

15 On violence

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These reflections were provoked by the events and debates of the last few years as seen against the background of the twentieth century, which has become indeed, as Lenin predicted, a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of that violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator. There is, however, another factor in the present situation which, though-predicted by nobody, is of at least equal importance. The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict. Hence, warfare – from time immemorial the final merciless arbiter in international disputes – has lost much of its effectiveness and nearly all its glamour. The “apocalyptic” chess game between the superpowers, that is, between those that move on the highest plane of our civilization, is being played according to the rule “if either ‘wins’ it is the end of both”;¹ it is a game that bears no resemblance to whatever war games preceded it. Its “rational” goal is deterrence, not victory, and the arms race, no longer a preparation for war, can now be justified only on the grounds that more and more deterrence is the best guarantee of peace. To the question how shall we ever be able to extricate ourselves from the obvious insanity of this position, there is no answer.

Since violence – as distinct from power, force, or strength – always needs *implements* (as Engels pointed out long ago),² the revolution of technology, a revolution in tool-making, was especially marked in warfare. The very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic; if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.

Moreover, while the results of men’s actions are beyond the actors’ control, violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness; nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more fateful role in human affairs than on the battlefield, and this intrusion of the utterly unexpected does not disappear when people call it a “random event” and find it scientifically suspect; nor can it be eliminated by simulations, scenarios, game theories, and the like. There is no certainty in these matters, not even an ultimate certainty of mutual destruction under certain calculated circumstances. The very fact that those engaged in the perfection of the means of destruction have finally reached a level of technical development where their aim, namely, warfare, is on the point of disappearing altogether by virtue of the means at its disposal³ is like an ironical reminder of this all-pervading unpredictability, which we encounter the moment we approach the realm of violence. The chief reason warfare is still with us is neither a secret death wish of the human species, nor an irrepressible instinct of

aggression, nor, finally and more plausibly, the serious economic and social dangers inherent in disarmament,⁴ but the simple fact that no substitute for this final arbiter in international affairs has yet appeared on the political scene. Was not Hobbes right when he said: "Covenants, without the sword, are but words"?

Nor is a substitute likely to appear so long as national independence, namely, freedom from foreign rule, and the sovereignty of the state, namely, the claim to unchecked and unlimited power in foreign affairs, are identified. (The United States of America is among the few countries where a proper separation of freedom and sovereignty is at least theoretically possible.) That war is still the *ultima ratio*, the old continuation of politics by means of violence, in the foreign affairs of the underdeveloped countries is no argument against its obsolescence, and the fact that only small countries without nuclear and biological weapons can still afford it is no consolation. It is a secret from nobody that the famous random event is most likely to arise from those parts of the world where the old adage "There is no alternative to victory" retains a high degree of plausibility.

Under these circumstances, there are, indeed, few things that are more frightening than the steadily increasing prestige of scientifically minded brain trusters in the councils of government during the last decades. The trouble is not that they are cold-blooded enough to "think the unthinkable," but that they do not *think*. Instead of indulging in such an old-fashioned, uncomputerizable activity, they reckon with the consequences of certain hypothetically assumed constellations without, however, being able to test their hypotheses against actual occurrences. The logical flaw in these hypothetical constructions of future events is always the same: what first appears as a hypothesis – with or without its implied alternatives, according to the level of sophistication – turns immediately, usually after a few paragraphs, into a "fact," which then gives birth to a whole string of similar non-facts, with the result that the purely speculative character of the whole enterprise is forgotten. Needless to say, this is not science but pseudo-science, "the desperate attempt of the social and behavioral sciences," in the words of Noam Chomsky, "to imitate the surface features of sciences that really have significant intellectual content." And the most obvious and "most profound objection to this kind of strategic theory is not its limited usefulness but its danger, for it can lead us to believe we have an understanding of events and control over their flow which we do not have," as Richard N. Goodwin recently pointed out in a review article that had the rare virtue of detecting the "unconscious humor" characteristic of many of these pompous pseudo-scientific theories.⁵

