

Theory for activists

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Is it possible to develop theory that is useful to activists—theory that they can use to be more effective? It sounds challenging, and it is. But it can be done, even by ordinary mortals. I know from one experience.

In 2005, Scott Parkin, an antiwar activist from Texas, visited Australia. Much of his time was spent holidaying, but he also contacted Australian activists and arranged to help run some nonviolence training sessions. One morning, on his way to a session, he was arrested by Australian police and immigration officers. He was detained while preparations were made to deport him.

While being transported by a police van, Scott was able to phone Iain Murray, an Australian nonviolent activist who was expecting to meet Scott and co-facilitate the training that day. Iain swung into action, contacting activists, organising protests and obtaining media coverage. How did Iain know what to do? Mostly he relied on his extensive experience in organising. But he was also influenced by a framework I had developed dealing with tactics against injustice. In fact, Iain had recently attended a workshop about the framework.

More on what happened with Scott later. My point here is that theory can make a difference. That's obvious enough in a general sense, for example via the influence of feminism or anarchism. But seldom is it clear in an immediate tactical sense. Iain's effective use of theory encouraged me to think that the world of ideas can have some immediate relevance to activists.

Scholars produce mounds of writing about theory, but little is of any interest to activists. Few theorists see activists as a prime audience, and even fewer try to develop theory for activists—at least not that I know about. Even for those who want to try, there's little guidance on how to go about doing it. So, I thought, why not tell the story of my own experience developing theory? It might provide a few hints for others. I begin with my encounters with social movement theory and then tell how I chanced upon some ideas relevant to activists.

I've had some second thoughts, asking myself, "Who am I to write about developing theory?" Surely this requires one to be some sort of iconic figure, widely lauded for having deep and powerful ideas. But such a view assumes that noted creators are different from other mortals. From what I've read about creativity, those people described as geniuses aren't qualitatively different from others—they have just become highly skilled in what they do.¹ So I present this story of

conceptual innovation as an illustration of what anyone might do, given suitable circumstances.

Movements and methods

In 1980, I was in the movement against nuclear power. At the time, I worked as an applied mathematician and was self-taught in social analysis. It was then that I first read some articles on social movements, namely some studies of the anti-nuclear movement. It struck me that there was very little that activists could learn from these academic treatments. It was only years later that I figured out why.

Most researchers write *about* social movements, as if they are watching them from the outside. They want to explain what happens from an outsider's perspective, which means their frameworks aren't oriented to what activists confront in daily decision-making or strategic planning.² Early social movement analysts used the concept of mob psychology, which was way off the mark. Then came various other perspectives. In Europe there was the new social movement literature,³ seeing social movements as "new" because they weren't in the Marxist tradition: they weren't about class. That wasn't news to activists!

In the US, there was a succession of frameworks, including resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, and framing. Resource mobilisation theory emphasised that movements needed to obtain resources—like money, offices and skills—to conduct their activities. This was a step up from treating movements as manifestations of irrationality, but not all that helpful to activists. After all, they already knew that resources are vital, because they were facing resource constraints all the time.

The idea of political opportunity structures is basically that movements cannot do anything they like because they are constrained by politics, in the widest sense. Sometimes there are opportunities to make progress; other times lots of agitation will make little difference. This is all very well, but doesn't give much guidance for identifying good opportunities and taking advantage of them. The political opportunity structure approach is more helpful in explaining the trajectory of movements, afterwards, than in helping activists be more effective.

The idea of framing is of more immediate use. Framing refers to sets of ideas. If you use Marxist ideas, you see the world in terms of class; from a feminist framework, you see the world in terms of gender. The ideas that people use to think about an issue often influence their attitudes toward it. Anarchists are all too familiar with the misguided but commonplace view that anarchy means chaos. Frame analysis offers a powerful tool for activists to think through the way they construct an issue.

Social Anarchism

George Lakoff applied his previous research on framing to the US political system.⁴ Based on an assessment of the ways conservatives and progressives conceptualise their politics, he claims each is underpinned by a key metaphor or conceptual model, conservatives by a strict father model and progressives by a nurturant parent model. These metaphors help to unify perspectives. Lakoff argues that progressives should talk about their own politics in ways that resonate with their own assumptions, rather than adopting conservatives' framing of the issues. For example, to counter conservatives' arguments for "tax relief," Lakoff says progressives could talk of taxes as "wise investments in the future" or "paying your dues."

Lakoff isn't a traditional social movement scholar—he's actually a linguistics researcher who has applied his insights to US politics. So back to social movements. After decades of dipping into writings on social movements and finding very little relevant to activists, I came across the work of James Jasper, someone working in the field, who pinpointed why the research wasn't relevant to activists.

