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Against Violence

The plea of an anarchist for non violence and
pacifism

Bart de Ligt

1937

The non-violent methods of struggle are not bound up with any one person, nor one particular race, nor with any separate country, nor with one sole conception-of life or of the universe. At the *Anti-Imperialist Conference* at Brussels in 1927, we heard the Zulu Goumed declare that the blacks, in their fight for liberty, could not do better than follow the example of India. Yes, indeed! for how could they ever rival the modern armaments of the whites, armaments which are closely connected too with a whole social and technical organization which is absolutely foreign to them?

At the *Conference of Non-Europeans*, which was held at Port Elizabeth in South Africa in April 1934, a resolution was passed among others asking the whole non-European population to boycott all goods manufactured or sold by establishments which refused to employ native workers.

Gandhi himself admits that he has come round to his tactics not only through the influence of certain Hindu religious traditions, but also:

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- through the Jewish legend of Daniel and his friends
- through the Sermon on the Mount
- through the ideas of the Englishman, Ruskin
- through the teaching of the Russian, Tolstoy
- and above all, through the words and actions of Thoreau.

Let us note that the technical term “civil disobedience”, which Gandhi likes to apply to his fighting methods, has been consciously borrowed by him from the immortal speech Thoreau made in 1848, in which he gave a classic *exposé* of his ideas concerning individual and collective refusal of military service, and, in certain circumstances, of all social service and payment of taxes.

According to Thoreau, every responsible citizen should utterly ignore the public authorities, laws and institutions, when a truly human interest requires it, and so prevent his Government from committing crimes in critical moments. Co-operation with all people and institutions which lean towards the good, non-co-operation the minute there is a question of promoting the bad, such is the maxim in which one could sum up Thoreau’s theory, which he himself put into practice in exemplary fashion.

The few hundred people who knew him during his life in America, looked on him as a rule as a cranky idealist, if not a pleasant simpleton, with whom practical dealings were impossible. To-day in Asia, millions of his fellow men have put his tactics, as simple as effective, into practice with surprising results.

Like his friend Emerson, whose speech *On War* in 1838 should at least be mentioned here, Thoreau was familiar with the doctrine of that gifted young Frenchman, Etienne de la Boétie (1530–63) to whom Emerson dedicated one of his most

It is the modern Minotaur, who sucks the masses’ blood and swallows up billions ! Nothing is actually changed when Socialist Governments replace the bourgeois, all *Étatisme* being in flagrant contradiction with self-government, which is the essence of all true revolution.

So the non-violent methods of struggle are not bound then either to a particular religion or to a special race or people. European and American lovers of freedom discover its worth just as much as Hindu mystics, rebellious Negroes and war-like Sikhs. Besides, the general strike, practised as much by English, Russian and Scandinavian Socialists as by French, Italian, Spanish and South American anarchists and syndicalists, and regarded since the beginning of the century as a typically proletarian means of struggle, is in itself a way of action foreign to the traditional violent method.

In the middle of the last century, the French revolutionary Anselme Bellegarrigue, as a consequence of his social and political experiences in the United States and in France, lost all confidence both in the Governments whose very nature is violence and in revolutions from the moment they allow themselves to be involved in bloodshed: in one case as in the other, everything rests in the final analysis on oppression and murder, and once caught in this trap there is no way of getting out. The barricades, in his view, are usually raised by those who wish to rule against those who are ruling. Let us do away with all forms of Government and govern ourselves in reasonable fashion, and henceforward all barricades will be superfluous for ever.

“In the end,” Bellegarrigue goes on, “there are no tyrants, only slaves.” The Socialist movement has only arisen from the profound thirst of humanity for freedom. The exercise of power, even in the name of Socialism, can only kill it. A people is always too much governed.

That is why Bellegarrigue spread the idea of a *refusal of assistance*, which is identified with the principle of non-co-operation and civil disobedience. He developed a whole “theory of calm” which opens up possibilities of overcoming even the most powerful regime “by abstention and inertia”. Everything must bow to the power of abstention: social privileges, unjust taxes, surveillance, military hierarchy, all must give way when the masses withdraw their support from violent regimes and exercise their moral force.

Bellegarrigue returned from America to France in February 1848. Soon after, he remarked that the tragic thing about revolutions is that they are always robbed of their fruits by the governments they set up. While in America, there was a minimum of government, in France everything was growing more and more centralized, in order that it might pass through the hands of the State. In his brochure, *Au Fait ! au Fait !* (1848) he described how bureaucracy ate up everything a person earned.

outstanding poems. In his essay called *Of Voluntary Servitude* Etienne de la Boétie threw a light on the whole social edifice and showed that a ruler only has power in as much as the people allow it to him. The power of the ruling class lasts only as long as those who are subject to it recognize it in principle and in fact — that is, as long as the governed people consent to give their respect to those who require it.

