**Nonviolent Action Campaigns**

**An Effective Option for Pacifists and Non-Pacifists Alike?**

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*Introduction*

What are the most effective ways to win victories for the common good, build long-term democratic capacity among the general populace, and reduce the stranglehold of power elites on our lives? Mainstream political scientists answer this question by saying citizens should make more robust use of normal institutional channels--such as elections, lobbying, and litigation. Yet, in many cases, this answer has not proven adequate on its own because such institutional channels for democratic change either do not exist or have been constrained or rigged by power elites.

This strategic challenge faces people living in dictatorships, under foreign occupation, and in illiberal, authoritarian societies. But, it also confronts people in many countries that count themselves as democratic republics, such as the United States. As social scientists Gilens and Page (2014) have documented, power elites are a dominant influence in countries like the United States and they work hard to divide and conquer the general populace, harm the common good for private gain, and undermine popular movements working for sustainability, rights, freedom, and justice. What are concerned citizens, activists, and movement organizers to do in these situations?

This question has been wrestled with by activists for decades. In 1921, a young Indian activist named Sripad Amrit Dange (cited in Ruha 2018, p. 169) explored two different possibilities in his pamphlet *Gandhi or Lenin?* For Dange, these two revolutionary leaders against oppressive governments represented two very different strategic approaches—nonviolent resistance or armed struggle. While admitting to having limited information at his disposal, Dange concluded that Lenin’s armed struggle approach was more realistic and powerful. What do contemporary social movement researchers have to say on this important question?

In this essay, I will assess some important research on the comparative effectiveness of these two main approaches to popular resistance, explore more deeply the alternative of nonviolent resistance and identify how nonviolent resistance researchers have contributed to the effectiveness of social movements in the past, and, finally, explore how this information can increase the effectiveness of today’s activists and organizers, including faith-based Quaker activists, who want their work to be as evidence-based, strategic, and effective as possible. Also, in order to emphasize how the task of learning what is the most effective form of popular resistance strategy can be as important in self-described democratic countries as in dictatorial or authoritarian societies, I begin my assessment with a discussion of the activist debate over armed struggle and civil resistance between two important U.S. movement leaders who came to prominence in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s.

*Assessing the Two Main Paths of Popular Resistance*

Historically, the best-known alternative to conventional institutional advocacy is armed struggle. Like Dange, many activist leaders see violent resistance as not only morally justifiable, but as the most powerful form of struggle and collective self-defense when normal channels are not enough in the face of entrenched power elites willing to use violence and other forms of repression against them. A classic statement of this perspective was made by the gifted African-American human rights activist Malcolm X (1964) in his widely-quoted speech “The Ballot or The Bullet.”

In that talk, this influential political leader rightly critiqued the racist, “so-called democracy” of the United States, which had long denied equal rights to millions of Black people; attacked human rights activists with police guns, dogs, clubs, tear gas, and imprisonment; and enforced an exploitive international order through massive militarism and violence around the world. Under these circumstances, Malcolm X rejected relying only on “ballots” for reaching his vision of a just, multiracial, and fully democratic society that embodies the principles of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead, he argued that the way forward for the US Black Freedom Movement was to start using Molotov cocktails, hand grenades, bullets, and urban guerrilla warfare, as had many other oppressed people around the world.

Malcolm X’s approach is not the only popular resistance option possible, however. While Malcolm X dismissed it as “that ‘turn the other cheek’ stuff,” many in the Black Freedom Movement were experimenting with what Indian anti-colonial leader Mohandas Gandhi (cited in Ackerman, 2017) dubbed “civil resistance” in the early 20th century. According to French researcher Véronique Dudouet (2017, p. 5), “Civil resistance is an extra-institutional conflict-waging strategy in which organized grassroots movements use various, strategically sequenced and planned out, nonviolent tactics such as strikes, boycotts, marches, demonstrations, noncooperation, self-organizing and constructive resistance to fight perceived injustice without the threat or use of violence.”

While not relying on political violence to win, it is inaccurate to confuse civil resistance with pacifism, as Malcolm X did. Pacifism is the absolute moral commitment to abstain from all violence no matter what the circumstances. As noted by movement sociologist George Lakey (2016, p. 82), “Most pacifists do not practice nonviolent resistance and most who do practice nonviolent resistance are not pacifists.” This was true in the Indian Independence movement and it was true in the US Black Freedom Movement. People who adopt the civil resistance approach most often think that it—supplemented with the use of elections, lobbying, and litigation wherever possible—will be more successful and cause less collateral damage than an armed struggle approach. They are not absolutely opposed to violence in all circumstances, but have a moral preference for nonviolent action, at least whenever it seems the most likely to achieve positive goals.

