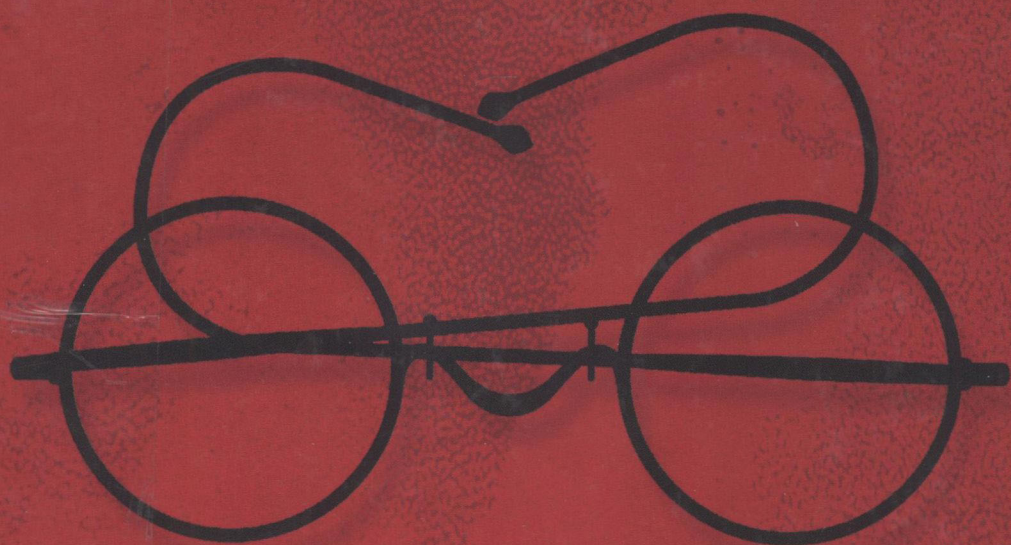


# NONVIOLENCE IN POLITICAL THEORY

IAIN ATTACK



# NONVIOLENCE IN POLITICAL THEORY

Iain Attack



EDINBURGH  
University Press

© Iain Attack, 2012

Edinburgh University Press Ltd  
22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF  
[www.euppublishing.com](http://www.euppublishing.com)

Typeset in 11/13pt Palatino by  
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and  
printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British  
Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 3871 0 (hardback)  
ISBN 978 0 7486 3378 4 (paperback)  
ISBN 978 0 7486 3379 1 (webready PDF)  
ISBN 978 0 7486 4967 9 (epub)  
ISBN 978 0 7486 3377 7 (Amazon ebook)

The right of Iain Attack to be identified as author of  
this work has been asserted in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

## PREFACE

Nonviolence has been a central feature of my research and teaching in Peace Studies for more than ten years and for even longer as a basis for my practical involvement in campaigns for peace and human rights. It is through campaigning, teaching and research that I became interested in exploring the deeper connections between nonviolence as a form of political action and some of the central issues of political theory, concerning the role of power and violence in human affairs.

Much of the writing about nonviolence has focused on chronicling and documenting its uses in specific campaigns or political events, sometimes as a core element of significant social and political change; in other cases, to be supplanted by various forms of political violence; and, in some instances, to be defeated or crushed by more powerful political opponents. Efforts to assess the reasons for these successes and failures, and to provide a more strategic and systematic approach to using the methods of nonviolence effectively, have also been prominent in the literature on nonviolence. These discussions have been shaped, to some extent, by the distinction between so-called principled and pragmatic proponents of nonviolence – the former, basing their commitment to nonviolence on ethical or, perhaps, religious principles; and the latter, on evaluations of its political effectiveness.

