

# Why call it nonviolent action?

## Introduction

Brian Martin, from Australia, is one of the best known practical theoreticians of nonviolence – the news section in this issue mentions his book on whistleblowing. The following paper comes from a War Resisters' International (WRI, <http://www.wri-irg.org> ) webinar, details at end, on the topic of nonviolent action and terminology related to it.

'Nonviolence' can be, though is not necessarily, an awkward concept to introduce, and those of us who are committed to it should remember that at all times. Part of this is due to the negative included in the word, and part is perhaps due to common cultural assumptions of the efficacy of violence. So clarity is very beneficial both for our own thinking and for others. So over to Brian Martin's exposition on the topic -

## By Brian Martin

Strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, fasts, mass rallies — these are familiar to many people. They are commonly called methods of nonviolent action. But what exactly does the expression “nonviolent action” refer to? Are there other expressions that would be better? And how well does nonviolent action work?

There are no definitive answers to these questions. A lot of people have opinions, but there are important differences and uncertainties, including among peace activists. Here, my aim is to provide a few perspectives to provide a basis for discussion. First I'll look at how nonviolent action is defined, then at arguments for using it and at what makes it effective, and finally at different expressions. Through this, I'll use “nonviolent action” as the provisional expression, acknowledging that others might prefer something different.

## What is nonviolent action?

Over the years, I've found the easiest way to explain nonviolent action is by mentioning some of the most well-known methods, such as rallies, strikes and boycotts. A comprehensive listing of methods might serve as a type of definition, except for complications at the boundaries. So let's look at the boundaries (see figure 1).

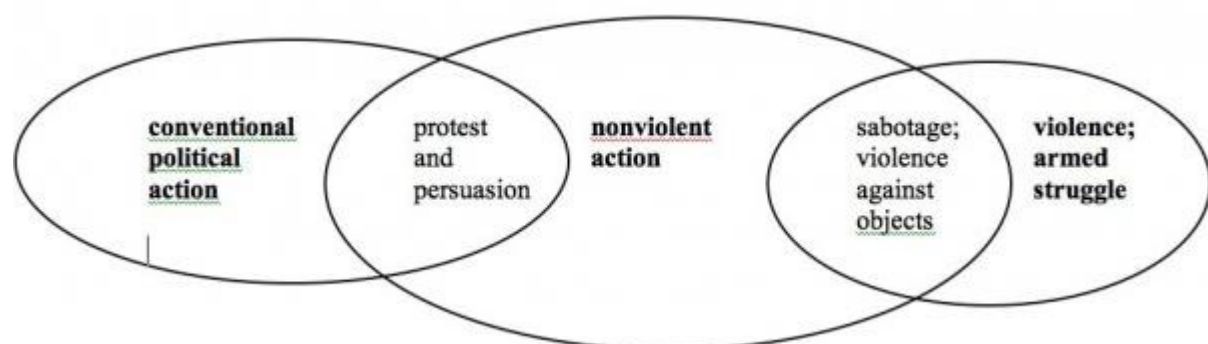


Figure 1. Diagram of the conceptual spaces of “conventional political action,” “nonviolent action” and “armed struggle” and their boundaries

One boundary is with violence, meaning physical violence such as beatings, torture and killing. Everyone agrees that using rifles and missiles to kill people is violence. But what about damaging physical objects, such as throwing rocks to break a shop window, burning a police vehicle or blowing up an empty building? Some would call this violence, whereas others believe it is not, saying violence must be against humans.

Some environmental activists use forms of sabotage such as destroying billboards, putting sand in the fuel tanks of bulldozers, and hammering spikes into trees, so that sawmill blades are damaged if the trees are logged. These types of action involve violence against objects but are designed to avoid hurting humans. Such actions are at the boundary between violent and nonviolent action.

What about using a hammer to dent a nosecone of a nuclear missile, a classic technique used by ploughshares activists, after which they turn themselves in to authorities? They have damaged an object — an object that itself is a powerful tool of violence. Many would call this a form of nonviolent action, despite the physical destruction involved.

What about a person who wipes a computer file containing a list of addresses of dissidents about to be arrested? This involves destroying something — the ordered patterns on a computer chip — but is hardly significant in a physical sense.

What about throwing small stones at a tank? It is using physical violence, but with little likelihood of hurting anyone.

It is possible to argue about these sorts of examples at length. Here, it is easiest to say they are at the boundary: people will disagree about whether they should be called violent or nonviolent.

Another important boundary is with conventional political action. Voting and electoral campaigning, in places where these are routine and encouraged by governments, are conventional. Nonviolent action, in contrast, goes beyond the conventional, being unusual, stronger or more confrontational. Without this boundary, someone could have a conversation about politics and say “that was nonviolent action: speaking is an action and there was no violence.”

