**On Revolution and Equilibrium**

*Barbara Deming*

**Barbara Deming (1917-1984) was a writer, film analyst, and nonviolent activist. She was at the center of the antinuclear, antiwar, civil rights and feminist movements of the second half of the 20th century; but the depths of her contributions has yet to be recognized. This particular essay was written in part to correct the mistake she thought many make when they equate power with violence. You have here an abridged version to be used for classroom use only.**

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*What we want to do is to go forward all the time . . . in the company of all men. But can we escape becoming dizzy?*

—Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*

Do you want to remain pure? Is that it?” a black man asked me, during an argument about nonviolence. It is not possible to act at all and to remain pure; and that is not what I want, when I commit myself to the nonviolent discipline. I stand with all who say of present conditions that they do not allow men and women to be fully human and so they must be changed - all who not only say this but are ready to act.

When one is confronted with what Russell Johnson calls accurately “The violence of the status quo” - conditions which are damaging, even murderous, to very many who must live within them - it is degrading for all to allow such conditions to persist. And if the individuals who can find the courage to bring about change see no way in which it can be done without employing violence on their part - a very much lesser violence, they feel, than the violence to which they will put an end - I do not feel that I can judge them.

The judgements I make are not judgements upon men and women but upon the means open to us - upon the promise these means of action hold or withhold. The living question is: What are the best means for changing our lives - for really changing them?

The very people who speak of the necessity of violence, if change is to be accomplished, are the first, often, to acknowledge the toll it exacts among those who use it—as well as those it is used against. In his classic 1961 work *The Wretched of the Earth,* West Indian psychoanalyst and philosopher Frantz Fanon writes, “We are forever pursued by our actions.” After describing, among other painful disorders, those suffered by an Algerian terrorist—who made friends among the French after the war and then wondered with anguish whether any of the men he had killed had been men like these—he comments, “It was what might be called an attack of vertigo.” Then he asks a poignant question: “But can we escape becoming dizzy? And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?”

“Vertigo”—here is a word, I think, much more relevant to the subject of revolutionary action than the word “purity.” No, it is not that I want to remain pure; it is that I want to escape becoming dizzy. And here is exactly the argument of my essay: we can escape it. Not absolutely, of course; but we can escape vertigo in the drastic sense. It is my stubborn faith that if, as revolutionaries, we will wage battle without violence, we can remain very much more in control—of our own selves, of the responses to us which our adversaries make, of the battle as it proceeds, and of the future we hope will issue from it.

The future—by whom will it be built? By all those whom the struggle has touched and marked. And so the question of how it marks them is not irrelevant. The future will be built even, in part, by those who have fought on the losing side. If it is a colonial struggle, of course, a good many of the adversaries can be expected to leave at the end of a successful revolution; but if it is a civil struggle, those who have been defeated, too, will at least help to make the new society what it is. How will the struggle have touched them? How will it have touched the victors?

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At this point suddenly I can hear in my head many voices interrupting me. They all say: “Who among us likes violence? But nonviolence has been tried.” It has not been tried. We have hardly begun to try it. The people who dismiss it now as irrelevant do not understand what it could be. And, again, they especially do not understand the very much greater control over events that they could find if they would put this “practice of action,” rather than violence, to a real test.

What most people are saying just now of course is that nonviolence gives us no control at all over events. “After years of this,” says Stokely Carmichael[[1]](#footnote-1), “we are at almost the same point.” They have served to integrate a token few into American society. Even those few cannot be said to have been absorbed into the mainstream; they still are not allowed to forget the color of their skins.

I won’t try to pretend that progress has been made that has not been made. Though I would add to the picture that Carmichael and others paint that there is one sense in which things hardly can be said to be at the same point still. If one speaks of psychological forces that will make a difference—the determination of black people not to accept their situation any longer, the determination of some white people not to accept it either, and a consciousness on the part of other white people that changes are bound to come now, doubts about their ability to prevent them—in these terms all has been in constant motion. And these terms are hardly unimportant. Literally, yes, one can speak of gains that seem to mock those who have nearly exhausted themselves in the struggle for them. But I think one has to ask certain questions. Have gains been slight because nonviolent tactics were the wrong tactics to employ—or did many of those leading the battle underestimate the difficulties of the terrain before them? Did they lack at the start a sufficiently radical vision? Can those who have now turned from reliance upon nonviolence say surely that resort to violence over those same years would have brought greater gains?

