Nonviolent Action and Its Misconceptions: Insights for Social Scientists

Kurt Schock, *Rutgers University*

Introduction

Prior to the wave of people power movements that erupted across the globe in the late twentieth century, scholars of social movements and revolution rarely addressed nonviolent action as a strategy for political change in non-democratic contexts. By the beginning of the twenty-first century this changed, as increasingly more social scientists began turning their attention to a topic once addressed primarily by peace studies scholars.[1] The analysis of nonviolent action by social scientists other than peace studies scholars should be welcomed. Yet, since popular and scholarly misconceptions about nonviolence abound, it would be useful to examine some of these in the hope that biases in the social scientific analysis of nonviolent action can be attenuated.[2]

Nonviolent Action and its Misconceptions

What is nonviolent action? As the name implies, nonviolent action is *active*—it involves activity in the collective pursuit of social or political objectives—and it is *non-violent*—it does not involve physical force or the threat of physical force against human beings. More specifically, nonviolent action involves an active process of bringing political, economic, social, emotional, or moral pressure to bear in the wielding of power in contentious interactions between collective actors (McCarthy 1990; 1998; Sharp 1973, 1999). Nonviolent action is non-institutional, i.e., it operates outside the bounds of institutionalized

***Kurt Schock** is associate professor of sociology and a member of the graduate faculty in global affairs at Rutgers University, Newark. His research interests include comparative political sociology and social movements. His book,* Unarmed Insurrections: The Power of Nonviolent Action in Non-Democracies, *will be published by the University of Minnesota Press. He can be reached at kschock@ andromeda.rutgers.edu.*

political channels, and it is indeterminate, i.e., the procedures for determining the outcome of the conflict are not specified in advance (Bond 1994). Nonviolent action occurs through: (1) acts of omission, whereby people refuse to perform acts expected by norms, custom, law, or decree; (2) acts of commission, whereby people perform acts which they do not usually perform, are not expected by norms or customs to perform, or are forbidden by law, regulation, or decree to perform; or (3) a combination of acts of omission and commission (Sharp 1973, 1999). Rather than viewing nonviolent action as one-half of a rigid violent-nonviolent dichotomy, nonviolent action may be better understood as a set of methods with special features that are different from both violent resistance and institutional politics (McCarthy 1990). That said, let us look at some common misconceptions about nonviolent action.

1. Nonviolent action is *not* inaction (although it may involve the refusal to carry out an action that is expected, i.e., an act of omission), it is *not* submissiveness, it is *not* the avoidance of conflict, and it is *not* passive resistance. In fact, nonviolent action is a direct means for prosecuting conflicts with opponents and an explicit rejection of inaction, submission, and passivity.

2. Anything that is not violent is not considered to be nonviolent action. Nonviolent action refers to specific actions that involve risk and that invoke non-physical pressure or nonviolent coercion in contentious interactions between opposing groups.

3. Nonviolent action is not limited to state sanctioned political activities. Nonviolent action may be legal or illegal. Civil disobedience, i.e., the open and deliberate violation of the law for a collective social or political purpose, is a fundamental type of nonviolent action.

4. Nonviolent action is not composed of regular or institutionalized techniques of political action such as litigation, letter writing, lobbying, voting, or the passage

of laws. Although institutional methods of political action often accompany nonviolent struggles, nonviolent action occurs outside the bounds of institutional political channels. Contrary to regular and institutionalized political activity, there is always an element of risk involved for those implementing nonviolent action since it presents a direct challenge to authorities. Thus, nonviolent action is context-specific. Displaying anti-regime posters in democracies would be considered a low risk and regular form of political action, whereas the same activity in non-democracies would be considered irregular and would involve a substantial amount of risk. It would therefore be considered a method of nonviolent action in a non-democratic context. Similarly, strikes in democracies that occur within the bounds of institutionalized labor relations cannot be considered nonviolent action, since they are not non-institutional or indeterminate. However, a wildcat strike in a democracy and most strikes in non-democracies would be instances of nonviolent action given their non-institutionalized, indeterminate, and high-risk features.

5. Nonviolent action is not a form of negotiation or compromise. Negotiation and compromise may or may not accompany conflicts prosecuted through nonviolent action, just as they may or may not accompany conflicts prosecuted through violent action. In other words, nonviolent action is a means for prosecuting a conflict and it should be distinguished from means of conflict resolution (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, 5).

6. Participation in nonviolent action does not require that activists hold any sort of ideological, religious, or metaphysical beliefs. Contrary to popular and scholarly assumptions, those who engage in nonviolent action are rarely pacifists. Those who engage in nonviolent action hold a variety of different beliefs, one of which may be pacifism, but pacifism is not prevalent among those engaged in nonviolent action. As noted by George Lakey, "most pacifists do not practice

nonviolent resistance, and most people who do practice nonviolent resistance are not pacifists" (Lakey 1973, 57).

