

CLASSIC BOOK REVIEW

Gene Sharp; *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*

Gene Sharp's monumental *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, published in 1973, was pioneering in several ways. It presented a theory for understanding the effectiveness of nonviolent action. It documented 198 methods of nonviolent action, classifying them into types and subtypes. And it presented a framework for understanding how major nonviolent campaigns proceed.

The book is the central statement of an approach to nonviolent action based on its effectiveness rather than its ethics. This approach is sometimes called pragmatic, in contrast to the Gandhian approach, called principled, though the terms are not ideal and the contrast is not as clear as sometimes stated.

I first looked at *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in 1977 and went through it thoroughly in 1979, when it was available as a single hardbound, 900+ page volume. These days it is most commonly available as three paperbacks, each containing one of the three parts of the book.

The Politics of Nonviolent Action was important for me. At the time, I was searching for a model of an alternative society without government, in which people directly made decisions about how their lives should be organised. But how could such a society exist in the face of aggression, in particular in the face of military attack? Arming the people sounds nice in principle but is implausible as a means of defence in an age of tanks and missiles, not to mention nuclear weapons. Sharp's writing helped convince me that communities could defend themselves against aggression without setting up their own military systems.

These days, few people sit down to read *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in full. Indeed, many younger people will only read what is available online, and so they see a list of 198 methods of nonviolent action, but no details, no rationale, no theory and nothing about part

three of Sharp's book, "The dynamics of nonviolent action."

Sharp spent many years researching the book. It began as his PhD thesis, but was only published five years later. Today, it is rare for a scholar to produce pathbreaking work without publishing articles along the way. Publishing books that take years to complete is not a promising road to an academic career. Sharp, though, was not writing the book as a means to a career, but rather as a contribution to human betterment.

Sharp initially had been a follower of Gandhi's ideas but, partially in reaction to dogmatic pacifists who envisaged a harmonious world without conflict, excised the moral dimension from his writing. There is a morality implicit in nonviolence, in that no physical violence is used against opponents, but for Sharp this was justified entirely on the basis that nonviolent action is more effective.

Theory

Part one, on the theory underlying nonviolent action, is by far the briefest of the three parts of the book. It has also received the most critical attention.

Sharp distinguished between two main understandings of power. The first is the monolithic picture, in which power is held by those in higher positions and exercised by them. This was the most common view among scholars at the time Sharp was writing, and remains a common implicit view among members of the public. The second picture is the consent theory of power: those in positions of authority have power only so far as subordinates and subjects grant it to them.

The consent theory of power is ideal for appreciating how nonviolent action can succeed against rulers. If the ruler's power is based on the acquiescence or cooperation of subjects (including functionaries, especially police and the military), then all that is required to bring down the ruler is to cease cooperating. Indeed, nearly all forms of nonviolent action can be conceptualised as noncooperation.

Just at the time that Sharp was writing *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, social movements and scholars were starting to rethink power. The student movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement and others were resurgent, and their efforts—almost entirely

without armed struggle—hardly made sense unless the people had power, not just rulers. Meanwhile, scholars attributed this emerging sensibility to other scholars, most notably Michel Foucault. However, Sharp seems to have developed his approach to power independently of the latest social movements, and he does not cite Foucault. It is possible to see Sharp's articulation of the consent theory of power as stimulated by the need to explain the success of the numerous nonviolent struggles he had studied.

Would it have made any difference if Sharp had omitted part one, and *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* had included only the (massive) parts on methods and dynamics? The book is filled with innumerable examples showing the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns, so perhaps no theory was required. After all, a truly pragmatic approach is to say, "Look, it works" and leave it to others to figure out why. One advantage of a theoretical foundation is to provide a warrant or rationale for nonviolent action. Another is to provide guidance when applying methods and developing strategy.

Methods

Part two of the book is on methods of nonviolent action. Sharp had collected examples of different methods, reaching a total of 198, showing the great diversity of types of action possible. Many activists were familiar with a few forms of protest, such as rallies, marches and sit-ins, but the usual repertoire is limited. That Sharp catalogued so many methods was inspirational in itself. The figure 198 was often quoted in accounts of his work, leading to comments such as "Wow, I never knew there were no many methods," even though few ever looked at the full list.

