Revolution Without Violence?
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Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present, edited by Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, contains reports on different cases by nineteen members of this project. It is a highly informative compilation of differing quests for political, economic, and social change over the past half-century, most of them non-violent. Successful or not, these efforts have contributed to a growing body of common wisdom about how civil resistance can work.

Civil resistance is seldom, if ever, a force that acts entirely on its own. As Adam Roberts explains, there is “a rich web of connections between civil resistance and other forms of power,” sometimes including force, violence, or the threat thereof. There is no set formula, although the methods used by successful civil resistance movements are carefully studied and sometimes emulated by succeeding movements. April Carter mentions that Gene Sharp, the author of The Politics of Nonviolent Action, has listed 198 methods of non-violence. Be that as it may, the essential elements of successful nonviolent action, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King to Lech Walesa, have been perceived strategy, imaginative and canny leadership, organization, and popular support. Coverage of civil resistance by the press, the Internet, and television has played an increasingly important part in its success.

The basic rationale of civil resistance is that the power of rulers ultimately lies in the obedience and cooperation of their subjects. So far, at any rate, no one has found a reliable way of making civil resistance work in a totalitarian police state—as distinguished from the satellite states of such states—although the current revolts in the Arab world may prove an exception to this rule. The American civil rights movement or the ultimately effective protests against the war in Vietnam could count on publicity and support in a working democracy. In Nazi Germany and the USSR, there were no such successes. Nor did the Tiananmen Square movement for reform in China in 1989 or the mass protests of Buddhist monks in Burma over increases in the price of food and fuel in 2007 survive forceful suppression. It was Gorbachev’s understanding of the need for change and reform and his refusal to use Soviet military force against demonstrators in the Eastern European satellites that made possible the spectacular changes of 1989. Indeed the willingness of leaders to retreat—Gorbachev, F.W. de Klerk in South Africa, or, more recently and surprisingly, Slobodan Milošević in Serbia—is crucial to the success of civil resistance.

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The leaders of the old regime not only reneged, but legitimated the “sad, retained their personal, economic, and social positions. As Aleksander Smolar writes, the fact that a “safe place was reserved for members of the old regime” has since been a source of resentment in Polish politics. But the manner of the Polish liberation was a major contribution to the peaceful end of communism in Europe.

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During the last forty years at least a dozen revolutionary events, powered by nonviolent civil resistance, have taken place around the world, of which several—notably in China and Burma—have failed to reach their objectives. The great value of Civil Resistance and Power Politics is to provide a connection between the diverse events in such a way as to underline both their differences and their similarities. (The cases reviewed do not include the unfinished business of Palestine.)

Portugal’s “Revolution of the Carnations” in the mid-1970s was a reaction to half a century of right-wing dictatorships and police stations without the “passes” that allowed them to live in many parts of the country. Police fired into these crowds, and at Sharpeville killed sixty-nine people, evoking outrage around the world. A month later the government banned both the ANC and the PAC.

By 1961, increasing government repression seemed to show that nonviolent protest was becoming irrelevant. Nelson Mandela and other leaders therefore agreed to sponsor an armed wing of the ANC. Umkhonto we Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation), to carry out acts of sabotage. By the end of 1963, most Umkhonto leaders, including Mandela, were in jail, and the ANC went in exile, with a formidable bureaucracy and an army based in Angola. In 1976 opposition to the government began to pick up again. Trade unions were active, and Umkhonto’s sabotage operations reminded Africans that the ANC in exile was still in business. A new internal organization, the United Democratic Front, organized civil disobedience through seven hundred affiliates, and began to provide civic or community training through women’s groups and a youth congress. Among the groups began to construct the alternative institutions of “people’s power.” Lodge writes that “violent attacks by [UDF] activists on PAC fact-fixing are mainly to be found at the frontier between politics and the media. Politicians have developed increasingly sophisticated methods to impose a dominant narrative through the media.” That is, among other things, an excellent description of American politics in the last two years.

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vast crowds that accompanied it. “I spent many hours of my life standing in those crowds in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague; their behavior was both inspiring and mysterious.” Garton Ash calls 1989 “one of the best [years] in European history”; it fascinated the world with a series of so-called “velvet” revolutions.

non-violent, anti-utopian, based not on a single idea but on broad social coalitions and characterized by the application of mass social pressure—to bring the current power holders to negotiate.

