

**Article: “Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa”**  
**Author: Gay W. Seidman**  
**Issue: Jun. 2000**  
**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***



***This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.***

---

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any of APSA's journals, please go to the website of our publisher Cambridge University Press (<http://journals.cambridge.org>).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. For permissions for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at [permissions@cup.org](mailto:permissions@cup.org).

# Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa

In 1992, while South Africa's political leaders were stalemated in protracted negotiations to end the system of white supremacy known as apartheid, a group of anti-apartheid activists decided to challenge the government's control through nonviolent demonstrations. Drawing inspiration from the popular mobilizations then sweeping Eastern Europe, they called on volunteers from all over South Africa to meet at a stadium in Bisho, a small town in an area controlled by conservative black officials. Facing large crowds, the stadium guards panicked and began firing on the unarmed demonstrators. Twenty-eight demonstrators were killed and more than 200 were wounded, most shot in the back as they fled. The episode drew widespread criticism. But who was

blamed, by black anti-apartheid activists and white conservatives alike? Instead of pointing fingers at the guards who fired guns and the officials who gave out live ammunition, most South Africans blamed the activist who led the

crowd. In the context of South Africa's history of violent repression, the decision to place volunteers in the line of fire was widely viewed as irresponsible, perhaps murderous (Sparks 1994, 149-51; Waldmeir 1997, 208).

It is ironic, perhaps, that South Africa does not fit easily into discussions of nonviolence and civil disobedience. After all, South Africa is the place where the immigrant Indian lawyer Mohandas Gandhi first developed his ideas of passive resistance in 1913. Just over half a century later, South Africa became an international symbol of reconciliation as President Mandela led the efforts to construct a new democracy in that country. Surely, South Africa's struggle against apartheid—a struggle which was primarily nonviolent, despite countless dire predictions that apartheid's racist violence would inevitably produce a bloody backlash against whites—should

stand as a monument to the power of nonviolent strategies against injustice?

Yet the history of nonviolence in South Africa is a complicated one and telling it requires rethinking the hidden assumptions and categories that run through discussions of nonviolent strategies. Developing a historically-nuanced picture of South Africa's struggle against white supremacy, I argue, requires examining carefully the assumptions that proponents of nonviolent resistance generally make about the character of authoritarian rule, and about the character of communities suffering under injustice. Such a picture forces analysts to distinguish more clearly between passive resistance and popular mobilization; it also prompts a reconsideration of the distinction between nonviolent and violent struggle, both in terms of the individuals and organizations who engage in each and in terms of the extent to which it is possible to clearly distinguish between the moral logics of their strategies and tactics.

First, and perhaps most importantly, attempts to use passive resistance in South Africa demonstrate how deeply such strategies rely on the oppressor's response—and illustrate the limits of such a strategy when the oppressor rejects universalist principles. In India and in the American South, both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. asked their antagonists to live up to the universalist moral principles they generally espoused: Indian nationalists referred to Britain's commitment to the Atlantic Charter while American civil rights activists asked only to be treated as full citizens, as the American constitution promised.

But in South Africa in the 1950s, proponents of civil disobedience came to believe that South Africa might be different. The apartheid government came to power in 1948, through an election basically restricted to the 20% of South Africans legally classified as "white." It was explicitly committed to maintaining white domination. Far from promising democratic citizenship to the 80% of South Africans who were not

by  
**Gay W. Seidman,**  
University of Wisconsin,  
Madison

racially classified white, the government considered them subjects, refusing to recognize their claims to political rights or inclusion. From 1948, South Africa's government intensified segregationist policies, backing white supremacy up with draconian security legislation. Individuals' racial classification legally determined where they could live, what schools they could attend, what jobs they could hold, even who they could marry. South African society was redesigned to ensure, as a major architect of the system put it, that

"natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them" (H.F. Verwoerd, quoted in Christie 1985, 12).

