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THE COMING STRUGGLE
FOR POWER

THE COMING STRUGGLE FOR POWER

BY
JOHN STRACHEY

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR



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INTRODUCTION TO THE MODERN LIBRARY EDITION

THE QUESTION OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE

ON March 13th, 1935, in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, I was arrested by two officers of the Federal Government of the United States. The charge was that I had advocated the overthrow of the United States Government "by force and violence."

Since no statement of mine advocating such action could be produced, the Federal authorities relied upon numerous passages in my books and articles in which I had described myself as a communist. For, they argued, syllogistically, all communists advocate the use of force and violence. Strachey is a communist. Therefore Strachey advocates the use of force and violence. This reasoning on the part of the Federal authorities served to raise a question which, I believe, agitates the mind and conscience of almost every man and woman who is concerned with the present condition of the world.

Do the communists advocate that the establishment of a new social system shall be accomplished by violent means? This question concerns especially those people who are today convinced that much at any rate of the communist case against capitalism is true, and who, therefore, feel that some change in the basic organisation of society is necessary. Such people often feel, however, that they can give no support to the communists if this often repeated charge of favouring violence is justified.

But the communists do not advocate or desire the use of force and violence.

This assertion may well seem incredible to those who are alone familiar with communist views as these views are described by the communists' most bitter opponents. We have all read a thousand times in the capitalist press that the communists favour violence, that this is the chief difference between them and the Socialists, that the communists openly "preach revolution."

None the less, I repeat, the communists do not, nor ever will, advocate or desire the use of force and violence.

It seems, then, that the communists have very different views on this question to those usually ascribed to them. In order to define precisely the communist position on the question of force and violence it will be necessary to raise three issues. First, we must enquire whether it is possible for us to live peacefully under our present social order. Second, we must define the difference between *predicting* that violence unfortunately will occur at certain junctures in human history, and *favouring* or *desiring* the occurrence of such violence. Third, we must deal with the question of whether or not there exists in Britain and America democratic machinery capable of effecting basic social changes by peaceful and constitutional means.

In the first place, then, what are the presuppositions of those who accuse the communists of advocating violence? The assumption which is always made, though usually tacitly, is that we live today in a kind of Eden of peaceful co-operation and social harmony. The one feature, it is implied, which mars the otherwise idyllic scene is the existence of certain criminal lunatics, labelled "the communists" who, for some totally inexplicable reason, are bent on turning an existing Arcadia into a scene of destruction, carnage and rapine.

Now if this assumption were true, who would not condemn such destructive fanatics. If it were true that we could, if we would, live in peace and plenty under capitalism, then, beyond a doubt, almost everybody would be ready to reprobate those who seemed likely to disturb us.

But does this assumption of an existing system of social and economic harmony bear any resemblance to the reality of the present world? To ask such a question is unfortunately to answer it. The world of our epoch is racked by extraordinary, intense and ever recurrent outbreaks of violence, both within and between every capitalist state. No capitalist community is free from social conflicts within itself, from strikes, lockouts, and demonstrations of the unemployed and the underfed. And all these events involve varying degrees of violence, frequently including the loss of life. Dwarfing, however, even these recurrent outbreaks of social violence, the shadow of a new outbreak of the incomparable violence of general

war advances upon us. This veritable inferno of existing or impending violence (and no Eden) is the social scene upon which the communists appear. If, then, the communists were so mad as to "advocate violence" they would be undertaking an altogether redundant task. The presuppositions of the accusation against the communists are totally misleading. For that accusation to have weight it must be *possible* for us to live in peace under capitalism. And this is precisely what is impossible.

Shall we, however, be told that the existing violence of our world is merely the result of the baleful activities of the communists themselves, that if only the communists were imprisoned or exterminated life under capitalism would become an idyll? Even in regard to the violence of industrial disputes such a contention is manifestly absurd to everyone who knows anything of modern industrial life. (This allegation of communist responsibility for every industrial dispute is made by the same people who, on other occasions, never tire of telling us of the insignificance, incompetence and impotence of the communists.) But it is impossible even to suggest that the communists are responsible for the far greater violence of past, present and future capitalist wars. Hence there is no doubt that whatever the communists are *preaching*, other people are here and now *practising* a constant use of violent methods for attaining their ends.

What then, must be our surprise when we discover that the people who are, demonstrably, responsible for the extreme violence of our times, are the very people who so loudly arraign the communists as disturbers of the peace? For, after all, so long as capitalism exists, the capitalists and their spokesmen must bear the full responsibility for both the social and the international violence which their system visibly involves. They are quick enough, in all conscience, to claim credit for the achievements of the system. They must carry the burden of its liabilities also. They have the power; they have created the world in their own image. They cannot escape responsibility for what it is like.

