

10-1-2008

Review of *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*

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Published version. *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall 2008): 25-28. [Permalink](#). © 2008 American Philosophical Association. Used with permission.
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Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence

Jose-Antonio Orosco (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008). 143 pp.

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1. Introduction

In *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*, José-Antonio Orosco seeks to incorporate Cesar Chavez into mainstream social and political thought. Given Chavez's life and work, this goal necessitates a subsequent blurring of the line between political theory and activity, an act which seats Chavez alongside of many Latin American thinkers in the wake of Comtean positivism. Placing the Mexican-American farmworker into the tradition of nonviolent political protest, Orosco presents Chavez as an iconoclastic thinker, i.e., an individual who works and lives according to ideals that try to change society for the better. In this sense, Chavez is a community intellectual who articulated, refined, and embodied these ideals in the first place (5-6).

This review will first sketch the terrain of Orosco's account of the major moments in Chavez's life and thought. Doing more than providing an overview of the union leader's speeches and letters, Orosco challenges the reader to rethink the complexities behind Chavez's actions by presenting his criticism of a variety of intellectuals and social ideas: e.g., Churchill's criticism of nonviolent protest; Fanon and Guevara's calls for revolutionary struggle and practice; the idea of property damage as civil unrest or disobedience; as well as the institutional and social patterns endorsing a culture of exclusion, oppression, and violence. According to Orosco, Chavez's great politico-philosophical contribution (and also the motivating force behind his social action) was a profound and nuanced understanding of nonviolence, "the common sense of nonviolence" (3).

Second, this review will question the recurrent theme of sacrifice, penitence, and self-knowledge apparent in Chavez's theory of nonviolence. My aim here is to question the performative and sometimes gruesome aspects of Chavez's actions, in addition to rethinking the consequences and moral implications of his type of nonviolent protest. With the explicit goal of making visible pain and suffering, does the kind of sacrifice associated with something like fasting constitute or depend upon a type of violence, albeit a violence to the self? Chavez's reason for hunger strikes and long marches was the desire to engender a level of discomfort allowing for further understanding of the pain and suffering felt by the victims of exploitation.¹ Does this not maintain that suffering is a necessary condition for human consciousness (on a critical reflective level)? On this point Chavez's stance is similar to that of G.W.F. Hegel and Sigmund Freud. However, as Orosco points out, Chavez's understanding of suffering is connected to Mexican understandings of penitence, hence "the masochism of Mexicanidad." And though the questions I have can be directed towards nonviolent theory in general, they force one to consider Chavez as more than just a political activist or union organizer. They present the reader with Cesar Chavez, Latino philosopher.

2. A Cultural "Revolution"

The political philosophy of such figures as Thomas Hobbes assumes a philosophical anthropology founded on axioms undergirding much Western political thought: humans as

violent, competitive, self-interested beings subject to a scarcity of goods and in need of governance.² Although a philosophy of non-violence and any political action based on this theory challenges this view, the difficulties that arise from the attempt to make peaceful social organization the basis for human life seemingly prove the Hobbesian humanism. Cautiously avoiding the traps of identity politics and banking on the "commonsensical" aspects of Chavez's thought, Orosco argues that the nonviolent life requires an understanding of human social organization that does not rest upon political power as the exercise of domination, but a commitment to justice understood as the alleviation of oppression through self-sacrifice.

From the onset of his book Orosco is keen to point out that there is an unprecedented concern (or even fear) of the growing Latino/a population in the United States. He stresses that many advertisers, politicians, and cultural critics are beginning to focus attention on this emerging population (1). And though such a large group of people is no more united than the rest of the country, some hold that there is reason to believe that a growing fractious collective is on the rise.³ These suspicions are part of a cultural attitude that requires negativity, exclusion, and polarization. The thought can be expressed through the following sentiment: "We are Americans, our values represent the core American way of life...they are not of our way of life therefore they are not American." For Chavez, this attitude was apparent in treatment of Mexican farmworkers as a transitory labor force undeserving of respect. Moreover, the subsequent dehumanization of these people allowed for the establishment of a sub-working-class who can be dealt with in any manner necessary—personal and institutionalized forms of violence (e.g., institutional racism) often being the most apt.⁴

Chavez's encounters with nativist social prejudice and the endemic racism of the mid-twentieth century inspired his awareness of the need for social justice (19). Anticipating the political power that an emerging Hispanic population would hold, Chavez saw oppressive social structures and racist practices as an attempt to delay this power. Fittingly, one of the main goals of Orosco's text is to show how Chavez and *La Causa* represent a collective effort to unify farmworkers through a sense of historical agency. This is social organization through a self-determination that looks past the immediate goals or setbacks of a movement while considering future injustices (6). This unification ensures the type of empowerment that combats the oppressive conditions under which many workers lived, in addition to providing a network that would challenge the racist attitudes of white America.

