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How Nonviolence Works

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1. There is ample evidence from historical examples that nonviolent action can be an effective method of social action. Examples from recent decades include the toppling of Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 through "people power," the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, the thwarting of a coup in the Soviet Union in 1991, the ending of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, the resignation of President Suharto due to popular pressure in Indonesia in 1998, and the overthrow of Serbian ruler Milosevic in 2000 (Ackerman and DuVall 2000).

2. There are also examples of nonviolent campaigns that have been less successful, such as the repression of the Chinese pro-democracy movement in 1989 and failure of the movement, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, to overthrow the Burmese military regime (Schock 2005). Yet the track record for nonviolence seems quite a bit better than for violence: it is hard to think of a single recent success by an armed liberation struggle against a powerful state. In South Africa, the anti-apartheid made much more progress after armed struggle was subordinated to nonviolent action (Zunes 1999). In East Timor, nonviolent protests in urban areas were far more successful in building international support than guerrilla warfare in the interior (Fukuda 2000). In Palestine, the first *Intifada*, from 1987-1993, which was largely unarmed, was much more successful in winning popular support in Palestine and internationally than the earlier terrorist campaigns by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and than the more violent tactics used in the second *Intifada* from 2000.

3. Despite the many successes of nonviolent action, the mechanism by which nonviolent action works has received relatively little attention.

4. Critics often say that nonviolence only works against opponents who are less than ruthless, citing the example of the British in India. Yet this claim does not stand up to scrutiny, given the many instances of success against dictators, including the Nazis (Semelin 1993). For example, during the Nazi occupation of Norway during World War Two, the Norwegian government led by Quisling directed the teaching of Nazi doctrine in schools. But the teachers refused, even though many were sent to remote prison camps. Eventually, worried about angering the population too much, the Quisling government backed down: Nazi doctrine was never taught in Norway. In the heart of Berlin in 1943, non-Jewish wives protested against the arrest of their Jewish husbands. After several days of protests, the Nazi government released the Jewish prisoners (Stoltzfus 1996).

5. Nor should it be thought that the British were always polite and gentle as colonialists. They were quite capable of brutality. For example, in putting down the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, the British suspended civil liberties, imprisoned thousands in special camps, used torture systematically, executed over a thousand prisoners, and killed tens of thousands of civilians (Elkins 2005).

6. It is important to go beyond debates with critics of nonviolence and to probe the dynamics of nonviolent action, because the insights gained may be useful for making campaigns more effective. In this article, I examine a series of perspectives on the operation of nonviolence, beginning with Gandhi and his interpreter Richard Gregg. Then I turn to nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp, who expanded on Gregg's ideas. Finally I present an expanded perspective on Sharp's ideas. As a test bed for the discussion, I use the example of the salt march, in particular the beatings at Dharasana, drawing especially on Weber (1997).

Gandhi on nonviolence

7. In 1930, Gandhi developed the idea of making salt as a challenge to British rule in India. The British had imposed a monopoly on salt manufacture and put a tax on salt. Given salt's role as a basic commodity, this had the capacity to cause resentment and thus was a potential issue for mobilising opposition to the British. Gandhi's idea was to make salt from

the sea as a symbolic form of defiance to the government. To increase the impact of this civil disobedience, Gandhi and his supporters organised a march to the coastal town of Dandi over 24 days. The march permitted speeches and recruitment along the way and a crescendo of anticipation and publicity before the actual violation of the salt laws.

8. The salt march illustrates Gandhi's methods perfectly. By exploring various ideas for campaigns, he hit upon a topic and opportunity that seemed promising. He announced the campaign with an open letter to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, in which he politely but assertively requested acquiescence to his reasonable demands for making salt, and described the civil disobedience that would follow otherwise. Polite dialogue with the opponent was a key part of Gandhi's method. He considered the opponent to be a partner in his quest for "truth." At a pragmatic level, this approach put Irwin in an awkward situation. If he acquiesced to Gandhi's demands, he would appear weak and open the way for further demands. But if he came down on Gandhi too heavily, he would appear to be unreasonable and unjust and thus increase the level of opposition (Dalton, 1993).

9. What Gandhi realised as much as anyone was the importance of winning support. It is easy to assume that the British were united in imposing their rule on India and that the Indian masses felt oppressed but afraid to act due to the likely consequences. Neither assumption is correct. Among the British, especially in Britain, there was opposition to colonial rule in India. A false step by Irwin could easily increase the level of opposition. Within India, there was active opposition to British rule from only a tiny minority of the people. The Indian population was divided by gender, caste, class and religion, making it quite a challenge to mobilise support for any campaign. Gandhi knew the importance of choosing and executing a campaign that triggered the popular imagination.