In response, anti-apartheid activists who hoped to establish a more inclusive democracy<sup>1</sup> sought to imitate Gandhi's success in India. In 1952, they embarked on a national Defiance Campaign. Thousands of volunteers refused to obey segregationist rules at bus stops, train stations, post offices, and so on, generally in an orderly and peaceful manner. In terms of mass mobilization, the campaign was a huge success. Eight thousand people were arrested between June and November 1952, and popular enthusiasm for the campaign swelled the membership of the African National Congress (ANC) from about 7000 to about 100,000. In terms of political achievement, however, the campaign was a dismal failure. The government made no concessions and took firm steps to crush the campaign. Thousands of volunteers were jailed; when jails grew overcrowded, the government rushed through new laws allowing judges to sentence resisters to floggings as well as three-year jail terms. Meetings were outlawed and leaders were placed under house arrest. Drawing on the language of the Cold War, the government redefined resistance to racial segregation as "communism" and then charged the campaign's leaders with treason. Eventually, repression disorganized resistance and immobilized the campaign (Kuper [1957] 1971; Lodge 1983, 33-66; Mandela 1994, 176-227).

Over the next decade, nonviolent actions against apartheid—bus boycotts, demonstrations, petitions, pass-burning campaigns—provoked violent government reaction. In 1960, 69 people were killed and 178 wounded, shot in the back as they tried to run from a police attack during an anti-pass law demonstration. The "Sharpeville massacre" came to symbolize the government's refusal to permit any kind of peaceful protest. In an earlier era, South African prime minister Jan Smuts had felt morally compelled to release Gandhi

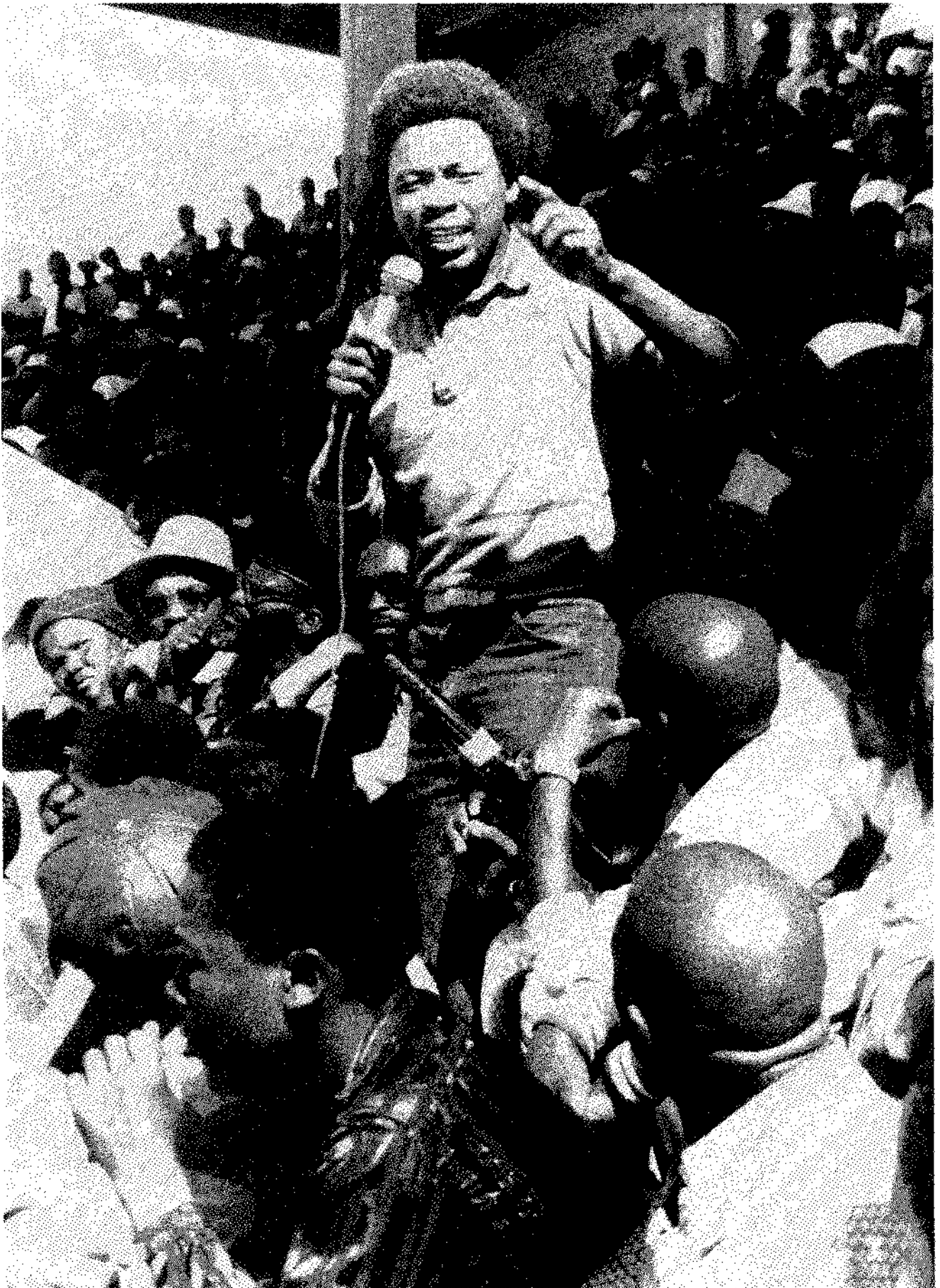
## South Africa's struggle against apartheid—a struggle which was primarily nonviolent . . . should stand as a monument to the power of nonviolent strategies against injustice.