There are those who are implying this now. One observer who implies it strongly is Andrew Kopkind, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in August [1967] about the uprisings in the ghettos. He writes, “Martin Luther King and the ‘leaders’ who appealed for nonviolence … are all beside the point. Where the point is is in the streets. . .. The insurrections of July have done what everyone in America for thirty years has thought impossible; mass action has convulsed the society and brought smooth government to a halt.” He itemizes with awe: they caused tanks to rumble through the heart of the nation’s biggest cities, brought out soldiers by the thousands, destroyed billions of dollars’ worth of property. This violence (or as Dave Dellinger better names it, this counterviolence of the victimized) certainly called out the troops. One thing violence can be counted on to do is bring the antagonist forth in battle dress. The question that hasn’t been answered yet is: Did this gain the rebels an advantage? It gained them many casualties. The powers-that-be paid their price, too. But it is one thing to be able to state the price the antagonist paid, another to be able to count your own real gains.

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Too often in the past [nonviolence] has confined itself to petition, but there is no need for it to do so—especially now that so many have learned “change [is] harder to get than they had imagined.” There have always been those in the nonviolent movement who called for radical action. The pressure that nonviolent moves could put upon those who are opposing change, the power that could be exerted this way, has yet to be tested.

I have introduced the word “power” deliberately. When the slogan “Black Power” was first taken up, the statements immediately issued, both for and against it, all seemed to imply that “power” was a word inconsistent with a faith in nonviolence. This was of course the position taken by Stokely Carmichael: “we had to work for power because this country does not function by morality, love and nonviolence, but by power. For too many years, Black Americans marched and had their heads broken and got shot. They were saying to the country, ‘Look, you guys are supposed to be nice guys and we are only going to do what we are supposed to do. Why . . . don’t you give us what we ask?’ . . . We demonstrated from a position of weakness. We cannot be expected any longer to march and have our heads broken in order to say to whites: Come on, you’re nice guys. For you are not nice guys. We have found you out.” Carmichael gives us: the humble appeal to conscience on the one hand, the resort to power on the other. If the choice were really this, anyone who wanted change would certainly have to abandon nonviolent action.

But the choice is very much wider than this: to resort to power one need not be violent, and to speak to conscience one need not be meek. The most effective action both resorts to power and engages conscience. Nonviolent action does not have to beg others to “be nice.” It can in effect force them to consult their consciences—or to pretend to have them. It can face the authorities with a new fact and say: Accept this new situation which we have created.

If people doubt that there is power in nonviolence, I am afraid that it is due in part to the fact that those of us who believe in it have yet to find for ourselves an adequate vocabulary. The leaflets we pass out tend to speak too easily about love and truth—and suggest that we hope to move people solely by being loving and truthful. It is easy enough to recommend “love.” How many, even among those who like to use the word, can literally feel love for a harsh opponent—not merely pretending to while concealing from themselves their own deepest feelings? What is possible is to act toward another human being on the assumption that all lives are of value, that there is something about any person to be loved, whether one can feel love for them or not. It happens that, if one does act on this assumption, it gives one much greater poise in the situation. It is easy enough to speak about truth; but we had better spell out how, in battle, we rely upon the truth. It is not simply that we pay our antagonist the human courtesy of not lying to them. We insist upon telling truths they don’t want to hear—telling what seems to us the truth about the injustice they commit. Words are not enough here. Gandhi’s term for nonviolent action was “satyagraha”—which can be translated as “clinging to the truth.” What is needed is this—to cling to the truth as one sees it. And one has to cling with one’s entire weight. One doesn’t simply say, “I have a right to sit here,” but acts out that truth—and sits here. One doesn’t just say, “If we are customers in this store, it’s wrong that we’re never hired here,” but refuses to be a customer any longer. One doesn’t just say, “I don’t believe in this war,” but refuses to put on a uniform. One doesn’t just say, “The use of napalm is atrocious,” but refuses to pay for it by refusing to pay one’s taxes. And so on and on. One brings what economic weight one has to bear, what political, social, psychological, what physical weight. There is a good deal more involved here than a moral appeal. It should be acknowledged both by those who argue against nonviolence and those who argue for it that we, too, rely upon force.

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But I can imagine the impatience of some of my readers with these various scruples. How can we hope to put any real pressure upon an adversary for whom we show such concern? This is the heart of my argument: We can put more pressure on the antagonist for whom we show human concern. It is precisely solicitude for their person in combination with a stubborn interference with their actions that can give us a very special degree of control (precisely in our acting both with love, if you will—in the sense that we respect the other’s human rights—and truthfulness, in the sense that we act out fully our objections to their violating our rights). We put upon them two pressures—the pressure of our defiance of them and the pressure of our respect for their life—and it happens that in combination these two pressures are uniquely effective.

One effect gained is to “raise the level of consciousness” for those engaged in the struggle—those on both sides. Because the human rights of the adversary are respected, though their actions, their official policies are not, the focus of attention becomes those actions, those policies, and their true nature. The issue cannot be avoided. The antagonist cannot take the interference with their actions personally, because their person is not threatened, and is forced to begin to acknowledge the reality of the grievance against them. And for those in rebellion, the more the real issues are dramatized, and the struggle raised above the personal, the more control those in nonviolent rebellion begin to gain over their adversary. For they are able at one and the same time to disrupt everything, making it impossible to operate within the system as usual, and to temper the response to this, making it impossible for the opponent simply to strike back without thought and with all their strength. They have as it were two hands upon them—the one calming them, making them ask questions, as the other makes them move.

