



Chapter 4: The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action from Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance* (Fontana), 1994

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[This is both Chapter 3 of *Challenge to Nonviolence* and includes Chapter 4 of *Civil Resistance*](#)

At its meeting in Bradford on 9 September 1994, the Nonviolent Action Research Group discussed, amongst other things, a chapter from Michael Randle's book *Civil Resistance*. The chapter, entitled 'The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action', is reproduced below, followed by an account of the subsequent discussion.

Text of chapter 4 from *Civil Resistance* by [Michael Randle](#) [2] (Fontana, 1994)

the dynamics of nonviolent action

Introduction

Governments need people more than people need governments. If one wanted a slogan that expressed in a few words the political philosophy underlying the concept of civil resistance this would do as well as any.

There is, of course, more to it than that. For one thing it is not only states and governments which derive their power from the cooperation of people, but institutions and groups at all levels within society. Nor do all power struggles where civil resistance is employed necessarily involve the state or government as one of the protagonists. However, since the focus in this study is chiefly on conflicts where the state or government is involved, the slogan provides a convenient point of departure.

In Chapter 1 we considered the links between power, authority and popular cooperation. A brief recap may be helpful here before discussing the social and political mechanisms by which civil resistance can bring about change.

Governments, it was pointed out, require the allegiance of key institutions to operate at all - the armed forces, civil servants, administrators. Beyond that they need the cooperation, or at least the compliance, of the majority of the population they seek to govern. Modern industrial society in particular requires a high degree of cooperation by the workforce to function effectively. This has given organised labour an important leverage which it has used at various times since the early 19th century to force economic and political concessions. At the present time when the mass media play such a major role in people's lives, the cooperation of those who work within it may be hardly less important than that of the armed services. Thus, at the height of the Czechoslovak 'velvet revolution', the workers in the State Television Service voted overwhelmingly in favour of transmitting live coverage of the demonstrations in Wenceslas Square and broadcasting a film showing student demonstrators being attacked by the security forces.¹ Other institutions and groups that make up civil society, such as the Churches and political, environmental and community organisations can also play a crucial role in shaping opinion and provide potential centres of dissent and opposition.

Dictatorial governments may use force, or outright terror, to secure the compliance of the population and this may succeed, sometimes over prolonged periods. In these circumstances, civil society, in so far as it exists at all, will tend to operate clandestinely, and the media is likely to be under tight government control. Even in such extreme cases, however, governments do not rule by force alone. The willingness of the



individual soldier to obey orders may be engendered by fear of the consequences of disobedience, but the collective allegiance of the armed services and security forces is dependent on something more intangible - the authority of the government and the acceptance of its claim to legitimacy.

Civil resistance seeks to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the government and thereby also to deprive it of its source of power in the cooperation of society and state institutions. Where the goal is to remove a specific injustice - such as race discrimination - the challenge to the government's authority is limited; its legitimacy in general is not in question, simply its right to pass or enforce certain laws, or to tolerate particular practices within society. In a more fundamental struggle, civil resistance challenges the government's right to rule and may also contest the whole political and social system within which it operates.

More often than not, coercion is involved in such struggles - not in the sense that violence is used against the opponents, but in that certain options are closed off to them, are rendered literally impossible to pursue. The numbers of protesters or strikers may be too great for the authorities to cope with. Jails may be filled to capacity, the economy halted by strikes, the administration brought to a standstill. Resort by the authorities to naked violence - assuming the political and social environment is such as to make this an option - may prove counter-productive, mobilising further opposition at home and abroad, and in the extreme provoking a refusal to cooperate by the police, the military and public servants. The political allies of the authorities may desert them - as happened for instance in both Poland and East Germany in 1989, where the small, formerly client, political parties moved over to the opposition.

We consider in a later chapter the particular problems associated with civil resistance in democratic, or partially democratic, countries where the government rests its claim to legitimacy on the mandate of the electorate. Meanwhile, we may note that even under dictatorial regimes civil resistance will often be directed against a particular aspect of government policy, rather than against the regime as such. However, because authoritarian governments claim absolute authority, a successful challenge by the population to any major aspect of policy can bring about its downfall, or at any rate, start the process of disintegration. Thus in Eastern Europe the demand for basic human rights was in one sense limited, yet it posed a radical challenge to the structure and political philosophy of the Leninist state. In this respect dictatorial rule has frequently proved to be at once more rigid and more brittle than democratic systems.

Moral and political jiu-jitsu

The impact of nonviolent action has been compared to jiu-jitsu. This analogy was first suggested by the American author Richard Gregg, in his classic study of Gandhian methods published in the 1930s.² In a chapter entitled 'Moral Jiu-Jitsu', Gregg argues that just as in jiu-jitsu the defender utilises the force of the attacker to throw him or her physically off balance, so the nonviolent resister throws the opponent morally off balance by the unexpectedness of his or her response. The aggressor expects a reaction of counter-violence or at least a display of fear or anger. Meeting neither, but instead a calm determination not to give way or to strike back, he (or she) is both surprised and perplexed. 'The nonviolence and good will of the victim act like the lack of physical opposition by the user of physical jiu-jitsu to cause the attacker to lose his moral balance.'³

Gregg goes on to elaborate a moral and psychological explanation for the workings of nonviolence at an inter-personal level, emphasising the impact of suffering borne with patience and fearlessness. Some of his claims rest on a quasi-religious view that 'except for a few congenital mental defectives and incorrigible desperate convicts, every person has in them at least some tiny spark or potentiality of goodness...' In subsequent chapters, however, Gregg examines the dynamics of collective, as opposed to individual nonviolent action, and here he has insights which were to be taken up by later writers of the more tough-minded and 'pragmatic' school. Nevertheless, he continues to emphasise voluntary self-suffering as the mainspring of satyagraha, and conversion of the opponent as the means by which the issue in dispute will be resolved:

As to the outcome of the struggle waged by nonviolence, we must understand one point thoroughly. The aim of the nonviolent resister is not to injure, or crush and humiliate his opponent, or to 'break his will', as in a violent fight. The aim is to convert the opponent, to change his understanding and



his sense of values so that he will join wholeheartedly with the resister in seeking a settlement truly amicable and truly satisfying to both sides.⁴

It is a classic statement of what Boserup and Mack term the 'positive' view of conflict which is present, if somewhat ambiguously, in Gandhi's own writings, and rather more categorically in those of some of his interpreters. (See the discussion below.)

