

Foreword

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“We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence,” stated Mahatma Gandhi, “But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence” (*Harijan*, August 25, 1940). This special issue of the journal *Diogenes* takes Gandhi at his word, by bringing together many theorists and practitioners of civil resistance and peace activism, in order to explore, investigate, and analyze the relevance of the theory and practice of nonviolence in today’s world. While an exhaustive literature offers insights into the theory and practice of nonviolence and civil resistance, the interest here is not to summarize and repeat all that has been said previously, but to highlight domains and areas of exploration and analysis where nonviolence as a concept and thinkers of nonviolence may have something of particular value to contribute. Unfortunately, when philosophy of nonviolence and nonviolent campaigns are discussed, many think in terms of charismatic heroism. Actually, most of the nonviolent campaigns in the past 30 years have been led by movements with no charismatic figureheads (Solidarity in Poland, Otpor in Serbia, Referendum in Chile, The Green Movement in Iran, the Arab Spring etc.). The key point here has been to demonstrate certain potentialities in persuasion and protest. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, in their groundbreaking study entitled “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict” (2008) underline that those “who claim that violent resistance is necessary are probably always wrong.” According to them, since 1900 through 2006 violent campaigns throughout the world have failed to succeed 60 percent of the time, while nonviolent campaigns have fully succeeded over 50 percent of the time. The cases presented by Chenoweth and Stephan speak to many of the principles of effective nonviolence, while reminding us of the fact that nonviolent discipline, creativity, and flexibility can leverage enormous power of liberation and construction.

A reminder, however, needs to be underlined. Nonviolence, like many other concepts, is a complex notion and should be constantly open to debate. Moreover, Gandhi himself considered that “nonviolence is impossible without humility” (*Harijan*, January 28, 1939). In other words, nonviolence should be thought and understood within a dynamic of interdependence and solidarity. The potential efficacy of nonviolent struggle is, therefore, guaranteed and established by a permanent challenge of the exercise of power. Acknowledging this can raise a complementary question. Is nonviolence itself a form of exercise of power?

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In her 1970 book *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt establishes a crucial distinction between power, force, and violence. According to her: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance” (1970: 56) For Arendt, the term “violence” should never be used interchangeably with “power” in the study of politics. Power springs up from human relations and acting in concert of a community. But, “Violence,” she writes, “can always destroy power. Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power” (1970: 53). As such, power can never be created out of violence because power is historically legitimate, but violence, though justifiable, can never be legitimate. Power is legitimate because it helps people to get together, but violence “does not depend on numbers or opinions, but on implements” (1970: 53). Through her explanation of power and violence, Arendt concludes that “[n]either violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man’s faculty of action, the ability to begin something new” (1970: 82). There is no way we can prepare a new beginning in politics, be it a transition from dictatorships to democracy or simply democratization of liberal democracies, without the process of taming of violence through the culture of nonviolence. We should, thus, perhaps avoid errors committed in the past in the name of a democratization process that believes in the strategy of “exporting democracy”, especially by use of violence. If democracy equals self-rule and self-institution – a term coined by Castoriadis (1998) – of the society, empowerment of civic actors and collective ability to rule democratically are essential constituents of democratic governance. Democracy and nonviolence, therefore, are inseparable.

The more we think about it, the more nonviolence appears to us as a “common responsibility” in all spheres of life, including economics and politics. Thus, human beings can no more escape nonviolence without abdicating their humanity. Nonviolence is, therefore, the embodiment of the ethical in our social and historical common world. As a result, we need to accept fully the concept of nonviolent action as an ethical approach to the three realms of the political, the social, and the economic. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr and, more recently, Mandela and the Dalai Lama, proved to us that politics as the practice of morality is possible – that nonviolence is not only a political experience, but also an ethical experience, which makes our responsibility towards life in common more fulfilling.

This new commitment to nonviolence has been the driving goal behind this special issue, which tries to create a unique space for the analysis of timely issues of nonviolence through multiple lenses and in multiple voices. As is always the case with *Diogenes*, the success of this collaboration can be measured only by the degree to which the readers will find the results to be useful in promoting a new debate on nonviolence in our contemporary society.

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