



Protest Against What?

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"The benevolence of bureaucracy is as much an affront to human pride as its indifference."

THE YOUNG, it is said, are always in revolt. The older we grow the thicker becomes our resistance to change and new ideas and the more we rehearse the grand debates of the past. The sweeping, impatient energy of the young frightens us, and our defences against it infuriate those who seek instant revolution. Our caution is partly prudent good sense but partly also the inability to keep up with the way in which society is moving. As George Bernard Shaw wrote: "It's all the young can do for the old to shock them and keep them up to date."

What seems to be happening now is that the young can no longer shock by student rags, demonstrations, or hard argument. Their passion makes no dent in the increasing apathy of the middle-aged. The recent rioting by students is one expression of this frustration, but the behaviour of students in 1968 should not be looked at in isolation. It is not long ago that the newspapers were reporting seaside skirmishes between Mods and Rockers; before that we had the Teddy Boys and the Angry Young Men; and the long-haired beatniks marching now against nuclear weapons, now against war in Vietnam, seem to be always with us. These social phenomena differ from one another in many ways, but all can be seen as examples of natural protest turning dangerously vehement in order to make itself felt. The most significant feature of this kind of protest is that the desire to lash out precedes the choice of what to lash out against. Often there is no specific object of protest at all, or, conversely, the protest is against the whole of society.

The young are screaming, articulately or otherwise, that something is wrong, wrong, wrong, but one of the drawbacks of screaming at people is that, far from inducing them to take notice, it makes them cover their ears. The reaction of the ordinary citizen to youthful violence is not an attempt at understanding but a variety of superficial explanations and remedies, all of which justify either inaction or repression. Remember how the Mods and Rockers had "nothing better to do these days," "too much money in their pockets," and "should have their motor cycles confiscated"? The students should get on with their work or have their grants stopped. It's a communist plot; it's all the fault of the Press; it wouldn't happen if we brought back the birch.

Some of these statements are partly valid, and if I seem to caricature them it is only because they so obviously do not go to the roots of the problem. Publicity in the Press and on radio and television no doubt helps disaffection in one country or one university to spread

to others; specific grievances, of which there are bound to be a few, can be used as the pretexts for militant action; communist and socialistic agitation probably did play a part in fostering or extending the recent disturbances. But these are all trigger mechanisms rather than causes: violent revolt would not take place if there were not a deep-seated feeling of discontent, but given this feeling, often buried far below the levels of consciousness and articulation, any little grievance, any stirring speech of an agitator, any sight of a scuffle a thousand miles away, can spark it into flame. The fact that it is only a minority of the young who run wild does not affect the issue. It is always a minority who make a fuss. The question is, why have the methods of that minority become so much more extreme?

The unrest in France has a valuable lesson for us. In France the student riots were accompanied by strikes by workers, and both groups were rebelling against the autocracy of a government that did not talk with the people it was governing. In Britain there is also a growing gulf between the government and the governed, but it is less blatant than in France, and perhaps partly for this reason, and partly because of the English temperament, the response among the bulk of the population is different. The same discontent shows itself in the hostility of industrial relations, but where politics is concerned it appears as apathy, distrust, and cynicism.

I will postulate the theory that it is the same feeling of frustration, even less conscious and less articulate in working men than in students, that leads on the one hand to violent action by those with the energy for it, and on the other hand to helplessness and withdrawal by those who do not. The young, who still have their sensitivity, are only expressing more openly what all of us feel, whether consciously or beneath the pretence, that there is something wrong somewhere which leaves us frustrated, unsatisfied, an unfulfilled.

It is not easy to nail the source of this frustration, for all the feelings associated with it, so far as they are consciously experienced, turn out to be alternative descriptions of the same condition: futility, boredom in the midst of activity, anger without knowing what one is angry about—all the states of mind that cannot be analysed but which are crystallised in the character of Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*.

Whatever is the cause of this trouble, it is undoubtedly powerful enough to strike deep into the human mind,

where it ceases to be recognized for what it is. It shows itself in hooliganism, in fleeting support for new causes, and in the general mood of disillusionment and "look after number one." It is a disease with many symptoms but difficult to identify.

