

WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

by Anthony Arblaster

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels expressed the view that "the epoch of the bourgeoisie", by contrast with earlier stages in human history, had "simplified class antagonisms", with the result that "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat." One reason for this, they suggested, was that capitalism had had the effect of stripping away the various ideological veils, religious and secular, by which exploitation and oppression had normally been both concealed and justified, and had "left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'." They summed up this process of de-mystification as follows:

In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

We do not need to assume that this represents the most central, or the most considered view on the subject expressed by Marx and/or Engels to recognise that this particular expectation as to the character of class conflict within capitalist society has not been fulfilled. Capitalist exploitation is not uniquely naked and unveiled. Ideology, bourgeois ideology, continues to play a quite decisive role in disguising and blurring class conflicts, and sustaining the claims to legitimacy made by the state and its agencies in capitalist society.

A similar tendency to underestimate the role of ideology is reflected in the stress that Marxists frequently place on the purely coercive and even violent character of the state, of which some of Lenin's remarks in *The State and Revolution* provide an important (because influential) example:

The state is a special organisation of force: it is an organisation of violence for the suppression of some class.

A standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power. But how can it be otherwise?¹

Lenin was, of course, primarily concerned to attack bourgeois theories of the state, which have always tended to disregard or slide over the coercive character of state power by indulging in elaborate and abstract discussions

of consent and legitimacy. No radical or socialist, contemplating the formidable array of courts, prisons, police and armed forces, or surveying the history of bourgeois societies, no one who has experienced or witnessed the response by the police and other public order bodies to often quite peaceful political demonstrations in innumerable countries in recent years, will be disposed to under-estimate the role of force and violence in upholding the structure of society and the state.

Nevertheless it is a mistake, and one to which Marxists are especially prone, to see in coercion or the fear it inspires the primary or central supports of the political institutions and the social and political structure of capitalism. For most people, most of the time, both institutions and structure command a kind of passive, usually resigned acquiescence which amounts in practice to support, and which sometimes rises to the level of positive support. That acquiescence and support is nourished and sustained by bourgeois ideology, which is actively disseminated in so far as that is necessary, but demonstrates its real effectiveness in the fact that it pervades and impregnates the whole of society, its institutions, habits and customs, its ways of thought and feeling, so thoroughly and so deeply that it is passed on from one generation to the next 'naturally' and without effort, in so far as habits of thought and feeling are transmitted to children as they learn to live in the social world of men and women. What Lukács observed as long ago as 1920,²—that the victory of socialism through the struggle of the working-class will require the transformation of the consciousness of the working-class itself, because it is so deeply saturated with the values and the world-view of capitalism—this remains fundamentally true, and perhaps even more relevant now than it was then. The struggle for socialism is, among other things, an ideological struggle, a process of constant challenge to the fundamental, deeply ingrained, and wholly tendentious assumptions and values of the dominant (bourgeois) ideology.

Such a challenge has to be posed at every level, in ways which are public and dramatic enough to induce re-thinking on a wide scale, as well as at various levels of theory and argument. It is a matter for action, for the 'demonstration' of certain truths, as well as for writing and talking. Nevertheless, this essay is intended as a contribution, however minor and marginal, to this necessary project of challenge and de-mystification, in which so many people are now in different ways involved. It concentrates upon a single term and a single issue—violence.

Of course this is not an arbitrary choice. On the contrary. We are daily deluged with reports and images of what is called 'violence', some of which at least correspond to what everyone understands by the term. We are told that we live in an age of unprecedented violence, or that violence is increasing (and ought to be diminished), and the reports and images seem to confirm these generalisations. The word is now one of the most common and central in ordinary political discussion. Whole books on the

subject appear, year by year and month by month: *The Conquest of Violence*, *The Future of Violence*, Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*, and many others. Leader writers, politicians and pundits of all kinds ceaselessly urge upon their readers and hearers the virtues of 'non-violence', as if they had all been belatedly converted. into disciples of the (murdered) Mahatma Gandhi and the (murdered) Martin Luther King. Here, for example, is Alastair Hetherington, the then editor of *The Guardian*, defending the 'right' of newspaper employers to enquire into the "political affiliations and activities" of prospective journalist-employees:

A newspaper committed to reasoned argument, non-violence and Parliamentary democracy has to protect itself against undue influence by Marxists or Fascists who do not share its philosophy.³

In what sense, one asks, is *The Guardian*, a paper which supported the Americans in Vietnam, and which has consistently refused to criticize the behaviour of the British Army in Northern Ireland, committed to non-violence? Clearly not in the same sense as the avowedly pacifist *Peace News*. Here is a situation of deep confusion in which it is necessary to look closely at the various ways in which words are being used. As E.J. Hobsbawm has written, in a notably sensible essay on the subject:

Of all the vogue words of the late 1960s, "violence" is very nearly the trendiest and the most meaningless. Everyone talks about it, nobody thinks about it.⁴

The commonest assumption is that everybody talks about it because there is more of it around. Thus an Oxford academic recently began a *Sunday Times* review with the words "Political violence is now so unscrupulous and persistent. . .⁵ as if in the past this was not the case. And another writer, Paul Johnson, followed last November's bombings in Birmingham, which killed twenty-one people, by suggesting in *The New Statesman* that

Step by step, almost imperceptibly, without anyone being aware that a fatal watershed has been crossed, mankind has descended into the age of terror. . . the international community has allowed itself to be corrupted into accepting. . . the indiscriminate murder of the innocent in the pursuit of political ends.⁶

Again the implication is that this is something new. But the assumption that there is now more violence than there used to be begs most of the important questions. For, as Raymond Williams drily remarked when reviewing Hannah Arendt's book on this subject:

During the last war, as I remember, there was not much discussion of violence. Today it is hardly possible to get through a serious political discussion without stumbling over the word and perhaps the concept.'

'Stumbling' is, I think, an accurate way of evoking the difficulties which surround this word.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that this barrage of words and images can be dismissed as 'mere' propaganda, and therefore, by implication, not worth serious consideration. The word 'violence' remains an extremely potent one, even if its over-use (and abuse) may bring diminishing returns. Despite allegations that there is a tendency to glorify violence on the Left—the names of Fanon, Sartre, and even Marcuse are habitually cited in this context⁸—it remains exceedingly difficult and, in fact, unusual, for anyone to advocate or defend in public the use of violence for political ends. The accusation of either condoning or supporting violence is one that most people prefer to shun, understandably enough. It matters a great deal, therefore, what the dominant definition of such a term is, and whether it can, and should, be effectively challenged.

Nor should it be supposed that the Left is immune from the impact of such a barrage. It, too, has shared in the general confusion, and, while implicitly accepting the potency of the term 'violence', has sought to re-define it in ways which correspond to a socialist analysis and scale of values. This is, as I shall argue, not an entirely illegitimate procedure. Nevertheless, it both reflects and compounds the confusion in ways which may ultimately prove to be damaging rather than useful. Let us then consider the meaning of the term 'violence', and the different ways in which it is actually used.



