

THEORY

REVOLUTIONARY NONVIOLENCE

Revolutionary nonviolence emphasizes dialogue among radicals of different stripes and seeks to build unity around a shared commitment to revolutionary social transformation via mass civil resistance.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Matt Meyer

Matt Meyer is a long-time leader of the War Resisters League and a founder of the anti-imperialist collective Resistance in Brooklyn (RnB). His other work includes co-authorship of *Guns and Gandhi in Africa*, with Bill Sutherland, a ten-year stint as Multicultural Coordinator for NYC's Alternative High Schools, and serving on the Board of the Peace and Justice Studies Association.

“REVOLUTIONARY NONVIOLENCE NEITHER CELEBRATES PASSIVITY NOR FETISHIZES CONFRONTATION.”

For activists working for radical change, there is a useful distinction to be made between Gandhian, strategic, and revolutionary nonviolence. Gandhian nonviolence is a combination of constructive base-building programs and *satyagraha*, often interpreted in the Global North as a form of spiritual direct action. Strategic nonviolence takes a more tactical tack and focuses on the methods enumerated by Gene Sharp. Meanwhile, as Gandhi himself noted, revolutionary nonviolence suggests that it is better to engage in violence than to do nothing in the face of oppression, and that any popular movement must push beyond mere reformist change that leaves structures of oppression intact, even though this requires active confrontation.

Indian activist Jayaprakash (JP) Narayan made important advances in this line of thinking, calling for “total revolution” in a framework that included anti-authoritarianism, non-orthodox Marxism, and self-determination for all peoples. As a campaigner at the time of the Chinese communist revolution, JP’s main critique of Mao Zedong’s maxim that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun” was the simple observation that those with the most destructive weapons were never the masses of the population, but rather those with the most entrenched power and authority. JP suggested that Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (at least in its core intentions) bore striking similarities to *satyagraha*, in that both were meant to combat a profit-motivated mentality, and both sought to disarm the exploiting classes.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Earth First!
- The Salt March

Tactics

- Blockade
- Civil disobedience
- General strike
- Gherao (encirclement)
- Mass street action
- Occupation

Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Define “hardcore” strategically
- Escalate strategically
- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window

The greatest successes of the Chinese and Vietnamese strategy of people's war — which calls for mobile tactics and the creation of clandestine fighting units — often lay in the implementation of popular education programs, the creation of self-sufficient economic units, and the formation of mass-based organizations. The military successes were more ambiguous. Even in the heat of battle, some of the leaders of Africa's liberation wars, most notably Amílcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, commanded his followers to be "militants, not militarists." The widely repeated South African dictum that "nonviolence just didn't work" in the ultra-repressive context of the racist apartheid regime has been refuted in post-apartheid society, as even organizers of the armed struggle now openly question the ways in which authoritarian styles grew out of their military structures.

In the US context, mainstream academics are beginning to discuss what many African-American activists have quietly understood for decades: that the ideological and tactical differences between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Minister Malcolm X were never as contradictory or divergent as the popular narrative would have us believe. As each developed and matured, their analyses of the nature of the US state, and the variety of approaches needed to resist it, increasingly converged.

The theory of revolutionary nonviolence demands a nuanced view of struggle that does not over-emphasise the dichotomy between nonviolent and armed revolutionaries — that neither celebrates passivity nor fetishizes confrontation. It embraces the contributions of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Ubuntu philosophy: the notion that everyone's liberation is indelibly connected. Advocates of revolutionary nonviolence must include an adherence to strategic nonviolence, but also must maintain dialogues well beyond those who agree with that framework.

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

LEARN MORE

Revolution in Guinea
Amílcar Cabral, 1970

<https://www.amazon.com/Revolution-Guinea-Selected-Amilcar-Cabral/dp/0853452229>

Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare
James H. Cone, 1991

https://books.google.com/books?id=PU_DdaFtYAMC&lpq=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false

On Revolution and Equilibrium
Barbara Deming, 1985

<https://www.warresisters.org/store/revolution-and-equilibrium-barbara-deming>

- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Capitalism
- Cultural hegemony
- Direct action
- Hamoq and hamas
- Palace coup
- Revolutionary reform
- Strategic nonviolence
- The tactics of everyday life

Methodologies

- Pillars of power
- Spectrum of allies

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Colonialism, Community building, Democracy, Dictatorship, Direct action, Human rights, International solidarity, Militarization, Movement building, Nonviolence, Racial justice, State violence, Street protest, War and peace, Wealth inequality

Revolutionary Nonviolence

David T. Dellinger, 1971

https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/title/revolutionary-nonviolence/?clickid=WbA0sYwfo0AgxWYzGZyGoyLeUkjUYfUEK2U8XM0&cm_mmc=aff-_ir-_-121977-_-77416&ref=imprad121977&afn_sr=impact

The Wretched of the Earth

Frantz Fanon, 2007

<https://books.google.com/books?id=-XGKFJq4eccC&lpg=PR43&ots=3LHCX786s-&dq=wretched%20of%20the%20earth&lr&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Towards Total Revolution

Jayaprakash Narayan, 1978

https://books.google.com/books/about/Towards_Total_Revolution_Total_revolutio.html?id=Sk4MAQAIAAJ