from jail. After 1948, however, South Africa's leaders explicitly rejected the possibility that the country's black majority could ever attain equality. It seemed unlikely, a prominent South African supporter of nonviolent strategies sadly concluded, that apartheid's enforcers could "be converted by extreme suffering when they are so strongly confirmed in the ideologies of white domination" (Kuper 1971, 94).

Of course, nonviolent resisters often appeal to international audiences as well as to domestic ones. Faced with an intransigent regime at home, South Africans looked beyond their borders for help. From the early 1960s, people who hoped to use nonviolent tactics to overthrow apartheid repeatedly appealed for international economic sanctions, arguing that South Africans would have no choice but to take up arms unless political and economic pressure from the outside helped to undermine the powerful and repressive apartheid state. But again, South Africa demonstrates the extent to which the power of moral appeals depends at least partly on the audience. In India and in the American South, London and Washington each sought to avoid international embarrassment by intervening on the side of resisters to overcome the intransigence of local colonial officials, states' rights advocates, and white elites. But, by the mid-1960s, no Western power had direct colonial or federal links to Pretoria; consequently, no western power appeared to feel much moral responsibility for ending apartheid, and appeals for sanctions had little real impact for another 25 years.

Between 1960 and 1985, Britain and the United States routinely vetoed United Nations resolutions that would have imposed sanctions on South Africa (with the exception of a loophole-riddled arms embargo passed in 1976). In 1961, ANC president Albert Luthuli received the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts at social change; in 1985, when South African Bishop Desmond Tutu won the same Peace Prize, Tutu was still echoing Luthuli's appeals for international pressure as a way to prevent violence. Their vision proved accurate. As soon as the European Community and America finally imposed mild economic sanctions in the mid-1980s, and especially after international banks refused to extend loans, the impact was indeed what sanctions advocates had long predicted. The threat of economic stagnation and isolation quickly undermined white support for strict apartheid and helped create a climate in which negotiations became possible (Massie 1997; Price 1991).

