Article

DIOGENES

Diogenes
2017, Vol. 61(3–4) 21–29
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192116648594
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio

"Transformative Nonviolence, Power and Social Change"

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Introduction

Nonviolent political action combines the two objectives of collective, popular empowerment and the reduction or elimination of violence as a feature of social and political change. Furthermore, these two objectives are mutually reinforcing, because collective empowerment is best achieved nonviolently, and nonviolence is most effectively expressed through collective action.

This type of action has demonstrated its effectiveness as a method of resistance against undemocratic regimes or other situations of injustice or oppression. One question is whether nonviolence can move beyond such civil resistance to establish alternatives to political regimes based upon violence for maintaining social order.

Transformative nonviolence, as distinct from nonviolent political action or civil resistance, involves the elimination of violence as a mechanism of social control and social organisation through releasing the capacity for cooperative collective action implicit in popular power. The transformation of nonviolence from a political method within conventional political processes or structures (such as the state) that depend ultimately on coercion and violence to a more permanent and even defining feature of human social organisation begins with understanding the possibilities associated with such popular power. Such power can be defined as cooperative nonviolent action to achieve agreed social goals, sometimes referred to as "power-to", as distinct from the "power-over" associated with violence and coercion.

The consent theory of power

The consent theory of power associated with Gene Sharp's theory of nonviolent political action provides a useful starting point for examining the connection between popular power or collective empowerment and transformative nonviolence (See for example Sharp, 1973, Part One). Sharp's theory of power is a theory of resistance, an attempt to explain the capacity of nonviolent action (as distinct from various forms of political violence, including the institutionalised violence of the state) to achieve, in some cases, profound political change in the face of apparently overwhelming forces of oppression and injustice. The question is whether or not such a theory of power and nonviolent

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https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192116648594 Published online by Cambridge University Press

action, or civil resistance, can form the basis of a more transformative vision of nonviolence, in which both nonviolence and popular power become the central normative principles of new forms of social and political organisation.

Sharp challenges the conventional, monolithic view of political power which assumes that the power of a government is “a relatively fixed *quantum*...a ‘given,’ a strong, independent, durable (if not indestructable) [sic], self-reinforcing, and self-perpetuating force” (Sharp, 1973: 9). In other words, power is somehow a discrete entity under the unique ownership or control of a ruling elite. Sharp argues instead that “governments depend on people, that power is pluralistic, and that political power is fragile because it depends on many groups for reinforcement of its power sources” (Sharp, 1973: 8).

Indeed, power is relational, depending ultimately upon a relationship of consent, compliance and obedience between rulers and ruled – i.e. citizens, subordinate social groups, and those involved in the intermediate bodies constituting its apparatus of administrative and coercive control (such as the police, court system, military and civil service) (see Sharp, 1973: 17).

This theory of power helps to explain the effectiveness of nonviolent political action because it shows that the power of ruling elites and dominant groups can be challenged and undermined if social groups or sectors of the population remove their consent and cease their obedience. In the “Introduction” to his seminal three-volume study *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* Sharp claims that the basis of “nonviolent action … has always been the same: the belief that the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled who, by withdrawing that consent, can control and even destroy the power of their opponent” (Sharp, 1973: 4).

The important point is that this withdrawal of consent can be achieved nonviolently, through various forms of mass mobilisation and civil resistance. Sections of the general population can withdraw their obedience, and so can those who administer the institutions of the state or implement systems of repression on behalf of a ruling elite. “Power always depends for its strength and existence upon a replenishment of its sources by the cooperation of numerous institutions and people – cooperation that does not have to continue” (Sharp, 1980: 28). The power of the ruling elite is not monolithic, permanent and self-contained. Its dependence upon multiple sources of power within a society and upon the consent of the governed makes it vulnerable to challenge by civil resistance and nonviolent political action.

