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# The Politics of Gene Sharp

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## ABSTRACT

*Gene Sharp's contributions to the understanding of nonviolent action provide a useful lens for understanding developments in the field in recent decades. Sharp built on Gandhi's pioneering endeavours, but moved away from Gandhi by providing a pragmatic rationale for nonviolent action. Three important contributions by Sharp are his classification and cataloguing of methods of nonviolent action, his consent theory of power and his framework for understanding nonviolent campaigns. However, few academics have paid much attention to Sharp's work, and policy-makers have largely ignored it. In contrast, activists have taken up Sharp's ideas enthusiastically. Sharp is an imposing figure in the field of nonviolent action. Scholars and activists can learn from him, but also need to question and build on his ideas.*

**Key words:** Gene Sharp; nonviolent action; scholars; activists; policy-makers

GENE SHARP IS THE world's foremost thinker on nonviolent action. Some nonviolence scholars regard him so highly that even the slightest criticism is resented. On the other hand, some left-wing critics paint him as a tool of US foreign policy. Meanwhile, few members of the public have even heard of him.

Sharp's public profile increased following the Arab spring, especially the toppling of the government in Egypt. In January and February 2011, a popular uprising challenged Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled the country with an iron fist for 30 years, brutally repressing resistance to his dictatorial control. The regime was supported by most foreign governments, most importantly by those of the United States, Israel and Arab states; outside support for opposition was minimal.

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The uprising was striking in several respects. It did not grow out of an opposition political party, but rather encompassed a variety of groups. Inspired by recent events in Tunisia, the uprising used a combination of offline and online tactics. Most importantly, the movement was unarmed, with sustained mass demonstrations in major cities being the primary mode of action. Activists made special efforts to warn against using violence, because that would play into Mubarak's hands, justifying a crackdown.

Many people new to activism attended the multi-day demonstrations, most notably in Tahrir Square in Cairo. The broad-based support for the movement enabled it to win over many previous allies of the government. In response, the military withdrew support for the regime; Mubarak, lacking any clear options to remain in power, was effectively coerced to step down. The movement did not fire a shot and yet toppled a dictator in just 18 days.

These dramatic events drew attention to Sharp, whose writings about nonviolent action seemed to provide the tools for undermining dictatorships.<sup>1</sup> Sharp's work provides a lens for understanding the evolving use of nonviolent action in recent decades. To understand Sharp and his impact, it is necessary to understand the changing role of nonviolent action and theory. My purpose here is to offer a perspective on this task.

### **Sharp: Background**

So who is Gene Sharp? Born in Ohio in 1928, he obtained degrees from Ohio State University and then spent several years in the early 1950s independently studying nonviolent action. In 1953, during the Korean war, he served nine months of a two-year sentence in prison for being a conscientious objector. From 1955–1958, he was assistant editor at *Peace News* in London, and he then spent three years in Norway at the Institute for Social Research, where he interviewed teachers who had resisted the imposition of Nazi teaching under the Quisling regime during World War II. In the early 1960s, Sharp studied for a doctorate at Oxford, which he obtained in 1968. He then obtained academic posts at a number of universities, including Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1970.

Sharp drew ideas and inspiration from the thinking and life of Mohandas Gandhi, whose approach to nonviolence was based on the moral principle of refusing to use violence against opponents. Gandhi also exhibited a remarkable sense of political strategy in his implementation of nonviolence on a mass scale. Sharp drew from Gandhi's strategic practice of nonviolent action while ultimately differing (at least in his published works) from Gandhi's moral

rationale for its use. Sharp argued that nonviolent action should be used because it is more effective than violence.<sup>2</sup> In taking this position, Sharp departed from the dominant pacifist orientation of the US peace movement in the 1950s.

In his extensive studies in the 1950s and 1960s, Sharp collected evidence of hundreds of historical struggles, gradually adding to a compendium of material from which he would fashion and advocate his new approach and framework for understanding nonviolent action. In this endeavour, he largely worked alone.

During some of this time, Sharp lived a hand-to-mouth existence. What he was working on received few plaudits in the academic or policy worlds: to support nonviolent action was highly radical at the time, going against dominant thinking among political scientists and the general public. Sharp carried on regardless: he was more interested in advancing and legitimizing his ideas than in rising within the academic hierarchy.

Sharp's magnum opus, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, published in 1973, was based on his Oxford University doctoral thesis.<sup>3</sup> Two other important books followed, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* in 1979 and *Social Power and Political Freedom* in 1980, each largely built around essays written earlier.<sup>4</sup> Sharp's most important innovations in the theory of nonviolent action date from his intensive study in the 1950s and 1960s.

Sharp's pioneering contributions have shaped the study and understanding of nonviolent action today. Among his most influential ideas are the classification and documentation of hundreds of nonviolent methods, a theory of power to explain why the methods work, and a strategic, agency-oriented framework for understanding nonviolent campaigns. These are facets of what is commonly called the "pragmatic approach" to nonviolent action, providing an argument that nonviolent action is more effective than violence.

Here, I give an assessment of Sharp's intellectual contributions, putting them in the context of other work in the field. To keep the discussion within bounds, I focus on *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* and assess Sharp's impact on three key audiences: scholars, policy-makers and activists.

Most researchers on nonviolent action become aware of Sharp's work sooner or later. He is, after all, a towering figure in the field. My own intellectual relationship with Sharp has two dimensions. On the one hand, I have been one of the most visible critics of his orientation and theory<sup>5</sup>; on the other, several of my most important contributions build on or extend Sharp's ideas.<sup>6</sup> My assessment of Sharp's role and impact reflects these two dimensions.<sup>7</sup>

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**What Is Nonviolent Action?**

To better understand the significance of Sharp's contributions, it is necessary to put them in the context of earlier work. As a preliminary, it is useful to address the concept of nonviolent action. For many people unfamiliar with the field, "nonviolent action" is a mystery. It is constructed as a negative (not violence). In a literal sense, having a conversation, voting and building a bridge could be said to be nonviolent. Then there is the vexing issue of defining violence. Does it include emotional violence? Does it include oppression, sometimes called structural violence? Does it include acts of property destruction, such as throwing rocks through shop windows or, as in the first Palestinian intifada, 1987–1993, throwing rocks at military tanks?