No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration.⁶ [...] This shows to what an extent violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all. Those who saw nothing but violence in human affairs, convinced that they were "always haphazard, not serious, not precise" (Renan) or that God was forever with the bigger battalions, had nothing more to say about either violence or history. Anybody looking for some kind of sense in the records of the past was almost bound to see violence as a marginal phenomenon. Whether it is Clausewitz calling war "the continuation of politics by other means," or Engels defining violence as the accelerator of economic development,⁷ the emphasis is on political or economic continuity, on the continuity of a process that remains determined by what preceded violent action. Hence, students of international relations have held until recently that "it was a maxim that a military resolution in discord with the deeper cultural sources of national power could not be stable," or that, in Engels' words, "wherever the power structure of a country contradicts its economic development" it is political power with its means of violence that will suffer defeat.⁸

Today all these old verities about the relation between war and politics or about violence and power have become inapplicable. The Second World War was not followed by peace but by a cold war and the establishment of the military-industrial-labor complex. To speak of "the priority of war-making potential as the principal structuring force in society," to maintain that "economic systems, political philosophies, and corpora juris serve and extend the war system, not vice versa," to conclude that "war itself is the basic social system, within which other secondary modes of social organization conflict or conspire" – all this sounds much more plausible than Engels' or Clausewitz's nineteenth-century formulas. Even more conclusive than this simple reversal proposed by the anonymous author of the *Report from Iron Mountain* – instead of war being "an extension of diplomacy (or of politics, or of the pursuit of economic objectives)," peace is the continuation of war by other means – is the actual development in the techniques of warfare. In the words of the Russian physicist Sakharov, "A thermonuclear war cannot be considered a continuation of politics by other means (according to the formula of Clausewitz). It would be a means of universal suicide."⁹

Moreover, we know that "a few weapons could wipe out all other sources of national power in a few moments,"¹⁰ that biological weapons have been devised which would enable "small groups of individuals . . . to upset the strategic balance" and would be cheap enough to be produced by "nations unable to develop nuclear striking forces,"¹¹ that "within a very few years" robot soldiers will have made "human soldiers completely obsolete,"¹² and that, finally, in conventional warfare the poor countries are much less vulnerable than the great powers precisely because they are "underdeveloped," and because technical superiority can "be much more of a liability than an asset" in guerrilla wars.¹³ What all these uncomfortable novelties add up to is a complete reversal in the relationship between power and violence, foreshadowing another reversal in the future relationship between small and great powers. The amount of violence at the disposal of any given country may soon not be a reliable indication of the country's strength or a reliable guarantee against destruction by a substantially smaller and weaker power. And this bears an ominous similarity to one of political science's oldest insights, namely that power cannot be measured in terms of wealth, that an abundance of wealth may erode power, that riches are particularly dangerous to the power and well-being of republics [. . .]

[. . .]

To speak about the nature and causes of violence in these terms must appear presumptuous. [. . .]

First, while I find much of the work of the zoologists fascinating, I fail to see how it can possibly apply to our problem. In order to know that people will fight for their homeland we hardly had to discover instincts of "group territorialism" in ants, fish, and apes; and in order to learn that overcrowding results in irritation and aggressiveness, we hardly needed to experiment with rats. One day spent in the slums of any big city should have sufficed. I am surprised and often delighted to see that some animals behave like men; I cannot see how this could either justify or condemn human behavior. I fail to understand why we are asked "to recognize that man behaves very much like a group territorial species," rather than the other way round – that certain animal species behave very much like men.¹⁴

Second, the research results of both the social and the natural sciences tend to make violent behavior even more of a "natural" reaction than we would have been prepared to grant without them. Aggressiveness, defined as an instinctual drive, is said to play the same functional role in the household of nature as the nutritive and sexual instincts in the life process of the individual and the species. But unlike these instincts, which are activated by compelling bodily needs on one side, by outside stimulants on the other, aggressive instincts in the animal

kingdom seem to be independent of such provocation; on the contrary, lack of provocation apparently leads to instinct frustration, to "repressed" aggressiveness, which according to psychologists causes a damming up of "energy" whose eventual explosion will be all the more dangerous. (It is as though the *sensation* of hunger in man would increase with the decrease of hungry people.)¹⁵ In this interpretation, violence without provocation is "natural"; if it has lost its *rationale*, basically its function in self-preservation, it becomes "irrational," and this is allegedly the reason why men can be more "bestly" than other animals. [. . .]