From a more pragmatic standpoint, Sharp later took up the notion of jiu-jitsu in discussing collective nonviolent action. He refers not to 'moral jiu-jitsu' but 'political jiu-jitsu' and employs it as a way of examining how the attempt to apply repression against civil resistance can backfire on those who employ it.⁵ Repression, Sharp argues, if met with disciplined nonviolence, is likely to increase sympathy among the general population for the resisters and antipathy and contempt for the regime. It may alienate sections of the population whose support it had earlier enjoyed, and thus narrow the regime's power base. It may even move large numbers to participate actively in the campaign, despite the costs, and in favourable circumstances lead to the opponent's downfall. Thus the violent attack on student demonstrators in Prague on 17 November 1989, was the spark that ignited mass opposition in Czechoslovakia. Third parties are likely to be similarly affected, and this could lead to sanctions and other forms of pressure applied internationally. Finally, the police, armed forces, and functionaries of the regime or occupying power may be sickened and repelled by the repeated use of violence against unarmed and nonviolent resisters and turn against their masters.

Among the examples Sharp gives are the massacre of petitioners at the Winter Palace in St Petersburg in January 1905 which ignited a general rebellion, the killings of hundreds of demonstrators in March 1917 which led to mutinies, desertions and further mass protests and the eventual resignation of the Tsar in the 'February Revolution', and the beatings, killings and bombings of civil rights protesters in the US in the 1950s and 1960s which had the effect of winning American and international support for the civil rights cause.

Civil resistance and the sociological mechanisms of change

While conversion of the opponent is emphasised by those who adopt the positive view of conflict, it is seen as only one of several mechanisms of change by those who lean towards the 'negative' view of conflict. Indeed, for the latter, conversion is regarded as unlikely to play a central role in major collective conflict as far as the principal protagonists are concerned. George Lakey, in a Masters thesis in 1962, proposed three main sociological mechanisms of change which were adopted and slightly modified by Sharp in his presentations. They are (in Sharp's formulation): conversion, accommodation and coercion.⁶ In his most recent work on 'civilian-based defence'⁷, Gene Sharp postulates a fourth mechanism - disintegration.

Conversion refers to the situation where the opponent has a genuine change of heart, having been won over by the argument, or the willingness of the resisters to suffer hardship, imprisonment and even death for their convictions. Its relevance in major struggles between large groups is problematic, and we consider the matter below.

Accommodation describes the process whereby the opposing group, recognising that the balance of forces is shifting against it, opts for negotiation and compromise. It would be physically possible to continue the struggle, but it is judged opportune to reach a settlement because the political and other costs of persisting with it are too high, and perhaps because there is a clear prospect of ultimate defeat. In Poland in 1988-9, General Jaruzelski sought accommodation with the opposition forces when he agreed to round-table talks with Solidarity. This led over a period of months to a peaceful transfer of power. At a less total level of confrontation, the Conservative government in Britain in 1990 found it necessary to withdraw the poll tax, in part because the campaign of civil disobedience was making it prohibitively difficult and expensive to impose, in part because the political backlash had begun to threaten its chances of re-election.

Coercion was touched upon earlier. It refers to the situation in which the opponent's will is forced, or thwarted as a result of civil resistance. This may occur in three sets of circumstances. First the defiance is too widespread to be repressed and social, political and economic change occurs - or is thwarted as the



case may be - regardless of the will of the opponents. Quisling did not change his mind about introducing Nazi indoctrination in the schools of occupied Norway; the non-cooperation of the entire teaching profession made it impossible for him to carry out the plan. Second, widespread non-cooperation may bring the administration and economy - or crucial parts of it - to a standstill, and it may be impossible to get things moving again without acceding to the demands of the protesters. In this way Czar Nicholas II was coerced by the general strike of 1905 to issue the constitutional manifesto of 7 October granting a Duma (parliament). Similarly employers have been coerced into granting recognition of trade unions and allowing them to operate despite, in many instances, their total opposition to such a move. Third, the opponents' may lose the capacity to repress the resistance because of the non-cooperation of the police, the army and the bureaucracy. The Shah of Iran was forced to flee the country in 1979 when the Army commanders ordered their troops back to the barracks and refused to take further part in the repression. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos fled from the Philippines when the Army refused to open fire on tens of thousands of demonstrators blocking their path in the streets of Manila. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the communist governments were forced out of office by mass demonstrations. Similarly, the coup leaders in the Soviet Union in August 1991 found themselves literally unable to hold on to power.

Disintegration. This refers to the situation where the opponent's power structure collapses altogether under the pressure of civil resistance. Sharp distinguishes it from coercion on the grounds that there is no longer a government or political unit to be coerced. Such a point will not be reached, however, without successful coercive pressure on the government or political unit prior to its disintegration. Sharp cites the Kapp putsch in 1920 and the Algiers generals' coup in 1961 among examples where the power base of the usurpers disintegrated. But clearly that disintegration was the result of a process in which the usurpers found it impossible to impose their will on the situation.

