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What is nonviolent action?

Rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins are examples of nonviolent action. There are many other types and subtypes, such as mock elections, humorous political stunts, teach-ins, excommunication (a religious boycott), refusal to rent, withdrawal of bank deposits, working to rule, noncooperation by judges, expulsion from international organisations, seizure of assets, and disclosing identities of secret agents. What these actions have in common is that no physical violence is involved and the methods are not standard, everyday sorts of actions. Leading nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp catalogued 198 different methods, but there are many others, limited only by the imagination of activists.[1]

Conceptually, nonviolent action can be identified by specifying several conceptual boundaries. On the other side of each of the boundaries are other types of behaviour or activity. Inside the three boundaries lies nonviolent action. It's not quite this simple because each of the boundaries is fuzzy and sometimes moveable. Still, it's a useful way to think about what's involved.

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1 These examples are taken from Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). See also Gene Sharp with Joshua Paulson, Christopher A. Miller and Hardy Merriman, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005).

Boundary 1: physical violence

Nonviolent action, as its name indicates, does not involve violence, normally taken to refer to physical violence. Beatings, shootings, bombings, arrests, torture and killings are forms of physical violence. Nonviolent action excludes any such methods.

The word "nonviolent" suggests, to those unfamiliar with what is involved, that no violence is involved at all. So when police beat or shoot protesters, this is sometimes perceived as a violent confrontation. Well it is, but the only violence may be by the police. "Nonviolent action" means those taking the action do not use violence, but it is possible, and common, for opponents to use violence against nonviolent activists.

There are several types of action at the boundary with violence. One is self-immolation: setting oneself on fire, usually causing death. This is violence to oneself, which is different from violence against an opponent.

Self-immolation has been used in a number of campaigns, including by members of groups that are otherwise completely nonviolent. A famous case was Thich Quang Duc, who burnt himself to death in Saigon, Vietnam in 1963 to protest against government persecution of Buddhists. In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in Tunisia as a form of protest; his action triggered a nonviolent uprising that toppled the dictator Ben Ali the next month.

Should self-immolation be considered a method of nonviolent action? Some say yes, because no violence is used against opponents. Others say no, because violence is

instigated by protesters. Gene Sharp excludes self-immolation from his catalogue of 198 methods of nonviolent action.

It is worth considering the motivations of those who use this technique. The Buddhists monks in Vietnam and Mohamed Buoazizi in Tunisia were trying to highlight their enormous concern about injustice, a concern so great that they were willing to sacrifice their lives to draw attention to it — but without any intent or threat to hurt others. This suggests self-immolation sits comfortably alongside other methods of nonviolent protest.

For the purposes here, there is no need to make a decision about whether self-immolation is *really* a form of nonviolent action. The key point is that it is at the boundary.

Another type of action at the boundary is action that seems like it could cause harm to opponents but in practice does not, or does so only very occasionally. An example is throwing stones against tanks. Throwing stones is violent: it has the potential of hurting others, causing injury or perhaps even death to someone who is unprotected. But what if the opponent is well protected, inside a tank or behind solid barriers? Does throwing stones count as nonviolent action in this situation?

Suppose you say yes. Then what about throwing eggs? The damage won't be as great as from stones, but an egg could hurt someone, especially if hitting their eye. What about throwing cream puffs? Flowers? Feathers? There is a continuum of objects that can be thrown or conveyed towards opponents. At some point on the continuum, there is a transition from violence to nonvio-

lent action, unless we want to have a different name for the methods at this boundary. What about blowing bubbles?

Another type of action at the boundary is violence against objects, such as burning a flag, smashing a shop window, or blowing up a vacant research laboratory. This is sometimes called violence against property, which assumes the objects are owned. The usual assumption is that the objects are owned by someone else, but it's also possible to damage or destroy your own property. You might own or buy some rocks and smash them as a form of protest.

Some people treat violence against objects as just as bad as violence against people, or even worse. The question here is whether using force against objects can be considered to be nonviolent action.

