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The Limitations of Strategic Nonviolence

Timothy Braatz

One of the great human achievements of the twentieth century was the refinement of civilian resistance. As generally understood, this means the organization of sustained mass nonviolent actions—protest, noncooperation, disobedience, and intervention—to force political change, usually at the national level. In some remarkable cases, campaigns of noncooperation and civil disobedience ousted entrenched and repressive dictatorships in a matter of days. Other nonviolent resistance movements succeeded after years of struggle, and some failed in their attempts to depose unwanted regimes. The achievement, though, was cumulative, as activists and scholars learned from the successes and failures of previous movements so that, by century's end, a body of knowledge was available to resistance leaders who no longer had to "reinvent the wheel"; nonviolent campaigns now included careful strategizing and training, not simply spontaneous uprisings. The limitations of successful civilian resistance movements are, however, often overlooked.

Political theorist Gene Sharp has been one of the key contributors to popular understanding of what he calls "strategic nonviolence." Sharp concluded that "Gandhian nonviolence," meaning personal commitment to *ahimsa* (non-harming), may be too exclusionary—not everyone can be a pacifist or saint, he said. For Sharp, "nonviolent action" or "nonviolent struggle" were more useful phrases because he was most interested in nonviolence as technique, a method of wielding power, a strategic choice. In Sharp's view, ruling power is based on "authority," meaning acceptance of the ruler's legitimacy as rule-maker, and on "sanctions," meaning punishment or threat of punishment to force obedience to rules. To weaken a ruler, to exert control *over* a ruler, a resistance movement must first undermine the perceived legitimacy of the ruler or ruling group; second, withdraw popular cooperation and obedience; and third, separate the ruler from what Sharp called "pillars of support," meaning the bureaucracies and institutions that carry out orders and maintain political and economic function. From his study of historical examples, Sharp cataloged dozens of nonviolent techniques which, in bringing about these three changes, can force otherwise recalcitrant rulers to concede demands.

Successful examples stretch across the century, but the global breakthrough for civilian resistance came in the 1980s. In 1986, a nonviolent uprising in the Philippines chased out a corrupt dictator despite his close ties to the U.S. government. In Poland, after a decade of nonviolent resistance to a Soviet-sponsored communist dictatorship, the labor union Solidarity regained legal status and negotiated for open elections that, in 1989, undermined communist rule. "People power" had upset the Cold War status quo. Nonviolent resistance campaigns soon appeared around the world, most famously in east central Europe, where massive protests evicted communist dictatorships in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Despite failed attempts to end dictatorships in China, Burma, and Kenya, the ability of nonviolent mass protest and noncooperation to remove unpopular regimes was well-documented. In the first eleven years of the next century, variously successful movements—Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt—were seemingly commonplace, and organizers frequently cited Sharp's influence.

Unfortunately, a successful civilian resistance movement, one that removes an unpopular repressive regime, is no guarantee of democratic inclusion, social justice, equality of opportunity, and human rights protections. Scholarly surveys of nonviolent campaigns, in their concern with understanding and promoting the dynamics of strategic nonviolence, often end national case studies at the triumphant moment—The dictator stepped down!—and omit what came next. The implication is that once a repressive regime is removed, the difficult work is finished, and society will inevitably be transformed for the better. Where power was highly centralized and coordinated, dramatic changes have, indeed, followed—for example, the opening of society in east central Europe after the removal of the communist party dictatorships. At a glance, this can give the impression that massive, spontaneous, nonviolent protests are a societal panacea. But the end of European totalitarianism left many people, despite their newly won enfranchisement, less secure in their livelihoods than when under communist rule. Elsewhere, where traditions of popular elections already existed at local, regional, and national levels, people power movements have often proved to be little more than an extension of electoral politics—a change in leadership at the top, but minimal structural reform. For some analysts, this may be satisfactory, following the understanding of Western liberalism that often equates open elections with a healthy and just society: if the leading vote-getter takes office, all must be well. More careful analysis reveals that in a complex and diffuse political and economic system, mass rallies and noncooperation to ensure a moment of electoral decency are unlikely to transform society.