My research on social movements showed me just how little social scientists have to say about strategy. Over the years many protestors have asked me what they might read to help them make better decisions. I had nothing to suggest, beyond Saul Alinsky.⁵ We knew about the political effects of strategic choices, especially effects on the state's reaction, which most scholars assumed to be the key issue. This was the most structural way of looking at strategy. We knew almost nothing, I discovered, about how activists (and others) make strategic decisions, much less how they might make good ones.⁶

This assessment sums up everything I had concluded from my own, more cursory, familiarity with the research.⁷ I've already said that scholars tend to look at social movements from the outside, as an object to be studied. In this quote, Jasper mentions one thing that I think has wider significance. He refers to "effects on the state's reaction, which most scholars assumed to be the key issue." This suggests that "most scholars" are oriented to the state as the key player. They think in terms of what the state might do—indeed they might even identify with the state. This ties in with a disparate body of writing on the connection between intellectuals and the state.⁸

Jasper identifies the key omission in most studies:

agency, the term used by structuralists when they reach the point where they throw up their hands and admit there is a lot their models cannot explain. They claim their job is to describe what is not agency, so it must be whatever is left over. They rarely try to look directly at it,

as though they might turn to salt and blow away in the howling winds of intellectual history.⁹

Jasper is here talking about the agency of individuals or social movements. As he suggested, scholars often analyse the agency of the state, namely the state's strategic options. This is another indication of identification with the state.

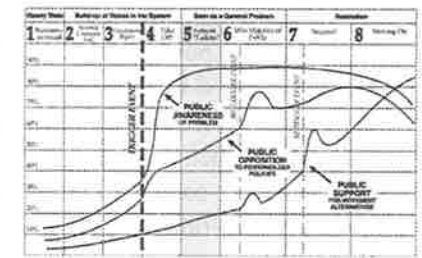
Jasper makes an assumption common among scholars: that the first step is explanation. Only after things are explained can implications be drawn for action. This assumption is implicit in an often-heard expression, "There's nothing as useful as a good theory." The assumption is that understanding comes first and usefulness derives from it.

This seems logical enough, but it's not how other parts of the world work. In medicine, for example, there are plenty of instances in which practitioners figure out effective treatments even though they don't understand, at the molecular or physiological level, how or why they work. In the history of science, there are examples of technologies being developed before scientific understandings of how they worked: for example, the steam engine preceded, and indeed stimulated, the development of thermodynamics.¹⁰

So it may not be necessary to understand social movements—whatever that might mean—before learning how they can be more effective. Or to put this another way: it might be worthwhile figuring out how movements can be more effective, even without fully understanding the dynamics.

In my reading about social movements over the years, I have come across two really useful frameworks. One is Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan or MAP. Moyer, an experienced activist, came up with a model of eight stages through which a typical movement passes: (1) normal times, (2) prove the failure of official institutions, (3) ripening conditions, (4) take-off, (5) perception of failure, (6) majority public opinion, (7) success and (8) continuing the struggle. It's useful for activists to understand where their campaign is, in terms of the stages, so they can pick the most appropriate strategy. Moyer paid special attention to stage 5, perception of failure: activists get demoralised when actually the movement is doing pretty well. Moyer's message is clear: understand what's happening rather than going off track due to unrealistic expectations.

I could readily see the applicability of MAP to the Australian movement against uranium mining and nuclear power. In 1979, activists became demoralised because of the beginning of uranium mining. Planned campaigns never got off the



Movement Action Plan

ground. But compared to other countries, the movement was doing extremely well—no nuclear power plants had been built in Australia—and should have sustained or increased its efforts.¹¹

Moyer also came up with a four-fold classification of social movement participants: citizen, rebel, change agent and reformer. Moyer says each role has something to offer, but certain roles are more relevant in particular stages, for example rebels in the take-off stage. He pays special attention to “negative rebels,” such as personal opportunists who seek egocentric goals at the expense of the movement.

The MAP is insightful and practical. It is exciting for activists. I remember when MAP was first circulated among Australian activists as a photocopied document. Here was something worth studying!

From an academic view, MAP can easily be criticised. It derives from trajectories of US movements and even then doesn't readily fit all movements. The classification of four activist roles doesn't have a solid anchor in psychological research. The eight stages refer variously to social conditions, movement actions and activist perceptions. And so on. Some of the initial shortcomings were addressed in the book presentation of the model, with several scholars putting MAP in context.¹²

For all its intellectual weaknesses, MAP is an incredibly useful contribution. It gets activists reflecting on their experiences, seeing their efforts within a bigger picture and thinking strategically.

The other framework for social movements that I think is really useful to activists is Gene Sharp's “dynamics of nonviolent action.” Sharp is the world's leading nonviolence researcher. He pioneered a new direction that can be called pragmatic nonviolence. Gandhi, the leading figure in the history of nonviolent action, based his approach largely on ethical principles, especially that violence is morally wrong. This approach is commonly called principled nonviolence—though it doesn't imply that others don't have principles. Sharp, in contrast, argued for nonviolent action on the grounds that it is more effective than violence.

Gandhi, because of his personal example and his inspirational leadership, continues to be highly influential. Gandhi wrote voluminously but he never systematised his ideas. Sharp, on the other hand, has largely been influential through his writings, especially his magnum opus, the 1973 book in three parts titled *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.¹³

In part one, Sharp presents the consent theory of power as the foundation for his approach. It basically says that power is relational—thus being compatible with Gramsci and Foucault—and that when people withdraw their consent from rulers, the rulers' power evaporates. “People” here includes members of the population and functionaries, such as the police and military. The consent theory of power is controversial.¹⁴ The point to note here is that it involves agency, that

topic that Jasper says is avoided by social movement scholars. Nonviolent action is agency in practice.

