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by David M. Craig

Reflecting on the writer’s internal struggle between the sense of futility and the need to persevere, the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald described the test of a first-rate intelligence [as] “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” (1) Stellan Vinthagen’s book, A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works (London: Zed Books, 2015), passes a similar judgment on Mohandas Gandhi. Even if Gandhi resisted the “Great Soul” title of Mahatma, his genius included a capacious imagination and experimental creativity that not only embraced opposed ideas, but also put them into action simultaneously. Some of the contradictions in Gandhi’s nonviolence are familiar. His aspiration for spiritual purification could sometimes conflict with his political strategizing. The nonviolent resister’s opposition to oppressive rules and roles stands in tension with solicitude for the people who support and benefit from the status quo. Vinthagen multiplies the contradictions inherent in nonviolent action, interpreting them as “a creative tension, a dynamic that gives nonviolence its social ‘force.’” (Vinthagen, 321)

Vinthagen’s original contribution is to map out these tensions in a general sociological theory of nonviolent action. For Vinthagen, Gandhi is the primary source and theorist for all discussions of nonviolence, but he also draws Gandhi outside of his historical context and religious identity. A good illustration is Vinthagen’s disagreement over the role and significance of suffering in nonviolence. Gandhi links suffering (tapasya) to a Hindu ideal of renunciation. In his re-reading of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita, Gandhi exhorts everyone to follow the samyasi’s practice of renunciation and always renounce the fruits of one’s actions. In place of personal goals, right action aspires to Truth. The clearest sign that devotion to Truth has displaced personal goals is a person’s openness to suffering even to the point of losing one’s life.

As Vinthagen observes, this willingness to suffer sometimes becomes, in Gandhi’s writings, a macho expectation thatpersonal
martyrdom is essential to self-purification as the highest goal of Hinduism and nonviolence. For example, when Gandhi criticizes the use of birth control and affirms male celibacy as the pinnacle of sexual self-control, he flirts with “a patriarchal assertion of a man’s power over others and his feelings.” (214) Here Vinthagen turns to feminist accounts of suffering in the communal experience of consciousness-raising. Listening to other people’s suffering builds social bonds of empathy and trust. In the process there grows solidarity among many people who are ready to suffer on behalf of each other. Thus, paradoxically, the heartfelt response to another person’s suffering is what propels the nonviolent resister to accept potential suffering for herself, all in an effort to stop human suffering. This voluntary suffering may build bridges within a community or even across opposing groups of people, but Vinthagen argues that suffering itself has no intrinsic value, pleasure or joy. This shift from the individual to the social, from the internal struggle of opposed ideas to the creative tension of practical paradoxes, reflects Vinthagen’s move to understand nonviolence on a social field of power relations and collective norms. His goal is a general theory that accounts for the “sociality” of nonviolent action even as the theory can be flexibly adapted to diverse social contexts.

The book divides into two main sections. The first section traverses familiar terrain for readers of this website, as the introduction and opening two chapters review the tenets of Gandhi’s work and the literature on nonviolence. On this foundation Vinthagen constructs a novel theoretical system of the core components and practical dynamics of nonviolent action. Starting in Chapter 3, the second section draws on Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action to identify and develop four ideal types of action employed by practitioners of nonviolence: dialogue facilitation, power breaking, utopian enactment and normative regulation.

Even the familiar yields new insights in Vinthagen’s drive for theoretical clarity. For example, in the introduction he revisits the old debate about whether the effectiveness of nonviolence lies in moral purism or tactical innovation. As a both/and thinker, Vinthagen criticizes advocates of one side versus the other, singling out those religious thinkers who celebrate the mystical power of suffering for a just cause as well as the followers of Gene Sharp for whom nonviolence is a grab-bag of techniques for social change. There is a hint of the American pragmatist John Dewey’s idea of social reconstruction in Vinthagen’s rejecting the two opposing dogmatisms. In Dewey’s pragmatism a society’s problems emerge within particular contexts that include both social institutions, roles and relationships, on the one hand, and moral habits, norms and principles, on the other. As a result, problems in current arrangements of power are always within a context. Likewise, the moral resources for addressing problems are embedded in the cultural situation, but they need an experimental imagination to articulate and apply them anew. Dewey argued that norms and principles do not pronounce conclusions about what one must do. Rather they are moral hypotheses about the different ways we might choose to act. The evolving meaning of norms and principles depends on the concrete expressions that people work out in their efforts at social reconstruction. Although Vinthagen never mentions Dewey, tactical strategy and moral ideals work hand-in-glove in his “social pragmatism of nonviolence.” (8)

