In the past six years more children have died globally as a result of starvation and preventable diseases than humans perished in the six years of the Second World War. Every three seconds a human life that just began ceases to exist in a cruel way. At the same time in these same three seconds $120,000 are being spent on military armaments world wide. There exists a fundamental contradiction between the alleged constraints of globalisation and human rights.

In the face of such outrageous injustice, an imperial war in the name of a ‘war on terror’, and the simultaneous expansion of the surveillance state, and confronted with the self-enrichment of the mega-rich and the increasing impoverishment of broad segments of society, resistance becomes a necessity. Brecht’s words are up-to-date: ‘That you have to resist/ If you don’t want to perish/ That you will surely understand’.

And yet, what do we make of peaceful demonstrations if they do not manage to block the US military machine and its allies? What is the purpose of non-violent blockades if they cannot enforce an ecological sea-change? Why speak and criticise if we find that our arguments turn out to be toothless? Are non-violent actions really more than narcissistic surrogate undertakings without any consequences for the First Class passengers on the Titanic?

It is twenty years since the Soviet system collapsed. The remaining powers of the West have declared themselves victorious, in order to simply continue what they had been doing all along, and even making it worse. This includes the arms race, as much as the destruction of the ecological foundations of human life, the exploitation of nature and human beings at one and the same time. If we want to avoid despair in face of the contradiction between the necessary and the real, we will have to turn radical and fight for fundamental change. But what route can lead us out of lethargy?
In the aftermath of the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986, one of the sharpest independent German thinkers of the 20th century, Günther Anders, called for the adoption of counter-violence. In the interest of ‘future world peace and the continued existence of the human species’, he argued, it was necessary ‘to consider the transition from protest to self-defence and from self-defence to a counter-attack’. He concluded: ‘In short, as it was in Hitler’s wars but also in Kennedy’s and Johnson’s Vietnam War, we have to consider as enemies, and treat accordingly, those who compel us to do that which in principle is taboo for us, namely to kill’. Insofar as counter-violence aimed at a violence-free future, it was legitimate. ‘Anyone who has been a contemporary of Verdun and Auschwitz and Hiroshima, of Algeria and Vietnam and, and, and... cannot and must not become or be or remain an advocate of non-violent action at all costs... to act in self-defence against threats of violence and especially acts of violence is not only legitimate but, in fact, also a duty… Those who are preparing the annihilation of millions of people of today or tomorrow... or who at least risk doing so, must vanish, must be stopped’.1 This diagnosis of our times has not changed much. In face of the already-existing global catastrophe, what could be more legitimate than counter-violence? Is violence not the only force which really has any meaning? And even if one dismisses all that, is it not necessary to show critical solidarity with those who make a decision in favour of violence?

Anyone who is convinced that capitalism must not be the last word of history is obliged to search for alternatives. And anyone who claims that the emergency is so big that we must not continue on the path we are currently on is compelled to point to a way out of the crisis. So the question has to be posed again with complete clarity: is violence in the last instance not the only radical means to bring about radical change? In the history of the left, has the renunciation of violence not also entailed in practice a renunciation of the goal of changing society fundamentally? All larger and smaller reforms, all ‘improvements’ here and there, the small or half-baked compromises – have they been anything more than an excuse, because one could not or did not want to resort to violence?2

WHAT IS VIOLENCE?
But what actually is violence? Is it not everywhere, and hence also nowhere? Is not every pore of human social life characterised by it? Do we not find violence lurking behind every labour contract? In what follows the concept of violence will have the very narrow sense of the ‘deliberate physical harm to humans by humans’.3 A deed becomes violent whenever the person who commits it consciously strives to hurt another person, whenever it deliberately
threatens their bodily or mental integrity, whenever it purposefully causes another person’s (deadly) fear. However useful a much larger concept of violence may be in other contexts, there appears to be a need for a concept that captures this concrete form of human behaviour towards other people, i.e. a behaviour that consciously seeks to physically or mentally destroy another person. Violence consciously or purposefully breaks into the inner existential shelter of another person, i.e. in that room in which there is no other hiding-place, a room from which there is no escape – the body of a human being.

What is so frightening, whenever there is debate about violence exercised in the name of a ‘good cause’, is the lack of empathy felt towards the person against whom the violence is directed. Violence is turned into a mere technique, a message, a symbol, a means of political action that does not differ from any other, that is more or less useful in a given situation. Violence may indeed be all that. As opposed to every other form of human interaction, however, violence is by its own nature speechless. Whatever purpose it may be serving, regardless of the message it is supposed to ‘convey’, in the first instance violence makes the person whom it hits ‘silent and hushed in horror’ – like an uncontrollable scream. And precisely because violence is silent, speaking about it is so important.