Positive & negative modes of waging conflict

Civil resistance can be seen as primarily either a 'positive' or 'negative' mode of waging conflict.⁸ The first approach assumes that persuasion and conversion are the essential mechanisms of change. The second is more in line with the traditional, antagonistic view of conflict, and thus accepts that coercion will often be necessary.⁹

Satyagraha, as defined by most of its exponents - though somewhat more ambivalently by Gandhi himself - belongs to the positive approach. It proceeds in stages from discussion and negotiation at the outset through to voluntary self-suffering by the resister, and finally to non-cooperation and civil disobedience. However, the intention, even in the last phase, is not to coerce the opponent but to arrive at a common understanding of the situation and the demands of truth and justice. The self-imposed suffering of the resisters and the withdrawal of cooperation are seen alike as ways of concentrating the mind of the opponent on the reality and seriousness of the issues involved, and inviting him or her to consider them anew.

Exponents of the negative mode see their approach as more pragmatic, more attuned to the real world. They do not rule out conversion in some instances, or at some levels, in the opposing group, but their theory does not depend on any particular assumption about the psychology or moral sensibility of the opponent. The pragmatists can themselves be divided into those who consider that civil resistance has (or may have) the potential to undermine the power of even the most ruthless of opponents, and those who see its viability as rather more limited by the nature of the opponent and the circumstances of the struggle. Those in the latter category normally argue the need to have other forms of enforcement and defence available, including military force.¹⁰

In practice, the division between the positive and negative approaches is not always clear-cut, since non-cooperation is a technique central to both. In the positive approach it is seen as functioning as a catalyst of conversion; in the negative or antagonistic approach as an instrument of coercion. From the point of view of the opponent, however, the distinction is likely to be regarded as academic. A campaign of mass civil disobedience will come across as coercive whatever the declared intention of its organisers. It was how the British government saw the non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns in India in 1920-21, and 1930-31, and perhaps even more so the Quit India campaign of 1942, whatever the protestations to the contrary by Gandhi and the Congress leaders.



Gandhi had a foot in both camps. He appears to be in the positive camp by the very choice of the term satyagraha - 'truth force' or 'soul force' - and his emphasis on voluntary suffering to touch the heart of the opponent. His letters to Smuts during the South African campaigns, and to successive viceroys in India on the eve of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, are in keeping with this emphasis on conversion rather than coercion.

But he also followed La Boétie and Thoreau in insisting that governments could not operate without the cooperation of the people, thereby acknowledging the potentially coercive power of withdrawing that cooperation. It is evident too that many - perhaps a majority - of those who participated in the campaigns under Gandhi's leadership saw them as a way of applying pressure on India's British rulers, rather than as a means of touching their hearts. Indeed, Gandhi himself was too astute a politician not to appreciate the bind in which his campaigns of mass civil disobedience, or, for instance, his hunger-strike in 1932 over the issue of separate representation for the Harijans (Untouchables), placed the British authorities.

This is not to suggest that Gandhi's continuing efforts to exert positive means of influence over both supporters and opponents were without effect. In both South Africa and India, he managed most of the time to keep the lines of communication with the opponent open - with Smuts in South Africa and with successive viceroys in India. His public fasts were mostly aimed at self-purification or directed at his fellow Indians in an effort to prevent or end communal bloodshed. Finally, if the British authorities did not experience a change of heart as a result of the satyagraha campaigns, many third parties were deeply affected by the conduct and demeanour of the resisters and the drama of the public demonstrations. Third parties here included the British public, and the public and governments of countries allied to, or on friendly terms with, Britain.

The extent to which the positive mode has the chance to operate will vary, in fact, according to the nature and scale of the conflict. Conversion is more likely to occur in struggles between individuals or small groups than in major political confrontations. There is also greater scope for it, and for a process of mediation and reconciliation, where a conflict arises more out of misperception and misjudgment than out of a genuine divergence of interests. Where there is such a fundamental clash of interests, especially between large collectivities, the issue is likely to be settled by a power struggle, rather than through one side convincing the other of the justice of its cause. Nevertheless, moral and political factors remain decisive. The opponent does not have to be converted, but his or her authority - either in general or in relation to a particular aspect of policy - has to be undermined.

Polarisation

One factor which makes the positive approach difficult to apply in situations of large-scale group conflict is the phenomenon of polarisation.¹¹ Polarisation is a process unique to group conflict. It is characterised by the closing of ranks within each group, and the drawing of a sharper boundary line between them which individuals cross at their peril. Extreme polarisation tends to produce undesirable and ugly symptoms - intolerance of dissent, hostility to 'neutral' parties coupled with intense pressure on them to come into line, stereotyping of the opposing group and its views, a tendency to treat its members as less than human, and so forth. These manifestations are often seen at their worst in wartime, particularly in ethnic conflicts. However, some degree of polarisation seems to be an inevitable, and indeed necessary, concomitant of any group conflict. It can be regarded as a social mechanism for achieving concerted action to complement, or replace, centralised controls and sanctions. Thus in Czechoslovakia in 1968, following the Soviet-led invasion, the united front of Czech and Slovak populations against the occupiers deterred the would-be collaborators within the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist party from declaring their hand and attempting to form a client government. Another positive feature is the heightening of individual self-esteem and group morale which follows from the close identification of the individual with the group. This effect is evident in both violent and nonviolent struggles - in the guerrilla warfare campaigns in Cuba and Vietnam, but no less in the Indian independence struggle and the civil rights campaigns in the United States. Polarisation is likely to be particularly acute in the circumstances of, say, a foreign invasion and occupation, or of a settler population attempting by force to maintain its position of power and privilege. By contrast, in some of the European colonies in Africa and Asia where there was a relatively small settler population and a measure of self-government had gradually been introduced, the situation as the countries



