

**Tuesday Nov 29, 2011
17:00 – 19:00**

Dr. Iain Attack

International Peace Studies / ISE
Trinity College Dublin

Ethics and Power in Nonviolent Political Action

The methods of nonviolent political action, civil resistance or “people power” are being employed increasingly as alternatives to political violence when constitutional or democratic institutions have failed or have been severely curtailed. Recent examples of political change achieved through nonviolent action or civil resistance include the “Arab spring” (especially regime change in Tunisia and Egypt), the so-called “colour revolutions” in countries such as Georgia and the Ukraine, and the end of Communist Party rule in the countries of eastern and central Europe. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King pioneered the use of nonviolent political action in the twentieth century, and Gene Sharp subsequently developed a theory of strategic nonviolence to help explain its political effectiveness.

This paper begins with the conventional distinction between principled and pragmatic approaches to nonviolence. Principled nonviolence views nonviolence as having intrinsic value as an ethical principle. This view is often derived from broader theological or cosmological perspectives. It is associated with Gandhi’s views on *ahimsa* (non-harm) or King’s understanding of *agape* and the beloved community, for example.

Pragmatic nonviolence, on the other hand, focuses on the instrumental value of nonviolent political action, or its effectiveness in achieving specific political objectives, such as democratic reforms or the protection of human rights. The central concern of pragmatic nonviolence is with nonviolent action or civil resistance as an expression of political power. The irony is that such civil resistance or “people

power” operates within the constraints of the liberal democratic state, which depends on forms of institutionalised political violence for both domestic control (police and prisons) and external security (the military).

This paper explores a third, transformative, approach to nonviolence, which uses the insights into political power associated with pragmatic nonviolence to achieve a more profound social transformation through which the values associated with principled nonviolence (*ahimsa*, the beloved community) can be realised. Both the core ethical values (peace and nonviolence) and the understanding of political power (cooperative and non-hierarchical) associated with nonviolent political action suggest characteristics of this new social order.



Dr Iain Attack is assistant professor of International Peace Studies at the Irish School of Ecumenics. His publications include *The Ethics of Peace and War* and *Nonviolence in Political Theory* (forthcoming).

Venue: Trinity College Dublin:
Long Room Hub, Lecture Theatre

Booking and Information: ressec@tcd.ie

Ethics and Political Engagement Focus