One of the problems with this boundary is that it is not the same in all places and times. Gene Sharp, the foremost figure in the field, catalogued 198 methods of nonviolent action and said there were many more. Sharp’s focus was on major systems of domination, such as dictatorships or racial oppression. In these systems, even seemingly mild forms of action can be a serious threat to the rulers. In a dictatorship, passing out a leaflet can lead to arrest, beatings and imprisonment.

Many of the methods that Sharp called “protest and persuasion,” such as leafleting, petitioning and rallies, are risky in a dictatorship but are routine in places where civil liberties are respected. Most of the time, passing out a leaflet in Sweden or Japan is not likely to be much of a challenge to the system. The problem is that activists look at Sharp’s list of methods, see leafleting, petitioning and other such methods, and say “We’re undertaking nonviolent action.” The methods are taken out of context and treated as if they automatically are in the category “nonviolent action.” Sharp didn’t intend this but his catalogue of methods created a strong impression that the methods operate the same way everywhere.

It’s worth mentioning that using leaflets, petitions and the like, even when they are routine, can be useful and effective methods. The point here is that only in some places and times are they powerful, non-conventional means of action. In some places, strikes and boycotts are so accepted that even they might not qualify as nonviolent action.

Some people want to use the word “violence” in other contexts. For example, “emotional violence” refers to harm to others using verbal abuse, emotional manipulation and other techniques to influence their minds. “Structural violence” refers to systems of domination — such as economic exploitation via trade systems — that cause poverty, subordination, exclusion and other forms of injustice. My preference is to use “violence” to refer to physical violence. This is because when “violence” is used to refer to all sorts of things, it becomes a vague term that basically signals that something is bad: if you think it’s bad, call it violent. However, these other meanings are clear if the full expression is used, such as “emotional violence.” However, the word “violence” in such expressions seldom adds much meaning. Alternatives to “emotional violence” include emotional abuse and psychological manipulation. Alternatives to “structural violence” include exploitation, domination, oppression and injustice.

Nonviolent action is not the same as civil disobedience, which refers to actions that intentionally violate laws as a means of challenging the laws or some other injustice. However, nonviolent methods are not necessarily illegal: boycotts or banging pots and pans at a particular time may be perfectly legal and still be powerful methods of action. Civil disobedience is a specific type of nonviolent action, but there are other types too.

In summary, “nonviolent action” refers to certain types of social action. If we look at the entire array of things people can do, nonviolent action can be thought of as bounded on two sides by violence and conventional political action. It is worth mentioning that this is just one way to think about what is called nonviolent action. Some people prefer other ways of defining it.

So far, I’ve talked about “nonviolent action” rather than “nonviolence.” In the Gandhian tradition of principled action, “nonviolence” refers to an entire way of life based on an ethic of respect and compassion. “Nonviolent action,” in contrast, is more commonly used to refer to methods of action.

### **Why use nonviolent action?**

Nonviolent action is more forceful, disruptive or unorthodox than conventional political action, but not as forceful or destructive as violence. Nonviolent action can be thought of as being strong but not too strong.

Much of the discussion about whether to use nonviolent action assumes the main alternative is using violence, whether this means assaulting police or fighting in guerrilla forces. There are two main lines of argument in support of nonviolent action compared to violence. The first is that using violence is unethical; this is the Gandhian tradition, often called “principled nonviolence.” The second line of argument is that using violence is less effective than nonviolent action. Gene Sharp is the most prominent proponent of this view, which is often called “pragmatic nonviolence.”

Much of the debate over violent versus nonviolent action is bogged down in arguments about whether violence is justified. In the face of torture and massacres, it might be considered legitimate to use violence. But that is not the point. From the viewpoint of pragmatic nonviolence, the question should be whether violence is more effective than nonviolent action. Violence might be justified but be a poor strategic choice.

The same applies to using violence to defend against attack, for example when protesters fight back against police. It might be justified to hurt police in such circumstances, but just because it is justified doesn’t turn it into nonviolent action. Nor does it mean that defending by fighting back is necessarily more effective than other tactics.

Being nonviolent means not physically hurting the opponent, but nonviolent activists often are at risk of being hurt themselves. When the potential harm to activists is great, it may be worth considering less risky actions, to minimise harm and to enable more people to participate.

To say that violence is “too strong” is to say it can be counterproductive. It limits participation in the struggle, stimulates opponents to be more committed and unified, and fosters secrecy and authoritarianism.

Far less commonly discussed is why to use nonviolent action rather than conventional political action. The basic reason is that these methods simply don’t work, or don’t work well enough or quickly enough. Voting can bring about change, but sometimes voting systems are unfair or elections are rigged, or voters are coerced or manipulated by propaganda. Nonviolent action is a way to push for change in such situations.

As well as looking at reasons for using nonviolent action, it is helpful to identify the features of effective nonviolent action. Going on strike might seem like a good idea, but if it isn’t the right method or isn’t properly organised, it probably won’t work. Here are some features that have been cited as important for effectiveness.