In part two of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp classifies nonviolent action into three main types. First are symbolic methods like speeches, petitions, rallies, mock awards, vigils, teach-ins and renunciation of honours. Second are methods of noncooperation, such as ostracism, suspension of sports activities, stay-at-home, rent strikes, refusal to sell property, withdrawal of bank deposits, embargoes, peasant strikes, general strike, boycott of elections, administrative stalling, and mutiny. Third are methods of intervention such as fasting, sit-ins, alternative communication systems, occupation of work sites, alternative markets and parallel government.

Within each of the three main types of nonviolent action, Sharp gives categories, sub-categories and so on. For example, he classifies noncooperation into social, economic and political types. The two main forms of economic noncooperation are boycotts and strikes. In the strike category, he has several types, such as symbolic strikes, strikes by special groups, and multi-industry strikes, and within each type there are two or more possibilities. In total, Sharp identified 198 methods of nonviolent action, giving historical examples of each one.

Cataloguing and classifying methods of action may seem simple enough, but it is extremely powerful. Sharp's list and case studies provide inspirational testimony to human agency. Unlike most social movement writing, which positions activists as pawns of social forces, Sharp's methods of nonviolent action show activists as agents. The implication is that activists have a choice of what to do. It's as if Sharp were saying to the reader, “Here are some possibilities, including a lot you probably never thought about before.”

Sharp said that his list wasn't exhaustive—there were other methods. It's a matter of identifying and classifying them. The advent of the Internet has opened up a rich field for action. In one industrial campaign at my university, the union named a time and invited members to email large attachments to each other. Within a minute the entire email system was paralysed. That is one of hundreds of additional methods that could be added to Sharp's list.

The third part of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is called “The dynamics of nonviolent action.” Sharp presents a set of stages or features in a typical struggle between nonviolent activists and their opponents, who may use violence. Some of the stages are laying the groundwork, challenge brings repression, nonviolent discipline, political jiu-jitsu and the redistribution of power. For each stage, Sharp gives historical examples.

This framework is the closest analogy to Moyer's Movement Action Plan. Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action isn't specific to social movements; it is a framework for campaigns as well as movements as a whole.

At an intellectual level, it's easy to see problems in Sharp's categories. "Laying the groundwork," for example, can be called a stage in a movement's trajectory, parallel to Moyer's stages 2 and 3. But Sharp's "maintaining nonviolent discipline" isn't a stage; it's more like a commitment or feature or choice. I think this sort of incoherency results from Sharp being true to the data. He doesn't discuss his research methods, but I think they could be said to be a form of grounded theory, which involves immersing yourself in the data and coming up with categories that make sense of it.¹⁵ Using this approach, Sharp developed a vivid and realistic way of understanding features of nonviolent struggles.

I was especially interested in one of Sharp's stages, "political jiu-jitsu." Sometimes, when a repressive government—through the police or military—uses violence against nonviolent protesters, this helps to discredit the government and mobilise the resistance. Jiu-jitsu is a martial art in which the opponent's force is used against them. By analogy, in political jiu-jitsu, the government's force is used against the government.

Sharp gives a number of examples of political jiu-jitsu. One of them is the Sharpeville massacre. In 1960, in South Africa under apartheid, white South African police opened fire on peaceful protesters in the township of Sharpeville, killing about a hundred people. This event, publicised worldwide, severely damaged the reputation of the South African government.¹⁶

Sharp didn't come up with the concept of political jiu-jitsu unaided. He drew on the prior concept of moral jiu-jitsu developed by Richard Gregg, who studied Gandhi's campaigns and wrote a book, *The Power of Nonviolence*, originally published in 1934.¹⁷ Gregg's psychological explanation of the effectiveness of nonviolent action doesn't stand up to scrutiny.¹⁸ Sharp broadened the jiu-jitsu concept from psychology to include political and social factors.

Since 1973, when Sharp laid out the concept of political jiu-jitsu, activists had not done a lot with it or more generally with Sharp's stages in part three, "The dynamics of nonviolent action." Much more attention was given to parts one and two, namely the consent theory of power and the methods of nonviolent action. These have been used in nonviolent action training, in preparation for direct actions.

My own assessment is that Sharp, of all living scholars, is the most influential among activists. His writings have been translated into numerous languages and used by activists worldwide, for example in Burma and Serbia.

I have been one of Sharp's most prominent critics, pointing to theoretical flaws in the consent theory of power¹⁹ and challenging his orientation to government for introducing nonviolent defence.²⁰ Yet I have always recognised his contributions. In fact, the more I've studied nonviolent action, the more I've appreciated how Sharp has addressed so many important areas in ways relevant to activists.

There is a strong irony in the response to Sharp's work. He has sought recognition from the establishment—from scholars through his affiliation with Harvard University and from government and military figures for his proposals on nonviolent defence—but only occasionally obtained it. On the other hand, he has tried to distance himself from social movements, yet his work is ideally suited for their needs and they have been the most enthusiastic users of his ideas.

