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### Theory and backfire

In the previous chapters, the phenomenon of backfire has been presented through case studies, from massacres to dismissals. These many examples reveal a remarkable regularity: perpetrators of injustice use the same five methods of inhibiting outrage. The details vary from case to case: devaluation of protesters at Sharpeville is different from denigration of a whistleblower and in turn is different from demonization of Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, each of the case studies gives additional insights, as discussed in the next chapter. But, despite differences, the commonalities are striking.

My approach to backfire has been to closely examine case studies and develop a framework that fits the data. This is an example of what is called "grounded theory": the theory is built up from observations.<sup>1</sup> Observations alone cannot dictate how they are explained: in developing grounded theory, the researcher draws on a repertoire of concepts, relationships, and ways of thinking drawn from personal experience, reading, and interactions with others. That is what I have done. I started with Gene Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu — discussed later in this chapter — and examined techniques that could inhibit or enhance the jiu-jitsu effect. Then I tested these ideas on a range of case studies, using them to extend and refine the framework.

The backfire model highlights tactics used in situations involving perceived injustice or norm violations. Tactics can be thought of as options for action. For example, employees who are treated unfairly respond in various

ways — for example by acquiescing, quitting their jobs, requesting explanations, counter-attacking, seeking union support, and making complaints through internal grievance procedures — each of which can be considered a tactic. Activists know a lot about tactics in practice, including how to carry them out and whether they are likely to be effective. Surprisingly, though, researchers seem not to have devoted much attention to classifying and analyzing tactics. The reasons for this are not obvious.

In this chapter, I look at how the backfire model relates to various bodies of social theory. Exploring these connections can offer insight into both backfire dynamics and the phenomena that are the focus of the other theories. A theory is just a framework for thinking about the world, and each framework has strengths and weaknesses. By exploring a range of theories for a particular issue, it is possible to gain greater insight, though at the risk of confusion from a proliferation of perspectives. It is important to keep one's purpose in mind, so examination of theory does not become an end in itself, separate from the real issues we must deal with in the world.

Some theories are clear, precise, and limited in domain; others are ambiguous, complex, and sprawling, which for some purposes can be an advantage. When it comes to comparing theories about social dynamics, some messiness is to be expected. Concepts seldom line up in regular ways, and, given that theories contain numerous concepts, relating two theories can be challenging. Because of these difficulties, the way I've arranged topics in this chapter is somewhat arbitrary: there is no ideal way to traverse diverse bodies of theory, some of which relate to backfire as an outcome, some of which relate to the essential conditions for backfire, and some of which

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1. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago : Aldine-Atherton, 1967).

relate to methods of inhibition and amplification.

I start with the antecedents of backfire in theories of nonviolent action as developed by Mohandas Gandhi, Richard Gregg, and Gene Sharp. Then I look at the two key requirements for backfire, a perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences. For dealing with injustice, I start with the ideas of Barrington Moore, Jr. and then introduce Albert Bandura's model of moral disengagement and Stanley Cohen's study of denial by individuals and governments. For dealing with communication, I look at communication technology and the role of the media. Next, I compare the backfire model to a number of bodies of theory, on unanticipated consequences, agenda management, social problems, and social movements. Then I mention theories relating to each of the methods of inhibiting and amplifying outrage. Finally, I comment briefly on studying backfire.

To begin, it is useful to return to the classic cases of Sharpeville, Dili, and Dharasana, in which one side had an overwhelming superiority in the means of violence and used it against opponents who were largely unarmed and peaceful. Many people believe violence is the definitive means of getting one's way and that the only way to stop a violent person or an aggressive military force is to threaten or use violence. Yet at Sharpeville, Dili, and Dharasana, the attacks turned out to be seriously counterproductive, leading to increased support for those who were attacked. These cases are a challenge to conventional wisdom about violence. They suggest that being peaceful, indeed refusing to use violence, can be a powerful tool against attackers in the right circumstances. How can this paradoxical effect be explained?

## Gandhi

In answering this question, the first port of call is Mohandas Gandhi, the pioneer of strategic nonviolent action. To explain Gandhi's contribution, a bit of context is useful.

For centuries before Gandhi, numerous social struggles throughout the world had been

waged using nonviolent methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, and various other forms of protest and noncooperation. For example, from about 1850 to 1867, Hungarians used nonviolent methods — setting up their own political, economic, cultural, and educational institutions — to build autonomy within the Austrian empire.<sup>2</sup> From 1898 to 1905, Finns used nonviolent methods to oppose domination by the Russian empire.<sup>3</sup> Through these and other campaigns, there was quite a bit of practical experience in using nonviolent action.

These early nonviolent struggles were carried out on an ad hoc basis, without a well-developed set of ideas to guide action. Gandhi's contribution was to conceptualize nonviolence as a method of struggle. He opposed violence as a matter of principle, but he was also acutely aware that nonviolent action, to be effective, needed to be used in specific ways. Before taking action, it was necessary to mobilize popular concern about injustice. Committed individuals had to be convinced about the need to take action, but not just any action. To be effective, solidarity was required, especially in the face of repression. Participants had to be highly principled and self-controlled, because any use of violence on their side could discredit the cause.

Gandhi was a master of strategic planning.<sup>4</sup> As described in chapter 4, the salt march, by focusing on a potent symbol of British oppression, mobilized millions of Indians. The drama of the lengthy march heightened expectations.

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2. Tamás Csapody and Thomas Weber, "Hungarian Passive Resistance against Austria and its Place in the History of Nonviolence," *Peace & Change*, in press.

3. Steven Duncan Huxley, *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland: Finnish "Passive Resistance" against Russification as a Case of Nonmilitary Struggle in the European Resistance Tradition* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1990).

4. Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979).

The British were placed in a bind: either capitulate to Gandhi's polite but assertive demands, or respond with force and risk causing widespread outrage, as well as violating their own reputation for fair play. In earlier campaigns, such as in Hungary and Finland, nonviolent action had been used in an instinctive way; Gandhi turned nonviolence into a strategy, namely a systematic, calculated way of using available resources to move towards a desired goal.

Gandhi was not the first person to conceptualize nonviolent action. Well before the salt march, some prominent individuals had advocated nonviolent methods. The famous nineteenth century author Leo Tolstoy was a pacifist and urged rejection of all violence. During World War I, prominent philosopher Bertrand Russell advocated nonviolent resistance as an alternative to military defense.<sup>5</sup> So Gandhi was not new in his advocacy of nonviolence. His great contribution was combining advocacy with the practice of nonviolent action. He was a leader as well as a thinker and strategist.

A note on terminology: I have been using the expressions "nonviolence," "nonviolent action," and "nonviolent struggle." This is standard language today for referring to methods of action such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and fasts. These are methods that both go beyond conventional political action (voting, lobbying, writing, speaking) and avoid physical violence against opponents. A century ago, these terms were not in use. What today is called nonviolent action was then often called "nonresistance" or "passive resistance." Gandhi thought these terms were misleading. The methods he supported involved resistance, but they were active. So he sponsored a competition for a new expression, a process that led to the word "satyagraha," literally "truth force" but also translated as

nonviolent action. For ease of understanding, I usually use contemporary expressions such as "nonviolent action" when describing earlier campaigns, even though people at that time used different language.<sup>6</sup>

Although Gandhi was the pioneer of strategic nonviolence and was a prolific writer, he was not a highly organized thinker. His vast corpus of writings contains many insights, but nowhere did he systematically spell out the basic principles and dynamics of nonviolent action. The best way to understand his methods is to look at his practice, especially at his most effective campaigns. Fortunately there are some writers and researchers who have perceptively extracted Gandhi's insights about nonviolence.<sup>7</sup> These writers might be called interpreters of Gandhi, remembering that in the process of explaining someone else's ideas, some aspects are emphasized, others neglected, and new insights added.

### Gregg

Richard Gregg, from the United States, was one of the earliest and most perceptive interpreters of Gandhi. A supporter of organized labor, Gregg watched the failure of massive strike campaigns in the early 1920s, seeing the failure of both violence and government action to solve industrial problems. After reading about Gandhi and becoming inspired, in 1925 Gregg set off for India in search of a better alternative. He spent four years in India, including seven months at Gandhi's ashram. On the basis of his observations, he wrote several books explaining Indian ideas for Western audiences.

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5. Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-violence* (New York: Bergman, 1967); Bertrand Russell, "War and Non-resistance," *Atlantic Monthly* 116 (August 1915): 266–74.

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6. On early terminology, see Huxley, *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland*.

7. As well as Richard Gregg, these include Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: the Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939).

Gregg's most influential piece of writing was a book titled *The Power of Nonviolence*.<sup>8</sup> First published in 1934, it was widely read in pacifist circles and beyond, and in the 1950s was influential in the U.S. civil rights movement, being cited by Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the five books most important in shaping his ideas.<sup>9</sup> The book is a classic work that can offer insights to readers today.

*The Power of Nonviolence* discusses examples of nonviolent action, how mass nonviolent action can be effective, nonviolence as a substitute for war, and training for nonviolence. Each of these topics is worthy of attention, but here I focus on a particular contribution by Gregg: his concept of "moral jiu-jitsu." Though Gregg's approach has weaknesses — discussed later — I present his views here because they laid the foundation for later developments.

