

# **Nonviolent Action; How It Works**

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## Nonviolent Action: How It Works

### I

An old man, his thin hair lifted by the breeze, steps forward on the Boston scaffold and waits patiently while the noose is fixed around his neck. A young Negro with horn-rimmed glasses tries to pray while behind him someone puts out a cigarette on his neck. A minister of foreign affairs tells Bismarck that, rather than yield to unreasonable demands, he will allow his beloved France to be occupied by German armies. Jewish leaders prostrate themselves before Pilate, saying that, before he places the insignia of Caesar in the temple enclosure, he will have to remove their heads.

These events, separated from each other by centuries, have something in common: all are cases of nonviolent action. We use this term “nonviolent action” because, though the behavior of the persons described is determined enough, and even in its own way forceful, it is without physical violence. As it happened, the nonviolent action was successful in these cases; the Quakers were given religious liberty by the Puritans, the sit-ins integrated the Nashville lunch counters, Bismarck backed down, and Pilate also relented.

Evidently, nonviolent action has some kind of power, even when the action is not very spectacular. The question then arises, what is this power? Some people say, “It is the power of God,” others say, “It is the power of love.” Either answer leads to further questions, for just as the astronomer

does not feel his task is done when he hears the stars defined as “the wonders of nature,” so we are not content with a philosophical description of nonviolent action. The task of this pamphlet, therefore, is to discover the *how* of nonviolent action.

## II

We want to know how nonviolent action works, and so we look at the opponents of the nonviolent campaigners to see what their reactions are to the campaign. From these reactions we may begin to work toward an understanding of the process or mechanism<sup>1</sup> involved. A difficulty immediately arises: instead of reacting in only one way to a campaign which finally proves successful, the opponents react in various ways. Sometimes the opponents change their minds completely about the issue, deciding that the campaigners were right after all. But then sometimes the opponents believe to the end that the campaigners are wrong, and yet they bow to the demands of the campaigners. Let us examine an example of the latter case.

In the fifth century B.C. the Roman peasants were suffering greatly as a result of the unjust social and economic systems of the time. The great landowners, or patricians, had all the political rights and most of the wealth. The plebeians resorted more and more to loans to maintain their families and pay the taxes. Finally, nearly crushed beneath the weight of these debts and frequent imprisonments, they left Rome in great numbers and camped on Mons Sacra, declaring they would not return until they were given a share in the government and in the common lands. No matter how reluctant the patricians were, they were forced to make concessions to the plebeians. They could not wage war or till the crops without the laborers.

Here is an example of what can fairly be called *coercion*. The plebeians actually took away the ability of the patricians to maintain the status quo, although they took away that ability by a nonviolent method. The patricians were coerced into lessening the injustice of their behavior.

Whether or not coercion of the opponent is a possible result of nonviolent action depends mainly on how dependent the opponent is on the nonviolent campaigner. The labor strike is a powerful weapon because the employer is dependent on the employees for his own goals. The boycott, too, usually depends for its effectiveness on the fact that the producer depends upon the purchaser for his own economic existence. The producer may not change his mind about the issues involved, but if the boycott is complete he is forced to concede.

### III

About 1531 the Portuguese began settling in Brazil. They met resistance from the Indians, as did most colonists, but in Brazil the tribes, particularly the Chavantes, were more ferocious than most. In 1650 an expedition in search of gold and diamonds entered the territory of the Chavantes. The Indians regarded this as an infringement of their hunting rights and massacred the expedition as it was crossing the river. To this day the river is called the River of Death.

Relations with the Indians continued to be stormy until 1910. That year Colonel Candedo Rondon took up the responsibility for relations between the government and the Indian tribes. As a soldier he had fought against the Indians, but in spite of this his Indian Protective Service began a radical new approach. Even in self-defense, firearms were not to be used. Rondon instructed his men: "Die if you need to; but kill, never."

