

Violence as a Negation of Freedom

CHRISTIAN BAY

VIOLENCE HAS COME FULL CIRCLE since the dawn of civilization. At first violence was essential for individual survival, against men and animals attacking or competing for scarce resources. Then, as tribes and states were formed, violence served to protect the tribe or state from external aggression, and at the same time it protected the prerogatives of power elites and ruling classes against possible contenders from within. In our age of super-powers and technological capacity to destroy the whole human race, old thoughtways about the utilities of violence continue to predominate. But what now has become essential to survival and to freedom in our time is the total elimination of large-scale violence. We must give the highest priority, for research as well as political action, to the optimal reduction of violence.

"Violence" is a thoroughly *bad* word. It is therefore in the interest of every political regime and every ruling class to associate this word with the behavior and aspirations of its opponents, and the more so the more menacing these opponents are.

A monumental paradox emerges, because every political order, past and present, has ultimately depended for its security on its own preponderant control over the available means of physical coercion, organized in disciplined military and police forces. At the same time, at any threat of force on the part of revolutionary groups, or even individual dissidents, they get a bad press in all the government-influenced media, on the ground that they are raising the specter of *violence*.

In a modern society we learn to use emotionally powerful words in ways that promote the ruling interests. "Violence" is generally taken to mean what happens "when revolutionaries or (other) criminals make assaults." When such assaults are sup-

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pressed, that is not called "violence," but more likely "police measures," "applying the full strength of the law," or the like. Charles L. Stevenson in his book *Facts and Values* (Yale University Press, 1963) coined the phrase "persuasive definitions" but stopped short of analyzing the crucial role of *authoritative, pre-set*, persuasive definitions in the "semantical defense," as I shall call it, of every stable social order.

The most basic political explanation of this phenomenon is that every social order is oppressive, even though some oppress more people than others, and some oppress more savagely than others; and yet every political regime, at least in modern, post-Gutenberg times, desires a halo of righteousness. Since "violence" is bad, half the battle against challengers is won if by definition any oppressive or forcible measures by the regime can be described in more legitimate-sounding terms.

When I say that every social order is oppressive, I mean that there are always *some* interests that are and remain privileged, at the expense of others. A regime that remains stable is able to extend its semantical fortifications far and deep, and its scholars and teachers become more essential in its defense than its cops and soldiers. Yet no regime, as we shall see, is fully protected against winds of change.

Let me focus on the semantical fortifications for the oppression that goes on in this country. "Violence" is generally understood, as we have seen, to refer to the use of guns by Black Panthers, not by the police; to stone-throwing and looting, not to shooting at the looters; and to bombs aimed at buildings or persons in American cities, not to those aimed at the Vietnamese, whether soldiers or civilians. Other examples of such semantical patterns will establish the general point.

"Defense" is generally understood to refer, not to all measures aiming at protecting the public interest against major hazards, but to the *military* establishment alone. A correspondingly limited scope is given to the concept "national security." If, say, a giant private corporation, or the Atomic Energy Commission, by careless standards were to expose millions of Americans to dangerous levels of pollution of air or water, that would be irrelevant to issues of "defense" or of "national security."

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"Freedom" refers conventionally to the liberties desired by middle-class Americans, with emphasis on the interests of businessmen and their allies, the professionals and (or including) the teachers. The essential liberties are free enterprise and free speech, not the rights to food and to education, or the other basic requirements of a life with dignity. Indeed, an extreme enthusiast for laissez-faire capitalism goes to the length of defining "freedom" or "liberty" as, *exclusively*, "that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society" (F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* [University of Chicago Press, 1960]). Oppression by economic circumstances becomes, by this sleight-of-hand, irrelevant to issues of freedom, and government regulations of business in the interest of social justice become by definition an attack on Liberty itself. This, of course, is a bit too thick, in an age of alliance between liberal regimes and corporate interests, with extensive government regulations in the service of these interests; and "free enterprise" has yielded a bit to "free speech" as the crucial meaning of "liberty."

And thus liberal regimes have been aided in the semantical defense of *their* kinds of oppression. If radical students or radical professors forcibly prevent a government spokesman from defending on a campus the war in Vietnam, that is not only by definition violent, but an attack on liberty itself. It becomes a moot point whether such an action aids the cause of nonviolence in Vietnam, or helps any Vietnamese gain the freedom to be "red rather than dead" or to achieve still wider choices.

As a final example of how semantics works for the ruling classes, take Anatole France's well-known gibe at the bourgeois principle of equality—"the majestic equality of the law that forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread."