These censors of the communists are, then, the very men who are leading our whole civilisation straight upon its destruction in a new world war. They are the capitalist statesmen, who turn aside for a moment from the pressing business of drilling their police or building their tanks, their battleships and their bombers, to

raise pious hands in holy horror at the wickedness of the communists who (they say) "advocate violence."

In the hearing before the District Director of Immigration which followed my arrest and which, apparently, resulted in the proceedings against me being dropped, I was asked to summarise my position. I replied as follows:

"I do not believe in or favor force or violence. What is true is that I cannot conceal from myself the fact that force and violence have been used and are now being used by the capitalist class all over the world. I believe that this use of force and violence has happened and I admit that I believe that it may happen again, but that does not mean that I am in favor of it happening again or that I advocate it in any conceivable way.

"On the contrary, I believe that the undeniable fact that an ever-growing use of force and violence hangs over the world to-day is a nightmare to me and to all decent people. As we sit at this hearing to-day the continent of Europe is on the brink of an outbreak of force and violence between the capitalist governments of that continent. First Europe and then the whole world is, in the opinion of every expert adviser, about to be plunged, if not this year, then in some future year, into the inferno of international capitalist war; and I cannot conceal from you, Mr. Inspector, that I consider that for any capitalist government to-day to accuse me of advocating force and violence is an insolent presumption."

So far I have sought to demonstrate two simple propositions. First, that the spokesmen of the capitalists paint a preposterously misleading picture of the world when they accuse the communists of disturbing a peaceful and harmonious scene with the advocacy of violence. Second, that the very men who make this accusation are themselves engaged, not indeed in the advocacy of violence, but in its ceaseless practice.

These facts discredit the particular persons who habitually accuse the communists of advocating violence. But they do not necessarily disprove that accusation itself. It may be that the capitalists have no shred of right to make the accusation; yet the accusation itself may be true. But every responsible communist repudiates the truth of the accusation itself. What in fact then is the nature of com-

munist doctrine on the difficult question of force and violence?

The communist is, and always must be, the champion of civilisation against all and every form of barbarism. He actively works for the banishment of all forms of force and violence from human affairs. He must desire, above everything, the establishment of a form of society in which social and international peace becomes, for the first time, possible. But he knows that such a harmonious society is not possible till the factories, the fields, and the mines, have been taken out of the ownership of a numerically small class and made the common heritage of man. Hence, in working for the abolition of capitalism, he is convinced that he is attempting to achieve the one thing which can make peace possible.

But, we may be asked, if this is so, why do not the communists abjure, utterly and immediately, the use of force and violence? If it is true that a peaceful society is their aim, why do not they set an example of absolute pacifism, quietism and non-resistance now? This sleek, ingenious objection comes readily enough to the lips of the better-informed apologists of capitalism. And, in truth, nothing more convenient to the capitalists can be imagined than that their opponents should take up such a position. "How delightful it would be," the capitalist statesmen wistfully reflect, "if only everyone who cannot agree with us would accept the principles of non-resistance. Then, we should be assured that whatever we did, we should never encounter any inconvenient opposition."

As long ago as 1884, Frederick Engels, one of two co-founders of the modern communist movement, answered them in a letter to Auguste Bebel, a leader of the German working class. The passage is worth quoting, not only in order to show that the communist position on the question of force and violence has always been the same, but also because Engels reminds the capitalists of something which they now often forget: namely, that they too have been in their time great makers of revolutions; that capitalism has not been in existence for ever, but was on the contrary established everywhere by the violent overthrow of feudalism, the social system which preceded it.

Engels speaks of Europe, but his words apply even more directly to the United States, which have an avowed and explicitly revolutionary origin.

"Throughout the whole of Europe the existing political situation is the product of revolutions. The legal basis, historical right, legitimacy, have been everywhere riddled through and through a thousand times or entirely overthrown. But it is in the nature of all parties or classes which have come to power through revolution, to demand that the new basis of right created by the revolution should also be unconditionally recognised and regarded as holy. The right to revolution *did* exist—otherwise the present rulers would not be rightful—but from now onwards it is to exist no more."

What, Engels continues, is the position of those German political parties which will only allow the German worker's party political rights on condition that it renounces all thought of armed resistance in any circumstances?

"What is the position of the parties?" Engels writes.

"In November 1848 the Conservative party broke through the new legal basis created in March 1848 without a tremor. In any case it only recognises the constitutional position as a provisional one and would hail any feudal-absolutist *coup d'état* with delight.

"The Liberal parties of all shades co-operated in the revolution of 1848-1866, nor would they deny themselves the right to-day to counter any forcible overthrow of the constitution by force.

