

# POLIS

REVISTĂ DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE

Volum IV, Nr. 3 (13), Serie nouă, iunie-august 2016



## Concepts and values about nonviolence

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## CONCEPTS AND VALUES ABOUT NONVIOLENCE. A MULTIDISCIPLINARY DEBATE

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### Human relations in a nonviolent perspective between “openess to thou” and creative management of conflicts

Gabriella FALCICCHIO

**Abstract.** *The nonviolent perspective radically modifies the relations between human beings and among other living creatures. The non – destructive and openness principle leads to see in the other a “you” that, even during interpersonal or social conflicts, does not become an enemy, but must still be considered akin, close, recognizable as human, capable of doing good. This vision changes the quality of conflicts which are not denied or avoided and therefore do not decrease. On the contrary, they increase because a positive dynamic of relation transformation is established.*

**Keywords:** *nonviolence, relations, conflicts.*

*Nonviolence is “an empowerment of the you, and of the interest in so that the other lives, develops and is as if they are generated by our inner world, the joy arising from the existence of another human being, being radically passionate”<sup>1</sup>.*

When Aldo Capitini (Perugia, 1899-1968) chose nonviolence, he was a young man of a modest family who actually had been in favour of World War I.

He represents the reference point of the Italian nonviolent movement and thought. He was born in the family of the Perugia belltower custodian. He commenced technical studies but after achieving his diploma he chooses to pursue classical studies which will bring him to become secretary of the Normale School in Pisa.

As a teenager he abandoned his enthusiasm for nationalism in face of the tragedy of the First World War and he increases the heritage of Saint

Francis of Assisi, Giuseppe Mazzini, Immanuel Kant and Gandhi founding an original way of thinking never detached from the daily anti-fascist action first and from the opposition to whatever war and violence later.

Tireless activist, he starts dozens of experiences some of them still active such as the Nonviolent Movement, the Italian Vegetarian Society, the March for Peace and the Brotherhood of Peoples. He meets and joins the intellectuals who lived in those two thirds of the century spreading the Italian culture of those years with his "persuasion", even if because of his critical ideas and his open dissent his thoughts have been marginalized and today not very well known to younger generations<sup>2</sup>.

In the violent context of Italian fascism, Capitini is an active anti-fascist either politically and socially (he got arrested twice and police kept him under surveillance for his entire life even after the end of fascism). He is also active as a thinker, a mentor and a pedagogue. Since the "conversion" years, he originates a deeply innovative view at a philosophical and religious level.

His thoughts start from the knowledge of Gandhi which he processes and develops in a practical and very original theory. The theory presents itself as "life to be lived" which out of the intimate experience does not unfold its deep meanings.

At the heart of this ever living thought her is the compresence of the living and the dead and the initial question of the "religious problem of

finding a place for the ill, the worn out, and he who activist society throws out as something that is unproductive and without use"<sup>3</sup>.

If I make this question my own, commencing an internal process of intimate conversion, of metanoia, I realize that my gaze upon the world is modified. Reality is limited (by moral evil, by illness, by death) which I experience too. But if I open myself to the "you" of the other, I realize that the other continuously gives me something precious. Actually, they were giving it to me before I was conscious, and this adds their existence's joy to my life.

This act of opening allows me to acquire the deep awareness that, while I say "you", I am also saying "thank you" for the gift I continuously receive from you. My openness, moved by a "passionate awareness of finiteness"<sup>4</sup> becomes an "infinite opening of the soul"<sup>5</sup> in a movement of restitution that will expand upon everyone.

The opening, for its very nature, cannot be but infinite and directed towards all the "yous", those that Capitini will call the "you-Yous" (il tu-Tutti), in other words all the beings that were born including those who are now dead, because everyone, no one excluded, cooperate to the choral creation of value, in other words, of the good that spreads onto everyone.

The co-presence happens in this cooperation, in this "chirality" that is impossible to ascertain (i.e. to fulfill, to deeply live as true) out the openness, in other words, out of the

emotional and ethical act of loving opening to the "you".

More, the co-presence happens on a double level: as a chance that it happens today with a single opening act and as an eschatology. With the loving openness the co-presence happens right now and as it becomes reality, it commences a long term process. We would say today that it feeds on infinite acts of openness and on the chorality of such acts up to a point in which we can imagine a "hopeful tomorrow" in which the co-presence will be perfect, full, complete.

