We must recognize that justice is a higher social goal than law and order.
—William Sloane Coffin, Jr., 1972

To be radical is habitually to do things which society at large despises.
—Daniel Berrigan, S.J., 1968

We shall be told … that actions which bring damnation to the worldling may be inculpable in the children of light. We must be prepared for strange alternations of rigorism and antinomianism as our history unfolds.
—Ronald Knox, Enthusiasm

In “Man’s Second Disobedience” (1989), an essay about radicalism and the French Revolution, the English philosopher Roger Scruton observed that “the decisive feature of the revolutionary credo … is its provision of a criterion of legitimacy that no actual institution can ever pass.” Note that there are two sides to this credo. One side—the smiling side— involves the seductive lullaby of perfectionism. Here we have a beguiling mixture of utopian dreams, elevating rhetoric, and ideals as simple (and often as simple-minded) as they are abstract. Proposing an impossible criterion of legitimacy, one is able to indulge in credulousness as a deliberate policy, undistracted by any contact with the less edifying realities of human nature. The other, more dour side of the revolutionary credo is the militant hangover from these intoxications: smug, righteous, peremptory, alternating wildly between the ecstasies of absolute self-regard and the implacable condemnation of the status quo.

In periods of brute political upheaval, this combination of toxins is deadly. The French Revolution, honing its guillotines with a rhetoric of virtue derived from Rousseau, dramatized this as surely as have the many grisly efforts to instantiate the tenets of Marxism, Fascism, and other utopian schemes in the course of this unhappy century. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski summed it up neatly in his essay “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered” (1983): “Utopians, once they attempt to convert their visions into practical proposals, come up with the most malignant project ever devised: they want to institutionalize fraternity, which is the surest way to totalitarian despotism.”
Of course, this utopian impulse expresses itself differently in a liberal democracy. When tumbrels and firing squads are unavailable, the upheaval tends to be primarily cultural or moral. But the element of confused fanaticism remains: a despotic subtext beneath the progressive rhetoric. The legal scholar Alexander Bickel was undoubtedly correct when he wrote, in 1970, that “to be a revolutionary in a society like ours, is to be a totalitarian, or not to know what one is doing.” Or, he might have added, both. One of the most prominent features of America’s cultural revolution was the sudden appearance in the mid Sixties of utopian agitation where prudent affirmation and common sense once reigned.

The great catalyst for this development was without doubt the Vietnam conflict. Almost overnight, it seemed, the entire climate of elite opinion in the country underwent a startling metamorphosis. The ostensible issue was U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But it soon became clear that Vietnam was merely the occasion for disruptions and demands that went far beyond any specific government policy. Vietnam became the banner under which the entire range of radical sentiment congregated. It provided a rallying point, a crusade large enough to submerge all manner of ideological differences. As the Sixties evolved, it became increasingly clear that what was at stake was not only the war. The real issue was our way of life: what used to be called without apology “the American way of life,” with its social and political institutions, its moral assumptions, its unspoken confidences about what mattered. One measure of the change is the fact that even now, thirty or more years on, it is nearly impossible for anyone with a college education to speak of “the American way of life” without irony. To a large extent, that is because it is now practically taken for granted that going to college involves not so much the “questioning” as the repudiation of traditional moral and political values. (Or to put it another way: the academic “questioning” or “interrogation” of traditional values has only one right answer, “No.”) The greater the exposure to higher education, the more thorough the repudiation is likely to be.

Not that such repudiations are confined to the academy. Far from it. It is part of the air we breathe: implicit as much in our degraded pop culture as it is in our assumptions about our responsibilities as citizens and moral agents. One of the most profound effects of America’s cultural revolution has been to institutionalize the assumption of institutional illegitimacy. It is less a matter of cynicism than a rejection of established authority, as if the very fact of being established undermined the legitimacy of an idea or institution.