The civil resistance approach certainly has a different “weapons system” than armed struggle. The classic list of civil resistance tactics is Gene Sharp’s 198 nonviolent action methods, which he derived from his case study research and published in the second volume of his groundbreaking book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973). Based on his research, Sharp classified these tactics into three broad categories (protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention), which are sometimes viewed as a growing spectrum of escalation and intensity. More recently, Sharp’s list and classification system has been expanded and updated by Quaker activist Michael Beer (2021). Could this “weapons system” prove to be a more powerful popular resistance option than armed struggle?

In the United States, the best-known advocate for experimenting with civil resistance was Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Malcolm X, King was a religious and moral leader of significant stature. Whatever their religious differences, both sought to be power-wielding, highly pragmatic movement strategists. They just saw things differently. In his own thinking, King agreed with Gandhi (cited in Qumsiyeh, 2011, p. 21) that “wherever there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence, but I believe nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence.”

King felt that Malcolm X should learn more about the history, underlying theory of power, mechanisms of success, and the strategy and tactics of civil resistance before dismissing it. He also felt that Malcolm X’s 1964 talk was not focused enough on strategy and was clouded by a powerful emotional reaction to witnessing so much anti-Black oppression and violence. As Malcom X had said in his 1964 speech, “When you drop that violence on me, then you’ve made me insane and I am not responsible for what I do.”

While King understood this emotional impulse to violently strike out against oppressors, he did not think it was a wise strategic choice for the US Black Freedom Movement. As far back as 1959, King (cited in Washington, 1986, p. 32) wrote,

*It is axiomatic in social life that the imposition of frustration leads to two kinds of reactions. One is the development of a wholesome social organization to resist with effective, firm measures against any efforts to impede progress. The other is a confused, anger-motivated drive to strike back violently, to cause damage.*

In King’s assessment, “There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in the guns of a few desperate men” and, he added, “Our enemies would prefer to deal with a small armed group than with a huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people (p.33).”

King was clearly aware of the existence of agent provocateurs—fake activists working undercover for movement opponents—who routinely instigated the use of violent tactics within the Black Freedom Movement in the hopes of making the movement smaller, weaker, and easier to defeat. This repression strategy, which I and others have documented (Chase, 2021), does not resolve the debate between Malcolm X and King, but it does suggest that it might be a good idea to look more critically at these two different approaches to popular resistance.

This strategic controversy was picked up by social movement researchers Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan when they met in 2006 at an academic conference hosted by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC). Stephan was on ICNC’s staff and her focus was on civil resistance research. Chenoweth was a doctoral student focused on violent resistance movements and was deeply skeptical about the power of mass nonviolent action, especially in the more extreme or difficult cases. During the conference, they frequently debated late into the night. Based on the research of Gene Sharp and others, Stephan tried to convince Chenoweth of the practical effectiveness of civil resistance by describing historic cases where grassroots movements were successful against brutal power elites by eroding the regime’s sources of power through strategic mass noncooperation and intervention. Chenoweth countered that for every successful case of civil resistance cited by Stephan, it is possible to cite a civil resistance failure or a case where armed struggle was successful.

By the end of the conference, Chenoweth and Stephan agreed on one thing—the contours of a plan to resolve their strategic debate through systematic research. These two researchers decided to analyze the outcomes of every mass popular resistance campaign they could find between 1900 and 2006 seeking “maximalist” goals, such as overthrowing dictators, defeating foreign occupiers, or seceding from an oppressive country’s domination. They identified 323 cases from around the world that fit their criteria, assembled a detailed database called Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO), and started coding whether these campaigns were primarily based on tactics of armed struggle or civil resistance. They then started comparing the impacts of each type of popular struggle in terms of success, partial success, or failure.

Before beginning, Chenoweth sought assurance that the research project’s funder would accept the findings of the study no matter what the conclusions. As Chenoweth (2014) recalls:

I remember telling Maria that we might find out… that violence was actually more effective—and asking her if [ICNC founder and funder] Peter Ackerman understood that this was a real possibility. She assured me that if we discovered that civil resistance was ineffective, then he and everyone else at ICNC would accept this outcome… Maria and I agreed that if it turned out that civil resistance was not very effective, then we had better find that out sooner rather than later.

Yet, after analyzing their data, Chenoweth (2021, p. xxi) shifted from being “a detached skeptic of civil resistance to becoming an invested participant in nonviolent movements.”