One of Rondon's first responsibilities was developing the telegraph system in Brazil. Before 1910 even heavy garrisons at outpost stations had not been able to protect the lines from the embittered Indians. Rondon withdrew the garrisons, began giving gifts to the Indians as the line was built, and in every way possible showed the goodwill of the Indian Protective Service.

Twenty-six men were sent into Chavante territory to establish friendly contact. At first contact six were killed; a few days later the remaining twenty were massacred. Not one fired back in self-defense.

A second expedition was sent into the territory, and was unmolested. The unarmed men spread around visiting encampments with gifts, and bit-by-bit hostility decreased. Finally to their encampment came four hundred Indian warriors, spears blunted as a token of friendship, to make peace with the "tribe of white Indians." Instead of chopping down telegraph poles, the Indians soon began to report the incidence of fallen trees on the lines.

This little-known case of nonviolent action shows a real change of heart in the opponents. As a result of the actions of the nonviolent campaigners the Indians came around to a new point of view which embraced the ends of the campaigners; this mechanism we will call *conversion*. Conversion usually demands a great deal of patience from the campaigners. The classic Vykam Temple Road Satyagraha in India required sixteen months of standing at the barricade before the Brahmans were fully converted by the campaigning Untouchables. Such patience is rewarded, however, by gaining cooperation from the opponent.

#### IV

Sometimes situations occur in which one cannot say that the opponents have been coerced, for they could continue

to oppose if they wanted to; but we cannot call it conversion either, for the opponents do not accept the point of view of the campaigners. Nevertheless the campaigners succeed in achieving their aims. The opponents can be overheard saying, "Let them have what they want; it's too much of a nuisance to continue the fight."

Midway through the Salt Satyagraha of 1930-31 in India, many in the Bombay English community were reported by correspondent Negley Farson to be changing their attitude toward the campaigners. Many were "appalled by the brutal methods police employ against Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent campaign." The very Englishmen who six weeks before were the "damn-well-got-to-rule" type were saying, "Well, if the Indians are so determined to have dominion status as all this, let them have it and get on with it."

These Englishmen still believed in the Empire, but the Empire was not worth treating the Gandhians the way police were forced to treat them in order to repress them. They could have continued to support harsh action, but there was something about the behavior of the Indians which persuaded them not to do so. Let us, then, call this mechanism *persuasion*.

The American movement for woman suffrage found the same response on the part of some important political figures. The militant suffragists, impatient with the slow progress of "suffrage education," formed the Woman's Party under the leadership of Quaker Alice Paul. They began by picketing the White House. For some months this did not create much public notice; what there was seemed impartial or mildly antagonistic. The World War was being fought, and suffrage seemed a very minor issue. However, the picketing continued with ever more uncompromising slogans, demanding that the right to vote be given, asserting that the United States was no democracy if it kept its women

in bondage. The public became increasingly antagonistic, and when the signs appeared to the crowds to be unpatriotic, there were riots and demands for repression of the women.

Those who were picketing were taken to jail, and prison sentences became longer and longer, but the picket line grew with each measure of repression. Ladies of high prestige, including White House dinner guests, were sentenced to foul prison conditions, but when they were released many immediately went back to the picket line. One woman was arrested dozens of times!

The public continued to dislike the picketing but there was increased sympathy for these women who were suffering for their beliefs. Representative Volstead of Minnesota was reported as saying, "While I do not approve of picketing, I disapprove more strongly of the hoodlum methods pursued in suppressing the practice."

Dudley Field Malone, who said that he had first been irritated by the picketing, resigned as Collector of Customs for the Port of New York *because of the treatment of the pickets*.

Finally the issue of suffering became stronger than that of suffrage, and one congressman is reported to have said, "While I have always been opposed to suffrage, I have been so aroused over the treatment of the women at Occoquan (a prison) that *I have decided to vote for the Federal Amendment.*"

Some of the opponents were apparently persuaded that, even though the women were wrong, they were not really so bad as to justify long prison sentences. The women, like the Gandhians, were using the mechanism of *persuasion*.