Chapter 1 provides readers with a conceptual overview of Gandhi’s writings on nonviolence and a literature review of nonviolence studies. Even the great Gandhi was defined by social contexts in South Africa and India. His practical method of nonviolence and his spiritual search for Truth were both unabashedly experimental. Thus Vinthagen treats Gandhi’s writings as “a touchstone not as a book of answers.” (25) Central to Vinthagen’s brief but cogent summary are a dialogical ideal of Truth and a constructive account of ahimsa (non-injury). First, Gandhi saw Truth as transcendent yet dialogical. Truth exceeds human comprehension, but the only path to it is a practical endeavor to serve the truth just beyond one’s grasp. Truth lies beyond one’s grasp because it is known by setting aside the personal desires and goals that normally grab one’s attention. The pursuer of Truth must doggedly serve the limited and relative truth he or she sees, while learning from, and being corrected by, other people’s truths. Second, nonviolence is also multisided for Gandhi in extending beyond resistance and self-purification. Vinthagen stresses Gandhi’s Constructive Programme, the organizational effort to create counter-institutions, roles and relationships to cultivate ahimsa in a community and its members’ character. The ashrams that Gandhi founded and the long periods he lived there with fellow Satyagrahis were the basis of his own constructive program, though he imagined broader economic and political reform through such practices as weaving khadi and the village governance of swaraj.

Vinthagen’s literature review of nonviolence studies has the scope and clarity to be expected of an educator and activist working in the field since 1980. The key stepping-stone in this history is Sharp’s science of nonviolence. Although critical of Sharp’s circumscription of nonviolence as technique, Vinthagen embraces Sharp’s account of power and affirms its Gandhian origins. For Sharp, power is not monolithic. Power is not held by governments, corporations, or institutions. Power is not even held over people. Instead power operates in relationships among people, and power is allowed and enabled by individuals’ participation in them. Power can be compared to the dance of society. It is highly interpersonal in its operation while depending on and gaining momentum through social hierarchies and group efficacy. For Sharp, as for Gandhi, nonviolence begins with the radical individual act of withdrawing one’s consent from existing orders of power. That is why Vinthagen calls nonviolence “libertarian” even as it also serves the social values of equality, mutuality and inclusion while cultivating collective capacity for action and reform. Renunciation remains a key ingredient in Vinthagen’s theory, though it sheds its distinctively religious and specifically Hindu quality in this secularized social science of nonviolence.

Chapter 2 summarizes Vinthagen’s conceptualization of previous theories of nonviolence. The ambivalent tensions of nonviolent action are front-and-center. As always, Gandhi is a practical guide into the abstractions of Vinthagen’s theoretical system. Gandhi once commanded his son to oppose violence with violence if his only other feasible option was to flee in cowardice. This advice is an arresting reminder that nonviolence is much more strenuous than simply avoiding violence oneself. Here we arrive at the fundamental tension in Vinthagen’s account. Refusing to define nonviolence in order to preserve its constructive ambiguities, he offers this formula: “Nonviolence = without violence + against violence.” (12)

On the one hand, practitioners of nonviolence employ entreaties to dialogue, visionary appeals, organizational structures and means of resistance that place peaceful coexistence at the center of all of their actions. On the other hand, practitioners are driven by a steely-eyed determination to oppose violence in all of its manifestations, from the overt force of military, police or corporate might to the subtle habituation to gender, racial, class and other hierarchies performed in daily life. This practical tightrope walk must unite two other tensions: first, between the movement’s ends and means, second, between its morality and practice. Two basic distinctions
must also be navigated, namely, that the movement’s target is violent actions not people and an individual’s relative truth is a necessary but limited step toward mutual truth. (79)

The second section of the book is the truly original contribution of Vinthagen’s philosophical sociology. I have lingered over the Gandhian foundations of the theory, but it is indebted as much to Habermas. Specifically, Vinthagen uses Habermas’s analysis of the four ideal types of action as a heuristic device for mapping out the distinctive modes of nonviolent action. Goal-rational action is the basis for nonviolent resisters’ power breaking efforts. Communicative action motivates their strategies for dialogue facilitation within their community and in the public sphere. Normative action appears both in nonviolent resisters’ challenges to prevailing social norms and in their exemplary fastidiousness in respecting the dignity of their opponents and appealing to higher laws of conscience. The expressive dramaturgical action of symbolism anticipates the utopian enactment of a nonviolent society.