One special case is sabotage.[2] During the Nazi occupation of Europe, workers sometimes slowed production in factories by covertly causing damage to their operations. This wasn't armed struggle against the Nazis, but it was a way of hindering their war efforts. Some sorts of sabotage seem more violent than others. Blowing up railway lines — another type of action taken against the Nazis — seems quite violent; using a sledgehammer to damage railway lines is less dramatically violent; putting

2 Pierre Dubois, *Sabotage in Industry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Martin Sprouse with Lydia Ely (eds.), *Sabotage in the American Workplace: Anecdotes of Dissatisfaction, Mischief and Revenge* (San Francisco: Pressure Drop Press, 1992).

stones on railway lines is even less visibly violent, though the consequences might be similar.[3]

Some environmental activists, especially those in the radical group Earth First!, have used sabotage to oppose what they consider to be anti-environmental operations.[4] They have pulled up survey stakes, hammered nails into trees and poured sand into the petrol tanks of bulldozers, among other forms of sabotage. In these activities, they are extremely careful to avoid any harm to humans or to non-human animals. For example, the idea in putting nails into trees — called spiking — is to prevent them being logged. The spikes can cause serious damage to sawmill blades.

To prevent a forest from being logged, Earth First! activists spike trees and then tell loggers what they have done. The idea is that the expense from damaged sawmill equipment will deter loggers. Activists also warn sawmill operators about the danger from broken blades. However, some activists think the risk to loggers is too great and therefore oppose spiking as a tactic.

Some forms of violence against objects cause very little physical damage. Burning draft cards — a form of protest against conscription into military forces — is largely symbolic, because the damage to an object, the

3 On nonviolent anti-Nazi efforts, see Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe 1939-1943* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

4 Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood (eds.), *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (Tucson, AZ: Ned Ludd Books, 1988, second edition).

draft card, is trivial. Another example is deleting files on a computer, such as files about protesters targeted for surveillance or arrest. Technically, deleting files causes physical damage, and can be called destruction of information, but most people think of this as quite different from throwing bricks through shop windows.

Violence against objects thus sometimes appears quite violent, for example blowing up a boat with no one aboard. On the other hand, it sometimes appears to involve hardly any violence at all, such as deleting computer files. Gene Sharp excludes sabotage from his methods of nonviolent action. There is no need to make a final decision here. The key point is that violence against objects is at the boundary between violence and nonviolent action.

In most cases, it is clear whether an action should be classified as violent or nonviolent action. Shooting people and blowing them up through drone strikes are clear instances of violence; fasting and boycotting a business are clear instances of nonviolent action. Actions at the boundary, such as self-immolation, may behave more like violence or more like nonviolent action, depending on the circumstances.

You might think that some actions, for example tree-spiking or self-immolation, are distasteful or wrong. However, just because you don't like them doesn't necessarily mean they should be labelled "violent." It's best to separate personal likes and dislikes from assessments of what counts as violence or nonviolent action.

Boundary 2: Usual politics

Nonviolent action is normally seen as something different from normal political action. Where there are free elections, conventional political action includes lobbying, election campaigning and voting. These, therefore, do not count as nonviolent action. They are too ordinary and too expected. When authorities expect people to do certain things, they are standard activities. Nonviolent action is action that is different from these standard activities. It is a form of struggle with a difference.

Most discussions of nonviolent action focus on the contrast with violence — as indeed I've done in the previous section. The boundary with normal political action is discussed much less and often is not mentioned at all. However, it is just as important, and probably even more difficult to pin down.

Imagine you're living in a country where free speech and free assembly are well respected. Signing a petition is nothing special. In fact, you might sign an online petition every week, forward petitions to others or even sponsor one. Maybe you attend a meeting and several others pass around petitions to sign. In such circumstances, petitions are a routine political activity.

Now imagine you're living in a country where criticism of the government is risky: if you speak out, you might be threatened, arrested or worse. Signing a petition — especially a petition with political demands — becomes a significant political statement. It is a serious challenge to the government. It is certainly not a routine political activity.

So signing a petition can be normal political activity in one place and exceptional, unusual, challenging political activity in another. This means it counts as nonviolent action in one place but not another. Quite a few of Sharp's 198 methods of nonviolent action, such as letters and rallies, have become routine in some places.

