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‘Us and Us’: Faslane 30 and academic direct action

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Introduction

Between 9th June and 9th July 2012, Faslane Peace Camp celebrated its 30th birthday by facilitating 30 days of non-violent direct action (NVDA) against nuclear weapons at Faslane naval base, Scotland. As part of this month of action we convened an academic seminar which took place at the main (North) gate of the base on Friday July 6th. Our seminar built on an emerging tradition of academic seminars staged as NVDAs, notably two blockades which took place from 1st October 2006 as part of Faslane 365, a year of daily protests at the base (see Vinthagen et al, 2012 and Zelter 2008). Stellan Vinthagen and Justin Kenrick developed the academic seminar blockade as a manifestation of the notion of ‘critique in action’, as:

‘(A) form of *constructive resistance*, a form of ‘saying no by saying yes’: a form of resistance in which you resist by using and doing that which you defend. If you want to defend community and celebration, you have a feast on the road, eat, dance and celebrate life – while blockading. If you want to defend academic enquiry and critical reflection, you have an academic seminar on the road’ (Kenrick & Vinthagen, 2012, p. 16).

Such academic constructive resistance was inspired by blockades against US nuclear weapons at Muntlagen in West Germany during the 1980s, during which a symphony orchestra played until the entire ensemble was arrested, and judges and lawyers put the nuclear policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) on trial in public space outside the base. More recently, an academic seminar blockade was held in solidarity with Climate Justice Action’s campaign at the United Nations Climate Conference in Copenhagen, Dec. 2009: for detailed discussion of the politics and praxis involved in such NVDA, beyond the scope of this piece, see Mason & Askins (forthcoming). Here, we wish to report on the 2012 seminar, to raise key points emerging from discussion there, and argue for approaches to

NVDAs that can begin to move beyond the antagonisms and entrenched positioning of 'us and them'. First, we need to briefly outline the Trident system.

Trident nuclear weapons

Along with Royal Naval Armaments Depot (RNAD) Coulport, Faslane constitutes Her Majesty's Naval Base (HMNB) Clyde, approximately twenty-five miles north west of Glasgow and is the site of the Trident system. This comprises four nuclear powered Vanguard class submarines or, in UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) terms, 'Ships Submersible Ballistic Nuclear'. Armed with up to 16 Trident missiles with 48 nuclear warheads (each missile can fire three warheads), at least one Vanguard submarine is on constant 'deterrent patrol' at sea. Each warhead has the destructive power of 100 kilotons of high explosive, eight times the Hiroshima bomb which killed 200,000 people directly in 1945 and many more via subsequent radiation. Accurate enough for a 'first strike' weapon, successive UK governments have rationalised Trident as a deterrent. The theory is MAD: UK citizens are supposed to feel secure knowing that if they are exterminated in an attack, then an equal number of the enemy power's citizens will also die (see Mason 2012 for more detail).

Strategic critiques have pointed out the shortcoming of MAD, particularly in a post cold-war world, but as Frank Barnaby highlights, 'Trident is, in the opinion of many analysts, a political weapon rather than a military one; it is less about defence and more about national prestige' (Barnaby, 2011, p. 86). Although somewhat contested by Liberal-Democrats, the Conservative-led coalition government appears as determined as its Labour predecessor to replace Trident at a cost which runs from the government's own figure of £20bn to Greenpeace estimates which begin at £34bn and spiral as high as £97bn over the life of the project. The Peace Camp came into being in 1982, shortly after Trident was installed, just across the road from Faslane, and has remained a permanent presence to challenge the nuclear facility.

The academic seminar action

The call for participation in our 2012 seminar invited academics of all disciplines, along with other interested citizens, to contribute in diverse ways to an action held in public space, to critically reflect on: 'the complex issues surrounding (and not restricted to) nuclear weaponry, governance, securitisation and discourses of 'terror', as well as issues of environmental and social justice in an era of 'austerity'. We took the opportunity to informally link the seminar action - thematically, temporally and geographically - to the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society and Institute of British Geographers which was held in Edinburgh from 3rd to 5th July. Serendipitously, the theme of this conference was 'Security of geography/geography of security', and we discussed the forthcoming academic seminar action in a panel session focussing on 'Civic geographies: securing geography in civic life'. As part of an exhibition which accompanied this session, we set up a rudimentary 'peace tree' and invited those unable to attend to the seminar blockade to attach suggested seminar questions and messages as leaves.

By its nature, the structure of the seminar action had to be flexible. We could not discuss communal strategy and individual intentions until participants met together at the Peace Camp on the evening before the seminar. We needed information from the Peace Camp regarding their logistical support of actions, and how the MoD and police were responding to other NVDA's in the 30-day campaign. And also we needed to know who was prepared to be arrested and who preferred to step back at that point: we should stress that each individual in the seminar chooses the level to which they wish to act, all non-violent involvement is welcome. In the event, we began the day around 7a.m. to synchronize our action with the peak time of staff arriving at Faslane and so have maximum impact. We walked from the Peace Camp to the North gate of the base, approximately a mile, and commandeered the MoD sign there as our notice-board. To this we pasted the suggestions and comments from our RGS-IBG peace tree while reading each one out through a megaphone to participants, the arriving workers and attendant police. Meanwhile, in a specifically geographic action, participants began to physically remake place. The mesh fence of the base was adorned with white ribbons woven into it to spell out words of peace,

paper sunflowers carrying messages from people unable to be there, and multicoloured Faslane 30 campaign posters. By the end of this first phase of our seminar action, the North gate to Faslane looked – and felt – like a very different place to be.

