The Methods of Nonviolent Action

part two of:

The Politics of Nonviolent Action

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Extending Horizons Books
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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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INTRODUCTION
TO PART TWO

Nonviolent action “works” in very special ways which must be grasped if the technique itself is to be understood, evaluated intelligently, and applied most effectively. These ways diverge significantly from popular assumptions about conflict and struggle—in particular the assumption that violence can be effectively met only with violence.

Nonviolent action is designed to operate against opponents who are able and willing to use violent sanctions.¹ There is no assumption in this technique that such opponents will, when faced with nonviolent action, suddenly renounce their violence, or even that they will consistently restrict their use of violent repression.

However, the use of nonviolent means against violent repression creates a special, asymmetrical, conflict situation, in which the two groups
rely on contrasting techniques of struggle, or “weapons systems”—one on violent action, the other on nonviolent action. To have the best chance of success, the nonviolent actionists must stick with their chosen technique. An extensive, determined and skillful application of nonviolent action will cause the opponent very special problems, which will disturb or frustrate the effective utilization of his own forces. The actionists will then be able to apply something like jiujitsu to their opponent, throwing him off balance politically, causing his repression to rebound against his position, and weakening his power. Furthermore, by remaining nonviolent while continuing the struggle, the actionists will help to improve their own power position in several ways.

It is sometimes assumed that the nonviolent technique inevitably leads to high public exposure and high vulnerability to punishment. Therefore, it is concluded, only a minority of persons is likely to use it. It is true that where nonviolent actionists are few in number and lack the support of majority opinion, the actionists may well be in an exposed and vulnerable position. (The use of violence in such a case would make them even more exposed and vulnerable.) However, the situation is very different where nonviolent actionists are acting in support of general public opinion and themselves constitute a large part of the population. In that situation there is less exposure, and the chances of any one person’s being singled out for punishment may be disproportionately reduced. But the opponent is unlikely to submit meekly.

There should, in fact, be no dismay or surprise at repression: it is often the result of the opponent’s recognition that the nonviolent action is a serious threat to his policy or regime. Nonviolent actionists must be willing to risk punishment as a part of the price of victory. The severity and chances of repression will vary. This risk is not unique to nonviolent action, however. There are also risks when both sides use violence—some similar to and some different from those faced by nonviolent actionists. One difference is that in violent action risks are incurred in the course of attempting to injure or kill the opponents, while in nonviolent action, this is not the case. Some people erroneously understand that to mean that the nonviolent group is helpless. This is not true. This difference in the treatment of the opponent should not lead to feelings of impotence or frustration, especially if the nonviolent actionist understands that remaining nonviolent makes it more possible for him to gain increased control over the opponent, reduce the violence against the nonviolent group, and increase the chances of winning.

The fact is, of course, that repression does not necessarily produce
submission. For sanctions to be effective, they must operate on people’s minds, produce fear, and create willingness to obey. However, lack of fear, or some overriding loyalty or objective, may cause the actionists to persist despite repression. (This is also true in military struggle.) When the nonviolent actionists so persist, the opponent’s problems may be aggravated in a number of ways. Most of his usual means of repression have been designed to deal with violent disobedience and violent rebellion. Because the dynamics and mechanisms of violent and nonviolent struggle differ, however, very different effects will result from repression against nonviolent actionists. For example, men imprisoned in a nonviolent struggle—whether Gandhi, King, Dubček, or students sitting-in at lunch counters—are widely regarded as still in the “front lines,” and not as removed from the battle. Instead of trying to avoid provoking repression, nonviolent actionists may seek to exhaust the opponent’s means of repression—such as by filling the jails—and thus to demonstrate his incapacity to rule even with such means. Repression against nonviolent action may be effective, of course. But depending on conditions, it also may not. If it is not, the opponent may be in difficulties. There will also be other sources of his troubles, however.

The opponent facing nonviolent action may be in a very awkward position if his own policies are hard to justify, if the nonviolent action involves the optimal combination of quality of behavior and number of actionists, and if, in face of repression, the nonviolent group is able to maintain a disciplined and determined persistence in its intended course. If the defiance is widespread or especially daring, the opponent cannot really ignore it without appearing to be helpless in face of defiance and thereby risking its spread. Yet repression may not only not strengthen his position, but may in certain circumstances set in motion forces which may actually weaken it further. These problems may make him wish that the rebels had chosen violent rather than nonviolent means, for violence does not pose the same kind of enforcement problems.