Back to political jiu-jitsu. When governments use violence against peaceful protesters, this can end up being counterproductive for the attackers, by triggering greater support for the protesters and even causing cracks in government ranks. This is exciting, as it shows a way to act against the apparently overwhelming power of government repression. But in studying some cases of repression, I came up with a question: what is going on when government repression is successful? Why doesn't the jiu-jitsu effect always occur?

In 1965 in Indonesia, the military launched a massive killing campaign against communists and others.²¹ The death toll was at least half a million people. There was no armed resistance; this could be categorised as genocide or, to be technical, politicide, mass killing of a political group. However, this horrific atrocity seemed to generate little outrage. There was some resistance within Indonesia, but not as much as might have been expected. Internationally, western governments mostly treated the killing as a beneficial development in a left-leaning third world country, what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman called "constructive terror."²²

This example, and others, got me thinking about what was causing the absence of a significant jiu-jitsu effect.²³ I had an idea: maybe the government was doing something to dampen reactions. From this small and simple beginning, I developed a model for what powerful perpetrators do to minimise outrage from their actions. It is simple enough. Five types of methods are commonly used:

- cover up the action
- devalue the target
- reinterpret the events through lying, minimising, blaming and framing
- use official channels to give an appearance of justice
- intimidate and bribe people involved.

Essentially what I did was probe the jiu-jitsu process and figure out what powerful attackers were doing to prevent political jiu-jitsu. To distinguish my model from Sharp, I adopted a new term: backfire. When the perpetrator methods are inadequate to prevent or minimise outrage, the attacks can backfire on the perpetrator. That's what happened in Sharpeville in 1960. The South African police and government used every one of the five methods to limit outrage from the shooting of peaceful protesters, but in the end were unsuccessful.

The backfire model didn't spring into my mind fully formed. Initially I had come up with just four methods to inhibit backfire. In 2002 I gave a talk at Virginia Tech, sponsored by Amnesty International, to a group including many activists. One of them immediately added intimidation to the list—that is what they had experienced.

I grappled with how best to classify the methods. Devaluation, for example, could be considered a method of reinterpretation, but I decided to list it as a separate method because it is so distinctive in some sorts of injustices—the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, for example. I even came up with a rationale, couched in terms of message transmission theory, for keeping them separate.

I kept two potentially distinct methods, intimidation and bribery, together. It is often difficult to obtain evidence about them, especially bribery, and they both target the expression of outrage. As well, I gradually refined the language of the model. Initially, I said the methods served to inhibit backfire; later, I said they inhibited outrage. In response to referees for one later paper, colleagues and I changed the name to the outrage management model, which is more descriptive when backfire doesn't occur.

My point in providing this detail is that developing new theory can be a gradual process, involving modifications of terms, factors and relationships within the concepts in the framework.

It's all very well to come up with a great new theory. But who is going to take any notice? In the scheme of things, new ideas are very cheap. With a bit of practice and the right sort of encouragement, you could become adept at coming up with a new framework every day. As one inventor said, ideas are a dime a dozen—or cheaper.²⁴ For the ideas to be taken seriously, a fair bit of work is required.

The basic ideas in Sharp's work aren't difficult. What made them more persuasive was his exhaustive work in giving historical examples to illustrate his frameworks. With some reading about social action, he could have written down a few dozen methods of nonviolent action and classified them. What he actually did was excavate examples of nearly 200 methods. The sheer quantity of evidence and the large number of methods are impressive, giving much greater credibility to nonviolent action. Sharp spent over a decade working on *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu was the point of departure for my model. I was dealing with the jiu-jitsu effect, but—unlike Sharp—delving into the tactics to prevent or enhance it. The most important conceptual step in developing the model was quite simple: I thought about what the opponent might do to inhibit outrage.

Activists usually focus on what they are doing themselves, including what they are protesting against, whether they will be able to bring it off and what impacts

their actions will have. In organising a rally or vigil for example, they think about things like how many people they can attract and what sort of media coverage they might receive. If they anticipate a strong police presence and the possibility of arrests, they might offer guidance in behaviour and plan for legal assistance. All this is important. The backfire model adds another layer: if the police attack the protesters, they need to think about what the police and government will do to dampen outrage—and then think about counter-tactics.

In terms of the backfire model, each of the five types of methods can be countered, with the aim of increasing outrage over injustice:

- expose the action
- validate the target
- interpret the events as unjust
- mobilise support; avoid or discredit official channels
- resist intimidation.

This set of tactics can readily be applied to dealing with the possibility of police brutality against protesters. The police are likely to use one or more of the methods to inhibit outrage, so the trick is to think of ways to counter their likely actions. Because police don't want a lot of people to see them being brutal toward peaceful protesters, so organisers, in preparation, can have plenty of witnesses present, with cameras and videorecorders. Police are likely to denigrate the protesters, so it is worth thinking about dress and behaviour that will give the protesters greater credibility and status. If police brutality generates public concern, the police or government may set up an inquiry—and protesters may enter into official channels voluntarily through making formal complaints. To better mobilise support, it is worth thinking about putting more energy into documenting and publicising what happened.