The easiest way to delimit nonviolent action is to refer to prominent campaigns, such as those in India against British colonialism and those in the US against segregation, often identified with the figures of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. For those familiar with the US civil rights movement, images of lunch counter sit-ins and bus boycotts come to mind. More recently, due to people power movements in the Philippines, Serbia, Lebanon, Egypt and numerous other countries, the predominant image is massive rallies.

Sharp's approach was to put two boundaries on the concept of nonviolent action. The first is that it is not physically violent: nonviolent action excludes beatings, arrests, imprisonment, torture and killing. The second boundary is with conventional political action, such as lobbying, campaigning and voting. Nonviolent action, for Sharp and most others in the field, is action that goes beyond the routine. It does not necessarily involve breaking the law; it does have an element of challenging business as usual.

Note that the adjective "nonviolent" refers to those taking the action: their opponents, such as governments, can and often do use violence against nonviolent activists. A typical scenario is nonviolent action on one side and violence, or the threat of it, on the other.

Nonviolent action, thus delimited, has a rich history. For example, in the mid 1800s, Hungary was part of the Austrian empire. Hungarians, in seeking greater autonomy, used a range of methods of noncooperation — for example, wearing of Hungarian colours, boycotts of official celebrations such as the Emperor's birthday, refusal to pay taxes and resistance to military service — over a period of 18 years. The struggle was unarmed, yet eventually successful.<sup>8</sup>

In 1920, there was a military coup in Germany led by Wolfgang Kapp. The government fled from the capital. There was spontaneous civilian resistance to the coup, which took the form of a general strike,

massive rallies and other actions. There was also potent noncooperation at a personal level. Bankers refused to sign cheques produced by the putchists without signatures of government officials, and typists refused to type Kapp's proclamations. The coup collapsed within four days due to nonviolent resistance in the capital, which was far more effective than armed resistance in the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

Conventional history gives great attention to militaries and wars, so much so that civilian forms of struggle are virtually invisible. Part of their invisibility has been due to the lack of a framework for understanding nonviolent action or even a term for labelling it. Nevertheless, a small number of individuals were aware of these and other episodes, drawing on them to advocate alternatives to arms. For example, during World War I, the famous philosopher Bertrand Russell advocated unarmed civilian resistance as an alternative to military defence.<sup>10</sup>

### **Gandhi**

The key figure in the history of nonviolent action was Mohandas Gandhi, who led campaigns in South Africa and then India. If there is a foundation date for nonviolent action, it is 11 September 1906, when Gandhi, at a large meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, concerned about a new law oppressing Indians, inspired a commitment by participants to refuse to cooperate with it.

Nonviolent action existed long before Gandhi, but he was the one who turned it into a consciously designed method of struggle. The campaigns led by Gandhi, which he termed his "experiments with truth,"<sup>11</sup> were built around an ethical commitment to avoid the use of violence and to respect one's opponents as human beings, but nevertheless to challenge them through the use of gradually more forceful methods of popular resistance.

Although Gandhi's adherence to nonviolence was ethical — or, to use the standard phrase today, "principled" — he was a shrewd practitioner, designing campaigns to maximise impact. To understand Gandhi's impact on the Indian independence struggle, it is important to realise that in the 1920s and 1930s, India was deeply divided by caste, class, sex and religion. By exploiting these divisions, the British were able to maintain control through a relatively small presence. Any movement that could bring the people together in a common cause would be a serious threat to British rule.

The highlight of Gandhi's efforts was the salt march. In 1930, he had the inspiration to mount a challenge to the British salt tax and monopoly on salt production. In the context of British economic and political impositions, this was not an important issue, but Gandhi

realised that everyone was affected by salt, which thus could become a potent symbol of British rule. Gandhi and his team organised a 24-day march to the ocean with the intent of making salt from seawater, a form of civil disobedience. The march itself was quite legal, and provided a means of building support along the way, with meetings and speeches at local venues and consequent publicity across the country.

Prior to the march, Gandhi wrote to Lord Irwin, the viceroy, outlining his plans. Irwin was placed in a bind. If he arrested Gandhi without cause, namely a legal pretext, this would inflame opposition, yet if he waited, the movement would gain momentum.

The salt march worked brilliantly to inspire popular nonviolent resistance, with thousands joining civil disobedience actions across the country. The salt campaign did not bring about independence immediately, but it did forge a national consciousness, cutting across traditional divisions, that had not existed before.<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi's campaigns inspired supporters of social justice around the world. Indeed, it can be said that Gandhi was by far the century's most important influence on people's struggles, through his writings but especially through his example.

Gandhi wrote voluminously, but was not a careful theoretician, so it fell to others to better describe and conceptualise his methods. One of the earliest and most influential was Richard Gregg, a US supporter of organised labour who, seeking ideas about how to be more effective, went to India in the 1920s to learn about Gandhi's methods. He wrote several books, of which the most influential was *The Power of Nonviolence*, first published in 1934. Gregg used psychological theory to explain the effectiveness of nonviolent action, proposing that in a confrontation with a nonviolent resister, a person using violence is inhibited by emotional reactions.<sup>13</sup>

Gregg can be called one of the early theorists of nonviolent action. Other important figures include Bart de Ligt, Krishnalal Shridharani and especially Joan Bondurant, whose book *The Conquest of Violence* was widely influential.<sup>14</sup> These and other authors described Gandhi's approach to struggle, putting it into their own preferred frameworks. Their works might be considered development of an approach within the field of conflict studies, an approach so different from the dominant approach of assuming armed struggle on both sides as to be unrecognisable.

