

NONVIOLENT POLITICS: FROM PRAXIS TO RESEARCH TO CLASSROOM TO PRAXIS TO RESEARCH TO CLASSROOM

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This is a narrative account of a nonviolent campaign in which the classroom study of nonviolence had a major impact on the outcome of the campaign. It takes the form of a story used as a way of presenting history. Centring on the issue of civil liberties, it features a protest movement. The plot unfolds in the State of Queensland, Australia (sometimes referred to as the 'Deep North'), and the events take place in 1978-79. The protagonists comprise a handful of students at the University of Queensland and a scattering of their community supporters arrayed against the State's premier, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, an arch-conservative, together with his functionaries and factotums. While the story is partly autobiographical, the key players are the small group of radical students who led the movement.

My contention is that the practice of nonviolence would spread faster if it were presented in the form of story-telling, an art that has been lost to what Martin Luther King Jr once called "the paralysis of analysis."¹ The text for this view comes from the novel of Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991), which begins with the great story-teller, Rashid Khalifa, opening his mouth to tell a story but finding it as empty as his heart. The rest of the novel depicts the search of his son, Haroun, to fight the Prince of Silence and return the magic of story-telling to humankind.

Rushdie's novel identifies a major failing of our times, an era in which the art of enchantment has given way almost completely to the registering of data upon data. Mounds of information and news assault our being, leaving us bereft of direction and meaning. Although the past of all cultures has abounded with story-telling and the evoking of imagination, the focus of modern life on numbers associated with market-oriented goals impoverishes the human spirit and contributes greatly to the mounting malaise of people's alienation. Peacemaking entails, *inter alia*, an attempt to remove this malaise. It needs to develop a history with a new plot. Instead of adding to the 20th and 21st centuries' dominant history of statistical plots of violence and economic fluctuations, its essential (but not sole) task is to record the peace victories of the past that can inspire future successes. A plot of history with nonviolence as its focus speaks to the art of peacemaking.

Case of the Cold War's Ending

How the dominant history can distort the past and preclude a peaceful future is illustrated by the way the ending of the Cold War is generally portrayed. The conventional view holds that the Reagan-Thatcher strategy of increasing the West's military strength forced the Soviet Union into an arms race that it could not match, and it was eventually driven into penury and ultimately capitulation.² In short, Reagan was responsible for winning the Cold War. However, far from being a closed debate that lays emphasis on the military build-up, the death-knell of communism did not resound throughout Eastern Europe until a series of nonviolent popular actions in late 1989 toppled government after government. Two years later, communism collapsed within the Soviet Union itself when the Russian people successfully thwarted a coup of hardline communists against the more open society advocated by Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. While acknowledging the multiplicity of the

¹ My inspiration for this approach comes from Campbell (1990) and Satha-Anand (1997).

² For a range of interpretations that steer away from the simplistic military view, see Summy and Salla (1995) and Roberts (1991).

causes behind these various successes, Adam Roberts (1992:1) still concludes in a more nuanced observation that

The whole chain of events in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union could be seen as a triumph of civil resistance (a nonviolent movement whose goals are widely shared by the community), validating the proposition that all government, even totalitarian government, is based on the consent and cooperation of the ruled: take that away, and the regime must collapse (my explanation in brackets).

Despite these and other recent nonviolent successes the concept of nonviolence has not gained widespread recognition and acceptance. Kurt Schock (2005: 6-12) attributes this failure to nineteen misconceptions social scientists and policymakers tend to have about nonviolent action. Gene Sharp sees the problem largely in terms of “the ghastly distortions of our media.” (1992: 3). He notes, for example, that in reporting the defeat of the 1991 coup in Russia, the standard explanation took such forms as Barbara Walters’ observation that Yeltsin did it “almost single handedly,” or from other commentators that ill-planning doomed the coup from the start, or that the plotters were not brutal enough, failing to kill key officials, or that the soldiers brought in from Odessa were not prepared to shoot their fellow citizens. All of these explanations, however, really beg the question. For sustaining Yeltsin and the rebellious soldiers, and undermining even the best of coordinated plans and the worst of brutal slayings, was “the massive resistance of the people employing nonviolent weapons.” (Sharp 1992: 3).