Political jiu-jitsu, as presented by Sharp, deals with a specific type of situation: violence used against nonviolent protesters. I wanted to apply my backfire framework more generally. The conceptual leap is straightforward. I noted that the reason why violence used against nonviolent protesters can be counterproductive is that it is seen as unfair. People are outraged. So to apply the framework more generally, I looked for anything that quite a few people would think is unjust or unfair.

One example is the beating of Rodney King in the course of his arrest by Los Angeles police in March 1991. King wasn't a protester: he had been driving while drunk, trying to escape arrest. He wasn't nonviolent: he resisted arrest and was able to shake off four officers who had grabbed him by his arms and legs. Nevertheless, the police beating—two officers hitting King dozens of times with metal batons as he lay on the ground—caused massive outrage. Unlike most

police beatings, a bystander recorded part of the encounter on video, which was later broadcast on television.

The model can be applied to a variety of perceived injustices, including censorship, sexual harassment, unfair dismissal, torture, war and genocide. Many of these topics are quite removed from the canonical violence-versus-nonviolence scenario. This is exactly what I had hoped for. A lot of the writing about nonviolence, however insightful, is dismissed by those who dismiss nonviolence. (The reasons for this are a separate matter.) By showing the relevance of the backfire model in a variety of situations, especially ones that affect people personally like bullying and sexual harassment, it could more readily escape the conventional stereotyping of nonviolence.

In developing the backfire model, I thus made two conceptual steps—both typical of the sort of steps taken in developing theory. The first step was to take a feature of an existing model and probe more deeply into it, trying to explain what happens. For me, that was starting with political jiu-jitsu and trying to explain why it often didn't occur. The second step was applying ideas from one arena, where they were developed, to another arena. For me, that was applying ideas from the arena of nonviolent action to all sorts of other areas where injustice occurs, from censorship to genocide.

Big theory, little theory

When people think of “theory,” they often imagine it must be big and important, like Marxism, the theory of relativity or evolutionary theory. If you're not some eminent figure like Marx, Einstein or Darwin, then who are you to be developing theory?

This attitude is understandable but unrealistic. Let's begin with the term “theory.” It's useful to think of theory as a set of ideas for understanding something. Sets of ideas can be big or small. I discovered that psychologists use the word “theory” without huge expectations: an explanation for the behaviour of alienated adolescents can be called a theory.

But if “theory” is still too frightening, and you don't want to offend others by seeming presumptuous by proposing one, then use “framework” or “model.” They are also ways of talking about sets of ideas.

When you look at a big-time theory, usually the core ideas are pretty simple. Marxism is built around ideas of class, class struggle, materialism and the dialectic. The special theory of relativity is built around the behaviour of objects at high velocities. Evolutionary theory is built around the idea of natural selection. What makes these theories powerful is the way they have been elaborated and applied.

This raises the question: in building a theory relevant to activists, is it better to start with a high-level, abstract theory and spell out its implications, or start with something closer to practice? My view is that it's better to start small and simple.²⁵

Some of the most powerful ideas are quite simple. An example is prefiguration, a jargon word for behaving now like you'd like the world to be in the future, or, in other words, turning the ends into means. For example, if your goal is doing things without bosses, then try to organise activities without bosses. This is sometimes called living the revolution or being the change you want to see.

Grand theory, like Marxism, operates on the trickle-down principle: decide on the big ideas and work out the implications. The alternative might be called grassroots theory: ideas come out of practice, with contributions from lots of people, and gradually a big picture develops based on the grassroots theory.

Academics are often attracted to grand theory.²⁶ Even postmodernism, which is supposed to be a critique of all-encompassing narratives, has itself become so dominant in some circles that alternatives are castigated.

Academic conventions make it difficult to acknowledge contributions to thinking that develop from the grassroots. Take the idea that power is not something tangible held by people at the top, but rather a relation involved in everything we do. Academics constantly cite Michel Foucault for his ideas about power. But those same ideas started becoming common in social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists, for example, said “the personal is political.”

Foucault wasn't the source of these ideas—they were in the air. But scholars can't cite “numerous unknown activists”—it's not the done thing. They need to cite an authority, so they cite Foucault. That's acceptable, especially because Foucault did excellent work articulating a valuable perspective.

This is not a criticism of Foucault or others like him. More Foucaults are needed! Academics could be criticised for focusing on intellectual stars rather than giving credit to unknown hordes, but they operate in a system that encourages, indeed requires, such an approach. So this is a cautionary comment: idea developers may not receive much credit, and it's easy to be misled by the tremendous attention given to a few individuals.

It's well known that ideas don't pop into people's heads out of nowhere. In science, there is a curious dichotomy in thinking about so-called breakthroughs. On the one hand, individuals are glorified as making crucial contributions, with special attention to Nobel prize winners and recognition through the naming of scientific quantities or ideas, such as the volt after Alessandro Volta. On the other hand, the scientific method is lauded for being a powerful tool that enables progress to be made. But if the scientific method is so reliable, then surely ordinary scientists can use it too, so that advances are possible without waiting for the insights of towering intellects. From this perspective, average scientists are no

smarter than anyone else, but are well skilled in using methods that generate new knowledge.

This suggests that it should be possible for lots of people to make contributions to activism-relevant theory. You don't need to be brilliant—at least not if there's a method for developing this sort of theory. And that is precisely the problem: what is the method? Perhaps it's simply a matter of taking the usual skills in developing concepts and applying them to activist-relevant topics. In addition, it's plausible that for activists it may be useful to propose ideas that are simple, practical and relevant.

