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4 Transportable features of nonviolent action

In chapter 2 and 3, I examined nonviolent action and what makes it effective. The next step is more challenging. It is to try to identify the features of successful nonviolent action that can be applied in quite different domains — in particular, domains where there is little or no physical violence. The idea is to find analogies to nonviolent action in arenas such as conversations and public controversies.

This may seem a strange sort of endeavour. Why bother trying to transport ideas from nonviolent action to different domains, when people studying those areas probably already know how to engage effectively in struggle? True enough — there’s no guarantee that this exercise will lead to useful insights. But there is some promise. Nonviolent action can be highly effective, yet it has been largely ignored by mainstream practitioners and theorists, who instead have devoted most attention to conventional politics and armed struggle. Therefore it is plausible that in other domains, the existence of an effective mode of struggle has been similarly neglected.

In looking for transportable features of nonviolent action, I found it was not sufficient just to look at the usual discussions, because there are some features that are so standard that they are just assumed to exist, and hence not normally noticed. Here’s how I proceeded. I started with the standard features of nonviolent action, adapting some

of them for different arenas. I added a few features that seemed necessary to fully specify the nonviolent-action approach in a different domain. So here is the list, with preliminary comments on how features might apply to other domains.

Non-standard

By definition, nonviolent action is a non-standard approach when compared to accepted and authorised methods such as holding meetings, lobbying and voting, which are conventional methods of political action. Whether a method is non-standard depends on the circumstances. In places where civil liberties are respected, handing out a leaflet is a standard method, whereas in a dictatorship it is definitely non-standard.

Consider the domain of organisations. In large organisations, such as corporations and government departments, there are many formal processes for dealing with difficulties, such as grievance procedures. If these are ineffective, then the organisational equivalent of nonviolent action has to be something other than the usual formal processes. It has to be something that is not spelled out in manuals, guidelines and rules.

In interpersonal interactions, rules are mostly implicit, understood by individuals in a culture, and learned through observation and through feedback on unwelcome behaviour. If you have always spoken politely with someone, being rude is non-standard. It is relatively easy to introduce a non-standard behaviour into a relationship; however, if the same behaviour is used repeatedly, it

quickly comes to be expected, at least from a particular individual or in a particular circumstance.

To summarise: the key is that the action is non-standard and/or non-authorised. This criterion will help to uncover hidden, less recognised methods in all sorts of domains.

Limited harm

A central feature of nonviolent action is that no physical violence is used against opponents. As noted in chapter 2, the boundary between nonviolent action and violent action is blurry and contested, with self-immolation and violence against objects being at the boundary.

For the purposes of applying nonviolence ideas to other domains, this criterion needs to be modified. In verbal interactions, for example, there is no physical violence. So what is the relevant criterion in other domains? A prime candidate is “limited harm”: not hurting opponents, at least not too much or not in the wrong way.

“Harm” can be interpreted in various ways. You can harm someone emotionally through a slightly derogatory comment, or even by failing to offer support. To make some sense of the criterion of limited harm, it is worth remembering that nonviolent action can cause harm to others. A strike can damage a business and a social boycott can cause distress. Nonviolent action can involve coercion, though without physical force or physical harm to an individual.

To progress on this matter, it's worth looking at the reasons for not using physical violence, and then apply these to other domains. Looking at reasons opens up this category, as there are several possible reasons.

Some activists refuse on principle to use violence. They believe it is immoral to hurt opponents. This is an ethical objection. This could be applied to other domains: some people refuse to shout or swear in anger at another person as a matter of principle.

Another reason not to harm opponents is because more people will be attracted to the cause. Imagine a rally in which some protesters are throwing bricks at the police. Some people, who don't want to throw bricks, might be willing to join nevertheless — but others will not. When no one is throwing bricks, participation may increase. This can be translated into other domains: the criterion for limited harm is what enables or fosters greater participation.

Closely related to this is the capability to participate (see below). Some people are too weak to throw heavy bricks or to run away from police who are pursuing brick-throwers. By refusing to throw bricks, or undertake other aggressive methods that require special strength and skill, greater participation is made possible.

