

Liberation Revisited: Beyond Democracy to the Apolitical StratML-Enabled Performance Web

Owen Ambur, April 17, 2017

In *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, Gene Sharp sets forth a set of principles for non-violent resistance with the aim of overthrowing dictatorships and establishing democratic governments.

Liberation has been [defined](#) as:

- 1: the act of [liberating](#) : the state of being [liberated](#)
- 2: a movement seeking equal rights and status for a group (such as *women's liberation*)

To disambiguate these meanings from other usages, Wikipedia cites the term “[emancipation](#)” – defined as “any effort to procure [economic and social rights](#), [political rights](#) or [equality](#), often for a specifically [disenfranchised](#) group ...” Perhaps the most famous usage of that term is President Lincoln’s [proclamation](#) emancipating African American slaves, which was required despite the ostensible existence of democracy in a nation where “[all men](#)” were deemed to have been “[created equal](#)”, i.e., the white, adult, land-owning male segment of the population.

Under the control of dictators, Sharp says:

The population has often been ***atomized (turned into a mass of isolated individuals) unable to work together*** ... they face ***suffering without purpose*** and a future without hope. (p. 5, emphases added)

In other words, with the exception of the ruling elite, everyone else may be equally (“fairly,” i.e., equitably) disenfranchised, impoverished, and helpless; and, stating the obvious, elections cannot be used to effect significant political change. (p. 9) Moreover, international pressures may be ineffective unless they are in support a powerful internal resistance movement. (p. 11) Venezuela and North Korea come to mind as poster children for the equitable sharing of poverty and helplessness under the thoughtful, nationalistic guidance of beloved dictators.

To overcome a dictatorship, Sharp suggests four tasks must be undertaken: 1) Strengthen the oppressed population; 2) Strengthen the independent social groups and institutions; 3) Create powerful resistance forces, and 4) Develop a wise grand strategic plan. (p. 12)

Insightfully, he notes, “A liberation struggle is a time for self-reliance and internal strengthening of the struggle groups.” (p. 12) More directly, he says, “liberation from dictatorship ultimately depends upon the people’s ability to liberate themselves ...” Moreover, he asserts repressed people have the means to free themselves but those capabilities have not been developed. (p. 11)

Regarding prospects for negotiating with dictators, Sharp says there should be no compromise on issues that are basic and fundamental, like religious principles, human freedom, and economic development.

(p. 16) Indeed, to the degree that a dictatorship may be ostensibly or actually based upon theocracy, its principles may be non-negotiable.

As has often been said, freedom is not free. Sharp notes that achieving both freedom and peace is not a simple matter but, rather, requires strategic skill, organization, planning and, above all, power. As he points out, “Democrats cannot hope to bring down a dictatorship and establish political freedom without the ability to apply their own power effectively.” (p. 26)

However, it is noteworthy to consider an apparent logical inconsistency in his argument in favor of applying political power to establish a new, more limited form of dictatorship -- [Majoritarianism](#) – under which the minority is still oppressed. Is it truly necessary to apply one’s own power to try dictate to others? (For a brief discussion of the bases of social power in the cyberspace, click [here](#).) Where is the line to be drawn on the continuum stretching from complete individual freedom to total, “socialized,” centralized, dictatorial power?

Sharp observes a characteristic of a democratic society is the existence of a multitude of nongovernmental groups and institutions, independent of the state, each of which serves its own stakeholders’ objectives and addresses social needs. (p. 33) [Additional characteristics](#) of democracy cited by others include [legal equality](#), [political freedom](#) and [rule of law](#).

Sharp notes nongovernmental organizations often have political significance, providing social and institutional “bases by which people can exert influence over the direction their society and resist other groups or the government when they are seen to impinge unjustly on their interests, activities, or purposes.” (p. 34) However, in terms of longer-term outcomes, it is unclear how such inter-group resistance differs from more prehistoric forms of clan warfare. Indeed, in some respects the [Maori war dances](#) seem more “civilized”.

On the other hand, helping to resolve matters of justice and purpose seems like an excellent opportunity for the application of artificial intelligence (AI). The issue is whether AI services can be stripped of human biases, of which [there are many](#), while at the same time upholding human values, which may themselves entail irreconcilable differences, e.g., between security/safety versus freedom of expression and action.

