

# **The War System, the Citizen and Nonviolent Activism**

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## **Abstract**

Our world today has irrefutably changed since the events of 9/11 in New York in 2001. The present United States administration has declared a 'war on terrorism', which by its nebulous statement has suggested both the Orwellian notion of a war without end and also the implication that any criticism raised against this war would be deemed 'unpatriotic'. Such is the way that administrations deal with free speech and the rights of citizens to voice their own misgivings against government policy. Throughout history however citizens have refused to have their voice stifled and through their own personal bravery and their quest for moral truths have raised their misgivings in public and suffered the consequences from oppressive states. This paper will consider several essays that deal with the principles of citizen-led nonviolent activism and examine their implications and potential for education and society in dealing with the unrest so prevalent in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Letter from Birmingham Jail: A Rebuttal of Prevailing Authority**

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the strengths behind the civil rights movement in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. His actions, speeches and moral righteousness formed the template for change to the segregation policies that denigrated the African American a second-class citizen. In his powerful letter to dissenting and censuring religious leaders *Letter from Birmingham Jail* April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963, King outlines his own philosophy and his motives for peaceful non-violent action.

King had been arrested in Alabama because he had dared to challenge injustices in that state against African Americans. Religious leaders of multi-

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*Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, 2005. ISSN 1347-8214. Vol.4, pp. 1-8

faiths had questioned his methods of protest and criticized him for his direct action and 'unseemly' behavior such as sit-ins, marches and peaceful process instead of waiting as all good members of society should for changes in the legal system. In his eloquent letter King argues, 'The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.' (2004:105)

Here is King's thrust. He states that in his nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps, 'collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action' (Ibid. 102). To dwell too long and wait for change to come from parties that have deprived the African American from equal rights argues King is to wait in vain. Police action towards African Americans and their supporters in the 'white' community had proved that the law was not listening, nor would governmental authorities like the newly elected Mayor of Birmingham, Albert Boutwell, help being a segregationist and dedicated to the status quo.

King declares in his mission statement that 'freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed' (Ibid. 104) and that for more than 340 years the African American had waited for constitutional change and God-given rights, creeping 'like a horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter' (Ibid. 104).

In the following passages of his letter he launches in to what was must be the one of the most eloquent, impassioned and seething diatribes against segregation ever - trying to explain to the innocent minds of children why they cannot visit public amusement parks because of their color, the denial of basic facilities to African Americans like hotel rooms or wash rooms and why vicious mobs carry out hate attacks that have ended in deaths with no recourse to the law.

To a citizen of the 21<sup>st</sup> century living in lands of technological and democratic advancement these examples may seem so remote and implausible as to be archaic. Yet these situations of disparity existed only forty or fifty years ago in one of the most advanced countries in the world, and some might argue that following the present US administration's inability to provide immediate security aid for its poor in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, still do in one form or another. The fact remains that without people like King to highlight these inequalities they will continue to remain unchecked, after all freedoms and rights are too often wrested from governments and not freely volunteered.

## **Patriarchy and Influence**

The question is raised as to why revered figures like King are not seen as designers of significant political possibilities. Possibly an answer is to compare King to the present leader of the free world at this time of writing, and ask how such a 'leader' could have been elected and not someone with the articulacy, compassion, and intelligence like King. In other words paradoxes such as these are often too extreme to be answered. Of course another more obvious suggestion is that King and Gandhi were not members of the white patriarchal hegemony so beloved by Western States. Patriarchy being in the words of Elster, 'a set of beliefs and values supported by institutions and backed by the threat of violence.' (Elster, 1981). Moreover, nonviolent action carries with it the 'flakey' stigma of the student and the seditious agitators of the peace movement that the western media always resorts to when direct action is carried out. Trouble makers, left wing radicals, anarchists, rabble rousing unfocused thugs, all these terms are used by areas of the western press to denigrate any form of protest against the status quo.

Many sections of the media and the western press of course consists of journalists worried about their jobs and willing to toe the owner's, company and editorial line hoping that their compliancy will forward their career – in reality they are the direct opposite of people like King and Gandhi who were willing to carry out their protests no matter what the implications would be. In both cases these men suffered greatly for their beliefs – imprisonment, verbal and physical attack and finally and tragically, violent death.

