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Nonviolent Methods of Power Redistribution: A Case for Utilising Threats of Violence

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Abstract

Within pacificism and nonviolence research there is a lacuna regarding the utilisation of threats as a nonviolent means of redistributing power. While threats may appear inherently violent, this article explores the hypothesis that they can be nonviolent and pacifist when reducing the likelihood of future violence. To make the case, the article explores the benefits of threats as a means of reducing violence in imbalanced power dynamics. The article seeks to divulge the benefits of threats as a means of initiating and engaging negotiations within asymmetrical power relations through analysing Georges Sorel's writing on the late 19th century syndicalism movement. In Sorel's case, the workers effectively developed threats as a means of nonviolently achieving political goals. The article then engages with Franz Fanon's critique of nonviolence as a challenge to the viability of threats as a nonviolent tactic.

Keywords

threats – nonviolence – negotiations – Georges Sorel – strikes – syndicalism

Introduction

This article poses an answer to the question: can threats be an effective means for groups to achieve political objectives without enacting violence? The hy-

pothesis put forward is that threats can be useful for pursuing political objectives for groups in unequal power dynamics, whilst remaining nonviolent in their implementation. The article specifically argues that threats can be nonviolently implemented by those with lesser power within imbalanced power relationships. Although not always successful, threats have historically been utilised to bring parties to the negotiating table, with one of the most obvious examples being trade unions threatening strike action to initiate negotiations with their employers (Ovetz, 2021). This article will focus on specific conditions under which nonviolent threats could be successfully implemented and delivered, though there are many situations in which threats may not be the most effective means for groups to achieve their objectives.

The central idea of this article is that threats can have a high probability of improving negotiating positions and achieving peaceful, nonviolent resolutions.[1] It focuses on analysing whether threats are useful when there are significant power imbalances between groups. Groups with lesser power are not always in the minority, as is often the case with workers, who may be a majority exploited by a minority. Nevertheless, it is typically minoritised groups that encounter power-imbalanced relationships and seek methods to redistribute power. This article will suggest factors that the leaders of a movement aiming to redistribute power may need to utilise to best implement nonviolent threats.

There is a gap in the research on threats as a potential nonviolent method, perhaps because it may seem counterintuitive to argue that threats could be an effective way of reducing the possibility of violence. Threats are typically considered violent and are often utilised violently, as will be discussed in Section 1. However, the article posits that it would be an oversight to consider threats solely as violent, as it may be possible to conceptualise ways in which previously assumed violent methods might offer effective nonviolent solutions.

Considering the critical challenges that emerge within pacifism and nonviolent resistance—as documented by Neta C. Crawford and Richard Jackson in their contributions to the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*—it is necessary to reconsider assumptions regarding methods of nonviolent resistance (Crawford, 2023; Jackson, 2023). With the global challenges of increasing inequality, various healthcare crises, a recent rise in militarism, and the urgent need to address the climate crisis, it is important to theorise whether nonviolent strategies are being overlooked or have been missed. In keeping with the objectives of the *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* to rigorously investigate nonviolence and pacifism, as set out by Alexandre Christoy-

1 I will not be commenting on the moral implications of threats in this article. The article focuses on the pragmatic ability of threats to nonviolently achieve redistributive power.

annopoulos, this article seeks to reconsider threats as a legitimate nonviolent political tactic through which peaceful solutions may be achieved (2023: 2).

To pursue this investigation, the article is divided into four sections. Section 1 will reflect on the nature of violence and offers a justification for why threats can be included within a pacifist and nonviolent framework. How violence is interpreted may lead to the contestation of threats as a means of reducing violence, since threats could be regarded as a form of psychological violence intended to disturb the threatened party's psychological and mental well-being (Morewitz, 2008: 5). Threats certainly can induce negative psychological consequences and, in many cases, should be considered a form of violence. However, Section 1 will explore the possibility that threats might be recognised as a form of nonviolence if their purpose and implementation are aimed at preventing future violence.

Section 2 will analyse a case study that shows the benefits of threats in achieving political objectives peacefully. It will discuss how threats were utilised by the French working-class syndicalist movement in the early 20th century. The case study demonstrates how the movement used threats to redistribute power within an imbalanced power dynamic, through the writings of Georges Sorel. Sorel's work offers important insights into how the leadership of the workers' movement utilised threats to improve their negotiating position.

Section 3 will seek to advance the best practices for delivering nonviolent threats in the pursuit of the peaceful redistribution of power. This section expands on Sorel's ideas by suggesting how threats might be most effectively deployed. It considers the example of the Swedish union IF Metall's strike against *Tesla* to indicate ways in which Sorel's insights into the power of threats can be augmented with additional approaches.

Section 4 will problematise the use of threats. It analyses Frantz Fanon's writings relating to threats and discusses his opposition to threats as a nonviolent tactic. The section concludes with consideration of Fanon's criticism of the use of threats relating to the Algerian liberation movement.

1 Reflections on Threats and Nonviolence

The topic of violence is a complex field full of differing definitions and interpretations. The debate surrounding the philosophical nature of violence is rich, and the search for a unified definition has proved contentious and nothing in the remainder of this article depends on resolving those disputes (Christoyannopoulos, 2023: 5). Nevertheless, it is important to clarify how this article defines violence before suggesting that threats can be an effective means of reducing it.

