BOOK REVIEW

Title of Book: Nonviolence in Political Theory  
Author: Iain Atack. 
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Though the recent years have witnessed an increase in the success of nonviolent protest movements, the theoretical assumptions of nonviolent political action has remained under-emphasized. Iain Atack in his book ‘Nonviolence in Political Theory’ tries to fill this void by explaining nonviolent political action in the realm of western political concepts like power, violence, state and international relations. In his own words, “instances of nonviolent political action are not simply spontaneous eruptions of popular sentiment” (pp. IV-V). In fact according to Atack, nonviolent political action can be explained with the help of Western political theory. In his book, “Nonviolence in Political Theory” Atack first analyses the writings of nonviolent theorists like Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Gene Sharp, then discusses the concepts of principled nonviolence, pragmatic nonviolence, civil resistance, transformative nonviolence and finally analyzes the role of state in legitimizing the use of violence both domestically as well as internationally. According to Atack, the ultimate aim of nonviolence is not only to achieve a society based on nonviolence domestically but also to create alternative forms of political organizations internationally that does not depend upon violence for justifying social order and control.

The book also deals with the question of state legitimacy and its power to use violence both at the domestic and in the international arena. Atack discusses the role of state through the writings of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau who believed that states help to maintain nonviolence in society and protect people from both internal and external aggression. The social contract theorists also believed that states would help to maintain peace and social order through the rule of law. He also mentions the criticisms of social contract theory in the writings of Georges Sorrel and Frantz Fanon, who believed that states are “merely a device for preserving an unequal and unjust social and political order, both domestically and internationally” (p.59). This allows Atack to highlight the differences in the theory of nonviolence ranging from Tolstoy’s appeal for eliminating the institution of state, to Gandhi’s belief in “progressive substitution”. Atack defines progressive substitution as “finding functional alternatives to violence, as the ultimate sanction for maintaining social order within political communities as well as defending them from external threats” (p.186).

Tolstoy criticized the state on the grounds that states had the sole right to use violence. Hence, this role of the state reinforced social, economic inequality and also restricted individual
autonomy and freedom. According to Tolstoy for a successful nonviolent society it was very necessary to eliminate the institution of state. But, both Gandhi and Sharp believed in the concept of progressive substitution which focused on local forms of government or civilian-based defense but not towards the elimination of state. According to Atack, this leads to two different forms of nonviolent political action- civil resistance and transformative nonviolence. Civil resistance recognizes the fact that states have the right to use violence for self-defense and resistance to oppression. Transformative nonviolence on the other hand believes in the creation of new forms of social and political order that provides an alternative to the concept of institutionalized violence.

Atack also discusses the three important sources of power within a society: power over as “power from the government or ruling elite”, power with as “power that results when social groups or individuals cooperate with one another to achieve agreed goals” and consent as “power of subordinate social groups in maintaining both elites and the intermediate institutions of the state in power” (p.112). He also mentions Foucault and Gramsci’s criticisms regarding consent theory of power. Finally, he deals with the concept of pacifism and nonviolence, which according to him, though “sometimes seen to be synonymous, because they both oppose the use of violence to achieve particular political ends” are “logically distinct”(p.158). According to Atack, while pacifism ethically rejects the use of violence, nonviolence is looked upon as a pragmatic means for achieving a desired end.

This book plays a very important role in developing a theory of nonviolent political action. Within 188 pages, the author has covered a lot of themes in a clear and systematic way. By explaining nonviolence in terms of western concepts like state and power, he has been successful in creating a theoretical framework which would help current practitioners as well as academicians in understanding as well as applying nonviolence. By differentiating between the concepts of civil resistance and transformative nonviolence, Atack has also been able to explain how transformative nonviolence can help in the creation of political organizations internationally that does not depend upon violence for maintaining social order and control.

But the solutions of progressive substitution or abolition of the state system for ending violence both at the domestic and international arena, though theoretically sound appears to be utopian in reality. The author also does not consider intrastate security issues like terrorism, ethnic or religious war where violence is regarded as martyrdom and states might have to use force in return as well.

Atack also emphasizes the importance of international law and international organizations in solving interstate and intrastate conflicts peacefully. Though the author is very optimistic that an international society based on nonviolence will be able to exterminate war, the question remains whether the self-interest of the states concerned would allow such a society to be formed. Moreover, the existing international organizations are in most cases in the hands of powerful states and act according to their interests. Stricter international law can also be criticized on the grounds of affecting the internal sovereignty of states. A nonviolent international arena is possible only if all states are equal and if people in spite of their ethnic, religious, cultural or economic differences believe in the power of nonviolence. This might require more in-depth analysis than proposed by Atack in his book.

In spite of the above mentioned flaws, the book proves to be a must read for both undergraduate and graduate students who are focusing on the theory of nonviolence, civil protests, peace and war.