

## REPLY TO WARD CHURCHILL

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In this paper, I reply to Ward Churchill's contention that, in struggles against tyrannical regimes and oppressive political systems, nonviolent resistance is ineffectual without either corresponding violence or the threat of violence. My response attempts to show why nonviolent resistance is an effective method in its own right, and can be superior to violent alternatives in terms of accomplishing both short and long term objectives. Finally, I address a peculiar aspect of Mr. Churchill's position that, while insulating it from falsifiability, simultaneously limits both its credibility and usefulness.

In "Pacifism as Pathology: Notes on an American Pseudopraxis," Ward Churchill condemns nonviolent resistance as ineffectual unless accompanied by either violent resistance or the threat of such violence. In his words, "The essential contradiction inherent to pacifist praxis is that, for survival itself, any nonviolent confrontation of state power must ultimately depend either on the state refraining from unleashing some real measure of its potential violence, or the active presence of some counterbalancing violence of precisely the sort pacifism professes to reject as a political option" (Churchill, 1998, p. 44). His contention is that all nonviolent resistance must necessarily result in one of two outcomes: "1.) To render themselves perpetually ineffectual (and consequently unthreatening) in the face of state power. In which case they will likely be largely ignored by the status quo and self-eliminating in terms of revolutionary potential; or 2.) to make themselves a clear and apparent danger to the state, in which case they are subject to physical liquidation by the status quo and are self-eliminating in terms of revolutionary potential" (Churchill, 1998, p. 44). In other words, he claims that nonviolent resistance is either ineffective or extinguished before becoming effective.

I believe that Mr. Churchill has based his argument on a false dichotomy. Between the extremes of the impotent and the vanquished lie those movements, many of them nonviolent, who have achieved varying degrees of success on behalf of the disenfranchised and oppressed. The purpose of this paper is to prove the viability of this largely nonviolent middle ground and to highlight the flaws in Churchill's argument. My argument will consist of four parts. The first will propose an alternative to violent action in the form of nonviolent coercion. The second will show how Gene Sharp (2002) makes use of such nonviolent methods to construct a strategy designed to systematically undermine and, in some cases, disintegrate, tyrannical regimes. The third highlights some of the reasons why violent resistance may be less effective than its nonviolent counterpart. The fourth and final part shows that Mr. Churchill's contentions, while containing *some* elements of truth, have serious structural flaws that may cause one to question the strength of his conclusions.

Churchill seems to confuse nonviolent action with *inaction*. This is clearly not the case. As Kurt Schock makes clear, “[N]onviolent 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” (Schock, 2005, p. 705). And herein lies the only limitation. All other forms of coercion, except physical violence, remain as viable options for the nonviolent proponent of social change. As will be outlined in the next section, the concerted application of economic and social pressure against repressive political systems can be of enormous value in achieving a greater share of justice for the oppressed, without resorting to physical violence or the threat of such violence.

In From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework, Gene Sharp conducts a comprehensive examination, probing for theoretical and historical weaknesses within tyrannical regimes, that can be effectively, and nonviolently, exploited to undermine and, in some cases, disintegrate, these unjust systems. Sharp’s logical strategy is clear and powerful: Locate the points where an oppressive regime is most vulnerable, and the points at which this system depends on the cooperation of the very people it oppresses. Then apply pressure to those points in order to further weaken its overall structure and exploit these dependencies.

In terms of well thought out strategies and tactics, Gene Sharp provides an impressive list that should be effective at weakening, and eventually dissolving, repressive authorities, and which also aims at the successful establishment of democracies after the dictatorships have fallen. It is noteworthy that Sharp’s methods for accomplishing both short and long term goals have consistently proven to be effective in many different instances, without resorting to the violent tactics that Churchill insists are necessary. Notable examples can be found among the nonviolent actions taken in Chile during the late 1980s, when resisters exposed the illegitimate acts of torture perpetrated by their government (Deats, n.d.), and the Argentinean women who courageously and peacefully protested the illegitimate acts of kidnapping perpetrated by their government (Ruddick, 1989, p. 226).

Any overview of nonviolent struggles, however brief, seems incomplete without some mention of the paradigm examples of the nonviolent movements headed by Mahatma Gandhi, on behalf of his fellow Indians’ struggle for equality and self-rule, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on behalf of the African-American struggle for equal rights in the United States.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great pioneer of nonviolent resistance, showed, through his incredible courage and relentless determination, the true power and effectiveness of nonviolence. Referring to Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “As I read his works, I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance...As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom” (King, 1963, p. 72).

