The Conceptual Aporia of Non-Violent Resistance: A Derridean Deconstructive Approach

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to display, by a Derridean deconstructive reading, that the term 'non-violent resistance' is aporetic and paradoxical taking into consideration that the resisting side uses non-violence as a means of psychological and conscience-related manipulation, which contains a certain degree of violence in it, to overcome the oppression in question. The definitions of non-violence seem to be wrongfully restricted to the physical aspects of violence, overlooking other aspects of the term like psychological and emotional violence. Even though violence has been mostly associated with physical damage in human history, the changing definitions of the term today make it necessary to develop a new perspective and conceptual framework for violence-related terms. This essay will interpret the concept of 'non-violent resistance' as one such term and attempt to offer a new concept that will represent the psychological and ethical aspects of the practice more eloquently.

Şiddetsiz Direnişin Kavramsal Açmazı: Derridacı Yapısökümcü Bir Yaklaşım

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı Derridacı yapısökümcü bir okuma yaparak 'şiddetsiz direniş' kavramının aporetik ve paradoksal bir kavram olduğunu ortaya koymaktır. Bu amaçla, direnen tarafın baskıları alt etmek için şiddetsizliği psikolojik ve vicdani bir manipülasyon yöntemi olarak kullanması ve bu yöntemin kendi içerisinde bir çeşit şiddet barındırması göz önünde bulundurulacaktır. Ayrıca, şiddetsizlik kavramının hatalı bir şekilde şiddetin fiziksel boyutuyla sınırlı tutulduğuna ve şiddetin psikolojik-duygusal boyutlarının göz ardı edildiğine dikkat çekilecektir. Tarih boyunca şiddet büyük ölçüde fiziksel zarar verme ile özdeşleştirilmiş olsa da şiddet kavramının günümüzde değişkenlik gösteren tanımı şiddetle alakalı kavramların tanımlanmasında yeni bakış açıları gerektirmiştir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmada 'şiddetsiz direniş' kavramı benzer bir gereksinim ışığında değerlendirilecek ve eylemin psikolojik-etik boyutlarını daha iyi kapsadığı düşünülen yeni bir kavram önerilecektir.

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Introduction

On 21 October 1967, tens of thousands of American demonstrators gathered outside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. to participate in a protest organised by The National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. The event was attended by one of the most diverse groups of protesters in history, including "high-minded literary figures, […] prominent clergymen, middle-class professionals, working people, students, black activists, and an array of colorful street people and hippies." (Fischer, 2006, p. 196) Uplifted by concerts and public speeches, the group then started their march to the Pentagon to demand the immediate termination of the US military's occupation of Vietnam. The March on the Pentagon was brought to a halt by a group of soldiers barricading the entrance to the headquarters building. Despite being teargassed and bludgeoned, the protestors kept the Pentagon under blockade for two days. Determined to remain as non-confrontational as possible, they adopted various forms of demonstration ranging from common sit-in acts or practices of protest art to more unconventional methods such as spell-casting or handing flowers to troopers.

It was on one such occasion that Bernie Boston, the photographer for The Washington Evening Star, took the picture of an American youth named George Harris placing a carnation into the barrel of a soldier's rifle during the protests. Later given the title "Flower Power", the photograph not only won Boston various awards, but also became an iconic image that inspired many non-violent anti-establishment movements around the world. Similar strategies of non-violent resistance have been observed as part of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, the Tiananmen Square protests in China, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Indignados Movement in Spain, Gezi Park protests in Turkey, and the Nuit Debout movement in France.[3]

Although the origins of non-violent resistance date back to ancient religious doctrines, the method has been popularised in the colonial and post-colonial eras in world history. Non-violent resistance has been variously employed by colonised peoples or oppressed minorities to resist political or cultural oppression by undermining the military power of oppressors through passive means. Two of the most paradigmatic examples are the Indian Independence Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States under the leadership of Martin Luther King. The term 'non-violent resistance' has been used to

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[3] For a detailed discussion of the history of non-violent resistance in recent history, see (Dudouet, 2011, pp. 245-246)

describe the prevailing method of resistance in the foregoing movements with an emphasis on the avoidance of using physical force in the fight against oppression. This description has disregarded the possible involvement of psychological or emotional factors in the process.