My aim in this book is to take these discussions and debates to another level. Nonviolence as a form of political action necessarily connects to some of the core themes in political theory, concerning forms of political organisation, the relationship between the individual and the state and the role of violence and coercion in political institutions and processes of social change. In other words, it encompasses issues and concerns that go beyond a specific focus on documenting historical examples of nonviolence, or its distinctive characteristics as a form of

strategic political action, to connect to broader themes within political theory. This book is an attempt to evaluate some of the core concepts and assumptions associated with nonviolence, in the context of these broader themes and debates within political theory.

The purpose of this evaluation is both to critically examine some of the theoretical presuppositions of nonviolence and to argue that such an exploration of nonviolent political action can contribute to, and expand, the scope of political theory. In other words, instances of nonviolent political action are not simply spontaneous eruptions of popular sentiment (although this can be one of their apparent features) that are somehow marginal to the essential issues of political theory. Rather than being mere political epiphenomena that somehow distract us from the real business of politics, such examples of nonviolence in action raise crucial and profound questions for central themes within political theory. Thus, it is hoped that such an exploration of the place of nonviolence within political theory will strengthen our understanding of nonviolent political action and help bring it in from the margins of political debate and discussion, through demonstrating its relevance and contribution to some of the central themes of political theory.

My colleagues in the Nonviolence Commission of the International Peace Research Association have provided an open and congenial environment in which to subject some of the ideas and arguments in this book to critical scrutiny, in the form of papers presented at successive IPRA conferences. Some of Chapter 5 appeared as an article on 'Nonviolent political action and the limits of consent' in *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 111 (December 2006). Similarly, much of Chapter 6 is reprinted with permission from 'Pacifism in international relations', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Ethics and International Relations*, ed. Patrick Hayden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

I would like to thank the Irish School of Ecumenics and Trinity College Dublin for providing me with the research leave that allowed me to complete the manuscript for this book. My colleagues – Etain Tannam and Gillian Wylie, in particular – bore the brunt of my absence from the International Peace Studies programme during this time, for which I am very grateful. The postgraduate students in the International Peace Studies programme also provided a helpful forum for testing, developing and scrutinising many of the theories of, and ideas about, nonviolent political action that appear in this book. I would also like to thank Nicola Ramsey of Edinburgh University Press for encouraging

my book proposal on such a speculative topic and for her continued patience while awaiting delivery of the typescript.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for accepting my need for time and space for research, thinking and writing. Their interest in the values and actions that underpin my own involvement in, and questions about, nonviolent political action provided necessary support and encouragement at crucial stages in the writing of this book.

*Iain Attack,  
Dublin,  
December 2011*

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	iv
Introduction	1
1 The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Political Action	6
2 Political Theory, Violence and the State	34
3 Nonviolence, the State and Civil Resistance	68
4 Nonviolence and Political Power	100
5 Structure, Agency and Nonviolent Political Action	132
6 Pacifism and Nonviolence	158
Conclusion	186
<i>Bibliography</i>	189
<i>Index</i>	197

## FIGURES

4.1 Three types of power	112
4.2 Grievance group and resistance group	118



## INTRODUCTION

Nonviolent political action has played a significant role in achieving social and political change in the last century and continues to be a vital feature of many campaigns for democracy, human rights and social justice. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were prominent proponents of nonviolence in the twentieth century, but nonviolent political action, or civil resistance, has also been central to toppling communist regimes in Eastern Europe, for example, and, more recently, in pro-democracy popular movements in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. The so-called 'Arab Spring' (especially in Tunisia and Egypt) and popular responses to the current global financial crisis, in the form of the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement, for example, demonstrate, once again, the widespread appeal and continuing relevance of this type of political action.

This book connects some of the central characteristics of nonviolent political action to fundamental themes within Western political theory. It examines some of the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of proponents of nonviolent political action, concerning the role of the state and the rule of law or the nature of social and political power, for example. The purpose of this critical scrutiny, however, is both to identify the contribution nonviolence can make to our understanding of some of the core concerns of political theory and, also, to move beyond discursive accounts of nonviolent political action to a deeper understanding of this distinctive form of political activity.

