

The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements

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With a Foreword by Brian Martin



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Foreword

BRIAN MARTIN

Violence gets a good press. In school, children learn about armies and battles. National holidays salute the sacrifices of soldiers. In Hollywood movies, there is plenty of violence, and usually the violence of the good guys triumphs over the violence of the bad guys. Many video games involve fighting or shooting down enemies.

As a result of a cultural emphasis on violence, most people assume that the only way to counter violence is by superior violence, either stronger or smarter. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the US government launched an invasion of Afghanistan, based on the assumption that the way to respond to violence was by using even more violence.

In the United States the glorification of violence is especially strong, complementing a gross double standard. When opponent governments such as Iraq, Iran, or North Korea seek to obtain nuclear weapons, this is cause for massive alarm. Meanwhile, the thousands of US nuclear weapons seldom cause concern because “our” threat to annihilate enemies is for the purposes of defense, whereas “their” weapons are for attack. The US government uses drones to assassinate enemies in foreign countries. If foreign drones assassinated people in the United States, the response can be imagined.

The result of the valorization of violence is that alternatives are assumed ineffectual by comparison. Diplomacy is used regularly to

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resolve disputes, but is seldom lauded in history textbooks, Hollywood films, or videogames.

Then there is another alternative, nonviolent action, which includes rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and a host of other methods of struggle. Nonviolent action is commonly conceived as social, political, or economic action that does not involve physical violence and that is nonstandard. Standard methods of political action include voting and campaigning. Boycotting an election or inauguration is nonstandard and can be a method of nonviolent action.

The term “nonviolent action” is awkward because it refers to a negative and is open to misinterpretation as referring to any action not involving violence. Various alternative terms have been proposed, including *people power*, *civil resistance*, and *satyagraha*, each with its own limitations.

Whatever the word, most people assume violence is always going to be victorious over nonviolent methods. Troops and police can use batons, tear gas, and rifles, if necessary, to quell an unruly crowd. The only scenario for nonviolent action succeeding is assumed to be when those in charge of violence are restrained in their use of it. This might happen in democratic countries, so the thinking goes, but will be hopeless against a seriously repressive government. It is at this point that Hitler is often invoked: nonviolent action wouldn’t work against the Nazis. This is frequently taken as the definitive refutation of nonviolence.

In this context, the possibility that nonviolent action could triumph over well-armed and well-trained opponents is, for many people, inconceivable. That it could work against the Nazis (Semelin 1993) may be dismissed out of hand. That repression might be counterproductive, leading to a greater chance of success for challengers, thus is seen as a paradox.

Part of the problem is that nearly all attention has been on conflicts in which both sides use violence, including war as well as counterterrorism versus terrorism. When the focus is on these sorts of methods, the dynamics of nonviolent struggle are ignored.

History of an Idea

Over the past century, the features of the paradox of repression have gradually been recognized and better understood. The first person to name and try to explain the process was Richard Gregg, a US supporter of organized labor who saw the failure of strike campaigns in the 1920s. He went to India and studied Gandhi's methods. Mohandas Gandhi was the pioneer practitioner of nonviolent action as a strategy for social change. There had been major nonviolent campaigns previously; for example, the struggle by Hungarians against Austrian rulers in the mid-1800s and by the Finns against Russian oppressors from 1898 to 1905. The methods of nonviolent struggle were known, but Gandhi was the one who turned these methods into a conscious strategy. Gandhi rejected the previous name for these methods, *passive resistance* (Huxley 1990), and adopted the term *satyagraha*.

The pinnacle of Gandhi's efforts, the salt satyagraha of 1930, involved a twenty-four-day march to the sea and civil disobedience against the British salt laws by making salt from seawater (Weber 1997). After Gandhi had been arrested and imprisoned, his deputies continued the campaign. In a set piece made famous by the 1982 film *Gandhi*, satyagrahis (activists) calmly walked toward a saltworks. They were met by police who brutally beat them, and then they were carried away while a new group came forward.

The salt satyagraha was the turning point in the Indian struggle for independence, inflaming passions throughout India and triggering great support in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Gregg sought to explain how the struggle had been so powerfully invigorated by activists acquiescing in being cruelly beaten. In his 1934 book *The Power of Nonviolence* he presented the concept of "moral jiu-jitsu." Jiu-jitsu is a martial art in which the force of the opponent is used against them. By analogy, moral jiu-jitsu involves behaving in a way that morally destabilizes the opponent. Gregg (1966) hypothesized that by remaining nonviolent, satyagrahis caused psychological distress among the police who were beating them.