Kenneth Boulding identifies three aspects of power; though “by no means unambiguous or complete”, these categories are useful in discussing both the sources of power and also the effectiveness of nonviolent political action: “The first of these is threat power … The power of the law rests on rather specific threats” involving the capacity to impose or inflict sanctions reinforced by violence. In addition to imposing the rule of law, such “threat power”’ is used to defend a society against aggression by means of military force (Boulding, 1999: 10–11). This power is associated with the sovereign state as a form of political organisation. Boulding’s second form of power is economic power. “This sometimes emerges out of the successful use of threat power, as in the conquest of land. On the whole, however, economic power comes out of the skills of production and exchange” (Boulding, 1999: 11).

His third, and he argues, most important form of power is what he calls “integrative power”. This integrative, or cooperative, power involves the capacity of individuals and social groups to work together to achieve agreed or mutually beneficial goals and objectives. “This is the power of legitimacy, persuasion, loyalty, community, and so on” (Boulding, 1999: 11.). It is used and shared by equals, rather than for the economic, social or political control of one group by another.

Gene Sharp identifies three mechanisms of political change that help explain the political effectiveness of nonviolent political action: conversion, accommodation and coercion. These mechanisms can be connected to Boulding’s “three faces of power”.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192116648594 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the case of conversion, the dominant group becomes persuaded by the grievance group's demands, and concedes or agrees to most or all of them. Processes of accommodation achieve political change because the grievance group exerts sufficient power that the dominant group realises that they cannot be defeated, and agrees to some sort of negotiated settlement, perhaps by means of mediation or conflict resolution. Coercion achieves political change because the grievance group exerts sufficient power that they are able to defeat or severely weaken the dominant group, and extract most of their demands from them. In conflicts involving nonviolent coercion:

> the numbers of resisters have become so large, and the parts of the social and political order they influence or control are so essential, that the noncooperation and defiance have taken control of the conflict situation … The opponents can no longer wield power contrary to the wishes of the nonviolent struggle group. This is nonviolent coercion … In more extreme situations, the noncooperation and defiance are so vast and strong that the previous regime simply falls apart (Sharp, 2005: 46).

Sharp refers to such "extreme situations" as involving a process of disintegration, which he sometimes categorises as a fourth mechanism of political change, because the exercise of coercive power by the grievance group has increased to such an extent that the dominant group or regime falls apart as an effective political entity.

Both accommodation and coercion involve the use of threat power, to paraphrase Kenneth Boulding, or the capacity of a grievance group to achieve their objectives against the resistance of their opponent. Thus, according to Sharp: "Social power may be briefly defined as the capacity to control the behavior of others, directly or indirectly, through action by groups of people" (1973: 7).

Accommodation depends upon a rough symmetry of threat power between conflicting groups, so that a negotiated settlement becomes the least destructive and even most productive outcome for all protagonists. Nonviolent coercion involves a grievance group acquiring a preponderance of threat power in a conflict situation, so that they can enforce and achieve their demands against the wishes of the dominant group. Threat power can of course take the form of violence, but it need not do so, according to Sharp. This is important, because it opens up the possibility of achieving political change nonviolently through the mechanisms of accommodation and nonviolent coercion using this form of power.

Sharp was sceptical about conversion as a mechanism of change, and considered accommodation for example as a more usual mechanism for achieving political change nonviolently:

> Rarely, the opponents have a change of view; that is a conversion takes place … A much more common mechanism is called accommodation. This essentially means that both sides compromise on issues … One must remember that these settlements are highly influenced by how much power each side can wield in waging the conflict (Sharp, 2005: 46).

He considered accommodation and coercion more reliable and effective mechanisms of change because they utilised or had access to threat power in a way that attempts at converting or persuading one's opponent do not.

Even though both accommodation and coercion, as mechanisms of political change, involve the use of threat power, when these are used nonviolently they depend ultimately upon integrative or cooperative power. This is because when such mechanisms are used nonviolently they are exercised through the withdrawal of consent, obedience or cooperation, all of which can be considered forms of integrative power. Sharp concurs that power ultimately "comes from the mutual assistance and loyalty of people binding themselves together for some purpose" (Sharp, 1980: 148) or integrative power. Such "binding together" is the source of the relationships of cooperation, compliance and obedience that allow dominant groups to govern. The capacity of resistance groups or grievance

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groups to exercise threat power depends ultimately on the withdrawal of consent, which is a form of integrative or cooperative power.