The concept of violence adopted here, then, is clearly distinct from the concept of structural violence as it has been introduced to the debate by Johan Galtung: ‘We must speak of violence whenever humans are influenced in such a way that their actual somatic and mental self-realization is smaller than their potential self-realization’ – be it through a diminished life expectancy, illiteracy, lies and indoctrination, etc. He writes: ‘Here no one makes an appearance who could immediately harm another person. Violence is built into the system and expresses itself through unequal power relations’. It is my contention that such a definition does not even broach the issue of the consequences of rule itself, and the inequality of the distribution of life chances connected to it. Such rule does exert violence, as defined in this essay, as a means; however, it cannot be reduced to it. Another line needs to be drawn vis-à-vis the concepts of symbolic or cultural violence which represent, propagate or legitimise rule.

Furthermore, violence understood as it is here has also to be distinguished from wilful damage to property, civil disobedience, sit-down demonstrations and blockades, etc. Violence is action that seeks to degrade subjects to mere things and uses this as a means to exert power, whereas damage to property and other forms of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience leave the political opponent physically unharmed. What they do is to factually or
symbolically limit his power (the power to move, etc.). For the ruling class, violence is always the *ultima ratio*, i.e. whenever its own means of power fail. Violence is its final and decisive ‘word’. In the concentration and annihilation camps of the German fascists, rule and the system of absolute violence merged into one.\(^7\)

This violence of rulers must, certainly, be distinguished from counter-violence, i.e. the resort to violence by those who defend themselves against oppression, exploitation and annihilation. It is the violence of the rebellious, the political resistance that resists to violence. Its aim is the negation of rule. It is used in order to defend oneself. And if it is used to achieve power it may be used to consolidate a new order of rule.

THE RIGHT TO RESIST

When I use the term ‘resistance’ it implies all forms of direct action that transcend the exercise of one’s own democratic rights in conformity with the law (for example, legal demonstrations, meetings, appeals).\(^8\) Resistance is always also a violation of existing laws and hence illegal. The existing state of legality is consciously surpassed. The person who decides in favour of resistance is consciously breaking the law and has to reckon with legal prosecution. However, what are the other consequences?

It was Immanuel Kant who developed the principle of the categorical primacy of a state of legality under public laws vis-à-vis any perceivable violation of this state of legality. The evils resulting from resistance would loom so large that even the worst state of legality was more desirable, since otherwise civil war would threaten. However, is this understanding still applicable today? May we really expect citizens to leave to the Supreme Court the question of whether laws or government action harm the dignity of humans, and to hope that free political speech and elections will really put an end to any state of existential emergency? Must every violation of the state of legality really lead to a war of all against all, to civil war?

It was by a democratically elected government that the Federal Republic of Germany was led to a war of aggression against Yugoslavia, and this war, which violated existing international law, was assented to by the Supreme Court as well as the President. The constitutional forms (including a constitutional appeal) were not sufficient to prevent Germany’s participation in this war. As a justification, the German government pointed to a humanitarian emergency in Kosovo (an imminent genocide). However, inasmuch as a war of aggression is necessarily connected to the killing of a large number of people (according to different sources, between five and ten thousand people died as a consequence of the NATO attacks), even
for the opponents of the war a crisis of conscience arose, namely to be co-
responsible as German citizens for the murder of other people.

The construction and maintenance of nuclear power plants has also
continuously raised similar questions: in face of the long-term consequences
for future generations, and the potential threats they present (accidents, the
consequences of terrorist attacks, etc.), is legality really reconcilable with
the protection of the indefeasible dignity and physical integrity of human
beings? To take two other examples, policies which in the eyes of many are
not sufficiently effective to prevent global warming, and which therefore
accept the deaths of large numbers of people; or a global economic order
that partially contributes to the fact that states are incapable of providing
their populations with basic rights to education and health services; both
raise questions in relation to which the right to resist might be justified. It is
also being discussed in terms of the introduction of genetically engineered
plants, and in relation to abortion versus the protection of human embryos.

What happens if a minority – even if it is a small one – comes to the
conclusion that the dignity of humanity is being harmed, that human rights
are being systematically violated? Is one then justified in asking them to subject
themselves permanently to the processes provided for in the constitution, to
restrict themselves to mere speech, rushing from one meeting to the next,
while being unable to see a way of averting the emergency that they perceive?
How are they supposed to behave when they have become convinced that
there is no chance of reaching a solution in due time through constitutional
procedures, when they believe that the lobby interests which are opposing
the free process of democratic opinion formation are so strong as to render
clarification, truth and enlightenment impossible?

In short, under the conditions of a democratic state functioning on the
premises of the rule of law, within what limits do citizens actually have a
right to do more than they are allowed by the constitution and the criminal
code? In what situations may citizens even feel it to be a duty to proclaim an
extralegal state of emergency? Under what conditions do they have the right
to turn against decisions made by the state?

