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Review of This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century

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***This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century.* Mark Engler and Paul Engler, New York: Nation Books, 2016 and 2017. Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1568587332. Paperback, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-1568585703. E-book, 9781568585147.**

This book is must reading for peace educators, scholars, social activists and citizen groups. It belongs in public libraries and in nonviolent training programs. And it belongs in the hands of local, national and global policy makers. Normally, such a recommendation would be placed at the end of a review as part of a summation and conclusion. But for this book, this reviewer is placing the recommendation first for emphasis. Despite some questions about omissions, and suggestions for improvement, this work deserves much praise.

Let me tell you why.

As a professor of peace studies as well as editor, reviewer, and social change advocate, I am familiar with the fine body of literature already available on nonviolence theory and action. Before reading this book I wondered whether it would offer fresh perspectives but did not expect to find new theoretical or analytic content. Happily, my hope was satisfied on the first count, and I was delighted to be mistaken on the second. The authors summarize some well-known theories and approaches to nonviolent social change, and sort through some important differences between them. And they include some of the most recognized thinkers and doers related to nonviolent theory and community organizing (Gene Sharp, Gandhi, Frederick Douglas, Martin Luther King Jr, Frances Fox Piven, Lech Walesa, Saul Alinsky, to name only a few). They also include some of the better-known social-change movements such as India's struggle for home rule, U.S. civil rights and labor movements, and Arab Spring uprisings. But to this usual list they add many examples that may be less familiar to readers, such as Serbia's Otpor group, Egypt's April 6 Youth Movement, Act Up, the "Occupy" movements, and more. And they include a wide range of issues being addressed by growing nonviolent movements, from HIV Aids, environmental protection, immigration (Hispanics vs. the Wall), worker rights, civil rights, women's rights, LBGT rights, and more. The examples are drawn from every continent and many cultures and from diverse historical, political, social and economic contexts, demonstrating that nonviolent strategies are versatile and adaptable. With lessons drawn from these diverse examples, the authors pursue a unique line of inquiry and suggest some new ways of analyzing and applying nonviolent theories and strategies.

The authors, Mark Engler and Paul Engler brought special experience and qualifications to this work. Mark Engler is on the editorial board of *Dissent*, and a contributing editor at *Yes! Magazine*. Paul Engler is founding director of the Center for the Working Poor in Los Angeles and an organizer in immigrant rights, global justice, and labor movements. He co-founded *Momentum Trainings* for social activists.

The authors' starting assumption, articulated in their introduction and first chapter, is that nonviolence does not require practitioners to be saints or perfect human beings. They view nonviolence as a learning process honed through practice, reflection, and more practice and reflection. In this regard they quote from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Autobiography*: "Human beings with all their faults and strengths constitute the mechanism of a social movement. They must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew."

Moreover, in contrast to some nonviolence advocates, the authors do not believe that nonviolence need be rooted in spirituality, faith or moral tradition. They prefer to explore nonviolence as a strategy that could be chosen by reason alone for its effectiveness and cost efficiency (no expensive weapons to buy or armies to support). They see it as a strategy and tool available to people from all traditions, walks of life, genders, cultures, and social and economic systems. It is available to non-constituted leaders and grassroots groups and poorer, less powerful people as well as more privileged. It can be employed within and between local, national and global groups without the constraints faced by governmental officials. It can be adapted within different cultural, social or political contexts (including democratic or nondemocratic political systems) to address diverse issues where military force would be ineffective, inappropriate, or counter-productive.

This does not mean that nonviolence does not require strategic choices, planning, discipline, organization and commitment. It does. And the authors spend much of the book discussing these requirements.

Chapter two explores two schools of thought on how grassroots groups can effect nonviolent social change—a) movement building (championed by Martin Luther King and Frances Fox Piven) or b) community organizing (championed by Saul Alinsky). Movements usually aim to break through the status quo and build momentum for change through disruptive action, such as mass protest. This is a short-range strategy. Community organizing is a longer-range strategy undertaken in incremental steps to build organizations and institutions for lasting systemic change.

In chapter three the authors advocate a hybrid approach that combines mass protest and institution building. Modeled on the Otpor group in Serbia, they call it “momentum-driven organizing.” Like forging steel from an alloy of iron, carbon and other elements, this hybrid approach seeks to overcome limitations and weaknesses of single strategy approaches and to maximize strength and endurance through combined efforts on multiple fronts. While momentum is built on one front, other actors are working to transform legal, political, economic and social structures and institutionalize the changes, making it difficult to overturn gains and easier to sustain them over time. The wisdom of this two-fold approach is addressed again in chapter ten, “The Ecology of Change.” Social change is advanced in phases, and each phase draws on strengths and skills of different actors. Getting people into the streets in mass protest takes one set of skills, but institution building—changing laws, education systems, cultural beliefs and habits, and developing what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the beloved community” require different talents and skills, and often different actors. In this more comprehensive approach, nonviolence is not just one tool, but a whole tool kit which can be used by multiple and varied social change agents.

Chapter four points to important pillars that support political systems and need to be addressed in efforts for social change. These pillars include the business community, educational establishment, media, entertainment, military, police, courts, and religious networks among others. It is not always necessary for social-change advocates to topple an oppressive regime directly. Transforming or changing one or more of these pillars may weaken and ultimately

topple systems of oppression. Likewise transforming these pillars can provide important supports for more humane social structures. The authors use the struggle for same-sex marriage (equality in marriage) in the U.S. as an example of this process.

Other chapters (5-9) cover important intermediary steps such as how to gauge success (in instrumental or transformational terms), and how to frame victories (in transactional or symbolic terms) to show signs of progress and build public confidence. It also explores different types of disruption, questions of whether and/or when to build alliances or to polarize (with positive outcomes), and group discipline.

The book also includes extensive end-notes and a short group discussion guide. While discussion guides can be helpful, this one seems not only too short, but possibly done in haste as an afterthought. It seems to omit or gloss over some of the most important questions that could arise among readers or that could deepen discussion. Perhaps future editions could remedy this.

Mark and Paul Engler have produced a well written work that can speak to both popular and scholarly audiences. It explores both theory and practice in nonviolent social movements, with an emphasis on strategy. Their documentation is thorough but never pedantic. Their reasoning is clear and logical but never dull or overbearing. Their arguments are persuasive and compelling, but never taxing or overwhelming. Most importantly, they speak from personal experience. They have been in the trenches of social action, investigative journalism and nonviolent training, and their combined experience, real-life examples, and heartfelt enthusiasm give this work an authenticity and immediacy not often found in academic texts where personal detachment is *de rigueur*. In refreshing contrast to academic aloofness, this work breathes engagement.

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