What is useful to activists?

What sort of new knowledge is likely to be useful to activists? There are lots of possibilities, such as group dynamics, communication and analyses of social and political systems. There are practical things too, like doing the accounts and arranging venues. But rather than presuming what would be relevant, why not ask activists themselves what they'd like?

In the mid 1990s, I attended an Australian nonviolence gathering. For several days, about 35 people from across the country met for discussion and planning. Most of them were involved with direct action in their communities on a regular basis. I was one of a few with more intellectual interests.

Preparing for the gathering, I had a thought. This would be a great opportunity to find out what activists wanted to know. In an evening session, I asked everyone to imagine that they had been assigned a social scientist to do research for them.

Militaries and big companies can pay social scientists, of course, but few activists are able to sponsor studies. But there might be some volunteers who would be willing to help. This is the principle behind science shops, pioneered in the Netherlands and copied in a number of other countries.²⁷ The science shop receives requests from groups such as trade unions and environmental organisations and seeks to find scientists who will undertake research to satisfy the requests.

Well, I wasn't about to set up a science shop—that is a huge effort—but just wanted to obtain a few ideas from activists. Then, perhaps, I could think of a few social scientists who might be able to help.

The activists were very interested and came up with all sorts of ideas—see the box.²⁸ But hardly any were the basis for research. Some of them were about things where research had already been done—it was a matter of tracking down a few references. Others were so big that researching them would be a major

enterprise. Very few were just the right size and content to be feasible projects (see box).

Questions from nonviolent activists seeking answers from social scientists

Is there a book for beginners on the global economy and how it operates, including the arms trade?

What are sources of funding on nonviolence issues, and how can they be accessed?

Historically and geographically speaking, which countries/communities have had family structures supportive of nonviolence internally and externally?

Which communities (in history and different parts of the world) have been closest to the principles of the Australian Nonviolence Network? What did they have and what did they lack?

What successful strategies have nonviolent movements used in the past?

How can activists be helped to locate their particular actions as part of an ongoing campaign?

How do/can egalitarian social change organisations retain their radicalism over time?

My conclusion was simple: few activists spend much time thinking about what research would be useful for them. In short, they often don't know what they need in terms of research. The problem of "research for activists" thus has gaps on both sides. Few activists spend any time thinking about research and few researchers are oriented to activists.

Writing style

Does it make any difference how theory is written? Aren't the ideas the key thing, not the way they're expressed? My answer is that writing style does make a difference.

In my experience, very few activists wait with anticipation for the latest issue of *Theory and Society* or *Culture and Communication*. Indeed, very few activists ever look at academic journals, except for activists who are academics themselves. The main audience of scholarly writing seems to be other scholars, and that often seems to imply a dense, jargon-ridden, reader-unfriendly style. There's a reason for this: it acts to prevent outsiders from easily making a contribution. To be treated as a serious scholar, you need to spend a lot of effort understanding writing in this style.

Are there any ideas useful to activists in this vast outpouring of scholarly prose? Undoubtedly there are a great number. But extracting the ideas and couching them in ways that activists can use them may require about as much effort as producing them in the first place. Few activists have time for this, which means that if scholars want their ideas to be taken up, they need to communicate them in accessible ways.

For those who write difficult-to-understand articles and books, one option is to occasionally write an accessible treatment. I'm sure that if Habermas had ever written "A beginner's guide to communication" or Foucault had ever written "Basics of power," many activists would have well-thumbed copies. Indeed, scholars would be the first to turn to such sources and use them in their classes. The absence of simple introductions has spawned series of books such as *Marx for Dummies*. Another option is to turn to Wikipedia for a straightforward explanation. However, it is usually only prominent intellectuals who receive this sort of popularisation.

Another option is to write as accessibly as possible within the confines of standard formats. Some scholarly journals allow clear expression, without treating it as simple-minded, and some even encourage it. As well, there are magazines, blogs and other outlets where it is possible to make an intellectually rigorous argument, backed up with references, in an understandable style, perhaps even an engaging one.

Developing a clear writing style is not easy: it takes time and practice. Getting feedback from members of the target audience is vital. I remember the first draft leaflet I wrote for Friends of the Earth Canberra, back in 1976. The others in the group went through words and sentences, seeking to make the message accurate and clear. That sort of experience is immensely valuable to anyone who wants to communicate to activists.

For academics, there is often a trade-off between scholarly status and communicating to non-specialists. Anyone who writes for an audience outside of disciplinary specialists may be dismissed or derided by peers for not being sufficiently scholarly. What lies behind this attitude? I think a key factor is that making insider knowledge understandable to outsiders is a threat to professional privilege. The influence of peers is another reason not to expect more than a few academics to orient their work to activists in both content and style. But it is no reason not to try.

Promoting theory

From the start, I felt that the backfire framework had the potential to be really useful to activists. But good ideas are not enough.