However, an insight into the etymological roots and changing definitions of the word 'violence' over time necessitates a new conceptual framework on this matter. Considering the fact that the oppressed (Indians and African Americans in the above examples) use non-violence as a strategy of psychological manipulation against the oppressor with the implications of ethical primacy, the conceptualisation of the term 'non-violent resistance' proves self-contradictory and reductionist. In this respect, this essay will attempt a Derridean deconstructive interpretation of the practice of non-violent resistance in order to reveal its psychological and ethical implications which function as a manipulative force to reverse the master-slave dialectic between the oppressor and the oppressed. Remaining on a purely conceptual critical level and leaving out the political ethics surrounding it, this essay will offer a new concept for 'non-violent resistance' that will represent the psychological and ethical aspects of the practice in a better way.

Derrida and Deconstructive Reading Method

Deconstruction is a reading strategy developed by Jacques Derrida to demonstrate the problematic and fragile nature of the relationship between the text and its hypothetical meaning. Post-structuralist theory put into practice, deconstruction brings a new perspective to any kind of textual analysis with an aim to reveal the points where a given "text may betray itself" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 189). It refers to a kind of close reading, in Barry's words, "with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity" (Barry, 2009, p. 69). In line with the post-structuralist view that language is an inevitably unequable system of signs, Derrida calls for a sceptical attitude towards the artificiality and constructedness of narratives of meaning that have come to determine human knowledge. In this respect, deconstruction aims to prove that linguistic meaning structures can be deconstructed and reconstructed variably depending on where one stands.

Derrida's deconstruction targets the structuralist claim that words in any language gain their meaning from their relationship with other words; that is, their meanings are determined by the absence of the characteristics included in others. In Saussurean structuralist theory, the relationality between signs manifests itself in terms of binary oppositions where a pair of

mutually exclusive terms strictly inform and imply one another's meaning. Derrida argues that the binary dichotomy between words is not only perceived and contingent, but it also postulates a false hierarchy between the two terms as if one was primal and the other was derivative. In this respect, Derrida's strategy of reading sets out to expose the lack of a transcendental origin in binary oppositions and display how meaning is constructed through the free play between two equally essential terms. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida intimates his motivation as follows:

> Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language' (Derrida, 1984, p. 123).

As Derrida conceives of language not as a static and confined reservoir of meaning but as a fluid and ever-evolving web of signs, words in a language are characterised by undecidability of meaning, a state where the possibility of a term's meaning resides in its very impossibility, hence "aporia". The job of post-structuralist critic is, then, to seek such inherent contradictions in words, and by extension in texts, to reveal the shaky grounds on which the ambitious narratives of modernism or Enlightenment are built.

In one of the most striking examples of his deconstructive reading, Derrida explores the paradoxical semantic evolution of the term 'hospitality' in his article titled "Hostipitality" which first appeared in English in 2000. In this article, he problematizes Kant's discussion of 'universal hospitality' as mentioned within the context of 'cosmopolitan right'. Derrida sees an incoherence in the German philosopher's argument that hospitality does not necessarily mean 'philanthropy', but it refers to the guest's right to a favourable reception. For Derrida, hospitality is a term that bears its exact opposite in itself and prescribes certain superior-subordinate relationship in favour of the host. He believes that hospitality mandates a law of visit and appears to be far from guest-friendly: "Hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct – put otherwise, produce itself as impossible, only be possible on the condition of its impossibility – or protect itself from itself, auto-immunize itself in some way, which is to say, deconstruct itself – precisely– in being put into practice" (Derrida, 2000, p. 5). Derrida reminds that Kant's conception of hospitality is a conditional one, indicating the status of a temporary visitor or the right of sanctuary arising from the

cosmopolitan right. In doing so, he draws attention to the self-contradictory nature of being one's 'host', which requires a great deal of demanding as much as providing. A host situates himself in a superior position from which he dictates his own rules, establishes the self and other relationship and constantly reminds the guest that he should not feel himself at home. Derrida supports this argument by tracing the term 'host' back to its etymological roots where it meets the terms 'hostile' and 'hostage' in a very ironic way. As a result of this conceptual analysis, Derrida comes to the conclusion that true hospitality is indescribable, firstly because it does not have a correspondence in the phenomenal world, secondly because it frustrates its own possibilities of realization by its self-contradictory nature.