Quite apart from the misleading transposition of physical terms such as "energy" and "force" to biological and zoological data, where they do not make sense because they cannot be measured,¹⁶ I fear there lurks behind these newest "discoveries" the oldest definition of the nature of man – the definition of man as the *animal rationale*, according to which we are distinct from other animal species in nothing but the additional attribute of reason. Modern science, starting uncritically from this old assumption, has gone far in "proving" that men share all other properties with some species of the animal kingdom – except that the additional gift of "reason" makes man a more dangerous beast. It is the use of reason that makes us dangerously "irrational," because this reason is the property of an "aboriginally instinctual being."¹⁷ The scientists know, of course, that it is man the tool maker who has invented those long-range weapons that free him from the "natural" restraints we find in the animal kingdom, and that tool-making is a highly complex *mental* activity.¹⁸ Hence science is called upon to cure us of the side effects of reason by manipulating and controlling our instincts, usually by finding harmless outlets for them after their "life-promoting function" has disappeared. The standard of behavior is again derived from other animal species, in which the function of the life instincts has not been destroyed through the intervention of human reason. And the specific distinction between man and beast is now, strictly speaking, no longer reason (the *lumen naturale* of the human animal) but science, the knowledge of these standards and the techniques applying them. According to this view, man acts irrationally and like a beast if he refuses to listen to the scientists or is ignorant of their latest findings. As against these theories and their implications, I shall argue in what follows that violence is neither bestly nor irrational – whether we understand these terms in the ordinary language of the humanists or in accordance with scientific theories.

That violence often springs from rage is a commonplace, and rage can indeed be irrational and pathological, but so can every other human affect. It is no doubt possible to create conditions under which men are dehumanized – such as concentration camps, torture, famine – but this does not mean that they become animal-like; and under such conditions, not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization. Rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable. Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage, and this reaction by no means necessarily reflects personal injury, as is demonstrated by the whole history of revolution, where invariably members of the upper classes touched off and then led the rebellions of the oppressed and downtrodden. To resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness. To act with *deliberate* speed goes against the grain of rage and violence, but this does not make them irrational. On the contrary, in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy. The point is not that, this permits us to let off steam – which indeed can be equally well done by pounding the table or slamming the door. The point is that under certain circumstances

violence – acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences – is the only way to set the scales of justice right again. (Billy Budd, striking dead the man who bore false witness against him, is the classical example.) In this sense, rage and the violence that sometimes – not always – goes with it belong among the “natural” *human* emotions, and to cure man of them would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him. That such acts, in which men take the law into their own hands for justice’s sake, are in conflict with the constitutions of civilized communities is undeniable; but their antipolitical character, so manifest in Melville’s great story, does not mean that they are inhuman or “merely” emotional.

Absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. “Detachment and equanimity” in view of “unbearable tragedy” can indeed be “terrifying,”¹⁹ namely, when they are not the result of control but an evident manifestation of incomprehension. In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be “moved,” and the opposite of emotional is not “rational,” whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling. Rage and violence turn irrational only when they are directed against substitutes, and this, I am afraid, is precisely what the psychiatrists and polemologists concerned with human aggressiveness recommend, and what corresponds, alas, to certain moods and unreflecting attitudes in society at large. [. . .]

Moreover, if we inquire historically into the causes likely to transform *engagés* into *enragés*, it is not injustice that ranks first, but hypocrisy. Its momentous role in the later stages of the French Revolution, when Robespierre’s war on hypocrisy transformed the “despotism of liberty” into the Reign of Terror, is too well known to be discussed here; but it is important to remember that this war had been declared long before by the French moralists who saw in hypocrisy the vice of all vices and found it ruling supreme in “good society,” which somewhat later was called bourgeois society. Not many authors of rank glorified violence for violence’s sake; but these few – Sorel, Pareto, Fanon – were motivated by a much deeper hatred of bourgeois society and were led to a much more radical break with its moral standards than the conventional Left, which was chiefly inspired by compassion and a burning desire for justice. [. . .]