Within the context of peace studies, violence is often defined as occurring when human beings are influenced such that their actual realisations fall short of their potential realisations (Galtung 1969: 168; Vinthagen 2015: 65; Lee 2019: 4). Violence, then, is the cause of the gap between potential and actual outcomes. For example, if someone is shot and dies, violence has occurred because the death prevented the person from realising their full potential.

Johan Galtung expanded the concept of violence from the individual to include societal structures. He argued that structural violence occurs when societal arrangements prevent people from realising their potential (1969: 168). To illustrate the difference between individual and structural violence, Galtung suggests that when one man beats his wife, it constitutes personal violence. But if one million men beat their wives, it reveals a form of structural violence because society enables the violence, thereby limiting the potential realisation of many women (Idem: 171). Galtung indicated that structural violence often manifests in resistance to changes in established hierarchies and power dynamics (Idem: 180–81). For instance, when oppressed groups protest, and these protests are suppressed with police force, such suppression becomes a manifestation of structural violence aimed at preventing the redistribution of power. Since this article addresses imbalanced power relations between groups, the type of violence typically encountered is structural violence, which hinders the full realisation of members of less powerful groups.

Brandy X. Lee offers an updated definition that builds on Galtung's concept in her work *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures*. She defines violence as the 'intentional or threatened human action, either direct or through structural neglect and diminution of others, that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in human deprivation, injury, or death, or contributes to the extinction of the human species' (2019: 6). This definition is helpful for two reasons. First, it acknowledges structural violence, the primary form of violence this article argues nonviolent threats can help reduce. Second, it recognises that threats can increase the probability of harm. This article accepts that threats can be violent or nonviolent, depending on how they are implemented and whether they decrease or increase the likelihood of harm. According to Lee's definition, if a method does not increase the likelihood of human deprivation, injury, or death, it should not be considered violent. Ultimately, this article contends that threats are a tool—one that can be used violently or nonviolently depending on intent, delivery, and their impact on future violence.

Within nonviolence and pacifism research, definitions of nonviolence vary, but a commonly cited one is provided by Stellan Vinthagen, who writes that 'nonviolence consists of a combination of two factors: without violence and

against violence' (2015: 12). He elaborates: 'Without violence is a nonviolent construction (of the increasing ability to act without violence), and against violence is a nonviolent resistance (against the violence that arises despite the nonviolent construction)' (Idem: 62–63). This article suggests that threats can fit within Vinthagen's framework. If a group uses threats to reduce the likelihood of future violence and resists violence that may arise from a lack of negotiation, then their threats may be both without and against violence. This conceptualisation aligns with the vision of nonviolent methods outlined by Christoyannopoulos, who states that 'nonviolent methods would already be wrapped into an envisioning of a less violent world' (2023: 5).

However, some pacifist thinkers reject the possibility of threats within nonviolent frameworks. Gene Sharp and Kurt Schock both argue that nonviolent action must not include the threat of violence (Sharp 1973; Schock 2010). Yet, neither author clearly defines what constitutes a threat. Schock acknowledges that the 'implied threats of violence attributed to actors [are] more complicated' than direct violence (2015: 2).

Given this ambiguity, it is worth examining the complexity of threats and exploring whether they can be categorised within a framework of nonviolence. Threats are commonly defined as the perceived possibility of danger or harm, or as statements expressing intent to cause harm (Meloy & Hoffman, 2014: 3). Based on this definition, it may appear counterintuitive to suggest that threats can be nonviolent, as they seemingly envision a more violent world. Most discussions on threats focus on how to respond to them and rarely engage with the relationship between threats and violence. For instance, both *The International Handbook of Threat Assessment* and *Threats in Context: Identify, Analyze, Anticipate* extensively address responses to threats but scarcely discuss what constitutes a threat (Meloy & Hoffman, 2014; Perois, 2023). These works accept that threats are intended to cause harm and focus on responding to threats of violence (2014: 3; 2023: 47). In contrast, this article considers whether threats may be nonviolent if their purpose is to reduce the likelihood of future violence.

Threats are sometimes categorised under the term coercion, but coercion is typically discussed in contexts where a powerful party seeks to influence a less powerful one (e.g., economic, physical, or sexual coercion). Since this article examines situations where less powerful groups seek to redistribute power, threats are more relevant to the discussion (O'Neill, 1991; Lyons, 1982).

In this article, the term nonviolent threat refers to a subset of threats: those made with the stated purpose of preventing or reducing the likelihood of future violence and structured so as to pursue that end. This is a pragmatic rather than exhaustive definition. Some theorists would still classify such threats as violent; others would not. The objective here is to explore whether movements

can deploy threats in ways that, in practice, help avert violence in asymmetric conflicts. Groups issuing nonviolent threats cannot advocate for violence—they merely foresee violence as a likely outcome if preventative steps are not taken. This article explores only those cases where a less powerful group threatens a more powerful one with the possibility of violence arising from inaction. Nonviolent threats must also target structures that enable structural violence. This understanding fits within the categories of nonviolent intervention or civil resistance, both of which explore how nonviolence can function in asymmetrical conflicts (Schock, 2013: 277). Such threats may be considered one of Schock's 'dynamics of civil resistance', particularly in how they work to 'sever the opponent from its sources of power' (2015: 15). Severing these power sources is crucial to envisioning a nonviolent future.