Peace theory sheds light on the shortcomings of successful people power movements. Johan Galtung has defined violence as "avoidable insult to basic human needs," and identified three types. Simply put, events that insult human needs are direct violence, processes that do likewise are structural

violence, and the beliefs that encourage and enable the processes and events are cultural violence. Any one type of violence can cause or increase any other type—violence begets violence—so all types must be addressed if the goal is to make society less violent. For example, a reduction of direct violence (say, handgun homicides) is likely to be temporary if structural violence (poverty and alienation) and cultural violence (celebration of bloody vigilantism) are left unmitigated. How well does Sharp's strategic nonviolence address these different forms of violence? The visibility and drama of direct violence—inflicting physical harm, curtailing freedoms, insulting the basic human need for survival and well-being—make it relatively easy to identify as a problem and target for change. Sustained nonviolent actions, such as a sit-in, can effectively counter an unwanted regime's direct violence; the state's use of violent repression against nonviolent protestors becomes a liability, undermining its legitimacy. Structural violence—the marginalization, exploitation, and alienation built into political and economic systems—is often less obvious. Sharp has outlined the political structures that support a violent regime, and has shown how those structures can be undermined. But what he advocates is the temporary separation of the current head of state from the pillars of support, not an entire restructuring of the state system to make it more inclusive and life-enhancing. Furthermore, even if collective refusal to cooperate with government leads to top-level resignations, economic structures are likely to remain unchanged, particularly if most property is privately owned. The dictator and his guards are gone; the structural violence persists. This is what twentieth-century nonviolence can teach the twenty-first: if reduction of violence, in all its forms, is the goal, the nonviolent removal of a dictatorship will not be sufficient.

The Philippines example of 1986 bears this out. The basic events are relatively well known. Pressured by mass demonstrations and capital flight, corrupt President Ferdinand Marcos tried to steal an election. In response, Corazon Aquino and other opposition leaders organized a boycott of loyalist-owned businesses, and several army generals declared their allegiance to Aquino. The events of February 22–25 in Manila were breathtaking. Hundreds of thousands of unarmed resisters formed a joyful human barricade around the rebel battalions, turning back the government's armored vehicles on several occasions, and mass military defections followed. With Marcos running out of loyal soldiers, the U.S. government withdrew its support, and the next day Aquino became president. What followed was an improvement over the Marcos dictatorship, and yet, in many ways, was Filipino business as usual. The new president came from a wealthy, well-connected family. The military continued to intervene in civilian politics and commit human rights abuses. Electoral fraud returned, poverty remained widespread, the volatile question of Muslim separatism went unresolved—insults to the basic need for

self-determination, well-being, and identity. The U.S. government retained its military bases in the country and pushed for violent campaigns against communist rebels. For a few heady days, the people of Manila had experienced real democratic participation, but, in the long term, did not institutionalize people power, and the average citizen saw little change in political access and economic opportunity. The very structures that had allowed for the emergence of a dictator—powerful chief executive office, meddling military officer corps, elite-managed electoral processes—were left in place. What changed were the loyalties within those structures.

In fact, this model—removal of the corrupt head of state and leaving social, political, and economic structures generally intact—is typical of strategic nonviolence campaigns. For example, the resignation of dictators in El Salvador and Guatemala after nonviolent urban shutdowns, in 1944, did not end the pervasive poverty and narrow concentration of wealth and political influence in those countries, did not reduce neocolonial interference by the U.S. government, and a long era of civil wars and brutal regimes followed. In a related scenario, the unseating of a dictatorship by a civilian resistance movement may open the door to a different type of repressive government, as happened in Iran in the late 1970s. More recently, the removal of a dictator in Egypt after three weeks of protest was a remarkable accomplishment, but whether or not Egyptians can fashion a less violent, more peaceable society, remains an open question.

A typical strategic nonviolence campaign is reformist—seeking to clean up the state and make government less corrupt and less repressive as well as more responsive to the needs of the people. Thus, it affirms the legitimacy and efficacy of a powerful state, and, in that sense, is not revolutionary. The powerful state remains, with all its potential for corruption and abuse. This can be seen in the post-communist states of the old Soviet sphere. After decades of Cold War propaganda, many people believed only two options were available—U.S. capitalism and USSR communism—and, while focusing on the very real differences between the two models, underestimated the significance of their commonalities: enormous state bureaucracy, highly militarized, and with centralized decision-making in the hands of an elite political class. Under both systems, the general population accepted the authority of a relative few bureaucrats or apparatchiks to start wars, make laws, and direct government spending. Despite constant rhetoric about the interests of workers or "the people," the ruling elite in such systems almost inevitably place their personal and class interests over the interests of the masses, use state power to protect and extend those interests, and the potential for direct violence (internally and externally) is very high. In the decades that followed the removal of Soviet-style dictatorships, the conditions that had allowed a small group to wield repressive power over an entire country were still largely present. In the former Soviet sphere, the structural violence of gangster capitalism replaced

the structural violence of totalitarianism, sometimes with the same people in charge—communist elites became capitalist elites, seemingly overnight—and many citizens longed for the old regimes when at least they had secure jobs, affordable housing, and other state guarantees. Nonviolent strategies shaped electoral outcomes in the former Soviet republics of Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004–2005), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), but these so-called "color revolutions" generally lacked structural change, and political corruption and direct violence promptly resumed.