Let us consider the possibility, for example, that within the next few
years Germany were to experience a nuclear catastrophe comparable to the
one in Chernobyl – be it only as a consequence of terrorist attacks. How
would the state’s refusal to shut down all the nuclear power plants affect
the constitutionally-guaranteed ‘dignity of the human being’? Would we
not have to accuse everyone who did not resist of failure? A democratic
constitution cannot lay down the forms that resistance might take, since there
always remains the question of whether they are going to prove sufficient to
deal with the emergency. It is therefore impossible for the democratic order to free itself from the impulse of rebellion. *In the innermost core of democracy there always beats a revolutionary heart which places the ideals of human rights above the constitutional order.*

Moreover Article 1 of the United Nations’ ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ of December 10, 1948, states that all human beings are born ‘free and equal in terms of dignity and rights’, and in the preamble there is a further formulation – something unique in international law – which is a positive individual right to resistance against ‘tyranny and oppression’.

But when and how can these rights be defended? Since the democratic left is bound to defend the legitimacy of its resistance to the constitution’s legal institutions on the basis of the same constitution, it is confronted with the question of what kinds of resistance are compatible with the goal defending the dignity of Man and defending human rights. It is necessary to determine the legitimate means of such resistance.

Resistance which goes beyond mere words and which breaks applicable law (otherwise it would not be resistance) conjures up the danger of civil war. Blocking the access route to the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm was, of course, against the law. To attack members of the police force is not part of the right to demonstrate. The attempt to prevent the transport of nuclear waste by sit-down demonstrations and blockades is not legal. The same applies to the destruction of genetically engineered seeds. Their legitimacy, however, cannot simply be challenged by declaring them to be illegal. But where is the limit?

Political action that is ready to commit illegal acts in the name of the dignity of Man and human rights is inevitably deeply contradictory. On the one hand it is proclaiming an extralegal emergency and hence an open conflict with the state. On the other hand such political action does this by invoking precisely this state’s constitutional order and fundamental rights. This implies that those who are claiming the right to resist for themselves are taking back from the parliament their sovereignty vis-à-vis the state. A left minority is effectively arguing – simply by making the transition to resistance – that for their own actions they are claiming a legitimacy transcending that of the democratic state. As Malcolm X proclaimed in 1963: ‘We are declaring our right on this earth... to be a human being, to be respected as one and to own the rights of human beings in this society, on this planet, on this day. This we are going to enforce by all means necessary...’. But this risks putting ourselves on the verge of a transition from the legal order to civil war. What *means*, however, are necessary for the legitimate end, and what means destroy it? Under which conditions is violence a legitimate and
expedient means of the struggle for liberation? When does resistance have to remain non-violent in order to be justified and appropriate?

VIOLENCE IS A CRIME

The question of the *expediency* of violence is not at all identical with the question of its *legitimacy*. This becomes apparent when the question is raised whether torture is legitimate if, by its application, other human beings can be saved; or whether shooting down a passenger airplane which is aimed at a stadium full of people is legitimate. There exist many good arguments for the expediency of such judgments. However, are there also arguments that justify them? To distinguish between the expediency and the legitimacy of the means may appear to be hairsplitting. And yet for those who become victims of political violence it remains a question of life and death.

It was Walter Benjamin who pointed towards a difference which is crucial for this debate. According to Benjamin, one should inquire into not only the goals but also the means. And this one should do ‘without regard for the ends purpose they serve’. He argued that it was necessary to develop ‘mutually independent criteria both of just ends and of justified means’. Benjamin rejected the view that violence is ‘a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends’. Independently of the ends pursued, ‘the question would remain open whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends’.12

Walter Benjamin posed this question of the ethics of violence immediately after the First World War which had driven Europe, the self-proclaimed ‘Treasure of Civilisation’, into the horror in which 10 million people died and 20 million were wounded. Similarly, other thinkers of the modern age such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, Christian Wolff, Charles de Montesquieu and Immanuel Kant developed their positions based on the experience of the religious and civil wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. What they had in mind was to stop the killing and to enforce ideally non-violent judicial forms of interaction both within and between states. The goal was to put a leash on violence.

For some, violence is a means among many, more or less reasonable, more or less useful, more or less appropriate in a concrete case. For others, the application of violence in political struggles is literally breaking a taboo. Something indefeasible is touched upon: the right of the other to physical integrity, and internal and external peace. Something becomes endorsed, tolerated or even promoted that as a matter of principle cannot be permitted. For whoever thinks that it is ‘appropriate’ to violently threaten other human beings claims to be the master of other people’s lives and deaths. It is precisely
this claim which marks the all-important difference from the point of view of the person affected by violence. Once it has taken the shape of violence, for those who become its victims, political communication transforms itself into injury, mutilation, the crippling of their bodies, or into murder.