The opponent’s difficulties in coping with nonviolent action do not depend on his being surprised by the nonviolence or on unfamiliarity with the technique. The opponent’s knowledge of the operation of nonviolent struggle, for example, does not on its own give him the capacity to defeat the actionists: as in military conflicts, both sides may seek to utilize for their own ends knowledge of the technique of struggle they are using. With more knowledge, the opponent may become more sophisticated, and perhaps less cruel. But the nonviolent group also may learn how to struggle more skillfully and effectively.

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The opponent’s difficulties in dealing with nonviolent action are primarily associated with the special dynamics and mechanisms of the technique, and their tendency to maximize the influence and power of the nonviolent group while undermining those of the opponent. For example, partly because extremely brutal repression against a nonviolent group is more difficult to justify, the opponent’s repression may be more limited than it would be against a violent rebellion. Furthermore, overreacting in repression may, instead of weakening the resisters, react against sources of the opponent’s own power, and thus weaken his power position. The opponent may therefore prefer that the rebels use violent, rather than nonviolent, action and may deliberately seek to provoke the resisters to violence, perhaps by severe repression intended to break the nonviolent discipline or by spies and agents provocateurs.

If the nonviolent actionists nevertheless maintain their discipline and continue the struggle, and if they involve significant sections of the populace, the results of their behavior may extend far beyond individual example and martyrdom. They may effectively block the opponent’s will and make it impossible for him to carry out his plans, even with the aid of repression. The arrest of leaders may simply reveal that the nonviolent movement can carry on without a recognizable leadership. The opponent may make new acts illegal, only to find that he has opened new opportunities for defiance. He may find that while he has been attempting to repress defiance at certain points, the nonviolent actionists have found sufficient strength to broaden their attack on other fronts to the extent of challenging his very ability to rule. Instead of mass repression forcing cooperation and obedience, he may find that the repression is constantly met by refusal to submit or flee; repression may repeatedly be demonstrated to be incapable of inducing submission. Furthermore, in extreme cases his very agencies of repression may be immobilized by the massive defiance; there may be too many resisters to control, or his own troops may mutiny. All these possible effects are examples of a process which may be called “political jiu-jitsu.”

The nonviolent actionists deliberately refuse to challenge the opponent on his own level of violence. Violence against violence is reinforcing. The nonviolent group not only does not need to use violence, but they must not do so lest they strengthen their opponent and weaken themselves. They must adhere to their own nonviolent “weapons system,” since nonviolent action tends to turn the opponent’s violence and repression against his own power position, weakening it and at the same time strengthening the nonviolent group. Because violent action and nonviolent action possess quite different mechanisms, and induce differing forces of
change in the society, the opponent’s repression—given a maintenance of nonviolent discipline and of persistence in the nonviolent group—can never really come to grips with the kind of power wielded by the nonviolent actionists. Gandhi has compared the situation with that of a man violently striking water with a sword: it was the man’s arm which was dislocated.  

This is part of the reason why it is important for the actionists to maintain nonviolent discipline even in face of brutal repression. By maintaining the contrast between the violent and nonviolent techniques, the nonviolent actionists can demonstrate that repression is incapable of cowing the populace, and they can undermine the opponent’s existing support. This can lead to weakening of his ability or will to continue with the repression and to defend his objectives and position.

To sum up: Repression of a nonviolent group which nevertheless persists in struggle and also maintains nonviolent discipline may have the following effects. As cruelties to nonviolent people increase, the opponent’s regime may appear still more despicable, and sympathy and support for the nonviolent side may increase. The general population may become more alienated from the opponent and more likely to join the resistance. Persons divorced from the immediate conflict may show increased support for the victims of the repression. Although the effect of national and international public opinion varies, it may at times lead to significant political and economic pressures. The opponent’s own citizens, agents, and troops, disturbed by brutalities against nonviolent people, may begin to doubt the justice of his policies. Their initial uneasiness may grow into internal dissent and at times even into such action as strikes and mutinies. Thus, if repression increases the numbers of nonviolent actionists and enlarges defiance, and if it leads to sufficient internal opposition among the opponent’s usual supporters to reduce his capacity to deal with the defiance, it will clearly have rebounded against him. This is political jiu-jitsu at work.

Whether or not this is achieved hinges on the capacity of the nonviolent actionists to continue their struggle by the use of their own “weapons system.” These “weapons,” or specific methods of opposition, are also capable of altering the selected social, economic, or political relationships, whether or not changes in the balance of forces are also produced by political jiu-jitsu. There are a multitude of such methods, which collectively constitute the technique of nonviolent action; it is to a classification of these to which the focus of this study now shifts.