Now, I take it that the role of responsible, independent citizens in any country is to promote the public interest, and that the public interest consists in maximizing the freedom for all (including the unborn) by way of, first of all, reducing the amount of physical and mental damage done to any human being, deliberately or by circumstances.

See also 635 *
 If so (and I shall elaborate on this formulation in a moment), then there is a *natural* collision course between every political regime and every fully responsible citizen: the former is partial to privileges, but the latter is a champion of human rights, and, above all, a defender of those who are the least secure and free. If social systems are always defended by established definitions of fighting words as well as by ideologies and brute force, then it becomes one of the responsibilities of the independent citizen to examine how key words can be pried loose from establishment control and then be put to better use, equipped with definitions that serve social justice.

Let us go to it, and redefine "violence" and "freedom."

One exercise in redefining "violence" has recently been carried out with boldness as well as precision by Johan Galtung, the director of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo. His choice is to make "violence" mean the opposite of "peace," and to develop extended concepts of peace as well as of violence. (See his "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," in *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 [1969]: 167-71.)

Galtung had noted the tendency for peace research to become not only respectable but virtually embraced by governments, and to be too often thought of merely as research on how to diminish threats to the established international order. Calling the objective of this kind of research "negative peace," he proceeds to define "positive peace" in terms of social and international justice, and calls for a peace research in the service of positive as well as negative peace. The alternatives are, he writes, to bolster leftist extremism by servicing the concerns of justice only, or rightist extremism by concern with law and order only, in and between the states. In Galtung's vocabulary, peace research as well as mass-media reporting has tended to focus on "direct" or "personal" violence, and to ignore "indirect" or "structural" violence, nationally as well as internationally. Acts of violence receive much attention, as threats to (negative) peace, unlike conditions of violence, as threats to (positive) peace, or social justice.

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by way of reducing structural violence, our tinderbox world equally needs to guard against threats to negative peace. International justice and international peace are both very urgently important aims.

I propose to use a similarly extended concept of violence, and to emphasize the same distinction between personal (or *deliberate*) and structural (or *traditional*) violence; but I shall treat violence as the negation of freedom rather than peace. This can be done with less of a violation, I believe, of customary usages of "violence."

"Freedom," once the term is liberated from its servitude under liberal capitalism, can be related to the whole structure of human needs. The freedom to live, and be protected from extreme violence, then becomes the "natural," first-priority freedom, closely followed by the freedom from severe deprivation by poverty. Without food one cannot live at all; without adequate nourishment, garments, shelter, and so forth, one cannot enjoy the freedom of the mind. Paraphrasing Galtung, I define as "violence" *any cause of any needless reduction in basic freedoms for any human being.*

For most practical purposes it will be better to speak in terms of human rights. "Human right" shall refer to any freedom that, in fact, *can* be granted to all, as distinct from privileges, or freedoms that by their nature are exclusive. (See my *Structure of Freedom* [Stanford University Press, 1958, 1970].) I shall assume that the proper business of every government is, above any other priorities, to maximize human rights for all (including the unborn, by way of conservation). If so, the priorities of the government must be the priorities among rights for those *least* well-off, instead of the businessman's and the professional's priorities, which always tend to place privileges ahead of rights.

From a humanistic point of view, to increase the freedom of the most oppressed is what matters most. How this can be done, in each society, and in the world as a whole, is what freedom research should be about. And violence, if understood in this broad sense, becomes the all-important challenge: how can violence be reduced or prevented (and the worst, most destructive kinds first) to the optimal extent? Violence is defined by Galtung, in one formulation, as "the cause of the difference . . . between what could have been and what is." Any person's premature death or disease or

humiliation or depression is by this definition caused by violence to the extent that the knowledge and resources with which to prevent that loss of freedom were available but not used.

Violence is measured by the harm that is done to human beings. Death tolls and physical disabilities are easier to measure than mental disabilities and many other kinds of losses in levels of freedom; but none are immune to efforts at measurement. And the common sense of political action need not wait for all that research to be done. We are sure to be aiding the cause of freedom and nonviolence if we accept these premises: (1) that all needless damage to human beings constitutes violence; (2) that violence is more to be shunned, or combated, the more badly people will be or are being hurt; (3) structural, traditional violence is no better, or worse, than deliberate acts of violence; what matters is how badly people are being hurt; and (4) no act of violence can be justified unless it is clear that it will alleviate worse kinds of violence than it brings about.

