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Nonviolent futures

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Abstract

Nonviolent action — including methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins — has become increasingly important in the past century as a method for waging conflict and promoting social change. Nonviolent action has been adopted by many social movements, yet its potential impact has only begun to be realised. Some areas for future expansion of the role of nonviolent action include replacing military defence, technological design, challenging capitalism, bureaucratic politics, information struggles and interpersonal behaviour. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

1. The rise of nonviolent action

The twentieth century was the bloodiest in history. Some one hundred million people were killed in war and, at any given time in the past few decades, perhaps two dozen wars were being waged around the world. Weapons of mass destruction were invented, built, deployed and further refined. There have been repeated cases of genocide.

In this deadly context, ironically, it can be argued that the rise of nonviolent action was one of the most important developments of the century. Nonviolent action lacks the visibility of wars and weapons, but behind the headlines it has been conceptualised, analysed and used ever more effectively.

Taken literally, 'nonviolent action' would mean any form of action that does not involve violence or force such as beating, torture, imprisonment or killing. In practice, 'nonviolent action' has come to refer to a range of methods of social action that neither involve violence nor are routine parts of life or politics. Typical types of nonviolent action include petitions, rallies, marches, strikes, work-to-rule, boy-

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cotts, fasts, sit-ins, work-ins and setting up alternative government. There are many variations; for example, there are dozens of types of strikes, such as strike by resignation, slowdown strike, and sick-in.

Although methods of nonviolent action have been used for centuries, it was not until the twentieth century that nonviolent action was clearly conceptualised as a method of social struggle. The pioneer was Mohandas Gandhi [1]. In his experiences in South Africa and then in India, Gandhi developed the idea of satyagraha, which literally means 'truth-force' but is often translated as nonviolent action.

Gandhi adopted nonviolent action as a matter of principle. Respect for opponents meant that violence should not be used against them. Gandhi hoped that when satyagrahis endured their opponent's violence without responding in kind, their suffering would 'melt the heart' of opponents, bringing about their conversion.

Gandhi was immensely inspirational, attracting large numbers of adherents to his campaigns. While best known for leading decades of struggle against British colonial rule in India, Gandhi also took up other issues, including challenging the caste system and promoting village-level democracy and self-reliance.

While Gandhi's successors in India tried to follow his vision [2], his examples and ideas had an impact in the West, both theoretical and practical. Quite a number of scholars investigated nonviolent action. The most important figure in the field, Gene Sharp, disavowed Gandhi's approach of principled nonviolence, instead advocating nonviolent action for pragmatic reasons, namely that it works better than violence. In his classic book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* [3], Sharp catalogued nearly 200 different methods of nonviolent action and provided historical examples for each one.

Sharp and many others [4–7] have uncovered a vast but previously neglected history of nonviolent action. Some examples are:

- resistance in Finland to Russian attempts to dominate, 1899–1905 [8];
- thwarting of the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920 [9];
- nonviolent insurrection to overthrow the dictatorship in El Salvador in 1944 [10];
- resistance against the Nazi occupation, 1939–1943, especially in Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands [11];
- the US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s [12];
- thwarting of the 1961 Algerian Generals' revolt [13];
- Czechoslovak resistance to the 1968 Soviet invasion [14];
- the Palestinian intifada, 1987–1993, challenging the Israeli occupation [15];
- collapse in 1989 of repressive Eastern European regimes [16];
- the removal of the racist and oppressive apartheid system in South Africa in the 1990s [17].

These were all dramatic instances of nonviolent action with reasonably positive outcomes. There are also instances of unsuccessful nonviolent action, such as in Beijing in 1989, and cases where successful nonviolent action was followed by a return of repression, as in El Salvador in 1944 and following the 1978–1979 Iranian Revolution.

Sharp also developed an analysis of the dynamics of nonviolent action. When activists use methods of nonviolence, the opponent can choose to ignore the protest and allow it to continue, in which case the activists have won or can move to stronger actions. Alternatively, if the opponent responds with violence — arrests, beatings, killings — then this is likely to be seen as illegitimate by observers and lead to an increase in support for the protesters, a process called 'political jiu-jitsu'.

