

Nonviolent techniques aim to escalate conflicts peacefully, and to make more people aware of hidden conflicts in our societies. Almost every democratic freedom or human right are the results of popular movements escalating the conflicts with the aim to change the old, unjust systems. The transformation to more equal and just societies still have a long way to go, and every hidden conflict should be made visible.

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Nonviolence and power

Andreas Speck

Nonviolent movements or campaigns aim to change society – or even to promote revolution. In doing so, they will come up against existing power structures which want to prevent change. An understanding of power – of different forms of power – is therefore crucial for any movement for social change.

Most people have some assumptions about power. The power lies with the government (which may or may not be democratically elected), with the large multinational corporations, with the media, with the international institutions – to name just a few. All of these views are true to some degree, but how is their power exercised? Where does it come from?

This article aims to explore a nonviolent understanding of power, and the forms of power nonviolence opposes, but also the forms of power it wants to build and nurture. Because power is needed to achieve social change – revolutionary change. And clarity about the kinds of power we object to, and the kinds of power we want, can help to avoid a “power-trap” of recreating structures of domination after toppling the powers-that-are.

A nonviolent theory of power

When we talk about power, we are often referring to power-over: the power of governments or corporations (or other power structures, such as patriarchy or heteronormativity) to impose on us what they see fit.

But power-over is only one form of power. There are several others, such as power-with, power-(in-relation)-to, and power-within.

Nonviolence

Gender and nonviolence

Strategy

Why things don't 'just happen'
Theories of change
Mobilising for change: building power in Nepal

Nonviolent actions

Planning nonviolent campaigns
Working in groups
Activism in oppressive regimes

Case studies

West Papua: “We will be free”
Castor – how we mobilised people for civil disobedience

Training

Who has power in a school?
Pillars of power

Power-within

Power-within is related to an individual's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it is the capacity to imagine and have hope. Power-within means, on one hand, to understand our own situation of dependency and oppression, and to want to freedom from this; on the other hand it means to realise that every person has the possibility to influence the course of their own life and to change it. Developing power-within is crucial in any empowerment process.

Power-with

Power-with is power found in common ground among different people, and building collective strength. An awareness develops that you are not the only one affected by a situation, but that others have had similar experiences, too. This can lead to the realisation that people do not personally bear the guilt for their fate, but that often a structural or political pattern is at fault. This realisation and cooperation in the group can strengthen one's self-esteem. Not everybody has to find ways to deal with the situation – it is possible to struggle jointly for change. The group provides the opportunity to combine skills and knowledge, to support each other.

Power-with is related to the power of numbers, to the collective power we build when joining together with others, forming organisations, networks, and coalitions.

Power-(in relation)-to

Power-(in relation)-to refers to our goals and to the dominant power relationships. It is the power to achieve certain ends and opens up the possibilities of joint action for change. The question is: What leverage do we have, working in groups and coalitions, against the entrenched corporate and political power?

Any nonviolent movement needs to set into motion empowerment processes that develop these types of power, in order to challenge what is usually understood when we talk about power: power-over.

Challenging power-over

Power-over – or just power – as understood by most nonviolent movements is nothing static. A government doesn't just have power because it is the government, even if it is a military dictatorship. People in positions of power do not have in themselves any more power than any other human being. If that is the case, then, as Gene Sharp points out, the power to rule must come from outside.

Sources of power

If power is not intrinsic to political elites, then it has to be based on external sources. These external sources include authority (the acceptance by people of the elite's right to command), human resources (the elite's supporters, with their knowledge and skills), intangible factors (such as psychological considerations and ideological conditioning), material resources, and sanctions at the disposal of those with power. These sources of power depend on the obedience and cooperation of the people. The relationship between command and obedience is an interactive one, and power-over can be exercised only with the active or passive compliance of those being ruled.

It would be over simplifying to say that people obey only because of the fear of sanctions – legal sanctions such as fines or imprisonment, the threat of violence, or death. While this might be the dominant reason in extremely violent dictatorships, generally, there are other reasons for compliance that are more important. For example, habit (or tradition) is an important reason – we are used to obeying and without being challenged about it, we do not see any reason not to.

A third reason might be called “moral obligation”: because of social or religious values in society we feel morally (not necessarily legally) obliged to obey so as not to divert from the accepted norms and paths within society. This is also linked to “hidden-power” (see below),

Cooperating with power might be in our own interest. We might gain from it – in terms of prestige, monetary benefits, or we might gain a little more power too. We might even identify with those in power, or simply not see the issue as important.