Sharp, in presenting 198 methods, classified them into categories. At the highest level were six types, in chapters 3 through 8: nonviolent protest and persuasion; social noncooperation; economic noncooperation (boycotts); economic noncooperation (strikes); political noncooperation; and nonviolent intervention. The various types of noncooperation are commonly grouped together, so there are three main types: protest/persuasion; noncooperation; and intervention. Each type contains subtypes. For example, nonviolent intervention is broken down into psychological, physical, social, economic and political

forms of intervention. Then each subtype has several methods. "Social intervention" includes establishing new social patterns (for example, interracial marriage when this is taboo), overloading of facilities (for example, hospital staff, protesting pay policies, admitting more patients than can be handled), stall-in (conducting business transactions, for example in a bank, as slowly as possible), speak-in (interrupting a meeting to express viewpoints), guerrilla theatre, alternative social institutions and alternative communication systems.

In some cases, the distinctions between methods seem unimportant. For example, under physical intervention Sharp lists sit-in, stand-in, ride-in, wade-in, mill-in and pray-in, all of which might have been grouped into a single method. By making these distinctions, Sharp was acknowledging methods actually used.

Sharp at the time said that he had not documented all methods and that additional methods would be used in the future. The emergence of the Internet has seen dozens of new methods of nonviolent action. I observed one myself. During an industrial dispute at the University of Wollongong in the early years of the Internet, union leaders called for everyone to email 1 megabyte files (quite large back then) at a nominated time. Within a few seconds, the university's network was totally clogged. Actually, Sharp had foreshadowed this method, mentioning in a footnote (page 445, note 301) some additional methods he had not included, one of which was "clogging a telephone switchboard with masses of calls."

However, innovation in methods of struggle seems rare. Despite the existence of 198 methods often being cited, the usual activist repertoire often remains limited, with mass rallies and labour strikes being most prominent, for example in the colour revolutions. Large rallies often generate media coverage. Although Sharp recognised the role of the media, his work predated the enormous expansion in media studies and much of the writing showing how media coverage is shaped by powerful interests even in countries without repressive governments.

Dynamics

Some have criticised Sharp's approach for being based on methods and hence ignoring the social, political and economic context. In part this

criticism reflects a neglect of part three of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, titled “The dynamics of nonviolent action.” Although it is the lengthiest part of the book, it has received the least attention even though it contains some of the most useful insights.

In part three, Sharp presents a series of elements in a major nonviolent campaign. These he calls—as the titles to chapters 9 through 14—laying the groundwork for nonviolent action, challenge brings repression, solidarity and discipline to fight repression, political jiu-jitsu, three ways success may be achieved, and the redistribution of power. Sharp, having looked at dozens of nonviolent campaigns, especially successful ones, observed a typical pattern, and these became the elements in his “dynamics.”

I refer to “elements” in a nonviolent campaign. They might also be called “stages,” because there is a logical sequence from laying the groundwork to the redistribution of power. However, “solidarity and discipline to fight repression” is less a stage than a requirement for success, political jiu-jitsu is not always present in campaigns, and “three ways success may be achieved” represents a branching of paths. (The three ways are conversion, accommodation and nonviolent coercion. Later, Sharp (2005) added a fourth way: disintegration, in which the ruler’s regime collapses.)

In terms of research methodology, Sharp can be considered to have used an approach called grounded theory, which involves looking at the data and then developing a framework, from the bottom up, to explain the data. Although Sharp did not refer explicitly to grounded theory, which was being articulated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) around the time he was working on *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, he does describe his approach as inductive, namely going from evidence to theory. The fact that the elements of the “dynamics” are only partly in the form of stages might be considered to reflect Sharp’s adherence to the data, with less concern about fitting campaigns into a preconceived template.

For each element in the “dynamics,” Sharp gives extended examples, often from the same campaigns, for example the US civil rights movement. The elements are not highly theorised. In some chapters, Sharp gives a brief introduction and then provides example after example. Though perhaps unsatisfying for the theoretically minded reader, this reflect

Sharp's immersion in the data and his inductive approach.

What is surprising is how seldom this approach to studying campaigns has been used. For years I have read studies of social movements, looking for frameworks that give guidance for activists who are thinking strategically, with a bigger picture than particular tactics. Aside from Sharp's dynamics, I have discovered only one other really useful framework: Bill Moyer's *Movement Action Plan*, which lays out eight stages in the typical trajectory of a social movement, plus four categories for activist roles and their relationship to the stages (Moyer et al., 2001). Aside from the *Movement Action Plan* and Sharp's dynamics, there seem to be few grounded-theory campaign frameworks oriented to activists. George Lakey's (1973) framework is also noteworthy, though it is for nonviolent revolution rather than a typical campaign.

