

# TACTIC

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Breaking a law in public in order to challenge the moral legitimacy of that specific law (e.g. racial segregation) or a greater injustice committed by the state (e.g. corruption).

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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**“ACTS OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE CAN CHALLENGE NOT JUST A SPECIFIC LAW, BUT ALSO THE VERY LEGITIMACY OF A STATE.”**

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"Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience."

—Howard Zinn

The greatest strength of social movements is often their capacity to disrupt. At its core, an act of civil disobedience is a disruption that expresses political opposition beyond what the law permits. In an act of civil disobedience, you either publicly break an unjust law in order to challenge the legitimacy of that law, or you commit some minor infraction (trespassing, for example, or obstruction), with the intent of bringing about broader political changes.

Civil disobedience can manifest in a number of different ways. Strikes, sit-ins or sit-downs, marches, and lockdowns, among many other tactics, can all be used as acts of civil disobedience.

Because it seeks to awaken the conscience of society to some injustice, an act of civil disobedience should be carefully planned if it is to have maximum effect. Design your action so that it places your target in a decision dilemma or uses humour to undermine their authority. Be public about your intent, maintain nonviolent discipline, and be prepared to go to jail (see: TACTIC: Jail solidarity).

Though nonviolent resistance to injustice is as old as injustice itself (as the classic Greek tragedy *Antigone* tells us), the modern understanding of civil disobedience dates to Henry David Thoreau's book *Civil Disobedience* (1849). Thoreau argued that the individual has a right to resist government abuses and injustices, stating, "the

### POTENTIAL RISKS

An act of civil disobedience is by definition a breaking of a law, so the risk of being arrested is pretty high. You should expect arrest, and plan accordingly. Make sure your group is prepared to offer jail solidarity. If the state is particularly brutal or if you are a member of an oppressed group, the stakes of breaking the law are naturally higher and the ability to awaken the conscience of the broader public is often more limited. Build a support network that will be able to apply pressure on the authorities in order to deter harsh sentences or violence against you (see: PRINCIPLE: Seek safety in support networks). Research whether there are international mechanisms that you can use to apply pressure on your behalf (see: PRINCIPLE: Activate international mechanisms).

only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right." He refused to pay his taxes because they were being used to expand slavery in the United States and wage a war against Mexico. A century later, Hannah Arendt argued that civil disobedience is integral to a democratic state, since only "extralegal action," such as civil disobedience, can expand rights and justice beyond the existing limits of the law.

Acts of civil disobedience can challenge not just a specific law, but also the very legitimacy of a state — particularly a colonial or occupying power (see: THEORY: Decolonization). Indeed, one of the best known examples of civil disobedience is Gandhi's salt march from Ahmedabad to Dandi to make salt in violation of the wildly unpopular British salt laws, a campaign that played a key role in exposing the illegitimacy of British authority and ultimately led to India's independence. This act of civil disobedience was brilliantly planned and strategically well thought-out. Gandhi crisscrossed the country for weeks, publicly announcing the impending "crime" and telling his fellow Indians that it was their duty to disobey British rule by marching with him. This put the British authorities in a decision dilemma: If they arrested the salty lawbreakers, it would spark even wider support for the movement and confirm the British rulers' brutality. But if they didn't do anything, they would look as if they had lost the ability to enforce their own laws. Either way, British rule was doomed by Gandhi's mass public violation of a simple law.

## LEARN MORE

Civil Disobedience Resources

ActUp

<http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/CDindex.html>

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, 1963

[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

## RELATED TOOLS

### Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Bidder 70 (Tim DeChristopher)
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Citizens' Posse
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Countering Homophobic Policing
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Earth First!
- Fees Must Fall
- Justice for Janitors
- Nuit Debout
- Schools of Struggle
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Standing Man
- Stop Praver Plan
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- The Salt March
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- Welcome to Palestine
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation

### Tactics

- Banner hang
- Blockade
- Creative disruption
- Critical mass
- Cultural disobedience
- Encryption
- General strike
- Jail solidarity
- Mass street action
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Subversive travel

### Principles

- Activate international mechanisms
- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Create many points of entry
- Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Everyone has balls/ovaries of

steel

- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Seek safety in support networks
- The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself
- Training for the win
- Use humour to undermine authority
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

### **Theories**

- Action logic
- Decolonization
- Direct action
- Hamoq and hamas
- Palace coup
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Postcolonialism
- Prefigurative politics
- Revolutionary nonviolence
- Strategic nonviolence

### **Methodologies**

- Pillars of power
- Points of intervention
- SMART objectives
- SWOT
- Theory of change

### **TAGS**

Action design, Climate justice, Campaign strategy, Colonialism, Democracy, Direct action, Militarization, Movement building, Nonviolence, Racial justice, State violence, Street protest, Student activism, War and peace