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# Riots and Resistance: Unarmed Insurrection and Lessons for Nonviolent Struggle

*Brian Martin*

**ABSTRACT**

*Some activists believe that riots should be included in the repertoire for strategic nonviolent action. Even those who disagree can learn from their arguments. This is illustrated by an analysis of Shon Meckfessel's book Nonviolence Ain't What It Used to Be. This analysis suggests the value of routinely giving examples of violence and nonviolence, of understanding the key characteristics of nonviolent action, and understanding the elements of nonviolent campaigns.*

**Key words:** nonviolence, riots, Shon Meckfessel, property damage, violence

## Introduction

SHON MECKFESSEL HAS decades of experience in social movements. Following the emergence of the Occupy movement in 2011, he carried out interviews with many US participants, seeking to understand more about their motivations and understandings. In his 2016 book *Nonviolence Ain't What It Used to Be,* Meckfessel draws on his experience, interviews and wide reading to offer a critical analysis of activism and a vision for the future.[1]

An important part of his book is a critique of nonviolence theory and practice. He questions the validity of the distinction between violence and nonviolence, and thinks that insistence on nonviolence is a divisive and restraining influence on campaigns. He argues in favour of the power of property destruction during riots — as long

as no one is hurt physically — as a means of psychologically challenging the assumed equivalence of lives and property under capitalism. Most of Meckfessel's criticisms are of principled nonviolence, in the Gandhian tradition. He might be considered to be a proponent of strategic or pragmatic nonviolent action, in the tradition of Gene Sharp, with one major exception: he argues that this approach be broadened to include rioting, specifically property damage that does not physically harm people.

Unfortunately, Meckfessel misrepresents some of the writings about nonviolence, ignores the constructive programme, does not look beyond anticapitalist struggles, and fails to provide evidence for the superiority or effectiveness of rioting. Furthermore, his claim that the circumstances in the US that enabled the effectiveness of nonviolence in the past no longer apply is questionable.

Given these shortcomings, nonviolence activists and scholars might well decide to not pay further attention to Meckfessel's ideas. Here, though, I take a different approach, looking at several of Meckfessel's criticisms and misunderstandings as guides to ways that nonviolence advocates might improve their thinking and practice.[2] I look at problems with the term "nonviolence," boundaries between violence and nonviolence, Gene Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action, key characteristics of nonviolence, and anticapitalist nonviolent action.

**The Term "Nonviolence"**

Much of Meckfessel's critique depends on a linguistic analysis of the way that the word "nonviolence" derives its meaning and power. Meckfessel claims that "nonviolence" is always posed against "violence," which remains ill-defined, as something bad that must be rejected, as an "Other." He says that whatever nonviolence advocates might say, nonviolence is linked to "its Other in just the manner that its name attests, as a gesture of disavowal of an indefinable 'violence'." (p. 76).

A considerable portion of *Nonviolence Ain't What It Used to Be* is taken up with this sort of linguistic analysis. To add to his argument, Meckfessel notes that violence has many meanings and that many actions called nonviolent involve violence. Most of his book is about protests and riots, with little attention to strikes and boycotts. In one mention of Gene Sharp's classification of methods of nonviolent action, Meckfessel disputes that strikes are nonviolent, quoting from anarchist writer Voltairine De Cleyre who said, over a century ago, that strikes invariably are accompanied by beating of strike-breakers and destruction of property. In this, Meckfessel prefers not to recognise the difference between, on the one hand, a category ("the strike")

and its key characteristic (noncooperation by withdrawal of labour or some other resource) and, on the other hand, activities that combine a number of actions from different categories.

It would be easy to continue to enumerate questionable aspects of Meckfessel's analysis of the terms "violence" and "nonviolence," but it is important to recognise that he has focused on weaknesses and common misunderstandings associated with the term "nonviolence." He states in the introduction,

> My goal in this book in not to advocate violence or to prescribe nonviolence; it is, in fact, to move beyond the politically obstructive dichotomy of such prescriptions. If I am successful, we will learn to hesitate when we use these words, to pause until we actually have some idea what we're talking about — or perhaps until we've managed to come up with more helpful terminology. (p. 7)

Meckfessel's concerns point to a bigger question: if it isn't called nonviolence, what should it be called? It is worth revisiting discussions about the most suitable name.

