

Tracing “Nonviolence” in the Mediterranean. From a polysemic idea to prefigurative politics

1. Introduction: theme, question, and objectives

What do a military conscientious objector in 1970 Southern Europe¹, an activist volunteering on a rescue boat in the Mediterranean in the 2018², and an Israeli and a Palestinian video-makers in the West Bank³ have in common? This project explores their relations and practices over 40 years in the Mediterranean, offering an innovative contribution to Peace Studies and regional peace-building. My ultimate objective is to develop a new understanding of non-state actors in the Mediterranean international relations.

The DIN in Peace Studies project centres on «nonviolence», approached with a historically rooted, interdisciplinary lens to connect seemingly disparate people and social phenomena. I'll focus on relationships within networks of individuals from diverse social movements during key sociopolitical moments (e.g., antimilitarist marches, 2001 World Social Forum, Palestinian Intifadas, Arab Springs). This study situates itself in the Mediterranean, serving as both field and analytical instrument, given its unique cultural dynamics (Gilmore, 1982; Ben-Yehoyada, 2022) and current geopolitical relevance.

The initial research question is: ‘How did nonviolence as an idea transform social movements’ narrative and practices in the Mediterranean between 1970 and 2025?’

¹Pannella, M. (01/01/1970) That fast that recognised conscientious objection [Archive of the Nonviolent Radical Transnational Party]

²Rackete C. (2021) The time to act is now, Rosa-Luxembourg Foundation

³ *No Other Land*. Directed by Yuval Abraham et al., Yabayay Media, Antipode Films, 2025.

Dialoguing with social movements' literature (Tilly, 2004; Diani, 1992) and recent research on prefigurative politics (Yates & de Moor, 2024; van de Sande, 2021), I propose a situated and empirically-based conceptualization of nonviolence. I refer to scholars who approached nonviolence theoretically (Atack, 2012; Mantena, 2020) or interdisciplinarily (Nepstad, 2015; Hallward & Norman, 2025).

This research approaches these issues through individuals choosing nonviolent resistance, rather than state or institutional levels. My objective is to create outputs becoming a transnational resource for scholars, researchers, and practitioners pursuing "positive peace." This entails overcoming the violence-nonviolence dichotomy and exploring prefigurative practices by grassroots groups in a geopolitically tense region often constrained by Realist approaches to peace.

2. Research Design: Sources and Selection of Methods

Nonviolence is approached as an idea traceable (Bennett & Checkel, 2015) through documents, practices, and discourses among activists to study movement transformation. I understand nonviolence not merely as a mode of action, but as a political position empowering and constituting political agency in peace-building processes.

Nonviolence also transforms political, personal, and moral relations toward building a new world – a radical form of prefigurative politics. I will therefore study nonviolence using this conceptual framework. Examining diverse comparative units within the same spatial contour enables a novel conceptualization of nonviolence as prefigurative politics for social movements. This is particularly interesting in the Mediterranean, where cultural continuities coexist with high levels of violence impacting daily lives.

The research draws on ideational theories examining power, agency, and structure through qualitative research (Haugaard, 2008). Focusing on how ideas are enacted by different actors, Parsons (2016) identifies four causal mechanisms, including "ideas empowering actors" and "ideas forming coalitions." The notion of "polysemic ideas" within networks (Cino Pagliarello, 2022) is relevant.

I'll proceed through interpretive 'process/practice tracing,' investigating "generative links between various social processes" rather than causal mechanisms (Pouliot, 2015).

2.1. Sources and Empirical Evidences

To answer my research question through process/practice tracing, I need criteria ensuring analytical standards for organizing, navigating, and coding sources. My research design and provisional methods combine criteria from Bennett & Checkel (2015) with core elements of social movement research, such as triangulation and flexibility (Della Porta, 2014).

I've identified a starting point for data collection via existing archives and have begun mapping:

- Archive of the Nonviolent Radical Transnational Party (Rome, Italy)
- Centro Studi Sereno Regis (Torino, Italy)
- Fondazione Aldo Capitini (Perugia, Italy)
- G8 Genova 2001 – VAG (Bologna, Italy)
- Movimento Nonviolento – collezione privata Daniele Taurino (Roma, Italy)
- Novact – International Institute for nonviolent action (Barcelona, Catalunya – Spain)
- Operazione Colomba – Report and Newsletters (Rimini, Italy)

These archives contain press releases, open letters, training programs, and joint statements. Documented occurrences reveal relationships between 1970s Italian military conscientious objectors, 2001 World Social Forum organizers, and current Israeli-Palestinian anti-occupation groups. Following these individual occurrences enables a tracing methodology, "casting a net broad enough" (Bennett & Checkel, 2015) to ground my data collection.

Following Bennett & Checkel's criteria, I've identified a timeline of key moments for data collection and analysis:

Timeline:

- 1972: the hunger strikes in Italy and Spain for the legalization of the right to conscious objection to the military
- 1987: The First Intifada in Palestine
- 2001: The World Social Forum in Genoa during the G8 Summit
- 2011: The Arab Springs 2018: the “Migrant crisis” in the Mediterranean and the civil disobedience by Carola Rackete
- 2019: the start of coordinated direct actions by Extinction Rebellion
- 2024: the Encampments in solidarity with Palestine
- 2025: The Global March in Solidarity with Gaza

These moments are selected using the Mediterranean as a research site, serving as a tool "to overcome the challenges and complexities of locating empirical research on transnational activism" (Patel and Levsen, 2022). The Mediterranean functions as: (i) a conceptual space of solidarity, (ii) a physical space for activism, and (iii) a space for information dissemination.

2.2. Selection of Methods

This research aims to study nonviolence as an idea traced through triangulation of archival document analysis, in-depth interviews, and critical discourse analysis. The empirical work will be organized in three phases.