Yet another reason not to harm opponents is that they are less likely to be alienated; indeed, some may be willing to stand aside or even switch sides. As is often noted, violence tends to unify opponents, because they feel under attack, whereas nonviolent action reduces the sense of danger, enables dialogue and opens the door to conversion or accommodation. In other domains, the

criterion of limited harm can be assessed by its influence on opponents. If they are alienated by your action or goaded into opposing you more passionately, the action is probably too strong. If they are encouraged to reconsider, change their behaviour or switch sides, the action is being effective.

Finally, there is backfire. When police beat peaceful protesters, and this is exposed to the world, it can generate outrage and backfire on the police. However, if even a few of the protesters use violence, the police violence is far less likely to generate outrage. Backfire dynamics apply in many other domains besides physical violence used against protesters. When looking at other domains, such as a conversation, the crucial test is whether an action enables backfire when the opponent overreacts. If you raise your voice and the person you're talking to raises theirs, eventually reaching the level of shouting, observers may think this is a shouting match and, if they don't know you or know what you're taking about, have no special sympathy for either of you. However, if you never raise your voice but the other person is shouting, observers are more likely to sympathise with you: the shouting can backfire in terms of wider support.

In summary, limited harm seems on the surface to be a suitable generalisation of the criterion of not using physical violence. However, "limited harm" is not precise enough as a criterion. It can be made more specific by looking at reasons for not hurting opponents: ethical principles, encouraging others to participate, enabling participation, winning over opponents and winning over observers.

In the case of nonviolent action, these different reasons all align, pretty closely, in the stricture to avoid physical violence against opponents. However, in other domains, such as conversations, the different reasons may or may not align in a common boundary. This needs to be explored on a case-by-case basis.

Participation

Many methods of nonviolent action, such as boycotts and rallies, allow nearly anyone to join in. In a nonviolent campaign in which various different methods are used, there are bound to be several ways to participate.

The key here is direct participation. People can be part of the action, not just spectators at the sidelines, like in a sporting event.

Compare this to armed struggle. Only some people are capable of front-line fighting, and ranks are usually filled with young fit men. Others can play supporting roles, such as being cooks, accountants or weapons manufacturers.

Much conventional political action is oriented to electoral politics, especially getting people elected and influencing politicians. Only the politicians and their paid staff are fully-fledged participants. Everyone else has an auxiliary role, either promoting or supporting or opposing politicians.

Why is participation important? At a psychological level, being directly involved can be empowering. It offers a sense of meaning, of commitment, of solidarity for a cause. Politicians and soldiers gain this — and so do

nonviolent activists. In terms of effectiveness, greater participation enables a greater impact.

Greater participation, and greater equality in participation, promotes greater equality in the wider movement. If only a segment of the population can join an activity, this exclusiveness can be the basis for power over others.

In armies, there is limited participation and a rigid line of command. In electoral politics, only a few people become politicians. In nonviolent action, the differences in status between frontline participants and supporters, in the rear so to speak, are smaller. In many types of nonviolent action, it is far easier to become a participant.

The feature “participation possible by all” thus has two elements. One is participation in terms of being involved. The other is fostering power equality among participants. In other words, participation is possible, and new participants enter as closely as possible as equal members.

Obviously there are limits to equality. Some activists have a lot of experience, knowledge and strategic acumen, and hence deserve to be heard. The point is not that the opinions of every participant are equally well informed or astute, but that there is less formal subordination. In an army, commanders are supposed to be obeyed on the basis of their rank, not their knowledge. In a parliament, the votes of parliamentarians are counted — and no one else’s views are directly taken into account.

This suggests that the feature of participation can be divided into two: involvement and equality.

Voluntary participation

This seems obvious enough: no one has to participate in nonviolent action. This separates nonviolent methods (as used so far) from military conscription and from coerced involvement in guerrilla struggles.

