

The Cult Of The Gun

Terrorism has become the catchphrase of the radical Right. **Fred Halliday** argued at *Marxism Today's* Left Unlimited that we should see this ploy for what it is, but not fall into the trap of condoning all violence associated with causes with which we sympathise

Violence is an odious, but inescapable, feature of politics and political change. I would like here to focus on three aspects of the question of violence and politics. The first, despite the current frivolous left concern for fashion, is to make a few classical points which are, I think, still relevant. Secondly I shall say something about 'terrorism'. And thirdly I shall say something about liberation movements and violence.

I want to begin by making two classical points. The first is that whatever we say about the use of violence and the justification of violence, we must never forget that it is something extremely horrible and unpleasant. We must never allow the degrading tendency to develop of valorising the gun, of valorising the use of violence. We may think it is justified for others, but we must never allow the cult of violence, the cult of the bomb, the fascist theory that somehow it is ennobling or purging, or like a fire which brings out the best in people, to get a hold on us, as it has done in the case of quite a number of liberation movements, European urban guerilla movements and the like.

One may see quite a lot of photographs of Third World liberation movements in which children of five or six are carrying rifles. This is not something which one should ever condone or support. And the cult of the gun, whether it's the Thompson machine gun or the Kalashnikov, is a deeply corrupting one which we should guard very carefully against. Therefore, not out of pacifist reasons necessarily, but out of political and moral reasons, a deep sense of hostility and disgust at violence, and a reluctance to use it, has got to remain with us. It is something that the generation of the 1960s onwards often forgot, because they did not remember fascism. But those people on the Left who do remember fascism will, I think, have a somewhat more sober and realistic sense of this. The ability to discuss and disagree without violence and the fear associated with it is very precious and all too easily lost.

But there is the other side of it. It is this: that all systems of social power establish and maintain themselves in part through the use of violence. This goes for political systems - the state and the ruling class. It goes for the power of gender, and for systems of racial and ethnic oppression. And the point about this, and the point that so much of the public discussion ignores, is that the starting point is not the violence of the oppressed, it is not that of the working class, or of women, or of blacks. It is the violence of those with power. It is the violence of those who have got power through violence, who maintain it either through overt violence or through the threat of it.

History is warped if you see violence



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as being solely a problem of those who revolt using violence. The question is equally about those who maintain power using violence whether this is directed through state repression, or through rape, or through racist attacks, or through attacking strikers. Therefore the discussion has to be about the violence of those who are in power, as well as about the question of when and how it is legitimate to use it against them.

It is sometimes said that some countries have had non-violent evolutions of politics, or their history has evolved non-violently, and the two countries that people are particularly fond of quoting in this regard are the United Kingdom, and the United States. But the British state was established through violence. We even had a revolution, only they don't call it a revolution any more; they just call it the civil war. Nobody now celebrates the anniversary of the execution of Charles I. But the fact is that England had a bourgeois revolution. Subse-



quently the British ruling class maintained itself: it made concessions in the form of the vote to workers and to women, and in the form of independence to colonies, but only after there was very widespread resistance. They only gave independence to Ireland after a long struggle there. So this is a country whose political system has been maintained and established through violence. As for the history of the United States, it had a vast civil war, the first a modern war, to maintain its unity; it had used violence to get independence, and it has maintained itself domestically and internationally in a violent way. The idea that these countries are not violent is nonsense.

The question of violence is often associated with revolution. But it is not just revolutions which produce violence. It's also non-revolutions. In the famous book by the sociologist Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Development*, he pointed out that the Russian, French and Chinese revolutions were impor-

'It is not legitimate to shoot hostages, burn children alive, or place bombs in shops'



tant moments of transition, and that there was considerable violence in them. But if you look at the countries which did not have violent revolutions, Germany and Japan, and look at the violence that they experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries, then the non-revolutionary path to modernisation is just as violent, and for people elsewhere maybe even more violent, than those of the countries which had revolutions.