While many historical uses of nonviolent action were largely spontaneous, there also has been an enormous expansion of conscious use of nonviolent action. This often involves 'nonviolent action training', with elements such as role plays of confrontations, practice in decision making in a crisis, fostering of supportive and participatory group dynamics, and practical matters such as clothing, legal rights, police liaison and child care [18,19]. Sometimes nonviolence workshops are just before an action and last only a few hours. There are also sustained programmes of instruction and practice lasting days, weeks or months.

Nonviolent action has many advantages over violence as a means of social struggle. Compared to violence, nonviolent action tends to reduce suffering. For example, the British colonial government used relatively low levels of violence against the nonviolent Indian resistance, but against the violent Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya used heavy repression, including torture and concentration camps.

Violence tends to unify the opponent, whereas nonviolence is more likely to lead to defections, including among troops. Nonviolent action is also more participatory. Women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities have much greater opportunities for participation in actions such as rallies, social ostracism, strikes, boycotts and parallel government than in armed struggle. Finally, with nonviolence the means and the desired end are compatible, unlike the use of violence to attain peace.

Nonviolent action has never been supported with the same resources and commitment given to violence. Military budgets amount to hundreds of billions of dollars each year and there are millions of trained and equipped soldiers. Vast investment is put into developing new weapons, into developing psychological techniques to make soldiers better fighters, into methods of communication and disinformation and into running war games and exercises. To give nonviolent action an equal opportunity to demonstrate its effectiveness, it should be given equal resources, research, support and training.

Governments have shown little inclination to support or even experiment with nonviolent action. While a few governments have commissioned reports into nonviolent action as a basis for national defence, there has been little practical consequence. The Swedish government includes nonviolent action as a small component in its system of 'total defence', which includes military defence, civil defence, economic defence and psychological defence; even this small step is far more than most governments have ever contemplated. Neither governments nor any other powerful or wealthy group such as corporations have yet put substantial resources into nonviolent action, which is why its development has largely been through social movements.

Nonviolent action can be interpreted as a strategy for social change that reflects an egalitarian impulse tailored for a time when systems of violence — whether used

by governments or their challengers — have become almost invariably tools of unaccountable power.

2. Areas for expansion of nonviolent action

Although nonviolent action has been used extensively, there are many avenues for greater use. Long-established methods, such as leafleting, strikes and rallies, are so common in some places that they seem almost conventional, but still there is much to learn about making them more effective. Meanwhile, they remain risky challenges to powerful interests in certain countries and contexts. In addition, there are less well-known methods, such as mock awards, nonviolent harassment, judicial noncooperation and refusal to accept appointed officials, that merit attention and refinement.

Another way by which nonviolent action can play a greater role is by its application in new arenas. Here, some future areas for expansion of nonviolent action are outlined.

2.1. Nonviolent defence

Nonviolent community resistance to aggression is a possible alternative to military defence. Various names have been given to this alternative, including nonviolent defence, civilian-based defence, social defence and defence by civil resistance. The basic idea is that there would be no military forces. Instead, complete reliance would be put on the population to use a variety of methods of nonviolent action to deter or defend against attack. This model of defence has been fully elaborated since the 1950s [20–24].

To introduce nonviolent defence would entail enormous social preparation. It is hardly enough just to get rid of the army and rely on spontaneous popular action to resist aggression. Instead, it is essential that planning, preparation and training be just as extensive as for military defence. There would need to be careful analysis of potential threats and plans for countering them. The skills of the population in nonviolent action would need to be developed, including through simulations, the equivalent of military exercises.

There could be a nonviolent ‘intelligence’ system, to assess developments that might require attention. This would be the nonviolent analogue of military intelligence, and would undoubtedly be much more open and participatory. Also involved in preparing for threats would be careful analysis of strengths and weaknesses of potential opponents. Plans for nonviolent action could be tailored accordingly, for example emphasising fraternisation if the opponent’s forces lacked cohesion or economic measures if this provided greater leverage.

A community adopting nonviolent defence would need to learn and practise skills in organising action, communicating in a crisis, enduring hardship, and refining strategy. There might be certain skills requiring development, such as learning particular foreign languages or assessing the psychology of community solidarity. Alliances

could be formed with sympathetic groups around the world, including within potential aggressor countries.

