Srdja Popović in conversation with Yogendra Yadav: "Every non-violent struggle supports the same principle – it becomes efficient the moment people take it personally"

*The first LSE India Summit took place in Goa 28-30 January 2016, and featured a wide range of panellists exploring topics from civil society to infrastructure challenges in India. During a pause in the conference, speakers **Srdja Popović** and **Yogendra Yadav** met to discuss political theory and the practicalities of fostering non-violent mass movements in the 21st Century.*

YY: Srjda we've had almost the opposite trajectory: you started as a student political activist, and have become something of a political theorist. I started as a as a political theorist, and am today seen to be a political activist. One thing we've both agreed is that political science doesn't make sense. Why don't we start by talking about that?

SP: Politics is a skill, and coming from a natural science background into the Serbian politics, it was a necessity: the regime was so bad that there were only two choices: you could fight, or you could flee. When you get involved in the fight then you learn things along the way.

The good thing about the people coming from natural science backgrounds is that we do experiment and this is how activists learn. My book is also about learning: you learn from your successes, and you learn even better from your mistakes.

YY: Political scientists often think they are being very scientific when they do what they do. But when I made a transition to activism, I realised that politics is prospective, and political science is retrospective. It tells you how to do a post-mortem, but it doesn't tell you which medicine to give for which disease. Politics is, as you said, a skill. Political science is strictly understanding. It doesn't tell you what to do. So when I graduated as a student of political science the one thing I did not know very much about was politics.
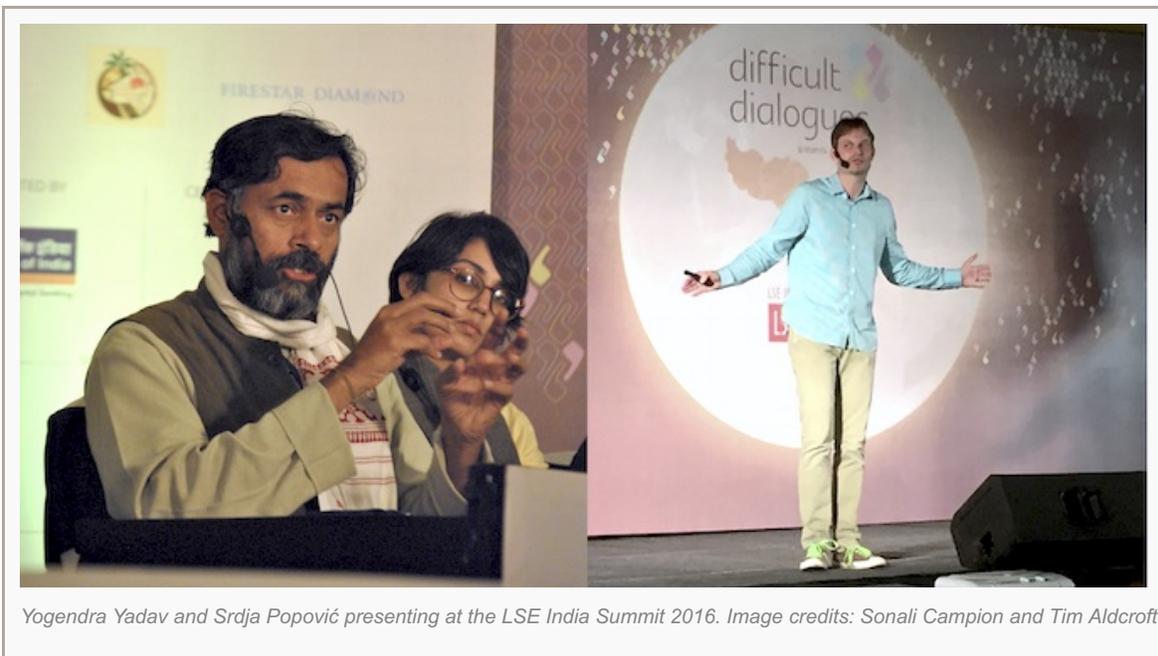
Yogendra Yadav and Srdja Popović presenting at the LSE India Summit 2016. Image credits: Sonali Campion and Tim Aldcroft.

SP: Exactly, I used to teach a course in a political science university in Belgrade, and I was amazed how little people know about the practical things, the campaign, the mobilisation, the volunteer management – all of these

things which we learn by doing. So they were very aware about how the car works, and how the combustion engine works, and how you shift the gears, but they couldn't drive the car.

But this dilemma you posed is something we always observe through the combination of understanding politics and activism. The way the non-violence struggle works is that you need to mobilise numbers. How? You need to understand what's important for the people, because people will join the movement only if it based on the things they consider important. In other words, it was not really the colonialism and anti-colonialism idea in India, it was the salt that mobilised the people because everybody needed salt, which was part of Gandhi's strategic genius.

The issue with politicians is very often they think they know what the vision of tomorrow should be. They go to the people and tell them, as opposed to the popular movements, which go and listen to the people. What is it that will make you, my friend, spend time, and energy, and money and take risk – *invest* – into this movement?

YY: That said, the strange thing is how little activists actually listen to the people, because they think they are with the people, they speak on behalf of the people, and they construct a reality around themselves. Say I'm a farmer activist, I claim to know what is in their interest, and I know what should be in their interest, and I therefore think it's below my dignity to actually speak to a farmer.

SP: Your activist highness!

