

CONTROVERSIES IN NONVIOLENT ACTION THEORY

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These are some of the big controversies in nonviolence theory. This brief training tool is designed to challenge and clarify your thinking about the nature of nonviolent action.

Nonviolent activists have been thinking about the controversies for some time. Some controversies are in the nature of either-or arguments, some are both-and, and some search for a resolution of polarized points. What this tool does is to identify some of the most important issues in the field. You may not resolve all the issues in one session, but even if you don't, you'll have better questions as a result of this training exercise!

1. THE POWER OF LOVE VS. FORCE AND AGGRESSION

PRO "POWER OF LOVE" ARGUMENT: Social change will come about if we understand the power of love. Love should not be seen as sentimental, or effective only among individuals. Love is disarming and prevents the development of fear and anger. Love keeps the focus away from seeing people as the opponent and on the focus of greed, war, injustice, etc., as the "opponent." Power is not the issue.

PRO FORCE AND AGGRESSION: You cannot change anything just by love. It takes forever and we can't wait. We need power and aggression as an active force to change anything. After all, it's nonviolent ACTION. Aggression towards our oppressors is healthy; we do not need love them to make them change.

2. PRINCIPLE VS. TECHNIQUE

PRO PRINCIPLE: We need to see nonviolence as a principle. Using nonviolent action as a technique alone too easily weakens when the opponent escalates the oppression and the struggle. Supporters of principled nonviolence have been responsible for staying in the struggle and initiating innovations in nonviolent action, when "technical" supporters do not see the need to continue the struggle. Witness the falling off of the US anti-war movement when the Indochina War stopped.

PRO TECHNIQUE: Nonviolent action is an effective method of change. Our main goal is change, not to convert people to believe in the rightness of nonviolence. Trying to convert everyone is not the best use of time and energy. Nonviolent action works because of its own dynamics. Nonviolent action is a technique of taking power and destroying the opponent's power by removing support for the opponent. The vast majority of historical cases where nonviolent action was used effectively has been carried out by people who saw only the value of the technique.

3. PERSUASION VS. COERCION

PRO PERSUASION: Persuasion creates more lasting change because it brings a change of heart and values. If you force people to change their behavior without a simultaneous change of heart, the change will last only a short time. Besides, you should not use force to change because you may not be right. Our motto is "better no change than change by force." Admittedly, it is slower than coercion, but it is surer.

PRO COERCION: Persuasion is not enough. Power never gives up willingly. Some institutions have to be coerced. There is a form of nonviolent coercion by which we can act against the opponent while not wishing them harm or destruction. Vested interests and systematic oppression require nonviolent coercion from time to time. It is true that we cannot legislate morality, but we can force changes in laws against some people's will so that a more just society will have a chance to develop.

4. NONVIOLENCE AND PACIFISM: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

THEY ARE THE SAME: Pacifism and nonviolence are essentially the same concept. Both are based on the view that life is sacred, and killing is never justified for any reason. If you are a pacifist, you are also nonviolent. If you are nonviolent, you are also a pacifist.

THEY ARE NOT THE SAME: Pacifism and nonviolence are not the same concept. Pacifism is a principle based on the sacredness of life. Nonviolence is essentially a means of carrying out social change without weapons. (There is also the concept of a nonviolent life style.) Not all pacifists are nonviolent because they do not always act on their principles. Not all nonviolent activists are pacifists — e.g. labor union strikes are nonviolent, yet an overwhelming majority of labor union members are not pacifists.

5. OPENNESS VS. SECRECY

PRO SECRECY: It is nice when you can be open, but it is not always possible. Sometimes you need to be secret under dictatorships and heavily repressive regimes when open organization and protests are illegal and are heavily punished. For example, during World War II, Dutch and French underground people needed to keep their identities secret. Otherwise, they would not have been so effective in working against the Nazi occupations. If you are open, the government will have the upper hand, so they can stop you in advance of the actions. They are the enemy; why be open with them?