Capitini calls that tomorrow "everyone's reality" (realità di Tutti) or "reality rid" (realità liberata) of limit as opposed to the limited reality, as it is today, or as "celebration" (festa). The celebration is the fulfillment of what can be already lived today with nonviolence.

The context in which Aldo Capitini writes sees the birth and the evolution of fascism first and then of the World War II and of the post war era. A dramatic period. His position does not evolve into a sweetened and candid vision. Instead it is dramatically aware of how difficult it is to achieve nonviolence. More, Capitini warns that who starts walking on this path should know that they will not have a peaceful life:

Nonviolence today is not the antithesis and symmetrical opposite of war. Here everything is untouched. Nonviolence is war too, or put it better, a continuous struggle against surrounding circumstances, the existing

laws, other people's and one own's habits, against one's soul and subconscious, against one's dreams which are full of fear and desperate violence together. Nonviolence means to be ready to gaze the chaos around, social disorder, the evil's prevarication. It means to be ready to face a harrowing situation<sup>6</sup>.

The existential condition of a "friend of nonviolence" is tragically and in a certain way, doomed. But it certainly is a condition as far as possible from despair because the core on which action is based is "persuasion".

To look at the chaos around, social disorder, evil's prevarication and to distinguish clearly the chaos inside one's interiority requires a movement towards the world and against the limits of the world. This brings to engage an eternal battle. If there was a glimmer of (fake) peace before, now peace ceases completely.

Capitini's subject is tormented by consciousness. They bring with them a tragedy no one knows it will ever have a solution. But their feeling is opposite of resignation. It becomes dissatisfaction and revolt, tireless action to bring the world to be worth the liberation.

At the core of the action there is Michaelstaedter's persuasion<sup>7</sup>. The intimate conviction having religious origins whose reality structure can intimately be modified by every single nonviolent act.

Nonviolent acts change reality. They change it so deeply that Aldo Capitini chose "transmutation" (*tra-*

*mutazione*) among all the possible words that may mean change. He does not hesitate to define themselves as “revolutionaries” because “nonviolence is the deepest tension point of the subversion of an inadequate society”<sup>8</sup>.

This is not about simple superficial reality transformations. It is about modifying world’s DNA, its apparently immutable laws, its “ontology” through the “atomic non-violent act”<sup>9</sup>.

We must ask ourselves: does Capitini put as the head of an almighty act, so arrogant to consider itself capable of changing Nature’s laws, of changing existence? No he does not. On the contrary, Capitini clearly highlights that the persuasion of the efficacy of the nonviolent action stands on its religious core. It is not a product of the *homo faber* but of the *homo religiosus*.

Here the intimate connection between nonviolence as *aimsha* and *satyagraha* is explained. Gandhi, as an induist, got in contact with the concept of *aimsha* because of his mostly maternal spiritual education. *Aimsha* is the nonviolent attitude which is the foundation of the interior life, linchpin of the spiritual *metanoia*.

Actually, Gandhi thought about deepening this more interior path when he went back to India. While in South Africa, during the fights for the rights of Asian communities, he already started nonviolent action campaigns which were inspired to the English concepts of passive resistance and civil disobedience.

While trying to give a translation to these two concepts, on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1907 Gandhi publishes on the *Indian Opinion* a contest thought for children and teenagers who had to invent a word that caught the essence of the fight that was going on. Fulvio Cesare Manara clearly highlights that Gandhi himself did not think of a doctrine, a theory about this. There was the need to give an Indian name (in Hindi, Urdu or Gujarati) a still developing fighting method. The spirit of this fight was clear and it evolves differently compared to the concept developed in English (which was the language of the colonists). The heart of this method lies in the decision of not harming the opponent but to consciously choose for one’s own sorrow (accepting imprisonment, for example) in order to lead a fair fight. A few days later, Gandhi shares submitted proposals and he thinks about the word *sadagraha* which was suggested by his nephew Maganlal. *Sadagraha* means “resoluteness in / adhesion to a good cause”. Starting from *sadagraha*, Gandhi processed the historical word of the nonviolent movement, the *satyagraha*, usually translated as “the power of truth”.

The nonviolent action contains the power of truth but its “capitinian” trait of tireless shows up in a more accurate translation: “to persist in the truth”. Persist. A truly “oriental” concept (please forgive the coarseness of my adjective) of action which rejects the promethean activism moved by a blind faith in the

progress of humanity and believes, instead, in the power of the action rooted in one's consciousness and, therefore, into persuasion.

