

Cooperation And Coercion As Methods Of Social Change

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PENDLE HILL PUBLICATIONS
WALLINGFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

Published 1934 by Pendle Hill
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http://www.pendlehill.org/pendle_hill_pamphlets.htm
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Throughout all history civilized man has had recourse to two methods of adjusting conflicting interests and effecting social change. These contrasting methods may be defined by the terms "cooperation" and "coercion." They do not stand in complete contrast either philosophically or politically. There is an intermediate ground in which they tend to merge into one another and the lines of distinction are not clear. Generally speaking, however, they involve widely different theories in regard to the nature of man, the morality of social conduct and the technique of effective group action. In practice they have had widely different results both in the inner life of man and in the character of social institutions and instruments.

The choice between these two methods has much more than an academic interest. Never before were social institutions in such a state of flux. Never before was social change so rapid in pace. The problem is more profound than the immediate effect of a given policy in a particular situation. Embattled farmers, striking workers, iron and coal police, fascist suppression of civil liberties, boycotting movements, may or may not accomplish a given objective. Every such employment of coercion, however, affects public opinion over an area much wider than the parties and the issues immediately involved.

Group action is contagious. The newspaper, the radio and other modern means of communication spread the contagion quickly and widely. The most terrible aspect of a

lynching is its widely flung stimulus to the spirit of violence. The contagion of nonviolent methods is less obvious but equally real, since modern life tends to promote conformity to established patterns of conduct. Modern society should give more earnest thought to the methods which are to be perpetuated as the normal means of adjusting conflict. It is often stated that well-intentioned men should employ persuasion as long as it seems effective, but be ready to use coercive methods when necessary. Such an attitude involves a grave psychological difficulty. No half-hearted enterprise is likely to succeed. Attempts at persuasion by a group that stands committed to ultimate coercion are crippled from the outset. Successful cooperation requires a thorough-going spirit of cooperation. Men who are ready at any time to be governed by the spirit of antagonism are not fit instruments of any cooperative method. Woodrow Wilson sounded the note of effective action when he proclaimed in 1917 that America would employ force to the uttermost. Half-hearted coercion cannot succeed. Half-hearted attempts at persuasion cannot succeed.

This paper presents a problem that involves the fundamental trend of our civilization in the adjustment of social conflict. The paper grows out of a course of study conducted at Pendle Hill during the school year 1932 to 1933. Those responsible for the views here expressed do not deplore the existence of conflicting interests. Men contribute to one another only through their differences. The moral problem is whether differences and conflicts shall be creative or devastating in their effect. We are convinced that the prevailing use of coercion perpetuates in the spirit of man and in social institutions an element that is destructive of the good life. In this brief paper, however, we make no attempt to prove a thesis or to cover a field that ranges widely through all human relationships from family life to international affairs. We are concerned rather with

outlining certain issues and suggesting certain criteria of moral judgment upon these issues.

Definitions

By “cooperation” is meant those processes of education and persuasion in which the solution to a conflict is sought by the free-willing assent of both parties. By “coercion” is meant those processes by which one party to a conflict seeks to subject the other party to an outward compliance without an inner or free-willing assent.

In attempting to form a moral judgment on methods of coercion, it is obvious that all situations falling within the above definition cannot be grouped in a single category. The definition covers situations ranging from war and armed revolution to the action of a political majority in imposing its will through the normal processes of government upon an unconvinced and recalcitrant minority. Among the distinctions that are commonly made, some would seem to have value and some would seem to be artificial and misleading. The distinction between violent and non-violent coercion is entirely too loose. There is, of course, a vast moral difference between the extremes of these two forms of coercion as might be represented on the one hand by war and on the other hand by the non-intercourse movement of Gandhi.