But in the intervening decades, what should protesters have done when nonviolent actions provoked repression and appeals for outside intervention fell on deaf ears? And, what is the obligation of leaders to protect their supporters from serious physical danger when they know that peaceful protest may lead to their deaths? From the early 1960s, many South African



**South Africa.** Mkhoseli Jack speaks at a memorial service in Don Qege stadium, January 4, 1986. Photo by Eastern Providence Herald.

anti-apartheid activists believed they could no longer ask their followers to risk their lives in unarmed confrontation. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, the government arrested 20,000 political activists and banned political parties that demanded political rights for all South Africans. At that point, leaders of the main anti-apartheid parties concluded they had no choice but to establish armed wings, following prominent contemporary examples of nationalist struggles from China to Cuba to Kenya.

Despite the arrest in the early 1960s of most major anti-apartheid leaders—including Nelson Mandela, a popular political organizer who served as the first commander of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe—the ANC managed over the next 15 years to establish a network of cells and arms caches. By the late 1970s, Umkhonto we Sizwe could claim to have attained some real visibility (Davis 1987).<sup>2</sup> Again, however, the South Africa case forces historians to reexamine the categories that often underlie discussions of nonviolence. These discussions frequently proceed from the assumption that nonviolent activists hold a higher moral ground, while armed struggle sullies the morality of the cause (see, e.g., Smuts and Westcott 1991). In fact, that distinction prevented Amnesty International from adopting Nelson Mandela or any other ANC member as a prisoner of conscience, because the ANC was involved in armed struggle.<sup>3</sup> The fact that, even after 27 years in prison, Mandela apparently remained convinced of the morality of the original stance—repeatedly rejecting government offers to free him if he would renounce the ANC's armed struggle (Sparks 1994, 49)—underscores the difference in perspective.

South Africa's curious history suggests that categories like "violent" and "nonviolent" do not neatly fit a complicated reality and raises questions about the ease with which proponents of either broad category can claim sole proprietorship of the moral high ground. The South African armed struggle, especially as it was conducted by the ANC, followed unusually principled rules. From the early 1960s, South African guerrillas were supposed to avoid civilian targets and concentrate on sabotage and military attacks. In a deeply segregated society, it would have been easy to have killed whites: The existence of whites-only schools, movie theaters, and shopping centers meant that if white deaths were the only goal, potential targets could be found everywhere. Generally, however, ANC militants showed remarkable restraint. Only a handful of attacks in the last years of apartheid—often by "rogue" ANC guerrillas, cut off from their lines of communication or desperate over the level of repression—involved civilian deaths, both white and black. (Another handful of bloody attacks on white civilians, mainly during the protracted negotiations of the early 1990s, were carried

out by guerrillas claiming to be linked to the Pan-Africanist Congress [PAC], which had a more "spontaneist" view of armed struggle than the larger ANC.) For the most part, ANC guerrillas limited their targets to military installations and economic sabotage, including military camps, power plants, and transmission towers. While highly principled, the strategy was not particularly successful. By the late 1970s, the ANC had postponed indefinitely any real claim that it could bring down the South African government by force and began calling its attacks "armed propaganda" aimed at raising black South Africans' morale, rather than waging a full-scale war.

In fact, very few South Africans ever participated actively in the armed struggle, or were even touched by it directly. Although anti-apartheid activists continued using the rhetoric of armed struggle, most had concluded by the early 1980s that a guerrilla insurrection could not succeed in a highly urbanized, industrialized society against a well-equipped and sophisticated enemy army. Instead, most anti-apartheid activists put their energy into political organizing, bringing people together around local issues, and looking for ways to protest that would not provoke immediate repression. By the early 1960s, public protest had been effectively silenced; with leaders in jail and organizations outlawed, there was little open political discussion outside from university campuses, where students could at least discuss political issues in relative safety, and aside from protests by white moderates. But from the mid-1970s, anti-apartheid activists developed new tactics. With more than half of black South Africans living in urban areas and working in industrial settings, and as experienced activists began to be released from jail, activists

## **Black South Africans learned they could disrupt the smooth functioning of apartheid with boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations without exposing individual leaders to arrest, or provoking immediate police attacks.**

in the 1970s began to look at how black students could paralyze urban school systems, black workers could paralyze production, and black communities could demand better urban services.

