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Review of Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know

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Erica Chenoweth. *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Erica Chenoweth. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, paper, 334 pp., ISBN: 9780190244408.

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Erica Chenoweth has written an excellent book on civil resistance, a term invented by Mahatma Gandhi over 100 years ago. (p. 1), Chenoweth defines civil resistance as “a form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence or the threat of violence against people to do so” (p.1). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has stirred interest in civil resistance as it has raised moral and practical issues regarding the use of violence to resist the invasion. As Thomas Reese has noted (2022), pacifists and some just war advocates applying Just War criteria, myself included, have concluded that civil/nonviolent resistance to the Russians needs to be seriously considered as a realistic, ethical option. However, the effectiveness of civil resistance, especially against a violent and highly repressive autocrat such as Putin, is not well-known or understood. This book by Chenoweth goes a long way to remedying that problem. The extensive empirical research on civil resistance, including the analysis of numerous cases in history of successful and unsuccessful civil resistance, warrants serious study and consideration rather than the superficial dismissal of civil resistance one sometimes encounters along with the naïve assumption of the great effectiveness of violence. Civil resistance is not the province of pacifists, though many pacifists support it. In fact, as Chenoweth and others have noted, most people who have engaged in civil resistance use it for pragmatic reasons, because they believe it can be effective, not because it is a philosophical or religious commitment for them (p. 68). Indeed, I am a Just War advocate and believe violence can be justified/legitimate in some cases—just as the use of nonviolence may sometimes be unethical/illegitimate (see pp. 74-76). However, because I use Just War criteria and I am aware of the possibilities of the successful use of civil resistance, as we saw in the nonviolent revolutions of Eastern Europe in 1989-1991 (Roberts, 1991) and of the possibilities of violence, and the possibility of fewer lives lost in civil rather than military resistance, I am willing to advocate civil resistance in various cases, including the current situation in Ukraine (see Hunter, 2022; Reese, 2022; Roberts, 1991; Sharp, 1990).

Erica Chenoweth, a political scientist, developed her interest in civil resistance over time – as she wrote: “in June 2006, I stumbled into the study of nonviolent resistance as a skeptic. Like many others in my field of international relations, I was concerned primarily with questions about why people pursue political violence...and how to contain it. Most of us start from the assumption that people turn to violence because it works” (p. ix). Then Chenoweth attended a workshop by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) that explored the theory and practice—various case studies – of civil resistance. There are cases of successful civil resistance that many of us know, such as Gandhi in India; the Civil Rights Movement in the US; Solidarity in Poland; the People Power Movement in the Philippines; and Otpor in Serbia, among others -- successes in various types of regimes, but Chenoweth, like many others, responded to such cases with skepticism, assuming these were probably exceptional cases. At the workshop she met a fellow social scientist and future collaborator, Maria Stephan, who proposed that Chenoweth do some

research to test her skepticism. She and Stephan then “teamed up to design a study that could assess—systematically and empirically – the relative success of nonviolent and violent mass movements, as well as the underlying reasons for these successes.” They did what serious empirical researchers often do to study the patterns of social and political phenomena – they put together a data set, drawing from thousands of source materials, with feedback and evaluations by numerous scholars. They focused on cases of “nonviolent mass mobilization featuring at least one thousand observed participants seeking maximalist (country level) goals [such as the overthrow of a government or territorial independence, (see p.13] from 1900 to 2006 [now updated to 2019]. We did not count smaller campaigns, or reform movements” (p. xx). It took them two years to put the data set together, but it was well worth it – after analyzing those data, in 2011 they published their results in their highly acclaimed book, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, which received the prestigious Woodrow Wilson Prize of the American Political Science Association. Chenoweth and Stephan found that “[m]ore than half of the campaigns that relied primarily on nonviolent resistance succeeded, whereas only about a quarter of the violent ones did” (p. xx). The findings from the updated data set are discussed below. Chenoweth, and Chenoweth and Stephan, have written many other essays on civil resistance listed in the excellent References section of *Civil Resistance*, and well worth reading. Indeed, one is struck by looking at the References how broad and interdisciplinary Chenoweth’s reading is: she brings together research on social movements, democratic transitions, and nonviolence studies – areas of research that need even more integration and cross-fertilization, though Chenoweth does a good job.

Structure and Content of the Book

Civil Resistance is a very good, readable introductory overview and reference book on civil resistance, organized in a comprehensive question and answer format, posing questions commonly asked by average people, practitioners and scholars. The question and answer format may lead some to think this is not serious compendium of scholarship – it very much is so, and Chenoweth noted that the book is the first synthesis of her thought on civil resistance. The arrangement of chapter topics allows one to zoom in on the areas of special interest to them. After the introductory chapter, Chapter 1, The Basics, provides the framework for thinking about civil resistance. Chapter 2 is on How Civil Resistance Works and gives a very good accounting of the research on the topic. Chapter 3 looks at Civil Resistance and Violence within the Movement, exploring such questions as can a violent movement transform into a nonviolent one and succeed, and how does a violent radical flank affect nonviolent campaigns? Chapter 4 is on Civil Resistance and Violence against the Movement, discussing such important and timely issues as civil resistance against brutal tyrants and how civil resistance campaigns deal with violent repression. Chapter 5, the last one, is on The Future of Civil Resistance; importantly, it includes a look at successful and unsuccessful revolutionary violent and nonviolent campaigns (as defined earlier in this review) using the updated data set with cases from 1900 to 2019; overall, as indicated earlier, an average of 50% of all nonviolent campaigns succeeded during this period, whereas only 26% of all the violent campaigns succeeded. However, the success rates for both violent and nonviolent campaigns have declined in the past 10 years. We see that less than 34% of the nonviolent campaigns were successful in this period, while only 9% of the violent campaigns were successful. An interesting finding in many ways: the overall decline of success in general, but yet nonviolent campaigns

actually improved their relative success rate compared with violent campaigns (pp. 226-227). Chenoweth devotes much attention in this chapter to trying to explain these findings and their significance for the future. The book closes with an Appendix listing all the revolutionary violent and nonviolent campaigns from 1900 to 2019 in the study. One might object to a couple of descriptions of these cases, but I found very little with which to disagree.