7. There are also significant misconceptions concerning the role of activists' perceptions about the methods used in struggles. Those who implement methods of nonviolent action may not recognize them as 'methods of nonviolent action,' and they certainly do not have to adhere to a theory of nonviolence or a moral code to successfully implement them.

8. Nonviolent action does not depend on moral authority, the 'mobilization of shame,' or the conversion of the views of opponents in order to succeed. Conversion of the oppressor's views, whereby the challenge effectively alters the view of the oppressors thereby resulting in the acceptance of the challenger's aims and an alteration in the oppressor's policies, is commonly assumed to be the only mechanism by which nonviolent action promotes political change.[3] In fact, conversion is only one of four mechanisms through which nonviolent action can promote change and it is the least likely of the four to promote change. The other more common mechanisms are accommodation, nonviolent coercion, and disintegration. Through accommodation, the challenge effectively produces changes in the oppressor's policies even though the oppressor's views have not changed. Through nonviolent coercion, change is achieved against the oppressor's will as a result of successfully undermining its resources, legitimacy, and ability to control the situation. Through disintegration, the oppressor's ruling apparatus falls apart in the face of mass nonviolent action (Sharp 1973; 1990). Thus, while conversion of the opponent's views may occur, more often than not, nonviolent action succeeds through nonviolent coercion, i.e., it forces the opponent to make changes by undermining its power. Of course, moral pressure may be mobilized, but in the absence of political and economic pressure, it is unlikely to produce change.

9. Those who implement nonviolent action do not assume that the state will not react with violence. Violence is to be expected from governments, especially nondemocratic governments. The violent reaction of governments is not an indication of the failure of nonviolent action. In fact, governments respond with violence precisely because nonviolent action presents a serious threat to their power. To dismiss the use of nonviolent action because people are killed is no more logical than dismissing armed resistance for the same reasons (Zunes 1999b, 130).

10. That said, suffering is not an essential part of nonviolent resistance. The view that suffering is central to nonviolent resistance is based on misguided assumptions that nonviolent action is 'passive resistance' and that nonviolent action produces change through the conversion of the oppressor's views (Martin 1997). While nonviolent challenges should expect a violent response by the government, they should also prepare to mute the impact of the opponent's violence. That is, they should, as stated by Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, "get out of harms way, take the sting out of the agents of violence, disable the weapons, prepare people for the worst effects of violence, and reduce the strategic importance of what may be lost to violence" (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, 38). Nonviolent resistance is much more sophisticated than the widespread conception of activists meekly accepting physical attacks.

11. Nonviolent action is not a method of contention that is used only as a last resort, when the means of violence are unavailable. Although nonviolent action may be used when no weapons are available, it may also be used *instead* of violence.

12. Nonviolent action is not a method of the 'middle class' or a 'bourgeois' approach to political contention. Nonviolent action can and has been implemented by groups from all classes and castes, from slaves to members of the upper-class (McCarthy and Kruegler 1993). For obvious reasons, it is used more frequently by the less-powerful, i.e., those without regular access to powerholders, than by the powerful.

13. The use of nonviolent action is not limited to the pursuit of 'moderate' or 'reformist' goals. It is just as appropriate for the pursuit of 'radical' goals. Anders Corr, for example, has documented the extensive use of nonviolent action in land and housing struggles across the developed and less-developed worlds (Corr 1999). Challenges to private property relations can hardly be considered 'reformist,' 'moderate,' or 'bourgeois.' Similarly, the feminist movement has radically challenged patriarchal gender relations—almost entirely through methods that do not involve violence. Challenging groups can be militant, radical, *and* nonviolent.

14. The mass mobilization of people into campaigns of nonviolent action in non-democracies does not depend on coercion. While some campaigns of nonviolent action in non-democracies have involved coercion to promote mass mobilization, it is not a necessary feature.

15. While nonviolent action by its very nature requires patience, it is not inherently slow compared to violent action in producing political change (Shepard 2001). Armed insurgencies that served as models for a generation of revolutionaries took decades to succeed: the Communists in China were engaged in armed combat for over 20 years before they assumed power in 1949, and the Vietnamese were engaged in armed combat against French, Japanese, and American imperialists for over three decades before national liberation. Similarly, numerous campaigns of terror, such as the Basque ETA in Spain and the IRA in Northern Ireland, have been operating for decades without meeting their objectives. By contrast, the nonviolent Solidarity movement in Poland took office about a decade after its emergence, and it took a mere 30 months, following the assassination of Benigno Aquino in August, 1983, for the people power movement in the Philippines to topple Ferdinand Marcos— something the Filipino Communists had been trying to do through armed methods since 1969.

