

MEDIA MYOPIA AND THE POWER OF NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

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Summary

In reporting on the 1989 nonviolent revolutions that swept through Eastern Europe, when reporters mentioned nonviolence at all, they often described the movements and methods as curious, seemingly one-time anomalies. Rarely did reporters endeavor to comprehend the years of preparation that led to the revolutions. Seldom did they place the incidents within the rich and varied context of nonviolent history and acknowledge the effectiveness and moral grounding of nonviolent social change.

This overview centers on what some consider to be the media's tendency to marginalize, ignore, or distort the power of nonviolent social change. I begin with a summary of prevailing myths surrounding violence and nonviolence, including some suggested etiologies of these assumptions, followed by a brief overview of the nonviolent revolution that overcame Communist rule in Poland as a case study of these tendencies. I then examine several questions regarding the media's role in the shaping of public opinion, and the effects of public opinion on policy formation and implementation. The article concludes with some thoughts about how a citizens' movement could establish an expanded alternative or "parallel" media to increase awareness about the appropriateness for and the effectiveness of nonviolent social change.

1. Introduction

“If public opinion would frown against violence, it would lose its power.”

—Leo Tolstoy

Rather than Tolstoy’s vision of rejecting violence, much of human society honors what Gandhi referred to as “the enthronement of violence as if it were a natural (or eternal) law.” The implied or pronounced belief that violence, and only violence, works and is to be glorified and revered is endemic to much of the world. A great deal of this general orientation is due to a dualistic approach that: (1) assumes that violence is innate to the human species, and at the very heart of human history; and (2) that discounts or completely ignores the history of and potential for nonviolent social change. Gandhi’s consistent and persuasive explanation that war, rather than nonviolence, is the aberration, and that nonviolence is universal and natural stands in stark contrast to this pervasive, general orientation.

In this brief analysis, I propose that much of this discrepancy can be explained by widespread ignorance, and the failure of major media to provide alternative perspectives on conflict and nonviolent conflict transformation. When, for example, nonviolent revolutions swept across Eastern Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s, many major media outlets described the effectiveness of these nonviolent revolutions as so many peculiar anomalies. In very few cases were these and other cases of nonviolent social change explained as yet another example of organized, principled, and effective means of achieving major socio-political change.

Numerous variables are at play in these dynamics. They range from the impact of corporate profit maximization, to the influence of governments and wealthy elites on news media, to the perception that war and violence are exciting whereas conflict transformation and peace are, in comparison, tedious or even boring. To illustrate this point, journalists Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick refer to the strikingly poignant observation by Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery. Writing from his perspective as a member of the peace organization Gush Shalom, Avnery writes, “media report things that happen. If you do not kill somebody, you are not news.” Although it is beyond the scope of this inquiry to carefully examine each of these variables, this article concludes with some suggestions and recommendations for countering these trends. The recommendations include a summary of, and the potential benefits from, what has become known as “peace journalism.”

2. Myths about Violence

No matter what our cultural up-bringing, we can quickly call to mind well-known war novels, or identify popular war movies. Aside from a small assemblage of peace scholars, however, most people would be hard-pressed to name a famous anti-war book, or describe a well-respected anti-war film. Few of the general public regularly read newspapers, or view television programs devoted to international news. When we do, the tendency of most is to focus our attention on reports dealing with violent conflict, and to ignore or disregard accounts of peaceful dispute resolution. The vast majority of the news accounts available through the major media largely ignores or fails entirely to

report on instances of nonviolent social change. When conflicts on a community-wide, national, or international level are resolved nonviolently, many persons are either surprised at the efficacy of nonviolence, or consider the instance a curious but insignificant deviation from the norm. From a more generous perspective, such accounts are perceived as an example of the proverbial exception that proves the rule. Yet within our families, our communities, or within our individual nation-states, nonviolent dispute settlement is considered the expected norm. Indeed, news stories that tend to captivate audiences are those involving individuals who, contrary to standard operating procedures, choose instead attempts at violent means of resolving a dispute. By taking the law into their own hands, such individuals not only engage in illegal activity, their actions become newsworthy precisely because they pursue violent rather than nonviolent means. We know well the “heroes” of modern war, and even violent criminals within our cultures. Many, however, are woefully ignorant of important peacemakers and the nonviolent methodologies they have used. A similar tendency exists regarding revolutions. As Kurt Schock has observed, “violent components of revolution have typically been emphasized, if not glorified, while the importance of unarmed components, which have also characterized events defined by social scientists as revolutions, have often been downplayed, overlooked, or forgotten”.