There is a strong possibility that the defiance of the Russian people (and those in Eastern Europe) might have gained universal recognition as a nonviolent action if it had been framed as a personalised story with a heroic plot of peacemaking. If the outside observer had been able to identify with the tension, the exhilaration, the sacrifice--the full range of emotions--that the individual protesters experienced, this different historical plot would very likely have provided the basis for a more balanced interpretation, featuring nonviolence, to the ending of the Cold War.

History As Storytelling

My thesis, then, is that all history is story that has a plot. This plot is not something discovered, but beyond the story’s events; it contains the historian’s imagined words and invented explanations. The same event can be given different plots: it can evoke a plot of any description—one, for instance, that is either tragic, comical, farcical, romantic, satirical, melodramatic, numerical or philosophical. The plot can depress or inspire; it can confuse or clarify; it can do anything that makes sense to the historian and, if s/he is a competent historian, never lose its historical accuracy. Explains the Thai political scientist Chaiwat Satha-Anand (1997: 12-13):

Historians are involved in the process of ‘emplotment’ when they...impose a certain kind of order on a seemingly confused or unrelated phenomena. Emplotment endows meaning on a set of events which take place chronologically and turns them into a related whole. It works as a logic that moves a narrative and creates an understanding.

The historical narrative of my presentation has a plot built around nonviolence and how its six components (action, research, education, action, research, education) were integrated into the unfolding of a successful nonviolent campaign. None of the opponents--and even some of the goal’s proponents--of this event, while their facts might jell with mine, would be likely to construct the event with a plot of nonviolence.

Genesis of the Nonviolent Story

My story begins at The University of Queensland in Australia around mid 1964, a time of awakening and upheaval for young people when fresh thinking and a distinctive popular culture were converging with a dramatic set of political and social events. Students found their estrangement articulated in the *Port Huron Statement* of Tom Hayden et al, in the works of writers from the Frankfurt School like Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, in the inspiration of activists Mario Savio of the 'Free Speech Movement' of Berkeley, the CND protesters of Great Britain, and 'Red Rudi' of the Free University in West Berlin, as well as through a mounting number of New Left journals such as *Radical America*, *New Left Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Red Mole*, *Ramparts*, and in Australia *Outlook*, *Australian Left Review* and *Arena*. This was also the heyday of the Beatles and the emergence of protest singers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul & Mary. In Australia the political scene was marked by Government decisions in November 1964 to introduce a selective conscription system and in April 1965 to send a battalion of troops to Vietnam. Groups sprang up to resist these war-making measures, and other issues quickly multiplied: university bureaucracy and dehumanisation, racism and civil liberties.

While the New Left movement initially looked to nonviolent icons like Martin Luther King Jr and Mohandas Gandhi, it developed within three to four years revolutionary heroes of the ilk of Che Guevara, Régis Debray, Frantz Fanon, and Mao Tse-tung. The rhetoric became more and more confrontational and violent, as did some of the actions. The analysis turned to a radical Marxist critique of neo-imperialism, away from the radical liberal critique of the formative years. Because sectarianism divided the student body, the solidarity necessary to effect radical institutional change quickly eroded, and the opposition triumphed in large measure due to the excesses of the student leadership. Despite the expanding opposition to the Vietnam War, the students were no longer its principal driving force. They were important to its success but not decisive. On the other hand, a determined issue-oriented section of the New Left did forge an effective draft resistance campaign.

For someone like myself who was interested in achieving instrumental success and who by personal inclination is attracted to the Gandhian political approach, the factionalism and demise of the New Left was a bitter disappointment. I wanted to help revive the movement, but this time keep it within an ideological framework related to where the vast majority of students were coming from, and guide it along an efficacious nonviolent path. Working as a tutor and then lecturer in the Department of Political Science, I incorporated this aim into my research program--trying to develop a strategic theory and method of nonviolence that would make sense in the context of Australian politics.