Gregg noted that when a person uses violence against someone else, if the other person responds with violence, this gives "reassurance and moral support" to the original attacker. That's because the attacker's moral values are not challenged. However, if the target of violence does not use violence, then the "attacker loses his moral balance" while the defender maintains moral balance. Gregg called this process moral jiu-jitsu, an analogy with the martial art of jiu-jitsu in which the opponents' strength and energy are used against them.

Gregg gave several reasons why moral jiu-jitsu works. The first is surprise: when faced with nonviolence, the attacker is caught unawares. The second is that nonviolence stimulates kindness in the attacker, which conflicts with the attacker's anger. The third is that an audience, if present, sees the attacker's

loss of prestige due to a resort to violence, leading the attacker to lose self-respect and self-assurance. The fourth is that the attackers become more suggestible to new ideas, in particular to the views of the resister. In summary, moral jiu-jitsu succeeds by taking the moral initiative, not being surprised, conserving energy (by not requiring anger), and not being suggestible.

Note that all of these effects are psychological. Yet Gregg provided no direct evidence of any such effect. He did not do psychological experiments with attackers, nor did he systematically examine their behavior using psychological models. Gregg *assumed*, rather than demonstrated, that nonviolence succeeds by affecting the attacker's emotions.

Gandhi was the inspiration for Gregg's analysis. Gandhi treated satyagraha as a moral process, which worked by converting the opponent to the view of the satyagrahi, or nonviolent activist. In essence, Gregg brilliantly repackaged Gandhi's views in terms of western ideas about psychology, thus making them understandable by and more plausible to western readers.

The weaknesses of Gregg's — and Gandhi's — assumptions about how nonviolence operates were pinpointed by Gandhian scholar Thomas Weber, who carried out a detailed analysis of the salt march, more than half a century after the event.<sup>10</sup> Weber pointed out that when the police, armed with lathis, brutally assaulted nonresisting satyagrahis at Dharasana, the police did not become converted by the satyagrahis' nonviolence. For these police, moral jiu-jitsu did not seem to apply. There is no evidence that they were surprised, were stimulated to feel kindly emotions, lost self-respect, or became more suggestible. Some of the police were appar-

8. Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, 2d ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1966).

9. Joseph Kip Kosek, "Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1318–48, is an excellent examination of Gregg's work and influence.

10. Thomas Weber, *On the Salt March: The Historiography of Gandhi's March to Dandi* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1997). See also Thomas Weber, "'The Marchers Simply Walked Forward until Struck Down': Nonviolent Suffering and Conversion," *Peace & Change* 18 (July 1993): 267–89.

ently provoked by the nonresistance of the satyagrahis and became even more frenzied in their beatings. This is compatible with increased anger, not what Gregg had presumed.

Weber decided that, in the case of the salt march, nonviolence worked primarily through a different means: by winning over observers, including those who heard about the events second-hand. These third parties were the key to the potency of the salt march campaign.

Gregg was actually quite aware that onlookers could be won over by nonviolence. But he treated this as a secondary means by which nonviolence could produce positive emotions in the attacker. Weber, in contrast, pointed to the reaction of the audience as central to the jiu-jitsu effect of nonviolence.

In summary, Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* was a pioneering book, especially by explaining and reconceptualizing Gandhi's ideas for a western audience. For understanding the core dynamics of nonviolent action, Gregg made two crucial contributions. First, he developed the concept of moral jiu-jitsu, highlighting the possibility that violence could rebound against the attacker. Second, he noted the potential role of the audience: nonviolent action could be seen as a performance. Though Gregg's analysis has important limitations, these two contributions have continuing relevance.

## Sharp

Gandhi has remained a pivotal influence on nonviolence research and action. One of the many people influenced by Gandhi was Gene Sharp. Born in the United States in 1928, Sharp became a pacifist and in 1953 spent nine months in prison for refusing military service. As he studied nonviolence in more depth and began a career as a researcher, Sharp gradually moved away from his Gandhian roots and developed a distinctively different conception of nonviolent action.<sup>11</sup>

11. Thomas Weber, "Nonviolence is Who? Gene Sharp and Gandhi," *Peace & Change* 28, (April 2003): 250–70.

Gandhi's conception of satyagraha was deeply moral. For him, violence was a violation of basic humanity, whereas nonviolence was an expression of the highest principles, part of an entire way of life. Accordingly, Gandhi's approach is often called *principled* nonviolence.

Sharp developed an alternative approach that can be called *pragmatic* nonviolence.<sup>12</sup> Rather than being a moral imperative, for Sharp nonviolent action should be used because it is effective. Whereas for Gandhi, nonviolence was a way of life, for Sharp, nonviolent action is a practical tool for waging struggle. Sharp argues for nonviolence on the grounds that it is more effective than violence. The moral superiority of nonviolence is shunted to the background.

Sharp's pragmatic conception can and should be assessed on its own merits, but it is worth noting its affinities with western sentiments. In western secular society, it may be argued, principled stances have long been in the decline, replaced with a practical orientation. Doing what's necessary to get the job done is seen as acceptable, even admirable, even though principles may be compromised or jettisoned. Especially in English-speaking countries, theory is commonly subordinated to practical action. Whatever works is given priority. Even widely supported principles, such as freedom and democracy, become rhetoric rather than principles, and are mouthed tactically to achieve results. This contrast between principles and pragmatism is easily overdrawn, but is useful for pointing out how Sharp's ideas diverge from Gandhi's.

Today, Sharp is widely regarded as the world's leading nonviolence researcher. His crowning achievement was the book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, published in 1973.<sup>13</sup> In it, he expounded a theory of power

12. The distinction between principled and pragmatic nonviolence was ably expounded by Judith Stiehm, "Nonviolence is Two," *Sociological Inquiry* 38 (Winter 1968): 23–30.

13. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). See

that explains the effectiveness of nonviolent action. He presented 198 different methods of nonviolent action, such as mock awards, symbolic sounds, excommunication, collective disappearance, producers' boycott, peasant strike, working-to-rule strike, blocking of lines of command and information, nonviolent air raids, guerrilla theatre, and overloading of administrative systems. Reading through the methods listed by Sharp, along with the historical examples he uses to illustrate them, helps dispel the idea that nonviolent action means just rallies or sit-ins.

Also covered in the book is what Sharp calls the "dynamics of nonviolent action." Sharp looked at a wide range of nonviolent campaigns and distilled their common elements, ending up with a set of stages or features that constitute the dynamics of nonviolent action. First is laying the groundwork, followed by a challenge that leads to repression. To be successful, activists must maintain solidarity and nonviolent discipline. If they do, then attacks on them can result in what Sharp calls "political jiu-jitsu." Successful nonviolent action results in a redistribution of power, including empowerment of activists themselves. Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action, emerging from a close examination of nonviolent campaigns, can be treated as a form of grounded theory.

My attention here is on the process of political jiu-jitsu. Sharp describes it this way:

By combining nonviolent discipline with solidarity and persistence in struggle, the nonviolent actionists cause the violence of the opponent's repression to be exposed in the worst possible light. This, in turn, may lead to shifts in opinion and then to shifts in power relationships favorable to the nonviolent group. These shifts result from withdrawal of support for the opponent and

the grant of support to the nonviolent actionists.<sup>14</sup>

Sharp says political jiu-jitsu affects three groups: third parties not directly involved in the conflict; the attacker's supporters; and the "general grievance group," namely those who support the goals of the nonviolent actionists. In the case of the Sharpeville massacre, third parties included foreign governments and non-government organizations plus groups within South Africa not implicated in the struggle for or against black equality; the attacker's supporters included the South African government, the police, and much of the white population; and the general grievance group was the oppressed black population.

Most of Sharp's treatment of political jiu-jitsu consists of examples of how repression of nonviolent resisters can affect various groups. He does not delve into why political jiu-jitsu occurs: the quote above is pretty much the extent of his analysis. In a footnote, he distinguishes political jiu-jitsu from Gregg's moral jiu-jitsu. Gregg focused on psychological effects of nonviolence on the attacker. Sharp accepts these may occur, but says these are "part of a much broader process" involving social and political processes.<sup>15</sup> According to Sharp, Gregg "emphasizes the mechanism of conversion and gives very little consideration to the wider social, economic, and political pressures, often coercive, which may be involved in nonviolent action."<sup>16</sup> Sharp agrees with Gregg that a jiu-jitsu process can occur, but says it operates not just at the individual level, through conversion of individual attackers, but also through social, economic, and political processes. These processes are collective as well as individual.

Sharp makes the point that not all nonviolent struggles involve political jiu-jitsu. Nonviolent action can be effective by persuading or discouraging oppressors, who

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also Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005).

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14. Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 657.

15. *Ibid.*, 698.

16. *Ibid.*, 703.

may decide attacking is counterproductive or futile. In Eastern Europe in 1989, governments held an overwhelming superiority in the ability to exercise force, but in the face of mass protests, most leaders decided to capitulate rather than attack.