Moreover, violent political resistance goes beyond the threat to the individual as well. Because it is political, it relates to the whole. Every politically motivated attack on individual representatives of the state attacks the legal order as such, disturbs the legal peace in toto, declares a citizens’ war against the order of the state. Regardless of how limited its focus may be, every violent political action is characterised by this horizon. What it symbolises is civil war. It does not merely threaten individuals, it threatens everyone.

The survival of homo sapiens has always depended on the limited usage of his capacity to murder. And yet, who is going to stop him? The ‘nature’ of Man, his historical heritage as a species, does not get in the way of it. His emotional inhibitions did not suffice to stop him from the copious murder of small children. ‘Reason’ does not take effect without the reasonable who, in the war of all against all, are murdered first. Humankind has been compelled to construct barriers against killing time and time again. The weapons that Man has now developed allow him to kill his fellow human beings with unprecedented ease and ‘efficiency’. At the same time, the command or lack of command of these increasingly effective weapons splits the human race like no other biological species on this earth. And no other species is capable of annihilating itself. The cycle of violence always generates new counter-violence and an ever more unhampered readiness to make use of it, too. The ongoing maximisation of the power of annihilation, and the inequality in respect of who commands this power, makes it more necessary than ever to construct barriers against the implementation of our potential for violence.

Human civilisation can now only survive if a minimum criterion of ethical behaviour is established and respected. Kant’s categorical imperative raises the protection of human life above all other goals. The maintenance of the community of humans through the protection of the right to life of every human being is given a higher importance than any perceivable other end. To threaten or annihilate one human being means to threaten humankind itself – as an ethical entirety and, if the murder is not stopped, as a race.

In his novel The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoyevsky took the question of the ethical legitimation of violence to its limits: in order to save the happiness of humankind in its entirety, in order to save it, would it be justified to kill ‘only’ a single child? Sacrificing an individual as a means to the salvation of all! But – solely a means! The former US Secretary of State Madeline
Albright thought in completely other dimensions when in 1996 she was asked by CBS whether the interests of the USA were worth the death of 500,000 Iraqi children and replied that it was a difficult choice, but ‘it was worth the price’.

During the twentieth century, acting on the responsibility of states, at least 160 million defenceless people were murdered – 4,650 people on average on every day of the 36,500 days of the century – three civilian deaths in every one of the more than 50 million minutes of the century. In the preceding 25 centuries there were a total of 130 million people who became victims of such murders. Never before had the lives of human beings been abused so instrumentally as they were during the 20th century. The ever-greater ends appeared to be justifying ever more arbitrary means. And some states which had emerged from socialist and communist revolutions contributed immensely to this balance sheet of violence.

Yet as opposed to all preceding eras, modernity has ‘defined itself as an anti-violence project and turned the rational order and the pacification of social internal space into the all-dominant topic’. Violence was meant to serve the protection of the individual and an order of peace, internally as well as externally. At the same time this entailed ‘forcing the world to be different from what it was’. The opposition between the pretension of pacification and the will to change (resulting from it) has to be mediated in an emancipative way or else it will lead to barbarism.

Theodor Adorno formulated the demand that ‘Auschwitz [must] never happen again’. The left today has to add that the Gulag, the murders of the Chinese cultural revolution, the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge, must never recur. To defy barbarism within the field of politics means overcoming a way of thinking and acting from mere expediency, of ‘instrumental’ reason. The person who conceives of the means of political action merely through the perspective of their expediency ‘relates to them as does the dictator to humans. He knows them inasmuch as he is able to manipulate them… as a substrate of rule’.

The rejection of violence in political struggles should not be played down as a merely instrumental argument. What is at stake is nothing less than the defence of the political-ethical protective barrier which has to be constructed over and over again in order for Auschwitz never to happen again. The existential horror of the application of politically motivated violence must never be explained away by considerations of expediency, because it is the most important emotional barrier against backslides into barbarism. After Stalin and Mao, after Pol Pot, the notion shared by parts of the left that radicalness is identical with the violent nature of the means is no longer
innocently naïve. The radical aim ‘to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being’ must never be confused with extremism of the means.

THE EXPEDIENCE OF COUNTER-VIOLENCE

But is it really possible to do without violence completely? Is this not – in the best case – self-deluding, and a legitimation for not doing anything that would do justice to the pretence of real change? Is not any rebellion better than mere acceptance of the status quo, or – worse still – an agreeable accommodation with it? (‘In the time of betrayal/ The scenery is beautiful’, wrote the poet Heiner Müller in 1958.)

If we accept that violence against human beings is in itself illegitimate and criminal, under what conditions is it not barbarism when used for ‘transparent, humane ends’?18 Are there not situations in which political violence can make sense, while at the same time not negating the end – a more humane society, free from violence? Are there not conditions in which it may it be politically necessary to make the transition to violence against other human beings? Why should the global struggle against hunger not be pursued through the means of violence; why should the struggle for minimum wages or for more democracy or against the use of nuclear energy not be pursued by means of violence? Why should not soldiers of the US Army, stopping in Germany on their way to Iraq, become targets for political murder – not to mention George W. Bush, who is undoubtedly responsible for war crimes?