Almost by accident I came across in 1973 the just published three volume magnum opus of Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. While on sabbatical six months later in the US, I had the good fortune to meet Dr Sharp personally and to sit in on a seminar he conducted. We subsequently spent a lunch and afternoon together, he providing Norwegian beer and I offering what turned out to be stale Fosters Lager. But much more significantly, I had found what I was looking for in the way of a nonviolent theory and praxis. On returning to The University of Queensland I began the process of designing a course on 'The Politics of Nonviolent Change' and eventually managed to steer it successfully through the maze of requisite university committees. The course was first made available to external students in 1976, but internal students could also enrol since nothing like it appeared in their catalogue.

The Next Stage: From Peace Research to Peace Education

Teaching a course in nonviolent politics required a lot of sustained work in researching and learning about the subject. I even wrote up a couple of local nonviolent campaigns and assembled accounts from other academics for an edited collection that never came to fruition. However, in the process I taught myself much about the theory and dynamics of nonviolence.

When my knowledge was distilled into a course at the undergraduate advanced level, there were problems mainly attributable to my shortcomings (eg. not providing alternative approaches to nonviolence or a range of critical views on the subject, or a variety of teaching aids). However, since the students were excited about the offering of such a novel course, they were patient and constructive in their criticisms. The student numbers increased the next year and continued rising in future years until levelling off at about 35-45.

Some of the students were heavily involved in campus politics and also concerned about peace, gender, environmental and Aboriginal issues. Two--in particular Mark Plunkett, a graduate of the Law School and researcher for the Federal Government's Leader of the Opposition; and Bruce Dickson, a journalist student and editor of the student newspaper--were keen about applying the techniques of nonviolence to their political activities.

Shortly after establishing the course another major character entered the story. He was Sugata Dasgupta, the former head of the Gandhian Institute of Peace at Varanasi, India. He had accepted a position in the Department of Social Work at The University of Queensland when the emergency in India declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had closed down his Institute and put its chair, Jayaprakash (JP) Narayan, in prison. As a person placed on the "second enemy list," Professor Dasgupta opted for discretion over meaningless sacrifice and decided to wait out the crisis abroad. One of the first things he did on arriving in 1976 at The University of Queensland was to inquire whether anyone was working in the area of nonviolence. And so he was directed to me, and we became close collaborators on a number of projects. He was quite critical of the content of my nonviolence course which he claimed fell short of Gandhian ideals. It overlooked Gandhi's constructive program and its application to the problems of development in the marginalised countries. The subsequent work of JP on *Towards Total Revolution* also needed to be added to the curriculum. Because I was convinced that he was right, I asked him to prepare the syllabus of a course that took up the writings of Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and JP, and I would work to have it approved by the appropriate committees.

This he did with my editing, and a course called 'Nonviolence and the New Society' was submitted and accepted in a little over a year. There were now two advanced nonviolent courses that complemented each other--one dealing with the pragmatics of strategic theory and instrumental politics, and the other focusing on revolution, Third World Development and principled nonviolence. The only setback to the program was the loss of Dasgupta who returned to India after the lifting of the emergency and the release from prison of J. P. However, with interest rising in nonviolence among a core of Queensland students, the stage had been set for it to be applied.

Back to Peace Action: The Queensland Civil Liberties Campaign (1978-79)

For many years the environmental and Aboriginal movements had been campaigning with mixed success to keep uranium in the ground. In 1978 a shipment of 'yellow cake' from the Mary Kathleen Mines in central Queensland was intercepted by protesters at the docks. The Queensland state premier, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, was incensed and ordered his police chief, Terry Lewis, to arrest the protesters and deal with them in the most severe way possible. The Premier subsequently announced (*Courier-Mail* 1977):

The day of the political street march is over. Anybody who holds a street march, spontaneous or otherwise, will know they're acting illegally....Don't bother applying for a permit. You won't get one. That's government policy now.

