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The Nature of Violence--Differing Perceptions of Reality in America

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The Nature of Violence—Differing Perceptions of Reality in America  
By Arthur Landever (circa 1970)

This is an effort to identify and reflect upon differences in group-perceptions of the existing political and legal realities in America. What are the differing views concerning the definition, nature, and impact of violence? What meaningful channels of change exist in America? Which institutions of law have legitimacy? At what point is bargaining with other groups deemed acceptable by a group? For what purposes and in what manner?

In subsequent studies, I shall identify bases for cooperative reduction of inter-group hostilities within the present cultural, technological, and pressure interest environment. I intend to compare and to contrast the essence and environment of international diplomacy, labor management negotiations, and domestic inter-group bargaining. Such a comparison may be of use in the next endeavor: revising the language and process of inter-group negotiations in order to develop meaningful sub-agreements.

First, what is the nature of violence? Such a question is an important one to raise. Group and individual perceptions of violence and its nature can properly be assumed to have an impact upon the actions of some of the group members. The current attention to the notion of violence can be explained, in part, by the mass media presentation continuously of specific acts of damage to property, physical injury, and threats to increased destruction. In addition, the concept of violence seems to have been infused with an enlarged category of actions which particular groups now contend properly viewed as violence.

What is the appropriate method, in general, of determining the nature of a concept? Presumably we should try to achieve a working definition which meets three tests: First, it should include those acts or elements which seem properly within its sphere to an audience which is deemed knowledgeable. Second, it should be an explanation which can be communicated to a particular audience in question. Third, the definition should be conducive to subsequent study and examination of the nation through the process of hypothesizing and data collection.

Let us briefly compare and distinguish the notion of violence. According to Webster, violence is defined in the following ways: 1. a), Broadly, exertion of any physical force considered with reference to its effect on another than the agent, as in effecting an entrance into a house in burglary; sometimes, the overcoming or prevention of resistance by threats of violence. b) An instance of violent treatment or procedure. 2. Profanation, infringement; outrage; assault. 3. Strength or energy actively displayed or exerted; vehement, forcible, or destructive action; force. 4. Hence: a) Intensity; severity. b) Vehemence in feeling; passion; ardor; fury; fervor. 5. Unjustified alteration of wording or sense; as, to do violence to a Scriptural text.

Political perceptions of the notions of violence differ markedly on what constitutes the essence of the idea. According to one point of view, in order for violence to exist, there
must not only be force present, but also the absence of legitimacy. Thus, no violence is deemed present where there is felt to be police employment of force…. Military action by government is generally perceived as warfare…Some draw the distinction between injury to persons on the one hand and damage to property on the other, finding the later not as clearly within the boundaries of the term. Others focus on the notion of intention by the actor, finding no violence in injury to persons or property in accidental or unintentional conduct. The New Left finds institutional violence in a school system, which, they believe, distorts the reality, provides poor skill development, and discourages creativity. The economic system, according to some, does violence to the human spirit, by manipulating individuals into limited alternatives, thereby intentionally concealing the more meaningful alternatives of free action.

Some draw a contrast between the doing of an act and the omission of action. Others, however, include acts of omission such as inadequate health care, resulting in injury or loss of life, and consider that the denial of the perceived right to adequate medical care to be an instance of violence. The notion lately has been used to encompass injury to life as a result of intentional pollution and misuse of the limited ecosystem. Still others view the prison environment as a repressive, regimented system inconsistent with the human needs of actors within it, and thus a system doing violence to prison inmates.

What’s in a name? Certainly violence by any other name is still violence, but just as clearly, names and categories move individuals, encourage commitments, divert attention from other areas, order and inevitably distort the reality. It makes a difference in a political system in which categories are perceived in terms of emotional commitments and attitudes, whether the emotionally charged category of violence is employed or whether other categories are used: to wit, “warfare,” “reasonable police force,” “accidental injury,” “crime,” “education,” “political socialization,” “disturbance,” “self-defense,” “family feud,” “coup d’etat,” “civil war,” “race revolt,” “class assault,” “release of tensions.”

It has been suggested that perceptions of the fundamental nature of the phenomenon differ widely. Clearly then, as to its extent in a particular environment likewise would cause marked disagreement. Where the focus is upon violence as a particular act of physical assault upon an individual or individuals, presumably the phenomenon would be interpreted as being limited, perhaps isolated in extent. On the other hand, if one takes the position that violence may be seen in the form of an educational system’s repression of one’s latent capacity and creativity, violence would then be judged more pervasive and continuous in its extent. Thus, one’s perception of the nature of the phenomenon will directly affect an assessment of its extent.

Since the essential elements to be included in the category of violence are in doubt, it is not surprising that the causes—underlying, as well as more immediate causes for the particular expressions of violence, its associations, and intensity—would be subject to controversy as well. Ethnologists take the view that when violence in the form of physical assault is found, it is explainable by referring to the “innate aggressive nature of the human animal.” Marshall McCluan emphasizes the notion of defense against intimacy
as explaining the ever-present physical hostility existing among individuals. By contrast, that men willingly go off to war is explained by the role of political socialization.