If one really does take the position seriously, that violence by humans against humans is always a crime, and if one does follow the position taken here, namely that one may only resort to such violence in a situation of utmost emergency, then there exists only one situation in which it does not completely contradict humane ends: the situation of a lack of alternatives. There exists only one humane grounds for the exercise of physical force against other humans for political ends, i.e. if one has no other means at one’s own disposal. And yet, what does this mean?

Only when the state denies the access to the most elementary conditions of survival, when the state’s monopoly of force has dissolved, when we are dealing with a totalitarian regime or a dictatorship, may violence become an acceptable political means of resistance inside the state. For example, violence may be understood as action resulting from an immediate emergency if human beings who are threatened with death by starvation take by force grain silos guarded by the police or the army. The dissolution of the state’s monopoly of force through the acquiescence or even promotion of death squads may
lead to a situation where the protection of one’s own life and the life of others cannot be guaranteed without armed force. Totalitarian regimes are those which oppress any expression of free speech and the opportunity for free association and organisation for the purpose of collective will formation. Dictatorships are characterised by the fact that the rulers cannot be replaced through free elections with a universal franchise. In all of these cases, in the absence of alternatives, violence may contribute to the immediate creation of the conditions of survival or the safeguarding of the most elementary conditions of a politics free from violence.

If one does follow this argument, then political violence by non-state actors is justifiable in terms of relating to humane ends when, and only when, it aims directly at making itself superfluous. This political violence has two legitimate goals: first, to end the killing of human beings; and/or, second, to create the elementary conditions of democracy. It is either about physical survival or about the creation of the conditions of being able to peacefully sort out political conflicts. The moment in which violence is executed for ends going beyond these two goals – for example, deterrence or ‘educational’ purposes’ – it ceases to support legitimate ends and sets its own ends of oppression, exploitation and annihilation.

COUNTER-VIOLENCE UNDER LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Why do so many who speak out in favour of violence, or act towards it in critical solidarity, speak so half-heartedly about it? Why is it played down, and its consequences linguistically belittled? Why do we not find proud avowals of it? The reason is simple: if political resistance resorts to the means of violence, the step towards symbolic civil war has been taken. Stones and molotov cocktails, sticks and clubs are the weapons of the weak in this war. They imagine weapons and declare war without really engaging in it. Until now it restricted to some individual combats, it is still subjected to certain rules of the game, there are rarely fatalities. As yet, while it is not open war, its shadow is hurrying on ahead. The smoke of burning police cars, or the sight of citizens and policemen beating each other, appear to the public as an impending war directed against society as a whole.

The arguments continuously brought forward on behalf of violence under the conditions of political democracy are fourfold. First, reference is made to the toppling of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. On this view, as soon as democratic elections lead to real changes being made to power and property relations – i.e. in situations in which elections really have any meaning – their results will be destroyed by military force. But why does this not lead to the conclusion that the control of the existing military force needs to
be improved? Why should the erection of a leftist dictatorship be a better solution than the protection of democracy against right-wing putschists? And if, in order to protect democracy, a democratically-elected government declares a state of emergency, and hence is compelled to abrogate, for a certain period of time, basic rights, this must not lead to a continued suspension of democracy and the obstruction of the free formation of public opinion and plural elections. Let us hear Rosa Luxemburg again, who criticised the establishment of the Bolshevist dictatorship in the following words: ‘Without universal elections, an unlimited freedom of the press and of assembly, and free contest of ideas, the life in every public institution dies down, turns into a pseudo-life in which the bureaucracy remains the only active element… a dictatorship indeed, but not the dictatorship of the proletariat but rather the dictatorship of a handful of politicians’.19

The resistance to Communist rule in the state socialist countries shows that even under the conditions of a dictatorship, democracy and non-violence may in the end prove to be more successful than any violent action. For decades, at least after 1968, the often very small, very weak, always persecuted opposition managed to generate a culture of conflict resolution that was far superior to that of the state. Even mass movements were disciplined – to the point where the marshals of opposition marches, with their wristbands that proclaimed ‘non-violence’, became the most important precondition for averting bloodshed. The state powers, which had always invoked the will of the people and humanist goals, were morally disarmed, and the servants of the Communist state were able to decide in favour of non-violence. Due to the longstanding interplay between non-violent opposition and the Communists who saw their power as a means to advance to a more humane society, it was possible for the ‘velvet revolution’, the ‘peaceful turn’ to occur, once even in the eyes of its supporters state socialism no longer embodied a superior perspective.