The minimal ordinary conception of violence is well-known, although, as we shall see, not as straightforward as it sounds: a violent action is one which involves doing harm, injury or damage to a human being, or to a non-human being, or perhaps, but more dubiously, to things, notably (in common speech) to things which are owned, i.e. property; and the harm or injury conceived of is characteristically physical, or at least, quasi-physical (I have in mind here forms of torture, or 'ill-treatment', which may leave no bodily mark), causing suffering and affecting health. As Gerald Priestland says:

... the essence of violence is that *physical* power is deliberately employed, with the ultimate sanction of *physical* pain, and little choice but surrender or *physical* resistance. . .⁹

It may harm someone if I tell a lie about him or her to the effect that he or she is dishonest—or violent—but we do not normally describe such harmful acts as acts of violence. Even an action which may indirectly, or even directly, cause not merely personal but actual physical harm, such as paying starvation wages, or preventing the building of drains or a water supply, is not usually termed an act of violence.

But here we are already running into difficulties. The archetypal act of violence—the image that we are likely to have of it—is something like punching someone on the nose, or stabbing them, or beating them. It is, in other words, a direct and personal act, and it is typically characterized as impetuous and angry rather than as calculated and deliberate. But most acts that involve physical harm, injury and killing in the twentieth century are quite impersonal. It is not, of course, that they do not involve human agency, but that the most responsible agents are normally remote from the harm and killing caused by their decisions and orders. If you think of aerial bombing—a typical form of modern mechanized violence—this applies whether you are thinking of the airmen who do it, or the generals and politicians who order it. To quote Priestland again:

There is a convenient division of labour built into modern warfare; as Barnett puts it: "Those who plan do not kill, and those who kill do not plan." It has a routine, unemotional efficiency about it, separating killer from victim almost as much as it separates them both from the planner. . . .¹⁰

These were the aspects of modern violence which emerged with particular force from the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, and which Hannah Arendt brought out so well in her remarkable book on the case. The prosecution, understandably outraged by Eichmann's claim:

With the killing of Jews I had nothing to do. I never killed a Jew, or a non-Jew, for that matter—I never killed any human being. I never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew; I just did not do it. . . .¹¹

tried to prove both that he had actually given orders to kill, and that he had even killed people himself. "The prosecution, unable to understand a mass murderer who had never killed (and who in this particular instance probably did not even have the guts to kill), was constantly trying to prove individual murder."¹² But all this was completely irrelevant, as Arendt implies. And so was the character of Eichmann himself. He was not a sadistic monster; he was not even a fanatical anti-Semite, as some Nazis were. He was simply a bureaucrat, an administrator whose job it was to organise and supervise the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews from their homes and countries to the extermination camps at Auschwitz and elsewhere. It was hardly even necessary for him to visit Auschwitz or to witness any of the ceaseless killing, and he did so only with reluctance and revulsion. He was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, a 'man of violence'. That is, he neither relished violence, nor personally engaged in it. But, as the Israeli judges correctly saw, this did not in any way diminish his responsibility or his guilt. If anything, the exact reverse was true:

. . . these crimes were committed *en masse*, not only in regard to the number of victims, but also in regard to the numbers of those who perpetrated the crime,

and the extent to which any one of many criminals was close to or remote from the actual killer of the victim means nothing, as far as the measure of his responsibility is concerned. On the contrary, in general the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands.¹³

It is this aspect of large-scale violence, the remoteness of those most responsible for it from the actual brutality and killing and suffering, which raises the most awkward questions when it comes to defining violence. If Eichmann was, to say the least, involved in violence by virtue of his role in the Final Solution, why should we not say the same of the man who pays starvation wages or perpetuates disease by obstructing a water supply? His remoteness from the actual suffering, or his personal niceness or otherwise are not to the point, as we have seen, any more than it constitutes an adequate defence against calling Dr. Kissinger a 'mass murderer' to say that he is personally humane and has a distaste for violence.

It may at once be suggested that the vital difference lies in the areas of intention. Whereas the Nazis had the deliberate policy of killing the Jews of Europe, the man who pays starvation wages or obstructs a water supply does not usually intend harm. He is concerned to make money or protect his interests; the harm is not intended, and perhaps not even foreseen. This seems plausible. Someone who greets you with a slap on the back that knocks you over wouldn't normally be said to have committed an act of violence. Yet someone whose mode of getting along the pavement regularly had the unintended effect of forcing other people into the gutter, might well be described as rough, if not violent, in character even if he intended no harm. If we take intentions as decisive, we shall be forced into some odd situations. The Americans, bombing North Vietnam, claimed on occasion that they aimed only at military targets: they intended to destroy only installations of strategic importance, not to flatten hospitals or kill civilians. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the Provisional IRA frequently disclaimed any intention of killing civilians with bombs intended to destroy property or military targets. Surely any action involving the risk, amounting to a near-certainty, that people will be killed and injured, whatever the aims of its perpetrators, must be regarded as an act of violence. But then we are brought back to the cases of wages and water supplies. Where is the line to be drawn between violence and other forms of power or coercion through which injury and death can be caused? It should already be clear that this is not an easy question, and we shall have to return to it in due course.

First, however, I want to deal with two less significant aspects of the definition of violence. The term 'violent' is used much more widely than I have so far indicated, to describe natural as well as human events. We speak of a violent explosion, a violent eruption, as well as of violent language, a violent conflict of views in which no actual physical violence is involved.

Such uses cast light on the meaning of the word, but they are not what the current debate is about. It is about the actual, not metaphorical, violence for which human beings are responsible, not that which is part of the natural world.

The second point is that the idea of violence to property, as opposed to persons, is more difficult and disputable, and so not, in my view, integral to the concept of violence. I say this despite the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, which offers as its first definition of violence:

the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this.

The concept of damage to property is not as straightforward as that of injury to persons. If you see a bulldozer at work destroying a building you are unlikely to call this an act of violence, although it is certainly "the exercise of physical force" for the purpose of destruction or damage. What is the difference between this kind of destruction and that achieved by a bomb planted by some illegal organization? The end result is the same, and so, very often, are the means used (explosives are often used to destroy buildings legally as well as illegally). The only difference is that the one action is legal, sanctioned by the owner of the building in question, and the other is not. The illegal action is described as an act of violence, but the legal action is not. An owner, it seems, cannot perform an act of violence against a building or other inanimate property that he owns.