Similarly, Derrida, in his article "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible" ("Pardonner: l'impardonnable et l'imprescriptible") published posthumously in 2012, delves into the etymological journey of the term 'forgiveness' and finds out that it is filled with connotations of renunciation, disinterestedness and nonindulgence as exemplified in various European languages including French, English, German, Spanish and Italian. His suggestion is that forgiveness comes along with the idea of an unconditional and disinterested act of 'giving' from oneself, or rather 'donation', which melts a whole past and future in the pot of a unique present. By making constant references to Levinas, Jankélévitch, and Arendt's understanding of the term within the context of the Holocaust, Derrida points out that it is in the nature of forgiveness to be directed towards the unforgivable and that real forgiveness is to avoid historicizing the wrongdoing and to prescribe the irrecoverable. He criticizes that the so-called universal moral code, which is always contaminated by the Judaic or Christian laws, relates forgiveness to "expiation, salvation, redemption, and reconciliation [...] through confession, remorse or regret [and] sacrifice" (Derrida, 2001, p. 26).

Reminding his readers of Jankélévitch's call for a distinction between forgiveness and forgetting, Derrida moves on to questioning the function of the wrongdoer in the act of forgiving. Whilst the former views an explicit and fully articulated regret and apology, an adequate punishment and goodwill towards compromise as prerequisites for forgiveness, the latter argues that such conditions and expectations are against the nature of forgiveness which must, instead, arise "beyond [...] an entire identificatory, spiritual, whether sublime or not, economy, beyond all expiation even" (Derrida, 2001, p. 30). For Derrida, Jankélévitch's understanding of forgiveness is religiously and morally informed along with being exaggerated, offensive and stubborn. In a similar way, Derrida also contests Arendt's call for

the necessity of punishment, though not revenge, for forgiveness with a peaceful mind. He contends that wrongdoing – whether minor or inhuman – remains ultimately, unattainably and irrecoverably in the past and true forgiveness stems only from an unquestioning settlement with the history. He says: "The past is past, the event took place, the wrong took place, and this past, the memory of this past, remains irreducible, uncompromising. This is one way in which forgiveness is different from the gift, which in principle does not concern the past. One will never have treated forgiveness if one does not take account of this being-past, a being-past that never lets itself be reduced, modified, modalized in a present past or a presentable or re-presentable past" (Derrida, 2001, p. 31). What Derrida demonstrates here is the paradox that forgiveness is possible only when the unforgivable is to be forgiven. In other words, forgiveness is an 'event' which, in order to take place, has to negate its own semantic richness, hence aporetic.

Non-violent Resistance: Definitions and Examples

As the name itself clearly suggests, non-violent resistance is a strategy of overcoming social, political and economic inequalities by means of a rejection of resorting to physically violent means. It is one of the commonest ways of demanding "social change and increased justice through peaceful means" (Lederach, 1995, p. 15) in recent human history. Apart from its being a common practice, non-violent resistance has also transpired as a more efficacious method for countering political, economic and social-cultural oppression than armed resistance. As Dudouet argues, "[a]lthough the power of nonviolent resistance does seem weak and inefficient in the face of acute power asymmetries, it has proven to be a very strategic tool in the hand of marginalised communities to redress structural imbalance and claim rights to justice or self-determination" (Dudouet, 2011, p. 238). In contrast with armed resistance, non-violent resistance manifests itself through the instrumentality of symbolic protests, noncooperative action, and self-possession against an oppressive and physically violent force. To be more precise, Sharp has listed almost two hundred different forms of non-violent resistance under three main categories: non-violent protest and persuasion (including public speeches, petitions, marches, meetings among others), non-cooperation (including strikes, boycotts, mutiny among others), and non-violent intervention (including occupation, obstruction, death fast, sit-ins among others) (Sharp, 1973).

In the simplest terms, non-violent resistance is characterised by the resister's conscious restraint from "the use of physical force against another's body, against that

person's will, and that is expected to inflict physical injury or death upon that person" (Bond, 1994, p. 62). Mostly used interchangeably with the term 'civil disobedience', non-violent resistance is essentially an umbrella term containing the other along with many other forms of passive resistance.[4] Lang draws attention to the difference between the two, claiming that civil disobedience connotes a deliberate violation of the law while non-violent resistance remains perfectly non-invasive and reserved as an ethical stance towards all (Lang, 1970, pp. 156-7). Traditionally adopted "by single-interest groups such as trade unions and anti-nuclear, indigenous or environmentalist movements", techniques of non-violent resistance have lately been adopted by a wide range of social and political groups on a national and international scale including identity groups "who are challenging internal oppression or external aggression and occupation, and are seeking either self-determination or civil rights in a truly democratic and multicultural state" (Dudouet, 2011, p. 239). Two best-known examples of it from modern history are Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March campaign in India in 1930 and Martin Luther King's part in the Civil Rights Movement between 1954 and 1968 in the United States.