Poland, too, was subject to the deficiencies of a civilian resistance movement. In 1980, economic hard times and the firing of labor organizers motivated industrial workers to occupy factories and halt production. Their most significant demand was the right to form trade unions independent from Communist Party (PZPR) control. With hundreds of workplaces shut down, and worried that soldiers and policemen might not obey orders to attack nonviolent strikers, party officials agreed to a compromise: workers could unionize if they did not challenge the PZPR's political monopoly. Within a few months, a free trade union called Solidarity had ten million members. But, in late 1981, under pressure from Soviet officials, PZPR leader General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law, outlawed free unions, and ordered mass arrests. With many labor organizers imprisoned, a general strike was difficult to organize, so resistance leaders, often with Catholic Church support, instead encouraged workers to ignore party-controlled unions and media while supporting secret factory committees and underground newspapers. In 1987, faced with economic sanctions from Western governments, Jaruzelski began negotiating with Lech Walesa and other Solidarity leaders, offering political reforms in exchange for acceptance of austerity measures to avoid a labor uprising led by younger activists. With new Soviet premiere Mikhail Gorbachev showing no interest in intervening, PZPR moderates accepted free trade unions and open elections and, in 1989 voting, Solidarity candidates trounced their PZPR rivals.

The Polish people showed to the world the viability of a peaceful transition from communist totalitarianism to an open society with democratic elections and a free press, yet this did not ensure economic and social justice, nor did it end militarism. In the decade that followed, Poland saw chronically high unemployment and expanding poverty, an example of structural violence. Then, in the early twenty-first century, the Polish government sent troops to participate in the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. After a nightmarish twentieth century—German and Soviet invasions and slaughters as well as fascist and communist dictatorships—and after all the Solidarity movement had revealed about the power of nonviolence, how could the people of Poland end up participating in the U.S. imperialist wars? In fact, one might ask why Poland even maintains an army, what purpose could armed soldiers possibly

serve, squeezed as the country is between the enormous Russian army on one side and the United States and its allies on the other. Keep in mind, Solidarity's goal was reform—free trade unions, free press, open elections—not a transformation of Polish society. The Solidarity movement did not reject violence as unethical, just impractical. Solidarity did not reject centralized state power altogether; it claimed it for itself. Solidarity did not put a dent in cultural violence—that deep layer of ideologies, cosmologies, arts and sciences, and other beliefs and symbols that encourage and enable structural and direct violence. While direct, structural, and cultural violence are mutually reinforcing, Galtung has suggested that "the major causal direction" begins with deep culture, which underpins the structural violence, creating an environment conducive to violent events. A successful campaign of strategic nonviolence can counter cultural violence through example, teaching the power of nonviolent action, and the virtue of negotiation and compromise. But cultural violence is usually complex and multi-faceted, and, for lasting change, must be addressed systematically, something strategic nonviolence does not do.

For example, belief in the legitimacy of a powerful, coercive state—so deep in the culture it is accepted as normal, natural, inevitable—is affirmed, not challenged, by a nonviolent movement that seeks to take over the halls of power. In fact, for all its efforts to be transparent and democratic, Solidarity was still led by a man of authoritarian instincts who, once elected, could make unilateral decisions. But it goes deeper than that. The Solidarity movement, in its embrace of the patriarchal Catholic Church as an ally against communist rule, was affirming Catholic doctrine: authority of a male pope who supposedly spoke on behalf of a male deity, denial of the priesthood for women, and rejection of many aspects of human sexuality. Catholicism also presents a story of redemption through direct violence (crucifixion, crusades) and a theory of "just war," which find strong parallels in the martial words of the Polish national anthem, fully endorsed by the new government. In other words, Solidarity was perpetuating, more than it was challenging, the acceptance of patriarchy and hierarchical society, and was ambivalent about direct violence.