The initial stage involves mapping individuals and sources, collecting documents like mailing lists, letters, press releases, and event/training programs. This corpus will then be triangulated with in-depth activist interviews to deepen field knowledge. I expect at least 40 interviews to reach saturation.

The final phase treats archived materials and interviews as “discursive units” for coding, studying “how social reality is linguistically constituted via analyses of the interplay between texts, discourses, and wider contexts” (Lindekilde, 2014), and examining subjects' relatedness.

Through this process, nonviolence as a form of prefigurative politics should emerge, providing the ‘diagnostic evidences’ (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, p. 7) necessary for theory development.

3. State of the Field

The research departs from social movement studies on contentious politics (Della Porta et al., 1999; Tarrow et al., 2015), where nonviolence is primarily understood as a "mode of action" (MacAdam et al., 2001). In contrast, I explore nonviolence as a political idea and practice beyond direct action.

Defining a social movement as an informal network of politically engaged individuals and organizations with a collective identity (Diani, 1992), I employ a historical approach (Tilly, 2004) to study activists and organizations building on nonviolence since the 1970s. My expectation is that nonviolence permeates individuals' and organizations' lifestyles, constituting a form of "prefigurative politics" (Yates and de Moor, 2024, p.189). This will contribute to research on non-state actors in International Relations and peace-building processes.

My contribution to the study of nonviolence as prefigurative politics specifically focuses on its diffusion (Chabot, 2022) within the Mediterranean, analyzing the idea's history and inter-movement relations.

Conceptually, nonviolence has been explored as political theory (Atack, 2012; Mantena, 2020) and empirically for its efficacy (Chenoweth, 2013). Nepstad (2015) and Hallward & Norman (2015) innovated by combining these, going beyond the previous distinction between 'Principled' (Gandhi) from 'Pragmatic' (Sharp) nonviolence. Baldoli (2018) frames nonviolence as an ideology, studying Aldo Capitini, whose definition as a 'praxis of continuous relatedness and openness to other' directly inspired the anti-militarist movement.

This research considers the Mediterranean an encompassing research site. Building on Adler's (2006) and Del Sarto's (2006) emphasis on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, I analyze social movement practices, focusing on "processes of connection, movement, and relatedness" (Ben-Yehoyada, 2022) within these movements. Interpreting the Mediterranean as a site of "exploration and transformation" where grassroots actors challenge dominant power structures (Di Peri & Meier,

2023), my research connects nonviolent choices within regional movements to the broader field of peace-building processes.

4. Originality and pertinence with the objectives of the DIN in Peace Studies

This project offers an innovative approach to studying international relations dynamics and processes, focusing on the transnational and historical trajectories of social movements in the Mediterranean.

Its interdisciplinary and trans-methodological nature aligns with the overarching objective of the Peace Studies PhD: fostering trans-disciplinary interconnection for innovative perspectives. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis will contribute to the development of a framework capturing the entanglements of colonial histories, transnational solidarities, and ongoing geopolitical violence characterizing the region. This will aid understanding the roots of the region's current state of war, allowing outputs to pursue peace within the horizon of 'Positive Peace'.

5. Expected results and sustainability in the time of the PhD

This doctoral project will yield significant academic, empirical, and methodological contributions within the standard PhD timeframe.

Primarily, it will culminate in a comprehensive doctoral thesis offering an empirically grounded conceptualization of nonviolence as a prefigurative force that transforms peace-building imaginaries and practices, specifically in the Mediterranean region. This conceptualization will intersect distinct bodies of literature. It can potentially be supervised with a co-supervisor from a non-Italian university and submitted for a Doctor Europaeus certificate.

Beyond the thesis, academic outputs will include publications in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Journal on Pacifism and Nonviolence*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Mobilization*). I also aim to disseminate findings through informative cultural outputs for the general public, such as a theatrical performance, documentary, or podcast series.

The project's sustainability extends beyond the PhD. The rich empirical data collected, including a unique archive of activist interactions, will be a valuable resource for future scholarly inquiry. My advocacy background uniquely positions me to translate academic findings into actionable insights for civil society organizations and policymakers, fostering deeper understanding of nonviolent strategies in complex geopolitical contexts. I envision post-doctoral research building upon these foundations, exploring further temporal or thematic dimensions of nonviolence in the Mediterranean and beyond.

Given the collaborative nature of the DIN in Peace Studies' academic networks and interdisciplinary cohort design, I see potential for this research to be developed within integrated projects and funding lines such as Horizon and CERV.

I conclude this research project with a GANTT chart outlining envisioned actions and timelines, to be refined with supervisors' support and feedback.

Attività / Trimestre	T1 - Anno 1	T2 - Anno 1	T3 - Anno 1	T4 - Anno 1	T1 - Anno 2	T2 - Anno 2	T3 - Anno 2	T4 - Anno 2	T1 - Anno 3	T2 - Anno 3	T3 - Anno 3	T4 - Anno 3
Momento collegiale iniziale												
Winter School												
Summer School												
Revisione Letteratura												
Piano ricerca												
Mappatura Archivi												
Mappatura attori - database												
Raccolta documenti												
Relazione Annuale												
Strutturazione e codifica documenti												
Contatto intervistati												
Conduzione Interviste												
Fieldwork												
Trascrizione Interviste												
Analisi dei dati - CDA												
Periodo di studio all'estero												
Identificazione co-tutor												
Workshop Interno												
Scrittura capitoli empirici												
Disseminazione pubblica												
Richiesta per Dottore Europeo												
Scrittura capitoli teorici												
Consegna bozza tesi												
Difesa												
Definizione output non accademici												

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