Undoubtedly this *is* more or less the way in which the term 'violence' is used in relation to property. But it is clearly a very different use from that which relates to persons, where the fundamental concept is that of physical or quasi-physical injury or harm, and the consideration of legality is clearly secondary. For example, torture is, and has been, legal in many countries, but this hardly makes it a non-violent practice; torture is, by definition, the deliberate and systematic infliction of pain and injury. Few practices are more quintessentially and exclusively violent than torture. Nevertheless we have here, in the belief that damage to things or property is only violent if it is illegal, one root of the very widespread assumption that violence against persons too is not to be described as violence if it is legal—only when it does not carry the sanction of the state or some other authority. So that when some politician refers, perhaps in the context of Northern Ireland or the Middle East, to 'men of violence'—it is a phrase that Mr. Brian Faulkner was always particularly addicted to—it is generally understood that he is not referring to soldiers, who kill people legally, but to the IRA and other non-state organizations, who kill them without a licence. Thus the characteristic way of thinking about violence in relation to property is extended to people—an extension which is profoundly typical of bourgeois society,

Frequent efforts are made to give the divide between legal and illegal

violence some conceptual validity by labelling legal violence as 'force'. This manoeuvre appeared at its most transparently ridiculous in a recent British army advertisement which contained the classic sentence "Sometimes a timely show of force can prevent violence breaking out." Priestland half perceives the problem involved in this supposed distinction but then brushes it aside with a routine sneer:

... where do we draw the line between "violence" and "force"? The criminal, the terrorist, the psychopath use violence, we tend to say, while the Police, the Army or the citizen acting in his own defence employ legitimate force. . . The standard retort of the modern revolutionary anarchist, when denounced for resorting to violence, is that the violence of Authority differs from his own merely in wearing a uniform and hypocritically calling itself force.¹⁴

The significant thing, however, is that Priestland makes no reply to this "standard retort." And this is hardly surprising, since both his definition of violence (quoted above), and much of his discussion of it implicitly reject this distinction. Indeed Priestland's definition closely fits the situation of someone being arrested by the police, while his discussion of collective violence rightly accepts that war is not the less violent when it is waged by the legal forces of established states rather than by **unofficial** and illegal armies. In fact it is usually a great deal more so. But at the same time Mr. Priestland wants to have it both ways and retain a supposed distinction for which he offers no justification, but which is, of course, extremely convenient to those who, like him, wish to condemn terrorism and support the forces of 'law and order'.

Another attempt to bolster up the **force/violence** antithesis has been made by Professor Maurice Cranston in the course of an attack on **Marcuse**. He berates **Marcuse** for rejecting "the simple, but very important, distinction between the force, or the strong arm, seldom actually used, of the law and that aggressive infliction of injury or damage which is violence as the dictionary defines the word."¹⁵ The patent tendentiousness of this attempted contrast requires ~~no~~ comment; and Cranston's next comment—that 'violence' is a word "which has an element of censure incorporated in its meaning^y—is almost endearingly naive. For this is precisely the reason why Cranston and those who think like him are so anxious to establish that 'force' is something quite different. Yet all that Cranston can finally do is to complain that **Marcuse's** "lumping together legitimate force and terrorism in the same category of violence is to make nonsense of the whole conception of the rule of law."¹⁶ This is itself complete nonsense. The question of whether it is desirable that the state or other legal authorities should have a monopoly of the use of violence is a question quite separate from the definition of violence itself. Neither Priestland nor Cranston nor any other writer on this topic that I have encountered offers any reason or argument for thinking that violence

becomes something other than violence when it is used legally or by state authorities. The distinction between violence and force (which Hannah Arendt also makes, in a rather eccentric form, however)" is, like the equally common supposed distinction between 'licence' (bad) and 'liberty' (good), totally spurious. Both of these non-distinctions do, however, have immense conservative political value, and this easily accounts for their persistence and popularity. It is very comforting for supporters of established states and governments to believe that they make use, not of violence but of that vaguer and less nasty-sounding entity, force; and that they are not hostile to or restrictive of, liberty, but only of that obviously undesirable phenomenon, licence.

Leaving aside, then, the difficult and rather odd idea of violence against property, and rejecting as spurious the supposed distinction between violence and force, we can concentrate on the central issue—violence against persons which is the result of human action rather than natural events. The concept of violence involves that of harm or injury, as the dictionary indicates, and, as Professor J.M. Cameron has suggested,¹⁸ this allows us to distinguish between torture and dentistry, or, more seriously, surgery—a distinction which, bearing in mind the character of Nazi 'medicine', is more necessary and less obvious than it might at first sight appear. The surgeon who amputates a limb is not to be distinguished from the Nazi experimenter or the torturer in Brazil or Belfast solely by his subjectively good intentions. His action is justified because there is good reason and empirical evidence to think that the action is necessary to the patient's continued well-being and even existence. It is also usually the case that the surgeon acts with the consent of the patient (although this is not always the case in emergency situations), and so cannot be said to be *imposing* suffering on the patient, again unlike the torturer.

So I am inclined to suggest that the root concept of violence is that of physical or quasi-physical injury, harm or suffering inflicted on someone against his or her will. The ultimate in such harm is killing someone.

This is obvious, but it is worth stressing because it is so easy to become complacent or indifferent about violence in one way or another (one way being to re-label it as force, or security, or order). Death, for each human being, is final and absolute. No compensation for loss of life, monetary or otherwise, can be made to the person killed. That person does not exist any longer. Everyone who is not a total pacifist accepts that it may be expedient and justified to kill some people on occasions in order to protect others. But however reasonable such calculations are, the arithmetic cannot compensate for the deaths involved. Each of us has but one life, and even if we are ready voluntarily to sacrifice it for this or that cause, the loss is still absolute. For each of us it is all we have, all we are. Any humanist, anyone who accepts the Kantian dictum that "every man is to be respected as an absolute end in himself; and it is a crime against the dignity that

belongs to him to use him as a mere means to some external purpose", is bound to acknowledge this. This is the strength of the pacifist position, and I do not see that anyone who is really sensitive to the value of human life can fail to feel some sympathy with pacifism, and a deep repugnance towards violence, which invariably involves harm and suffering, and frequently also involves death.

The Kantian dictum is usually brandished as a stick to beat revolutionary politics with, on the grounds that revolutionary politics, as opposed to gradualism, involves the sacrifice of the individual to "some external purpose", namely the revolution itself. But it is only the incurably complacent who can seriously believe that the non-revolutionary societies of the capitalist world are committed to the principle of treating every individual "as an absolute end in himself". Apart from the obvious incompatibility of such a principle with the existence of conscript armies and the punishment of some individuals in order to deter others, consider the single example of traffic accidents. In Britain in **1972** road accidents caused some **7,700** deaths, seven times as many in a single year as the total number of deaths caused by the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland between **1969** and **1974**. Heads are shaken sadly over such figures, but very little is actually done to reduce the level of accidents. In fact, the level *has* fallen more recently, due to the imposition of lower speed limits; yet these restrictions were inspired by a concern to save not lives but money, to economize on costly imports of oil. Despite what people claim, or imply, we do not live in a society governed by the Kantian ethic.

No doubt one reason why road accidents cause so much less concern than other better publicized, though often less murderous, forms of violence, is because they are accidental. But this can only be at most a mitigating factor, since, as we have seen, there are reasons to reject the criterion of an intention to cause injury or death as a necessary condition of calling an action violent, and in any case it is clear that certain forms of driving behaviour do at least involve a high risk of injury and death. Yet, as J.M. Cameron noted, "Traffic accidents, even when they spring from carelessness or malice, will rarely get into the crime statistics though we might take them as paradigm cases of human violence."¹⁹

The awkward case of the carnage on the roads not only indicates one of the limits of liberal-democratic society's alleged respect for human life. It also suggests that there is not much consistency in popular thinking about violence. It suggests that what is classified as 'violence' at any given time or place will reflect the particular concerns and priorities of a particular society or class or social group, to which some kinds of violence, and some kinds of actions which will and do cause harm, injury and death, are far more objectionable than others which in their results are equally deadly. In other words no society or class is likely to be equally opposed to all forms of violence, or concerned primarily to eliminate violence as such.