We can go deeper yet. Christianity typically emphasizes a chosen people with a special relationship to an all-powerful God and the promise of individual salvation. By definition, a chosen people cannot exist without the presence of unchosen people, whose lives and identities are not as important. The promise of individual salvation in the next world teaches the superiority of certain "saved" individuals, justifies the misery of others, and makes a sustainable ecology in this world unnecessary. This "vertical" cosmology—some higher than others—easily accommodates Polish nationalism, with strong notions regarding the Other (Polish anti-Semitism has deep roots), and with the state assuming God-like powers, as an example of top-down decision-making. It also fits well with the ideology of capitalism, which celebrates individualism, dominance over less fortunate others, and destruction of the natural world.

Solidarity leaders and their successors were liberated from communist party rule, but not from a vertical cosmology. Once they controlled the reins of state power, Solidarity leaders concluded that economic security and national defense meant submitting to dictates from the West and adopting an economic system that valued property rights over human needs and encouraged individualism and competition rather than cooperation and community. Pressured by capitalist ideologs and international financiers, the Polish government submitted to "shock therapy"—privatization of state-owned industries and elimination of price controls and subsidies—a clear betrayal of the promised "third way" of worker ownership in a market economy. Poland fell into the grip of international finance capitalism just as that system was accelerating the concentration of wealth and widening the poverty gap—not exactly what Polish strikers had risked their lives for in the 1980s. Indeed, the Polish people were not fully included in this decision-making. Polish politicians approached their constituency as voters to be swayed, not co-equal partners to be heard. Western leaders viewed Poles as cheap, exploitable labor. Polish troops, defenders of national honor, were sent off to fight the Other, now defined as "Islamic terrorists." The CIA constructed a secret base on Polish soil for extra-legal detainment and torture. The U.S. empire had a new client state, conquered not by generals but by bankers. Poland had traded one imperial master for another: more verticality. The Polish masses could have mounted another nonviolent campaign to challenge the new political class and its submission to foreign dictates—in fact, it should have been easier in the more open, post-communist society. But, tamed by an ideology that identified democratic participation only as voting for office-seekers and blamed economic marginalization on personal failures—a more sophisticated form of political control than communist brutality—they did not. Simply put, Polish culture had not been transformed into a life-enhancing, peace system. Like people power campaigns worldwide, the strategic nonviolence of the Solidarity movement had forced out an unwanted regime weakened by historical forces, but had not confronted, and at times reinforced, many of the violent aspects of the national culture, leaving it vulnerable to the violence of imperialism.

The alternative, of course, is what Sharp rejected as too difficult: Gandhian nonviolence. For Gandhi, the nonviolent campaigns against British rule, against bad government, were just an initial step, teaching nonviolence, instilling fearlessness, and restoring self-esteem to a colonized, demoralized population. This is direct peace to counter direct violence. Gandhi spent more time on his "Constructive Programme," trying to develop a decentralized network of self-reliant, self-governing communal villages—a rejection of the competition and exploitation of market capitalism, the centralized ownership and authority of communism, and coercive state systems in general. The emphasis on all individuals working to satisfy their own basic needs was intended to liberate both the exploited and the exploiter from an exploitative system.

This is an example of structural peace used to counter structural violence: horizontality, not verticality. Gandhi also preached the unity of life, that society must enhance all life, not just human life, and not just the lives of some privileged humans. No one should use the life of another as simply the means to an end. Behavior and institutions that deny the satisfaction of basic human needs are unacceptable. Thus, he advocated interfaith cooperation, the liberation of women from patriarchy, the abolition of "untouchability," and the practice of vegetarianism. He reinterpreted the Bhagavad Gita, Hindu scripture, as an allegory of selfless devotion, not a heroic battle against human enemies. This is using cultural peace to counter cultural violence.

The fact that Gandhi failed to transform Indian society should not be a deterrent. Deeply held assumptions and deeply rooted structures, centuries in the making, are unlikely to fall as quickly as a decades-old dictatorship. The point here is not that Gandhi had all the right solutions, nor that purity is a reasonable goal, but Gandhi does provide an example of how to address all three points on the violence triangle. Some scholars make a distinction between pragmatic nonviolence and principled nonviolence, and omit the key factor: the goal. If the goal is removal of a popular regime, strategic nonviolence is a pragmatic choice. In fact, recent research suggests nonviolent civilian resistance is far more likely to succeed than a violent resistance campaign. But if the goal is to reduce violence of all types, to create a society where tomorrow is less violent than today—a much greater challenge—strategic nonviolence is insufficient and, thus, not pragmatic. For such a transformation, the principled approach—identifying and rejecting any and all forms of violence—is also the pragmatic one.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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