Similarly, Boulding recognises that his three types of power are closely linked, and also argues, somewhat hesitantly perhaps, for the primacy of integrative over other forms of power. The three types of power can reinforce each other, although they can also undermine or challenge each other.

> Any actual exercise of power tends to involve all three 'faces' … Threat power is certainly dominant in the military, but unless it has a certain base in economic power, of course, the means of destruction and threat cannot be produced … economic power of property is supported by the threat power of the law, yet where ownership of property becomes illegitimate … no amount of threat power can preserve it (Boulding, 1999: 12).

Military power can also be used to destroy economic wealth and productivity, and similarly removing access to natural resources (through blocking trade for example) or investment (through economic sanctions) can challenge a country's capacity to develop and employ military force.

Nonetheless, Boulding also suggests that the other two types of power are somehow ultimately dependent upon integrative power.

> I have sometimes argued that if we are looking for any single element in the social system on which everything else depends – something which we should probably not do – the best candidate would be integrative power in the shape of legitimacy, for without legitimacy neither threat power nor economic power is very effective (Boulding, 1999: 15).

This connects to a central theme of the consent theory of power because according to Boulding "power is a gift to the powerful by those over whom the power may be exercised, who recognize the power as legitimate" (Boulding, 1999: 11), so that even power as threat or domination finds its origin or source in integrative or relational power in the form of the consent and cooperation of the governed.

Sharp provides a lengthy discussion of the reasons people obey or consent to being ruled in Part One of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973). These reasons include habit, fear of sanctions, a sense of moral obligation, and self-interest. Fear of sanctions involves a more conventional identification between threat power and violence as its ultimate expression, for example, "the sanctions provided in the law and practice of the State. These generally involve the threat or use of some form of physical violence against the disobedient subject" (Sharp, 1973: 19). And yet even here, Sharp claims, obedience ultimately depends upon the compliance of those on the receiving end of such sanctions "because in order to produce obedience, sanctions must also operate through the volition, or will, of the subject" (Sharp, 1973: 26). In other words, those threatened with or receiving sanctions (including violence resulting in harm up to and including death) still have a choice as to whether or not they are willing to accept this cost of non-compliance and disobedience.

This is one of the reasons perhaps that Gandhi (and Martin Luther King) emphasised the need for the voluntary acceptance of suffering as a crucial source of strength for nonviolent activists or *satyagrahis*, of the discipline required by such activists, and of the power and effectiveness of nonviolent political action, or *satyagraha*. Thus, Sharp claims, in the kind of language that would not be unfamiliar to Gandhi:

> The threat of physical compulsion or sanctions produces obedience and consent only … when the subject fears the sanctions and is unwilling to suffer them … *It is not the sanctions themselves which produce obedience but the fear of them* (Sharp, 1973: 28).

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Both Sharp and Gandhi accept that it is difficult to persuade people to accept such sanctions and such suffering, and yet maintain that they can decide to do so if they are sufficiently committed to a cause or objective, when convinced of the possibilities of social and political change, for example, or the dangers of perpetuating the status quo.

The centrality of integrative power helps us understand the effectiveness of nonviolent political action even against the most egregious or severe forms of threat power, in the form of repression, political violence and the use of armed force. Such threat power is ultimately dependent upon integrative power in the form of social relationships of compliance and obedience, both on the part of those on the receiving end of such violence or repression, but also on the part of those employing such violence, such as members of the security forces (in the case of the state) or armed groups. The central role of integrative power and its close connection to nonviolent political action can also open a discussion about nonviolence as a more permanent normative and institutional feature of social and political life, supplanting political institutions such as the state that rely on threat power expressed in the form of violence as a method of social and political control. In other words, integrative power and nonviolence can be seen as alternatives to threat power and violence as the basis of social and political organisation. Both are connected through the withdrawal of the consent, compliance and cooperation associated with such power. It is important to recognise that while the use of such power can support nonviolent political action in achieving its negative objectives of undermining or challenging a violent or repressive opponent, it can also facilitate the more positive objective of empowering those social groups that engage in civil resistance.