Nonviolent struggle, as well as using different means from armed struggle, is also different in its goals and applications. Military means are normally assumed to be relevant to attack and defence in conflicts between states or when used against opponents who are called

terrorists; armed struggle is the term used when a non-state group challenges state power, for example through guerrilla warfare. Nonviolent action can be used as a method of defending a government, but comes into its own as a way of challenging oppression, such as in the Indian independence struggle and the US civil rights movement. Armed struggle for black emancipation in the US is conceivable but implausible; armed struggle for women's liberation seems almost ludicrous.

In India, Gandhi had wider goals than independence from British rule. He challenged the caste system, taking up the cause of the most oppressed groups. He promoted village democracy, an alternative to the standard model of elected national governments.

Gandhi's vision of a liberated society was one without systems of domination, one in which people were locally self-reliant and self-governing. As in other areas, his ideas were not systematically organised and sometimes contradictory, but his basic direction was clear. For Gandhi, nonviolent action as a method was simply one tool in a wider struggle that involved building grassroots social institutions. His approach has much in common with anarchists, who seek to replace hierarchical institutions with ones managed by the people involved: Gandhi can be considered to be a nonviolent anarchist.<sup>15</sup> In Western incarnations, the radical social goals of Gandhi's programme are less commonly grasped than his challenge to British rule using nonviolent methods.

### **Sharp's Contributions**

The context in which Sharp developed his approach thus had two main elements. The first was a history of nonviolent action, involving extended major campaigns as well as short-term efforts — though much of this history was submerged in contemporary accounts, and only excavated and highlighted by a small number of writers advocating nonviolent means.

The second element of the context in which Sharp developed his work was the presence of a small social movement committed to nonviolence as a method and goal. Probably most prominent among these were the pacifists who, following Gandhi, emphasised an adherence to nonviolence based on a principled rejection of violence. Sharp positioned himself as the advocate of a different rationale for using nonviolent methods: that they are more effective than violence.

Today, Sharp is most widely known for having documented and classified 198 different methods of nonviolent action. He scoured history books and primary sources looking for evidence of any method that fitted his criteria: a method of popular struggle that



went beyond conventional political action but didn't involve physical violence.

As well as identifying and illustrating 198 methods, Sharp classified them into three main groups, each with sub-groups. The first main group he called "nonviolent protest and persuasion." It includes slogans, petitions, banners, wearing symbols of resistance, mock awards, public disrobings, skywriting, rude gestures, rallies, marches, vigils and taunting of officials, among others. These are all methods to send a message to opponents. In the public mind, protest is often visualised as rallies, such as the massive rallies in Cairo in January-February 2011. Sharp collected examples of dozens of other sorts of symbolic action.

His next main group is called "noncooperation." It includes numerous types of strikes and boycotts. A strike is commonly thought of as an action by workers, rather than popular protest, yet many people's movements have included strikes. Sharp lists many different types of strikes, such as peasant strike, prisoners' strike, sick-in (many workers call in sick) and mass resignations. His sub-category of economic boycotts includes consumers' boycott, rent strike (not paying rent), refusal to sell property, withdrawal of bank deposits, refusal to pay taxes, embargoes and blacklisting of traders, among others. Many people, when they think of boycotts, think of consumers' boycotts such as of grapes, tuna or Nestle's products. Sharp identified numerous other forms, providing examples of each. Also in the category of noncooperation are social methods, such as ostracism of individuals, suspension of sporting activities, stay-at-home, and "total personal noncooperation."

For those who think of social action as public protest, the category of noncooperation can be a surprise. Strikes, boycotts and forms of social noncooperation are methods that involve a suspension of normal activities. These can be more powerful than protest: opponents can simply ignore a rally or petition, but strikes and boycotts have a direct effect. They are also usually far safer for participants: there is relatively little chance of reprisals for not buying from particular shops or calling in sick for work. The US civil rights movement used boycotts, most famously the Montgomery bus boycott, but also boycotts of business that refused to integrate. There were sit-ins in lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, which received lots of publicity, but it was the subsequent boycotts that induced businesses to change their practices.

As well as social and economic noncooperation, Sharp identified dozens of forms of political noncooperation, for example boycotting of elections, refusing to assist government officials, going into hiding,



stalling by government officials, and cutting off diplomatic relations. Many of these methods are used in national or international political struggles, but are seldom thought of as “nonviolent action.”

Sharp’s third main category is “nonviolent intervention.” It includes a variety of ways of intervening in a struggle, including fasts, sit-ins, nonviolent obstruction, overloading of facilities, alternative communication systems, factory occupations, politically motivated counterfeiting, disclosing the identity of secret agents, and setting up parallel government. Quite a few of these methods have become mainstays of campaigning against nuclear weapons and nuclear power, for example occupation of construction sites and blocking of transport by sitting on rail lines.

Some methods of nonviolent action, when used on a massive scale, are potentially revolutionary. Mass demonstrations in places like Egypt, Lebanon and Ukraine are familiar from news reports. Less recognised are general strikes, which can bring economies to a standstill, and setting up parallel communications, transport and government, which are the basis for an alternative system of governance. Methods of nonviolent action are often seen as negative — as challenging the established system — but they can also be positive, setting up alternative structures.

By identifying, illustrating and categorising hundreds of methods of nonviolent action, Sharp accomplished several things. First, he documented actual use of these methods. Although some struggles — such as the US civil rights movement — are widely known and well documented, many others are little known. Sharp delved into all sorts of historical sources, pulling out information and stories that had been little remarked at the time and putting them in a new perspective.

Second, by collecting so much information about different techniques, Sharp offered a sense of the immense number of possible ways of carrying out nonviolent struggles. Rather than being restricted to a small number of well-known techniques such as rallies, strikes and sit-ins, Sharp opened the door to an ever-expanding repertoire. He never suggested that he had documented all possible methods: stopping at 198 methods was a matter of saying “enough for now” rather than “finished.” Activists and scholars have noted numerous other methods though, significantly, there is no widely recognised list that supersedes Sharp’s.<sup>16</sup> His achievement is a hard act to follow.