It is an extreme over-simplification of the issue, however, to apply the same moral assessment to all forms of non-violent coercion. An embargo as an instrument of national duress, even though it does not eventuate in war, may involve the spirit of war. It is important to remember that moral opposition to military action is founded upon something much deeper and more important than the mere fact of killing. It sets large numbers of people against their

fellows in ruthless antagonism and hate; it erects a barrier against the flow of understanding; it stifles the processes of cooperative endeavor without which human society, as we know it, cannot exist; it poisons in the spirit of man those springs which nourish our civilization. Judged by these standards, many forms of mass coercion partake of the moral nature of war, even though they may stop short of its more terrible consequences. Similarly, an industrial strike, even though it avoids the practice of violence, may accentuate and perpetuate the spirit of bitter antagonism and sow the seeds of future conflict which render illusory any seeming and temporary achievement.

Another distinction which requires careful examination is that between coercion as employed by a community against certain of its members and coercion as employed in a conflict between one party and another. It is this distinction which condemns the private settlement of individual quarrels and sanctions the handling of conflicting interests through the established processes of the civil and the criminal law. Whatever value this distinction may have in relations between individuals, it is doubtful whether the analog can properly be carried into the realm of group conflicts. Even though all nations were members of a League of Nations, military action by the majority against recalcitrant members would still be war even though conducted in the name of the League.

Classification

In the international field, the area of coercion includes war, embargoes of goods and credits, and discriminatory trade policies. The area of agreement includes chiefly such methods as arbitration, various processes of mediation and conciliation, international conferences and education of

world opinion through manifold agencies. Between these two fairly distinct categories are certain policies in which both coercion and persuasion are linked in varied emphasis.

As typical of such methods might be mentioned the popular boycott as represented by the Gandhi movement and the policy of non-recognition as represented by the so-called Stimson doctrine. The popular boycott and other forms of non-intercourse, although often described in terms of non-resistance, must be considered as chiefly coercive in character if they reach the proportions of an organized movement. The policy of non-recognition, although somewhat coercive, in character, would seem to fit chiefly within the realm of moral suasion. The purpose of this policy, as applied to any given nation, is to strengthen in that nation those elements who desire to conduct her international relations in accord with the peace treaties and the peace machinery of the world.

In the industrial field, the methods of coercion are largely attributable to the doctrine of a class struggle in which an adjustment is sought through the ultimate defeat and domination of one group by the other rather than through a cooperative endeavor of all parties involved. The coercive methods available to the under-privileged group include the industrial strike, the boycott, the so-called general strike and armed revolution. The methods of cooperation include such forms as trade agreements between owners and labor unions, the increasing democratization of industry, and political action that is based, not upon class-conscious antagonism, but upon a recognition of the common interest of all. This use of political power is difficult to classify under our discussion. To the extent that it rests upon public opinion, it is a method of agreement and cooperative endeavor. To the extent that it rests upon the

use of the sheriff, the police and the militia, it is obviously coercive in character.

Criteria Of Moral Judgment

There is no easy formula or standard available for judging these various methods either in the realm of morals or in the realm of political expediency. In seeking a moral judgment based upon the dictates of conscience, we are confronted with the fact that two individuals or two groups of individuals may hold opposing moral convictions with equal honesty. On the other hand, a pragmatic attitude based upon the supposedly successful results of a given method offers no ready solution of the problem because the actual results are not predictable with certainty. Furthermore, beneath the surface of a seeming achievement may lie the seeds of future difficulties which render the achievement temporary or illusory.

The distinction often made between the moral and the utilitarian basis of judgment is a loose distinction and subject to much misuse. Unless one rejects the concept of a moral universe, the most insistent pragmatist must admit that no method can be politically expedient or successful in the long run which violates the moral nature of man. Conversely, no conduct can be considered moral which, in the long run, does not promote the well-being of society. A more accurate distinction is between the particular interest of a contending group and the general interest of society at large. The realm of morals is identified with this regard for the general interest. Another distinction that has real value is the short view as contrasted with the long view. A moral judgment of any social action is concerned with its ultimate effect rather than with its immediate objective.