And this violence again is not irrational. Since men live in a world of appearances and, in their dealing with it, depend on manifestation, hypocrisy’s conceits – as distinguished from expedient ruses, followed by disclosure in due time – cannot be met by so-called reasonable behavior. Words can be relied on only if one is sure that their function is to reveal and not to conceal. It is the semblance of rationality, much more than the interests behind it, that provokes rage. To use reason when reason is used as a trap is not “rational”; just as to use a gun in self-defense is not “irrational.” This violent reaction against hypocrisy, however justifiable in its own terms, loses its *raison d’être* when it tries to develop a strategy of its own with specific goals; it becomes “irrational” the moment it is “rationalized,” that is, the moment the reaction in the course of a contest turns into an action, and the hunt for suspects, accompanied by the psychological hunt for ulterior motives, begins.

Although the effectiveness of violence does not depend on numbers – one machine gunner can hold hundreds of well-organized people at bay – nonetheless in collective violence its most dangerously attractive features come to the fore, and this by no means because there is safety in numbers. It is perfectly true that in military as well as revolutionary action “individualism is the first [value] to disappear”;²⁰ in its stead, we find a kind of group coherence which is more intensely felt and proves to be a much stronger, though less lasting, bond than all the varieties of friendship, civil or private.²¹ To be sure, in all illegal enterprises, criminal

or political, the group, for the sake of its own safety, will require "that each individual perform an irrevocable action" in order to burn his bridges to respectable society before he is admitted into the community of violence. But once a man is admitted, he will fall under the intoxicating spell of "the practice of violence [which] binds men together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward."²²

Fanon's words point to the well-known phenomenon of brotherhood on the battlefield, where the noblest, most selfless deeds are often daily occurrences. Of all equalizers, death seems to be the most potent, at least in the few extraordinary situations where it is permitted to play a political role. Death, whether faced in actual dying or in the inner awareness of one's own mortality, is perhaps the most antipolitical experience there is. It signifies that we shall disappear from the world of appearances and shall leave the company of our fellow-men, which are the conditions of all politics. As far as human experience is concerned, death indicates an extreme of loneliness and impotence. But faced collectively and in action, death changes its countenance; now nothing seems more likely to intensify our vitality than its proximity. Something we are usually hardly aware of, namely, that our own death is accompanied by the potential immortality of the group we belong to and, in the final analysis, of the species, moves into the center of our experience. It is as though life itself, the immortal life of the species, nourished, as it were, by the sempiternal dying of its individual members, is "surging upward," is actualized in the practice of violence.

It would be wrong, I think, to speak here of mere sentiments. After all, one of the outstanding properties of the human condition is here finding an adequate experience. In our context, however, the point of the matter is that these experiences, whose elementary force is beyond doubt, have never found an institutional, political expression, and that death as an equalizer plays hardly any role in political philosophy, although human mortality – the fact that men are "mortals," as the Greeks used to say – was understood as the strongest motive for political action in prephilosophic political thought. It was the certainty of death that made men seek immortal fame in deed and word and that prompted them to establish a body politic which was potentially immortal. Hence, politics was precisely a means by which to escape from the equality before death into a distinction assuring some measure of deathlessness. (Hobbes is the only political philosopher in whose work death, in the form of fear of violent death, plays a crucial role. But it is not equality before death that is decisive for Hobbes; it is the equality of fear resulting from the equal ability to kill possessed by everyone that persuades men in the state of nature to bind themselves into a commonwealth.) At any event, no body politic I know of was ever founded on equality before death and its actualization in violence; the suicide squads in history, which were indeed organized on this principle and therefore often called themselves "brotherhoods," can hardly be counted among political organizations. But it is true that the strong fraternal sentiments collective violence engenders have misled many good people into the hope that a new community together with a "new man" will arise out of it. The hope is an illusion for the simple reason that no human relationship is more transitory than this kind of brotherhood, which can be actualized only under conditions of immediate danger to life and limb.