Third, as well as suggesting the range of possibilities of action, Sharp’s documentation and classification provide greater understanding of nonviolent action. The three main categories of

protest/persuasion, noncooperation and nonviolent intervention have proved durable, and likewise the subcategories such as the three main forms of noncooperation, namely social, economic and political. These categories provide a way of thinking about nonviolent action that is highly useful to activists. Rather than just picking a method because it seems doable or attractive, they can understand its role within a wider array of possible actions.

Fourth, Sharp's documentation of methods of nonviolent action provides inspiration to activists. Reading the stories of how these techniques have been used can give hope to readers who may have imagined that everything has already been tried. In documenting methods, Sharp is also providing lessons.

Despite its strengths — or perhaps in part because of them — Sharp's treatment of methods can be criticised. In documenting methods of nonviolent action, Sharp presented them in isolation from the circumstances from which they developed, and thus did not, and perhaps could not, present them in full historical context. Historians like to present a rich picture, describing personalities, events, beliefs and social structures. Sharp, writing as a political scientist rather than an historian, had a different purpose, namely illustrating and documenting methods.

To take an example that would have been contemporary for Sharp, the US civil rights movement, he can illustrate sit-ins using the example of Greensboro. However, the effectiveness of sit-ins in Greensboro depended on many circumstances: patterns of racism, laws and their enforcement, the distribution of power locally and nationally, personal relationships in the city, leadership in the movement, and preparation and training by activists. To separate "the sit-in" from this context is to assume that a method has some autonomous nature or capacity, independent of the historical circumstances.

This is a valid criticism from the point of view of those who seek a rich, nuanced version of history, but Sharp had a different aim: to extract elements that are transportable, namely that can be used in other circumstances. A sit-in in Bulgaria or Burma will never have the same dynamics as in Greensboro, to be sure. However, in the context of Sharp's work, this seems like an academic quibble. In as much as he was writing for activists, Sharp assumed they will choose and adapt methods to the local situation, using their knowledge and experience. Sharp's purpose in documenting the methods was to demonstrate the range and possibilities of nonviolent action, not to embed each one in full contextual detail.

Sharp is sometimes accused of presenting a "methods" approach to struggle, of looking only at methods and not considering wider

questions of strategy, resources, morale, opponents and the like. This criticism would have more bite if Sharp had *only* written about methods. But his 198 methods of nonviolent composes part two of the three parts of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. There is more to Sharp than methods.

Part one presents Sharp's theory of power, undoubtedly the most contentious of Sharp's contributions. Sharp begins by outlining the standard, most widely held view of power, that it is something held by those in or with power, who can be called power-holders. Sharp more commonly refers to rulers: one of his primary concerns is dictatorship. This orthodox view, which Sharp calls the monolith view, is that rulers hold and exercise power, using it to get others to do what they want.

Sharp proposes instead the consent theory of power: rulers only have power because subjects give their consent or, in other words, because they acquiesce or do not oppose the ruler and the ruler's supporters. This is a relational view of power: power does not adhere in anyone or anything, but instead is based on what others do or do not do.

Sharp drew on precedents for consent theory, the earliest being Étienne de La Boétie from the mid 1500s.<sup>17</sup> There is an entire intellectual history of this perspective.<sup>18</sup>

For activists, consent theory can serve as conceptual liberation. It implies that rulers can be undermined by getting people to withdraw their support, for example by not obeying commands, not paying taxes, going on strike and joining massive rallies. Consent theory is a warrant for nonviolent action. The ruler might seem all-powerful, but is actually vulnerable.

The obvious retort is to say, "It's all very well to withdraw consent, but what good is that when soldiers shoot down protesters? Force will always be successful against peaceful protest." This objection makes one faulty assumption, that soldiers are necessarily loyal. But what if the soldiers withdraw their consent, namely become unreliable or rebellious? Then the ruler's power is gone. A ruler whom no one will obey is like a military commander without any troops — powerless.

One of Sharp's methods is fraternisation, which is talking to, appealing to or consorting with troops to persuade them to withdraw their loyalty from their commanders or from a ruler, and either stand aside or join the opposition.<sup>19</sup> Fraternisation is a practical application of consent theory aimed at transforming the relationship between functionaries and rulers. It has been a crucial technique used in many revolutions, for example the French revolution.<sup>20</sup> Rather than saying

that fraternisation is an application of consent theory, it is more appropriate to think of consent theory as one way to understand how the loyalty of troops can be undermined.

Sharp's use of consent theory has come in for criticism.<sup>21</sup> One of the main problems is that there are many situations involving power in which the role of consent is questionable and "withdrawing consent" does not seem straightforward. Patriarchy is a system involving men collectively having power over women; to say that women "consent" to these arrangements seems condescending. What does withdrawing consent from patriarchy mean in practice? Leaving an abusive marriage? Boycotting businesses that discriminate against women? On the other hand, feminists have used many of the methods of nonviolent action documented by Sharp, such as petitions, strikes and disrupting meetings.

Withdrawing consent is most relevant when power relationships are explicitly hierarchical, as in Sharp's model of ruler and subject. Consent theory applies readily to dictatorship, but is less helpful when dealing with systems of power involving complex relationships infiltrating daily interactions. In capitalism, power is built into market relationships, so that every time a person buys some goods or employs someone for a service, the capitalist system is engaged and often reinforced, so much so that it becomes routine and unnoticed. It is hard to avoid recognising the power of dictatorial rulers, but power in capitalism is more dispersed.

Academics are fascinated by the complexities of power. In the 1930s, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to explain how capitalist systems maintained their legitimacy despite a relative lack of force,<sup>22</sup> and subsequently many academics have developed and applied Gramsci's ideas. Far more influential, though, has been Michel Foucault, who developed the idea that power is built into all relationships and is intimately connected with knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Foucault's ideas about power became, within parts of academia, hegemonic. Writing in certain fields or for certain journals, students sometimes would find that a discussion or citation of Foucault's work was a ritualistic expectation.