By adopting a new label, “political jiu-jitsu,” Sharp emphasizes how his conception differs from Gregg’s. Through many examples, he illustrates the wide range of social, political, and economic processes potentially involved. For Sharp, political jiu-jitsu is embedded in a wider dynamic of nonviolent action that he sees as a pragmatic process for waging struggles more effectively than using violence. However, Sharp does not give much attention to the essential conditions for political jiu-jitsu, nor to its relevance to situations outside the framework of nonviolent action.

## Injustice

What is required for political jiu-jitsu to occur? One crucial factor is a feeling of outrage, shock, or disgust. Sharp simply assumes, without comment, that people will be upset by violent attacks on nonviolent protesters.

However, not all people react in the same way to an event. Consider an event such as the Dili massacre. Some who witnessed it or found out about it became so passionately aroused that they felt driven to take an open stand against the perpetrators. Others were highly disturbed and receptive to initiatives by others. Yet others were not concerned enough to do anything, but nevertheless revised their opinions of the perpetrators. Then there were those who tried to ignore information about the massacre or who just didn’t care. On the other hand, some thought the shootings were an unfortunate mistake or that they were fully justified, and perhaps a few thought the soldiers should have killed even more people.

It is important to remember that even apparently cold-blooded murder can seem acceptable to many of the killers and some observers. Nazi death camp guards were willing to witness and perpetrate horrendous atrocities without any apparent revulsion, although in

the rest of their lives these same individuals behaved much like family and friends in conventional roles and occupations. A small percentage of soldiers are or become hardened to killing, some of them enjoying it. Only a few centuries ago in Europe, public executions and torture were routine. History reveals a human capacity for cruelty and barbarity, and complacently witnessing them, found in few other species.

Fortunately, though, only some individuals become indifferent to or enamored with violence, at least so far as personal participation is concerned. Evidence exists that most soldiers prefer to avoid harming their enemies. Many soldiers would rather be killed than kill. For example, in World War II, only a quarter of U.S. soldiers on the front line in Western Europe actually fired their rifles, and many of those who did fire did not aim at the enemy. Training in the U.S. Army since then has used psychological techniques to increase the firing rate.<sup>17</sup>

If many soldiers are reluctant to kill enemy troops who are trying to kill them, then they are likely to be even more reluctant to kill peaceful protesters. The history of nonviolent action provides many examples of this. In 1986 in the Philippines, there was a nonviolent uprising against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets of Manila: ironically, the peaceful demonstrators defended military defectors from armed attack by the regime’s main forces. Because of the crowd, pilots refused to attack the defectors.<sup>18</sup>

In 1991, opponents of a coup in the Soviet Union congregated around the Russian parliament building, which became the centre of resistance. A special assault team was instructed to take over the building, but the team refused

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17. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

18. Monina Allarye Mercado, ed., *People Power: An Eyewitness History: The Philippine Revolution of 1986* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1987).

to act because it would have meant large numbers of civilian deaths.<sup>19</sup>

These examples testify to a widespread reluctance to harm others, especially when the others are not causing harm themselves. Society could hardly operate otherwise. Human cooperation is necessary for production of necessities, rearing children, and learning, among many other activities. If every second person was prone to use violence without provocation or restraint, society as we know it would not be possible. Therefore it is not surprising unprovoked attacks are widely condemned.

Social historian Barrington Moore, Jr. in his book *Injustice* examines the ways people in different societies respond to certain things as unjust.<sup>20</sup> From his observations, he draws some important conclusions. Moore starts with an example: a man hits another man in the face, without any justification. (It's not a boxing match, for example.) The victim will feel moral outrage because the attack was unjustified. The feeling would be much the same if it was a man striking a woman, or a woman striking a man or another woman. The anger felt by the victim is due to the violation of a moral code, namely that a person should not assault another without justification. It's also possible to feel anger about an inappropriate moral code. Workers might well feel angry about a rule that allowed bosses to kick them in the shins at any time.

Moore argues that the sense of injustice is shaped by human biology, which sets limits on and influences the direction of moral codes. For example, no moral code exists that requires people to kill other humans on sight, because any group with such a code would never survive. Moore thinks it is plausible that some situations may generate a sense of social injustice in every society. He gives criteria for

determining if a situation does this: it generates outrage in western society and in some nonwestern societies (including nonliterate ones), and, in cases where no outrage is observed, there are "social and psychological mechanisms" present to inhibit it. (Note that Moore's argument assumes only a biological influence on moral codes, not genetic determination. In any case, a biological foundation is not needed for the analysis in this book.)

According to Moore, in societies in which there are rulers — hereditary, dictatorial, or elected — these rulers are expected to provide security against attacks, whether physical attacks or threats to food and other vital necessities. A feeling of injustice can be created by certain violations of an implicit and variable social contract, including when rulers do not provide security, when rulers take advantage of their position, and — most relevant to political jiu-jitsu — when rulers exercise excessive cruelty. Moore says, "every culture seems to have *some* definition of arbitrary cruelty on the part of those in authority."<sup>21</sup>

It is worth expanding on this point. Moore says most if not all societies have definitions of what it means to be human. These definitions set limits on the severity of punishment and how it should be carried out. Exceeding these limits leads to "moral outrage and a sense of injustice." In summary, "An unjust punishment we can define as one that arouses revulsion either because it is undeserved or because it is excessively severe or cruel, or some combination of these two reasons."<sup>22</sup>

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21. Ibid., 26 (emphasis in the original). Another way to look at this is to say that people adopt an "injustice frame" — a frame is a way of looking at the world — when they believe that authorities, or the authority system, are linked to injustice. See William A. Gamson, Bruce Fireman, and Steven Rytina, *Encounters with Unjust Authority* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1982), 14; William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31–58.

22. Moore, *Injustice*, 30, 28.

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19. Vladimir Pozner, *Eyewitness: A Personal Account of the Unraveling of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1992), 175.

20. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London: Macmillan, 1978).



The Sharpeville massacre, the Dili massacre, and the Dharasana and King beatings all fit this picture. Indeed, they were *both* undeserved and excessively severe. This helps to explain the massive reaction against the attackers in each case. It also explains the revulsion against torture.

I have elaborated on Moore's examination of injustice because I find it especially relevant to understanding social struggles, but there are many others who have studied justice and injustice. There is a great deal of philosophical writing, though much of it is conceptual; its relevance to practical struggles requires further investigation. A huge body of legal writing about justice exists; however, much of it is about rules and formal procedures — the sorts of matters dealt with by courts — often quite divorced from the powerful human emotions experienced by plaintiffs and defendants. When I speak of "justice," I'm referring to people's sense of right and wrong, in other words to "moral justice."<sup>23</sup> Even so, legal conceptions of justice overlap with moral justice, and these can influence each other. Finally, there is a large amount of research in social psychology about justice. These and other bodies of theory undoubtedly contain insights that can be used for better understanding backfire dynamics.

### **From Political Jiu-Jitsu to Backfire**

Backfire, in a general sense, is the recoiling of an action against its originator. My focus is on backfires due to actions taken by powerful individuals or groups against those less powerful. Typically, this occurs because information about the action is communicated to people who perceive it as unjust, disproportionate, disgusting, or otherwise inappropriate.<sup>24</sup>

23. Thane Rosenbaum, *The Myth of Moral Justice: Why Our Legal System Fails to Do What's Right* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 17–18.

24. David Hess and I, in "Backfire, Repression, and the Theory of Transformative Events," *Mobilization* 11 (June 2006): 249–67,

This concept of backfire is an extension of Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu, in two ways. First, whereas political jiu-jitsu deals with violations of the norm condemning violence against nonviolent protesters, backfire deals with violations of a variety of norms, such as those relating to free speech, fair treatment in the workplace, and appropriate behavior in international affairs. Second, backfire examines tactics used in struggles over injustice, specifically perpetrators' tactics of cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation and bribery and their opponents' tactics of exposure, validation, interpretation, mobilization, and resistance. The case studies in this book, from Sharpeville to Abu Ghraib, reveal a rich variety of tactics that nevertheless can be conveniently classified into five categories.

The need to look at tactics is motivated by the observation that injustices often do not backfire. The case studies in this book are atypical in that they involve massive public outrage. For every publicized police beating, such as Rodney King's, there are thousands that receive little or no public attention. For every counterproductive massacre, such as the one in Dili, there are numerous others that do not generate such a massive reaction, such as the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians in 1965–1966.<sup>25</sup> So there is a need to explain the relative lack of reaction in these other cases. Moore gives a clue when he notes

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came up with a definition of backfire relevant to social movements: "a public reaction of outrage to an event that is publicized and perceived as unjust." Here, I give a more general description. A single definition that covers all possible circumstances is likely to be too abstract to be all that useful in specific applications, so it makes sense to use somewhat different definitions for different purposes.

25. Brian Martin, Wendy Varney, and Adrian Vickers, "Political Jiu-Jitsu against Indonesian Repression: Studying Lower-profile Nonviolent Resistance," *Pacifica Review* 13 (2001): 143–56.

that certain types of situations universally generate a sense of social injustice except when “social and psychological mechanisms” exist that inhibit it.<sup>26</sup> The five methods of inhibition resulted from my search for what discourages outrage.

My concern is primarily with norm violations by powerful groups, such as Moore’s “rulers.” Among the possibilities are police beating protesters, governments jailing opponents, corporations dismissing whistleblowers, and bosses harassing employees.

