

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND IDEOLOGICAL MYSTIFICATION

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I.

Is political violence, used to try to achieve a liberating social revolution or to redress some grave social injustice in a society at least nominally democratic, ever justified and if so when? Political violence, like violence generally, is in need of very special justification indeed. Bombs maim and kill. Violence gives rise to suffering and acute distress. Violence is plainly an evil and if it is ever justified it must be justified as a choosing of the lesser evil. My argument is that sometimes it is the lesser evil.

When violence is in response to severe and protracted injustice and oppression, when there is extensive and reliable evidence for believing that no non-violent means for correcting the situation will be available in a reasonable length of time and when we have good grounds for believing that the proposed violence will (everything considered) cause less suffering and degradation than the present injustice and oppression is causing, then the course of violence is justified.

It is more difficult to ascertain when these conditions are met than is generally realized, but there clearly are some appalling circumstances where these conditions are met such as the circumstances of life in the regimes of Amin, Macias and Bokassa and the circumstances of life sustained by recent regimes in Chile and Argentina. These are situations in which there is a justification for political violence where it has a reasonable chance of success. There are, of course, many more doubtful cases where persons of moral sensitivity and knowledge may very well deeply disagree. But there are paradigm cases as well. We are not always in a moral bog here.

It is much more difficult to say when, if ever, political violence of a revolutionary sort could be justified in a country that is nominally speaking a democracy. I suspect that if such a justification can be made at all it can only be made if a socialist perspective on society is justified. For such a justification to go through it is necessary but not sufficient to believe that a

exploitative and de-humanizing relations of production and conditions of life. If one believes that class divisions and many of the myriad inequalities that go with them are inevitable or desirable or the least undesirable alternatives, given what one takes to be inescapable social realities, then with those background beliefs, one will, if one is sensible, be against political violence in the bourgeois democracies even when the democracies in question are exploitative, repressive and corrupt and even when the *aim* of the political violence is clearly to transform or radically reform those social orders. Classes and inequalities are taken to be either inevitable or morally necessary. If either belief is true the disruption caused by political violence will achieve little good and will, if it is at all effective, de-stabilize the society and damage the climate of civility. Rational belief in the justifiability of political violence in such societies requires either the well-grounded belief that a qualitatively different social order could reasonably be expected to come into being, partly as a result of the political violence, or a reasonably grounded belief that the circumstances of misery and exploitation are so considerable and the through-the-channels rectification of them so remote that only by a violent reaction to the particular authorities and government can this situation be rectified.

What I think is quite essential for the justification of political violence is the correct belief that (a) significant numbers of people live, quite unnecessarily, in conditions of poverty, exploitation and degradation, (b) that things are unlikely to change significantly without resort to some forms of political violence, and (c) that there is a reasonable chance that a different social order could come into existence in which these conditions would be radically ameliorated if not completely eradicated. These beliefs could hardly be correct beliefs if it is not also correct to believe that a socialism with a human face is a reasonable possibility and that without socialism the different social order mentioned in (c) will not become a reality.

So a socialist perspective is crucial to my argument. Without it one could hardly justify the use of revolutionary violence under certain conditions even

within what formally speaking is a democracy. I do not, of course, intend my argument to have the "character of an in-house party tract." My empirical claims, like all empirical claims, are open to intersubjective assessment and my normative claims and arguments are open to the quite general rational assessment that all normative claims can be given.(1) In those important ways my contentions are not partisan or *parti-pris*, though they are "partisan" in what I would take to be the perfectly harmless way that they argue for a distinctive normative ethical point of view and a certain conception of society. Only if it is correct to believe, as some have (Ryle for example), that philosophy must always be normatively neutral, will it be the case that, simply in setting to argue in the way I have, I will *eo ipso* fall from philosophical grace into partisanship, where that notion connotes (as it does in ordinary usage) bias and irrational or at least non-rational commitment. I have argued elsewhere against such a neutralist conception of philosophy and it is a conception which, rightly or wrongly, is no longer widely held, though its unacknowledged influence still lingers on in actual philosophical practice. My claim is only in a damaging sense partisan if such severe neutralist restrictions on what constitutes proper philosophical activity are justified. Its acceptance does not require an act of faith and if one, for example, thinks socialism is not a morally justifiable form of social organization, one could still ask, if socialism were a rationally and morally superior form of social organization in the way I claim, whether violence, under the circumstances elucidated by me, would be justifiable to achieve this order? I argue that there are circumstances in which it would be. This is a perfectly general argument which can be assessed in the same general way that arguments for mercy killing, abortion and the rightness of always doing what God wills can be argued for; at no point in my argument is there the need for any non-rational commitment to a certain ideological point of view. Moreover, my arguments can be generalized. If some kind of rightist authoritarianism or bourgeois liberalism could be known to be the most morally and humanly appropriate choice among the various forms of life, then we could ask questions, in the same general way, about the justifiability of using violence (including terrorist tactics) for achieving or - which is the more likely situation with such forms of life - sustaining such a social order. Where the

contrast is between moral and non-moral and not between moral and immoral, I agree that the rightist position is a moral one. There are immoral moral codes or doctrines, e.g. the Roman Catholic teaching on abortion and South African doctrine on race. Nothing in my account commits me to what I have elsewhere argued is false, namely the claim that all morality is class morality or that there are no general moral conclusions.