## V

It now appears that there are three mechanisms of nonviolent action: coercion, conversion, and persuasion. A friend, who has been looking over our shoulder all this time,

is nevertheless unsatisfied. "All you have done," he says, "is to classify actions by their results. You find out that someone changes his mind about the campaigner, but not about the issue, and call that persuasion. If he changes his mind about the issue, too, you call it conversion. What I want to know is *why* he changed his mind. What does the campaigner do that causes such a change?"

Our friend has asked a forthright question, and it is one we will not try to evade. In order to answer it, though, we must again look at people and try to understand why they are willing to use violence in the first place.

## VI

All men, no matter how debased they may seem, treat well the members of their own group. Even the famous gangs of cold-blooded thugs who terrorized the highways of India received intense loyalty from their members. For these criminals the persons who "counted," who were their true fellowmen, were the other thugs. Their victims they despised as weak, foolish beings who only deserved to be exploited. Indeed, these thugs saw the travelers not as human beings, but merely as objects who no more had human feelings than the victims of the fly-swatter.

Again and again in history we see that violent persons do not regard their opponents as fully human. The Greeks, it seems, waged war only against "the barbarians." For the Massachusetts Puritans, the early Quakers were "ravaging wolves." African slaves were thought to be animals. Himmler repeated again and again that Jews were vermin, and vermin must be exterminated. The Nazis, in turn, were "mad dogs."

On the other hand, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier notes in his history of slavery that "where human relationships were established between masters and slaves, both slaves

and masters were less likely to engage in barbaric cruelty toward each other.” It is also known that debtor slaves were as a rule treated with more consideration than were foreign slaves obtained by capture and trade.

In sum, it is easy to be violent against those who are seen as either inhuman (“mad dogs”) or nonhuman (foreign slaves, unseen faces). The task of the nonviolent campaigners, then, is to get the opponent to see them as human beings. To understand how this is done we must look at close range at an actual case of nonviolent action — the case of the Quaker “invasion” of Puritan Massachusetts.

## VII

The story begins with the image the Puritans held of the Quakers; these now-gentle folk had been described in a letter from England as “railing much at the ministry and refusing to show any reverence to magistrates.” Quakers of both sexes were reported to have danced together naked. They were said to be plotting to burn Boston and kill the inhabitants.

Puritan hostility to Quakers was not only because they appeared to be such monsters, however; to admit groups like the Friends would have meant the end of theocracy and surrender of the Puritan “way of life” in a political sense.

In July, 1656, the first Quakers came to Massachusetts: Mary Fisher and Ann Austin arrived in Boston. They were greeted as though they carried the plague with them, and were sent out by the next ship. But two days after these first two sailed out of Boston harbor, eight of their co-religionists sailed in. In spite of harsh penalties the number of Quakers coming to Massachusetts constantly increased.

These formidable zealots carried the battle to the Puritans, avoiding devious means of spreading their message. They attempted to speak after the sermon in church, made speeches during trials and from jail windows during imprisonments, issued pamphlets and tracts, held illegal public meetings, refused to pay fines, and refused to work in prison even though it meant going without food.

Sixty-year old Elizabeth Hooton came back to Boston at least five times, being expelled each time, and she was whipped four times through neighboring towns. Even the death penalty did not deter the Quakers. While William Leddra was being considered for the death penalty, Wenlock Christison, who had already been banished on pain of death, calmly walked into the courtroom. And while Christison was being tried, Edward Wharton, who also had been ordered to leave the colony or lose his life, wrote to the authorities from his home that he was still there.

The public did not go unaffected by all this, however. The jailer's fees were often paid by sympathetic citizens and food was brought to the prisoners through the jail window at night. A number of colonists were converted to Quakerism by witnessing the suffering. For example, Edward Wanton, an officer of the guard at the execution of Robinson and Stephenson, was so impressed that he came home saying, "Alas, mother! we have been murdering the Lord's people."

When Hored Gardner prayed for her persecutors after her whipping, a woman spectator was so affected that she said, "Surely if she had not the support of the Lord she could not do this thing."

