

The Power of Moral Sanction

By Jay Taber

The power of moral sanction, as a penalty of conscience for violations of our sense of decency, based on a belief in the application of justice, has been essential to struggles for autonomy and dignity since the Middle Ages, and is, in my opinion, central to the struggle of rebuilding democratic society today. An examination, therefore, of the strengths and weaknesses of this tool of social change is warranted. This paper is my attempt to articulate the related aspects of leadership as demonstrated by the historical figures focused on in our readings and discussion. I begin with some general thoughts and impressions from our seminars, and proceed to particulars revolving around some of the figures examined.

Moral sanction, alone, may be insufficient to constrain political violence or official repression, but it can bring significant pressures to bear on public behavior as well as within institutions under the control or influence of civil society. Indeed, both reform and revolutionary movements, as well as all forms of resistance in fundamental conflict with tyrannical powers, rely on moral sanction as an essential component of warfare.

Resistance warfare may take different and multiple forms: war of position, based on a principle (i.e. boycotts); war of movement, uniting affinity interest groups (i.e. strikes); civil disobedience, to garner attention to an issue or recognition of the aggrieved; underground warfare, to subvert illegitimate authorities (i.e. sabotage); or open conflict, to challenge the police powers of these authorities (including riots and armed insurrection), but the degree of commitment by the oppressed participants, and the approbation of non-combatants and potential recruits, is largely determined by the ability of resistance leaders to articulate and disseminate the moral values at issue.

In this way, resisters gain not only attention, but also recognition of the validity of their grievances. At the same time, the moral prestige of the oppressive or repressive State is diminished, and opportunities to obtain concessions or to leverage discussion and dialogue are enhanced. The danger encountered at this fulcrum point is in allowing mediation of communication to divert attention from the revolutionary movement toward an often fraudulent negotiating process. Bad faith offers of conflict settlement by official parties are usually welcomed with open arms by observers and less committed allies. The psychological warfare, the war of ideas, and the war of maneuver are constant; those committed to and capable of seizing power must, thus, continue intelligence and self-defense activities in anticipation of future attack.

The strongest movements will, I believe, combine all forms of warfare, emphasizing the appropriate form at the appropriate time. Highly-principled charismatic leaders, such as Gandhi may, unfortunately, become dismayed by movement shortcomings, but this is the unavoidable paradox of leadership: visionaries are essential to inspiring altruistic action, yet the visions are always betrayed; the quest for justice is what motivates the multitudes, but a better deal that can be built on is sometimes all that can be gained.

Chief Joseph came to understand these aspects of the march of human folly, accepting his responsibility toward the survival of his people in order to hope for better times. A much younger and less socially burdened Joan of Arc did not.

Conflicts with authority and struggles for autonomy take many forms: arguing for temperance in the application of justice, as in the case of Antigone; maneuvering for

institutional reform, as in the case of St. Teresa D'Avila; withdrawal of allegiance and the institution of new government, as with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress; declaring war without negotiation or possibility of truce, as in the case of Joan of Arc; or conditioning one's assent to truce, subsequent to warfare over irresolvable differences, as in the case of Chief Joseph. Indeed, a single movement of liberation may include all of these forms as it matures and evolves; witness Mandela and the African National Congress.

The patterns of cultural preference, consciously articulated as values, provide continuity and grounding in times of social disintegration, turmoil, and transition. The core values expressed in acts of moral sanction, even if they at times motivate righteously indignant believers to commit violence, are ultimately the foundation on which a new society can reintegrate around altered relationships of the old. As such, communication of these values leads to the empowering acts of individuals that develop commitment to a process of transformation they believe will lead to greater fulfillment of these values. Faith in the possibility of justice, despite the evidence of history, is sometimes all that prevents the complete annihilation of human dignity—hence the ethical imperative to fight for lost causes.

Core values of a society, when superseded by false values or fraudulent representations of true ones, occupy the collective subconscious and create a cognitive dissonance that prepares a population to accept expressions of dissent that reaffirm their most deeply held beliefs. To stir these thoughts and compete with official obfuscation and spectacle, resistance leaders must be selected who can not only access these depths, but who also have organic credentials to speak with authority on the topic.