There is such a thing as institutionalized violence and in societies such as ours, particularly when we consider our relation to the rest of the world, it is pervasive and pernicious. If there is a legitimate State or social order - morally legitimate and not just legally so - force of a certain degree and certain kind, used by it in certain circumstances is not violence but a morally legitimate use of force. If there is no such thing as a legitimate social order then, of course, there can be no genuine distinction between force and violence and the concept of violence, as Wolff consistently argues, becomes an utterly ideological one.(2) However, there can be such a thing as legitimate authority and in a genuine socialist order there would be rules and regulations expressive of that legitimate authority. This is all, of course, arguable, as the disputes turning around Wolff's *Defense of Anarchism* attest.(3)

II.

My concern with the justifiability of political violence is fastened neither on the agent's nor the sufferer's point of view, though role reversal and universalizability is assumed. It turns rather on what can be justified from a morally concerned but dispassionate general moral point of view, i.e. what a rational moral agent would be prepared to commit himself to in a position of reflective equilibrium.(4) In trying to consider general social policies from such a point of view, would the use of violence ever be justified and if so under what circumstances would it be justified? Any justification would have to meet the test of an acceptance by rational moral agents who would be prepared to accept a role reversal between sufferer and a revolutionary. That is to say, a moral revolutionary must be prepared to acknowledge that if he were the sufferer instead, the same type act, now directed against him, would nevertheless be justified; while the moral sufferer must be prepared to acknowledge the rightness of the revolutionaries' action, this does not at all

mean or imply that he must *want* to be victimized.

I agree that there are circumstances in which the employment of revolutionary violence is genuinely tragic. (This gives the lie to the fantasy of some literary critics that tragedy is impossible in our time.) In responsibly reflecting on the justifiability of violence, we cannot but consider the underlying cause or ideal in the name of which some people will be victimized. Victimizing people is always at least *prima facie* wrong; indeed it is terribly wrong. Precisely because of this it always requires very strong justification, and this involves considering very carefully the underlying cause or ideal involved and the chances of its attainment. In that respect there is no sensible examination of the justifiability of violence in the abstract. And sometimes when we have carried out this examination to the full and taken the whole matter to heart, we will conclude that there is, morally speaking, no avoiding these terrible wrongs and that we must just choose - with all the agony that brings - the lesser evil.

III.

If the 'end of ideology' theorists are near to the mark, there are such considerable grounds for suspicion of all causes and ideals and underlying social orientations - anything that looks like a world-view - that arguments attempting to justify revolutionary violence will seem radically mistaken and in some circumstances even dangerously irresponsible. But this very end of ideology stance is itself very problematic and it very well could be irresponsibly conservative. We must recognize, as Alasdair MacIntyre has well argued, that such an end of ideology stance fits hand and glove with the world-view of the secular liberal - a world-view that is usually not even acknowledged or recognized by its participants to be a world-view.⁽⁵⁾ In such a view of the world, as MacIntyre points out, "there are only individual lives and history has no meaning;" rather secular liberals see themselves as people in various circumstances with rival and competing preferences and alternative and conflicting valuations. On such a world-view, we are finally faced with arbitrary choices between these alternative evaluations. Good and evil, for such secular liberals, "have to be weighed on a scale the balance of which is in the end arbitrary."

In Western bourgeois societies such a view of the world is so pervasive and

has such a hold that it is hardly seen by people in such countries as a world-view with alternatives, but is typically taken simply as what it is said to be, reasonable and realistic. Where this way of thinking - the ideology of 'the end of ideology' - has such a hold, any argument attempting to justify revolutionary violence is easily dismissed as 'dangerously utopian' and/or irrational without ever getting its day in court. One important aspect of MacIntyre's work is to show that to be such a secular liberal is not just to take what is incontestably 'the point of view of reason' but it is to take a contestable point of view which is but one point of view among quite different contestable alternatives.