Norm violations by the less powerful, the opposite situation, seldom generate outrage. When a person steals a car and is caught and ordered to pay a fine or do some community service — whatever is the normal penalty in that society — most people perceive that justice has been done, so there is no need to be concerned. If the penalty is nonexistent or too light, some people will be upset. Likewise if the law is regarded as unjust or the penalty is seen as excessive, some people will be upset. Jean Valjean, the protagonist of Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Misérables*, stole some bread to feed his starving family and was sent to prison for 19 years. The social injustice of desperate poverty and the legal injustice of an excessive sentence provide the motive force for this powerful and influential story.

### The Psychology of Outrage

Moral outrage is a matter of individual psychology. It can be thought of as anger directed outwards, against social injustice, literally “out-rage.”<sup>27</sup> For a given event, some people become outraged but others do not, perhaps because they are susceptible to the methods of devaluation, reinterpretation, and official channels.

Most people are concerned about justice and many are willing to take action to promote

it. Psychologists call this the “justice motive” and have analyzed how it arises and is expressed.<sup>28</sup>

Related to the justice motive is belief in a just world: many people want to believe the world is just and people get what they deserve. This belief can have divergent consequences. If it is possible to help someone suffering injustice, many people will take action. On the other hand, some people — especially when they are powerless to have an impact — will maintain their belief in a just world by blaming the victims for their plight.<sup>29</sup>

Rather than becoming outraged at the injustice, an alternative is “moral disengagement.” Albert Bandura, a leading psychologist who developed an entire framework for understanding human thought and action, examined “mechanisms of moral disengagement,” which are the ways a person who is responsible for something can psychologically minimize or eliminate moral concern about it. He identified various mechanisms that apply to reprehensible conduct, to the detrimental effects of the conduct, or to the victim.<sup>30</sup>

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28. Claudia Dalbert, *The Justice Motive as a Personal Resource: Dealing with Challenges and Critical Life Events* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001); Michael Ross and Dale T. Miller, eds., *The Justice Motive in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I thank Truda Gray for suggesting these references.

29. Melvin J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum, 1980); Leo Montada and Melvin J. Lerner, eds., *Responses to Victimizations and Belief in a Just World* (New York: Plenum, 1998).

30. Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161–91. This chapter is based on Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), 375–89. I thank

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26. Moore, *Injustice*, 14.

27. Carol Tavris, “A Rage for Justice,” in *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 251–85.

- Moral justification, for example religious permission to kill in certain circumstances.

- Euphemistic labeling, such as describing civilians killed in a bombing raid as “collateral damage.” This sort of labeling serves to shape the way perpetrators think about matters, minimizing the sense of guilt.

- Advantageous comparisons, such as noting that the other side has committed horrendous atrocities. This serves to make one’s own transgressions seem insignificant by contrast.

- Displacement of responsibility, for example by saying one was only following orders. This serves to put psychological distance between the perpetrator and responsibility. Authorities can use this mechanism by finding ways to encourage action by others — the agents of the authorities — while minimizing the sense of responsibility felt by the agents. For example, state terrorists use proxies to carry out atrocities, and then, should anyone complain, blame the proxies. Bandura notes that agents are most efficient when they take responsibility for executing duties but do not feel personally responsible for consequences.

- Diffusion of responsibility, for example through the division of labor. A cook or accountant in the military may feel little responsibility for atrocities carried out by troops. A scientist who develops a mathematical model for bullet design may feel little responsibility for the people killed and maimed by the bullets actually used.

- Disregarding or misconstruing consequences, such as not enquiring into the effects of an assault. This process is easiest when the consequences are remote, as when missiles are fired at a great distance from the target. If the suffering caused by one’s actions is immediate and vivid, it is more difficult to disregard.

- Dehumanization, as when targets are portrayed as mindless, ferocious, or subhuman. A crime against a devalued object does not seem so bad.

- Attribution of blame, as when victims are blamed for their plight. If protesters use even a

little violence, then heavy-handed brutality is easier to justify. This highlights the importance of maintaining a principled stand in the face of injustice, refusing to adopt the reprehensible techniques used by the perpetrator. As soon as the victims make a misstep, attackers will have a pretext for blaming them.

Bandura’s mechanisms of moral disengagement offer a psychological framework for outrage-inhibition techniques of reinterpretation and devaluation. Bandura focuses on the psychology of the perpetrator, but the same analysis can be applied to bystanders and perhaps even to some victims.

Several of the psychological methods discussed by Bandura are exact counterparts of the methods used by perpetrators to inhibit the injustice response. Avoiding thinking about an atrocity can be thought of as psychological cover-up. Blaming the events on the victims is a form of devaluation. Believing one of the alternative accounts of what happened is a form of reinterpretation. Trusting that official bodies will ensure justice will be done is the psychological foundation for the tactic of official channels.

The backfire model, as I have presented it, focuses on actions, such as hiding information, making public statements, and setting up formal investigations, and gives little overt attention to psychology. There are striking parallels between these actions and Bandura’s psychological processes for moral disengagement. Bandura’s framework offers one way for backfire analysis to be extended to the psychological domain and for studying the psychological foundations for the generation and inhibition of outrage.<sup>31</sup>

### *States of Denial*

For linking psychology, politics, and injustice, the outstanding treatment is Stanley Cohen’s book *States of Denial*, which examines the ways people and governments respond to

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Samantha Reis for helpful discussions about Bandura’s work.

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31. Samantha Reis and I are investigating psychological theories that provide a useful underpinning of backfire analysis.

information about atrocities such as torture, massacres, and genocide.<sup>32</sup> In many cases they prefer to ignore or deny what is happening. Individuals commonly use psychological techniques to deny the existence or significance of atrocities; governments use a variety of procedural and rhetorical techniques. Cohen also examines and assesses strategies of human rights groups, especially Amnesty International, to overcome denial. In his analysis, Cohen acknowledges that denial is inevitable to some extent, at the same time seeking ways to understand and expose it.

Cohen focuses on five key techniques of denial:

- Deny responsibility;
- Deny injury;
- Deny the victim appropriate status;
- Condemn the condemners;
- Appeal to higher loyalties.

He looks at how these techniques are deployed by perpetrators (such as torturers and killers), officials, bystander individuals, and bystander states.<sup>33</sup>

Cohen's five techniques of denial can be readily related to the methods of inhibiting outrage from injustice. Denying responsibility for the injustice and denying injury — namely, saying the harm is nonexistent or less than claimed — are two key methods of reinterpretation. Denying the victim appropriate status is much the same as devaluing the victim. Condemning the condemners — namely, criticizing those who raise the alarm about human rights violations — is also a

method of devaluation, though of witnesses and concerned citizens rather than the victims themselves.

Cohen's category "appeal to higher loyalties" — in which the loyalty could be to a peer group, a nation, or an ideology — could be taken as a psychological form of an official channel, but it also affects the other methods of inhibition. Cover-up is easier to justify when it is demanded by law, government policy, or commanding officials. Devaluation of victims is a natural counterpart to the glorification of peers, nations, or ideologies. Reinterpretations are easier to accept when one is loyal to those making them. Finally, intimidation and bribery, like cover-up, are easier to justify when promoted by those in authority. Cohen's model overall is quite compatible with the backfire model.

There are a number of differences in emphasis between the two models. Cohen focuses on denial at the psychological and government levels, whereas the backfire model looks at tactics used by perpetrators, with less immediate attention to psychological dimensions. Cohen focuses on atrocities, whereas the backfire model can be applied to anything perceived as an injustice or norm violation. Cohen focuses on denial and how to challenge it, whereas the backfire model looks at actions by perpetrators and targets as a strategic engagement.

Cohen also looks at many important issues that are not central to the backfire model. One is the process of turning outrage into action, something the backfire framework simply assumes to happen for a portion of the population. Cohen probes this process by examining appeals by Amnesty International, looking at what sorts of images and texts attract attention, whether simplicity or complexity is more effective, how resistance to appeals can be overcome, and how people become involved. Cohen also examines ways of acknowledging past crimes, such as truth commissions.

*States of Denial* thus both overlaps with and complements backfire analysis. The book is an essential study for anyone concerned about human rights.

32. Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

33. Cohen adapts these techniques from Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency," *American Sociological Review* 22 (1957): 664–70. Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization are psychological mechanisms used by delinquents to justify their deviant behavior. Cohen shows how these techniques are used by both individuals and deviant authorities.

## Communication

As well as a perception of injustice, a second requirement for backfire is that information about the event or situation is communicated to receptive audiences. Sharp simply assumes that relevant audiences, notably third parties, are aware of what has happened. Yet in many cases they are not. If photojournalists had not been present in Sharpeville, if Max Stahl's video had been confiscated by Indonesian troops, or if Webb Miller had not filed reports from Dharasana, outrage about these events would have been reduced.

