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Non-Violence as a Reading of History

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IN BREAKING AWAY FROM ELECTORAL PARTY POLITICS we — in the Committee of 100 in particular — began to explore the idea of non-violent direct action and experiment in its practice. There was at the outset no agreed elaborate theory as to what it was all about. The discovery of new ideological qualities has proceeded as the complement of practical application.

There have been two widely differing approaches to non-violence and to date they have been able to co-exist in the Committees of 100 because in practice they yielded the same conclusions about particular actions at particular moments.

In the first approach non-violence is seen as a moral principle and in the second as a necessary expedient.

In this as in other subjects a great deal of confusion arises out of varied uses of the same terms. It will be as well, therefore, to attempt definitions. These may serve in themselves to indicate the nature of the present problem.

Morality is the sum of the standards or principles by which we distinguish right from wrong. Its foundation can be human-

ist, i.e. derived from human experience alone, or religious, i.e. derived in the last analysis from a source outside humanity — God. Given either derivation the ultimate standards are goodwill, creativity, love. It follows that whatever is in positive accord with that valuation is good and whatever contrary to it, bad. Thus violence, the negation of reciprocity in human relations, is bad, to be avoided and replaced by a positive kind of non-violence that admits and demands of communication between hostile parties to the end of resolving the causes of their antagonism. Violence closes the possibilities of creative relationships, non-violence re-opens them. Non-violence becomes the way into the future as means and end.

Expedience is the theory and practice of doing whatever circumstances seem to require in order to achieve a certain limited result in the short term. In the current context of direct action, expedient non-violence is a necessary requirement — so the theory runs —in face of large numbers of police backed where need be by the Armed Forces. To think and act otherwise is to invite disaster. But this conclusion arises not from principle but from a recognition of the comparative weakness of the movement for the time being.

Non-violence is therefore, it is argued, an expedient by which the movement is built until such time as it is strong enough to meet the state on its own terms (i.e. violence) if and when necessary.

The constructive side of the argument from expedience, it seems to me, is that its advocates are much more aware than the others of the problems of the state and of the need to challenge it directly by action on a vast scale and at a non-parliamentary political level— thus the thinking on syndicalism, anarchism, workers' councils, industrial self-administration, the political general strike and mass international insurrection.

The philosophers of expedience tend to subscribe to a theory of revolution that includes violence on the ground that to think

otherwise is to be utterly unrealistic. There has never been, so they say, a successful non-violent revolution — nor likely to be.

On the other hand non-violence as a principle leads those who subscribe to it to affirm that very thing — the idea of non-violent revolution. There is always a first time, they say, especially in the unprecedented circumstances of possible nuclear war.

Whether it be conceived of with or without violence the concept 'revolution' needs to be defined again in relation to its new context.

If we continue proceeding in the direction of war and none of the existing means of political remedy avails to stop the process, then we either accept war and the probable death of hundreds of millions, including ourselves, or we step outside existing political forms to create new ones to supplant the old.

Political revolution in the sense in which the word is used here is a change in the very nature of the state and a change which passes the point of no return on a single day. The classic example for us is the overthrow of the personal monarchy of Charles I and its replacement by a new authority representative of the propertied classes. This came to a head on December 6th, 1648. Just as the English Revolution was not carried out within the constitution of the old state so a future anti-war revolution in this country in the context of threatened or actual war will be as extra-parliamentary as Cromwell's was extra-monarchical.

But to return to the main theme … The division of non-violent direct actionists into two groups, those of principle and those of expedience, is a calculated over-simplification aimed at attempting to make certain essentials clear. It is probably the case that many people subscribe to an empirical or common-sense view of non-violence and see it as being right whatever the differing grounds may be. But muddling through is not good enough any more.

1961 saw the birth of comparatively large scale direct action against the state, collective responsibility, 'open politics' and the sit- down. So far 1962 has produced decentralisation and the beginnings of industrial and international action. What next?

We have now reached a difficult stage in the development of the movement when we are required to discover new ideas and devise new practices if we are to grow.

