REVIEW OF A CLASSICAL BOOK:

Joan V. Bondurant; Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958. New Revised Edition, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988)

If one is interested in nonviolence, especially Gandhian nonviolence, there are some key texts that make interesting and, sometimes, essential reading. However, while there are plenty of important writings about Gandhi the man, starting with Romain Rolland's 1924 biography *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One With the Universal Being*, significant ones dealing with the Mahatma's nonviolent praxis are far fewer. In 1923, Clarence Marsh Case's *Non-Violent Coercion: A Study in Methods of Social Pressure* became probably the first systematic examination of nonviolent coercive tactics. Towards the end of the book, Case examines Gandhi's contribution to the field based on Gandhi's first major national struggle against British domination. Richard B. Gregg, who spent four years in India in the late 1920s, including over half a year at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, was the first to present a theory of the workings of Gandhian nonviolence with his 1934 publication, *The Power of Nonviolence*. In that book, Gregg explained the psychological mechanisms (which he termed "moral jiu-jitsu") by which *satyagraha* (literally "firmness in truth"), Gandhi's method of nonviolent activism, works.

That classic was followed a few years later by another, Krishnalal Shridharani's *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments*. Shridharani, who had been involved with Gandhi's celebrated Salt March, presented *satyagraha* as a technique that could take the place of war in situations of conflict. These books received attention in pacifist circles; however, it was not until 1958, with the publication of Joan V. Bondurant's almost legendary book, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, that Gandhian nonviolence more or less positioned itself into the political science mainstream. It became, and remains to this day, the go-to book on the subject.

Joan Valerie Bondurant was born in 1918. She studied music at the University of Michigan and shortly thereafter, following the

bombing of Pearl Harbour, decided that she had to play her patriotic part in the war effort. With a belief that musicians had a facility for learning languages, she studied Japanese and was recruited by the Office of Strategic Services (a forerunner of the CIA) and, after a year in San Francisco, she was dispatched to India where she translated and analysed Japanese military intelligence. While in India between 1944-1946, she became interested in Gandhian *satyagraha* and even met Gandhi himself. He was not overly helpful in assisting her in her desire to analyse his method of activism, explaining that "*satyagraha* is not a subject for research – you must experience it, use it, live by it." Thankfully, she did go on to analyse the technique so that the rest of us could have a better understanding of this powerful method of ending conflict. She returned to America in 1948 to work on her Ph.D. She completed her dissertation, which was to form the basis of *Conquest of Violence*, in 1952. The rest of her working life was spent as a professor of political science in various American universities. After a long illness, she died at the age of eighty-seven in 2006. She leaves this book as her major legacy.

Gene Sharp is the best known western analyst of nonviolent struggle (see his *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* and *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*), especially what has come to be known as "pragmatic" (as opposed to what is often referred to as "principled"), nonviolence. He points out that Bondurant was the first western political scientist to write on the significance of *satyagraha* from the perspective of western political theory and practice. In this task Bondurant attempts to flesh out the philosophy of conflict, noting that there is a demand for a constructive solution to the problem of violence. *Conquest of Violence* is an attempt to fill this gap by locating *satyagraha* within the literature of modern political philosophy. In the book, she makes the point that Western social and political theory has been dominated by the question of ends, while hitherto largely overlooked Gandhian nonviolence challenges this approach by concentrating on means. Bondurant compares Gandhi's approach to conservatism and anarchism and decides that while there may be elements of both political philosophies in *satyagraha*, it transcends them, and, towards the end of the book, she notes that Gandhi was not really interested in limiting violence, but in eradicating it through a dialectical process that resulted in a new synthesis of the opposing sides.

Bondurant details and analyses five of Gandhi's best known India-based campaigns, selected because they clearly illustrated the use of techniques for divergent objectives in different social and political situations by different groups against different types of opposition. In doing so, she seeks to delineate a philosophy that underlies Gandhi's nonviolent activism.

In backgrounding *satyagraha*, Bondurant notes that Gandhi believed individuals have the ability to act and reason in a way that can effect changes in society. She points out that it is not necessary to subscribe to either Gandhi's asceticism or his religious ideas (after all, the war-like Muslim Pathans, under Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, were great practitioners of *satyagraha*) to understand his contribution to nonviolent activism. She clearly demonstrates that *satyagraha* is valid in a secularised form, that it is open as a method of ending conflicts for everyone. After all, power lies with the grass roots, rather than with the leadership in society. It is only the cooperation of the subjects which allows the elites to exercise power. And the withdrawal of cooperation and obedience can disempower the elites, and perhaps even convert them to the *satyagrahi's* position. This means that *satyagraha* is very different from other political philosophies which see a seizure of power, generally through violence, as a precursor to desired change.

In illustrating the methods of *satyagraha*, Bondurant tackles the perennial question of whether *satyagraha* could work against a totalitarian regime, concluding that although this is possible, there is no direct empirical evidence on which to base an answer to the question. More recent writings (for example Summy's seminal essay, "Nonviolence and the Case of the Extremely Ruthless Opponent", and the writings of Kurt Schock and Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth), based on many examples, answer the question with a resounding "yes." The key lies in a peaceful method of responding to conflict once it has broken out. *Satyagraha* encompasses a technique of social action (or way of life for those concerned with a more ideological approach to nonviolence) to be used for struggles as they arise, but it also provides an avenue for basic change, including change of oppressive regimes.

While Bondurant does not give detailed step-by-step instructions for conducting a Gandhian campaign to win over an opponent, she does note that the "first stage is characterised by

persuasion through reason. The subsequent stages enter the realm of persuasion through suffering, wherein the *satyagrahi* (one engaged in *satyagraha*) attempts to dramatise the issues at stake to get thought to the opponent's unprejudiced judgement so that he [sic] may willingly come again to a level where he may be persuaded through rational argument."

Bondurant reviews the principles of nonviolence that are fundamental to *satyagraha* as nonviolence and self-suffering. And these, in turn, require sincerity and courage. She admits that *satyagraha* employs force, but of a type that is quite different from that employed in conventional, violent conflict. Traditional political thought assumes a separation of ends and means, emphasising ends and downplaying means. *Satyagraha*, on the other hand sees means as ends-in-the-making. The practitioner of *satyagraha* does not seek victory, but a situation in which the total human needs of all the parties are best met. This is the most efficient way to overcome the future violence, the most likely way to arrive at truth.

Bondurant notes that one of the key elements of *satyagraha* is the issue of self-suffering which "remains the most obscure to the Western mind." It is a tactic for cutting through "the rational defences which the opponent may have built in opposing the initial efforts of rational persuasion through the clear statement of, and argument for, the *satyagrahi's* position. The role of self-suffering is to break a deadlock, to cut through the rationalised defences of the opponent because, according to Gandhi, the hardest heart and the grossest ignorance would disappear in the face of suffering without anger or malice." In any case, the loss of life and injuries sustained by *satyagrahis* in conducting nonviolent action campaigns is likely to be far less than those sustained in violent combat, and certain to leave less future conflict-generating bitterness behind.

Quite obviously, the way to cut through the defences of an opponent is not through the employment of coercion. But is it not true that nonviolence and even the taking on of suffering is a means of coercing an opponent? She admits that as a method, *satyagraha* itself contains a positive element of coercion. Bondurant points out that the tools of noncooperation, boycott and strike, which can be used in *satyagraha*, do involve elements of compulsion which may affect a change on the part of the opponent which was originally against their

will. However, she notes that violent coercion, which sets out to injure the opponent, is vastly different from nonviolent coercion which may cause indirect injury. In *satyagraha*, the practitioner of nonviolence willingly submits themself to suffering in contrast to those employing violence as a tool of coercion who intentionally cause suffering to their opponent.

In short, in *satyagraha* it is not a one-sided triumph that is sought, but the engagement in a dialectical process that produces a synthesis rather than a victory or compromise. The process by which *satyagraha* brings about change is essentially creative and inherently constructive. Its immediate objective is "a restructuring of the opposing elements to achieve a situation which is satisfactory to both of the original opposing antagonists, but in such a way as to present an entirely new total circumstance . . . through the operation of nonviolent action the truth as judged by the fulfilment of human needs will emerge in the form of a mutually satisfactory and agreed-upon solution." The *satyagrahi* does all that he or she can to persuade the opponent that his or her position is correct while at the same time inviting the opponent to demonstrate the correctness of their position. The *satyagrahi* would then accede to it if he or she were persuaded by the opponent of an error in his or her own thinking. "The *satyagrahi* is never prepared to yield any position which he [sic] holds to be the truth", but "he may be persuaded that he is in error in so holding them."