## **The War System as a Means of Resolve?**

George W. Bush, as any leader in power, faces the constant threat of assassination but it could be argued in karmic terms that this is because he himself carries the blood of numerous violent deaths carried out in his name. Bush has resorted to the 'war system' in a direct response to the attacks on the twin towers on 9/11. Support for the USA was at its highest after the attacks but unfortunately this was dissipated by the US administration's subsequent movement to target blame on and to launch a preemptive attack on Iraq. Perhaps a definition of the 'war system' is necessary here. B.A.Reardon defines this as referring to 'our competitive social order, which is based on authoritarian principles, assumes unequal value among and between human beings, and is held

in place by coercive force.’ (Reardon, 1966:10).

This method of resolve is in direct contrast to King and Gandhi who advocated non-violent action to further their aims. In the words of the Hague Agenda for Peace ‘it is commonly assumed but has never been proved that violence and warfare are inherent in human nature. In fact many traditions and examples show that active non-violence is an effective way to achieve social change.’ (Hague Agenda clause 9). In direct contrast to the Iraq War and its outcome, which shows no sign at the time of writing of this paper of ever being resolved, nor was there ever any meaningful strategy suggested apart for the direct targeting of the civilian population with firstly economic sanctions and then, following on, ‘shock and awe’, Gandhi and King ended their endeavors successfully with the inspiring results of equal rights legislation for African Americans and the independence of India.

The contrast could not be clearer. Two men without the money or the power behind them of multinational companies, the military, or political sponsors, who took on the white hegemony and succeeded against overwhelming odds with only their eloquence and the moral belief that they would prevail. They advocated direct action without violence at what they believed were unfair and unjust circumstances and were criticized and pressured to revoke these beliefs, and yet their unbound and sincere faith carried them forward to their respective successful conclusions.

## **The Law and Citizen’s Movements as a Means of Action**

Certainly citizen movements have taken up their beliefs in justice for all in issues like the unfairness of globalization or in the current protest at what many see as an unlawful war against a country that through no fault of its own was ruled by an unpopular dictator and was seen as a threat to the west, which has since been proved totally unfounded. If weapons of mass destruction were concealed in Iraq they certainly continued to remain concealed even after the event of a direct attack on its sovereignty. It is a credit to King and Gandhi and citizen movements that a sense of injustice is felt in the Iraq war and that many people are willing to actively protest in the form of marches and methods such as collective action and education organized through mediums like the Internet.

Of course the status quo will always purport that protest is unconstitutional and therefore against the law of the land. But Gandhi and King both question the act of following laws blindly. Gandhi himself was a lawyer and he argues that

someone 'obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will, because he considers it to be his sacred duty to do so. It is only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position to judge as to which particular rules are good and just and which unjust and iniquitous.' (2004:77). King echoes this when he says, 'a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.' (2004:105).

King and Gandhi both challenge the assumptions that laws are in their own right tenable, on the grounds of moral and legal debate. Indeed the present war in Iraq has been deemed unlawful in international terms and yet only recently has the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, spoken out in what was perceived as generally couched terms against the actions of the US administration and the British Government. Again the popular voice is ignored and the 'might is right' perpetrators steam roll over voices of dissent. In this way the voices of King and Gandhi are still meaningful and still resonate with citizens in their call for action against injustice, namely the thousands of innocent women and children who have been killed and maimed so that geopolitics and economics can be perpetuated in the West's name in the Middle East.

## **The Moral Equivalent of War**

In the essay by William James *The Moral Equivalent of War* James discusses attitudes regarding the military and the power of men to adjudicate their selfish will in deploying such unfocused military might. He addresses historical attitudes to 'heroes' such as Alexander whose career he deems, 'piracy pure and simple, nothing but an orgy of power and plunder, made romantic by the character of the hero.' (2004:177). It is interesting and perhaps rather sad to note that in terms of popular entertainment emanating from areas such as Hollywood, sex and violence are still the acceptable sublimation of entertainment.

James is succinct when he states, 'civilized man has developed a sort of double personality'. (2004:178). As Shakespeare's Hamlet would passionately concur, 'Aye, there's the rub' as most arguments on the subject of war and civilized man come back to this double personality. Noam Chomsky the political commentator has himself pointed out that man has the potential to be the gas chamber operator or a saint. According to James there is this acceptance of war

'as a biological or sociological necessity, uncontrolled by ordinary psychological checks and motives.' (Ibid.,179). Expansion of Empire will always continue with 'two unwillingnesses of the imagination, one aesthetic, and the other moral; to envisage a future in which army-life with its many elements of charm, shall be forever impossible' (Ibid., 180) but it is to be hoped that the future of people will be decided by means other than the quick and brutal use of force as opposed to the slower but far more incontestable methods of diplomacy or tolerance.