10. The defining images of the salt march derive from the salt raids at Dharasana, in the weeks after the march reached the sea. In what can be described as a battlefield, activists moved forward and were met by native police, who beat them ruthlessly using wooden batons called lathis. Many of the activists were severely injured and taken away to hospital. This was a stern test of nonviolent discipline. The confrontations at Dharasana were dramatically portrayed in the film *Gandhi*.

11. How exactly did this acquiescence to brutal beatings help to undermine British rule? Some hints are available from Gandhi's comments at the time.

12. In his letter to Lord Irwin, 2 March 1930, Gandhi expounded on the British exploitation of India and said that "the conviction is growing deeper and deeper in me that nothing but unadulterated non-violence can check the organized violence of the British Government." He explained that "my ambition is no less than to convert the British people through non-violence, and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India." (Gandhi 1971: 6). Gandhi thus believed that nonviolence worked by converting the opponent.

13. Gandhi was also quite aware that violent attacks on nonviolent protesters could arouse widespread condemnation. In an interview with Associated Press of India on 10 April 1930, he said:

In order to avoid needless injury, I advised the people to take only a handful of salt which could be contained in their closed fists and invited even women and children, if they had the courage to take part in the battle, and challenged the police to lay their hands upon women and children. If the police laid their hands upon women and children, I said that the whole of India would become inflamed, and resent the insult by inviting suffering of the same kind as they. The manner in which I expected Indians to respond to such an insult was by taking up other methods of civil resistance, and by students boycotting schools and Government servants giving up service by way of protest. There is no departure from my creed of non-violence, and I regard this snatching of salt from the civil resisters as a piece of barbarity. The greater the barbarity of the Government, the greater will be my call for self-suffering. (Gandhi 1971: 235-236).

Here Gandhi is committed to nonviolence and self-suffering, but with a powerful outcome if the British use violence: the "inflaming" of India. Thus nonviolence, when met by violence, also worked by mobilising the masses.

14. Gandhi was in no doubt that adherence to nonviolence was necessary for the struggle to be effective: "In my humble opinion, a struggle so free from violence has a message far beyond the borders of India" (Gandhi 1971: 336). One of the dangers for the independence struggle, in his view, was violence by opponents of the British. Following "disturbances" in Calcutta and Karachi, Gandhi wrote on 21 April 1930 that these were

... most regrettable and interfere with the growth of the movement which is otherwise shaping itself marvellously well and gaining fresh momentum from day to day. ... Violence is bound to impede the progress towards independence. I am unable to demonstrate how it will impede. Those who survive the struggle will know how. (Gandhi 1971: 296).

Gandhi thus knew that British violence, if used against nonviolent resisters, could arouse the masses, but violence by Indians would neutralise the effect. Therefore, for Gandhi "popular violence is as much an obstruction in our path as the Government violence" (Gandhi 1971: 296).

15. I have selected quotes from Gandhi, during the period of the salt march, to suggest his

views about how nonviolence works. In doing so, I have added more coherence to his ideas than are readily apparent in his prolific writings, which cover a vast range of topics. Gandhi was eloquent and emphatic in his commitment to nonviolence as a principled method of struggle, but he was not a systematic theorist. Nor was he a scholar who kept abreast of research findings.

16. At the level of practice, Gandhi saw himself as an experimentalist with nonviolence (Gandhi 1927/1929). In today's terms, this might be called a type of action research. But Gandhi did not report his findings in any organised way.

Gregg on nonviolence

17. In addition to probing Gandhi's writings and actions for insight into how nonviolence works, it is fruitful to turn to Gandhi's interpreters. One of the earliest and best was Richard Gregg, who closely studied Gandhi's campaigns. In his 1934 book *The Power of Nonviolence*, Gregg presented Gandhi's ideas in a way suited for Western audiences, in a systematic form backed up with references.

18. Gregg developed the concept of "moral jiu-jitsu" to explain the core mechanism by which nonviolent action brings about change. In Gregg's view, using violence in response to violence was no challenge to moral values, but instead offered "reassurance and moral support" (Gregg 1966: 43). Using nonviolence in response to violence, on the other hand, made the attacker lose moral balance, while the defender maintained moral balance. The term "moral jiu-jitsu", by analogy with the sport of jiu-jitsu in which the energy of the opponent is turned against them, captured this dynamic. Moral jiu-jitsu is largely a psychological process which works by the nonviolent activist taking the initiative morally, not being surprised, avoiding anger and not being suggestible, causing opponents to become more suggestible. Gregg also noted that nonviolence, because it shows respect for the opponent's integrity, wins over onlookers. I will return to this important observation.

