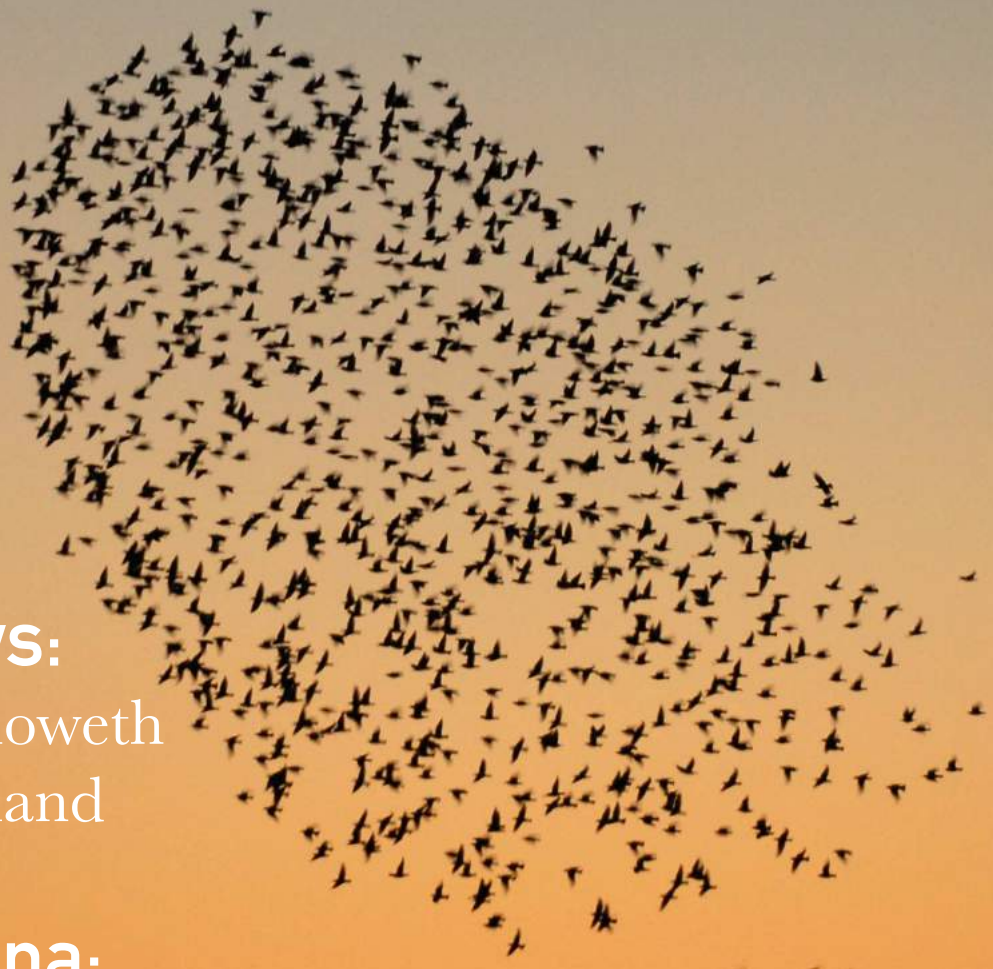


# nonviolence

A Magazine for Practical Idealists

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*the democracy issue:  
unifying theory & action*



## Interviews:

Erica Chenoweth

David Ragland

## From China:

Hua Ze illustrates  
activist struggles

# Q&A: Erica Chenoweth



Interview: Stephanie Van Hook  
Above photo: University of Denver

Erica Chenoweth is Professor & Associate Dean for Research at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. She is an internationally recognized authority on political violence and its alternatives—in 2013, *Foreign Policy* magazine named her as one of the top 100 global thinkers. Chenoweth received the 2014 Karl Deutsch Award, which the International Studies Association gives annually to the scholar under the age of 40 who has made the greatest impact on the field of international politics or peace research.

**What criteria do you use to assess democracy and democratic freedoms?**

Most political scientists rely on procedural and qualitative metrics of democracy. The procedural ones, like the Polity dataset [a data series commonly used in political sciences research], assess the institutional dimensions of democracy, such as whether a country holds free and fair elections, allows for participation among pluralistic political parties, possesses separation of powers through various branches of government and imposes institutional constraints on the executive. Qualitative metrics tend to focus on the more substantive dimensions, such as whether the government observes civil liberties, press freedom and economic freedom. Freedom House releases an annual report evaluating these dimensions. Best practice suggests that people use both indices when assessing democracy, since neither on its own fully captures the phenomenon.