moved to independence was much less polarised. This allowed greater scope for the positive mode of exerting influence and waging conflict. Gandhi in India, for instance, was operating in a less polarised situation than, say, the Hungarians in 1956, or the Czechs and Slovaks in 1968. Indeed, one of his tasks, like that of so many of the leaders of liberation movements, was actually to increase polarisation by arousing the population to a sense of the injustice and indignity of continued colonial rule, and consolidating group identity so that people were willing to take collective action. In internal struggles, such as that of the civil rights movement in the US, or the struggle for black majority rule in South Africa the degree of polarisation will vary. In South Africa, it was less acute during the period of Gandhi's campaigns in the early years of the century on behalf of the Indian population than at the time of the Defiance of Unjust Laws campaign in 1952, a few years after the electoral triumph of the Nationalist party and the introduction of apartheid.

The difficulty about applying the positive approach in a highly polarised situation is that it requires contact and communication between the contending parties, the constant reinforcement of goodwill, a mutual endeavour to find common ground - all of which go against the grain in such conditions, and may indeed confuse and divide the population. Thus a policy of fraternisation with opposing troops and officials where a country is under occupation from foreign forces, might be seen as the most desirable strategy from the standpoint of the positive approach - rather than, say, ostracisation and social and economic boycott. But such a policy faces a double difficulty. On the opponent's side it is likely to be regarded as a ploy. On the defending side it may be seen by many as a step in the direction of collaboration. Some proponents of the positive approach have proposed a policy that distinguishes the individual soldier or official from his or her function. Thus there would be fraternisation with individual soldiers - for instance, by welcoming them into one's home - but refusal to co-operate with them in their role as occupiers. In practice this would be a difficult line to draw, and presupposes a civilian population that is highly trained and disciplined and fully understands the strategy that is being pursued.

Of course, those who take the negative approach will for their own reasons want to communicate with occupying forces and officials. Their explicit purpose, however, will be to open up divisions in the opposing side, while making it clear beyond doubt that the right of the aggressor to station forces in the country is totally rejected. Actions here may be a more effective means of communication than words - i.e. noncooperation coupled with refraining from violent retaliation. The opportunities for verbal communication with the opposing forces are likely to be limited especially if the opposing regime is aware of the tactics that are being planned. However such opportunities will tend to be greater in the case of a coup d'état than in that of an invasion by a foreign power, and greater with a mainly conscript army than with an entirely professional one.

To sum up, we can say that in any conflict situation involving large groups of people a degree of polarisation is inevitable. It is likely to be more acute in some situations than others - more acute, for instance, in the immediate aftermath of invasion and occupation, than where a pattern of domination of one group by another has come to be seen as almost inevitable. Resistance, whether violent or nonviolent in character, will have the effect of increasing polarisation. This is desirable in so far as it strengthens group cohesion and raises morale. However, civil resistance is somewhat less likely than guerrilla or conventional warfare, or terrorism, to give rise to extremes of hatred and intolerance. Indeed, where civil resistance implies a commitment to promoting nonviolent solutions, the resistance leadership may take active steps to inhibit the negative manifestations of polarisation. Gandhi in India, Luther King in the United States, Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak in South Africa, provide examples where such efforts were made. They will not always be successful, but in general one can say that nonviolent civil resistance challenges injustice but seeks to inhibit the undesirable features of group conflict and to keep open channels of communication with the opponent.

Elements of a nonviolent strategy

In an earlier chapter we noted one approach to classifying the methods of nonviolent resistance based mainly on the work of Gene Sharp. He proposed three main categories: methods of protest and persuasion; non-cooperation at social, economic and political levels; and nonviolent intervention.¹² Marches, vigils, pickets and the like come under the first category. Social non-cooperation would include the ostracisation of individuals, boycotts of social, academic, artistic and sporting institutions, and total personal non-



cooperation. Economic non-cooperation includes strikes of various kinds, go-slows, economic boycotts and sanctions. Political non-cooperation covers such things as boycotts of legislative assemblies, defiance of particular laws, and the boycott of government-supported organisations. Finally, examples of nonviolent intervention would be sit-ins, obstruction, fasts and hunger strikes. Sharp listed ninety-eight methods within these major categories.

Boserup and Mack, by contrast, group the methods of nonviolent action according to their strategic function. They propose three main categories: symbolic action; denial action; and undermining action.

Symbolic action. Symbolism plays a crucial role in defining and consolidating a community. Symbolic demonstrations - which can cover a wide spectrum of activities - have a threefold function. They draw public attention to a claim or grievance; they are an expression of the unity and determination of the resistance; and they challenge the uncommitted to take a stand in relation to it. Thus they contribute to the polarising process discussed earlier and, in the words of Boserup and Mack, 'serve to define the resistance as a moral community which may then provide a powerful basis for sanctions such as ostracism or social boycott (isolation) of dissenters, collaborators, etc.'¹³

Actions strongly charged with symbolic significance can energise the participants, and have an emotional and galvanising impact on the wider public. They are a form of 'propaganda by the deed'. They communicate at a level deeper than words the conviction that change is possible, and the determination of the resistance to achieve it. Thus they can contribute to the solution of a problem which any group or movement challenging the status quo has to face: namely, that the existing social and political reality takes on an aura of normality and inevitability. Governments and regimes which enjoy minimal support and legitimacy rely heavily on this disempowering sense of the normalcy of the existing order to maintain their authority.