These rules of thumb urgently call for a continuing flow of steadily improved research-based criteria, to reduce errors in factual judgments. This is for peace research, and freedom research, to supply.

Suppose we champion the freedom of the oppressed, or optimal human rights, and choose an appropriately broad concept of violence. Are we then to support any acts of violence against the system that promise to pay off in terms of reduced oppressive violence? In the abstract, this view may seem to have merit, as we have seen, but let me conclude on some cautionary notes:

(1) The wider the discrepancies between liberal-democratic pretenses and the stark facts of oligarchy, and the wider the observed differences between the rich and the poor, the greater the potential for riots, vandalism, crimes of violence and other acts of violent desperation. Michael Harrington has brought home the fact, in *The Other America*, that the poor have become increasingly invisible to the affluent; but the affluent are more starkly visible than ever before to the poor. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and others have made the same point about blacks in relation to whites. Television, the movies, the glossier mass media are expos-

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ing the habitual democratic make-believe as a colossal fraud. When there is no use screaming, let alone arguing or voting, what other remedies but violence are left? Indeed, what other defenses of dignity or sanity? None, I believe, unless new kinds of disruptive but largely nonviolent politics can become available.

(2) Riots and vandalism may be preferable to insanity or slow, quiet death, but are counterproductive in terms of their political consequences. Acts of violence against the established powers invite fierce retribution. In North America the affluent classes are as a rule unable to comprehend the reasons for the anger of the dispossessed, and are therefore self-righteously outraged when "fellow Americans" attack property or symbols of patriotism, and more so when policemen or middle-class citizens are attacked. Anything goes, almost, in retaliation. And the defenders of "law and order" always have the larger arsenals of weapons and the lesser inhibitions, after the initial burst of dispossessed fury, about shooting to kill. Indeed, as Edgar Z. Friedenberg has pointed out, some police officers seem addicted to violence and crave for chances to indulge in their habit, for which they are also well trained. (See his "The Spirit of Fascism: Hooked on Law Enforcement," *The Nation* 205, no. 12 [1967]: 360-65.) And actions that "uphold law and order" are, as we have seen, not generally thought of as acts of violence.

(3) Unlike games of chess, contests of violence create psychological barriers to realistic assessments of opponents' future moves. Anatol Rapoport in his book *Strategy and Conscience* (Schocken, 1964, 1969) has well demonstrated how this works in the game of latent mass terror between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., too. With actual as distinct from latent violence, even on a small scale, moral indignation and fury will come to cloud cool reason, and usually more so on the side of the left. That is, after all, where the most basic liberties are at stake, and the most elementary demands for justice.

(4) In North America, at least, I conclude that the dispossessed and their champions have the most to gain by developing alternatives of largely nonviolent political action—techniques of disruption that avoid physical assault on individuals, or the kinds of attack on property that endanger human lives.

A vast potential for acts of physical violence against individuals has accumulated in this superficially stable-seeming society. If this potential were suddenly released, the ensuing holocaust might well incapacitate the American military machine for future Vietnam-type adventures, but at the cost of enormous suffering of those, in particular, who are already the victims of traditional violence. Also, the madmen of the "massive retaliation" doctrine might reappear in Washington and get the doomsday machines ready for action. A white public opinion literally scared silly might once again, as Joan Robinson once put it, take the "attitude of the wrong mother in the judgment of Solomon—rather blow up the world than allow someone else to lead."

What is to be done, if we want to push *against* the tide of mounting violence in so many aspects of American life? Simply to condemn all (antisystem) acts of "violence" will not do, for the levels of anger have become too deep; still less will it help to appeal to purely imaginary self-redeeming characteristics of our political system.

I have argued here that we need, for one thing, a more reasonable *language* of political understanding, in which fighting words like "violence" realistically register the sufferings of all kinds of human beings who are being needlessly hurt, not mainly troubles for the privileged.

Beyond that, I believe we must keep improving our strategies and techniques of civil disobedience. To show that "creative disorder" can be nonviolent and yet effective, and to show this on tv, offers perhaps the best hope for defusing the American powder keg today. It is important, too, that we become better at thinking of our opponents or enemies as human beings, and better at thinking of acts of violence as something that always hurts the actors as well as those that are being hit; but we must also keep remembering that, from a victim's point of view, it makes little difference whether his life is destroyed by structural violence or by acts of violence. To compare actual and potential harm of acts and facts of violence involves political equations that require medical and sociopsychological criteria, and an end to loaded concepts of violence.