In discussing the problem of social change with a large number of interested persons, it has appeared that two

methods of approach are fairly well differentiated. The one approach is the attitude of political expediency. The politically minded social reformer is interested in the realization of a given social objective by successive steps or stages. At any given time he is primarily interested in the next step. To make this step possible, his conduct must be adjusted to that of his fellows. In these adjustments and compromises of conflicting opinions and interests he is constantly ready to modify or abandon his ideal for the time being to such a degree as may be necessary for the early realization of the next step. He is interested primarily in the institutional life of man. He sees the evil in the world and seeks to organize social movements for its mitigation. He is impatient of delay. He may be conscious of an eternal significance in his program, but this consciousness is apt to be dim. The fact of importance to him is not the sweep of eternity but the seeming demands of his time. He insists that something readily discernible must happen in his own lifetime. The emotional energy generated by his revulsion against evil must find an outlet in social activity directed toward an immediate object.

The other approach to the moral problem of evil and social change is perhaps best represented in the attitude of Jesus. He was concerned with the problem of evil as found in the suffering of the under-privileged and in the unjust oppression of the weak by the strong. For him, social progress toward an increasing well-being for all men consisted in the multiplication of individuals whose inner life is in harmony with the purposes of God. The "rich young ruler" was not advised to organize a movement for the help of the poor. He was advised to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. He could not be an effective instrument for social reform until his own intimate personal attitudes and conduct were brought into harmony with the law of love.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan the emphasis is placed, not upon the existence of thieves and the need for their elimination, but upon the intimate personal response of those who were confronted with the evil situation. In the attitude of those who “passed by on the other side,” the purposes of God were defeated. In the attitude of the Samaritan, who broke with the established customs of his people and did a bizarre thing, the purposes of God were fulfilled.

John Woolman had this attitude toward social injustice. He first sought to make his own conduct consistent with his ideals. He then felt free to urge these ideals upon others. Although he was not identified with any movement to eliminate social injustice by coercive methods, there was nothing of complacency in his attitude. His lifelong opposition to slavery and economic inequality was revolutionary both in his precept and in his personal example.

One of the most impressive modern embodiments of this attitude toward morality and social change is found in Tolstoy. He was deeply concerned with the evil in existing social institutions and practices and sought to help the suffering under-privileged folk of the cities and the country. His primary concern, however, was the extent to which he himself was involved in the evil and partly responsible for it. For him, as for Jesus, the only guarantee of true social progress is to be found in the multiplication of individuals whose own conduct is in harmony with the moral law. When the problem of social evil is approached in this attitude, one is not bewildered and confused by the wide differences in the spiritual vision and ethical standards of individuals or of groups. Tolstoy did not run away from the realities of political and social situations. He was fully aware that a majority of men did not share his ethical standards. This fact, however did not alter his conviction that each man is morally bound to express in conduct such moral insight as

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is afforded to him. Since the moral life of the individual man is a matter of supreme importance, man does not truly serve his fellows when he violates his sense of truth for the sake of conformity to the moral level of his social group.

There is much current argument for the thesis that social groups are essentially predatory and generally incapable of acting in a spirit of love. If this is merely an historical observation, there is much evidence to support it. If it means that an individual, whose ideals are not shared by his fellows should feel conscience-free to abandon his ideals in group action, the proposition is ethically unsound. The individual — not the group — is the moral unit. Group action has no moral significance apart from the action of those individuals who compose the group. The action of a group may sink to the lowest levels of moral sense as in the case of a lynching mob. It may express the highest ideals of its members, as in the case of the early Christians or the attitude of William Penn's colony toward the Indians. In any case, an individual best serves his fellows when he seeks to contribute to his group, in counsel and in conduct, his highest ideals of human relationship.

Moral Intuition As An Instrument Of Knowledge

It is obvious that neither of these two attitudes is represented exclusively in any personality. The politician has times of insight when he feels that certain things are *right*, not through any rational process but through his faculty of moral intuition. The idealist must be ready to check his convictions by the data of experience and the tools of reason. Each attitude has its advantages and disadvantages. The politician and the social reformer are in constant danger of losing the clarity of their moral insight in the dust of their activity. The idealist is in constant danger of smug

complacence and of insulation from the needs of the world. In this choice between the pragmatic and intuitive approaches to truth, there is no method by which one can demonstrate the superior validity of either. In either case, there is always the possibility of error.

