Debunking the myths around nonviolent resistance (2020)

ART BY GORD HILL

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VARC READING (2 OF 2)

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Contents

movement. Though their data show no general pattern and a mix of positive and negative results, they try to obscure those facts in the abstract by leading with a couple cherry-picked examples of movements where the armed flank had a negative effect, and then insisting that the positive effects of the armed flank in many other cases were "despite" and not "because of" these armed flanks.

THE DISHONESTY

The dishonesty of this approach to the difficult questions we grapple with in social movements is distressing, and even more so when it comes from highly paid academics and government agents who are not themselves involved in social movements and are not fighting for their own dignity, freedom, or well being.

In fact, it smacks of earlier Defense Department interventions in social movements to peddle nonviolence, as when it was revealed that Gene Sharp protégé and Otpor founder Srdja Popovic was working for the Stratfor global security company to use nonviolent campaigns to overthrow governments hostile to US elite interests.

As we go forward into the difficult times ahead, we need to remember our own histories, we need to hold high the examples of the George Floyd uprising and Standing Rock, and we need to remember earlier movements like the long history of resistance against slavery and segregation, the workers' struggles that led to what few labor protections we have today, the Stonewall Riots and anticolonial struggles across the world. Not the whitewashed versions sold back to us, but the actual, complex memories of those who participated.

Collective memory does not give us convenient statistics, but it will give us clear lessons about what works and what we need to do to make our movements stronger.

For decades, police and prison abolitionists have repeated the same argument: police and prisons do not prevent violence, healthy communities do. Yet, it was not until the mass uprisings in hundreds of cities across the country in response to the murder of George Floyd when, suddenly, abolitionist ideas were propelled to the forefront of the American imagination. A counterhegemonic and politically radical viewpoint became perplexingly commonsensical overnight.

Impatient politicians, including Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, pointed to the disproven "outside agitator" myth in a desperate attempt to delegitimize the protests. Media and politicians tokenize "Black leadership" at the service of the ruling class, platforming establishment groups that argue militant resistance somehow detracts from the Black liberation message.

In the essay that follows, Peter Gelderloos, author of several books including *How Nonviolence Protects the State* and *Anarchy Works,* addresses the shortcomings of a well-known study by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan promoting nonviolence, darling of pacifists, politicians and both progressive and corporate media. In 2013, he critiqued the study's flawed methodology that uses statistics to "obscure complex realities," which, according to Gelderloos, "became popular because it offers a very comfortable view of social change that allows white activists to preserve their privilege and physical safety…"

His revamped analysis is contextualized for the current moment. Following sustained, militant resistance alongside massive demonstrations in Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia, city councils have moved toward defunding the police, and Minneapolis may abolish its force entirely.

Having seen the power of a diversity of tactics and the state's continual prioritization of profit over people during the pandemic, Gelderloos' rebuttal is even more compelling this time around.

— Ella Fassler

It is probably no coincidence that in the wake of the George Floyd uprising the statistical study by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan about the supposed effectiveness of nonviolence is once again making the rounds. This uprising conclusively demonstrated that police are only held accountable for their murders when people rise up, riot, and fight back, or when recent experience makes it clear people will do so if no accountability measures are immediately forthcoming.

Only in the face of a major, countrywide rebellion were longstanding demands for police abolition ever given consideration by the general public. In fact, in the early days of the revolt it was widely understood that an insistence on nonviolence was a condemnation of the movement and a way of protecting the police and delegitimizing the anger that white supremacy provokes.

The Chenoweth and Stephan study has been circulated in other social movements as well, being most fervently adopted by Extinction Rebellion, the mediatic mass movement that injected pacifism into the climate struggle at a time when two of the most visible sites of ecological resistance were Standing Rock and Le ZAD. More and more people were realizing that the ecological crisis is very much a human issue, that Indigenous peoples are at the forefront of the resistance, that ecology is complex and atmospheric carbon is just one part of an interlocking web of disasters, and that direct action gets the goods.

Standing Rock spurred a wave of similar encampments that actually stopped pipeline construction projects without erasing the experiences of colonized and racialized people. Le ZAD achieved the cancellation of a major new airport and also undermined the liberal idea that to protect nature we must separate ourselves from it.

> Such operational successes occur among violent campaigns occasionally, but nonviolent campaigns are more likely to produce loyalty shifts. Although in the quantitative study these findings are qualified by data constraints, our case studies reveal that three violent campaigns were unable to produce meaningful loyalty shifts among opponent elites, whereas such shifts did occur as a result of nonviolent action in the Philippines and East Timor.

To put it more plainly, these "data constraints" are a lack of data supporting their argument, or "insignificant effects" as they admit later. The three case studies they call in to save the day are three examples cherry-picked out of 323 to prove the point they are trying to make.

We can do better: resistance against the US invasion of Vietnam, resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, partisan resistance during World War II in Yugoslavia and in Italy and the anarchist resistance in Ukraine during the Russian Civil War. Five examples of armed movements provoking defections or mutinies among the armies sent to crush them, all of them more definitive and on a higher scale than the "loyalty shifts" provoked in the Philippines and East Timor. In one paragraph summing up her research, Chenoweth acknowledges that the impact of a "violent wing" on the success rates of a movement is "not statistically significant" and then in the next paragraph says that "the most troubling possibility is that the armed wing will reduce the movement's chances of success." Later, she asserts that "an *armed wing can reduce popular participation* [her emphasis]" even though her own data do not support this assertion.

