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Gandhi – well known for his acts of nonviolent resistance in pursuit of an India free from British colonial rule – argued that we need to be both dismantling the systems and structures of violence and oppression while also building new, healthier, more resilient structures, which illustrate new ways of relating to each other and to our planet. Gandhi proposed this twin process because his vision for social change in India didn't rely only on seizing state power, on directly confronting the powers with direct action campaigns; just as crucial to his understanding of social change was his idea of radically transforming the social fabric of the whole country, from the bottom up. Gandhi realised it was not the state that should – or could – make society anew, but the other way around. The fundamental idea behind this view of social change was his unique approach to the relationship between means and ends. Contrary to the commonly held view that the end justifies the means, Gandhi saw that the means were “the ends in making”, that the means used to achieve change had to reflect and correspond to the desired ends. If you want to build a future society characterised by justice, sustainability, and equality, your means need to be just, sustainable, and equitable. Others have described this process as “building a new world in the shell of the old”. The book you are reading attempts to understand what this means, drawing on the example of communities around the world that are in some way illustrating how they go about living a revolution.

For Gandhi, confrontation with the old order (through direct action) was essential, and we see this in the salt marches, the protests, the mass civil disobedience he was part of organising. Equally critical though was the quieter, less photogenic (and so perhaps less well known) work of practising a new society, which Gandhi called “constructive programme”. Gandhi believed that such work should pre-empt and prepare activists for confrontation. Direct action was used to undermine the colonial rulers of India, but the role of constructive programme was to reinvent the very social fabric of the country. In Gandhi's vision, these two processes – of nonviolent resistance and creative construction – become two sides of the same coin, a process that allowed his movement to say “yes!” and “no!” at the same time, to simultaneously deconstruct and rebuild.

Having said all that, this is not a book about Gandhi. For us, Gandhi and his “constructive programme” concept in particular is a jumping off point, and this is a book about social change now, in the first decades of the 21st century. We want to explore where we can observe this dual process taking place now, where it is already being put into practice around the world, discuss some of the principles and practice of this form of activism, and consider how it could be applied more widely within our movements. Our scope is intentionally broad; we have tried to gather stories from all over the world that help to illustrate what we mean when we talk about constructive programme, because it is in its practice that we think “constructive programme” makes most sense. Another reason that this is important is the fact that no one has ever managed to create an isolated and sustainable microcosm of the utopian-ideal, and this isn't the goal of constructive programmes. All of the examples we have drawn on engage in the wider world, communicate something of what the world could be, challenge our preconceptions of how we could be organising our communities and societies. Together, they help to illustrate the practice of principles and approaches that, brought together, begin to look like a deeply radical, transformative way of living, working, and playing.

The Nonviolence Programme of War Resisters' International has put a great deal of work into resources and material focusing on strategic nonviolent campaigning, and in 2014 we published the second edition of the “Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns”, which is a practical guide to the use of campaigning and direct action to foment social change. The Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns has been translated into over a dozen languages, and thousands of copies have been sold all over the world. 'New Worlds in Old Shells' is perhaps a response to a sense that the “direct resistance” work explored in the Handbook is both deeply needed, and clearly insufficient for building a radically nonviolent world. As a programme we spent many hours discussing what 'constructive programme' was, what it meant, how it was (and wasn't) being applied by movements we were ourselves involved in, and wanted to bring our ideas and discussions together into something that might be useful to others.

Few of the case studies and examples we will draw on are explicitly “Gandhian” in their analysis or approach, some might even baulk at the association. Our aim isn't to suggest a single framework, approach, or analysis that is being - or should be - replicated. We do want to illustrate the rich diversity of different approaches and contexts where groups are simultaneously confronting the injustices and violences of our world through direct action and campaigning, while daring to experiment with what a more beautiful and life-enhancing society might look like.

Writing about constructive programme is difficult because it is a complex concept, that varies from context to context. While there is some theory, it only truly makes sense when it is applied – only in its application is it possible to see how the 'old world' is being transformed into something new. Gandhi proposed a series of principles, and these make up the bulk of the second section of this book.

There are, however, a number of ways of deconstructing these projects, which help us to generalise about what it is they are doing or trying to achieve. A thorough understanding of different types of violence, prefiguration, resistance, and nonviolent understandings of power can help us to understand how constructive programme's set about changing the world. However, the first thing to raise is the relationship between active resistance and constructive programme.

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