How, then, does this *satyagraha* technique work? Bondurant notes that satyagraha can employ several different forms of nonviolent action, such as noncooperation (e.g., strikes and resignations) and civil disobedience (for example, contravention of laws and the non-payment of taxes), but adds that it also has a positive aspect that is fundamentally connected to it – the constructive program. It can be disempowering always to be struggling against things, working for something provides the rewards that enable one to keep going and also is a step in the creation of the better future while the unsatisfactory present is being pulled down.

From her analysis of Gandhian campaigns, Bondurant summarises some fundamental rules of *satyagraha*: *Satyagrahis* must be self-reliant; they must maintain the initiative in the campaign and progressively advance it when necessary; they should propagate the

objectives, strategy and tactics of the campaign; their demands should be reduced to a minimum consistent with truth; they should examine their own weaknesses; they should continually search for avenues of cooperation with the adversary on honourable terms, while refusing to surrender essentials in negotiation; and, finally, they must insist on a full agreement on fundamentals before accepting a settlement.

The steps in conducting a Gandhian campaign against an established political order could include the following: negotiation and arbitration, preparation of the group for direct action, agitation, issuing of an ultimatum, economic boycott and strikes, non-cooperation, civil disobedience, usurping of the functions of government, and parallel government. She notes that a *satyagraha* campaign requires planning, preparation and a thought-out execution in which the tactics may vary to suit the situation. In the new epilogue to the 1988 revised edition of the book, Bondurant reminds us that "the most significant objective for Gandhi was ....not India's independence, significant though it was. His ultimate and overarching quest was for an effective method to meet, engage in, and resolve conflict."

Although the main aim of *Conquest of Violence* is to study *satyagraha* as a political technique, there is also an examination of its spiritual underpinnings. Bondurant summarises the position of satyagraha as a method of helping practitioners realise their potential by saying that Gandhi "fashioned a method of conflict in the exercise of which a man could come to know what he is and what it means to evolve. In *satyagraha* dogma gives way to an open exploration of context. The objective is not to assert propositions, but to create possibilities. In opening up choices and confronting an opponent with the demand that he make a choice, the *satyagrahi* involves himself in acts of 'ethical existence.' The process forces a continuing examination of one's motives, an examination undertaken within the context of relationships as they change towards a new, restructured, and reintegrated pattern."

In another of her writings, Bondurant takes this definition even further when she claims that a life of ideals requires a good deal of self-discipline, and those who have mastered this to enable them to act constructively may find, as many of Gandhi's followers have, "a sense of becoming, or realization of self that makes the demanding

tasks required not only tolerable but also attractive." After all, *swaraj* – self-rule – was not merely about independence for India, it was about self-rule for the individual.

By way of conclusion, it needs to be admitted that some of this book will be hard going for those without a background in political theory or a knowledge of the writings of some of the main (and not so main) political theorists. It may even disappoint activists who are looking for a handbook that will guide them in easy steps to conduct a Gandhian campaign (although this can be teased out from the philosophical/theoretical analysis Bondurant provides – however for this purpose it may be better to go to either one of the classics of the field such as Coover et al's *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* or George Lakey's *Powerful Peacemaking*, or one of the many more recent handbooks). It is a book of political theory not about personal lifestyles. It attempts to place *satyagraha* into the context of political science – where previously it had little purchase. Bondurant does this, as noted above, by first comparing it with conservatism, anarchism, and then with Marxism, authoritarian realism, liberal democratic theory, compromise and Quaker methods of dealing with conflict. She presents a cogent case, but, in some respects, given that the book was originally published in 1958, her project seemed to have less impact than it should have had as Gandhi was not taken particularly seriously in the realms of political science. Perhaps now the time for *Conquest of Violence* has finally come. With the upsurge (and indeed success) of nonviolent campaigns around the world (think of people power, the various coloured revolutions and springs), and increasing analysis of them, nonviolence can no longer be sidelined by political scientists. Bondurant was merely way ahead of her time. And if one is particularly interested in the contribution of Gandhian nonviolence to political theory and practice, there is no better place to start than with Joan Bondurant's *Conquest of Violence*. In fact, we can agree with Sharp that this book is a "must" for all interested in social research to promote peace. And, further, that "No sociologist, psychologist, political scientist or social and political philosopher ought to miss it."

Thomas Weber, Honorary Associate of the Politics Program, La Trobe University