

THEORY DIRECT ACTION

Action that changes our circumstances without handing power to an intermediary. Direct action interrupts business-as-usual, seizes leadership, and introduces an alternative narrative.

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“SMART DIRECT ACTION ASSESSES POWER DYNAMICS AND FINDS A WAY TO SHIFT THEM.”

“Direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free.”

—David Graeber

Direct action is at the heart of all human advancement. Sound like a grandiose claim? It is. But it's also beautifully simple: direct action means that we take collective action to change our circumstances, without handing our power to a middle person.

We see instances of direct action in indigenous parables and stories, in the Bible, Torah and Koran, in every people's movement and popular revolution in modern history. Direct action is often practiced by people who have few resources, seeking to liberate themselves from an injustice.

People often conflate direct action with “getting arrested.” While sometimes getting arrested can amplify your message, or is strategically necessary to achieve your goal, it isn't the point of direct action. (In most liberation struggles throughout history, “getting captured” is actually seen as a bad thing!)

Similarly, people often conflate direct action with civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is a specific form of direct action that involves intentionally violating a law because that law is unjust — for instance, refusing to pay taxes that would fund a war, or refusing to comply with anti-immigrant legislation. In these circumstances, breaking the law is the purpose. With other kinds of direct action, laws may be broken, but the law being broken isn't

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Battle in Seattle
- Battle of the Camel
- Bidder 70 (Tim DeChristopher)
- Brazil's Free Fare Movement
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Earth First!
- Honk at Parliament
- Justice for Janitors
- No vote, no sex
- Nuit Debout
- Orange Alternative
- Pedestrian death puppets
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Reclaim the Streets
- Santa Claus Army
- Schools of Struggle
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Standing Man
- Stripping Power in Uganda

the point. For example, we may be guilty of trespassing if we drop a banner from a building, but the violation is incidental: we aren't there to protest trespassing laws.

While associated with confrontation, direct action at its core is about power. Smart direct action assesses power dynamics and finds a way to shift them.

One way of thinking about power is that there are two kinds: organized money and organized people. We don't have billions of dollars to buy politicians and governments, but with direct action, organized people spend a different currency: we leverage risk. We leverage our freedom, our comfort, our privilege or our safety.

Anthropologist David Graeber defines direct action as "a form of action in which means and ends become, effectively, indistinguishable; a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action — or at least, the organization of the action — is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about."

As Frederick Douglass said, "power concedes nothing without a demand." Malcolm X elaborated, "Power never takes a step back, except in the face of more power." Rather than deferring to others to make changes for us through votes or lobbying, we seek to change the dynamics of power directly.

LEARN MORE

Direct Action, Anarchism, Direct Democracy
David Graeber, **Direct Action: An Ethnography**, 2009
<http://paycreate.com/directaction/>

Resources for Organizers
Praxis Makes Perfect
<https://joshuakahnruessell.wordpress.com/resources-for-activists-and-organizers/>

Gene Sharp's 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action
Albert Einstein Institution
<http://www.aeinstein.org/nonviolentaction/198-methods-of-nonviolent-action/>

- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- The Salt March
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- Trail of Dreams
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- Yellow Pigs in Parliament
- Yomango
- #YouStink
- Zapatista Caravan

Tactics

- Autonomous servers
- Blockade
- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Citizen's arrest
- Civil disobedience
- Creative disruption
- Debt strike
- Eviction blockade
- Flotilla
- General strike
- Gherao (encirclement)
- Image theatre
- Jail solidarity
- Mass street action
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Occupation
- Public filibuster
- Subversive travel

Principles

- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Choose your target wisely
- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Don't dress like a protester
- Escalate strategically
- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Show, don't tell

- Take risks, but take care
- The real action is your target's reaction
- The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself
- Turn the tables
- Use others' prejudices against them
- Use the Jedi mind trick
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Action logic
- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Artivism
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Commodity fetishism
- Dunbar's number
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Gerontocracy
- Hamoq and hamas
- Neoliberalism
- Palace coup
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Poverty
- Prefigurative politics
- Revolutionary nonviolence

Methodologies

- Action star
- Pillars of power
- Points of intervention
- Power mapping
- SMART objectives
- Spectrum of allies

TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Democracy, Direct action, Labour, Movement building, Nonviolence, Pranks, Student activism