PRO OPENNESS: Secrecy undermines trust among allied. Secrecy is defensive, prevents confrontation, increases fear among allies and opponents. Most important, a policy of secrecy develops two classes of people: those who know the confidential plans and those who do not know. There are examples of open resistance in dictatorships; Guatemala, Holland, and Norway are examples. And, protecting Jews, for example, during World War II may have been a moral and necessary imperative, but essentially it was not nonviolent because it relied heavily on secrecy.

6. UNIVERSAL APPLICATION OF NONVIOLENT ACTION: YES OR NO

PRO UNIVERSAL APPLICATION: Nonviolent action is applicable in all conflict situations whether or not we are talking about an intensely repressive regime. This analysis is based on the principle that governments derive their power from the consent of the people. If people noncooperate with that power, then the regime ultimately falls. The deciding force is people's awareness of their own power and capacity to organize themselves. It may be next to impossible to create a successful nonviolent revolution. But an armed strategy may have no greater chance of success. The use of nonviolence is not a guarantee of success.

CON UNIVERSAL APPLICATION: Third world people have tried nonviolent action and found it does not work in their situation. Third world people see nonviolent action as a weak idea which middle class Westerners just talk about. We cannot really know what third world people really face. So we should not judge them if they choose a military campaign as a means for liberation. Besides, Gandhi himself said that if you have to choose between a violent struggle or no struggle at all, it is imperative to carry on a violent struggle.

7. ANGER AS BASIS OF A CAMPAIGN: YES OR NO

PRO ANGER: Anger is a sound basis for organizing a campaign. When people are outraged at injustices, corruption, etc., they are ready and willing to act. Organizers of all forms of action campaigns, military or nonviolent, recognize that apathy and fear are the biggest obstacles to action. Anger is more conducive to action than fear is. We need to encourage anger and use it as a basis for a social change campaign.

CON ANGER: Anger is not a sound basis for organizing a campaign. When people are angry, they do not think carefully about goals, strategy and tactics (steps) of a campaign. Anger spends so much emotional energy that it leads to burn-out. People cannot hold a pitch of "righteous indignation" for very long. In addition, people are too easily swayed by emotional ups and downs of apparent short term victories or defeats. What successful campaigns really need are careful planning, thinking, and analysis.

8. PROPERTY DESTRUCTION AND SABOTAGE: YES OR NO

PRO YES: Sabotage destroys property, not people. Property is not important in a revolution intending to create humane social values. Therefore, it is OK to use sabotage. It is appropriate as a means of or coercion. We can make sure that no one is hurt, so it is nonviolent. Some property should not exist, such as some corporation files or some forms of military equipment. Therefore, we are justified in destroying them.

PRO NO: Property destruction escalates the struggle in such a way that allows activists to have less control over the struggle than if property had not been destroyed. Property destruction gives clear justification for greater oppression by the opposition. It frightens potential allies and creates a bad image of the campaign for the uncommitted. Because planning is done in secrecy, property destruction creates two classes of people --- those who know and those who do not know. Property destruction is easy to spill over to a destruction of people. There is always the problem of accidents. Finally, property destruction creates a climate of violence, counter-productive in a struggle.

9. PERSONAL CHANGE VS. POLITICAL CHANGE

PRO PERSONAL CHANGE: We must start with ourselves; we must begin at home. Changing the world is hypocritical if our actions are not reflected in our lives. We cannot have a new society without also having new people.

PRO POLITICAL CHANGE: Changing life styles does nothing to confront governments or corporations which hold the real power. The revolution is a change of institutions --- it means cultural changes. We can mess around with our lives after the revolution. Anyway, we are not able to lead pure lives because of the nature of the system. Life styles are irrelevant to political struggle. We need to put all our energy into organizing, not to cooking soybeans, meditating, and so on, which are just self-indulgent.