Sharp highlights the importance for resisters to “create new independent social groups and institutions, or to reassert democratic control over surviving or partially controlled bodies.” (p. 35) He notes one of the weaknesses of dictatorships is that mistakes of judgment, policy, and action are likely to occur since so many decisions made by so few people. (p. 40) Among the means Sharp suggests for nonviolent resistance is establishment of a *parallel* government. (p. 46) Insightfully, he notes:

... the chosen means of struggle will need to contribute to a change in the distribution of effective power in society. Under ... dictatorship the population and civil institutions of the society have been too weak, and the government too strong. (p. 77)

However, to those on the political right, this sounds like an argument that can be applied to many well-established social welfare democracies as well. Indeed, whereas Marx characterized religion as the [opium of the people](#), it appears government may be assuming that role for increasing numbers in many countries. Thus, a relevant issue is to what degree, if any, government should engage in “parallel” functions that might be better served by apolitical, self-organizing groups, including not only nonprofits and cooperatives but also commercial enterprises.

In any event, Sharp says, “When the grand strategy of the struggle has been carefully planned, there are sound reasons for making it widely known.” (p. 81) However, even if the strategy has not yet been well constructed, perhaps the best way to enhance it might be to publish the draft openly on the Web and engage other stakeholders in improving it. Indeed, no strategy will ever be perfect. Continuous improvement should be pursued, regardless of how carefully a plan has been crafted. Indeed, taking into account acceleration in the pace of technological change, even a plan that is highly optimal today needs to be dynamic enough to deal with the realities of tomorrow.

Among the purposes of the Strategy Markup Language (StratML) standard (ISO 17469-1) is to enable more efficient, effective, and dynamic sharing of the content of strategic and performance plans and reports with interested and affected stakeholders. Publishing such information openly on the Web in standardized, machine-readable format supports those purposes.

Sharp suggests, “Most of the strategies of campaigns in the long-term struggle should *not* aim for the immediate complete fall of the dictatorship, but instead for gaining limited objectives. Nor does every campaign require the participation of all sections of the population.” (p. 93)

Indeed, *requiring* acceptance, if not necessarily participation, is the definition of dictatorship. No one should be required to accept everything that anyone else may wish to impose upon them nor should everyone be required to participate in anything unconditionally. Moreover, [South Africa’s forgiveness trials](#) might provide a more hopeful model for action to depose dictators and their supporters, each of whom are human beings with emotions and motivations – including fears – very similar to those who choose to resist their dictates.

In short, perhaps it might be best to separate the past from future actions and aim for a win/win future that is better for all concerned, including those who have supported the dictatorship in the past.

In the initial stages of resistance movements, Sharp suggests that separate campaigns with different objectives can be useful. (p. 93) That thought is highly consistent the conceptualization of [efficiency diversity](#) set forth by Dietrich Dorner in *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations*.

While it may seem logical to convert general goals into specific ones, Dorner cautions not to do so prematurely, because “if particular actions are not informed by an overall conception, behavior will respond only to the demands of the moment.” To avoid that result, he suggests:

One way out of this dilemma is to set intermediate goals according to the criterion of maximum “efficiency diversity.” A situation is characterized by high efficiency diversity if it offers many different possibilities (“diversity”) for actions that have a high probability of success (“efficiency”) ... We can pursue situations of efficiency diversity even when we cannot specify our final goal. (pp. 53-54, emphasis added)

Maximizing efficiency diversity seems like a good strategy not just in the initial stages of a social movement but in long-term as well. Indeed, any other strategy tends to lead back to dictatorship, with the only difference being a matter of degree. By definition, any large, centralized institution or process reduces diversity, freedom, and choice among those subject to it. While Sharp’s focus is narrower, on the resistance process itself, he devotes a section of his book to “spreading responsibility,” in which he asserts:

Selective resistance is especially important *to defend* the existence and autonomy of independent social, economic, and political groups and institutions outside the control of the dictatorship. (p. 97)

That assertion is equally applicable to all forms of government, regardless of whether they are called dictatorship, oligarchy, communism, socialism, democracy or anything else. Indeed, usage of the word “resistance” may be a needlessly pejorative substitute for the words “freedom” or “self-governance” – even as some view the term “[majoritarianism](#)” as a pejorative substitute for the word “democracy”. Feeling the need to resist may be a symptom of repression under any institutionalized form of government, none of which truly constitutes *self-governance*, literally speaking.