Sharp did not rely entirely on the data for developing his dynamics framework. One element, "political jiu-jitsu"—the increase in support a movement sometimes obtains when nonviolent protesters are physically attacked—is an expansion and modification of "moral jiu-jitsu," formulated by Richard Gregg in the 1930s.

Chapter 9, "Laying the groundwork for nonviolent action," is an extended discussion of nonviolent tactics and strategy, including commentary on topics such as risk, casting off fear, leadership, secrecy and issuing an ultimatum to the opponent. This chapter alone could serve as a primer for campaigners.

Significance

The full package in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* thus includes theory in part one, methods in part two and dynamics in part three. The book is pioneering in terms of original frameworks, but also pioneering in its wealth of empirical material. Sharp provided extensive referencing throughout. Indeed, in reading the book what is striking is how empirical it is. Even in part one, presenting the consent theory of power, Sharp presents many examples. Part two, on methods, might almost be called a catalogue of case studies, and part three, on dynamics, is constructed around lengthier case studies. The amount of case material is so large that Sharp's theoretical contributions can be overshadowed.

In presenting case material, Sharp can be criticised for providing selective accounts. For example, in describing the opposition to the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920, Sharp talks about various methods of nonviolent resistance in Berlin and gives little attention to armed resistance elsewhere. An historian might question many of Sharp's case studies as being incomplete and slanted, as finding what he was looking for rather than providing a full account. This sort of criticism would be reasonable if Sharp had been aspiring to write full and even-handed treatments of events. However, it is unrealistic to expect him to analyse the Kapp putsch in full historical detail, which would take a book on its own. Sharp was instead searching for evidence about nonviolent methods and campaigns, and so can be excused for not always giving the full context.

Reading *The Politics of Nonviolent Action today*, it is worth being aware that there are different readings of many of the events and campaigns Sharp described. This is important so that activists do not imagine that nonviolent action is uncomplicated and neatly distinguished from armed struggle. However, in judging Sharp's writing about nonviolent action, it is important to remember the context: nearly all writing about conflict at the time assumed the superiority of violence. The overwhelming volume of writing was about armed conflict, especially war, and for most historians and others, nonviolent struggle was invisible. Sharp might have made nonviolent campaigns sound neater than was actually the case, but this can be justified by the need to counter the far more one-sided emphasis on violence in conventional history.

Legacy

The Politics of Nonviolent Action has become a standard reference for those writing about nonviolent action, especially scholarly treatments. Indeed, if the book is not cited, this is sometimes an indication that the author is not familiar with literature in the field. Being a classic reference has advantages and disadvantages. Sharp's insights are now more widely recognised in a number of fields. On the other hand, citing Sharp is not a substitute for actually reading Sharp, and it is likely that many who cite *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* only know it second-hand, while careful reading of the text is rare.

This is partly due to Sharp's writing style, which is laborious. Someone looking for a short and sharp summary of key ideas will be frustrated by Sharp's immersion in examples.

I remember talking to activists in the 1970s and 1980s who read some of Sharp's works and were tremendously excited by them. Although his style is not scintillating, his ideas are laid out carefully and systematically. Today, due to a great expansion in writing about nonviolent action, many of Sharp's ideas have been incorporated into common sense in the field, but decades ago this was not the case. The activists entranced by Sharp's work were responding to ideas that were revolutionary in their own way.

Although *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* has received some of the long overdue recognition it deserves, it could be argued that it deserves even more attention, in particular critical attention. One test of the impact of an original contribution is the interest others take in criticising, modifying, developing and applying the ideas. While there have been worthwhile efforts to add to Sharp's catalogue of methods, especially to include online actions, it seems that no one has attempted to rethink Sharp's principal categories, including the classification of methods as protest and persuasion, noncooperation and intervention. For example, the intervention category includes seemingly disparate types of action, and it might make sense to set up a separate category of constructive actions.

A different sort of extension of Sharp's work is to better theorise the role of communication and the media. Sharp recognised the importance of these; in dictatorships, after all, the mass media are fully controlled by the regime. Nevertheless, there is much more to say, for example about the roles of propaganda, disinformation, spin-doctoring, astroturfing and other techniques used to manipulate beliefs.