This intractable response did not deter the determination of the protesters who continued to picket the shipments of uranium and endure the heavy-handed arresting methods of the police.

Among students, left-wing unions and civil libertarians generally, there arose a movement to regain the right to march, to distribute pamphlets and carry placards. The students took the lead role, refusing even to suffer the indignity of applying for a permit from the police chief when it was known in advance that permission would be denied.

Protest rallies were organised in King George Square in the middle of the city. This area was under the control of the Brisbane City Council and the Mayor who did not believe in prohibiting the exercise of free speech in public places, and thus granted permits for assemblies of citizens. Time and again people would assemble in their thousands on a Friday evening to protest the denial of the right to march. A kind of pageantry marked the gatherings. There would be a program of fiery oratory, street theatre, dancing and folk-singing. Although King George Square was always cordoned off by police, on some occasions the protesters would vote to march and break through the police lines. Arrests invariably followed with television cameras whirling to record the random outbreaks of violence, some of it instigated by the police but a few of the militant leftists were quick to strike at the police when taken in tow to the paddy wagons. However, most of the protesters resisted nonviolently, going limp so that they had to be carried away. This scene was re-enacted week after week and proved to be expensive for the demonstrators and their supporters. Moreover, the charges were becoming more serious and the fines heavier. The opinion polls indicated that the Premier was gaining in popularity, because he was prepared to take a “firm stand” against a group of “long-haired troublemakers” who were making the streets unsafe for ordinary law-abiding citizens. Faced with these depressing results, the protesters became dispirited and some were prepared to admit defeat.

Not so a band of students familiar with the strategy and methods of nonviolence. Led by Mark Plunkett, Bruce Dickson and others, they decided to engage in less confrontational but more effective tactics that would reach a sympathetic public. Among target groups like the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the legal profession, school teachers, clergymen, journalists and celebrities, there were possibilities for enlisting support. Individual students were assigned the task of directly contacting these people. Gene Sharp’s category of “protest and persuasion” (1973: 117-182) was also to be conducted at the level of street politics.

The students came up with three innovative types of marches: ‘No-March,’ the ‘Guerrilla March,’ and the ‘Border March.’ These were not included among Sharp’s 198 methods.³ The first of these, the **No March** entailed making an announcement that the students were marching from the campus into the heart of the city, three miles away, but when the students gathered and then marched to the edge of the campus where the police were lined up ready to arrest them, the nonviolent leadership abruptly called off the march, telling the students to reassemble two hours later. Two hours later, with the police still waiting, the march was again called off. This procedure would be repeated about three or four times every day. The students would carry their banners to the entrance of the University, face the police, and then disband. On a few occasions, when the police failed to appear, a march would commence and only disperse when the police arrived. The press and TV showed pictures of students marching in flagrant violation of the government’s policy. An enraged Premier ordered more police on duty, drawing officers from as far away as Rockhampton and Mt Isa, the latter well over a thousand miles from Brisbane. The police department also rostered officers on overtime.

While continuing the ‘No March’ strategy, the students invoked another nonviolent method they called the **Guerrilla March**. This involved breaking down into small groups and going to different exit points of the University which were not covered by the police. Then the small body of protesters

³ He relates that people have informed him of hundreds of additional methods since writing the 1973 seminal work.

would march down the streets of the local suburb until they encountered a busload of police sent out to track them down.

I have a vivid recollection of one bus travelling in the opposite direction of the students who waved and cheered as it sped past, and the police obligingly waved back. The bus quickly turned around and set off in pursuit of the students, but by this time they had managed to scamper down side alleys. The scene was reminiscent of a Keystone Cops movie, and, course, was considered great sport by the high-spirited students. Morale had now soared and the campaign's continuation was no longer in jeopardy.