Like poor people elsewhere, anti-apartheid activists discovered the power of disruption (see McAdam 1982). Black South Africans learned they could disrupt the smooth functioning of apartheid with boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations without exposing individual leaders to arrest, or provoking immediate police attacks. In 1973, a scattering of illegal wildcat strikes among black factory workers showed that some employers would rather negotiate than fire and replace

striking workers; by 1985, South Africa had one of the most militant labor movements in the world, and employers often begged police to release trade unionists from detention so they could have someone with whom to negotiate.

In 1976, high school students in Soweto, South Africa's largest township, protested against segregated inferior schools, provoking extraordinary police repression. That repression, in turn, sparked an urban uprising; by the late 1980s, black high schools and universities were regularly disrupted by student boycotts, to such an extent that employers and government officials expressed concern about future shortages of skilled workers. From the early 1980s, township activists began to organize community groups around local issues ranging from bus fares to high rents; by the mid-1980s, countless township "civic associations" organized rent and consumer boycotts, funerals for activists killed by police, and other forms of protest. In all these cases, activists focused on local issues. Underlying all the various demands and tactics, however, were common themes: political rights, democracy, and human dignity (Cobbett 1988; Marx 1991; Price 1991; Seidman 1994).

Still, even a careful observer of South Africa's anti-apartheid resistance will find it difficult to draw bright lines between violent and nonviolent strategies during the uprising of the 1980s. In part, this blurriness stems from the government's authoritarian response: Activists convicted of "furthering the aims of a banned organization" were routinely jailed under the principle that any support for democratic goals—even so mild an act as scraping "Free Nelson Mandela" on the side of an enamel mug—could be construed as support for armed struggle. Student activists, trade unionists, and community organizers were all detained without charge, tortured, and convicted for violations of ever-expanding security legislation.

But it must also be recognized that, just as security police insisted on blurring the line between different kinds of anti-apartheid resistance, most activists over the years viewed violent and nonviolent strategies as more intertwined and complementary than contradictory. Even anti-apartheid activists with a strong moral commitment to nonviolence generally avoided condemnation of those who had taken a different route.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the most visible organizational player in the armed struggle, the ANC, was regularly named by over half of black South Africans as the party they would vote for if allowed to vote; and at least some part of Nelson Mandela's extraordinary popularity stems from his early command of the ANC's armed wing. Symbols of the armed struggle—including the *toyitoyi*, a jogging dance that imitated the physical training of guerrilla camps, as well as the wooden guns frequently carried at nonviolent protests and the many songs and slogans which celebrated ANC guerrillas as heroes—pervaded anti-apartheid

protests, reflecting the respect most black activists granted to those engaged in armed struggle.<sup>5</sup>

The extent to which banned organizations helped coordinate mass protests in the 1980s remains unclear. Organizations like the ANC, the PAC, or the Communist Party were illegal, and "furthering the aims" carried a

## Even anti-apartheid activists with a strong moral commitment to nonviolence generally avoided condemnation of those who had taken a different route.

minimum five-year sentence. Understandably, activists involved in open protest organizations such as trade unions, students groups, or civic associations generally denied they had any links to or knowledge about those underground networks. To admit any affiliation with an illegal organization would have been to risk detention and torture, and would almost inevitably have led the government to outlaw the activists' otherwise-legal groups. Given South African repression, activists linked to the ANC felt absolutely no qualms about lying about their allegiances (V.K. Harare 1989, author's interview). But by the late 1980s, the truth was clear to any observer willing to see it: Although many South African activists were indeed truly disconnected from clandestine networks, and some may even have been honestly unaware of their colleagues' closer ties to the ANC, many "above-ground" activists were secretly linked to the ANC even while they participated openly in nonaligned groups like unions or community or student organizations. Before the categories "violent" and "nonviolent" can be more clearly separated, future historians will have to reexamine the relationships among the "internal" opposition, the ANC, and the Umkhonto we Sizwe, looking at how strategies were discussed and disseminated, at how funding and other resources were channeled by the exiled ANC to nonviolent civic associations or unions, and at how the ANC's armed wing often selected targets in order to bolster nonviolent campaigns of mass mobilization.