Whatever we come up with, it seems to me that we have immediately to do some further thinking about our theory of non-violence. Now it is no longer enough to bridge the gap between the two schools of thought by agreement over what we do at particular demonstrations. the lowest common denominator formula tends to reduce us to mere activism — the sit-down for its own sake — a cul-de-sac if there ever was one.

If the two contrasting outlooks cannot be synthesised then relations between direct actionists will inevitably tend to break down. There are signs enough of this already. The we-and-they situation will spawn distrust, cliques and factions and a return to the conspiratorial method that is the death of non-violence, the heart of the new politics.

It may well be that there is a more advanced concept of non-violence in which the two previous conceptions can merge without loss of their essentials. The new conception might be historical non- violence.

History, properly understood, is the study of the future in the light of the past. We are part of the past-present-future process, its products and its agents. We were born into a society that was not of our making, but also born with the power to understand how it has been made and with that power to remake it in future. Each one of us makes history every day whether he or she knows it or not, or likes it or not.

If however we get together, in the light of an agreed reading of the history and probabilities of war, to decide what shall or shall not be done by the state and its armed forces — interna-

with which we educate in non-violence really depends on the speed with which we can educate ourselves. It requires both action and analysis.'

The point is taken. Not only is it true that some who claim to subscribe to non-violence as a principle fail to practice it, it is also conversely true that others who treat non-violence as an expedient (on the grounds that it is unrealistic to hope that it will ever succeed) will themselves practice non-violence as a way of life.

So where are we? Not far, I suggest, from where we have always been — being forced to acknowledge that things are not always what they seem to be, and that a man's philosophy is more to be read from his deeds than heard from his tongue.

tionally as well as internally — we shall be making history at the highest level. But we cannot do this unless we have as an initial minimum an added concept of the kind of society we propose shall replace the present coercive one.

It ought to be possible for us to reach agreement about the essential nature of that society. First, it will be without war. Second, it will be without want. Third, it will be without classes.

Utopia has ceased to be utopian. It is on the agenda of the second half of the twentieth century. Its material prerequisites are already with us. Technologically, in industry and agriculture, we are within mere decades of the total-supply-exceeding-total-demand situation.

What is lacking is a theory and practice of human relations that matches the achievements of science and technology.

Between 1920 and 1956 political science stood still. Then came the Hungarian and Egyptian revulsions against empire; political thinking, suspended for a whole generation, started again. Came the Afro-Asian revolutions and in Europe, the Far East and America the new power of non-violence began to emerge. In 1962 we are well past the beginning.

Historical non-violence requires us to deliberate the kind of society we are going to create and then to embody its values in what we do here and now within our own ranks and in our relationships with people outside those ranks. We shall challenge and openly infiltrate the universe of war to the point of defeating it and becoming the architects of its opposite.

Present policemen, present members of the Armed Forces and present employees of the Establishment will be as much part of the future classless society as ourselves. We work to win them over now. Ultimately we want the overwhelming majority of them to be on our side, and the experience of non-violence to date indicates that this is not wishful thinking. In face of the incorrigibles we need to be equally but non-violently incorrigible! Non-violence is the way to effect the

disintegration of the means of war in the very hands of those who would use them.

Nothing can stop a people on the move. But people will not move without the inspiration of a simple and great idea. The restraining factor at the moment — over and above the success of 'deterrent' propaganda — is fear of the unknown and possibly violent aspects of sweeping change. If the case here argued is a valid one, the concept of historical non-violence is the new catalyst.

Our recognition of the pull of the future on the present is more important for us and for humanity than propaganda about the horrors of war. Since we live under the conditions of continuous war, peace is not something to be defended — it is to be newly created as an unprecedented condition of human kind.

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Someone who is well known to the readers of ANARCHY saw the script of this article so far and commented: 'I would question the historical accuracy of the statement that political thought stood still in the age of Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Gandhi, Tawney, Stalin, Mao, etc …!'

I think the answer is, that in the period in question, political thought rather than advancing, revolved round a fixed point in a new and bewildering fashion, and in certain respects actually turned back. If standing still can be equated with not making progress, political thought in that sense, it seems to me, did stand still.