Thus, this book augments historical accounts of particular instances of the use of nonviolence for political purposes and, also, the efforts to develop a systematic understanding of the conditions for its effectiveness, with a critical examination of nonviolence in the context of political theory. Nonviolent action raises crucial issues for our understanding



of political power and the role of violence and force, or coercion, in human affairs, in particular. Nonviolent action provides an innovative and, at times, hugely influential approach to social conflict and political change and, yet, it remains somewhat marginalised, misunderstood or dismissed as, perhaps, an aberration or diversion from core political concerns. Similarly, proponents of nonviolence have focused on chronicling its successes, explaining its effectiveness and promoting its use, without necessarily assessing it against deeper issues and debates in political theory. Nonviolence can make an important contribution to political theory, but can also benefit from it, in terms of improving and developing its own theoretical sophistication. Exploring key themes of nonviolent political action, in conjunction with some of the central concerns of conventional political theory, will strengthen and deepen our understanding of both.

#### APPROACH TO THE TOPIC

There are three dimensions to the approach of this book – to the place of nonviolence in political theory. The first involves identifying key themes in some of the central proponents of nonviolence, especially Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Gene Sharp. The second focuses on seminal texts in Western political theory, particularly those associated with social contract theory (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau), because these help identify central issues that are relevant to a theoretical analysis of nonviolent political action. The third involves applying these central themes that have emerged from the examination of nonviolence and political theory to a discussion of shared issues or concerns.

Two shared themes emerge, in particular, from the examination of the conjunction of nonviolence with political theory, that are most useful for analysing nonviolent political action: power and violence. Such themes also reflect the two central components (sometimes implicit, rather than explicit) of nonviolence as a form of political activity. These are: a commitment to peaceful forms of political action and an understanding of the power of popular mass-based political movements. A full understanding of nonviolent political action requires an equal analysis of both its peaceful and its popular power components. These two components are interdependent, because the methods of peaceful political action (identified by Gene Sharp under the categories

of protest, non-cooperation and intervention<sup>1</sup>) are effective, precisely because they are equally available to all and do not depend upon access to weapons or restrictive, hierarchical or secretive forms of military or political organisation. Peaceful or nonviolent forms of political mobilisation can be successful, precisely because they unleash the full potential of popular power.

According to its proponents, nonviolent political action is effective because it utilises a particular understanding of the nature of political power, known as the consent (or, sometimes, pluralistic) theory of power. In simple terms, this theory claims that the capacity of any regime to govern depends ultimately on the consent, compliance and obedience of the population it rules. When this consent or compliance is withdrawn by sufficient numbers of people (or social groups), no regime – no matter how oppressive or undemocratic – can survive. Nonviolent political action is effective precisely because it can organise the withdrawal of such consent on a mass basis, using the methods of protest, non-cooperation and intervention. This is the basis of the popular power associated with nonviolent political action.

Proponents of nonviolence – from Tolstoy through to Gene Sharp as prominent, prolific and representative examples – incorporate the full spectrum of what is sometimes identified as principled (ethical/violence) versus pragmatic (political/power) approaches to nonviolence. Principled proponents of nonviolence tend to focus on ethical or, perhaps, religious objections to the use of violence. Pragmatic proponents, on the other hand, emphasise the political significance and effectiveness of nonviolent action and, hence, perhaps, its power dimension. Nonetheless, the book tries to build upon, and go beyond, these sometimes limiting and possibly artificial divisions between principled and pragmatic approaches to nonviolence, to examine such issues in the wider context of political theory. Thus, these themes of power and violence coincide with, and help identify, specific issues that emerge as core concerns at the intersection of nonviolence with political theory, such as state sovereignty and forms of political organisation and tensions between pacifism as an ethical position and nonviolence as a form of political action.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 begins with the categories of principled and pragmatic approaches to nonviolence, to identify characteristics of nonviolent political action that are relevant to broader themes in political theory. Gandhi's pioneering use of *satyagraha* ('truth-force'), as a form of mass, nonviolent civil resistance,<sup>2</sup> provides a useful link between a philosophical or principled commitment to nonviolence and its effectiveness in achieving social and political change.