Sharp liked to compile lists of factors, for example about reasons for accepting domination. In an appendix to *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, he provided a "Summary of factors determining the outcome of nonviolent struggles" that listed four factors in the social situation, nine associated with the opponent group, four associated with third parties and 17 associated with the nonviolent group. This list can be a bit frustrating, because with 34 different factors, it's hard to know which ones are more important. On the other hand, Sharp's lists can usefully

provide reminders of the many factors involved, and thus serve as an antidote to thinking caught up in just a few aspects of an issue.

The Politics of Nonviolent Action then and now

In the years immediately after its publication, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* opened a new way of thinking about nonviolence, which had previously been dominated by Gandhian perspectives. Instead of focusing on the ethics of action, Sharp offered an approach that was potentially broader in its appeal. People had been using methods of nonviolent action for centuries, and there had been quite a number of significant campaigns. Sharp provided a different way of thinking about this action, in terms of a pragmatic warrant (the consent theory of power), methods used and trajectories of campaigns.

Sharp was not alone in his understanding of nonviolent action. There had long been a strategic dimension to nonviolence, and Sharp showed this most clearly in his 1979 book *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*. By clearly distinguishing his perspective from Gandhi's, Sharp took nonviolence to activists and researchers who were not enamoured by the emphasis on the moral superiority of nonviolence.

In the decades since the publication of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, there has been a great expansion in the strategic use of nonviolent action, so much so that many of Sharp's ideas have become implicit understandings within social movements. While some revolutionaries remain committed to armed struggle, and debates rage about diversity of tactics, nonviolent action is widely accepted as a standard approach.

In the years while Sharp was writing the book, he was frustrated by the attitude of pacifists who wanted to eliminate conflict and who criticised nonviolent action because it accepted the need to wage conflict. Sharp did not anticipate that this sort of opposition to nonviolent action would die away and be replaced by virulent attacks from left-wing opponents of US imperialism.

Meanwhile, in the academy, the uptake of Sharp's work has been much more tentative. For decades, few scholars outside the small nonviolence research community took any notice of nonviolent action as a serious area for research. This has changed somewhat in recent years,

but Sharp, and nonviolence more generally, remain little appreciated in mainstream disciplines.

Although many of Sharp's ideas have become common currency among activists, few actually spend a great deal of time immersed in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Yet there are some important messages that deserve revisiting. Concerning the consent theory of power, it is possible to raise all sorts of theoretical objections, especially in light of contemporary thinking about power as being pervasive, implicated in all sorts of actions and relationships. Yet despite the theoretical appeal of figures like Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, their frameworks do not provide guidelines for resistance that are tied to specific ways of acting. The consent theory's ruler-subject framework may be simplistic but no other approach has been shown to have such practical value for activists. Thinking again of Sharp as using grounded theory, it might be said that the consent theory of power grows out of empirical studies of nonviolent campaigns. The implication for today's scholars is to undertake their own development of theory grounded in observations of action, aimed at a way of understanding action that serves those who oppose domination.

Although the idea of 198 methods of nonviolent action has become almost a cliché in some circles, its implications still remain to be fully grasped. The key is that there are innumerable ways to undertake action that are neither conventional nor do physical harm to opponents. Activists need to think creatively, as recommended by a number of analysts, and Sharp's methods remain a good starting point. Rather than simply ticking off methods, it is important to understand each one in context: methods need to be chosen and used in the context of skills, opponents and the strategic context. Experienced activists know this intuitively. Yet there remains plenty to learn by looking at Sharp's examples and at new methods that have been documented.

Finally, Sharp's framework called "the dynamics of nonviolent action" remains largely untapped. It would be possible to take each element of the dynamics and carry out a detailed analysis. For example, the first element, "Laying the groundwork," has been given little attention by researchers. It would be possible to examine methods used by rulers to undermine budding opposition (Dobson, 2012) and methods that activists can use to build capacity and resist repression and cooption.

Similar examinations could be undertaken of other elements in the dynamics.

The Politics of Nonviolent Action is deservedly a classic of nonviolence, but it should not be left on a shelf. The greatest tribute to Sharp's pioneering work is to tackle the issues he put forward, building on his ideas, challenging them and adapting them to today's challenges.

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