

Kevin J. O'Brien

The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance From Nonviolent Activists

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The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance From Nonviolent Activists, is an engaging work by Kevin J. O'Brien which seeks to address the question of climate change from a new direction. O'Brien's work focuses on climate change as an act of structural violence and the role of nonviolent resistance in climate change. O'Brien, a notable academic in the field of Christian Environmentalism, links climate change to structural violence by suggesting that 'atmospheric changes are structural because they are the result of countless small decisions and developments in politics, economics, and technology' (p. 2). This work explores this position through the novel use of five historically significant Christians in the United States. The inclusion of such individuals and their personal stories of resistance and nonviolence forms the unique attraction of this work. The author's novel approach to the question of climate change contributes favourably to this work and provides the reader with reflections on justice and the individual's role in the world. O'Brien's five historically significant Christian witnesses – John Woolam, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez – who span the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries all practised nonviolent resistance throughout their lives when faced with social and racial struggles. Through these witnesses of nonviolent resistance, O'Brien ties together centuries of struggle to engage the reader in the current issue of climate change.

The structure of this work centres on the wicked problem of climate change and the concept of nonviolent resistance. In the initial chapters, the author allows for a sufficient exploration of the concept of climate change as a wicked problem, along with an explanation of the current landscape of climate change and offers a critique of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The author discusses how 'Paris was both a success and a failure, and which way one sees it depends on what kind of problem one thinks climate change is' (p. 18). Drawing on commentaries that suggest that at the very least politically the Paris Agreement was successful, if indeed it lacked the practical pathways required to achieve its

goals. This act of dissecting the problem of climate change allows for the introduction of six unique perspectives aimed at allowing the reader to develop a more nuanced approach to understand climate change. O'Brien engages with climate change as a scientific problem, an environmental problem, a human problem, a political problem, an economic problem and a religious problem in an effort to broaden the reader's perspective on how climate change is contextualised.

O'Brien argues that 'climate change has been created by generations of decisions from privileged people who seek to make themselves safe and comfortable, who contribute disproportionately to the problem of climate change while tending to avoid its worst effects' (p. 2). This demonstration that societal groups with the most damaging impact on the climate are those who feel the least of the effects is far from a new perspective. This approach reasserts issues of justice while placing the blame on the industrialised nations of the world while also placing the responsibility for action with the reader.

In the remaining chapters of this work, O'Brien offers significant space to the introduction of five witnesses of nonviolent resistance in the United States and designates a chapter each to the lives of John Woolman and moral purity and its limits, Jane Addams and the scales of democracy, Dorothy Day and the faith to love, Martin Luther Jr.'s hope for an uncertain world, and Cesar Chavez and the liberating power of sacrifice. The accounts of the five witnesses are engaging reads in their own right and are fittingly positioned within the context of this work on climate change to add value and a new lens for the reader. O'Brien's engaging and free-flowing style makes this work on climate changes accessible to those outside the traditional climate science disciplines.

Exploring O'Brien's work in more detail requires the selection of one of his carefully chosen Christian witnesses. Examining the life of Jane Addams in more detail allows us to investigate what the Nobel Peace Prize winner offers to issues of climate change. O'Brien argues that Addams' lived experiences in the multicultural community of her Chicago neighbourhood played a key role in allowing her to better 'imagine planetary peace, and negotiating international agreements helped her to better understand the lives of her immigrant neighbors. To resist the violence of climate change, concerned people need to think and work across local and global problems and consider every scale in between'

(p. 92). In the view of the author, what the life of Addams offers is 'that global morality is too unidirectional – if people only seek to expand their attention, then they risk missing the complexities of particular places. Drawing on her pragmatism, I also argue that through moral attention to nonhuman creatures is a vital ultimate goal, it is not immediately important to insist upon it' (p. 108). What Addams offers is an approach that doesn't limit itself to the global and often abstract approaches; her work celebrates diversity and local understandings and community. The author successfully bridges the gap between these five diverse if not similar witnesses and their ability to influence current attitudes and approaches to climate change. In the case of Jane Addams, her commitment to democracy across diverse scales is a prominent feature of this work.

This work offers a new direction to what O'Brien acknowledges as the wicked problem of climate change and its potential to be a problem that we shall not solve. This could suggest that action is worthless; however, O'Brien avers the contrary and argues that 'there is a great deal that privileged people in the industrialized world can and should do if we learn from five witnesses who demonstrate resistance against structural violence' (p. 197). In its essence, this book is a call to resist. To resist the structural violence that O'Brien identifies climate change to be. O'Brien concludes that all of the chosen witnesses left a body of work that was incomplete. In their experiences, the individual examples of structural violence which they faced were undefeated and the need for resistance remains a constant.

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