Paving the way for leadership today, networked as well as charismatic, thus requires the subversion of establishment media by the uncensored, unmediated, exchange of news and information, combining emerging technologies and underground networks to inform and engage people through existing social centers such as churches and schools. In this way, leadership can emerge, be exercised, and find expression in multiple venues, while retaining a base of operations, funding, and social support with potential for mobilization.

Making room for the spirit of reflective, conscious, self-disciplined thought that leads to political engagement is a leadership task that combines both facilitative as well as inspirational talents, and may not be found in a single individual; hence, the advantage of networked, shared, cooperative leadership that has the diversity of experience and perspective to develop activities and actions that serve to enact the collective vision, that in turn catalyze movements in quest of truth, liberation, and reconciliation .

Leaving room for the intuitive in the arts and sciences of leadership, leaders are well-advised to methodically prepare themselves, their followers, and their allies for the eventuality of attack and counter-attack. The degree of commitment and courage among their supporters will vary greatly, ebbing and flowing with the tumultuous circumstances of conflict. Oppressive regimes and ideologues are well-versed in the use of fear, hate, and revenge as a formula for undermining and destroying opposition; terrorism is used because it works.

Fear blocks intelligence and leads people to seek reassurance from sometimes dangerous authorities; isolation of this social pathogen, inoculation of those most susceptible to official rhetoric, and education of those looking for certainty, are essential programs of revolutionary movements. Integration of the nodes of resistance, open

dialogue and discussion, as well as courageous denunciation and defiance of transgressions of societal norms, are all requisites of the public health model of social change. In the end, all reform and revolution comes down to a war of ideas. Networking amongst the nodes builds a sense of solidarity based on ideas, and allows groups to develop more effective strategies based on the experience of other people similarly engaged.

Dissent without resistance, it should be noted, is a form of consent. If official acts offend our sense of decency, moral sanction must be enacted, and justice applied through punishment and restitution, or one's words have no meaning but to flatter one's sense of piety. Autonomy, human dignity, integrity, and justice cannot be obtained without accountability. Thus there are distinct limits to a strategy of moral theatrics in containing such things as the neurosis of militarism and the associated pathogen of aggression; at some point, risks must be taken to curtail systematic global violence. The problems of terrorism, foreign and domestic, lay and official, I would observe, promise to get worse until the popular desire to be either righteous or reassured is surpassed by a popular desire to be informed and effective; faith in piety or patriarchy is not conducive to personal growth. Reflective analysis is the antidote to doctrinaire strategy and tactics.

Examples of moral resistance to injustice in the last millennium, and the associated lessons of leadership, are now examined for insights and essential truths we will need in order to keep our bearings in the next.

For Mahatma Gandhi, like other great souls, the act of resistance was a reclamation of the soul of his community—the Indian people. In fact, he was chosen to lead, by his mentors and advisors, because of his spirit, patience, and powers of analysis in communicating the radical, indigenous vision of transformation—an autonomous unified sub-continent achieved through the use of moral sanction, and fought by a war of position and movement, until the colonial power itself was transformed. Gandhi's approach of converting, as opposed to annihilating, one's opponent, allows for a more permanent reconciliation. The practicality of this approach lies, in my view, in simultaneously converting conscientious officials, as well as the individuals and institutions of civil society that hold influence over them.

This vision of transformation, articulated by Tagore, and enacted by Gandhi, was thus able to seize the initiative in proclaiming a war of ideas, rather than a war of individuals—a conflict in which ordinary individuals could both participate in a national movement as well as grow in self-worth. With the help of international media, that was yet to become amoral, the injustice was made visible to the world, and the power of moral sanction was exercised.

Key to Gandhi's success in mobilizing world opinion and the Indian people, were his notion of ripeness of one's issue and the discipline of preparation, essential tools of public interest litigation in which he had initially engaged in South Africa. He realized that people needed time to absorb new ideas, and to develop convictions based on these ideas, before they could be effectively mobilized. From his experience in the judicial system, he also knew the importance of honoring the positions of all parties in a dispute as a means of constructing consent to the resolution reached. A significant aspect of Gandhi's philosophy, rare in the cynical populism of America as we enter the era of demise of our empire, is his implicit trust in human nature to want to do what is morally right once the truth is revealed. What today seems naïve is, I propose, misunderstood;

Gandhi was referring to the human nature of people living and acting in harmony with their beliefs—not to the perverted acts of the desperate, of sociopaths, or of neurotics.