The case studies reveal the changing role of communication technology. In rapidly communicating the events at Dharasana in 1930 to an international audience, the principal means was text, namely Webb Miller's eloquent prose, sent by cable to press outlets worldwide. (Photos were taken, but could not be distributed electronically.) Thirty years later, at Sharpeville, text was supplemented by photographs, which helped turn the massacre into a front-page story outside South Africa. Another three decades later, at Dili in 1991, video footage supplemented photographs and text, and it was the video images that had the greatest impact. That same year, in Los Angeles, the videocamera also played a key role, in recording the beating of Rodney King; furthermore, a portion of the King-beating video was ideal for television, which turned the incident into a giant scandal. In 2004, at Abu Ghraib, the key technology was the digital camera: quick and easy to use, its images can be stored and sent electronically.

As information and communication technologies evolve, their contribution to making injustices backfire is subject to divergent influences. Most obviously, devices for cheap, convenient, and high-quality recording and communication make it possible to obtain ever better documentation of abuses. This trend towards lower cost, smaller size, higher quality, and easier communication seems likely to continue, making it ever easier to acquire and distribute evidence of all sorts of injustice.

On the other hand, many audiences now have a higher expectation of documentation, especially visual documentation. With a diet of graphic images in television news, it is plausible that viewers are saturated with stories about wars, atrocities, and starvation, suffering "compassion fatigue." Only something even more spectacular and horrific than usual can disturb the equanimity of the viewer habituated to atrocities — or so the argument goes. Would eloquent prose alone be sufficient today to arouse passions about an unseen event, as did Webb Miller's stories about the salt march in 1930? Arguments can be made either way; further study is needed to assess the matter.

Communication certainly involves more than facts: it is also about meaning. Miller's reports were vivid personal accounts, undoubtedly generating more concern than a dry recital of the number of people injured in the salt raids. Photos and film add another dimension to communication. A picture can dramatize a situation in a way virtually impossible to achieve in words.

Another reason why pictures can communicate effectively is they seem to be more direct. A verbal description has to be composed by someone, and the credibility of the author influences the response by readers. Photos, though, seem to portray reality without mediation.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, often this is an illusion: photos are taken by photographers, and their choices of what to include and exclude influence the meanings inferred by audiences. Every story and every camera shot frames an event and excludes or downplays some perspectives. A photograph can suggest the point of view of the victim or the perpetrator. Details of angle, shade, focus, and distance shape the message conveyed. Similarly, subtle changes in the use

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34. Perceptive accounts of the influence of images of suffering include Cohen, *States of Denial*, 168–95, and Matthew Ericson, "The Public Epiphany: Photography, Censorship and Public Policy," *Australian Journalism Review* 27 (July 2005): 123–38.

of words can make a big difference in the impression conveyed by a text. Some manipulation of images and texts is more obvious, as in blatant propaganda; subtle manipulation, intended or not, is ubiquitous.

With digital editing technology, available to anyone with a computer, it is ever easier to lie with pictures. To the extent viewers know about this potential, they may be more skeptical about what they see. Furthermore, exposure of faked images — such as of a British soldier allegedly urinating on an Iraqi prisoner — serves to create wariness about genuine ones.

The mass media often play a key role in communication about injustice. The attitudes and practices of journalists, editors, and owners are crucial in determining what issues are reported and how they are portrayed. Western news practices are guided by what are called “news values,” which are implicit criteria journalists and editors use to decide what counts as news. News values include prominence, proximity, conflict, timeliness, action, human interest, and perceived consequences. Events satisfying these criteria are more likely to be perceived as newsworthy.<sup>35</sup>

For example, no prominent people were involved in the Sharpeville massacre as either perpetrators or victims; proximity was greatest in South Africa and then in countries, such as Britain, with historical links to South Africa; conflict was obviously a central feature; timeliness was high, as the shootings had just occurred; the action was dramatic; the victims provided limited human interest, because they were unknown as individuals; and perceived consequences were large because of the implications for foreign policy as well as citizen reaction. The Sharpeville massacre did not fit all these news values, but it easily fulfilled enough of them to be worthy of feature coverage, and this was crucial in

causing the shootings to backfire on the South African government.

As described in chapter 5 on the King beating, the mass media normally adopt framings by dominant groups, particularly governments. Official assessments are often presented without critical comment, even when journalists know politicians are being misleading or attempting to set the agenda in their own interests.<sup>36</sup> For example, in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, U.S. mass media reported government claims about weapons of mass destruction and the danger posed by Saddam Hussein, seldom mentioning double standards such as lack of government concern about Israeli or Pakistani nuclear weapons or about ruthless dictators in other countries. As noted by Regina Lawrence concerning police use of force, sometimes an event breaks through the usual elite framing of news, creating an alternative event-driven framing.<sup>37</sup> The King beating and many other backfires fit this model.

Media coverage is central to many backfires, such as Sharpeville, the King beating, Chernobyl, Exxon Valdez, and Abu Ghraib. So it is reasonable to ask, is media coverage *essential* to backfire? The answer has to be no: the key is communication to receptive audiences; the mass media are just one way for this to occur, though an exceedingly powerful way. In the dismissal of Ted Steele, there was some mass media coverage, but much of the news traveled by e-mail and word of mouth. News of the beatings at Dharasana were initially reported through newspapers, but much of the subsequent publicity resulted from the efforts of groups supporting the Indian independence struggle, for example by distributing reprints of Webb Miller’s articles. Social movement groups can operate as information disseminators.

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35. On news values and practices, see for example W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1988) and Rodney Tiffen, *News and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).

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36. Paul H. Weaver, *News and the Culture of Lying* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

37. Regina G. Lawrence, *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

The Chernobyl and Exxon Valdez accidents received saturation coverage by the mass media. But other accidents were initially unknown to or ignored by the media, but publicized by environmental groups. Well before the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, anti-nuclear-power groups had circulated information about an incident at Brown's Ferry, Alabama, in 1975, among others. Collections of stories about accidents and near misses were a staple of anti-nuclear brochures and talks, and served to sensitize activists, supporters, journalists, and much of the wider public to the possibility and consequences of a nuclear disaster. This helps explain why the mass media were so ready to cover Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986. It might be said that some early accidents backfired, to a limited extent, as a result of awareness fostered by anti-nuclear groups, whose efforts laid the foundation for media-driven backfires of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

It is also possible for personal attacks to backfire in local situations, without any media involvement. If the actions of an adult who sexually exploits a child are exposed to parents or peers, there may be serious repercussions, including loss of friends, reputation, or job, even when police and courts are never involved and there is no media coverage.

The prominent role of the media in the cases described in this book is, in part, an artifact of the process by which these cases were selected. The easiest cases to analyze, at a distance, are ones in which there is ample information publicly available, and this often means media coverage. For cases without extensive media coverage, it is an advantage to be close to the events or to talk to people involved; that is how I gained a perspective on the dismissal of Ted Steele.

The two essential requirements for backfire, a perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences, are sometimes hard to separate. Communication is not a neutral process of information transfer, but shapes meanings through the forms by which information is packaged. Nevertheless, it is useful to mention both requirements as a reminder

that injustice alone is not enough to cause outrage: people need to know about it.

### Unanticipated Consequences

The idea of backfire has similarities with the idea that when someone takes action, the consequences may be unexpected. In 1936 Robert Merton, in the early stages of his career as an eminent sociologist, published a pioneering article on "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action."<sup>38</sup> He enumerated, in abstract terms, reasons for the occurrence of unanticipated consequences, namely ignorance, error, a focus on immediate consequences that neglects concern with other consequences, basic values that prevent consideration of consequences, and self-defeating prophecy (namely, predictions of consequences that lead to a changed dynamic).

There is indeed a connection to backfire, but not as close as might first appear. In most cases, perpetrators are aware of what is likely to backfire and take precautionary steps, but the situation sometimes doesn't work out as they hoped. In other words, the possible consequences are actually anticipated and actions are taken to prevent them. For example, police realize brutal beatings can cause outrage, so they usually hide their actions from wider audiences, use intimidation, and so forth. Merton's factors are relevant to backfire in a general sense, most commonly in relation to the scale of consequences.

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38. Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review* 1 (December 1936): 894–904. Later, Merton related unanticipated consequences to the concepts of manifest functions (consequences that are recognized) and latent functions (consequences that are neither intended nor recognized): Robert K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enl. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1968), 73–138. I thank Sue Curry Jansen for referring me to Merton's work in relation to backfire.

Raymond Boudon later developed and expanded Merton's idea by looking at "perverse effects" in which the combined actions of many people produce effects unintended by any individual. These effects may or may not be foreseen and may be positive or negative. For example, many people obtain university degrees to improve their status and job prospects, but when lots of people obtain degrees the result is credential inflation, with a reduction in benefits to individuals.<sup>39</sup> Backfire is a type of perverse effect, at least in most cases. However, neither Merton nor Boudon systematically examined tactics used by perpetrators or targets to inhibit or promote consequences of social action.

### Blowback

Blowback is a term for the adverse unanticipated consequences of foreign covert operations by government agencies. It was originally used in the early 1950s by personnel in the Central Intelligence Agency to refer to unwelcome side effects of agency operations such as undermining governments or funding guerrilla forces. Merton's analysis of unanticipated consequences fits blowback perfectly.