That, however, is but one side of the matter. Fanon concludes his praise of the practice of violence by remarking that in this kind of struggle the people realize "that life is an unending contest," that violence is an element of life. And does that not sound plausible? Have not men always equated death with "eternal rest," and does it not follow that where we have life we have struggle and unrest? Is not quiet a clear manifestation of lifelessness or decay? Is not violent action a prerogative of the young – those who presumably are fully alive? Therefore are not praise of life and praise of violence the same? [. . .]

Notes

- 1 Harvey Wheeler, "The Strategic Calculators," in Nigel Calder, *Unless Peace Comes*, New York, 1968, p. 109.
- 2 *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (1878), Part II, ch. 3.
- 3 As General André Beaufre, in "Battlefields of the 1980s," points out: Only "in those parts of the world not covered by nuclear deterrence" is war still possible, and even this "conventional warfare," despite its horrors, is actually already limited by the ever-present threat of escalation into nuclear war. (In Calder, *op. cit.*, P.3.)
- 4 *Report from Iron Mountain*, New York, 1967, the satire on the Rand Corporation's and other think tanks' way of thinking, is probably closer to reality, with its "timid glance over the brink of peace," than most "serious" studies. Its chief argument, that war is so essential to the functioning of our society that we dare not abolish it unless we discover even more murderous ways of dealing with our problems, will shock only those who have forgotten to what an extent the unemployment crisis of the Great Depression was solved only through the outbreak of World War II, or those who conveniently neglect or argue away the extent of present latent unemployment behind various forms of featherbedding.
- 5 Noam Chomsky in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, New York, 1969; Richard N. Goodwin's review of Thomas C. Schelling's *Arms and Influence*, Yale, 1966, in *The New Yorker*, February 17, 1968.
- 6 There exists, of course, a large literature on war and warfare, but it deals with the implements of violence, not with violence as such.
- 7 See Engels, *op. cit.*, Part II, ch. 4.
- 8 Wheeler, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Engels, *ibidem*.
- 9 Andrei D. Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*, New York, 1968, p. 36.
- 10 Wheeler, *ibidem*.
- 11 Nigel Calder, "The New Weapons," in *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- 12 M. W. Thring, "Robots on the March," in Calder, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
- 13 Vladimir Dedijer, "The Poor Man's Power," in Calder, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- 14 Nikolas Tinbergen, "On War and Peace in Animals and Man," in *Science*, 160: 1411 (June 28, 1968).
- 15 To counter the absurdity of this conclusion a distinction is made between endogenous, spontaneous instincts, for instance, aggression, and reactive drives such as hunger. But a distinction between spontaneity and reactivity makes no sense in a discussion of innate impulses. In the world of nature there is no spontaneity, properly speaking, and instincts or drives only manifest the highly complex way in which all living organisms, including man, are adapted to its processes.
- 16 The hypothetical character of Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* (New York, 1966) is clarified in the interesting collection of essays on aggression and adaptation edited by Alexander Mitscherlich under the title *Bis hierher und nicht weiter. Ist die menschliche Aggression unbefriedbar?*, München, 1968.
- 17 von Holst, *op. cit.*, p. 283: "Nicht, weil wir Verstandeswesen, sondern weil wir ausserdem ganz urtümliche Triebwesen sind, ist unser Dasein im Zeitalter der Technik gefährdet."
- 18 Long-range weapons, seen by the polemologists as having freed man's aggressive instincts to the point where the controls safeguarding the species do not work any longer (see Tinbergen, *op. cit.*), are taken by Otto Klineberg ("Fears of a Psychologist," in Calder, *op. cit.*, p. 208) rather as an indication "that personal aggressiveness played [no] important role as a motive for war." Soldiers, one would like to continue the argument, are not killers, and killers – those with "personal aggressiveness" – are probably not even good soldiers.
- 19 I am paraphrasing a sentence of Noam Chomsky (*op. cit.*, p. 371), who is very good in exposing the "facade of toughmindedness and pseudoscience" and the intellectual "vacuity" behind it, especially in the debates about the war in Vietnam.
- 20 Fanon, *op. cit.* p. 47
- 21 J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (New York, 1959; now available in paperback), is most perceptive and instructive on this point. It should be read by everyone interested in the practice of violence.
- 22 Fanon, *op. cit.*, pp. 85 and 93, respectively.