

THE RELEVANCE OF METAPHYSICS TO CONTEMPORARY UNREST

GERMAIN G. GRISEZ

There is a temptation to try to deal with this topic by projecting a metaphysical theory in the light of which one can explain the development and transformations of politics. Given such an explanation of politics, it would be a fairly easy matter to account for a great deal of the data for which the expression 'contemporary unrest' stands, for these data could be seen as symptoms, expressions, or embodiments of the new politics that is coming into being.

Thus, for example, if reality is a process through which absolute spirit realizes itself, politics can be explained as the process by which freedom gradually expands, overcoming all irrational limits by the power of reason until freedom becomes identical with necessity. The phenomena of contemporary unrest can then be fit into a framework determined by a conception of various forms of unfreedom that are now happily being transcended in favor of a certain newly emerging freedom, which perhaps cannot yet be concretely described. However, whatever is coming is sure to be an improvement over what has been, for that is what the underlying metaphysics—or, if you prefer, ideology or myth—is there to guarantee.

Personally, I might find some explanations along these lines exciting, entertaining, amusing, or reassuring. But I would not find them convincing, for I know of no metaphysics of that sort that can support itself rationally. The motive for accepting the theory is the wish that it were true, the sense of intelligibility and security it lends to a carefully selected portion of the disturbing data with which we are confronted.

Therefore, rather than beginning from metaphysics, I would prefer to start from a consideration of what we mean by the expression: 'contemporary unrest'. What did we think of when we saw this expression in the title of a symposium in this program?

Of course, everyone will have to answer for himself. But I suspect that the answers, if we were to survey them, would reveal that the expression suggests a certain pattern of behavior that recurs in various relationships having a similar structure.

The structure is that of authorities in relation to subordinates.

The pattern of behavior involves active insubordination making use of certain specific tactics. These include a rejection of accepted political means as inadequate, outmoded, inherently biased, and therefore unjust. Consequently, confrontation involving some degree of coercion is needed. This coercion may take forms ranging from picket lines and sit-ins through disruption of normal procedures and harassment of authorities, even to the point of terror against the uncommitted and assassination of obdurate authority figures.

So far the description would apply to various phenomena of insubordination—such as mutiny, rebellion, civil war, and so on—in any period. One specifically contemporary contribution, I think, is the use of discourse by subordinates as an effective method of exacting alterations in established structures. Of course, discourse has always been an element in phenomena of unrest. What appears new is that discourse has become the typically dominant technique in strategies of extra-legal action that are variously regarded either as a new politics or as a replacement of politics by subtle forms of violence.

Discourse is used not only to state the issues, to make the demands, to issue the manifestoes, not only to communicate information and reasons, not only to persuade in the light of relevant values, but also to arouse and appeal to irrelevant passions, to project an image, to defame the opposition, and to threaten more drastic measures if demands are not complied with and the methods thus far used are not at least tacitly legitimized.

Both sides in a confrontation may make use of discourse in the manner I have indicated; it is characteristic of contemporary unrest that the insurgents do so. To a great extent the techniques used for the sophistic perversion of discourse were worked out in the first place by staunch members of the establishment, who did not become critical of the methods employed by their advertising or public relations men until those means were put in the service of unwelcome ends. Then these methods became propaganda, psychological warfare, and so forth.

The rebels often have great advantages in this sort of warfare. Opposition is news as long as it lasts; the status quo is news only at the moment it crumbles. Moreover, news of dissent, of violence, of rebellion is an important form of entertainment, because there is always drama and sometimes amusement in confrontations.

In the foregoing analysis, I have not mentioned the aims of the restless ones, nor have I said anything about their internal

organization and their long-term attitude toward the institutions they are simultaneously using and attacking. I have left these points out, not because I judge them insignificant, but because I do not think there is any single specification of these points essential to what we mean by contemporary unrest.