Christopher Simpson in his book *Blowback* tells of secret U.S. operations after World War II employing former Nazis or collaborators, many of whom were guilty of war crimes. Some scientists who were Nazi collaborators were brought to the United States to work on research projects. Other ex-Nazis were recruited by the CIA to spy against the Soviet Union or to participate in armed anti-Communist movements in countries in the Soviet sphere. Simpson describes a range of negative consequences from these covert programs. They created distrust between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union, which had been allies during World War II, just a short time before. Operations by Nazi collaborators in Eastern

Europe tainted the anti-Communist cause. The recruitment of criminals and torturers, such as Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie, had a corrupting influence on the CIA, which tried to hide its links with such agents, and obstructed efforts by U.S. courts to prosecute war criminals.<sup>40</sup>

Chalmers Johnson, in his book also titled *Blowback*, tells of numerous disastrous outcomes from U.S. covert operations. In 1953, the CIA helped to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh of Iran and then supported the ruthless regime led by the Shah for the next 25 years. This caused enormous antagonism and contributed to anti-U.S. sentiment and actions by the theocratic Iranian regime that came to power following the revolution of 1978-79. In the early 1970s during the Indochina war, the U.S. military carried out massive covert bombing of Cambodia, killing hundreds of thousands of people. This helped the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, who carried out genocidal killings from 1975 to 1979. The most famous case of blowback involves the Taliban in Afghanistan, supported in the 1980s in their war against Soviet occupiers by CIA funding. Among those receiving CIA support was Osama bin Laden, who later turned on his backers and launched attacks against U.S. targets, most notoriously the 9/11 attack.<sup>41</sup>

In theoretical terms, blowback is one type of backfire, namely a backfire from foreign covert operations. Most of the studies of blowback have focused on the consequences

39. Raymond Boudon, *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

40. Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and its Effects on the Cold War* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

41. Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). See also Jonathan Kwitny, *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Mark Zepezauer, *Boomerang! How Our Covert Wars Have Created Enemies across the Middle East and Brought Terror to America* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2003).



of covert operations, but it is straightforward to note the role of the five methods of inhibiting outrage, most obviously cover-up.

### **Agenda Management**

Governments have to deal with lots of policy issues, some of which are difficult to handle, with the potential to cause loss of popular support and possibly loss of office. Therefore it is predictable that governments will try to manage the issues already on the policy agenda, to move some issues off the agenda, and to prevent some issues from emerging in the first place. Government leaders prefer to deal with the issues they decide are significant rather than being put in the position of handling issues raised by other groups, whether business, professions, community groups, or the media.

In political science, this topic is called “agenda management.” Here is a list of agenda management techniques.<sup>42</sup> I have grouped them under the five methods of inhibiting outrage.

#### *Cover-up*

- Stop collection of data, for example on people discouraged from seeking work or civilians killed in Iraq.
- Lie about what action the government is taking.

#### *Devaluation*

- Discredit groups and spokespeople critical of the government.

#### *Reinterpretation*

- Make symbolic gestures concerning the issue.
- Say the issue can’t be solved by government, or can’t be solved at all.
- Say the issue shouldn’t be dealt with by government.
- Redefine the issue.
- Shift attention to a different issue.
- Redefine data that is being collected.

#### *Official channels*

- Set up consultations, committees, or inquiries in order to postpone taking action.
- Establish a new organization to deal with a problem.

#### *Intimidation and bribery*

- Threaten or punish critics, for example through withdrawal of government funding.
- Co-opt critics by inviting them onto official committees.

This list shows it is quite easy to find correspondences between agenda management techniques and methods of inhibiting outrage from injustice. Indeed, it might be said that agenda management is a process for governments to prevent or minimize backfire. This makes sense because a prime reason for agenda management is to prevent or manage public outrage over government policies or lack of government action.

There are a few agenda management techniques that do not fit easily into any of the five categories, such as taking tokenistic actions on an issue and offering concessions in one area in exchange for reduced opposition in another. These are closer to the process of institutionalizing change. But most agenda management techniques fit into backfire categories.

There are some differences between the two frameworks. Agenda management treats a host of techniques under one general category; the backfire model classifies methods into five main categories. Agenda management has been studied as a tool used by governments; backfire dynamics apply to all sorts of issues, not just ones in which the government is seen

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42. Items on this list are drawn from Ann Harding, “Unemployment Policy: A Case Study in Agenda Management,” *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 44 (September 1985): 224–46, at 225. See also Robert Eyestone, *From Social Issues to Public Policy* (New York: Wiley, 1978); Eric A. Nordlinger, *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). I thank Marian Sawyer for referring me to agenda management and Harding’s article.

as the “perpetrator.” Agenda management studies look mainly at government actions; in the backfire model, equal attention is given to responses by targets. But these are differences in scope and focus. The backfire framework can be seen as an elaboration and generalization of agenda management to other arenas.

### Social Problems

When lots of people believe something is a social problem — such as abortion, crime, police beatings, climate change, tax avoidance, or war — this seldom happens spontaneously. Individuals and groups take a variety of actions to convince others something should be conceived of as a problem. Environmentalists and others have argued global warming is a serious problem; peace movements have pushed to have war recognized as a problem that needs to be addressed. Others take a contrary position: some industry leaders argue global warming is not a big problem; some government leaders argue war is sometimes the solution to a more urgent problem, namely a dangerous enemy. In short, defining something as a social problem can be thought of as a social struggle.<sup>43</sup>

The making of claims, which is the key process used in encouraging people to see something as a social problem, is much the same as the struggles over interpretation in backfire dynamics. The backfire over the King beating fed into the ongoing construction of police brutality as a social problem. Prior to the beating, police brutality was already recognized, in some circles, as a significant social problem. The beating was an opportunity for commentators and activists, both those who had previously been active and new ones, to make powerful claims about the significance of police brutality.

Backfire analysis differs from the usual analysis of social problem construction by directing attention to a diverse range of tactics, including but going beyond claims-making, used in struggles around particular events. To put it another way, backfire can be conceived as part of an ongoing construction of a social problem, and backfire analysis as an examination of a diverse array of tactics within the general framework of social problem construction.

### Social Movements

Social movements are alliances of groups and individuals with a common vision for society. Familiar social movements include the feminist, anti-racist, peace, and environmental movements. Movements can be defined by what they are for — for example, peace, pro-life, globalization from below — or what they are against — anti-war, anti-abortion, anti-corporate globalization. Sometimes the name itself is contentious.

Movements are typically made up of a core of activists (sometimes paid, sometimes not), a set of organizations, members, occasional participants, and sympathizers. Movements are usually thought of as challengers to dominant groups or viewpoints, because powerholders don’t need to agitate to get what they want.

There is an enormous body of writing about social movements, with several well-developed theories for explaining their dynamics, including resource mobilization theory, new social movement theory, political process theory, and framing theory. This theory can be related to backfire in various ways.

Members of social movements are often motivated by outrage over perceived injustices.<sup>44</sup> The movement for gay and lesbian

43. Joel Best, ed., *Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989); Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems* (Menlo Park, CA: Cummings, 1977).

44. For a psychological perspective, see Tom R. Tyler and Heather J. Smith, “Social Justice and Social Movements,” in *The Handbook of Social Psychology, Volume II*, 4th ed., ed. Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, and Gardner Lindzey (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 595–629. I thank Truda Gray for this reference.

rights was and continues to be motivated by concern over discrimination, persecution, and violence against gays and lesbians. This is fertile ground for backfire: a movement can be thought of as an audience that is highly receptive to information about injustice, including injustices concerning the core issues that concern the movement and attacks on the movement itself. Furthermore, movements have the capacity to mobilize outrage, by conceptualizing events in their frameworks, communicating with members and supporters, and taking coordinated action.

Studies of the movement against nuclear power, the anti-abortion movement, and the movement for animal rights shows that they gain many recruits because of “moral shocks,” namely shock at violations of one’s expectations of what is fair. The 1979 nuclear reactor accident at Three Mile Island was a key moral shock for recruiting people into the U.S. anti-nuclear power movement. Some people decide to join the anti-abortion movement after seeing pictures of aborted fetuses; likewise, seeing pictures of animal experimentation can stimulate people to join the animal rights movement.<sup>45</sup> Amnesty International uses images of

suffering in its appeals to recruit members and contributors.<sup>46</sup>

Christian Smith, in his study of the U.S. Central American peace movement, found that what he calls “moral outrage” was a key factor in recruitment into the movement, which had strong religious roots. Smith found a number of factors were important in producing outrage, including religious murders (such as the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980), refugee stories, and visits to Central America.<sup>47</sup>

A person’s perception of injustice is an individual matter, but often it is linked to prevailing moral codes. Social movements seek both to reveal things already perceived as unjust and to change people’s beliefs about what is just and unjust. For example, the animal rights movement seeks to expose overt cruelty to animals and encourages people to see practices such as animal experimentation and factory farming as injustices that should be opposed.

