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Lester R. Kurtz



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Shifting Economic Paradigms, Mobilizing Nonviolent Resistance¹

- *Lester R. Kurtz*

Power concedes nothing without a demand.

It never did and it never will.

- Frederick Douglass,
African-American Abolitionist, 1857

Without the mobilization of civil society to transform our economic system, United Nations declarations at Bhutan's High-Level Meeting on economic transformation will be just another high-sounding proclamation.² I like such declarations – they help us to aspire and map our higher ideals and give us leverage when the powerful resist justice. We can call them to account by pointing to the documents they signed. Without collective action, however, we cannot confront the current multifaceted crisis – economic, political, environmental, and spiritual, that requires us to resist and create.

To get the world we want, we have to listen, analyze, and mobilize a challenge to the existing paradigm. What are the genuine needs of the world's people? What are the pillars of support that hold up the existing system? How might we mobilize civil society to bring about its transformation? The Bretton Woods paradigm facilitated international

trade, but also reflected the power of the United States and its allies at the close of the World War. Europe and Japan were in shambles and the postwar economic system privileged a few and created the current unjust distribution of the world's precious resources. A new paradigm can result only by mobilizing people power.

Fortunately, in recent decades, civil societies mobilized around the world to demand an end to the unjust concentration of power and resources. The Berlin Wall fell, the apartheid system in South Africa collapsed, and dictatorships the world over were brought down by nonviolent civil resistance within civil society to everyone's surprise. This hopeful model for paradigm transformation comes from Mahatma Gandhi, who challenged not only the colonial paradigm but also the way to fight existing powers and the paradigms they proffer.³ His approach comes not from the "top" or the centers of power, but from within individuals who resist daily on the micro level, but organize to shake the larger systems of power.

Upon returning to India after years in South Africa, Gandhi was asked to join the Indian Independence Movement. Instead of jumping into action, first, he traveled the country for a year, observing, talking with people, seeing how people lived, measuring

¹ Lester R. Kurtz, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr MSG35, Fairfax, VA 22030 USA; email: lkurtz@gmu.edu. An earlier version was posted online for participants in preparation for the "High Level Meeting on Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm" hosted by Bhutan at the United Nations, 2 April 2012. See <http://tinyurl.com/z4nssgw>.

² See Royal Government of Bhutan (2012). The Report of the High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm. New York: The Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations. Thimphu: Office of the Prime Minister. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/janc3g2>.

³ Lester Kurtz, "Gandhi and His Legacies" *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008). Available online at http://works.bepress.com/lester_kurtz/1/

the injustice, discovering their grievances and dreams. Next, he analyzed the situation, concluding that a few hundred thousand British troops could only control hundreds of millions of Indians because the Indians allowed them to do so. He took lessons from the spiritual wisdom of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity, as well as his “experiments with Truth” in South Africa. He assumed the karmic laws of the universe controlled empires as well as individuals: every thought, word, and deed has consequences that in turn have multiplicative results. Plant a seed of resistance in one’s daily life and it bears fruit in society.

Gandhi’s strategic plan was symbolic and also practical, both spiritual and political: he inspired strategic actions that aimed at the heart of the British colonial system. The cloth boycott, for example, undercut the power of the Empire that was built on the extraction of resources (like most empires) and the industrialization process, especially in textiles, then marketing the products worldwide. The British had expanded their means of exploitation globally, beyond the workers of the homeland to the citizens of the colonies. Use labor and resources from elsewhere to accumulate wealth and profit, luring consumers elsewhere to buy the industrially-created products forged from their natural resources. The logic of the economic system constructed in the nineteenth century persists in the twenty-first, which is how (according to Oxfam), 62 individuals own as much as half of the entire world’s population.⁴

Deep Listening

As Gandhi demonstrated a century ago, our first task is to develop systematic mechanisms for deep listening, not just to experts, politicians, elites or corporate executives whose perspectives are already part of the global discourse but to the people of the world in all of their diversity. It also involves exegesis – unpacking cultural frames and deep assumptions embedded in and sometimes hidden by by figurations and poetics. By giving voice to the voiceless as the

first step in the process we can ascertain the basic human needs and aspirations of the people whom the global system and its constituent parts are supposed to serve, sharpening our ability to empathize and expanding our knowledge base.

This listening process would utilize the techniques and skills of the social sciences in its myriad forms, including random sample surveys, focus groups, interviews, textual and narrative analyses, social accounting, and ethnographic observations of the many social and economic groupings on the planet. The wheel has already been invented, although not fully operationalized - much of this knowledge is already collected in encyclopedias such as UNESCO’s *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (<http://www.eolss.net/>). Those of us who produce, write, edit, and analyze knowledge often have no idea what life is like for the majority of earth’s cohabitants and we need to tune into their voices.

Listening to the people should also draw upon traditional cultural techniques developed for individual and collective expression and spiritual techniques for deep listening. These traditional techniques would ideally be combined with the latest technological tools for collecting and analyzing data – we might videotape personal and collective narratives about needs and aspirations, use the Internet and computer databases, mapping techniques for qualitative and quantitative analysis of narratives, to bring together the cacophony of voices that are sometimes drowned out by monopolized media and powerful elites, so that our new economic paradigm genuinely meets our collective needs.