When in the early 1900s Gandhi became active in resisting injustice in South Africa, the prevailing term was "passive resistance." Gandhi was unhappy with this term because it had a connotation of passivity, and ran a competition for a new name. The result was "satyagraha," literally meaning truth-force. Gandhi always thought of his campaigns as searches for the truth.[3] In translation, as "truth-force," satyagraha is a rather mysterious term that doesn't give much indication of what is involved practically. Nevertheless, an advantage of "satyagraha" is that it avoids the association with passivity.

Outside India, the term satyagraha never caught on. Instead, the most common expression became nonviolence or nonviolent action. The term "nonviolence" is a label that uses a negative, namely not violence, and thus lacks specificity. Here lies a problem that has plagued the area ever since.

Sharp in his classic work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* delineated nonviolent action in two ways.[4] First, it eschews physical violence against opponents. Second, it is a method of political action that is not part of the conventional repertoire accepted in the prevailing political system. In a country like the US, methods of conventional political action include advertising, lobbying, public meetings and voting. Therefore, in Sharp's framework they do not count as nonviolent action.

In what he called methods of protest and persuasion, Sharp included public speeches, petitions, slogans, prayer and worship,

parades, renunciation of honours and quite a few other methods. Consider one of these, petitions. In a dictatorship, a petition is non-standard; it can be deemed subversive and met with sanctions. However, in many countries, petitions are routine. You can sign one every day online without the slightest risk. Therefore, Sharp would say that in these countries, petitions do not count as nonviolent actions.

Meckfessel cites *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* but, like many others, does not note Sharp's distinction between nonviolent action and conventional politics. Some activists read Sharp's list of 198 methods of nonviolent action and assume that every one of them applies anywhere, regardless of how tolerated or routine it might be.

Sharp's other boundary is between nonviolent and violent action. By violence, Sharp refers to physical violence, but not everyone thinks of violence in this way. Even decades ago, a survey of one thousand US men revealed that over half considered burning a draft card as violence. Indeed, "violence" was a label reserved for actions they opposed; over half believed that police shooting looters was not violence.[5] Just referring to "violence" without a qualifier such as "physical" can be a prescription for confusion.

Since Sharp wrote, the concept of violence has been expanded in various ways. Johan Galtung introduced the concepts of structural violence and cultural violence.[6] These concepts have been enormously productive intellectually but have the disadvantage of making the meaning of "violence" less specific. As Galtung's terms have been taken up by social movements, "violence" has become a catch-all term for anything bad. Additional types include verbal violence and emotional violence. In many contexts, "violence" has become a synonym for "harm."

As "violence" has become more ambiguous, this has affected the connotations of "nonviolence," which were diffuse enough already. If "violence" doesn't refer specifically to physical violence, then it isn't obvious that "nonviolence" refers to the absence of physical violence. Perhaps this was never obvious anyway.

One solution to this terminological confusion is to use a different expression than "nonviolence." After the 1986 overthrow of Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, the term "people power" came into the vocabulary. It is evocative but can be easily misinterpreted. More recently, scholars have adopted "civil resistance." Again, it is open to misinterpretation.

Any single term is almost bound to be inadequate because it attempts to encompass a diverse range of actions. Rather than search for a single term — satyagraha, nonviolent action, people power, civil resistance or whatever — there is a different way to seek clarity: give

examples.

Rather than just using the term "violence" or even "physical violence," examples can be given, such as beatings, shootings, imprisonment, torture, killing and massacres. Similarly, rather than just using the term "nonviolence" — or "civil resistance" or whatever — examples can be given, such as strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, occupations and parallel government. For more precision, specific types could be mentioned, for example religious excommunication, disobedience to social customs, protest emigration, withholding rent, refusal to sell property or pay debts, blacklisting of traders, lightning strike, slowdown strike, calling in sick, election boycotts, civil disobedience, severing diplomatic relations, and disclosing the identities of secret agents.[7] Giving examples has the advantage of making the ideas more vivid. Furthermore, the list of examples can be tailored to the audience and context. In places where petitions and rallies are prohibited, these could be included among the examples, but omitted in places where these are routine methods of political action. The adjective "illegal" can help sometimes, for example in distinguishing illegal rallies from legal ones. Legal rallies, if they are small and frequent, might be considered conventional politics whereas illegal rallies, if police try to shut them down, would be considered non-conventional, and thus in the category of nonviolent action, or whatever term is used.

The point is to clarify the meaning of words. It is still all right to use generic words like nonviolence, as long as audiences know what they refer to.

