People’s power prevails

Stellan Vinthagen has rebellion and nonviolence on the schedule
Xmas eve 2013, the phone rings at the home of Stellan Vinthagen. It is the University of Massachusetts who is informing him that he has been named the world’s first professor in the study of nonviolent direct action and civil resistance.

“The academic appointment, which is directly aimed at overthrowing dictatorships and promoting human rights, was the best Christmas present I could ever imagine.”

THE ECO-VILLAGE on Orust is seductively picturesque, even on this grey, cold January day when the GU Journal is looking down the winding roads. One finds here some twenty ecologically built houses, fruit trees, a forest, and a flock of sheep peacefully grazing in the meadow. Water is obtained from the adjacent lake and the root zone wastewater treatment system is built by craftsmen from the alternative community of Christiania in Copenhagen.

We are heading to a white house with green-painted gingerbread work from 1861. This is where Stellan and Li Vinthagen have lived for the past 7 years. They’ve recently returned from Amherst, Massachusetts,
family has previously been active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, as well as the civil rights movement, but wishes to remain anonymous.

“...The United States is full of contracts. While the country accounts for just over half of the world’s military spending and performs more interventions than any other country, there is also a strong tradition of resistance in a way that hardly exists in Sweden anymore.”

THE SELECTION PROCESS took the university two years in order to choose the person they thought was precisely right for the position. Among other things, Stellan Vintagen had to undergo, he was subjected to some thirty interviews and had to give two test lectures as a part of the appointment process.

“They wanted someone who could build networks, apply for research funding, and collaborate with both activists and academics. And that is precisely what I have been doing throughout my entire academic life!”

Stellan Vintagen was raised on stories about Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. His father was a conscientious objector and his grandfather a trade union activist who ended up in a Swedish military prison during the war because he let in Jews when he was supposed to be guarding the border in Slovakia.

“My parents were perceived as hippies in the small community of Ramsö outside of Ljungby where I grew up with new-age yoga and meditation in a kind of vegetarian dharma. My first protest action, which I performed already as a four-year-old, was one day when I rushed to the meat counter in the local grocery store and pinched a sausage that I immediately gobbled up. The butcher had a good laugh, as being the only vegetarian in the countryside there, we were of course quite well known, but my mother insisted anyway on paying for my snack.”

TODAY, HE BOTH uses snuff and he drinks, and a vegetarian he is not. But the most important lesson from his parents, that a human being has a moral responsibility for what he does with his life, followed him throughout his life.

“The wisdom of life, however, didn’t come only from his family.

“Today I am utterly and completely disinterested in sports. But when I was young, it was football that taught me that with discipline and diligent training, things can actually get better. And this applies in all areas: human beings have the capacity to both do good and to do bad, but with practice we can strengthen that which is good.”

In the 1980s, Stellan Vintagen was active in the Ploughshares movement, protesting against the JAS–30 Gripen and Boeing, among other things. In 1986, he was one of the activists who eventually got three months in a West German prison for having knocked down and breaking the firing equipment to a nuclear missile. In 1998, he participated in a campaign against the British nuclear submarine Trident, which led to six months behind bars. He also protested against the Trident in 2007, along with seventy other researchers, via the Academic Seminar Blockade. And in 2012 he was one of the eleven Swedes who were arrested by the Israeli authorities on the Ship to Gaza ship Estelle.

He wrote part of his doctoral thesis while in jail.

“When I got to university, I thought at first that I would be considered controversial. But I have never experienced this. Instead, it is from activist meetings that I have literally been thrown out.”

But that his time in jail would ever be regarded as an asset when he applied for the professorship in Massachusetts is something that Stellan Vintagen had not expected. Nor that collaboration with activists all over the globe would be a crucial part of the job.

“There are those who argue that social scientists must be neutral vis-a-vis the subject they are studying, but I don’t agree with that. Let’s compare this with medicine. No one questions the fact that medical researchers collaborate with medical clinics and make use of their practical experience in order to fight disease. I look at conflict and peace research in the same way: there are activists around the world who under difficult circumstances build up knowledge about how to conduct resistance. To me it is a given that my research is ultimately about supporting their struggle for democratization and human emancipation.”

FOR EVEN if the state of the world may seem bleak, things are happening indeed. Since the 1970s, people in about forty countries have managed to free themselves from oppression and these societies have evolved towards greater freedom via resistance as a part of people's movements, moreover, almost entirely without the use of violence.