The second objection to the position of non-violence under the conditions of a secure political democracy is the thesis that only violence is capable of arousing ‘the masses’ and intimidating ‘the rulers’. Historical facts suggest exactly the opposite: political violence evokes civil war. It threatens everyone and everybody. In the best case an alliance between the citizens and the ruling elites emerges that aims at collectively fending off the slide into the barbarism of dehumanised violence. And in the shadow of such an alliance the rulers are able simultaneously to try to roll back democratic citizens’ rights and expand the realm of unchecked surveillance and the exercise of force. The rulers are encouraged to secure their rule by also
using repression, and the ruled start to believe that being so ruled is the precondition of national peace.

The third argument of those advocating violent political resistance assumes that it is the representatives of the state, or the people protected by it, who are the obstacle to the goal pursued. They would have to be threatened or got rid of (how and where to?) in order for the goal to be realised. If, however, basic political rights are secured and free elections are conducted regularly, who is then forcefully standing in the way of changing the economic, social and political order? A successful assassination of Hitler would undoubtedly have been expedient, given that the entire state power within national socialism was comprised in the ‘Führer’. His earlier death would have saved millions of human beings’ lives. Under the conditions of free elections, however, and guaranteed fundamental rights, political rulers are elected by the citizens and can also be removed by them. Given that this path is open, no violent path can be shown to be rational for the purpose of humanity. Violent attacks on policemen and policewomen (with the exception of a situation of endangered life) are even less sustainable. Pointing to obstacles hampering the way of a sea-change in politics does not justify violence.

The true ‘obstacles’ to a change towards a more just, more ecological, more democratic and more peaceful society are those who tolerate unjust, un-ecological and un-peaceful conditions – the majority of all the citizens. If the majority within a given society does not change, then there is no real solidaristic emancipation but only the more or less frequent exchange of the top personnel. If this is the case, what leftist would demand the annihilation of the majority of the population as a condition of a new politics? On the contrary, the preconditions of a solidaristic and collective self-transformation of the majority have to be created. This, however, can only occur through non-violent means.

A fourth objection to non-violence is that representative democracy in most states is confronted by a global dictatorship of large corporations and financial institutions. The political representatives of states can be voted out, but the managers of the multinational firms and hedge funds are accountable only to the owners of capital. This is, without a doubt, one of the biggest challenges to solidaristic emancipation. Political democracy necessitates social democracy. However, the latter cannot last permanently without economic democracy. The task is not to wage a ‘war’ against corporate bosses, but rather to democratise economic power and economic sectors and financial institutions which are not under democratic control.
On the Western left there are, as yet, hardly any open advocates of violence. However, there exists a false and blind tolerance, a false laissez-faire which considers throwing a stone or a molotov cocktail into the side of a police car a legitimate form of protest and a path to emancipation, and seeks to build alliances with others who take this course. Reaction, resistance, counter-force can be the onset of liberation. As expressions of protest against rule they contain the dignity of rebellion. Even the crudest revolt is at least revolt; blind anger goes beyond mere endurance and tolerance. However, as a mere reflex of oppression, exploitation or exclusion, counter-force is initially no more than the other side of rule. To this extent, it is not different, it is only against. Often it imitates in the rawest form the means of domination, and sometimes even make these more brutal. It can also be aimed at scapegoats, and can become self-destructive. The step towards emancipation does not begin with resistance itself but only then when rebellion turns solidaristic.

RESISTANCE UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

Everything that has been said so far has been aimed at showing why under liberal democracy violence is neither a legitimate nor an expedient means of action. This, however, does not explain why in the name of ‘another world’, a more humane, more democratic, more peaceful world some people do resort to violence. There exist many arguments for it and one very understandable reason – their deeply felt powerlessness: ‘Use of force is… also failure of power’. Counter-violence is (also) the desperate hope of gaining power.

There are many causes of this despair amongst leftists, as well as a view of the world which is itself one-dimensional: not only did the dictatorial path taken by Bolshevism and the Soviet Union fail, but so did the reform strategy of left social democracy – judged by its goal of overcoming a world dominated by capital. In the eyes of many leftists, the participation of leftists in governments does not appear to be achieving anything beyond a more benign administration of the status quo. Often too the claim is heard that it is precisely these participations in governments which have paved the way for another wave of commodification. Never before in the history of the world have so many free elections taken place, yet at the same time a sober realisation is spreading how little this has meant for social and ecological progress. Even wars of aggression have been legitimated in the name of democratisation.