Nonviolent defence requires a different mindset to military defence. Instead of defending territory through force, the aim would be to defend a way of life or the social fabric. Instead of relying on a small segment of the population for defence — the armed forces — the entire population would be encouraged to be involved. Nonviolent defence solves one the major problems with military defence, namely the use of the army against a country's own population, as in military coups and dictatorships.

Nonviolent defence has been promoted by activists — typically within the peace or green movements — in a number of countries, including Australia, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, but so far relatively little progress has been made in putting this option on social movement agendas, not to mention changing government policies.

2.2. Technology for nonviolent struggle

Governments have devoted vast resources to developing sophisticated and powerful weapons. Every field, from oceanography to microelectronics, is scrutinised for possible military applications. Proponents of nonviolent action, in contrast, have almost entirely neglected technology. That is perhaps understandable, given that psychological and social dimensions are the most important aspects of nonviolent struggle. Nevertheless, technology does have crucial roles to play [25,26].

Communication is a crucial area for any defence system, and technology plays a large role. In a military coup, occupation of television and radio stations is one of the first steps. This correctly suggests that mass media are a vulnerability from the point of view of nonviolent struggle. Far more resilient and compatible with the participatory nature of nonviolent action are interactive network media such as telephone, short-wave radio, fax and e-mail, as well as the post for non-electronic communication [27]. Therefore the effectiveness of nonviolent action can be improved by reducing the role of mass media, developing the infrastructure for network media and developing people's skills in using them. The design of communication systems is vital too. For example, telephone and e-mail systems can be designed to make surveillance or centralised control more difficult. In a number of military take-overs, such as the invasion of East Timor in 1975 and the coup in Poland in 1981, communication to the rest of the world was cut off. A suitable communication system will ensure that this cannot happen.

Centralised technologies tend to make a society more vulnerable to attack. For example, large power stations can be destroyed or held to ransom by aggressors or terrorists. Therefore, self-reliant energy systems, with energy-efficient design and small-scale renewable energy generating systems, are far better for communities engaged in nonviolent action. Similar considerations apply to the areas of housing, transport, food, water and medicine: reliance on centralised facilities and specialised workers increases vulnerability, whereas decentralised facilities and a broader base of skills for self-reliance provide resilience in the face of attack. Most of the techno-

logical directions helpful for nonviolent action are congruent with those identified by the appropriate technology movement.

2.3. Nonviolence against capitalism

The mass actions in Seattle in November–December 1999 were a dramatic example of nonviolent action against corporate globalisation though, in typical fashion, the mass media focussed on violence by a tiny proportion of the protesters, obscuring the important role of nonviolence philosophy and training in making the action so powerful. Of course, nonviolent action has been used against capitalists since the rise of capitalism, with grassroots workers' movements relying primarily on nonviolent means of resistance such as slow-downs, strikes, occupations and boycotts. However, opposition to capitalism as a system has long been claimed by socialists as their exclusive domain, following either the Leninist route of armed struggle or the electoral route of socialist parties and social democracy, in both cases with the aim of capturing state power. For socialists, nonviolent action is at most a tool on the road to 'real power' exercised by the state.

However, it is also possible to formulate an anticapitalist strategy that is nonviolent in both method and outcome [28]. There are a number of visions of economic systems that are both noncapitalist and nonviolent, without the coercive power of the state that is used under capitalism to protect private property and smash challenges to capitalists such as workers and local communities taking control over production. For example, the Gandhian model of sarvodaya [29] involves self-reliance and self-government at the village level.

A nonviolent strategy against capitalism would involve undermining the violent foundation of capitalism — namely the power of the state to protect capitalist relations of production — undermining the legitimacy of capitalism and building a nonviolent alternative to capitalism. It would need to be a participatory process and it would need to reflect its goals in its methods. Many campaigns in a range of areas can contribute to such a strategy, including initiatives for workers' control [30], establishment of alternative money systems [31], and challenges to expansion of property relations to intellectual products, such as patenting of genetic material or copyrighting of software. Nonviolent action has been widely used in these and many other areas, to challenge aspects of capitalism or build alternatives, but so far this has not been consistently oriented to building a nonviolent economic system as an alternative to capitalism.