Finally, South Africa's history in the 1980s prompts some rather disconcerting questions about the moral logic of nonviolent mass mobilization, questions arising from the logic of mass mobilization in a context of systemic repression and violence which problematize the nonviolent character of South Africa's "peaceful" protests. Obviously, protestors cannot be blamed for the violent reaction of police and security forces (Zunes 1999). But what of township activists who used violent tactics both against symbols and supporters of apartheid and to persuade reluctant members of their own communities to join in mass mobilizations?

During the uprising of the mid-1980s, young South African activists routinely threw stones and bricks at police, burned cars, and destroyed buildings, but the

tactics they used to persuade township residents to join their protests could also be violent ones. The practice of “necklacing” suspected informers—that is, placing a burning tire around their necks and burning them alive—was widespread in South African townships by the mid-1980s, while other, less-visible kinds of community violence were perhaps even more prevalent. The Eastern Cape’s consumer boycotts, for example, clearly involved coercion. While most black South Africans probably supported the boycott’s goals, many were also terrified of young activists who believed they were enforcing a collective will when they forced black shoppers to pour their groceries out on the street or, in some drastic cases, to drink bottles of dish-soap or worse. In Alexandra township, or Soweto, or any of the black townships that repeatedly “stayed away” from work during the 1980s, most residents may have supported local community organizations’ goals, but they also knew that they could not ignore calls for mass action without risking serious physical harm. Similarly, by the mid-1980s, violence had become a regular feature of South African strikes. Trade union members regularly attacked and sometimes killed strikebreakers. In KwaZulu-Natal, in the context of fierce conflicts within communities and between organizations, the line between peaceful protest and violent struggle lost any real meaning by the late 1980s; respected activists were frequently implicated in actions they would later attribute to thugs, or *tsotsis*.

These episodes should not be seen as somehow tarnishing the moral claims of the anti-apartheid movement. Instead, they underscore the problems inherent in grading political protest against an absolutist scorecard on which violence and nonviolence are seen as pure and distinct categories. The strategy of disrupting apartheid from below required that nearly all black South Africans participate in campaigns entailing personal risk and daily difficulties. Efforts to initiate and extend such campaigns often provoked violent conflict between black South Africans who thought ending apartheid was worth any sacrifice, and those

who felt that, in the short term at least, they had more to lose than to gain. True, the regime itself frequently intensified the violence attending mass mobilization. Police provocateurs often initiated violence or provided guns for use by one group against another. Also, police repression tended to remove older, more moderate leaders from the scene. But while it is rhetorically possible to dismiss violent acts as the work of police provocateurs, as the overenthusiastic response of leaderless crowds, or as the influence of “criminal elements” on the fringes of the a broader movement, doing so requires turning a blind eye to the fact that such behavior was condoned by many participants. Coercive behavior may well be embedded in the sociological logic of a campaign of mass mobilization and disruption, making it harder to sustain moral purity than advocates of pure civil disobedience generally acknowledge.

In the year 2000, the Johannesburg jail that held Gandhi and Mandela was remodeled to serve as the site for South Africa’s newly-established constitutional court. In a fitting illustration of South Africa’s near-miraculous transformation, the building will house a court that seeks to interpret a democratically-designed constitution to protect the rights of all South Africans, black and white. But that transformation has not been an easy one. During 40 years of struggle against apartheid, facing a regime willing to use brutal force to sustain white supremacy, the apparently easy distinction between violent and nonviolent tactics, or between different moralities, was sometimes more blurred than it appears in the abstract. Rather than simplifying South Africa’s history—or, perhaps, the history of any movement for social change—scholars could more fruitfully acknowledge the complicated tensions that underlay social change. While mass mobilization may present a more complex picture in reality than the image offered in abstract discussions of nonviolent protest, perhaps acknowledging the underlying dynamics of social movements will allow a better appreciation of the challenges involved in the effort to build a peaceful, lasting democracy.

