

Some Definitions and Dimensions of Social Change

Violence Versus Nonviolence

Violent Social Change — the use of physical, economic, or emotional violence or threat of violence to destroy opponents or to force them to change their behavior.

Unviolent Social Change — the use of physical or economic force, verbal threats, emotional manipulation, or any other non-physically violent means to coerce opponents to change their behavior.

Nonviolent Social Change (Satyagraha) — the use of persuasion, appeals to conscience, emotional counseling, or withdrawal of one's consent and support to convince or coerce opponents to change their behavior, while supporting and protecting them personally.

Often unviolent and nonviolent social change is distinguished by the "tone" of the activity: in nonviolent change, activists struggle with their opponents while maintaining an attitude of respect towards them. Nonviolent activists attempt to love their opponents as they attempt to change them. Furthermore, non-violent activists try to remain humbly open to the possibility that they are the ones who must change.

In contrast, unviolent activists often maintain an attitude of righteousness towards their opponents whom they see as evil or unworthy. They often attempt to blame and demean their opponents as part of their efforts to win.

Nonviolent activists also usually attempt to develop alternatives that can better satisfy people's real needs, while unviolent and violent activists generally focus only on abolishing existing institutions or customs.

Violent and unviolent social change is often approvingly described as "militant." Generally, social change activity is termed "more militant" the more strongly it relies on threat and coercion or the more disruptive it is to the normal order.

Active Nonviolence Versus Passive Nonviolence

Passive Nonviolence — the attempt not to harm anyone (or anything). People practicing passive nonviolence usually try to refrain from any activity that might cause the slightest harm.

Active Nonviolence — the attempt to eliminate violence in all its forms including systemic oppression like classism, racism, and sexism that quietly harm people through economic, political, social, and cultural institutions or customs. People engaged in active nonviolent social change seek to end violence even if it requires intense struggle or makes their opponents uncomfortable.

Social Service Versus Social Change

Social Service — compassionate activity to promote social welfare, especially to help the sick, ignorant, frail, destitute, young, or powerless.

Social Change — activity to change the social structure to promote social welfare. Often this means creating new, alternative institutions that will serve people compassionately.

The difference between social service and social change is like the difference between giving a hungry man a fish so he won't be hungry and teaching him how to fish so that he will never again be hungry. Social service relieves the immediate situation while social change alters the political, economic, social, or cultural institutions or customs that created the problem.

"Reformist" social change only resolves the immediate problem — other similar problems may continue to arise. The solution may even create new, equally pernicious problems. "Non-reformist" change (or "transformation") fundamentally changes institutions enough that similar problems can never again arise. Social change activity is considered more "radical" the more it addresses the root causes of problems and the more fundamen-

tally it transforms institutions — and particularly the more it democratizes decision-making power.

Goals of Social Change Activity

Resistance — action to defend or protect established everyday life from new, outside oppression and return things to normal. A society is considered more "free" the more that people are safe from new oppression. Typically, groups that have thrown off their oppressors or have achieved a certain level of privilege resist any change that might restrain their freedom. Resistance can therefore be quite reactionary.

Liberation (Empowerment) — action to overcome on-going, traditional oppression and achieve the full measure of everyday rights and opportunities promised in the social charter ("social justice"). A society is more "just" the more that every person can obtain the freedoms that others enjoy.

Democratization (Enfranchisement) — action to spread decision-making power broadly to everyone affected by those decisions. A society is more "democratic" the more that people can influence and decide the important issues that affect them without extraordinary effort (that is, through their daily routine).

Humane-ization — action to ensure that society will defend or protect the rights of everyone in society, especially those who cannot do so on their own behalf (such as those who are ignorant, powerless, sick, frail, mentally incompetent, young, or unborn). A society is more "humane" or "altruistic" the more that every person is protected and supported through the routine, everyday activities of others (including societal institutions).

Activists

Social Change Activists — those who actively and consciously work for social change.

Self-interested Activists — those who work to resist oppression directed at them, liberate themselves from their own oppression, or enfranchise themselves or their immediate group.

Altruistic Activists — those who work to free others from oppression, to enfranchise others to make societal decisions, or to make their society more humane.

Types of Social Change Activity

Educate (Raise Consciousness) — activists inform others about oppression, injustice, and alternative visions. Examples include conversations with friends, street speaking, leafletting, rallies, protest demonstrations, fasting, vigiling, study groups, advertisements, and publishing articles, reports, and books. When people see things in a completely new way they have had a "paradigm shift in their thinking."

Empower — activists encourage and support others to work for social change, often by showing them how to do it and demonstrating that the consequences are bearable.

Build Change Organizations — activists bring people together to work toward a common goal.

Develop Alternatives — social change groups create new, better alternatives to existing institutions or customs.

Challenge the Status Quo — social change groups attempt to change or undermine existing institutions. Examples include lobbying, campaigning for progressive politicians, lawsuits, boycotts, strikes, direct intervention (blockades), and building and patronizing alternative institutions.

— Prepared by Randy Schutt, P.O. Box 608867, Cleveland, OH 44108 <<http://www.vernalproject.org>>. OK to copy for non-commercial purposes.