

marxism and nonviolence

In 1966, shortly after he spoke at the second Vietnam Day rally in Berkeley, Isaac Deutscher participated in a discussion on Marxism and nonviolence organized by Dave Dellinger. The following is taken from a transcription of the discussion originally published in the July 1969 issue of Liberation. The other participants were Dellinger, the late A. J. Muste, and Hans Konigsberger.

Dave Dellinger: I operate on the theory that nonviolence is not sufficiently developed yet, that it can't be fully appraised or understood in its present form as revealing of the true potential of nonviolence. I think the same thing can be said of socialism at a certain stage; there was the pre-Marxian stage of Christian Socialism and various forms of what is called romantic socialism. Socialism has been going through a gradual sophistication and process of maturation. I think the same thing has to happen in relation to nonviolence, but that unfortunately revolutionary Marxists have had a tendency to

discard nonviolence as a revolutionary weapon, based on its earliest and most primitive formulations.

There has been a transition from nonviolence as either a symbolic witness or as the special vocation of a small group of people somewhat set apart from the rest of society by their religious training, to the kind of nonviolence which has the determination to change history, to actually change events, a determination which is as strong and as dominating as the revolutionary impulses of non-pacifist revolutionaries of the past. . . .

In this respect I like to think in terms of the dialectic, at least in my limited understanding of it. The old-fashioned nonviolence of nonresistance, perhaps inadequate preoccupation with institutional violence, I think of that as the thesis. The anti-Nazi resistance movement during World War II, the guerrilla movement in Cuba of the Fidelistas, the heroic resistance in Vietnam today, I think of that as the antithesis. What I would like to have us consider is the possibility that there is a synthesis that will be something new that we've had hints of but has really not been developed. Guerrilla warfare rests on an identification with the population of the country that is conducting the resistance, and that identification is not a facile or a facetious thing; it's something that stems from an identification with the aspirations for liberation, dignity, justice of the country. This is an example of one of the things that has come out of the synthesis. On the other hand, nonviolence has a deep and universal humanism which is also characteristic of historical, not-nonviolent revolution at its best, but which tends to be betrayed and squeezed out in the course of the actual conflict. I think we've learned that anything that looks on the class enemy or the institutional enemy as also the human enemy tends to lead to internal corruption and a cumulative deterioration within the movement of its original idealism and its original methodology.

I have one other example. Isaac Deutscher, when he spoke at Berkeley recently of the negative effects of the present conflict in Vietnam within the Communist world,

indicated that although the de-Stalinization process has not been totally lost, it has nonetheless been halted or possibly even set in reverse a little bit. He spoke of the fact that in fighting supposedly for freedom in Vietnam, one of the indirect effects has been to encourage the throttling of freedom within the Communist world. I think this stems from the fear and from the reaction of like producing like, violence and hatred and distrust producing violence and hatred and distrust, and I wonder why it isn't equally true that even the most idealistic revolutionary movements who rely on hatred and violence provoke a similar misunderstanding, a similar fear, a similar hysteria in the opposition so that there is again this cumulative effect and we actually antagonize the people it is our job to win over. . . .

Isaac Deutscher: I must admit that talk about the challenge of nonviolence tends at the beginning to stare at all my deep-seated Marxist bias against this kind of argument. I am at once aroused to suspect some wishy-washy idealistic generalizations that lead us politically, analytically and morally nowhere. But as I listen to your argument I become increasingly aware that my bias is directed against an opponent who doesn't stand in front of me at all; my bias is directed against the escapism of absolute pacifism. Even against the high principles of absolute pacifism it is difficult to argue without feeling a certain moral embarrassment, because one would like the absolute pacifist who denies absolutely any positive role of violence in history to be right. And yet one knows that he isn't right and that this is a very dangerous escapism. Therefore, one tends to react, if one is a Marxist, with a certain venom. But you are not romantic creatures of nonviolence. To my mind, and I hesitate to use strong words, you have taken a heroic stand over the war in Vietnam. When you started your protest you could not have foreseen that you would be backed by such wide popular response: you have taken great risks in order to express not only your opposition to the violence used by American power, by

American imperialism, but also to defend to some extent, morally, the violence to which the Vietnamese have to resort in order to save their own dignity, their own interests, their own present and their own future.