Incidentally, Chenoweth and Kurt Schock produced a study in 2015 of 106 cases to measure the "armed flank effect," the effect that an armed sector or organization can have on a wider

For example, they cite psychological studies on individual decision-making, with the unspoken assumption that complex social conflicts between institutions and heterogeneous populations will follow the same patterns. They provide no evidence for key arguments like "the public is more likely to support a nonviolent campaign" nor do they interrogate the figure of "the public." They also make convenient use of non sequiturs, as in the following paragraph:

> Second, when violent insurgents threaten the lives of regime members and security forces, they greatly reduce the possibility of loyalty shifts. Abrahms finds that terrorist groups targeting civilians lose public support compared with groups that limit their targets to the military or police.

All the subsequent arguments in the paragraph, which are rhetorical arguments lacking any documentation or data, refer to the topic sentence of the paragraph. All of them are intended to convince readers that so-called violent movements are less effective at provoking defection or "loyalty shifts" among state forces.

The only sentence that makes any reference to evidence is the second one, quoted above. But notice how Abrahms' study actually has nothing to do with the topic sentence, no bearing on the question of defection nor the variable violence/nonviolence, but rather only addresses violent groups, distinguishing between those that do and do not target civilians.

Elsewhere in the study, the authors ambiguously admit that the statistics do not reveal more defections in the face of nonviolent movements, but they structure the entire article to hide that inconvenience and advance their preconceived arguments:

In my 2013 book, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, I included a rebuttal of Chenoweth's and Stephan's study, which had been spreading like wildfire through progressive and corporate media alike, making attractive claims that nonviolent movements gain four times as many participants, are twice as likely to succeed and can triumph with just 3.5 percent of the population. Notably, none of these media linked to the actual study or reviewed the methodology used.

In fact, the study's data and methodology are extremely flawed. But it never became popular because of its quality. It became popular because it offers a very comfortable view of social change that allows white activists to preserve their privilege and physical safety, and that protects the owners of corporate media from the destructive, riotous uprisings that have been a principal means of the downtrodden throughout history to respond when degradation, oppression, poverty and indignity reach a boiling point.

THE EXAMPLES

Chenoweth and Stephan compiled a list of 323 major nonviolent campaigns or violent conflicts from 1900 to 2006. The selection process they used is rife with problems. The examples of nonviolent campaigns were furnished by experts in nonviolence, all of whom are also proponents of nonviolence. They do not include nonviolent campaigns that never got off the ground, polite protest movements that withered away before they even got started.

They do, however, include movements that were not actually nonviolent, movements that drew much of their strength from major riots and armed wings, like the Civil Rights movement in the US, the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa and the movement for independence in India.

Proponents of nonviolence, reflecting a privileged perspective, also tend to naturalize or invisibilize state violence. People arming themselves for self-defense is discouraged, but a military intervention or police protection is considered compatible with nonviolence. For example, the movement in East Timor is claimed as a victory for nonviolence, even though international "peacekeepers" had to be sent in to protect the protesters.

To select the examples of "violent" movements they intended to contrast against these supposedly, but not actually, peaceful movements, Chenoweth and Stephan made no effort to contact proponents of a diversity of methods in social movements. (There are very few proponents of "violence" per se, as it is an inaccurate dichotomy that seems only to exist in the minds of pacifists, as well as in the self-interested vocabularies of government spokespeople.) Instead, they replace the subjective criterion used to select members of the nonviolent group with an objective criterion for the violent group: in short, they take all armed conflicts with more than 1,000 combat deaths.

They are essentially comparing a whitewashed list of the greatest victories of nonviolence against a list of major wars. To say this is a case of apples and oranges is a severe understatement. What it is not is a comparison between social movements using different methods to achieve their goals, even though the study has been fraudulently paraded through the world's media as just that.

THE EVALUATION

Subsequently, they run their skewed collection of samples through a meaningless evaluation, asking, were these movements "successful," "partially successful," or "failed." They do not define "success" or "failure" and they also evince a belief that social movements tend to have consensus around what

their goals are. Pretty much everyone who has ever participated in a social movement knows this is not the case.

Incidentally, Stephan and Chenoweth are not social movement participants, they are highly remunerated academics, and Stephan worked for the US Defense Department — also connected to Gene Sharp's work on nonviolence — and NATO.

It is safe to assume that the goals they rate as belonging to the entire movement represent the most superficial, reformist sectors of those movements. For example, they rate the "Color Revolutions" of Ukraine, Lebanon, Georgia and Serbia as successes. These movements were spurred by a diverse mix of issues relating to quality of life as well as political expression, with government corruption and worsening economic conditions being frequently cited complaints. They succeeded in toppling the governments in power at the time, though in every case, poor economic conditions persisted and many of the new governments were plagued by corruption scandals and low approval ratings within a year or two of assuming power. Incidentally, all the major Color Revolutions occurred in countries that were close to Moscow, and they brought in governments closer to the EU and Washington. So really, these superficial revolutions were only successful for the NATO bloc and the politicians who rode their coattails to power.

THE STATISTICS

Though the way the statistics are produced effectively renders them meaningless, Stephan and Chenoweth engage in a number of manipulations when presenting their work so as to encourage nonviolent conclusions even when their own data do not support them. They tend to focus on detailed explanations of their hypotheses and pseudo-logical arguments for why their hypotheses must be correct.