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Power in Nonviolence Theory. Using violence is a method of exerting power, widely seen as highly potent. Yet, despite this, nonviolent action is commonly used against opponents who have a superior capacity to use physical violence. The question thus arises: What theory of power underlies nonviolence? In particular, what power dynamics are involved when nonviolence succeeds against violence?

Theories of Power

The concept of power has been widely discussed by social theorists, with no consensus. Power is most commonly said to be the ability of a person, group, or system to influence someone's behavior. Power of this sort can be divided into different types, such as economic, coercive, and belief-based. For example, parents have power over small children through their provision of food and shelter, their ability to restrain or hurt, and children's trust in them.

Steven Lukes (2005) has classified power into three kinds, or "dimensions." The first dimension is direct power, such as when a person uses money or force to change another's behavior. This first dimension of power is overt and recognized. The second dimension involves non-decision-making: without doing anything, a figure or organization changes the set of options discussed. For example, in a small town where most people are employed by a large company, local government officials might discuss only those options that will serve the company, everyone realizing that challenging the company would be foolish. The second dimension of power is latent, yet widely understood.

The third dimension of power is when beliefs and behaviors are shaped so deeply that the people who are influenced do not realize it. It is control over the political agenda. In a company town, an outsider might say the workers are being exploited and poisoned, but the workers themselves might believe the company has their interests at heart and defend it against critics. The third dimension of power is close to the concept of hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci, in which belief systems in a society are systematically distorted to serve the interests of particular groups, such as capitalists. People who, because of this, do not understand their own interests are said to be suffering "false consciousness."

The ideas of hegemony and false consciousness grew out of the Marxist tradition. They are examples of a structural approach to

power, in which capital and the state have superior economic and coercive resources and shape the belief systems of workers. They are also compatible with the idea that power is something that is held by individuals, groups, or systems.

Beginning with the social movements of the 1960s, a different approach gained acceptance: power as a relationship, involved in all interactions and relationships, large and small. A feminist slogan, “the personal is political,” reflects this view, with the word “political” referring to the role of power. Intellectuals found an expression of this approach to power in the works of Michel Foucault. Rather than power being held and used, in Foucault’s picture power grows out of and reflects interactions and relationships.

Gene Sharp’s Theory of Power

Gandhi and thinkers following his tradition did not formally engage with theories of power. Having a moral commitment to nonviolence means there is no need to examine effectiveness, though in practice Gandhi and others with a principled commitment to nonviolence were often astute in their tactics.

Gene Sharp is the key figure in a different approach to nonviolence, called the pragmatic approach: it argues for using nonviolent action because it is more effective, not because it is moral. Sharp’s book, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), presents a theory of power and makes other pioneering contributions, including classifying methods of nonviolent action and presenting a series of typical stages in nonviolent campaigns.

Sharp’s model of power is relational. A ruler has power, according to Sharp, because subjects acquiesce or tacitly consent to the actions or systems of the ruler. But this consent can be withdrawn, in which case the power of the ruler is undermined. Sharp sees the methods of nonviolent action—protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention—as ways of refusing to acquiesce and thereby revoking consent.

Sharp lists various reasons for obedience by subjects, such as habit, self-interest, and fear of sanctions. He notes that sanctions on their own do not induce obedience but rather the fear of them. Hence the keys to liberation are the willingness to resist and the capacity to take action.

Sharp’s picture fits with Lukes’s first dimension of power: it focuses on direct efforts to influence someone’s behavior. It combines with this the relational perspective typical of Foucault. It also can be mapped within a concept of hegemony: the usual acquiescence of subjects is characteristic of the

hegemony of a dominant ruler or system. But Sharp juxtaposes this with the idea of withdrawing consent, which parallels the idea of resistance in studies of hegemony.

Sharp's view, in a challenge to conventional views, asserts that nonviolent action can be effective against rulers having a monopoly on violence. The usual assumption is that superior violence will triumph.

Brutal attacks on peaceful protesters by police or troops can cause outrage, leading more people to join the cause of the protesters and withdraw support for the ruler. This phenomenon, called political jiu-jitsu by Sharp, reflects a withdrawal of consent or, in other words, a change in the previous acquiescent relationship.

Critiques of Sharp

Some critics of nonviolence dispute Sharp's picture, saying that although nonviolence may succeed against soft-hearted opponents like the British in India, it will always be defeated by ruthless opponents like the Nazis, willing to exercise brutality without restraint. In short, withdrawing consent from a ruler is inadequate if the ruler kills you. However, this is to misunderstand Sharp's model. The consent that gives power to rulers includes consent by functionaries such as police, soldiers, prison guards, and executioners, and those who feed, clothe, and arm them. When support by such functionaries is withdrawn, the power of a ruler evaporates. Critics along these lines assume that power is monolithic, namely a possession of the power holder, whereas Sharp assumes it is relational and is subject to change. This is where Sharp's picture has most affinities with Foucault.

