

POLITICS OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE

Some months ago there took place in Cambridge, Mass. a discussion among student leaders, especially those who had been active in the movement for Negro rights, on the relevance of non-violent resistance to larger political problems. Both for their intrinsic interest and as reflections of the thinking that is now taking place among liberal and radical students, we are pleased to present here, in condensed versions, two of the presentations made at that meeting.—EDITORS

1. THE IDEA OF RESISTANCE

Michael Walzer

1. Disillusionment with the idea of revolution is one of the most interesting features of American intellectual life today. Since revolution was never a practical possibility in America, this disillusionment might seem as unimportant as the enthusiasm preceding it. What was always impractical has now become abhorrent; it is a part of the process of accommodation. And yet it is more than that, for in the light of recent history, it surely seems necessary to be at least critical of the revolutionary tradition. After seeing the terror and the purge and all that goes with the revolutionary transformation of a society, the brutal manipulation of human beings, the corruption of culture—after seeing all this we are none of us, I suppose, revolutionaries. We have renounced Bolshevik “realism”; we have accepted, in some secular fash-

ion, the fact of human limitation; we have searched for moral laws and human rights so absolute as to control our activity and our goals. We have learned that there must be in human affairs a realm of the forbidden, of things which men cannot do. (I don't mean to deny that men, or rather *a man*, may on occasion have to do the forbidden thing; that is another question. It is important, however, that at such a moment he knows what moral risks he takes.)

But the general disillusionment has gone much further than this; men are never content to be taught elementary things. Having viewed the revolution through an apocalyptic haze, our intellectuals have come away so shaken by the vision as to renounce every spark of enthusiasm in their hearts and every utopian dream in their heads. They have fallen back in

disorder upon the practical politics of pressure and reform. I say disorder because the retreat has brought with it no major re-examination of political alternatives. The defense of pragmatic, democratic politics has moved entirely between the poles of reform and revolution. We have been warned that any step outside the realm of conventional politics—outside the parties, the parliament, the system of pressures—is a step toward revolution and totalitarianism. Nothing is seen but terror on the one hand and gradual reform on the other. I would like to suggest that there are more possibilities than this—and especially that there is one, radical and far-reaching, but entirely compatible with the moral repudiation of revolutionary terror. (At the same time, I want to leave the question of revolution itself unclosed; the apocalypse may yet turn out to be an exaggeration.)

2. The idea of revolution in Western thought emerges in the course of the 17th century from the much older idea of resistance. Long before men conceived of a plastic political order which could be refashioned at will, they had developed modes of response to oppression. These responses were not aggressive and transforming, but were rather defensive and limited: they were designed to defend natural law, traditional rights or legal order. They involved civil and disciplined disobedience by groups of men led by the lesser magistrates, their immediate political superiors. Resistance was a form of collective defense of laws and rights. Its practicality was based upon two features of medieval life. It required, first, the existence of an objective body of laws and rights—whether divine, natural or conven-

tional—in other words, of an ideal order. And it required, secondly, the existence of groups—corporations, guilds, churches, cities, provinces—capable of independent, cooperative and disciplined activity.

It is obvious that resistance can lead to a transfer of power; it approaches the forms of revolution. It can also lead to civil war, though this would be, in medieval terms, a “just war” rather than a crusade: it would have limited, secular reasons rather than millenarian purposes. The nonpayment of taxes, the refusal to publish the king’s decrees, the passive refusal to stir at his command—these are all forms of resistance. They can be enacted at many different social levels, down to the smallest community of men which, in an organized fashion, can insist upon its immediate obligations to divine commandment or natural law, and refuse to obey the mightiest sovereign.

I have not presented here any picture of medieval practice, nor any adequate view of the highly developed theory of resistance. I have only intended to suggest an alternative politics to that of reform and revolution. Resistance has survived in the West as civil disobedience, but it has come, largely under the impact of protestantism, to be an individual activity and a matter less of objective law and right than of private conscience. Every conscientious objector is practicing a form of resistance; his disobedience is not revolutionary precisely because it is *civil*—that is, it is orderly and public, it involves no conspiracy, it does not require the total renunciation of the established social order. But civil disobedience can also be a collective activity. The 500 people who refused to take shelter when ordered to do

so in New York's civil defense drill were practicing a form of resistance; so were the young people who "sat-in" at the Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco. And so, finally, are the Negro students whose demonstrations continue.

All these activities can be called resistance because they oppose governmental activity or social convention with an appeal to a higher law and to the conscience of the community; because they are orderly and disciplined activities, with limited aims; and finally because they express sentiment from "below" rather than policy from "above." Reform is always a governmental function, though governments are likely to act only in response to public demand. But resistance is entirely a popular and communal function. Revolution, as we have learned, is the task of professionals, requiring total commitment and life service; resistance is a politics for amateurs and citizens.

3. I would suggest that resistance can become considerably more extensive than it has yet been in modern America. The enormous growth of governmental power makes it increasingly necessary to develop means of communal and collective self-defense. It seems fair to argue that the effort of liberals to increase the participation of citizens in the affairs of government has failed. And the failure of participation, the virtually total inability of ordinary citizens to affect decision making, leaves resistance as the only possible response to the misuse of governmental power and to decisions wrongly made.

If resistance is to be effective in practice we need, first of all, to be less conscientious in our political ac-

tivity, and more moral, less private and more communal. We need to free ourselves from the protestant tradition, which turns activity into personal testimony and the *actor* into a *witness*. We need to appeal without embarrassment to the religious and humanist traditions of objective law and human right, and we need to act collectively and not in such an eccentric and self-indulgent fashion as to alienate the mass of our potential colleagues. Resistance is ideally the act of an already constituted political community, led not by private individuals but by the elected officers of that community. But resistance is also a form of spontaneous action, producing entirely new kinds of association, discovering a new discipline in common needs and interests and throwing up new leaders. Even spontaneous association, however, has its roots in some shared identity and trouble and in some collective sense of power and possibility.

