

VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM. A REVOLUTIONARY APPRAISAL.

It would be pleasant to have ethical rules whereby the rightness or wrongness of all our actions could be decided. If there were absolute moral truths they would absolve us from the dilemmas of choice. The pacifist, for example, has discovered such a simple rule of thumb: all violence is wrong. And once having stated the principle all that is needed in any situation is to refrain from violent action to be good, to be right . . . how convenient to have conscience, morality and social action in one complete package deal!

But because our very existence depends on our social relations, ~~and~~ this means that we cannot live without taking action that affects those relations. 'Even to cease to act, to let things go their own way, is a form of action . . . and since man is always action, he is always exerting force, always altering or maintaining the position of things, always revolutionary or conservative. Existence is the exercise of force on the physical environment and on other men. The web of physical and social relations that binds ^{humans} ~~men~~ into one universe ensures that nothing we do is without its effect on others, whether we vote or cease to vote, whether we help the police or let them go their way, whether we let two combatants fight or separate them forcibly or assist one against the other, whether we let a man starve to death or move heaven and earth to assist him.' (1)

The issue is not whether violence is 'good' or 'bad', but for what purpose it is being used, and where it involves the taking of 'civilian' lives or the large-scale destruction of physical environment with consequent harm to all sorts of people, whether there is some relation in proportion between what may be reasonably achieved by the action and the action itself.

Such a discussion is necessary because of the danger of young radicals being seduced by the belief that only violent action is revolutionary action, and the consequent appearance of groups whose activities lead to a disruptive adventurism.

Clearly we do not even ask the question: Do we believe in violence as a political weapon? for the violence exists. The imposed

violence of apartheid, resulting directly in the deaths of black children from kwashiokor, gastro-enteritis and pellagra, (not because our country is poor or under-developed, but because of conditions violently and artificially imposed) demands simply that we decide which kind of violence we will choose. But we do need to distinguish between various kinds of revolutionary action.

On the question of individual terror, Marxism has a consistent and clear attitude. Marxists have always been opposed to the policy of individual terror, not because we are 'opposed to the use of violence', or because we are pacifists or because we wish to defend the status quo. We oppose it because such a policy runs counter to the method of mass action and conscious political struggle advocated by scientific socialism.

Pioneers of the Marxist movement in Czarist Russia began by separating themselves from the populist terrorists of their generation. They repudiated terrorist adventurism in favour of the organisation and mass struggles led by workers to overthrow the Czarist autocracy.

Lenin became convinced that terrorist tactics would have to be abandoned if a mass movement was to be built, even though his own brother had been put to death for an act of attempted terrorism. In polemical articles on the subject he states: 'Without in the least denying violence and terrorism in principle, we demanded work for the preparation of such forms of violence as were calculated to bring about the direct participation of the masses and which guaranteed that participation . . . we give preference to long and arduous work on what promises a future rather than to an 'easy' repetition of what has been condemned by the past.' And concludes that 'the urge to commit terrorist acts is a passing mood . . . we shall fuse the militant organisation of revolutionaries and the mass heroism of the Russian proletariat into a single whole!' (2)

We may admire the courage and good intentions of individuals and small groups, but must recognise that such acts seek to substitute an elitist group, ~~self-interest~~ for mass action and organisation. We cannot disrupt or overthrow capitalism by blowing up a few buildings, nor can such actions be substituted for the political and industrial activities of the working class and its allies. In the secrecy,

restrictions, and difficulties of such conspiratorial actions the advantage is always on the side of the reactionary state.

Nor can the backwardness of a mass movement be compensated for by artificial means. The Barder-Meinhof group, the Weathermen, appear as a middle-class reaction to the frustration and violence of Western society.

But while we do not regard acts of individual terrorism as a substitute to mass action, this does not mean that we are opposed to all acts of terrorism per se. The assassination of individual servants of the bourgeois state - politicians, policemen - does not bring about a change in political power; a Vorster replaces a Verwoerd; the state will always find new men and the apparatus remains intact. YET there are still occasions when such acts serve a positive purpose provided the limitations are understood. The removal of a notorious Security Branch torturer would not prevent his replacement, but it might discourage his successor from indulging in the same extremities; and the assassination of a police informer does not ensure the end of all informers, but it can serve as a useful object lesson. But these are not substitutes to mass action to change the nature of society or overthrow the state. They cannot absolve us from the necessity to involve the people themselves in the struggle against oppression.

