
A Strategy for Nonviolent Politics

Conflict and Values

For the nonviolent activist, conflict is an innate and highly desirable characteristic of human society; it is a major engine of change and growth. How the conflict is resolved is vitally important however. This is particularly so if long term social goals are being considered.

The activist who uses nonviolent politics in the tactical sense is primarily concerned with limited campaign goals. However, the activist who uses nonviolent politics in the strategic sense is vitally concerned with fundamental change in society and measures such change in terms of consciousness and culture rather than changes of government or shifts in bureaucratic responsibility.

Strategic nonviolent activists, therefore, seek total revolution: the transformation of each and every person. They seek transformation of the values and emotions which underpin the malignant global power structure. The revolution in community values which is necessary to bring about this paradigm shift (and thus undermine the existing power structure) requires an astute awareness of the 'value change' aspect of any campaign and an awareness of the campaign's importance in the nonviolent revolution as a whole.

Political Power and Nonviolent Action

According to the theory of nonviolent politics, power is dispersed throughout society; it is not controlled by an elite at the top of a political pyramid. All elites (including governments) depend on the goodwill, consent and co-operation of ordinary people in order to exercise authority. Power is thus fragile and elites are heavily dependent on the many sources of political power in order to survive.¹

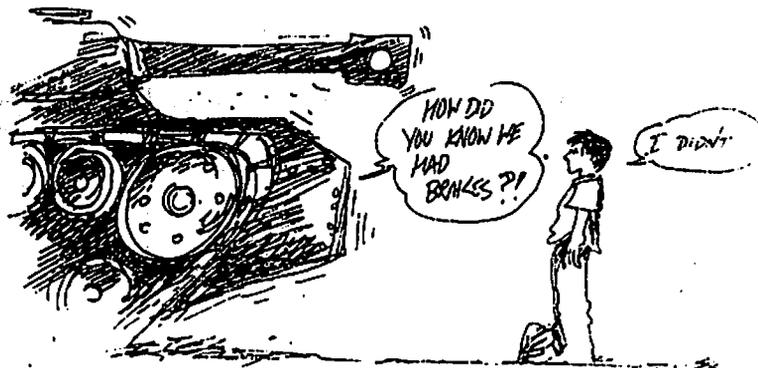
For governments, this includes formal institutions such as the parliament, the

bureaucracy, the military, the police and the judiciary. It also includes an education and social system which encourage compliance.

Ultimately, of course, any power structure depends on the support of people; therefore, it is people who are the ultimate source of all power.

In recognition of this insight, nonviolent politics are acts of protest and persuasion, non-co-operation and nonviolent intervention designed to undermine the sources of power of the opponent in order to bring about change.²

In the revolutionary context, the creation of alternative institutions (a form of nonviolent intervention), which compete with and undermine mainstream structures, is centrally important.



The Principles and Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

It is apparent to me from analyses of historical and contemporary examples of 'nonviolent' actions, that an action is most appropriately classified as truly nonviolent only when it employs the (following) principles and dynamics:

1. It must be *nonviolent*. That is, the action must involve no risk of physical injury to the opponent or third parties.

The use of violence in any form fundamentally undermines the nonviolent dynamic. It demonstrates lack of commitment to our strategy, it shifts the focus away from our concern, it justifies the use of unnecessarily high levels of repression against us and it enables our opponents to portray the issue as a 'law and order' one.

2. It must be *truthful*. There is truth on all sides in any conflict; we must be willing to acknowledge and respond to the truth of our opponents' case. In addition, we must be willing to say the things that it is not always popular to say.

3. It must be *open*, that is, *the action must not be secretive*.

One reason why nonviolent actions are not secretive relates to the organisational principles which underpin sound nonviolent action. Secrecy creates informed elites; it disempowers and excludes those not privy to the planning. According to the analysis of nonviolent politics, people are not apathetic about the great social evils of our time, they are just unsure what they can do about it; they are *disempowered*. It is crucial therefore that all planning is open so that it can include and empower everyone.

Secrecy is a principle common to exclusive groups, particularly those of a patriarchal persuasion. These outmoded values must be confronted by nonviolent activists as well.

4. Our nonviolent action and behaviour should demonstrate *respect* for the opponent and third parties. Gandhi regarded this as crucially important. From your own experience you know that you respond best when people treat you with respect, take your concerns seriously and do not patronise you. If we want to challenge people to soul-search their deeply-held values and beliefs, we must affirm their integrity and capacity for growth.

5. It should *undermine* the opponent's *source of power*.

In the actions we plan we should be conscious of the *roles* people play in support of the opponent. For instance, a police officer is taught to perceive activists in a certain way and to behave in a particular manner. We can reinforce that behaviour (and strengthen the state) by acting in ways which encourage the police to 'role up'. Conversely, we can recognise the genuine fears that police feel in 'demonstrations' and use police liaison and nonviolent discipline to build

awareness of our concerns, trust of our motives and respect for our integrity. This de-roles the police and undermines one source of power available to the state.

6. It should focus attention on the *conflict between people*; and particularly their *values* and *emotions*. All conflicts ultimately get back to the values and emotions which underpin them.

7. It should allow and encourage *people involvement*. The sheer power of good nonviolent politics is that it allows and encourages ordinary people to be active participants in the struggle. People who care want to *do something*; let us help them to focus that energy (and anger) in *politically effective* ways.

8. It should *empower* people. Being involved in well-planned nonviolent actions should help people to cast off their fear. It should also reinforce their belief in themselves and their capacity to do something about the major social issues of our time.

9. It should be *consistent with the long term (nonviolent) revolutionary strategy*.

As the Rainbow Alliance has gone to great lengths to highlight all the great issues of our time are facets of the one Global crisis. You do not need to feel buried by this reality or even feel you need to do something about 'everything'. Just be aware that the 'fast-track' to the world we want is to ensure that each step we take is as consistent as possible with our long-term strategy and goals.

Nonviolent struggle is the politics of ordinary people. Activists who choose to fully utilise its principles and dynamics invariably feel empowered and liberated by it. And history clearly records that nonviolent politics works. [2]

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References

1 Power is discussed extensively in Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Parts 1, 2 & 3*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1980, pp 7-62

2 Nonviolent action is discussed extensively in Sharp. See, for instance, pp 63-106.