What Sharp has in common with Gramsci and Foucault is seeing power as a relationship rather than something possessed by individuals. Why then do academics treat Gramsci and Foucault as gurus whose works are dissected for insights, while ignoring or dismissing Sharp? No one has investigated this question, but one clue is the academic orientation to understanding social problems rather than figuring out what to do about them. Gramsci and Foucault focus on the complexities of power from the point of view of social

structure, whether this is capitalism or prisons. This makes their work attractive to academics whose focus is analysis rather than action. As a result, Gramscian studies and Foucault-inspired analyses are not rich sources of practical advice on challenging or transforming power systems. This is an ironic fate for Gramsci and Foucault, who were committed to challenging oppressive social structures.

Activists have no time for pessimistic or constraining academic formulations. They would rather read something practical, and Sharp's theory of power serves admirably. A standard activist teaching tool is to envisage an oppressive system being supported by a set of pillars, such as the military, police, big business and foreign allies. The task then is to work out ways to weaken different pillars, for example by starting with the weakest one first. In an elaboration of the pillar analogy, each pillar can be dissected into a set of concentric rings; for example, the innermost ring in the military pillar might be the officer corps and the outermost ring being low-ranking soldiers. To undermine the pillar, activists can first target the weaker rings.

The pillar metaphor is compatible with Sharp's theory of power but would be anathema to a scholar following Gramsci or Foucault. If such scholars were to use analogies for the operation of power, they might describe it as water in soil or electricity in a grid, something to indicate its ubiquity, pervasiveness and interconnectedness. However, metaphors about power being found in all relationships do not lend themselves to thinking about how to change power relationships. Where is the leverage point for intervening against water in the soil? And who stands outside the system and plans to intervene? For whatever reasons, few scholars have used their models of power to give guidance for action.

Sharp never connected his theory of power to either Gramsci or Foucault, but even if he had, it seems unlikely that it would have become a hit among scholars, precisely because it is too linked to practice. Scholars seem to prefer frameworks that give priority to analysis, not action.

Social theorists commonly assume that theory is foundational, namely that a sound theory — providing a deep understanding of social reality — is a prerequisite for deriving sensible conclusions. This assumption is seldom articulated and even less seldom justified empirically. In other realms, the connection between theory and practice is complex. For example, the steam engine was developed before physicists developed the science of thermodynamics to explain how it worked: theoretical understanding is not essential to practical action.

This undoubtedly applies to theories of power: it is possible to

act effectively in the world — to engage with power systems — without having developed or understood formal theory about how the world works. Indeed, it might be argued that the task of theorists is to come up with frameworks that make sense when applied to what people actually do. In this context, theoretical flaws in the consent theory of power do not necessarily undermine the rest of Sharp's work. Sharp's methods of nonviolent action would still be insightful and useful even if he had never presented a theory of power.

While Sharp's methods of nonviolent action are widely known among activists, and his consent theory of power also widely taught, less well known is what he called "the dynamics of nonviolent action," which comprises the third and longest part of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Sharp analysed numerous nonviolent campaigns and characterised their typical trajectories by a series of stages or features: laying the groundwork, challenge brings repression, maintaining nonviolent discipline, political jiu-jitsu, ways to success, and redistributing power. In a canonical campaign, such as the US civil rights movement or Gandhi's salt march, activists begin by raising issues and building networks (laying the groundwork). After they develop enough capacity, they launch actions, such as sit-ins, that trigger a strong reaction by opponents (challenge brings repression). If the activists are sufficiently disciplined and prepared to avoid using violence (maintaining nonviolent discipline), then violent attacks on them can rebound against the attacker (political jiu-jitsu). The subsequent processes of mobilisation of support and undermining of the opponents can enable the movement to achieve its objectives (ways to success; redistributing power).

Sharp illustrated each of the steps in this sequence with various examples. It is obvious that he built his "dynamics" model through examination of numerous campaigns. This can be considered a type of grounded theory, namely theory built from scratch following close examination of data,<sup>24</sup> although Sharp did not use the term.

It is easy to find flaws in Sharp's dynamics. For example, the different components do not have the same form. Some components, such as "laying the groundwork," refer to actions by campaigners. Others, such as "challenge brings repression," refer to actions by both sides. The component "maintaining nonviolent discipline" refers to something campaigners should not do, namely not use violence. Sharp's dynamics would be difficult to analyse by collecting data and running regression analyses because the components are not well defined or compatible.

Around the time Sharp was researching the dynamics, research



into social movements was developing. Scholars documented the history of movements, analysed the social context in which they operated, and developed theories for understanding them. The earliest theories assumed that what we today call citizen protesters were members of an irrational mob best understood using the psychology of groups. This derogatory categorisation gradually gave way to less judgemental frameworks that treated movement participants as rational. In the US, one popular framework was resource mobilisation theory, which looks at the human and material resources available to movements. Another framework is political opportunity structures, which examines the context in which movements operate and assesses obstacles and opportunities. Yet another is framing theory, which focuses on the way issues and campaigners are understood. In Europe, attention has been given to the role of “new” social movements, new in the sense that they were different from the labour movement and driven by less self-interested purposes.

Social movement researchers have written hundreds of books and thousands of articles and argued about all sorts of issues. A curious feature of all this work is how little relevance it has to activists. James Jasper, a social movement researcher himself, remarked on this:

My research on social movements showed me just how little social scientists have to say about strategy. Over the years many protesters have asked me what they might read to help them make better decisions. I had nothing to suggest, beyond Saul Alinsky.<sup>25</sup>

Saul Alinsky was a community organiser who became famous for his work with poor neighbourhoods in Chicago. He wrote a book, *Rules for Radicals*, filled with practical advice for organisers, that became a classic among well-read activists.<sup>26</sup> Despite Alinsky’s high profile and impact on campaigners, his approach was seldom emulated by academics. There are books and articles *about* Alinsky and his campaigns, but few attempts to provide Alinsky-style practical insights. Incidentally, Alinsky, who was not an academic, wrote in a chatty, hard-hitting way that is a pleasure to read.