Although figures like Huntington, Hanson, and even Chavez himself see this self-determination as the awakening of a sleeping Hispanic power-block, Orosco argues that Latino/as do not represent a unanimous, ominous collective but a heterogeneous group seeking inclusion into the American dream (21-22). However, if Chavez is banking on the idea that people in similar positions of oppression share analogous demands for justice, then there is room for argument with Orosco about the last point. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Chavez attempted to provide Latino/as with a sense of civic responsibility and democratic participation while striving to engender a culture of peace inside of the United States. His direct goal was not to change the policies of U.S. society, although changes were required insofar as the system itself is prejudicial. More important was the transformation of the culture that supports and provides the values of this country, since Chavez is of the opinion that these values are misplaced or wrong (this being the subversive or revolutionary aspect of *La Causa*) (44). Following this line of thought, it is safe to argue that Chavez understood the formal policies of a nation as responding to the culture that supports or warrants its necessity.

Given that his goal was to change the culture of U.S. society, which in consequence would reformulate the nation, his objective could be called “trans-national.”⁵ This trans-national approach is the basis for Orosco’s criticism of Churchill’s critique of nonviolent political protest and the narrow traps of identity politics found in some Chicano politics. For example, Orosco shows how Churchill thinks nonviolent political theory mistakenly assumes the moral high ground when choosing not to engage in revolutionary military combat, as if moral superiority is enough to persuade a state to stop its oppressive tactics (35). Presenting what amounts to Chavez’s critique of this line of reasoning, Orosco writes that there are three conceptual mistakes which support the pro-violence view: (1) the understanding of political authority as ultimately the exercise of violence (the myth of violence), (2) the lack of vision into the real potency of moral criticism, and (3) the inability to recognize that the immediate goal of nonviolent theory is not the overturning the state (37-44). Focusing on the last, Orosco writes, “Chavez speaks of developing power not for the immediate purpose of overthrowing the state but for creating alternatives to mainstream political and economic institutions that will be the focal points for engaging people in activities to learn democratic skills and abilities for self-determination” (44).

Along the same lines, Chavez’s criticism of the type of identity politics found in narrow Chicano nationalism pushes a “trans-national” agenda. Stopping racist behavior and formulating an authentic sense of self is crucial for Hispanic, Latino/as, Chicano/as, etc. However, the positing of an identity construed in strict oppositional terms—situations where, as Orosco writes, “Chicano/a identity derives its content primarily by defining itself against, or by rejecting, white mainstream culture” (81)—does nothing to combat the underlying structures and causes of oppression. Moreover, as I tried to convey above, it revels in the same pattern of thought that motivates nativist ideology. This is not to say that all Chicano nationalism lacks a structural component nor is this a homogenous movement. But, as the author writes, “[m]erely challenging mainstream America’s racism, as narrow ethnic nationalism did, might diminish the resources of cultural violence that lend support to structural violence; but that strategy would not, by itself, dismantle the institutions of power that marginalize and discriminate against people of color” (85).

Likewise, as the chapter on “structural violence” or institutional prejudice shows, focusing solely on policy changes or specific public practices does not venture far enough to dispel the cultural prejudices that spark racist (and thus violent) institutions and ways of life (72). Building on the work of Johan Galtung and Jürgen Habermas, Orosco argues that “cultural violence,” oppressive behavior that results in what can be called structural or institutional violent acts (i.e., the necessary assimilation of one group into another for reasons based upon the fear of becoming a bilingual or multicultural society), can still occur in settings where little or no personal violence is taking place.

In this manner the progressive element of *La Causa* becomes obvious, especially when Orosco uses Chavez’s words to convey the idea that the movement “doesn’t have to be experienced twice” (22). Put differently, the farmworkers’ struggle, which in this sense is more than just a movement for farmworkers, does not begin from scratch with every generation. Building upon past achievements, a culture of peace requires a rethinking of “time” (a point which I will return to later) and continual dialogue towards a more just society (23). Placing Latino/as and migrant workers of a variety of backgrounds into the American imaginary as affective contributors to this

conversation, this progressive minded dialogue synthesizes the oppositional points of view that sometimes appear intransigently locked in the bitter confines of identity politics, another point that supports Chavez’s reasoning for the de-centering of race as the basis for *La Causa* (85).