Official authority, the power some hold legally over others is more moral than physical in character. It rests less on violence than on respect, that is, on the belief in the right to govern of those in power. The day the masses learn to free themselves of their veneration for those who hold them down, the authority of the ruling classes, no longer being recognized, will vanish at once, and they will lose their power immediately.

No despotism, tyranny, dictatorship or public authority of any kind exists except thanks to the submission of the masses. As soon as the people realize that the public authorities are essentially parasitic in nature and take from them the power which formerly they had granted, the whole social pyramid topples. The one advantage, declares la Boétie, that the ruling class has over the subjugated masses is the right these masses have conceded them to hold them in slavery. From where come the police, the spies, the soldiers? From the people, who, putting themselves at the service of all branches of official authority, fight amongst and destroy themselves. When, with their heavy tread, the soldiers go forward over fields and towns, it is the people crushing the people, at the behest of the established powers, declares la Boétie once again. Domela Nieuwenhuis, a Dutch anti-militarist, was to say, several centuries later, “A people in uniform is its own tyrant! ”

Another thinker to be deeply impressed by la Boétie’s essay was Tolstoy, who quotes a striking passage from it in *The Law of Violence and the Law of Love*. Tolstoy’s *Letter to a Hindu* bears witness also to a strong influence from de la Boétie. The German Socialist and lover of freedom, Gustav Landauer — whose

tomb was one of the first to be violated by the Nazis — made a stirring summary of *Voluntary Servitude*, which became the pivot of his classical essay, *Die Revolution*.

Let us pass over the impressive history of the direct non-violent action of Christianity in the first centuries and that of religious sects, both mediaeval and modern, as well as the remarkable anti-war movement which is being led by an ever increasing number of Protestant clergymen in Europe and America, reaching a figure of thousands at the present time — a history which we have dealt with at length in another book (*La Paix Créatrice*). Because, if we were to quote these, the Western workers would immediately reply: “That has nothing to do with us, it’s religion.”

Well then, let us leave out the Christians, whether modern, mediaeval or primitive, and go back to pagan Rome. In 494 B.C. even she gave us an unforgettable example of non-co-operation. As we know, the plebeians — that is to say, the small peasants who, although free, were excluded from political power — were suffering out of all reason from the iniquitous laws. The patricians — that is to say, the great landowners, who occupied the State offices — had all the rights; they possessed enormous fortunes. On the other hand, the plebeians, who were very poor for the most part, were shut out of all position and public duty. The patricians had seized all the common lands, which had been a survival of communal ownership, and drew vast profits from them. They continued to force the people to equip themselves at their own expense for war. These people, resorting more and more to loans to maintain their families, got deeper and deeper into debt. Crushed beneath the weight of these debts, they were subjected to a cruel system of imprisonment. But aware that in society, the wealth and the victory of the upper strata only exist thanks to continual support of the lower classes, they decided at a certain moment to withhold their forces from this iniquitous social system. Driven to the end of their

tether, they left Rome to found an independent community on Mons Sacra, *sine ullo duce*, without a leader — they had no use for Führers! They declared that they would not return until they were granted a share in the government and in the common lands. Livy describes how this exodus took place in exemplary order and how these peasant-soldiers organized a camp on Mount Aventine and installed themselves there. Such a *secessio in montem*, secession to the mountain, must have been repeated more than once. At last, the patricians were forced to comply with the demands of the plebs because, with their warlike policy, they needed them. In the fourth century B.C., therefore, the plebs acquired considerable advantages both economic and political.

Clarence Marsh Case affirms that this “boycott”, the first effective action by the proletariat, took place without any disorder or violence. (*Non-violent coercion. A study in methods of social pressure*, 1923)

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In Livy, too, we find a description of how, in 375 B.C. the people of Tusculum “averted the vengeance of Rome by an obstinate peace, which they could never have done with their arms “. See the different forms of Gandhi-ism which appeared even in pagan Rome ! We must admit that the non-violent methods of struggle are not at all foreign to a Western conscience. Did not Mirabeau, who has been praised as one of the thinkers who were most alive to the different times, declare at the Assembly of the States of Provence, “ Take care, do not despise these people who produce everything, this people who, to be formidable, have only to stand motionless.” Opposing in this way the “strength and the law of the producers” to the privileged “sterility of the nobles”, he gave “the most powerful and striking formula of what we now call the general strike”. (Jean Jaurès, *Histoire Socialiste de la France contemporaine*, Tome I, La Constituyente)