Power and Struggle

part one of:

The Politics of Nonviolent Action

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gene Sharp is Senior Scholar at the Albert Einstein Institution in Boston, Massachusetts. From 1965 he held research appointments in Harvard University's Center for International Affairs for nearly thirty years. He is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Dr. Sharp has been called "the Clausewitz of nonviolent warfare" and "the Machiavelli of nonviolence." He founded the Albert Einstein Institution in 1983 to promote research, policy studies, and education on the strategic uses of nonviolent struggle in the face of dictatorships, war, genocide, and oppression.

He holds the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Theory from Oxford University (1968), and a Master of Arts in Sociology (1951) and a Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences (1949) from Ohio State University. He holds two honorary doctorates and has received other honors.

He lived for ten years in England and Norway. He did advanced studies at Oxford University and in Norway he held positions at the University of Oslo and the Institute for Social Research.

Dr. Sharp is the author of various books and many other publications on nonviolent struggle, power, political problems, liberation struggle, dictatorships, and defense policy. His writings have been published in 32 languages.

His books include *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (2005), *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973; Introduction by Thomas C. Schelling), *Making Europe Unconquerable* (1985; Foreword by George F. Kennan), *Civilian-Based Defense* (1990), *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980; Introduction by Senator Mark O. Hatfield), and *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (1979 and 1999; Introduction by Coretta Scott King and Foreword by Frederico Mayor). Sharp's *The Power and Practice of Nonviolent Struggle* (in Tibetan; 1999) carried a Foreword by the Dalai Lama.

His first book, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power* (1960), included a Foreword by Albert Einstein and an Introduction by Bharatan Kumarappa. Sharp is also co-editor of *Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for Independence* (1986) and of *Nonviolent Action: A Research Guide* (1997), as well as a contributor to several encyclopedias.

His recent shorter writings include "From Dictatorship to Democracy" (available in 12 languages; 1993, 2002, and 2003), "The Anti-Coup" (co-author; 2003), and "There Are Realistic Alternatives" (2003).

Dr. Sharp has prepared simplified presentations on the nature of nonviolent struggle and its applications against dictatorships and coups d'état. He has conducted workshops and consulted on strategic nonviolent struggle internationally in severe crisis situations.

He is convinced that pragmatic, strategically planned nonviolent struggle can be made highly effective for application in conflicts to lift oppression and as a substitute for violence.

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Chapter Two
NONVIOLENT ACTION: AN ACTIVE TECHNIQUE OF STRUGGLE

Introduction

by Professor Thomas C. Schelling, Harvard University

The original idea was to subject the entire theory of nonviolent political action, together with a full history of its practice in all parts of the world since the time of Christ, to the same cool, detailed scrutiny that military strategy and tactics are supposed to invite. Now that we have Gene Sharp's book, what we lack is an equally comprehensive, careful study of the politics of violent action.

Violence gets plenty of attention. But purposive violence, violence for political effect, is rarely examined in print with anything like the care and comprehensiveness, the attention to detail and the wealth of historical examples, that Gene Sharp brings to nonviolent action.

It is too bad that we haven't that other book, the one on violent action. It would be good to compare the two in detail. This book's analysis of nonviolent action might be even more impressive if it had a competitor.

Nonviolence can hardly compete with violence in total effect–it rarely produces disasters of the magnitude that violence has made familiar–but what we would want to compare is not some gross potency but the achievement of political purpose and the costs of the achievement. And we would need detailed comparisons in a multitude of contexts, to learn the strengths and weaknesses of both kinds of action in differing circumstances.

The difference is not like the difference between prayer and dynamite. Political violence, like political nonviolence, usually has as its purpose making somebody do something or not do something or stop doing something. The aim is to influence behavior. Violent action tries to do it mainly by intimidating people–large numbers or a few, followers or leaders, common citizens or officials. (The people to be intimidated need not be the direct victims of the violence.) The violence does not directly make people behave or perform or participate; it can only make it hurt if they don't. Indeed, the most skillful use of violence may produce, precisely because it is skillful, comparatively little violence.