The second chapter focuses on social contract theory and justifications for the state as a form of political organisation that ostensibly limits and contains violence, while retaining violence as its ultimate sanction for preserving and maintaining the social order, both internally and internationally. Hobbes and Locke are examined as philosophers of peace, for instance, but tensions between individual autonomy, popular sovereignty and the centralised, hierarchical state are also explored.

The next chapter (Chapter 3) begins to apply some of these themes at the intersection of nonviolent political action and political theory. It opens with an examination of Tolstoy's three-part critique of the state, based on its use of violence, its reinforcement of social and economic inequality and its restrictions on individual autonomy or freedom.<sup>3</sup> It then examines Gandhi's more ambivalent attitude towards the state and civil disobedience as a form of nonviolent direct action that directly challenges the state. The chapter concludes by distinguishing between two forms of nonviolent action – civil resistance and transformative nonviolence – differentiated, at least partly, by their attitude towards the state as a form of political organisation.

Chapter 4 examines the nature of power from the perspective of nonviolent political action and, especially, the so-called consent (or pluralistic) theory of power, which forms the basis of explanations of its effectiveness. This view of power is especially significant for Gene Sharp, as a proponent of the pragmatic (and strategic) use of nonviolent political action.

The following chapter (Chapter 5) continues with this theme, by discussing some of the criticisms of the consent theory of power and embedding it in broader concerns around structure and human agency. In particular, Gramsci's concept of hegemony<sup>4</sup> and Foucault's views on micro-power<sup>5</sup> are used to expand our understanding of the consent, compliance and obedience that form the basis of this theory of power.

The final chapter (Chapter 6) moves from the focus on internal processes of political or social change, directed at an oppressive and unrepresentative state, for example, to examine the relevance of non-violent political action to international relations and the problems of war and armed conflict. It also shifts from the discussion of the role of power in nonviolent political action in the preceding chapters, to examine issues connected to the ethics of nonviolence and its relationship with pacifism.

An important aspect of the content and structure of the book as a whole is that the theorists and themes discussed and identified in the opening two chapters of the book are employed in response to core issues for nonviolence and political theory examined in subsequent chapters. These include power, violence, state sovereignty, war, political authority and individual autonomy. In this way, the book attempts to fulfill its objective of providing a more systematic analysis of the intersection between nonviolence as a form of political action and some of the central concerns of political theory.

### Notes

- 1 See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Part Two: The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973). This is the second volume of Sharp's three-volume work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. The whole of this volume is dedicated to examining these three categories of nonviolent action, with specific methods discussed in connection with each of the three categories.
- 2 Gandhi discusses satyagraha in many places, but a useful volume is: Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, Bharatan Kumarappa (ed.) (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1961).
- 3 The analysis of Tolstoy, in terms of his three-part critique of the state, is my own, and this is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, 'Nonviolence, the state and civil resistance'. See, also, Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York, NY: The New American Library, 1968); Leo Tolstoy, *Government is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism* (London: Phoenix Press, 1990).
- 4 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
- 5 See Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

## Chapter 1

# THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF NONVIOLENT POLITICAL ACTION

### INTRODUCTION

Nonviolent political action, civil resistance or 'people power' have become increasingly important mechanisms for achieving significant political and social change, especially where both conventional constitutional politics and political violence or armed force have failed. This has become particularly noticeable during the last century or so – a century devastated by war and armed conflict, but also characterised by a trend towards democratisation and popular sovereignty, as well as the recognition and protection of fundamental human rights and civil liberties. Recent examples of political change, achieved through nonviolent action or civil resistance, include the 'Arab spring' (especially regime change in Tunisia and Egypt), the so-called 'colour revolutions' in countries such as Georgia and the Ukraine and the end of Communist Party rule in the countries of Eastern and central Europe. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King pioneered the use of nonviolent political action in the twentieth century, and Gene Sharp subsequently developed a theory of strategic nonviolence to help explain its political effectiveness. Nonviolent political action has been used to resist and defeat authoritarian and undemocratic regimes, to challenge racial segregation and promote and protect human rights and to end colonial rule and achieve political independence.

Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash recognised the importance of this form of political activity in their recent volume of case studies, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*. The opening paragraph of the book states:

Civil resistance, which has occurred in various forms throughout history, has become particularly prominent in the past hundred years. Three great overlapping causes – decolonization, democratization, and racial equality – have been advanced by campaigns of civil resistance characterized by extensive use of non-violent action. So have many other causes: workers' rights, protection of the environment, gender equality, religious and indigenous rights, defence of national cultures and political systems against foreign encroachments, and opposition to wars and weaponry. Civil resistance was one factor in the ending of communist party rule in many countries in 1989–91, and hence in ending the Cold War. The world today has been shaped significantly by this mode of political action.<sup>1</sup>

Nonviolent political action and civil resistance involve a powerful confluence of ideological or philosophical concerns based on anti-war sentiment and moral opposition to the use of violence, and pragmatic considerations about the most effective way to mobilise popular power and to resist and replace authoritarian or undemocratic regimes and protect fundamental human rights.

Martin Luther King claimed that nonviolent political action provides a middle way, between acquiescence to an unjust or evil system and violent resistance to it. Acquiescence may seem like the easier way, but it 'is not the moral way. It is the way of the coward'. This is because to 'accept injustice or segregation passively is to say to the oppressor that his actions are morally right'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, for King, violence 'as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral'.<sup>3</sup>

The third way open to oppressed people in their quest for freedom is the way of nonviolent resistance . . . With nonviolent resistance, no individual or group need submit to any wrong, nor need anyone resort to violence in order to right a wrong . . . Nonviolent resistance is not aimed against oppressors but against oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Nonviolent political action provides an effective form of mass mobilisation against injustice that avoids the immorality of both acquiescence and violent resistance, according to King.

Nonviolent political action can be 'understood as a set of methods with special features that are different from both violent resistance and

institutional politics'.<sup>5</sup> Mark Garavan, for example, contrasts what he calls 'the politics of moral force' with 'conventional, parliamentary politics on the one hand and . . . physical force or violence on the other'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a basic definition of nonviolent political action could be: collective action outside the formal institutions or procedures of the state that avoids the systematic or deliberate use of violence or armed force to achieve its political or social objectives.

Michael Randle uses the term 'civil resistance' to refer to nonviolent political action,<sup>7</sup> in order to emphasise its character as collective action on the part of ordinary citizens or civilians, outside conventional political structures or organisations (such as political parties).<sup>8</sup> In other words, as well as avoiding the systematic use of armed force or violence, nonviolent action is also collective political action on the part of ordinary citizens or civilians, organising themselves directly through civil society groups or social movements to achieve their political or social objectives. It tends to be based in the institutions or organisations of civil society, outside the established institutional or constitutional procedures of the state.

Furthermore, such collective action often involves popular resistance to the policies or structures of an oppressive state or government, which explains why it is based in civil society. This provides us with a positive definition of nonviolent action as involving not merely the absence of violence (negative), but also the strengthening of the capacity for popular power and popular resistance against oppression and injustice (positive).

The relationship between nonviolent political action and both political violence and constitutional politics is a complex and subtle one. Although the methods of nonviolent political action can be distinguished from these other two forms of political activity, it is often employed in tandem with one or both of them, in the context of specific campaigns for social and political change. Thus, the US civil rights movement relied upon the legal system and the federal government to alleviate racial segregation. Similarly, the ending of apartheid in South Africa involved both mass nonviolent civil resistance through the United Democratic Front and political violence through the armed wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe, for example.