Finally, we might lack self-confidence and just feel powerless (a lack of power-within).

Of course, it is not always easy to disobey. We are part of a web of (power) relationships and structures that often appear to leave us few choices. How can we disobey capitalism, when we need to earn money to satisfy our basic needs? While complete disobedience might not always be possible, there are often different degrees of compliance with the demands of power-over, which can be used to develop resistance.

A social movement aiming for social change – and not just for replacing one government with another – needs to address these reasons for compliance with power-over in order to challenge the power relationships, and build different types of power as a social movement.

Visible, invisible, and hidden power

It can be useful to look at power-over also from a different perspective, which is in some way related to the sources of power. These can be called ‘dimensions’ or ‘levels’ of power-over.

Visible power

Power-over can be very visible. This includes the formal rules (constitutions, laws) which establish relationships of power-over, but it also includes the threat of sanctions, either legal sanctions or the threat of arbitrary detentions or torture, which are designed to prevent people from claiming their rights.

Hidden power

Power-over can also be hidden, in the sense that no obvious, visible decisions need to be made which would expose the power. One example is the power of agenda setting: which issues are worth discussing in a society, at the place where decisions are being made. Who decides this? This can be done by controlling the media (which plays an important role in agenda setting), as well as by deciding who will be involved in discussing certain issues, and eventually in taking formal decisions. While the process of decision making itself might seem democratic, power-over is exercised by keeping issues off the agenda or excluding those most affected from taking part in decision making.

Invisible power

Power-over can also be completely invisible. It is kept from the mind and consciousness even of those most affected by it. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power-over contributes to shaping people's beliefs, sense of self, and acceptance of their supposed superiority or inferiority.

In many ways, invisible power is closely related to what Johan Galtung calls 'cultural violence' (see p27), which serves as legitimisation of both direct and structural violence, or the existence of power-over. As VeneKlasen and Miller put it: 'Processes of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable, and safe.' This contributes to creating what Sharp calls the "moral obligation" to obey.

Patriarchy in societies where it is still almost unchallenged and therefore widely accepted can be seen as a form of invisible power.

Social empowerment – nurturing the power we want

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

Alice Walker

As movements for social change, which are distinct from political parties (which might want to get into government) we are not interested in acquiring power-over, but rather in limiting it. First and foremost, through empowerment we need to develop power-within each one of us, which is a prerequisite for developing power-with and power-(in-relation)-to.

These three types of power influence and strengthen each other. The desire

to achieve certain aims (power-to) can foster the power to act and join with others (power-with). And the group passes on power to the individual (power-within) – and the other way round.

In order to develop these kinds of power, we need to make sure our work facilitates empowerment processes. Empowerment processes often begin out of an experience of crisis, of a change in personal circumstances, which can lead to the realisation that one has to take responsibility for one's own life, and the desire for change. In joining with others in a similar situation or with similar interests, people begin to realise that they are not alone, and in acting together with others gain more confidence. With more experience, people get a better understanding of the structural causes of their problems, but also begin to challenge their assigned positions in personal life and within the group.

Finally, one might reach a stage Wolfgang Stark calls 'burning patience', derived from a poem by Arthur Rimbaud; 'And, in the dawn, armed with a burning patience, we shall enter the splendid cities'. This stage is characterised by an awareness of one's capacity to make change happen (alongside others) and a burning desire to do so, but combined with an understanding of the time required for empowerment processes and general social change, and the patience needed to facilitate and nurture empowerment processes in others.

These stages should not be seen as linear, but are intertwined and occur in parallel.

Group culture

A group culture facilitating empowerment is characterised by the possibility to gain new skills, fostering of social relations, sharing of competences and decision making (that is by consensus), and an open leadership structure. Our groups and organisations need to be at the same time empowering organisations – organisations that nurture empowerment processes among their members or activists – and empowered organisations, focusing on making use of power-to to achieve their campaigning objectives.

Further reading:

For more on the different forms of power, see:

■ *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics. The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, Lisa VeneKlasen with Valerie Miller (Practical Action Publishing, 2002).

For more on empowerment, see:

■ *Nonviolence and Social Empowerment*, Julia Kraft and Andreas Speck (2001), and 'Empowerment – neue Handlungskompetenzen in der psychosozialen', in *Praxis*, Wolfgang Stark (Freiburg, 1996).

■ *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Part One: Power & Struggle*, Gene Sharp (Porter Sargent Publishers, Boston, 1973).

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