The violent actions and the nonviolent are different methods of trying to make it unrewarding for people to do certain things, and safe or rewarding to do other things. Both can be misused, mishandled, or misapplied. Both can be used for evil or misguided purposes. "Nonviolent action" furthermore, as developed in this book, is not merely all the kinds of political activity in which violence is absent or unintended; so "violent action" and "nonviolent action" do not exhaust the possibilities. A comparison of the two would not be just a way of picking a favorite, but rather a way of highlighting similarities and differences in different contexts and illuminating political processes themselves.

This book does shed some light on the theory of violent action. The more coercive nonviolent techniques, in particular, have something in common with the techniques based on violence. (They can even entail a latent threat of violence, although often it is the people "nonviolently" posing the threat who would be the victims if violence broke out.)

Discipline, command and control; intelligence about the adversary; careful choice of weapons, targets, terrain and time of day; and, especially, avoiding impetuous recourse to provoked or purposeless violence, are critical to success in violent as in nonviolent action. Most of what are usually called the "principles of war" are chapter headings rather than rules to follow–things like economy, concentration, purpose, initiative, and surprise–and, as topical headings, are about as appropriate to the study of nonviolent action as to the violent.

One of the main differences is that violent action often requires hot blood, while the nonviolent depends more on cool heads. That is why the

violent is so much easier to engage in, but perhaps harder to engage in with a clear and sustained consciousness of purpose. The violent tends to make demands on morale that are incompatible with dispassionate calculation or continual assessment of goals. The victims of violence get to be seen as enemies or criminals. The scoring system is corrupted; and accomplishment comes to be measured negatively, by how much an enemy has been frustrated and hurt, not by how effectively someone has been influenced into accommodating, participating, or whatever it was that the violence was supposed to make him do.

There is probably a corresponding effect in nonviolence, a tendency to count one's own risk and suffering as accomplishment. But in terms of effectiveness, as political action, neither the hurting nor the being hurt should be mistaken as the ultimate goal or the accomplishment of political purpose.

What Gene Sharp's book does at every step is to relate the methods of nonviolent action, and the organizational requirements, the logistics and the leadership and the discipline, the recruitment of members and the choice of targets, to political purpose. Nonviolence as a source of sheer personal gratification gets little attention, just as inflicting pain for its own sake, as sheer retribution, should get little attention in that other book on the politics of violent action.

The book does not attempt to convert you to a new faith. It is not about a compassionate political philosophy that, if only enough of us believed it, would make the walls come tumbling down. It offers insight, by theory and example, into a complex field of strategy. There is a coherence to the theory and an integrity to the book as a whole; but no one has to accept all the principles developed or to assume the author's point of view in order to get a new appreciation of politics and its methods. The book offers insight into the past and it illuminates a multitude of contemporary events that, whether or not they affect us, we are witnesses to. And many of them do affect us. And some of them we are engaged in.

And if the book should fall into the wrong hands, and begin to inform and enlighten our adversaries, we can be doubly thankful for the work Gene Sharp has done. Whatever the contest, there is a good chance that one is better off confronting a skillful and effective recourse to nonviolent action than a savagely ineffectual resort to violence.

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The Nature and Control of Political Power

INTRODUCTION

Unlike utopians, advocates of nonviolent action do not seek to "control" power by rejecting it or abolishing it. Instead, they recognize that power is inherent in practically all social and political relationships and that its control is "the basic problem in political theory"[1] and in political reality. They also see that it is necessary to wield power in order to control the power of threatening political groups or regimes. That assumption they share with advocates of violence, although they part company with them on many other points.

Social power may be briefly defined as the capacity to control the behavior of others, directly or indirectly, through action by groups of people, which action impinges on other groups of people.[2] Political power is that kind of social power which is wielded for political objectives, especially by governmental institutions or by people in opposition to or in support of such institutions. Political power thus refers to the total authority, influ-

ence, pressure and coercion which may be applied to achieve or prevent the implementation of the wishes of the power-holder. In this book, when used alone, the term power is to be understood as referring to political power.

WHAT IS THE BASIC NATURE
OF POLITICAL POWER?

All types of struggle, and all means to control governments or to defend them against attack, are based upon certain basic assumptions about the nature of power. These are not usually explicit. In fact, so little do people stop to think about these assumptions that people are rarely aware of them and would often find it hard to articulate them. This is true of advocates of both nonviolent and violent action. Nevertheless, all responses to the "how" of dealing with an opponent's power are rooted in assumptions about the nature of power. An erroneous or inadequate view of the nature of political power is unlikely to produce satisfactory and effective action for dealing with it.

