

Violence and its Consequences in 20th Century American Protest Movements

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The 1960's and 1970's were a pivotal time in America's history during which civil disobedience and social disorganization would both challenge and shape the structure of American society. From enhanced media coverage, to witnessing it on the streets, to partaking in social protest, to networking for the cause of protest, social movements impacted most every aspect of America during this time. Many in the Civil Rights Movement rebelled against what the country believed was the inherent inability of specific races to function in society. The advent of the nuclear bomb during the Second World War was a sign of the absolute irrationality of war, revealing a corrupt government's utter indifference to human welfare (Bingham and Bingham 1970:53). In lieu of the tragic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, social organizations were mobilizing to protest the next unjust war: Vietnam. Some anti-war political extremists including the Weather Underground erupted during this period, resorting to violence to persuade and educate the nation symbolically through: petitions, rock throwing, canvassing, vigils, sit-ins, freedom rides, lobbying, draft resistance, arson, desertion, fragging, assault, rioting, confronting police officers, obscenity screaming, marching, tax evasion, guerilla theatre, looting, sniping, destroying draft records, damaging property, immolation, bombings, and murder (Rhodes 2001:1). The use of violence is a very risky and extremely dangerous method for conducting political protest and for this reason it is compulsory to understand why, how, and when people feel it is necessary to resort to such means, the role the media plays in framing movements using violent tactics, how violence affects cause(s), and how these movements are structured by their environments.

Several factors cooperated to catalyze student involvement in the refutation of American intervention in Vietnam. Threatened by a tyrannical state that would literally

spare no expenditure in the name of capitalism and imperialist pursuit, students began to react. America had enlisted soldiers through a draft unjustly. Eighteen year old men were expected to serve their country regardless of political ideologies; however, they were refused the right to vote until they were twenty-one (Bingham and Bingham 47, 49). Not until the ratification of the 26th Amendment on July 1, 1971 as a result of public scrutiny toward the United States government would an eighteen year old have the right to vote. This inherent hypocrisy in American policy displeased many believing that the right to fight and die ought to at least come with the right to vote for the man sending civilians to war. The controversial draft sent many fleeing the country in fear of enlistment; however, Canada and other countries were also reluctant to accept these American refugees. To avoid public scrutiny in both Canada and the United States, people started turning to another viable option: college. When opportunities are created for people with similar presuppositions to meet, they may eventually develop joint action (Porta and Diani 2006:124). As people began enrolling to avoid the draft, students found themselves within close proximity of those sharing similar ideologies and began to network; sparking the formation of anti-war movements and acts of rebellion across college campuses.

Societal structure and conditions influence the distribution of resources that are pertinent to participation in collective action (Porta and Diani 2006:35). The youth of America received little to no representation in the policies of the government. The students and draftees were not part of the professional world. Without voting rights or professional representation, movements pose an insignificant threat to their oppressors (Merry 2008). The proceeding youth protests were an inevitable consequence of the economic conditions in which they occurred; the youth were driven to protest as, due to

lack of resources, it was their only means to have a voice (Piven and Cloward 1979:3). The underprivileged are most likely to protest when they feel that their way of life is threatened the most; when the people feel that they can no longer live their day to day life without overwhelming strife. The civil unrest and commonality of extremism created by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., senator Robert F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War may have provided what Piven and Cloward refer to as a 'major disturbance within larger society' which weakened the power of the elites, helping transition the underprivileged from apathy to hopefulness (Piven and Cloward 1979:14; Rhodes 2001:7). With little resources to work with, youth may resort to violent ends as a result of the difficulty to act in ways that will significantly influence the political system. Youth may struggle when attempting to bring about positive change due to their lack of control over resources or their inability to reach the masses in as great a number as their opposition. For example, students lacking the means to make political progress via the process of democratic ballots may begin to utilize protest tactics that violate social norms as their only means of recourse (Piven and Cloward 1979:3).