What is our attitude, then, to ~~xxx~~ Palestinian geurillas who take, and shoot, hostages, or who invade an international sports gathering? Here I find myself totally sickened by the nauseous hypocrisy of those who lead the chorus of condemnation against the 'terrorists.' We must speak of Vietnam, for to think of terrorism or violence in 'the late bourgeois world' without speaking of Vietnam is meaningless. At the moment when State Secretary Rogers was convening a meeting to discuss 'terrorism', President Nixon was ordering the most pulverising saturation bombing against ~~the~~ a small, largely rural nation, unleashing the most savage terrorism short of nuclear bombardment that the highly developed technology of the United States could achieve. Even the widest cross-section of religious leaders said they refused to accept 'the fabric of

deceit and arrogance woven by the Nixon regime,' and condemned the unleashing 'with vindictive barbarity of the mightiest air force in the world to bomb and bomb again.' Nor has the terrorism ended as the US withdraws its troops. America has equipped its puppets in South Vietnam with the third largest air force in the world, armed with (among other things) napalm; and day by day the devastation of villages and villagers in South Vietnam, the unrelenting terror, continues.

Must we weigh terror against terror? No final balance can ever be made in terms of human lives, but the monstrous inequality of their terrorism against that of small groups driven by total dispossession and despair must be recognised. What constitutes the greater terror: Nixon's release of, and support to, Calley, or the attempt of Palestinians, expelled from their own country, to draw attention to their 'non-existence' at an international sports gathering?

Another point must be emphasised: the nature of the bourgeois world in the ~~xxxxxxx~~ twentieth century. The scale of horrors created by a Hitler and a Nixon is a reflection of the fierceness of the struggle today, and also of the increasing strength of revolutionary forces, requiring greater and greater violence to attempt to control or repress them. The existence of socialist countries and the radical change in the nature of the struggles for national liberation forces the capitalist states to pursue policies resulting in acts that become increasingly cruel, increasingly violent, more deeply corrupt and immoral. In such a world we need a very clear understanding of how we must act, and why; keeping before us not only those immediate and necessary aims, but also of the foundations that are being laid, while we act, for the new society we wish to create.

'Marx makes a radical distinction between human life and animal life because man creates the means by which he lives, his culture, his history and thus gives proof of a capacity for initiative which is his absolute originality. Marxism opens up a horizon where "man is for man the supreme being." If Marx does not take this vision of man as an immediate rule of politics, the reason is that to teach nonviolence is to strengthen established violence, that is

to say, a system of production which makes misery and war inevitable. Still, if one enters into the game of violence, one risks remaining there forever. Marxism's essential task is therefore to seek a violence which transcends itself on the way to the human future.' (3)

Our new generation grows up in the full understanding of the inevitable armed confrontation that lies ahead, and perhaps because of this there are many who tend to romanticise or glorify war and violence. The bearded geurilla, gun slung over back, is a heroic symbol, and rightly so.

But let us remind ourselves that we Marxists, as much as many and more than most, hate violence. We hate war and its consequences, we value human life, we believe in its nurture and not in its destruction.

And it is precisely because we hate violence that we seek most passionately to bring into being, in our own country and everywhere, a society that has no need of violence, no need of violent exploitation, of the violence and the terror of poverty and migratory labour, of resettlement camps and banishment, of starvation wages, of violent domination and violent oppression. We will bring to an end not simply the violence endemic in modern life, but the social relations that give rise to that violence, destroying the instruments of coercion and creating the conditions for humanity to live in freedom and true peace.

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- (1) Christopher Caudwell 'Studies in a Dying Culture.'
 - (2) Lenin 'Revolutionary Adventurism.'
 - (3) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in 'Terror and Marxism', Monthly Review, November 1972.

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