Governor Endicott was not so easily moved. When Catherine Scott indicated her willingness to die for her faith, the Governor replied, "And we shall be as ready to

take away your lives, as ye shall be to lay them down.” But the protest against the treatment of the Quakers continued to grow.

After William Brend had been so cruelly beaten that he seemed about to die, even Governor Endicott became so alarmed at the attitude of the people that he announced that the jailer would be prosecuted. The later execution of a woman, Mary Dyer, added to the discontent, and even the General Court began to weaken. Virtual abolition of the death penalty followed; there were problems in getting the constables to enforce laws which became ever milder. By 1675 Quakers were regularly meeting undisturbed in Boston.

## VIII

This story illustrates what seems to happen again and again in conflicts where the nonviolent campaigners succeed, where the success is not due to coercion. In the beginning the Puritans rejected any common feeling which might exist between them and the Quakers; to them the campaigners seemed inhuman — as they put it, “ravens wolves.” With such an image it was easy enough to persecute people. The Quaker suffering *trained the Puritans’ attention to a new area of common feeling*. In the Freudian sense they came to *identify* with the sufferers.

Identification, according to Freud, “may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person.” Through their suffering the Quakers brought the Puritans to perceive their common humanity. The Puritans reacted by reducing their persecution, for as Freud said, one of the effects of identification is “a person limiting his aggressiveness towards those with whom he has identified himself, and in his sparing them and giving them help.”

## IX

Our friend is not convinced. “You say that suffering changes the attitude of the opponent, for suffering forces him to see you as a human being. After all these words you have only echoed Gandhi’s belief that ‘suffering melts the heart of the evildoer.’ Wasn’t that idea discredited in World War II? If you and Gandhi are right the suffering of 6,000,000 Jews should have melted the hearts of the Nazis — and yet just the opposite often took place. Extermination camp guards were brutalized by the experience. How can your theory account for that?”

Our questioner has asked a difficult question, one to which a pat or simple answer must not be given. The persecution and suffering of the Jews under the Hitler regime raises many questions about the nature of man and civilization. But unless we can encompass evil of this magnitude in our understanding, we have no right to put faith in our theory of nonviolence.

If we look more closely at the idea we have been using, the idea coming from Freud that identification may arise with any new *perception* of a common quality, we must ask what perception really is. Let us imagine, for example, that we overhear someone saying, “It was devastating!” We do not know if that refers to a terrible storm or a clever repartee; our perception of the phrase will be confused until we hear its context. Psychologists call that which stands out the “figure,” and the context, the “ground.” It is the ground which removes the ambiguity.

In nonviolent action the figure is *suffering* and the ground is the *actions* of the campaigners which precede and accompany the suffering. Whether the suffering is perceived as human or nonhuman suffering depends upon these actions.

The values which the campaigners show by their actions are bravery, openness, and goodwill. These are values which everyone shares. When Wenlock Christison walked into the courtroom with the knowledge that he was by this act risking his life (bravery); when Edward Wharton wrote to the authorities that he was living in Salem (openness); when Hored Gardner prayed for the authorities after her whipping (goodwill): they were creating a context whereby people saw their suffering as human suffering, and it was possible to identify with them.

There now seem to be some distinctions between the sufferings of the Jews and the suffering of successful nonviolent campaigners. The suffering of the Jews was not voluntary. Except in Warsaw and a few other places, the opposition to persecution was not united. There were instances of Jewish suffering arousing compassion and sympathy, but the large picture is one of suffering unrecognized and ineffectual in bringing about conversion. Perhaps because the Jews had experienced a high degree of assimilation into the German society and felt, at first, they could dismiss anti-semitism as the ravings of a harmless minority; perhaps because the persecution increased gradually, with the Nazis using a "divide and conquer" technique; perhaps because the Jews were attached to society and to property, they were unable to resist collectively the oppression of the Nazis. To say "The Jews did not do thus and so and therefore their suffering was ineffectual" may seem callous. But if our theory is to be useful, we must test it, and must analyze the situations in which it seems disproven. The suffering of the Jews was incalculable, but the *ground* composed of their action (and inaction) caused their suffering to be seen as non-human. Suffering so perceived does not have the power to "melt the hearts of the evildoers." It may be noted that when the suffering of the Jews is perceived as human, even

now, it begins to have a leavening influence, as in the Europe of today.

