

NONVIOLENCE AND CIVIL RESISTANCE

Nonviolence

For those of us who work, act, and build knowledge on the base of the culture known as “nonviolence” (old as the hills, Gandhi called it optimistically), it has always been a problem to explain the term to define it a bit better as distinct from “passive pacifism”. Or as Gandhi himself had to do, adopt the term – invented by his son Maganlal in 1906—*satyagraha* (strength of truth) to distinguish his struggle in South Africa from the already current “passive resistance”.

Nonviolence is a word created to define the Gandhian movement’s Independence struggle in India during the first half of the twentieth century, but it is a term that has always been the object of confusion, misunderstanding and controversy because it is based on the negation of something (violence) and this is not strictly true. We believe it is more appropriate to write the two words conjoined, because in this way it expresses a culture and forms of action with their own historical principles and logic, which reach far beyond the simple opposition to violence, as if an apparent absence of direct violence (non-violence or no violence) were to signify nonviolence (understood as justice, dignity, cooperation and disobedience of inhuman orders). It is something like what happens with “negative” or “armed peace” which is believed to come about in the “absence of war”. Neither nonviolence nor positive peace can be defined as opposites of violence or of war.

For this reason, the different social movements of many peoples all over the world that have become involved in nonviolent struggles for justice or liberation, have always procured more precise definitions in terms of the local culture, so that the people should understand them better, thus avoiding Manichean or byzantine discussions: Gandhi would speak about *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* (strength of the soul; not cause harm to any living being); Martin Luther King would refer to the “force of love”; in the Philippines, those who struggled against dictator Ferdinand Marcos defined themselves as “People Power”; in Czechoslovakia, during the resistance against Soviet occupation, it was “the power of the powerless”; in present day Mexico it is “Civil Resistance”.

For Gandhi, modern systematizer and innovator of this philosophy and practice:

“Nonviolence is the greatest force that humanity has at its disposal, as old as the hills. It is not a monastic virtue conceived to procure inner peace and

guarantee individual salvation, but guideline of conduct necessary for living in society, as it ensures respect for human dignity and enables the cause of peace to develop, according to the most fervent yearning of humanity. Nonviolence does not imply ‘abstaining from any real struggle against evil’. On the contrary, I see nonviolence as a much more energetic and authentic form of struggle than the simplistic application of the Talion law, which only results in multiplying evil by two. Against all that is immoral, I propose to use moral and spiritual weapons. In my view, there is nothing passive in nonviolence. On the contrary, it is the most active force in the world... It is the supreme law. It is impossible to be really nonviolent and be passive in the face of social injustice” (Gandhi, M, 1985).

In a similar vein, father maryknoll Donald Hessler, a pioneer of nonviolence in Mexico during the sixties, stated: “Nonviolence is the most violent of violences, but it does not use weapons which destroy the adversary, but rather which try to induce in him/her a change in favor of truth and justice... It is a humble and bold force at the same time”. (Hessler, D., 1992). And we add what Gandhi said about not being able to wait thirty years while an adversary changes his/her actions towards justice, and this is why we must apply nonviolent action.

This culture embodies principles as a form of life and methods of struggle as a form of action directed at social change. There is permanent debate over which of these aspects should prevail in each social situation or identity; this debate, especially in the field of action, sometimes sparks dichotomic ruptures between living according to one type of ethics but acting according to another, for example, using nonviolence in some strategic opportunity but, at the same time, encouraging deprivation and injustice. The great masters of this culture have always insisted on the paramount importance of coherence: “Happiness is achieved when what you think, say and do are in harmony” (Gandhi, M, 1985).

If we could begin to explain in detail –using our own experience— the different areas from which nonviolence can be approached, or even adopted, bearing always in mind that it is an “entirety”, in the same way as in peace there are areas of education-culture-construction, we could say that here too different aspects have developed historically, such as direct social action, philosophy, spirituality, experiences of community life, just and solidary economics.

The basic principles have their roots in religious, spiritual, humanist, cultural, social, economic and political traditions of humanity, in its broadest and most pluralist sense. For example, Christianity sees a nonviolent model in the life of Christ, especially in the passage about “respect for the enemy”; Buddhism in “compassion” and “detachment”; the indigenous peoples from all over the world have grown and survived thanks to their close integration with Mother

Earth or *Pacha Mama* for some South American cultures, or the “Good Life” in Ecuador and Bolivia (*lekil kuxlejal* in tzeltal, a Mexican Maya group); Islam states one of the most important universal principles of nonviolence, which unite a vast majority of traditions, in the words of Mohamed: “do no harm and you will receive no harm”. In other words, do not do to others what you don’t wish they do to you. If this were a reality, surely the world would be different and much more humane.

