

On the need for social movements to avoid secrecy and fear

The introductory text below is by Bruce Hahne, based on the [bio text at aeinstein.org](http://aeinstein.org)

Political scientist and nonviolence scholar Prof. Gene Sharp's three-volume series [*The Politics of Nonviolent Action*](#) is one of the foundational texts for the understanding of strategic nonviolence and its use by broad-based social movements to achieve their goals. In these extracts, Sharp writes on the topics of secrecy and fear within change movements.

Until his death in 2018, Gene Sharp was Senior Scholar at the [Albert Einstein Institution](#) in Boston, MA. He held research appointments in Harvard University's Center for International Affairs for nearly thirty years and was Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. In an academic and professional career spanning more than six decades, Gene Sharp articulated and advanced the cause of nonviolent action for change. His ideas and writings and his close study of Gandhi and dictatorships have informed nonviolent struggles for freedom around the world.

Extracts from Gene Sharp, [*The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*](#), Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973

CASTING OFF FEAR (pp. 456-458)

One of the prerequisites of nonviolent struggle is that the participants must cast off fear of acting independently and fear of the sufferings which may follow. A high degree of courage is required of nonviolent actionists. [...]

The emphasis which Gandhi and other nonviolent actionists have placed on casting off fear has political roots and consequences. Despotism, they have insisted, could not exist if it did not have fear as its foundation. "The Government takes advantage of our fear of jails," argued Gandhi. In the earlier theoretical analysis of the roots of political power, in Chapter One [of this book series], it was emphasized that sanctions *themselves* do not produce obedience; but the *fear* of sanctions does. If there is great fear among the subjects, even minor sanctions may produce great conformity, while severe sanctions in face of a high degree of fearlessness may not secure the regime. [...]

Gandhi repeatedly emphasized the importance of this inner psychological change from fear and submission to fearlessness and self-respect as a necessary prerequisite of real political freedom. [...] Speaking of India's millions, Gandhi wrote; "We have to dispel fear from their hearts. On the day they shed all fear, India's fetters shall fall and she will be free." This is not to say that fear must initially be *fully* cast off, and that only then can nonviolent action follow. Fear may be cast off by degrees, and certain groups in the population may become less afraid than other groups. Also, participation in nonviolent action often seems to lead to a loss of fear.

Casting off fear is closely tied to gaining confidence that one possesses power and can act in effective ways to change a situation. This was apparently the case in Montgomery, Alabama, during the bus boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. reported that when repression began, "a once fear-ridden people had been transformed. Those who had previously trembled before the law were now proud to be arrested for the cause of freedom". [...]

Assuming that the actionists maintain courage, the specific type of action possible will be determined

by the *degree* to which the participants have become fearless. As E.D. Nixon said at the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott: "... if we are afraid we might just as well fold up right now." If the groups which have been dominated by the opponent are afraid, there can be no nonviolent action, no challenge to the opponent, and no willingness to risk [the opponent's] sanctions. If the nonviolent actionists become fearful in the midst of the struggle, then the movement collapses.

Fear interferes with or destroys the operation of most of the processes of change upon which nonviolent action depends, whether these be conversion of the opponent by convincing [them] of a new, more favorable, image of the grievance group, or be paralysis of the system by the massiveness of noncooperation despite repression. Fear may also contribute to the continuation of brutalities rather than their diminution and cessation; *the shortest way to end brutalities is to demonstrate that they do not help to achieve the opponent's objectives*. Courage is required if the nonviolent struggle is to continue and to lead to the increasing strength of the nonviolent group and an undermining of the opponent's power. [...]

The emphasis on fearlessness in Gandhian thought, and in various cases of nonviolent struggle, is well advised, for it is a casting off of one's fear - or at least the deliberate reduction and control of one's fear - which makes possible the challenge, the persistence in the face of repression, and the capacity to bring into operation the sources of strength and change which can finally lead to victory... The nonviolence in nonviolent action rests upon courage.

OPENNESS AND SECRECY IN NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE (pp. 481-88)

Secrecy, deception and underground conspiracy pose very difficult problems for a movement using nonviolent action. No matter from what ideological or philosophical position one starts there is often no easy solution to them. [...]

Some persons taking part in nonviolent struggle have at times tried to get the action organization to use secrecy and conspiratorial behavior. This has happened not only where the movement was under political dictatorship, where such an approach might seem reasonable, but even under relatively liberal political conditions, as in Britain. Within the anti-nuclear weapons Committee of 100 in its heyday, there were, for example, members who were acting, or pressing the Committee to act, by secret and conspiratorial means. ... However, if one asks what the consequences of secrecy and deception for the movement and the society are, or their effects on the dynamics of nonviolent action, or what the practical alternative means to openness in building and conducting an effective movement are, the weaknesses of the intellectual case for underground conspiratorial means become apparent.

In this section we shall look at the relationship between openness or secrecy and the dynamics of nonviolent action. We are not here concerned with moral imperatives to openness and truthfulness, but with the psychological, social and political effects of such behavior. The basic conclusion of this discussion will be contrary to what might commonly be assumed: the dynamics of this technique require that, in most situations at least, nonviolent action movements operate openly if they are to achieve their maximum strength and advantage in the struggle.