Where violence is said to take the form of institutional repression and distortion of viable alternatives, the culprits include: (1) a “power elite” of the monopoly capitalists seeking to maintain their control in a guise of democratic structures; (2) the institution of mass media striving to create both product demand and non-examination of their practices, (3) [individuals arrogantly] assuring themselves of comfortable positions while belittling the cultural heritage and life style of the under classes, (4) the mass industrialized bureaucratic-society itself, in which the creative energies of individuals “crying to be heard” are snuffed out. Where there is an expression of physical assault—whether it be labeled class assault or rebellion or hooligans—some suggest that it is the result of a sense of powerlessness. Others emphasize that such episodes reflect feelings of relative deprivation where there are increased expectations of rights, clearly perceived as owing to individuals or as their supporters. Thus the actors are deemed to be responding to socially induced frustrations.

We have raised questions regarding the important dimensions of the category of violence—its nature, its appellation, its extent, and its causes. Controversy runs throughout the discussion of such dimensions. Consider, as well, the issue of effect. What is the effect of violence? Does it succeed in producing results sought by initiators of violence? Does it enlarge or diminish the size of potential supporters or sympathizers? Does it depend on the extent to which those employing violence are perceived as legitimate, to the extent that their cause is deemed legitimate? What is the impact upon the stability of the political system? To what extent is violence merely the outer manifestations of the ever-present conflicts within the system’s political process? Regarding effect, is it useful to distinguish between the mode of violence, its intensity, the particular environment in which the violence is employed? Can it be said that violence is inevitable under certain circumstances? Is it profitable in considering the effect to distinguish between long-range and short-range results? Is it useful to distinguish between perceived threats and the actual employment of violence?

Without doubt, the issues raised with regard to the dimensions of violence are fundamental ones. At the same time, responses to the questions posed require the student to recognize the differing perceptions of the nature of reality not only with regard to violence but in general. Knowledge is relational and can only be formulated, according to Manheim, with reference to the position of the observer. Not only is knowledge related to the position of the observer, but the resultant image—what one believes to be true—according to Boulding, determines what is the current behavior of any organism or organization.

We have raised important questions regarding the nature of the phenomenon of violence. At this point, it may be appropriate to get a sense of the world view of the New Left movement regarding the nature of the social system as it exists in America and its particular violent impact upon humans with the system. In the forefront of the New Left thinkers is philosopher Herbert Marcuse. In his *One Dimensional Man*, he charges that
individuals within the American industrial society are prevented from seeing the alternative channels for movement and change. The capitalist system is thus achieving repression while pretending to operate democratically. No longer, in his view, is the Western worker, the proletariat in earlier Marx[ist] terms, considered the appropriate vehicle, the vanguard which will liberate the society. Rather it is the young college students not yet the captive of the industrial system and increasingly aware of the mythology of democratic liberalism. Thus far, industrial society has seemed capable of containing social change. Traditional forms of protest are inadequate for reform. Indeed, they may be even more dangerous to freedom because they preserve the illusion of popular sovereignty.

A chorus of New Left voices is quick to endorse the Marcusean indictment. Mark Rudd, the Weatherman leader of the Columbia student takeover acknowledges that the system leaves white radical students with a sense of powerlessness over their own destiny. Staughton Lynd refers to the New Left as an international tendency among students rejecting capitalism, bureaucratic Communism, and imperialism. There is an existential commitment to action in the knowledge that the consequences of action can never be fully predicted. According to Lynd, the Left seeks to replace corporate liberalism, the main enemy, with participatory democracy. Edgar Fridenberg charges that the American educational system indoctrinates middle class children with the view that the experience and life style of the lower classes is somehow illegitimate. He contends that the middle class has stifled the consciousness of its members and has sought refuge in formalism and process while not focusing upon the content of the process. Mario Savio adds that the universities with a mask of impartiality are engaged in training people to operate the system. Tom Hayden and Carl Oglesby charge that the liberal rhetoric is the cover for corporate exploitation. Steve Weissman, another SDS leader, adds that the corporate state demand a docile population that was not taught to pose basic questions about the structure of the system itself or the underlying values. It is, he said, a false consciousness, pitting student versus student for favors from the establishment.

Intellectuals who tend to concur in this general indictment of the present American capitalist system include Barrington Moore, Noam Chomsky, Gabriel Kolko, William Appleman Williams, Eugene Genovese. Moore declares the costs of moderation to be at least as atrocious as those of revolution, perhaps a great deal more. He makes a case for the necessity of revolution, as a last resort, to destroy the reactionary power of agricultural interests. Chomsky detects a linkage between imperialism and liberal elitism suppressing popular revolutions. In his American Power and the New Mandarins, he blames the Vietnam War on amoral technocrats who slavishly serve the repressive U.S. social order. He finds the United States Government to be the largest employer of violence to