

People Power

People Power: Fifty Peacemakers and Their Communities

Michael True

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There is a certain redundancy in the claim that a book detailing the lives of various individuals and groups dedicated to peace, social justice, and nonviolent social change is timely. Given that the history of humanity is indelibly scarred by wars, inequalities, and injustices, when would a book about courageous individuals and groups, unfailingly opposed to the models and practices which produce these scars, not be timely? We need not look to the past for evidence of the ravages of violence and injustice because some of the most appalling examples are occurring today. The actions of Islamic extremists on September 11, 2001, the U.S. war in Iraq, human rights abuses, and the rampant poverty in an age of stunning wealth are a mere sampling of recent failures in the search for global peace and justice. Within this brutal landscape of violence and injustice, Michael True offers a series of portraits of fifty peacemakers who illuminate not only the history of, but also the possibility for, nonviolent civil disobedience, peacebuilding, social change, and social justice. Undoubtedly, the task of building peace through nonviolence faces “overwhelming odds” (2), but it is just this resistance which makes True’s offering so compelling, timely, and necessary.

True is a committed researcher, lecturer, scholar, and activist in the movement for global peace and nonviolence. He has authored several books in this field, including *Justice Seekers, Peace Makers: 32 Portraits in Courage* (1985) and *To Construct Peace: 30 More Justice Seekers, Peace Makers* (1992). Expanding upon these previous works, True’s *People Power* introduces the reader to activists committed to social change through nonviolent resistance. The portraits True produces range from luminaries such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi, to academics such as Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, to labor organizers such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta to ““ordinary”” (39) citizens such as Rosa Parks, all of whom are, in their own way, “responsible for momentous changes in human events” (117).

For those readers unfamiliar with nonviolent movements for peace and social justice, these portraits, composed of brief descriptions of the historical and political context in which the individual or group made their respective contributions, could be off-putting. Although each portrait ends with various recommendations for further research and study, the brevity of the portraits often results in a cursory treatment of the contributions of these peacemakers. In turn, this cursory treatment produces a lack of continuity from one portrait to the next. For example, the first portrait recounts the efforts of the Young Catholic Workers to alleviate poverty and hunger in the U.S. This is followed by Stephen Biko's struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa. The relationship between the two is nearly impossible to discern because the historical continuity and the theoretical and practical milestones of the nonviolent movement are not immediately revealed. This failure leaves the reader mystified, backtracking through the book in search of the organizing principle of the portraits.

Although the use of the portrait as a stylistic technique is initially frustrating, the patient reader is eventually rewarded. Rather than isolated histories of individuals and movements committed to peace and social justice, by the end of the book, the portraits coalesce into a patchwork quilt depicting various nonviolent political, religious, social, and economic responses to specific injustices over the past two centuries. In this way, the apparent disconnect between the Christian foundations of nonviolent resistance, non-religious labor movements associated with Marxist ideology, and the civil disobedience performed by feminists and academics is attenuated when the disparities between these various movements are viewed as a whole united by the over-arching theme of the pursuit of social justice through non-violent means. However, True's portraits are more than a mere stylistic approach to explaining the nonviolent movement.

While the historical and theoretical foundations are important and lend themselves to further scholarship and research, nonviolent resistance is a dynamic process practiced throughout the world in different ways that do not necessarily follow a logical progression or share a common historical foundation. True's portraits mirror this non-linear, dynamic process and challenge and inspire those of us interested in peacebuilding and social justice to move beyond contemplation towards action. Most simply, nonviolent resistance cannot thrive as a mere intellectual endeavor. Rather, it is an alternative model aimed at constructing "cultures of peace" (2) through personal courage and sacrifice. Ironically, *People Power's* portraits show that non-violent resistance is not something one learns from a book; instead, it is

something practiced, risked, and waged by committed individuals. Understood in this way, it is clear why True's portrait of Thoreau, a founding father of civil disobedience, includes a quote from his criticism of quietism in the face of injustice which states, "even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. ... it is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail" (208). True's portraits teach us that the fundamental tenet of nonviolent resistance is that we must risk our own personal freedoms to ensure freedoms for all.

In a world marred by religious violence, it is revealing that nonviolent resistance also has its roots in the Christian religious tradition. Accordingly, it is not surprising that a majority of the portraits in the book are of Christians who draw upon these principles to guide their work. Undoubtedly, this may serve as an anodyne to anyone distressed by violence committed in the name of religion, and, in this context, *People Power* is indispensable for anyone interested in conflict resolution, peace studies, and social justice. By contrast, the book's major shortcoming is that it only provides a small sampling of the contributions of non-Christian religious groups and individuals committed to nonviolence. Specifically, given the current political climate, True's work fails to respond to the urgent need to dispel the characterization of Islam as a homogenous and static practice and religion which is and always has been violent. Although the theory and practice of nonviolence is strongest in Christianity, it is present, in some form, in all the world's major religions. True could have demonstrated this by including Islamic individuals and movements committed to nonviolence; it is both perplexing and disappointing that he did not. There is little doubt that religious nonviolent traditions can and must play a leading role in the elimination of war and injustice; however, in order for this potential to be realized, the pacifist traditions associated with *all* religions must be further researched and publicized in order to intrigue and inspire believers of all faiths.

Book Reviewed by:

Jeffrey Epstein, American University