Denial action aims to deprive the opponent of the fruits of aggression or of an unjust social, political or economic order. Strikes, boycotts, go-slows, on-violent obstruction are means by which material and 'non-material' objectives can be denied to the opponent. (Non-material objectives would include such things as establishing - or maintaining - authority, imposing political ideology, and - in the aftermath of a coup or occupation - receiving de facto or de jure recognition by the international community as the government of a territory.) Thus industrial strikes can raise the costs of any attempt to exploit the economic resources of the country. Strikes and obstruction by civil servants and officials can hamper the opponent's attempt to establish an administration, raise taxes, impose new laws and regulations. Opposition and non-cooperation by teachers, academics, religious leaders and so forth can make it much more difficult for the opponent to achieve ideological objectives. Campaigns of civil disobedience can obstruct the administration and present the authorities with a dilemma. If they ignore the defiance, their authority has been successfully challenged. If they use draconian methods to suppress nonviolent protest they may lose moral and political standing at home and abroad.

It will be clear from the above discussion that denial actions are most effective when they are simultaneously charged with symbolic significance. Thus, at a physical level, it could be more effective to obstruct the entrance to, say, a military base with barriers such as immobilised lorries than to have people sitting down on the road in front of vehicles trying to go in and out of the base. But the symbolism associated with people putting their own bodies on the line, and perhaps risking injury or death, would be lost. This is not to say that there are no circumstances in which the use of physical barricades would be the appropriate tactic. It is simply to stress again the point that the moral and psychological impact is more important than the obstruction as such.

Undermining actions Undermining actions are those which seek to open-up and exploit divisions within the opponent's camp, and to deny it the cooperation of third parties. Clearly, many of what we have termed symbolic and denial activities serve also to undermine the confidence and unity of the opponent. But campaigning actions can also be directed specifically at opening up and exploiting divisions within the opponent's ranks. In the case of a dictatorial regime, this could mean finding ways of rupturing the links between it and that section of society which has hitherto given it support, exploiting disagreements within the ruling clique, seeking to win over previously neutral or indifferent groups or sections of society. In the case of a foreign occupation it could include encouraging disaffection among occupying forces and officials, splitting the opponent on the home front, and seeking international support and sanctions.



There is an on-going debate as to the best means of encouraging disaffection among occupying forces and officials in the context of a foreign occupation. Fraternisation, even at an individual level is likely to arouse suspicion within the defender's own ranks that collaboration rather than subversion is taking place. Non-cooperation is less ambiguous and may be more effective - though of course it may be coupled with engaging the opponent's forces in open public discussion as happened on the streets of Prague and other cities in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The potential for opening up divisions within the home country of an occupying power, and seeking allies among opposition groups and independent social institutions such as churches, centres of learning and so on, will be affected by the nature of the opponent's regime. We have noted how Gandhi availed himself of the opportunity provided by the Round Table Conference in London in 1931 to meet individuals who might have an influence on the situation and to address religious bodies, university gatherings and other groups, including some of the cotton workers in Lancashire whose jobs had been jeopardised by the Congress-sponsored boycott of foreign cloth. Similarly, Ho Chi Minh visited France in 1946 and rallied support there for the Vietnamese cause. Clearly, such activities are easier to conduct where the occupying or colonial power has a reasonably open and democratic system. Nevertheless, dictatorial governments too have their critics and opponents at home, and there is usually some scope for an occupied country to secure friends and allies amongst them.

Finally there is the need to seek sympathy and active support in the international community. Enlisting support among the political and religious organisations of countries allied to, or having an influence on, the opponent can be particularly important here. In this case the aim ultimately is to get the governments and populations of these countries to apply coercive pressure on the opponents. Among the other obvious goals in this connection are enlisting the support of international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Community, international peace and human rights organisations like Amnesty International, peace movements, socialist and social democratic internationals, and so forth. Probably the most striking success of efforts to enlist international support at the level of individual countries, and international governmental and non-governmental bodies, is the anti-apartheid and pro-democracy movement in South Africa. The Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have had successes in this field, too, especially since the start of the Intifada resistance.

In a later chapter on defence by civil resistance we consider how the various means of exerting pressure on an opponent can be marshalled to constitute a coherent strategy. It is in the context of a major national struggle - and preparation for it - that strategy assumes a central importance. Hence the decision to discuss it in detail in that context.

The problem of repression

Repression is a potentially the most severe problem for a civil resistance movement. At some level it is inevitable, is invited almost, by the very act of resisting an authoritarian or dictatorial government, or occupation regime, or challenging a well-entrenched system of domination and oppression. Indeed, a willingness to endure such hardship and suffering, and to persevere in the face of it, can have a powerful moral impact. As we noted earlier, repression has frequently proved entirely counter-productive. However, in some instances, it has been severe enough to disrupt the organisation and undermine the morale of the resistance, the Sharpsville massacre in South Africa in 1960 being a case in point.

Repression, however, also carries political costs for the side which perpetrates it. Any rational government, therefore, is obliged to weigh these in the balance when deciding how to respond to the challenge of civil resistance. In Beijing in June 1989, the Chinese authorities decided that the balance of risks and costs favoured military intervention and massacre. In East Germany a few months later, Erich Honnecker lacked the support of Gorbachev - his key external ally - and of sufficient members of his own party to take similar action against the mass demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin. We have also noted earlier how the British government felt constrained from acting too harshly against the civil resistance in India in 1920-21 and again in 1930-31, but was much better placed to do so during the Quit India campaign of 1942.