If we were to delve more deeply and conceptually unite the more universal and characteristic principles of the philosophy and practice of nonviolence –which have accumulated and been enriched by the actions and reflections of peoples and outstanding individuals from all over the world-- along certain reflective axes, we would find that:

- 1) It is a force based on the power of Truth and Love. For Gandhi, “Love is the greatest force in the world and, simultaneously, the most humble imaginable” (Gandhi, M., 1985). It is a practice and social struggle which collaborates in the age-old task of making our species a bit more human, as part of an unfinished process which still has a long road to cover, with so many genocides, massacres, famine, arms races, death penalties, repressions and injustices which we observe daily on a worldwide scale.
- 2) At the same time, the first requirement of nonviolence resides in respecting and promoting legitimate justice around us and in all possible territories, making a distinction between a human being and his/her acts. To avoid “dehumanizing” the other, it is necessary to know more about the social process that built his/her inhumanity, and thus be able to face it and stop it, without hating the adversary nor eliminating him/her, even when he/she shows the desire to do that with us.
- 3) It is also necessary to avoid falling into the trap of increasing the “spiral of hate, violence and war” in which we are operating, many times from the point of view and the logic of the strategy used by the adversary to provoke and attack us, with the aim of destroying us.
- 4) On the other hand, the means must be as just and humanized as the ends, because the means are an end in themselves. We must escape from the logic which is dominant in the present day world and capitalism that “the end justifies the means”. Gandhi used to say that “the means are like the seed, and the end is like the tree. There is an inescapable relationship between the end and the means. It would be as if you expected a rose to grow from a weed” (Gandhi, M, 1985). And he added: “There is no road towards peace; peace is the road”.
- 5) Finally, in the fields of culture, education and direct action, it is essential to build bodies, social identities, groups and movements capable of

practicing a “due disobedience to any inhuman order” (Marin, J.C., 2014), in contrast with “a priori obedience to authority and to any order for punishment it may dictate”.

Civil resistance

Nowadays, in Mexico, the idea of nonviolent social struggle associated with civil resistance has become very frequent, including in this concept all forms of conflict over territorialities, identities, cultures, natural resources and bodies, principally in the sense of “defense of”, in the face of an attack with intent to plunder, expropriate, repress or exterminate. Resistance is undertaken using all possible means, from culture to knowledge, with available resources on the part of groups-organizations-movements-individuals involved in the conflict, within a broad array of tactical and strategic alternatives, which can range from armed struggle to extreme nonviolence.

Michael Randle states that “Civil resistance is a method of collective political struggle based on the idea that governments ultimately depend on the cooperation, or at least the obedience, of a majority of the population, and the loyalty of the military, the police and the civilian security services... It works on the basis of mobilizing the population so that it withdraws that consensus, attempting to undermine the opponent’s sources of power, and attract support from third parties” (Randle, M., 1998).

In his “Indian Constructive Program”, Gandhi stated from the beginning his fundamental idea concerning power in the relationships between people and authorities, in terms of social struggle:

“For a long time, we have been accustomed to thinking that power originates in legislative assemblies. I consider this belief to be a grave mistake, caused by inertia or by the effect of some collective autosuggestion. A superficial study of British history has led us to believe that power is entrusted to the people by parliamentary assemblies. The truth is that power comes from the people who, for a determined period of time, entrust it to the representatives we have chosen. Parliaments can have no power, not even existence, independently from the people. During the last twenty years I have strived to convince the people of this simple truth. Civil disobedience is the key to power. Let us imagine a whole people refusing to conform to laws in force, and willing to suffer the consequences of this insubordination” (Ameglio, P., 2002).

And Gandhi himself enriches the previous paragraph: “Even the most authoritarian governments find it impossible to stay in power without the

consent of the people. As soon as the people cease to fear the force of the tyrant, his power crumbles. Democracy is not made for those who endure like sheep. In a democratic regime each individual jealously protects his/her freedom of opinion and action” (Gandhi, 1985).

Moving on to social struggle, nonviolent actions of civil resistance (Ameglio, P, 2002) –they are not the only form of civil resistance— tend to grow in intensity when a given level proves insufficient to achieve the proposed objective. A theoretical approach to this idea of the intensity of struggle in terms of levels, should take into account the following:

- 1) The ideal solution would be that conflicts should be settled on the first level, by means of agreements, negotiations between parties, or legislation; when this is not achieved, should the conflict be made public, with the object of involving more people (forums, statements, media campaigns, conferences, pamphlets...);
- 2) The failure to achieve the objective on the first level would spark mass mobilizations or action of groups in open spaces (marches, demos, sit-ins, caravans, brigades, pilgrimages...);
- 3) If these mobilizations are not sufficient, acts of social, political and economic non-cooperation would commence in which, without violating any law, actions which benefit and enhance the power of the adversary and his/her allies are suspended (money, obedience, disinterest: strikes, stoppages, boycotts, hunger strikes...);
- 4) And, finally, civil disobedience would be applied, in which –openly and consciously (individually or collectively)—it is decided to disobey a law, regulation or rule considered to be unjust or illegitimate, and/or which goes against our conscience (the conscience comes first, then the law), even at risk of eventual punishment. “Civil disobedience is an inalienable right of every citizen; he/she cannot waive it without waiving his/her humanity... Nonviolence and cowardice exclude each other. If there is not real daring, there cannot be nonviolence” (Gandhi, M, 1985).

