Critique of Violent Rationales

A review article of *Critique of Nonviolent Politics: From Mahatma Gandhi to the Anti-Nuclear Movement* by Howard Ryan, http://netwood.net/~hryan, 1996.

There is a vast amount of nonviolent action and lots of writing about it as well. Therefore it is surprising that there are relatively few systematic critiques of the nonviolent approach to politics. Nonviolence is most commonly ignored by its critics. For this reason alone Howard Ryan's book is welcome. It lays out many standard arguments against nonviolence as well presenting Ryan's angle on the matter. Even though nonviolent activists and scholars will disagree with many of the arguments in the book, there is much that they can gain by examining them closely.

Ryan may not be familiar with the latest research and nuances of international nonviolence practice, but he knows far more than most critics. His critique can help to pinpoint weak points, confusions and biases in nonviolence theory and practice. If he "misunderstands" nonviolence in certain ways, then proponents of nonviolence can learn from this to express their views more clearly or to counter misapprehensions head on.

In reviewing such a book, there is a temptation to respond to the author's argument, especially to his apparent misunderstandings of nonviolence theory and practice. I will succumb to this temptation to some extent, but I will also try to draw out insights that may help to improve nonviolent politics.

Ryan stopped work on his book in 1984, never completing it to his satisfaction. The advent of the Internet makes self publication much easier. The 1996 version is only slightly changed from the earlier one, with the deletion of a chapter and addition of a 1996 preface and epilogue. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect the book to be up to date. It is grows out of ideas and experiences, especially from the US movement against nuclear power, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Ryan's arguments

Critique of Nonviolent Politics is in three parts. Part I deals with problems with nonviolence theory. Ryan accepts that sometimes nonviolence can be effective, but says that sometimes it is not: *"a principled insistence on nonviolence can in some circumstances be dangerous to progressive social movements."* He says that nonviolence theory *"is troubled by moral dogma and mechanical logic."* He argues that history has been misinterpreted to support claims for nonviolence: *"success is claimed for nonviolence where failure occurred."* Finally, the insistence on nonviolent politics has led to a rigidity *"in the way peace activists think"* (ch. 1).

Ryan does not claim that violence is always better. He is quite realistic in assessing that violence in contemporary United States, for example, would be counterproductive. He supports nonviolence as a tactic. What he opposes is the ruling out of violence against oppression and repression in all circumstances. He thinks the option should be left open for violence if it would be more effective in achieving revolutionary change and bringing about a society with less structural violence.

Part I covers nonviolence as a moral principle, the argument that violence leads to more violence, the consent theory of power and the technique of protest through suffering. It also includes a chapter rebutting common arguments for nonviolence.

Part II is a critique of Gandhi's politics, proceeding historically from his South African campaigns to various campaigns in India and finally Indian independence and partition. Ryan seeks to expose Gandhi as a false prophet and therefore discredit the nonviolence he advocated. According to Ryan, *"Gandhi has been portrayed as a militant seeker of justice; yet, he used nonviolent doctrine to contain militant movements. Gandhi is believed to have stood for the poor, fought for the Untouchables, and befriended the Muslims, but he betrayed each of these groups"* (ch. 8). Ryan presents a class analysis of Gandhian politics.

Part III deals with the antinuclear movement, especially in the US. Ryan criticises several approaches common in certain antinuclear groups: consensus decision making; the expectation that activists be open, friendly and respectful, including towards opponents; and civil disobedience. He recognises that these are not automatically required by nonviolence theory, but argues that they reflect a general nonviolent philosophy. He believes that this philosophy may prove a hindrance if a revolutionary movement develops. In this situation, *"the intensity of government repression may require an armed response"* (ch. 17).

Nonviolence theory

Two main ways have been used to justify nonviolence: that violence is inherently wrong (principled nonviolence) and that it is less effective than nonviolence (pragmatic nonviolence). In the case of principled nonviolence, the sanctity of human life is accepted as a fundamental. Ryan accuses the moral approach of being mechanical, rigid and dogmatic. True enough—it is, after all, "principled," and being principled reduces flexibility. Another word to describe "flexibility" is "expediency."