For its part, therefore, the resistance movement has to consider how the government is likely to respond and to shape its plans accordingly. It may have to decide, for example, if it is an appropriate moment for an



all-out confrontation, or whether it would be more prudent to concentrate on other forms of opposition. However, the 'prudent' course will not always be the right one. If the morale and authority of the government are clearly tottering, all-out resistance may be the right course of action, despite the near certainty that there will be repression and perhaps a heavy loss of life. Sometimes, of course, events will be out of the control of the resistance leadership, as when the anger and frustration of years of repression express themselves in an explosion of popular anger. The ANC in South Africa in the early 1990s is finding it difficult to channel the pent-up anger of its supporters in the townships.

Steps can often be taken which strengthen the constraints against the use of violence by the opponent. Generally a government is more likely to act circumspectly if it knows that its actions are being observed by the national and international media, and by other governments and organisations. For this reason it is clearly in the interest of a resistance movement to ensure that actions take place under the public gaze. When the Freedom and Peace movement (Wolnosc i Pokoj - WiP) in Poland undertook their first public demonstrations in 1985, they made a point of informing their friends in the Western peace movement, Radio Free Europe and other Western media, and the Polish underground press, of their intentions. They made sure also that the Polish authorities knew of these moves so that they would understand that their responses to the demonstration were being closely monitored. This was effective in preventing police assaults, and deterring the courts from handing out punitive sentences.¹⁴ There are countless similar instances of resistance movements using advance publicity and the presence of the international media as a shield against excessive retaliation by the authorities.

The form of demonstrations may also be varied to reduce the risk of repression. In 1970, and again in 1976, the Polish Army and security forces used tanks and firearms to break up demonstrations by striking workers. This experience was taken into account when the workers in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in 1980, at the time of the birth of Solidarity, opted for a sit-in strike rather than once again taking to the streets.¹⁵

Actions in which the resisters voluntarily impose hardship and suffering upon themselves rather than directly confronting the opponent have a tendency (though of course no more than a tendency) to inhibit a violent response. Fasts and hunger strikes are the clearest examples of this. In the earlier historical chapters we noted examples of these in Bolivia in 1978 and in Uruguay in 1983. There may, however, be periods during which the extremity of the repression makes any open confrontation unwise. In such times, symbolic acts such as the wearing of badges, the singing of national songs, the observance of national traditions, can contribute to keeping alive a culture of resistance. Such activities may be supplemented by go-slows and other forms of economic and administrative obstruction which are difficult if not impossible for the opponent to detect or counter. Even at the height of World War II, resistance along these lines occurred in all the countries of occupied Europe.

Meanwhile, the task of building up base communities and organisational networks can continue in an unobtrusive or clandestine fashion. The work in this respect may include the publication of underground newspapers and magazines, the smuggling in of literature, printing and transmitting equipment, the establishment of lines of communication with foreign media, international organisations, and so on. Churches sometimes occupy a privileged position under repressive regimes of both right and left, and can provide an important locus of dissent. This has been true, for instance, in Poland, East Germany, South Africa, and many countries in Central and South America. In Latin America, in particular, the development of 'liberation theology' has provided a crucial underpinning for emancipatory movements. The pattern in several countries in this region has been that after a more or less prolonged period of clandestine and grass-roots activity, including symbolic and 'micro-resistance', a dictatorial government has found it necessary to make concessions to keep the economy and administration going, and to try to allay international hostility. This in turn has made possible more open, public dissent. Such, as noted earlier, is the way things developed in Chile and Uruguay in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, the weapon of humour should never be overlooked. Its puncturing effect on official propaganda throughout Eastern Europe during the period of communist rule has been well documented. Some opposition groups also managed to incorporate humour and irony into their demonstrations - as for instance when WiP in Poland in the mid-1980s staged a street drama in ironic celebration of the Russian Revolution.¹⁶

Clearly, then, there are circumstances in which a campaign of confrontational civil resistance has little



immediate prospects of success, and perhaps should not be attempted. This is not of itself, however, an argument for abandoning civil resistance altogether. What may be called for instead is a longer-term strategy of cultural and 'semi-resistance' which eventually renders the regime vulnerable to open defiance. The successes of 'people power' over the last decade or so - often preceded by such a prolonged, low-key resistance - have shown that even regimes which seemed at one point irremovable except by war may be vulnerable in the end to nonviolent power.

NARP Discussion

Mechanisms of Change

Walter said that of the four 'mechanisms of change' listed by Sharp - Conversion, Accommodation, Coercion and Disintegration - only the first fitted into the 'positive' mode, the other three were all part of the 'negative' mode. There were in reality only two mechanisms, conversion and coercion. Sharp's last three 'mechanisms' were really different degrees of the same thing. You didn't plan for one or other of the effects he listed - you had a go and hoped for the best. In fact, once you opted for a negative emphasis you were not really in control of what would happen. Could you deliberately choose between the aim of limited coercion and the disintegration of the regime? Michael said that depended in part on the context. If you were trying to stop the building of a motorway, you might hope to coerce in a limited way, but you would not be aiming at or anticipating the overthrow of the political system - and you would know that in this kind of society it was not going to happen.

Howard said you could have an idea early on in a campaign about what kind of deal you were prepared to make with the powers that be. In South Africa, the ANC over the last few years had been working out ways to include the whites in the future of the country. When you were confident in a nonviolent strategy, the idea that you had to help those people change - not convert necessarily, but help them step down - could become part of the strategy. You needed to find ways of appearing less threatening to them personally. This could affect the goals you set yourself.

