

notes on terror

-- ROD MORAN

"There were two 'Reigns of Terror,' if we would but remember and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passions, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon a thousand persons, the other upon a hundred million; but our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with life-long death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heartbreak? ... A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror -- that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves."

-- Mark Twain, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court"

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Approximately 12 months ago the reputable business and affairs journal "The Economist" carried an editorial captioned: "He and his kind will be among us for the rest of our lives." This comment referred to their cover photo of a sinister, black-hooded IRA gunman slinking along a Belfast rooftop. This phantom in the shape of a man was the object of a ponderous and sermonising commentary by the magazine:

"We are going to have to live with the man in the hood for a long time: certainly until the present generation of terrorists, the Black September men and the Provos and the rest, has expended itself in death or defeat."

The logic of this short passage is indicative. One would have thought it will not be until the *material conditions* that so demoralise a community or an individual as to present terrorism as a serious alternative are overcome, that this "international community of the possessed" will pass into history. The cynical,

anti-human logic of "The Economist" and other upstanding critics of terrorist movements, recognises in them nothing but the irrational fanaticism of the psychopath. It is a valuable mode of arguing since, having established the gunman as a mad fanatic, almost by definition, he has nothing substantive to say, no real grievance that rational democratic procedure couldn't solve.

This editorial, I suggest, is a valuable lesson in moral relativism. For ever since the beginning of the escalation of the Vietnam war, "The Economist" has been a staunch supporter of US policy in South-east Asia, underwriting what must be one of the most outrageous acts of lawlessness and barbarism in the recent history of imperialism. The obvious (and moral) question is, what is the difference between the sniper's bullet and billowing napalm? Between the grenade hurled into a city hotel and wave on wave of superfortresses striking at the enemy's vital population centres? The manner in which we conceptualise the difference again emphasises the mystification of language by politics. George Orwell pointed out some time ago. The former is "terrorism" and reprehensible, the latter "war" and unfortunate. Or, from a slightly different perspective, as Marx pointed out in his passionate tirade "The Civil War in France," a gun in the hand of a plebeian is an outrage, in the hand of the bourgeois a right.

It is from such lofty heights that Marxists are often reproached for their moral relativism. Yet even on the basis of the above example it can be suggested that the "relativism" derives not so much from Marxist theory, as from the *essential relativism of bourgeois reality*. How can we make serious statements about the morality of methods used in the struggle to achieve a humane world, when man is everywhere morally and socially mutilated? How can we appeal to the moral criterion of human solidarity when in reality there is no unitary Mankind, only a class-ridden, fragmented humanity? In 1915 W. E. B. DuBois posed the problem this way: in a world suffering the horrors of an imperialist war what does the struggle for freedom and human dignity demand? His answer was, of

course, revolution:

‘Are there other and less costly ways of achieving this? There may be in some better world. But for a world just emerging from the rough chains of almost universal poverty, and faced by the temptation of luxury and indulgence through the enslavement of defenceless men, there is but one adequate method of salvation – the giving of democratic weapons of self-defence to the defenceless.’ *

I will not venture here to summarise Marxian ethical theory. I will suggest however that Marxists must always reject terrorism, (though not necessarily violence), as a political weapon. And not just because terror is usually the resort of those who have not built, for whatever reason, a broad and conscious social base. It is rejected for two additional reasons:

Firstly, because terror is the *ultimate reification of man*. The human person becomes a mere object to be manipulated, used, expended. Whereas the reification inherent to bourgeois society is the alienated quality of man’s social relations mediated by an abstract, ahuman market, the reification of terror is death, man’s final and absolute objectivity. The irony of the politics of terrorism is that it leads to a complete *de-politicisation* of its immediate environment. People are no longer subjects to be won over to solidarity, but expendable objects. And secondly, since at one level any historical situation is the sum of its historical antecedents, socialism cannot come to fruition on the bodies of the innocent. If the end justifies the means it is only because there is a constant and intimate nexus between the two. The great end struggled for, socialism, is in fact a constant process of coming-to-be. It is present in every moment of the revolutionary struggle in terms of aims fought for and methods chosen. It was for this reason that Marx and Engels despised the conspiratorial ethics of the Anarchists. Engels complained to Theodor Cuno in a note written in 1872 that the ideas of truth and honesty in the labor movement were dismissed by the Anarchists as mere “bourgeois prejudices.” They would employ, in the name of “freedom,” any and every tactic. The parallel with Stalinism is clear.

For any philosophy that holds man as the ultimate source and measure of all moral values, inevitable difficulties arise when devising tactics in the struggle for a humane and rational world. It is that “tragic” element at the heart of Marxist philosophy. For only in “a better world” as DuBois phrased it can man be treated humanely, even by socialists. I can perhaps clarify what I mean here by reference to the philosophers and strategists of the Latin American revolution, particularly Debray and Guevara.

Both men reveal a high sensitivity to the value of human life. When the guerrilla strikes from a jungle ambush he is aware of the humanity of those he attacks in a way that the elite killers of the US airforce attacking from 20,000 feet aren’t. At the same time he knows it is not merely a confrontation of individual men, but of class representatives engaged in a desperate struggle for mutually exclusive aims. He thus murders in the name of justice. It is this driving contradiction that opens Marxism to the various attacks on its moral basis, but a contradiction that ultimately establishes it as a humane philosophy of man.

Above all it seems important to me that Marxists don’t abdicate in the realm of morality, that we don’t dogmatically evade the contradictions inherent to the revolutionary and Romantic world-view, by invoking the “good of the cause.” For that cause is nothing more than a revolutionary praxis here and now, and its raw material Marx’s pre-historical man. We can thus only invoke the *good* through all its contradictions and vicissitudes.

Finally, to return to our starting point, we can at least agree on some of the remarks offered in “The Economist’s” sermon:

“The world itself is no worse than usual; but the obsessed are prepared to do worse to have their way about it.”

The terror of Greece, South Africa, Vietnam, Chile, to name but a few recent instances of the handiwork of the “obsessed few,” bear out our pious editorialist admirably.

* W. E. B. DuBois, “The African Roots of War,” in “Monthly Review,” April 1973, p. 37.