There is a consequent tendency to define violence not in any strict way, but according to the established selective interests and priorities of a society or class..

There are two opposed ways in which this process is currently taking place, both of which have already been hinted at. On the one hand, as we have seen, it is quite possible for suffering and death to result from actions which do not correspond to the conventional image of violence, or are not classified as violence, and are certainly not intended to cause harm. This has led many radicals to extend the definition of violence to include actions and also inaction which cause death or perpetuate suffering. Priestland recalls that "Martin Luther King used to insist that it was violence to deprive a Negro child of decent food and schooling."²⁰ The slogan "poverty is violence" is a further example of the same tendency to stretch, or extend, the concept of violence.

On the other hand there is the conservative tendency, far more common in the capitalist world, and always popular with those in authority at every level, to re-define violence so that it both *excludes* legalized violence yet *includes* many forms of non-legal or non-authorized action which are quite patently non-violent. In Britain this tendency has been particularly noticeable in relation to the politics of student protest and the politics of Northern Ireland. I will look first at this conservative tendency.



Professor Cameron, in the article already referred to, begins by pointing out how deeply institutionalized, and how readily accepted, most violence has been. He illustrates this with a little piece of irony from *Pride and Prejudice*:

Much had been done and much had been said in the regiment since the preceding Wednesday; several of the officers had dined lately with their uncle, a private had been flogged, and it had actually been hinted that Colonel Foster was going to be married.

Perhaps the only surprise is that there should have been only one flogging in a week, for, as one writer has noted of the British Army in the eighteenth century:

Flogging was monotonously commonplace. Almost every day's entry in the Order Books contains the names of one, two or three men sentenced to the lash, receiving anything from the minimum of twenty-five strokes to the maximum of three thousand.²¹

But flogging was not part of what the ordinary bourgeois of that time thought of as violence:

In all periods what is taken to be unalterable, a part of the natural order, is not singled out as violence. Violence in the England of the Regency was something

that showed itself in the actions of foreign revolutionaries or of poor people firing ricks or smashing machines.

Cameron concludes that "what counts as violence at a given time is very much a matter of the position and angle of vision of members of particular social groups."

This is not, needless to say, a matter merely of past history. The relevance of Cameron's conclusion is demonstrated by the results of a survey carried out by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.²² A sample of 1,374 American males were questioned about what acts they considered violent and what acts not. Of this sample 57 per cent thought that shooting looters was not a violent act, and "almost a third considered beating students" not to be violent. On the other side of the question, 58 per cent regarded draft-card burning as an act of violence, and 22 per cent described even passive sit-ins as violent.

Such views are not found only among American rednecks. They are quite politically respectable. Recently Mr. William Van Straubenzee, a former Minister of State with special responsibility for higher education, delivered himself of the following views on the sit-in as a tactic:

It is designed to secure by, at best, coercion, and at worst brute force, what cannot otherwise be secured by argument. As such it must be as rigorously condemned and firmly stood up to as terrorism by the IRA. The degree of violence is different, but the intent is the same.²³

And here is Mr. Reginald Maudling, speaking as then Home Secretary to the Police Federation, and offering his definition of 'political' as opposed to merely criminal violence:

By political violence I mean everything from the wickedness of the IRA or bombers who murder—a level of wickedness I find it very hard to comprehend—to those protesters who sit down and block the traffic.²⁴

He did concede that there was "a total moral difference" between his two examples, but both were nevertheless described by him as forms of violence. Nor is such an approach confined to vote-seeking politicians. The appeal tribunal which upheld the dismissal of Robin Blackburn from the London School of Economics in 1968 was composed of two professors of law and a Queen's Counsel, and these three learned and legally expert gentlemen apparently saw nothing wrong in equating violence quite simply with direct action—"he (i.e. Blackburn) spoke very strongly in favour of 'direct action' (that is to say, violence). . ."—and, from this premise, going on to argue that no university teacher should be "at liberty to encourage unlawful violence". Hence Blackburn was justifiably deprived of his post.²⁵

Thus this conservative process of defining, or re-defining, violence involves both a narrowing and a broadening of the root meaning of the

term. On the one hand, as the results of the Michigan survey and Mr. Faulkner's remarks about "men of violence" indicate, there is a narrowing. Violence, to be called violence, must be performed illegally or by unauthorized persons. Otherwise it is known as 'force'. This was implicit in an amendment to West German law which was suggested in 1974, according to which it would be "possible to prosecute people for advocating violence or inciting others to violence."²⁶ Undoubtedly the violence which it would be illegal to advocate would have to be unauthorized violence. Presumably no one would have been liable to prosecution for urging, say, that the police should be more ruthless in shooting down suspected terrorists. This can seem plausible enough at a superficial level, but its logical implication—that violence, in the strict sense of action causing injury or death, is not violence when it is committed legally and by those with a licence to kill and injure—must seem meaningless and even an insult and a mockery to those who are actually on the receiving end of this 'force', that is legal and authorized violence. Death and injury are death and injury whoever inflicts them, and the Catholics of Northern Ireland were as likely, or more likely, to regard the British Army as "men of violence" as they were the Provisional IRA. They were inclined to condone IRA violence because it was not directed at them, whereas most army violence was. Most people in Britain and the Protestants of Ulster took the reverse position, and Faulkner, by using the phrase "men of violence" to refer to the IRA and other non-legal military organizations, but not the British Army, revealed that he was implicitly addressing himself to the Protestant majority, but not the Catholic minority of the province.

It is however one thing to condone, support or justify violence of a particular kind or in specific circumstances (such as when it is legal and authorized). That is something that is open to anyone who is not an absolute pacifist. It is quite another thing to attempt to define it out of existence, or rather, out of sight and discussion. Yet this is what this narrowing down process tries to do. Legal violence ceases to be described as violence at all. This is a device so patently tendentious that it flourishes, not on account of its intellectual merits (which are non-existent) but because it quiets so many people's consciences not to see authorized violence as violence at all. As Cameron points out, this "social myopia" is nothing new. But the antiquity of the hypocrisy does not make it any more tolerable.

The other aspect of this process of conservative re-definition is the simultaneous extension of the concept of violence to comprehend other forms of non-legal, or even legal, demonstrations, opposition, and pressure. Through this process we reach the position in which an occupation or sit-in, which may well be demonstrably non-violent in the elementary sense that it involves neither physical injury nor harm to

persons or even to property, is nevertheless classified as a form of "political violence" by leading politicians, not to mention academics. To the zealots of 'law and order' it may well seem very attractive and quite reasonable to place sit-ins and terrorism on the same spectrum. However this denial of basic distinctions does have the effect of devaluing the entire careers and ethics of protagonists of non-violence such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. And it has the danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you tell people that there is no significant difference between sit-ins and terrorism they may come to believe it—and move that much more easily from non-violence to violence.