Gandhi's non-violent activism during the Indian Independence Movement culminated in the Salt March of hundreds of miles from his residence in Ahmadabad to the coastal city of Dandi in an attempt to protest against the heavy taxes levied on Indian salt. This seemingly insignificant incident triggered the bigger national resistance to the British rule and economic monopoly in India and led to the deployment of 'satyagraha', the key to Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent activism against evil, en route to Indian independence. In his theorization of 'satyagraha', Gandhi identifies two ways of handling injustice: physical force and non-violence. To him, the latter is "infinitely superior to violence [as] forgiveness is more manly than punishment" (Gandhi, 1960, p. 5) even though it may mean dying in the process. Gandhi attributes violent action to brutes whilst non-violence, to him, is the essence of humanistic conscience. He views non-violence as the only means to truly save freedom and democracy, for it is "infinitely braver and more glorious because it will give life without taking any" (Gandhi, 1965, p. 47). This philosophy has not only brought about the Indian independence but has also been an inspiration for the future of humanity.

A similar philosophy was adopted by Martin Luther King during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, this time for social justice and political reform concerning the racial discrimination, particularly in the southern states. The movement manifested itself by

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[4] For a more exhaustive account and detailed analysis regarding the other forms of passive resistance, see (Sémelin, 1993, p. 27.)

means of boycotts, local protests, strikes, sit-in campaigns and marches without resorting to violence even though some segregationists went too far with their acts of intimidation including physical assaults and bombings. The establishment of the Montgomery Improvement Association accelerated the pace of the movement with Martin Luther King as the leading figure. King was not only an activist that appeared on the streets, but also the spokesperson of the philosophy behind the movement.

The philosophy in question favours non-violent resistance and civil disobedience over violent and injurious behaviours when it comes to facing oppression on various levels. For instance, in his essay titled "Three Ways of Meeting Oppression", King describes the ways of reacting to oppression and lists three categories as 'resignation', 'resorting to counter-violence' and 'non-violent resistance'. He also argues that 'non-violent resistance' is the most honourable and humane way of struggle for black people against white segregationists' oppression and abuse, as it means that the black people are not like them (King, 2012, pp. 465-8). King's non-violent resistance philosophy proved rather fruitful with various law amendments marking the end of racial segregation in public places, education, employment, and various other matters. It is ironic, however, that both Gandhi's and King's non-violent resistance campaigns ended up in a violent manner and cost them their lives as they were both assassinated.

Deconstructing Non-violent Resistance

On the surface, as the above instances display, the practice of non-violent resistance is characterised by the oppressed party's non-involvement in any form of physical force to overcome the oppression. However, on a closer examination of this process, a serious conceptual flaw emerges at the core of non-violent resistance in relation to the oppressed party's use of his condition as a means of psychological manipulation, giving the oppressor the feeling that the oppressed is superior to him by not resorting to violence. This issue can be clarified most effectively by anatomising the concept of non-violent resistance.

'Violence' appears as an unstable term that has acquired a wider range of meanings in time. As Schinkel observes, the word 'violence' is etymologically related to "a concept of *force*, hence the primary definitions of violence: 'the exercise of (physical) force'. It is derived from the Latin noun *violentia* ('vehemence', 'impetuosity') and the adjective *violentus* ('vehement', 'forcible', 'impetuous', 'violent') and it appears to have become an independent word in Anglo-French and Old French sometime around the fourteenth century.

The verb to which both *violentia* and *violentus* are related is *violare*, meaning 'to outrage, to dishonour' or 'to treat with violence'" (Schinkel, 2010, p. 19). Michaud, on the other hand, draws attention to the relation between the Latin term '*violare*' and another Latin term '*vis*' which stands for the force of vitality inherent in all living organisms (Michaud, 1986, p. 4). Such an archaeological outlook to the root of the term displays that 'violence' refers to the use of an excessive amount of force by one party on another for the purposes of and/or culminating in the violation of the latter's rights, values and wellbeing.