19. In Gregg's view, nonviolence worked primarily by affecting the psychology of the attacker. He said that nonviolence induced shame in the attacker. To induce this effect on the psychology of the attacker, activists had to adopt particular psychological states themselves: they had to suffer voluntarily, thereby demonstrating sincerity and deep commitment, and yet love their opponent. Loving the opponent was a central theme of Gandhi's. Gregg's genius was in capturing the essence of Gandhi's view, packaging it in a logical framework readily understandable to western audiences.

20. The trouble with Gregg's formulation is that there was no evidence to back it up. Moral jiu-jitsu was a plausible explanation of the effectiveness of nonviolent action, but not the only possible explanation. More than half a century later, Thomas Weber (1993) examined the dynamics of the Dharasana salt raids and found that Gregg's explanation was inadequate. Weber noted that the Indian police wielding lathis against the nonresisting satyagrahis did not lose their moral balance. Or rather, even if they lost their moral balance, this did not affect their behaviour. Few of the police declined to carry out their repulsive job of beating the protesters. Indeed, a number of the police became angry at the lack of resistance and became even more energetic in their beatings.

21. Weber said that the impact of the salt raids largely came from their effect on third parties. A key to this was the reporting by US journalist Webb Miller, who eloquently described the situation and the horrific beatings in stories that were published in hundreds of newspapers.

22. Here are a few paragraphs from one of his key stories:

Suddenly, at a word of command, scores of native police rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with their steel-shod lathis. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of watchers groaned and sucked in their breaths in sympathetic pain at every blow. ...

Then another column formed while the leaders pleaded with them to retain their self-control. They marched slowly towards the police. Although every one knew that within a few minutes he would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no signs of wavering or fear. They marched steadily with heads up, without the encouragement of music or cheering or any possibility that they might escape serious injury or death. The police rushed out and methodically and mechanically beat down the second column. There was no fight, no struggle: the marchers simply walked forward until struck down. There were no outcries, only groans after they fell. There were not enough stretcher-bearers to carry off the wounded; I saw eighteen injured being carried off simultaneously, while forty-two still lay bleeding on the ground awaiting stretcher-bearers. The blankets used as stretchers were sodden with blood.

At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp sickened me so much that I had to turn away. The Western mind finds it difficult to grasp the idea of non-resistance. I felt an indefinable sense of helpless rage and loathing, almost as much against the men who were submitting unresistingly to being beaten as against the police wielding the clubs, and this despite the fact that when I came to India I sympathised with the Gandhi cause. (Weber 1997: 444-445).

Weber noted the significant effect of the beatings on observers, both the immediate

observer Miller and the readers of his eloquent prose. Nonviolence works through a psychological process, to be sure, but not quite in the way that Gandhi or Gregg believed. According to Weber's analysis, affecting audiences was the key to the success of the salt march. Gregg had noted the influence on onlookers, though he did not think this was the main effect.

Sharp on nonviolence

23. One of the many individuals inspired by Gandhi was Gene Sharp, a US pacifist and researcher. Sharp systematised the study of nonviolent action. He looked at hundreds of cases and observed patterns. In his epic work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), Sharp listed 198 methods of nonviolent action, from leaflets to parallel government, and classified them into three main types: protest and persuasion; noncooperation; and intervention. By examining numerous campaigns, he observed that they usually went through a series of stages which he called the "dynamics of nonviolent action". One of the stages he called "political jiu-jitsu", a generalisation of Gregg's moral jiu-jitsu.

24. The basic idea of political jiu-jitsu is that nonviolent action can work in several domains: the psychological domain (as postulated by Gregg) but also political, social and economic domains. Furthermore, nonviolent action works not just on opponents but also on the grievance group (the group of potential supporters of activists) and third parties.

25. In presenting political jiu-jitsu and documenting the effects of nonviolent action on opponents, the grievance group and third parties, Sharp used several historical examples, including "Bloody Sunday" in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1905, the Russian revolution, resistance to the Nazis, and the East German revolt of 1953. In this context, Sharp commented on the salt raids as follows:

The nonviolent raids on the salt works at Dharasana ... were deliberately planned by Gandhi with the knowledge that they would provoke extreme repression. He expected such repression to put the British *Raj* in a very bad light, strengthening the Indian position while weakening the British. Concerning this instance, J. C. Kumarappa has written: 'Dharasana raid was decided upon not to get salt, which was only the means. Our expectation was that the Government would open fire on unarmed crowds Our primary object was to show to the world at large the fangs and claws of the Government in all its ugliness and ferocity. In this we have succeeded beyond measure.' (Sharp 1973: 687).