In the centres of capitalism Fordism dissolved the resilient milieus of the proletarians and created what seemed to Marcuse to be a ‘one dimensional society’ based on technological-administrative domination and
its sublimation in the consumerist desires of the dominated. They became accomplices of their own subjugation, negating the possibility of new forms of existence. Now, in the name of freedom, neoliberal capitalism seems to be replacing this one-dimensional technological-administered world with a one-dimensional marketised world. The external command of the factory and the large organisation is replaced by the internal guidance of market-conforming behaviour where failure in the markets becomes individualised, and punished by exclusion. The neoliberal constellation of rule differs from rule in earlier periods in history. Even wars are supposed to lead to free elections and guaranteed basic political rights for the defeated. In the capitalist centres this appears particularly valid. Much more intensely than ever before the ruled appear to be integrated as independent subjects into the structures of rule. The global war against terror, to make use of this formula, conducted without front lines, without hinterlands, without central commands and without prisoners, is the military reflection of the global competition of ‘network enterprises’ on the markets.22

Such a view of the world generates despair: how can there be resistance to such domination if it has been internalised by the dominated in such a way that it has turned into a part of them? What sense does it make to de-elect the rulers, if those rulers are interchangeable? Why make a revolution if competition between economic regions captures the new state powers as well? But this view of the world as a one-dimensional closed system is a construct, which generates hopelessness. There are alternatives. Actually existing societies have very different countenances.23 Even neoliberal capitalism is characterised by the conflicting tendencies of the logic of capital and the logic of the social.24 The Empire is coming up against forces of an alternative order. The marketisation of society generates new potentials of individual desire, agency, self-determination and solidarity. The new subjectivity within neoliberalism can also be transformed into an independent emancipation movement. It is a chance, nothing more, but also nothing less. People who invoke democracy and simultaneously undermine it will suddenly find themselves in a position of needing to justify themselves vis-à-vis new democratic movements. The person who proclaims freedom as the highest aim is not going to be able to avoid debating the necessary preconditions of freedom. The person who makes self-determination into the highest value will have to confront the question on what conditions this self-determination ultimately depends. The person who promotes globalisation and equal market rights for all is no longer going to be able to avoid the problem of a just global order.
From the moment when rule no longer manifests itself primarily through the foreclosure of the self-determination of individuals and social groups, but attempts to channel it instead, from the moment when rule tries to conceal its violent nature in order to remain rule, spaces of liberation can be created. This is because we are not dealing with a totalitarian-fascist opponent. The historical model of the labour movement, along with the majority of movements against colonialism and racism, have been characterised by the idea of countering the power of the rulers with a mirror-image of counter-power, but with new and different goals. At least as a historical step towards a social transition this appeared to be inevitable. The forces opposing capitalism, imperialism, colonialism and militarism imagined themselves as armies with generals, officers and soldiers, bound together by an ideology of irreconcilability with the enemy.

It is true for all forms of rule that they prove to be very stable as long as they are capable of creating a culture ‘in which the dominated permanently have to struggle against the dominators within the limits that the latter have set up for them’. To destabilise the rule of neoliberalism, new routes to solidaristic emancipation must be found. If rule is achieved through the subjectivity of the ruled, through the expansion of the forms of their self-determination and democratic participation, through conditioning, and by punishing refusal with exclusion, the struggle for a solidaristic emancipation can and must change. If rule relies not primarily on the state but rather on the ‘inherent necessities’ of unleashed markets, which are also enforced by state action, then the struggle over the state and within the state is not going to suffice. More than ever before is there a need for emancipatory-solidaristic subjects as both the condition for, and the consequences of, liberating struggles.

Currently, the emancipatory left is pursuing three strategies in order to overcome neoliberal capitalism and the violence emanating from it. These are the strategy of the rejection of wars, socially reactionary reforms and the new authoritarianism; the strategy of the development of autonomous spaces for the development of alternatives; and the strategy of comprehensive social transformation. These all begin, however, with the strategy of the simple ‘no’. The worldwide demonstrations against the war on Iraq in February 2003 and the mobilisation in Germany against the Hartz IV labour market reforms did not stop these things, but they showed that the peoples of the world, citizens, are challenging the arrogance of the elites and their claims to rulership. The non-violent blockade of the land routes to the venue of the G8 summit in Heiligendamm was another case in point. The goal, to actually and effectively block the G8 summit and disconnect it from its infrastructure, was achieved. At the same time, the security interests of the state were
taken seriously. The fence which sealed off the centre of the convention was not supposed to be stormed. However, through civil disobedience it could be shown that the G8 summit was an illegitimate claim to power.

This strategy of the left, to confront neoliberalism with a life-affirming solidaristic ‘no’, to challenge every new war, every new counter-reform, every rolling-back of democracy and citizens’ rights, does not only need demonstrations, rallies, voting for this party and support of these organisations which are resisting neoliberalism. When the entire economic, social and political order’s obligation to the ‘dignity’ claims of the constitution appears to become lost, more is needed.27

Non-violent resistance is anything but passive. It is an active ‘third way’ between conflict avoidance and the violent playing-out of a conflict.28 Among other things, the boycott of commodities and infrastructure, social boycotts, refusal to pay taxes, refusal to cooperate, rejection of distinctions and awards, civil disobedience, workplace and sympathy strikes and occupations as well as political strikes all belong to the category of non-violent resistance. Such resistance calls for the highest personal ethics, and for the extraordinary courage it takes to expose oneself to someone else’s violence while at the same time refusing to answer it with violence.