**Boundaries**

Meckfessel throws doubt on the distinction between violence and nonviolence by questioning both the theory and practice of nonviolent action. Yet he sets up his own preferred boundary between what is acceptable or effective action and what isn't. He supports "noninjurious" anticapitalist violence, meaning harm to physical objects without physical harm to humans. His support for destroying property is restricted to the property of large corporations, for example smashing windows of banks. The rationale is that this is psychologically liberating for rioters by throwing into question the capitalist equivalence between property and humans.

Meckfessel recognises that harming humans can be counterproductive. He cites an example: in Greece in 2010, three employees died when a bank was set on fire. This consequence of rioting totally discredited the movement, bringing action to a halt. As Meckfessel says, "… the movement of numerous millions effectively demobilized in shame over the deaths, however accidental." (p. 61).

Meckfessel thus seemingly agrees with the activists he criticises about the importance of a boundary between actions that are acceptable or wise and those that are not. The question is where to draw the line.

The important point here is that the line or boundary may be somewhat arbitrary yet quite valuable for ensuring that actions do not become counterproductive. Meckfessel's preferred boundary, between injury-causing and non-injury-causing, is precarious because rioting so easily slips over the boundary, as the Greek example shows. Throwing objects at police is risky if one of them might seriously injure an officer. Even breaking windows has a risk of hurting people. When drawing a boundary, it might be worth thinking in terms of a precautionary principle: make a choice that minimises the risks of people going beyond the line.

Meckfessel does not mention agents provocateurs, who are police or people paid by the police who pretend to be protesters, join action groups and, in many cases, encourage the use of violence. Agents provocateurs have been used by authorities in many countries for a long time.[8] Their aims can include collecting information and sowing discord in group. In some cases, they seek to discredit protesters by encouraging violence. This should be recognised as a warning: whatever infiltrators are recommending is probably a bad idea. There is no known instance in which undercover police agents have advocated that campaigners maintain nonviolent discipline.[9]

In the nonviolence tradition, property destruction has always been at the boundary. This includes sabotage in workplaces: some workers in Nazi factories used low-key destruction of equipment to slow production. Other opponents of the Nazis blew up railway tracks, a much more obvious form of resistance, and one that could possibly harm crew or passengers on trains. In retaliation for such actions, Nazis took severe reprisals against local people.

The implication is that boundaries can be worthwhile even if they are arbitrary to some extent. In choosing actions, it is worth considering the reaction of authorities and the general public.

### The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

In part 3 of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Gene Sharp presents what he calls the "dynamics of nonviolent action." Drawing from his study of numerous campaigns, Sharp inferred a set of stages or facets that commonly occur. Sharp labels these stages 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.[10] For each stage, he provides numerous examples.

One of Sharp's stages is political jiu-jitsu, a process that sometimes occurs when police or troops assault nonviolent protesters. A classic example is when in 1960 South African police opened fire on protesters in the town of Sharpeville, killing perhaps a hundred of them, many shot in the back while running away.[11]

Sharp says that an attack like that in Sharpeville, one that is widely seen as unfair, can potentially trigger changes in thought and action in three groups. First is the grievance group, those people in sympathy with the protesters. In the case of Sharpeville, the grievance group was the black population in South Africa. Second is people not directly involved in the conflict. In relation to Sharpeville, most international audiences were in this category, as were some whites in South Africa. Third is the opponent group. Concerning Sharpeville, the opponents were the South African police and government. Sharp said that in cases of political jiu-jitsu, an act that is seen as unfair can mobilise greater action within the grievance group, trigger concern and involvement among non-involved parties and occasionally even sway some opponents. In the case of Sharpeville, the most important effect was a shift in perception among international audiences. At the time, the South African government was seen as legitimate and democratic, a valued member of the international community. Sharpeville was the trigger for a reassessment that eventually turned South Africa into a pariah state.[12]

Meckfessel comments on political jiu-jitsu. He says it is supposed to happen in every nonviolent campaign, whereas Sharp says it sometimes does and sometimes doesn't. Meckfessel claims that political jiu-jitsu depends on the mass media reporting on events. Sharp never made this claim. The role of the media is worth examining in more detail.