Towards the end of the sixties, many activists became downtrodden with the realization that the nonviolent protests of the past received little or no attention; having little to no benefits for social movements (Bingham and Bingham 1970:54). In 1969, the U.S. Defense Department began banning assemblies in coffee houses and printing of political propaganda with resulting nonviolent free speech protests receiving little to no response. When prisoners in a military stockade participated in a brief sit down protest against the killing of a prisoner by a prison guard, they were sentenced to fifteen years in jail under charge of mutiny (57-58). On May 4, 1970, four white students were killed at

Kent state and 2 black students at Jackson State when law officers shot them down for protesting the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia (49). Discouragement led to dismantling of social organizations, enraging dedicated activists who had been working in vain for their goals. As a result, nonviolent organizations evolved into much smaller extremist organizations believing only violence could truly influence radical change. Indifferent American society was framed as “reachable only through the language of power and violence” with militants staging political violence as vital to portray their agendas (Farber 1994:20). Although many violent organizations seemed irrational, even insane at times, there is no doubt that these symbolic acts stirred consciences and greatly contributed to the demonizing affects of the war in Vietnam on American life (Bingham and Bingham 1970:54).

The influence of police violence against youth protestors resulted in the development of radicalism on college campuses. Students in the peace movement began to realize that the tactic of nonviolence must be abandoned (Bingham and Bingham 1970:59). Berkeley uprisings which began in 1964 over free speech escalated to the Freedom Ride and sit-it seizure of an administrative building. Police were called to the scene and exhibited forceful tactics to remove students from the premises. Shortly after, campus revolutions became a common spectacle for television, spreading the revolt from college to college. The free speech movement moved to other campuses like Columbia University and to the streets becoming the filthy speech movement in which people shouted slurs over microphones and committed petty acts of vandalism; police reacted violently and a riot ensued. Non-participating students often sympathize with the activists claiming that violence did not occur merely as mob rule, but as a reaction to police

officials and university authorities initiating it (43). Rhodes claims that protest violence is always coupled with police brutality; the full extent to which organizations such as the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) or the CIA's similar program Operation CHAOS (specifically geared toward anti-war protestors) enticed violence can never be fully realized (2-3).

The Hunt Saboteurs, a nonviolent British based animal rights movement, committed their first violent acts, two acts of arson, in 1973 after a member, Cliff Goodman, suffered an eye injury when struck by angered fox hunters (Lutherer and Simon 1992:8). Extremely violent rioting in the Watts area of Los Angeles in August 1965 spurred in response to wrongful accusations of the false arrest of a local drunken colored man. What started as 1,500 people against 100 policemen escalated to a mob 10,000 strong fighting against 1,000 local police officers accompanied by 13,500 officers of the California National Guard: 34 people died, 1,032 were injured, 200 buildings were destroyed, 720 damaged, and property losses accumulated to roughly \$40 million. The old humanitarian peace movements seeking to encourage peace by strengthening the United Nations had failed; hippies were becoming increasingly convinced that America was doomed: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Students for Democratic Society (SDS)., and draft resisters could no longer stand idly by while America continued to kill innocents in Vietnam (Bingham and Bingham 1970:59).

We must name it, describe it, analyze it, and change it. For it is only when the system is changed... that there can be any hope for stopping the forces that create a war in Vietnam today or a murder in the South tomorrow... [T]he people in Vietnam and the people in this demonstration are united in much more than a common concern that the war ended. In both countries people are struggling to produce a movement that has the power to change their condition. The system that frustrates these movements is the same. All our lives, our destinies, our very hopes to live depend on our ability to overcome this system.

- April 1965, Students for Democratic Society (SDS) president Paul Potter (Gitlin 1993:184)

With the assassination progressive Democrat Robert F. Kennedy and the impending defeat of Eugene McCarthy, anti-war radicals lost all hope of working with the political system. Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey who pledged to perpetuate Vietnam via maintaining Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policies. In response, protestors assembled in the park of the Chicago convention and refused to leave. When police attacked the crowd a violent riot erupted; television cameras would paint a portrait of America as a civilization out of control, on the brink of destruction. In 1968, SDS student leaders were scrutinized and punished for protesting the war in Vietnam and challenging Columbia University's plans to build a gym as an act of racism. Black students successfully occupied one building; whites quickly occupied four more shutting the campus down (Varon 2004:26-27). Media coverage of the events quickly swept the nation; police arrested over 700 people, injuring twelve (Caute 1988:141-158). The events of Columbia drew students closer to the problems of racism, government militancy, and economic injustice plaguing the nation. "The uprising... achieve[d] student power...[and] advance[d] the struggle for liberation outside the university itself", proclaims one protestor; students began to sense a connection with the larger struggle (The Uprising at Columbia 1968). The use of violence against the protestors convinced them to see political conflict as overtly confrontational and militant. Two flyers quickly released in Columbia read:

[Students] now know personally the brutality and inhumanity of a System which kills its young men without remorse and allows its poor to starve... We will free Columbia of the Company men and profiteers and cake eaters who control its future and direct its participation in death industries. Our weapon is our solidarity (On Solidarity 1968).

