Nonviolence doesn’t always work – but violence never does.
Madge Micheels-Cyrus

Academic debates on the concept and definition of violence have played a major part in the emergence of the field of peace and conflict research and its historical development from a “minimalist” focus on preventing war to a broader “maximalist” agenda encompassing direct, structural and cultural forms of violence (as defined by Johan Galtung). Nowadays, there is a general consensus that violence includes much more than the use of physical force by persons to commit acts of destruction against others’ bodies or property. Structural conditions such as unjust and oppressive political systems, social inequality or malnutrition, as well as their justification through culture or ideology, are seen as chief sources of violence and war. An example
of a comprehensive definition of violence is offered by the team of the NGO Responding to Conflict: “Violence consists of actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevent people from reaching their full human potential.”

Peace and conflict research has tried to elucidate the origins of violence, especially the phenomenon of escalation from latent to violent conflicts through ethnopolitical mobilisation by grievance groups or “minorities at risk”. Since 2006, Berghof has been conducting research on resistance and liberation movements in order to better understand the phenomenon of radicalisation and de-radicalisation, understood as the shifts from non-violent to violent conflict strategies and vice versa. Central to our understanding of the distinction between violence and conflict is our approach to conflict transformation as the transition from actual or potentially violent conflicts into non-violent processes of social change.

**Nonviolence as the antithesis of violence in all its forms**

Nonviolence might be described both as a philosophy, upholding the view that the use of force is both morally and politically illegitimate or counterproductive, and as a practice to achieve social change and express resistance to oppression.

The basic principles of nonviolence rest on a commitment to oppose violence in all its forms, whether physical, cultural or structural. Hence, the term encompasses not only an abstention from the use of physical force to achieve an aim, but also a full engagement in resisting domination, inequality, racism and any other forms of injustice or “hidden” violence. The ultimate aim of its supporters is the dismantling of the power structures, military systems, and economic networks that make violence and war an option at all.
Gandhi, whose ideas and actions have most crucially influenced the development of nonviolence in the twentieth century, described his moral philosophy through the religious precept of *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word meaning the complete renunciation of violence in thought and action. This definition does not imply, however, that all actions without violence are necessarily non-violent. Nonviolence involves conscious and deliberate restraint from expected violence, in a context of contention between two or more adversaries. For purposes of clarity, scholars have established a distinction between the terms *non-violence* and *nonviolence* (without hyphen): while both refer to actions without violence, the latter also implies an explicit commitment to the strategy or philosophy of peaceful resistance.

When it comes to the motives for advocating nonviolence, two types of arguments can be distinguished. The label “principled nonviolence” refers to the approach elaborated for instance by Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King or the Quakers, who oppose violent strategies for religious or ethical reasons, because violence causes unnecessary suffering, dehumanises and brutalises both the victim and the perpetrator, and only brings short-term solutions. However, the majority of contemporary nonviolent campaigns have tended to be driven by pragmatic motives, on the grounds that nonviolence works better than violence; the choice in favour of peaceful methods is made because of their efficiency to effect change and does not imply a belief in nonviolent ethics.

**Nonviolence in action: a catalyst for conflict transformation**

The terms “nonviolent resistance” or “nonviolent action” are usually employed as generic qualifications to designate the process or methods of action to achieve peace and justice through nonviolence, alongside other methods such as negotiation or → dialogue. Nonviolent strategies are seen as particularly appropriate when there is acute power disparity between two sides in a conflict, acting as a tool in the hands of minorities or
dominated groups (“the underdog”) to mobilise and take action towards empowerment and restructuring relations with their powerful opponent (power-holders or pro-status quo forces). The aim is both dialogue and resistance – dialogue with the people on the other side to persuade them, and resistance to the structures to compel change.

Historically, nonviolent practices have included various methods of direct action. In his seminal 1973 manual, Gene Sharp documented 198 different forms of nonviolent action, ranging from symbolic protest and persuasion to social, political and economic non-cooperation, civil disobedience, confrontation without violence, and the building of alternative institutions. In recent decades, nonviolent methods have achieved worldwide success through the productive demonstration of “people power” against dictatorships and human rights abuses in various countries such as the United States, the Philippines, Chile, Eastern Europe, South Africa, the former Soviet Union and most recently North Africa. Many other transnational campaigns for global justice, land rights, nuclear disarmament, women’s rights, etc., waged through nonviolent means and with a vision consistent with creating a nonviolent world, are still struggling to make themselves heard.

Although nonviolent resistance magnifies existing social and political tensions by imposing greater costs on those who want to maintain their advantages under an existing system, it can be described as a precursor to conflict transformation. The recurrent label “power of the powerless” refers to the capacity of nonviolent techniques to enable marginalised communities to take greater control over their lives and achieve sufficient leverage for an effective negotiation process. Moreover, while violent revolutions tend to be followed by an increase in absolute power of the state, nonviolent movements are more likely to promote democratic and decentralised practices, contributing to a diffusion of power within society. The constructive programmes that are part of many such movements are facilitating more participatory
forms of democracy, such as the 1989 forums in Eastern Europe, Gandhi’s self-sufficiency programme in India, or the “zones of peace” created by peace activists amidst violent wars in Colombia or the Philippines. Recent statistical studies by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan confirm that nonviolent campaigns are more likely than violent rebellions to be positively related to greater freedom and democracy.

However, in practice, when conflicts oppose highly polarised identity groups over non-negotiable issues, positive peace does not emanate automatically from the achievement of relative power balance, and nonviolent struggles are not always effective at preventing inter-party misperceptions and hatred. In such situations, negotiation and process-oriented conflict resolution remain necessary to facilitate the articulation of legitimate needs and interests of all concerned into fair, practical, and mutually acceptable solutions. Therefore, nonviolence and conflict resolution mechanisms should be seen as complementary and mutually supportive strategies which can be employed together, consecutively or simultaneously, to realise the twin goals of justice and peace.

References and Further Reading


Online Resources


People Power and Protest Since 1945: A Bibliography of Nonviolent Action. Compiled by April Carter, Howard Clark and Michael Randle and regularly updated at www.civilresistance.info/bibliography

Responding to Conflict, www.respond.org