

Slandering Nonviolence

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Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines "nonviolence" in its political sense as "nonviolent demonstrations for the purpose of securing political ends." It also defines it as "abstention from violence as a matter of principle" and "avoidance of violence," but, of course, as the civil rights movement of the 1960s showed, nonviolent demonstrations don't always avoid the violence directed against them by the state, and those protected by the state. However, as the movements of nonviolence led by Martin Luther King and Gandhi demonstrated so well, determined nonviolent political struggles can often achieve significant ends. The quiet dignity of such demonstrations puts the onus on the state and the forces it backs and directs when they engage in violence against nonviolent demonstrators, making nonviolent demonstrations effective both as moral witness against oppression, and as a tactic that succeeds in achieving at least some desirable ends.

Ironically, three great advocates of using nonviolence to achieve freedom and justice in the 20th Century—Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and Robert Kennedy—all died violently, felled by assassins. Their nonviolence could not prevent the violence of others. (Of course, Kennedy came only lately to the "nonviolence" mantle, after King's assassination; yet, his pleas for civility and for negotiating an "acceptable" end to the Vietnam War were derided as appeasement and wistful pacifism by the U.S. right. Here in Indianapolis where I live, mention of Robert Kennedy's renowned speech announcing the murder of Dr. King and calling for peace nonetheless, given in an Indianapolis park, was buried deep in an unrelated story by the *Indianapolis Star*, a consistently archconservative, pro-Republican newspaper.)

Nor was the civil rights movement of the 1960s spared from the violence of those who couldn't tolerate its nonviolent insistence on justice. According to official statistics, at least 217 civil rights activists lost their lives in that campaign. And the list of martyrs for that cause is sickening to comprehend. It ranges from four African American children killed in the fire bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama church to the gunning down of Medgar Evers, and to the death by torture of those three civil rights workers in Mississippi whose names read in unison rings as a tocsin—Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman. Then there was Viola Liuzzo, gunned down in her car, and up North (or what Malcolm X called "up South") in Cleveland, the Rev. James Reeb, crushed beneath a bulldozer as he sat protesting the razing of Black homes. And so many others. Those who are nonviolent are often not spared from the very violence they resist doing themselves.

This, to me, can separate nonviolence from simple pacifism. Nonviolence used as a tactic to fight for justice does not prevent the violence of those determined to maintain the injustice. Nonviolent struggles against oppression, despite their quiet moral dignity and tactical efficacy, do not prevent, or even necessarily curtail or dissuade, the violent retaliation of the oppressor. Nonviolence itself carries the risk of being struck down violently, despite its merits.

And yes, nonviolence may generate anger among its practitioners, who get tired of being beaten and jailed, and seeing their friends and fellow nonviolent activists beaten and jailed, and sometimes killed. And yes, they can get angry at the obdurate state, which lets the perpetrators of violence against them get away with it. Malcolm X understood this, and while some in the IPJC [Indianapolis Peace & Justice Center] have invidiously contrasted Malcolm X against Martin Luther King as the "apostle of violence," Malcolm X never killed anybody, even though he was killed. Nor did the

mid-1960s Black armed self-defense group in Cairo, Illinois, the Deacons for Defense, ever kill anyone, and neither did 1960s Black self-defense advocate Robert Williams of Monroe, North Carolina, who had to flee the U.S to avoid being framed for kidnapping.

While some member of the Black Panther Party in New York state were convicted of killing police officers, commonly in legally dubious trials, the Party itself was continually infiltrated, besieged and harassed by the forces of "law and order." Black Panther Party head Huey Newton was charged with killing a cop, but was not convicted; Black Panther Party leader Bobby Seale was also charged with murder, but was also acquitted. Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Bobby Hutton were both killed by the police, though both were unarmed. Hutton was a teenager living on Oakland, California. Hampton, prominent Black Panther Party leader in Chicago, was actually killed while he was sleeping!