One might say that there is an inconsistency in your attitude, a contradiction in your preaching nonviolence and yet accepting morally to some extent the violence applied by the Viet Cong in Vietnam and probably by the FLN in Algeria. But I think that this is a creative inconsistency, a creative contradiction in your attitude. Although you start from an idealistic and to my mind somewhat metaphysical principle, nevertheless your inconsistency opens for you an important horizon into the realities of our age. I think that you are carrying out something like truthful self-criticism. It is the self-criticism of a variety of pacifism which is not afraid of bringing its own apparent formal inconsistency into the open in order to achieve a greater moral and political consistency in action. And may I say that arguing philosophically from places partly opposed, I admit a similar, but a much larger, perhaps a more tragic inconsistency in the history of revolution, in the history of communism and Marxism.

The fact is that there is a whole dialectic of violence and nonviolence implied in the Marxist doctrine from its beginnings and throughout all its historic metamorphosis from 1848 to 1966. As Marxists we have always preached proletarian dictatorship, and the need to overthrow capitalism by force. We have always tried to impress on the working classes of all countries that they would have to be prepared to struggle, even in civil wars, against their oppressing and ruling classes. We were quite devastating in our rejoinders to all those who doubted the right or questioned the need for all those preachings. But here is the dialectical contradiction; after all, what has been the idea of Marxism? That of the classless society in which man is no longer exploited and dominated by man, a stateless society. So many people of the left consider this the utopian element in Marxism, the aspiration to transform societies in such a way that violence should

cease forever as the necessary and permanent element in the regulation of the relationship between society and individuals, between individuals and individuals.

In embracing the vision of a nonviolent society, Marxism, I maintain, has gone further and deeper than any pacifist preachers of nonviolence have ever done. Why? Because Marxism laid bare the roots of violence in our society, which the others have not done. Marxism has set out to attack those roots; to uproot violence not just from human thoughts, not just from human emotions, but to uproot it from the very bases of the material existence of society. Marxism has seen violence fed by class antagonism in society—and here Marxism should be assessed against the two-thousand-year record of futile Christian preaching of nonviolence. I say futile in the sense that it has led to no real consequences, to no real diminution of violence. After two millenia of “love thy brother” we are in this situation: that those who go to church throw the napalm bombs and the others who were also brought up in a Christian tradition, the Nazis, have sent six million descendants of Christ’s countrymen to the gas chambers. After two millenia the preaching of nonviolence has led to this! One of the reasons for this is that the roots of violence have never been attacked, never been dug up. Class society has persisted and therefore these preachings, even when most sincere, even when the Christian teacher put both his heart and soul in them, were bound to be futile, because they attacked only the surface of the nonviolence. But then the dialectic of Marxism has also been at fault—Marxism itself, throughout its history of deep and tragic contradictions. How strong the dream of nonviolence lay at the root of the Russian Revolution one can find out if one studies Lenin’s statement on revolution, which is written in outwardly a very dogmatic form, almost like an ecclesiastical text interpreting Biblical verses. Behind these somewhat ecclesiastical formulas there is the dream of the stateless society constantly welling up. The October insurrection was carried out in such a way that, according to all the hostile eyewitnesses (such as the

Western ambassadors who were then in Petrograd), the total number of victims on all sides was ten. That is the total number of victims of that great revolutionary October insurrection. The men who directed this insurrection—Lenin, Trotsky, the members of the military revolutionary committee—gave some thought to the question of violence and nonviolence and organized this tremendous upheaval with a very profound although unspoken concern for human lives, for the lives of their enemies as well as for their own people. The Russian Revolution, in the name of which so much violence has been committed, was the most nonviolent act of this scale in the whole history of the human race!