YY: Exactly! Something else struck me when you were talking about Gandhi, you see the interesting thing is that Indians love to speak about Gandhi. They speak about him all the time.

SP: Of course, you should be proud, he was a genius.

YY: The interesting thing is how much of attention is paid to one aspect of Gandhi. Everyone raises him into a moralist, "Gandhi: non violence, Gandhi: purity, Gandhi: ethics, Gandhi: morality". All that is right. But what they never care to see is that he was a great advertising genius. What made Gandhi into Gandhi was not because he was for truth, not because he was for non-violence. He was great, he did very nice things…

SP: …but he was a great strategist and a tactician.

YY: Absolutely, he in a sense choreographed every single thing that he did. In the salt march that you spoke about, Gandhi had almost like a film director decided every single step.

SP: That brings us to the world of political theory, and ethics. The difference between non-violent movement and non-violent protest is the core values. So obviously Gandhi has the core values, the right of self-determination, being non-violent, that's great. But when you look at the very different struggles, Serbs and Indians, we are different, with different colour of skin, different gods, different history, but the same principles apply. You'll never win without mapping your battleground, you'll never win without identifying potential allies, you will win by listening to the people and putting something into their vision because they will follow if there is something there for them. Then you need a strategy and you need reliable tactics. So what really struck me the most talking to the people here is how little we all know about this technology.

The basic idea is you want to make everybody participate. Not only because of your selfish goal that you will win by numbers, but the change is as durable as the number of people involved in the change. This is very simple maths, the reason why Serbs have free and fair elections, it's not in the fact we ousted Milošević, yes we fought bravely, he was the Butcher of the Balkans, all the ethical side of things. But he stole votes. The moment he started stealing votes it turned from political into very personal. It's like someone stealing your wallet, it becomes between you and the state. So the moment the people defended the vote, the free and fair elections became a durable change in Serbia. I always assume the Serbian politicians wouldn't have anything against manipulating the vote but they know there is a huge price tag on it.

So every struggle, wherever you look at it, supports the same principle, but the moment it becomes efficient is the moment people take it personally.

YY: That in a sense is what in India the national movement succeeded in doing. It ended up making it very personal for everyone.

There are two things that we need to pick up. These are my dilemmas, coming from a democratic socialist tradition, which is convinced about the merits of non-violence, the question is only of how to do it.

Firstly, how do we practice this non-violent protest in a society which is so large in scale, so diverse in its publics, and in society where no one channel of communication binds us all? There are mobile phones now, but that probably reaches two thirds of India. Television reaches half of India. So, scale, diversity and absence of single message. Secondly, what is the role of the political party, party as an agent of change? Is it more effective to be a political party or not to be a political party?

SP: The first question, India is a huge society and thoroughly diverse – I wouldn't dare give any advice on how to do things in India! But how it is done everywhere else is that you have a process in which you listen to a lot of diverse social groups, you put them on a spectrum of allies and you try to take a look at why the different social and political and ethnic and geographical and business groups will join your movement. What the smallest common denominator that will gather the majority of the people around the idea?

Sometimes it is something very simple. I mentioned the case of Harvey Milk being the first openly gay elected politician in the United States. He understood it was dog's poop that he needed to solve: very often this answer is not something very high and very ideological, it's something very down to earth that will unite people. Like salt in the salt march.

When we talk about the messenger, the real problem of modern communication, whether it's television or the internet, is that people are measuring everything quantitatively. The fact that you've got three hundred thousand, three million, in India probably thirty or thirty five million, views of something doesn't necessarily mean you're affecting things. Finding the way to move from the virtual space into the real space is the key, as opposed to getting a lot of Likes and a lot of Shares. Because the virtual world is not where you are fighting the struggle.

Second, and the most tricky thing, is who is the most suitable carrier or agent of change? And of course, the answer is "it depends". It took us 10 years in Serbia was to understand that the only way to win was to unify divided opposition parties, a separated civil rights community and brave but small in number student groups. So even if we hated the political parties, we needed to find a way to bring them to the table. That gets us back to the principles, whenever you wage a non-violent struggle, you need to tackle the three main principles: unity, planning and non-violent discipline.

YY: That's right. And even non-violent discipline is not all that easy. It doesn't come from history books, every generation has to learn it afresh. Which is what, in a sense, our challenge is today. We've been through the Ana Hazare/anti-corruption movement. Then came the Aam Aadmi Party, of which I was one of the founders, followed by the experience (at least from my point of view) of the party going the way of every other established political party.

This is when some of us moved out and are trying to think of a way forward. The real question is what is a suitable instrument? We want to be something of a political party, but we don't want to be *just* a political party. How does one use all other organisational forms, the form of an NGO, the form of a movement, a university, and in Indian context there is also the ashram, which is a semi-spiritual space. How do we bring all that space together in a new, different imagination? But it was great fun speaking to you – I've been speaking to your book for the last year so it's been great to talk with you.

SP: And let's continue the dialogue, I think these have been very important questions, and very difficult to answer. I must say, in my experience working with people from different countries is the values are more important than the

form. The form can be the parties, the civil rights groups, the movement, the student groups, the intellectuals, the church groups, the ashram, whatever. If you're clear about the values, then you can take all of these different forms that are only the vehicles to communicate this and to mobilise the people. So thank you for this marvellous experience.

This post is an edited transcript of a recorded conversation. Listen to the full podcast *here*.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our *comments policy* *before posting.*

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