16. The occurrence of nonviolent action is not structurally determined. While there are empirical relationships in geographically and temporally bound places and time periods between political contexts and the use of a given strategy for responding to grievances, the method used to challenge unjust or oppressive political relations is not determined by political context. Processes of learning, diffusion, and social change may result in the implementation of nonviolent action in contexts or situations historically characterized by violent contention. Conflicts involving land, separatism, autonomy, or self-determination, for example, are generally assumed to be—and have historically been—violent. However, nonviolent strategies are increasingly being used in such conflicts (e.g., see Cooper 1999). Certainly the context of the struggle and the issues at stake influence the strategies used by challengers, but not in a deterministic manner.

17. The effectiveness of nonviolent action is not a function of the ideology of the oppressors. It is often claimed that nonviolent action can only succeed in democracies or when it is used against benign or 'universalist' oppressors. Certainly the beliefs of the oppressors influences the dynamics of nonviolent struggles, but it is not the sole determinant of their outcomes.

18. The effectiveness of nonviolent action is not a function of the repressiveness of the oppressors. In fact, nonviolent action has been effective in brutally repressive contexts, and it has been ineffective in open democratic polities. Repression, of course, constrains the ability of challengers to organize, communicate, mobilize, and engage in collective action, and magnifies the risk of participation in collective action. Nevertheless, repression is only one of many factors that influence the trajectories of campaigns of nonviolent action, not the sole determinant of their trajectories.

Blurred Lines?

To illustrate how some of these misconceptions may influence the work of social scientists, I will briefly examine Gay Seidman's essay "Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa" (*PS: Political Science and Politics,* June 2000). This is not meant to be a personal attack on the work of Seidman. She is a respected scholar who has published path-breaking work on social movement unionism in Brazil and South Africa (Seidman 1994). Moreover, we agree on many points in her essay. We agree that the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa stands as a monument to the power of nonviolent action in challenging systems of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. We agree that social scientists must not glorify the use of nonviolent action in the anti-apartheid movement, or in any other predominantly nonviolent struggle. We agree that social scientists should develop historically nuanced and empirically accurate analyses of predominantly nonviolent struggles. Nevertheless, since more and more social scientists are beginning to study nonviolence, and since Seidman's essay may be representative of some of the general biases that social scientists bring to the table when turning their attention to the study of nonviolence, it is hoped that by offering a constructive criticism of these misconceptions, biases in the social scientific analysis of nonviolence can be attenuated.

Passive Resistance

Seidman uses the term "passive resistance" to describe nonviolent action (Seidman 2000, 161). This is a misnomer. There is nothing passive or evasive about nonviolent resistance, as it is an active and overt means for prosecuting conflicts with opponents. While Mohandas Gandhi at first used the term 'passive resistance,' he subsequently rejected the term due to its inaccurate connotations. Similarly, Martin Luther King rejected the term 'passive resistance' and used words such as 'aggressive,' 'militant,' 'confrontational,' and 'coercive' to describe his campaigns of nonviolent action. The term 'passive resistance' has not been used by activists or scholars of nonviolent action for decades, yet social scientists continue to use the term when addressing nonviolent action. Like Gandhi and King, social scientists should abandon the term 'passive resistance' and use the more accurate and precise term 'nonviolent action.' This is not a mere semantic distinction, but rather is critical to the understanding of nonviolent resistance.

Of course, there is a class of actions that do not involve violence and tend to be passive: everyday forms of resistance. These actions are informal, undeclared, disguised forms of resistance by oppressed individuals that do not require formal coordination or organization (Scott 1985; 1987). In empirical instances of contention, there is likely to be transgression across everyday forms of resistance and methods of nonviolent action. But clearly, everyday forms of resistance should be distinguished from nonviolent action, and 'passive resistance' should not be confused with nonviolent action.

Coercive Mobilization

Seidman suggests that mass campaigns of non-cooperation that occur in non-democratic contexts may involve an 'inherent sociological logic of coercion' (Seidman 2000, 166). To support this assertion, Seidman correctly notes that township activists sometimes created a situation of fear in which people knew that they could not ignore calls for mass mobilization without risking physical harm or perhaps death. But is coercive behavior embedded in the sociological logic of campaigns of mass mobilization and disruption in non-democracies, or is it something that varies across campaigns and contexts?