**Do you find substantial differences across cultures in what is meant by “democracy”? I’m thinking of the specious claim made by the Chinese some years ago that Asian human rights are different from Western ones—a claim the Dalai Lama quickly refuted.**

During the Tiananmen Square revolt in 1989, student protesters demanded democratic reforms from the Communist Party of China. At one point during the protests, student leaders held a vote to determine whether they ought to vacate the square and pursue negotiations or stay in the square and press ahead. Although the majority voted in favor of leaving the square, the movement had a disagreement about whether a “democratic” vote constituted unanimity or majority vote. Reaching no agreement, the movement made the fateful decision to stay the course.

The Arab Barometer surveys tell us that in many Arab countries today, the word “democracy” tends to conjure reactions like “invasion,” “foreign domination” and “Western hypocrisy.” However, if one asks people in the Arab world what kinds of political systems they prefer, they tend to focus on principles like “fairness,” “transparency” and “accountability.” These concepts are, of course, wholly consistent with Western notions of democracy, in theory if not in practice.



**Civil resistance can create social capital in spaces where it did not exist.**

Now, most scholars today conceive of democracy as something more than majority rule and institutional checks and balances. Many contemporary movements, such as Occupy, aim for consensus when possible. So I wouldn’t say the controversy about democracy is specific to Asian values, Arab values or [values in] any other region of the world. Instead, I think that these anecdotes speak to the fact that democracy is still very much a contested and experimental work-in-progress—and that the ability of political entities of all types to put democratic ideals into practice is far from settled.

**You and Maria J. Stephan discovered in research for your book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, that nonviolent uprisings lead to greater democracy even when they fail than uprisings that use violence, even when they “succeed.” If I remember correctly, the first part—that nonviolence leads to greater democracy—was found in studies done by the Freedom House some years ago.**

Yes, that’s right. The Freedom House study looked at political transitions specifically and found that those in which civil resistance played a critical role were more likely to become more democratic down the line. Maria and I took a slightly different approach in that we were trying to look at the long-term outcomes of violent and nonviolent campaigns (regardless of whether they resulted in political transitions). We





Photo: Allison Stroh

found that the nonviolent campaigns were associated with longer-term democratization trends than the violent ones, even when accounting for a variety of other facts typically associated with democratic transition. Moreover, the Freedom House study relied on their index of “Freedom in the World,” whereas our study relied on the Polity data I described above. So I’d say our findings and Freedom House’s findings are consistent with one another, although not identical in scope.

**Gandhi often claimed that democracy and nonviolence go together, that you can’t really have the former in any complete sense without the latter. What’s your perspective on that? Does it hold up in the work that you and Maria—and others—have done?**

Neither the Freedom House study nor my work with Maria answers the question of whether nonviolent action is necessary or sufficient for democracy to come about. Neither study was scoped that way, exactly. That said, at its core, democracy is about the peaceful transfer of power from one elected leader to another, peaceful resolution of conflicts within a society, fair treatment of minorities despite majority rule, the prevention of unchecked accumulations of power within a polity and accountability and responsiveness of elected leaders to their populations. All of these are fundamentally compatible with typical notions of nonviolence. That said, when we talk about democracies, we’re usually talking about states. The fundamental qualifications of statehood are the ability to control territory,

maintain sovereign borders and possess the monopoly on the use of violent force. Because violence is so inherent to contemporary conceptions of statehood, even the most democratic countries in the world today possess a capacity for violence—and willingness to use it—that many nonviolence advocates disparage.

**How do you explain the dependency of democracy on nonviolence to the extent that you’ve found the latter to be true?**

Although my work with Maria wasn’t quite scoped in these terms, it is true that in the NAVCO data [the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes Data Project at the University of Denver], there is scarcely any case where violent struggle resulted in democratic reform, at least in the short term. And it’s definitely the case that nonviolent action, as compared with violent struggle, is strongly correlated with the emergence of democracy as defined in procedural terms. The main explanation I have for this is the notion that civil resistance tends to create the kind of social capital necessary to bring about and maintain a transition to democracy. Social capital is the political, social and economic community that forms the basis of a functional civil society. And as many scholars of democracy have long observed, a functional civil society is absolutely vital to the creation and preservation of democratic governance. Civil resistance can create social capital in spaces where it did not exist before.