## X

Identification by suffering in a context of goodwill, openness, and bravery, is the process which persuades and converts. Persuasion ends when I realize that "those whom I have exploited or violated are human beings like me," but conversion goes further than this. I am open to conversion when I agree to look again at the issue causing contention. This reexamination may take place through discussions and negotiations, or through silent supplication, as when the Untouchables stood for four more months on the empty Temple Road, when the barriers were taken down but the caste Hindus were still not converted to the idea of the Untouchables' right to the road.<sup>2</sup>

People change their attitudes most often when criticism of their attitude does not imply criticism of them. Separating the issue from the opponent, the "sin from the sinner," is difficult in any conflict situation; the nonviolent campaigners must take special pains to make the distinction clear. In the course of the Gandhi-led South African Satyagraha, for example, the government was seriously troubled by a railroad strike which was not connected with the campaign for civil rights. As a chivalrous "don't hit a man when he's down" gesture, Gandhi called off the campaign until the strike was settled. This one act seems to have been of enormous significance in leading to a settlement satisfactory to the Satyagrahis.

The campaigners must show patience also, if they are seeking to convert the opponent. In the Vykam Temple Road Satyagraha the Brahman opponents expected the Untouchables to reenter the roadway as soon as the police cordon and barricade were removed. The campaigners' restraint

threw them off balance, and this additional act of patience brought victory.

## XI

Our skeptical friend is back again. “You have spun out a neat little theory of nonviolent action, but it is only theory, after all. What if I should want to use nonviolent action to right a wrong in my neighborhood, or to oppose military preparations in my country? What good would your theory do me?”

If a theory leads to understanding, then it is good in itself; truth-seeking needs no justification. But that understanding may be useful in deciding what policies to take in neighborhood or nation, so before our impatient friend goes away, let us sketch out a few policy implications which derive from the theory.

1. It does not make much difference if we consider the opponent “civilized” or not. Nonviolent action works on such a fundamental level that cultural differences count for little. The savage Chavantes as well as the British, the fanatic Puritans as well as the patricians have been won over by nonviolent action. Accordingly, there is no reason why such action cannot be used against any national group today.

2. What it takes to get through to people will vary, depending on the campaigner’s ability to be recognized as a human being. The respected local doctor will have as much impact by standing on the corner with a sign as the outsider will by committing civil disobedience.

3. The “local doctor” is not always with us; this was the case for the early Quakers in Massachusetts and it is often our problem, too. We must, then, establish new bonds of identification with the persons we are trying to reach. These new bonds can be established by courageous self-suffering.

4. A decision should be made before the campaign begins regarding the mechanism(s) to be used. For example, let us consider the peace movement.

It is absurd to think that the government is going to be *coerced* by the peace movement into unilateral disarmament or anything else. The coercion mechanism depends upon a state of dependency between the opponent and the campaigner. Strikes succeed when the factory manager *needs* the workers. The government, it is apparent, does not need pacifists to accomplish its goals of military security. When the Air Force officers put on a sit-down in front of the Pentagon we can begin to think about “forcing” the government to adopt a real policy of disarmament. In the meantime, 300,000 or three *million* pacifists sitting down will not coerce the government because they are irrelevant to the defense structure of the nation.

If coercion is ruled out, that leaves conversion and persuasion. In many campaigns these mechanisms operate side by side, with some in the opponent’s camp being converted and others only persuaded that the campaigners are unfit objects of repression. Both mechanisms rest upon a series of acts of bravery, goodwill, and openness which will bring suffering to the campaigners.

5. Sitting down on the pavement, paying your fine, and going back to hearth and home is not generally considered great suffering. This is the problem of mass civil disobedience by the uncommitted. (In the suffrage case, the women nearly always went to prison.)

