

On Terrorism and Authoritarianism

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“He who humbles himself wills to be exalted.”

—Nietzsche

I would like to present some thoughts and comments on terrorist organizations and activities in general and on the SLA and “The Last SLA Statement” in this context. My main intention is not to criticize the SLA as such, but to contribute to the discussion concerning what is to be done by those of us who fervently desire the transformation of the present “social order” into a free world.

The capacity for self-determination within a social context must become widespread for revolutionary social transformations to take place and be sustained. But this does not simply involve intellectually rejecting formal and informal leaders or developing more egalitarian tactics and “ideologies.” Those of us who consider ourselves rebels cannot claim to be above the habits and forces of the old world; historical experience, including that of the recent past, demonstrates otherwise. We have to try to understand the mistakes and failures of the past—that is, the cumulative reasons why we still are where we are instead of in a new world—rather than distorting and glorifying them for whatever irrational motives. We have to explore more deeply the relationship of revolutionary organizations and individuals to the proletariat and the rest of society and to the process of revolutionary transformation. Without such an assessment, or with a shallow, mechanistic one, leftists of all tendencies have again and again fallen into the pits of capitalist reformism whether their tactics were violent or non-violent, active or passive, etc.

While I can strongly sympathize with the desire to act, to do something that will blow the whole system apart (since I have felt it myself), I believe that terrorist groups such as the SLA participate in and help perpetuate the authoritarian separation between “theory” and “practice,” and that between “professional revolutionaries” and everyone else. This division is inherent in the hierarchical character of our society; it is a reality that must be confronted; it cannot be blown away by egalitarian ideology. It isn’t a question of better tactics but of better understanding of the social processes in which we participate, from which effective action can and must follow. As far as I am concerned, the problem has yet to be definitively resolved, but a critical understanding of past activity is a beginning.

On the whole, it is more positive and healthier to be violent than to be non-violent—that is, to be assertive rather than passive—in this overtly and covertly violent society. I respect all those who resist “discipline,” coercion, oppression and exploitation. I admire solidarity of action on the part of those who share common desires and goals of freedom. I feel strongly that we all have to become more assertive. Even when we react in a confused way, such actions are in the right direction.

My objections to terrorists such as the SLA are based on the direction and intention of their violent actions and their non-violent actions alike. The activities of the SLA did not represent direct acts of revolt against their own specific socio-economic or subjective situations, except in the most abstract, confused and ideological sense. In this they have not been alone on the left. The SLA members considered themselves, and have been considered by many to be brave heroes sacrificing the possibility of more comfortable lives for the good, the education and the salvation of “the people.” This was not due to any real privileges which they renounced, but to their own self-denial intermingled with their desire to serve.

Paternalism and Manipulation

The SLA's actions—including their pronouncements—have been both clearly paternalistic and benevolently manipulative. They were designed to dramatically demonstrate specific lessons to those less informed than the SLA members and to involve those people in “revolutionary activity.” The SLA wanted to be part of a process of “organizing” the masses of ignorant, oppressed people. In “The Last SLA Statement,” (See FE #282, April-May 1977) Emily Harris tells us that the group was formed in order to “develop a guerrilla front with the idea that armed actions along with aboveground political organizing, educates and mobilizes people in support of revolution...” Her main criticism of the Hearst kidnapping is that it was premature, “premature in the sense that they were unprepared to coordinate and bring together and organize the spontaneous momentum sparked by their actions.” In other words, the SLA intentionally, as well as unintentionally, practiced conventional leftist politics through violent tactics. They protested against such injustices and inequalities as militarism in the schools, discrimination against minorities and the unequal distribution of wealth and power, and they demanded reforms, nothing more.

The self-criticism of tactics offered in “The Last SLA Statement” does not constitute a break with the SLA's view of itself as teacher of the people. Russ Little's main criticism of the tactics involved in the Foster killing is that the SLA didn't adequately educate the public as to the significance of LEAA [Law Enforcement Assistance Administration]. He also comments in passing that they may have killed the wrong person for their purposes, that they might have achieved a greater effect by killing someone else. Little criticizes Patty Hearst's admission to SLA membership and comments that if she had been sent home instead, she and many others would have been educated by her father's refusal to cough up the additional \$4 million for the food program.

Emily Harris asserts that the food program was a positive factor in that it “educated” people about the extent of poverty and wealth in this country. Little asserts that it “politicized” people to varying degrees. Joe Remiro caps it off by stating that, “Those who allow subjective political prejudices to blind them from seeing the SLA's victories as well as their mistakes have missed a valuable learning experience.” Bill Harris criticizes the SLA for using too-spectacular methods in their chosen task because, “revolutions need direction and exemplary leadership but not heroes.” He admits that, “for the effects of propaganda the SLA projected the qualities that the-group, as revolutionaries, opposed”; that is, authoritarianism and militarism, etc. They reproduced the status quo despite their intentions. In this predicament, how could they presume to direct or informally lead anyone? If they had been more effective “organizers” where might they have led us?