Britain and Europe, as such, much like the United States and its client states today, lost their formal moral prestige, however shallow, and were for a time seen realistically--as upholders of race supremacy and exploiters of other peoples.

Moral sanction, in the case of St. Joan, took more time to fully play out. Preparing the way for those who would follow, she, consciously or not, initiated the removal of ideological barriers to liberation.

While we tend to focus on heroes at the moments of final victory, the development of moral sanction often evolves over several generations: witness the progression of acknowledgment and understanding by the dominant society of the suasions of civil rights protagonists from Frederick Douglass through Martin Luther King. And while it is true that preparing new leaders and battling societal mythology takes many years, we must recognize the role of impatient, sometimes martyred leaders, such as St. Joan, in helping to define and make visible the social forces in conflict.

In the case of modern conflict tactics, like civil disobedience and civil resistance (sometimes referred to as direct action), repeated exposure to inappropriate or severe official reaction helps to make patterns of oppression recognizable. Repression and censorship only serve to reinforce the sense of betrayal felt as observers first become aware or conscious of a particular injustice. It is at this point that individuals become potential recruits to a community of socially-based participants engaged in experimenting with the tools of moral sanction.

The observation that superior wits find it hard to understand the fury roused by their exposures of stupidity, and consequently fail to adequately appreciate the fear they inspire, can lead to tragic failure in a most crucial role of leadership--to anticipate. Ironically, St. Joan's enormous self-confidence and lack of caution or scholarship in battling both foreigners and moral authorities, served to exacerbate tensions and to accelerate the process of societal evolution, ruthlessly dramatized by her explosive violence.

Colonialism takes away a subdued people's place of communal interaction; this removal of meeting places destroys their cohesion. As the first step in the process of disenfranchisement, the erosion of the land base of an enemy leads to the severing of their philosophical roots and the abolishment of orally conveyed cultural lessons that demoralizes the vanquished and prepares them for conversion to the dominant mentality. In the wake of such callous brutality, atrocities are perhaps inevitable. Subsequent attempts to reclaim the souls and diminish the trauma of both the oppressors and the oppressed, such as truth and reconciliation processes, are dangerous, and must be carefully designed to avoid the eruption of acts of vengeance or reactionary terrorism.

The clarity of argument for moral sanction against aggression is most pronounced in the case of classic colonialism, where a foreign power occupies, or controls by its military force, the territory of another people. It is less clear in the case of neoliberal economic colonialism that often relies on puppet regimes, economic penalties, and mercenary or paramilitary forces to suppress the fulfillment of social needs. But it is most obscured where the descendants of colonists, through the passage of time and consolidation of control, manage to assuage their collective conscience regarding their inherited privilege. The evolution of their mythology in rationalizing the acts of their

ancestors during the process of invasion and conquest is a continuous, semi-conscious, collective effort at avoiding moral sanction.

The dissonance of conscience provoked by this mechanism of self-delusion is most dangerous when confronted with the reality of resistance by those deprived—particularly when the violated claims of indigenous populations are codified by statute and treaty, as they are in the US. The determination of American Indians to reclaim their heritage, their right to exist as a people and culture, has never wavered. Empowered by their knowledge of history, an authentic philosophy, and overarching relational values of integrity and sharing, they have persistently awoken a moral position in our conscience. Indigenous statesmen, during the initial internment to reservations, faced the formidable task of forbearance while laying the groundwork for future reclamation. However conscious indigenous leaders like Chief Joseph were of the sacrifices his people would make for the right of self-governance, the courage they manifested in positing their relationship with the United States in moral terms, made it difficult at first, and ultimately impossible to deny their humanity. Everyone knows truth when they hear it.

Moral sanction, however, is not expressed solely in words; to be made visible; it must be dramatized in deeds. Despite the spiritual challenge, bewilderment, and trauma associated with diametrically opposed values, witnessing the murder of elders, women, and children, Joseph's resilience, and steadfast commitment to the apparently lost cause of Native American sovereignty, served to disturb authorities of his era and document the unresolved grievance for ours. The message of moral sanction, communicated through the acts of resistance by Makah whalers, Navajo lawyers, and Iroquois warrior societies, demonstrate the moral imperative of self-determination.

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