Sharp also referred to the 1919 Amritsar shootings as seriously counterproductive for the British.

26. Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu is valuable in pointing to the power of disciplined nonviolent action to cause a violent attack to rebound against the attacker through a variety of mechanisms, including influences on third parties and members of the grievance group. Weber's (1993) analysis of the salt march showed these mechanisms at work.

27. On the other hand, though the concept of political jiu-jitsu is more comprehensive than Gregg's moral jiu-jitsu, this comprehensiveness has a negative side: a lack of precision. In much of his work, Sharp was inclined to list lots of factors that could be involved, for example listing six sources of power and nine effects of nonviolent action on the nonviolent group. This approach is valuable for classificatory purposes but lacks the cogency and insight that can come with a more structured model.

Backfire and nonviolence

28. Inspired by the concept of political jiu-jitsu, I have sought to expand its range and power. The first step is to look at essential conditions for political jiu-jitsu. One of these is that people react with outrage to something. In the case of the Dharasana beatings, the outrage was over the injustice of brutal assaults on nonresisting protesters. Indeed, violent attacks against peaceful protesters, or against innocent victims generally, are a potent cause of outrage. This is why maintaining nonviolent discipline is such an important requirement for the effectiveness of nonviolent action: if even a little violence is used in response, this diffuses the outrage response. This condition is implicit in most discussions of nonviolent action.

29. A second essential condition for political jiu-jitsu is that information about the event be communicated to relevant audiences. (On communication and nonviolence, see Martin and Varney (2003).) This seems obvious enough, but in reality there are many cases where brutal assaults occur but few people know about them. Webb Miller's news reports about the Dharasana beatings were essential for political jiu-jitsu to occur.

30. Noting these two essential conditions, it is then possible to generalise the concept of political jiu-jitsu to events that do not involve nonviolent action. For example, censorship sometimes rebounds against the censors, generating more attention to the forbidden object, such as the fatwa against Salman Rushie's book *The Satanic Verses* which stimulated enormous interest in the book and mobilised many anti-censorship constituencies. Censorship involves violation of free speech, something that is valued in many societies. If information about the censorship is communicated to relevant audiences, a sort of jiu-jitsu process can occur.

30. To refer to this more general social jiu-jitsu process, I use the term "backfire", to distinguish it from political jiu-jitsu, which refers to cases of violence against peaceful protesters. Backfire can be observed in censorship (Jansen and Martin 2003, 2004), defamation (Martin and Gray 2005), attacks on whistleblowers (Martin 2005a; Martin with Rifkin 2004), dismissal of academics (Martin 2004b, 2005b), police beatings (Martin 2005c), torture (Martin and Wright 2003), the attack on Iraq (Martin 2004a) and social movements (Hess and Martin 2006).

31. The second step in expanding the concept of political jiu-jitsu starts with the observation that some violent attacks on peaceful protesters do not cause outrage. For example, many massacres occurred in East Timor after the 1975 Indonesian occupation, but few led to repercussions for the occupiers. In other words, political jiu-jitsu is a contingent phenomenon rather than an automatic one. To find out why, it is useful to look at methods used by attackers that inhibit outrage. Examination of a wide range of cases reveals a diversity of methods, which for convenience can be grouped into five categories.

- Cover up the attack, hiding it from observers.
- Devalue the target.
- Reinterpret the attack, describing it as something else or as someone else's responsibility.
- Use official channels, such as authoritative pronouncements or official inquiries, that give the appearance of justice.
- Intimidate or bribe participants, thereby discouraging action against those responsible for the attack.

32. For example, torture is usually hidden. Torture victims may be labelled criminals or terrorists. The torture process may be said to be routine interrogation that does not harm the victim. Official investigations into judicial processes can be initiated to dampen concern. Threats to torturers, victims and witnesses discourage action.

33. Attention to methods that inhibit outrage naturally leads to attention to ways of overcoming these methods or, in other words, amplifying backfire. There are five obvious categories:

- Expose the attack.
- Validate the target.
- Interpret the attack as an injustice.
- Avoid or discredit official channels.
- Resist intimidation and bribery.