Terry Bisson wrote trenchantly for *New York Newsday* in 1995:

The Panthers are not America's only political prisoners; there are scores of American Indians, MOVE militants, Puerto Rican *Independentistas* and white radicals serving draconian sentences for what can only be deemed "political" crimes. But I single out the Panthers because they have been in jail the longest; because every veteran of the sixties, black and white, was inspired by the courage and commitment of these politicized ghetto youth; and because their treatment is so transparently, so cruelly, so shamefully vengeful.

The Panthers are still being punished for the violence of a decade of struggle in which crimes were committed on both sides. Policemen were killed, it is true (though far more Panthers were killed by police). But it is no secret that violence and criminality by police was a desperate issue in the Black community, then as now....Rodney King was not the first African-American man beaten unmercifully by police; he was only the first on prime-time TV. And J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO program was only the most notorious of many illegal government operations aimed at preventing the rise of a "Black Messiah."

Let this remind us not so easily to forget the violent "nonviolence" directed against Martin Luther King and other justice advocates by constant FBI spying, and through its attempts to brand King and others as dangerous subversives. Let us not so easily forget the defaming of King for standing up to Lyndon Johnson and the liberal Democratic Party establishment on the war in Vietnam. (King was, in fact, called "the most dangerous man in America" by J. Edgar Hoover. He was not nearly so eulogized in his lifetime as he was in death, and certainly not embraced as an advocate of "color-blindness" by the Rush Limbaughs and Glenn Becks of the 1960s. In fact, just the opposite—he was a racially-motivated agitator who deliberately stirred up people without justified grievances, according to the conservatives and segregationists of that time, while "racial moderates" would often separate King's goals, which they lauded, from his confrontational tactics, which they decried.)

Nor let us so easily forget the legacy of violence directed throughout U.S. history against those who sought simple economic and social justice and an end to imperialist wars, from Haymarket Square to Kent State, from the murderous outrages committed by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1911 to the police rampage against the Little Steel union picnickers in 1938. All the way up to torturing prisoners suspected of "terrorism" today, ever since 9/11, at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and Bagram, and "renditioning" others to friendly foreign countries for torturing and forced confessions there. But, as Alfred W. McCoy's book, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror* shows, it happened much earlier as well. Violence is, indeed, "as American as

cherry pie.”

State violence against the downtrodden and oppressed rising up to demand justice is the great red thread woven through world history. It was put very well in the “Appeal from Russian Intellectuals” in honor of the 90th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution (2007):

The October Revolution is often termed a “violent overthrow.” Yet the actual “overthrow” in Petrograd occurred almost without human victims. While we are not advocates of violence, we recognize that it is inevitable at particular stages of historical development, when it is bound up with the presence of class and national antagonisms.

Revolution is indeed associated in many respects with violence, as was clearly evident, for example, in the bourgeois revolutions in the Netherlands, England, France and so forth. The ending of slavery in the United States was accompanied by the bloodiest conflict of the 19th century, the American Civil War. In Russia, the ending of feudalism was also accompanied by wars and revolutions.

These developments were not called forth by the machinations of political intriguers, but by the crisis of the old system and by the impossibility of solving age-old problems by evolutionary methods. People resort to revolutionary violence in specific circumstances, when the ruling classes, blinded by thirst for their own enrichment and for the maintenance of their privileges, neglect the well-being of the people.

The dispossessed classes then have no choice except to take their fates in their own hands. (*Against the Current* 131, November/December 2007, p. 19)

This makes nonviolence, then, but one weapon in the hands of these “dispossessed classes [who] have no choice except to take their fates in their own hands.” Such was the context of the nonviolent movement of Gandhi, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa: all of them facing the armed, violent might of the oppressor state. To thus conflate nonviolent struggle with pacifism, to righteously decry the “violence on both sides” when the massively greater means of violent power are held by one side only, and by holding such power can contemptuously ignore these solemn pleas, can only disarm the “dispossessed classes,” tie their hands behind their backs as they face a formidable foe, and in fact, in doing so, only engender more violence. Nonviolence is an honorable and useful tactic in the struggle for economic, political and social justice; pacifism, too often, is only a pious and utopian wish, a phantasm. Thus, to me, to conflate nonviolence with mere pacifism is to dishonor nonviolence, to soil it, and, ultimately, to slander it.