We must prepare ourselves to deal with the enemy. Our weapons: political education and tactical organization for students and workers: rocks, clubs, fire bombs, plastique, guns – but most of all – commitment and courage (Dare we be Heroes 1968).

“[We need] to be a movement that fights, not just talks about fighting” (Bring the War Home 1969). The Weathermen, consisting of many SDS sympathizers whom already had pre-existing network ties with anti-war organizations, established a violent anti-war faction in response to political apathy regarding peaceful protest: militancy would correct the ineffectiveness of conventional protest (Varon 2004:22). The Weathermen, convinced that revolution was the only answer to society’s corruption, saw themselves as an organization waging guerilla war against an unjust government. Growing despair within the middle-class white community regarding the uselessness of peaceful protests and the desire to emulate the Black Panther movement to help blacks overcome capitalism and promote communism fueled much of the early development of the Weathermen. Similar to the Latin American tactics of rebels like Che Guevara, the Weathermen hoped to persuade the ‘masses’ of the necessity to move towards violent means of protest by directly fighting for political gains; they fought to entice a radical leap toward action, a revolution. Although armed struggle was denounced by many on the New Left, dozens if not hundreds of New Left collectives incorporated this philosophy of violence into their political protests; committing bombings, arson, and vandalism to campuses around the country (2-8, 11, 14, 22). Estimates show as many as 2,800 such attacks between January 1969 and April 1970 alone (Sale 1973:632).

The “Bring the War Home” campaign of the Weathermen led to an official schism from the SDS. The Weathermen announced that the campaign to be exercised during the ‘Days of Rage’ in Chicago on October 8th, 1969, would awaken a complacent America to the slaughter of the Vietnamese. The riot was intended to be the largest protest movement of the decade with an estimated 10,000 protestors to participate in what

the Weathermen deemed 'a measurement of commitment to the New Left.' When the rally took place, only two to three hundred were in attendance; however, this would not stop the Weathermen from waging their attack on the United States. The rally quickly became a riot; people smashed the windows of cars and banks, a statue dedicated to the police casualties of the 1886 Haymarket Square riot was also blown up: as a result, six people were shot and seventy were arrested. On December 6th, 1969, after the assassination of Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers on December 4th, 1969, by the COINTELPRO the Weathermen bombed several police vehicles in Chicago in retaliation. On December 27th, 1969, the Weathermen altered their identities and renamed themselves the Weather Underground Organization (WUO). Adopting new covert tactics, the WUO began scheming assassinations of military officers at Fort Dix, New Jersey; bombings would persist until the mid-seventies (The Weather Underground 2003).

The Weathermen failed to realize that most citizens of the United States lacked the seething discontent the Weathermen had for capitalism and refused to accept that America nearly completely denied its citizens basic democratic rights. This would lead to public reluctance of involvement in such extreme factions. The armed struggle adopted two seemingly polar philosophies to justify their existence: on the pessimistic side, their actions did not depend on political success or failure, merely resisting was victory; on the optimistic side, imperialism was on the verge of collapse and resistance would soon topple their oppressors (Varon 2004:10). Violence in the United States appeared to reach its summit in spring 1970 with the killing of student demonstrators at Kent State and Jackson University; shortly after, violence dropped significantly. In their infancy the Weathermen conceived limitless plots of grandiose political executions; however, these

desires subsided as the organization grew. On March 6, 1970, several members of the Weathermen died when a townhouse in which they were building bombs suddenly exploded. The Weathermen concluded to restrain themselves from partaking in violent endeavors against political figures; drawing parallels between militant tactics for political gain at home with similar techniques used during the war in Vietnam. Targets established for attack were informed ahead of time and encouraged to evacuate to avoid casualties. The Weathermen, a group that set out to define itself through action, established a new policy prohibiting direct targeting of specific individuals to prevent these radicals from becoming what they so ardently rejected: murderers (Varon 2004:10-13, 16). On April 30, 1975, America officially withdrew from Vietnam. This social change would alter the structure of the environment in which the WUO existed; significantly decreasing its relevance to society (Porta and Diani 2006:35). After a meeting in 1976 called the Hard Times, the WUO largely disbanded after many leftists accused them of abandoning the cause via the discontinuation of violent tactics (Varon 2004:297).