"The Centre recognises the church as the highest power, above the state, a power which might in a given case, therefore, make revolution a *duty*.

"All these are the parties which demand from us that *we, we alone of them all*, should declare that in no circumstances will we resort to force and that we will submit to every oppression, to every act of violence not only as soon as it is merely formally legal, legal according to the judgment of our adversaries—but also when it is directly illegal. Indeed no party has renounced the right to armed resistance, *in certain circumstances*, without lying. None has ever been able to relinquish this ultimate right."

The reader of this introduction who is unfamiliar with communist thought will, I fancy, be feeling a growing sense of bewilderment.

"If all this is what the communists really think, and believe,"

he will be saying "why do they often talk about revolution, and, if I am not mistaken, about the necessity of revolution?"

These questions of the nature of revolutions and of the likelihood, or inevitability, of their future occurrence, figured prominently in one stage of the dialogue between the U. S. Inspector of Immigration (Mr. Zucker) and myself in Chicago. The Inspector read out a passage from this book, to be found on page 359 of this new edition.

Inspector: I read into the record the following excerpt found on pages 357 and 358:

"The coming of communism can alone render our problems soluble. A working-class dictatorship can alone open the way to communism. A working-class dictatorship can only be successful if the workers as a whole achieve a clear understanding of the historic destiny of their class. And this understanding, in turn, cannot be developed unless the working class succeeds in organising its most conscious and clear-sighted members into that indispensable instrument of the workers' will, a Communist party. The assumption of power by the workers can occur by means of a revolution alone: by means, that is, of an event which takes place over a limited number of years, and of which there may be a critical moment such as the conquest of the existing state apparatus in a capital city which can be 'dated' to a given week of a given month of a given year. The coming of communism itself, however, after the achievement of working-class power, must be a gradual process. And it is only gradually, with the emergence of communism, with the creation—and that, we may be sure, only by Herculean labours and painful sacrifices—of the essential economic basis for a classless society, that the problems which to-day threaten civilisation with eclipse will actually be solved."

Inspector: Have you anything to say?

Strachey: Yes, I would call your attention to the fact that once again I am expressing my view, for what it is worth, of the way in which social and political events take place, whether we like it or not.... Then, I think that I had better explain what the word "revolution" means in the passage cited, as this is not clear without the context. The word "revolution" means the transference of political power from one social class to another. Now

there have been instances in history in which such a transference of power has taken place without any violence occurring. Such revolutions have been called peaceful revolutions and the leading historical example is the transference of power from the British aristocracy to the British middle or capitalist class by the "Reform Bill" of 1832.

I further call your attention to the fact that on line 3 of page 358 I state that there may be a critical moment in such revolutions "such as the conquest of the existing State apparatus in a capital city." I do not see how any student of history, whatever his views, could deny that there may, unfortunately, be such moments in the future just as there have been in the past, but this does not mean that he wishes or advocates that such critical moments should occur.

If I might use a simile I might say that when sitting on the seashore, I might take the view that the tide would come up and wet my clothes but this would not mean that I should favor or advocate the coming up of the tide.

I believe that this difference between *predicting* that the abolition of the capitalist system will involve violence, and *advocating* or *desiring* such violence, is a distinction of primary importance. For no one could deny that communists do predict that violence will take place. But such prediction does not mean that they have ever dreamt of advocating or desiring violence. The best demonstration of this vital point was made by R. Palme Dutt in his periodical the *Labour Monthly* in 1926.

Dutt is the leading communist thinker of the English-speaking world and is a responsible member of the Communist International. Hence his words will serve to shew that the repudiation of the accusation of favouring force and violence was not the suddenly evolved casuistry of a communist author under arrest, but is the consistent attitude of all communist spokesmen. Dutt is answering the familiar accusation of favouring force and violence which Mr. James Ramsay MacDonald (at that time the leader of the British Labour Party, but now Lord President of the Council in the British National Government) had just preferred against the communists with particular venom.

Dutt wrote:

"It is a lie to say that the revolutionaries advocate violence and civil war. What the revolutionaries say is that the issue of bourgeois violence confronts the working class and has got to be faced, and that the workers cannot afford to put their trust in the capitalist law and the capitalist state machine for their protection. And events are daily proving the truth of this.