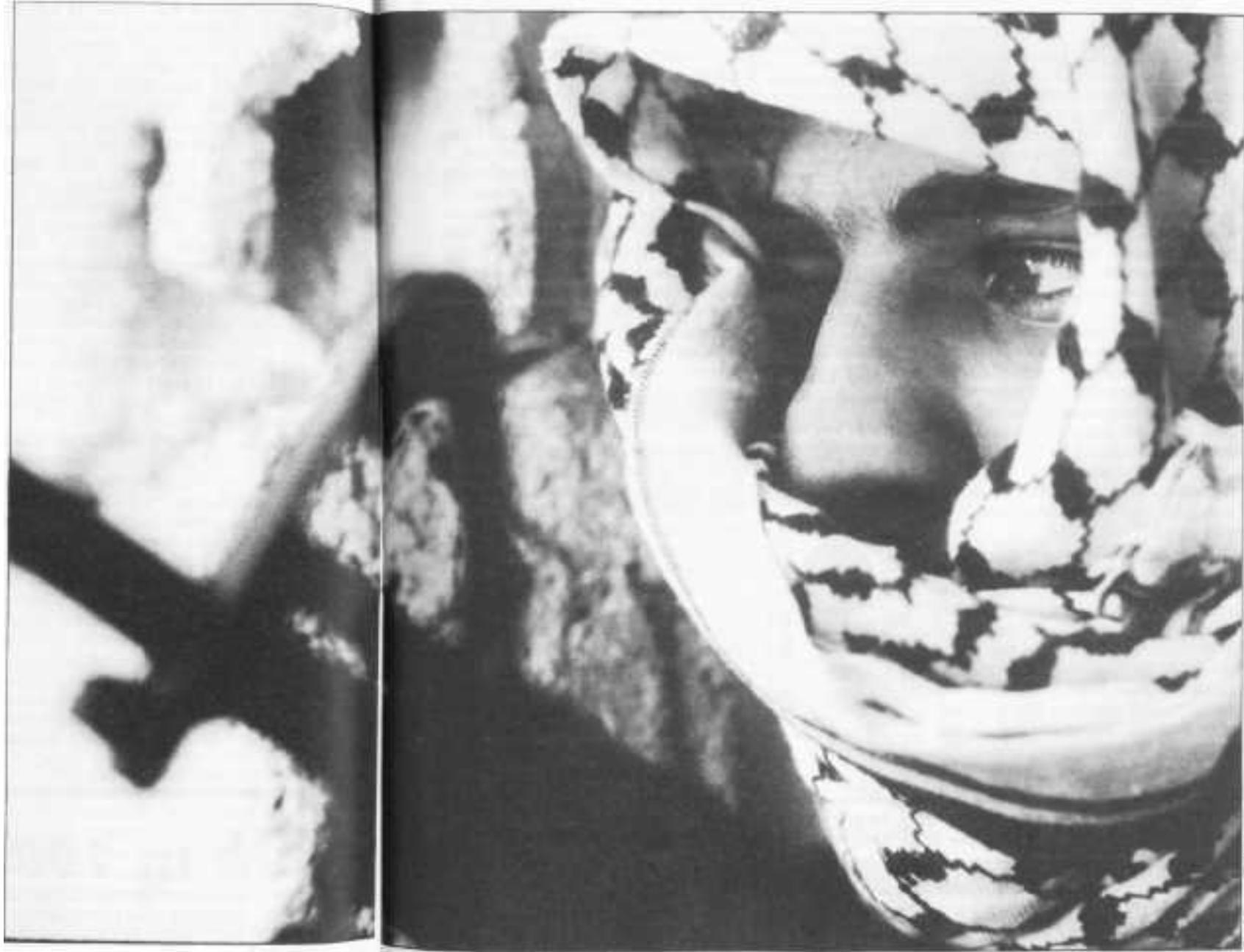
The question of violence is inescapably linked to systems of political power and is inescapably bound up in the history of even the most apparently peaceful of countries. This remains so to this day. Anybody who wants to produce, or lead, substantial political and social change in a developed capitalist country cannot avoid this issue. The reason is very simple: the people who have power are not going to give it up easily. It is a myth, it is a nice comforting myth, to think they will. That was the most pertinent lesson of Chile.

This brings us to the issue of terrorism. It is sometimes said that one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist. The implication of that is that it really depends on what a person's political goals are whether or not you see them as a terrorist. I do not share this view. It is relativist. I think there are certain general moral principles. It is not legitimate to shoot hostages, burn children alive, or place bombs in shops, in any circumstances. It is a very dangerous path to get on to when people say this. The Palestinian demand for a state is just: but Palestinians sometimes say, when placing bombs that kill Israeli civilians: 'well, everybody in Israel is in the army'. The Israelis say the Arabs are responsible for backing the resistance, when they bomb refugee camps in Lebanon. This is in both cases nonsense. Secondly there is a problem of the use, in the current international situation, of a series of tactics which are terrorist in any strict sense - the hijacking of planes, the placing of bombs in supermarkets and night clubs etc - which should be condemned whoever carries them out. I don't think this is a relativistic or unimportant issue.

