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Peace Building by Mexico's Civil Resistance

What Peace Are We Talking About?

I think it's relevant that our most important national university—and the largest in Latin America—is publishing a monographic issue of a magazine focusing on reflections about two seemingly antithetical concepts that are actually complementary and two sides of the same coin and reality: war and peace. For this reason, anyone who studies and specializes in one must have the same or greater knowledge of the other. This is even more the case in a country that, since 2007 has been crisscrossed by very serious processes of war—very badly officially defined as “the war against drug trafficking”—with hundreds of thousands of people murdered, more than 105,000 disappeared, 52,000 unidentified bodies according to official figures, hundreds of thousands of forced displaced per-

sons, and “selective extermination.” This process has also included the recurrent, unpunished murders of social activists, human rights defenders, journalists, seekers of disappeared, pre-candidates, and political authorities. All of this extermination has been bravely struggled against and resisted in an organized way by large numbers of fighters and social movements who are building justice and peace throughout the country.

As Juan Pablo Lederach, an important theoretician and peace and conflict mediator, has said, it is much easier to approximate conceptualizations of “negative peace”—I prefer the term “armed peace”—than of “positive peace.” However, we can advance a few very concrete ideas based on which it would be possible to enter that huge wilderness that is peace. The first is that peace is part of the long road of humanization of our species, which we forget we belong to because we leave to one side an un-

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derstanding of history in the long term. Culturally and socially, it is still more a desire than a reality; it is still a project, since, as Konrad Lorenz would say, we are the missing link.

Why? It is difficult to call a species fully “humanized” if one out of every five people does not know what he/she is going to eat the next day, earning one or two dollars a day, and two out of five live in extreme poverty, practically without basic services of water, housing, health As if that were not enough, every day on electronic media we see genocidal acts, the most inhuman action of our species, while the first or second largest industry, the weapons industry, grows exponentially, amidst real threats of nuclear self-destruction.¹

A complementary view of all this, as a species, and central to approaching the issue of peace, involves the “social order” we live in, which determines an enormous part of what we do and think (or repeat, unconscious of the hackneyed phrases constantly reproduced in a thousand ways; for example, the erroneous interchangeability of concepts like “discipline” and “regimentation” or “information” and “knowledge.”), which is constructed based on enormous doses of normalized violence. To advance toward true (just and decent) peace, very often, we must look away from what the social order considers normal and correct and adopt the perspective of the “other,” of otherness, of separateness, empathy, of those who suffer and are the weakest or defenseless. To do that, we need new concepts that allow us to see the “unobserved, and socially unobservable,” that we do not perceive at first glance because they are so normalized.

Also, it is a dangerous error in many dimensions to speak of peace as though it were an abstract or absolute concept, which must always be accompanied by an adjective (for example, “with justice and dignity for all”). Peace always has very precise times and spatial territoriality where we must think about it and build it. Therefore, it is more exact to speak of different kinds of peace as well as different kinds of violence. This leads us to think of two essential tools: historical knowledge and the construction of a good, empirical “reality principle” of the situation or conflict where we want to build some principle of peace or greater humanization for everyone and all those involved.

Finally, for those of us who want to deepen our knowledge of these fields of practice and study, experience in

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training and action has taught us the importance of differentiating between culture, education, and the construction of peace. While these are the three sides of a single triangle, when we put them into practice, they exhibit many specificities, temporalities, forms of knowledge, and tools that are intertwined but different. Distinguishing among them in our praxis helps a great deal in not constructing metaphysical illusions, but rather hopes and concretions.

Civil Resistance

Michael Randle, an English theoretician and activist, wrote,

Civil resistance is a method of collective political struggle based on the insight that governments depend in the last analysis on the cooperation, or at least the compliance, of the majority of the population, and the loyalty of the military, police and civil service. It is thus grounded in the realities of political power. It operates by mobilising the population to withdraw that consent, by seeking to undermine the opponents’ sources of power, and by enlisting the support of third parties.²

Nonviolent or peaceful resistance includes many kinds of typologies and gradations of actions and tactics of social struggle. The main analyst who systematizes this kind of action to whom everyone refers one way or another is U.S. American sociologist Gene Sharp, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In the 1970s, he constructed three large categories based on inventorying 198 different kinds of “action techniques.” They are not static or rigid—one technique can even morph into another if the political moment changes—: social protest and persuasion-information, noncooperation, and intervention. The first are based on publicly announcing protesters’ demands and denouncing the circumstances that led to them arising; outstanding among them are all manner of statements and (in)formal communications, symbol-

ic public actions, and artistic actions of all kinds, marches, and pilgrimages. Noncooperation, based on “stopping doing” something that empowers injustice and those who commit it, takes social, economic, and political forms (boycotts, strikes, fasts). Finally, interventions are disruptive actions on the ground that may be psychological, physical, social, and economic (occupations, blockades, takeovers, parallel governments, civil disobedience).³

U.S. American social activist and theoretician Michael Beer has performed an extensive, very complete historical recovery of different authors regarding the classifications of civil resistance.⁴ His starting point is whether they have constructive or confrontational traits, and he also puts forward new forms of action constructed in recent decades using the following initial classification: Saying (protest and appeals); Not doing (non-cooperation and abstaining from doing); and Doing (disruptive and creative interventions).