James focuses on the glamour of the military life in the minds of men, the somehow unquestionable decree that it's a man's duty to fight and that nonviolence is dishonest, however he suggests, 'Pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents.' (Ibid., 181). Furthermore he states, 'Do that first in any controversy, says J. J. Chapman, *then move the point*, and your opponent will follow.' (Ibid., 181).

James in his utopian ideal echoes H.G. Wells and argues for the adoption of a new way of thinking to the military. By all means keep the discipline, by all means keep the gainful employment, by all means keep the camaraderie and the esprit de corps but focus it on 'toughness without callousness, authority with as little criminal cruelty as possible, and painful work done cheerily because the duty is temporary, and threatens not, as now, to degrade the whole remainder of one's life' (Ibid., 183). If this could be carried out without recourse of the political doctrine of fear as advocated by the Bush administration, this would awaken 'the higher ranges of men's spiritual energy' (Ibid., 185). In this way instead of the military being the means to an end in any conflict, the military would perform a far more disciplined role in society, that of focusing energy into itself and not outward into destruction and death. Moreover with the current focus on bullying in the military in Germany and the UK and the human rights issue raised by the USA's treatment of prisoners in Cuba and Iraq these changes in military training are clearly called for.

## **Thoreau and Civil Disobedience**

Thoreau in his *Civil Disobedience* also takes up a similar controversial use of a recognized system. Instead of acceptance of the government Thoreau purports, 'the government is best which governs not at all' (2004:48). Thoreau posits the right of every individual to protest their right to free speech and states, 'the progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual'...with 'the

individual as the basis of the empire.' (2004:63). Like James, Thoreau analyzes the military system and sees their role in serving the state, 'not as men mainly, but as machines with their bodies.' (Ibid., 49) and argues that men like lawyers, legislators, ministers and politicians rarely make any moral distinctions.

As with the other advocates of nonviolent direct action Thoreau's thrust is a humanist one arguing that it is better to act oneself than to leave actions to others and trust that meaningful laws will be passed or that inequalities will be dealt with in due course and with due process. These arguments are still relevant to our society both in education and society. Citizen movements are active in protest and distrust of government for being the only voice of the people. Injustices still exist, poverty, environmental damage, health inequalities, gender inequalities, and the imbalance of human rights.

For all the talk of the interconnectedness that globalization has brought, and the heading for a brave new world, the reality is still the 'haves and have-nots'. A simple phrase but a pertinent one nevertheless in its summation of the current world order. In the words of Tow and Cawagas, 'despite technological and social advances the world today is still marked by a tragic gulf...among nations and within societies. Such global and national inequalities reflect the condition of *structural violence* where the poor suffer a chronic lack of basic needs because of unjust and exploitative social systems.' (Tow and Cawagas, 1987:11).

## **Conclusion**

In society and in its education systems it is imperative that the messages of non violence carried by the essays mentioned above are imparted but at the same time it is important that these ideas are brought out in citizens rather than any 'educator' imposing their own doctrines on the populace. The readings carry value in themselves as they instill empathy and tolerance and provide a foundation for ideas of nonviolence and, together with questions that require reflective critical analyses, people can be gently led to draw their own conclusions. It is after all the search for truth that most responsible citizens are interested in.

Gandhi fought for the liberation of the Indian people from colonialism, that he succeeded using no guns, merely his own moral belief and commitment to a cause is strength enough. This is a message that can be passed on to others and as an example it is a very powerful one. So too is King's. The feeling of solidarity with these people can be made very strong simply by simply reading their eloquent arguments. They state their case in very clear and yet paradoxically

complex terms when considered in greater depth. Their work should be read in media and in classrooms as examples of compassion, truth and justice. Such issues will always resound wherever open-minded and active citizens gather whether in a formal classroom setting or beyond. The mark of true genius is found in these articles, to inform and to touch people on all levels, to inspire a feeling of positive empowerment and to instill the skills in citizens to recognize that it is right and proper to take action against injustice.

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