

VIOLENCE, NONVIOLENCE, AND DEFINITIONS:
A DILEMMA FOR PEACE STUDIES

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Defining “violence” and “nonviolence” is less simple than one might think. In peace studies, broad definitions allowing for structural and psychological violence are common. Yet such definitions pose surprising problems when we want to contrast violent political responses from nonviolent ones, as is required if we wish to argue for the moral preferability of nonviolent strategies. Perversely, some standard nonviolent approaches turn out to be violent after all, if one uses broad definitions of “violence.” After working through representative accounts by Johan Galtung, Robert Paul Wolff, and Robert Holmes, I suggest a return to a narrower definition in which violence requires the application of physical force. We may find in nonviolence the potential for a deliberate and autonomous human response, morally favouring nonviolent strategies.

In a recent work, *A Force More Powerful*, authors Jack DuVall and Peter Ackerman offer a history of some successes of nonviolent “people power” in the twentieth century. According to Ackerman and Duvall, there is such a thing as nonviolent force, which is a display of conviction and withdrawal of cooperation: “it works by identifying an opponent’s vulnerabilities and taking away his ability to maintain control.”¹

A mass nonviolent movement can force a favorable outcome in one of three ways: by coercing a ruler to surrender power or leave; by inducing a regime to compromise and make concessions; or by converting the regime’s view of the conflict, so that it believes it should no longer dictate the results.²

The following fundamental presumptions behind this account need further exploration: