

PATHS TO SOCIAL CHANGE: CONVENTIONAL POLITICS, VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE

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Keywords: Nonviolence, violence, politics, social change, participation, means, ends, suffering

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Summary

Methods of bringing about social change can be divided into three categories: conventional politics, violence and nonviolence. Conventional politics in turn can be divided into authoritarian, representative and participatory systems. Each of these methods has strengths and weaknesses. These methods are assessed using four criteria. First is their track record, namely how well they have worked in the past. Second is the level of popular participation in the process of change. Third is compatibility between the means to create change and the desirable goal. Fourth is the level of suffering

caused by the process of change as well as by the *status quo*. Of conventional approaches, authoritarian systems are worst in every regard. Representative systems have a better track record and have much greater capacity for self-transformation but also have shortcomings. Participatory systems seem especially good, though the evidence is limited. Of the nonconventional approaches, nonviolence is superior to violence by nearly every criterion.

1. Introduction

There is a need for social change, because society is not perfect. The list of the world's problems is a long one. For example: torture is practiced in many countries; many people live in poverty; discrimination occurs against women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and many others; the environment is being seriously damaged; and chemical, biological and nuclear weapons exist, poised to be used.

So change is needed. What sort of change? People have different visions of a desirable world, so it is difficult to gain agreement about what would be a perfect world. Agreement is much easier over what is wrong. Nearly everyone is opposed to torture, exploitation and environmental destruction. Nearly everyone will agree those sorts of things should be reduced or eliminated.

The next question is how. How can torture and exploitation be reduced? How can the environment be protected? At this point there is far less agreement. Agreeing how the world *should* operate is far easier than agreeing on what to do about it.

People have come up with lots of different approaches. Here are some:

- Don't do anything about the problems. They will fix themselves, through a process of social evolution.
- Pray to a higher power. The higher power will fix the problems (or provide personal salvation).
- People with power will fix the problems due to a sense of responsibility.
- Purify yourself. If each individual becomes pure, the problems will no longer exist, or can be transcended.

Each of these approaches has supporters, but there is not a lot of evidence to back them up. What these approaches have in common is they operate without politics. Politics, in the broadest sense, is the collective exercise of power. The focus here is on political options, in this sense of politics.

There are three main approaches.

- Conventional politics, by and through governments.
- Violence, including beatings and killings, and the threat of violence.
- Nonviolent action, including rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins.

In the remainder of this chapter, three approaches are examined through a series of lenses. First is their track record in challenging and eliminating major problems. Second is the level and type of participation in these approaches. Third is the relationship between means and ends, namely between how change is brought about and the desirable goal. Fourth is the role of suffering. But before beginning this comparison, in

the next section the three approaches are outlined.

2. Three Approaches to Social Change

2.1. Conventional Politics

“Conventional politics” means the usual way of doing things in terms of the collective exercise of power. The world today is divided into countries, each under the authority of a government (though in some countries the government has broken down or has little power). The government is the political executive of the state; other components of the state include the police, military and various bureaucracies to handle diplomacy, trade, taxation and other functions.

The economic system has important political dimensions, because it is also about the exercise of power. States normally set up regulations for handling economic affairs. Businesses, especially large corporations, have a strong influence on economic policy. Huge global corporations have an influence on whole countries.

States interact in various ways, and the strongest states — economically, militarily, diplomatically — usually have the largest influence over others, and on the global system as a whole. There are also many international organizations such as the United Nations. At the other end of the scale are local governments and other local groups.

Focusing on the government function of formal decision making, the forms of government can be divided into three main types: authoritarian, representative and participatory. This is a simplification of the actual diversity of political systems, but useful for expository purposes.

Authoritarian governments include military dictatorships, state socialist and fascist systems, and others where rule is by a single individual or group. In authoritarian systems, decisions are made by rulers without any substantive accountability to the wider public.

In representative systems, the top-level political decision makers are chosen by members of the public, typically through elections. Like authoritarian systems, decisions are made by an individual or small group, but those decision makers are formally accountable to the electorate. Note that some authoritarian governments run sham elections, in which votes are falsely counted or where only one candidate is available, to give the appearance of representative government.

In participatory systems, decisions are made by the people who are affected by them. In ancient Athens, the assembly, composed of all male citizens, made decisions for the city. A participatory mechanism today is the referendum, in which all voters choose between options on a ballot, as used in countries such as Switzerland.

There is considerable variation within conventional systems. For example, authoritarian systems can be ruthless dictatorships or have rulers who coexist with significant opposition. Representative systems can use proportional representation or single-member electorates, and may or may not have constitutional protections for human

rights. Using conventional politics to bring about change means operating through the current system. In authoritarian systems, there is often no formal way to do this. In representative systems, the formal method of change is to vote for different political leaders, who in turn will introduce new laws or policies. In participatory systems, new laws or policies can be introduced directly.

A society may have several different systems operating at the same time, in different areas. In countries with representative governments, most corporations are run using authoritarian principles: decisions are made by top executives who are not accountable through elections. Some churches are run on authoritarian principles, such as the Catholic Church in which the Pope has formal power. On the other hand, some congregations make decisions through participatory processes.

2.2. Violence

A second approach to social change is through using violence. At the international level, this includes using military force to threaten or attack another country, defeating the other country's military forces in a war and taking control of the government, corporations and so forth. Within a country, violent change can occur through a military coup, in which a segment of the military takes control of the government.

Another option is use of violence by challengers from a social movement with some degree of popular support, an approach called armed struggle. When the challengers are militarily weak, without a normal army, they typically use "unconventional" military techniques such as harassing raids, an approach called guerrilla warfare. Examples include phases of the American Revolution and the Chinese Revolution. When the challengers become stronger, they may have regular troops that fight government forces in conventional battles.

Another way to use violence is against civilians, a method often called terrorism, though the label "terrorism" is used inconsistently. The largest scale violence against civilians is by governments, for example in wars when cities are bombed. Governments can use violence against civilians as a method of social change. Genocide — the extermination of an entire group, such as the Jews under the control of Nazi Germany — is the most extreme example. Violence against civilians is also used by challengers to governments, such as by the Irish Republican Army.

2.3. Nonviolence

Nonviolent action refers to methods of action that are not violent and that are not conventional politics. Examples include rallies, vigils, ostracism, strikes, work-to-rule, boycotts, sit-ins, fasts and setting up alternative political structures. Nonviolent action can be by an individual, such as a protester who perches in the top of a tree to prevent it being logged, or by groups, such as marches. Nonviolent action can be through physical presence, such as occupation of offices, or through withdrawal, such as when voters boycott an election or workers walk off the job.

There is also a positive side to nonviolent action, including such things as developing neighborhood associations, serving the needs of the poor, promoting harmony between

different groups in a community, constructing environmentally friendly buildings, setting up interactive communication systems, and fostering community participation in local decision making. These are all things that help make a community survive and thrive without violence and without domination. Gandhi called this the constructive program.

Nonviolent action can be treated as a set of techniques of struggle, melded together into a campaign. Nonviolence can also be a way of life or, in other words, a philosophy of personal behavior and being. It means living in a way that minimizes harm to others, both avoiding any personal violent behavior and also acting positively to help others and reduce the level of domination in the world. Nonviolence as a way of life is sometimes linked to religious belief.

Many people use methods of nonviolent action because they are effective in achieving their goals. For example, workers may strike to achieve better pay and conditions. This is called the pragmatic orientation to nonviolent action. Others adopt nonviolent methods because of ethical or religious beliefs that life is sacred or violence is evil. An example is a pacifist who believes it is wrong to hurt another person. This is called the principled orientation to nonviolent action. Principled adherents refuse to use violence even when it might be more effective.

