped in peace-making by their basically violent structures.

### Alternative Means of Global Communications and Trade

The People-to-People project on which Bill Moyer is working is an example of this. Since participants in movements such as the anti-Cruise/Pershing movement in Europe and the disarmament movement in this country tend to rely largely on the conventional news media to form their picture of what is happening abroad, the European movement people, according to Bill, too often tend to think that the movement in the U.S. is practically dead because their news media don't report on it, and we tend to think that the European movement has died because it couldn't stop the first deployments, and our media tell us it failed. Obviously, we need to get into direct touch with each other and clear up these misperceptions, and also open up channels for appealing directly to "ordinary people" in other countries. Here again we are making a start, perhaps a small one, but still a significant step towards an alternative communications medium of our own.

We will also need alternative trade institutions eventually; this is very difficult, since confronting entrenched economic power requires a great deal of power in our own hands, which we obviously don't yet have. But some efforts have been made to market Third World products in the rich countries through channels alternative to the capitalist system. Also, we can have some effect on multinational corporations even at the present stage, through campaigns such as the Nestle boycott.

### Next Steps

How can we take steps to expand and strengthen these embryonic parallel institutions? We must have some means of making clear to people who habitually think of "international relations" in terms of government-to-government diplomacy--and this includes many social change activists--that people-to-people, movement-to-movement action is what's needed. Perhaps one key to this is to point out to those who are concerned about the issue of war and peace (particularly nuclear war) that, just as we can't rely on governments to protect us from annihilation, we can't let them "represent" us to the world at large in peacetime, either (given the above-mentioned continuity between diplomacy and war).

The really difficult job, which we still need to become more effective at, and about which I don't have any bright ideas at the moment, is attracting the attention of masses of people (especially Americans) who don't care much about transnational problems as long as their own soldiers aren't dying, and encourage them to change their attitudes in non-violent directions. In short, how can we change the view that "everything's all right as long as our boys

(and girls?) aren't fighting"? The results of the Presidential election underline the seriousness of this problem.

A couple of final thoughts. One obvious risk in this "ambassadors to each other" approach is that we may tend to focus our attentions exclusively on our counterparts in other countries, and become an ingrown clique, cut off from the rest of the world. This is particularly tempting for those who deal with issues such as peace and disarmament. Since governments cling more tightly to their weapons and geopolitical strategic positions than almost anything else, it is excruciatingly difficult, most of the time, to make obvious, visible progress toward change in this area, and the resulting discouragement often leads peace activists to seek shelter in each other's warmth. We need to keep up the faith that there is a longing among people in every part of the world to break with this deadly game, and we can stay on track by staying in touch with that longing.

We should also remember that traditional left organizations, such as the Socialist Parties (both reformist and revolutionary) before World War I, have always had great trouble in working for peace and for solutions to global problems in general (ending world poverty, etc.) precisely because they have generally aimed at taking power in their respective governments, by parliamentary or revolutionary means. Since all their efforts are directed toward the day when they will be their governments, they naturally end up behaving just like governments. This is what we want to avoid, while at the same time working toward building strong, active alternative institutions.

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In response to persistent attempts over the past several years to raise questions about the use in MNS of the term "national" to describe itself, a small group met at the Summer Meeting believing we had to understand the concerns raised and to determine steps we need to take as a network. Particular thanks go to Taylor for his willingness to keep challenging us on these issues even when he was not being heard.

The statement below is in two parts: first, a listing of the present "realities" within MNS; and second, four proposals for consideration and decision by the full MNS membership.

#### PRESENT REALITIES:

1. MNS has made clear decisions, principally at the 1982 Network Meeting, to organize itself "on the local, regional, and national levels, with strong transnational ties." Any decision to change this formulation requires full network consideration and approval and should not be taken lightly or as mere editorial changes.
2. For many of us, the MNS vision does not have a place for a United States nation-state.
3. Historically, MNS has largely been US-based with persistent interest in and action on transnational ties.
4. The U.S. empire is under attack both from within and without the United States. Some of the most successful "winds" against the U.S. have come from Third World nations (e.g., Viet Nam). Nonviolent revolutionists can benefit greatly from transnational links.
5. MNS already has members who are not U.S. citizens or who are living abroad.
6. MNS has limited organizational capacity for outreach or care of members in isolated situations - within the U.S. or overseas. While we hope that this will change in the future, this must be recognized as the present reality.
7. MNS has not acknowledged the existence or sovereignty of Native American Nations nor sought transnational links with groups within those nations.

#### PROPOSALS FOR NETWORK CONSIDERATION:

1. SOVEREIGNTY OF NATIVE NATIONS: The MNS strongly recognizes and promotes the sovereignty of the native Nations (also known as "Indian Nations"), based on a number of treaties signed by the United States. Over the past several hundred years these treaties have been broken repeatedly by the United States and native peoples have never enjoyed equal sovereignty. We are committed to solidarity with the just liberation struggles of indigenous peoples and to seeking transnational ties with them.

PROPOSALS (continued)

2. USE OF LANGUAGE: In accordance with the above commitment, we will examine our language and the ways it perpetuates the disenfranchisement of any group. Specifically, we will avoid use use of the term "national" to describe our organization in official publications, preferring the term "U.S.-based" or other terms which do not deny the presence of sovereign nations within the borders of the United States.

The above policy will require several changes in the IWS Organizational Handbook and in our organizational brochures. It is proposed that the network as a whole approve the above policy with regard to language, but that actual changes to wording be left to a smaller editorial group in consultation with MCC. (Those IWS members who specifically indicate a desire to personally review and approve changes can be consulted when actual new language is produced).

The suggested revised language for our IWS organizational agreement is as follows: "IWS is organized at the United States-wide level, and at local and regional levels, with strong transnational ties."

3. TRANSNATIONAL MEMBERSHIP: Our organizational forms and consensus decision processes require regular face-to-face contact and dialogue for meaningful participation in network-wide decisions and political work. Members in far-flung places (even within the United States) often find it difficult to maintain close links or to receive adequate communication, response or direct support from other IWS members.

In many cases, the most appropriate mode for IWS transnational ties will be through alliances or links with organizations in other countries that are committed to basic struggle through revolutionary struggle. However, there will continue to be individual cases where transnational networking will take some and can be undertaken responsibly by some in the Network and its cooperative members. In such cases, particular attention needs to be given (in clearness meetings) to sustainable mechanisms for support, consultation, and communication.

NOTE: Specific language regarding transnational membership needs to be added to the Membership section of the Organizational Handbook - offer presentation to the Network for consideration through IWS's decision-making.

4. THE U.S. AS FOCUS OF OUR STRUGGLE: Our programs and strategies should primarily focus on struggle through revolutionary action against the U.S. empire and on the ultimate dismantling of the U.S. nation-state, based on the reality that the bulk of IWS members at present live in the United States and that the U.S. is a major perpetrator of oppression and exploitation both within its borders and throughout the world. This is a lengthy a long-term process that will involve work on many levels including local action.

FOR MEMBERS INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT, CONTACT: Steve Linton, George Steiner, George Lacey, K. John Sprague, Michael Day, Diane Harvey, Taylor, Ruthanne Larson, David Gardner