First, there are numerous examples of mass mobilization into campaigns of nonviolent action in non-democracies that did not involve coercive behavior, which suggests that mass mobilization does not involve an 'inherent sociological logic of coercion.' The 'people power' movement in the Philippines and the challenges to communist rule in Eastern Europe come to mind as examples where mass mobilization occurred without coercion. Second, evidence from the very case examined by Seidman suggests that coercion was not inherent to mass mobilization, but rather it was something that varied, depending on the consensus within the community and the extent to which there was knowledge about the campaign throughout the community. With regard to consumer boycotts, for example, when the political loyalties of a community were sharply divided or when the campaigns were not adequately publicized, coercion was more likely to be used to enforce the consumer boycotts. However, when there was solidarity within the community and people were well aware that a consumer boycott was to be implemented and how long it was supposed to last, then coercion was less likely to occur.

Third, the use of coercion to promote participation in mass campaigns in South Africa varied across the type of non-cooperation that was implemented. While consumer boycotts sometimes involved coercion in order to promote mass mobilization, mass participation in rent boycotts in South Africa did not involve coercive mobilization (Seekings 2000, 179). Thus social scientists should attempt to identify the contextual factors that influence whether or not coercive mass mobilization occurs, such as the tactic being implemented, the solidarity of the community, and whether or not members of the community know that a mass campaign has been called for, rather than assuming that coercion is an inherent component of mass mobilization into nonviolent campaigns in non-democratic contexts.

'Universalist' Oppressors and Moral Conversion

Seidman maintains that, ". . . attempts to use passive resistance [i.e., nonviolent action] in South Africa demonstrate how deeply such strategies rely on the oppressor's response—and illustrate the limits of such a strategy when the oppressor rejects universalist principles" (Seidman 2000, 161). Furthermore, quoting Leo Kuper (1971), Seidman suggests that for nonviolent action to succeed, it must convert the views of the oppressors through extreme suffering (Seidman 2000, 162). A problem with these assumptions is that they lead to *post hoc* explanations of the outcomes of nonviolent struggles as a function of whether or not the oppressor held 'universalist' views or whether or not the oppressors were morally converted to the views of their opponents. From this perspective, the characteristics of the challenge and the dynamics of the interactions between challengers and the state become superfluous to explanations of the outcome of the struggle since the outcome is assumed to depend on the views of the oppressors. But, is it possible, for example, that the nonviolent campaign in South Africa in the 1950s failed and that the nonviolent campaign in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in contributing to political change due, at least in part, to the characteristics of the challenges? The trajectories and outcomes of challenges are determined by a variety of factors, some within and some outside of the movement's control. But given the assumption that the outcomes of nonviolent challenges depend on the views of the oppressors and whether or

not the oppressors are morally converted to the views of the challengers, there is no reason to examine movement characteristics such as organization and strategy or even the broader political context such as international support for the challenge or international pressure on the regime.

Regardless, South Africa was ruled by P. W. Botha and the 'securocrat' segment of the political elite for most of the 1980s—not exactly exemplars of universalist principles. Botha and the securocrats implemented a 'total strategy' against perceived enemies of the apartheid regime, and imposed two brutal states of emergency within South Africa, the first from July 1985 to March 1986, and a second, more comprehensive one beginning in June 1986 (Price 1991). Botha was subsequently replaced by F. W. De Klerk in 1989, but what was the likelihood that the securocrat segment of the elite would have been dislodged at the end of the 1980s by the 'internationalist-reformers' were it not for sustained campaigns of nonviolent action? While elite divisions can ultimately be traced back to long-term economic and political trends, the proximate mechanism that exacerbated elite divisions and led to the displacement of the securocrats was the anti-apartheid challenge. The dismantling of the apartheid state did not occur because proponents of apartheid were converted to universalist principles, it occurred because the anti-apartheid movement undermined the power of the state (directly through strikes and noncooperation, and indirectly by promoting capital flight and international sanctions), diminished the government's capacity to control the political situation, and made it clear that those who held racist (i.e., non-universalist) principles would not be able to hold office.

That is not to say that moral pressure was not operating in the anti-apartheid challenge, but it was not the only or the main type of pressure; far more important than moral pressure was economic and political pressure. Did white middle-class business people desegregate their stores and pressure the state for political change due to their sudden moral conversion to racial equality, or because boycotts were driving them out of business? Did white capitalists urge the government to reform because they were moved by the extreme suffering of blacks engaged in nonviolent action, or because they realized that endemic strikes and civil disobedience, along with capital flight and international isolation, made economic growth impossible?

Seidman also refers to the struggle for national liberation in India as a case where nonviolent action succeeded because of the views of the oppressors (Seidman 2000, 161). In the case of the Indian independence struggle, the attribution of 'universalist' views to the British is questionable. British rulers hardly believed that Indians were their equal. They viewed non-whites in a racist and exclusionary, rather than in an universalist, manner. Seidman also suggests that Britain's commitment to the Atlantic Charter contributed to the success of the national liberation movement in India.[4] But, if Britain was committed to the Atlantic Charter, then why weren't they compelled to grant independence to their other colonies in the 1940s as well?

