

Nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation – impeding or promoting unity through communication in South Africa?

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the idea of nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation and whether it can help to promote unity through communication in South Africa. By means of critical-analytical argumentation key aspects of nonviolent resistance are posited, placed in historical context, and applied to socio-political reality in South Africa. It is concluded that nonviolent resistance efforts create a greater awareness of stumbling blocks that impede the promotion of ideal communication (as mutual understanding) among all the social groups in South Africa. However, the dilemma of organising nonviolent actions responsibly, that is in such a way that they do not violate the human rights of others, remains.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article, which poses the question whether nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation impedes or promotes unity through communication in South Africa, may well raise a few eyebrows. This would apply particularly to communication scholars who regard the coupling of any form of agitation to the quest for unity through ideal communication as contradictory. Likewise, the opponents of agitators in general, and specifically the political opponents of agitators, invariably point out that agitation is destructive, that realistically it cannot promote communication. For these parties, the answer is simple: nonviolent resistance impedes



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the process of unifying South Africans through communication.

However, if one argues that ideal communication is the expression and interpretation of messages with the aim of arriving at *mutual understanding* on a given subject-matter, then that which appears paradoxical at first may be probably true or at least possibly true as the proposition develops, namely: nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation can promote communication (as mutual understanding) among antagonists competing for a say in a future democratic political dispensation in South Africa. In this vein, nonviolent resistance would be able to promote

the process of unifying South Africans through communications.

What follows in this article then are a clarification of certain critical concepts, a brief exposition of the nature and broad starting-points of nonviolent resistance, and argumentation related to the question under consideration.

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE AS A STRATEGY OF AGITATION

The idea of *nonviolence* in the concept of nonviolent resistance should be viewed in opposition to physical violence. However, nonviolent resistance might well and often does relate to psychological and structural violence or, as it is often referred to, "covert" violence.

For the purposes of the discussion *nonviolent resistance* as a strategy of agitation specifically revolves around nonviolent protest such as marches and mass attendance at funerals, nonviolent noncooperation such as strikes and consumer boycotts, and nonviolent intervention such as sit-ins and fasts.

Note, however, that while the article focuses on nonviolent resistance as a *strategy* of agitation (cf. Bowers & Ochs, 1971), nonviolent resistance may also function purely as a *technique* (method employed to further a strategy) or *tactic* (rule to complement a technique and strategy) of agitation.

As a strategy of agitation, nonviolent resistance does not specify a set of tactics that are to be used in every situation, but it does require the tactics of *persistence* and *appropriate timing* in resistance efforts.

Agitation may be described as a form of (mass) persuasion which usually occurs when social groups outside the normal decision-making establishment advocate significant social change and encounter resistance within the estab-

lishment such as to require more than the normal discursive means of persuasion (Bowers & Ochs 1971:4). Agitation is often characterised by highly emotional argument based on citation of grievances and alleged violation of moral principles.

This conceptualisation of agitation relates to what Ellul (1973) calls agitation propaganda. According to Ellul, agitation propaganda is a form or type of propaganda which stands in direct opposition to integration propaganda. Moreover, taken together agitation propaganda and integration propaganda constitute a specific category of propaganda that can be distinguished from other categories of propaganda, namely political and sociological propaganda, vertical and horizontal propaganda, and rational and irrational propaganda.

For Ellul (1973:70ff.) *agitation propaganda* generally attracts all the attention since it usually attempts to exploit areas of conflict, whereas integration propaganda is a propaganda of conformity which aims at stabilising the social system, of unifying and reinforcing it. All revolutionary movements and popular wars have been nourished by agitation propaganda. Ellul (1973:72-73) explains the essential nature of this form of propaganda:

In all cases, propaganda of agitation tries to stretch energies to the utmost, obtain substantial sacrifices, and induce the individual to bear heavy ordeals. It takes him out of his everyday life, his normal framework, and plunges him into enthusiasm and adventure ... it operates inside a crisis or actually provokes the crisis itself. On the other hand, such propaganda can obtain only effects of relatively short duration. If the proposed objective is not achieved

fast enough, enthusiasm will give way to discouragement and despair. Therefore, specialists in agitation propaganda break up the desired goals into a series of stages to be reached one by one. There is a period of pressure to obtain some result, then a period of relaxation and rest ...

Nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation employed by organisations and movements competing for socio-political power has been under the spotlight in South Africa for some time. In fact, nonviolent resistance (in the context of socio-economic and politico-ideological resistance) has been a universal phenomenon during the ages with the Indian Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi (1870-1948) and his follower on the North American continent, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), the leading exponents during this century.

As a strategy of agitation, nonviolent resistance has been used throughout history by people who desire immediate justice and immediate human rights – often under the banner of a call for democracy. Nonviolent resisters are concerned with social and legal change that will satisfy their demand for pragmatic results which correct a social or political injustice. An ethical position is thus implicated and this in turn is influenced by cultural-ideological factors. Gandhi's devotion to human rights and India's independence from Britain by means of nonviolent resistance or "satyagraha" (a term born in South Africa) resulted in millions of people considering him a saint – so much so that he died a *Mahatma*, a wise, holy and moral leader (Fischer 1982). During the 1950s and 1960s King, a black American Civil Rights leader, gained world recognition in his nonviolent crusade for social and legal equality in the United States

where he aspired to work for integration in the South and an end to *de facto* segregation in the North (Laqueur, 1973:280). Ironically, both Gandhi and Martin Luther King were tragically assassinated in the end.

KEY ASPECTS OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

As a manifestation of verbal and non-verbal (not-word) communication, nonviolent resistance is purposeful. The idea is to influence public opinion in favour of the nonviolent resister's cause.

The communication of images is an important part of any conflict and consequently the need for dramatising the conflict issue(s) is well understood by nonviolent resisters. In our mass communication media age, the power of the media to set the agenda on public issues and to influence perceptions of political reality are well recorded. News flourishes on conflict, especially dramatic conflict, which in turn leads to dramatic story-telling. Dramatic stories draw attention and nonviolent resisters are attention-seekers.

Nonviolent resistance is instrumental (a means to an end) rather than consummatory, and is almost always symbolic. Nonviolent resisters always try to appear to be on the side of the angels and in the case of marches and sit-ins they use their bodies as natural symbols to show their very strong convictions about laws and customs or other issues.

Nonviolent resistance is pro-active in the sense that initiatives are taken to confront problem areas rather than to withdraw from them. In confronting government, nonviolent resisters often aim at making the mechanics of government so difficult that the government would throw up its hands and submit to their will – in much the same way as people give in to a nagging spouse or crying child. Direct action,

then, is involved. As Sharp (1990:149) points out: "Nonviolent action may involve: (1) acts of omission

that is, people practising it may refuse to perform acts which they usually perform, are expected by custom to perform, or are required by law or regulation to perform; (2) acts of commission – that is, the people may perform acts which they do not usually perform, are not expected by custom to perform, or are forbidden by law or regulation to perform; or (3) a combination of acts of omission and acts of commission.

Nonviolent resistance in the socio-political realm thrives on group or mass participation. Reinhold Niebuhr in his famous work, *Moral man and immoral society* (1932), argues persuasively that man's basic egoism is often magnified into unthinking reactions in his group behaviour, and that the success of nonviolent resistance or the use of "soul-force" as opposed to "body-force" (as Mahatma Gandhi suggested) is dependent also on group solidarity.

Note, however, that while numbers are important in nonviolent struggles, the overall image transmitted by nonviolent resistance remains more important than merely the number of persons comprising the image. The person for whom nonviolence is a matter of faith is more likely to give, in Goffmanian terms, a "consistent performance" making fewer "slips" (thereby presenting a clear-cut image of suffering and courageous humanity) than those who follow en masse without real commitment. The quality of the resistance rather than the quantitative aspects thereof may also have a ripple effect in terms of enlisting support. Quality resistance may become contagious as it were and multiply. For example, the number of nonviolent resisters enrolled

under Gandhi's leadership in South Africa from 1893 to 1915 rose from a mere sixteen persons to sixty thousand persons (Sharp 1973:478).