Washington Post columnist and peace scholar Colman McCarthy, one of the very few Western journalists who pursues the principles of what has become known as peace journalism, is fond of engaging students in a classroom exercise comprised of a simple quiz. He begins by opening his wallet and revealing a \$100 bill. He then announces that the student who is able to correctly identify the six persons he is about to name will win the one hundred dollars. McCarthy reports that generally the students excitedly smile at one another, filled with great expectations about winning the money. He begins the quiz by asking who can identify Robert E. Lee. Hands shoot into the air, and it is clear that everyone is able to name the former general of the U.S. Confederate Army. He then asks them, “Who was Ulysses S. Grant.” The students respond in the same manner. McCarthy then asks them to identify Norman Schwarzkopf. Nearly all the students are able to successfully name each of these well-known U.S. military leaders. However when he asks, “Who was Jeannette Rankin?” the smiles are replaced with expressions of consternation and confusion. No one raises a hand. He tends to get the same response when he asks, “Who was Dorothy Day?” and when he asks his students to name the sixth person, Jody Williams. These experiences are not intended as a critique of young people in the U.S.; clearly the exercise would result in very similar responses and non-responses were it conducted among U.S. adults. Using comparable leaders, this exercise would likely produce similar responses in other cultures as well. Throughout the world, history books, major media sources, and opinion leaders ensure that nearly everyone is familiar with military leaders. But within the U.S., women such as these leaders who courageously opposed the first and second world wars within the U.S. House of Representatives, or who founded a national movement in pursuit of social justice for the poor, or who organized an international campaign to ban landmines, are not at all well-known.

It should not be surprising that in addition to this pervasive lack of knowledge about peacemakers, most of the U.S. population — and sadly most of the global community as well — dwells in ignorance about the history of and potential for nonviolent social

change. General assumptions of most reporters notwithstanding, important change sometimes occurs slowly, through the active participation of many, through cooperation, and through well-developed nonviolent campaigns. As Gene Sharp has observed in his most recent volume, “Although historians have generally neglected this type of struggle, it is clearly a very old phenomenon. Most of the history of this technique has doubtless been lost, and most of what has survived has been largely ignored.” Why has this occurred? Why do so few of the information sources in this “information age” fail to conduct research and report on the many successful instances of nonviolent social change? I contend that at the heart of this tendency is a fundamental misunderstanding about the role of power vis-à-vis violence. As noted above, most observers and most media reporters assume that violent, coercive power is, and has been, the only effective change agent within human society.

Vamsee Juluri provides a helpful condensation of these prevailing assumptions in reporting on what he refers to as “media mythologies of violence”. Juluri explains that “three broad assumptions about violence in popular media discourses seem to elide independent critique from the usual sources”. He identifies these assumptions as follows: (1) violence is cultural, which is perhaps best illustrated in Samuel Huntington’s often-cited work, *The Clash of Civilizations*; (2) violence is historical, characterized by tendencies to order human history according to warfare; and (3) violence is natural, as seen in classical anthropological, socio-biological and psychological debates. Gandhi emphasized what most of humanity experiences daily, namely, that nonviolence — rather than violence — is universal, eternal, and natural. Gandhi’s classic statement to this effect, as recounted by Juluri, is instructive:

History as we know it is a record of the wars of the world...
but...if this were all that happened in the world, it would
have ended long ago. If the story of the universe had
commenced with wars, not a man would have been found
alive today... The fact that there are so many men in the
world still alive today shows that it is not based on the force
of arms but on the force of truth or love. History is a record
of an interruption of the course of nature.

In contrast to the above predominant assumptions about violence and power, Gandhi, and numerous others have made it clear that cooperative power, based on consent of the masses, is the more important form of power. As Jonathan Schell points out, these two sources and forms of power are antithetical. He stresses, “To the extent that the one exists, the other is ruled out. To the degree that a people is forced, it is not free. And so when cooperative power declines, coercive power often steps in to fill the vacuum, and vice versa.” State controlled coercive power often takes the form of violence — overt or structural. According to Max Weber’s often-cited definition, “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” Applying one of the central tenets of nonviolence theory, viz., that power is based on the consent of the governed and therefore power is pluralistic, we find that contrary to Weber’s contention, a state is not based on a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force. Rather, it is based on a monopoly of public legitimacy. The means through which such legitimacy is generally attained, and

whether such methods could be appropriated by others, is discussed in greater detail below.

An additional explanation regarding the tendency to consider violent, coercive power the only means of resolving international or intranational conflict is simple ignorance regarding nonviolence as a viable political strategy. Sharp has asked:

Why is it that when most of the people of the literate world at least agree that war must be abolished and know that another world war may end everything, does almost everybody continue to support preparations for war? The answer, I suggest, is that they will continue to do so until they have the confidence in an alternative way of dealing with those crises for which they have traditionally relied upon war.

The primary impetus behind Sharp's classic work, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, was to construct the theoretical base, establish the historical record, and provide a compelling case for the efficacy of nonviolence as an alternative to violence.

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Biographical Sketch

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