There are many issues that could be raised here. One thing we can learn from Ryan's analysis is how deeply embedded is the assumption that political actions must be judged by outcomes, namely pragmatic considerations. Many people, such as politicians, bureaucrats and corporate executives, have a hard time understanding principled politics, since conventional politics is assumed to involve compromises, flexibility, expediency and the like.

As well as dismissing principled nonviolence, Ryan tackles pragmatic arguments for nonviolence. He states that rejection of violence on the grounds of practicality *"can only be valid if violence is never a practical means for bettering people's lives and alleviating oppression, be it on an individual or societal scale"* (ch. 2). This is a stringent test, since all it takes to reject nonviolence is one case of violence bringing about a better world. But this is not the only way to pose the violence versus nonviolence issue. Commitment to nonviolence can also be on the basis that it is worthwhile seeking nonviolent alternatives, even at the expense of some short-term gains. Violence may be practical in some circumstances now but if nonviolence is developed further it might become more practical.

It is unwise to claim that nonviolence is better in every instance in achieving desirable goals. It is far safer to claim that nonviolence deserves far more testing and development before it is rejected. Ryan raises the familiar argument that Third World liberation struggles deserve support even though they use violence. Liberation struggles have indeed posed a challenge to nonviolence advocates. But rather than having to choose whether to support or oppose a violent liberation struggle, another option is to investigate nonviolent strategies and develop nonviolent options.

A common argument for nonviolence is that means cannot be separated from ends: if violent methods are used, they are likely to lead to a more violent outcome. Ryan, though, interprets this as a rigid formula: *"that violence leads to further violence and injustice"* (ch. 3). This is easy for Ryan to refute, since the link between means and ends is only a tendency, not an inevitability. There are, to be sure, some cases where violence has led to a less violent society.

Ryan's treatment of the means-ends connection is a warning for nonviolence advocates. Rather than asserting that nonviolence is always better, it is better to say that nonviolence is clearly better in many circumstances, and that with further development it may prove better in even more.

In chapter 4, Ryan gives a brief critique of the consent theory of power as presented by Gene Sharp, arguing that it leaves out the role of *"the social system that requires obedience for our survival"* (ch. 4). This is indeed a shortcoming of the consent theory. The theory needs modification to include social structures, though what exactly this means in terms of nonviolent politics is not quite clear. There is a lesson here for nonviolence proponents who run workshops based on Sharp's model. A dose of theory on social structures would provide a nice complement to the voluntaristic orientation of consent theory.

One thing that does not appeal to Ryan is suffering, at least unless he can fight back. He says that *"nonviolence requires voluntary suffering"* (ch. 5). By using violence, in contrast, *"it isn't necessary to suffer peacefully the brutalities of the government in order to win popular support"*; *"people may more likely join the struggle if resisters are fighting to defend their lives rather than allowing themselves to be beaten and punished"* (ch. 6). He quotes Barbara Deming's case for nonviolent resistance and then, to show its futility, recasts it from his own perspective: *"When the armed force of the state is sent to maintain law and order, and bludgeons people with tear gas, batons, bullets, and possibly torture, resisters will allow their blood to run with quiet forbearance until their suffering wins the sympathy of the soldiers and the rulers' power is undermined"* (ch. 6).

One trouble with this is that suffering is not an essential part of nonviolence, at least not in the eyes of many activists and theorists. Nevertheless, Ryan's arguments can be a useful reminder that the suffering model of nonviolence can be offputting. It is also a perception of nonviolence that seems to stick in people's minds, along with the expression "passive resistance" in spite of its being exorcised from nonviolence language decades ago. Suffering is an important part of Gandhian nonviolence, and many viewers of the film "Gandhi" will remember the satyagrahis meekly accepting vicious baton assaults.