As one would have anticipated by now, nonviolent resistance often involves suffering. In a society or community where the laws are extremely unjust, violent suppression of dissent and nonviolent resistance often follows. In such cases, as Bowers and Ochs (1971:30) point out:

the nonviolent resister predicts violence. His theory is that if this violent suppression becomes known, and if he does *not* react to violence with violence, the larger community will release pressures on that section in which the unjust laws exist, pressures to cease the violence and to change the laws.

If the larger community reacts as the nonviolent resister predicts, namely in sympathy with the nonviolent resister, then the strategy of agitation has succeeded. In a sense, the nonviolent resister has had victory without war. The suffering experienced at the hands of violent opponents is equated with suffering in the name of dedication to the "cause". Suffering enormously strengthens group identity.

Nonviolent resisters often carefully focus resistance on certain key issues. For example, as Pelton (1974:179) notes, Gandhi's Indian civil disobedience movement of 1930-1931 centred upon resistance to the Salt Tax which:

provided the opportunity for dramatic action (such as the march to the sea to make salt), generated much popular support because the tax affected all the people in their daily lives, and caught the opponent off balance because many English

people supported a repeal of the tax.

Nonviolent resistance is not always civilly disobedient (in the sense of breaking a statute), but it is often the case. When it is not civilly disobedient, nonviolent resisters are violating custom rather than law.

By combining nonviolent discipline with solidarity and persistence in struggle, nonviolent resisters may cause the violence of the opponent's repression to be exposed in the worst possible light. As Sharp (1973:657-658) points out, this may lead to the process of political jiu-jitsu taking place, culminating in shifts in opinion and subsequently shifts in power relationships favourable to the nonviolent group. These shifts may result from withdrawal of support for the opponent and the grant of support to the nonviolent resisters. After all, cruelties and brutalities committed against the clearly nonviolent are likely to disturb many people and to fill some with outrage.

Nonviolent resistance thus aims at diminishing the *power* (the ability to have your will prevail even against the resistance of others) and *authority* of the opposition. Authority, as sociologists would point out, is a form of power that is often distinguished from coercion (Cilliers & Joubert, 1968). Authority is taken to be that form of power which is accepted as legitimate (right and just) and obeyed on that basis. For instance, if members of South African society accept that Parliament has the right to make certain decisions and they regard those decisions as lawful, then Parliamentary power may be defined as legitimate authority. Coercion, on the other hand, is regarded as a form of power which is not regarded as legitimate by those subject to it. For example, disenfranchised South Afri-

can blacks may define the power of the South African government as coercion.

Sharp (1973:745) suggests that nonviolent resistance affects the opponent's authority in three ways:

- (1) it may show how much authority the opponent has already lost, and a demonstrated major loss of authority will by itself weaken his power;
- (2) nonviolent action may help to undermine his authority still further;
- and (3) people who have repudiated his authority may transfer their loyalty to a rival claimant in the form of a parallel government, which may in turn weaken his authority yet more as well as create or aggravate other serious problems.

In the final analysis nonviolent resisters act on the assumption that the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled who, by withdrawing that consent, can control and even destroy the power of the rulers. *In other words, nonviolent resistance is a strategy used to control, combat and destroy by nonviolent means the rulers' power.*

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The strategy of nonviolent resistance against successive white regimes in South Africa (cf. Kuper 1956; Smuts & Westcott, 1991) has shown a remarkable resurgence since the late 1980s. For example, it has been claimed that the defiance campaign of 1989 was also instrumental in persuading the National Party government to open the political playing field in South Africa by unbanning political organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP).

During the 1980s, and preceding the Defiance Campaign, nonviolent resistance in the form of school and rent boycotts, conscientious objection

against military service, courting arrest for resisting petty apartheid, resistance against the whole tricameral system, the burning of the South African flag, attending funerals en masse, hunger fasts, sit-ins, stayaways and marches (cf. Smuts & Westcott, 1991) from resistance groups in South Africa opposed to the apartheid regime was predominant. These actions had led the American theologian and activist Walter Wink to declare after visiting the country in 1986 that the practice of nonviolent resistance in South Africa was "probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse nonviolent strategies in a single struggle in human history" (Smuts & Westcott, 1991:161).