"Imagine a parallel. Suppose a scientist to declare, as a result of his investigations, that an earthquake will take place in England within ten years, and that all houses, unless reinforced in a certain way, will be shattered. It is reasonable to doubt his conclusion, to discuss his evidence, to examine the facts and see how far they bear him out. But the MacDonald method is different. Mr. MacDonald would say: 'Infamous scientist! He is in favour of earthquakes. He wants to shatter all our houses. Out with him! Earthquakes are all very well for countries like Japan: but we do not want them here. We like to live at peace. We have always lived at peace. Expel this scientist! Vote for me and no earthquakes!' And amid general applause, by an overwhelming majority, a resolution would be carried denouncing the scientist and denouncing all earthquakes. ... Neither the communists, nor any other section of the working-class movement, desire or advocate violence or civil war in any form. Communism stands for the abolition of every form of coercion and every form of violence. Compared with communism, the Quaker opposition to violence is half-hearted and insincere, for the Quakers rest on capitalism and the capitalist apparatus, draw their wealth from it, are mixed up with their financial investments and shares in the whole of imperialism and its daily violent subjection and coercion of the majority of the human race. Communism alone proceeds along the correct method to remove coercion by removing the causes of coercion. But this process involves struggle in the existing world of struggle; and communism teaches that, so long as the working class submits to bourgeois violence, so long they not only do not escape struggle but, by the continuance and expansion of capitalism and imperialism, the sum-total of violence in the world is increased."

Many readers, and in particular those who desire fundamental social change, but who believe that such change will come about

gradually and peacefully, will, no doubt, still be feeling dissatisfied with our presentation of the problem. They may maintain that the whole issue has been misstated.

"There is really no question," they may say, "of any passive submission to the will of the capitalists. It is demanded of the communists that they should pledge themselves in all circumstances not to use violence. But this will not leave them helpless. On the contrary there exists in Britain and America a well-developed democratic, constitutional procedure by which social changes, no matter how far-reaching, can be effected. The communists have only to convince the majority of the electorate that their case is sound for them to be able forthwith to use the existing state machinery, first for gaining valuable concessions for the working class and ultimately for the expropriation of the capitalists and the organisation of production for use on a socialist basis, and none will say them nay."

The communist answer to this assertion is, quite simply, that neither part of it is true. It is not true that there exists to-day in England and America democratic, constitutional machinery which can be used for the abolition of capitalism and the organisation of socialism. It is not even true that our existing democratic machinery can be used to win significant reforms without it being first paralysed and then abolished altogether by the capitalists.

We are not here concerned with the preposterous disadvantages under which the workers of a capitalist community must suffer if they seek to use the existing democratic machinery for their purposes. I am taking no account of the fact that the wealth of the capitalists gives them a 99.0 per cent monopoly of all our modern and perfected means of influencing and confusing men's minds; that the press, the radio and the cinema are just as much the private property of the capitalists as are the coal mines or the steel mills; that the schools and, to a very great extent, the pulpits, too, can be, and are, used to prevent men from becoming conscious of the possibility of any alternative to capitalism; that democratic electoral machinery responds only when it is approached with hard cash in hand. For it is true that all these enormous difficulties can be, and have been, in some measure overcome by working-class political parties, operating in capitalist democracies. The sheer, intolerable pressure of capitalism upon the workers is so great that

working-class political parties of an ostensibly anti-capitalist nature have struggled into existence almost everywhere. And they have in some countries, such as Germany, for example, won sufficient votes to attempt to use the existing machinery of the state to win concessions, and to look forward to using it for the abolition of capitalism itself.

Now, whenever and wherever this situation has developed to a point at which its power has begun to be called into question, the capitalist class has immediately scrapped the democratic and constitutional system and has resorted to rule by what we have come to know as the method of fascist dictatorship.

This point emerged towards the end of my examination in Chicago. The following passage from a book of mine, called *The Menace of Fascism* was read:

"Indeed the conditions of political life in a modern capitalist democracy may well be compared to a game of cards. The capitalists sit playing against the workers. For a number of years the game goes on in a perfectly orderly way. Neither side shows any signs of trying to tamper with the rules (to alter, that is, the framework of the Constitution). And then it becomes apparent that the stakes of the game have gradually been raised until all that either side possesses is now at hazard. (The economic crisis, that is, has grown worse and worse until the inescapable issue has emerged: either slow starvation and ruin for the workers, or the taking of the means of production from the capitalists.)

"Moreover, when this point is reached, another fact also becomes apparent. It becomes apparent that under the existing rules of the game the workers would, sooner or later, (and in spite of all the advantages of the capitalists)—the workers by sheer, overwhelming weight of numbers would, if the democratic system were preserved, acquire a parliamentary majority. Will the capitalists, in these circumstances, scrupulously preserve the rules of the game and meekly hand over their whole property as the forfeit? To ask such a question is surely to answer it. Of course they will cheat; of course they will tear every constitution in the world to shreds rather than allow their property and privileges to be taken from them. Who wouldn't?"

Q. Mr. Strachey, do you have any comment to make on that passage?