If we think of various examples that fall under the broad concept of "contemporary unrest", their essential political dissimilarity should be clear. We might include Communist revolutions such as the Vietnam war, intramural Communist struggles such as that in Czechoslovakia, civil rights protests such as those led by Martin Luther King, anti-civil rights protests such as those in England that led to restrictions on immigration, the so-called "free speech movement" at Berkeley, the draft-card burnings, the prayers and walk-outs—both anti-ecumenical and anti-traditional—that have been occurring in various churches, and so on and so forth. Some of these are isolated and have very specific aims; some are only small parts in a large, organized movement. Some are carried out by organizations whose internal structure is democratic; some by groups who blindly follow a single charismatic leader without question and without criticism. Some merely seek to install the restless in seats of power with a minimal alteration in the institutions—they are "palace revolutions"; others aim at the utter destruction of the institutions they attack.

From a political point of view, therefore, I do not see a single phenomenon in contemporary unrest. There are many examples of unrest that fall beyond the borders of politics conceived in the narrow sense—that is, referring to civil government. For instance, many disturbances in schools and churches are of a strictly academic or ecclesiastical character.

Of course, in the broad sense in which politics refers to the organization and functioning of power to determine any community's action, all the phenomena of contemporary unrest are political. But since the restless ones have such varied conceptions of what is good for man and how this good is to be attained, it seems to me that contemporary unrest is a unity of technique rather than a single political trend.

Various factors have given shape to this technique, which provides an instrument for dissatisfaction of all sorts. Certainly, dissatisfaction is nothing new. History is full of conflict. But contemporary technology, particularly the mass media of communications, have made it possible in many cases to use discourse coercively against authorities.

Moreover, the multiplication of instances of phenomena of

unrest perhaps owes more to mob psychology than it does to metaphysics. Violence is contagious, particularly if it is successful. The experiences of labor union organization and of totalitarian subversion of liberal governments are different in many respects. But the two experiences showed what could be done by a minority of organized subordinates against authorities. Contemporary unrest owes much to these experiences from the recent past. Whenever the new techniques are successful in one situation, they are adapted—sometimes with too little adjustment for success—to a multitude of more or less different situations.

The phantasy of one's own dissatisfactions being successfully resolved by similar techniques joins with a thirst for excitement and a desire for attention to provide a strong motive for potential rebels. At the same time, the paradigm for politics in our age is the nuclear stalemate, the balance of terror. Many an authority restrains himself for fear of escalation, which will cause even greater damage to the community for which he is responsible, when a group of dissidents begins to appear willing to accept irrational damage rather than to submit. In effect, those who are most irresponsible are most likely to succeed in episodes of contemporary conflict. Authorities are always responsible for the preservation of a community, and so they are bound to think a long time before escalating a conflict with rebels who convincingly act as if they feel they have nothing to lose by destroying the institution.

Of course, the political actions of each group of restless ones are more or less related to their own world views. In some cases the relation is very close, as when dedicated communists set out to extend the revolution to new territory. Though their ideological basis may not truly be a metaphysics (it is claimed by them to be a science) and though their actions may be determined more by circumstance than by Marxism-Leninism, still there is a direct relation in such a case between the metaphysics or pseudo-metaphysical ideology and the political action which utilizes the techniques characteristic of contemporary unrest.

In other cases there appears to be little or no relationship between action and ultimate principles. For instance, if a group of high school students sit-in at the principal's office demanding that new management be found for the cafeteria, I think it would be very difficult to show any but the most indirect and remote relationship between their acts and any metaphysics they might hold.

In sum, I am sceptical of any philosophies of history that come to throw light upon the cosmic-historical significance of current events. Any metaphysics that tries to give a unified sense to as variegated a set of phenomena as that designated by the expression 'contemporary unrest' seems to me to have lost its metaphysical modesty and to have presumed to fill the function once reserved for religious dogma.

I do not object to religious dogma, but I do object to the confusion of faith with philosophy. And while there are obviously important links between metaphysical theory, political action, and the techniques comprised under the head of 'contemporary unrest', I think that only muddle will come from the systematic and reductive unification of theory with practice, and of practice with technique.

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY