The Politics of Nonviolent Action is a landmark contribution to the analysis of power and conflict. It is simultaneously a theoretical statement on the nature of politics, a strategic manual for nonviolent action, and a historical compendium and classification of nonviolent techniques. The impressive feature is not that Professor Sharp attempted all of this within 928 pages, but that these tasks are integrated skillfully and cogently.

In terms of theory, this study offers a major revision in the paradigm of power and conflict typically employed by political scientists and nonviolent activists. It rejects traditional pacifism and moralistic proselytizing via “love and peace,” and offers concepts and strategies of nonviolent action designed to recognize conflict, repression and violence, and to counter them from a pragmatic position of power and strength. This strength derives from the asserted ability of nonviolent action (manifested in a vast array of techniques of economic, social and political “noncooperation”) to subvert and overcome violence and centralized power, if such action is properly planned and executed. As conceived by Sharp, nonviolent action is primarily a political strategy calculated from assumptions about, and analyses of, power and human behavior. It is only tangentially a belief system or set of moral imperatives.

The conceptualization of power avoids the morass of elitist-pluralist debates that have so preoccupied political scientists and sociologists. For Sharp, power is pluralistic, but not necessarily in its manifest distribution; and not in the egalitarian or democratic sense often connoted by applications of pluralist theory to Western democracies. Unlike many pluralist assessments, Sharp’s view of power does not lead to sanguine conclusions about particular political systems, for it shares some basic assumptions associated with less sanguine, elitist critiques as well: politics is concerned with processing conflict and force is a pervasive response in such conflicts (even vis-à-vis nonviolent action). Sharp asserts that power is “plural” (and “fragile”) in its dependency on its socioeconomic roots. This is, for his theory, not a justification for certain institutional arrangements or an ipso facto panacea, but rather a strategic entry for well-disciplined and executed nonviolent struggle.

As a strategic statement on nonviolent action, the analysis is sophisticated, pragmatic and cognizant of the complex interrelations among technique, motivation, perception and political context. The military flavor of the exposition, generated by an emphasis upon “organization,” “logis-
tics, "strategy" and "morale," is not accidental, for nonviolent action is posed as an effective alternative to violent struggle; effective not in its normative superiority, but in its ability to combat opponents. A major strategic tenet is "political jujitsu," turning an opponent's violence to his own disadvantage. The rhetoric often approximates a military training manual:

Faced with repression and suffering, the nonviolent actionists will need to stand together, to maintain their internal solidarity and morale and to continue the struggle. As the opponent attributes violence to them and tries to provoke them to commit violence—with which he could deal more effectively—the nonviolent actionist will need to persist in reliance on their chosen technique of struggle and to maintain nonviolent discipline.

The historical evidence concerning divergent kinds of nonviolent technique is impressive. Chapters three to six alone contain over 100 categories of nonviolent action, with accompanying examples. The historical research is a major contribution in light of previous neglect of nonviolent politics. Examples span ancient times to the twentieth century and include a broad range of geographic areas and conflict situations. Some examples, such as the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and Nazi totalitarianism, are employed often and manifest numerous instances of nonviolent action.

Sharp's approach is marked by tentativeness and epistemological consciousness. The Politics of Nonviolent Action avoids two of the most pervasive and counterproductive pitfalls of empirical research in contemporary social science: it neither hedges nor obscures its theoretical offerings so that it is impossible to pin down its contentions, nor does it overclaim or oversell either the epistemological utility of its data in validating its claims or the explanatory power of the endeavor. It recognizes the cultural relativity of important dimensions of nonviolent action, and offers its theory as a heuristic device rather than as a firmly established explanatory framework.

With all its clarity, rigor and ambitiousness of task, this work cannot help but put its deficiencies and weaknesses out front. This in itself is a sort of epistemic jujitsu which converts methodological-conceptual weaknesses to heuristic strengths. In terms of theory, the rich historical evidence establishes the possibility and utility of divergent nonviolent techniques across a broad range of political contexts, but for the most part does not consistently test the major assumptions on which the theory rests: that the coercive powers of government are ultimately vulnerable because they rest on the cooperation of various groups; that the psychological dynamics of fear, terror and anticipated reaction can be transcended by proper nonviolent discipline and motivation; and that the methods and techniques described have a central and independent influence upon political outcomes.

For example, several nonviolent techniques were manifested during the Russian Revolution of 1905, and they are used for illustrative purposes. But these occurred...