On July 29th, 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson made remarks upon signing an order to establish the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders or, named after its chair, The Kerner Commission. The commission was established under the precedent that no nation can tolerate violence. Johnson called for an establishment of the reasons for the riots that had been taking place throughout the mid to late sixties. He wanted to know: what happened, why it happened, and preventative measures he could initiate to thwart future violence. Johnson recognized the importance of police relationships within a community towards the outbreak of a riot and asked how well police were equipped to handle or prevent riots (Woolley and Peters 1967). COINTELPRO was also hard at work

maintaining social order and preventing militant violence. COINTELPRO was established by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and operations began in 1956 to: neutralize, discredit, and disenfranchise organizations and their leaders. COINTELPRO infiltrated organizations to discover ways to prevent the recruitment of new members, especially those of youth. The organization set out to systematically detach movements from sympathizers and their communities regardless of their tactics. In December 1964, COINTELPRO sent a letter to Martin Luther King to provoke his suicide in an attempt to prevent him from becoming a messiah (Churchill and Wall 2002:xi; Moore 1968). A very specific plan was established to break apart the Black Panthers and other black militant groups: “1. discredit militants within the responsible negro society, 2. discredit militants to white sympathizers, and 3. discredit the members of militant organizations to fellow members” (Moore 1968). COINTELPRO integrated television programs into their mission to destroy New Left Movements. The author of the following report from within COINTELPRO is concealed:

A carefully planned television show can be extremely effective in showing these extremists for what they are. Local New Left and black nationalist leaders were interviewed on the show and seemed to have been chosen for either their inability to articulate or their simpering and stupid appearance. Miami furnished a film of this show [on July 7th, 1968] for Bureau review and it was apparent that the television source used the very best judgment in editing comments by these extremists. He brought out that they were in favor of violent revolution without their explaining why. But he also brought out that they, personally, would be afraid to lead a violent revolution, making them appear to be cowards (Director to 42 Field Offices 1968).

The Kerner Commission released the following statement in the closing years of the 1960s in response to civil disobedience in schools and ghettos around the nation:

The key to much of the violence in our society seems to lie with the young. Our youth account for an ever-increasing percentage of crime, greater than their increasing percentage of the population. The thrust of much of group protest and collective violence- on the campus, in the ghettos, in the streets is provided by our young people (Bingham and Bingham 1970:16).

The Kerner Commission called for a crackdown on student leaders calling for the use of trained military and police forces (the CIA’s Project CHAOS and Special Weapons and

Tactics (SWAT) teams), attributing violence solely to the breakdown of respect youth had for authority (Gregory 1976:ii). The youth, on the other hand, practiced violence because they saw democracy as a political system determined by violent acts: from police violence at home, to the war in Vietnam, force was seen as the necessary tool to combat force (Rhodes 2001:3). Protest methodologies and motivation are highly influenced by the structure of their political systems via government opposition or democratic affirmation (Porta and Diani 2006:218). Sir Robert Mark, retiring Metropolitan Police Commissioner professed, "... the methods adopted for keeping the peace will inevitably reflect the... political conditions of the community" (Gregory 1976:1). Violence is often justified by protestors as a response to violent oppression inflicted by the state. The Kerner Commission attributes the prolonged violence to inadequately and inconsistently trained riot police and the lack of non-lethal counter attacks such as CS gas (Gregory 1976:9). The substantial record of violence associated with protests in the United States shows that civilian casualties often far outweigh those of the oppressive state that is supposedly under attack by unruly protestors (Piven and Cloward 1979:19). When the government uses escalated-force to silence protestors and discourage communication between the organization and the state, organizations often mobilize in fear of the consequences of remaining sedentary (Porta and Diani 2006:200). American political violence predominately takes place at the local level: "details and conflicts can be rendered most vividly on manageable terrain" (Gitlin 1999: 853). Militants prefer to challenge the local power of the state rather than the national power of the state as attacking the ladder with a positive outcome is a practical impossibility (Rhodes 2001:5). This is of particular importance for violent protestors in the United States as the United

States has no national police force; violence against the nation yields military response (Gregory 1976:ii).