What applies to Alinsky applies more generally to research about social movements: it is primarily *about* movements, not *for* them.<sup>27</sup> It is analogous to a cancer researcher’s analysis of the genetic features of a cancer cell, without any practical suggestion for prevention or treatment. Furthermore, much social movement research is written in a dense, jargon-filled style that is unappealing to anyone except researchers, and probably not their favourite reading either.

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Activists are selective about their learning. Most of them are too busy to pore through a dry academic article that tells them little they didn't already know. So it is no wonder that the social movement theories most popular among researchers are virtually unknown among activists, except those activists who are also researchers themselves.

Justin Whelan, a Sydney-based social justice activist, looked up Google Scholar citation counts for several books by leading social movement scholars and found they were many times greater than counts for Sharp's books. Yet in his conversations with activists, he has not encountered anyone who had ever heard of these social movement scholars, nor even the names of the theories they espouse.<sup>28</sup>

There are a few other contributions about social movements that are practical. One of the most important is the Movement Action Plan (MAP) developed by Bill Moyer. It is a model of eight stages of a typical social movement, such as the movement against nuclear power in the US. The stages are normal times, prove the failure of official institutions, ripening conditions, take off, perception of failure, majority public opinion, success, and continuing the struggle. These stages can be incredibly helpful in helping activists see their efforts in a wider context. Especially valuable is the perception of failure stage: many activists become demoralised just at the point when the movement is becoming successful by having its agenda taken up by the mainstream. Understanding what is happening is an antidote to despair.

MAP also specifies four typical activist roles: the citizen, the rebel, the change agent and the reformer, each of which has effective and ineffective manifestations. This is a simplification of the actual diversity of activist roles, but is very helpful in helping activists understand the different things they do individually or are done by different members of their groups. Moyer gives special attention to the negative rebel role, which can be highly counterproductive for movements.

MAP can readily be criticised. The eight stages do not apply to every movement, especially not in cultures without the media-influenced processes of social issue formation, mobilisation and decline. The four activist roles omit much of the complexity of group dynamics. And so on. Despite its conceptual and theoretical weaknesses, MAP is far more useful to activists than nearly any other contribution by traditional social movement scholars.

Among academic social movement researchers, MAP has had much the same reception as Sharp's dynamics: it has been ignored. Moyer teamed up with several committed scholars to produce a book

about MAP that contains practical information and theoretical reflections.<sup>29</sup> However, this worthy effort has not led to a burgeoning of social movement research using MAP.

Narrative Power Analysis (NPA) is an activist-friendly framework more recently developed.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on framing theory, it is a practical method of looking at the messages conveyed in the media. It helps campaigners design their actions with an acute eye to what story, or narrative, they are trying to get across. NPA can be considered a successor to George Lakoff's 2004 book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, which analysed the common assumptions and themes underlying the policy stances by conservatives and liberals in the US.<sup>31</sup> Lakoff is an academic whose previous work was little known outside scholarly circles. *Don't Think of an Elephant*, written in an accessible fashion, was widely discussed by activists.

The responses to MAP, NPA and *Don't Think of an Elephant* illustrate the receptivity of activists to frameworks that help them understand situations, analyse them and develop better strategies. Sharp's work can be seen in this context, with a crucial difference: it is not especially easy reading compared to other materials taken up by activists. In its initial incarnation, MAP was described briefly with diagrams for easy comprehension. NPA, in the online book *Re:imagining change*, is presented with tables, graphics and an attractive layout. *Don't Think of an Elephant* is engagingly written, with many current examples.

In comparison, Sharp's writing style is pedestrian.<sup>32</sup> He uses a lot of words to make a point, and is more concerned with logical exposition, with exhaustive footnoting of case studies, than providing a racy narrative. Yet I know, from talking to numerous activists over the years, that Sharp's work can be inspiring. This is achieved not through fancy writing or pictures but through the power of his ideas, which provide an entirely new perspective to many readers.

Sharp's work amounts to a new approach to nonviolent action, often called the pragmatic approach, in contrast with the ethical or so-called principled approach espoused by Gandhi. However, the principled and pragmatic approaches are not as distinct as they might seem at first glance. Gandhi, though committed to nonviolence on principle, nevertheless was a shrewd strategist, choosing methods and campaigns that had the greatest chance of success — as Sharp perceptively observed in *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, although most activists today have no explicit ethical adherence to avoiding violence in all circumstances, in practice they would never use arms, because they believe it would be counterproductive in the short or long term. It might be said that they think maintaining a commitment to nonviolent methods is the wisest strategy.

In many circles in today's secular societies, ethical commitments are suspect: saying one is being effective is a stronger argument than taking a moral stand. So while activists might personally be opposed to ever using violence, it is convenient to argue publicly on pragmatic grounds. In this context, Sharp is the ideal authority to justify their stands.

### Academic Reactions

Sharp's main outputs have been books: he did not publish many articles in refereed scholarly journals. Nor did he write in the typical scholarly style or use the conventional approaches to prior work. Sharp's work is extensively referenced, but his theoretical frameworks are presented more by exposition than by rigorous logical and empirical development. The result is that if Sharp had tried publishing in leading journals such as the *American Political Science Review* or *American Sociological Review*, he would probably have been savaged by referees, who might have said something like "new material yes, but insufficiently justified theoretical framework, inadequate literature review, unsystematic use of empirical materials, ..." <sup>34</sup> Sharp's work was too original to be justified within a 5,000 or 10,000 word article: he needed the hundreds of thousands of words, and the discursive freedom, available in books.

In the decades since the publication of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in 1973, Sharp has gradually received more recognition by scholars. Anyone who knows about the pragmatic tradition in nonviolent action, and is writing in the field, is bound to cite his work. Even so, his most important contributions have received relatively little attention in the academy and seldom been the basis for developing new theory or applications. It seems that no scholar has tried to expand or improve his classification of methods of nonviolent action, nor tried to test his model of nonviolent campaigns. The reason for this relative neglect can be traced to Sharp's emphasis on agency, which goes against the grain in social research.