The revolution was won not with guns, but with words, with argument, persuasion. The words were very violent, the words were terribly forceful, but this is the violence of emotion in the revolt against the actuality of violence, of a world war which cost millions of human beings. All those people nowadays who take it upon themselves to preach morality to the makers of the Russian Revolution assume, of course, that there was a kind of good and angelic status quo, an angelic nonviolence which was upset by those Dostoevskian possessed fiends the revolutionaries, who appropriated to themselves the right to dispose of human lives. Nearly ten million people had perished in the trenches of the First World War when the Bolsheviks carried out that great revolution which cost ten victims.

The deep universal humanism inherent in what you call the challenge of nonviolence has been there in Marxism as its most essential element. We were a little more shy about talking about humanism; we are more shy about this because what scoundrel in history hasn't spoken about humanism—hasn't Stalin, hasn't Hitler, hasn't Goebbels? I always get more than a little shocked when I hear leftwingers and ex-Marxists suggest that Marxism needs to be supplemented by humanism. Marxism only needs to be true to itself.

But what happened really after this very promising beginning of the Russian Revolution, after Lenin had written

The State and Revolution, which is the great revolutionary dream about nonviolence expressed in Marxist terms, what happened? The others who preached nonviolence, for instance Kerensky, preached nonviolence to the oppressed by reintroducing the death penalty for soldiers who were refusing to fight on the front. Perhaps in the nature of people who really detest violence there is a greater shyness about speaking about nonviolence. I distrust those who have so many noble words on their lips. I very often trust more those who speak frankly and even brutally about the necessities of the political struggle as long as they don't get carried away by their own righteousness.

Then came the intervention, the civil war. Violence had to be used on an increasing scale, just as the Viet Cong today have to use violence on an increasing scale. They can't help it; either they go under or they use the violence. But even in the civil war what did the Bolsheviks do? Again they tried to keep a balance between argument, persuasion and violence; a balance in which they still attached far greater importance to persuasion and argument than to the gun. In sheer arms they were infinitely inferior to the British, the French, and the Americans (who sent both troops and munitions for the White armies in Russia). The Red army, led by Trotsky, at that time was far inferior. What happened? They agitated, they appealed to the consciousness of the soldiers, of the workers in uniform in those interventionist armies. The French navy, sent to suppress the revolution, rose in mutiny in Odessa and refused to fight against the Bolsheviks: another triumph of nonviolence in the civil war. This revolt of the sailors was the result of what was called Bolshevik propaganda, but this "subversion" prevented violence. (In Britain in 1920 during the intervention, during the Russo-Polish war, the dockers of London struck and refused to send arms against Russia and the docks of London were immobilized—this was nonviolence.)

Then comes the great tragedy of the isolation of the Russian Revolution; of its succumbing to incredible,

unimaginable destruction, poverty, hunger, and disease as a result of the wars of intervention, the civil wars, and of course the long and exhausting world war which was not of Bolshevik making. As a result of all this, terror was let loose in Russia. Men lost their balance. They lost, even the leaders, the clarity of their thinking and of their minds. They acted under overwhelming and inhuman pressures. I don't undertake to judge them, to blame them or to justify them. I can only see the deep tragedy of this historic process, the result of which was the glorification of violence.

But what was to have been but a glassful of violence became buckets and buckets full, and then rivers of violence. That is the tragedy of the Russian Revolution. The dialectics of violence and nonviolence in Marxism were so upset that in the end the nonviolent meaning of Marxism was suppressed under the massive, crushing weight of Stalinism. It wasn't a matter of chance that Stalin implicitly denounced the Leninist and Marxist idea of the withering away of the state. It was in that idea that the whole Marxist nonviolence was epitomized. The Stalinist regime couldn't tolerate, couldn't bear the survival of that dream. It had to crush it out of human minds in order to justify its own violence. I'm not saying this to blame the whole thing on single individuals. It was more than that. It was the tragedy of an isolated and poverty-ridden revolution incapable of fulfilling its promise in isolation and poverty: a revolution caught in this tragic situation—the irreconcilable contradiction between promise and fulfillment, between dream and reality, sunk into irrationality.