We would suggest, however, that the world suffers more from its politicians than from its prophets. Social progress toward the good life might move more surely if practically-minded men would dare to credit more highly the inner voice of moral guidance and would take more time to cultivate an apprehension of this guidance.

We would challenge a popular assumption that the path of the pragmatist is more certain. It is his habit to assume that he is closer to reality; he believes that his path is surely indicated by the guideposts of fact and experience. In speaking of the religionist or idealist he uses indiscriminately such adjectives as sentimental, impractical, theoretical. He regards the intuitive process as a series of guesses, as hazy in outline, and as a leap in the dark.

The truth about the matter may be the exact opposite of this conception. As a definitive, reliable instrument of cognition, the intuitive process has much to commend it. The man who seeks to determine his conduct chiefly by a pragmatic test of morality assumes an enormous burden. It is difficult enough to foretell the immediate and surface results of conduct and much more difficult to foretell those ultimate results that are of controlling significance. The intuitionist may well have an easier task. He is dealing with a realm with which he is intimately familiar — the realm of his own inner life. He is guided by the certainties of the past rather than the uncertainties of the future. There is available to his so-called faculty of intuition a certain synthesis of knowledge born of the whole of his past experience. Much of this experience may be forgotten in detail but its values are permanently registered and available in his subconscious

self.

Creative achievement in any field is born of intuition. For the religious man, this faculty of intuition takes on a special significance. He is in communication with a divine purpose which is concerned with the entire life of man and seeks to direct man's motive and understanding toward that which is good. Apprehension of this good is not a rational process, although it is conditioned by experience and confirmed by reason. The validity of the process cannot be argued about. For any given person it exists as a determining condition of his life, or it does not.

Such a discussion of basic attitudes seems necessary in this introduction to our subject, because a controlling belief in the law of love often rests upon intuition. It is not meant to be indicated that the pragmatists are necessarily the coercionists. The intuitive approach to moral truth may lead to the conviction that force and coercion are necessary. Many religious persons have such a sincere conviction. In presenting an argument for cooperation it is important however to note the historical fact that a belief in the way of cooperation has often grown out of an intuitive sense that it is the *right* way, despite majority belief and impressive argument to the contrary — that it must be followed even though the immediate path is largely uncharted.

The views here expressed do not discount the importance of the social sciences or the need for carefully planned social institutions. It would seem, however, that society suffers not so much from lack of knowledge, as from poverty of moral insight. In passing judgment upon any method of coercion one is under obligation to himself and to his fellows to refer the decision to his sense of moral values. He may feel conscience-free to participate in the coercive action. Many Christians have gone to war in a spirit of high endeavor although it is difficult to understand how they

reconciled the Christian law of love with such an enterprise.

If, on the other hand, one has an intuitive sense that the coercive policy of his group is out of harmony with the good life, he should trust this intuition. The results of coercion in the distressed life of our modern world are not so impressive as to invalidate such a belief in the *rightness* of cooperation. Most social groups have relied upon coercion in seeking their objectives and the heavy impulse of this tradition tends to the common conclusion that social achievement has come and must come by this means. An historical study is beyond the scope of this paper, but a more critical examination might reveal that true and lasting good has been achieved in spite of the coercive element.

Persuasion And Coercion Have The Same Objective

An ultimate state of mutual agreement is the goal of all effort for the adjustment of conflict whether it be persuasive or coercive. Even the most ruthless statesman of blood and iron asks a defeated foe to sign a treaty and he expects this treaty to be obeyed. If the treaty is only a truce and the temporary achievement of peace is only an interlude between recurrent wars, nothing has been gained. One of the chief objections to the method of war is the historical fact that it has usually been inconclusive. Even though each successive war may involve new issues and represent new alignments each war tends to perpetuate the psychology of war in public opinion, making it inevitable that the international conduct of peoples should, at times, flow into this groove. The same is true of other coercive methods even though they fall short of the horrors of war. It is fruitless to boycott a people into submission if the spirit which led to the boycott is perpetuated to break out again in the same or another issue.