Although force is not used to compel people to join nonviolent actions, there can be very strong peer pressure. Some types of peer pressure seem benign, as when a person thinks, “everyone else is going to the rally — including my friends — so I don’t want to miss out.” Some peer pressure has other motivations: “my boss refuses to buy this product, so I’d better not either, otherwise my job might be at risk.” Some peer pressure is more pointed, and has coercive elements, such as shaming and exclusion: “I’d better go to the rally, because otherwise my friends won’t speak to me, or will continually taunt me.”

Few advocates of nonviolent action favour compulsion. After all, forcing someone to join a nonviolent movement seems to contradict the principles of nonviolence itself. It could be argued that it is legitimate to use pressure, so long as it is nonviolent, but perhaps a more pressing question is whether compulsion is ever a good idea. It may alienate people more than it aids the movement.

Setting aside these debates, the point here is that voluntary participation is a generally accepted feature of nonviolent struggles, with no one supporting conscription backed by force. This can be transported into other domains, such as scientific controversies, by the admoni-

tion that tactics should not involve compulsion — at least not damaging forms of compulsion. It is reasonable to expect that peer pressure will play a role, but not too much more.

Fairness

When methods are seen as unfair, they are not productive. One way to assess whether people see a method as fair is the absence of backfire.

This feature is simple and powerful. It is simple to apply: if most people think an action is reasonable, legitimate, acceptable or justified, then more people will be willing to join in, and fewer will become active opponents. It is powerful because it can be applied to many domains.

Imagine a group of protesters at a rally, in a regime where protest is treated harshly. If many people oppose the regime, the protest will be seen as reasonable. If police brutally beat the protesters, this will be seen as too harsh. Then suppose a group of protesters detonate a huge bomb, killing hundreds of government officials and some bystanders. This is less likely to be seen as fair — the bombing may result in a backlash against the bombers, and against the peaceful protesters too.

The basic idea here is to use methods that are strong enough to make a difference, but not so strong that they increase support for the opponent or give the opponent a pretext for harsh measures. This idea is relevant in other domains.

Imagine you are having a conversation with your boss, with some others listening. If the conversation is balanced and polite, then it can be counterproductive to do something so apparently minor as raising your voice. Swearing or sneering might also be counterproductive. On the other hand, if you continue to calmly present your views, and your boss starts shouting, then you gain the advantage: sympathy is likely to be with you rather than your boss.

The basic idea of perceived fairness is straightforward, but its application to different domains can involve complexities. The case studies will be useful to seeing how this criterion operates in practice.

Prefiguration

Prefiguration is a fancy word meaning that the way you do something is compatible with the goal you're trying to achieve. If you want a world without war, then don't wage a war to achieve it — instead, use peaceful means. If you want to build a harmonious workplace, don't do it by yelling abuse.

Instead of using the word “prefiguration,” it's possible to talk of the means reflecting the ends or the means embodying the ends. Other expressions are “living the alternative” and “living the revolution.” If the alternative involves ecological sustainability, then living the alternative means having a sustainable lifestyle now.

Nonviolent action is commonly seen as prefiguring a world without organised violence. If the goal is a world

without war, then nonviolent action is a compatible way of pursuing it.

A different philosophy is encapsulated by the motto “the ends justify the means.” Some revolutionaries believe armed struggle, and perhaps a lot of killing and suffering, is a necessary prerequisite to overthrowing capitalism and creating a less exploitative society.

There are several justifications for prefiguration. One is moral: it is hypocritical to say one thing and do another, for example calling for peace while waging war. Another is practical: incorporating the ends in the means enables people to learn what it's like to live in their desired future. Living the alternative can provide an example to others. It can be a way of reminding oneself and others about their goals. It can be a symbol of commitment and a source of pride.

On the other hand, the principle of prefiguration, if applied too rigidly, can become a straitjacket. An environmentalist can be castigated for driving a car or taking a long-distance flight. A pro-democracy activist can be chastised for acting without full consultation. Applying the principle of prefiguration too strictly can mean not recognising the constraints of the world we live in. There are many people who desire a world that is more cooperative and in which human needs are a greater priority than profit. “Living the revolution” might be interpreted as avoiding capitalist relationships, but this is unrealistic: to survive in a market society, nearly everyone seeks paid employment or buys goods.

