

able to imagine new lives for themselves, if we have refused to threaten them with any personal injury.⁶

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Man versus Function

I have had conversations with a Marxist who argues that it is absurd to claim we can avoid personal injury to others in any serious social struggle, for "men are reduced to functional elements;" to threaten to deprive a man of his accustomed position in society is to threaten his very person. It will certainly be felt in many instances as just such a threat. But no man is ever reduced quite in his entire being to a functional element in society. And precisely because the rebel who is nonviolent distinguishes, as he struggles with another, between the man himself to whom he offers a certain basic respect (simply as another man) and the role that man has been playing, which he refuses to respect, it becomes more possible for the other, too, to begin to make the distinction. It may indeed at first be literally impossible for him to see himself, if he tries to imagine himself functioning in any way but the way that he has been. But the fact that others seem to be able to makes it easier—especially if so much pressure is put on him that it becomes impossible for him to see himself functioning comfortably any longer in the old way. It is necessary to remember—as Oglesby says—that "the enemy is not a few men but a whole system," to remember that when the men with whom we struggle confront us it is as functional elements in this system that they do so, behaving in a certain sense automatically. It is necessary to know this well. But it is precisely if we refuse to treat them as nothing more than this—if we insist on treating them not as parts of a machine but as men, capable of thought and of change—that we gain a very much greater control in the situation.

It is practical, in short, always to be talking with the enemy.

Oglesby describes the rebel as one who is quite unwilling to talk. "The rebel is an incorrigible absolutist who has replaced . . . all 'solutions' with the single irreducible demand that . . . those who now have all power shall no longer have any, and that those who now have none—the people, the victimized—shall have all. . . . 'What do you want?' asks the worried, perhaps intimidated master. 'What can I give you?' . . . But the rebel answers, 'I cannot be purchased.' The answer is meant mainly to break off the conference." One reason the rebel wants to break it off, Oglesby explains, is that he has as yet no really clear vision of "the revolutionized, good society," and would be embarrassed to have to confess this. He is not yet a responsible man. Then Oglesby adds: Ultimately he must become so. I am not quite sure how—as Oglesby sees it—he is to become responsible. My own suggestion is, of course, that nonviolent battle in itself teaches one to be.

It is a more difficult way. It does, for example, complicate the process of defining for ourselves and others who can be expected to act as our allies and who can be expected to resist us as harshly as they dare when, of the latter, we have always to be making two points at the same time; (1) here are men toward whom we have to be on our guard and (2) here are men for whom we have to show human concern. It can be done, though, and in very few words. I remember James Bevel addressing a church audience in Birmingham: "We love our white brothers"—pause—"but we don't trust them."

The Feel of an Action

The trouble is that people tend to feel that they are taking bolder action when they disdain all conversations with the adversary. We had experience of this often on the Quebec to Guantanamo walk while we were in the South. There were any