This conception of nonviolence is oriented to psychology, both of nonviolent activists and their opponents. The idea is that resisters will maintain nonviolent discipline in spite of their suffering, thereby converting some of their attackers. In this conception, nearly every aspect of society remains the same except for the attitudes and actions of individuals. Since most people do not routinely think about major changes in society and their implications, this image easily springs to people's minds when they hear about nonviolence. Instead of fighting back, nonviolent resisters will simply wait to be attacked.

This conception leaves out an enormous amount of what would be involved in a full-scale nonviolent strategy. This might include: introducing appropriate technology (such as network communication systems); appropriate organisational systems (such as self-managing teams rather than bureaucracies); appropriate infrastructure (such as self-reliant energy systems); appropriate education programmes; simulations and training exercises; and development of sophisticated

strategies. For nonviolence to live up to its potential, there would need to be massive changes in nearly every sphere of life. These changes are not prerequisites for using nonviolence, of course, but are part of the process of nonviolent social change. Contributing to such changes is an important part of nonviolent struggle. "Suffering" on the "front line" is certainly not essential for everyone and, in a well developed campaign, may be a rare exception.

Ryan's conception of nonviolence as primarily a matter of meekly accepting physical attacks is a common but meagre one. His analysis of its limitations can be criticised, but more importantly should alert us to wider issues.

Comparing nonviolence and violence
As its titled indicates, Critique of Nonviolent Politics is primarily a critique rather than presentation of an alternative position. But comparisons with violence, explicit and implicit, are found throughout the book. The main difficulty with these comparisons is that Ryan does not develop the case for violence in anything like the detail he presents the case against nonviolence. This is unfortunate.

Ryan argues that Gandhi's politics was biased, serving wealthy Indians at the expense of workers and peasants. He argues that Gandhi called off actions when lower class uprisings seemed possible, thereby undermining revolutionary possibilities. Since I am not a Gandhian scholar, I will leave to others an assessment of Ryan's claims about Gandhi. But it is possible to make a few general points.

It is important to know whether Gandhi was consistent in his advocacy of nonviolence and whether he made the best decisions in campaigns he led. But any inadequacies that Gandhi may have had do not undermine the case for nonviolence as a strategy, any more than Karl Marx's bourgeois life and authoritarian personal politics undermine the case for Marxism or Michael Bakunin's conspiratorial personal politics undermine the case for anarchism.

Ryan says that many advocates of nonviolence present simplified and misleading readings of history. I agree. For example, the Kapp Putsch—a military coup in Germany in 1920—is commonly cited as a case in which nonviolent resistance thwarted a coup. This omits mention of the armed struggle against the coup in many parts of the country. After the "legitimate" government regained power, it used the now reliable army to smash the popular workers' movement. Ryan asks for detailed histories, giving the complexity of events and circumstances in which nonviolence was used. Unfortunately, he does not do this himself when recounting the "successes" of violence.

India and China are often compared. India achieved independence in 1947 after decades of struggle, largely nonviolent. Communists took power in China in 1949 after decades of armed struggle. India's poverty, corruption, inequality, starvation and exploitation have been unfavourably compared to China's equality, health system and full employment, for example. But there is more that can be said. This leaves out the vast number of Chinese who are political prisoners, the killings of the Cultural Revolution, and the imposition of the party line. In 1959-61 some 20 million Chinese people died of starvation due to government intransigence in the Great Leap Forward. In contrast, press freedom in India has prevented famine in recent decades. A full comparison of India and China remains to be carried out. Violent revolution cannot be assumed to have been more successful on a superficial examination.

Ryan also looks at the revolutions in Nicaragua and Russia. He concludes that *"A balanced evaluation shows that armed revolutions, while not achieving democratic socialist ideals, have won immense gains for hundreds of millions of people"* (ch. 3). True enough: many revolutions have produced a net benefit. The question is whether a nonviolent revolution could have achieved as much. Again, a full comparison remains to be carried out.

Ryan says that *"Nonviolence has won concessions, but not revolutionary change"* (ch. 5). The Iranian revolution, in which the repressive regime of the Shah was toppled using nonviolent methods, is a counterexample. When Ryan refers to revolution he really means anticapitalist revolution, but this is a narrow definition.

Another sort of comparison Ryan makes is between nonviolence, which he says involves middle class biases, and violence, which he seems to treat as a neutral tool. It is important to become aware of biases in nonviolence theory and practice, and the greatest value in Ryan's critique is in helping do this. But his treatment is unbalanced because he does not address biases in violence. These include tendencies toward centralisation of power, male domination, internal oppression and corruptions of power. To take one example, violence is largely the preserve of young fit men, in spite of a few exceptions. Women, children, people with disabilities and old people are far less likely to be practitioners of violence, and also less likely to be military commanders. This is a serious bias. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for nonviolence is precisely that it is more participatory than violence.

Ryan says that if a revolutionary movement ever developed in the US, many people would be willing to use violence to support it. He backs this up by noting that US citizens supported the government during World War II and that *"most Americans would endorse the armed defense of our own country in the event of a foreign invasion"* (ch. 6). The trouble with this is that weapons are far more likely to be used for reaction than for revolution. It is much more feasible to democratise struggle by promoting nonviolence.

Another comparison between violence and nonviolence relates to suffering. Ryan says that *"nonviolence requires voluntary suffering."* So does violence! Violence goes further, requiring involuntary suffering. When civilians are bombed in war, they are expected to accept the suffering as part of the struggle. Some Gandhians may glorify suffering, but political and military leaders glorify sacrifice: *"they gave their lives for a noble cause."* Using violence requires a willingness to die. The main difference between violence and nonviolence is not in suffering - which is always a possibility - but in the willingness to kill.

Maintaining discipline in the face of suffering is not the key to nonviolent campaigning any more than self-sacrifice by soldiers is the key to warfare. (Soldiers are kept in line by the threat of court martial or execution.) The keys include organisation, winning allegiance, social structure and technology.

Ryan says that *"Any violent or nonviolent movement that seriously challenges the ruling powers will evoke violent retaliation at the hands of the state"* (ch. 3). He wrote before the 1989 collapse of the repressive regimes in Eastern Europe.

Ryan does not examine the limits of revolutionary violence. He says *"People struggling for social change should be free to choose any tactics and strategies, violent or nonviolent, that suit their needs given specific circumstances"* (ch. 7). The usual picture seems to be workers armed with rifles. What about machine guns? Bazookas? Tanks? Aerial bombing? Fuel air explosives? Chemical, biological and nuclear weapons? Torture? Assassination? What means are justified by the goal of revolution? Ryan says any methods can be used. The historical record shows that armed liberation movements seem to have used whatever weapons are available. The successful revolutionary party in China moved quickly to build nuclear weapons. Torture by revolutionary movements is not uncommon.

It is quite possible that a clear statement of appropriate limits for revolutionary violence could be spelled out. But it hasn't been done, at least not by Ryan.

Ryan's alternative viewpoint is Marxism, which he interprets to include insights from feminism and antiracism. Ryan does not elaborate his version of Marxism, which is unfortunate. Nor does he examine class biases in Marxism. There are many Marxisms. Among those who draw on the heritage of Marx are Leninists, Stalinists, Trotskyists social democrats and libertarian socialists. Ryan says that *"The thrust of pacifism, distinguishing it from Marxism, is the rejection not only of political violence but of class analysis"* (ch. 7). I disagree. Class analysis is, arguably, compatible with several different roads to a classless society, including the Leninist road of a vanguard party that seeks to capture state power by force, the parliamentary road to socialism, and the anarchist road of building self-managing structures at the grassroots. Class analysis is quite compatible with nonviolence. Ryan doesn't recognise this. On the other hand, many nonviolent activists reject class analysis because of its association with Marxist parties, revolutionary violence and state socialism. This is a mistake. There is much that nonviolent activists can learn from class analysis without having to adopt its usual accompaniments.