In studies of nonviolent action, there is often a contrast drawn between “principled nonviolence” and

pragmatic nonviolence.” Principled nonviolence is in the tradition of Gandhi: not hurting opponents is a moral imperative. Pragmatic nonviolence is most associated with Gene Sharp: nonviolent action is used because it is more effective than violence or conventional political action. Prefiguration is often a feature of principled nonviolence, in which the emphasis is on foreshadowing the desired future. Pragmatic nonviolence is more instrumental: nonviolent action is a means to an end — but in many cases it is possible to ensure that the means reflect the ends.

The implication is that prefiguration is desirable but seldom essential or fully achievable. In looking at struggles outside the traditional arenas for nonviolent action, it can be helpful to examine the meaning of prefiguration and see how it applies to struggles.

Skilful use

To be effective, nonviolent action needs to be carried out capably. In an ongoing campaign, this includes choosing the most appropriate action, picking a suitable time and place, preparing for action carefully, taking into account the strategic situation, carrying out the action effectively and learning lessons from what happened. At the level of strategy, it includes setting up organisational and communication infrastructure, choosing suitable goals, liaising with potential allies, taking into account moves by opponents, protecting against attack and designing campaigns. What this means, in brief, is doing everything concerning nonviolent action as effectively as possible.

Consider other sorts of actions, like election campaigning or military manoeuvres. In elections, choosing the most suitable candidate and running persuasive advertisements are important. In wars, choosing the right tactics and carrying them out well are important. This is obvious enough, but it is worth remembering that the same applies to nonviolent action. A boycott or vigil does not work automatically: to be effective, choices, preparations and execution are vital. For the sake of brevity, I refer to these dimensions with the expression “skilful use.”

Being skilled in taking action is relevant in other domains. Whether in a conversation or a policy debate, a method isn’t likely to work if it is the wrong method, or the right method but used at the wrong time, or simply executed poorly. When trying out new techniques, it can be worth remembering the importance of planning and skills. A new technique is not likely to be effective unless it is used well, and it usually takes practice and experience to become adept at using it.

Features of nonviolent action potentially relevant to other arenas

Feature	Description	Examples fitting description	Examples <i>not</i> fitting description
Non-standard	Actions are not routine or authorised.	Workplace occupations, alternative government	Voting, lobbying
Limited harm	Opponents are not physically harmed.	Vigils, strikes, etc.	Shootings, bombings, hostage-taking
Participation	Many people are able to be involved in an action.	Rallies, boycotts, etc.	Tree-sitting, blockading large vessels using small craft
Voluntary participation	No one is forced or bribed to join actions.	Sit-ins, boycotts, etc.	Paid attendance at rallies
Fairness	Actions seem fair to most observers.	Vigils, strikes, etc.	Reprisals, abuse, humiliation, violence
Prefiguration	Goals are incorporated in methods used to achieve them.	Planting a community garden; consensus decision-making at a protest	Using violence to advocate for peace; high-level diplomacy to promote participatory democracy
Skilful use	Activists develop skills in planning, taking action.	Preparation and practice for nonviolent action	Unprepared actions; ignoring lessons from previous actions

Conclusion

Nonviolent action can be remarkably effective in its core domain of unarmed citizen struggle against an armed opponent, typically a government. The aim here is to identify the key features of nonviolent action that can be transported to other domains, such as scientific controversies and interpersonal interactions, in which there is little or no physical violence.

The features identified in this chapter are non-standard action, limited harm, participation, voluntary participation, fairness, prefiguration and skilful use. None of these is straightforward. With a bit of explanation, they sound clear enough, but applying them to new domains is bound to involve a fair bit of interpretation and creativity. Spelling out these features is the beginning of the investigation rather than the conclusion.

Have all key features been identified? Probably not. Some key features are so taken for granted among nonviolent activists and scholars that they are overlooked or not thought to be important, but they may turn out to be important in other domains.

There is no guarantee that analogues to nonviolent action will be equally effective in other domains. That is something to be determined empirically, namely by seeing what methods are actually effective and how they relate to the features identified here.