VIOLENCE, DISRUPTION AND COERCION: NOT HERE, NOT NOW

Quentin L. Quade

I claim no novelty for the following reflections on violence and coercion. Certainly there is no new data presented here. I offer, rather, simply a discussion of values and *how* to value certain things, and even in this sense I doubt that newness will appear. This, however, is no apology. For regarding value and how to value, I am increasingly convinced that much of our responsibility consists in rediscovery rather than discovery.

This hoary commentary is brought forth because, after some probing of violence-disruption-coercion in the United States, I have decided that the major points that need to be made — the points of principle and value — have been made and re-made many, many times for many, many ages. To illustrate, let me state that my reflections on violence-disruption-coercion have suggested that society needs to rediscover and reapply such maxims as these: men and men's activities should be judged *on balance*, rather than in isolation; men are prone to error, quite apart from any evil intent; any humanly attainable freedom is necessarily relative; potential human acts must be judged with an eye to the alternatives — not many points are scored simply by noting the corruption of the "present" or the "system," but only when the indictment is accompanied by some sketch of the better to come; the fallibilities of reason as the basis for human acts is no compelling argument for the abandonment of reason, unless its superior alternative can in some fashion be shown; the democratic bargain has always included and must always include a willingness to lose — not everything but lose nonetheless — as well as win.

Old precepts needing new connections, new applications and new demonstrations — to present these as pertinent to a discussion of contemporary violence is, obviously, to present the conclusions rather than the argument. It is time, then, to look to the argument.

The violence that concerns me is the violence men do to men, and the aspect of such violence which I want to explore is the coerciveness implicit in it. Violence is, among other things, an attempt to coerce men,

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an attempt at forcing an action on men. Thus, the essential meaning I am laying on violence is its negation of the free human act. By free human act I mean one chosen when I might practically have chosen another, or one I choose when my own reason, through some system of argument, has led me to it.

This notion of free act suggests that *tendencies* or *inclinations* to do one thing rather than another are not coercive. A case may be useful. I have this problem: which of several possible routes to take driving to work. If I know the goods I seek in doing this thing (e.g., to get there fast and to get there safely); and I know the characteristics of the alternative routes; and I put the two together; then a tendency has been set in train which I will follow, probably. By caprice I could choose the longer, less safe route, but practically I will not if, in fact, the only values I have pertinent to the issue are speed and safety. Reason binds me if I am reasonable, but I call this neither violence nor coercion — rather, I am freely following my own judgment.

By contrast, coercion as I am defining it, is an attempt to induce an action in another party by some power or force or leverage other than the strength of argument. One may think, perhaps, of the difference between Socrates and Hitler. The barrel of a gun is not strength of argument, though it clearly represents strength and it clearly can induce in others actions desired by its wielder.

Violence as coercive inducement of acts from others, defined as broadly as above, can occur in relations among persons, groups, nations, or between groups and civil authority. War, for example, is a form of such violence and coercion in general. Like war, violence and coercion impress me as always being ugly. They represent a dehumanization, a movement away from the human good. I would tend to define that human good as the maximizing of human freedom and responsibility, on the grounds of a Christ-informed belief in the individual person as valuable. This presumed person-value seems to me testified to by the fact that each person can make a difference in the universe, the condition being his capacity to act freely on the basis of his own best judgments. Violence and coercion represent the antithesis of this capacity and are

accordingly ugly, though, like war, they may be the good to do in some situations.

But it is only *political* violence and coercion which I am discussing here. And under the umbrella of political violence I will look only at violence in an institutionally democratic system, and specifically at the violence, disruption and coercion employed by persons and groups not representing official authority, and aimed at social policies or structures. I am well aware that the term "political violence" has been applied to a variety of things which may occur in a democratic society, including the real violence officialdom may bring to bear against non-official persons and groups. Today there is a widespread notion of systemic violence, exemplified by a statement of one of the working groups of the National Council of Churches in the fall of 1967: "Violence in our land is inherent in value structures and social processes which the Church itself undergirds and participates in as a social institution. The violence which permeates these structures and processes we shall call 'systemic violence.' " *De facto* segregation is such a policy or process, and such things are often portrayed as reasons for others to resort to violence against the "system." I think it is necessary to find another name for such things, not because in any sense they are tolerable, but just to preserve some language and conceptual integrity.

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How are we to value political violence defined as above? When is it good to do? Political systems exist, among other reasons, to provide authoritative decisions for society precisely when men cannot voluntarily decide matters of dispute among themselves. And, we need to note, the matters which politics typically decides are matters of value, of alternative visions and interpretations of what the human good is, here, now.

Implicit in this notion of politics is the understanding that force inheres in any political system, force in the sense of the physical capacity to settle an issue. The issues of politics concern choices about which men care, the disagreements are serious and often irreconcilable, and no matter how much accommodation may be made there are finally "winners" and "losers."

