

Letters

Debacle, Disruptions, Demagogues

On 29 December at the AAAS meeting in Chicago, I was on the platform as a scheduled member of a panel discussion during the initial phases of an absurd debacle intended to be a symposium on crime, violence, and social order. It was my first exposure to the contemporary "revolutionary" style so familiar to our academic brethren. The stentorian interruptions, the puerile arguments, and the boring rhetoric of the make-believe radicals need no elaborations; the proceedings of the symposium have been widely enough reported already. I wish to offer some reflections.

The frivolous conduct of Zimmermann, Kunnes, Rosenthal, and their coterie was a burlesque of the radical tradition. Those who can find no more meaningful outlet for their zeal than the disruption of meetings certainly present no threat to American institutions more serious than mere inconvenience.

Unfortunately, these self-indulgent young men were playing with a serious point. It is clear that violence in this country is engendered by social dissonance. The nature of this dissonance, its links to violent behavior, and the long- and short-range remedies need analytical review which these problems are certainly not getting now. An AAAS symposium might have been a good place to define problems and compare views on potential solutions. This symposium became a shambles where serious discussion was lost in a blather of ignorant arrogance. The poor blacks, the poor chicanos, the oppressed, and the repressed all received lip-service concern from the "revolutionaries." They deserve better from social scientists working in the interests of the people.

On the afternoon before the meeting, I toured the South Side with a well-informed friend. Clearly, all is not well in Chicago. Large numbers of idle young men on the streets, deteriorating

commercial districts, and the incredible concentrations of the welfare poor in housing projects 16 stories high are ominous sights, to say the least. These are not conditions which will respond favorably to revolutionary rhetoric. They need hard work, imagination, and a faith in the future of our people. We are not applying enough of any of these ingredients to our urban infections. We must not be distracted from the mobilization of talent to do what needs to be done by the likes of Zimmermann, Kunnes, and Rosenthal.

There remains the practical question of protecting AAAS meetings from the intolerable behavior of these young men. Certainly none of us can face the enforcement of any rule which would limit freedom of discourse; it would be better that the AAAS should never meet again. But I cannot see that the freedom of discourse would be jeopardized by a rule that he who interrupts a speaker without permission from the chair must be summarily ejected. Such a rule and the provision of means to enforce it might induce the "revolutionaries" to prepare a rational exposition of their views—obviously within the capabilities of persons possessing their academic credentials.

Finally, I must say that, although I deplore the knitting-needle attack on Rosenthal's person (which occurred during my stint at the microphone), I shall always treasure the memory of the beatific expression on the face of the lady who did it. There must have been many others who shared my exquisite ambivalence.

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I am fed up with disruptions at scientific meetings caused by self-styled scientists. Their arrogant, self-righteous insistence that they have all the answers, that they have discovered morality, and that they represent the people are about as difficult to bear as the disruptions,

but the beliefs must be tolerated, no matter how fallacious. Scientific societies must take action, however, to bring the disruptive behavior under control.

As a preliminary step let us recognize that these young men are not simply misguided, starry-eyed idealists. Motivation is better judged by behavior than by rhetoric. There is no more idealism here than there was in the Hitler Brownshirts or there was or is in the members of the Klu Klux Klan. Fascistic behavior is still that no matter what the goals claimed happen to be.

I am not suggesting that there should be any curbs upon the freedom of speech of the disrupters. Anyone, young or old, should be allowed to document thoroughly the occasions and intellectual areas in which he acts the fool or the demagogue. I do expect, however, that steps will be taken to reduce their curbs on the freedoms of the rest of us.

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I wonder why the people in charge of scientific meetings have abandoned any sense of responsibility to those who attend sessions because they are interested in the subject matter. This seems to be a widespread phenomenon, of which the AAAS convention provided several examples.

Granted, there are many chronological and mental adolescents who need to bolster their ego by obscenely and disruptively intruding upon innocent bystanders. But have the innocent bystanders no rights? Must a large number of people be frustrated in their desire to hear a symposium, or an address by the president-elect of their association, because a small number of people prefer their own televised histrionics?

I would suggest that future meetings have rooms and times set aside for the ego-trippers to enjoy themselves, and that steps be taken to ensure that those hopeless curmudgeons who are interested in the scheduled program will be able to hear it. If the convention authorities cannot be persuaded to pay any attention to what is, after all, the great majority of their constituents, maybe more of the latter should bring their knitting needles in the future.

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