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Nonviolent direct action – a critical reflection

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“A group of eight activists blockaded the entrance to AWE Aldermaston this morning at 6.45am. Using steel lock-on tubes the group have completely blocked the road. Thus stopping all construction traffic entering or leaving the site. This has called a large tailback and the police turned all traffic away from the site.”
(Aldermaston shut down, Indymedia UK, 3 January 2007)

“On 8 October, campaigners blockaded US Air Force Lakenheath in Suffolk ... Six demonstrators chained themselves together, delaying the removal of the blockade.”
(Peace News No 2491, November 2007)

“Twenty-two (22) Trident Ploughshares activists using heavy “lock-on” tubes shut down all gates at the Faslane Naval Base on the Clyde today for more than two hours ... MoD cutting teams worked for two hours to remove the protesters, while traffic was completely prevented from entering or leaving the base.”
(Faslane 365, Two hour blockade shuts down all entrances to Faslane Trident sub base, 13 April 2007)

These are just three snippets of recent direct action reports. In an almost “guerilla tactic” style, these direct actions focus on small groups of people having a high impact using ever more sophisticated lock-ons or other techniques. “Impact” or “success” is then often measured in terms of hours it takes the police to remove the blockade.

Of course, it's always fun to see the police struggling with lock-ons or other tools when they try to remove protesters – I'm not going to deny that. But the more important question is: what does this achieve?

How does nonviolence work?

It is part of the philosophy of nonviolent direct action to have a direct impact on what we are opposed to – the construction of a nuclear weapons factory, a nuclear submarine base, nuclear waste transports, or whatever. In contrast to “pure” civil disobedience – the symbolic breaking of a law – direct action aims to practically put a spanner into the works, with less focus on arrest and a potential subsequent court case, and more focus on disruption.

However, does this mean the political impact of direct action can be measured in terms of disruption caused by the action? I have my doubts, and would argue that although we call it direct action, the more important political impact comes from its symbolic nature.

(Nonviolent) social movements are engaged in some form a power struggle with the state. This requires an understanding of issues of power. According to Gene Sharp’s Consent Theory of Power, the basic idea is that obedience is at the core of political power. Political power is never exclusively vested in the powerholders or elites, but in society. Only through society’s consent can society be ruled by an elite (Sharp 1973). The power of the ruler will collapse if consent is withdrawn in an active way. The 'active' here is vital. A government will not be threatened by grumbling, alienation or critical analyses alone (Martin 1989).

While Gene Sharp focused his theory on less democratic regimes, I do think that some core principals also hold true in Western liberal democracies. The political elites – and this includes not only the government, but also the major opposition parties as potential governments – are far removed from society, and can be understood as

“powerholders”. However, in democracies social movements rarely aim for the total overthrow of the system, but mostly aim to achieve certain reforms. The power struggle is therefore not absolute, but only in relation to a certain issue. However, the power struggle will be the more difficult the more high-profile an issue is for the state – and questions of nuclear weapons or nuclear power have to be classified as a high-profile issues, touching at the core of the state – thus making it more difficult for a movement to be successful.

Looking at social movement theory, nonviolent direct action as major movement strategy aims to trigger what Felix Kolb calls “the disruption mechanism” to social change. In order to trigger this mechanism, “mass defiance on a scale needed to cause political crisis” is needed. In addition, “some degree of elite conflict and electoral instability are political opportunities required for the triggering of the disruption mechanism.” (Kolb 2007)

This defines an important starting point for social movements: “The decisive task of social movements is ... the fight between the movement and the powerholders for the hearts (sympathy) and minds (public opinion) and active support of the majority of the people” (Moyer 1987), to create the political power base for the social movement, which can confront the power of the state (or corporations).

The role of direct action

Direct action has an important role to play in a nonviolent movement strategy. Mass direct action symbolises the “active withdrawal of consent” that causes a crisis and threatens the ability of a government to govern, or to carry out a certain policy. A recent example is the anti-Castor movement in Germany, which mobilised (and mobilises) thousands of people for blockades of Castor nuclear waste transports to the storage facility in Gorleben. The impact of these direct actions cannot be measured in terms of time it takes the police to clear the blockade, but in the loss of legitimacy of government action in the Wendland region and beyond. Thus, lock-ons or other sophisticated techniques of blockading do not play a mayor role – they are only used in addition to mass direct action, to increase the disruption, but do not dominate the public or the movement's perception.

When in 1998 the then Christian-Democrat government used the contamination of Castor containers to temporarily halt all nuclear waste transports, the mass defiance in the Wendland had clearly caused a political crisis, which combined with elite conflict and electoral instability (the Christian Democrats lost the following elections) triggered the disruption mechanism.

It is important to use nonviolence to create the political conditions for mass direct action. Jochen Stay, one of the organisers of the anti-Castor protests in Germany, identified 10 points which might contribute to creating those conditions, one of which relates to the form of direct action: “A form of civil disobedience is devised whose consequences are neither too heavy nor too light. This means through limited violation of the law and through the preparedness to confront the consequences public awareness is created, but also that many people are prepared to wage civil disobedience, because the legal and physical consequences are limited and costs can be calculated” (Stay 2002).

An obsession with direct impact?

However, this does not mean that nonviolent direct action is pointless if it is not on a mass scale. But what exactly is the role of smaller scale nonviolent action? How can success be measured then?

Obviously, it makes sense to clearly define an objective for any kind of action – not just nonviolent direct action. If the objective is to obstruct a certain military establishment for two hours, then the action has been successful. However, while this might be very satisfying and initially empowering for those involved in the action, I am more interested in

the question how such an objective for a singular action fits into a broader strategy of building a movement, and creating the conditions for success on a movement scale.

An important task for a relative weak social movement is to raise awareness about an issue – such as nuclear energy (which will be important in Britain now) or nuclear weapons, and to put this issue on the public and political agenda. Nonviolent action has a role to play here. As Moyer puts it: “Small local demonstrations and nonviolent action campaigns begin to dramatize the problem, placing a dim spotlight on it” (Moyer et al, 2001).

At this stage, the main objectives of a nonviolent (direct) action should be twofold: Reaching out to the broader public about the issue at stake, and the empowering of social movement activists to take direct action. The direct disruptive impact the action creates is only important in so far as it helps to escalate the conflict and contributes to raising awareness. However, it seems the nonviolent direct action “scene” is sometimes more concerned about tools to enhance “effectiveness” in the sense of causing maximum disruption, then about reaching out to the public. Ever more sophisticated techniques are designed to make it more difficult for the police to remove small numbers of protesters. This form of nonviolence leads to an “arms race” between protesters and police, a competition about who has the better tools to blockade/remove protesters, but not to a fight for the hearts and minds of the people.

When Rosa Park in 1955 refused to leave her seat to make space for a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, she did not need any tool. However, her action and the subsequent arrest sparked the Montgomery bus boycott – which triggered the US civil rights movement. The action contributed massively to the escalation of the conflict around the injustice of racial segregation in the US, and was thus highly effective.
However, even in a mass nonviolent movement there can be a role for more sophisticated direct action techniques, which can support mass actions. For example when Northwood headquarters was blockaded by about 200 protesters in January 2003 – before the start of the Iraq war –, six activists blocked the second gate using lock-ons, thus making it possible for the entire base to be blockaded. The important aspect is that “effectivity enhancing tools” are not used as a substitute to broader support, but in support of mass nonviolent action.

If sophisticated direct action is more focused on causing disruption than on the creation of a movement, then direct action turns into a matter of policing, and does not contribute to creating the conditions for social change. It can even turn counter-productive, when it alienates the public support that already exists.

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