During the (Mass) Defiance Campaign itself, peaceful protest marches proved a spectacular way of expressing opposition to national party rule (cf. Smuts & Westcott, 1991:81ff.). On 13 September 1989 nearly 30 000 people led by among others, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. Allan Boesak and the Mayor of Cape Town, Mr Gordon Oliver, marched in Cape Town's central business district to appeal for immediate political reforms and peace. This march rivalled that of 1960 when Pan Africanist Congress activist, Philip Kgosana, led 30 000 people (mainly migrant workers) from Langa to Caledon Square police station in protest against the pass laws. During September and October 1989 protest marches in which thousands participated also took place in Grahamstown, Johannesburg, Oudtshoorn, Durban, East London, Kimberley, King William's Town, in Botshabelo near Bloemfontein and in Uitenhage. A factor in the success of the marches in 1989 was the new approach of President F.W. de Klerk who suspended the laws and emergency measures prohibiting such demonstrations.

On the general prudence of the nonviolent resistance campaign in South Africa during 1989, and within the context of the question posed in this article from the onset, one may do well to reflect on the argument of Martin Luther King, Jr. In a letter from Birmingham jail to fellow American clergymen who had criticised his (nonviolent) direct action programme for being "unwise", King states:

You may well ask, 'Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored ... there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation (In Estey & Hunter, 1971:105-106).

President De Klerk's historic speech of 2 February 1990 in which he announced far-reaching political reforms

and an end to apartheid through negotiation with all recognised South African leaders has not made nonviolent resistance as a strategy of agitation less significant. On the one hand, white organisations and interest groups from the right-wing and far right-wing are now also using nonviolent resistance in the form of marches, hunger strikes and mass rallies to make their views public and to score political points. On the other hand, left-wing organisations have been employing nonviolent resistance or mass action following any breakdown in negotiations with the Government.

Indeed, mass action had become the buzzword following the breakdown of the Codesa 2 (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) talks in May 1992. The ANC's week-long mass action campaign involving rallies, demonstrations, marches and the occupation of government buildings and cities throughout South Africa in early August 1992 is a prime example. Mass action has also led to much violence. For example, on 7 September 1992 twenty-nine people were killed and 195 injured in Bisho as the Ciskeian army opened fire on a crowd of ANC protesters who had ignored the conditions laid down in a magisterial ruling about the protest march.

This year it appears that the threat of *inter alia* (ANC-led) large-scale mass action has moved the National Party government to make a concerted effort to get multiparty negotiations back on track at the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park, although it has been criticised widely for allegedly conniving with the ANC in bilateral talks to the detriment of other important political organisations such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

Multiparty negotiations are moving forward, but are still often threatened by unforeseen events, such as the Chris

Hani assassination on 10 April 1993, that lead to mass action and violence. More recently on 25 June 1993, right-wing resistance simply turned chaotic with protesters smashing through and occupying the World Trade Centre for a while.

CONCLUSION

As Leo Kuper (1956) pointed out many years ago, the essential problem in South Africa is what to do with the idea of democracy and, as a natural corollary to this, how to accommodate the power interests of major social groups in the divided society. These vexing issues can only be solved through communication which strives to promote mutual understanding and unity among all South Africans.

In bringing grievances to the foreground, nonviolent resistance efforts create a greater awareness of stumbling blocks that impede the promotion of ideal communication among all the social groups in South Africa. In this way nonviolent resistance can help to promote ideal communication.

Of course, nonviolent resisters are faced with the dilemma of organising nonviolent actions in such a way that they do not violate the human rights of others. While freedom to protest might be in order, the issue of bearing *responsibility* for one's actions also comes into play. Therefore the question again arises as to whether nonviolent resistance will be waged humanely and constructively and be used to further the satisfaction of ideal communication and other human needs, or whether it will contribute to destruction and chaos.

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