Listening to the world’s peoples is imperative and complicated enough, but we must also listen to the non-human elements with which we share the planet, the sentient and non-sentient beings, the ecosystems, the animal, vegetable and mineral elements that constitute our common world and whose existence is now threatened by the course of human development under the old economic paradigm. Here

⁴ Oxfam, “An Economy for the 1%.” Available online at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-1> 2016.

the natural sciences are vital, especially when holistic understanding, often coming from spiritual traditions and understandings of deep ecology, are combined with the sometimes reductionist but enormously productive methods of modern experimental science.

Finally, the visions that diverse people bring to the human table can be compared and analyzed for their similarities and differences. Do common themes emerge? How can the diversity of our social as well as natural ecology be preserved as we move forward together? Efforts to develop common visions should not flatten the paradoxes and contradictions of human life, the variety of cultures that are as necessary to the social ecology of the planet as the millions of natural species that constitute our natural ecology.

Strategic Analysis for Nonviolent Civil Resistance

After listening, we are ready to undertake a strategic analysis what we should do based on what we have heard; the goal of the analysis would be first to ascertain the causes and consequences of violence and injustice and secondly to look for windows of opportunity for a nonviolent civil resistance of the existing system as we try to construct a new one.

Following Gene Sharp's systematization of Gandhian nonviolent direct action,⁵ we would analyze the pillars of support that sustain the current economic paradigm and the social systems that reinforce it. We ask how our daily lives and the systems we uphold perpetuate the scandalous inequality that results in more child deaths from malnutrition each year than the Nazis killed during the entire holocaust.

The fundamental principle Gandhi recognized is that there are multiple sources of power and that we can withdraw support from unjust systems,

Pillars of Support
Police & Military
Civil Service
Bureaucracy
Educational system
Religious & Cultural
Institutions
The Media
Economic Institutions

facilitate defections by people who make the system work, and bring about fundamental transformations. This is not just theory, but the power dynamics behind the subversion

of the colonial system, the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa, and the overthrow of dictatorships worldwide; the theory and practice of nonviolent civil resistance have been widely elaborated and documented, e.g. by the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict (www.nonviolent-conflict.org).⁶ There is no reason why it could not work against the ruling global economic system as well, just as activists in Norway and Sweden turned around their economy in the 1930s.⁷ The enemy is never individuals but their behavior and its interlocking, bureaucratized system. The winner of a successful resistance is everyone including the perpetrators, because the system itself is unsustainable and makes no one happy, so it is in everyone's interest to transform it.

We would analyze how each pillar sustains the current system and where its vulnerabilities lie. Which sectors and key individuals are susceptible to transformation and defection as allies of an oppositional movement? What are the reciprocal, institutional, and symbolic mechanisms that prevent its transformation and how do they work?

Educating and Mobilizing

Finally, we organize a movement to resist the old paradigm while constructing and implementing the new. The social movements literature is rich with

⁵ Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*. (Albert Einstein Institution, 2003).

⁶ See Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works* (Columbia University Press, 2011) and Swarthmore's Global Nonviolent Action Database.

⁷ George Lakey, "How Swedes and Norwegians broke the power of the 1 percent." <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2012/01/26-3>.

data and analysis about how resources are mobilized, political opportunities recognized and shaped, and messages framed to resonate widely.⁸ Moreover, Sharp⁹ provides a basic inventory of 198 categories of nonviolent action available to protest and persuade, engage in social, economic, political, and cultural noncooperation as well as nonviolent intervention to make the current system ungovernable and open up a

space for the creative development of a new system of economics that sustains and nurtures humans while protecting the ecosystem and our fellow inhabitants.

We can begin by measuring Gross National Happiness (GNH),¹⁰ inspired and developed by Bhutan, as an indicator of how well an economy is performing, from the village to the nation and the globe.



⁸ Benford, R.D., and D.A. Snow. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* (2000): 611–639.

⁹ Sharp, *Op cit.*; cf. Popovich et al., *Canvas Core Curriculum*: 4400 University Dr MSG35, Fairfax, VA 22030 USA; email "an press for policy changes that promote new kinds of economic organizaGuide to effective Nonviolent Action. Available at <http://canvasopedia.org/project/canvas-core-curriculum/>.: 4400 University Dr MSG35, Fairfax, VA 22030 USA; email "an press for policy changes that promote new kinds of economic organiza

¹⁰ Ura, K., S. Alkire, T. Zangmo, and K. Wangdi. "A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index." *The Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies*, 2012. Available online at <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Short-GNH-Index-edited.pdf> or <http://tinyurl.com/pqkjb6d>.

This approach has nine dimensions that measure well-being of citizens and the environment in which they live, rather than the GDP, an indicator of production and potential wealth accumulation by those who own its means. At local community, provincial, national, regional, and global levels, we can press simultaneously for policy changes that promote new kinds of economic organization. Our mobilization strategy should recognize that different kinds of rationality as well as the power of emotion

and tradition are motivators for action and change, as Max Weber has observed at the beginning of the last century.

We do not wait for governments or elites to do the work— although we insist on their responsiveness and service— rather, we begin together, as a human community, framing the future and acting with resolve. We can think, organize, march, dance, boycott, and sing our way to a new future.