Is it the fear of nuclear weapons of mass destruction and the insecurity this brings? The nuclear threat, considering its seriousness, does not seem to worry people too much but it is precisely because the horror of nuclear war is unthinkable that the dread of it might implant itself out of the reach of consciousness. Or did the damage begin centuries ago, expressing itself first in the thrust for material benefit and only later in psychological distress? Is the hidden evil the divorce of man from nature, of which Mr. McEachran so brilliantly writes in his book *Freedom—The Only End*, the making of man rootless, the division of the whole man into a body and a soul contrasted with each other? Is it an internal crisis for every man, our estrangement from what the theologian Paul Tillich has called "the Ground of our being?" Are there perhaps many diseases in the mind of man today, so that to eradicate one is to leave others more subtle still in need of treatment?

In France the more overt autocracy of General de Gaulle and his government has drawn out one of the diseases so that it can be seen, at least in part, for what it is. The students wanted a say in the running of their universities and the workers a say in the running of their factories. They wanted it fiercely enough to take violent action. The driving force behind the riots and the strikes was the desire for "participation."

We live in a world where the units of power and decision-making are becoming bigger and further away; where technological progress accentuates the difference between those who are trained for it and those who are not; where, above all, the power of the state is increasing rapidly, and the burden of taxation with it. To try to describe complex feelings and the states of mind in a sentence is foolhardy, but if the cause of violence is to be summed up at all I would suggest that it is the lack of control by the individual over his own destiny. This lack is as real under a benevolent state as under a despotic one, for the benevolence of bureaucracy is as much an affront to human pride as its indifference.

The individual today has lost the sense of his own value. Whatever he does he cannot have any effect on decisions and policies, whether in his place of work, his university, or in government. He is looked after like a pet cat: well fed, given a comfortable place to sleep if he is lucky, but intellectually castrated. He no longer respects himself, and since he feels that nothing he does matters he does not care what he does. The attitude of "don't care" is the common ingredient in the narrow outlook of the working man, the apathy of the middle class, the casualness of many small businessmen towards their customers, and the violence of the teenage gang.

When violence erupts, law and order has to be restored. The more violent the protest the stonger the force

DEFUSING VIOLENCE

No society can survive if every power block decides that it can force its will on the majority by ignoring law and democratic process. But neither can society survive if it waits until coercive power is applied before making reforms that should have been made without unlawful pressure.

The best way to defuse violence and disruption is through forehanded action to eliminate the institutional defects that provide valid basis for complaint.

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needed to control it and the stronger the revulsion of law-abiding citizens; equally, the stronger the force and the revulsion the more desperate the protest. Clearly the way to end violence, as well as the other products of "don't care," is to attack the disease that causes it. How is this to be done?

Not everybody can be a computer programmer, nor can the large units always be made smaller, although greater encouragement could be given for the small business to thrive. General de Gaulle offered "participation" as a satisfying social system different both from communism and from capitalism, but it is not yet clear what he meant.

In industry, joint consultation on the factory floor is essential, together with collective bargaining at local level. There should also be a greater stake in the economy as a whole, for instance, by the wider ownership of shares, and a return to a vigorous free enterprise economy giving the individual the opportunity to influence economic decisions which the rapid growth of the public sector is now denying him. Politically, there must be more devolution of power; more thought given to ways in which citizens can have some say in the process of government other than at elections; and a reversal of the trend by which government is growing larger, more powerful, and more grasping. A state that takes away so much of people's money takes away also their dignity and hope. The combination of the bureaucratic remoteness of the state with the destruction of worth-while incentives and rewards by high taxation is intolerable enough, but there is also the effect of inflation. Subconsciously we are aware that if we cannot rely on our currency our whole future is full of uncertainty.

The return of power and wealth to the people, and the limitation of the state, are matters of urgency. Both could be achieved by the reduction and eventual abolition of taxation and its replacement by collection of the rent of land, which would yield a revenue adequate to finance necessary public functions but which would be limited in amount in any one year. This major change, in addition to its many economic advantages, would give renewed independence to people. Without this independence men will begin to look on the state as their master, not their servant, and from there it is only one step to tyranny.