

# Avoiding Contention by Bearing Witness to the Popular Desire not to Change

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## Introduction

Recent empirical scholarship questions the efficacy of nonviolent civil resistance and considers the prospect of anocratic civil war in the West. This article examines Thomas Hobbes' argument from his *Behemoth* for the common people's yearning and desire for a civil peace as the proper basis of political authority. It further considers the possibility of public demonstrations of civil obedience, affirming this basis of political authority and repudiating divisive ambitions for change, as counterpoint to both the ineffectiveness of civil resistance and the danger of a descent into anocratic civil war.

In *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2021) [1], Erica Chenoweth revisits the key claim from her earlier co-authored study with Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (2011) that nonviolent resistance campaigns are twice as likely to achieve their goals as violent campaigns. This claim was based a comparative empirical study, and accompanying statistical analysis, of nonviolent civil resistance in 323 cases from 1900 to 2006. In her later work, Chenoweth (2021) recognizes that such nonviolent campaigns have declined in their effectiveness since 2010.

She considers a variety of reasons for this declining effectiveness including the increasing effectiveness of repressive states learning and adapting to nonviolent resistance campaigns by developing ever more sophisticated techniques of smart repression. These techniques "delegitimize movements in the eyes of the public, thereby diminishing the movement's capacity to mobilize a larger base of supporters, create defections, maintain discipline" and so on [2]. That said, Chenoweth's musings on smart repression disrupting and subduing nonviolent resistance are thrown into relief by a contemporary social science literature on civil war.

The civil war scholars, Barbara Walter (2020) and David Betz (2022) attribute the declining effectiveness of nonviolent civil resistance not to smart repression as much a rapid anocratic decline in Western societies. In other words, they do not see states as be

coming more sophisticated and powerful in their capacities to repress nonviolent dissent. On the contrary, states are losing control, failing to maintain their own central authority over populations fractured along multiple lines of racial and ideological identity, and violently turning on one another. Once strong democracies are turning into anocracies, that is, weakened democracies collapsing into anarchic civil war. Rather than smartly repressing nonviolent civil resistance, anocratic states are proving increasingly ineffective in responding to violent resistance to their own authority and containing anarchic violence among mutually hateful social factions.

This latter focus on anocratic decline and the imminent dangers of increasing levels of factional violence brings back into focus a much older civic ideal, that of avoiding contention through civic education and public demonstrations of civil obedience. Such an ideal is articulated by the seventeenth century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, in his lesser-known work *Behemoth* (1681-2). Responding to the devastating violence of the English civil war, Hobbes argued that the sovereign must teach the common people not to desire change [3].

The gist of Hobbes' argument is that, as civic educator, the sovereign should counteract the influence of all those zealots and fools ambitious for rule who would sow anger and hatred among the people to advance their own factional agendas. This entails mobilizing civic demonstrations or ceremonials promoting public conscience not as opinion but *thinking with others* (Ibid). These ceremonials bore witness to the deepest yearnings and desires of the common people *to live in peace with their neighbors*. They taught the common people that the proper basis of civic authority is public conscious as thinking and living with others in peace.

*Behemoth* thus represented a shift in emphasis from Hobbes' better-known *Leviathan* (1651) in which he had argued the sovereign should suppress resistance through coercive force and punishment. Education and persuasion should replace state repressive

power. What, if anything, does *Behemoth* tell us about the present-day decline in the effectiveness of nonviolent civil resistance and the terrifying prospect of anocratic civil war?

If the efficacy of nonviolent resistance is in doubt, and all the social scientific markers point to anocratic failure and collapse into civil war, then teaching obedience is perhaps worthy of reconsideration today. The objection to any such reconsideration is that anocratic civil war precludes the sovereign state civically educating a fractionalized disobedient population rejecting its authority and turning to internecine violence. Nevertheless, some prospect for civic education as civil obedience may still exist if the common people, living through anocratic decline, repudiate fools and zealots ambitious for power, and instead yearn for a return to thinking and living together in peace.

This would call upon the common people to reject divisive opinion in favor of asserting a Hobbesian public conscience. Yearning and desiring peace among civic neighbors, the common people would thus *take over from the failing sovereign* the role of civic educator. Moreover, they would do so using the same method of public ceremonial bearing witness to their deep desire to pull back from anocratic violence and together publicly reaffirm the shared value of civil peace. Mobilized bottom up rather than the top down, this would amount to public demonstrations of *civil obedience*, that is, grassroots demonstrations by the common people calling for a return to shared norms of civic neighborliness and peace eroded by factional violence.

Are there any real-world examples of public demonstrations bearing witness to the common people's desire to pull back from factional violence and return to civic peace? One such example is the 1976 Peace People demonstrations during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Responding to the pointless deaths of three chil-

dren caught in the crosshairs of paramilitary violence, these public demonstrations bore witness to the common people's yearning for a return to basic norms of neighborliness and civility, a time past when innocent children could play outside without getting shot by sectarian fools and zealots.

A more recent example from the United States is the nationwide No Kings demonstrations. Responding to the anocratic decline of the US and the emergence of a President who would-be-King, these demonstrations bear witness to the popular yearnings of US citizens and residents for a return to basic norms defining a strong democracy, such as the peaceful transition of power, the constitutional separation of powers, and so on. Both exercises in political nostalgia, the Peace People and No Kings demonstrations reaffirm older civility norms repudiating disruptive changes violently wrought by ambitious fools and zealots.

In sum, reaffirming the proper basis of political authority in Hobbesian public conscience, grassroots public demonstrations bear witness to the yearning and desire of the common people to live in peace with one another. I consider in greater detail this Hobbesian conception of the basis of political authority in the popular desire not to change, in a future monograph project, *Love and Violence in the Philosophy of Peace and War: Everyone a Metaphysician in the Trenches of Meaning*.

## References

1. Erica Chenoweth (2021) *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. 22(4): 251
2. Maria J Stephan (2011) *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*.
3. Amy Gais (2021) Thomas Hobbes and 'gently instilled' conscience. *History of European Ideas* 47(8): 1211-1277.