Admittedly, it is difficult to make distinctions between violence and other forms of action which may be effective partly because the danger of violence is implicit in the situation; and a display of massive physical force, or simply a very large crowd (usually called a 'mob' in conservative parlance), may be *more* effective than actual violence in compelling something to happen; and such action may be illegal, as violence often is. Nevertheless not all forms of coercion or pressure are violent, nor should the question of violence be confused with the question of legality, as both the narrowing and the widening of the concept that I have been discussing in fact do.

Yet it is, of course, through the specious identification of violence exclusively with unauthorized violence, or of violence with any and every kind of unauthorized pressure and demonstration, that it is possible for the politicians and pundits of contemporary bourgeois society to pose as dedicated opponents of violence, even though they are well known not to be pacifists of any kind. Thus when Bernard Levin, to take a representative example, writes in *The Times* that:

Violence breeds followers as a dead dog maggots, and the maggots that are now crawling through our society, multiplying as they go, will, if we are not careful, end by eating us alive.²⁷

we know from the context that he sees as "maggots" only those who may defend the use of illegal violence, not those who, like himself, defended the enormous violence of the **American** war in Vietnam. Or when Brian Harrison, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, refers to "the political gangsters and their apologists who **plague** our **society**,"²⁸ his readers can take it for granted that he is not referring to President Johnson or President Nixon or anyone else with responsibility for the invasion of Santo Domingo in **1965**, the invasion of Cambodia in **1970**, or the subversion of President Allende, but to the IRA, the Palestine Liberation Organization and *their* apologists. Or when the academic author of an essay on "Socialism and Violence" writes as if it is only revolutionary socialists who have had anything to do with violence, while "the ethic of Social Democracy is essentially passive..."²⁹ we understand how it is possible

that he, and doubtless many of his readers, can so easily, so *naturally* forget the support of social democrats for the First World War, the involvement of social democrats in resisting and crushing innumerable colonial rebellions and wars of national liberation, the involvement of French social democrats in the Suez operation of 1956, the support of British social democrats for the Americans in Vietnam, and so on *ad nauseam*. This is how ideological conditioning operates—so effectively that it is only revolutionary or oppositional violence that is even *seen* as violence at all.

This gigantic bourgeois self-deception, and the verbal tricks which embody it, are obvious enough once one begins to think at all sharply about the issue. Nevertheless the self-deception continues to flourish, and it will require more than an essay or two to challenge it with even limited effectiveness.

The significance of this re-definition is underlined by the fact that there is an alternative line of argument, and a more honest one, open to those who would in general share the repressive attitudes of Bernard Levin, Paul Johnson and the rest. This can be described, roughly speaking, as the Hobbesian position. Instead of turning a blind eye to legal and authorized violence, this case would argue frankly that any state, any human order, must rest ultimately on force, and that the only way in which general insecurity and chaos can be avoided is for the state or government to hold the monopoly of authorized force and violence. This argument, though by no means unchallengeable, is a respectable one and not only Hobbes but a great deal of traditional political theory goes to support it. Its virtue is that it is clearly an honest line of argument, by contrast with the fake pacifist position which is currently so popular. But its political and propagandist disadvantages are almost as obvious as its intellectual merits. It is a bleak and unattractive position, and when we come across a straightforward advocate of it, such as John Carey (another Oxford academic) denouncing

peevish anti-authoritarianism, issuing in squawks about police brutality and "the system" . . .

and asserting that "the only effective response to violent criminality is violent retaliation. . . every ordered society is built on force and must be,"³⁰—we are likely to be shocked, and even (the more squeamish of us) alarmed, at such a blunt endorsement of brutality. And this makes it easy to understand why politicians in particular should prefer to pose as opponents of violence *tout court*. The Hobbes-Carey position has the further disadvantage of raising awkward questions about the character and role of the state (why should we assume that the state will act for the general good in *its* use of violence?) which, again, bourgeois politicians would naturally prefer to avoid. The ideological benefits of the fake pacifist position, by contrast, are far too tempting to be renounced on

WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

merely intellectual grounds of honesty and consistency.

* * *

So much for the conservative redefinition of violence. I must now consider the alternative type of revision, that which attempts to extend the definition of violence to include other kinds of action which can be described as coercive, or which have the (usually unintended) effect of causing physical harm and death. This is, in effect, the radical counterpart of the Van Straubenzee-Maudling extension of the normal concept. A summary by Colin Ward of an argument of Simone Weill is a good example of this radical approach:

Violence.. . is that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal way: it makes a corpse out of him. But you don't have to wound or kill a man to turn him into a thing. All you have to do is to ignore him, to neglect him, to refrain from sharing with him the things that make life possible, and which make life worth living, and you have made of him "another human species, a compromise between a man and a corpse".³¹

To suggest that to ignore somebody, or to neglect him or her, is an act of violence, because any way of treating people as *things*, or objects, is violence, is a challenge to our ordinary, common sense use of the term 'violence'. And it is intended to be one. It is intended to draw our attention to the undeniable, embarrassing fact that an immense amount of physical suffering and death are not caused by anything so outrageous, so visible and dramatic, as direct physical violence. It can be, and often is, the result of inaction rather than action. It was not the action, but the refusal to act, to intervene, of the British governments of the 1840s which ensured that the disastrous crop failures in Ireland would cause millions of deaths by famine and generate a wave of mass emigration to the United States.

If violence is defined in terms of the imposition of physical harm and suffering and death, then it is immediately clear that a great deal of suffering and death is imposed on people—that is, they have no choice but to accept it—without the use of direct physical force, through action or inaction which perpetuates hunger, poverty, illiteracy and disease, and through such events as changes in the international terms of trade to the disadvantage of primary producing countries. This is why Martin Luther King would describe depriving black children of food and schooling as violence, and why it is said that "poverty is violence", and why it is plausible to suggest that a man who pays starvation wages or prevents the building of a water supply commits an act of violence as surely as if he were a prison warder with the physical power to withhold food and water from a sick or dying person.

Now we may object to this on the grounds that not all forms of coercion,

power, and exploitation should be called 'violence' because they have results which are as bad or worse than those achieved by direct physical force and brutality. And such an objection may not be merely a form of semantic conservatism, or a finicky intellectual concern with fine distinctions. But it must be recognised that this is a view which it is easier to take if you are not yourself among the victims of 'non-violent' coercion or exploitation. For the millions of these victims the effects of these 'more civilised' modes of oppression are the same as the effects of violence—i.e. suffering and death. Why then should they seek to distinguish between the two, particularly when it appears that the 'non-violence' of these other forms of oppression makes them morally more acceptable than sheer physical violence? The radical re-definition of violence is, in part, an attempt to see the issue from the point of view of the victims, rather than from the point of view of the oppressors or of those who try, or profess, to sit neutrally on the sidelines.