This requires to be demonstrated by reference to the actual cases of the people mentioned. But first something more needs to be said about this expression 'political thought'.

All thought about the nature of government and people in relation to government is political thought. This will continue to be the case so long as the state itself survives. With the passing of the state political thought will itself pass. Thought will be emancipated by the demise of its adjective. What I am con-

rather than his. It seems that what he put forward as a principle other people proceeded to use as a successful tactic — and with success, discarded it.

Had Tawney not been so much alone his example might have proved my thesis wrong. He was the middle strand of the red thread of hope. To socialist politicians he was the voice of conscience (to be heard on Sundays) and to intelligent humanists who had abandoned politics as a dirty business he was the embodiment of intelligence, vision and integrity. There were others, Russell and E. M. Forster for example, but Tawney was a student of the state as they were not and was therefore much more nearly a political thinker. He became the mentor of the radicals who were not-of-the-machine and not part of any large-scale organisation until CND.

So I adhere to my case. The new creative political thinking we are now beginning to produce and round which we are actually organising direct action is a post '56 manifestation. There were significant suggestions of it in Gandhi, Tawney and Brailsford but their day, like that of D. H. Lawrence, followed their deaths. There was also Caudwell.

To return, in conclusion, to the original subject matter …

I have dealt with the conflict between non-violence as principle and non-violence as tactic and suggested what seems to me to be the deeper and synthetising concept of non-violence as a reading of history. But it is too simple to present the two schools of thought (as they are at present) as though each was an internally consistent expression of a unifying idea.

Having seen my draft, Robert Milsom wrote: 'the real conflict within non-violence is how to build a non-violent movement with a majority of non non-violent supporters (i.e. those who accept the idea of non-violence as morally good, but who do not naturally adopt non-violent attitudes in response to provocation. These people are not using non-violence as a tactic, but as an experiment in self- education) so the speed

Mao Tse Tung seized upon one single new truth, one that was and is of value only to countries still struggling to get out of the Middle Ages. It is that a peasant revolution is now possible, given enough by way of twentieth century techniques and a considerable body of professional revolutionaries recruited from students. In consequence of this discovery Mao has literally become the war-lord to end all war-lords in China. He needs war as much as Khrushchev and Kennedy but for rather different reasons.

It used to be an axiom of historical theory 'that all peasant revolutions fail'. It used to be true! This is what Mao has changed, but he says little to modern Europe beyond the old truth that once a people have been roused they can perform miracles — until they discover they have been betrayed by their leaders. This discovery the Chinese people are now in the process of making.

The truth about their own power, revealed to the Chinese people, is the same as that that was discovered by the New Model Army in seventeenth century England. If the Chinese experience was to lead some Englishman to read Brailsford's book — that would be something!

Gandhi's thought, like any other, has to be judged by its effect on thinking people and on practice. Of what real consequence is it in India today? Reports suggest that it is slight indeed. To what extent did his distinctive ideas contribute to the political freedom of India? One too easily forgets the part played by the mutiny of the Indian Navy, the threat of war on the British if they did not go their way in peace, and the horror of the war between India and Pakistan. Since Gandhi's day dozens of African states have won their independence moved by the idea of self-determination, a notion as old and as real as the hills.

It may well be that the creative part of Gandhi's thinking— on non-violence (not new of course, cf. Winstanley and the Anabaptists before him) — is to come into its own in our time

cerned about in this article is creative political thought — the kind of thing we have to do now whilst we remain within the context of the state in order to rid ourselves of that context. Or to put it another way — new thinking is to be found in the current discovery of ideas and practices that serve to enable us to extend the frontiers of human freedom towards ultimate delivery from material and political restraint. Over against this is its restrictive opposite — ideas and practices that constitute mere elitist adaptation to changing circumstances — with the substance of servitude unchanged.

Hitler and Mussolini were avowed terrorists before they became heads of state. Violence was the foundation of their thinking. As heads of state they nationalised their view of violence, and as the heads of warring states they internationalised it.