There are many facets to this phenomenon. One of the most curious concerns the role of certain religious figures who, in the mid Sixties and Seventies, brandished the phrase “civil disobedience” as a patent of moral rectitude. It began with the Civil Rights movement, when various religious leaders participated in marches and demonstrations to end racial segregation. The nobility of that cause imbued the idea of civil disobedience with an aura of supreme moral urgency. Whether, even then, civil disobedience—i.e., illegal though (generally) nonviolent agitation—was justified was a question that could hardly be raised. The rightness of the cause made this question seem impertinent at best. Besides, there was the warm glow of self-satisfaction that attended participation in such activities. Increasingly, “civil disobedience” came to imply, at least to its advocates, obedience to a higher authority—the authority of one’s conscience, first of all, but construed in such a way as to suggest the gratifying thought that the dictates of one’s conscience were indistinguishable from the dictates of justice itself.
Those addicted to the pleasures of moral superiority found it an irresistible brew. By the time that Vietnam became an issue, civil disobedience had established itself as a prescription for moral intoxication, not to say anesthesia. Sanctioning illegality as an expression of higher virtue, the ethic of civil disobedience promised to transport its partisans to the ranks of a moral elect even as it undermined the authority of the law and its supporting institutions and beliefs. Never mind the contradictions that this situation bred: opportunities for moral megalomania were too precious to squander. Among the many individuals responsible for proselytizing the ethic of civil disobedience as a form of higher virtuousness, three deserve special mention in these reflections: William Sloane Coffin, Jr., chaplain at Yale University during a crucial period in the Sixties and Seventies; and the Berrigan brothers, Daniel and Philip, Catholic priests whose names became synonymous with the antinomian uproar of Sixties radicalism. Wrapping themselves in the mantle of a religious authority that, in one way or another, they repudiated by their actions, Rev. Coffin and the Berrigan brothers made an enormous effort to legitimize the politics of delegitimation. In this sense, they epitomized one prominent side of America’s cultural revolution; members of the establishment, they nevertheless embraced a political program dedicated to the destruction of the establishment.

Born in 1924 to a prominent New York WASP family, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., grew up in a privileged world of servants, penthouse apartments, summer houses, and expensive schools. He served in the army in World War II and matriculated at Yale after the war, “shamelessly bypass[ing] the Yale admissions office,” he explains in his memoir, Once to Every Man (1977), “accepting the offer of Henri Peyre, the chairman of Yale’s French department, that he accompany me on a visit to Dean De Vane.” In the late 1940s, his fluency in Russian caught the notice of the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency. He had agreed to a two-year stint in the CIA when a lecture by Reinhold Niebuhr intervened and he decided instead to enroll in Union Theological Seminary, where he committed himself to “as much of God as I believed in.” When the Korean War broke out in the summer of 1950, he left the seminary and joined the CIA, working as an operative in Germany until 1953. Looking back from the late 1970s, Coffin was clearly a bit embarrassed by his earlier, patriotic self. “National security,” he comments, “is not a very important consideration in the Bible—not as compared to national righteousness and world security.” Perhaps fortunately, he doesn’t attempt to give chapter and verse for that conviction.

In the following years, Coffin completed his education at Yale Divinity School, worked as a chaplain at Andover and Williams College, and, in 1958, returned to Yale as chaplain. By the early 1960s, he was very active in the Civil Rights movement and was (as he puts it in a chapter title from his memoir) “Moving Toward Civil Disobedience”—toward a species of political activism he later described as “a form of moral jiu-jitsu.” Gradually, he emerged as a national figure. And as he gained in prominence, he more and more cast himself in the self-dramatizing role of the man of conscience battling the world’s injustices. “If we are to serve our country with our consciences,” he wrote in a lecture delivered in 1972, “we must recognize that what is most important is not what the law requires but what justice demands.”
As it turned out, Coffin was seldom in doubt about what justice demanded. When Vietnam hotted up, it demanded that he aid and abet young men in burning their draft cards, that he participate in marches on the Pentagon, and that he travel to Hanoi courtesy of the North Vietnamese government (where he promptly discovered “a very special feeling for the North Vietnamese, a feeling I attributed to the fact that we were friends because we had deliberately refused to become enemies”). In 1970, when Bobby Seale and eight other Black Panthers were on trial for murder in New Haven and it looked for a moment as if New Haven would erupt in a riot, justice demanded that William Sloane Coffin publicly declare in a sermon that the Panthers should go free because their trial was “legally right but morally wrong.” Concluding that the situation was “prerevolutionary,” he urged the Yale community to engage in nonviolent protests and acts of civil disobedience. “To those who say ‘what if this were a Klansman on trial and his fellow Klansmen were threatening destruction?’” Coffin wrote, “I can only answer that, while releasing a Klansman would be increasing the power of the oppressor, the releasing of the defendants in this case would mean the sharing of power with the oppressed.”