In practice, there is a lot of overlap between the pragmatic and principled approaches. In a group of activists, some may support nonviolent action for pragmatic reasons while others have a principled commitment. Furthermore, many principled adherents to nonviolence seek to find methods that are as effective as possible.

2.4. Boundaries

The boundaries between conventional politics, violence and nonviolence are not well defined, and to some extent depend on the circumstances. Consider first the boundary between violence and nonviolence. A normal distinction is to say violence involves physical harm to a person. Nonviolent action does not. At the boundary is harm to physical objects, commonly called sabotage. This includes blowing up empty buildings, smashing the nosecone of a nuclear missile, disabling equipment at a factory, breaking windows, destroying documents, and altering a website. Sometimes this is called violence against property.

In practice, nonviolent activists usually avoid actions that cause massive damage or pose any risk to humans. So setting a forest fire would usually be seen as violence. When the physical damage is low, or the damage is to something that itself is a tool of violence, then it is more likely to be treated as nonviolent action. Examples are deleting a computer file containing names of dissidents to be arrested or destroying the detonators on military explosives.

The boundary between nonviolent action and conventional politics depends on what is considered conventional. In authoritarian systems, a leaflet or petition challenging the government may be treated as subversion; people involved might be arrested or harassed. Therefore, leafleting and petitioning are definitely methods of nonviolent action in such circumstances. In representative systems, leaflets and petitions can

become commonplace and accepted as routine and nonthreatening. They therefore become part of conventional politics.

In many countries, workers have the legal right to strike, but sometimes only in tightly regulated conditions. For example, strike pickets might be legally permitted to talk to other workers to encourage them to stay away from the workplace but not the right to block their entry. In such circumstances, legal strikes are conventional politics in a formal sense, but may be so unusual or disruptive they could be classified as nonviolent action. Any violation of regulations makes the strike illegal and therefore more obviously in the category of nonviolent action. For example, a wildcat strike, when workers strike without warning or the involvement of union officials, is definitely nonviolent action.

Working backwards, it is possible to use the response to methods to judge the system. If a few workers put out a leaflet critical of organizational policies, management sometimes responds by criticizing, harassing or even dismissing the workers. When this occurs, it is reasonable to say the organization is operating with authoritarian politics and that a workplace leaflet is a form of nonviolent action, even though the same sort of leaflet, used by a neighborhood group, would be conventional politics.

There is also a boundary between conventional politics and violence. When governments use military force to defend against an armed attack, this is normally treated as conventional politics, whereas aggressive war is not. But when non-government groups use violence, whether in aggression or defense, this is almost never counted as conventional politics. An example is when police mount an armed raid on a household to confiscate goods or arrest people. If members of the household, or neighbors or friends, use any means — violent or nonviolent — to resist the police, this is usually seen as well beyond conventional politics.

3. Track Records

To compare conventional politics, violence and nonviolence as means of social change, one crucial criterion is how well they work: can they actually bring about change widely regarded as beneficial? This question is deceptively simple, because people differ greatly in what they see as beneficial. Today, nearly everyone condemns slavery, but in 1750 it was widely accepted and fiercely defended. Supporters of slavery would not have seen its abolition as beneficial.

Similarly, today's peace activists believe nuclear weapons should be abolished, but many people believe nuclear weapons — especially their own country's nuclear weapons — are needed to deter aggression. So to assess the track records of conventional politics, violence and nonviolence, it is easier to look at changes widely accepted today as beneficial, such as abolishing slavery, ending dictatorships and improving the situation of women.

There is an additional complexity: when change occurs, it can be difficult to determine exactly why, for example when conventional politics, violence and nonviolence were all used. So the examples here are not definitive.

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Biographical Sketch

Brian Martin has a BA in physics from Rice University (USA, 1969) and a PhD in theoretical physics from Sydney University (Australia, 1976).

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