

Chapter 7: A Radical Praxis

People wish to be settled. Only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.

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“Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed — even in part — the other immediately suffers,” Freire writes. “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis ... to speak a true word is to transform the world.”² This study of nonviolent intervention as transnational empowerment is meant to be an opening utterance in that dialogue. Intervention organizations are and have been active in divided societies around the world. This is not meant to be a critique of their vital work, but further reflection on its implications — a praxis of transnational empowerment.

Drawing upon the formulations of social movement theory developed in the last quarter-century, the emergent field of third-party intervention continues the investigation of the problems of external groups supporting movements’ attempts to change power structures. The benefits of transnational support are clear; studies of the US civil rights movement like Morris’ indicate that there is a significant role to be played by outside allies.³ Attempting to create an entirely new power structure, on the other hand — a project undertaken by more recently-organized groups such as Nonviolent Peaceforce — is a much more difficult proposition and will need to be grounded in a serious commitment to anti-oppression fundamentals in order to avoid outright appropriation. Yet, the promise of autonomy and empowerment for local communities through this development of alternative power is a potent one, and nonviolent intervention has a

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1903). “Circles,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton & Mifflin, Boston, p. 320.

² Freire (2000), 87.

³ See Morris (1984).

responsibility to formulate methods other than dependency on old forms of control and legitimacy. Decentralized, non-hierarchical forms of strategic intervention seem most likely to enable this type of empowerment.

Third-party intervention organizations are often aware of the history of nonviolent action and protest from which they arise, yet seem unclear about the results of this history. If power is seen as relational, interventionists must be willing to investigate the nature of that relationship and the dynamics by which it is structured. Often this will mean confronting their own systems of privilege, including the way in which they go about recruiting volunteers. Because social change requires some form of identity reformation, transnational empowerment must be willing to legitimately engage in methods of organizing that depart from a purely “neutral” stance. Transnational empowerment is not about providing aid, nor is it about providing theory. It is about creating networks of autonomous change that support themselves; grassroots education that leads to community development and power.

When third-party intervention adopts this approach, it will necessarily have to take a more nuanced view of ideology and strategy. Particular approaches will be required for particular situations, but this does not mean changing the core values of an intervention based on empowerment. The nature of biopolitical control in the context of a global Empire means that intervention as a system is already bound up in discourses of power and culture. If interventionists continue to shy away from engaging on a cultural level with local activists, they will be much more likely to mimic the paternalistic form of aid found throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If, on the other hand, interventionists recognize that the knowledge of liberation resides in each local movement, they can act co-intentionally to create a path toward that freedom.

There exists both a need and potent methods for nonviolent intervention to succeed, as it already has in many ways in Guatemala, Palestine and Sri Lanka. Ongoing investigations of these methods and the “best practices” of such intervention can only lead to more responsible, effective and emancipatory change.