I have assumed, as over against the secular liberal, another of those not uncontentious alternatives (to use MacIntyre's apt phrase). For a deeper and more fundamental philosophical justification of what I have argued, such a case for such an alternative world-view would need to be made out. I do not believe that it is unreasonable to think that such justification is possible. I cannot, of course, undertake this here, but must be content, for the nonce, with the reminder that the principled philosophical rejection of all such general normative arguments also rests on a not uncontentious world-view, namely, the world-view of secular liberalism.

Much talk of political violence, particularly in right-wing and liberal circles, is ideological mystification often, wittingly or unwittingly, politically inspired. When conservative political theorists such as Sidney Hook play down the notion of institutional violence, stress the importance of the distinction between force and violence - the government, of course, using legitimate force and Left revolutionaries engaging in violence - and lament the way violence in our society 'undermines the democratic process,' they are in effect arousing the emotions of many people in such a way that their thinking is deflected from raising questions about who really is justified in using coercion in a society, given that on all sides violence actually exists.(6) In the work of such conservative theorists, the manifold forms of violence of the capitalist order, with the government as one of its instruments, gets neatly concealed or re-described as a legitimate use of force - begging all the central issues about what is and is not legitimate and how this is established. Counter-force against institutional violence is simply ruled out as a morally

defensible move by linguistic legerdemain and the central *practical normative problem* concerning violence, becomes how to *prevent* it, while deep problems about justification get trivialized by diversionary talk about "dramatic terrorism" or "theatrical terrorism." We all know that violence is an evil not lightly to be engaged in, but we all also know, or at least ought to know, that violence is extremely pervasive and is inflicted by many different sources. What we need to know is when, if ever, it is justified. Are we to applaud Kissinger-inspired terror in Chile while condemning its use by the National Liberation Front? Should we make the reverse judgement? Or should we cry a plague on both houses and reject all claims to the justified use of violence to attain social ends or protect political commitments? And if we do that, is that not in effect acquiescing in a repressive *status quo* with its massive and diverse forms of institutional violence? (When we consider this last question it is crucial to consider not only the bourgeois democracies but the whole world and particularly the relation of these democracies to the rest of the world.)

Starting with the moral truism - though I take it to be a truism which is true - that all other things being equal, non-violent means are preferable tools of social change to violent ones, we can reasonably proceed to the claim that there are certain determinate circumstances, even in what at least formally speaking are democracies, where the use of such violent means for social and humane ends is justified. The problem of violence (including terrorism) raises no distinctive moral problems *of principle*. It is possible, is it not, that it is the work of ideological apology to make it appear that there is such a problem of principle? Some philosophers have been trapped in the ideological milieu in which they work and live. It is important to consider whether those who think there is some great issue of principle are either confused or are being willfully mystificatory. Much of the popular and semi-popular talk about violence averts attention from the pervasive coerciveness of society and insinuates falsely that the sometimes violent actions of revolutionaries and radicals are different in *kind* from those of the government and are, simply because they are the kinds of acts they are, unprincipled and morally unacceptable. This has the effect of distracting attention from the merits of the revolutionary socialists' or radicals' cause

and the actions they take in support of that cause. Such ideological mystification needs to be unmasked.

A tolerably careful observer who travels through Latin America and who reads (say) Sven Lindqvist's perceptive account of conditions there and reads the interpretive writings of Salvador Allende and Carlose Marighela, will, not unnaturally, conclude that the violent oppression of the masses there is such as to make a commitment to revolution to achieve socialism the moral duty of a humane and informed man, where there is some reasonable chance of its success.(7)

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FOOTNOTES

1. See my "Moral Truth," *Studies in Moral Philosophy*, Nicholas Rescher (ed.), (Basil Blackwell's Ltd.: Oxford, 1968), my "Class Conflict, Marxism and the Good Reasons Approach," *Social Praxis*, Vol. II, No. 2 (1974), and my *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Chapter 26.

2. Robert Paul Wolff, "On Violence," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXVI, (October, 1969). See the response by Bernard Gert in the same issue and see as well Robert L. Holmes, "The Concept of Physical Violence in Moral and Political Affairs," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fall, 1973).

3. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) and (among others) Jeffrey H. Reiman, *In Defense of Political Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and Tom L. Beauchamp and Ken Witkowski, "A Critique of Pure Anarchism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. II, No. 4 (June, 1973).

4. This conception is articulated in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), Chapter 1.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre, "On the Limits of the Use of Force in Modern Warfare," Unpublished, and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1971).

6. I am much indebted to Professor Richard Schmitt for certain aspects

of the argument I make here and in the next two paragraphs.

7. Sven Lindqvist, *The Shadow: Latin America Faces the Seventies* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1972), Salvador Allende, *Chile's Road to Socialism* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1973) and Carlos Marighela, *For the Liberation of Brazil* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1971).