In 2006, social movement researcher James Jasper tried to put the issue of strategy on the agenda for sociologists. To talk of strategy is to resurrect agency — including the capacity of activists to make decisions and affect outcomes of campaigns. Jasper graphically describes the usual attitude of social scientists to agency:

One idea lurking behind this book is *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 into salt and blow away in the howling winds of intellectual history.<sup>35</sup>

Sharp's entire body of work is devoted to agency. His methods of nonviolent action are means to be chosen by activists. His theory of power, based on the idea of consent, is a warrant for agency, namely the withdrawal of consent. His dynamics of nonviolent action are a description of various factors or phenomena related to nonviolent campaigns, providing guidance for activists. Given the allergy to agency among social scientists, as highlighted by Jasper, it is no wonder Sharp's work has been neglected.

But Sharp is not alone in his isolation from mainstream social science. Others working on nonviolent action have been similarly treated. As a general rule, the more valuable research is to activists, the less likely it is to be treated as a significant contribution to scholarship.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask, why should Sharp and others in the field be seeking scholarly kudos anyway? Why not write for activists and ignore conventional researchers? Some important figures have done this.<sup>36</sup> Sharp did not put a lot of effort into cultivating academic recognition, preferring to present his ideas to international activists, but for many years he also had a different audience in mind: policy makers.

### **Policy-maker Reactions**

Sharp wanted to move nonviolent action away from its traditional home among pacifists and others who were driven primarily by moral commitments. With the rise of the new social movements in the 1960s — the student, antiwar, feminist, environmental and other movements — Sharp seemed wary. He sometimes warned, in his writing and especially in his talks, about keeping nonviolent action separate from ideological agendas.

In one particular area, Sharp spent years seeking recognition by the establishment: civilian-based defence, an application of nonviolent action approaches for the purpose of deterrence and defence against military aggression. In his books on civilian-based defence, Sharp's orientation was towards governments, which he hoped would switch from military defence to an alternative based on nonviolent action because this is a more effective mode of defence.<sup>37</sup> A few military and government figures supported Sharp's proposals, but for the most part this approach to defence has been ignored by the establishment.

To abolish the military and replace it with civilians would strike

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at the roots of the power of the military itself, of course, and the government, which depends on the military for defending against popular challenges, not to mention capitalism, which needs armed force to defend against challenges to private property. Civilian-based defence, however rationally presented, is a threat to the groups with the greatest power and wealth in an unequal society. However, Sharp, who was so very good at nonviolent strategy against dictatorships, never made an analysis of strategy to transform the military-industrial complex. He somehow assumed that defence policy-makers are primarily concerned with their nominal tasks, defence against foreign enemies.

Sharp sought recognition of his ideas from scholars and policy-makers, but received very little. In contrast, activists became his greatest enthusiasts. His writings — especially a short volume titled *From Dictatorship to Democracy* — have been translated into over 30 languages, primarily to be read by activists.<sup>38</sup> In 1989, I wrote that Sharp was more widely influential among activists than any other living theorist,<sup>39</sup> a judgement that still applies more than two decades later. Sharp has undoubtedly been pleased with the uptake of his work by activists.

Sharp was able to achieve what he did in part because he pursued a lonely research path, without relying on support or recognition from mainstream scholars or policy-makers. This meant he did not keep up with trends in scholarship or with new forms of social critique. Being cut off from mainstream developments limited Sharp's impact in some ways, but enabled him to pursue a path that might otherwise not have been viable.

### **A Sharp Cult?**

Sharp is undoubtedly a pivotal figure in the field of nonviolent action, pioneering a new approach and making great strides in conceptualising, classifying and documenting nonviolent action. His ideas are especially useful to activists; indeed, he can be seen as an exemplar of how to develop theory for activists.

Although Sharp's contributions are exceptional, he has not been the only person doing nonviolence research. Yet this could be the impression gained by looking at his publications and two of the organisations oriented to his work. In his articles and books, Sharp regularly cites his own work but mentions only a few works by others, mostly those closest to his approach. He has seldom responded in print to critics, nor even acknowledged the existence of critical studies.

The Civilian-Based Defense Association was set up in 1982 and published a newsletter until 2002. Its purpose was to promote civilian-

based defence, this being Sharp's term for national defence by unarmed civilians using nonviolent action. The newsletter *Civilian-Based Defense* published articles by a range of authors. However, the items sold by the association describing and presenting civilian-based defence reveal a strong orientation to Sharp's approach.<sup>40</sup>

Sharp set up the Albert Einstein Institution (AEI), located in Boston, to promote nonviolent action. For a time, it funded scholarly research on nonviolent resistance, with no strings attached, leading to some important studies. Some left-wing critics allege that the AEI is some sort of US government front aiming to advance US imperial interests,<sup>41</sup> but in practice it has been a modestly funded operation employing a few assistants.

The AEI has made some grand claims about Sharp's role. For example, an AEI notice from January 2012, commenting on the tremendous increase in media attention to Sharp and the AEI following the Arab spring, said, "People all over the world wanted to know, 'Who is Gene Sharp, and why have we never heard of him or these important ideas before now?'"<sup>42</sup> This suggests that "these important ideas" — namely, concerning nonviolent action — are due to Sharp alone. This gives an entirely unrealistic view of Sharp's role in relation to nonviolent action.

Like every other thinker, Sharp was a product of his times, drawing inspiration from others before him. As mentioned earlier, there were significant contributions to nonviolence theory before Sharp. For example, Sharp's important idea of political jiu-jitsu is an adaptation of the prior concept of moral jiu-jitsu developed by Richard Gregg. Sharp briefly mentions Gregg's original conception in a footnote.<sup>43</sup>

Then there are theorists contemporaneous with Sharp, writing from the 1960s onwards.<sup>44</sup> More recently, there have been numerous contributions, including studies of struggles around the world,<sup>45</sup> application of nonviolence theory to different realms,<sup>46</sup> and new developments in theory.<sup>47</sup> However, researchers differing from Sharp's orientation are largely invisible to anyone reading his work or the AEI's notices.