Perhaps Chenoweth’s and Stephan’s (2011) most important finding was that civil resistance struggles were twice as effective as armed struggle campaigns. In their study, the difference was a success rate of 53 percent for civil resistance campaigns as opposed to a 26 percent success rate for violent resistance. Another compelling finding was that civil resistance struggles, even failed ones, are more likely to result in democratic outcomes compared to campaigns relying on a strategy of armed struggle. Indeed, they found that successful civil resistance campaigns led to democratic outcomes 57 percent of the time, versus only six percent for successful violent campaigns. In addition, they found that civil resistance campaigns that ended without immediate victory still led to democratic outcomes within five years about 35 percent of the time compared to only a few percent for failed violent campaigns.

Other findings emerged that are important in understanding the differing effectiveness of these two different forms of popular resistance. For example, on average, successful civil resistance campaigns took three years to achieve victory, whereas successful violent resistance campaigns took nine years. Also, civil resistance campaigns tend to involve much more of the general population in the struggle than violent resistance does, which helps explain civil resistance success rates and its higher likelihood of achieving democratic outcomes. Indeed, on average, civil resistance campaigns involved ten times more of the population than armed struggle efforts.

Chenoweth and Stephan published their remarkable findings in *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* in 2011. In the years since, the social science study of civil resistance has exploded. Some of this research uses the ever-expanding NAVCO dataset for finer and finer statistical analysis of key questions. Other researchers do comparative case histories, library and archival research, network and discourse analysis, as well as interviews, surveys, and focus groups with activists and organizers. Some civil resistance scholars have also done ethnographic participant observation studies and others have helped make documentaries like *A Force More Powerful* and *Bringing Down a Dictator*.

Among the many useful insights developed by this body of research is additional evidence for the conclusion that “civil resistance is a realistic and more effective alternative to violent resistance in most settings (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 251).” Some of these studies even found that civil resistance does a superior job of limiting the severity and extent of anti-movement repression in a wide variety of situations, as well as making violent repression backfire against elites and expand popular support for movements (Nepstad, 2011; Pinckney, 2016; Perkoski & Chenoweth, 2018; Kurtz and Smithy, 2018; Wasow, 2021). In addition, this research has identified four key elements that increase the potential success of nonviolent resistance campaigns: nonviolent discipline, strategic thinking, a broad and diverse popular coalition participating in the movement, and the use of a wide variety of carefully sequenced nonviolent action tactics that put increasing moral, economic, and political pressure on decision-makers to support the just demands of popular movements.

*The Practical Application of Civil Resistance Research*

Grassroots activists and organizers stand to benefit from this research as they make their strategic choices. The best activists and organizers I know are reflective practitioners who, along with everything else they do, engage in study, observation, reflection, dialog, experimentation, and evaluation. They regularly engage in an informal action research cycle of *looking* (gathering data), *thinking* (analyzing and interpreting the data), and *acting* (generating and implementing an action plan) and they then engage in additional rounds of this cycle to improve their organizing over time. These people are on the lookout for any useful information that can strengthen their organizing efforts.

Mohandas Gandhi is a good example. A common misconception is that Gandhi derived his thinking about civil resistance as simply a logical deduction from Hindu religious beliefs about universal love or pacifism. Yet, as noted by Sharp (1979, p. 316), “An examination of Gandhi’s early speeches and writings in South Africa makes it clear, perhaps for the first time, that *before* Gandhi’s first participation in nonviolent action as group struggle he was familiar with both the concept and technique of struggle separated from the ethical element, and also with specific cases from Russia, China, Bengal, England, Ireland, and elsewhere.” Gandhi learned all this from the writings of journalists and organizers—as there were few, if any, academic civil resistance researchers publishing at that time. He then started engaging in his own experiments in civil resistance organizing, first in South Africa and then in India. He also routinely used his prison time to read and reflect deeply--and draft essays, articles, and reports on what he was learning for other activists and organizers in the Indian Independence campaign. While his early experiments in civil resistance were far more powerful than many expected, imagine if he also had the benefit of the strategic and organizing insights of professional civil resistance researchers that now exist. How much more successful might the movement campaigns he championed been?

Civil resistance research has certainly been significant in my own activism. In the 1970s, when I first became involved in Movement for a New Society, a national network of nonviolent US activists and organizers that grew out of A Quaker Action Group, many of us studied movement history, the thinking of key activists before us like Gandhi and King, and the groundbreaking research of Gene Sharp on the power theory, methods, and dynamics of nonviolent action. We organized activist study groups on these topics to develop more strategic campaigns for sustainability, rights, freedom, and justice. We also incorporated many of Sharp’s insights into our nonviolent direct-action training programs, which were influential in a number of US movement campaigns (see Cornel, 2010, pp. 231-249).