There is another aspect of this radical attempt to extend the concept of violence which is important, and deserves sympathy. It can be seen as part of a continuous struggle to extend the range of events which are seen as being in principle within the scope of human control, and for which, therefore, mankind must accept responsibility. It is only too easy for comfortable people to slip into the frame of mind in which poverty and hunger and disease are seen as essentially caused by apparently 'natural' occurrences such as drought or epidemic or (a current favourite ~~ajbb~~) over-population. Then poverty and hunger and disease themselves come to be seen as 'natural', in the same way as economic depression and unemployment were in the nineteenth century; and because they are natural, they are beyond human control and beyond more than marginal alleviation. By calling poverty, or hunger, or exploitation, 'violence', radicals seek to stress the degree to which these are the consequences of human action and inaction, and, at a less abstract level, of the economics and politics of international capitalism. It is not by accident that China, with the largest population in the world, does not talk about the supposed problem of 'over-population', and does not look to birth-control for a solution to its problems. It feeds its people instead.

I think that the radical re-definition of violence is also inspired by the desire to respond adequately to the impersonal, structural, organizational character of most modern violence. As we have already seen, these characteristics create difficulties in relation to the traditional way in which we think and speak of both "acts of violence" and "men of violence". Eichmann's judges rightly observed that his non-involvement in the actual killing of Jews, so far from diminishing his responsibility for mass murder, actually implied that he had a far greater responsibility for it than the death squads who did the killing, since they were only obeying orders handed down by Eichmann and those who stood above him in the Nazi

hierarchy. But whereas no one would have any difficulty in recognizing that what went on at Auschwitz was massive violence, it still seems odd to say that the orders which led to the mass killings were themselves acts of violence. Yet if giving an order for violence to take place is not in itself an act of violence, it is indisputably the action which causes the violence to take place. So we are faced with two alternatives: either we classify the orders themselves as acts of violence, which is semantically awkward but morally reasonable; or else we stick to the narrow definition, according to which the killing itself is violence, but the orders to kill are not, in which case we are obliged to recognize that the violence itself is less culpable than the orders which led to it.

Similar considerations apply to the notion of being a "man of violence". There are two senses in which Eichmann, in common with Kissinger, Nixon, Johnson, and innumerable other political leaders who give orders leading to injury and death, was not properly described as a "man of violence". First of all, he, like them (or most of them), was not a man of violent character. He did not relish or enjoy violence. Secondly, he was, again like most of them, not directly involved in the violence which he ordered or assisted in. We sense the difficulty in thinking of, say, Kissinger, as a 'mass murderer'. He doesn't, after all, do it with his own hands. Yet again we are faced with two difficult alternatives: either we recognise that the questions of personal character and direct involvement are irrelevant to their responsibility, and we call them "men of violence" on the basis of their responsibility; or else we stick rigidly to the view that only those who actually commit acts of violence, or even only those who enjoy them are properly called "men of violence", in which case again we have to acknowledge that "men of violence" are for the most part far less culpable for the death and destruction of our age than peace-loving, and Peace Prize-winning, statesmen like Henry Kissinger. Even Priestland has to admit:

Terrorism and assassination are far more sparing of life than full-scale war. Even car-bombing takes fewer lives than bombing from the air.³²

And he goes on to remind us that no less than 115,000 people were killed by the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War.

The problems are not absolutely new, of course. The Duke of Cumberland, commander of the army which defeated the rebellion of the Highland clans at Culloden in April 1746, and which then proceeded to burn, murder, plunder and rape the Highlanders and their homes, naturally played no personal part in these brutal and indiscriminate reprisals. What is more, a recent historian of these events, John Prebble, could unearth only one order "oblique and ambiguous, by which Cumberland seems to have authorized murder and brutality."³³ (my italics). Nevertheless, it was just

that it should have been Cumberland who earned undying hatred and contempt and the nickname of the "Bloody Butcher" for what he allowed to be done, and what he alone had the power to prevent. The greater power and efficiency of modern political organization as well as modern technology have greatly extended the distance between those who decide on policies of violence and those who implement them, and it has become correspondingly more difficult to make the intellectual and imaginative connections needed to identify those bland political faces, smiling into our homes from the small screen, as the features of the men chiefly responsible for the bloodshed in our age.

So there is a good deal to be said in favour of the radical attempt to extend the concept of violence: it acknowledges the impersonal character of so much violence; it recognizes the difficulties in distinguishing between 'violence' which causes suffering and death and other forms of coercion which have the same results; it represents an attempt to see things from the point of view of the oppressed; and it represents an effort to extend human awareness of human responsibilities.

Having said all that, I think nevertheless that the case for a degree of semantic conservatism is strong in relation to this radical extension of the concept, as it was in relation to the conservative attempt to stretch the term to include any form of illegal direct action, whether violent or non-violent. I think it is right that we should distinguish violence from other forms of oppression and coercion, because it ~~is~~ is different from them, and Priestland is surely right to say that it is the *physical* character of violence that differentiates from these other means and methods of coercion. But it does not follow from this that the moral responsibility for violence lies with those who actually carry it out rather than with those who give the orders, or decide on the policies, that require violence.

Nor does it follow that we must necessarily rate violence as morally and humanly more abominable than these other forms of coercion and oppression. The inhabitants of relatively peaceable societies such as Britain are conditioned to regard the very idea of violence with peculiar horror and revulsion. And it is this deep, spontaneous revulsion which Mr. Maudling and Mr. Van Straubenzee seek to exploit, by classifying as violence various other actions which they abominate and want other people to abominate with equal fervour. In the same way the radical attempt to extend the concept of violence implicitly accepts the conventional moral status of violence, rather than challenging it.

But if a more strict and narrow definition of violence is adhered to, then it seems to me that the radical or the socialist is bound to challenge the conventional moral estimate of violence, which is that it is the worst of all evils. He will do this because there are clearly other forms of oppression and coercion which have results which are quite as dreadful as those of actual physical violence. For from the point of view of the **oppressed**—

those (to cite a few examples) who are hungry, under-nourished or dying of starvation, prey to devastating and debilitating diseases, exposed to extremes of cold or damp or heat, those who are illiterate, ignorant, poor, deprived and either excessively hard-worked or else not able to work at all, those whose living standards, and therefore their health and even their life-expectancies, fluctuate according to the wholesale price of cocoa or sugar or coffee or cotton or rubber on the markets of the capitalist world—from the point of view of these people and many more, violence is then not the word that describes their suffering or its causes. It is perfectly possible for injustice, deprivation and oppression to operate effectively without overt or direct violence, or even, quite often, the threat of violence (although this is usually a factor in the situation). In consequence there are many people to whom bourgeois politicians' sermons and tirades against violence, disorder and anarchy make no appeal, simply because they see that their condition and their sufferings are totally compatible with the existence of peace and order and the absence of overt violence. Indeed they may well suspect that their continued misery may be both a condition and a consequence of the maintenance of peace and order, and that nothing substantial will be done to alleviate their condition so long as peace and order continue; so that, instead of abominating violence as the worst of all evils, they may see it as the only way in which their own wretched condition can be ameliorated.

It is a mistake, one more commonly made by the comfortable and privileged than by the deprived, to suppose that 'everyone agrees' that peace and order are the first priorities in politics, both international and internal. 'Everyone' does not agree, in Northern Ireland, for example, that the first priority is peace and order; Catholics are likely to say that the first priority is justice, or equality, and they may be, and certainly have been, prepared to countenance a good deal of disorder and even violence rather than endure another fifty years of injustice and second-class status.