- Participation by many people. According to Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, the more participants in anti-regime campaigns, the greater the chance of success.
- Participation by different sorts of people. When diverse groups — such as students, workers and small business owners, or people from different ethnic groups — participate in action, they are harder to marginalise. Diverse groups bring new ideas and networks into the struggle.
- Strategic choice and use of methods. It is important to choose the most appropriate methods of action and to use them well, and to innovate in response to the opponent’s tactics.
- Winning over neutrals and opponents. This is vital for success.

One other feature is vital: maintaining nonviolent discipline, which means not resorting to violence. This is built into the definition of nonviolent action but bears emphasising. Some campaigns fail when activists resort to violence, thereby discouraging participation and solidifying support for the opponent. Furthermore, using violence nearly always leads to greater suffering overall.

### Why call it nonviolent action?

The concept I’ve been calling nonviolent action is easier to describe than to label. To say an action is “nonviolent” is to use a negative — not violent — to point to a positive, and thus is easily misinterpreted. Are there better terms? Some of the common alternatives are “passive resistance,” “satyagraha,” “civil resistance” and “people power.” Each one has advantages and disadvantages, some of which are listed in the table.

Term	Usage	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Passive resistance</b>	prior to 1906, and by people unfamiliar with newer terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indicates lack of aggression</li> <li>• indicates opposition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• suggests passivity</li> <li>• suggests the opponent takes the initiative</li> </ul>
<b>satyagraha</b>	Gandhi’s preferred term; little used outside Gandhian circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unfamiliar (so less easily misinterpreted)</li> <li>• specific</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unfamiliar</li> <li>• seen as foreign (except in India)</li> <li>• associated with pacifism</li> </ul>
<b>nonviolent action</b>	standard expression in many academic and activist contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• standard expression</li> <li>• indicates absence of violence</li> <li>• indicate not passive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• negative construction</li> <li>• easily misinterpreted</li> <li>• associations with pacifism</li> </ul>
<b>civil resistance</b>	used by some academics and activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• suggests action by civilians</li> <li>• suggests non-routine activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unfamiliar</li> <li>• not specific</li> <li>• suggests the opponent takes the initiative</li> </ul>
<b>people power</b>	used in some media stories and by some academics and activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indicates popular participation</li> <li>• implies strength</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not specific</li> <li>• omits actions by individuals</li> <li>• associated with mass rallies</li> </ul>

As suggested by the table, there is no ideal expression — and none that is used by everyone. This seems to be a big mess: different expressions, most of them misinterpreted, misunderstood or obscure. What is the solution? One response is to advocate for a particular term. Some academics prefer “civil resistance” because it avoids some of the conceptual baggage associated with “nonviolent action.”

However, there are always likely to be problems with the words, because “nonviolent action” is a contested domain. Advocates of armed struggle denigrate nonviolent action as weak and ineffective, whereas supporters of conventional politics portray it as a threat to the system. From both sides, nonviolent action is unwelcome and therefore painted in unfavourable ways. So if there was a descriptive term available for use by the wider public, before long it might also acquire undesirable connotations.

Think of the word “anarchism,” which refers to a political system without government, in which people collectively organise their own lives. Due to opposition from Marxists and mainstream politicians, the

word is popularly and inaccurately used as a synonym for chaos, with anarchists portrayed as irrational bomb-throwers. This suggests that avoiding terms such as “nonviolent action” or using safer-sounding alternatives may not be effective, at least not for long.

On the other hand, sometimes a term of contempt — such as “queer” — can be reclaimed for positive uses. The idea is to embrace a term of derision and use it proudly, eventually making it seem normal and valued.

An intermediate position is to not worry about the range of different terms, and just use whatever communicates best to the audience involved. Sometimes no word need be used, because actions can be described more precisely, for example “vigil” or “occupation.”

### **Problems due to language**

One of the traps of language is to assume that once a label is applied, then the label confers every characteristic on the thing labelled. This occurs when activists agree that something is “nonviolent” according to a definition, and assume it must be good, for example ethically acceptable or more effective than alternatives. Activists might say, “Breaking into the installation is nonviolent, because we’re only cutting wires and not hurting anyone.” That might be true, but it’s not enough.

Activists need to look at whether the action is likely to be effective. Just because it’s nonviolent action doesn’t make it effective. There might be other methods that are more effective, that enable greater participation, that win wider popular support or that undermine the commitment of opponents. Sometimes conventional political action is a better choice.

Activists need to continually examine actions in the light of their ethics and politics. Being nonviolent is not automatically ethical. Sometimes going on strike is too strong and sometimes it is for the wrong cause. The implication is to always consider ethics and politics, and think of short-term tactics in light of long-term goals, and act accordingly. Words can be useful, but shouldn’t become a substitute for thinking carefully about goals and how to achieve them.

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### **References**

- Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. (New York: Columbia University Press).
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