A closer examination of the Indian struggle for national liberation suggests that it worked because it made India ungovernable for the British and it rendered Britain's military might useless. The Indian struggle for national liberation succeeded, not because of the humanitarian views of the British, but because the force of nonviolent action undermined the power of British rule, showed that Great Britain's rule in India was based on force rather than legitimacy, reduced the justification for violent repression, influenced reference publics in Great Britain, and illuminated the futility of trying to violently repress a nationwide movement of nonviolent action with military force (Dalton 1993; Sharp 1973). Claims that the nonviolent struggle in India contributed to political change because the British were soft, humanitarian, or universalist are simply inaccurate.

Even if the British were less brutal or more universalist than the 'typical' oppressor, there are a number of historical cases where nonviolent challenges worked against ruthless oppressors. Moreover, nonviolent action worked not because the oppressor's views were converted as a result of extreme suffering, but because it undermined the oppressor's ability to rule and rendered their repressive capacities ineffective. Nonviolent action, for example, worked when it was implemented against the Nazis, undoubtedly one of the most brutal regimes in recent history. Nonviolent protest demonstrations by German wives against the imprisonment of their Jewish husbands in Berlin led to their release. Nonviolent resistance to Nazis in Norway, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Romania saved the lives of countless Jews. Nonviolent resistance to Nazi occupation in Norway prevented the implementation of

a corporatist system. Non-cooperation in Denmark through tactics such as work slowdowns and strikes severely hindered the German effort to extract resources and exert control over the country.[5] Generally, the Nazi military machine was dumbfounded in the face of widespread nonviolent resistance. B. H. Liddell Hart, a British military strategist who interrogated Nazi generals after the war, found that "they were experts in violence, and had been trained to deal with opponents who used that method. But other forms of resistance baffled them . . . It was a relief to them when resistance became violent, and when non-violent forms were mixed with guerrilla action, thus making it easier to combine drastic suppressive action against both at the same time" (Liddell Hart 1968, 205).

More recently, of course, nonviolent action worked with unprecedented effectiveness against communist regimes—regimes that although were no longer Stalinist, could not be characterized as soft or embracing of universalist principles. The nonviolent Solidarity movement in Poland seriously challenged the communist regime well before Gorbachev implemented reforms. In fact, the Solidarity movement made it clear to the more enlightened segments of the Soviet political elite, like Gorbachev, that reforms had to be implemented. The success of the Solidarity movement subsequently set the stage for successful nonviolent challenges throughout the Soviet sphere, from East Germany to Mongolia. The Soviet Union itself disintegrated in the face of predominantly nonviolent secessionist movements from the Baltic states to Central Asia.[6]

Moreover, in instances where *violent action* failed against brutal oppressors lacking universalist views, *nonviolent action* succeeded. The Shah of Iran did not hold 'universalist' beliefs and his regime was supported by a ruthless military and internal security apparatus, SAVAK. Iran's two underground armed guerrilla movements, the *Fedayeen* and the *Mujahhadin,* were small and ineffective in challenging the state. Their membership did not surpass 300 at their peak, and they were infiltrated by the SAVAK. While there were armed battles between military forces loyal to the Shah and soldiers who deserted the regime immediately prior to the transfer of power, the Shah was not toppled by an armed insurgency, but rather by an unarmed insurrection whereby ordinary citizens engaged in nonviolent action, such as protests demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience.[7]

Moral Logic

No assumptions that "nonviolent activists hold a higher moral ground" or have the "sole proprietorship of the moral high ground" (Seidman 2000, 164) are necessary for nonviolent action to work. The operation of nonviolent action does not have to be based on any moral logic, hidden or otherwise. While some major proponents of nonviolent action have been morally committed to nonviolence, nonviolent action *per se* does not require proponents or activists to be morally committed to nonviolence, or hold any sort of ideological, religious, or metaphysical beliefs.

Morality aside, there may be *pragmatic* reasons for proponents of nonviolent action to encourage nonviolent discipline, i.e., the strict adherence to nonviolent methods. While responding to state violence with violence seems appropriate and justified to most people, it permits the state, not the challenging group to choose the means by which the conflict will be prosecuted. This takes the comparative advantage away from the challengers and gives it to the state, as the ability of governments to use violence almost always exceeds the ability of challengers. In fact, violent rebellion by challengers often strengthens regimes since it justifies the government's use of violence in the name of 'law and order,' 'political stability,' or a 'stable business climate.'

