

Agents of Change and Nonviolent Action*

Nonviolent action is a way for ordinary people to fight for their rights, freedom, and justice. It is frequently associated with moral or ethical nonviolence, but I will address it here as a distinct phenomenon, separate from any moral or ethical underpinnings, to expand on how it works as a pragmatic way to exert leverage in a conflict.

Nonviolent action is based on the insight that power in a society is ultimately derived from people's consent and obedience. In contrast, the prevailing view is that power in a society is inherently based on whoever has concentrated wealth and the greatest capacity for violence. But just as the economy is a subsystem of the biosphere—and therefore is ultimately governed by the laws of the biosphere—so too, systems of power that are seemingly based on violence and money are actually subsystems of thousands or millions of people's broader behavior and obedience patterns. If those people shift their loyalties, behavior, and obedience, the balance of power in a society, and in the world, shifts. Simply put, if people do not obey, then rulers or corporations cannot rule.

Nonviolent action, therefore, wields power by creating shifts in people's loyalties, behavior and obedience patterns at a collective level. This can happen dramatically, for example as it did at moments during the Indian Independence Struggle, the US Civil Rights Movement, various labor struggles (i.e. the United Farm Workers movement in the mid-late 1960s), and the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos (1986), Augusto Pinochet (1988), Apartheid in South Africa (1980s-90s), Slobodan Milosevic (2000), and the authoritarian system in Ukraine (2004). Or, shifts can happen more subtly, as when people choose to shop at locally owned businesses, boycott a product, or work to develop alternative institutions and economies. Regardless of its myriad of methods and manifestations, all acts of nonviolent action fall into one of three categories: acts of

commission—that is, people do things that they are not expected, supposed, or allowed to do; acts of omission—that is, people do not do things that they are expected, supposed, or required to do; or a combination of acts of commission and omission.¹

In order to promote shifts in people's obedience and behavior patterns, it is important to understand why people obey and behave as they do in the first place. Reasons will differ from society to society, but two of the most common reasons for obedience that I encounter in my work with activists and organizers around the world are that people feel there is no alternative way of behaving and they lack confidence that their actions make a difference. Many people have forgotten that they are the true power holders in their society. Of course formal education, corporations, governments, and media all reinforce the narrative that power resides among the few individuals in a government building or corporate headquarters, and that money and guns (on which they have a monopoly) are the ultimate source of strength. This narrative suits their purposes well. Successful nonviolent movements throughout history, however, have awakened people to the fact that through their collective actions, people who are organized around a common vision and act strategically are far stronger than armies and money. Any contemporary grassroots movement that wants to gain traction should take note of this fact and make reminding people that they are powerful a central point of its rhetoric.

Taking this one step further, successful movements not only tell people that they are powerful, they demonstrate people's power by setting clear, achievable objectives and then documenting and publicizing their victories. The victories themselves may be limited, but their impact on mobilizing people can be enormous. For example, the US Civil Rights Movement concentrated its strength on desegregating buses in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955-56 and desegregating Nashville lunch counters in 1960. The Indian Independence Movement focused its effort on gaining concessions from the British on the Salt Acts and others laws in 1930-31. Once achieved, these objectives were small

¹ Gene Sharp, Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential, (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent Publishers), 2005, p. 547.

relative to the mammoth task of overturning segregation in the entire US South or gaining independence in India. But their true impact was in their catalyzing effect on the movements themselves. These victories showed people that their actions mattered and that they were capable of making a difference, which led to great increases in support and mobilization and propelled these movements to the national and international center stage.

These objectives were not achieved merely because the US Civil Rights Movement or the Indian Independence Movement occupied the moral high ground. They were achieved also because of hard work, creativity, and skillful political analysis. This is true of all successful nonviolent action. However, many neglect this fact and instead assume that nonviolent action consists primarily of public protests, expressions of outrage, and moral injunctions, or that its success depends on a charismatic leader or some sort of mystical power. It does not. Nor does it require people who are ideologically committed to pacifism or ethical nonviolence. What it does require is an inclusive vision that unites people, sound strategic planning, effective public communications, and the identification of appropriate methods for the situation. There is no one-size-fits-all recipe—nonviolent action is place-specific. While the principles that govern it, such as power being based on consent and obedience, are constant across all struggles, its application depends on the context and particulars of a given society. Whether it manifests as bold public action, subtle shifts in buying patterns, or both (most movements have a wide variety of tactics that are designed to be used by people with different levels of involvement), it provides a way for people to use or create political space in their society from which to leverage concessions from an entrenched adversary.

Fortunately, a lot of intellectual work, research, and communication have been done about how people can use, and historically have used, nonviolent action to achieve great results. Demand for this knowledge is increasing among those who recognize the power and potential that nonviolent action holds. You won't read about this in most

newspapers, and you won't find a lot of politicians talking about it, but if you talk to grassroots organizers and members of civil society around the world, they will tell you. They recognize that it is the people in a society who are the agents of change and that structural change is created from the ground up. They are not waiting for a person to lead them, because they understand that most government and corporate leaders will not take the lead to do what is right if their populations are disengaged and do not know the means to hold them accountable. Therefore, people around the world are increasingly looking towards nonviolent action (which they may use in conjunction with voting, the legal system, or other traditional means of making change) as a pragmatic way to empower their communities to win human rights, freedom, justice, transparency, women's, indigenous people's and minority rights and environmental protection. Regardless of the objective for which nonviolent action is used, its prerequisite is the same: a reframing of the concept of power in people's minds. Sharing this knowledge, and awakening people to their power, is an essential task in shifting humanity's course.