34. By examining methods of inhibiting or amplifying outrage, attention is drawn to backfire as a *process*, not just a potential outcome. Backfires are socially constructed, not inevitable consequences of injustice. By examining the construction processes, it is possible to learn how to be more effective in mobilising action against injustice.

35. Sharp, in developing the concept of political jiu-jitsu as well as his other concepts for understanding the dynamics of nonviolent action, used a pragmatic approach, in which nonviolence is the method of choice because it is more effective than violence. This contrasted with Gandhi's approach of principled nonviolence. The concept of backfire builds on Sharp's pragmatic approach, probing the effectiveness of techniques used by parties in a struggle. But this is seldom a process of cool calculation, because it revolves around outrage, namely anger directed outwards against injustice. The sense of injustice is what also drives those who adhere to nonviolence for principled reasons.

36. It is now fruitful to return to the Dharasana salt raids using the lens of backfire. The two essential conditions for backfire were present. The first was perceived injustice, initially over the British salt monopoly but more acutely over the savage beatings of nonresisting protesters. The second condition was communication to relevant audiences, which was achieved internationally through Webb Miller's stories.

37. Next consider each of the five methods that attackers can use to inhibit outrage.

- The British attempted to *cover up* the beatings by imposition of press censorship throughout India. During the salt raids, they chased away journalists. They also tried to prevent Miller's stories getting out of the country, even though censorship laws did not apply to foreign correspondents. A Gandhi supporter alerted Miller that one of his cables had not been sent. Only after repeated protests was Miller able to have his story transmitted.
- British officials *devalued* the protesters, for example by commenting that some of them requested a "tap or two on the back of the legs" in order to obtain meal tickets and go home (Weber 1997: 453).
- British *reinterpretation* of the events amounted to blatant lies: they claimed that there was no brutality by the police, that few protesters were hurt and that they were faking their injuries.
- *Official channels* were involved when Gandhi and other independence leaders were arrested. The courts gave the appearance of justice, though the rules had been established by the British. The British government held a conference in London to

seek a settlement with the independence movement, but, according to Weber (1997: 461), "The negotiations yielded no tangible gains to the nationalist cause."

- Finally, the beatings and arrests served as a form of *intimidation* of those who might potentially join the protest. *Bribery* was implicit: those police and other officials who performed according to British requirements could expect to maintain their jobs and possibly obtain additional rewards.

38. The British thus used every one of the five methods for inhibiting outrage. But their efforts were unsuccessful, most importantly because Miller's stories breached the cover-up and communicated to a huge audience of potential sympathisers. British efforts to devalue the protesters had little success because of their nonviolent discipline. British lies about the beatings had little credibility in the face of Miller's stories. The use of the legal system to arrest and try Gandhi and others had little credibility to those with sympathy for the struggle. Indeed, the arrests were seen as an additional injustice. Intimidation and bribery undoubtedly reduced participation in the salt raids, but they had no impact on the readers of Miller's stories.

Conclusion

39. Gandhi showed through his campaigns that nonviolence could work to challenge injustice, but understanding how the process operates is complicated. Richard Gregg focussed on conversion of attackers through direct psychological processes, but this is not backed up by observations. But Gregg came up with the concept of moral jiu-jitsu, which inspired Gene Sharp to develop his expanded concept of political jiu-jitsu. The key idea is that violence against peaceful protesters can be counterproductive as a result of support mobilised from opponents, the grievance group and third parties.

40. The next step of conceptual expansion is to look at the same jiu-jitsu process outside violence-vs-nonviolence scenarios, with a new frame: backfire. Backfires are contingent: attackers often act to prevent them and the opponents try to amplify them. This struggle over outcomes can be a social version of the struggles within an individual over how to respond to information about an unjust event (Bandura 1986: 375-389).

41. It should not be surprising that there is still much to learn by studying Gandhi's campaigns. In refining his approach over decades, and through his leadership of the Indian independence struggle, he and his team were able to mount campaigns that have a structural clarity that is ideal for research purposes. Furthermore, Gandhi's commitment to openness means there is ample material for investigation, at least on the side of the satyagrahis.

42. It is common to study Gandhi's campaigns, and other nonviolence struggles, either in their own terms or by using concepts from social science and psychology, such as social movement theory. But it is also possible to move in the other direction, namely to develop concepts inspired by study of nonviolent action and, by generalising them, apply them to arenas outside of the nonviolence sphere. If people can understand personal experiences and world events through frames informed by nonviolence theory, then there is a much greater prospect for expanding the use of nonviolent action itself.

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