Sharp was mainly concerned with nonviolent action against severe forms of injustice. Under highly repressive governments, letters and petitions are often seen as serious threats to the authorities and those involved are subject to reprisals. In such circumstances, letters and petitions are well outside "normal political action," which basically means acquiescing to rules imposed by authorities. In these sorts of situations, the boundary between conventional politics and nonviolent action is fairly easy to identify: any form of protest becomes a type of nonviolent action.

However, this classification breaks down in societies where freedom of speech and assembly are respected. Sharp did not put asterisks next to methods such as letters and petitions.* His 198 methods are often quoted, almost never with any qualification, so most readers assume that the methods count as nonviolent action irrespective of the circumstances.

What difference does this make? It's reasonable to say that Sharp's classification of methods provides a useful way to highlight a category of action, regardless of whether they are sanctioned or routine or so ordinary as to

* "This method doesn't count as nonviolent action when it is a routine form of political action."

be boring. This is a practical way of addressing the boundary, but it sidesteps an important strategic issue: whether to work within the system or to take stronger action.

In places where voting and election campaigning are routine, they do not count as nonviolent action. But in some countries, elections are staged. In others, voting fraud is rampant. If you go along with a fraudulent election, this is politics as usual. In the face of corrupt voting systems, if you try to vote or to ensure that your vote is registered properly, this might be considered nonviolent action. In Serbia, Georgia and elsewhere, massive rallies have been part of action taken against electoral fraud.

The fuzziness of the distinction between nonviolent action and conventional politics also extends into the methods of noncooperation, which are types of strikes and boycotts. In some places, strikes by workers in support of better pay and conditions are commonplace, accepted as a standard negotiating tool, and hence might be considered a part of conventional political action. In other places, strikes are seen as serious threats to the system.

In Australia, the government has placed severe restrictions on trade unions in order for a strike to be legal. Only if workers have voted to strike according to legal technicalities will the union and workers be protected from serious penalties. Following all the procedures for a legal strike might seem to make this a form of conventional political action. When workers go on strike on their own — a wildcat strike, unsanctioned — this is more clearly a form of nonviolent action.

There is yet another complication. Sometimes authorities respond differently to the same method, depending on who is using it and how. In the United States prior to and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there were numerous rallies and marches in opposition. Most of these were unobstructed. Police accepted these protests and seldom tried to arrest anyone. In 2011, the Occupy movement emerged, with protesters against economic inequality setting up camps in downtown areas. Some of these were left alone for a while, until police moved to forcibly evict the protesters. In different parts of the world, some Occupy camps have been permitted to continue whereas others have been attacked.

Another complication comes when laws change. If it is illegal to enter an area — such as a public square, a forest or a military base — then doing so, as a form of protest, is civil disobedience. If the law is changed and it becomes legal to enter the area, then doing so is no longer civil disobedience. Many methods of nonviolent action involve breaking the law, though this is not a requirement. The point here is that when laws change, the classification of an action as civil disobedience — and hence different from conventional political action — changes. This is another example of how the boundary can shift.

Does it really matter where the boundary is between conventional political action and nonviolent action? In one sense, the answer is no, because they are both types of action and can be judged in terms of their impact on participants and wider audiences, or treated as part of a campaign strategy.

There are, though, a couple of senses in which it can make sense to distinguish between these two categories of action. If a criterion for nonviolent action is that it is something different from, and usually stronger than, conventional political action, then it can be useful to identify the boundary between them. Secondly, to apply ideas about nonviolent action to entirely different domains, it is useful to identify its essential features. One of them is being different from conventional action.

Boundary 3: language

There is another interesting case to consider: what about verbal abuse, or what might be called "emotional violence"? Activists certainly engage in this sort of behaviour. At rallies and marches, shouting may occur, sometimes coordinated as in the case of chants. Some of this "loud speech" is directly at issues, such as "US troops — out now!" Some may be directed at individuals, such as "George Bush — out now!" There can be more abusive language too, such as when protesters swear at police. It's also possible to imagine petitions, slogans, badges and other forms of symbolic protest that contain abusive language, possibly directed at individuals. Emotional violence can also be conveyed without words, such as through gestures like the widely known "one-finger salute" — though the meaning of gestures varies across cultures.