Thus, nonviolent action releases the integrative power of social groups, through facilitating cooperative forms of political action both within and between them.[1] It develops the capacity of social groups to achieve their own objectives while strengthening their ability to resist externally imposed oppression. As Sharp says, such empowerment is the constructive counterpart "of noncooperation with the opponent":

> Effective nonviolent sanctions are likely to strengthen the group using them … Internal cooperation is needed to apply the nonviolent sanctions effectively, and also to provide those needs formerly met by the opponent with whom cooperation has been withdrawn (Sharp, 1980: 345–346).

Structural critique

Proponents of the consent theory of power are sometimes accused of ignoring the structural constraints on human agency and choice because of an emphasis on the volitional dimension of consent. Social structures and systems are by-products of entrenched and regular social interactions, according to Robert Burrowes. Such structures or systems "limit the capacity for individual decision-making", and hence the role of consent in any given power relationship (Burrowes, 1996: 91).

Sharp hints at such a structural approach, for example, through his critical assessment of the relationship between the centralised or hierarchical state and "social groups and institutions", which he refers to as "*loci* (or places of power)" (Sharp, 1980: 26–27). Such *loci* of power correspond to civil society organisations and social movements. This suggests a need for a structural, and not merely a behavioural, analysis of power, in order to understand the relationship between these *loci* of power and the state.

Sharp considered nonviolent political action not only as a method for dealing effectively with specific grievances, but also as a more general mechanism for counteracting the power of a centralised, hierarchical state. According to him, a "free society needs strong social groups and institutions capable of independent action and able to wield power in their own right in order to control an established government" (Sharp, 2005: 427).

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Antonio Gramsci provides a useful discussion of the ways in which power can be exercised through a combination of structure and consent in his analysis of hegemony. He shows how consent perpetuates sustained social interactions or structures, and is more than a psychological or behavioural disposition on the part of individuals towards those who rule or govern them. Power involves more complex relationships than the relatively transparent social contract between the rulers and the ruled suggested by consent theory, and is mediated by the structures of international capitalism and state power that provide the context and limits for individual and group political action. His discussion of such large-scale economic and political structures suggests the importance of external constraints for any relationship of consent between ruler and ruled (Gramsci, 1971).

John Holloway also offers a structural analysis of the nature and possibilities of power that reiterates some of the central themes of the consent theory of power, although he seems to have arrived at his views independently through his essentially Marxist analysis of alienated labour, or the separation of "doing" from the "done" as the basis of capital and capitalism. Holloway employs the dichotomy between "power-to", which he identifies with the ability to make and create through labour, and "power-over", which he associates with the capacity of command and control. "Power-to" corresponds to Boulding's integrative power while "power-over" corresponds to what Boulding refers to as threat power.

According to Holloway, under capitalism power-to becomes converted into power-over through the separation of what is created or made (the "done") from the act of creating or making ("doing"), or the alienation or estrangement of labour from its own product (see Holloway, 2005: 32). This separation or alienation occurs because workers sell their labour-power in the marketplace, so that this labour-power (and its product) belongs to the capitalist who purchases it:

> In capitalist society, doing is turned against itself, alienated from itself; we lose control over our creative activity. This negation of human creativity takes place through the subjection of human activity to the market. This subjection to the market, in turn, takes place fully when the capacity to work creatively (labour power) becomes a commodity to be sold on the market to those with the capital to buy it…. The social antagonism is thus not in the first place a conflict between two groups of people: it is a conflict between creative social practice and its negation (Holloway, 2005: 146–147).

This relationship between worker and capitalist is thus at the core of the power inherent in capitalist social relations. Using Boulding's terminology, one could argue that "power-to", or the productive capacity of labour through social and economic cooperation (integrative power), becomes converted into "power-over", or the capacity for domination and control through ownership of the products of labour (threat power), by means of exchange power, or the buying and selling of labour-power and its products in the marketplace.

