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Nonviolent Anarchism

The Convergence of Pacifism and Anarchism

Geoffrey Ostergaard

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The development of Christian Anarchism presaged the increasing convergence (but not complete merging) of pacifism and anarchism in the 20th century. The outcome is the school of thought and action (one of its tenets is developing thought through action) known as 'pacifist anarchism', 'anarcho-pacifism' and 'nonviolent anarchism'. Experience of two world wars encouraged the convergence. But, undoubtedly, the most important single event to do so (although the response of both pacifists and anarchists to it was curiously delayed) was the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Ending as it did five years of 'total war', it symbolised dramatically the nature of the modern Moloch that man had erected in the shape of the state. In the campaign against nuclear weapons in the 1950s and early 1960s, more particularly in the radical wings of it, such as the Committee of 100 in Britain, pacifists and anarchists educated each other.

The single most important intellectual influence helping to shape anarcho-pacifism is that of M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948), who began his career as a disciple of Tolstoy. Tolstoy's great weapon for undermining (rather than overthrowing) the state was the

refusal by individuals to cooperate with it and obey its immoral demands — the weapons defended by Henry David Thoreau in his classic 1849 essay, 'Civil Disobedience', and the one used by pacifist conscientious objectors. But Gandhi, in the course of the whole Indian movement for national liberation, showed that there is a whole range of weapons, collective as well as individual, in the armoury of those who are prepared to resist oppressive structures. In doing so he shifted the emphasis from passive non-resistance to active nonviolent resistance. He also emphasised the theory of power underlying their use: the theory of 'voluntary servitude', originally outlined in 1548 by the father of political philosophy, the French thinker Étienne de la Boétie, namely that structures of power, even when they seem to rely on physical force, depend in the last analysis on the co-operation, however reluctant, of those over whom power is exercised.

Gandhi clarified the relationship between means and ends, particularly with reference to the use of violence. Means, he insisted, must not merely be consistent with ends; this principle, though preferable to 'the end justifies the means', is based on a misleading dichotomy. Means *are* ends, never merely instrumental but also always expressive of values; means are ends-creating, or ends-in-the-making. One implication of this view is that we can forget what are called 'ends' and focus on 'means', confident in the knowledge that if the 'means' are pure, then the desired 'ends' will follow. Another is that our conceptions of desirable futures, our 'utopias', are only mental constructs for guiding our actions here and now. We realise our 'utopias', insofar as they are realisable at all, by acting now as if 'utopia' had already arrived. Lastly, Gandhi developed the concept of nonviolent revolution, to be seen not as a programme for the seizure of power, but as a programme for transforming relationships. The concept sits neatly with the observation of the German anarchist Gustav Landauer (1870–1919): 'The state is a condition, a certain relationship between beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.'

fervent advocates of nonviolence, and, like their forebears, they can recognise an ‘abomination’ when they see it.

trine that Baptism should be deferred to adulthood and freely chosen. Again the Wikipedia.org article is a reliable starting point.

Gandhi’s ideas were popularised in the West in books such as Richard Gregg’s *The Power of Nonviolence* (1934), and Bart de Ligt’s *The Conquest of Violence* (1937).¹ The latter is particularly important for anarchists since, as one himself, de Ligt specifically addressed those who lust for revolution. ‘The more violence, the less revolution’, he declared. He also linked Gandhian principled nonviolence with the pragmatic nonviolent direct action of the syndicalists, who propose an economy in which industries are owned and managed by the worker. The General Strike is an expression of total non-cooperation by workers, though it should be added that most syndicalists believed that armed workers should defend the revolution.