Thus, nonviolent discipline is useful for very pragmatic reasons, such as keeping the movement and reference publics focused on the issues rather than on acts of violence, and attenuating fears that reference publics may have about the challengers. The exposure of state violence in contrast to the unarmed methods of the challengers reveals that the state's rule is based on force, not legitimacy, and this may lead to shifts in public and international opinion that ultimately reshape the balance of power (Galtung 1989; Lakey 1973; Sharp 1973; Summy 1994). What is the likelihood that the United States Congress, during the Cold War, would have passed sanctions against South Africa if the challenge to apartheid occurred primarily through an armed insurgency? What is the likelihood that American churches and universities would have imposed sanctions and divested if the challenge to apartheid was primarily armed and violent?

Sustained nonviolent resistance in the face of violent repression may invoke a dynamic whereby the suppression of unarmed protesters merely fuels the determination of the activists, catalyzes the support of reference publics, and reduces the effectiveness of further violent repression. This dynamic has been variously referred to as "political jiu-jitsu," the "paradox of repression," and the "critical dynamic."[8] In South Africa, the sustained campaign of nonviolent action in the face of repression had the effect of "eroding the state's capacity and will to govern through repression. . . . In the meantime, the capacity and will of black South Africans to reject their continued domination grew more quickly" (Marx 1992, 162). Significantly, this dy-

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namic has absolutely nothing to do with what assumptions the proponents of nonviolent action hold about the 'moral purity' of nonviolence. The dynamic may operate even when the proponents of nonviolent action are as Machiavellian as the targets of their dissent.

In South Africa, for example, numerous UDF-affiliated street and area committees attempted to make a clear distinction between the nonviolence and accountability of 'people power' and the undisciplined violent action of 'ultra-militant' youth, and promoted highly organized forms of contention that would not lead to unnecessary violence. 'People's courts' were organized to maintain order and justice within the townships and to promote nonviolent discipline, as violence threatened the support that had been cultivated among South Africa's churches, whites, and the international community (Marx 1992; Price 1991; Seekings 2000). The calls for nonviolent discipline were not based on principled nonviolent action; i.e., those calling for nonviolent action were not concerned that violence would 'sully' their struggle. The calls were based on pragmatic nonviolent action; i.e., the realization

that they could generate greater pressure against the state through methods of nonviolent action than through methods of violence.

I suspect that some of the misconceptions that social scientists have about nonviolent action are that nonviolent action is principled nonviolence, or that those promoting nonviolent struggle adhere to principled nonviolence. Scholars of nonviolent action, however, have traditionally made clear distinctions between principled and pragmatic nonviolent action. Those who practice principled nonviolent action view nonviolence as a way of life and assume that violence is inherently wrong. Those who practice pragmatic nonviolent action view nonviolent action as efficacious or convenient for attaining their goal in a given context, and do not reject the possibility that violent action may be a practical means for alleviating oppression under some conditions. Thus, methods of nonviolent action are used without any objection to violence in principle. Most campaigns of nonviolent action (including the struggle in South Africa) are pragmatic rather than principled. Yet when mainstream social scientists turn their attention to nonviolent action they fail to distinguish between principled and pragmatic nonviolence, or make (hidden?) assumptions that it is principled nonviolent action. A more nuanced understanding of struggles implementing nonviolent action must recognize the difference between pragmatic and principled nonviolent action.

Blurred Vision?

Are the lines between violence and nonviolence blurred—in the case of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa—or in any other challenge that involves nonviolent action? We can look at this from two points of view: that of observers and that of parties to the conflict. With regard to observers, Seidman writes ". . . a careful observer of South Africa's anti-apartheid resistance will find it difficult to draw bright lines between violent and nonviolent strategies during the uprisings of the 1980s" (Seidman 2000, 165). I disagree. In fact, a careful observer of the anti-apartheid movement—or any other challenge—should be able to do just that: provide nominal and operational definitions of violent and nonviolent action, apply them to empirical cases, and differentiate

between various forms of contentious activities. There is a long and distinguished tradition in the social sciences that does exactly this (e.g., Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Gurr 1993; McAdam 1999; Taylor and Jodice 1983; Tilly 1978). Clearly distinguishing between various forms of contention is not a simplification of history, it is a clarification of history. Of course, empirical instances of political contention are rarely pure; i.e., they rarely involve one and only one strategy of resistance. Instead they transgress between institutional politics and non-institutional politics, and they transgress between everyday forms of resistance, nonviolent action, and violence. Nevertheless, *conceptually* it is necessary for the careful observer to clearly distinguish different types of resistance in order to better understand the dynamics of contention.

From the point of view of the parties to the conflict Seidman writes, " . . . it must also be recognized that, just as security police insisted on blurring the line between different kinds of anti-apartheid resistance, most activists over the years viewed violent and nonviolent strategies as more intertwined and complementary than contradictory" (Seidman 2000, 165). Did security forces respond to nonviolent challenges with force because their vision was blurred, or because those giving the orders clearly realized that nonviolent action represented a serious threat to the interests of the regime? Referring to the intensified repression imposed during a state of emergency, American theologian Walter Wink, who was in South Africa in 1986, states "in an eloquent tribute to the power of nonviolence, the government has decided, in effect, to treat nonviolence as the equivalent of violence" (Wink 1987, 79).