Howard also commented that in his view the 1989 events in Eastern Europe were more to do with disintegration than accommodation. Accommodation had been one step on the road to disintegration. Wojciech Lamentowicz, one of the Solidarity negotiators at the Round Table Conference in early 1989, said they went in to demand elections and found they were being offered the presidency. This was at a time when Solidarity had passed the peak of its power and had lost many of its activists. However the government's power had been eroded to such a point that they didn't feel able to continue. Solidarity were actually trying to put the brakes on the transfer of power as they did not want to be blamed for the problems they would inherit. There were examples from other struggles where opposition movements said that they wanted elections but not until they had time to organise and prepare for them.

Discussing the approach of Gene Sharp as against that of Boserup and Mack, Christina said Sharp's approach was in the negative mode and concentrated on coercion whereas the strategy advocated by Boserup and Mack's was not to employ coercion at first but use symbolic methods to build up the unity of the resistance. Later the resistance could employ undermining and denial methods. However, if one looked back at historical examples, such as the Czechoslovak resistance in 1968, it was much harder to distinguish between stages of resistance. Nor was there always a sharp distinction between positive and negative modes; often the two approaches occurred side by side.

Regarding conversion, Christina said she had always disagreed with referring to 'the opponent' as a single person, when in fact it was always a social system. Within that social system there were various levels. Conversion might not be happening to the ruling group, but it might occur at sub-levels and this could eventually feed through to other levels and influence the society as a whole

Symbolism and pragmatic coercion



Walter said that one of the things he found most interesting in the chapter was the relationship between symbolic action and purely pragmatic forms of coercion. If your primary aim was symbolic, the reason probably was that you assumed a common moral universe of some sort between you and your opponents. To put the matter in a simplistic way, you were trying to show them they were morally wrong. In Gandhi's case this was quite explicitly the objective. But what was there to symbolise except a common discourse? You resisted symbolically in order, so to speak, to 'woo' your opponents to your interpretation of the rights and wrongs of the situation, and to convince them they were not entitled to act as they were doing. This interpretation would help explain the special difficulties one encountered in ethnic and nationalist conflicts. In the case of extreme forms of nationalism, almost by definition your opponent didn't accept that there was a common universe of discourse. My country right or wrong was the implicit assumption of extreme nationalism.

Michael said that in Boserup and Mack's analysis the function of symbolism was not simply to appeal to shared moral assumptions with the opponent, but to establish and define a moral community among your own people. This could be crucial even if there was no immediate prospect of getting through to the opponent. In the early period of apartheid its opponents couldn't hope to win over the white population in South Africa in the short term, particularly the Afrikaaners who had such a strong ideological and quasi-religious commitment to the notion of racial superiority. However, over a long period, with sanctions and pressure being applied from outside, and with the shift in the power balance, there was eventually a debate within the white population. The civil disobedience demonstrations of the 1950s, such as the defiance of the pass laws, were not aimed simply at trying to establish common ground with the whites but were also intended to build up the solidarity of the movement. Howard added that such symbolic acts were also intended to send a signal to the rest of the world. During an invasion, for instance, you needed dramatic actions to ensure that the international community was fully aware that a terrible violation had occurred and that it was being resisted.

Limits of non-cooperation and the Resistance in Kosovo/a

Howard saw a problem about identifying non-cooperation and withdrawal of support as constituting the basis of the power of nonviolence. What nonviolent leverage did a population have in situations where a state or occupying power did not depend for its existence on the cooperation of a population? In Kosovo/a, Serbia did not need the cooperation of the overwhelmingly Albanian population. There were now no Albanians in Kosovo engaged in other than menial jobs. Nevertheless they had an impressive strategy of their own of non-cooperation and of building social solidarity - setting up parallel universities, schools, clinics and so forth. Today, the Albanian medical clinics in Kosovo were actually better than the Serbian ones, partly because of the international support they were getting. This was a nonviolent strategy based on building social solidarity. It didn't exercise pressure on the Serbs through its non-cooperation, and one had to be looking for other mechanisms at work here. It was certainly not trying to convert the Serbs either. As a group we needed to examine more closely the mechanisms involved where a body of people managed to sustain some form of nonviolent resistance, and to achieve successes, despite the fact that their support wasn't essential to the foreign power or the existing authorities. He thought it must in part be to do with shaming the opponents and undermining their self image. Ultimately you did get through to the Serbs - or to some Serbs - if you acted as the Kosovo Albanians were doing.

Walter said one major reason why nonviolent methods did not seem to be applicable to ethnic or extreme nationalist conflicts like those in Bosnia, or Rwanda was the time it took for nonviolent processes to work. A great deal of nonviolent strategy presupposed an endless amount of time to effect the change. With social defence, for example, you first of all let in the enemy, then you got going for the next ten or twenty years in order to divide their forces and their internal governmental system and so forth, by a cumulative process of winning over the more susceptible elements in their population. This process was linked to the capacity for symbolic appeal in the chosen method of resistance. He was referring here to the kind of symbolism that had a moral meaning, as opposed to the kind that merely created solidarity on your own side, though that too could be described as a kind of ethical process. It was where you had both kinds of symbolism present that nonviolent methods seemed possible. But the moral appeal required time. Where you had ethnic cleansing, you didn't have time. This was one of the key problems which traditional nonviolent theory had to deal with and which in practice was why no-one had tried it seriously in such contexts. Where some radical



destructive process took place, what cards did a nonviolent strategy hold?

Howard said that in the Kosovo situation many people would say that their main achievement had been not to be provoked. It would have suited Serbia better for Kosovo to have taken up arms. There were now several debates among the Kosovo Albanians. One was about self-defence and the possibility of people taking up arms and working out military strategies. The leadership, meanwhile, had continued to do their rounds of international visits trying to get someone to say they recognized that Kosovo ought to have self-government or be a UN Trusteeship or something. There was yet another strand who were talking about the need for dialogue with Serbs.

