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Strategic Nonviolent Struggle in the Twenty First Century

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Abstract

The Twenty First Century is on track to become the first significant Century of Nonviolent Struggle in human history. New discoveries about the effectiveness of strategic nonviolent action, a proliferation of unarmed civil resistance movements, and an explosion of research of and development of creative training methods for such movements, transmitted globally via the internet and other means of international communication point toward the increasing prevalence of unarmed methods of struggle as the emerging paradigm for conflict transformation.

Some may find this declaration premature, but I believe the Twenty First Century will go down in history as the century of nonviolent struggle, a century of deep change in which humanity finally recognized the power we can wield by taking action for change while refusing to do harm. Most people, aware of the violence that marred this century's first two decades, are likely to be skeptical of my claim. Global destruction inflicted by humans on humans since the year 2000 has included, but is not limited to: the 9/11 attacks; the "global war on terror"; the Syrian civil war; the genocidal violence against the Darfuri, Rohingya, Yazidi, and Uyghur peoples; the epidemic levels of rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; starvation and extrajudicial killings in Venezuela; the missing and murdered indigenous women in North America; police killings of black people in the United States; and femicide in Mexico.

Yet this same 20-year period also witnessed a plethora of successful unarmed social and political movements. Unpopular leaders were overthrown nonviolently in places like Serbia in 2000, Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, along with Bolivia, Sudan, Algeria, and Puerto Rico in 2019 (Chenoweth et al., 2019). And this is just a partial list. Already in 2021 nonviolent movements have helped prevent a coup by right-wing supporters of President Trump in the United States (Zunes, 2021), forced the resignation of Mongolia's prime minister (Reuters Staff, 2021), and won the legal suspension of controversial agricultural laws opposed by farmers in India (Mashal & Kumar, 2021). This is not to mention the uncounted numbers of unarmed marches, rallies, sit-ins and other unarmed interventions making daily headlines around the globe. It's a global insurrection, not only against social oppression and political repression, but also against longstanding traditions of violent revolution.

In the past decade, unarmed rebellions have exploded into the news. Behind these movements, which are the visible face of nonviolent struggle, lies a global infrastructure of research, organization, education, and training that records and teaches the history of civil resistance, analyzes the dynamics of nonviolent power, creates strategies for movements, and trains people for action. These developments, arriving as they do at a time in which technology allows virtually instantaneous communication around the globe, have set the stage for the unprecedented use of strategies and methods of nonviolent civil resistance.

Of course, nonviolent direct action is not new to the world. Most people are familiar with the successful movements led by Gandhi for Indian independence in the early 20th Century and by Martin Luther King, Jr. for civil rights in the United States in the middle of that century, but they might be hard pressed to add more examples to this list. Scholars in the field of peace research, on the other hand, have uncovered a much more complex history. In the second volume of his 1973 classic, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Gene Sharp detailed 198 methods of nonviolent action, citing historical cases for the use of each tactic listed. More recently, the freely accessible online Global Nonviolent Action Database, launched by George Lakey and his Peace and Conflict Studies research students at Swarthmore College in 2010, encompasses more than 1,000 case studies, dating all the way back to a Twelfth Century BCE labor strike in ancient Egypt.

Nonviolent struggle is ancient and enduring, but its visibility and reach today are unprecedented in human history. Scholarly literature on the topic merits its own bibliography, also available free online, the *Guide to civil resistance: A bibliography on people power and protest since 1945* (Carter et al., 2013). The digital library of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) offer links to hundreds of books, journal articles, new reports, videos, and other resources for scholars, educators, activists, journalists, policy makers and NGOs.

A major turning point for the popularity of nonviolent action came in 2011, when Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan published their paradigm-shifting work, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. The authors, who wanted to understand why and under what circumstances nonviolent movements succeed or fail, developed a database of 323 violent and nonviolent resistance movements that took place around the world. When they crunched the numbers they had gathered, they discovered that “between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts” (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 5). Having expected to find that violent movements were more likely to succeed, the authors were themselves surprised by what they learned from their data (Chenoweth, 2013).

The data collected and analyzed by Chenoweth and Stephan presented strong empirical support for Gene Sharp’s theories of nonviolent political action. Additional scholarship by leaders in the field, including Kurt Schock, Sharon Nepstad Erickson, Stellan Vinthagen, Lester Kurtz, and Lee Smithey, whose English language books are easily found today, have built on and these foundational works and added to our knowledge of nonviolent struggle. Additionally, organizations engaging in nonviolent action and training new activists, such as Nonviolent Peaceforce, Meta Peace Teams, Training for Change, DC Peace Teams, and the Metta Center, are readily accessible via the internet.

For those who want to see nonviolence in action, the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict offers a library free films in addition to the written sources mentioned above. This collection offers free streaming of classic documentaries like *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, *Bringing Down a Dictator*, and *Egypt: Revolution Interrupted?* (see Recommended Reading in this issue). As with many of the ICNC’s resources, these streaming videos are available on the site in multiple languages. And people interested in current events will appreciate news websites like Waging Nonviolence and Nonviolence News, which keep tabs on nonviolent

movements around the world sharing progress, successes, and analyses of what works and what doesn't work on their sites and also via email newsletter subscriptions.

Teachers and activists will also want to try out some newly developed board games that can be used to educate people of all ages about nonviolent strategy. *Rise Up: The Game of People & Power* from the Tesa Collective lets players cooperate and find creative strategies to fight for social justice against an opponent that wants to destroy their efforts. The Beautiful Trouble collective has created the *Beautiful Struggle Strategy Card Deck*, which players can use “to get creatively unstuck, design an action that pops, flashcard [their] way through social movement history, learn & teach organizing, win grassroots victories, or just have fun staying up late with friends...”. The Metta Center for Nonviolence offers the cooperative boardgame *Cosmic Peaceforce: Mission Harmony 3*, through which players will learn key principles of nonviolence.

The explosion of resources for research, education, and action on nonviolence since the year 2000 and their ready availability around the world have substantially transformed thinking about and receptivity to these movements and methods in the academy and among the general public. As of this writing, nonviolent action remains in global headlines. Russians are marching by the thousands to demand the release of political dissident Alexy Navalny, anti-nuclear activists worldwide are celebrating the entry into force of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and the newly elected President of the United States has decorated his office with busts of three celebrated American heroes of nonviolence—Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and César Chavez (Butigan, 2021). While it's true that the Twenty First Century has witnessed a great deal of national and international violence, all signs are pointing toward the emergence of the Twenty First Century as a landmark time period in the evolution of human methods for resolving group conflicts. We are living in the Century of Nonviolent Struggle.

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