It was an enormous help that Sharp was a mission-driven, public intellectual, not a careerist researcher content to write only in academic jargon in peer-reviewed academic outlets while never thinking about the practical application of their research. Indeed, Sharp wrote clearly for both academic and general audiences. He wrote some of his books, such as *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (2011), specifically for activists and organizers. He also worked hard to have his work translated into many different languages, and he frequently consulted with many pro-democracy movement organizers around the world through the Albert Einstein Institution.

It is no exaggeration to say that Sharp had significant practical impact around the world. The documentary film *How To Start a Revolution* features many activist leaders and organizers who have studied Sharp’s work, or consulted with him, to inform their civil resistance efforts to topple authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. These activists include organizers from Burma, Bosnia, Estonia, Serbia, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Mideast.

One compelling example comes from Thailand. On February 23, 1991, a military group calling itself the National Peace Keeping Council launched a coup. A pro-democracy movement quickly emerged in response, gaining strength over time through numerous mass demonstrations, hunger strikes, public criticism of the military regime, and organizing a popular public dialogue process that drafted an alternative people’s constitution to challenge the military. The movement’s main organizers chose civil resistance as their strategic approach based on their own experience, but they helped spread the popular understanding of their approach through sharing insights developed by Gene Sharp. A sympathetic Thai newspaper, which had not yet been shut down by the military, published a translation of a Gene Sharp article on defeating military coups through nonviolent resistance, and thousands of leaflets were distributed at mass demonstrations based on Sharp’s list of “198 Methods of Nonviolent Action.” This pro-democracy movement, strengthened by the sharing of Sharp’s research insights, soon achieved its goal of ending the coup and creating a more democratic civilian government (see Miller, 2005, pp. 299-314).

The influence of other civil resistance researchers can also be traced with a little effort. For example, Quaker activist George Lakey (2012) created the online Global Nonviolent Action Database at Swarthmore College to “provide free access to information about hundreds of cases of nonviolent action for learning and for citizen action.” As part of this effort, he offered research seminars and taught talented graduate and undergraduate students to develop new historical case studies to add to this searchable website. Inspired by their research projects, several of these students went on to organize the Sunrise Movement, a national youth-led climate justice campaign that integrates nonviolent direct action and institutional advocacy to build support for a Green New Deal in the United States. Other examples could also be offered, such as how the Extinction Rebellion climate justice movement has incorporated key insights developed by Chenoweth and Stephan in their activist training programs.

I have personally seen this happen many times. For example, when I worked at International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, I was a co-organizer of an annual eight-week online course on civil resistance for grassroots activists and organizers around the world. During these activist education courses, I saw firsthand the value of having civil resistance researchers like Maciej Bartowski, Veronique Dudouet, Mary Elizabeth King, Cecile Mouly, Janjira Sambatpoonsiri, Kurt Schock, and Isak Svensson serve as active discussion participants. ICNC’s online course design created a mix of systematic generalized knowledge developed by professional researchers and activist-constructed local knowledge, all combined with peer-to-peer storytelling and debate. This led to greater reflection and insights for all involved, including the researchers. Over time, similar interactions have guided several civil resistance researchers on how to “translate” their work for an activist audience in ever more useful ways. Their activist-oriented videos, talks, articles, and monographs are then often included to good effect in the ICNC’s course curriculum. (For ICNC videos, articles, and downloadable publications, go to ICNC’s website: <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>.)

*Pacifists and Strategic Nonviolent Resistance*

Knowing about civil resistance research is a real plus for faith-based activists committed to nonviolence as a moral philosophy for at least two reasons. First, it can give us a practical argument that can help non-pacifist activists stick to a nonviolent discipline in the course of a tough campaign, including when there is violent repression. Preaching pacifism to non-pacifist activists is less likely to be effective in promoting nonviolent discipline when the going gets rough compared to carefully explaining the solid empirical evidence of both the power and effectiveness of nonviolent resistance campaigns. It allows us to encourage an ethical preference for nonviolent action that many non-pacifists hold, but it also speaks their language about practicality, effectiveness, power analysis, strategy, and organizing broad-based movements and campaign coalitions. This helps ordinary people who might join nonviolent movements and campaigns realize that nonviolent action will more likely lead to positive change than unstrategic riots, emotionally-reactive low-level political violence, or even organized armed struggle.