The second phase of action began mid-morning, when participants gathered beside the North gate to hear the papers presented. There were four formal papers, sixteen people had 'registered' to attend and were issued with conference-style name tags, and more than double that number listened, maintaining a broader protest presence at the gate. The police immediately tried to 'kettle' the seminar, surrounding us with their 'protective' presence to ensure that we did not block the entrance to the base. So, to demonstrate our academic freedom, we dispersed, crossed the road in front of the gate and reconvened. The police followed, and reformed themselves around us. The first speaker was Claire Reddeman from Goldsmiths, University of London, and Fundraising and Membership Officer for Conscience (Taxes for peace not war), who presented 'Popular geopolitics of the everywhere war'. Claire analysed *Targets*, an art work by Joyce Kozloff, a hollow globe which the viewer stands inside. The interior is painted with maps depicting countries the US has bombed since 1945. Cartography, Claire argued, is always politically situated and traditionally plays a role in reinforcing hegemony: *Targets* compromises the truth claims of cartography. Next, Hugh Hubbard from the School of Physics and Astronomy at Leeds University presented in mortarboard and gown, diffusing some of the tension of the stand-off with police. Hugh's paper, 'Sixty Years', arkeding the Queen's 60th Jubilee by highlighting a key paradox: noting that as Head of State she had authorised the use of Trident missiles, he asked how this could be reconciled with her role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith? Hugh then invited the Queen, as Head of the Armed Forces, to exercise the duty of Divine Conscience and withdraw her authorisation. Despite themselves perhaps, the attendant police officers evidently listened intently throughout the seminar.

At this point, we took a mid-session break to do some concerted physical exercise, inviting the police to join in. The seminar restarted with a paper from

Thomas Daffern, International Institute of Peace Studies and Global Philosophy, who explained the symbolic meaning of the nine muses, and linked to work by contemporary academics around the world to think through a philosophical orientation for humankind which would render nuclear weapons outmoded. Then, in his paper 'Making Some Connections: Challenging Trident, Missile Defence, Space and Information-led Warfare', Dave Webb, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University, highlighted how a culture of nuclear weapons spills over into the everyday, using graphic examples of the violence perpetrated by police and private security guards to secure the strategically linked Faslane, RAF Fylingdales and RAF Menwith Hill from peace protesters. Expressing support for the inspiring example of Faslane Peace Camp, Dave noted that wherever militarisation concentrates itself, a group of people always rise up to resist it. In order to change a culture of violence, he concluded, conflict resolution should be a core subject on school and university curricula.

Discussion followed, among academic and non-academic, pre-registered and there-on-the-day participants, during which a number of themes emerged:

- the possibility of Scotland's independence and the concomitant policy to refuse nuclear weapons on its territory;
- US hegemony continuing to dictate global politics;
- the strategic and technological dependence on the US that Trident replacement means for the UK;
- the imperative for geopolitically rethinking Britain in the world;
- the extent to which many nation-state economies depend on the weapons industry;
- the need for trans-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research to render weapons of mass destruction obsolete in geopolitics;
- how MAD and the wider arms race fits so disconcertingly with the supposed sanity of continual economic growth; and
- how academics might individually and collectively reject research and institutional complicity with violence.

Spatialities of and for peace

Underlying these themes and threading through our debate was a central concern with 'unthinking' the ontological concepts that give rise to nuclear weapons as an extreme expression of violence, which in turn perpetuate an everyday culture of violence. Such a reconceptualisation suggests a politics of 'us and us' rather than 'us and them', and indeed, highlighting this philosophical reorientation in discussion at Faslane had an instant and surprising effect on the nature and tactics of the seminar: the relational distinction between seminar participants and police blurred and faded, no longer were we captive and surrounded, rather the police were fully welcomed into *our* circle.

This shift prompted specific reflection, perhaps led by human geographers but across the interdisciplinary participants, on the relational space which mutually assured destruction defines. If we think for a moment of space as a negotiating table, we can see how it both brings us together and separates us. The table formed by MAD means all negotiations are underwritten by violence: the space is defined by intimidation and fear, bullying and resentment, mutual distrust and insecurity; the outcomes of negotiation are inevitably corrupted and therefore surely unreliable. Paradoxically, places such as Faslane which this geography of violence spawns also give rise to places such as the Peace Camp. To function as the welcoming, inspiring and internally safe space that it has been for 30 years, the Peace Camp embraces non-violence, hope and trust. As the North gate of Faslane was transformed on the morning of our seminar, from a place of razor-wire and the grim securitisation of weapons of mass destruction into somewhere vivid with coloured paper, ribbons and flowers, it was clear how the love of life which the Peace Camp fosters can be transferred by basic material means. Our modest academic seminar illustrated, we argue, how a space of dread and blinkered acceptance can be transformed by imagination and the sharing of ideas.

Living in fear surely closes off the potential for peace, and a world shaped by hatred and distrust can only serve those who wish to perpetuate (especially neoliberal) social and spatial inequalities and injustices.. The seminar at Faslane showed to those participating that our aspiration must rather be a Peace Camp

society without its MAD binary. Despite the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament, the United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons still offers the potential to (re)make spaces of negotiation differently, and our debate also called for academics of all disciplines to contest the multiple ways in which the production of skewed rationality and fear attempts to secure the insecurity of geographies of violence. Central to this project, for us, is actively engaging with and supporting those groups which rise up to resist violence in all its forms - injustice, exploitation and ecological destruction – via communal academic actions that take into public space and enact the very best academic virtues.

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