Does this 'blurred vision' on the part of activists influence the dynamics of nonviolent action? The literature on nonviolent action suggests that nonviolent struggles can succeed regardless of the views of the activists. Those who implement nonviolent action may not even be aware that they are implementing a particular class of methods. Wink interviewed participants in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in 1986. He writes, "What we found most surprising is that a great many of the people simply do not know how to name their actual experiences with nonviolence" (Wink 1987, 4). When asked about methods of nonviolent action, a common response of participants was "'We tried that [nonviolent action] for fifty years and it didn't work. Sharpeville in 1960 proved to us that violence is the only

way left'" (Wink 1987, 4). Yet, when Wink pressed them to identify the tactics that were most effective in challenging the state over the past two years,

> they produced a remarkably long list of nonviolent actions: labor strikes, slow-downs, sit-downs, stoppages, and stay-aways; bus boycotts, consumer boycotts, and school boycotts; funeral demonstrations; noncooperation with government appointed functionaries; non-payment of rent; violation of government bans on peaceful meetings; defiance of segregation orders on beaches and restaurants, theaters, and hotels; and the shunning of black police and soldiers. This amounts to what is probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse nonviolent strategies in a single struggle in human history! Yet these students, and many others we interviewed, both black and white, failed to identify these tactics as nonviolent and even bridled at the word (Wink 1987, 4).

The point being that those who implement methods of nonviolent action may not recognize them as 'methods of nonviolent action' or they may believe that violent methods and nonviolent methods are intertwined and complementary. Nonviolent methods can work regardless of whether or not activists make the sharp distinctions between violent and nonviolent action that careful observers can.[9]

As another example of the allegedly blurred lines between violence and nonviolence, Seidman notes that the ANC helped to coordinate mass protests in the 1980s and funneled resources to trade unions, student groups, and civic associations (Seidman 2000, 165). But is this a reflection of the ANC's blurred vision concerning violence and nonviolence, or is it an indication that by the 1980s the ANC clearly perceived that nonviolent tactics were more effective than violent ones in undermining state power and that their time, energy, and resources would be better spent on nonviolent action rather than guerrilla warfare?

As noted by Seidman, anti-apartheid activists drew on the songs, symbols, and slogans of the ANC's armed struggle to construct identities and promote solidarity and mobilization (Seidman 2000, 165). This included, for example, the *toyi-toyi,* a dance imitating the physical training of guerrilla insurgents, and the carrying of mock wooden AK-47s. However, as suggested above, those who organize or participate in nonviolent campaigns are not required to make any moral pledges or renounce all things related to violence, and adhering to the rhetoric of armed rebellion must not be

confused with implementing violent action. A *toyi-toyi* dancing, mock AK-47 toting thug who marches in protest demonstrations and participates in boycotts is engaging in acts of nonviolent action.[10] An avowed pacifist who gets caught up in the heat of the moment and participates in the 'necklacing' of an alleged apartheid collaborator is engaging in violent action. Rhetoric must be distinguished from action.[11] In any challenge, activists draw on existing cultures of resistance. The use of nonviolent action does not require the creation of an entirely new culture of resistance—if it were possible to do so—nor does it require activists to reject all forms of violence. Whether or not 'nonviolence' is identified by name as a method of struggle by activists, social scientists should be able to differentiate nonviolent action from violent action. Certainly social scientists are capable of distinguishing between *violent rhetoric* and *nonviolent action*.

Conclusion

Let me reiterate that the purpose of this essay is not to attack Seidman's work, but to raise issues that social scientists should be aware of when studying struggles that implement nonviolent action, particularly in non-democratic contexts. Seidman is correct in suggesting that proponents of nonviolent action—as well as those who have traditionally studied nonviolent action (e.g., see Sørenson 1992)—need to be aware of their 'hidden assumptions.' But social scientists need to be aware of the 'hidden assumptions' and misconceptions about nonviolent action that may bias their analyses as well.

Nor do I mean to marginalize or belittle the role of violence in the anti-apartheid struggle, but rather to help clarify thinking about the role of nonviolent action. The anti-apartheid movement certainly had its share of violence, including the necklacing of alleged regime collaborators, instances of coercive mass mobilization, gun battles with security forces, and the acts of sabotage by the ANC (not to mention the brutal state violence and terrorism). Scholars will continue to study and uncover information about the anti-apartheid movement. While we are aware of the important symbolic role that the armed struggle played in the mobilization of the challenge to apartheid, we still know little about the underground networks, the roles of guerrillas, how the ANC funneled resources to the unarmed urban insurrection, and how the threat of violence influenced the calculations

on both sides of the struggle (but see the insightful work of Seekings 2000 and Seidman 2001). Nevertheless, those who label as 'revisionist' studies of the anti-apartheid movement that emphasize the role of nonviolent action most likely do so from a position that has misconceptions about nonviolent action.