Secondly, this knowledge can help focus the attention of pacifists on power and strategy and increase the effectiveness of our own nonviolent activism rather than just standing on a street corner with signs every week witnessing to our wish for peace, justice, or sustainability. There is more to creating powerful movements and campaigns than that! The goal of nonviolent movements and campaigns is not to just express our opinions, but to actually to shift power, change policy, and improve our communities and world through real peace, justice, and sustainability reforms. Thinking about power and strategy can help increase our chances of improving the world through nonviolent resistance campaigns, along with other forms of social betterment, such as normal institutional advocacy, humanitarian efforts, and more neutral peacebuilding approaches to help facilitate the resolution of other peoples’ conflicts.

I come to this conclusion as a long-time Quaker activist because I believe that many Quakers are less in touch with the nonviolent rebelliousness of the early Friends and live more in tune with the more Quietist and uncontroversial approach to Quakerism that emerged among many British Friends after the restoration of the repressive British Monarchy. These Friends throughout history have tended to shy away from civil resistance activism—though there are many exemplary examples of a more faithful approach to what the early Friends called the “Lamb’s War,” which was essentially the nonviolent revolutionary Quaker approach to foster the Peaceable Kingdom.

The existence of this unfortunate non-resistance tendency among many Friends is illustrated by a little-known story from Quaker history. In June 1934, as the rise of Nazi fascism was causing alarm around the globe, Professor Henry Cadbury, then AFSC’s chair, gave a keynote address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In his talk, Cadbury told the assembled Jewish leaders to seek only dialogue and negotiations with Nazis, and not “fight back” in any way. He specifically urged the rabbis not to support boycotts to pressure the German regime to change its antisemitic policies. Cadbury claimed boycotts—and all the nonviolent resistance tactics used by Gandhi in the struggle to end British rule in India—were “simply war without bloodshed.” He said such warlike tactics should be avoided by all adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead, he argued that a strategy of “non-resistance” would put an end to the Nazi persecution of Jews “more effectively and earlier” than any form of resistance.

Cadbury’s advice to the rabbis was not well received. Samuel Schulman, the honorary president of the conference, declared that he could not in good conscience "subscribe to the principle of non-resistance to evil which Dr. Cadbury advocated.” Rabbi Stephan Wise, who The New York Times reported “led a wave of objection to the advice of Professor Henry J. Cadbury,” said from the conference podium: “A boycott is a rightful refusal to not have any relation morally or economically with any government which has persecuted us and done injustice to our people.” Wise added: “A boycott is not war. It is a moral and economical weapon of self-defense.” Ultimately, the conference participants adopted a resolution rejecting Cadbury’s advice and asserted instead that “moral persuasion should be supplemented by every manner of nonviolent resistance” whenever people face violent repression, social injustice, economic marginalization, and systemic inequality or persecution.

Cadbury, the AFSC, and many Quakers ultimately came to agree with the rabbis and embraced the strategy and tactics of nonviolent resistance as a key component of their efforts to promote equality, justice, freedom, and peace. Cadbury, the AFSC, and Quakers like Bayard Rustin (2012), Adam Curle (1971), Bill Moyer (2001), and George Lakey (2018, 2022) fully embraced strategic nonviolent movement building and campaigning. Indeed, many Quakers and the AFSC supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56, and the nonviolent resistance strategy of the civil rights and the anti-Vietnam War movements in the 1960s, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against South Africa’s apartheid regime in the 1980s, and the current international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign against the US-backed Israeli system of military occupation and apartheid against Palestinians.

Learning from our faith-based activist brothers and sisters, and from civil resistance researchers, may help us all offer bolder and more effective contributions to the organizing of nonviolent movements and campaigns of all types. This effort will increase the power and capacity of the Religious Society of Friends and other faith-based activists to contribute to the building of what Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community.

*Conclusion*

Close to a hundred years ago, Gandhi articulated the grand strategic insight that undergirds civil resistance activism: “No Government can exist for a single moment without the co-operation of the people, willing or forced, and if people suddenly withdraw their cooperation in every detail, the Government will come to a standstill (cited in Sharp, 1979, p. 44).” This is an empowering theoretical insight, but the practical challenge facing civil resistance organizers is figuring out how to turn this latent power potential into well-organized and mobilized social movements that can win reforms and, when needed, nonviolent revolutions to enforce the popular will against the will of often violent power elites. Knowing the evidence for the superiority of civil resistance compared to political violence and armed struggle is a key strategic insight relevant for effective activists and organizers.

There still remain many movement building questions that are not easy to answer, of course. Experienced activists (often through trial and error) and civil resistance scholars (often through systematic research) can help us address these remaining questions, offer valuable insights about the theory and practice of effective nonviolent movements and campaigns, and hopefully increase the likelihood of movement victories. Such research and insight can help us all better address what Martin Luther King (cited in Washington, 1986, p. 243) called “the fierce urgency of now.”

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