In a number of cases of political jiu-jitsu, the media has played an important role, but not quite in the way Meckfessel suggests. After the Sharpeville massacre, there was no coverage in the South African media. However, there were some foreign journalists present at Sharpeville; their reports and photos made front-page news internationally. In the case of the beating of satyagrahis during the 1930 salt march in India, there was no coverage in India itself because the press was controlled by the British colonial rulers. The beatings became international news due to stories written by western journalist Webb Miller, who was able to get them past British censors. Furthermore, much of the jiu-jitsu effect was due to supporters of the Indian independence movement in Britain, the US and elsewhere who reproduced and distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of Miller's stories.[13]

Meckfessel claims that US mass media are now less receptive to stories that might trigger political jiu-jitsu. It is true that US mass media seldom question fundamental assumptions about the political and economic system, as argued by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, among others.[14] But political jiu-jitsu does not depend on mass media reporting, and social media now provide an alternative. The killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on 25 May 2020 offers a vivid example. Floyd was not a protester nor part of a campaign, so this was not a case of political jiu-jitsu, but the same processes were involved: public outrage over an injustice leading to a tremendous burst of support for the movement whose grievances were encapsulated by the single event. Outrage was triggered by the posting online of a video of the final minutes of Floyd's life; mass media coverage followed.

One of Meckfessel's main arguments in favour of rioting is that destroying the property of large corporations enables collective empowerment, in other words a process of psychological, social and political liberation. Participation in nonviolent actions can provide the same sort of empowerment.[15] Meckfessel might be said to be arguing that property damage and clashes with police are compatible with Sharp's observations of empowerment.

As noted earlier, supporting property destruction but without physical harm to humans is a precarious boundary, because thrown bricks or burning buildings can so easily hurt people. There are other ways to challenge capitalist property relations with less risk to people's bodies. One option is to challenge so-called intellectual property such as copyright and patents. Several forms of intellectual property are a restraint on trade and thus irrational even within the logic of the market, and so are a prime target for resistance.[16] Whether resistance to intellectual property would be as psychologically liberating as breaking bank windows is unknown, but it would allow greater participation.

Though *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* was published nearly half a century ago, activists can still learn from it. Sharp's "dynamics of nonviolent action" in part three of the book remains valuable for understanding the features of campaigns.[17]

**Key Characteristics**

Another way to approach nonviolence is to understand and appreciate its key characteristics. It can be asked, what do strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, alternative government and other such methods have in common? Some possible key characteristics include being non-standard methods of political action, causing limited harm, allowing wide participation,

being fair, incorporating ends in means, and requiring skilful use.[18] Compare, for the sake of argument, boycotts and riots by a few of these criteria.

Both boycotts and riots are non-standard forms of political action: unlike voting or lobbying, they are not part of the official repertoire of citizen participation. The issue of harm has already been canvassed: both boycotts and riots (assumed to be noninjurious) avoid physical harm to humans, while they differ in that riots cause damage to physical objects.

Next consider participation. Anyone can participate in a boycott: women, men, children, elderly and people with disabilities. In contrast, rioting requires a certain degree of physical capacity just to break a window. In practice, most of those joining riots seek to avoid arrest, in which case they need to be able to run. Another factor is the level of perceived risk: due to the danger of police aggression, many people avoid participating. The result is pretty much as observed: most members of black blocs that cause property damage seem to be young fit men.[19] Not coincidentally, this demographic is much the same as the police and military. In comparison to boycotting, rioting in practice discourages participation by several segments of the population.

Another feature of effective nonviolent action is skilful use of methods. Prior to the sit-ins at Nashville, Tennessee in 1960, when Blacks sat at lunch counters and, when refused service, remained in their seats despite verbal abuse and physical harassment, they spent months in training. In many nonviolent campaigns, it is considered important that participants gain some knowledge and skills beforehand, in what is called nonviolent action training. Soldiers receive extensive training before entering combat, so it makes sense that activists also undertake training to become more effective.[20] This is especially important when opponents, such as police and government officials, develop more sophisticated methods of quelling protest.

What would training for rioting look like? Might it include practice in throwing stones to cause damage to property while avoiding injury to people? Might it include practice in dealing with tear gas canisters? In hand-to-hand fighting with police? In evading arrest? Training in rioting might sound ridiculous because riots are widely assumed to be spontaneous displays of popular rage yet, to be effective as a means of social change, training is vital, especially considering that police receive training and learn from experience.

In summary, it can be useful to identify the key characteristics of successful nonviolent action — or social action more generally — and then use them to judge particular actions. A task for those who support Meckfessel's view would be to identify the key characteristics of

successful rioting. It is unlikely that widespread participation or prefiguration would be among them.

**Nonviolence and Capitalism**

Meckfessel's focus is on protest action against capitalism. In the history of nonviolent action, there are plenty of examples of anti-capitalist campaigns. Gandhi's constructive programme, including for example spinning cotton to produce khadi, was in support of a vision of an economic system built around serving human needs rather than driven by profit. Sharp's methods of nonviolent action include dozens of types of economic noncooperation and labour strikes. The labour movement has a long history of workers' action, most of which has relied on methods in the nonviolence repertoire.