In an industrial conflict the purpose of a strike or boycott is to bring about an agreement which has some

promise of permanence. The history of the labor movement both in England and in the United States indicates that most strikes have been unsuccessful in attaining this objective. Either no satisfactory agreement was attained or a temporary achievement was upset as soon as general economic conditions shifted the balance of power. The most that can be said for this coercive method, in a long view of social progress, is that it tends to produce a sense of emergency on the part of both parties to a conflict and on the part of the general public, which may eventuate in an early agreement. Even when the agreement is permanent, the question remains as to whether or not the price paid was too high.

In a recent strike at the Aberle Mill in Philadelphia, there was no seeming progress toward a solution until a murder was committed. This event shocked the community into a sense of emergency and through the efforts of a mediation board the conflict was adjusted. Although it is undeniable that this murder proved to be an effective instrument in the solution of the conflict, such a method is condemned even by most of the ardent coercionists. Although only one life was taken, and an agreement affecting the lives of hundreds was achieved, there is a deep-seated and intuitive feeling that the moral universe suffered a blow which no social achievement could compensate. This moral sense, which condemns murder even though it helps to effect a worthy objective, may also condemn methods involving the spirit of bitterness and hate even though they stop short of killing. The souls of men are more important than the bodies of men and methods which poison the souls of men cannot be reconciled to an attitude toward human life which regards man's moral nature as the supreme value.

Advocates of the use of force in order to oust oppressors from power, assume that the oppressed, when victorious,

will use their power for the social good. Neither history, nor psychology, support such a thesis. There is something in the psychology of power which is always dangerous, even under the best conditions. When power has been won through combat, the stability of an improved society is constantly threatened by the fact that its dominant members have been schooled in the processes of combat rather than the processes of cooperative enterprise. Advocates of persuasion must face squarely the fact that the holders of unjust privilege have seldom relinquished their position voluntarily. In opposing methods and movements which merely transfer power from one predatory group to another, the main problem remains unsolved. This problem is the discovery of methods of social change which offer some guarantee of successful and stable results. It cannot be said that the practice of daring, whole-hearted good-will in grave conflict has failed because there has been little attempt to perfect such a practice.

There are those who promote combat for the sheer love of fighting or for reasons of personal gain. Such motives can have no place in a moral justification of coercive action. In the light of true social values, the goal of all conflict is not a sullen truce, but an agreement, guaranteed in stability by a willing spirit of agreement. The time to begin this achievement in the spirit of man is in the early stages of the conflict. There is an intimate accommodation between the end and the means employed to secure the end. They must be harmonious. The one must be appropriate to the other. For certain purposes of logic the two words "end" and "means" are placed in apposition, but all phases of a social situation are parts of a single process. The desired goal of a cooperative solution of any conflict can never be achieved until the spirit of cooperation is first achieved in the minds

and hearts of the persons involved. If the history of man indicates the difficulty of such an achievement, it also indicates the futility of attempting to produce a state of good-will by methods that are pregnant with ill-will. It is probably true that certain methods of coercion can be harmonized with the spirit of good-will, but it is by this test that the morality and the efficacy of any social action must be judged.

Out of the above discussion the following three questions would seem to crystallize:

1. What methods of adjusting group conflict seem to offer the greatest promise of achieving a stable solution?
2. Even though certain coercive methods may achieve permanent results, is the price paid too high in terms of moral values?
3. What new techniques of persuasion may be devised which tend to dramatize the issue and produce a sense of emergency resulting in action?

The manner of life of our children and our children's children will be determined by the answer which the controlling elements in our generation give to these questions.