Over half a century later, Gandhian scholar Thomas Weber (1993) looked again at the salt march, traversing the route himself and examining archives about the response of the police. He discovered that the police were not affected in the way Gregg had hypothesized; instead, some of them became enraged by the nonresistance of the satyagrahis and became even more vigorous and cruel in their assaults. However, there was a jiu-jitsu effect that operated through a different medium: print. US press correspondent Webb Miller witnessed the beatings and wrote a moving account that was circulated by United Press and appeared in over a thousand newspapers, as well as reproduced in leaflet form with hundreds of thousands of copies. The brutality of beating unarmed and nonresisting protesters, as recounted by Miller, caused widespread outrage and a surge of international support for the Indian independence struggle.

Gene Sharp is widely acknowledged as the foremost researcher on nonviolent action. His magnum opus is *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, published in 1973. It contains three parts. The first expounds Sharp's concept of power as a relationship, often called the "consent theory of power." The second part presents 198 methods of nonviolent action with documentation of the use of each one. The third and longest part, called "the dynamics of nonviolent action," presents a set of stages or elements in a nonviolent campaign: laying the groundwork, challenge bringing repression, maintaining nonviolent discipline, three potential roads to success, and the redistribution of power.

A key element in Sharp's dynamics framework he calls "political jiu-jitsu." Sharp broadened Gregg's concept of moral jiu-jitsu to include social and political processes, and he gave it a new name (Sharp 1973, 657–703). Political jiu-jitsu occurs when violence against nonviolent actionists is seen as so wrong or disturbing that it causes more people in the "grievance group" to become active, more third parties to become sympathetic, and even some opponents to change their minds or behavior. Sharp documented several cases of political jiu-jitsu, for example during the 1905 Russian revolutionary upsurge following the massacre of protesters on Bloody Sunday. Sharp is careful to say that political jiu-jitsu does not necessarily occur in every nonviolent campaign.

One of the requirements for political jiu-jitsu is maintaining non-violent discipline: in the face of violence by police or soldiers, protesters must refrain from using violence themselves. The reason is so that the violence by authorities is seen to be unfair. When protesters, often under provocation, use violence themselves, it appears to justify the authorities' violence, which is typically far greater.

In the 2000s, I explored political jiu-jitsu further, prompted by noticing that there were many cases in which violence against peaceful protesters did not have a jiu-jitsu effect, such as massacres of civilians by Indonesian troops (Martin, Varney, and Vickers 2001). Why did political jiu-jitsu sometimes occur and sometimes not? This led me to look at methods perpetrators and their supporters could use to reduce the likelihood of popular outrage over an injustice. Five types of methods are commonly used: covering up the action, devaluing the target, reinterpreting the events (by lying, minimizing consequences, blaming others, and reframing), using official channels to give an appearance of justice, and intimidating and rewarding people involved (Martin 2007, 2012).

In the 1930 salt satyagraha, the British rulers used all these methods to reduce outrage from the brutal beatings of nonresisting satyagrahis. For example, they tried to prevent journalist Webb Miller's stories from being transmitted outside India (cover-up), denigrated the protesters (devaluation), claimed there was no brutality by the police and that protesters were faking their injuries (reinterpretation), offered Gandhi an opportunity to negotiate (official channels), and arrested protesters (intimidation). However, in this case these methods were inadequate to prevent a huge reaction to the beatings. It was a case of political jiu-jitsu (Martin 2007, 35–42).

I and others have documented the use of the same five methods in other sorts of injustices, including ones not involving violence or protesters. Examples include censorship (Jansen and Martin 2003), police beatings (Martin 2005), torture (Brooks 2016), bombing (Riddick 2012), and genocide (Martin 2009). To distinguish this model, with its five methods of reducing outrage and its application beyond the violence-versus-nonviolence format, I introduced the term *backfire*.

The framework might also be called the outrage management model (McDonald, Graham, and Martin 2010).

The model provides a guide for targets of injustice: counter each one of the methods for reducing outrage. The five resulting methods for increasing outrage are exposing the action, validating the target, interpreting the events as an injustice, mobilizing support (and avoiding official channels), and resisting intimidation and rewards. Preparing to use these countermethods—for example, to record and broadcast images of possible atrocities—can serve to deter attacks.

The backfire model includes two facets: backfire as a process (including the five methods of reducing outrage and the five countermethods) and backfire as an outcome. Backfire as an outcome is much the same as political jiu-jitsu, except that it can occur with a range of injustices such as censorship, torture, and genocide.

The paradox of repression, addressed in this book, primarily addresses backfire as an outcome. It is basically the same concept as political jiu-jitsu, though with slight differences in emphasis. In Sharp's framework of the dynamics of nonviolent action, political jiu-jitsu is a stage or facet of a nonviolent campaign triggered by violent attacks on protesters, dependent on the protesters not using violence themselves. The concept of the paradox of repression draws attention to the role of repression, suggesting it can be counterproductive, and opening the possibility that this dynamic may occur outside of an organized nonviolent campaign.