Churchill’s assumption that, when a nonviolent group becomes a viable threat to an oppressive government, this group would be destroyed or become self-eliminating, does

not match the evidence, since both Dr. King's movement in the United States and Gandhi's movement in India survived their successes.

In many of the cases under discussion, violent resistance simply does not make good practical sense, and would result in unacceptable losses, while contributing relatively little to the overall cause. One reason for the inappropriateness of violent action in these circumstances is stressed repeatedly by Sharp and others. Implicit in almost all the situations under discussion is the assumption that the group *doing the oppressing* has more weapons, soldiers and all the other necessary ingredients for violent action than the *group being oppressed*. In such cases, if the subjugated group insisted on using violent means as their primary mode of operation, their movements would effectively amount to suicide, and the actual benefit to their cause would probably be negligible. It may be objected at this point that some groups and individuals protesting in this way, and willingly giving their lives, could inspire others through their martyrdom. Their sacrifice could possibly elicit the sympathy of other groups that may be willing to help their cause. In answer to this, one only has to consider the response that people are likely to elicit using this method in a nonviolent, as opposed to a violent, way. The Buddhist monks who immolated themselves in protest during the Vietnam War, and the followers of Gandhi who were beaten and killed, represent this method done nonviolently. They sacrificed their lives while making sure to harm no one else. In contrast, consider the suicide bomber who kills herself in the middle of a crowded marketplace, taking as many people as possible along with her. She is representative of martyrdom conducted violently. Both are types of martyrdom; but to the former, we assign virtue, while, to the latter, condemnation. The nonviolent variation is far more likely to elicit the support of other groups and even nations. It is practically superior.

There is also something to be said about the difference in results that are obtained when a dictatorship is overthrown through violent means, as opposed to nonviolent means. Gene Sharp notes that, essential to the removal of a dictatorship and the establishment of democracy, is a fundamental redistribution of the governmental power structure. Violence may be less conducive towards this goal. According to Sharp,

A military coup d' etat against a dictatorship might appear to be relatively one of the easiest and quickest ways to remove a particularly repugnant regime. However, there are very serious problems with that technique. Most importantly, it leaves in place the existing maldistribution of power between the population and the elite in control of the government and its military forces. The removal of particular persons and cliques from the government positions most likely will merely make it possible for another group to take their place. (Sharp, 2002, p. 5)

Sharp feels that, unless the dictatorial power structure is changed to a more democratically oriented power structure, the stage is set for *another tyrannical group* to simply take the place of the deposed one.

At this point, in order to avoid the same reliance on absolutes that I find inappropriate in Churchill's argument, it is important to recognize the crucial role that the uniqueness of every situation has in determining the proper methods to be employed on behalf of an oppressed or subjugated group. There are kernels of truth in Churchill's contentions that

have more or less import in accordance with the specific situation. There are cases, both historical and theoretical, for which violent action seems the only logical alternative. The extermination of the European Jews during World War II seems like such an instance. One important difference between this example and the oppression of Indians by the English, or African-Americans by the United States, is that, in the case of the Nazis, it was not an instance of the same type of repression. They did not wish to subjugate or exploit the Jews; they simply wished to kill them.

Fortunately, however, the Nazi example is the exception rather than the rule. Most cases of oppression stem from a wish to subjugate a population in order to profit unfairly from their labors, or to usurp their property. To give Mr. Churchill his due, even in cases such as these, there may be factors, specific to particular situations, which call for violent resistance or a mixture of violent and nonviolent resistance. Each situation must be evaluated on its own merits. My contention is not that there is *no truth* in Churchill's position. Rather, it is his use of absolutes, his insistence that violence or the threat of violence is always necessary, that demands a refutation.

Churchill presents his contention, that violence or the threat of violence is a necessary constituent of successful resistance to tyranny, in a way that makes it unfalsifiable. This, however, does not add to its merit. To potential counterexamples, Churchill simply relies on the presence of groups which may be *potentially* violent. The very nature of tyranny, however, naturally encourages feelings of resentment and hostility on the part of the oppressed. If one looked hard enough, he could always find some indication of *potential* violence, even if not overt. Churchill's argument will, in this sense, always be true, but gives us no more actual information than a tautology. Also, since Churchill supposes a causal relationship between violent resistance and the defeat of dictatorships, and this construct is placed within an historical context, we can never know what would have happened if there had been no violence or the threat of violence, but only nonviolent resistance. While it may not be possible to prove Churchill's argument unsound, its very nature makes it of limited utility.

## VI. References

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