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Carter Hallward, M. & Norman, J.M. (Eds.). *Understanding Nonviolence: Contours and Contexts*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

In this edited volume, Maia Carter Hallward and Julie M. Norman present a compilation of eleven chapters—divided into three sections (foundations, contours, and contexts—that explores the role played by *non-violence* as a form of protest. The editors distinguish between revolutionary and reformist non-violence. While the former aims to change deep social structures and patterns of power that create discontent, the latter aims to remove leaders from power but does not typically affect the foundation of power itself or change the place from which power is derived. This fascinating book reminds us not only that non-violence should not be equated with pacifism, but also that non-violence sometimes represents the most efficient instrument of social change. Under some conditions, violent struggle does not obtain the planned results. However, the book’s objective is tricky; defining a phenomenon by what it is not is a very hard task to accomplish. Indeed, while social scientists have for decades studied what violence is, the definition of what constitutes non-violence remains less clear.

The first section discusses the conceptual background of non-violence and its historical evolution as well as the power of ideologies to orient the struggle. Philosophically speaking, the two chapters forming this part of the text are included by the editors in order to provide the reader further understanding of the issue. The second section then explores a vast range of cases of non-violence, ranging from the Middle East’s recent Arab Spring to the tactical non-violent approaches adopted in Kosovo and Chile (Clark, 2015, p. 62). Last, the third part of the work contextualizes the ways in which “disadvantaged groups” typically gain legitimacy by means of the use of non-violent methods. Problematically, say the editors, conventional wisdom often presumes that violence is associated with dictatorship and that non-violence is associated with democracy—the presumption being that the only effective means of challenging the authority of an authoritarian state must include violence and that, inversely, methods of non-violence only work in democracies. On the flip side of this misperception is the equally erroneous presumption that democracies do not use violence to exert power over their citizens. In reality, not only is violence utilized in a variety of political contexts, so too may non-violent methods be successfully employed in those contexts. At some extent, numerous studies hilted at claiming non-violent protests are unable to change the status quo. The struggle between exploited and exploiters is defined in favor of those who monopolize the means of coercion. In this vein, the work under review asserts that regardless of context, non-violent protests can channel popular discontent to change the ruling class.

Despite the chapters’ methodological differences, this project offers a model that explains new forms of protests (*i.e.*, non violent modes) as disestablishing instruments of force. Established as a seminal work, a guidebook for the consultation of experts, *Understanding Nonviolence* exhibits an attempt to combine theoretical frameworks with case studies. However, though the text sheds light on the nature of non-violence and dispels many myths pertaining thereto, the work contains some flaws that merit discussion. For instance, at first glance, this reviewer did not find in the work any clear definition of what violence is. Without this, it is almost impossible to understand its counterpart, non-violence. Additionally, to some extent, this text confuses states’ “coaction” (*i.e.*, the force exerted by the state that restrain—or impel—violence) with violence. This is perhaps not surprising, since conventional wisdom typically conflates violence with physical aggression. To this point, Hernandez (2011) observes that violence should not, in fact, be conceived of as any act of aggression. (She gives the

example that animals may be predatory to survive, exerting aggression against the prey but that such acts of aggression do not constitute “violence”.) Rather, violence, she says, is unleashed—in multiple forms—when power is at stake. Human beings, Hernandez asserts, unleash violence when political boundaries of power are challenged, for example. Therefore, we cannot distill violence from politics: Violence results from the disputes of power among competing parties in order to maintain legitimacy. A much deeper unspeakable violence, such as that associated with the conquest of indigenous populations or the enslavement of others, Guidotti Hernandez adds, is discursively used to draw the history of nationhood.

Despite its generally successful unpacking of non-violence, the book’s primary shortcoming may be that it fails to acknowledge many forms of violence *as* violence, which, in turn, limits the work’s analysis of non-violence. Violence not only accompanied humankind from its onset, but is associated to a counter-action, a reaction our specie follows when feel threatened. Therefore, violence resulted from the decline of credibility or legitimacy, or in conditions where status quo is weakening. By framing violence as a problem or even pathology seems to be like thinking love in the same category. Rather, it represents a pre-condition of human existence. Secondly, violence not always is associated to coercion. There are a lot of examples of invisible discursive violence which are not correctly addressed in this book. Included in this category are (1) the political act of conservation of power, which can perpetuate psychological suffering and deprivation, (2) the use of extortion, threat, and blackmail—methods that are also, paradoxically, found in non-violent practices—to achieve a desired outcome, and (3) the instrumentalization of “Other,” (*i.e.*, the relegating of certain groups or segments “less than” in order to justify their mistreatment). Korstanje (2015) has argued that capitalism expanded its hegemony by means of such invisible violence. Specifically, for example, he says, nation-states classified the organized protests and strikes of labor unions as “civil unrest” and then proceeded to pacify unions—by meeting their demands—in order to maintain the legitimacy of the state. In short, Western states have historically exerted various forms of violence in response to both internal and external threats to hegemony. The text fails to account for this. In fact, despite an introduction that proclaims the importance of dispelling the myths of conventional wisdom with respect to violence, the body of the book ultimately ignores invisible violence and the fact that the history of Western capitalism has been thoroughly determined by violence of this nature.

Beyond this, a second shortcoming of the work involves the lack of “horizon” or orienting frame these types of non-violent protests have. Unlike the clearly articulated objectives of historical non-violent movements such as those associated with Ghandi or Martin Luther King, the objectives of more recent non-violent movements such as Spain’s anti-austerity movement (facilitated by Spain’s young, unemployed workforce, the “Indignados”) and the Middle East’s Arab Spring are not politically channeled to change the rule. Rather, these movements function as a diffuse network of commodities and are more similar to *Matrix Saga*¹ than a radical struggle. As Geoffrey Skoll (2014)

¹ *Matrix Saga* shows an apocalyptic landscape where the concept of reality turned up into a diffusing full-simulacrum. Once liberated, Neo is invited to “the dessert” by Morpheus, which is no other thing than reality. This metaphor is used by social scientists to deepen a classic philosophical debate about fake and reality. To what extent we are observing the reality is one of the aspects that lead protesters to channel their claim with accuracy. In this token, movements as indignados, or any other protesters who use non-violent acts not only are not familiar with a planned program of government, but also they are confused about what they claim for, putting in the agenda abstract demands as the end of corruption, or a world without violence. These demands are unnatural. Violence and corruption accompanied humankind from its onset.

puts it, any state of crisis triggered by non-violent popular protest sets the stage for a “renovation” of the political landscape (i.e. by impelling a change in leadership) but not a complete razing and overhaul of power structures; meaning, the elite’s interests and power are never in dispute. Far from being resolved, violence exhibits a fertile ground for future discussions, and of course, thereupon, this book represents a driving text which turns very helpful for academicians, and policy makers interested in these types of issues.

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