“There is hardly anything that is stronger than organised popular power! Democratization is remarkably hopeful in South Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Chile, for instance, and not least in many countries in the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe. One looks at the past 100 years, peaceful resistance as a political movement has been twice as effective as armed struggle. The world has never before seen such a popular mobilisation and trans-national cooperation as it has today. The fight is far greater than it was against slavery in the 1800s, for example. But what really surprises me is that so few researchers have taken an interest in how the Latin American military regimes fell, in Solidarno, or in the longing for freedom that we now see in the Arab world. Traditionally, the examinations conflict
and peace researchers engage in focus on exploring the causes of war, dictatorships, and injustice. Now it should be time to find out how to proceed further and achieve change."

But Stellan Vinthagen does not want to act as a megaphone that uncritically passes on what activists want to promote.

“My job instead is to be sympathetic but critical: why don’t the uprisings bring better results?; what are the internal difficulties?; are there power struggles on-going or even outright oppression also among these people? As I myself have been devoted to civil disobedience, I can detect such things which the activists, for good reasons, are reluctant to talk about.”

FOR EVEN THOUGH it is difficult to overthrow a dictator, the work that follows is even more difficult. Then the groups that have fought together with each other try to reach agreement and get along with each other, and that this doesn’t always go so well is shown, for instance, with the developments in Egypt.

What needs to be done is to the highlight good examples, such as South Africa, argues Stellan Vinthagen.

“After the clear-cut electoral victory in 1994, the ANC, instead of governing in an unlimited way with unrestricted power, invited the former opponents to join them in a unity government. Although South Africa today is just as unequal as before, and the ANC might be considered quite corrupt, what they have done there is that they have been able to establish a democracy.”

What would be then give for advice to protesters, for example to the young people in Hong Kong, who in December were evicted from their tent camps?

“In Hong Kong, the activists made three mistakes: firstly, a little group fighting against an overbearing regime should not be making demands that are too excessive; it is better that change happens in stages. Secondly, it is ill-advised to choose their opposition at a tent camp or some other physical location that can be attacked; instead, the resistance should be combined with methods such as boycotts or something like that that is difficult to access. The third failure was failing to spread the mobilisation to the Chinese mainland. But think for a moment, what if the activists had been able to learn what to do by taking a course from experienced activists and scholars? That is what I hope, with my research, to achieve.”

For those who want to engage in peaceful resistance, they have to find cracks in the system, emphasizes Stellan Vinthagen.

“To bring Hitler round to reverse course for instance, would hardly have been possible. On the other hand however, it is possible to establish relationships with a few people within the regime who can contribute to an easing of the repression. But the trend towards a more high tech warfare makes this much more difficult. How does one for example protest against the military in the US flying a war with the help of remote controlled drones and therefore never sees the people they kill? In Pakistan, activists have put out huge pictures on the ground so that the drones should at least register a human face.”

What seems to be the most difficult to resist is an occupation, explains Stellan Vinthagen.

“THEREFORE WHAT I hope is to bring together groups from, for example, Palestine, Western Sahara, West Papua and Tibet in order to be able to share each other’s experiences and learn from previous resistance movements.”

Sweden has a strong tradition of solidarity, Stellan Vinthagen reminds us.

“For instance, in the early 1990s, Sweden provided half of the ANC’s annual budget, and Sweden was one of the first countries to give recognition to the PLO. However today we increasingly seem to be living in a glass bubble where the outside world does not exist.”

We have simply forgotten that even Sweden’s development into a democracy with extensive personal freedom is based on civil resistance argues Stellan Vinthagen.

“Every part of the Swedish Constitution can actually be traced back to the great popular movements’ peaceful struggle, where a combination of strikes, blockades and a clear willingness to compromise created success. Today, it seems the Swedes believe that it is sufficient to present a good argument, but in my view, fundamental change requires that we dare to take personal risks.”

RIGHT NOW, Stellan Vinthagen is looking forward to this spring’s upcoming trips, especially to the United States.

But when we go out to the chilly air, from the yard he points out over the lake. Through the grey haze we can catch a glimpse of a small building standing on the waterfront.

"At the dock over there, we see the eco-village’s wood-fired sauna. Sure, it is interesting to visit foreign countries. But the first thing I crave when I arrive home from a long distance journey, it’s over there, to a lovely hot bath in the sauna."