Non-violence, a force for the 21st century

Article written by François Vaillant\(^1\) for the EESC, in the framework of the conference "Non-violence, a new way forward for the 21st century?" (translated from French)

Non-violence is a way of humanising human society. It develops ethical requirements that merely hark back to the age-old wisdom of civilisations. Given that violence is, increasingly, the main scourge of our time, how can we escape from the spiral of violence? Meeting violence with non-violence to resolve a conflict: is this effective or realistic? This article attempts to answer these questions, while setting out the fundamental principles of non-violence.

The term "non-violence" was coined by Gandhi in 1920, and was first used in the French-speaking world from 1921, thanks to the writer Romain Rolland.

"Non-violence" is the English translation of the Sanskrit word *ahimsa* (*a*: without and *himsa*: violence, harm). In the 21st century, "non-violence" is a term used across the five continents. This means that non-violence is not tied to any one culture or any one religion; this is very important to understand, as is the fact that non-violence has nothing to do with passivity or resignation.

**Be able to say "no!"**

The originality of the term "non-violence", is the immediate emphasis, in its pronunciation, on the "non" [or "no" in French], so as to say "no!" to violence. Violence, even the mildest form, always leads to a mimetic cycle from which it is difficult to then escape. "You hit me, I hit you", then the situation...

escalates and it is "war". By saying "no!" immediately, a person avoids falling into imitation of their opponent's violence and letting themself be led. Saying "no!" means standing back and taking the necessary time to reflect and ask the right question: "what is the right thing to do?".

Violence is specific to humans. Only humans are capable of murder because they are the only beings equipped with reason\(^2\). There is no such thing as "good violence"\(^3\). Violence is always evil, even if sometimes, in rare borderline cases, it can prove to be a lesser evil.

Violence operates as a cycle: even to combat a case of blatant injustice or institutional violence, a violent revolt will trigger a brutal violent crackdown from the established power, which only serves to exacerbate the initial injustice or institutional violence. It is always futile to say that power comes from the barrel of a gun, when it is the opponent who holds all the weapons.

The originality of non-violence lies in thwarting repression by breaking the cycle of violence. The methods of non-violent action are aimed at creating a balance of power that compels the opponent to engage in dialogue, i.e. to negotiate.

The new societal reality is that violence is gradually losing its aura through the decades. It is being more and more brought to light and criticised – domestic violence against women, for instance, began to be seen as a real social problem only in the twentieth century. All violence creates one or more victims, but it also wounds and bruises the humanity of those who perpetrate it. While violence has indeed been around forever, it should be noted that the concept of non-violence is new.

It was only in the 1980s that NGOs referring explicitly to non-violence began to be formed in European countries (Italy, France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, etc.). Since the year 2000, other NGOs have emerged outside the EU, notably in Africa\(^4\), which have then called on European NGOs to help them set up programmes for non-violent conflict regulation\(^5\).

**Conflict**

Non-violence does not postulate a world without conflict, but shows people that it is possible to resolve their conflicts without recourse to violence. Recognising a conflict – interpersonal, social or political – is the first step to take to avoid being cowardly. Contrary to popular belief, non-violence does not mean refraining from taking a stand in a conflict. It may, on the contrary, be required, in

\(^2\) As Jean-Marie Muller says: "when a lion kills a gazelle, it is simply preparing its dinner".

\(^3\) See article on the use and misuse of the terms "violence" and "non-violence" by the philosopher Bernard Quelquejeu in the journal *Alternatives Non-Violentes*, No 167, p. 68-70.


\(^5\) See, for example the site www.nonviolence21.org Non-Violence XXI (as in 21st century), which brings together the main French non-violence organisations with a view to developing, in France and worldwide, a genuine culture of non-violence. See also the site www.education-nvp.org of the organisation *Coordination of education promoting non-violence and peace*. Both sites include links to numerous websites of NGOs active within and outside the EU.
order to trigger a conflict. In this vein, direct non-violent action was for Gandhi and then Martin Luther King a way of bringing conflicts out into the open, so as to, in King's own words: "create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatise the issue that it can no longer be ignored".