Sharp notes, “the growth of autonomous social, economic, cultural, and political institutions progressively expands the ‘democratic space’ of the society and shrinks the control of the dictatorship.” (p. 107) Again, however, the same is true of any form of government, which, by definition, shrinks the space for autonomous, self-governing institutions to grow and support the objectives of those who voluntarily associate with and participate in them.

Indeed, as Sharp highlights, the “combination of resistance and institution building can lead to *de facto* freedom ...” (p. 108) Perhaps it might be useful to dispense with the resistance part of the equation and focus not on building new institutions for others to resist but, rather, a StratML-enabled worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results. How’s that for a “grand strategy”?

Regarding such a strategy, Sharp avers planners should estimate in advance “the possible and preferred ways in which a successful struggle might best be concluded ...” For example, he says a new government should be established and begin functioning quickly (p. 112) so that “changes won at a great price” aren’t lost due to lack of planning. (p. 113) However, even while striving to improve the planning, consideration should also be given to revolutionary opportunities to reduce the “price” of the struggle to all affected stakeholders, including those in dictatorial positions of power.

Indeed, as Sharp suggests, “The new political system should provide the opportunities for people with varying outlooks and favored measures to continue constructive work and policy development to deal

with problems in the future.” (p. 116) Ideally, however, the new system should be *apolitical* as well as noncoercive.

Perhaps there should also be fewer “policies” (in narrative form) and more performance plans (in machine-readable format), in which the participants commit their own time, effort, and resources to accomplishing their desired objectives – with little or no undesired impact for others to resist. Might that not be the best of all worlds in which a “successful struggle” might not merely “end” (culminate) but rather continue indefinitely, in a routinely ongoing virtuous cycle of productivity and improvement?

Addressing threats to newly established democracies, Sharp asserts that legitimacy must be denied to putschists. (p. 118) Again, however, there is a bit of irony in his admonition since the democratic resisters themselves were recently putschists against the former government. ([Definition of putsch](#): a secretly plotted and suddenly executed attempt to overthrow a government.) The differences are matters of the number or percentage of people feeling oppressed and thus the need to resist as well as the degree to which the plans and actions are openly or secretly conducted and the speed with which they are implemented. (Sharp notes that some dictatorships have fallen very quickly in recent years.)

Indeed, even with respect to the most universally accepted purpose of centralized government – national defense – Sharp suggests, “placing resistance capability directly in the hands of the citizenry ... could avoid the need to establish a strong military capacity which could itself threatened democracy or require vast economic resources much needed for other purposes.” (p. 121)

While it is doubtful Sharp intended as much, his words in that regard must be music to the ears of supporters of the [Second Amendment](#) albeit not so much to “resisters” of that provision of the U.S. Constitution, including mayors of some of the largest, most crime-afflicted cities in the country.

Sharp’s suggestion also takes on special meaning to supporters of President Trump who have grown weary of the failure of most of the other members of NATO to honor their financial commitments to provide for common defense, preferring instead to stick their heads in the sand (if not somewhere else) while relying unduly on the U.S. and at the same time criticizing how much we spend on defense.

In any event, after resisters have overcome a dictatorship, Sharp cautions against including promises in the constitution that might prove impossible to implement or provisions requiring a highly centralized government. (p. 120) However, a more revolutionary approach might not include any “promises” at all or even a document called a “constitution”. Instead, it might simply involve the creation and use of a worldwide, distributed StratML-enabled, Cloud-based network in which values, intentions, stakeholders, and results are clearly and openly documented and thus speak for themselves.

The vision of the StratML standard is: ***A worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results.*** What could be simultaneously more liberating and de-atomizing than that? How rapidly might the revolution occur if those who feel oppressed were to take it upon themselves to engage each other voluntarily in a global nonpartisan, non-violent, apolitical performance network?

If you choose not to participate, who will you blame for the helplessness and oppression you feel?