In the 1950s and 1960s anarcho-pacifism began to gel, anarchists adding to the mixture their critique of the state, and pacifists their critique of violence. Its first practical manifestation was at the level of method: nonviolent direct action, principled and pragmatic, was used widely in both the Civil Rights movement in the USA and the campaign against nuclear weapons in Britain and elsewhere. These two movements provided part of the matrix for the emerging New Left. It soon became clear that what was ‘new’ about the New Left — hardly surprising since it was triggered by disillusionment among socialists with both Marxian Communism (Stalinist variety) and Social Democracy — was in large part a rediscovery and reassertion of libertarian socialism that had been submerged for over a generation. In its first decade several themes, theories, actions, all distinctly libertarian, began to come to the fore and were given intellectual expression by the American anarcho-pacifist novelist, Paul Goodman²: anti-militarism, the rediscovery of community, com-

¹ Richard B. Gregg *The Power of Nonviolence*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1934; and a recent edition of Gregg, thus: Larmar (Cyprus): Pieres Press, 2007. Bart de Ligt *The Conquest of Violence*, London: Routledge & Sons, 1937. The most recent edition of the De Ligt title is London: Pluto Press, 1989.

² Paul Goodman (1911-1972) became widely known upon publication of his groundbreaking study of alternate education methods, *Growing up Absurd*, New

munity action, radical decentralism, participatory democracy, the organisation of the poor and oppressed inter-racially, and the building of counter-culture and counter-institutions (such as new co-ops, collectives and communes). For a brief period it looked, at least to anarcho-pacifists, as though these might be woven into a grand strategy for nonviolent revolution. Then, from 1967, for reasons explored by the English pacifist Nigel Young, the movement (really ‘a movement of movements’) experienced a failure of nerve. The prospect (or dream) vanished, and by the early 1970s the New Left had disintegrated, the end being marked by, among other things, the bombings carried out by the New Left’s ‘dark angels’, the Weathermen and the Angry Brigade.

The collapse of the New Left coincided with the exhaustion of the less well-publicised Sarvodaya (welfare of all) movement for non-violent revolution in India, led by Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, which had sought through voluntary villagisation of land to realise Gandhi’s dream of an India of village republics. The implication of Sarvodaya is brought out by the statement of Jayaprakash Narayan: ‘In a Sarvodaya world society the present nation states have no place.’ In the India case the disintegration was disguised by the movement’s venture, sparked off by students in Bihar, into confrontation politics — a venture which led to the declaration of a state of emergency in 1975–77 and the period of unstable politics that has followed.

It would be premature, however, to write off anarcho-pacifism. In India, Gandhi remains a potent symbol and source of inspiration. And in the West, since the demise of the New Left, various groups, such as War Resisters’ International, The Peace News constituency in Britain, the Philadelphia Life Center in the USA, and the ecological and Women’s Liberation movements have sought to

York: Vintage, 1960 (with many reprint editions since). His controversial autobiography *Five Years*, and his novels, especially *Parents Day* are still highly regarded. There is a great deal of information about him in the web, through Wikipedia.org or any of the search services.

give clearer definition to the central concept of anarcho-pacifism: nonviolent revolution. Most notably, the counter-cultural critique of modern industrial society was articulated by Theodore Roszak in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995).

However, the nation state still stands as ‘the norm of modern political organisation’. It is not likely to be abolished, in the way the founder of ‘collectivist anarchism’, Bakunin envisaged.³ But it may be subverted or transcended. There are forces at work in the world — multi-nationals and ‘sub-nationalisms’, for example — which are finding it necessary to use both larger and smaller frames of reference than the nation state provides. Anarcho-pacifism is only one of these forces and not, some may think, the most important. But its continued opposition to war and preparations for war, its clear trans-national orientation and appeal, and its insistence on the importance of rediscovering community at all levels from the local to the global — the latter encapsulated in the counter-culture’s vision of humankind coming home to their ‘global village’ — make it a potentially significant source of both subversion and transcendence. These nonviolent revolutionaries do not think that the nation state is ‘the foundation of world order’: they think it is the active promoter of disorder, and fear that its various rival agents will one day start throwing nuclear bombs at each other and destroy the only civilisation we have. The nation state is not ‘the chief definer’ of their ‘identity’ — it does not ‘permeate’ their ‘outlook’; and even the atheists among them find it blasphemous to regard it as ‘the main object of individual loyalties’. They are modern Anabaptists,⁴

³ Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) was a Russian political thinker and founder of collectivist anarchism advocating the abolition of both the state ownership of the means of production and the state. Wikipedia.org has a reliable article as starting point.

⁴ The Anabaptists were a Protestant sect that began in Saxony, Germany in 1521 and were among the first radical pacifists. The name refers to their doc-