

Gene Sharp's Theory of Power

Gene Sharp, the world's leading writer on nonviolent action, uses a theory of power based on a division between rulers and subjects and on the withdrawing of consent as the main avenue for effecting political change. From the point of view of structural approaches to the analysis of society, Sharp's picture leaves out much of the complexity of political life, such as the structures of capitalism, patriarchy and bureaucracy - which do not fit well with the ruler-subject picture. As a set of conceptual tools for social activists, however, Sharp's theory of power is far superior to structural approaches.

Gene Sharp's book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) is widely regarded as a classic. Other important works are two collections of essays, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980) and *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (1979).

Other writers and activists have made important contributions to the theory and practice of nonviolent action, especially Gandhi. Sharp's key role has been to systematize the field in two ways. First, he has classified methods of nonviolent action and catalogued hundreds of different techniques along with an extensive array of historical examples. This classification has produced conceptual order amongst the scattered experiences detailed in the literature on nonviolent actions. Second, Sharp has elaborated a theory of power which offers a framework for understanding how nonviolent action works.

Sharp's ideas are especially worthy of critical attention because they have been widely adopted by social activists as providing a theoretical underpinning for their own nonviolent actions. Training sessions on nonviolence often include segments on "power theory," which typically is a simplified version of Sharp's ideas, based either directly on his writings or on secondary accounts of them. Yet, compared to the intensive use of his ideas by activists, scholars have devoted little attention to Sharp.

My aim in this paper is to analyze Sharp's theory of power, especially by comparing it to structural approaches to social analysis. Sharp has written that he welcomes critiques. My analysis is done in the spirit of sympathetic criticism.

Sharp's Theory

The essence of Sharp's theory of power is quite simple: people in society may be divided into rulers and subjects; the power of rulers derives from consent by the subjects; nonviolent action is a process of withdrawing consent and thus is a way to challenge the key modern problems of dictatorship, genocide, war, and systems of oppression.

The two key concepts in Sharp's theory of power are, first, the ruler-subject classification and, second, consent. The ruler-subject classification is one that Sharp uses without detailed justification. The "ruler" includes "not only chief executives but also ruling groups and all bodies in command of the State structure" (1980, p. 22). Sharp focuses on the state in his analysis. He spells out the various structures involved in the state, especially the state bureaucracy, police and military, all of which "are under the command of the person or group which occupies the position of 'ruler' at the head of the State" (1980, p. 316). All others besides the rulers are the subjects.

Sharp defines political power, which is one type of social power, as "the totality of means, influences, and pressures - including authority, rewards, and sanctions - available for use to achieve the objectives of the power-holder, especially the institutions of government, the State, and groups opposing either of them" (1980, p. 27). Sharp counterposes his analysis to the common idea that power is a monolithic entity residing in the person or position of a ruler or ruling body. Sharp argues instead that power is pluralistic, residing with a variety of groups and in a diversity of locations, which he calls "loci of power." The loci of power provide a countervailing force against the power of the ruler, especially when the loci are numerous and widely distributed throughout society.

Accepting the argument that power is not intrinsic to rulers, then it must come from somewhere else. Sharp gives the following key sources of power: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources, and sanctions (1973, pp. 1112). What is the basis for these sources of power? This is Sharp's second key concept. He says that these sources of the ruler's power "depend intimately upon the obedience and cooperation of the subjects" (1973, p. 12). This can be called the consent

theory of power. Without the consent of the subjects, either their active support or their passive acquiescence, the ruler would have little power and little basis for rule.

Power for Sharp is always contingent and precarious, requiring cultivation of cooperation and manipulation of potentially antagonistic loci. His consideration of the sources of power thus leads him to obedience as the key: "the most important single quality of any government, without which it would not exist, must be the obedience and submission of its subjects. Obedience is at the heart of political power" (1973, p. 16).

The focus on obedience then leads Sharp to ask "Why do men (sic) obey?" He suggests that there is no single answer, but that important are habit, fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the ruler, zones of indifference, and absence of self-confidence among subjects (1973, pp. 16-24).

Nonviolent action constitutes a refusal by subjects to obey. The power of the ruler will collapse if consent is withdrawn in an active way. The "active" here is vital. The ruler will not be threatened by grumbling, alienation, or critical analyses alone. Passivity and submissiveness are of no concern to Sharp; he is interested in activity, challenge, and struggle (1973, p. 65), in particular with nonviolent methods of action.

The account here has abbreviated and simplified Sharp's full exposition, but nevertheless highlights key assumptions made by him. His theory of power is only the beginning of his work on nonviolent action, which leads him through methods of nonviolent action to the "dynamics of nonviolent action," which includes laying the groundwork for action, making challenges, building discipline, building support, and redistributing power. The theory of power is important because it is the theoretical foundation for Sharp's other work.

This is part of a longer article written by Brian Martin and published in *PeaceWork*, a magazine published monthly since 1972 by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-based peace & justice organization. *PeaceWork* is a source of dependable information to those who strive for peace and justice and are committed to furthering the nonviolent social change necessary to achieve them. Rooted in Quaker values and informed by AFSC experience and initiatives, *PeaceWork* offers a forum for organizers, fostering coalition-building and teaching the methods and strategies that work in the global and local community. *PeaceWork* seeks to serve as an incubator for social transformation, introducing a younger generation to a deeper analysis of problems and issues, reminding and re-inspiring long-term activists, encouraging the generations to listen to each other, and creating space for the voices of the disenfranchised. 2161 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140 (617) 661-6130 pwork@igc.org **This article is posted at <http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0505/050514.htm>**

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