The third type of march, the **border march**, proved to be the most successful of all. At one of the planning meetings the leadership hit upon the idea of organising a march in the state of New South Wales from its border town of Tweed Heads to the Queensland border town of Coolangatta, about 75 miles south of Brisbane. The idea was to obtain permission from the Tweed Heads police to conduct a march in New South Wales which had no total ban on the granting of permits, unlike Queensland. Indeed, the New South Wales people were inclined to view Queenslanders as politically and culturally backward, and in the rivalry between the two states liked to stress their more progressive sensitivities *vis a vis* their northern neighbours.

As anticipated, a march permit was granted by New South Wales and denied by Queensland. The media was fully informed of the planned march to cross over the state border into Queensland. Five busloads of students and others sharing their cars, all in holiday spirits, headed for Tweed Heads, NSW. On arrival they were greeted by two NSW policemen who discussed with them the route along the main street of Tweed Heads to the border. Unfurling a big banner with the words "Queensland Is a Police State" that was strung across the front row, the one thousand marchers set off with their escort of two policemen. On reaching the border, the students and their fellow marchers--some of them local residents and holiday makers who had joined the demonstration--were met by a phalanx of Queensland police, their arms akimbo, blocking the road. Police cars were parked behind, and paddy wagons behind them. Red lights were flashing, making an eerie sight in the otherwise natural environs. TV cameras were everywhere, focusing on the large banner of the students as they approached the grim line of police. A loud speaker blared a warning that if the marchers proceeded across the border they would be immediately arrested. A loud booing arose from the marchers and crowd of bystanders. Shouts rang out, "Queensland is a police state." The chanting continued for about fifteen minutes before the student marshals decided to abandon the march--the contrast between the two states' policies on civil liberties having been effectively made.

An exhilarated pack of students climbed back into the buses and headed home to watch the six o'clock TV news. They were not to be disappointed. Their banner was juxtaposed against the cordon of police, and beamed around the country. Queensland police became the butt of national jokes. When Mark Plunkett later gained access to police department records, he discovered that policing the three novel types of marches were undermining morale in the force. He also discovered the cost was proving excessive and moving the state's budget from a predicted surplus into the red. Even some of the Premier's most ardent rural supporters were beginning to doubt the wisdom of the march ban. An event occurred in the country town of Bundaberg, some 300 miles north of Brisbane, that accentuated the policy's absurdity.

Harry Akers, a mature-aged external student from Bundaberg, who was doing both nonviolent courses, had been conducting a one-man campaign for civil liberties in the letters-to-the-editor section of his local newspaper. His letters incurred the wrath of the townspeople in this conservative town, so that Harry's dental practice even began to suffer. Not to be deterred, he decided to stage an illegal march all by himself. He announced to the town's police and media that he and his German shepherd dog would be marching for civil liberties in a local cane field at one o'clock in the

morning. At the appointed hour in the middle of the night, Harry and dog, together with the police and a newsman, showed up at the designated cane field. Harry was carrying an appropriate placard, and the dog wore a sign around his neck declaring, "Dogs Want Civil Liberties Too." No sooner did Harry--with dog alongside--take a step down the path of the cane field than he was arrested. The newsman photographed the entire episode, and a picture of the lone marcher and his dog appeared in the next day's nation-wide media. As Harry tells the story, he literally became an "overnight flash-in-the pan mega star." He was even approached to go on a popular national TV show with dog, but he declined, not wanting to isolate himself completely from friends and fellow townspeople. Nevertheless, he had made a decisive statement--ridiculing the march ban with humour--from which the Bjelke-Petersen Government never recovered.

Postscript to the Civil Liberties Campaign

The Premier did not officially rescind his policy. No announcement was ever made. But he gradually relented, first allowing permits for marches through the empty inner-city streets on Sunday afternoons, and eventually even permitting marches during the peak hours on Friday nights. The students and their supporters (who in the end became many, including key members of the clergy) did not experience the elation of a clear-cut victory. The outcome proved to be a victory of attrition. The plot would not have had a definitive resolution if student Plunkett had not combed the police records to discover how badly police morale had fallen and how badly the cost of enforcement was affecting the state budget. This information, in conjunction with the modified *de facto* response of the Government, finally concludes my story (as much as stories can ever end).