In “Islam in Europe,” Garton Ash recalls that Charles Martel threw back the Muslim advance into Europe at the Battle of Poitiers in AD 733, and proceeds to a brilliant analysis of the continent’s biggest current problem. “To return from the US to Europe,” he writes,
is to travel from a country that thinks it is on the front line of the struggle against jihadist terrorism, but is not, to a continent which is on the front line but still has not woken up to the fact.

Writing thus in 2006, Garton Ash seems to underestimate the terrible and unhealed wound—and the reaction to it—that September 11 inflicted on the American collective psyche.

In the summer of 2001 Garton Ash, in Oxford, was asked by the White House to come to Washington (coach class) “next Thursday” to “prepare [President George W. Bush] for his first official trip to Europe.” At the end of this not altogether satisfactory, but highly revealing, session (“On most issues relating to Europe [the President] seemed to have an open, not to say an empty mind”), Garton Ash recalls that Bush remarked, “...It takes a little time to grow into this job.” But would he? Somewhere deep down, he obviously had some doubts whether he would. So did I.”

Garton Ash admits that in his “tormented liberal ambivalence” he was wrong about the 2003 invasion of Iraq and should have written against it before it started. As it turned out, “Never in the field of human conflict was so little achieved by so great a country at in the field of human conflict was so fore it started. As it turned out, “Never in the field of human conflict was so little achieved by so great a country at

something of the tranquil beauty of an isolated, traditional culture, almost unnoticeable in today’s world, could survive the necessary and longed-for tempest of modernity. But the armies of global capitalism are waiting at the frontier, engines revving up, with their container-loads of tawdry goods, their ready-made life-style packages, sex shops, reversed baseball caps, and state-of-the-art software for the unceasing manufacture of new consumer desires. These armies are more irresistible than any... People’s Army, because they are truly welcomed as liberators.

Of his time in Iran Garton Ash writes, “The Islamic revolution, like the French and Russian revolutions before it, has been busy devouring its own children. One day, its grandchildren will devour the revolution.” Of Egypt, “Trying to strangle Islamism, it feeds its growth.”

The 110 miles of Stasi files that became available in 1990 contained a 325-page file on Garton Ash, based on his years studying in East Germany. He interviewed all but one of the acquaintances who had talked about him to the Stasi and all the Stasi officers on his case, and wrote a book about it, The File (1997), that is at the same time coolly descriptive and quietly angry at a system that demanded personal betrayal.

Finally Garton Ash turns to the elephant in all our rooms,” the global triumph of capitalism. Although there now seems to be no practical alternative to it, recent developments are not encouraging. Capitalism, Garton Ash wrote in 2007, is clearly not an automatically self-correcting system. That has since proved to be devastatingly true. Inequality of wealth has also reached grotesque levels. Garton Ash comments:

If a lot of middle-class people begin to feel they are personally losing out to the same process of globalization that is making those few fund managers stinking rich, while at the same time outsourcing their own middle-class jobs to India, then you may have a backlash.

The Tea Party has proved that to be an understatement. Worst of all, in the long term,

this planet cannot sustain six and a half billion people living like today’s middle-class consumers in its rich North…. Sustainability may be a grey and boring word, but it is the biggest single challenge to global capitalism today…. The genius of contemporary capitalism is not simply that it gives consumers what they want but it makes them want what it has to give. It’s that core logic of ever-expanding desires that is unsustainable on a global scale.

As Garton Ash puts it, “remove the elementary staples of organized, civilized life—food, shelter, drinkable water, minimal personal security—and we go back within hours to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all.” There are now ominous global problems, of which the increasing severity and number of natural disasters probably linked to climate change may before very long have such an effect. The resulting mass migrations alone would test the veneer of civilization as never before. Is humankind irreversibly stuck in a downward spiral? Or can it find the common sense and solidarity to fight its way back from this?}

**Facts Are Subversive makes a lovely companion for Civil Resistance and Power Politics. Garton Ash also reminds us that while serious progress has been made in the art and method of radical political change, we cannot count on the automatic survival and growth of democracy, nor indeed on the self-correcting capacity of a predomi- nationally capitalist system. We also face urgent global problems to which we have scarcely started to look for solutions. The popular political involvement that was the lifeblood of civil resistance movements, as well as determined and courageous leadership, is now desper-ately needed nearer home.**