Threats that do not align with the goals of pacifism and are made without regard for avoiding future violence should be considered violent. However, this article investigates the use of threats in asymmetrical power relationships, specifically where violence is envisaged and so the intent is to prevent or reduce the likelihood of future violence. The claim is that nonviolent threats can serve as useful tools for groups seeking to challenge and redistribute power by targeting structures that perpetuate inequality. The effectiveness of such threats depends on movement credibility, public support, institutional openings, elite cost tolerance, and recent patterns of repression—points developed in Sections 2 and 3.

Nonviolent threats differ from justifications for violence, such as just war theory, which argues that actualised violence is necessary to achieve future peace.[2] In contrast, nonviolent threats predict a violent future but aim to avoid it and are judged here by their avertive intent and effects, not by any consensus about conceptual boundaries. For example, a hypothetical community might declare that if investment in local infrastructure is not made, an increase in gang violence is likely. While this may appear to be a threat of violence, the community's objective is to prevent such violence by securing resources. If the threat is made to avoid harm, not cause it, then it should be categorised as nonviolent.

Of course, even this definition is not free from ambiguity. It could be argued that articulating a threat inherently implies a vision of a violent future, contrary to the goals of nonviolence. But in the framework presented here, violence is only envisaged as a likely consequence of inaction—not as an in-

2 Just War Theory is sometimes used to legitimise state violence but has been exposed as lacking intellectual consistency by Richard Jackson and Cheyney Ryan among others (2020; 2018).

tended result. For instance, if the aforementioned community fails to receive concessions and gang violence does increase, their threat remains nonviolent in intent. It sought to reduce violence and warned of possible consequences, rather than causing them.

A familiar worry arises here. Movement leaders often need to spell out how violence could unfold if grievances remain unaddressed; doing so lends credibility and mobilises members. Yet, the more concretely movements develop these escalation pathways, the harder it becomes to distinguish merely foreseeing violence from preparing (and thus, arguably, intending) it. In the following discussion we set aside that deeper moral dispute and focus on cases where leadership publicly frames itself as restraining potential violence it does not seek.

A nonviolent threat must convey some degree of psychological pressure, as it aims to convince the targeted party that inaction will lead to consequences. If the threat is not taken seriously, it may fail to produce negotiation. Nonetheless, this psychological impact does not preclude the threat from being considered nonviolent. First, all nonviolent actions may pose psychological stress to powerful actors. Second, a threat should not be considered violent if it does not raise the probability of human deprivation, injury, or death.

Ultimately, a nonviolent threat aims to pressure a more powerful group into recognising a shared interest in avoiding violence through negotiation. It is a warning of a potential future—one the threatening group is actively trying to prevent. If violence eventually occurs due to inaction, that outcome was not intended by the group but was, rather, the unfortunate result of a failed warning.

In Sections 2 and 3, we will explore features that may influence the effectiveness of nonviolent threats in achieving political objectives. The article will now turn to a case study that illustrates how Georges Sorel observed the late 19th-century French workers' movement using threats of violence to win concessions—without ever enacting violence.

2 Georges Sorel and the Success of Workers Threats

To briefly contextualise Sorel's work, he was writing in France at the end of the 19th century into the beginning of the 20th. He supported the movement to transfer ownership of the means of production to workers' unions, known as syndicalism. He saw syndicalism as the true version of Marxism, in which strike action would lead to revolution, bringing capitalism to an end and replacing it with a society of producers—not State socialism.

In Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1908), he observed that the threat of striking—and the fear of future violence that might occur during a strike—was a way for workers to gain concessions from employers and the government. He argued that the threat of halting production systems would lead employers to the negotiating table, and the disruption and potential violence from striking workers would encourage government support for the workers.

It is clear from Sorel's writing that he did not truly desire the enactment of these threats, as he did not promote the destruction of the systems through which power is maintained, arguing that this would destabilise society. He discussed this in his comparison of syndicalism to the fall of the Roman Empire. Sorel writes that the fall of Rome 'occurred at the price of a terrible loss of resources; I can understand the anger which has seized many historians reflecting on the destruction of such a marvellous civilization' (Sorel, 1978: p. 78). Sorel indicated that the destruction wrought by violent revolution was an unnecessary waste of accumulated effort. We can therefore deduce that he opposed the destructive violence being threatened.

This view is further evidenced in his writing, where he suggests that the fear of such destruction gives a workers' revolution the ability to achieve pacifism and nonviolence:

> I believe that a workers' revolution, conducted according to Marxist ideas and arising from the action of organized labour, would have an excellent chance of being carried on without terror and without proscriptions. Its pacific quality is, no doubt, only hypothetical; but the ferocity of idealists is a certainty.
>
> Ibid

Sorel reflected on the downfall of the Roman Empire and other violent revolutions to illustrate the extent of damage that might be inflicted on society if the demands of workers are not met. He suggested that the 'ferocity of idealists' and the evidence of historical destruction should convince those in power of the seriousness of potential violence. According to Sorel, it is the passion of the movement, combined with historical knowledge of violent revolutions, that should strike fear into the powerful. The fear of past idealists and the violence they used to redistribute power should reduce the likelihood of future violence—if those in power seek to preserve themselves. Thus, Sorel indicates that threats can be pacifistic when the threatening party is convincing in their ideals, as this conviction increases the likelihood of achieving objectives without violence.

Here, Sorel provides one of the contingent factors that increase the likelihood of a nonviolent threat succeeding: the threatened party must be prepared

to negotiate to avoid violence. If the threatened party is willing to encounter violence, then threats may fail to open negotiations or achieve concessions, making this an ineffective method. This raises the question of whether threats can be effective in contexts where the powerful are not cautious about the destruction being threatened. The answer is entirely context-dependent, but in situations where a powerful party has no fear of violence, other nonviolent methods may be preferable. If the threatened party refuses to negotiate, the violence predicted in the threat may come to pass, which would not seem pacifist or nonviolent. However, based on this article's definition of nonviolence, so long as the threatening party decreases the probability of future violence—and the threat is intended to prevent violence—it can still be considered nonviolent. Even if a nonviolent threat does not significantly reduce the likelihood of future violence, it could be implemented alongside other nonviolent tactics to increase the chances of reducing violence.

It is impossible to know for certain how a threatened party will respond to a threat, but it can be theorised that the better prepared the less powerful party is to deliver its threat, the greater the probability of achieving peaceful concessions. Even before outlining how threats can be delivered most effectively, it is reasonable to suggest that a no-negotiation strategy would be a very high-risk one for the threatened party. This reiterates both the context-dependence of negotiations and the importance of the less powerful party having leadership capable of recognising this—which we will discuss shortly.

If we assume that those in power are cautious about future violence and prepared to negotiate, then Sorel provides insight into how threats helped the workers' movement achieve its objectives. Sorel writes about the French miners' strikes in the early 20th century:

> [...] the workers have no money but they have at their disposal a far more effective means of action—they can *inspire fear*... At the time of the discussion of the law regulating labour in the mines, the question of threats addressed to the government arose several times: on 5th February 1902, the president of the commission told the Chamber that those in power had lent 'an attentive ear to clamourings from without, [that they had been] inspired by the sentiment of benevolent generosity by allowing themselves to be moved, despite the tone in which they were couched, by the demands of the workers and the long cry of suffering of the miners'.
>
> SOREL, 1999: pp. 60–61

In the context of the French workers' movement, Sorel observed that although the workers had no material resources, they achieved concessions through

their ability to inspire fear in the government. This fear was based on the historical memory of violence caused by striking workers. The workers did not wish for violence to erupt, but they encouraged the government to envision it as a potential future if changes were not made. This fear can be considered nonviolent within the framework of this article, since the threatened party feared limitations to their potential realisations if violence occurred, while the threatening party acted to prevent such outcomes. If the threat of strikes results in negotiations, concessions, and a decrease in the likelihood of violence, then nonviolent action has succeeded. Through the threat of future violence, the workers established a nonviolent means of forcing negotiation within a relationship where power was disproportionately held by the government and employers.

Nevertheless, this quotation also illustrates that threats may cause psychological harm through fear, even without actual physical violence. In this case, the workers' threats decreased the probability of harm, and the government yielded without human deprivation, injury, or death. Moreover, the fear incurred by the government and employers was inspired by the implied possibility of future violence based on historical precedent—not by direct violent threats. The workers did not say, 'we shall destroy the systems of production if our demands are not met' but instead made respectful demands and threatened strike action. The fear arose in the minds of the powerful as they imagined the potential consequences of those strikes. Therefore, in this example, violence is anticipated by those in power, and this foresight helps reduce its likelihood. However, a threat may verge on violence if the fear it inspires increases the likelihood of violence or reduces the potential realisations of the threatened. For a threat to remain nonviolent, the threatening party must frame it as a possible future they are trying to prevent—and one they can only continue to prevent with the support of the powerful party.

In support of using fear within a nonviolent framework, we can infer that psychological disruption is often used in nonviolent movements. Indian journalist Krishnalal Shridharani noted that psychological disruption was pivotal for the Satyagrahis, who used 'psychological suggestions' to unbalance colonial forces (1939: 31). Shridharani wrote that Gandhi delivered two ultimatums to the British colonial government between 1922–1930, warning that if the Satyagrahis' demands were not fulfilled, direct action—amounting to a 'conditional declaration of war'—would follow (Idem: 33–34). Shridharani suggests that Gandhi used threats in the same way proposed in this article, writing:

> True to the spirit of nonviolence, Gandhi approached the authorities, according to his own words, on 'bended knees' and imploring them to 'find

> a way out' before he had to resort to civil disobedience... If this decisive phase of Satyagraha also fails to bring about a just settlement, the populace is then called upon to plunge into the more militant programme of direct action.
>
> Ibid[3]

According to Shridharani, Gandhi used threats and psychological disruption as part of his nonviolent strategy. He warned that if the Satyagrahis' demands were not met, he would not be able to prevent escalating violence. The Satyagrahis are considered one of the most important exemplars of nonviolent political movements, and Gandhi is often credited as the originator of nonviolent resistance. This makes it surprising that nonviolent threats have not previously received focused research (Vinthagen, 2015: 2).

Furthermore, it could be argued that all nonviolent action may induce fear in those against whom it is directed. However, in the case of these threats, they did not create the conditions that lead to human deprivation, injury, or death. In the case of the French workers' movement, the government even appeared to acknowledge that the threats were not violent. They stated that they disapproved of the 'tone' in which the threats were made but did not explicitly accuse the workers of violence—though we will consider the intent behind this claim shortly. The threats successfully led the government to make concessions, after which it attempted to reframe its actions as having lent an 'attentive ear' to the 'cry of suffering' in order to save face. In other words, to justify yielding to the demands of the workers, the government claimed to be a benevolent pursuer of social justice, thereby preserving its pride (Ibid).

If government officials had experienced harm that negatively impacted their capacity for self-realisation, this could be classed as violence. However, it seems that the workers' threats aimed to reduce the likelihood of violence at all stages of negotiation.

Sorel warned that yielding to threats creates a situation in which the government seeks to be perceived as supporting the workers, when in fact the opposite is true. He is critical of the government for taking such a position, though he sees it as beneficial for the workers. By allowing the government to claim it has always supported the workers, it enables government negotiators to preserve their pride and makes it more difficult for them to oppose the workers in the future. Should a similar situation arise again, the government—having previously claimed to support the workers' movement—would risk greater

3 I do not focus on the Satyagrahis and Ghandi because this movement has far less of a focus on nonviolent threats than Sorel who writes extensively on the matter.

reputational damage. If it were to turn against the workers after such supportive rhetoric, it would likely be perceived as untrustworthy and traitorous, increasing public hostility.

Additionally, threats become easier to reuse because the government would find it difficult to claim retrospectively that it does not negotiate with threats. Having previously conceded to them and publicly supported those concessions, it would be embarrassing for the government to reverse its stance, damaging the pride of those in power. Such changes in policy would likely lead the public to perceive the government as deceitful, weak, and indecisive. While there is no guarantee that a powerful group will fear the embarrassment of reneging on past statements, in this context, there is a clear benefit to the powerful party having acted in such a way. Thus, Sorel identifies another contingent factor that improves the success of nonviolent threats: that the powerful party yields and then claims to have always supported the concessions.

Sorel quoted former French Prime Minister (1906–1909 and 1917–1920), Georges Clemenceau, to highlight the cowardice of the government and to stress why continued capitulation to threats is vital for reducing power imbalances:

> I cannot refrain from noting here a reflection made by Clemenceau with regard to our relations with Germany and that applies equally well to social conflicts when they take on a violent aspect (which seems likely to become more and more general in proportion as a cowardly bourgeoisie continues to pursue the dream of social peace): 'There is no better means… [than the policy of perpetual concessions] for making the opposite party ask for more and more. Every man or every power, whose action consists solely in surrender, can only finish by self-annihilation. Everything that lives resists; that which does not resist allows itself to be cut up piecemeal'.
>
> Idem: 62[4]

Clemenceau was referring to appeasement in relation to Germany prior to World War I, but Sorel applies the same logic to show what happens to a powerful party that repeatedly yields to threats. Based on Sorel's use of the quote, he suggests that the bourgeoisie's continual capitulation leads to its 'self-annihilation' and a redistribution of power back to the workers. Through quoting Clemenceau, Sorel illustrates the long-term benefits of sustained nonviolent threats—that they may eventually redistribute power without the need for

4 Georges Clemenceau served as Prime Minister of France from 1906 to 1909 and again from 1917 until 1920. He was particularly important for his role in WWI and the peace talks.

actual violence. We will later consider whether this was an overly optimistic theorisation in Section 4.

Nevertheless, it appears vital for the less powerful party not to contradict the powerful party's claim to have supported the social movement, since doing so increases the likelihood of future concessions.

For Sorel, the syndicalists were successful because they recognised that the bourgeoisie were 'cowardly' and would not risk inciting violence, though the government refused to admit that social policies were gained due to the threat of violent disturbances (Idem: 63). Sorel's framing of bourgeois fear as cowardice is open to question, since it may be prudent to fear violent consequences. However, he is clearly alluding to their deceit in claiming to support social movements only after conceding to their threats.

Based on Sorel's writing, it seems that he considered the ability of the leaders to be the most important contingent factor in the successful implementation of threats. He recognised that leaders needed skill and tact to achieve political concessions through nonviolent threats. In crafting audacious demands and selecting the right opportunities to press for concessions, Sorel offers practical advice. As he writes: '(the movement's diplomacy must) make the workers believe that you are carrying the flag of revolution, the bourgeoisie that you are holding back the danger which threatens them, and the country that you represent an irresistible current of opinion' (Idem: 68). Here, Sorel touches on one of the most important aspects of the nonviolent threat: the threatening party must convincingly show that it will be unable to continue preventing violence if its demands are not met.

When making threats, the threatening party should demonstrate that their intention is to prevent violence—and that they can only continue to do so if they are either granted their objectives or entered into negotiation with. This resembles the earlier example of a community that warns of increasing gang-related violence and threatens that, without concessions, they may be unable to prevent future unrest. In this case, the community frames itself as a preventer of violence. This approach is understandably more effective in certain contexts and not always viable. However, it most closely aligns with nonviolent and pacifist objectives, since the threatening party clearly demonstrates peaceful intent aimed at reducing the likelihood of violence.

Sorel also argued that one of the most important considerations for leaders is that pride plays a central role in negotiations. He suggested that those negotiating with the workers were motivated more by the desire to 'win' than by the details of the concessions themselves. Therefore, he advised the workers to 'pile up' demands. As he writes: 'Since the feelings and, above all, the pride of the peacemakers are in question… they must be given the idea that they have to accomplish

a titanic task; demands are therefore piled up, figures fixed in a haphazard way, and no one worries about exaggerating them' (Idem: 57). By overwhelming the threatened party with demands, they are more likely to grant many of them while preserving their pride by rejecting a few—and thus claiming to have 'won'. This sense of pride is also why the threatening party should not contradict the powerful party's claim to have supported the concessions. Doing so risks damaging the latter's pride, making future concessions less likely. Furthermore, the greater the list of demands, the more likely concessions will be prioritised and granted.

In Sorel's context, he argued that the leaders of the syndicats understood that their counterparts were largely cowardly. As he writes:

> Nearly all the leaders of the *syndicats* know how to make excellent use of this situation and they teach the workers that it is not a question of demanding favours but that they must profit from *bourgeois cowardice* to impose the will of the proletariat. There is too much evidence in support of these tactics for them not to take root in the world of the working class.
>
> Idem: 61

Sorel observed overwhelming evidence that those in power typically react cautiously to threats, making them highly effective tactics. He wrote:

> It did not take much time for leaders of the *syndicats* to grasp this situation (the cowardice of the bourgeois), and it must be admitted that they have used the weapon that has been put into their hands with great skill. They endeavour to intimidate the prefects by popular demonstrations, which have the potential for serious conflict with the police, and they commend riotous behaviour as the most effective way of obtaining concessions.
>
> Idem: 62[5]

In this situation, the syndicats effectively used the threat of violence to obtain concessions. Since demonstrations could end in 'serious conflict with the police', the syndicats persuaded those in power that concessions would prevent the likelihood of violence. This shows that Sorel considered the syndicat leaders to be skilled in using threats and that the effectiveness of threats depends on the threatened party's reluctance to face harm or disruption.

However, it is not always the case that the threatened party will choose to concede. Just because the bourgeoisie in Sorel's case were quick to yield does

5 Brackets added by Adam R. North.

not mean that all powerful groups will acquiesce so easily. Therefore, the context of an asymmetric power relationship is essential in assessing whether nonviolent threats might be effective. If the powerful are unwilling to negotiate, threats may fail as a tactic. The syndicats may have succeeded because they selected the right strategy for their specific context. Sorel argued that their leaders recognised that the opposing party would negotiate under pressure. If that is the case, Sorel provides a valuable framework for understanding how threats can peacefully achieve concessions.

The diversity of contexts in which imbalanced power relationships exist means Sorel's model will not universally apply. Moreover, despite his endorsement of threats as a tactic, Sorel was ultimately incorrect in predicting that syndicalism would be realised: there was no revolution that transferred the means of production to workers' unions to create a society of producers. Though threats were effective in the context Sorel described, they failed to bring about the full realisation of syndicalist goals. This does not disprove the effectiveness of nonviolent threats in Sorel's analysis, but it does suggest that his broader belief in their long-term potential may have been overly optimistic. We will consider Frantz Fanon's critique of nonviolent threats and their capacity to redistribute power in the final section.

It is impossible to conclude that the syndicalists' long-term vision failed solely because of their nonviolent methods; many factors, including the outbreak of World War I, influenced the movement's trajectory. Nonetheless, Sorel provides important analysis of syndicat leadership and the effectiveness of nonviolent threats in gaining concessions from politicians and employers who feared the disruption and violence that strikes might cause. However, Sorel does not offer clear guidance on how groups should present or deliver threats. His focus lies more on the leaders' strategic skill in navigating negotiations than on the precise delivery of the threat itself. The next section will summarise Sorel's analysis of how syndicalist leaders successfully utilised threats and expand on his insights by proposing how threats might most effectively be delivered in a nonviolent way.

3 Advancing Sorel's Utilisation of Threats

Sorel's discussion of the success of the syndicat movement leaders can be summarised as follows:

- The leaders recognised that they could inspire fear in the government and employers by threatening a potentially violent future.
- They understood how best to entreat with government and employer representatives, recognising that these negotiators were driven by pride and acted pragmatically in response to it.

- They allowed the government and employers to claim that they had always supported the workers once concessions were granted. This preserved the pride of those in power and increased the likelihood that future threats would be effective.
- They deliberately made demands that exceeded their true objectives, enabling the powerful party to negotiate them down and still feel they had 'won', thus maintaining their pride. Additionally, larger demands gave the negotiations higher priority.
- They framed their threats as efforts to hold back violence—implying that unless their demands were met, they would be unable to prevent unrest. These threats were less antagonistic and could be considered nonviolent, as they aimed to reduce the likelihood of violence.

While these insights are valuable, we aim to extend Sorel's framework by suggesting that nonviolent threats can be more effective when they are:

- Presented as a detailed plan outlining the consequences that will occur if objectives are not met. The plan should be ambitious so that negotiators can later concede on some demands, allowing the powerful party to claim a successful negotiation.
- Widely disseminated, increasing public pressure and scrutiny on the powerful party's decision-making process.
- Framed to split the interests within a powerful group. Powerful actors often consist of parties with divergent interests—for instance, in Sorel's case, the employers and the government could be split by targeting their distinct concerns.

Since nonviolent threats aim to reduce the likelihood of future violence, it is essential that they convincingly communicate the serious consequences of inaction. If threats are carefully prepared and framed, they are more likely to result in concessions. The more clearly the consequences are articulated, the greater the likelihood that the powerful party will choose negotiation over risk. Broad dissemination also increases public pressure, which may further incentivise negotiation.

When power is distributed across multiple actors, threats can be used to drive a wedge between them. Consider a scenario in which a government and an employer are working together. A strategically delivered threat could exploit a disagreement between them—for example, the government might be more sensitive to public unrest than the employer. If striking workers warned that unrest was likely unless working conditions improved, the government—fearing a loss of public approval—might pressure the employer to negotiate. Splitting a powerful group into rival factions can significantly enhance the threatening party's negotiating position.

This tactic is evident in the ongoing dispute between the Swedish industrial union IF Metall and electric car company *Tesla*. Their actions illustrate how nonviolent threats can target differing interests within powerful coalitions. Beginning in October 2023, IF Metall threatened strike action after *Tesla* refused to enter collective agreement negotiations aimed at improving wages and working conditions. Since then, the union has effectively divided the interests of *Tesla* and the Swedish government, strengthening its bargaining power.

Labour unions are widely supported in Sweden, where 90% of workers are covered by collective agreements (Kjellberg, 2023). As a result, it is not in the government's interest to oppose the union. Per Ewaldsson, senior labour adviser to Sweden's national mediator (Medlingsinstitutet), acknowledged this by stating: 'Support for our labour market model is very strong, and politicians don't even want to go near it' (Stewart, 2023). The union's actions pose a dilemma for the government: supporting *Tesla* risks alienating the public, which favours workers' rights. Thus, despite the government's general interest in protecting business, it has not sided with *Tesla*.

Tesla's November 2023 lawsuit against the Swedish Transport Agency—intended to force the government to grant access to license plates—further reveals how the union has successfully created conflict between the government and employer (Capoot, 2023).[6]

A less powerful group can also increase its influence by joining with other groups that share its goals or sympathise with its cause. IF Metall's dispute with *Tesla* is a case in point: Sweden's largest workers' union, Unionen, has since joined the campaign (Mannes, 2024). Such alliances increase the threat's impact by expanding public backing and making the demands harder to ignore. The broader the support base, the more serious the threat appears and the more likely it is to succeed. Building coalitions is thus an essential strategy for redistributing power through nonviolent threats.

So far, we have considered how nonviolent threats can be effective in redistributing power. In the next section, we will explore the limitations of this method and the conditions under which threats may no longer be appropriate.

4 Problematising the Utilisation of Threats

The previous discussion has shown that nonviolent threats can be highly effective in securing concessions and improving negotiating positions in contexts of

6 The case was dismissed by the Solna District Court.

asymmetric power. However, it is important to question whether such threats are capable of fully redistributing power. As discussed in Sorel's case, French workers never succeeded in transferring capital from employers to themselves. To deepen this critique, we turn to Frantz Fanon, whose work challenges the optimism surrounding nonviolent threats. While many thinkers within liberation movements reject the sufficiency of nonviolence for power redistribution, Fanon specifically addresses why nonviolent threats fail liberation struggles (Fanon, 2004; Wahnich, 2015).

Fanon, best known for his writings on liberation from colonialism, particularly during the Algerian struggle against France in the 1950s and '60s, was a staunch critic of nonviolence. He argued that nonviolent threats always fail because, at the decisive moment—when the oppressed are about to dismantle systems of domination—the colonised bourgeoisie introduce nonviolence to negotiate with colonial powers. As he writes: 'Nonviolence is an attempt to settle the colonial problem around the negotiating table before the irreparable is done, before any bloodshed or regrettable act is committed' (2004: 23). For Fanon, violence was essential to liberation and the formation of a new national identity—something nonviolence could never achieve.

While Sorel saw nonviolent threats as a way to pressure the government and employers into conceding power (thereby avoiding total destruction), Fanon believed that such destruction was a necessary step toward liberation. He argued that when negotiations occur prematurely, the colonised bourgeoisie often act in self-interest, protecting infrastructure in exchange for personal gain rather than collective emancipation. In short, they are willing to preserve exploitative systems so long as they benefit personally.

Fanon's critique mirrors Sorel's analysis of elite responses to threats. Just as Sorel argued that governmental and employer elites were moved by the fear of mass violence, Fanon wrote: 'The adherents of the colonial system discover that the masses might very well destroy everything. The sabotage of bridges, the destruction of farms, repression and war can severely disrupt the economy' (Idem: 24). The colonial elite, recognising the threat, respond by negotiating—but crucially, they negotiate with bourgeois leaders who act without involving the broader movement. Fanon explains that such leaders effectively say: 'We (the leaders of the movement) are still capable of stopping the slaughter, the masses still trust us, act quickly if you do not want to jeopardize everything' (Idem: 23–24).[7] This framing mirrors the effective structure of a nonviolent

7 Brackets added by Adam R. North.

threat as outlined earlier in this article: the threat is framed as preventing violence, while implying that violence will occur if demands are not met.