This also shows, however, that power-over, or domination, originates from and is ultimately dependent upon power-to: "power-over is nothing but, and therefore absolutely dependent upon, the metamorphosis of power-to" (Holloway, 2005: 36). In other words, the power of the "rulers", those in control or those who dominate a social system, or those with power-over, is derived ultimately from power-to, the social cooperation required by labour, by making and creating ("doing"). This connects to a central theme of the consent theory of power, the dependency of rulers upon the ruled as the ultimate source of their power:

> Rulers, in other words, always depend on those who they rule. Capital depends absolutely upon the labour which creates it…. That is the weakness of any system of rule and the key to understanding its dynamic. That is the basis for hope (Holloway, 2005: 35–36).

This dependency is also the basis for processes of social and political transformation, through providing the conditions for effective nonviolent resistance by means of popular nonviolent

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mobilisation and the withdrawal of consent and cooperation from the rulers (or ruling structures). According to Holloway, this realisation of “the vulnerability of power-over…. takes us beyond the merely radical-democratic perspective of an endless struggle against power to … the real possibility of social transformation…. What we want is not a theory of domination, but a theory of the vulnerability of domination” (Holloway, 2005: 40).

Democracy, the state and violence

A counter-argument to an emphasis on transformative nonviolence, and the essential connection it makes between integrative power and alternative political institutions (or alternatives to the state as institutionalised political violence), promotes nonviolent action or civil resistance as effective methods for defending and strengthening democracy, more effective than armed resistance or political violence. Democracy, in turn, can be seen as the best way to achieve peace and promote nonviolence both internally (through the social contract and the rule of law, for example) and externally (namely the democratic peace theorem).

This position views nonviolent political action or civil resistance as having instrumental value, as an effective method for protecting a democratic state, for example. The role of the consent theory of power, as discussed by Sharp, is to explain the instrumental value or effectiveness of this method of political action.

Civil resistance operates as only one method or technique among many within the constraints of conventional state structures and power politics, at both the domestic and international levels. Adam Roberts, in his “Introduction” to *Civil Resistance and Power Politics* (2009), sees civil resistance and nonviolent political action as being at most supplementary to, and in many cases highly dependent upon, conventional forms of political activity, all of which occur within a system in which violence and the threat of violence provide a fundamental source of political and social power. Nonviolent political action can be an effective resource for resistance against unjust or repressive uses of state power, but this is not necessarily extended to a rejection of conventional state structures as such. This is in contrast to transformative nonviolence, which challenges this conventional understanding of political power because of its connection to state-sanctioned violence.

A response to such arguments requires a critique of the state and even liberal democracy as both institutionalised violence and the suppression of popular power. This instrumentalist view of power as a way of explaining the significance of nonviolent political action, contrasts with Holloway’s view of anti-power or power-to as intrinsic characteristics of human emancipation and new forms of social and political organisation.

The emancipation achieved through social transformation is not the freedom of liberal democracy or the market economy, according to Holloway. This freedom is essentially the freedom of the worker to sell their labour-power as a commodity in the marketplace, and rests upon the separation of labour (or “doing”) from the product of that labour (or the “done”), which belongs to the capitalist who purchased the labour-power of the worker:

> The means by which the worker can move from one master to another is by offering her labour power for sale and receiving in return a wage…. Value, or money, is inseparable from what liberal theory refers to as freedom (Holloway, 2005: 183).

In other words, this “freedom of the worker that is the peculiar feature of the relation between capital and labour” (Holloway, 2005: 179) involves alienated or estranged labour and relationships of ownership, subordination and power-over. Holloway talks instead about “anti-power”, which “is not counter-power, but something much more radical: it is the dissolution of power-over, the emancipation of power-to” (Holloway, 2005: 36–37).

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This emphasis on “anti-power” (power-to) and human emancipation or “self-determination” as the ultimate objective of social change leads Holloway towards a suspicion of the state as a form of political organisation, although he only hints at alternative forms of organisation (just as he does not specify alternatives to capitalist economic and social relations). The function of the state within capitalism is to enforce capitalist social relations, through property laws and mechanisms of social order for example, so that “Marx’s critique of political economy should be extended to the critique of law and the state” (Holloway, 2005: 76).

Thus, a central purpose of Holloway’s book is a critique of the emphasis on the capture of state power as the primary objective of efforts to achieve social transformation or revolutionary change. He claims that “traditional revolutionary theory is a pivoted movement, with the winning of state control as the pivot”, and the capture of state power as the basis for achieving further social and economic transformation. Holloway rejects “this idea of a pivoted movement” (Holloway, 2005: 221). “The mistake of Marxist revolutionary movements has been … to misunderstand the degree of integration of the state into the network of capitalist social relations” (Holloway, 2005: 14). Human emancipation and the release of anti-power or power-to requires a rejection of the state as a manifestation of power-over deeply embedded in capitalist social relations. “The drive towards self-determination is not compatible with the aim of taking state power. The state as a form of organisation is the negation of self-determination” (Holloway, 2005: 232).

Holloway’s rejection of the state is one of the more controversial aspects of his argument. Atilio A. Borón criticises Holloway’s anti-statism because: “A new world is not constructed … unless the correlation of forces”, by which Borón means various forms of power-over or domination, “is radically modified … And the state is precisely the place where the correlation of forces is condensed.” Control of the state is important because the state “is the only place from which … the victors can transform their interests into laws, and create a normative and institutional framework that guarantees the stability of their conquests” (Borón, 2005: 37). This critique, however, sidesteps or ignores the distinction between power-over and power-to that is central to Holloway’s argument, indicated by its use of terms like conquest and control. In other words, it is not sufficient to replace one form of state control with another, because this merely replicates the politics of domination and control inimical to anti-power and human emancipation. We need a new form of politics and social organisation that dispenses with the power-over, alienation and fetishism central to capitalist social relations.

Holloway hints at alternative forms of organisation in his brief discussion of direct democracy in the “Epilogue” added to the second edition of his book. “The organisational form which I take as the most important point of reference is the council or assembly or commune” (Holloway, 2005: 223). He refers briefly elsewhere to some historical examples of such organisational forms: “The Paris Commune discussed by Marx, the workers’ councils theorised by Pannekoek, the village councils of the Zapatistas, and so on and so on” as “experiments in the movement … for self-determination” (Holloway, 2005: 105). Such forms of organisation are attempts “to respond to the crisis of the party as a form of organisation” (Holloway, 2005: 223) aimed primarily at the capture of state power.

Proponents of nonviolent political action such as Gene Sharp connect its effectiveness to the consent theory of power, and question the usefulness of political violence for resisting oppression and achieving social change. Holloway also questions the utility of political violence and armed struggle because of his emphasis on anti-power and human emancipation as the ultimate objectives of social transformation and revolutionary change.

> [O]rganising as a revolutionary army which aims to overthrow capitalism in military confrontation makes little sense … because an army engaged in military conflict inevitably reproduces the hierarchies, the

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> values and the logic of all armies. There could be nothing further removed from the drive towards self-determination than military organisation (Holloway, 2005: 237).

Armies, of course, are also the ultimate embodiment of state power. In other words, both the consent theory of power and Holloway's analysis of power-to or anti-power support the use of nonviolent forms of resistance, Sharp because his theory of power explains the effectiveness of nonviolence, and Holloway because the use of organised political violence precludes the objectives of self-determination and human emancipation.

Conclusion

Nonviolent political action or civil resistance can be used instrumentally as an effective method to protect human rights or defend democracy against repressive or authoritarian governments, and its importance in this regard should not be underestimated. The consent theory of power promoted by Gene Sharp and other theorists of nonviolence helps explain the effectiveness of such nonviolent civil resistance. That theory also connects to an analysis of integrative power (Boulding) or "power-to" (Holloway) that suggests a potential for alternative forms of social and political organisation embodying both popular power and nonviolence. Furthermore, a structural critique of society (Gramsci, Holloway) can be linked to some of the central themes of the consent theory of power, requiring a transformative approach to the use of nonviolence going beyond the defence of the liberal democratic state.

Note

1. Sharp argues that "the technique of nonviolent action produces changes in the participants ... power becomes more widely diffused in the society … Even more important than the changes produced by the nonviolent struggle on the opponents is the strengthening of the former subordinates who have learned to use this technique" (2005: 424).

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