Basically, there appear to be two views of the nature of power. One can see people as dependent upon the good will, the decisions and the support of their government or of any other hierarchical system to which they belong. Or, conversely, one can see that government or system dependent on the people's good will, decisions and support. One can see the power of a government as emitted from the few who stand at the pinnacle of command. Or one can see that power, in all governments, as continually rising from many parts of the society. One can also see power as self-perpetuating, durable, not easily or quickly controlled or destroyed. Or political power can be viewed as fragile, always dependent for its strength and existence upon a replenishment of its sources by the cooperation of a multitude of institutions and people–cooperation which may or may not continue.

Nonviolent action is based on the second of these views: that governments depend on people, that power is pluralistic, and that political power is fragile because it depends on many groups for reinforcement of its power sources. The first view–that people depend on governments, that political power is monolithic, that it can really come from a few men, and that it is durable and self-perpetuating–appears to underlie most political violence. (A notable exception is guerrilla war in its predominantly political stages.) The argument of this chapter is that the theory of power underlying nonviolent action is sounder and more accurate than the theory underlying

most violent action, especially military struggle. In contrast to the pluralistic-dependency theory of nonviolent action–to which the bulk of this chapter is devoted–we might call this other view the "monolith theory."

The "monolith theory" of power assumes that the power of a government is a relatively fixed *quantum* (i.e. "a discrete unit quantity of energy"), a "given," a strong, independent, durable (if not indestructible), self-reinforcing, and self-perpetuating force. Because of these assumed characteristics, it follows that in open conflict such power cannot in the last analysis be controlled or destroyed simply by people but only by the threat or use of overwhelming physical might. The opponent's power may increase somewhat in the course of the struggle, or it may be somewhat reduced. But it is almost an axiom that in severe crises a hostile government's power can be significantly reduced, obstructed, or demolished only by destructive power–something like blasting chips or chunks off a solid stone block with explosives until it has been brought down to size or obliterated. War is based on this view of the nature of political power: faced with the actual or potential destruction of men, weapons, cities, industries, transport, communications and the like, the enemy will be forced to accept a settlement or to surrender (unless *he* has the greater destructive capacity). Nuclear weapons are the extreme development of the approach to control and combat based on this monolith view of the nature of political power.

If it were true that political power possesses the durability of a solid stone pyramid, then it would also be true that such power could only be controlled by the voluntary self-restraint of rulers (discussed below), by changes in the "ownership" of the monolith (the State)–whether with regular procedures (such as elections) or with irregular ones (regicide or *coup d'état*)*,* or by destructive violence (conventional war). The monolith view would not allow for the possibility of other types of effective pressure and control. But the monolith view of a government's power is quite inaccurate and ignores the nature of the power of any ruler or regime.

Nor can belief in the monolith theory by the rulers themselves make it come true. That theory can only alter reality when both the subjects and the opponents of a regime presenting this monolithic image of itself can be induced to believe the theory. Then, if the "owners" of the monolith refused to grant concessions, dissidents would either have to submit helplessly or resort only to the destructive attack called for by that theory of power. However, since the monolith theory is factually not true, and since *all* governments are dependent on the society they rule, even a regime which believes itself to be a monolith, and *appears* to be one, can be weakened and shattered by the undermining and severance of its sources of power, when people act upon the theory of power presented in this chapter.

If the monolith theory is not valid, but nevertheless forms the basic assumption of modern war and other types of control, the resulting underlying fallacy helps to explain why war and other controls have suffered from disadvantages and limitations. Relying on destructive violence to control political power is regarded by theorists of nonviolent action as being just as irrational as attempting to use a lid to control steam from a caldron, while allowing the fire under it to blaze uncontrolled.

Nonviolent action is based on the view that political power can most efficiently be controlled *at its sources*. This chapter is an exploration of why and how this may be done. It will lead us to basic questions concerning the roots of political power and the nature of government. It will finally lead us to the distinctive way of looking at the problem of how to control power on which nonviolent action rests. This conceptual framework is both old and new.[4] It is rooted in the insights of some of the most respected political thinkers concerned with the nature of society and politics.