

PRINCIPLE

DON'T DRESS LIKE A PROTESTER

If you look like a stereotypical protester, it's easy for people to write you off, but if you look like the girl next door, people just might sympathize with you instead.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Andrew Boyd

Andrew Boyd is an author, humorist and long-time veteran of creative campaigns for social change. He is Wrangler-in-Chief Emeritus at Beautiful Trouble.

"IF YOU'RE PLANNING AN ACTION, CONSIDER HOW YOU CAN UNDERMINE PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS AND STEREOTYPES ABOUT PROTESTERS."

"Dress like a Republican so you can talk like an anarchist."
—Colman McCarthy

People don't care about protesters. Oh, there go those silly protesters again. What are they protesting this time? Look: The police are hitting them over the head! Well, they must have done something to deserve it.

It's not quite that bad, but you get the idea. Based on what they see in the media, folks get a fairly fixed idea of what "protesters" look like — and the stereotype doesn't usually lend itself to immediate sympathy for your cause. If you're planning an action (see: TACTIC: Mass street action) and want to reach out to people who may not already agree with you, consider how you can undermine their expectations and stereotypes about protesters. Remember: protest is *what* you are doing; not your *identity* (see: THEORY: Political identity paradox).

If you want schoolteachers, seniors, and office workers to care about your issue (or get angry that a cop is hitting you over the head for taking that issue to the streets), dress like you're on your way over to their house for dinner. Make it easy for them to imagine themselves, or their kids, in your position.

Consider the aura conveyed by what you wear, whether that's the civility and seriousness of civil rights marchers in suit and tie or the calculated absurdity of "Billionaires" in tuxedos. In all ten years that Billionaires for Bush protested in the streets, including in the midst of some running street battles with police, never did a single one of us get arrested. It undoubtedly helped that most of us happened to have white skin color, but it also helped that most of us were

POTENTIAL RISKS

Excessive concern with presenting yourself in a way that is appealing or non-threatening to some imagined "respectable" social norm can lead to a kind of self-censorship and self-policing that surrenders too much of our power, voice, and subjectivity. Recent debates within the Movement for Black Lives Policy Table, in particular, have called attention to the trap of "Respectability Politics." Black Lives Matter has often contrasted itself to the decorum and classic "church best" attire of the mid-century civil rights movement, a distinction well captured here: 7 Ways #BlackLivesMatter Improves on the Civil Rights Movement.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Billionaires for Bush
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel

wearing tuxedos. In New York, we had a one-liner: "New York's Finest would never arrest New York's finest dressed." And it was true. They never did.

Of course, the action you're involved in may not afford the luxury of tuxedos, or generally leave you a lot of room to not dress like a protester. It may require protective gear: bandanas or gas masks to protect from tear gas; heavy clothing or even shields to protect yourself from billy clubs and rubber bullets. Even then, creativity can show the human and beautiful side of dissent. At the Battle in Seattle, many blockades were works of art, and many blockaders were creatively costumed. Or consider the Masquerade Project in New York, who decorated gas masks with multicolored sequins and feathers, or the Tute Bianche in Italy, or the Prêt à Révolter collective in Spain, or the Book Bloc in the UK, all of which wore creative yet protective protest gear into battle, thereby subverting the official media narrative that protesters are violent, scary, and (worst of all!) humourless.

Often the most effective protests are those that don't look like protests. Perhaps to be effective — to quote a character in Peter Carey's novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* — "you will have to make yourself into something beyond anyone's capacity to imagine you."

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

LEARN MORE

Suits for Wall Street

<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/suits-for-wall-street#/>

Someone Wants To Solve Occupy Wall Street's 'Dirty Hippie' Problem

Business Insider, 2011

<http://www.businessinsider.com/occupy-wall-street-suits-fashion-2011-10>

Clown Army

- Countering Homophobic Policing
- Miniskirt March
- Occupy Wall Street
- Orange Alternative
- PARK(ing) Day
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- Walk a mile in her shoes

Tactics

- Cultural disobedience
- Mass street action
- Nudity
- Public filibuster
- Visibility action

Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Consider your audience
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Show, don't tell
- Stay on message
- Use others' prejudices against them
- Use the Jedi mind trick
- Use the power of ritual

Theories

- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Hamoq and hamas
- Political identity paradox

Methodologies

- Action star
- Spectrum of allies
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Action design, Campaign
strategy, Humour, Street protest