6. If the *image* is the important thing in establishing the common bond which will make the public and government ready to hear us seriously, then quality of participants is more important than quantity. Gandhi had good reason for insisting that a dozen dedicated, courageous nonviolent soldiers were better than thousands of campaigners who show to the opponent hostility and lack of courage.

7. Concern about “the image” should not lead us to superficiality. Merely appearing to be nonviolent is not enough; the heat of conflict melts masks. It is better for us to learn to draw on inner strength than to learn how to mime.

8. Action proposals are not defeated by the lament that antagonism may be raised. Raising antagonism is an indication of relevance. Some campaigns can never succeed without raising great hostility and persecution, as we have seen in earlier examples. The real question is, does the campaign have the staying power to get through the antagonism to the sympathy which lies on the other side?

## XII

In honesty, we cannot say that we are finished with the task we announced at the beginning of the pamphlet. The question of how nonviolent action works is complicated, and there has been too little research to say that this is the definitive word. We need more investigation. The problem of “how to combat evil without acting like the devil” will be with us until we better understand how to mobilize the forces of God, within ourselves and within those who differ with us.

### Acknowledgements

Roland H. Bainton, *Early Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1960). Bainton refers to the story of Pilate and the Jewish leaders on page 22.

Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1958). Perhaps our best book to date on nonviolent action, especially Gandhian. Good case studies, sophisti-

cated analysis. The story of the Vykom Temple Road Satyagraha is on pp. 46-50.

Bartolomey De Light, *The Conquest of Violence: An Essay on War and Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1938). An old book but still worth reading, it has the stories of the Roman plebeians and patricians (pp. 106-7) and Bismarck's frustration (pp. 139-40).

John Ferguson, *Rondon and the Chavantes* (pamphlet distributed by American Friends Service Committee, Phila. 7, Pa.). This story, well-told by Ferguson, is derived from Hernane Tavares de Sa's *The Brazilians: People of Tomorrow* and John Collier's *The Indians of the Americas*.

E. Franklin Frazier, *Race and Culture Contacts in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957). The discussion on social distance and what Frazier calls "the common moral order" is on pp. 45ff.

Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960). This is Freud's classic statement of the concept of identification; see especially pp. 49-50.

Mohandus K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961). Here are distilled the most important of the writings on this subject by the Copernicus of nonviolent action.

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"Public Witness," pamphlet by a working party of Friends Peace Committee (Philadelphia: Friends Peace Committee, 1962). Valuable for a list of techniques of nonviolent action, taken from a larger list compiled by sociologist Gene Sharp.

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Gene Sharp, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power: Three Case Histories* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960). Well-documented and detailed accounts of three nonviolent campaigns in India, including the great Salt Satyagraha.

Wilmer Young, *Visible Witness: A Testimony for Radical Peace Action* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 118). Makes clear the need for personal commitment in nonviolent action.

### Notes

1. Note that what we are calling a mechanism does not refer to a goal, for a variety of goals may be won by the same mechanism. Neither do we refer to methods such as boycott, strike, vigil, sit-in, although the methods people choose probably affect the mechanism by which they win. Finally, we are not referring to results, for we are discussing here only nonviolent action which yielded *favorable* results for the campaigners. The mechanism which we are considering in this pamphlet is the answer to this question: what happened to the opponents in the course of the struggle?
2. The Vykam Temple Road Satyagraha took place from the Spring of 1924 to the Autumn of 1925 in Travancore State, India. Its object was to remove the prohibition upon the use of roadways passing the temple by Untouchables. A group of several hundreds, many of them high caste Hindus, first made processions along

the road, then took up positions opposite a police barricade set up when orthodox Hindus used violence against the satyagrahis. Gandhi persuaded the authorities to remove the barricade, but the satyagrahis refrained from using the road until the Brahman opponents were fully won over to their position. In the autumn of 1925 the Brahmans declared, "We cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us, and we are ready to receive the Untouchables."