Thus the radical who rejects the radical extension of the concept of violence will not reject the principal argument that inspires that extension. He will accept that there are other forms of coercion just as destructive in their impact on human beings, and he will therefore question the assumption implicit in so much contemporary denunciation of violence—that it is physical violence which is the worst of all social and political evils. The oppressed, and those who support them, are concerned primarily with the fact of oppression, and how it can be ended, only secondarily with the particular form it takes. It is logical, therefore, that when, as so often, oppression, injustice and exploitation operate quite legally and without overt **violence**, (as in Northern Ireland in the first fifty years of its history as a semi-separate state), the issue of violence and the necessity of avoiding it will not appear to the oppressed as the cardinal issue.

The radical is obliged to challenge not only the conventional moral priority given to the violence of violence. He will challenge also the conventional contrast that is made between violence on the one hand and the rule of 'reason' on the other. This antithesis, like the denunciations of violence, is part of the stock-in-trade of contemporary reactionary and bourgeois polemics. One case may serve as typical of many: in an article called "Open Letter to a New Student" Lord James, first Vice-Chancellor of York University, suggested that a student who wanted to change things will not use force, because to use force is to "reject reason". He will use "rational arguments and never anything else."³⁴ How plausible and attractive this sounds—the universities as a world governed by the dictates of pure reason and rational argument. How appealing, and how utterly false. This contrast between reason and force (or violence), is false for several reasons.

Firstly, it implies that there is no violence or threat of violence on the side of reason, or order, or peace. But as we have already seen, the existence of legal violence is not effectively denied by re-labelling it force. Nor does the fact that this violence may only infrequently be actually used mean that the threat of violence is insignificant or ineffective. Many tenants who are evicted from their homes leave without physical violence having to be used against them; but it is very unlikely that they would leave if they believed that no such threat could be enforced. Factory owners or college authorities may not need to employ the actual violence of the law to end an occupation; again the threat is enough. But it is the reality of the threat that counts. The violence has got to be there, and authorities have to be ready to use it, in order for the mere threat to work. And the convenience of threats is precisely that they enable people to get their way without actually *using* violence, thus maintaining a plausible appearance of peace and order. But it is ludicrous to claim of any society equipped with prisons, a police force and armed forces that it is ruled by 'reason', as opposed to force or violence.

Secondly to pose an absolute antithesis between reason and violence disguises the fact that, as again has already been noted, there are many forms of oppression, coercion and exploitation which do not normally assume the form of violence, and which do not rely primarily on violence for their effectiveness. I have suggested that we should adhere to a narrow definition of violence, but if the moral and human consequences of these other modes of oppression, in terms of suffering, deprivation, harm and death, are as dreadful and as widespread as the consequences of physical violence, then there is no reason, *a priori*, why they should be seen as morally more acceptable than violence. And there is certainly no reason why we should take the mere absence of physical violence and the existence of order and the rule of law, as synonymous with the rule of reason. The choice, in most political situations, is not between reason on

the one hand and violence on the other. It is a much more difficult and ambiguous choice between action which may involve or lead to the use of violence on the one hand, and support for forms of social stability and political order which incorporate less spectacular but equally harmful forms of oppression and injustice on the other. (I use the comparative since violence is necessarily, by definition, oppressive to those who suffer it.) The maintenance of order or even law implies nothing about the absence of injustice or the sovereignty of reason.

Finally, it is not only the case that peace and order rest to some degree on violence and the threat of violence; and that they are compatible with, and may even—as in Northern Ireland—embody injustice and oppression. It is also the case that, historically, violence has played an immense part in the establishment of the very peace, order and civilization whose spokesmen now preach to the rest of the world the virtues of non-violence and patient gradualism. This is a point made very forcibly by **Conor Cruise O'Brien** in the preface to his play about the Congo crisis of 1960-61, *Murderous Angels*:

For the white man the thought of the destruction of civilization is far more terrible than for the black man. It is the white man's civilization. . . . The period in which white civilization achieved its definitive preeminence was also, and by no accident, the period in which the triangular trade—guns, slaves and **sugar**—flourished between Western Europe, West Africa and the Caribbean. The Age of Shakespeare was also the Age of Sir John **Hawkins**, whose slaving expeditions Shakespeare's *Queen* disapproved of but invested in. . . . Gladstone was the great voice of white liberalism. The family fortune, on which his career was founded, was in its time founded on the slave trade. The family crest, drawn by his father, was a Negro's head shedding drops of **blood**.³⁶

O'Brien is, of course, trying to explain why the black man, whether in Africa or Bradford or Los Angeles, is likely to take a more sceptical view of the nature of 'civilization', peace and order than the white man, and the point can be applied to other exploited and deprived groups.

The historical point he encapsulates is, I would have thought, incontrovertible. Europe and America did not achieve their present levels of prosperity and culture by means of pure reason but through the ruthless expenditure of blood (their own as well as that of the 'lesser breeds') and iron. Yet the Whig mythology of English, and even European, history, which presents that history as a steady peaceable and humane evolution towards the contemporary apotheosis of liberal democracy, still enjoys wide popularity. Tennyson's complacent vision of England as

A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where Freedom slowly broadens down
From precedent to precedent:

has recently been re-cast in more up-to-date terms by the popular historian and former editor of the *New Statesman*, Paul Johnson. In the epilogue to his history of England, *The Offshore Islanders*, Johnson writes:

Everything worthwhile the English have achieved, for themselves and for others, has been built upon the great tripod of the liberal ethic: the rejection of violence, the reaching of public decisions through free argument and voluntary compromise, and the slow evolution of moral principles tested by experience and stamped with the consensus. All English history teaches that these are the only methods which, in the end, produce constructive and permanent results.³⁶

A little earlier he is even more specific about the extent to which 'the English' have rejected violence:

The English regard—have always regarded—violence as the supreme political cancer. One could fairly say that the entire history of the English is the story of the conquest of violence.. . The English hatred of violence springs from the conviction that it is unnecessary.³⁷

I do not want to discuss here the allegedly non-violent character of liberalism—O'Brien's comment on Gladstone is sufficient in this context—but I do want to comment on the extraordinary suggestions i) that only non-violent methods "produce constructive and permanent results"; ii) that violence is "unnecessary"; and iii) that English history is "the story of the conquest of violence".

As to the first two suggestions, they are clearly untrue, both in general and in the particular case of English history. The term 'necessary' raises, of course the question 'necessary for what?'; but, leaving general difficulties aside, there is not the least evidence to suggest that English (or British) governments have not been perfectly ready to use violence, both externally in their empire, and internally against recalcitrant elements of their own people, whenever they have judged violence to be necessary. "Constructive", too, is a question-begging term, but again it is obvious that the English civil war of the 1640s did achieve permanent results which many people, probably including Johnson, would regard as "constructive".