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Such a classification is useful in a number of ways. For one thing, it assists us in understanding better the nature of the nonviolent technique, while also revealing very clearly the important distinctions and classes which exist within it. Some methods are basically symbolic actions, some involve a withdrawal of particular types of cooperation, others are largely direct interventions in a conflict situation. Classification also reveals the very large number and variety of methods of action the technique encompasses; the present listing is certainly not exhaustive. The terminological refinement and definition of specific methods will also make possible future comparative analyses of the operation of different methods, or of the same method in different situations. In addition, a detailed classification provides something of a checklist of the main methods of nonviolent action thus far practiced. Such a listing may assist actionists in the selection of methods most appropriate for use in a particular situation. It may also give groups faced with nonviolent opposition an idea of the methods which may be used against them, possibly reducing nervousness and brutalities. In addition, the list may give researchers and persons evaluating the political potentialities of the nonviolent technique a greater grasp of its armory of methods of struggle.

The broad classification of the particular methods of action under the general categories of protest and persuasion, noncooperation and intervention ought not to be regarded as rigid, but simply as generally valid. In particular circumstances one method may more correctly fall into a different category than the one under which it is classified in this study. In some situations one method may in the course of action develop into another, so there is no clear dividing line between them. Or two distinct methods may in a particular case be so closely combined as to be inseparable, even for analytical purposes.

Neither should the listing of specific methods be regarded as complete for all time. Doubtless some have been missed altogether, and a number of unlisted variations exist on those methods which are included. Perhaps more important, new forms of nonviolent action may be deliberately developed or improvised in the course of struggle. The “reverse strike,” for example, in which people do without pay additional work they are not expected to do, is probably only about twenty years old. The examples of the specific methods offered in these chapters should be regarded as only illustrative. They are not intended to be representative, either geographically or historically, and they include both “successful” and “unsuccessful” cases. They do, however, indicate something of the widely differing historical, political and cultural conditions under which the tech-
nique of nonviolent action has already been used. Further research could
doubtless provide additional examples from many cases not even mentioned
in this study.

Which methods will be used in a particular case, and how many of them,
will vary widely depending on such factors as 1) the traditions of the people
involved; 2) the extent and depth of the knowledge of, and experience with,
methods of nonviolent action possessed by the general population, the direct
participants in the struggle and their leaders; 3) the general social and political
situation; 4) the degree of repression which the general population, the ac-
tionists and the leaders are prepared to suffer; 5) the nature of the opponent’s
objectives; 6) the resources at the opponent’s disposal (including his adminis-
trative system, agents of repression, and so on); 7) the degree of ruthlessness
the opponent is prepared to use; 8) the degree of the opponent’s dependence on
members of the nonviolent opposition; 9) the numbers of participating action-
ists and the degree of support they receive from the population; 10) the quality
of the actionists and leaders; 11) the nature of the grievance; and 12) the physi-
cal details of the specific situation in which action is contemplated.

Let us now turn to an examination of our first category of the methods of
this technique: nonviolent protest and persuasion.

NOTES

1. Cases in which both sides use nonviolent means are discussed in Chapter
Eleven.
3. The terms “method” and “form” are used interchangeably here, although
generally “method” is used and recommended. There are precedents for the
use of these terms in the way we apply them here. Joan Bondurant (Conquest
of Violence, p. 36) uses the phrase “forms of nonviolent action” to describe
the phenomena discussed in these chapters. Carl von Clausewitz (On War,
[New York: Barnes and Noble, 1956, and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,
1956], vol. I, pp. 125 and 166, and vol. II, p. 409) refers to those types of ac-
tion in war which are in their relationship to the over-all struggle roughly
comparable to these “forms” in nonviolent struggles as “methods.” Despite the
vast differences between military and nonviolent struggles there is sufficient
similarity in the role of the respective “methods” or “forms” in the over-all conflict to justify, and for clarity even require, the use of the same or similar terminology.

4. This catalog of methods of nonviolent action has no precedent in the literature. There are, however, separate listings of various types of strikes and of economic boycotts in the literature, and these are cited in the appropriate chapters. But for nonviolent action as a general technique, earlier listings were extremely limited. See, for example, Shridharani, War Without Violence, pp. 28-62 (fifteen methods, at least two of which “negotiations and arbitration” and “self-purification” are not classified within the technique here), and Lindberg, Jacobsen and Ehrlich, Kamp Uden Vaaben, p. 10 (seven methods, including sabotage which is excluded here, some of which are here discussed in whole chapters).