The roots of the term 'resistance', on the other hand, can be traced back to the 14th century, to its Latin noun 'resistentia' and its verb form 'resistere' which is basically a combination of the prefix 're' meaning 'against' and the word 'sistere' meaning 'to hold out' or 'to stand', hence 'to stand against' (Partridge, 2006, p. 3055). Evidenced by this brief etymological analysis, the term 'resistance' evokes a cluster of relevant concepts. The two most prominent among the concepts readily implied by 'resistance' are 'power' and 'domination'. Malmvig, for instance, establishes a reciprocal cause and effect relationship between power and resistance: "power and resistance circulate together and are mutually constitutive" (Malmvig, 2016, p. 263). Ortner, on the other hand, observes a similar relationship between resistance and oppression, arguing that the latter refers to "a relatively unambiguous category, half of the seemingly simple binary, domination versus resistance" (Ortner 1995, p. 174). In line with the relational dynamics delineated above, resistance signifies an act of strategic noncompliance with power mechanisms that seek to change and/or corrupt one's preferred conditions of existence. In other words, resistance refers to the desire to "apprehend the conditions of one's subordination, to endure or withstand those conditions in everyday life, and to act with sufficient intention and purpose to negotiate power relations from below in order to rework them in a more favorable or emancipatory direction" (Chandra 2015, p. 565).

In line with these findings, it is necessary to re-evaluate the definition of non-violent resistance in order to question its ethical dimension. Non-violent resistance can be defined as dedication and determination to abstain from physical violence so that the action will remain within humanistic borders. Yet, non-violent resistance is used as a means of giving a clear message that the violent side is not as humane as the victim side. In this respect, non-violent resistance turns into a tool for psychological manipulation that serves the oppressed, because

by this, the oppressed plays with the oppressor's conscience and aims to achieve a psychological and ethical superiority.

This confusion stems from the limited perspective that tends to associate violent resistance with physical force or damage. Although the term 'violence' has mostly been associated with 'physical damage or abuse' inflicted on another being, its range of meaning is essentially wider to cover other aspects of life. This is evident in the drastic changes made in the definition of violence by The World Health Organization. In one of its earlier reports on the rates of violence around the world, WHO defined violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (WHO, 1996, n.pg) Later, it revised its definition by categorizing violence under three headings as self-directed violence, interpersonal violence and collective violence; and determined types of interpersonal violence with a list including, but not limited to, physical violence, emotional violence, psychological violence and sexual violence (WHO, 2002, n.pg). This classification covers a wider range of human actions and inevitably changes the definitions of crime on a constitutional level.

Conclusion: The Conceptual Aporia of Non-violent Resistance

Taking into consideration this broader definition of violence, the term 'non-violent resistance' appears to be aporetic in the way that it is a form of psychological violence inflicted on the oppressor by the oppressed. This definition also implies that any means of resistance to any form of violence can easily be viewed as a means of counter-violence directed towards the victimizer by the victim. As Smithey and Kurtz observe, "nonviolent activists do not simply absorb repression and accept it passively but anticipate it strategically as part of a sophisticated interaction, which they can shape" (Smithey and Kurtz, 2018, p. 6). In light of this observation, it seems problematic to associate non-violent resistance with passive resistance to which it is commonly taken to be tantamount. Instead, it transpires as an active strategy of manipulation adopted to achieve or demonstrate ethical superiority. In this manner, non-violent resistance implies a certain degree of psychological violence which aims to turn the power balance upside down in favour of the oppressed. Targeting the oppressor's conscience and/or ethical integrity, the oppressed actually resort to psychological violence, which makes the term 'non-violent resistance' paradoxical and aporetic.

As a consequence, a new concept must be created in order to cover all psychological and ethical implications of the practice of non-physical resistance. A potentially apt concept can be "psycho-ethical resistance". It is psychological because it targets the psychological composure, rather than the physical integrity, of the oppressed. As observed by Dudouet, "whereas classical strategic studies have a tendency to equate power with military capabilities, nonviolent struggle emphasises political and psychological factors of power, such as undermining the opponent's sources of authority, and increasing division in its base of support" (Dudouet, 2008, p. 15). It is ethical because the manipulation of the given situation is intended for dishonouring the oppressor by demonstrating his violation of universal ethical codes and principles. May draws attention to the ethical dimension of non-violent resistance as follows:

> In certain nonviolent struggles, the oppression of the adversary reacts back against him or her or them, making others and then themselves consider their position in a different moral light from the one they had previously seen themselves under. [It] turns the ethical tables on an adversary, so that what had once appeared as justified actions or policies turns out to be an unjustified assault upon the dignity of those who resist them (May, 2015, p. 163).

Through their refusal to resort to physical violence in the face of physical violence, non-violent resisters bring forward the question of human dignity and thus urge the oppressors to change their course of violent action. Consequently, the concept "psycho-ethical resistance" not only emphasises the non-physical nature of this specific form of struggle, it also complies with the modern definitions of violence that encapsulate a wider range of offensive human actions on physical, emotional and psychological levels.

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