Should this sort of aggressive language count as nonviolent action? In dealing with this question, it is helpful to set aside the question of effectiveness. Shouting

and swearing may be unwise, indeed counterproductive, but so can methods such as sit-ins and strikes. Effectiveness alone is not the key criterion for deciding what is nonviolent action.

If we stick with the specification that no physical violence is involved, then verbal abuse can be part of nonviolent action. Sharp lists as one of his methods "taunting officials," and gives the example of peasants in China in 1942 who followed and mocked soldiers from the Kuomintang government who had seized their supplies of grain.[5] There are plenty of other examples in which protesters target individuals, especially government and corporate leaders, including via rallies, vigils and blockades. Leaders are prime targets, for all sorts of reasons, whether it is their policy on wars, abortion or some other contentious topic. In many cases, these protests involve verbal abuse.

Although Sharp included taunting as a method of nonviolent action, he did not discuss verbal abuse systematically. His approach is strategic, and it is reasonable to argue that he would address the question of abuse by asking whether it is effective. In other words, verbal abuse might count as nonviolent action but usually be unwise.

Gandhi offers another way of approaching this issue. For him, respect for the opponent is paramount. The purpose of satyagraha — the Gandhian search for truth — is to create the conditions for mutual dialogue. To do this may require forceful action, but does not require personal abuse. The idea of Gandhi shouting an abusive slogan is

5 Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action,* p. 146.

absurd: it was not his style. From a Gandhian perspective, satyagraha does not involve verbal abuse.

For the time being, there is no need to make a final judgement about verbal abuse. It can remain a method at the boundary of nonviolent action.

A good cause?

Suppose the Nazis used some of the methods catalogued by Sharp, such as rallies, strikes and boycotts. Would this count as nonviolent action? To couch the question more generally, does nonviolent action have to be for a good cause? There are two main answers: yes and no.

Many activists say yes, or rather they assume the answer is yes, because they don't even ask the question. Activists who are familiar with nonviolence ideas often assume that nonviolent action is by those on the side of justice. When US civil rights protesters used rallies, boycotts and sit-ins, this was nonviolent action, to be sure. Their opponents, the segregationists, opposed the protesters using various means. The actions by segregationists are seldom analysed in terms of methods used. Activists thus may look only at one side in discussing nonviolent action (and comparing it to other options, such as violence) and completely ignore actions by the opponents.

Gandhi and those in the Gandhian tradition definitely answer yes. For them, satyagraha is not just a method, but a search for truth that seeks to overcome injustice, inequality and domination. For Gandhians, the means and the ends should be compatible. Satyagraha, as a method of action, therefore cannot be used for an unworthy goal.

Sharp, in cataloguing methods of nonviolent action, gave numerous examples, nearly all of them involving challenges to war, oppression and other bad things. Nevertheless, his definition and framework allow for nonviolent methods to be used for unworthy causes. If the Nazis organised a boycott of Jewish businesses, this is nonviolent action even though it is used by a murderous regime for a racist purpose. Sharp would say it is possible for nonviolent methods to be used for bad purposes.

Another example is the "capital strike," when business owners withdraw investment as a form of protest, such as disinvestment from South Africa under the racist system of apartheid. However, withdrawing investment, or threatening to, can also be used for the selfish purposes of owners, for example to push for tax concessions, exemptions from environmental regulations or cuts to wages. A capital strike is not necessarily for a good cause.

An advantage of restricting nonviolent action to good causes is that it broadens the concept of nonviolent action beyond actions to include purposes: activists need to examine their goals and not just use methods mindlessly and instrumentally. Most importantly, nonviolent action becomes inherently worthy.