When a movement exists, therefore, events seen as unjust are more likely to backfire. Cover-up is more difficult because movement sympathizers with inside information know there is a receptive audience should they decide to leak information or blow the whistle. When respected figures join a movement, it is

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45. Social scientists have examined various cases and ways in which injustice can stimulate social action. Edward J. Walsh, “Resource Mobilization and Citizen Protest in Communities around Three Mile Island,” *Social Problems* 29 (October 1981): 1–21, found that “suddenly imposed major grievances,” including the Three Mile Island nuclear accident and major oil spills, could promote mobilization of citizens. The idea of “moral shocks” as means of recruitment into social movements is analyzed by James M. Jasper and Jane D. Poulsen, “Recruiting Strangers and Friends: Moral Shocks and Social Networks in Animal Rights and Anti-nuclear Protests,” *Social Problems* 42 (November 1995): 493–512; James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); James M. Jasper, “The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social

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Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 13 (1998): 397–424. On the role of emotions in social movements more generally, see Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

46. Cohen, *States of Denial*, 196–221.

47. Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Smith describes two factors important for creating moral outrage, “subjective engageability” and “cognitive accessibility.” These are similar to what I call perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences.

harder to devalue it. The movement's networks provide ready means for communication, and the movement may have access to skilled communicators. Even when the mass media are unsympathetic, a movement may have sufficient communication capacity to circulate its message widely.

In social movement theory, an event that makes a dramatic difference to the success or failure of a movement is called a "transformative event." A major backfire can be a transformative event.<sup>48</sup> Examples include the Sharpeville massacre for the international anti-apartheid movement, the Dili massacre for the East Timor independence movement, and the salt march for the Indian independence movement. In some cases, campaigning can turn a seemingly minor event into a major issue. For example, the arrest of U.S. alternative cancer therapist John Richardson in 1972 became the basis for a massive expansion of support for alternative therapies; rather than suppressing alternative therapies, the arrest served as a tool for campaigners to promote them.<sup>49</sup>

Not every backfire involves a social movement, at least not centrally: few whistle-blowers are involved with a movement and neither Rodney King nor Ted Steele was a movement activist. Even so, prominent cases can link in with and stimulate movements. The King beating gave an enormous boost to activism against police abuses and the Steele

dismissal stimulated concern about academic freedom.

Given the important role of social movements in raising awareness of issues that members believe are important — in effect turning them into social problems<sup>50</sup> — there is much to be learned by further study of backfire in connection with social movement theory. Further insight into backfire dynamics will come from activists using the backfire framework to help choose their tactics.<sup>51</sup>

### The Methods of Inhibition and Amplification

Each of the five methods of inhibiting outrage, and corresponding methods of amplifying outrage, can be related to bodies of research. Addressing all of these would be a mammoth task, so all I can do is indicate some directions. If the methods of inhibition and amplification are thought of as tactics, then from a practical viewpoint the main thing is to be able to recognize what tactics are being used and, if desired, know how to counter them. For this purpose, the primary purpose of delving into theories is to gain insights into varieties of tactics. Of course, there is much more to theories; in particular, they can throw light onto why things are the way they are. Suffice it to say that relating bodies of theory to the methods of inhibition and amplification is a task waiting to be done.

#### *Cover-up and Exposure*

Cover-up can be achieved in various ways, one of which is censorship. There is a long history of censorship by churches and governments, but any group can practice it. Censorship assumes one group has information and exercises its power to ensure others cannot

48. Hess and Martin, "Backfire, Repression, and the Theory of Transformative Events." See especially Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2001), a grounded theory of social movements in which, after laying the groundwork, a "trigger point" can stimulate mobilization. There are commonalities between Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action and Moyer's MAP model.

49. Hess and Martin, "Backfire, Repression, and the Theory of Transformative Events."

50. Armand L. Mauss, *Social Problems as Social Movements* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975).

51. Brian Martin and Iain Murray, "The Parkin Backfire," *Social Alternatives* 24 (Third Quarter 2005): 46–49.

access it.<sup>52</sup> Hence, an analysis of censorship follows naturally from an analysis of power: each system of power — state, capitalism, bureaucracy, patriarchy, and other others — will have its own characteristic modes of censorship.

Another way to achieve cover-up is to swamp important information in a deluge of trivial or distracting information. Sometimes a corporation, required by a government or court to disclose documents, delivers boxes or truckloads of material; the sheer volume makes juicy secrets harder to find. In a less deliberate fashion, the news media offer a kaleidoscope of short items, including on crimes, celebrities, and human interest, so important stories, requiring understanding of history and context, are lost on most of the audience.

To make sense of the world, information is not enough: it needs to be put together in a meaningful way. Often, there are various ways to understand important events; powerful groups would like to discourage attention to ones that highlight their own nefarious roles. In this context, “conspiracy theories” — unorthodox explanations for important events, usually relying on self-interested actions by powerful groups — can serve as a form of de facto cover-up. There are so many bizarre theories for events such as 9/11 and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy that it is easy to dismiss alternative explanations that are better documented: every challenge to the dominant view is classified as a conspiracy theory and dismissed.

To challenge cover-up, the basic idea is exposure: getting information to audiences that can make sense of it. For analyzing this process, theories of free speech are relevant, but they do not focus on tactics of overcoming cover-up. More relevant are studies of investigative journalism and free speech campaigns. Using theory in these areas to help understand backfire is a project waiting to be carried out.

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52. Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship: The Knot that Binds Power and Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

## Devaluation

Devaluation is the subject of a large amount of theory in social psychology, anthropology, and other fields. One explanation of devaluation is built around the creation of stereotypes, the construction of in-groups and out-groups, and the perception of out-groups as inferior. One psychological basis for this process is projection, in which despised, unrecognized aspects of a person’s personality are projected onto — in other words, attributed to — some other person or group. This other person or group is then despised and, in more serious cases, attacked.<sup>53</sup> One example is a man who denies his feminine side and projects it onto women, who he treats as inferior. A similar process can help explain homophobia. At wider levels, projection helps to explain racism and militarism. It could be said that U.S. government officials, in planning an attack on Iraq, denied their own aggression and instead attributed it to the Iraqi regime, which was seen as so dangerous it had to be attacked, and encouraged others to use the same process of projection.

Sam Keen, in his book *Faces of the Enemy*, a provocative analysis of the psychology of war, reproduces war posters and other images of the enemy in various degraded or hostile forms, including stranger, aggressor, faceless being, enemy of god, barbarian, greedy person, criminal, torturer, rapist, beast, and agent of death. In Keen’s catalogue, there is only a single positive image of the enemy, the worthy opponent of heroic warfare. Then there is the modern technological view of the enemy as an abstraction, as a set of coordinates to be bombed. This is less personal but is certainly a potent form of devaluation.<sup>54</sup>

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53. Philip Lichtenberg, *Community and Confluence: Undoing the Clinch of Oppression*, 2d ed. (Cleveland, OH: Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press, 1994).

54. Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986). See also Robert W. Rieber, ed., *The Psychology of War and Peace: The Image of the Enemy* (New

For challenging devaluation, Wolf Wolfensberger offers a theory called social role valorization. It is specifically designed for severely devalued people, such as people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>55</sup> The two basic approaches are to increase the competencies of the devalued person, so they obtain more respect through their appearance and performance in everyday life, and to put them in socially valued roles — such as friend, employee, and family member — so they acquire status through the roles. If you meet a well-groomed person working in a lawyer's office who greets you pleasantly, you are likely to think more highly of them than meeting the same person who is slovenly, unfriendly, and living on the street or in an institution. Therefore, abuses frequently perpetrated against street people or people in institutions would very likely backfire if done to the same person in a lawyer's office. Social role valorization is a systematic approach to challenging devaluation and can readily be applied to a range of circumstances.

### *Interpretation Struggles*

Interpretation often overlaps with cover-up. To distinguish them, it is convenient to say that cover-up, in relation to a particular audience, occurs when this audience does not know anything has happened. When the audience knows something has happened, but is encouraged to believe particular things about the facts involved, the significance of the action,

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York: Plenum, 1991). On the stereotyping of political resisters, see Austin T. Turk, *Political Criminality: The Defiance and Defense of Authority* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), 71–81.

55. Wolf Wolfensberger, *A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization: A High-Level Concept for Addressing the Plight of Societally Devalued People, and for Structuring Human Services*, 3d ed. (Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency (Syracuse University), 1998).

or responsibility for it, this can be called interpretation.

Sometimes, due to secrecy or inherent uncertainty, even well informed observers cannot agree about what happened. Therefore, it may be impossible to decide whether an event is being covered up or reinterpreted, neither, or both. This type of situation can operate as a type of cover-up itself.

Interpretation can be based on genuine belief or on lies. Lying occurs when there is an intent to deceive, and can be either by stating falsehoods, not stating truths, or giving misleading accounts. There is a fascinating body of writing about lying that is relevant to both cover-up and reinterpretation.<sup>56</sup>

The field of semiotics deals with systems of signs and how they create meaning. It offers a wealth of insight into the ways people understand the world, and has influenced studies in many fields, but seems seldom to have been packaged specifically for activists.<sup>57</sup> Closely related to semiotics is the study of rhetoric, and on this Ellen W. Gorsevski's book *Peaceful Persuasion: The Geopolitics of Nonviolent Rhetoric* is essential reading. She shows how rhetoric can be used to prevent and

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56. J. A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York: Norton, 1985); Charles V. Ford, *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!! The Psychology of Deceit* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1996); David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); W. Peter Robinson, *Deceit, Delusion and Detection* (London: Sage, 1996).