## Notes

1. Although a discussion of the ideologies of these activists is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that most anti-apartheid activists assumed that a democratic South Africa would be inclusive. Even those who espoused “black consciousness” as a philosophy generally sought to create a democracy that would include all South Africans, white as well as blacks, willing to live in a nonsegregated society (Fredrickson 1995; Gerhardt 1978). The African National Congress and its allies were explicitly committed to “non-racialism” and an inclusive vision.

2. The smaller Pan-Africanist Congress, which decided at the same time to take up armed struggle, was far less successful and its armed wing remained relatively invisible.

3. In the mid-1980s, largely in response to demands from its members around the world, Amnesty International (AI) agreed to adopt South Africans who were convicted of “pass” offenses—that is, people who were caught outside the areas designated for members of their racial category without the appropriate permits. However, AI never considered any prisoner convicted of belonging to the ANC to be a prisoner of conscience because of the organization’s involvement in armed struggle, even when the prisoner’s own activities had been limited to trade union activity,

student organizing, or other nonviolent forms of protest.

4. The most obvious exception to this generalization proves the rule. Gatsha Buthelezi, who accepted an appointment from Pretoria to serve as head of the bantustan assigned to Zulu-speaking Africans, was essentially isolated from the anti-apartheid movement from the mid-1970s, when he first opposed calls for international economic sanctions, and later when he denounced armed struggle. The sincerity of Buthelezi’s call for nonviolent tactics was regularly called into question by his explicit support for his organization’s violent attacks on anti-apartheid activists (Mare 1992). In contrast, Bishop Desmond Tutu, an anti-apartheid leader firmly committed to nonviolence, supported calls for international sanctions and refused to condemn the armed struggle, even while pleading with his fellow South Africans to seek nonviolent alternatives.

5. A parallel process occurred in white South African society, blurring the line between “civilian” and “military.” Faced with a constant threat of instability and overthrow, the government promoted a radical militarization of white society. White males were required to perform years of military service. In addition, white women and men were encouraged to join voluntary militias and to get weapons

training, while white teenagers were encouraged to spend their vacations in paramilitary training camps. The government subsidized arms production to such an extent that South Africa became the world's fifth largest arms producer; the government also stockpiled strategic fuels and minerals. From 1979, when the government

announced its plan to meet a "total onslaught" with a "total strategy," until the early 1990s, South Africa engaged in brutal wars in all its neighboring states, hoping that destabilization would prevent those countries from offering safe havens for anti-apartheid guerrillas (Cock and Nathan 1989).

## References

- Christie, Pam. 1985. *The Right to Learn: The Struggle for Education in South Africa*. Johannesburg: SACHED/Ravan.
- Cobbett, William, and Robin Cohen. 1988. *Popular Struggles in South Africa*. London: Currey.
- Cock, Jacklyn, and Laurie Nathan, eds. 1989. *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Davis, Stephen. 1987. *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Frederickson, G. 1995. *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gerhardt, Gail. 1978. *Black Power in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kuper, Leo. [1957] 1971. *Passive Resistance in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lodge, Tom. 1983. *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Mandela, Nelson. 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Mare, Gerry. 1992. *Born of Warrior Blood*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Marx, Anthony. 1991. *Lessons of Struggle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Massie, Robert. 1997. *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years*. New York: Doubleday.
- McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, Robert. 1991. *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa, 1975-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seidman, Gay. 1994. *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smuts, Dene, and Shauna Westcott, eds. 1991. *The Purple Shall Govern: A South African A to Z of Nonviolent Action*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press and the Center for Intergroup Studies.
- Sparks, Alistair. 1994. *Tomorrow is Another Country*. Johannesburg: Struik Books.
- Waldmeir, Patti. 1997. *Anatomy of a Miracle*. London: Penguin Books.
- Zunes, Stephen. 1999. "The Role of Nonviolent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37(1): 137-69.