

6. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Nonviolent Resistance in History, Theory, and Practice

Convenor: Mischa Gabowitsch (Einstein Forum, Potsdam)

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: The Arab Spring began in early 2011 with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia—a year later you are staging a Berliner Colloquium on the theme of »Nonviolent Resistance.« How did the topicality of the events factor into your conception of the colloquium?

The topicality of the subject did indeed play an important role in choosing this particular theme. After the »color revolutions« in the post-socialist countries and at the start of the Arab Spring it seemed as if a new era of nonviolent protest had dawned. However, public discussion on the topic was rather one-sided. It was not just the fact that it occasionally took on the character of exaggerated enthusiasm, but that it unfolded on a purely pragmatic, almost technocratic level. This could be seen in the sudden interest in the work of Gene Sharp or the impact of Serbian activists on movements in Georgia or Egypt. Suddenly it looked as if successful nonviolent protests were merely a matter of tactics and organization. That is why I was at first somewhat hesitant when Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum, proposed the colloquium's theme. But then we agreed to a broader approach, taking both historical and philosophical questions into consideration.

BCZ: And what exactly were these?

First of all the historical question as to what significance the long history of theories of nonviolence had for the concrete practice of activists on the ground—must one have read Tolstoy, Gandhi or Goss-Mayer in order to have your nonviolent resistance result in success? Then the question—which is also a philosophical one—as to what the criterion for the success of nonviolent movements should be. Is it always about toppling the hated regime? Can a nonviolent movement claim success for any such upheaval if other actors—including those willing to use violence—have contributed to the such a change? And is regime change alone a worthwhile goal for nonviolent movements, or should their success be judged on the basis of what ensues thereafter?

Developments in Egypt in recent years make it clear how urgent such questions are. They also highlight the moral dilemmas faced by those who are part of nonviolent protest movements.

There are related questions that are relevant for philosophical as well as social-scientific and historical approaches: How are we to evaluate the causal link between nonviolent resistance movements and political upheavals? In order to establish this connection beyond any doubt the movement must have been completely nonviolent. But this is rarely the case. In addition, the movements' objectives must be clearly identifiable. But this can only be achieved at the expense of favoring the perspective of organizers and ideologists. Conceding an interpretational prerogative to them reduces the large variety of experiences and objectives of the people in the street to a common denominator, while declaring alternative views to be marginal ones. This also applies to rival leaders of nonviolent movements, for instance the case of Gandhi and Ambedkar in India.

Such approaches bring into sharper focus the conflict of interpretations that entwine about many movements which have been dubbed failures. For instance, outside observers often cannot see or discern the importance of those nonviolent components in the first Palestinian Intifada, in Kosovo's resistance to Milosevic, or in the protests against Bashar al-Assad before the Syrian civil war. But, in each of these cases, it can be argued that nonviolence helped to avert even greater bloodshed or that it laid the foundation for the subsequent rejection of violence.

BCZ: Alongside the scholars there were also activists taking part in the colloquium. What did you expect from their participation?

The participants really came from a wide spectrum of fields—historians, political scientists, experts in peace studies, sociologists, philosophers, a psychologist, a Russian human rights campaigner, a Coptic politician from Egypt, an activist from the Tunisian teachers' union, and some participants expressly regarded themselves as being from both the scholarly and the activist camps. The idea was to have the activists give a concrete account of their experiences and in this way connect or contrast historical and philosophical constructs with the more recent empirical research. Interestingly, the lines of division in the discussion were not between sceptical scholars and enthusiastic activists—but rather between certain activists expressing their reservations with regard to the notion of nonviolence as a panacea. Their scepticism led us back to the question as to whether nonviolence is a goal in and of itself or only a means to an end.

BCZ: What other aspects of the discussion did you find particularly interesting?

Another part of the debate focused on whether nonviolent resistance might not in fact, in certain cases, be quite useful for repressive states, since it subverts armed resistance and obviates any danger. The question of whether successful nonviolent movements are not in fact flanked by other movements prepared to use violence came up repeatedly. A classic example of this would be the relationship between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the United States. But what are the consequences of this observation? A fascinating historical question asked in this context was how nonviolent resistance changes once the state and society change. In other words, are there social systems where nonviolent political resistance carries a particular significance? Interestingly, it would seem that it plays a significant role mostly in societies where the level of violence is otherwise relatively high.

BCZ: Did the colloquium provide incentives for further research on this subject?

I can personally affirm that with a resounding yes. It was after all the invitations had been sent out and the preparations were in full swing that a massive and entirely unexpected movement for fair elections began in Russia, which I followed attentively. Our colloquium took place in the midst of this protest phase. When the Suhrkamp publishing house then proposed that I write a book on this protest, I—inspired by our discussion—took it as an opportunity to intensively examine nonviolence as well as the Russian apparatus of violence. No other Berliner Colloquium has probably found its way quicker into print than this one.