57. One activist-oriented study using discourse analysis is Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman, and Michael Gismondi, *Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993). I thank Nicky Evans for a helpful discussion about semiotics.

manage conflicts; it is a short step to apply her approach to interpretation struggles.<sup>58</sup>

The study of propaganda offers many relevant insights,<sup>59</sup> as does work on advertising, public relations, and spin doctoring. Psychological research on influencing people is also relevant.<sup>60</sup> A lot of this is about manipulating people; the reverse process, countering manipulation, is not as well developed, but there are nevertheless numerous insights in these bodies of research. Studies of debating techniques are another fruitful source of ideas.

Karen Cerulo in her book *Deciphering Violence* says accounts of violence in the media can be classified into four sequences: the performer sequence, from the perspective of the perpetrator; a victim sequence; a contextual sequence, giving priority to the context of the violence; and a doublecasting sequence, in which the victim is also presented as a perpetrator. “The police beat Rodney King” is a performer sequence. “Rodney King was beaten by police” is a victim sequence. “Just after midnight, under the spotlight from a hovering helicopter, a confrontation occurred between Rodney King and the Los Angeles police” is a contextual sequence. “Rodney King, after resisting arrest and lunging at an officer, was beaten by police” is a doublecasting sequence. Cerulo found performer sequences were most commonly used when violence was portrayed as legitimate, with victim sequences used for violence presented

as illegitimate. The ways audiences reacted to sequences were more complex.<sup>61</sup> Cerulo’s analysis reveals something few people notice — the semantic structure of headlines and key sentences about violence reported in the media — can both reflect and influence attitudes about that violence. This has obvious relevance to struggles over the meaning of violent incidents.<sup>62</sup>

Harry Murray studied the introduction of fingerprinting for welfare recipients in the state of New York. The government’s rationale was to prevent multiple claims for benefits, but in practice the fingerprinting served to degrade a stigmatized group. Murray calls this “deniable degradation” because the degradation was justified by a cover story: the government could deny degradation was intended. Murray lists four different deniability strategies: deny the action; deny knowledge of the action; deny the meaning of the action; and deny any intention for the action.<sup>63</sup> Each of these four strategies can be treated as a technique of reinterpretation, except that denying the action might be cover-up.

Thomas Mathiesen in his essays titled *Silently Silenced* gives a highly insightful analysis of methods of silencing opposition, many of which could be classified as forms of reinterpretation. For example, he lists the following methods of “silent silencing”:

- individualization, in which an action is treated in isolation;
- normalization, in which an action is considered normal;
- cooption, in which criticism is accepted;

58. Ellen W. Gorsevski, *Peaceful Persuasion: The Geopolitics of Nonviolent Rhetoric* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

59. Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

60. Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: How and Why People Agree to Things* (New York: Morrow, 1984); Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: Freeman, 1992).

61. Karen A. Cerulo, *Deciphering Violence: The Cognitive Structure of Right and Wrong* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

62. Grammar can also influence understandings: see Annabelle Lukin, “Information Warfare: The Grammar of Talking War,” *Social Alternatives* 24 (First Quarter 2005): 5–9.

63. Harry Murray, “Deniable Degradation: the Finger-Imaging of Welfare Recipients,” *Sociological Forum* 15 (2000): 39–63, at 42.

- superficial endorsement;
- displacement of responsibility, namely blaming someone or something else.<sup>64</sup>

Each of these could be considered a technique of interpretation, though some go beyond. Mathiesen is concerned with ways that systems — such as bureaucratic structures — promote silencing, something deeper than the active techniques deployed in struggles over outrage.

I have commented on a few studies that throw light on interpretation struggles. There is a huge body of research relating to interpretation, both theoretical and practical material, which waits to be mined for insights relevant to backfire dynamics.

### *Official Channels*

Official channels in practice serve as powerful tools to dampen outrage from injustice. For example, when a government sets up a commission to investigate an issue, it is often apparent this is a tactic to delay taking action while the commission deliberates over a period of months or years. Sometimes the government, by setting narrow terms of reference and carefully picking the chair of the commission, obtains exactly the recommendations it wanted; if not, the government may just ignore them.<sup>65</sup>

My initial assessment of official channels drew heavily on my experience with whistleblowers, as described in chapter 6, but on examining other sorts of cases it became apparent official channels play a similar role. But I have been unable to find much theory to say why this should be the case. To be sure, there are plenty of studies showing the failure of official channels in particular cases.<sup>66</sup> There are some excellent critiques covering specific areas, for example the legal system<sup>67</sup> and disarmament negotiations.<sup>68</sup> But there is little on the general phenomenon. This is not surprising, because the usual assumption is that courts, formal inquiries, ombudsmen, and experts are routes to justice: they are “proper channels.” To argue that they provide only an illusion of justice, for those making a challenge from below, is a form of heresy, highly threatening especially to those who believe the world is fundamentally just.

The explanation for the failure of official channels is quite simple: if agencies were able to dispense justice, then powerful elites could be convicted of crimes and unequal social structures would be in danger of collapse. A single whistleblower would be able to bring down top managers; a single victim of discrimination would be able to undermine systems of racism; a single victim of economic exploitation could overturn global trading rules; a single victim of state terrorism would

64. Thomas Mathiesen, *Silently Silenced: Essays on the Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2004).

65. This is a popular conception of investigatory commissions, according to Frank Burton and Pat Carlen, *Official Discourse: On Discourse Analysis, Government Publications, Ideology and the State* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 7–8; their book, though, does not explore commissions as tactics but rather analyzes the discourse of their reports. See also Adam Ashforth, “Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation: On Commissions of Inquiry as Power/Knowledge Forms,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (March 1990): 1–22.

66. In June 2005, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a series of articles exposing the Australian government’s pattern of ignoring the recommendations of parliamentary inquiries. The government “has not replied on time to a single public inquiry out of the 62 it has ordered in the House of Representatives since December 1998. It has given no reply at all to almost half of them.” Gerard Ryle and Lisa Pryor, “Democracy Denied,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 2005, p. 1.

67. Rosenbaum, *Myth of Moral Justice*.

68. Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).



be able to thwart wars. Agencies that are supposed to dispense justice in practice have to operate in contexts shot through with inequality, unfairness, exploitation, and domination. That means there are serious limits on what they can do. When those with less power are in the wrong, agencies can dispense a semblance of justice, but when powerholders are perpetrators, little can be done.

### *Intimidation and Bribery*

There is a vast amount of writing about intimidation, especially at the violent end of the spectrum, including studies of torture, warfare, counterinsurgency, prisons, police powers, rape, and domestic violence. For milder forms of intimidation (though often just as effective), there are studies of peer pressure, bureaucratic power, and social control. For examining bribery as a tactic, there are psychological and economic studies of incentives, among others.

There is not nearly as much material on tactics of resistance to intimidation and bribery. Militaries have studied how to resist torture and brainwashing. Jeff Schmidt in his book *Disciplined Minds* gives an excellent analysis of how military advice on resisting indoctrination — commonly called brainwashing — can be used by students and professionals who want to stand up against pressures for ideological conformity.<sup>69</sup>

James C. Scott has studied ways that subjugated groups — such as slaves and peasants — use a range of subtle methods to resist domination.<sup>70</sup> Studies of resistance in repressive

states — such as Nazi-occupied Europe — are highly relevant.<sup>71</sup>

Studies of nonviolent action are a fruitful source of ideas for resisting repression. One of the stages in Gene Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action is "solidarity and discipline to fight repression."<sup>72</sup> One of the later stages is political jiu-jitsu, discussed earlier as the precursor to the concept of backfire. Intimidation, used to prevent the expression of outrage, can itself backfire, so increasing the risk of backfire is one of the ways to counter intimidation. This is a recursive use of backfire dynamics.

### **Studying Backfire**

For studying backfire dynamics, how should case studies be chosen? Norm violations occur every day. A few of them backfire but most of them don't. Which ones are worth studying? In principle, just about any event can be used, but in practice a crucial requirement is documentation. In many cases in which police use excessive force, there are no independent witnesses; cover-up and reinterpretation are successful in containing the story. A prominent case like the King beating generates enormous interest, stimulates participants to tell their stories, and raises the stakes for everyone, so there is active use of processes of devaluation, reinterpretation, official adjudication, and intimidation. The struggle becomes more public: the mass media seek all sorts of stories, including investigative probes into backstage behaviors. Partisans on each side have increased access to the media and are encouraged to challenge their opponents publicly. All this helps to expose some of the techniques that are usually hidden, especially intimidation and cover-up. Prominent cases

69. Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

70. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

71. Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe 1939–1943* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

72. Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 573–655. See also Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle*, 387–95.

thus offer a tremendous opportunity to study the dynamics of backfire.

But prominent cases of backfire aren't ideal for every purpose. One shortcoming is that backfire did occur, often spectacularly. Therefore, it is harder to see how backfire can be prevented. So it can be useful to study cases where backfire did not occur, for example due to cover-up. But when cover-up is totally effective, then other methods of inhibiting backfire become redundant and often aren't used. Sometimes, therefore, learning about backfire dynamics in a particular arena is best done by using a variety of case studies, each illustrating a different feature. That is the approach I've taken in this book.

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