

Murder Is Not a Political Weapon*

by Herbert Marcuse

In taking a position towards terrorism in West Germany, the Left must first ask itself two questions: Do terrorist actions contribute to the weakening of capitalism? Are these actions justified in view of the demands of revolutionary morality? To both questions I must answer in the negative.

The physical liquidation of single individuals, even the most prominent, does not undermine the normal functioning of the capitalist system itself. On the contrary, it strengthens its repressive potential without (and this is the decisive point) either engendering opposition to repression or raising political consciousness.

Obviously the victims of terrorist actions represent the system – but they only *represent* it. That is to say, they are replaceable and exchangeable. The reservoir for recruiting their replacements is practically unlimited. In view of the overwhelming disproportion between the concentrated power of the state machine and the weakness of terrorist groups isolated from the masses, the attempt to create uncertainty and anxiety among members of the ruling class is hardly a revolutionary accomplishment. Given the prevalent conditions in the Federal Republic (the situation of preventive counter-revolution), it is destructive for the Left at this time to provoke the power of the state.

There may exist situations in which the elimination of people who sponsor a policy of repression does really change the system – at least in its political manifestations – and liberalize forms of oppression. (For example the successful assassination of Carrero Blanco in Spain, or the killing of Hitler might have had such an impact.) But in both of these cases the system was already in a phase of disintegration, a condition which certainly does not exist in West Germany today.

Marxist socialism, however, is not only guided by the laws of revolutionary pragmatism. It also adheres to the laws of revolutionary morality. Its goal, the liberated individual, must appear in the means to achieve this goal. Revolutionary morality demands – as long as it remains a possibility – open struggle, not conspiracy and sneak attacks. An open struggle is class struggle. In West Germany – and not only there – the radical opposition to capitalism today is for the most part isolated from the working class. The student movement, the “declassed” radicals from the bourgeoisie and women are all searching for their own forms of struggle. The frustration emanating from their political isolation is hardly bearable. It results in terrorist actions against individual people, actions which come from isolated individuals and small isolated groups.

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By personalizing the struggle, the terrorists must be held accountable and judged for their actions. Those representatives of capital whom the terrorists have chosen as their victims are themselves responsible for capitalism — just as Hitler and Himmler were responsible for the concentration camps. This means that the victims of terror are not innocent — but their guilt can only be expiated through the abolition of capitalism itself.

Can the current terrorist activity in West Germany be considered a legitimate continuation of the student movement which must now use different political tactics in the face of intensified repression? I must answer in the negative to this question as well. Terror is primarily a break with the movement of the 1960s. The extra-parliamentary opposition (APO) was, despite all reservations due to its class basis, a mass movement on an international scale and a movement with an international strategy. It signified a turning point in the development of class struggles in late capitalism, that is, it proclaimed the need of struggling for “concrete utopia.” It redefined socialism as qualitatively different from and surpassing all traditional conceptions of socialism — as a concrete utopia that has now become a real possibility. The movement did not turn away from open confrontation, but the great majority of its members rejected conspiratorial terrorism. Today’s terrorism is not the heritage of the German New Left. Instead it remains bound to the old society it wishes to overturn. It works with weapons which will undermine fulfillment of its goals. At the same time, it splits the Left just at the moment when it is necessary to unify all oppositional forces.

Precisely because the Left rejects this terror, it is not necessary to join in the bourgeois denunciation campaign of the radical opposition. The Left expresses its autonomous judgment in the name of the struggle for socialism. In this spirit it says — “No, we don’t want this terrorism.” The terrorists compromise this struggle, a struggle which nevertheless is their own as well. Their methods are not those of liberation — nor are they even those of survival in a society which is mobilized to repress the Left.

Translated by Jeffrey Herf