Thus, Fanon shows that while colonised bourgeois leaders may adopt the same nonviolent threat strategies as syndicalist leaders, the outcomes differ significantly. Since these leaders act in their own interest, not the collective's, they undermine true decolonisation. Fanon writes: 'For them, there can be no doubt, any attempt to smash colonial oppression by force is an act of despair, a suicidal act… They are losers from the start' (Idem: 25).[8] In his view, such concessions only serve to renegotiate elite benefits within oppressive structures, rather than dismantling them. Consequently, Fanon concludes: 'force is the only solution' (Idem: 32). For him, only the violent destruction of colonial systems could yield meaningful redistribution of power and foster national consciousness.

However, while Fanon critiques nonviolence, he also indirectly highlights its potential. He acknowledges that the threat of violence and 'irreparable' damage can force oppressors to the negotiating table (Idem: 23). Still, in his case, the colonised bourgeoisie failed to extract meaningful gains for two reasons: they acted in self-interest, and they failed to formulate a comprehensive agenda. Fanon writes: 'The demands of the colonised are thus formulated. But there is no substance, there is no political and social agenda. There is a vague form of national framework, what might be termed a minimal demand' (Idem: 29). Whereas syndicalist leaders built leverage by demanding more than they expected to gain, Fanon's colonised lacked the leadership necessary to maximise their bargaining power. That said, even if such leadership had existed, Fanon believed that concessions within an oppressive system merely preserved it. Thus, the acquisition of such concessions represented a failure of true liberation.

Fanon's critique potentially undermines Sorel's optimism by suggesting that even substantial concessions may not redistribute power meaningfully. While workers in France may have gained rights, the fundamental asymmetry between labour and the owners of capital persisted. Nevertheless, we can theorise that the effectiveness of nonviolent threats depends heavily on the objectives and competency of movement leadership. Though nonviolent threats may never achieve a fully equitable power structure on their own, they can initiate negotiations and achieve incremental gains.

Sorel and Fanon, while writing from different contexts, both offer valuable perspectives on the use of threats in power struggles. The key distinction lies in

8 Brackets added by Adam R. North.

their views on destruction. Sorel believed mutual destruction through violence would harm all stakeholders and thus should be avoided. Fanon, conversely, saw this destruction as the only viable path toward redistributing power in a colonial context. Given the devastation that violence can bring, a pacifist might argue that nonviolent threats should be the first approach to securing change. If employed effectively—as outlined earlier in this article—nonviolent threats can be a powerful tool for gaining concessions and opening space for transformation, even if they fall short of achieving complete liberation.

Conclusion

This article has supported the hypothesis that, under certain conditions, threats can be used to achieve political concessions in a peaceful and nonviolent manner. Drawing on the work of Georges Sorel, it has shown how threats—when strategically deployed—can advance political objectives without violence, as demonstrated by the French workers' movement. Sorel identified several key tactics for leaders of such movements:

- Leaders must recognise their capacity to inspire fear in those with power.
- They should allow the powerful party to claim alignment with the cause after yielding to a threat.
- They should consider the pride of the negotiators and operate accordingly.
- They should demand more than they expect to obtain, creating room for compromise.
- Threats should be framed as efforts to prevent violence rather than provoke it.

However, Sorel did not explain how these threats should be implemented. This article has aimed to fill that gap by proposing three key recommendations for delivering nonviolent threats effectively:

- Present a detailed plan outlining the consequences of unmet demands.
- Disseminate this plan widely to increase public pressure and accountability.
- Where possible, exploit divisions within the powerful group to weaken resistance.

These strategies enhance the likelihood that threats will lead to negotiation and concessions. Still, the effectiveness of threats is context-dependent. In some situations, the targeted group may refuse to negotiate regardless of how well the threat is constructed. Even so, when carefully designed and tailored to specific contexts, nonviolent threats can reduce the likelihood of future violence by opening space for dialogue and achieving meaningful goals.

Sorel's analysis suggests that the success of nonviolent threats depends largely on the pragmatism and adaptability of movement leaders. He attributed the achievements of French syndicalist leaders to their ability to navigate the pride and fear of government negotiators—pressuring them without undermining their dignity. Similarly, Fanon acknowledged that colonial elites were willing to negotiate with the colonised bourgeoisie when they feared potential unrest. However, Fanon rejected nonviolence as a means of true power redistribution, arguing that it often preserved the existing order rather than dismantling it.

Nothing is guaranteed by nonviolent threats and if a powerful group are unwilling to negotiate or concede to threats, then it is unlikely that they will be the most effective means of achieving redistributive power. Therefore, despite the success that threats can have in certain contexts, they will not always be the most effective tactics. Nevertheless, through the implementation of the strategies considered in this article, threats can be a powerful tool in the peaceful pursuit of redistributive change.

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