There is in every political society a system of concurrent powers, whether constitutionally recognized or not. There are always groups of men whose consent is required before policy can be carried out. Such groups exercise a kind of veto over policy decisions. One of the things we mean when we talk of mass society is that secondary associations and functional communities of this sort tend to disappear. They are replaced—never entirely—by bureaucratic organizations which represent the supposed interests of the old groups, but are no longer intimately responsive to their actual needs and desires. The politics of the old group was a kind of resistance: workers "sitting-in," peasants burning crops are different but related examples, and so are the various forms of cultural resistance practiced by reli-

gious and ethnic groups, their struggles to maintain old laws and customs. The politics of the new organizations is largely a politics of dealing and pressuring; one of the indicators of "massification" is the replacement of communal resistance by organizational pressure. Parallel to this, of course, is the increasing isolation of the conscientious objector.

Members of Southern Negro churches and students on the various Negro campuses are currently reviving the forms of collective resistance. It is especially important that they have turned to the community at large for support, that they have insisted upon mass arrests and not permitted the martyrdom of the heroic individual, and that they have tried to enforce city-wide boycotts. In doing these things, they have moved beyond the lonely courage of the political witness. They are in search of a social basis for resistance. It is not too much to suggest that this search may replace, at least for a time, the search for a "new" revolutionary class.

Surely the answer to "states'-rights" is to insist upon the rights of still smaller groups—churches, universities, cities. But we need to develop also a sense of the rights and duties of "lesser magistrates," of those vast numbers of intermediate officials of all sorts, administrative and political, governmental, corporate and religious, whose independence and moral willfulness have withered away, leaving individuals to be acted upon directly by the national government. A benevolent and liberal state power ought to function as an enabling agency for magistrates and groups, setting limits and enforcing standards, of course, but also sponsoring and encouraging local activity. In the absence of such

a state power, we need to imagine situations, however unlikely at the moment, in which unions would withdraw their members from participation in armaments projects, in which whole cities refuse to hold civil defense drills, etc.

It is a piece of the good-willed naivete of liberal reformers to refuse to recognize the rights of local obstruction. So long as legislation is merely human, evasion and resistance are perfectly legitimate responses. If the obstruction is itself oppressive, as it is in the South today, then men must organize and resist it in their cities, colleges, unions, in the name of human rights or of higher law. National reform is too often a kind of philanthropy, directed at "under-privileged" groups; resistance at its best is a kind of collective self-help. The two are not historically unrelated, and they are often both necessary—resistance prompting reform, reform making resistance possible—but surely the preference of radicals ought to be for resistance.

4. The boycott and the strike are forms of resistance, though the passive immobility of the sit-down is perhaps its best symbol. All these were first used in the fight against economic injustice, and socialists once hoped that the worker would carry on from these activities to revolution. But the refusal to work, the refusal to buy, the refusal to move are not, in fact, revolutionary. They are acts of stoppage and withdrawal, expressions of discontent, requiring physical presence, self-control and solidarity. But they do not point to transformation and utopia; they aim at concrete grievances and at limited self-aggrandizement; they defend, often enough,

threatened standards and ancient liberties, the good society which once had been. The general strike in Budapest in 1956 seems to me an act of resistance: a public and demonstrative repudiation of an oppressive ruling party. But in the absence of any group comparable to the Puritans, Jacobins or Bolsheviks, it would be difficult to argue that there was an Hungarian revolution, in the full sense of that term.

Whatever the social level on which it is enacted, and whatever the forms employed, resistance implies an essentially defensive politics. I do not mean to renounce that more purposive and aggressive politics which is so important an element in revolution. But perhaps, after all, utopias are not established or even approached through the old revolutionary channels: by seizing governments, writing constitutions, announcing decrees and enforcing them with a new police. Such ac-

tivities may still be necessary—and if necessary then worthwhile—in Africa and Asia. But in the West today what we must look for in politics is the defense of standards, the protection of rights and liberties, the maintenance of life. These are not little things, and each of them is endangered and threatened by those historical trends whose conclusions have become contemporary clichés: mass society, garrison state, totalitarianism. Against all these, the forms of resistance are appropriate. Indeed, insofar as communities exist through which resistance is possible, the grotesque and awful future we so casually promise one another may safely be postponed. The possibility of communal resistance, and not the balance of organizational pressures, is the only test of a pluralist and democratic society. When consent becomes a platitude and a myth, resistance is the proper activity of citizens.

2. THE NEW PACIFISM

Stephan Thernstrom

Only an extraordinarily prescient observer could have predicted the revival of the American pacifist movement in the fifties. Shattered by the international crisis of the late thirties, pacifism had become by 1941 an intellectually bankrupt, morally compromised appendage to America First.

The New Pacifism has been called into being by advances in military technology. Our age of nuclear terror has given new force to the pacifist dogma that war is the supreme evil,

to be avoided at all costs. In recent months the cause of non-violence has reaped further gains from its dramatic application in the Southern sit-ins. Particularly for students, the philosophy of non-violence put into practice in the South exercises a seductive appeal. Pacifism appears a bright shining cause. The battles of the thirties are dead, and the traces of radicalism that have survived the thirties seem quaint and cold. The other alternative, the pallid defensive liberalism of the fifties, is equally uninspiring. The