

# Nonviolence in an Age of Political Catastrophe

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## Abstract

How might we develop a constructive notion of political nonviolence as a challenge to symbolic violence? Presenting the idea of political catastrophe as a constructed form of historical experience today, this chapter seeks to position this organization of understandings and dispositions within the complex of violence to which it offers a misleading and depoliticizing orientation. Here the citizen becomes a spectator and genuine political engagement falls away. After explaining how this form social appearance constitutes a kind of symbolic violence, the paper points to initiatives of social movements to argue for a notion of a constructive nonviolence that focuses on certain features of political agency: sensitivity, responsibility, and practical engagement.

## 1 Introduction

How we think about nonviolence is shaped by our sense of the extent and significance of the violence that functions in today's world. In this chapter, I proceed from the hypothesis that violence is more pervasive and important than usually acknowledged in public discussion and conventional analysis. Contemporary political language itself is both an instance and a symptom of this extensive violence: from injunctions from media politicians like Sarah Palin's to "reload", to the routine demonization of the president, and indeed of politics as such, we encounter not only violent imagery, but also refusal of the reciprocity that is at the heart of the transition from violence to political interaction. This occurs in the public culture of a society whose policies have a profoundly militarist commitment, including pursuit of long, costly, and seemingly intractable wars, the persisting campaign against terrorism, a complex global network of military bases and operations, and a massive commitment of public resources to the production of armaments. The language of domestic politics mirrors a global strategy that relies extensively on unprecedented destructive power. If it is uncontroversial to say that our politics is infused with violence, we still need to think in detail about how that operates if we have any hope of promoting an alternative.

The violence of political language may draw from the apparent incapacity of our institutions to respond to the conditions of scarcity and inequality that shape the immediate context of military violence. Public life seems also to have reached an impasse in the face of other outstanding problems that haunt society, including climate change, racial division, and deepening inequality. Perhaps it is not unrealistic to think that the resort to violence, even if often in the form of violent public language, becomes more likely as politics fails to resolve the conflicts that are inherent in seemingly intractable social problems.

My approach in this discussion is to trace some connections between politics and violence by discussing one of the forms that contemporary political experience has come to assume. I will speak of this as the experience of catastrophe. By way of my analysis of the kind of violence that operates in this context, I hope to move back to the theme of nonviolence, working from the assumption that thinking about nonviolence may begin from a diagnosis of existing violence. On the conception with which I will be working, nonviolence will be understood as a kind of social learning, in which the identification of violence goes with practical initiatives that create alternatives both in our institutions and the forms of agency that inhabit them.

I will conclude this chapter by responding to questions raised in the Call for Papers for the conference for which it was written. In particular, I will explore one sense in which war and peace issues intersect with environmental issues. We find this connection in the political form that I will be analyzing, that of what I will call the political catastrophe. On this basis, we can think about the organizers' questions about the successes and failures of the Obama Administration.

## 2 Recent Politics as a Series of Catastrophes

Let me begin by offering a preliminary notion of catastrophe as a form of political experience. At least since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there has been a series of dramatic crisis moments that have been experienced socially as catastrophes. In the present discussion, I will be referring to four events in particular: 9/11, the devastation of New Orleans associated with the hurricane Katrina, the Great Recession starting in 2008, and the Gulf Oil spill. Although these events are very different in specifics, the public experience of them displays striking similarities. As I draw out some similarities in the political responses to them, I will also argue that they have something else in common, namely that each of these can be understood as a complex of different kinds of violence. The respects in which the political form