The New York Times, which was a very different sort of paper in 1970 than it has since become, editorialized that, by delivering this sermon, Coffin had done

his best to guarantee moral confusion among his student followers. Mr. Coffin said that even if Mr. Seale were to be found guilty as charged, the entire nation stands accused of bringing him to the state of mind in which the alleged crime might have been committed. This is a legally and morally wrong and dangerous concept, even when supposedly elevated to the level of theological doctrine.

The truth is that by the early 1970s, Coffin was dazzled by his sense of himself as a representative of what he described in one lecture as “the universal conscience of mankind.” Acts of civil disobedience that dramatized the conflict between Coffin’s own morality and the requirements of the law were his preferred means of exhibiting the workings of that conscience.

For Coffin and those who emulated him, it was the work of a moment to distinguish between what was “legally right but morally wrong.” But as Morris I. Liebman noted in a debate with Coffin about civil disobedience, “in democratic societies any violation of the law is an uncivil act. This is true notwithstanding the motives of the violator.” Indeed, there is a sense, Liebman remarked, in which “civil disobedience” is a misnomer, since its activities, by breaking the law, are by definition uncivil. Like most advocates of civil disobedience, Coffin was quick to cite the example of Henry David Thoreau. But Liebman is right to point out that Thoreau, who was essentially an anarchist, not a democrat, provides an unedifying precedent. Everyone remembers Thoreau’s remark: “That government is best which governs least.” It is less often recalled that he went on to say that “‘that government is best which governs not at all;’ and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government they will have.” As Liebman observed dryly, “the day that men are so prepared will be the day that men are angels.”

Similarly, Coffin’s appeal to the “rule of conscience” turns out to be a rule whose content is determined by William Sloane Coffin and his like-minded friends. “The advocates of civil disobedience,” Liebman points out, “insist upon license which they would not permit to their opponents. The police, it seems, are to arrest members of the Ku Klux Klan, but not members of the Weathermen. Laws may be violated if, and only if, one is a member of the elite.”
Coffin was hardly alone in seeing himself as part of a moral vanguard whose prerogatives included breaking the law when “the rule of conscience” said it was OK. Indeed, this form of self-infatuation was a defining characteristic of the new generation of radicals that populated America’s cultural revolution. For example, the left-wing historian Howard Zinn once blithely informed his readers that civil disobedience should be allowed for programs of “liberal” but not “reactionary” reform. And who was to decide what counted as suitably “liberal”? Why, Mr. Zinn, of course. (The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, in a statement quoted in an earlier installment of these reflections, put this extraordinary idea in perhaps its baldest form: “Liberating tolerance,” Marcuse wrote, “would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left.”)

William Sloane Coffin, acting from his position as Civil Rights leader, chaplain of Yale University, and member in good standing of the American WASP aristocracy, did a great deal to legitimize this form of illegitimacy and illegality. His example helped to convince a generation that the law was dispensable when it conflicted with duly ratified liberal sentiments. That these sentiments should seem to be invested with the authority of religion made them all the more appealing to anyone seeking to enhance his sense of moral election. Of course, Coffin was not the only cleric to avail himself of this opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Of those who invoked religious principles in conducting this assault on legality and civil order, there were none more notorious than Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Indeed, when it came to the sentimental blending of religious rhetoric and radical activism, the Berrigans had few equals.

In background, the Berrigans could not have been more different from Coffin. He hailed from the genteel ranks of New York society; the Berrigans came from a poor Irish Catholic family that settled, finally, in Syracuse. Their father was a scrappy, depressive railroad man and farmer: a fount of bitter labor-union sentiment, bad poetry, and temper tantrums. Their mother was a devout and long-suffering women who held the family of six boys together. Philip, the youngest, was born in 1923. Like four of his five elder brothers, he was bluff, athletic, and robust. Daniel, born in 1921, was delicate, with weak eyes and weak ankles—“a species of house boy” as his father contemptuously put it.