In this view of political problems, there is implicit one of the classic definitions of the state: namely that the state is the monopolist of the means of force and violence. That is, in order that violence may be removed as a method for acting in other social arenas, it is held monopolistically by the political order.

It is not possible to say of political systems that some have force and violence in them while others do not. They all do. But one can distinguish among them in terms of the completeness of the political monopoly on the means of violence, and in terms of the incidence, great or small, of violence, disruption and coercion in the political operation.

Looking at modern democracies in these terms, one may say of them that their governments tend to have a relatively complete monopoly of the means of force and coercion, and also that they tend to be relatively non-violent and non-coercive in their normal modes of operation. Regarding the second point, we would note, of course, that democratic forms set out to create a relationship of responsibility between officials and citizens, and that such relationships, to the extent that they are real, augur against the arbitrary and the coercive in governmental action. But we would note also, I think, that the relative non-coerciveness of modern democracies is significantly to be explained in Rousseauist terms, i.e., that the citizenry of such polities tend to be self-limiting — to accept the desirability of community and system continuance as a good which limits them in their pursuit of other goods.

Such societies like to describe themselves as "free," in the sense that their citizens can freely choose much of what they do. And, indeed, they *are* free in this sense, relatively speaking. But of course they are not free in opposition to *order* — they are relatively free in large part exactly because they are *self*-ordered. Such societies — I am thinking of Britain and Sweden, for example — arrive almost at the *tendency* situation I noted at the outset, as opposed to the condition of *imposed order* of, e.g., the USSR *circa* 1937. And in such societies the model for change is the democratic-argumentative model. Issues are to be surfaced, examined, argued and ultimately resolved through an opinion-gathering mechanism such as formal voting, consensus, and so on. Decision still must occur; not all will agree; but all or nearly all will accept, either because of their prior agreement about the value of sustaining the system or, if worse comes to worse, because of implicit awareness of the force possessed by political authority.

Of course, we know better than early democratic and liberal theorists the imperfections of the democratic-argumentative model. We know something of class interest and vested interest in general and something of mass lethargy, all of which are obstructions to sweet reason as a force for social change. Darwin, Marx, and Freud, among others, have taught us much about the kind of thing man is, the way he decides, and the incompleteness of argument's command. With their help we have come to appreciate that the *romantic* view of the democratic-argumentative model can have no currency.

But I would suggest that the model's virtue can still

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zens who have not lost faith in the basic system. The reason for this is that in such a system, any and all have a basic claim *to be heard,* on the general principle of the value resident in them. But there is on the face of it no reason for them to be heard *specially.* There is on the part of the disrupter neither a self-evident wisdom nor a self-evident virtue which can compel others. They share with all society's members the lack of socially authorized right to obstruct or coerce. Thus within the democratic-argumentative society, perpetrators of violent and disruptive actions are likely to find favor only with those who have concluded that the present is so bad it needs to be destroyed — and I think this appropriate.

But this raises an interesting problem for the violent and the disruptive in the democratic-argumentative society. If most people oppose violence and disruption because they are *not* anti-system, then those who are violent and disruptive cannot take refuge by claiming to act for "the people." The people in such a system have the power to change the system's policies if those policies become antithetical to "the people." If not directly commissioned by "the people," then those who are violent seemingly must assume a super-stature of some sort, an elitist and virtue-endowing status from which they know the "right" and what "the people would really want if they but knew" — rather as Stalin, when Bolshevik Commissar for Nationalities in 1918, could suppress the Ukrainian revolution because he *knew* the Ukrainian uprising could not *actually* be the working of "the people."

The Bolsheviks claimed in 1917-18 to speak for the people. There is no rational way to say they did, but neither did anyone else, nor could the people speak for themselves. Such a situation, I suppose, invites people to presume to speak and act for "the people" — but the democratic-argumentative system is not such a situation. It would seem not to be, in any case, unless one has concluded that what *appears* to be a democratic-argumentative system really is not. A Marxist view of politics as simply superstructural would produce such a conclusion, as would perhaps some theory of ultimate manipulation, for example, advanced stage "military-industrial complex" categories.

Thus, if the social structure is open, in some admittedly relative but reasonable sense, social response to violence and disruption is likely to be and in my judgment should be to oppose it, argue against it, and suppress it if need be. This is likely to happen and should happen, I would say, precisely because the violence and disruption are rightly seen to be coercive in character, the antithesis of freedom. Obviously, the more constructive social companion to such a posture of opposition and suppression must be to recognize social

discontents early and to seek their resolution — both because of the person-value we rightly expect the system to recognize and because of the contribution such pacific resolution will make to continued social good order.

Just as obviously, the more constructive *personal* companion to this needs to be a significant examination of the relationship of self and other selves *to* a social order, a probing for the root that self-realization and perfecting freedom have in a regular, predictable, and relatively benign social structure.