For example, when in December 1955, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, deliberately took a seat in the area reserved for white people in the bus taking her home after a hard day's work, she sparked a conflict with the driver and then with the police. Racial segregation was in force at the time on the buses of Montgomery and in its schools and shops. Whites on one side, blacks on the other, throughout the city. The conflict sparked by Rosa Parks came to the attention of a young black pastor, whose name was Martin Luther King (1929-1968). He was known then only by his parishioners. He went on to become the leader and thinker who is now so well known. On the evening of the arrest of Rosa Parks, he said "no" to the segregation that had worn down and humiliated the black community, just as he said "no" to violence as a means of struggle. He proposed that the black people of Montgomery boycott the city's buses until the law on segregation in buses was changed. From the next day on, most of the buses were empty, as blacks walked instead. The boycott lasted 382 days! The bus company was owned by white people. It did not back down out of any generosity of spirit, but because it was on the brink of bankruptcy. To survive, it had to bring back its black customers. In the final negotiation, it should be noted that Martin Luther King forced his opponent – the bus company – to hire black drivers.

Triggering a conflict, and then resolving it, is at the heart of the principle of non-violence. The problem is not that there are conflicts to resolve. Even friends and couples who get on wonderfully well sometimes have conflicts to resolve. There are no human communities free from disputes or conflicts. The problem is not their existence but how they are resolved. It is so easy to suppress such conflicts, to pretend not to see them, and then they may re-emerge as more serious conflicts, involving violence.

The aim of non-violent conflict resolution is not to humiliate the opponent but to eliminate the injustice being perpetrated. At the end of a conflict that is resolved non-violently, there is indeed a winner and a loser, but there is neither victor nor vanquished, because the gain in humanity is shared between all.

European NGOs engaged in non-violence fall into two main categories: those concerned primarily with education as regards non-violence and those seeking to act with regard to the political factors of particular types of violence, such as the stockpiling of weapons, the arms trade, or the military and/or civilian nuclear industry. There are not many NGOs involved in both fostering a more harmonious coexistence and in denouncing violence linked to a policy of weapons stockpiling. It should be noted that, since the 2000s, these various NGOs have sought, within their respective fields, to get to know each other better and to pool their research and activities. For instance, and particularly following the

6 Quoted by S.B. Oates, in Martin Luther King, Paris, Centurion, 1985, p. 254
war in Kosovo, the concept of unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP) emerged and several NGOs sought to work together to train and send volunteers into high-tension areas (Albania, Colombia, Israel/Palestine, etc.)

Seeking means adapted to the end

Gandhi highlighted the dialectical relationship between the end and the means of action. In the West, now just as before, the problem of the means-end relationship is too often dealt with by a mechanical solution, that of an abstract determination of the means based on a given end. Having established the intended end of an action, its achievement is left at the mercy of any means at all. The end justifies the means, or I'll get there by any means necessary, are phrases we often hear, which imply the possible choice of violent means.

Gandhi showed that non-violence requires that both the means and the end come into play dialectically. “The means may be likened to a seed”, he wrote, "the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree." The means to achieving a moral end is never neutral in terms of ethics; it is always like an evolving form of the end. According to the logic of non-violent action, the end that is sought must be consistent with the means used in order to be ethically admissible.

A decent community life can be built only through democratic means, i.e. through means that respect the physical integrity and honour of each person. The means are an evolving form of the end.

Seeking courage

"Where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence", Gandhi said, before adding "but I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence". Non-violence allows you to be neither cowardly nor violent. It is passivity that is the most common enemy of non-violence. Taking it to the extreme, real courage means putting your life at risk so as not to kill, instead of killing so as not to die. Courage grows stronger every day. It is a source of joy, as those that foster it spread it around them like an incomparable moral force.