An important distinction is often made between those who use the methods of nonviolence political action for pragmatic reasons and those who have some underlying principled ethical or religious com-



mitment to nonviolence. Pragmatic proponents of nonviolent political action use these methods, because they seem to be the most effective under the circumstances or because armed resistance or armed conflict are not realistic options. Principled proponents of nonviolence, on the other hand, attach some deeper ethical or religious significance to avoiding or replacing violence in political action and social relationships more generally.

The iconic figures of twentieth century nonviolence, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, tend to be associated with principled nonviolence and, yet, as theorists and scholars of nonviolence (such as Gene Sharp and Adam Roberts) point out, the vast majority of the instances of nonviolent political action or civil resistance involve individuals or groups who are using it for pragmatic reasons. They may not even employ the language of nonviolence to describe what they are doing, and, in many cases, they are only dimly aware of the rich history of nonviolent political action in other parts of the world and of recent efforts to systematise and develop a theory of strategic nonviolent action. According to Sharp: 'There has been much variation in the degree to which people in these conflicts have been aware of the existence of a general nonviolent technique of action and have had prior knowledge of its operation'.<sup>9</sup>

The vast majority of those involved in any of the campaigns associated with nonviolent political action – from the struggle for Indian independence in the first half of the twentieth century through to the 'colour revolutions' in countries of the former Soviet Union in the first decade of this century and, even more recently, the 'Arab spring' in North Africa and the Middle East – would have a largely pragmatic commitment to the use of nonviolent methods. Gandhi certainly acknowledged that many, if not most, of his colleagues in the Indian National Congress and the majority of Indians who took part in *satyagraha* or campaigns of mass nonviolent civil disobedience employed these methods pragmatically, rather than for reasons of principle. He recognised it explicitly in his distinction between nonviolence as a policy (pragmatic) and the *dharma* (or ethical law) of nonviolence.<sup>10</sup>

Timothy Garton Ash, in the conclusion to *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, states that the authors of the various case studies arrive 'separately but almost unanimously' at the same view,<sup>11</sup> concerning the preponderance of pragmatic over principled examples of nonviolent political action:

The choice of non-violence, we find them arguing again and again, was more pragmatic than principled, and often less unequivocal than is generally assumed. Even Gandhi countenanced the use of armed force in some circumstances. Only a very few of the leading actors in these histories are true pacifists, like the Theravada Buddhists of Burma . . .<sup>12</sup>

Like Gandhi and King, the Burmese monks have an ethical commitment towards the use of nonviolence, derived from Buddhism and their monastic code, but this places them among the few who employ the methods of nonviolent political action primarily for moral or religious reasons.

There are two important concerns of nonviolent political action that correspond to this distinction between pragmatic and principled reasons for employing it. These are power – the political dimension – and violence, which is the ethical dimension. Thus, we find pragmatic proponents of nonviolence, such as Gene Sharp, primarily concerned with developing theories of social power peculiar to civil resistance or nonviolent political action, which help explain its effectiveness in resisting even the most oppressive or authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, principled or ethical supporters of nonviolence are interested in promoting civil resistance or nonviolent action as an alternative to violence, where constitutional methods, for example, are unavailable, incomplete or insufficient, because of the harm to human beings (and, in some cases, all living beings) resulting from violent forms of political action, whether perpetrated by individuals, states or other social groups.

This is not to say that principled or ethical proponents of nonviolence are uninterested in its effectiveness, in issues of political power or in achieving or realising other ideals or values, such as democracy or human rights. Gandhi epitomises the connection between an underlying philosophical commitment to nonviolence and a concern with political effectiveness. It is more that their primary ethical concern is with replacing or eliminating violence as a feature of social life. Principled proponents of nonviolence are committed to the use of non-violent methods because they assign it intrinsic value or significance as a political objective so that such methods are not merely extrinsic to some other valued political objective, such as political independence or democracy.