

# THEORY

## THE SOCIAL CURE

The actions of our peers are more likely to motivate us to act than either information or an appeal to fear. The social cure shows us how to harness this power of social groups for social change.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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## “THEIR LANGUAGE SMELLED LIKE DEATH. AND WE WON BECAUSE WE LOVED LIFE MORE.”

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People are rarely swayed by information alone. If they were, the tobacco industry would have collapsed when the first Surgeon General’s report on smoking came out in 1964, and fossil fuels would have been phased out in 1989, when the threat of global warming reached public consciousness.

So what does move us? According to Tina Rosenberg, author of *Join the Club*, it’s peer pressure. You know, the same thing that compels teenagers to engage in all sorts of risky behaviour that drives parents crazy. But there’s more to it than that.

Peer pressure is also responsible for some astounding instances of positive social change, from lowering HIV rates among South African youths to reducing the number of teen smokers in the United States. Both advances, Rosenberg explains, came about through targeted efforts by local NGOs to activate peer networks for positive social change.

It’s a point that many are willing to accept in theory. Few, though, would believe that something so simple could topple a brutal dictator. But that’s precisely what the Serbian student movement Otpor was able to achieve when it transformed a previously passive and fatalistic citizenry into the nonviolent army that overthrew Slobodan Milošević, the “Butcher of the Balkans,” in 2000.

As Rosenberg explains in her book, “Traditional democracy activists create political parties. Otpor created a party. People joined the movement for the same reasons they go to the hot bar of the moment.” By branding itself with hip slogans, black t-shirts, absurd humour, rock music, and an iconic clenched-fist graphic, the eleven

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- Billionaires for Bush
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- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
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- Replacing Cops with Mimes

#### Tactics

- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Carnival protest
- Cultural disobedience
- Distributed action
- Flash mob
- Lamentation
- Mass street action

#### Principles

- Brand or be branded
- Breakfast is persuasive
- Burn brightly, but don’t burn out

founders of Otpor — all university students at the time — reinvented resistance in Serbia by making it a desirable club to join.

They even managed to create a cult around getting arrested. For teenagers, it was a way to be rebellious and win the respect of their peers at the same time. Eventually, getting arrested became a competition and kids would compete to rack up the most busts. As one Otpor member noted, "When someone asks me who took down Milošević, I say, 'High school kids.'"

By appealing to people's need for not just information but identification, Otpor showed that the social cure can be used in even the most difficult and repressive of situations as a force for rallying citizen power. Put more simply, in the words of Otpor founder Srdja Popovic, "Their language smelled like death. And we won because we loved life more."

*Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.*

## LEARN MORE

How Peer Pressure Creates Social Change

Bryan Farrell, 2011

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/how-peer-pressure-creates-social-change/>

Bringing Down a Dictator

Steve York, 2001

<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/bringing-down-a-dictator/>

- Create many points of entry
- Everyone has balls/ovaries of steel
- Foster safer spaces
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make new folks welcome
- No one wants to watch a drum circle
- Seek safety in support networks
- Simple rules can have grand results
- Think narratively

## Theories

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Cultural hegemony
- Dunbar's number
- Political identity paradox
- The tactics of everyday life

## Methodologies

- Hardship to grievance
- Ladder of engagement
- Peel the onion
- Perception box
- Pillars of power
- Theory of change

## TAGS

Campaign strategy, Community building, Democracy, Dictatorship, Movement building, Student activism