

Nonviolence against Neoliberalism

Alison Farmer

Antioch University, Seattle

Abstract

The new modern nonviolent movement against neoliberalist policies is discussed with the help of three essays from "A Movement of Movements" by Tom Mertes. A brief history and definition of neoliberalism is touched on. Devastation of the neoliberal policy of 'privatization' is explored in South Africa and India. What is the future of the movement and the need for new creative nonviolent strategies?

## Nonviolence against Neoliberalism

The book "Movement of Movements" by Tom Mertes asks if another world is really possible? Thirty years have passed since nonviolence was used in the in the civil rights movement during the 60's but the fight goes on, only now it is a multi-colored global one. Human rights and unjust laws are still the cause and Dr. King's six steps towards nonviolence are still being taken. However the steps have widened and those navigating them have had to find more creative maneuvers as authorities discover them too. Two hands are still being raised, one to stop the injustice and one to offer reconciliation. Able to link race and religion in the past, they now join countries and language, uniting together in support for a just and sustainable earth. Civil Rights activists join hands with Environmentalists as the window to the future becomes clearer and separate fights emerge connected. However, as more hands are united the web of capitalism grows in deceit and complexity in an effort to protect itself against the light of truth the growing two hands hold.

Mertes includes "Sparks in the Township", by Trevor Ngwane in his book which discusses the swell building against the neoliberal privatization policies of the ANC government in South Africa. Ngwane says "the leadership has captured the bodies of the workers, but their souls are wandering around. One day they will connect with other bodies" (Mertes, 2004, p. 132). The ANC were victorious in their apartheid fight but Ngwane, once a supporter now opposes them and criticizes their concealment of a capitalist elite agenda that has led to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer (Mertes, 2004, p. 117). Under the direction of neoliberal policies some "3 billion people — or half of humanity — now live on under 2 dollars a day and 86 percent of the world's resources are consumed by the world's wealthiest 20 percent" (Shah, 2007). Ngwane is wary of many other civil rights movements being open for capture by the evil forces of capitalism in the same way the ANC has been.

However, similar to Gandhi and Dr. King he feels truth and justice will eventually win as more souls connect and unite with the Soul of the World.

One of Ngwane efforts to shine the light on the dark web of neoliberal policies has been to launch “Operation Khanyisa” (Khanyisa means light) where he literally restores the light and illegally “reconnects people’s electricity supply when it’s been cut off” (Mertes, 2004, p. 124). This act of defiance is a nonviolent direct action born out of criminally unjust, unaffordable electricity prices caused by privatization. Realization of Johannesburg being in the “red” in 1997 caused the ANC to adopt “GEAR, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme – a thoroughgoing privatization-deregulation strategy” (Mertes, 2004, p. 120), but the privatization of electricity in South Africa has been yet another failure record for neoliberalism. It led to steep price rises, consequential cut-offs and resulting hardship. It only proved to escalate foreign debt to local debt, squeezing the country then its people into darkness. Nonviolent action against ESKOM led to them retreating in 2001, cut-offs were halted, an amnesty on arrears adopted and electricity supplied to all at more reasonable prices.

Privatization is part of the neoliberal package based on “Fair Trade” sold by the West over 25yrs ago as a way to end poverty, but its credibility is weakening as resulting havoc ensues. The Iron Lady of Britain, Margaret Thatcher undertook the neo-liberal revolution in Britain in 1979. A disciple of philosopher-economist Friedrich von Hayek who pushed the ideology of neoliberalism and a social Darwinist, she justified her program with the single word TINA, short for There Is No Alternative. Central to Thatcher’s doctrine and of neo-liberalism itself, is the notion of competition — competition between nations, regions, firms and of course between individuals. It is supposed to allocate all resources with the greatest possible efficiency. This is a sharp contrast to Eastern thought; the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu ended his Tao-te Ching with these words: “Above all, do not compete” (Shah, 2007).

The Reagan and Thatcher era in particular, saw neoliberalism pushed to most parts of the globe, demonizing anything that was public, and encouraging privatization (Shah, 2007).

During “prevalent times before the Second World War, neoliberalism had already started to show signs of increasing disparities between rich and poor” (Shah, 2007) and in the 50’s the IMF and the World Bank, with Keynesian policies in mind, handed out loans to third world countries to help them build secure infra-structures and develop. However, they had no control over the way local governments spent the money, or control over those running the governments. Flow towards productivity and economic growth of any country was thought to rely on resources. A large resource resided in the building of Dams, water and electricity being the blood of life and progress of western civilization. The Electricity Supply Commission in South Africa (ESKOM) absorbed over half of South Africa’s allowance and unjust, corrupt regulation resulted in white-owned industries receiving cut-price power and the majority of blacks without any.