Though there remains some tension in Orosco’s portrayal of Chavez as a reformist who sought to create social change by changing the values that are said to historically define the “American” mentality (i.e., assimilative, pro Anglo-Protestant hegemonic beliefs), a culture of peace does not come as a result of cultural imposition or aggressive take over. The supporters of *La Causa* are not attempting to override American culture by overt aggressive tactics or overwhelming numbers. On the contrary, Chavez’s culture of peace begins in the relaying of social injustices, an act that requires not only affective communication but also personal encounters with suffering. Undergirded by a humanism differing from that espoused in traditional pre-political violent social relations, the encounter with suffering is not self-alienating or exclusive, but receptive towards foreigners and the difference they bring.

3. The Masochism of Mexicanidad

For Chavez, the liberation of the oppressed members of a society should serve as the impetus of self-realization. The most famous line that expresses this idea is often quoted,

When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men.” (91)

Also the basis for a new masculinity, since Chavez thinks that too many young men are influenced by a commercially driven culture that promotes the exercise of power as an act of domination,⁶ the idea of self-sacrifice is a form of self-realization grounded in the liberation of the other. This humanism requires a willingness to combat social injustice and share in the suffering of the oppressed members of society. However, to sacrifice oneself to those in need requires familiarity with what the other is going through: commiseration.

At the heart of Chavez’s many marches and long fast was the hope that intentional suffering would inspire a sense of reflection that allows one to understand unjustified pain. For Orosco, this type of asceticism is grounded in Mexican culture and folk-wisdom (24). This being “the Masochism of Mexicanidad,” a fixation with suffering often seen in Mexican religious practice and worship,⁷ there is a performative and ritualistic aspect to these public expressions of sorrow. Reverence for Christ and the Passion are also present in penitential suffering.

For those exploited like the farmworkers, those who labor but only receive inadequate monetary compensation, their marches and days without food are meant to provide a cleansing that allows for insights into one’s condition: self-knowledge (25-29). In this setting a culture of peace provides the type of reflection that not only generates a profound demand for justice but also challenges the idea that through war self-reflection becomes possible. As Orosco points out, the self-awareness often credited to moments of war are not as helpful in the realization of self-consciousness as one might think. This is the basis for the criticism of Fanon and Guevara available in the text, considering that these revolutionaries prescribe to an idea that self-determination includes the violent

overthrow of unjust political situations; the self-numbing that allows for the dehumanization of the enemy limits any possible experience of the self since it requires a removal or quieting of moral sense (47-48).

It is through suffering, then, that the exploited gain themselves back, self-recognition. However, Chavez's theory of the self as connected to suffering relates to two ideas from the history of philosophy: (1) the way in which angst and toil furthers the progression of self-consciousness in Hegel's master/slave dialectic, and (2) the development of the self in conjunction with an awareness of suffering in Freud's later work. My concern here is that Chavez's pattern of thinking shares an understanding of human consciousness (on a critically reflective level) often espoused in relations of oppression, alienation, and sometimes violence.

For Hegel, especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he tries to provide an account of how objective knowledge of the world is possible, the move from sense-certainty to self-consciousness requires the realization that one does not live in a solipsistic world but a place inhabited by other (self-)consciousnesses. Initially these others serve as objects through which self-realization is possible.⁸ When this realization occurs a social pattern tends to develop, it rests upon the necessity of abolishing the alien aspects of others in order to discover the self in them—an act that denies their alterity (Hegel, p. 167). This is Hegel's master/slave dialectic, a life-and-death struggle that thrives on the tension generated by opposition. Here, the progress of Spirit's self-consciousness requires domination. However, as it is well known, an inversion takes place and the slave ends up being the one with the real sense of self, i.e., the real ability to arrive at self-discovery (Hegel, p. 193). The means through which this is done are the toils of labor; the ability to endure work and suffer hardships as a slave brings the type of recognition furthering self-consciousness. The slave finds himself/herself in the world through labor—a type of suffering.

Likewise, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, while providing a pathology of the inclusive or "oceanic" feeling endorsed by representatives of religious traditions, Freud argues that the initial detachment or formulation of the ego arises out of our first instances of pain and suffering.⁹ The realization of the split or partition between one's self and the world around them (our alienation from the world around us) is caused by the desire to appease the various means through which displeasure arises. In this scenario our sense of self is not possible without the frustration that arises from realization that the world does not automatically respond to our needs. Our needs only become apparent through suffering. Maturing and becoming a full member of society implies the proper sublimation of desires via the constrictions of social relations, e.g., the reality principle. However, this process requires the type of self-examination that necessitates suffering in the first place.