Media often portrays violence as a negative means through which social organizations function resulting in negative public relations; however, violence attracts the media, bringing attention to organizations within social movements displaying the government as imperfect (Porta and Diani 2006:174; Bingham and Bingham 1970:51). Also, these extreme factions understood the damaging affects violence would have on their image and thus limited themselves to violent ‘performances’ that served as symbolic victories over the state to rally support. Limited resources led college students to utilize devices like the television for public attention (Rhodes 2001:15). The transition from radio to television created a youth driven by visual stimuli; creating images of triumph over the government to motivate the masses. Violence received more media coverage and attention than nonviolence, thus students began conducting violent acts as a means to out-compete other events for headline news coverage and to radicalize potential support (3). This method gave maximum return for minimal effort which was optimal for those having limited resources at their disposal (Gitlin 1988:196, 202, 234). As activist Jerry Rubin admits, “People took images very seriously... It’s getting harder and harder to reach people with words. Harder and harder to find anything outrageous... so those who want a revolution had better learn how to communicate properly” (6).

Mass media, particularly television, in the United States played a crucial role in the structuring of violent protests. For example, in the late summer of 1968, the nation watched in awe as the delegates and newsmen of National Democratic Convention in Chicago were manhandled by security guards; they saw young men and women clubbed

by police. The harsh words from protestors escalated to violence with the introduction of police brutality (Bingham and Bingham 1970:51-52). The media established parameters for protests, shaping society's response via consistently framing social organizations and violence out of context, disregarding underlying ideologies. This catalyzed social imitation and polarization, creating unease in a public now fearing a unified assault on American institutions (Thomson 1990:154-155). Polarization, as a result of negative media coverage, may alienate a protest movement from public sympathizers leading to further violence in the future; both from fearful opposition and desperate protestors. (Piven and Cloward 1979:3; Porta and Diani 2006:200-201). However, police violence against protestors often brought sympathy for movements. The public watched in horror as excessively violent tactics were used by government officials to thwart activists practicing their right to protest. The violent tactics of radicals portrayed on the television also changed social norms during the late sixties and early seventies: a report issued by the Kerner Commission concluded that, "... violent behavior is usually the result of interacting social forces of which television program content may be one... It links violent content with social learning and socialization...[which may lead the public to] support greater tolerance for violence in the community" (Baker and Ball 1969:379). COINTELPRO's Miami division claimed that "publicity about New Left and [militant] nationalist groups, especially television coverage, sometimes enhances the stature of these groups" (Director to 42 Field Offices 1968). Performative violence may be an attempt by these extremist groups to frighten and demoralize opposition or warn people about the consequences of inaction; in lieu of these reports, it appears as though these tactics were, to some degree, successful (Rhodes 2001:8; Porta and Diani 2006:200).

The war in Vietnam sent many Americans into a frenzy of protest against a morally unjust war. Students and minorities alike stringently opposed a political system that sent civilians to Vietnam via a draft only to oppress civilians of a foreign land. Many sanctions within the anti-war movement remained non-violent in their protest of the United States' intervention in Vietnam; however, violence became increasingly common as the sixties came to a close. Poor economic conditions, lack of political representation, social networks, and police resistance played a crucial role in the structuring of protest and would shape the late sixties and early seventies into a period of brutal protest and harsh resistance. Continued persecution and ignorance from political figures and law enforcement alike would lead protestors to exhibit more drastic methods to bring about massive social change. Protest movements like the Black Panthers and later the Weathermen were fueled by disenfranchised minorities and student rage enticed by police brutality in ghettos and on college campuses across the nation. Enhanced media coverage and competition for the public spotlight allowed increasingly violent protests to appear as a more realistic means to persuade the masses for action. Taking third world revolutionaries as inspirations, these later extremist groups waged guerilla war to entice the nation into revolution.

Anti-war extremists would eventually cease as government investigators attempted to silence them, the Vietnam War concluded, and the hypocrisy of using violence to end violence demoralized the cause. Public scrutiny and New Left opposition to violence also dampened the direct success of radical tactics; however, there is no doubt this ultimate form of resistance left a lasting impression on the anti-war movement. Despite the eventual disintegration of the Weather Underground in the mid-seventies,

former member Robert Roth professes that the inspirational ideology of the Weathermen will always persist: the FBI does not always 'get their man'. Overthrowing the state may not be easy, but one "*can* fight City Hall." Seeing satisfaction with how people reacted to the news of the WUO bombings he concludes: "[the Weather Underground] provide[s] hope in being something the Establishment couldn't control" (Varon 2004:293-294).

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