To what extent is Marxism, as such, responsible for this? It would be wrong to identify Stalinism with Marxism, and to blame Marxism for the things that have been done under Stalinism. On the other hand, it would show a lack of moral courage in Marxism to draw the formal line of dissociation and say that we are not responsible for Stalinism, that that wasn't what we aimed at. You see, in a way Marxism is as responsible for Stalin as Christianity was responsible for the Borgias. The Borgias are not Christianity, but Christianity

cannot bleach the Borgias from its records. We cannot delete Stalinism from our records although we are not responsible for Stalinist crimes. To some extent we (and when I say we I mean that generation of Marxists with which I as an individual identify morally, I mean Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev, the early Communist leaders in Europe) participated in this glorification of violence as a self-defense mechanism. Rosa Luxemburg understood this when she criticized the first faint signs of this attitude.

But the issue is larger and deeper than just human intentions. The violence isn't rooted in human intentions. The human intentions are, shall we say, the mechanism, the psychological, the ideal mechanism through which material factors and material necessities transmit their pressures. Marxism had not made any allowances for the possibility of such tremendous outgrowth of violence, of such tremendous abuse of violence that would be done in the name of Marxism, for a simple reason. Marxism assumed that revolution would always be an act of change in society carried out violently, but with the support of immense popular majorities. It assumed revolution in an industrialized West carried out by working classes committed to socialism, supporting the revolution with all their heart and confronting as their enemies a really small minority consisting of the exploiters. In such a confrontation of revolutionary majorities with counter-revolutionary minorities, the need to use violence would indeed have been very limited and the dream of nonviolence would have had all this hope for fulfillment.

It is said that Marxism suits the underdeveloped countries but not the advanced and industrial West. I still maintain that the original dream of Marxism and the real original inspiration and hope of Marxism still suits the industrial West much better than it can suit the underdeveloped countries, even if revolution in certain phases is the job of great majorities as it was in Russia in 1917, as it was in China in 1949, as it is in Vietnam today. In underdeveloped countries there comes a moment after the revolution when again there is a

breach between promise and fulfillment. Therefore there come frustrations, explosive dissonances and the desire of the postrevolutionary rulers to secure the revolution as they understand it and are able to secure it. The more underdeveloped the country, the more bound to come, after the revolution, a moment of bitter truth and violence.

However, I think that the violence in China already is much smaller than it was in Russia. The irrationality of the Chinese Revolution, though goodness knows there is a lot of irrationality, so far is much less, I think, than what came to the top in the Russian Revolution. But then the Chinese Revolution wasn't the first pioneer, wasn't the *isolated* revolution: it was already assisted by Stalinist Russia, and this reduced the amount of irrationality. I think that with the spread of revolution, with the advance of the industrial and technological aspects of revolutionary societies, with the growth of their wealth, with the rising in their standards of living, with a relative contentment in the popular masses, the irrational element will decrease. The final vindication of the dream of nonviolence in Marxism will come with socialism gaining the advanced countries. That is my belief, and it is not a belief of wishful thinking; it is the whole theoretical structure of Marxism that leads me to this conclusion. I think that the de-Stalinization carried out in Russia, partial, self-contradictory, inadequate, hypocritical as it has been, has already somewhat re-established the balance between the contradictory elements in the Russian Revolution by reducing the violence and giving more scope to the nonviolent element in Marxism.