Openness in nonviolent action means that the organization backing the action act openly: that the names and activities of their leaders be revealed to the public and the opponent, that written protests be signed by the person or groups making them, that actions of protest, resistance and intervention be

taken openly without attempt at deceit or hiding the behavior. Usually it has also even meant that the opponent and often the police be directly notified in advance, usually in writing, of the date, place, time, often the names of participants, and of the type of action to be taken. Gandhi was well known for this type of behavior, typified by his letter of March 2, 1930, to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy. In that letter Gandhi said that if his appeal for major political changes were not granted by March 11, he would with his co-workers, begin his plan to disobey the provisions of the Salt Laws. On March 12, the names, ages, and identification of those who were to march with him to the sea to make salt were published in his paper, *Young India*. ... Similar openness has been used by American nonviolent civil rights groups...

Discussions in favor of secrecy in nonviolent action often seem to assume that it is not difficult to keep the opponent or the government from finding out what is to be kept secret. In many situations this is a very naive assumption, both for small and large movements. While it may be possible to keep certain matters secret for some time, it is likely that sooner or later the police will learn not only the most important general intentions, but often the detailed plans as well. Modern electronic devices of various types may be used in addition to the older methods of opening the mail, telephone tapping, volunteer informers, planting of agents, spying and the like. If there are no secrets and planned action is not dependent on secrecy, such measures are not likely to impede the movement seriously. But when the implementation of plans for action depends on the maintenance of secrecy, then such police methods may pose serious threat. [...]

However, the most powerful single objection to secrecy in a nonviolent action movement is that secrecy is not only rooted in fear but that it contributes to fear. Fear is often a block to action even when people are stirred to indignation. As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, willingness to use nonviolent action depends in large degree upon the casting off of fear.

To produce change, nonviolent action operates on much more fundamental psychological, social and political levels than other techniques of action... These more fundamental levels of operation in nonviolent action, which may produce shifts of loyalties and invisibly undermine the power of a hostile regime, often operate more quickly than dramatic acts which might only be possible by secrecy. But the more basic changes will be far more important. Therefore, it is highly dangerous to threaten the operation of these sometimes less obvious but much stronger forces by a secret effort to produce a quick temporary victory on some subordinate point. If the nonviolent actionists are to maximize their strength, they must act in harmony with the dynamics of this technique and its requirements. Especially important in these requirements are the maintenance of fearlessness and nonviolent discipline.

If - because of an inadequate understanding of their own technique and its dynamics, or because of the temptations of shortsighted expediency, or because of undisciplined behavior - the nonviolent actionists introduce into their struggle qualities and means appropriate to a violent struggle, they reverse important processes necessary for their success. At the same time they strengthen the opponent. The introduction of secrecy into a nonviolent action movement operates strongly against the maintenance of fearlessness and nonviolent discipline. Thus openness - that is, being truthful in statements and frank with the opponent and the public concerning intentions and plans - appears to be a corollary of the requirements of fearlessness and nonviolent discipline.

The openness of the movement and even its effrontery in daring to state its intentions publicly will have a significant impact on the nonviolent group itself, on the opponent, and on third parties. Conversely, resorting to secrecy, deception and underground conspiracy is likely to have a detrimental impact on all three groups. [...]

When there are serious attempts to maintain secrecy in a nonviolent resistance movement, an atmosphere of fear spreads - fear that plans will be discovered, fear that hidden leaders will be captured, fear that the secret organization will be broken, fear that key members and masses of supporters will be imprisoned. As this happens among actual and potential supporters, the spirit of resistance is dampened. Instead of open nonviolent action demonstrating that repression is powerless, fear that secrets and plans will be revealed and that personnel will be captured permeates the movement; this leads to a kind of degeneration, demoralization and weakening which inevitably tends to undermine the movement.

Gandhi charges that resort to secrecy during the Indian 1932-33 struggle had been a prime cause for that movement's collapse. He said: "... the secrecy that has attended the movement is fatal to its success..." "There can be no doubt that fear has seized the common mass... I am inclined to think that the secret methods are largely responsible for this demoralisation." [...]

Secrecy is most likely to be used by a movement to maintain itself when it feels too weak to operate openly. However, the secrecy may in fact lead to fewer participants rather than more, not only because of the above factors, but also because, in many situations at least, the movement which is "security conscious" will have to reduce the number of people who plan and carry out policy. Under some conditions, numbers may also be reduced by the alienation of persons who were becoming sympathetic to the movement when it operated openly, but who distrust a secret political organization; this is especially likely to be the case where the nonviolent action is being applied in a society with a liberal democratic form of government. [...]

In summary, a nonviolent movement which attempts to maintain a policy of secrecy concerning its planning, actions and organization faces problems and obstacles which are likely to prove insurmountable and which will, at best, severely threaten its requirements for casting off fear and the maintenance of nonviolent discipline. It is for such reasons that in their handbook for American civil rights demonstrators*, Oppenheimer and Lakey wrote:

"It is possible to confuse and delay the obtaining of "secret" information by your opponents in various ways. However, if your opponents are determined, this is pointless. It results in *inefficiency* because you have to cover up much that you do from your own members, *authoritarianism* because you cannot tell your members what is going on, and *mistrust*. In any case, your opponents, if they are determined, will plant "informers" and/or modern electronic devices in such a way that your activities will be an open book. You may as well open the book and be fully honest about your plans to begin with. You should try to plan tactics... which do not depend on secrecy for their value."

* The extract here is from [*A Manual for Direct Action: Strategy and Tactics for Civil Rights and All Other Nonviolent Protest Movements*](#), Quadrangle Books, 1964-65. Co-author George Lakey continues to write on nonviolent strategy. His most recent book was published in 2018: [*How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning*](#).