Another criticism of Sharp's model concerns his dichotomy between rulers and subjects. This distinction is appropriate for many systems, such as dictatorships, against which nonviolent action has been deployed historically. However, there are other sorts of power systems in which the contrast between rulers and subjects is blurred or variable. The key power relations in capitalism, for example, involve ownership of capital and selling of labor power, which are not easily correlated with a ruler-subject dichotomy. Many individuals and families own property and may hire labor for short or long periods; some wealthy people are nominally employees of corporations. It is not so obvious what it means to withdraw consent from capitalist rulers. Does it mean not owning property, not buying products from large corporations, or resisting the states that provide legal and police protection of private property? Sharp, in his accounts of hundreds of different types of nonviolent action, describes many economic actions such as various forms

of strikes and boycotts but never addresses direct challenges to capitalist systems.

Bureaucracy is another power system to which the ruler-subject dichotomy does not apply particularly well. In bureaucratic organizations—that is, organizations characterized by hierarchy, a division of labor, rules, and treatment of personnel as interchangeable cogs—it is common for a middle-level worker to be in charge of workers below while being subject to orders from those above, in other words, to be both a ruler and a subject. It is certainly possible to withdraw consent and to bring about a change in policies or personnel, but it is not clear how withdrawal of consent can transform the system of bureaucracy itself. Writers on nonviolence have given little attention to struggles within bureaucratic organizations and even less to transforming them into nonhierarchical alternatives.

Patriarchy—the system of beliefs and behaviors through which men collectively dominate women—also fails to conform to a ruler-subject dichotomy, in part because it is inextricably linked with men dominating other men. Some feminists object to the idea that male domination is based on female consent, because this implies that women are complicit in their own subordination. Part of the problem rests with the word “consent,” which has negative connotations arising from debates over rape and sexual assault, in which male defendants often claim that the woman consented to sexual relations. The idea that a woman being assaulted can withdraw consent, and thereby challenge male domination, seems to put exclusive responsibility on individual women. The term “consent” can lead some people to infer that blame attaches to those who consent to injustice. This resonates with a long history of blaming women for their oppression.

Although individual resistance certainly can be part of nonviolent action, the idea of withdrawing consent is, in most nonviolent actions, a collective challenge, with the goal of a change in policy or system, such as enabling free speech or ending practices of racial discrimination. Sharp refers primarily to the problems of dictatorship, war, and genocide.

Sharp, in articulating his theory of power, drew on a long tradition of writing in the area. In retrospect, however, it might have been better to have adopted different terms. If, for example, the expression “withdrawing consent” were replaced by “resistance,” the emphasis would shift away from acquiescence, and the language would mesh with that typically used by scholars inspired by Foucault.

Nonviolent Action and Power

Nonviolent action is undoubtedly a means of challenging systems of power, but how to conceptualize this in theoretical terms is less clear. Sharp's consent theory of power is the most well articulated connection between nonviolent action and power theory, yet it has some serious shortcomings, especially in dealing with systems not fitting a ruler-subject dichotomy, such as capitalism, bureaucracy, and patriarchy.

Mainstream scholars have given remarkably little attention to nonviolence generally, and researchers into power are no exception: Sharp's theory of power is hardly known, much less discussed, compared to Foucault's. This is in striking contrast to activists, among whom nonviolence is widely used, with Sharp's ideas frequently presented in activist trainings. For activist purposes, the limitations of the consent theory of power do not matter so much: its primary function is as a warrant for action. If power is relational, it can be changed. Sharp's model emphasizes agency, in contrast to most models that emphasize social structure. Effective activists have a good grasp of local power structures; therefore, arguably, the inadequacies of Sharp's model in this regard do not matter too much.

This raises the question of whether nonviolence theory needs its own special analysis of power. Is it sufficient to document methods of nonviolent action and how they can operate to change behaviors, policies, and social systems? Power comes into the picture implicitly through understandings of maintenance and change in behaviors, policies, and social systems.

On the other hand, it could be said that just as nonviolent action challenges power systems, so it poses a challenge to conventional theories of power. Nonviolent action is a living refutation of monolithic pictures of power and a rejection of the idea that violence is inevitably superior to nonviolence. Nonviolent action also confronts Foucault-style microanalyses of power in systems with the need to incorporate a much more direct, confrontational, strategic approach to social change. Nonviolent action is, as its name indicates, action. In order to deal with nonviolent action, theories of power need to incorporate a theory of action.

[See also [Gandhian Theory of Nonviolence](#); [Nonviolence, Feminist Views of](#); [Nonviolence, Theory and Practice of](#); and [Nonviolent Action](#)]

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