Reality is not the recipient of this action. Reality understood as impersonal, as a "thing". The recipients are the "yous", all the "yous", the "you-Yous". The transmutation of reality, its transformation towards liberation, does not happen with the action "onto what", but through the relation with the "yous".

Even conflicting relations are part of a new vision of relations if lived and led under the openness to the "you" and to the co-presence. For this reason we cannot overlook in this synthetic work to mention the co-presence. Not a theory, not a concept, but "life to be lived", eschatological horizon which recalls the fulfillment of time (the Kingdom of God for Christians, the newly found Eden) as well as a completely achievable reality in every single act because:

The nonviolent act is singularly apt to bring out and immediately from the usual natural and social dimensions, to add to the roots of this reality another reality, immediately and without a utopian expectation<sup>10</sup>.

The relationship that arises from the nonviolent framework introduces the distinction between "opponent" and "enemy" within the conflict. The fight is nonviolent because it realizes both with the purpose and the medium the founding principle of minimizing everyone's suffering,

opponent's suffering included. The relationship is inspired by the principle according to which it is just to fight to reduce and to eliminate the suffering of all the people that endure violence at many levels and fulfills the fight by methods that do not differ too much from the purposes, in other words they are nonviolent in their being processual.

The enemy in this context ceases to exist. No one is an enemy anymore. I might still talk about "opponent" but I will not bring any destructive action upon them, not physical nor psychical, not total nor partial. I shall get closer, unarmed from whichever point of view. I will respect their religious festivities. I will not disturb their family's serenity. I will honour their kindness and I will cooperate when he will take steps towards me or in towards the group for which I fight. I will recognize their value because they were born to life as I was and most of all I will believe (this is the major religious qualities of nonviolence) in their ability to become conscious of what is good in their moral potential.

This is the purpose of the radical choice not to carry weapons of any kind: to be unarmed is everything but an act of cowardice (and we have nothing to do with the nonviolence of the cowards, Gandhi used to say; better the daring violence of the brave). It is not surrendering use of weapons because of fear but because there is a clear will to offer myself to my opponent in the purity of my intentions, letting them know that my

trust in their ethical ability to outdo themselves: "Well, I believe in you, I believe in the possibility that you will not hurt me, that you will not answer with evil to my being unarmed".

In this view, to "re-ethicalize the conflict"<sup>11</sup> means to merge it in the human game of relation possibilities up to the point that a "literacy teaching"<sup>12</sup> in conflicts management becomes necessary, especially in education. It was easier to illuminate this dark area with an idealistic harmony vision in the Italian context. Behind this fantasy lays educators' great inability to manage conflicts because they are not trained to fully live the conflict, to "stand in the conflict"<sup>13</sup> and to pass through it with the right slowness. It is preferable to let go or to be repressive. This blocks the always slow learning of very different relation and communication abilities.

Among the reasons of this spread ineptitude there is the difficulty of living the negative part of the relation and to recognize it as a complement to the relation itself. Conflicts bring sorrow, anger, frustration, powerlessness, sadness and depression. They let one discover the disturbing and unsettling aspects of our being because they have to do with what Gustav Jung calls "shadow". These dark aspects are still socially unacceptable if we consider that the spread daily pedagogy is based on two repressive imperatives: do not cry (do not express depressive emotions) and do not get angry (do not express aggressive emotions) that

merge in the imperative "do not fight". It is a hypocritical and self-righteous vision that keeps a part of the child secluded, it keeps the child from knowing it and from defusing it. This results in an apparent low infighting which hides the child's a high violence potential (violence towards others and towards themselves). Emotions that are not recognized are clockwork bombs.

These emotions, instead, should be legitimated in all of their tones to let the conflict deploy all of its transformation potential and to let it show itself as one of the most dynamic factors at all levels: psychic, interpersonal and social. The discriminating element consists not in the result but in the process and its quality. Nonviolence represents a qualitative addition to the relation which certainly aims to achieve satisfactory results for everyone but in order to reach them it improves the process.

Johan Galtung by going beyond the idealization embedded in the expression "conflict solution" introduces the idea of "transcending" conflicts introducing the Transcend method<sup>14</sup>. Conflicts cannot be solved so we go back to the starting point: nothing happened. They introduce a perturbation in the relation game which modifies and demands the insertion of new elements in the game. To not introduce them means blocking out the narration and to close in a safe negative emotions which might become explosive material and detonate.