Antinuclear politics

Ryan argues that several of the standard methods used in the US antinuclear movement are limiting, and that their limitations derive from rigid adherence to nonviolence theory. He deals with consensus decision making, the expectation that activists adopt certain attitudes, and civil disobedience. For many activists, these chapters will be the most stimulating in the book, since they address issues of practical politics.

Consensus decision making is widely used in the nonviolence movement. It has many strengths, including building a strong sense of community and common purpose. At the same time, it can be incredibly difficult and disruptive, leading to excessive attention to process at the expense of action. In small groups, especially affinity groups of say five to fifteen people, the advantages are greatest and the problems less common. In

larger groups, especially where there are fundamental differences of viewpoint, consensus can be more of an obstacle than a help. At some size - whether it is ten thousand or ten million - consensus becomes totally impractical.

Ryan's critique of consensus is one of the most useful short treatments available, perceptively describing both its strengths and weaknesses. It is well worth studying. Less impressive is his comparison with voting: he tells of its strengths but not its weaknesses. Furthermore, he deals only with two alternatives, consensus versus voting. The bigger problem is how to organise a participatory society in which decisions need to be made although there are strong differences in viewpoint. Much more attention on this bigger problem is needed by those who appreciate the value of consensus but recognise its limitations for large groups.

Ryan's next chapter deals with expectations or codes in nonviolence groups that promote friendly and respectful attitudes—in particular, friendly towards each other and respectful, if not loving, towards opponents such as police. I agree with Ryan's reservations. If fostering participation is the key aim, then care should be taken not to impose "cultural" norms such as strong pressures to hug each other or to be friendly towards police.

Ryan's final chapter is a critique of the antinuclear movement's emphasis on civil disobedience, drawing on experiences in both Europe and the US. He argues that *"Reliance on jail-going tactics limits the movement's constituency. Blockade militancy has become a substitute for the development of broader programs and strategies."* Instead, he argues, *"A multi-layered strategy is required, alliances need to be built, a social and political base developed. Direct action tactics have their role—and, in the long run, a very crucial role—but will only be effective within the context of broader strategies"* (ch. 20). Again, I agree. As I suggested earlier, nonviolent politics has too much emphasis on putting bodies on the front line and not enough on strategy, transforming social structures, technology and infrastructure.

The chapters on the antinuclear movement are, in my view, the most persuasive and helpful in the book. They grow out of Ryan's personal experience in the antinuclear movement and relate to the everyday concerns of activists. There is much to gain by pondering Ryan's arguments, whether or not you agree with them.

On the other hand, limitations in the US antinuclear movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s do not automatically translate into limitations of nonviolent politics in general.

Conclusion

Vast amounts of money and effort have been devoted to improving techniques of violent struggle. Warfare has transformed societies at many levels, from psychology to industrial systems. Connected to warfare, there is also quite a tradition of revolutionary violence. By comparison, the development of nonviolence as a strategy is relatively undeveloped. Far more needs to be done in fostering, analysing and testing nonviolence theory and practice. In this context, *Critique of Nonviolent Politics*, for all its limitations, is worthy of attention. It is a critique by someone who is sympathetic to the goals of nonviolent activists and who has been deeply involved in the nonviolence movement. If we judge Ryan not to have understood nonviolence properly, then this should warn us to take extra efforts to explain it better. If we judge Ryan to have made inappropriate comparisons with history, then this should warn us to be careful with our own comparisons. After all, Ryan is a relatively sympathetic critic. If he makes "misinterpretations" of nonviolence, they are likely to be magnified by those who are more hostile.

Most of all, *Critique of Nonviolent Politics* is an opportunity for understanding the thinking of critics of nonviolence. A key part of nonviolence is engaging in dialogue. Here is an opportunity to learn how to improve it.

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