

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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Preparation of High-Risk Actions in Groups: Some Challenges

(About Nonviolent Action and Group Process, with the example of the European ploughshares movement)

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Second draft, version 2007-12-11

A challenge for any movement which wants to do effective nonviolent actions is how to prepare these actions. Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King emphasized mass-meetings and “self-purification”, i.e. individual preparation through meditation, fasting or prayer. They believed in “nonviolence of the strong”. Since the 1970s – with the criticism of such spiritual and individualistic nonviolence together with the creative development of new organisational forms, especially within the US feminist movement – NVDA preparation has become more group-oriented. Even in big movements most work is done in (smaller) groups.

If we work in the tradition of Gandhian thought means and ends are connected and facilitate each other. Then it makes sense to build a democratic, respectful, non-oppressive and just community culture within your movement if you want to be effective in creating such a society. Thus preparation is two-folded: building community and enabling effective results. Any group will differ in how exactly it wants to go about combining such process and goal orientations, since they demand very different activities. To make our own unique combination with energy, fantasy and endurance we need something more: creativity, both individually and collectively.

So, a good group needs to facilitate creativity, community and effectiveness, in a good combination (and that combination depends on the group and the context, the task ahead, etc.) that makes nonviolence flourishing in our selves and our society.

This is a difficult task which demands good understanding of both groups and the world you work in. In order to give an example of how it can be done and what problems might arise the experience of the Ploughshares movement in Europe might be helpful.

The Ploughshares movement does nonviolent disarmament actions at military factories or bases (see <http://www.plowsharesactions.org/>). Since 1980 there has been some 70 actions in which equipment of e.g. nuclear weapons, fighter air-planes or machine-guns have been disarmed/destroyed, with the hammer blows and bolt-cutters of ordinary citizens. The actions have been done in the US, Western Europe and Australia. Activists have sometimes received up to 20 years in prison but mostly one or two years. In the US ploughshares are predominantly Christian but in Europe typically secular.

The ploughshares preparation process is best described as a group oriented resistance retreat model which builds on group reflection. The retreat means that you take a step back from action and daily life, reflect on it and get ready for new actions and a changed daily life. The process is on a political level about facilitating the reflection on our social role in the world we live in and our duties and possibilities of social change. Ploughshares normally meet for weekend retreats for a couple of months, then a week or two at the site before the action, followed by support work of jailed or imprisoned activists (which sometimes takes several

years).

Building a resistance movement in the Western context among predominantly white middle-class means struggling with the dominance of a consumer society in which (most) people live alienated from the world realities of poverty, war and oppression, i.e. where power is internalised and resistance abstract.

On a practical level it is possible to understand it as group work on participants obstacles, to develop solutions that make their action possible. The retreats are designed to systematically process all hindrance that exists. There is no chance of getting rid of the serious obstacles (like fear of violence and humiliation; years of prison time, etc.), they don't have "solutions", but they can be minimized, handled or accepted. In that sense the process is about "disarming the self", i.e. to manage or live with fears, and temptations of affluence and privileges (without becoming paralyzed or passive).

Dilemmas that groups will have to deal with and which arise from the aim to do a high-risk NVDA and the group process: How to balance action/movement commitment with other commitments in life? A major problem is deciding on the relative importance of your family/partner vs. the movement/action.

Who decides? Are activists those deciding the action alone as they are the ones risking their skin or are supporters having an equal say since they are the ones that have to do support work the whole prison time?

How long preparation in the group? The action can be done too early (not enough prepared to do a good job) or too late (energy and focus is lost).

When is the group dissolved? After the action, the jail-time or when all consequences (also psychological damages) are dealt with some years after?

The balance between practical action planning and community building retreat.

The balance between the need to rotate leadership roles versus the need that the work is done with high quality and competence.

The degree of openness and what will be kept secret is something each group needs to make a judgement on (since total openness or total secrecy is impossible).

The balance between formal decisions and structure versus a flexible attitude and supportive atmosphere in the group.

How to combine individual needs and personality vs. group needs and task? Do we really need to like each other and become friends?!

The experience of ploughshares has made visible several difficult problems which might arise in any group preparing for nonviolent resistance actions that involves risk-taking. All these problems have already occurred in some groups in Europe, as serious conflicts threatening the existence of a group or as minor tendencies which has been managed.

How do we avoid becoming trapped in these group problems?

- 1.The sect and the chosen ones (the revolutionary avant-garde).
- 2.The community of intimacy and hidden conflicts (which don't dare to be honest and face conflicts).
- 3.The community as self-serving goal, i.e. hindrance of the action ("Why do actions when the group process is the great thing, which is what we should bring to others?").

4. The problem of using the group as therapy or a new family (Instead of giving energy to the group, the energy is drained for private purpose...).
5. The Hero Syndrome (the Brave Activists and their adoring fan clubs).
6. The Macho Activists who can do it themselves (without the group) (but who want a group to do the not-so sexy support service...).
7. The One Big Action (which is not sustained by boring long-term movement work). Becomes the “The Big Witness” by the truth-speakers, or “the Sainly Act” of self-purification (which, when it is done once, gives a ticket to the Moral Club...).
8. Desperation and belief of “quick effects”, i.e. pressing the group to do things too quick (wanting to do “something drastic” due to pessimism and anxiety).
9. The endless process as hindrance (After several months of group process: who has the energy to do an action?).
10. Actions as self-realisation (Developing yourself, becoming a different human through interesting experiences...).
11. An alternative and fast development of your job-carrier? (Doing an action and becoming a media-star, author, lecturer, conflict-trainer, radical intellectual, etc.).
12. Totalizing of commitment, i.e. pressing people to make an “all or nothing choice” (e.g. between family and resistance).
13. The dictatorship of the (stubborn) individuals (through veto and consensus decision-making).
14. Group pressure and the difficulty (for new or insecure persons) to say no.
15. A preparation for an action or romance? (Using the group to find intimate relationships).
16. Envy or power struggle between participants, i.e. the support group as hindrance (undermining acts by those who didn’t feel ready to risk prison time against those who did...).
17. Ritual murder of leaders (Liberating yourself from internal dependency on authorities or moral leadership figures by attacking them symbolically).

The basic idea behind the group preparation process in ploughshares is that the support and community of the group can facilitate the ability and commitment to disarm. At the same time it is evident, at least from the European and especially the Swedish experience, that the community or the difficulties to build a community with several and different persons constitute the main problem. It is in a sense the paradox of ploughshares preparation that the main source of activism is the supportive small community of activists, while the main obstacle is the conflicts of the same close relationships (including family, partner, children, etc.). Of course state punishments (prison, fines, etc.) and other social punishments (like job problems, media campaigns, etc.) are difficult, especially when activists get long time in prison..., but these problems are mediated through the group.

My conclusion is that a resistance culture creates its own problematic tendencies which need its own reflexive counter-culture in order not to destroy the attempt of resistance. The creation of a resistance culture with its way of life, values, and new behavioural patterns makes a new little society (a “prefigurative society”) with its own problems, conflicts, hierarchies, power and even oppression. In order not to get stuck in an oppositional role, in a reaction to the “old” surrounding society, a self-reflective and critical evaluation

of its own power problems is needed. Thus, a kind of “internal resistance” against the movement culture is necessary: i.e. internal resistance against (some aspects of) the external resistance. If the principle of preparation is support and community, the principle of the internal resistance is open dialogue, plurality and critical self-reflection.

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