To the extent the social-political system is unresponsive to the intense needs of the community's components; and to the extent that individuals within the democratic-argumentative system refuse to place on themselves the harness of self-restraint; to that extent violence and disruption are likely to occur, and their repression to follow. If one envisions both unhappy dynamics growing over time, one will likely encounter a point at which the relatively non-coercive democratic-argumentative system is transformed into another, different political system, overtly authoritarian in character.

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Thus, on the basis of my understanding of the coercive implications of violence and disruption, and on the basis of my conviction that change is in fact possible through present structures, I cannot see how I could counsel for myself or others the path of violence and disruption. It is important to understand that this is no attempt to pass moral judgment on the subjective virtue of the perpetrator of violence and disruption. It is, however, a critique of his actions. Moreover, this is a judgment about violence and disruption as things being *contemplated.* I am most certainly not saying that one cannot scan history and find violent and disruptive acts which on balance have been instruments of virtue and social progress. One can find many such, though I suspect relatively few in the democratic-argumentative systems as compared to non-democratic ones. Nor am I saying that the future will not see disruptive acts which, in hindsight and on reflection, will be judged humanly productive. But I am saying that violent and disruptive acts in the democratic-argumentative system cannot be legitimized before the fact as a category of right actions. I am saying, then, that *if* one believes he is in the democratic-argumentative situation, he should say to another who asks when is it right to do violence and disruption: never.

I have one thing more to say. It is possible to view much of today's violence and disruption as expressions of reformist energy — gone astray, in my view,

but potentially fruitful. And it is possible to offer an alternative path for this energy.

If, as I have suggested, there is no viable alternative to the democratic-argumentative system, and if violence and disruption threaten the maintenance of such a system and are accordingly not valid within it, still there may be steps to take for those with strong antipathy to the *status quo*. I refer to the serious business of serious reform.

There is in such systems, as Camus noted, the potential for upward change without destruction. There can, of course, be change in policies, but more important there can be fundamental changes of structure. It is precisely this potential for change which is the ultimate reason for saying one cannot today in the U.S. rightly conclude to violence and disruption. One of the reasons I personally have so little sympathy for many doers of violence and disruption is that I see so little they have done by way of system reform. The abandonment has been too quick and too easy. I am struck among other things by the incongruity of nineteen-year olds offering their impatience as a justification for disruptive action. Indeed, if sometime someone sets out to develop a Theory of Just Impatience, I suspect he may take it as axiomatic that no one under thirty can be impatient justly.

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I would myself and do myself say that the central institutions of political act in the U.S. are outmoded and crucially flawed. Indeed, the policies of this nation which *seem most to stimulate violence and disruption* tend, in my judgment, to reflect the flawed political structure from which they come. (*One* discussion of institutional problems is to be found in Quentin L. Quade and Thomas J. Bennett, *American Politics: Effective and Responsible?* American-Van Nostrand, 1969.)

And the point is that, though difficult, reform of a serious character is possible within the confining agreements of the American polity. But, of course, to talk of reform of institutions is to talk about a course of action established through several fairly arduous steps: first there must be the perception of serious problems and imperfections deriving from the system. Second, there must be a thought-out place to go — the better arrangement needs to be seen. Third, there must be study of how to get there — of the political stages, the forces that must be mustered. At that point, one can talk seriously about reform. If he decides the pieces fit, he may then start to work in building support for change.

Where has been this kind of effort among the doers of violence and disruption?

HYPOCRISIES UNMASKED

The following editorial by Michael Novak is reprinted in its entirety from the May 12 issue of Christianity and Crisis.

The radical protests in one after another American university have rendered the empire naked. Almost everyone is embarrassed. Under intense pressure, opposing myths about our society are passionately set forth without their customary clothing. The "end of ideology" has ended; freedom has begun.

The radical left is driven by a split between progressive labor militants and gentler SDS factions who recall the humanism of the Port Huron Statement. Yet even the most gentle have been driven to sickness and despair by their experiences these last three years. "Moderate" students are divided between those who concede the good points raised by the radicals, but still believe that "reason" and "democratic procedures" operate in the universities; and those who rush from fraternity houses to drive the protesters from their sit-ins, or who desire still stronger police retaliation.

The moderates accuse the radicals of infringing on the liberties of the majority. The radicals retort: Can't you see that the liberties of the majority are more apparent than real, infringed on every day by an armed government and by fatally deficient democratic procedures?

The moderates say that they are a majority. They like the Establishment, on whose bottom rungs their feet are firmly placed, the way it is. The radicals retort: Can't you see that the Establishment has bought you off, that you have been channelled into this place, and are being taught precisely those skills the Establishment most wishes you to have? And that other people are dying from the narrowness and inhumanity of those skills?

Newspapers speak of "Reform by Bully." The *New York Times* editorialized on April 26: "The nation's leading universities have shown themselves slow learners of a fundamental lesson: Reforms accomplished through surrender by the majority to force and unreason invite the continued exercise of control over campus government by those who know how to coerce and bully." The editors of the *Times* fail to see that "the majority," whether of university students or of American people, have long since "surrendered" to the "force and unreason" exercised by minorities, who