Readers of the book probably will focus on various and different topics, and the book is structured to accommodate that. Here I would like to highlight just a few things in the book.

Chenoweth begins with a look at two theories of social and political change, which I contend is essential to consider. The first theory, which Chenoweth calls the “control” theory, assumes that a ruling power is monolithic and entrenched in an almost autonomous political elite, and that only violence can dislodge the monolithic, embedded elite power. But, Chenoweth writes, control theory forgets that rulers “must be supported by a pyramid of people” (p. 30), and need the cooperation of various people in order to rule. What Chenoweth calls control theory, Robert Helvy, drawing from Gene Sharp, calls the “Monolithic Model of Power,” which assumes that “All power resides at the top; Structure is unchanging; People have no input; People must obey; People [are] dependent on [the] ruler” (Helvy, 2004, p. 167). Chenoweth calls the second theory the “legitimacy approach” (p. 30), which is the theory underlying civil resistance. Chenoweth writes that this approach has three basic assumptions: 1. Legitimacy: “political power comes from the ability to get other people to cooperate and obey authority voluntarily” (p.31). 2. “no oppressive system is monolithic....every oppressive system leans on the cooperation and the acquiescence of the people involved” (p. 31). Here Chenoweth refers to a concept commonly used by academics and activists alike: pillars of support, which refers to the categories of people that a ruler relies on to various degrees in order to rule, such as security forces; economic elites; government bureaucrats; media; religious authorities; educational institutions; workers in various sectors; and cultural figures (pp. 31-32). Civil resistance attempts to get people in these various sectors to stop cooperating with the ruling elites in order to deny them what they need to rule, and to get elites to change as well, out of self-interest or a change of view. An example Chenoweth provides is how white South African business owners concluded after black boycotts and international sanctions, that to prosper they needed to accept the demands of antiapartheid activists and pressure the apartheid government to change (pp. 33-34). These businesses changed primarily because of their self-interest, not a conversion or change of heart. Helvy, drawing from Gene Sharp, discusses pillars of support in terms of what a ruler needs to rule, such as 1. authority/legitimacy; 2. human resources; 3. people with certain skills and knowledge; 4. intangible factors such as values and attitudes towards obedience of authority; 5. Material resources; and 6. sanctions: which are of various types and severity and are usually used by the ruler elite to maintain order or coerce compliance. Rulers often use sanctions to rule, but people may or may not obey because of sanctions (Helvy, 2004, pp. 4-7). Chenoweth notes that activists often do a pillars of support analysis of who is supporting the ruling elite; Helvy provides a framework to do that analysis – a strategic estimate of the situation and guidelines for possible courses of action (Helvy, 2004, 47-65).

From the research Chenoweth identifies four key factors that help to explain the success or failure of civil resistance: 1. “Mass participation, drawing from all walks of life” (pp.83-85); 2. “Shifting the loyalties of the regime’s supporters” (pp.85-87); 3. “Using a wide variety of tactics, not just demonstrations” (pp. 87-88); “Discipline and resilience in the face of repression” (pp. 88-90). Regarding the first factor, Chenoweth found that “[n]o movements have failed after getting 10% of the nation’s population to be actively involved in their peak event. Most succeed after mobilizing 3.5%” (p. 94). Getting 10% of the population to actively participate is rare; approximately 3.5% participation in a peak event is more common. Chenoweth goes on to discuss this 3.5%’ pattern of participation in successful civil resistance campaigns on pp. 114-121. One of her points is that having a participation rate of around 3.5% probably indicates a broader support for the campaign’s goals in the population, and is related to withdrawal of support for ruling elites and the defection of ruling elite supporters. And though Chenoweth does not directly cite a finding in some research on democratic transitions, such large protests also may strengthen the hand of elite reformers in relation to hardliners in an authoritarian regimes.

Finally, I call attention to a finding I found particularly interesting. Chenoweth summarizes her research with Jay Ulfelder on the indicators,-- such as population size, level of democracy or autocracy, degree of ethnic fractionalization, levels of poverty -- that might help to explain why nonviolent campaigns emerge in some countries but not others (see pp. 184-186). To my surprise, and something I am investigating further, the level of democracy or autocracy was not strongly correlated with civic resistance emergence, but rather, Chenoweth reports, “the most consistent and influential predictor of nonviolent uprising was a country’s human rights record. Countries with *worse* records had a higher chance of witnessing a mass nonviolent uprising than countries with relatively better records” (p.184). Chenoweth goes on to discuss the effects of violent repression on civil disobedience campaigns. Chenoweth isn’t saying that violent repression doesn’t matter, but rather that it doesn’t usually prevent the emergence of civil resistance campaigns.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this readable but comprehensive book on civil resistance. One of my few criticisms is that I wish it had some case studies to illustrate some points, as we see in Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, but one can certainly consult that excellent book for the examples.

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