Dams built to make money flow have only proved to block water, fish and human rights. In “Monsoon Risings” in Mertes book, Chittaroopa Palit discusses the Mega-Dam Resistance in the Narmada Valley in India. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) emerged from several groups working to save the valley in the late 1980’s. Farm land was being seized compulsorily for dam building and when promised rehabilitation was not forthcoming and the political economy of the dam project began to unravel, many nonviolent actions based around the Gandhian movement erupted. An act of 1894 “allows for the confiscation of properties on the grounds of ‘public interest’ and the NBA sought to challenge “the Narmada land expropriations on the basis that the public interest clearly isn’t served” (Mertes, 2004, p. 76), famously forcing the World Bank to withdraw its financial support. Following the six steps of nonviolence the NBA gathered information and went about educating those not only effected by the injustice, but the world. By the late 80’s the Bank was already facing criticism for it’s

support of dam construction and the personal commitment of many environmental groups was already on board, leading to many protest marches against the dams. In their negotiations the NBA was able to show viable alternatives to dam building, showing “decentralized methods of water-harvesting” (Mertes, 2004, p. 75) could be used in the area. They proved the government promises of drought prone areas receiving any water was false and presented contradictory evidence of the benefits of huge multi-purpose dams. A strong civil rights legal case questioning the public interest gave the NBA’s a strong argument to bring to the World Bank who agreed to an independent review on the Sardar Sarovar project by Bradford Morse – the first in its history. When the Morse Report came out showing the project was “flawed on environmental and hydrological grounds” (Mertes, 2004, p. 78) the World Bank was publicly shamed and eventually withdrew its funding for the project in 1993. The build up and reaction to the eventual scrapping of the loan lead to intensive repressive action of the NBA ending in a killing of a young tribal protester by the Maharashta police. Nonviolent direct action continued against the government, with fasts and sit-ins, until construction was stopped when an interim stay was granted until 2000. The Sardar Sarovar project was unfortunately continued, but the NBA has succeeded in forcing foreign capital to withdraw from other dam projects, thereby reducing foreign debt and dependency and the unjust hardship that derives from it. Talking about the organization of nonviolent movements Palit says that during the good times structure is not that necessary, but during the bad times there is a need for representatives, formal structure and principles. She also mentions how repression and indifference can arouse feelings of helplessness and frustration and highlights a real need for richer more compelling strategies in an increasingly globalized world saying “if you use the same weapons again and again, they become blunt and ineffective”. (Mertes, 2004, pp. 89 -90). Palit was first attracted to nonviolent action through a feminist environmental group called “Kalpraviksh”, The words is Indian for “tree of the imagination” and Palit notes women are often more militant and

radical than men, they have different earth values and are capable of more imaginative protests (Mertes, 2004, pp. 83-84).

Modern Western nonviolent campaigns are making full use of imagination to bring back blows to the forces of evil. As oppressors repeatedly find ways to counteract nonviolent action the activist has to increasingly become more creative. Only today a Mickey Mouse protester was arrested in California as the Disney characters highlight unfair cuts to their benefits (BBC News Special Reports Mickey Mouse protester arrested, 2008) and yesterday Batman brought a stop to the traffic on the M25 in London in a fight for father's rights (BBC News UK England London Fathers 4 Justice protest over, 2008). The "Fathers 4 Justice" movement has had a lot of publicity for their highly creative protests involving super heroes breaching national security. They say "You can't fight power with power. But you can fight power with ridicule, satire and subversion" (fathers-4-justice.org Cunning Stunts, 2006).

In Mertes book "Raising A Ruckus" by John Sellers discusses the merger between environmental movements and civil rights activists. They are emerging as one big movement to fight the injustice of neoliberal policies and the negative global impact on both the planet and people. Many movements have been undermined by the four critical roles within them fighting internally; this has also been the case for movements against movements. In the past environmentalists and social activists have been fighting against each other, but finally after over 30 years we have the potential for a mass movement for positive change. The force of evil born out of the belly of economics, the blood of capitalism and the heart of greed, has been located. Education is taking place and people are stepping up and calling for justice to prevail as our world view is being expanded. Human rights, fair trade, labor, social justice and environmental movements have all now converged against the World Trade Organization and the Citigroup has been targeted as a poster child of unjust corporate globalization (Mertes, 2004, p. 182). Ruckus has become a clearing house and support network for the new movement against neoliberal

polices and was integral in the very public WTO protest in Seattle in 1999. Street protests have turned into street theatre and a united web of justice is slowly infiltrating the dark web of capitalism and bringing the truth to light. Those in power are beginning to feel shamed and attempting to repress the glowing movement by discrediting, deception and dishonesty, but the more they try to stop it's growth, the greater and brighter it shines.

***“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that”*** – Martin Luther King Jr.

#### References

- BBC News Special Reports Mickey Mouse protester arrested.* (2008, 08 15). Retrieved 08 15, 2008, from [www.news.bbc.co.uk: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/7564166.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/7564166.stm)
- BBC News UK England London Fathers 4 Justice protest over.* (2008, 08 15). Retrieved 08 15, 2008, from [www.news.bbc.co.uk: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/london/7562703.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7562703.stm)
- fathers-4-justice.org Cunning Stunts.* (2006). Retrieved 08 15, 2008, from [www.fathers-4-justice.org](http://www.fathers-4-justice.org): [http://fathers-4-justice.org/f4j//index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=44](http://fathers-4-justice.org/f4j//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=44)
- Mertes, T. (2004). *A Movement of Movements*. New York: Verso.
- Shah, A. (2007, 07 02). *A Primer on Neoliberalism - Global Policies*. Retrieved 08 15, 2008, from [www.globalissues.org](http://www.globalissues.org): <http://www.globalissues.org/article/39/a-primer-on-neoliberalism>