Daniel entered a Jesuit seminary near Poughkeepsie in 1939 when he was eighteen and was ordained in 1952. Philip, who fought with distinction in France and Germany during the war (an achievement he later disdained), entered a seminary of the Society of Saint Joseph—an order founded in the nineteenth century to help blacks—in 1950. (A third Berrigan son, Jerry, also entered the seminary but left before being ordained.) Although both of the younger Berrigan have written books, Daniel is by far the more literary. Like his father, he has produced prodigious quantities of bad poetry; unlike his father, he has managed to get reams of it published and even praised. (In *Disarmed and Dangerous*, a joint hagiography of Daniel and Philip by Murray Polner and Jim O’Grady that appeared last year, we are told that Daniel “had become a holy man, perhaps even a prophet, ... to be admired, read, and reread fifty and one hundred years from now.”)

Daniel’s radicalization began on two trips to France and Eastern Europe after his ordination. He affected the dress and hauteur of French worker priests and came to regard persecution as a prerequisite of seriousness. In 1964, recalling with relish the hardships faced by religion in the Marxist countries he visited, he wrote that the churches there “are small but purified by persecution... . The Christians under Marxism have returned to their pre-Constantinian situation of being poor, pure, and persecuted, and they are leading the life which I believe God has decreed for the Church ... what a great feeling, to be in a country where there’s no head of state going to church every Sunday and corrupting it!”
Philip, political awakening came mostly from witnessing racial discrimination in the South. He was consumed by the injustices he saw around him. About both brothers there was a strong current of what Francine du Plessix Gray, in an admiring profile published in 1970, rightly called “moral fundamentalism”—an evil thing in conservatives, of course, but laudable indeed in political radicals eager to engage in histrionic gestures to declare their solidarity. Daniel summed up the attitude frankly in 1968: “one had to go to jail. It was an irreplaceable need, a gift not to be refused.”

It was a gift they have both been treated to frequently, especially Philip. The Berrigans’ great moment was in the 1960s and early 1970s. For them, as for so many others, the Vietnam conflict sharpened their radicalism and provided an overarching cause that seemed to explain all manner of evil in American society. As Daniel put it in the preface to Night Flight to Hanoi (1968), “the American ghetto and the Hanoi ‘operation’ were a single enterprise—a total war in both cases.” (Yes, he, too, went to Hanoi—accompanied by Howard Zinn—courtesy of the North Vietnamese government. From about 1965 to the early Seventies, Hanoi was a prized pilgrimage spot for starry-eyed American radicals from Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda to Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag: they all felt, as Hayden put it, that “here we begin to understand the possibilities for a socialism of the heart.”)

The Berrigans’ favorite pastime was to raid draft boards and destroy A1 files by pouring blood on them or setting them afire after dousing them with homemade napalm. In October 1967, Philip led a raid on the draft board offices at the Baltimore Customs House. In May 1968, he, Daniel, and seven others made their most notorious raid, on the draft board at Cantonsville, Maryland. They snatched hundreds of files from the hands of startled clerks, spirited them out to the parking lot, and burned them while singing the Lord’s Prayer for the benefit of the news media that had been carefully tipped off about the event beforehand.

Such conjunctions of illegality and smug religiosity was a Berrigan speciality. Writing about the Cantonsville raid in Night Flight to Hanoi, Daniel offered this rationale, half mocking, half maudlin, and entirely self-righteous:

Our apologies, good friend, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of the Burning Children. And for thinking of that other Child, of whom the poet Luke speaks.

(The poet Luke? Well, this was 1968.) Asked later whether he had given any consideration to the feelings of the draft board clerks, Daniel snapped that “anyone who works for the draft board deserves no more consideration than the guards at Belsen and Dachau.”

The Berrigans were eventually sentenced to jail. Daniel first became a fugitive from justice for several months—an action that only enhanced his status as a counter-cultural hero—before finally serving his sentence. While in jail, he was able to catch up on the latest volumes of Che Guevara, Herbert Marcuse, Régis Debray, and other edifying revolutionary authors.
It is difficult to say what is more repulsive about the Berrigans: their sanctimoniousness or their naïveté. Both qualities are on prominent view in Night Flight to Hanoi. The book has two main themes: the unspeakable evil of the United States, and the great nobility of the North Vietnamese. The two are woven together with an unbreakable thread of self-satisfaction. Early on in the book, Daniel acquaints us with his idea of “the biography of the white Westerner. He requires (1) someone to kill for him and (2) someone to die for him. His power is such that he can arrange both requirements, that of vicarious executioner and of vicarious corpse.” Meeting some U.S. embassy officials in Laos, he and Zinn “see what ‘foreign service’ does to human faces. Dead souls. They fix their gaze on the middle distance and announce the utter impossibility of all suggestions.” But getting to Hanoi was worth any number of cantankerous civil servants, even American ones. “It was,” Berrigan tells us, “like stepping out upon the threshold of a new planet, and then reporting back to those whose lives and history and future had wedded them to earth…. It was as though … a new creation was in its first stages. History being woven by a people who refused to die.”