More to Learn

Whatever the nuances of the concepts—the paradox of repression, political jiu-jitsu, and backfire as an outcome—there is, no doubt, much to learn about them. This points to another contrast between nonviolent and violent struggle: the enormous discrepancy between the resources put into them, including research. The world's total military spending is well over a trillion dollars per year, a vast sum that covers everything from salaries to missiles. An important component of military budgets is research, including how to make bullets more deadly, how to design nuclear weapons, how to motivate soldiers to

perform more reliably in battle, and how to control the media to serve military goals.

Given hundreds of billions of dollars spent each year on military research, it is perhaps surprising that nonviolent campaigns have been able to topple repressive regimes. These regimes seem to have all the advantages in terms of resources, including troops, weapons, and training. Their challengers are mostly ordinary citizens with minimal training, making use of tools readily available to them, such as phones and the Internet. Imagine that nonviolent campaigners had at their disposal massive resources to prepare the population to resist aggression and repression, with an entirely different set of policies for everything from communications to agriculture. This is a vision of a society organized for nonviolent struggle (Boserup and Mack 1974; Burrowes 1996; Martin 1993; Sharp 1990). Such a society would naturally want to rely on the best available knowledge—including about the paradox of repression.

However, nonviolence researchers are relatively few and receive very little support. There is no funding for major simulations or for developing communication systems designed for civil resistance. In this context, it is vital to learn as much as possible by analyzing previous struggles. This book is one outcome of researchers and activists seeking to develop and articulate insights about nonviolent struggle, with a focus on responding to repression.

The editors wisely decided not to insist on a particular definition of repression or the paradox of repression, thereby ensuring that the conceptual terrain is more open for exploration. Some of the possible areas for further exploration are canvassed by the editors in their chapters and by several of the other contributors. One of the most important contributions of this book is that it points to possibilities for future research and action.

One valuable approach involves databases and statistical analysis of campaigns, both violent and nonviolent. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works* is the exemplar of this approach. It has had a huge impact on the field. In her chapter, Chenoweth points to insights gained from analyzing hundreds of

antiregime campaigns. Undoubtedly there is much more to learn from such studies.

Case studies can provide insights about repression, as shown in the chapters by Williams, Ziada, and Satha-Anand. There are numerous additional case studies worth examining. I would like to see more study of cases of repression that did not backfire, namely when massive violence against activists and civilians did not lead to increased resistance. Unfortunately, there are untold numbers of such cases of nonbackfiring repression.

Then there are different domains. The canonical form of antiregime struggles involves large numbers of people protesting in public places. These at least are the most visible forms of resistance, given that strikes, boycotts, and occupations offer fewer opportunities for stunning visuals. As Beyer and Earl point out in chapter 5, struggles also occur online, and there are interactions between online and offline activism and repression. What other domains might be studied? Struggles inside organizations are one possibility, almost untapped in the nonviolence literature. If members of a dissident group within an army are attacked, could this generate greater support for the dissidents? And how should activists outside the military best interact with insider movements?

Many social analysts would like their studies to be useful to activists. There is much to learn from activists who reflect on their experiences, and on those of others. Lakey and Williams in their chapters approach repression issues from the perspective of activists, each with a special interest in how to overcome fear.

There are many other important insights in this volume, including MacNair's examination of the psychology of repressors (very useful for activists planning to fraternize) and Satha-Anand's surprising suggestion that locking up the leaders of a movement can open the door to more effective resistance.

There is little public information about whether and how authorities think of the possibility that repression can backfire. No doubt there is often an intuitive understanding, which is why they so often try to hide their actions, devalue targets, and frame their actions

positively. But are authorities consciously calculating how best to control movements for greater freedom and justice? According to Baumeister (1997), those who perpetrate horrible actions such as torture and killing usually think they are victims or justified. So it may be unwise to think of repressors as consciously scheming to get their way: they may frame their actions as righteous and necessary, which means they may not act as instrumentally as imagined by resisters.

In their chapter on smart repression, the editors address some of the techniques used by sophisticated rulers. These techniques overlap with the methods of outrage management and with methods described in Dobson's 2012 book *The Dictator's Learning Curve*. The key point is that authorities with the capacity for repression can learn from experience, including experience interacting with nonviolent movements. They can also learn by reading about nonviolent movements and even from reading about the paradox of repression! In the long term, there is bound to be learning on both sides, with no final end point.

The one great advantage held by most nonviolent campaigners is that their methods cause limited harm. So while we might imagine military strategists studying the paradox of repression, they may not gain all that much from writings in the field because their mindsets cannot fully align with their role as repressors. Furthermore, convincing the rank and file to join in will remain a serious challenge for commanders.

Rulers and commanders are bound to make mistakes. As Shultziner shows in his chapter, some instances of repression can be transformative even when the circumstances do not seem all that favorable. If movements are prepared, then the chances of major change from repression are increased. In any case, it is important for activists to understand findings about the paradox of repression to stay one step ahead of their opponents.

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