In this context, Meckfessel's focus on rioting, in particular on public destruction of corporate property, looks peculiar as a path to challenge capitalism and build alternatives to it. There are other long-established anti-capitalist methods of struggle, including local money systems, community exchange schemes, green bans and workers' control.[21]

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that nonviolence writers and campaigners have given far more attention to challenging political authoritarianism than to challenging oppressive economic systems. In this regard, riots might be a distraction. What is needed is more thought and action to promote alternatives to capitalism.[22]

**Conclusion**

As nonviolent campaigning becomes more widely used, it is understandable that it is criticised. This was true in the 1920s, when Gandhi's approach attracted fierce criticism from Marxists. It remains true in the 2020s. The question is, what is the best way to respond to criticisms of the standard formulations of nonviolent action?

One option is to counter them, showing why they are wrong or misguided. Another is simply to ignore them and proceed unperturbed. Each of these options may be appropriate, depending on the circumstances. Here I have suggested a different option: examining criticisms and seeking to learn from them how to make nonviolent campaigning more effective. There are quite a few critiques of nonviolence to which this learning approach could be applied.[23]

Shon Meckfessel's book *Nonviolence Ain't What It Used to Be* criticises principled nonviolence, especially that associated with Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., arguing that in the US this century, rioting should be added to the activist repertoire, as long as it only damages property and not people. Whatever judgement is made about his arguments, they can be used to sharpen understanding and presentation of ideas about nonviolence.

One lesson from Meckfessel's treatment is, when referring to violence or nonviolence, it is useful to give examples. In particular, it can be helpful to refer to strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and other methods of noncooperation and nonviolent intervention, to counter the common identification of nonviolent action with rallies. Another thing to be learned by studying Meckfessel's arguments is the value of a greater understanding of the dynamics of nonviolent action, namely the typical features of nonviolent campaigns, including political jiu-jitsu.

Finally, it is possible to agree with Meckfessel that it is important to maintain dialogue with those who disagree with the standard approach to nonviolence. This is in the spirit of Gandhi's quest for the truth. No one yet has the final answer. The implication is that it is worth combining vigorous advocacy for our preferred approaches with a willingness to listen to those with different ideas.

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## Notes and References

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2. This same approach might be applied to other writings about riots and civil resistance such as Benjamin S. Case, "Riots as civil resistance: rethinking the dynamics of 'nonviolent' struggle," *Journal of Resistance Studies*, 4 (1), 2018, pp. 9–44, to which there was a response by Craig S. Brown, "'Riots' during the 2010/11 Tunisian revolution: a response to Case's article in JRS Vol.4 Number 1," *Journal of Resistance Studies*, 4 (2), 2018, pp. 112–131.
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6. See for example Johan Galtung, *The True Worlds: A Transnational Perspective* (New York: Free Press, 1980).
7. These examples are taken from Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Part 2.

8. There is a limited amount of research about this. See for example Andrew Karmen, "Agents provocateurs in the contemporary U.S. leftist movement," in Charles E. Reasons (ed.), *The Criminologist: Crime and the Criminal* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear, 1974); Gary T. Marx, "Thoughts on a neglected category of social movement participant: the agent provocateur and the informant," *American Journal of Sociology,* 80 (2), 1974, pp. 402–442. The best source on infiltration of social movements is Eveline Lubbers, *Secret Manoeuvres in the Dark: Corporate and Police Spying on Activists* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).
9. Steve Chase makes some astute comments in "Let's get real: facing up to the agent provocateur problem," International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, *Minds of the Movement,* 18 July 2017, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/lets-get-real-facing-agent-provocateur-problem/: "There is simply no documented case that I know of where a paid undercover government or corporate agent has encouraged activists to engage in strategic civil resistance tactics and maintain their nonviolent discipline doing it. … The powerholders that hire agents provocateurs know that undermining a movement's nonviolent discipline, and encouraging the kinds of tactics also advocated by some wellmeaning but strategically challenged activists, makes movements easier to defeat."
10. In 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), the names of the elements in Sharp's dynamics are somewhat different and there are four, rather than three, ways to achieve success.
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*Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2001).
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**BRIAN MARTIN is emeritus professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Email: bmartin@uow.edu.au; Web: http://www.bmartin.cc/**

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