Chapter 3 introduces each type of action using engaging illustrations of a West German anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s and the US Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The descriptive analysis of the protests staged outside a West German nuclear weapons base—an all-day orchestral concert, a series of medical lectures by physicians and nurses to their students, a Christmas tree market, a sit-in by nineteen judges—is evocative. The organizers combined the strategic blockade of the transports carrying nuclear weapons with dramatic performances of alternative values. Although lasting only ten days, the performances were a communicative olive branch to the police officers monitoring the protests and the soldiers working on the base. Each protest countered the official appeals to the security of nuclear deterrence with norms of beauty, health, festival and justice.

Chapters 4 through 7 each take up one of the four types of nonviolent action. In analyzing each dimension independently, Vinthagen has two main goals. First, he is responding to criticisms of Habermas’ theory of communicative action that charge him with failing to account for the many barriers to open dialogue and democratic deliberation. Each type of nonviolent action unlocks different obstacles. Dialogue facilitation navigates the social reality of “various truth claims, disagreement and dogmatism” by modeling inclusive participatory dialogue within a movement and challenging dominant patterns of public argument. Power breaking disrupts structures of “power, injustice or oppression” through the various means typically associated with nonviolent resistance. Utopian enactment counters “hatred, stereotypes or enemy images” with aesthetic performances of a better society and universal values. Normative regulation cultivates personal virtues and habits in a counter-society that detaches people from and subverts “the legitimised and socialised use of violence.” (130-131) For Vinthagen, the Gandhian pursuit of Truth through nonviolent action is essentially a moral quest and practical toolkit for opening up dialogue in situations of intractable conflict with opponents who have no desire to negotiate with or even hear the cries of the oppressed.

The second purpose of these chapters is to provide practitioners with “how-to” guidance. Each chapter includes lists of strategies for conducting one type of nonviolent action. For example, the chapter on dialogue facilitation bullet-points a variety of group discussion formats used by nonviolence trainers and applicable to social movements as well as classrooms. The chapter on power breaking lists techniques of counter-discourse, non-cooperation, hindrance, withdrawal and dramatization through humor. Vinthagen punctuates these chapters and the rest of the book with illustrations from a rich assortment of nonviolent movements in the twentieth century and across the globe. Often the most memorable parts of the book, these examples will suggest many ideas for practitioners. But readers will have to plow through pages devoted to conceptual definitions and the critical theory of Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu.

My personal favorite is Chapter 6 on “Nonviolent Utopian Enactment.” Social movements are emotionally charged. Protesters adopt the symbolic postures of slogans and gestures. People move to the beat of songs. Today photos and videos are fast-forwarded in a visceral experience of personal immediacy. The power of nonviolence is partly vested in its capacity to generate emotions that touch the heart. As Vinthagen observes, fear, hate and enemy images pervade public life and are authorized by cultural authorities, government agencies or the state. Rational arguments will have little appeal if their advocates are not even recognized as human equals. (209-210) To counteract the emotional blockages that divide people, utopian enactment consists of actions that dramatize a vision of a better society of affirming relationships, a vision that invites both active opponents and passive onlookers to see their own desires fulfilled therein. To be effective, the aesthetics of the action must be direct and personal. Social role-playing, choosing to risk suffering and other dramatic techniques create a vivid tableau of emotional connections infused by empathy and affirmation. Wearing the mask of dignified, open and amicable rebels, protesters thwart the expectations of their opponents. The audience of onlookers is prodded to identify not merely tacitly but emotionally either with the dominant order of power or with protesters. Vinthagen’s use of dramaturgical theory is very effective here in demonstrating the breadth and depth of nonviolent action.

The final chapter returns to the ambivalences of nonviolent action. Vinthagen categorizes how each of the four modes of action advances the twin goals of “without violence” and “against violence.” He indicates how narrow understandings of nonviolence—whether religious or technical—latch onto a subset of the broader array of activist tools and hinder efforts at social change. Vinthagen’s schematized layouts of the components of nonviolent action help keep the full range of nonviolence in view. He also describes characteristic tensions that practitioners must navigate, for example, between the power-breaking pushback of resistance and openings for dialogue.

My own sense of the scope and permutations of nonviolence has been enormously enriched by reading this book. Scholars of nonviolence, social movements, critical theory, feminism and social, political and religious ethics will find the volume instructive. The book will inspire research projects as scholars test out the theory’s applicability to historical and contemporary movements. Whether the general reader or even the committed activist will make it all the way through the book is another question. The engaging interludes about nonviolent movements and the practical observations about the flexibility of nonviolent action make the effort worthwhile. The richness of the detail may make it something of a Bible of nonviolent action that people will want to consult in portions as they piece together their own campaigns and search out untapped domains of action with which to experiment. In this sense the book stands in Gandhi’s tradition of experimentation while demonstrating how the core elements of his thought and practice open new vistas for the future of nonviolence.

Endnotes: (DMC)


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