Civil disobedience has a double function: on the one hand it is directed at the ‘population’, the large majority of citizens, and it points to the fact that a constitutional emergency has come into being, a situation in which power may no longer legitimately rest with representative institutions. Acts of civil resistance are a ‘form of political appeal’.29 At the same time, such acts of resistance are supposed to increase the ‘costs’ of state action in enforcing the specific interests of the state.

In his empirical study of the extra-parliamentary protests of the 1970s and the 1980s, Thomas Balistier concludes that protest which makes the transition to destruction can also lead to violence: ‘Its actors have dismissed the strategy of non-violent protest; they organise and practise open militancy, whose goal contains the qualitatively different dimension of the threat of damage. Destruction and attempted destruction is a product of, and produces temporary or permanent, communicationlessness… As a rule, these concrete behaviour patterns actually… neither advance the social movements nor the resolution of the conflict. On the contrary, they lead into a dead-end street at whose end we can find the paramilitary victory of the state powers and quite often also the collapse of the protest itself’.30 To cross the line between the destruction of things and violence against persons does not take much, even if for the new social movements of recent decades – unlike the Red
Army Fraction and the Movement 2nd June of the 1970s – injuring or killing human beings never became a direct goal.

When this line is crossed, the means vitiate the end. Instead of dynamising the contradiction between the claims of the constitution and reality, what becomes actualised is the contradiction between internal peace and civil war. Under the conditions of a democratic state based on the rule of law, the use of violence is not only illegitimate but in the highest degree inexpedient. Citizens are immunised to the concerns of the protest; its actors are delegitimised and become isolated as ‘anarchists’ and ‘terrorists’. Pressure is not increased on political power to change gear, but rather on civil society to refrain from any form of protest, let alone resistance, in order to avoid slipping into civil war.

Moreover, the ‘no’ to violence is necessary so that barbarism is never again perpetrated in the name of socialism. The barbarism of unhampered capitalism must be stopped and foreclosed so that the necessary spaces for emancipation can really emerge. Sober impatience and engaged patience are called for. Chances have to be seized so that the despairing do not pick up stones and the rebellious do not become discouraged.

Finally, rolling back violence in social and interpersonal relations is also very closely linked to any strategy for a peaceful revolution transcending capitalism. It is only going to be successful if we succeed in ‘making life more interesting, making individuals less powerless and creating a society in which more opportunities exist to practise love and integrity, a society which functions in the name of life’.31

NOTES


2 In the course of its history the left has discussed this issue over and over again. Thomas Müntzer’s despairing call to the members of his revolutionary league of 1525 to join the Peasant Uprising is still echoing in our ears: ‘On with it, on with it as long the fire’s burning hot. Do not let your sword turn cold, do not slow down. Weld swiftly on Nimrod’s anvils, throw their tower to the ground’. Thomas Müntzer, ‘An die Allstedter. Manifest an die Mansfeldischen Berggesellen’, in S. Streller, ed., Hutten, Müntzer, Luther, Volume One, Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1970, p. 264. From his prison cell Louis Blanqui wrote: ‘Weapons and organization – those are the decisive means of progress, the sole serious means to end misery. He who has iron, also has bread. One surrenders
to the bayonets, unarmed lots are swept away like husk. France, peppered with armed workers – that marks the advent of socialism. In the face of the armed proletariat anything is going to vanish: obstacles, contumacies, impossibilities. But for those proletarians who are passing their time with ridiculous street promenades, freedom trees and euphonic advocate’s phrases, for them there is holy water to start with, then insults and finally canister shots and always misery. Let the people choose’. Louis Blanqui, ‘Warnung an das Volk’, in J. Höppner and W. Seidel-Höppner, eds., Von Babeuf bis Blanqui. Französischer Sozialismus und Kommunismus vor Marx, Volume 2, Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam, 1975, p. 525.

Gertrud Nummer-Winkler, ‘Überlegungen zum Gewaltbegriff’, in W. Heitmeyer and H.-G. Soeffner, eds., Gewalt, Entwicklungen, Strukturen, Analyseprobleme, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004, p. 28. I would add ‘and psychological’ – M.B. At the least, ever since the publication of the instructions for ‘contactless torture’ (long term sleep-deprivation for prisoners in Stalin’s caves of torture, the confrontation of bound prisoners with cold and heat in Guantanamo belong to this category as well), we also have to include these ‘indirect forms’ of the deliberate destruction of human beings. In what follows, violence is understood in the sense of the Latin term violentia and is sharply distinguished from the exercise of power (potentia) or rule (potestas).


A ‘dense description’ of this absolute violence is provided by Wolfgang Sofsky, Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004.


11 Quoted from: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X.