I assumed that it would take a lot of work and at least five or ten years before the backfire model obtained some recognition. I told myself five or ten years because in these sorts of endeavours some optimism is needed, otherwise it's hard to put in the effort. If I had said to myself, "It will take 25 years of hard work, and even then hardly anyone will take any notice," I might have been more reluctant to put so much effort into the model. I might have said, "Why bother?"

Even so, five or ten years is quite a lot of time to spend promoting a set of ideas. I think it takes some experience to have a sense of when it's worth embarking on such an effort. By that time I had been thinking about theory for activists for over 20 years.

So what is involved in promoting a theoretical framework? I assumed that I needed to publish analyses using the framework, to show its applicability. Publishing would help build my own credibility and hence the model's. I wanted to take the model to activists—publishing on its own wouldn't do that. Yet another factor was obtaining feedback from all sorts of people, including scholars and activists, to improve and refine the model.

The approach I adopted was to publish a series of papers showing how the framework could apply to range of different topics. I also ran workshops about the model, for activists and others.

Writing papers on a wide range of topics requires work to get on top of the different topics, so for some of this I sought collaborators. I contacted Steve Wright, one of the world's leading experts on the technology of repression. We had corresponded for years and I had met Steve once, in Manchester in 1990. We collaborated on a paper on backfire and torture technology.²⁹ I also contacted Sue Curry Jansen, an expert on censorship, with whom I had exchanged a few letters a decade earlier. She also agreed to collaborate, and we soon wrote an article on backfire and censorship.³⁰

When first proposing a new model, it can be hard to justify it. In social science, it helps to refer to show continuities with prior work. But if there haven't been any prior studies using the model, then plausibility arguments and well-known examples may have to suffice. After publishing a few articles, I could refer to them. For example, I could write that "These techniques of inhibiting outrage are found in areas such as censorship and torture technology, so it is plausible to see whether they are also found in police beatings"—or whatever new topic I was exploring.

Writing articles helped me refine the model. Furthermore, the more articles I wrote, the better I became at expressing the ideas. By the tenth time I wrote an overview of the backfire model for an article, my prose was flowing pretty well.

Working with collaborators was highly valuable. Having someone else look critically at the model helped develop and refine it. Collaborators enabled tackling topics that I would have struggled to deal with on my own. Finally, it's stimulating to exchange ideas with others.

Within a few years I had written quite a few articles on backfire. Some of them took a lot of work. In writing about the beating of Rodney King, I read perhaps ten books, taking detailed notes.³¹ Similarly, writing about the Rwandan genocide required a lot of study.³²

I wrote a book about the model. A book allows more space to develop ideas. Furthermore, I thought it would add credibility to the model and create a convenient citation.³³ Probably more useful than a book was putting all my backfire articles on my website, eventually including articles by others as well.³⁴ I also wrote an introductory leaflet, "Backfire basics," and developed a slide show that can be used by others.

Writing articles is all very well, but does it get ideas to activists? It depends. There are some individuals who scour scholarly publications looking for things useful to activists and then either alert key individuals or write accessible treatments. These go-betweens serve a valuable function, but there aren't all that many of them. If you just put your work out there in some journal or other, you can't expect it to be picked up and disseminated. After all, there are so many thousands of scholarly journals that no one can rely on being spotted for relevance.

One option is to write directly for activists. My very first treatment of the backfire model was a short article for *Peace News*.³⁵ I could have done more of this sort of writing. The main problem is that it's hard to pinpoint what activists read or to find out whether they take much notice of articles, in *Peace News* or elsewhere, presenting a new framework purporting to be a useful tool in activist repertoires. If your ideas involve thinking differently, the challenge is to convince people to step outside familiar ways of doing things.

More productive, in my case, was giving talks and workshops. I gave talks to all sorts of groups—my immediate colleagues, academics and students at other universities, conferences and public meetings. After a while, I developed a talk-workshop that involved a slide presentation intermixed with small-group interaction, getting participants to draw on their own understandings of injustice and to analyse their own case studies using the categories in the model. This worked well, especially when participants already had extensive experience with injustice. I ran the workshop at a conference for community legal centre workers, and

received lots of positive comments: these workers knew all about injustice and could immediately see the relevance of the tactics in the model.

I also ran workshops for nonviolent activists. One of those who attended was Iain Murray, an experienced activist based in Melbourne. Not so long after this, Iain met with Scott Parkin, the visiting US activist. They were scheduled to be joint coordinators of a workshop on nonviolence. Then Iain received a call from Scot, who said he had been arrested and thought he might be deported.

Iain immediately went to the police station where Scott was being held and started ringing people and groups to join him in a protest. Iain had a lot of experience and knew how to proceed. But he also picked up some tips from the backfire model. One key tactic was exposure, which meant publicity. Another key tactic was validation: Scott needed to be presented in a positive light. So Iain continually referred to Scott as a friend and emphasised Scott's commitment to nonviolence. (One of the discrediting techniques used by the government was to suggest Scott had been linked to violent protest tactics.)

Scott was deported, but the whole saga backfired on the Australian government and intelligence agencies. If Scott had been left alone, he would have had a pleasant visit, mixing travel with meeting a few activists. Instead, Scott's arrest received considerable news coverage and stimulated interest in nonviolent action across the country. It wasn't pleasant for Scott but it had a huge impact.