You have asked me what I meant when I spoke about the negative effect on the Communist World of the war in Vietnam. The war in Vietnam may or may not be a prelude to new confrontations of violence surging back from the Western world and flooding the world again. The fear of the ultimate violence promotes a recrudescence of the authoritarian and violent trend within Russia and in China. I made an analogy between the effects of the Vietnamese War in the

Communist part of the world and the repercussions of the Korean War in the last years of Stalin's era. The fears and panics let loose by the Korean War expressed themselves in Russia in the insanity of Stalin's rule in the last years, in the repetition of the witches' sabbath of the thirties. I don't foresee and I'm not afraid of something as terrible as that in Russia in response to the American aggression in Vietnam, but we have already seen some recrudescence of the authoritarian trend. The Twenty-third Congress of the Communist Party testifies to this. The trials of Daniel and Sinyavsky were symptomatic of the partial return of the authoritarian trend.

On the other hand I don't think that one can say that the Korean War had only one effect, i.e., the encouragement of domestic violence in the Soviet Union and China. It also had a positive effect parallel to the effect that it had in our part of the world. It gave one a sense of human solidarity with a small nation so ruthlessly attacked, so ruthlessly crushed by the most powerful, the greatest, the richest nations in the world. The Korean War disposed of certain illusions which Khrushchevism spread; namely, the illusion about the possibility of the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism in such countries as France or Italy. Try to go now to French and Italian workers and tell them that they can accomplish this miracle when in such small nations as Korea and Vietnam it is so resisted by the great capitalist powers.

A. J. Muste: . . . A question that gives me problems and which you have left in an overview is the tragedy of the Marxist movement in its orgies of terror and violence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, under Stalin. It seems to me that the great tragedies of which we must be aware should actually be the Soviet Union and the United States. But there is something that needs further analysis in order that, given the example of the communism in the Soviet Union, those of us who are revolutionaries may guard ourselves against going further in that kind of evolution of violence. In the second place we must ask whether in the concept of nonviolence

there are other forms of force than military forms. This means guarding against accommodation with a system whose very essence is violence, even in so-called peacetime. Now on my part, I am constantly frustrated in trying to know what we should think when we think about nonviolent revolution. What do we do if concretely we are in Vietnam? Are there concrete ways of struggle other than those used by the Vietnamese? I think we have only an elementary concept of non-violent force as a constant in struggle with the arms of imperialism, which is a very reactionary force. I think there is no room for compromise but I think we do have suggestions on how perhaps to avoid what happened in the Soviet Union in this country. . . .

Deutscher: We have to make known the long, terrible road leading us to classless society. You speak as if we stood already on the threshold of a classless society. You see it's so easy to make the slogan of nonviolence an escapism; so easy to overlook the realities of this long road, and on this road we shall live with violence, and if we are socialists we shall use violence.

My point is this. As Marxists, whenever we are driven to use violence what we must know and tell those people whom we shall call to act, is that violence is a necessary evil. And the emphasis will be on both the adjective and the noun, on the necessary and on evil. To preach nonviolence to those always the object of violence may even be false. I say the lesson we should learn from Soviet history is that we can't overemphasize the evil of violence. But if I were a Vietnamese and also in the ranks of the Viet Cong I would try to tell my comrades in arms we should not make a virtue of the bitter and terrible necessity of violence. But we are acting in the West—where this argument has much more chance of being understood and accepted.

On the Left in the West we must foster a way of thinking which would not shirk realities. We have in front of us—and this is where Marxism parts from anarchism and pure

pacifism—we share with anarchists the dream of a stateless society, but we ask: how do you arrive at it? You accept the view that the Vietnamese war is not an accident of history; that it expresses the structure of your society, expresses the imperialist character in your relationship to the outside world. If you accept this, you imply that the social order has to be changed. How is it to be changed? How is it going to be changed by nonviolent methods when those who refuse to move an inch in Vietnam to their class enemies—will they yield the territory of the United States to socialism without defending the status quo? Can you imagine this? I can, but only under one condition. That is when you have the overwhelming number of Americans ready to use violence in order to bring about socialism, only then may socialism conquer the United States without the use of violence. The capital of the revolution was its moral supremacy. You see, if you achieve for socialism a moral supremacy in American society comparable to that of the Russian Revolution, then you might have to use only an infinitesimal amount of violence. But—here again is the dialectic—only if you're ready to use violence without making a virtue of it.