In any violent struggle one can expect the violence to escalate. It does so automatically, neither side being really able to regulate the process at will. In nonviolent struggle, the violence used against one may mount for a while (indeed, if one is bold in one’s rebellion, it is bound to do so), but the escalation is no longer automatic; with the refusal of one side to retaliate, the mainspring of the automation has been snapped and one can count on reaching a point where de-escalation begins. One can count, that is, in the long run, on receiving far fewer casualties.

Nothing is more certain than this and yet, curiously, noting is less obvious. A very common view is that nonviolent struggle is suicidal, but this hardly stands up under examination. Which rebels suffered more casualties—those who, under Gandhi managed to throw the British out of India or the so-called Mau Mau who struggled by violence to throw the British out of Kenya? The British were certainly not “nice guys” in their response to the Gandhians. They, and the Indian troops who obeyed their orders, beat thousands of unarmed people, shot and killed hundreds. In the Amristar Massacre, for example, they fired into an unarmed crowd that was trapped in a spot where no one could escape and killed 379 people, wounding many more. There was a limit, nevertheless, to the violence they could justify to themselves—or felt they could justify to the world. Watching any nonviolent struggle, it is always startling to learn how long it can take the antagonist to set such limits; but they finally do feel constrained to set them—especially if their actions are well publicized. In Kenya, where the British could cite as provocation the violence used against them, they hardly felt constrained to set any limits at all on their actions.

One can, as I say, be certain if one adopts the discipline of nonviolence that in the long run one will receive fewer casualties. And yet very few people are able to see that this is so. It is worth examining the reasons why the obvious remains unacknowledged. Several things, I think, blind people to the plain truth.

First, something seems wrong to most people engaged in struggle when they see more people hurt on their own side than on the other side. They are used to reading this as an indication of defeat, and a complete mental readjustment is required of them. Within the new terms of struggle, victory has nothing to do with their being able to give more punishment than they take (quite the reverse); victory has nothing to do with their being able to punish the other at all; it has to do simply with being able, finally to make the other move. Again, the real issue is kept in focus. Vengeance is not the point; change is. But the trouble is that in most people’s minds the thought of victory and the thought of punishing the enemy coincide. If they are suffering casualties and the enemy is not, they fail to recognize that they are suffering fewer casualties than they would be if they turned to violence.

Actually, something seems wrong to many people, I think, when—in nonviolent struggle—they receive any casualties at all. They feel that if they are not hurting anybody, then they shouldn’t get hurt themselves. (They shouldn’t, but it is not only in nonviolent battle that the innocent suffer.)

To recognize that people have greater, not less, control in the situation when they have committed themselves to nonviolence requires a drastic readjustment of vision. Nonviolence can inhibit the ability of the antagonist to hit back. And there is another sense in which it gives one greater leverage—enabling one both to put pressure upon the antagonist and to modulate this response to that pressure. In violent battle the effort is to demoralize the enemy, to so frighten them that they will surrender. The risk is that desperation and resentment will make them go on resisting when it is no longer even in their own interest. They have been driven beyond reason. In nonviolent struggle the effort is of quite a different nature. One doesn’t try to frighten the other. One tries to undo them—tries, in the current idiom, to “blow their minds”—only in the sense that one tries to shake them out of former attitudes and force them to appraise the situation now in a way that takes into consideration your needs as well as theirs. One is able to do this—able in a real sense to change minds —precisely because one reassures the other about their personal safety all the time that one keeps disrupting the order of things that they have known to date. When—under your constant pressure—it becomes to their own interest to adapt themselves to change, they are able to do so. Fear for themselves does not prevent them. In this sense a liberation movement that is nonviolent sets the oppressor free as well as the oppressed.

The plea this essay makes is for the strengthening of two impulses—one for assertion (for speaking, for acting out “aggressively” the truth, as we see it, of what our rights are) and for restraint toward others (for the acting out of love for them, which is to say of respect for their human rights). May those who say that they believe in nonviolence learn to challenge more boldly those institutions of violence that constrict and cripple our humanity. And may those who have questioned nonviolence come to see that one’s rights to life and happiness can only be claimed as inalienable if one grants, in action, that they belong to all people.

**Sexist language has been reversed. These are excerpts from the full essay, originally published in Liberation, February 1968, which can be found in the collection *We Are All Part of One Another* (New Society Publishers, 1984, out of print).**

1. Stokely Carmichael was a prominent organizer in the Civil Rights Movement and one of the founders of the Black Power Movement. Inspired by Malcolm X, he saw nonviolence as simply a tactic, not a founding principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)