Often when non-violence is being discussed the question is asked: "and what would you have done with your non-violence in a concentration camp?". To which one might reply: "I don’t know, but I do

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7 See www.interventioncivile.org The French Comité pour une intervention civile de paix [The Committee for unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP)], the Comité ICP, is a group of associations engaged in international solidarity and in the field of non-violence. The Comité ICP forms part of a European network aimed at promoting civil peace service in all its forms (such as unarmed civilian peacekeeping). Its action is aimed at promoting UCP with a view to its official recognition and its use as a standard tool for conflict regulation in areas with high racial and political tensions. To that end, the Comité ICP seeks to raise awareness among the public and policymakers. It should be noted, however, that UCP has been much more developed by North American NGOs than by European NGOs, which are desperately short of funds.

8 Gandhi, Tous les hommes sont frères [All men are brothers], Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 149.
know that with any segregation, intervention must happen at the beginning, including through civil disobedience. Shortly after he came to power, Hitler demanded that German Jews report to the police to have a yellow star stamped on their identity card. They duly did so. Then the Jews were required to wear a yellow star on their left breast, and they duly wore a yellow star on their left breast. Then, a yellow star was painted on their home, to make it easier to locate them. Then they were required to board trains. And you know the rest. It was at the beginning that the intellectuals, artists, and religious authorities should have acted, to prevent this segregation of the Jews, which was only the prelude to their killing. This is where civil disobedience should have come into play. It is always at the beginning that there should be intervention so as not to let things fester.

And why did Hitler's armies fail to round up the Jews in Denmark, after occupying that country for over two years? Because from the beginning of the Danish invasion, courageous people, in their tens of thousands, immediately began to wear a yellow star on their clothes, and to hide Jews in their country. And among these people were Danish politicians and intellectuals that everyone knew. Their courage was contagious; with the majority of the population claiming to be Danish Jews, the final solution was derailed in Denmark. This is why, as Paul Ricœur wrote: "while non-violence is the vocation of the few, it should be seen as the duty of all."

A new development has emerged in several European countries since the beginning of the 21st century, whereby more and more people between the ages of 20 and 40 are engaging in the civil disobedience so dear to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, in order to assert fundamental human rights. These "disobedient" people are generally drawn into taking part in non-violent civil disobedience, and, when they come to trial, the judges understand fairly quickly that these defendants are in fact acting in the service of law, and they are sometimes acquitted. Acting in the service of the law means seeking to have a law considered unfair changed or repealed, while recognising that living in society requires rule and laws.

The golden rule

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10 Paul Ricœur, in the article "L'homme non-violent et sa présence à l'histoire", in the journal _Esprit_, February 1949, p. 224.
11 This phenomenon is seen particularly in anti-advertising circles. In France, the "disobedient" members of the _Collectif des déboulonneurs_ [Debunkers’ collective] are critical of the invasive advertising that extols a society of excessive consumption, which generally portrays a degrading image of women, and which fosters frustration in terms of the insatiable appetite for designer clothing (that frustration is one of the sources of racketeering by young people, especially in the suburbs). These anti-advertising activists typically do not engage in violent behaviour, and are always courteous before the police and the courts. Although under French criminal law, they can be fined up to EUR 15 000, they are either fined a symbolic one euro or are sometimes acquitted. See www.deboulonneurs.org. Since 2006, French anti-advertising activists are in ever closer contact with other European partners. There is also the so-called _décroissant_ [growth-objector] movement, which is rapidly developing in the EU, and is particularly focused on denouncing structural violence, preventing it and seeking societal solutions towards a more humane and environmentally-friendly world.
"Do to others what you would have them do to you", the Gospel recommends\(^\text{12}\). This maxim, known as "the golden rule", has featured since ancient times in many wisdom-texts (Confucius, Epictetus, etc.), often in a negative form: "do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself".

Since no-one wants another person to use violence against them, the golden rule defines an objective principle according to which every rational being must act, which Kant expresses differently through his categorical imperative. The principle of non-violence merely affirms this choice with respect to others, without compromising on the respect that each person must show to others, including adversaries.

