

Commentary

On the bombing of a linear accelerator

In the style of a more old-fashioned journalism than we practice here, the kind of person who throws bombs is called a fiend. The term sounds a little baroque, but it serves well to express the irrational hellish quality of such an act. It is of course not news that after three centuries of triumphant rationalism, there is a resurgence of the Dionysian in our society. Nor is it surprising that when the Dionysians attack, they pick one of the major centers of rational inquiry for their target. Among the causes of the attack is, though sometimes not acknowledged, the unbalanced attitude of the scientists themselves. This is apparently felt so strongly that not even the friendly open-door policy of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center could preserve it from attack.

In the middle ages the Scholastic philosophers insisted that there were areas of experience beyond the reach of logical reason. Even so they may have been the beginning of the present troubles since in their anxiety to baptize Aristotle the ground they gave may have been more important than what they held. By the 18th century rationalism was triumphant among the intellectuals. It is not a coincidence that this was the golden age of classical mechanics and classical mathematics, both extremely logical. By the 19th century scientists were going out to convert the heathen to rationalism by way of university extension and lecture series. Dickens in a novel portrayed a geologist who went around knocking rock samples off the facades of buildings. Arrested for defacing property he answered the charges by saying he knew no building but the temple of science. It seems nowadays that the bomb planters also know that address.

What seems not to be pointed out or what seems to be taken for granted regarding the current Dionysian resurgence is that it is mostly the Hadean side of the Dionysian that comes up, excrescences like witchcraft and astrology. The struggle of millennia to sanctify the Dionysian, to subject it to the government of love and to a certain ethic seem forgotten. In part the forgetfulness may be a result of taking ethics for granted in the Victorian era: The battle was between apes and angels; the devil was ignored.

Of course the attempt to sanctify the Dionysian is an arduous undertaking especially if one wishes to include a good bit of sensuality in one's solution. ("The Son of Man came eating and drinking.") The gospels contain a spiritual biography that ought to be read, not for its ethical content, which was hardly original, but for its synthesis of the natural and the transcendent, which was original. However, it also led to the cross. It is far easier to escape into puritanism or antinomianism. And so people make bombs.

In 1794 the triumphant devotees of reason desecrated the altar of Notre Dame de Paris. In 1971 the Stanford Linear Accelerator was bombed. If we learned nothing else from the hypostatic union, it would seem that we should have learned some balance.

—DIETRICK E. THOMSEN

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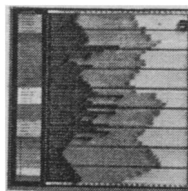
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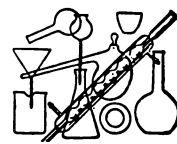
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