Walter asked how important a factor was Kosovo's small size as say compared say with Bosnia. Howard was unsure. Within Kosovo you had a nine to one preponderance of Albanians and you also had the Albanians in Albania, and those in Macedonia. Certainly the Serbs were militarily much more powerful than all the Albanians put together. There were some people who talked about creating a Greater Albania, so there was a threatening prospect in that direction. And always you had some Albanians, especially ones who had left, who got carried away and talked about going back and fighting, and wanted to buy arms. He did not know how realistic was the everyday assessment of Serbian military power. No doubt Ibrahim Rugova, President of the League for a Democratic Kosovo, realised that Serbia could crush a Kosovo military resistance, but he did not know how far this realisation was shared among the bulk of the population. Walter said that you always got such differences of emphasis in a population, but he would imagine that the power factor must be a key element in Kosovo Albanian psychology, and people's assessment of what could be done. This kind of context favoured the growth of some support for a nonviolent approach. It was much less likely where there was a more even power balance.

Christina suggested that by their non-provocative stance the Albanian Kosovans were helping to remove the fears that fuelled ethnic strife and extreme nationalism. Howard gave an example from his own experiences in Kosovo. The time before last when he was there, Arkan, the local Serbian war lord, was the member of parliament. He was operating out of the main hotel in the capital, Prishtina, his banner was draped across the street, and his guys were having riotous parties and shooting every night. He was trying to do what he and Seselj had done in other areas, namely to intimidate and provoke. When Howard went back in April of this year, Arkan's banner was still there, but he had lost his parliamentary seat. His guys just weren't around any more; they had been rejected by the Serbian community there. You could only imagine such a thing happening in Kosovo and it was due to the non-provocative, nonviolent behaviour of the Albanians.

Walter wondered what enabled the Albanians to respond in this nonviolent way. Howard said he thought that in the early 1980s the Albanians had overstepped the mark when they were demanding more rights, though he had not found any who would admit this. They had achieved autonomous status in the 1974 constitution, but no-one was too clear about what happened in the early 1980s. However, there was a massive clampdown at that time, and leading Albanians were given long jail sentences. The population probably came to appreciate then the extent of Serbia's power of repression. Thus when Milosevic starting campaigning against Kosovo in the late 1980s, they did not see much potential for violent resistance. But they also had one or two remarkable young leaders, and one remarkable old leader, Adem Demaci, who had been one of those sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. He was saying - 'Look when I was in prison, I was beaten and tortured. But actually it was some of my Serbian fellow prisoners and one or two Serbian prison guards who made it possible for me to survive. Therefore I am not going to hate Serbs.' Then one or two other leaders, Veton Surroi in particular, began a process of changing their own community. They had, for instance, big symbolic reconciliations between feuding families, and what they called a 'funeral of violence'. They had been getting support, too, from Slovenia and Croatia and other republics until the split up of the Yugoslav federation.

Notes:

1. The vote was taken at a meeting on 23 November 1989 following a raid by plainclothes police on the central TV station and the sacking of its director. 4,900 staff voted in favour of the motion, 300 against. See Nigel Hawkes (ed), *Tearing Down the Curtain*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990, p. 118. The film of the student demonstration was broadcast the following day - the day that Jakes and the whole of the Politburo



resigned.

[2.](#) Richard Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, George Routledge & Sons, London, 1935.

[3.](#) *Ibid*, p. 26.

[4.](#) *Ibid*, p. 36.

[5.](#) See the chapter entitled 'Political Jiu-Jitsu' in Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, pp. 657-98. There is a succinct summary of his argument in *Civilian-Based Defense*, pp.58-9.

[6.](#) See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, especially Chapter 13, 'Three ways success may be achieved', pp.705-776. George Lakey's MA thesis in 1962 at Pennsylvania University was entitled 'The Sociological Mechanisms of Nonviolent Action'. A copy of the thesis is housed at the Commonweal Library at Bradford University, West Yorkshire.

[7.](#) *Civilian-Based Defense*, pp. 60-5.

[8.](#) The distinction is drawn by Johan Galtung in 'On the Meaning of nonviolence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 1965, Vol 2, No.3, pp .228-57. See also Boserup and Mack, *War Without Weapons*, London: Frances Pinter, 1974, Chapter 1, 'Positive and Negative Conflict Behaviour: Theoretical Problems', pp. 21-36.

[9.](#) Boserup and Mack place the Norwegian researcher Arne Naess firmly in the first camp, and Gene Sharp, Adam Roberts, Theodor Ebert, a leading German researcher, and other 'pragmatists' in the second. The Norwegian researcher Johan Galtung attempts to combine both negative and positive approaches, though with an awareness of the problems of employing positive methods in highly polarised situations.

[10.](#) I would place Gene Sharp into the first of these two categories since he insists on keeping open the notion that civil-resistance and 'civilian-based defence' will be shown by further research to deal with all conflict situations. Roberts, since the 1970s at least, has clearly placed himself in the second category.

[11.](#) See Boserup and Mack on this issue, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-8.

[12.](#) Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Part Two: 'The Methods of Nonviolent Action: Political Jiu-Jitsu at Work'.

[13.](#) Boserup and Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[14.](#) See my interview with Elzbieta Rawicz-Oledzka in Randle, *People Power*, pp. 167-71

[15.](#) See Jan Zielonka, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of Nonviolent Action: the Polish Case', in *Orbis*, Spring 1986, p.91-110, especially pp. 103-4.

[16.](#) Elzbieta Rawicz-Oledzka in Michael Randle, *op. cit.*, p. 169

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