One of the most common and costly mistakes we have observed over decades in our country is that of associating nonviolence with civil disobedience automatically and mechanically, without realizing that the latter is the last phase of any nonviolent struggle, which cannot be improvised, nor organized and carried out lightly, without planning and much previous preparation, due to the need to build the necessary moral and material strength that make it legitimate and radical, in the face of the adversary’s reactions and provocations, which will be equally radical and legalistic.

The main nonviolent weapon is the accumulation of “moral strength” – derived also from the increase in “material strength”— and a “permanent firmness” (which sometimes means not moving from a given place until your demands have been met) needed to achieve the objectives of the struggle. For this reason, it is of primary importance to make the truth of any given conflict as visible and well-known by society as possible –by means of the media and public acts—, so that social pressure forces authority to apply justice. Historic experience teaches us that, in any nonviolent effort, it is of primary importance to convene as many people as possible, attract more and more allies of all types, of which those with more “social power” are particularly strategic, as they make up a nonviolent weapon defined as a “moral reserve” which, if mobilized on the streets or in public places, to undertake acts of firmness proportional to the violence that is being faced, will make the authorities become more sensitive and liable to concede popular demands.

In this sense, we need to be aware that the nonviolent civil resistance acts undertaken by a group, movement or individual must strive to maintain a degree of intensity proportional with the violent actions developed by the adversary; if not, the effect of the pressure applied will be insufficient. And it is obvious, too, that our own actions must be graded according to the strength and support on which we can count, thus avoiding unnecessary risks, provocations, repression or unnecessary defeats.

The capacity to attract and incorporate into the struggle part of the “moral reserve” of a country is very important for breaking the “asymmetry of power” which often exists between the parties in conflict. However, in cases like the Mexican one, in which we are faced with great levels of war and impunity caused by the connivance between organized crime, authorities of all levels and associated business sectors, support at rhetorical, symbolic and verbal levels on the part of the moral reserve is not enough; it is essential that those representing this reserve should “interpose their bodies” in non-cooperation and civil disobedience acts, proportionate to the high levels of violence brought to bear against the population.

It is precisely due to this lack of involvement in actions of greater intensity and presence of bodies in public spaces that the “moral frontier” of inhumanity has advanced in our country so much in terms of normalization and impunity. That is why relatives of victims, along with peoples and communities defending their territories, resources and cultures, have often been obliged to strive alone, and in the face of great risks of repression and extermination, in the construction of truth, justice, reparation and no

repetition. These relatives have gone through many phases, in at least the last ten years of social struggle, in making themselves visible in magnitude and dignity for both the country and the world; they have organized themselves country wide, individually and collectively; they have undertaken infinite actions –legal, social and mobilizations in the name of human rights— to pressure authorities and others involved in the disappearance of their loved ones; until, at present, they have been forced to discover and dig, with their own hands, in sites reported to conceal clandestine graves.

The Search Brigades for Missing Persons, which have been organized in nearly every state in the country, and which embark on new activities every week, led by relatives of victims, sometimes with the grudging support of authorities, and in other cases without even that, represent a very important example of how to escalate nonviolent actions in the face of unacceptable levels of impunity, foot-dragging and complicity of authorities with organized crime. Thus, the relatives have decided to “take into their own hands, without asking for permission” (as Zapatista commander David would say in Oventic in 2003), the search in the field of their loved ones (whether alive or in clandestine graves), in a nonviolent autonomous direct act of non-cooperation (To co-operate would have implied waiting for the authorities to decide when to start and do the searches). Thus, they began to do what authorities have not done, more out of complicity than due to lack of resources. By these means, more than two thousand clandestine graves have been unearthed in Mexico.

In this sense, the struggle has grown considerably. However, the challenge now is to exert much greater pressure to accelerate and optimize the deadlines for the identification of body remains and bones found in the clandestine graves. Without this, the conflict remains barely half cleared up, and the personal, family and social drama only grows larger. This present phase in which as many major social sectors possible –starting, for example, with churches, universities and intellectual hierarchies, those with greater “social power”— should interpose our bodies; our material, human and spiritual resources; along with our moral determination and indignation – powerful nonviolent weapons if channeled strategically (Arendt, H, 2005; Hessel, S, 2010)— to serve the relatives in their quest to exert decisive pressure and “permanent firmness” against the authorities.

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