2.4. Challenging domination in organisations

Bureaucracy, in a sociological sense, is a way of organising work that involves hierarchy, a division of labour and standard operating procedures. Bureaucracy is the organising principle for most large organisations, whether government departments, armies, corporations, trade unions, churches or international environmental bodies. While bureaucracy is usually justified by its rationality and efficiency compared to prior systems of personalistic rule, there are alternatives to bureaucracy that are far

more democratic and participatory, for example involving smaller groups and consensus decision making [32].

It is a familiar saying that democracy ends once a worker goes through the factory door. While there is much rhetoric about flat hierarchies, the network organisation and the like, the transformation of organisations in recent decades has not been a process of democratisation but rather 'rationalisation' of hierarchical control. Indeed, bureaucracy can be analysed as analogous to a political system characterised by authoritarian politics [33]. Within bureaucratic organisations, there are power struggles, including rebellions, coups and crushing of challengers.

Authoritarian organisations are a potential arena for the exercise of nonviolent action. Bureaucracies differ from authoritarian states primarily in that, within most organisations, violence is not used to sustain the power of elites. Nevertheless, methods of nonviolent action can be applied within bureaucracies. Opposition movements within authoritarian organisations can draw insights from successful nonviolent struggles against authoritarian states [34].

Until now, nonviolent activists have devoted most of their attention and energy on activity in the 'public sphere'. Most rallies are in public places, not inside organisations. Workers undertake strikes for better pay and conditions but far less often formulate campaigns to transform organisational structures. Social activists have mounted potent challenges to corporations and governments from the outside — such as through symbolic protests and blockades — but have seldom teamed up with dissidents on the inside to seek a transformation of the internal decision-making apparatus. Once organisations become recognised as 'political' and as legitimate sites for nonviolent struggle, then an enormous expansion of nonviolent action may occur.

2.5. Cybernonviolence

With the rise of the Internet, the role of information in post-industrial societies has become increasingly recognised. The net has become an important tool for communication between activists, especially useful in mobilising support and coordinating global campaigns such as against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment [35] and in circumventing mass media censorship.

In addition, struggles routinely take place within and over cyberspace. Attempts by the US government to impose its preferred system for encryption were met by direct action to circulate user-preferred encryption software [36]. Attempts to block or shut down web sites have been countered by establishing mirror sites. Corporate attempts to take over established domain names have been met with massive cyberprotest, causing share prices to tumble. Hackers have sabotaged web sites run by authoritarian regimes [37].

In a strict sense, all activity on the net is nonviolent: no one is physically hurt through e-mail or web sites (though they may report or instigate violence). Nevertheless, the principles of nonviolent action can be invoked to develop better strategies for net activism. Certainly there are attempts at domination in cyberspace, for example involving monopoly, censorship, disinformation and surveillance. Nonviolent action theory can provide insights for effective cyberstruggle that challenges oppression

both on-line and off-line. Furthermore, insights from cybernonviolence may be used to inform nonviolent action off-line. While there is considerable interest in net activism, a strong synergistic link with traditional nonviolent action methods remains to be developed.

2.6. Interpersonal behaviour

The dark side of interpersonal behaviour includes bullying, sexual harassment, stalking, assault and murder. Any of these can occur in families, at schools and in workplaces as well as public spaces. Personal abuse and attack can be motivated by sexual or ethnic factors but others are targeted because they are vulnerable, competent or in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people with personality disorders make life a misery for virtually everyone around them.

Many sensible mechanisms and techniques have been developed to deal with problems of interpersonal behaviour, such as communication skills, conflict resolution techniques and informal mediation. Various formal procedures have been established, for example grievance procedures in organisations and mediation through community justice centres. Nevertheless, some interpersonal conflicts seem intractable and it is worth examining what nonviolent action can contribute.

What is now well known as sexual harassment was, before the 1970s, largely ignored. Feminists named the phenomenon and made it a focus of attention, promoting awareness and instigating legislation and formal procedures. In spite of the enormous increase in awareness and introduction of formal systems, sexual harassment continues on a substantial scale. Another response is direct action, such as when women confront harassers and tell them their behaviour is inappropriate [38]. This approach draws on feminist self-defence theory but is quite compatible with nonviolent action theory.