This was exactly as predicted by the backfire model: an attack that many people saw as unfair—Scott's arrest and deportation—was counterproductive for the attackers. In a further indication of the relevance of the model, the government used all five techniques for inhibiting outrage—cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels and intimidation. However, the government's techniques did not succeed, in large part because of the efforts by Iain and other activists to challenge the arrest.³⁶

The Scott Parkin saga was one of those rare occasions when it was possible to see the immediate relevance of theory to action. The more common experience, from the theorist's perspective, is developing ideas, putting them out into the world—through articles and talks—and never hearing a thing about how they are used. That may mean that no one is taking notice. It's hard to know. Not only is there limited understanding about what it takes to develop theory for activists, but there is little feedback when attempting it. Even so, it can be worthwhile to try, though it's only a small part of efforts to create a better world. *A*

Notes

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- 1 K. Anders Ericsson, Neil Charness, Paul J. Feltovich and Robert R. Hoffman (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 2 The most insightful treatment I know of the relevance of social movement theory to activists is Chris Rootes, "Theory of social movements: theory for social movements?" *Philosophy and Social Action*, 16 (4), October-December 1990, pp. 5–17.
- 3 Some of this work is highly stimulating. I especially like the approach of Alain Touraine. See for example *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 4 George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2004).
- 5 Saul Alinsky was a community organiser, not a social movement scholar. His best-known book is *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).
- 6 James M. Jasper, *Getting Your Way: Strategic Dilemmas in the Real World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. xii–xiii.
- 7 See also David Croteau, William Hoynes and Charlotte Ryan (eds.), *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. xii: "Movement theorists usually speak to themselves, rarely reaching beyond the narrow confines of specialized academic journals and conferences. As a result, movement activists generally do not know or use social movement theorists' work. If they are familiar with some of it, they often think it trivial."
- 8 B. Bruce-Briggs (ed.), *The New Class?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Trans-Action Books, 1979); Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (London: Macmillan, 1979); George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1979); Charles C. Lemert (ed.), *Intellectuals and Politics: Social Theory in a Changing World* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991); Max Nomad, *Aspects of Revolt* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959).
- 9 Jasper, 2006, p. xiii. Emphasis in the original.
- 10 For a short readable account of the interplay of science and technology in the 1800s, see John Ziman, *The Force of Knowledge: The Scientific Dimension of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
- 11 I discuss this in "Environmentalism and electoralism," *The Ecologist*, 14 (3), 1984, pp. 110–118.
- 12 Bill Moyer with JoAnn MacAllister, Mary Lou Finley and Steve Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2001).
- 13 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).
- 14 My own critique is "Gene Sharp's theory of power," *Journal of Peace Research*, 26(2), 1989, pp. 213–222. See also Kate McGuinness, "Gene Sharp's theory of power: a feminist critique of consent," *Journal of Peace Research*, 30, 1993, pp. 101–115.
- 15 Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1967).
- 16 The authoritative account is Philip Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity: Sharpeville and its Massacre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 17 Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence* (New York: Schocken, 1966).
- 18 Thomas Weber, "'The marchers simply walked forward until struck down': nonviolent suffering and conversion," *Peace & Change*, 18, 1993, pp. 267–289.
- 19 "Gene Sharp's theory of power."
- 20 Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993).
- 21 Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966* (Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990).
- 22 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights, Volume I: The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).
- 23 Brian Martin, Wendy Varney and Adrian Vickers, "Political jiu-jitsu against Indonesian repression: studying lower-profile nonviolent resistance," *Pacifica Review*, 13(2), 2001, pp. 143–156.
- 24 Don Lancaster, *Case against Patents: Selected Reprints from Midnight Engineering and Nuts & Volts Magazines* (Thatcher, AZ: Synergetics Press, 1993).
- 25 Brian Martin, "On the value of simple ideas," *Information Liberation* (London: Freedom Press, 1998), pp. 143–163.
- 26 In this article, I don't explore activist-academic relationships. For valuable insights see Croteau et al., *Rhyming Hope and History*; Bart Laws, "Taking it from the streets: an organizer goes back to school," *Radical Teacher*, No. 34, January 1988, pp. 16–22; Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
- 27 Nicole Farkas, "Dutch science shops: matching community needs with university R&D," *Science Studies*, 12(2), 1999, pp. 33–47.
- 28 Robert Burrowes, Brian Martin and Rebecca Spence, "Research questions on nonviolence," *Nonviolence Today*, No. 49, March/April 1996, pp. 8–11.
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- 30 Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "Making censorship backfire," *Counterpoise*, 7(3), July 2003, pp. 5–15.
- 31 Brian Martin, "The beating of Rodney King: the dynamics of backfire," *Critical Criminology*, 13(3), 2005, pp. 307–326.
- 32 Brian Martin, "Managing outrage over genocide: case study Rwanda," *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 21(3), 2009, pp. 275–290.
- 33 Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
- 34 "Backfire materials," <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html>
- 35 Brian Martin, "Rallying support," *Peace News*, March-May 2003, pp. 32–33.
- 36 Brian Martin and Iain Murray, "The Parkin backfire," *Social Alternatives*, 24(3), Third Quarter 2005, pp. 46–49.