The golden rule runs counter to the desire for vengeance. Of course, it is not always easy to shake off the desire for revenge when one has just suffered a brutal evil, but that is something that can be learned, not in one go, but by letting non-violence chisel away at oneself over time. In fact, \textit{revenge never fixes anything}. Its intention is never to repair but to cause another wrong, in the belief that the latter can wipe out the affront of the former. An act of vengeance is pure retaliation. Its only aim is to make the wrongdoer suffer, in line with the ancient law of retaliation: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth".

The singer Jean-François Bernardini told me about a great saying that he heard in his youth in Corsica: "Better to die than to kill". This saying not only advocates turning away from the law of retaliation but also enters into the secret of life, which involves learning to give your own life rather than take another’s. It combines courage with the golden rule. It is sad and lamentable that French people far from Corsica tend to say that "the Corsicans are violent"! These pedlars of lies would do well to spend time in Corsica and experience the culture of non-violence that is long-established there.

\textbf{Finding the means of non-violent action}

Non-violence is inventive. Since Gandhi and Martin Luther King, countless men and women have found ways to take non-violent action, both in their daily lives and in order to obtain more justice in their society, and that has taken place across all five continents, involving people of all cultures and religions. Dialogue, seeking compromise, boycotts, non-cooperation, hunger strikes, unarmed civilian peacekeeping, civil disobedience ... there is a long list of options for those wishing to train in non-violent action\(^\text{13}\). It always requires training and preparation. No-one is non-violent by nature, but everyone can strive to become a little more non-violent each day. Non-violent action requires training\(^\text{14}\).

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{12} Bible (New International Version), Matthew 7:12.
\bibitem{13} On the subject of non-violence in education, see the book by Élisabeth Maheu, \textit{Sanctionner sans punir}, Lyon, Chronique sociale, 2010. To learn more about the ethical, social and political potential of non-violence, see the quarterly journal \textit{Alternatives Non-Violentes} \url{www.alternatives-non-violentes.org}. To discover non-violent movements, see \textit{Non-Violence XXI} \url{www.nonviolence21.org}.
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Conclusion

Non-violence is ultimately a philosophy, an ethical requirement and a possibility that humans can achieve. It is not an ideology, because its comprehensive nature means it is not set in stone. It is naturally of interest to anybody seeking meaning in order to lead their spiritual, moral and political life as well as possible. The end result is, at the rate our societies are going, and as Martin Luther King said, that "the choice today is no longer between violence and non-violence. It is either non-violence or non-existence". This indeed is why non-violence is so full of promise, and why it is our responsibility to continue to explore it and put it into practice.

A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest. Non-violence can be likened to that forest.

Following the conference in Bastia on 14 June 2013 on Non-violence, a new way forward for the 21st century, organised jointly by the EESC and Umani-Fundazione di Corsica, I can state that this kind of international gathering constitutes a great source of hope. Not only are the players that have already embraced non-violence in various parts of the EU eager to deepen the potential of non-violent action, but they have high expectations regarding the recognition and aid that the EU can deliver here. NGOs working towards the non-violent regulation of conflicts in such diverse environments (urban areas, schools, conflict zones, etc.) struggle to pool their efforts without help from institutions. They are convinced that they hold the keys to helping build a fairer, more humane and more solidarity-based world. This conference is a source of great hope.

I can say that most of the NGOs already engaged in non-violence in Europe are ready to embrace new initiatives coming from European institutions such as the EESC, in order to get to know each other better and pool their work, with regard to both their failures and their successes. Non-violence is not a panacea; it is a path that holds great promise. I would like to think that, in a few years' time, when we re-read the history of non-violence and its recent impact in Europe, historians will discover that the foundation stone of this great work was laid today in Bastia.

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15 Martin Luther King, Autobiographie, Paris, Bayard, 2000, p. 430.