However, terrorism is a bit like witchcraft. You have to ask why people make such an issue of it at a particular time. What are the political motives behind the scare about terrorism at this time? It's not that there have been more hijackings. The number of people killed in all the 750 hijackings in history has been about 230, which is much less than in, for example, either plane or car accidents. There is a political purpose behind the current scare about terrorism. And to say this is not to ignore the fact that there are problems about terrorism. The purpose is, apparently, to discredit all forms of resistance to colonial rule in the Third World, and to American foreign policy. The point is to discredit all those who are fighting for national liberation, as 'terrorists', as illegitimate. And this is something that much of the press in this country has participated in.

It also serves another function, which is to conceal the degree to which the United States government is itself pursuing terroristic policies. The Contras in Nicaragua and the Afghan *mujahidin* are terrorists. They are people who are using tactics of a criminal kind, and they are people who are by any definition terrorists.

So, there is a problem about terrorism: we can't just say it's all reactionary propaganda. But we have to define the terms on which we discuss it and our own judgements. And we have to see the political purpose behind the current hullabaloo about terrorism, which is in no way the most serious problem confronting the world. If we are going to talk about terrorism we should talk about the terrorism of Reagan, the South Africans and the rest.



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Two other points about terrorism are important to make. I do not think there is such a thing as a terrorist mentality. I do not think there is a general theory of terrorism, or even a general definition of terrorism. But if there is one thing that runs through it from the mid-19th century onwards, it is a short-circuiting of politics. It is a belief that you can get radical change not by strikes, or by organising people, or by convincing people, but by some kind of dramatic gesture which will somehow shake everyone up. You seize a hostage, America will change its foreign policy. You blow up a supermarket, the government will fall. Or even you blow up Margaret Thatcher and the whole British policy in Ireland will change. These ideas are illusions, mythical. The short-circuiting of politics is a refusal to see what is in fact required, the difficult path that is required, to get changes. The interesting thing about the history of terrorism of this kind is that it does not work.

It may precipitate greater repression as it did in a country like Russia in the 1880s or Argentina in the 1970s. You may of course get rid of a hated minister. But it does not produce substantial political change. I can't think of a single place where it ever has done. The philosophic assumption behind terrorism - that you can get radical change by a bomb, a hijacking, media coverage or whatever it may be - is fundamentally faulty. It has not

happened and it will not.

The final point I'd make on terrorism is this. There is, indeed, a major problem of terrorism in the world today, a problem of gigantic and tragic proportions, which pertains not to the discomfort of air travellers in the West. Rather it is the spread of terrorism in communal situations in countries where you have a multinational situation. For example in Cyprus, in Lebanon, in Sri Lanka, in the Christian-Muslim clashes in the Philippines, in Ethiopia or in the Punjab. And Ulster exhibits the same problem. In situations like this we have communities living together who are bombing each other. It is a spreading phenomenon and it is a very dangerous one. It produces generations and generations of revenge, hatred and all the rest of it. And if we are going to talk about the political problems of terrorism, I think this is the thing above all to look at: the deformation of political and social struggles by inter-communal terrorism.

Finally about liberation movements. It is legitimate to support liberation movements and people who are struggling for independence, but not uncritically. It is not our job to cheer on everything they do or construe solidarity as providing good reasons for their mistakes. In that sense one has to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of terror and of violence. The

use of violence in a situation is justified if three conditions are met: (1) there is major oppression, and no possibility of achieving change politically; (2) you represent a majority of the people as far as you can see; and (3) you limit the kinds of violence that you use. All three of those conditions have to be met. I therefore think that it is legitimate to use violence against the government of South Africa. It is legitimate to crush the Contras in Nicaragua. I do not think that the Red Brigades or Red Army Faction are defensible. Nor is it legitimate to use violence in the Basque country in Spain, nor do I think it is legitimate for the IRA to use violence in Northern Ireland. In the latter two cases non-violent political expression is possible and those using violence represent a minority - around 15% of the population in the province concerned. I think one has to be quite clear that, if I might say, the softheaded collusion with all sorts of chauvinists, communal violence merchants, and 'left' nationalists, in conflict situations where words like liberation are bandied about, is often politically spurious.

A final point: We are talking about political violence. Let us not forget the one which hangs over us all which is the threat of nuclear weapons. I think there is a four to one chance that we shall all be blown up. Maybe three to one. We shouldn't forget it. We're living on borrowed time, and this is no small part of the overall problem. •

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