In some circles, there seems to be a sort of Sharp cult, positioning him as the sole authority and unique pioneer in the field. This is sad, because acknowledgement of other contributors would not diminish Sharp's reputation, but rather put it in context, revealing more clearly the significance of what he has so amazingly done.

In relation to activism, Sharp's work is important but not essential. Activists are always on the lookout for useful ideas. Many activists acquire their ideas about strategy through their own personal reading,



reflections, experience and conversations. Nonviolent action training has also played a role in spreading knowledge of nonviolent action and helping people to prepare. Training exercises can last a few hours or several days. Training programmes can last for weeks or months. (Why should nonviolence training be any less rigorous than military training?) Trainings can include information sessions, games, small group tasks involving analysis of opponent strengths, plans for action and the like, and role plays and exercises to prepare people for undertaking actions such as rallies, sit-ins and blockades.

Training is just one way in which activists develop ideas and skills. Most of all, they draw on the experience of other activists and their own previous reading, discussions and experiences, adopting and refining what works well and discarding what doesn't.<sup>48</sup>

Sharp's ideas have influenced nonviolent activists around the world, but so have many other ideas, experiences and individuals. Likewise, Sharp's work has had a role in nonviolent action training, but not a pivotal one. Nonviolence campaigners had been running trainings before Sharp started his studies. For example, US civil rights campaigners were active in the 1940s. In the 1950s, with the burgeoning of the civil rights movement, there was careful preparation for actions, drawing on previous experience with training and inspired more by Gandhi than Sharp.

Sharp never wrote any training manuals. When activists use his ideas in workshops, they adapt it and incorporate it into their own frameworks. Sharp's ideas are valuable, but to be taken up in practice, they require modification and incorporation by practitioners.

Sharp's ideas undoubtedly have been valuable to nonviolent movements and campaigns, serving as both inspiration and guide, but seldom been the driving force behind them. Theory can help activists but they have to figure out its applications, and limitations, in particular circumstances. From all the theory available, from Sharp and others, activists pick and choose what they think will be helpful. Theory can be a useful adjunct, to provide ideas and inspiration, but theory should not be given a privileged role — that would be to simplify and misrepresent a complex process.

### **Sharp in Context**

For many years, Sharp toiled in isolation, his achievements largely unknown to scholars and policy-makers, though taken up by activists in a major way. Sharp sought recognition for his ideas about civilian-based defence from the establishment, especially governments, but it was not forthcoming. Among the small network of nonviolence scholars, Sharp's work was well known; many preferred to pursue



other directions, some of which were complementary to Sharp's thinking, and a few undertook critiques of Sharp's approach. During this time, it seemed that Sharp encouraged the creation of a self-contained bubble of supposedly autonomous development, as if his ideas were the only significant ones in the field of nonviolent action, indeed as if his ideas *were* the field of nonviolent action. In the early years, this element of ignoring critics and other contributors may have enabled Sharp to doggedly pursue his lonely intellectual path. But as he became more well known, Sharp's lack of engagement with scholarly peers may have contributed to his intellectual stagnation: his framework hardly progressed in decades.<sup>49</sup>

The mass media emphasise personalities over processes: when reporting on a protest event or movement, journalists seek comments from high-profile figures rather than giving a sense of collective dynamics. In Egypt at the beginning of 2011, there was no recognised leader of the pro-democracy actions — no equivalent of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Aung San Suu Kyi. Consequently, it was not entirely surprising that, in searching for someone to highlight, some journalists discovered Sharp and gave him some long-deserved credit for his pioneering research, even if they exaggerated or made unsubstantiated claims about the magnitude of his role in events in Egypt.

There is an element of chance in this sudden visibility. After all, there were plenty of earlier successes of popular nonviolent action, for example the toppling of Philippines ruler Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, the overthrow of Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, and similar actions in Ukraine, Georgia, Lebanon and other countries in the 2000s. Research by Sharp and others played some indeterminate role in these events; nonviolent action trainers and communicators had a more direct influence in some of the struggles; and in every case the immediate instigators were the people themselves. So it was curious to suddenly single out Sharp's role following the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt. Sharp's ideas had been around for decades, and having an influence, along with the ideas of others and, far more importantly, the courage, commitment and strategic sense of activists on the ground.

There may be another factor in the recent recognition of Sharp's work. People power has received increasing media attention through coverage of struggles in Ukraine, Georgia and other countries. Ignoring the role of nonviolent action in these struggles has become more difficult. A key point is that these struggles have all been outside the United States: they are in foreign lands, seen as in need of liberation. Yet the same sorts of methods used in Egypt and many

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other countries have been used in numerous social movements, most obviously in the peace and environmental movements. It is safe to laud Sharp for his ideas when methods he described are taken up *elsewhere*. But he could just as well be thanked for the role of his ideas in home-grown struggles, for example against nuclear weapons and coal-burning. From the point of view of some policy elites, people power is a useful tool against “enemies,” but when activists challenge their own government’s policies — for example, in the global justice movement<sup>50</sup> or in the occupy movement — they are more likely to be subject to denigration, surveillance, harassment and arrest.

Sharp’s ideas thus are a double-edged tool. They can be turned against foreign dictators — Sharp’s own emphasis — but can also be turned against the policies and practices of western governments and corporations. Sharp himself avoided the more revolutionary implications of nonviolent action; that was part of his journey away from Gandhi. But by making nonviolence into a pragmatic tool, easier to take up in a range of contexts, Sharp nevertheless played a subversive role. He legitimised tools that can be used for different, and some would say more radical, purposes than he wrote about.

The best tribute to Sharp is not to unquestioningly follow his approach, much less to worship the man. Sharp’s contribution was to see nonviolent methods as tools that are more effective than violence. It is only fitting to use his studies and ideas as tools, and to apply, revamp, refine and build on them.

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50. Commonly called the anti-globalisation movement, it is better described as anti-corporate globalisation. It is also called the movement of movements.

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