There must have been some special reason why this happened in Germany and Italy (and Japan) and not elsewhere. It is not hard to find.

The rulers of Germany and Italy, and that proportion (a high one) of their subjects who accepted their rule, came on the imperial scene in their nation-state capacity hundreds of years later than their neighbours. The earlier nation-states had been established and had built their empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England, France, Turkey and Austria.

By 1920 Germany and Italy had had only half a century of national and imperial existence, and fascism was one of the inevitable anomalies that arise from uneven historical development. Performance of the imperial operation hundreds of years late called for an irrational savagery alien to post-parliamentary understanding. Fascism was a form of religio-politics, essentially medieval, propounded by a priesthood that elevated its historic defence mechanisms to the nth degree by the fullest exploitation of modern techniques and methods of communication. These mechanisms were those of

the Inquisition i.e. forced acceptance of absolute authority and the physical destruction of critics.

In the lifetime of a single generation Germany and Italy telescoped three centuries of the imperial process. They and the world suffered accordingly. But now that they have done it they have arrived in the twentieth century.

A new form of authoritarian tyranny threatens mankind today but it will not be fascism.

If these generalisations about the historical nature of fascism are valid it will be apparent that from the point of view of man as a political animal there was nothing new in the thinking of Hitler and Mussolini. Just as individuals have personal compulsions so societies have historical ones. They cannot, on their own, jump historical stages of development. They require to work through them; and such thinking that that requirement necessitated, in the cases of Germany and Italy, was epitomised in the thinking of Hitler and Mussolini. Short cuts into the future called for philosophies of violence. They provided them.

The case of Stalin was essentially similar. He and his fellow terrorists dragged Russia out of the fifteenth century and into the eighteenth. There the Soviet Union stands today. In the name of Karl Marx, Lenin did Cromwell's job. Then in Lenin's name Stalin performed his Earl of Chatham. What else was possible? We can only understand Khrushchev once we appreciate that he still keeps the Bastille. We can only understand Russia if we are prepared to go back to the forgotten, and exercise ourselves in historical rather than contemporary thought.

In the new and remarkable A Key to Soviet Politics Roger Pethybridge puts this same thesis in another way — with even greater back-dating: 'To the political historian Soviet events present much the same problems as medieval history. In both fields important sources are lacking altogether, while others are of a fragmentary or unreliable nature. Similarly the ideologies of the two eras are alien to the thought processes of present-day historians from the non-Communist orbit. The

documentation of the ideological struggle between Stalin and Trotsky appears hardly less bizarre than the commentaries of the medieval Church on the quarrel between Pope and Holy Roman Emperor.' (p.9).

Nora Beloff has said of F.D.R.: 'Despite Roosevelt's New Deal emergency measures, America completely emerged from the slump of the 'thirties only in the boom of the Second World War.' (Observer).

I think it could be shown that this understates the case. It was war's old hat and not Roosevelt's 'new' thinking that saved the political economy of America. What is it that counts in America today — Roosevelt's thought or 'the industrial-military complex'?

The notion of state intervention in industry and the social services for political reasons is in practice at least as old as Bismarck and before his day, as an idea at least, had vintage antecedents. (Lest my fellow historians bite my head off at this point may I say that I take mercantilist practices to belong to an earlier order of things and therefore not directly comparable. The antecedents referred to here are Paine, Owen, Fourier …).

It was Keynes who extended the notion of state intervention to industry in general and in relation to the trade cycle. In the authoritarian context this had already been done by the fascists and Stalin but Keynes was doing it in the setting of non-authoritarian circumstances. This made Keynes not a creative thinker (as defined earlier) but the supreme architect of elitist adaptation. His work can be read as 'Lessons of Advantage to Capitalism following upon the Study of Marx and Lenin and The Economic Consequences of the Peace.'

(If we have to have labels — political science, like any other requires formulae and a mode of identification — it would seem useful to regard the period 1914–1939 as that of state capitalism and the period from 1939 to the present day as that of the emergence of international state capitalism.)