On the other hand, saying nonviolent action can be used for good or bad purposes leads to fewer logical complications. Sometimes it's not possible to know which side in a dispute is in the right; sometimes both sides have good intentions and worthy goals. Consider, for example, protests against genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The protesters think they are right, of course, but what if there are counter-protesters who believe GMOs are

beneficial in feeding poor farmers? If nonviolent action can only be used for good purposes, then the two groups of protesters will have opposite ideas of who is using nonviolent action. In such circumstances, it makes sense to look only at the methods and not try to judge the goals. The same sort of thing applies in all sorts of other disputes, such as over pornography, abortion, euthanasia and pesticides. A definitive assessment of which side is correct may not be easy.

Individuals and groups

Does nonviolent action have to involve lots of people? Not necessarily. An individual can hold a vigil, hunger strike or work-to-rule. Sometimes an individual's action is immensely inspiring to others. On the other hand, some methods of nonviolent action seem to require many people. A consumer boycott by just one person won't have much impact, unless the consumer is wealthy or politically influential. Strikes usually involve groups of workers. For a single worker to go on strike is more a form of symbolic protest than noncooperation — unless the single worker is crucial to operations, such as the sole computer programmer in a business. A rally with one person attending is better thought of using another name, for example a vigil. Then there are methods such as setting up alternative government, which require many participants.

Based on these examples, it is reasonable to say that nonviolent action can be carried out by individuals and by groups, small and large. The role of numbers is to change the character and sometimes the type of the action. Larger

participation usually leads to more powerful actions, but not always, and anyway that is another matter than deciding what counts as nonviolent action.

On the other side of the confrontation or struggle is the opponent. Can the opponent be an individual? Not in the normal conception of nonviolent action. The usual picture is that the opponent is a government, a corporation or a major group such as military or police forces. Sometimes the opponent is an entire system of rule, such as the previous apartheid system of white rule in South Africa. Nonviolent action, in the usual conception, is not about a struggle against an individual or even a small group, but against something larger. It is political activity, rather than interpersonal activity.

This is parallel to the division between political science and psychology. Political scientists study collective behaviour whereas psychologists study individual thought and behaviour. Nonviolent action falls in the domain of political science, but it needs to be asked, why? Why couldn't the same approach be used for examining struggles between individuals? Well, it can be, as covered in chapters 5 and 6. Indeed, the purpose of this book is to show that features of nonviolent action can be transported to other domains and used to assess methods and strategies. For the time being, though, the main thing is to note that the usual study of nonviolent action deals with groups on one or both sides.

Conclusion

One of the challenges in understanding nonviolent action is to specify exactly what it is. Some examples seem clear-cut, such as sit-ins, boycotts and large rallies. But complications abound. At the boundary with violence there are several forms of action, such as sabotage, that may or may not be counted as nonviolent action. Even fuzzier is the boundary with conventional political action: methods such as petitions and banners, when they are legal and routine, could be considered conventional political action, but are commonly listed as forms of nonviolent action. Then there is the issue of action for a bad cause. Some would say any action by racists cannot be nonviolent action, whereas others would say racists can use nonviolent action — and that activists need to carefully consider both their methods and their goals.

It is tempting to try to decide on a definition of nonviolent action and work with it, to reduce misunderstanding. However, any definition is bound to have boundaries that are contested. Furthermore, understandings of other sorts of action — violence, conventional political action, and language — are different in different places, and change over time, so it is inevitable that the meaning of nonviolent action will have to adjust accordingly.

My goal is to identify the key features of successful nonviolent action and then find their analogues in arenas where the idea of nonviolent action is not normally applied, such as conversations where there is no physical violence. For this purpose, it is not necessary to make a

final decision on defining nonviolent action, because in other arenas there will be movement from the usual meanings. My aim in outlining some of the contested aspects of the meaning of nonviolent action is to raise the issues rather than make final determinations. These issues will continue to be raised as activists discuss what to do and why.

Appendix: What to call it

I started this chapter by giving various examples of nonviolent action. Using examples is helpful because they provide a mental image of people collectively challenging something without using physical violence. If you try to provide a definition, it's likely to end up boring and confusing: "Action by one or more people in pursuit of a goal without using physical violence while going beyond the conventional methods used in politics and discourse."