Authoritarianism Shared by Populists and Anarchists

The SLA was far from being a unique example. Both their desire to be the informal teachers, leaders ‘ and directors of revolutionary insurgency, and their inability to go beyond the authoritarianism and social distortions of the present have been shared by many populist and anarchist, as well as marxist groups in the past—notably Bakunin's Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the Spanish F.A.I. The formation and activity of terrorist groups have preceded all known revolutionary attempts.

The question is what role such groups and their activities play in revolutions and in revolutionary failures. I would contend that they have been detrimental and sometimes disastrous to revolutionary possibilities precisely because such groups participated in the perpetuation and reassertion of old forms of authority, despite their intentions. This reality can only become clear when we cut through the revolutionary mythology about heroes and martyrs. It is vital to dispel such myths in order to understand revolutionary failures of the past as more than betrayals, sell-outs or weaknesses in numbers or organization.

For example, we might ask ourselves what role the F.A.I., and particularly Durruti and his comrades, played in the-Spanish revolution of 1936 and its outcome. During the preceding period Durruti and those with him had engaged in terrorist acts. They intended by those acts to protest and demand the reform of the injustices of Spanish society. They also intended to inspire proletarian revolutionary activity by the masses and prepared themselves to help guide this activity informally. They thereby gained the admiration and appreciation of many Spanish proletarians as well as rebels all over the world. In 1936 these terrorists decided that it was time to change tactics. When

respected C.N.T. and anarchist militants joined the Republican government, Durruti went so far as to publicly urge obedience and work discipline, and to participate in the jailing and elimination of those—even anarchists—who disagreed with and resisted the new policies of the C.N.T. and the anarchist-influenced government.

Was this change in tactics simply a mistake or an unavoidable tragedy? Did Durruti and his comrade anarchist terrorists sell out? I don't think so. Many participants and sympathetic observers have stated that they felt they had no alternative if they were to continue to pursue their ideals. It was these ideals which led to their counter-revolutionary repressive activities in 1936.

When he spoke in New York in 1976, Augustin Souchy asserted that the anarchists felt that there were only two alternatives open to them (in the light of their ideals): either that the C.N.T. take over management of the activities of the Spanish proletariat or that they enter the Republican government and influence it in behalf of the workers. Since the C.N.T.-F.A.I. militants did not want to become the dictators over the proletariat—and it was obvious to them that some group had to maintain that position because the proletariat still needed to be organized and directed—they chose the latter alternative. The proletarians were not consulted even though (or by the C.N.T.-F.A.I. estimation because) they were at the moment of decision, engaged in a militant life-and-death struggle in the streets of Barcelona and on the fronts to free themselves.

We must not only condemn this obvious betrayal, we must also ask how the revolutionary “representatives” got away with it. There was resistance; not everyone obediently went along with the “change in tactics.” But all too many did. Without them the new tyranny of the Republic could not have been established; Part of the answer to the question of how this came about lies in the authoritarian character of the admiration which many had for Durruti and his like, and which prompted them to respect “their” respected militants’ opinions instead of what their own experiences and desires could have taught them at that moment. Thereby the “mistake” of a few became the mistake of many.

Self-Sacrifice for the Sake of Domination

The stance of such instructors and avengers of the people as Durruti has led them to participate in the reestablishment of tyranny—even though this was far from their intentions. Because they have sacrificed themselves for the revolution, they have felt they have the right to demand that others sacrifice their felt needs, desires and goals to the judgment of these “friends of the revolution.” This is usually the price which they decide must be temporarily paid to combat the “enemies of the people.”

I am not asserting that the historical significance of the SLA is comparable to that of Durruti's group, but only that they share certain vital similarities: namely their terrorist tactics and their basic attitudes toward the population and their relation to revolutionary processes. Most terrorist groups are defined by these characteristics irrespective of articulated ideology. And the example of the Spanish revolution of 1936 demonstrates, when stripped bare of mythology, some of the concrete ramifications when such groups gain access to power, irrespective of articulated ideologies.

Although I don't, as yet, have definitive positive ideas for activities which will demolish the old world, I believe that it is necessary to go beyond the ideological mystifications of the past and present in order to become capable of participating in the creation of the future.

Related

See responses in FE #287, October 28, 1977 and in FE #288, December 1977.

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