

DEMOCRACY AND VIOLENCE

I think that Paul is right in his second post that once we see human rights as a kind of politics (the point of [track one](#)), we do end up thinking of it as a subject which, like any other kind of politics, can be practised in a variety of ways. Inevitably, some of these can entail the deployment of violence. But as Zoe points out, this is not to legitimise such violence, it is mainly to set up a discussion about its legitimacy.

THINKING HARD ABOUT POLITICAL VIOLENCE

This is where Anthony's post is so helpful. He really narrows the ground down and can be read as a powerful fleshing out of what I have been trying to say in the track. If we leave aside the force/violence distinction and don't bother with the distraction of the language of terrorism (on which more in a moment), we are indeed left with particular situations which cry out to be assessed for themselves and not by reference to this or that grand theory.

Also Anthony is right to distinguish situations of sporadic breaches of human rights with their wholesale destruction, and to remind us that the right to rebel does not necessarily entail the use of violence in the course of that rebellion.

It strikes me reading this and many of the other helpful posts on this point that the human rights activist needs to be very reluctant to go down this route but that in extremis it can be from a human rights point of view both right and necessary. But it is hard if not impossible to say more *in the abstract* other than perhaps just this – human rights is a peace-loving subject but not a pacifist one and while proponents of human rights appreciate order they also relish justice and know that sometimes it can only be achieved via turmoil, even (there being nothing else) bloody turmoil.

As Holly puts it, 'in extreme cases violence could be legitimately used' but the thrust of my comment just now is that we cannot pronounce in advance on what is meant by extreme – it is a creature of so many variables. Guidelines are risky I think. As Paul asks who makes them? They can start as restrictions on violence and then get read in a way that makes them a platform for the kind of excesses their drafters never contemplated: language is always vulnerable to bad-faith interpretation, especially when their meaning is not made subject to some independent referee (ie is outside the legal framework as such guidelines would probably need to be).

I remember being very impressed by Tony Blair's principled argument for intervention in domestic affairs in his [Chicago speech](#) delivered at the height of the NATO action in Kosovo – but less impressed when exactly the same leader seemed to put aside all these guidelines when it came to Iraq. Yet no-one seemed to have the authority (or the guts?) to stop him.

TYPES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

There is a spectrum of this kind of violence – it can be revolutionary/insurrectionist as Charlotte reminds us in her first post or it can be narrow and subversive. The first is about mobs and turmoil. It is as Charlotte says 'sudden and innately disorganised.'

(By the way Idealist's remarks about the power of the people to 'create new norms and coerce the government into action' came to my mind here and speaking of Lady Thatcher as Idealist did, there

is the poll tax violence that some of us recall – moral violence in a just cause? Is something similar going to happen today, in a Britain which seems similarly intent on attacking the poor?)

The second kind of violence is in marked contrast to this – it is about targeted campaigns under the radar of society: Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigades and the IRA and so on.

AND WHERE DOES TERRORISM COME IN?

Reacting to Favio and Charlotte, I don't think it ever helps to call either insurrectionist or even subversive violence 'terrorist'. As I'll be saying in a later track and perhaps also a common track I have never believed that the language of terrorism adds much to this debate – it is a kind of abusive description that is fired around the place in discussions about violence but it serves only to obscure the key issue in my view – namely when is it right to be violent for political ends and when is it not.

Incidentally I also think it is wrong to call a state a terrorist state for the same reason. Interestingly by way of response to Charlotte's second post, 'terrorism' as such is not a crime in many places – it is a kind of conduct which permits executive power to be deployed in all sorts of strong ways once it is suspected that such conduct is or might be about to occur. So it is a weapon available to the state to unlock new and additional powers – that is its attraction to many democratic authorities.

After all what terrorists do is usually also already criminal – it is the extra powers that terrorism law gives them that makes this law so attractive – this is another reason I am against the language of terrorism as I simply don't believe such laws are necessary.

THE ENEMIES OF AN OPEN SOCIETY

I disagree with Favio that democratic leadership's tendency to identify any opposition to its policies with a threat to democracy itself is 'the biggest threat to our civil and political rights. It is a problem to be sure but I have long fought against being too quick to assume that democratic leaders are as bad as our commitment to freedom allows us to say they are. (Anthony makes a similar point very well towards the end of his post.) And towards the end of his remarks, Favio sets out the various ways in which – outside of party politics and narrow legislative arenas – civil and political rights can be defended, the NGOs, the courts and so on.

I think culture is a very big deal here, so I was delighted to read what Louise Thompson had to say – the link between art and culture on the one hand and political freedom on the other is rarely made so it is great to see it being so eloquently expressed here. I couldn't agree more.

ISRAEL?

Paul makes a provocative remark about Israel. The whole Palestine issue will need to be dealt with in a later track, I appreciate that. For now I would say that there are two kinds of subversive violence that produce national leaders later. The first is where the violence is part of the mainstream revolutionary movement which has generated the push for freedom, and the second is when it is peripheral to that movement – more radical, more violent and, well, more indiscriminate. Often the leaders of the first despise the promoters of the second.

This was how it was in what became Israel in the period 1945-48. And whereas we know that the main revolutionary movement secured power initially, the fringe figures took over in 1977 –

Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir – with I would say pretty disastrous results, for human rights and much else. But that as i say takes us on a different story.

AND SOME OTHER IDEAS WE NEED TO RETURN TO

Ronan McCrea makes some very strong points about the UN: these will be the centre piece of my next common track which I will be putting out on Monday – its title is ‘The UN and Human Rights: Time for a Great Awakening’, and it will be based on the talk I gave at Leicester on Wednesday evening.

I’ll be dealing with ethics in a later track so hope to take on Damien’s important points then (echoed by Charlotte and Anthony): I do appreciate these must not be long delayed so perhaps I’ll get to this next week or the week after.

And Carl – yes absolutely spot on about freedom-loving slave owners. Watch out for my track on the virtue of hypocrisy (well not quite, but almost) coming soon.

As Zoe says ‘Argh, so many questions!’ But keep them coming!