The expression "nonviolent action" is not very helpful for understanding the concept. It is constructed as a negative, as *not violent,* rather than in terms of what it is. Taken literally, "nonviolent action" includes walking down a street and brushing your teeth, because they are types of action and do not involve violence. Or do they? People differ greatly in their interpretation of the word "violence." Some think shouting or insults are violent: they are "emotional violence" or "verbal violence." So does nonviolent action mean being polite in a conversation?

"Nonviolent struggle" is an improvement because "struggle" implies the existence of conflict and an

opponent, thereby ruling out everyday activities. However, as noted earlier, another problem with any expression containing "nonviolent" is that it suggests no violence is involved at all, whereas violence is often used *against* nonviolent activists.

The expression "nonviolence" — as contrasted with "nonviolent action" or "nonviolent struggle" — has these problems and more, because it doesn't specify action. Sitting contemplating the moon — does this qualify as nonviolence? No, but it might be interpreted this way. A complication here is that "nonviolence" is used within activist circles to refer to several things: coordinated action towards a goal, living a life in harmony with ideals of justice and simplicity, and constructing a peaceful, compassionate society. The Gandhian meanings of nonviolence as a way of life are much broader than the idea of action towards an immediate goal.

Although "nonviolent action" is not a very good expression, alternatives are not much better. One is "people power," popularised after the mass action in Manila that helped topple Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. "People power" as an expression has the advantage of being positive and indicating the involvement of "people" — in contrast to leaders or rulers — exerting power, suggesting change. However, as an expression it is vague. "People power" might be interpreted as voting, cleaning up a park or pushing for a cancer clinic. It is not much more specific than "social action," namely groups of people doing things.

"Civil resistance" is another expression. It has the advantage of being unfamiliar to most people, so they

can't so easily misinterpret it! "Civil" refers to members of the public — civilians — as contrasted with "military." It is different from "civil" meaning polite as contrasted with rude. The word "resistance" is unanchored: resistance to what? By implication, resistance is to those backed by greater authority or force. This fits a picture in which opponent forces attack and civilians defend, but doesn't cover scenarios in which civilian activists initiate campaigns. Despite its ambiguities, "civil resistance" is worth considering as an alternative to "nonviolent action" and "people power."

Yet another option is "unarmed resistance," referring to campaigners who do not use weapons such as guns or missiles — they do not use "armaments" in the usual sense. Referring to "unarmed resistance" or "unarmed struggle" leaves the door open to some methods of sabotage and to symbolic yet violent methods such as throwing stones at tanks. A disadvantage of "unarmed resistance" is that it does not give much idea about what activists actually do.

In the early 1900s, what is today called nonviolent action was commonly called "passive resistance."[6] This conjures up images of protesters sitting and refusing to move, allowing themselves to be carried away by police. It is a highly misleading term, because only a few forms of nonviolent action can reasonably be said to involve

6 Steven Duncan Huxley, *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland: Finnish "Passive Resistance" against Russification as a Case of Nonmilitary Struggle in the European Resistance Tradition* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1990).

passivity. For this reason, Gandhi invited suggestions for an alternative name. The result was the word "satyagraha" which literally can be translated as "truth-force" or "soul-force." As a new label for an unfamiliar concept, "satyagraha" is a brilliant innovation. Because the word does not have prior connotations, it is less easy to misinterpret: it has to be explained. Nevertheless, it has not caught on outside India, perhaps because it sounds alien and is hard to pronounce.

For the past century, Gandhi and others using nonviolent action — or satyagraha or whatever you want to call it — have avoided the expression "passive resistance." Yet, for some reason, "passive resistance" continues to be applied by others. This may reflect a persistent association between violence and action, so that not using violence is assumed to be passive by comparison. Efforts at linguistic education seem unable to eradicate "passive resistance." For this reason, terms such as "nonviolent action" are helpful, because "action" is the opposite of passivity.

I do not have a firm view about the best words to use. Even if I did, others might not agree. Language evolves by use, and how words in this area will be used in the future remains to be seen and heard. In this book I most commonly use "nonviolent action," but for the sake of variety use various alternatives. When possible, it is often better to be specific and refer to a strike or a rally rather than generic terms such as "nonviolent action."