When Orosco writes, "Besides evoking the cultural symbolism of the procession, Chavez intended the Sacramento March to be a time for the farmworkers and other marchers to model the penitent and suffer from fatigue, heat, and thirst in order to induce self-reflection," (27) does he not place Chavez in line with the previous thinkers? To argue that people need to feel pain in order to self-reflect or gain the type of awareness that awakens one's moral sensibilities is to think that moral reasoning is impossible without suffering. In addition, if taken to their extreme, do the possible outcomes of a hunger strike (i.e., starvation) amount to self-inflicted violence? If starvation is not the goal, but the goal is to force a moral circumstance, what is it that makes this situation moral? It is the fact that someone's well-being is at stake. Chavez's actions personify this fact; the actions of the growers are killing, harming, or hindering people,

and Chavez must go through his protest to make this visible. But again, does this not require the threat of death, even if it is self-inflicted? To say that peace requires sacrifice, and that this sacrifice is violent or harmful towards oneself, is to really say that peace requires violence, but not the type aimed towards others.

Thus, Chavez's long marches and fast are performative acts requiring the (possible) presence of death to highlight a moral situation. Using Chavez's words, Orosco writes, "He believes that when people see these symbols of sacrifice they will be moved to help in some fashion. 'When you sacrifice you force others to sacrifice. It's a powerful weapon. When somebody stops eating for a week or ten days, *people come and they want to be part of that experience*'" (105; emphasis added). In no way do I seek to challenge the goals of *La Causa*. As a philosopher I am only interested in what philosophical or theoretical insights I can infer from Chavez's actions. This is especially true in light of his views on moral reasoning.

Deliberation, communication, and peace being crucial to Chavez's ideals, human social organization and the political structures that come to support it are drastically different in a framework where power is joint exercise of affective communication (25). Individuals working together require the ability to live peacefully. Living peacefully is not that difficult when people work together to bring it about. Building on the work of Hannah Arendt, Orosco argues that rather than having "power over" (governance as domination), "power with" is the recognition of the shared goals of a community (93).

In this sense rather than argue that we live in uncertain yet critical times, i.e., moments of crises, Orosco holds Chavez to be quite sure of the goals he seeks to realize. Not being an advocate of crisis time, which uses the fear of social catastrophe as a motivator for social change, Chavez was quite confident that justice and truth would prevail (106). "Sooner or later," he thought, "truth is going to be exposed. ... Mankind has never been able to deal with the suppression of truth" (107). Though there are possible eschatological and certain teleological aspects to this train of thought, such that one can speculate whether or not a concern with a final judgment or day of reckoning is present, the message is quite clear: peace and social justice take time. In other words, peace requires patience, the literal definition of which is the quality of enduring suffering.

Endnotes

1. See Jose-Antonio Orosco 2008, 23-27.
2. Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 74-78.
3. See Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), and Victor Davis Hanson's *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), for more on this growing fear of immigration and national dissolution.
4. Orosco provides the following comment by a grower: "We protect our farmers here in Kern County. They are our best people. They are *always* with us. They keep the country going. ... But the Mexicans are trash. They have no standard of living. We herd them like pigs" (Emphasis Added) (Orosco 2008, 80).
5. Aware of the complexities that surround this term, I use 'trans-national' in the sense that Chavez's project exceeds or ventures beyond the goal of reconstituting the nation. Hence the prefix 'trans.' Perhaps a more appropriate term could be 'meta-national' (in the fashion of meta-ethics or metaphysics), since it is safe to say that the cultural or social atmosphere of a people supply the necessary and sufficient conditions for the possibility (and need) of a country in the first place. But I am sure that this is another paper altogether.

6. “Chavez wants a man to be someone who is willing to sacrifice himself and his well-being for the benefit of others, not by fighting or using physical strength but by taking the pain of others upon himself, feeling it, through nonviolent practice and discipline” (Orosco 2008, 91). For more see Orosco 2008, 88-89.
7. For some, this masochism has its roots in Indigenous practices of Mesoamerica (Orosco 2008, 28).
8. G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). (See section “B” of “Self-Consciousness”; pp. 174-77 and the subsection titled “Lordship and Bondage” in particular.)
9. Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton & Company, 2005), 39-41.