The nonviolent campaign was analysed in a lengthy prize-winning article that appeared in *Social Alternatives* (1980: 73-90).⁴ As a peace action the campaign had now become the subject of peace research. To the extent the campaign was recorded into the story-telling of nonviolent triumphs, replete with its trials and tribulations, it represented a part of history. The peace research as history once again then evolved into peace education, continuing the circular movement among the three components of peacemaking. However, this flow was not always in the same direction (as has been emphasised in this story). Interaction was also occurring. Although some of the study's peacemakers chose to concentrate in a single area, they remained dependent on connecting and learning from the other areas.

Some Post-Postscripts to the Story

No story ever really ends. There can be denouement after denouement. The saga just rolls on. And so the civil liberties story has lots of sequels.

First, the heavy weight of arrogance and mismanagement eventually brought about the downfall of the Premier after a record-breaking number of years in office. His police chief, Terry Lewis, was found guilty of serious charges of 'rotting' the system and sentenced to ten years in prison. One of the protesters' leading parliamentary opponents and a former member of the special police, Don Lane, was also imprisoned for corruption.

On the nonviolent activist side, Mark Plunkett has become a prominent legal defender of minority groups. He enrolled in the Harvard Program on Negotiation of Roger Fisher and William Ury, and has played a leading role in resolving the bloody conflict between the Bougainville separatists and the Papua New Guinea Government. He also has been active in reconciliation work in East Timor.

Bruce Dickson, currently living in the US, continues to be involved in nonviolent protest movements and through his many contacts with activists spreads the teachings of Gene Sharp and how nonviolent campaigns can be made strategically and tactically more effective.

⁴ The authors were awarded the \$2,000 George Watson Essay Prize of 1981 for best political article under 10,000 words published in Australia.

At The University of Queensland the popularity of the two nonviolent courses encouraged a couple of faculty members and myself, together with the support of some students, to press for the introduction of an interdisciplinary major and double major in peace and conflict studies (PACS). The consultations and paper work began in 1989, and the first courses were up and running in the second half of 1991. This PACS program had the good fortune to be inaugurated by the prominent peace researcher and educator Johan Galtung. Over the years the number of students enrolled in the first year introductory course have reached as high as 270, averaging about 190. The two nonviolent courses remained an integral part of the program for eleven years before the Nonviolence and the New Society course was replaced with an advanced course in conflict resolution. Due to the program's popularity, my position was retained following my departure at the end of 1996 (despite a policy of general retrenchments throughout the University). My successor and others involved in the program have ensured that it has gone from strength to strength. The University was selected in 1999 by the International Rotary Foundation as one of seven universities throughout the world to receive each year ten scholarship students outside Australia who would commence a masters peace and conflict studies program. Thus the two-year course would have twenty Rotary scholars participating at any one time. In 2002, a generous donation by the Amitabha Buddhist Society provided for the establishment of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, an institute designed for peace research. Its foundation director is the renowned peace researcher and dynamic administrator Kevin P. Clements.

It may sound as if the success of peace studies at The University of Queensland came easily, but it was a long, hard struggle ... one more grand plot and many characters to add to the telling of the unabridged story of nonviolence and peacemaking. And yet in many other places exist additional untold "emplotments" of nonviolence to be set down and heard. In the domain of formal and informal schooling, alone, there are countless stories to tell about the blending of spirit, science, solidarity, strategy, skills, slogans, symbols, and songs into scripts that can inspire and make a difference.⁵ Indeed, these are the stories that readers are encouraged to create and record as their own *Ahimsa Nonviolence*.

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⁵ The idea of combing the ten 'S' words for effective nonviolent action comes from Glenn Paige who listed four--spirit, science, skill and song--as the principal elements needed to realise a nonkilling transformation (2002: 149).

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