Like sexual harassment, bullying at work — also called mobbing — is a regular occurrence but until recently has been largely unrecognised. In the 1990s, various authors have exposed the problem and spelled out ways to respond [39–41], and an international e-mail network has been established for researchers and antibullying activists to share insights.

The theory and practice of nonviolent action so far has focussed on issues of collective behaviour such as military aggression and racial oppression. While it is possible to apply nonviolence principles to interpersonal behaviour [42], this has not been undertaken systematically. Within nonviolent action groups, there is enormous attention paid to emotional support, nonsexist language, egalitarian group dynamics and many other aspects of interpersonal behaviour. But the usual techniques, assuming an underlying good will by all concerned, break down in some cases, such as persistent antisocial behaviour. So there are two important avenues for application of nonviolence principles to interpersonal behaviour. One is to address the more difficult cases where communication and other techniques based on assumptions of good will and rationality are inadequate. The other is to apply nonviolence principles outside social action groups, to arenas such as families, schools and workplaces.

3. Conclusions

Nonviolent action has tremendous potential both for its traditional domains — against repression, aggression and oppression — and for varied new domains such as bureaucratic struggles and interpersonal behaviour. This may require an extension or generalisation of nonviolence principles, building on the core dynamic of political jiu-jitsu in contexts where the opponent does not use physical force. However, so far only a fraction of the potential of nonviolent action has been realised. Many applications remain unreflective, in the sense that the dynamics of nonviolent action are not fully grasped in developing a strategy.

Ongoing experiences with nonviolent action can be deeply meaningful to participants. In addition, experiences are more frequently being documented and used to inspire others and to develop insights. Nonviolence theory is being tested and elaborated in the light of practice and then being fed back into nonviolence campaigns. Some theorists are also practitioners, facilitating this theory–practice synergy. Nonviolent action might be said to be developing through a process of social learning that is far more participatory and responsive than analogous learning with systems of violence.

As nonviolent activists become more skilled in building support through political jiu-jitsu, governments, militaries and police will come under greater pressure to justify or reduce their overt use of violence against nonresisting opponents. They can do this, as always, by censorship, disinformation and fomenting violence among opponents. Many governments are investing in so-called ‘nonlethal weapons’, such as rubber bullets, chemical sprays and incapacitating foams. These can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain social control without the counterproductive consequences of using traditional weapons.

But, in an age of ever more potent information technologies, traditional tactics of lying are more readily exposed. Violence, when captured on videotape, is a powerful tool against the perpetrators. For example, the Indonesian government covered up military atrocities in occupied East Timor for years. But when a 1991 massacre in the East Timorese capital Dili was recorded on videotape and subsequently broadcast worldwide, this generated enormous support for the resistance [43]. On a smaller scale, the same thing happens when police violence is recorded.

As activists become more skilled at documenting violence and using this to mobilise support, governments will seek methods to hide their complicity, for example by relying on allegedly independent proxy armies and militias to carry out their dirty work. Nonviolent activists can counter by developing more searching investigative capacities.

The net result is that violence will continue to become less and less legitimate. This has already occurred with torture which, while widely practised by governments, is never acknowledged, much less endorsed. As violence becomes less legitimate, struggles will occur more in nominally nonviolent arenas such as bureaucracies and cyberspace.

While some see the ultimate nonviolent future as a world in total harmony, others recognise that conflict will continue and that the key is how the conflict is waged.

Such a nonviolent future will be just as filled with struggle as today's world, but the means will be entirely nonviolent. There will be large peace brigades for intervention, extended blockades, and intra-organisational campaigns of enormous scale. An extra complexity will be that the very conception of what counts as nonviolence will be under constant challenge, as contenders seek to appear more nonviolent than their opponents. As all sides lay claim to the mantle of nonviolence, a sort of 'nonviolence race' may eventuate.

All this is far in the future. Today's media stories, histories, education and thinking still focus on violence, while nonviolent alternatives continue to develop with little funding or attention. But the concept of a nonviolent future is now on the agenda, and that is an enormous change.

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