What Mr. Johnson's ludicrous generalizations demonstrate is the capacity, amazing in someone who claims to be a historian, to forget or simply discount the large role that violence, both internal and external, has played in English history. Let us leave aside Britain's involvement in the slave trade, Let us leave aside the entire history, often bloody and brutal, of the British empire. Let us even leave aside the English record in Ireland. Even if we concentrate solely on the internal history of mainland Britain, Johnson's claim that it is "the story of the conquest of violence" is still preposterous. I will here do no more than refer to two points made by Barrington Moore in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

First he draws attention to the fact that the balance of power between the monarchy and nobility which was so much boasted of and admired in the eighteenth century was, of course, not itself achieved by gradualism and argument but by the protracted and bloody struggle against the Stuart dynasty:

It is wise to recall that the achievement of such a balance, so dear to the liberal and pluralist tradition, has been the fruit of violent and occasionally revolutionary methods that contemporary liberals generally reject.³⁸

Secondly he points out the role that violence played in the establishment of a modernized, capitalist agriculture and industry. The process of enclosure simply meant forcing peasants and labourers out of their homes and off the land, and involved a great deal of violence, not the less cruel because it usually had legal sanction:

That the violence and coercion which produced these results took place over a long space of time, that it took place mainly within a framework of law and order and helped ultimately to establish democracy on a firmer footing, must not blind us to the fact that it was massive violence exercised by the upper classes against the lower.³⁹

A particularly brutal example of this process at work was the vast clearances made by landlords in the highlands of Scotland between 1780 and 1855, which have recently been vividly described by John Prebble in his book, *The Highland Clearances*.⁴⁰ The clearances hardly feature in *The Offshore Islanders*. Yet this is not because Johnson is unaware of them. Indeed, elsewhere he has written that "the Sutherland clearances were an act of tribal genocide, carried out with the full force of the law, and subsequently vindicated by its majesty and authority."⁴¹ That his knowledge of this act of "genocide" should not prevent him from presenting English history as a progressive renunciation of violence is a striking tribute to the strength of a false mythology and a false ideology.

I have taken Johnson as an example, not because he is an important historian but because his transfiguration of British history is entirely typical of contemporary bourgeois ideology, in which the West not only represents peace and order in the present, but rewrites its own history to prove that it has always stood for non-violence and peaceful, evolutionary progress. Very similar arguments of Johnson's have been put forward by academic medieval historians such as Sidney Painter and Walter Ullmann. The latter has written of England that "the road to constitutionalism from the feudal point *d'appui* was characterized by debates, compromise—by evolution"⁴²—a view for which he tries to gain acceptance through frequent repetition rather than substantial argument. O'Brien's comments, and the works of Barrington Moore and John Prebble have been cited to indicate the blatant hypocrisy of these claims, and to explain why it is that the

sermons on non-violence preached by the Western politicians of today enjoy so little credibility among those who are able to remember the Western history of yesterday. The point is not that the West today is held to be guilty of the sins of its forefathers: that may be just or unjust. It is rather that the peace, order and civilization which the West now enjoys are seen as the results of a history of bloodshed, conflict and ruthless exploitation of the non-Western world. If such fruits can only be won through violence, then those who enjoy them have no moral right to lecture others on the virtues of non-violence.

I have moved inevitably from considering definitions of violence to discussing justifications of violence. But my primary aim has been simple and straightforward—to expose the fraudulence of much of the contemporary rhetoric about violence and non-violence, including the much-employed antithesis between reason and violence. For some people, this may be to labour the obvious; yet it may nevertheless be necessary. My quotations indicate widespread confusion and self-deception over the issue of violence, by no means confined to professional politicians, and it would be optimistic to assume that the Left is wholly immune to this very pervasive ideology. Indeed, the radical attempt to extend the concept of violence can be seen as an oblique tribute to the current potency of the word and the idea. I have suggested that we should, in the end, reject that proposed extension, and the chief reason for that is the greater need to challenge the essentially conservative mode of thought in which violence is seen as always and invariably more terrible than any other form of oppression or coercion. If, in terms of human suffering and death, the effects of these other forms of oppression are quite as terrible and quite as widespread, why should we concede that they are in any way morally or politically more acceptable?

NOTES

1. It would be pointless to refer to particular editions of these two works. The quotations from *The Communist Manifesto* come from Part I, those from *The State and Revolution* from Chapter 1.2, and Chapter 11.1.
2. In *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin Press, 1971), p. 80.
3. See *The Guardian*, January 25, 1975.
4. E.J. Hobsbawm, "The rules of violence", in *Revolutionaries* (Weidenfeld, 1973), p. 209.
5. Brian Harrison, reviewing a book on the Suffragettes, *Sunday Times*, January 5, 1975.
6. Paul Johnson, "The Age of Tenor", *New Statesman*, November 29, 1974.
7. *The Guardian*, June 25, 1970.
8. For example by Gerald Priestland in *The Future of Violence*, (Hamish Hamilton, 1974) pp. 19 and 139; by Paul Johnson in *The Offshore Islanders*, (Weidenfeld, 1972) pp. 415-16; by Hannah Arendt in *On Violence* (Allen Lane, 1970) pp. 12-13, and 19-21; by Elie Kedourie reviewing a book on Fanon in

The New Statesman, May 11, 1973, etc. etc. It has become one of the clichés of current anti-socialist polemics.

9. Priestland, op. cit., p. 11.
10. Ibid, p. 80. See also Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Tavistock, 1974) pp. 121-122.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Faber, 1963) p. 19.
12. Ibid, p. 196.
13. Quoted, ibid, p. 225.
14. Priestland, op. cit., p. 7.
15. "Herbert Marcuse" by Maurice Cranston, in Cranston, ed. *The New Left* (Bodley Head, 1970), p. 113.
16. Ibid
17. See *On Violence*, pp. 43-46.
18. In a very useful article in *The New York Review*, July 2, 1970.
19. Ibid
20. Priestland, op. cit., p. 10.
21. John Prebble, *Culloden* (Penguin, 1967), p. 19.
22. Quoted in Colin Ward, *Violence* (Penguin Education, 1970), p. 4.
23. Quoted in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 13, 1974.
24. Quoted in *The Guardian*, May 18, 1972.
25. For more details of this case, see my *Academic Freedom* (Penguin Education, 1974), pp. 119-120.
26. *The Times*, November 28, 1974.
27. *The Times*, May 17, 1974.
28. *Sunday Times*, January 5, 1975. See note 5 above.
29. Neil Harding on "Socialism and Violence" in *The Concept of Socialism*, ed. Bhikhu Parekh (Croom Helm, 1975), p. 213.
30. Book review in *The Listener*, April 25, 1974.
31. Colin Ward, op. cit., p. 46.
32. Priestland, op. cit., pp. 73-74.
33. John Prebble, op. cit., p. 126.
34. *The Guardian*, October 20, 1969.
35. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Murderous Angels* (Hutchinson, 1969), p. xxiii.
36. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 421-422.
37. Ibid., pp. 420 and 421.
38. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Allen Lane, 1967), p. 418.
39. Ibid, p. 29.
40. John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (Penguin, 1969). For the driving out of the highlanders of Strathnaver in Sutherland, to which Johnson makes particular reference, see pp. 78-85.
41. Paul Johnson and George Gale, *The Highland Jaunt* (Collins, 1973), p. 66.
42. Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Penguin, 1965), pp. 148-9. See also pp. 226-8 and 230-1.