Experience has taught us that for those in struggle an initial characterization is useful according to the intensity of the confrontation with the adversary and its relationship with legality. Thus, four different possible gradual levels can be distinguished that may or may not interact simultaneously and, at other times, step by step, although not necessarily sequentially and mechanically if the previous level was not enough to come to a fair agreement in the conflict. The levels of the active, nonviolent struggle or spiral could be:

1. *Information, dialogue, and mediation.* The idea is that conflicts are resolved on this first level on which people seek to come to fair agreements for both sides, in meetings or negotiations with the adversary. But if this is not achieved, then the aggrieved party decides to make the conflict and its causes more public, making it known to more people in forums, statements, through the media, lectures, flyers).
2. *Direct or popular action.* The conflict and the confrontation become more open to national and interna-

tional society and become fully public. Masses are mobilized in open spaces (marches, caravans, rallies, brigades, pilgrimages, concerts) to pressure the adversary and gain strength by winning over sympathizers and allies to the cause.

3. *Social, economic, or political noncooperation.* Those in struggle explicitly stop collaborating with one of the causes of oppression or with a certain material or ethical element that strengthens the adversary (boycott, strike, work stoppage, fast), withdrawing the body and material resources of empowerment of what oppresses, but without violating legal and institutional order.
4. *Civil disobedience.* Given the failure of the foregoing attempts at coming to a satisfactory agreement, those in struggle resort to actions that openly and consciously break a law or regulation that reproduces conditions of inhumanity and injustice (stopping payment of certain taxes, taking over lands, blocking streets, creating parallel governments or institutions), even running the risk of the corresponding legal punishment, since “civil disobedience—whether individual or collective—is the imprescriptible right of every citizen; he or she cannot renounce this right without stopping being human.”⁵

Building Peace in Mexico

The main nonviolent weapons are based on the accumulation of moral strength, derived from the increase in material strength; permanent firmness sometimes means not moving until the demands have been heard in order to achieve the aims of the struggle. Historic experience shows us how adding more bodies to that struggle constitutes precisely that increase in moral and material strength, attempting as far as possible that those bodies become moral weapons and not just “blindly obedient” sympathizers.

As part of this accumulation of legitimacy, the social power that these bodies have (members of ecclesiastic hierarchies, university officials, prominent figures in the arts and culture) is important for the confrontation process, not because we think they are humanly better than others, but rather because we cannot deny their social observable as a space for concentrating power, and that the violent social order is based on an “asymmetry of pow-

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er” that seeks to perpetuate and reproduce itself as much as possible. At the same time, these bodies form an essential part of a weapon called society’s “moral reserve” that, if they manage to “make their presence known” in the public space through a actions with a moral determination proportional to the level of violence they face, often in the form of noncooperation and civil disobedience, will represent greater pressure —sometimes decisive pressure— on the adversary.

In today's Mexico, the most important peace-builders have been peoples and communities, above all indigenous and peasant communities, that have confronted their national and international aggressors and exploiters in their territories in a very isolated way. Their aggressors constantly try to rob them of their natural resources, lands, and culture, even selectively exterminating them. Because local, state, and national authorities act in concert with organized crime and businesspersons, these peoples, as well as urban neighborhoods, have explored and experimented with their own forms of community security. This has taken the form of community patrols, guards, or police (the Regional Coordination of Community Authorities – Community Police [CRAC], the towns of Ostula, Cherán, etc.), subject to the decisions and mandates of local and regional community assemblies, and following a tactic of non-punitive family, social, and community reinsertion of the perpetrators. The Zapatista communities and today the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) are examples and models of these struggles, with their construction of autonomy and Good Government.

The families of the officially recognized 105,000 disappeared and murder victims have been the other great peace-builders and leaders of social struggle in the country in the last decade. They have transformed themselves from victims into human rights defenders and social activists organized in a swift, painful process in numerous collectives and networks. These women and men have had to do what the government has refused to do for them

for many reasons, but above all because of the involvement of part of it in organized crime and illicit businesses. Thus, these citizens have created innumerable collectives and networks throughout the country and built brigades to search for both live victims and clandestine burial grounds on a local, regional, and national level. Now they are experts in forensic identification —52,000 unidentified bodies exist nationwide—, designing laws and protocols for victims of violence, in security, and the organization of searches.

Outstanding amidst this heartrending, dramatic struggle for truth, justice, reparations, non-repetition, and active memory have been the mothers and fathers of the forty-three Ayotzinapa normal school students who were disappeared in Iguala on the night of September 26 and 27, 2014 in a genocidal action perpetrated by the Mexican government. The construction in wartime of the social figure of the “disappeared person,” begun by the Nazis and perfected in the war in Algeria by the French and in the 1970s Southern Cone dictatorships together with the United States, has been a policy aimed at tearing apart the fabric of society and destroying the social struggle with the greatest possible degree of dehumanization. It destroys an entire network of social relations based on terrorizing and fostering uncertainty about the fate of bodies.

Today in Mexico, very important social struggles for peace-building have been carried out by feminist groups of all kinds. Currently, they are in the streets mobilized in carrying out campus take-overs and marches by high school and university student groups demanding profound changes and an end to all forms of gender violence and abuses of power, as well as academic improvements. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Information for the first part of this article is from Pietro Ameglio, “Paz y noviolencia,” *Desinformémonos*, September 9, 2021, <https://desinformemonos.org/paz-y-noviolencia-algunos-principios-basicos/>.
- 2 Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance*, Fontana Movements and Ideas Series (1993), <https://civilresistance.info/sites/default/files/Civil%20Resistance%20-%20Randle1994.pdf>, p. 20.
- 3 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, volume 2 (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).
- 4 Michael Beer, *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century*, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, (ICNC) Monograph Series, 2021, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Civil-Resistance-Tactics-in-the-21st-Century-Monograph.pdf>, p. 16.
- 5 Some ideas from this part of the article are taken from Pietro Ameglio, “Noviolencia y resistencia civil,” *Revista Latinoamericana. Estudios de la Paz y el Conflicto*, Consejo Latinoamericano de Investigación para la Paz (CLAIP), December 2021.