Empirically, political contention is transgressive and there are rarely cases of purely nonviolent struggle, especially in non-democratic contexts. Yet, this should not prevent social scientists from attempting to disentangle and understand the impact of different strategies and tactics of contention. Social scientists do not have to idealize nonviolence or make the (faulty) assumption that the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa followed a similar logic to the America civil rights movement in order to analyze the crucial role of nonviolent action in the toppling of apartheid. But they do have to understand what nonviolent action is and how it operates.

In the end, the goals of Gay Seidman and myself are the same: the dispassionate social scientific analysis of nonviolence. Seidman is correct in pointing out that social scientists must clearly understand the limits of nonviolent resistance. But social scientists must clearly understand its potential as well. In doing so, the power of nonviolence will not be glorified. Nor will it be underestimated.

Notes

1. E.g., see the symposium in *PS: Political Science and Politics* (June 2000) where a number of prominent social scientists address the strategy of nonviolence.

2. Also see "Correcting Common Misconceptions About Nonviolent Action," by the Albert Einstein Institution (n.d.), *Mahatma Gandhi and His Myths*, by Mark Shepard (2001), and the works of Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Martin 1997; Sharp 1973; and Zunes 1999a; 1999b; Zunes et al., 1999.

3. Part of the confusion results from the fact that Gandhi believed that conversion was the mechanism through which nonviolent action worked. See Shepard 2001.

4. Since Gandhi's campaign of nonviolent action in India emerged in the 1920s and 1930s and the Atlantic Charter was declared in 1941, it could be argued that the national liberation movement in India was one of the factors contributing to the declaration of the Atlantic Charter, which contained a statement on the right of people to choose their own form of government. By assuming that the Atlantic Charter provided the opportunity for the Indian struggle to succeed, without considering that the struggle in India and in other colonies may have contributed to the formulation of the Charter reflects a structural bias in the social movement literature. That is, the study of how social movements *alter* the political context and create opportunities is woefully under-examined compared to the study of how social movements *respond* to the political context. See Goodwin and Jasper 1999.

5. For discussions of nonviolent struggles in and against Nazi Germany, see Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Semelin 1993; Sharp 1973; and Summy 1994.

6. Violent exceptions, of course, include the revolution in Romania and the separatist movement in Chechnya.

7. See Shivers 1980; 1997. Also see Zunes 1994. Nonviolent action contributed to a *revolutionary outcome* in Iran, which is defined as a "transfer of state power from those who held it before the start of multiple sovereignty to a new ruling coalition" (Tilly 1993: 14). Of course, the *consolidation* of the rule of the Ayatollahs involved substantial violence and coercion.

8. According to Sharp (1973), *political jiujitsu* refers to the dynamic by which a sustained nonviolent challenge in the face of repression highlights the stark brutality of the regime, produces dissension within the government, and mobilizes support for the challengers among the general population, the regime's usual supporters, and third parties that would not have occurred during the course of a violent challenge. In effect, the use of violent repression against persistent nonviolent challenges rebounds against the states' sources of strength. This dynamic has been observed in a variety of empirical contexts. According to Smithey and Kurtz (1999), the *paradox of repression* refers to the dynamic by which efforts to violently repress nonviolent challenges backfires and leads to increased support for the challengers, as occurred in the Soviet Bloc between 1988 and 1991. According to McAdam (1999), the *critical dynamic* of the civil rights movement in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s was that the challengers broadened the conflict by inducing local and state authorities to disrupt public order by violently repressing the nonviolent challenge. The result was third party intervention by the federal government, the sustaining of activist commitment, the generation of public sympathy, and the mobilization of financial support.

9. While nonviolent action can be effective without this knowledge, theorists of nonviolent action suggest that campaigns of nonviolent action are likely to be more effective if people understand what the methods are and how they operate (e.g., Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Burrowes 1996; Lakey 1973; McCarthy 1990; and Sharp 1973; 1990).

10. Smuts and Westcott (1991) correctly list *toyi-toyi* dancing as one of the methods of *nonviolent action* implemented by anti-apartheid activists in their book, *The Purple Shall Govern: A South African A to Z of Nonviolent Action*.

11. When George W. Bush announced air strikes against Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, he proclaimed "We're a peaceful nation." Does his peaceful rhetoric make his actions less violent?

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