

Footnotes

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## **Gene Sharp 1928 - 2018**

Gene Sharp was arguably the most widely influential sociologist in the last 50 years. His endeavors have increasingly influenced the use of nonviolent action in struggles around the world. They also profoundly influenced academic sociology in the study of social movements, social conflicts, and social change, as well as other social sciences and interdisciplinary fields such as peace studies and conflict resolution. Of course, nonviolent action as a means of struggle was known about before Gene Sharp's studies of it. But, as exemplified by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, it was considered rare and depended on extraordinary, principled leaders, who stressed its morality, as well as its effectiveness. Sharp, however, drew upon the sociological understanding that authority derives from the goodwill and obedience of the subjects. Authority collapses if obedience is withdrawn. This fits his tough-minded approach. In 1973, he published *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, which immediately drew much attention. In this monumental book he analyzed the bases for the power of nonviolence and documented the very many cases of its effectiveness.

Gene Sharp was born on January 21, 1928, in North Baltimore, OH, and he died on January 28, 2018 in Boston. He received his bachelor's degree from Ohio State University in 1949 and his master's degree in sociology there in 1951. His thesis was: *Nonviolence: A Sociological Study*. Concerned about the great violence of World War II, he was searching for alternatives. He refused to cooperate with the conscription process, which was renewed during the U.S. war in Korea, and was imprisoned for nine months. Afterwards, he undertook intensive research about Gandhi that resulted in his first book, published in 1960, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power*, with a foreword by Albert Einstein.

In 1955, Sharp left for Norway, first as a fellow at the University of Oslo and then as a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo. He investigated the extensive Norwegian resistance to the Nazi occupation. In 1961, he began his doctoral studies at St. Catherine's College, receiving his PhD from Oxford University, Faculty of Social Studies in 1968. He had returned to the United States, and in 1967 he began teaching at various universities in the Boston area. From 1970 until 1986 he taught in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at Southeastern Massachusetts University. His main base for his work was in the Program on Nonviolent Sanctions in Conflict and Defense, at the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, which he led. In 1983, he established the Albert Einstein Institute to study and promote nonviolent alternatives in conflict and defense. Based in Boston, it continues its global activities. Many materials are available at no cost from its website: [www.aeinstein.org](http://www.aeinstein.org).

During all these years, Sharp published many books, articles, and pamphlets. The work included broad surveys, deep analyses, and manuals for action, such as, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th*

*Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* and *From Dictatorship to Democracy*. Much of this work was translated into 35 languages. He traveled widely giving lectures and consulting with academic programs, non-governmental organizations, and governments. Funding for these activities was generally limited and also required Sharp's continuous effort. In addition, however, several organizations in the United States and abroad, drawing on his work, continue training in and education about nonviolent action. They include: the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. In addition, important research assessing the short- and long-term effects of employing nonviolent action is increasingly being published (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011) (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000; Zunes, 1999).

Gene Sharp is most known as the theorist for the many nonviolent struggles to overcome authoritarian rule or gain autonomy and independence. Indeed, he has provided a basic understanding of the power of popular resistance, strategic insights, and lists of possible tactics. Major weapons in nonviolent struggles include boycotts, hunger strikes, provoking counter-productive responses, and symbolic challenges. He stressed the importance of careful planning. His ideas were applied, sometimes not thoroughly enough, in the Baltic countries, Serbia, Myanmar, Tunisia, and Egypt in the Arab spring.

At times, the specter of civil resistance worried the Iranian government and some other authoritarian governments, which were leftist as well as rightist. Some banned Sharp's writings and absurdly accused him of being an agent of the CIA. As Sharp made clear in an open letter in June 2007, he never worked for or received money from the CIA. He wrote, "The Albert Einstein Institution receives no funding from any government...[It] neither creates conflicts, nor becomes a participant in a conflict once one exists." In any case, Sharp always urged both sides in a struggle to use nonviolent methods. Furthermore, he generally argued that the United States government should not become involved in indigenous revolutions.

Gene Sharp devoted his life to the promotion of carefully planned use of nonviolent action and has left a remarkable legacy. He produced a sound base upon which important work can be built. Such work is greatly needed now, as anti-democratic forces are so evident.

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