The purpose of the trip was to receive, as a gesture of goodwill from the Hanoi government, three captured American pilots (whom Berrigan later described as having been brainwashed … by the American military). It is when the pilots are herded before him by their captors that the pap really starts flowing. “I was struck,” Berrigan writes, “by the thought, How well they look, how ruddy, how clean cut, how unkillably American.”

They seemed eager and nery and somewhat overanxious to please. They declared without prompting that they were well fed and cared for and grateful to the North Vietnamese military for the kindness with which they had been treated…. They said they had been given news of the war regularly, that they had visited Hanoi during Christmastime, that they had had a Christmas celebration “with a tree in that corner there,” that their Christmas dinner had consisted of turkey and rice, that they had even received a kind of gift package at that time.

And one recalls that George Bernard Shaw, visiting the Soviet Union in 1931, boisterously announced that he could find no trace of famine anywhere. Mirabile dictu!

Both Berrigans, as of this writing, are still with us. Daniel has faded almost entirely from public notice. Philip, who secretly married a nun in 1969 and was defrocked in 1973 when he publicly announced the marriage, continues to intrude periodically through his group Plowshares. Although the Vietnam conflict is long over, Plowshares carries on, traveling around the country breaking into military installations and beating with hammers on submarines, missiles, and jet fighters. Disarmed and Dangerous describes a typical episode from the 1980s: “Six of them entered a building … and proceeded to shatter part of two Mark 12A casings (the damage was estimated at $28,000) and then dumped blood … onto blueprints, work orders, and assorted equipment. Then they knelt in a circle, held hands, and sang hymns.” This, we are told, was “a small but stubborn challenge to ascendant Reaganism.”

And more than for William Sloane Coffin, the Berrigan brothers are men for whom calculated illegality became a patent of moral seriousness. Dazzled by the thought of their own virtue, they exempted themselves from the claims of established authority to pursue the calling of a “higher” morality. Poaching on the prestige they commanded by virtue of their status as clerics, they helped to undermine respect not only for the Church’s authority but also for the authority of the various laws they broke with such regularity and insouciance. And by their example, they helped to license the spirit of casual antinomianism that has had such destructive effects on American life and culture.
Howard Zinn, in a preface he contributed to Night Flight to Hanoi, blithely observed that “of course [Daniel Berrigan] violated the law. But he was right. And it is the mark of enlightened citizens in a democracy that they know the difference between law and justice, between what is legal and what is right.” But who is to decide what counts as enlightenment? Howard Zinn? In an earlier installment of these reflections, we had occasion to quote from George Kennan’s essay “Rebels Without a Program” (1968), a scathing indictment of lawless student radicalism. Many Sixties radicals regarded civil disobedience as a form of political theater. One broke the law in as noisy a way as possible, and then one was hauled off to jail, generally for a token sentence. The willingness to endure jail was supposed to legitimize the illegality. But as Kennan notes, “the violation of law is not … a privilege that lies offered for sale with a given price tag, like an object in a supermarket, available to anyone who has the price and is willing to pay for it.”

Kennan is an especially noteworthy critic in this context because he, too, was deeply opposed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But he understood, as the Coffins and Berrigans of the world do not, that in a democracy illegality is not a justifiable brand of political opposition. And he also understood that, even when one disagrees with specific policies, one’s country continues to exercise a legitimate claim on one’s allegiance, a claim that cannot be disposed of in a fit of self-righteous bravado. “It seems to me,” Kennan writes, “that the citizen who lives under a system that assures him not only voting rights but extensive guarantees for the inviolability of his person and property, and who accepts the protection of the state in the enjoyment of these rights, owes to the state at least a high measure of respect and forbearance in those instances where he may not find himself in agreement with its policies.” The alternative, as Willam Sloane Coffin and the Berrigans illustrated so graphically, is not a higher morality but the delegitimation of the institutions and attitudes that guarantee our freedom.