

TACTIC

CULTURAL DISOBEDIENCE

Civil disobedience is the deliberate violation of unjust laws. In a similar spirit, cultural disobedience bravely subverts unjust *cultural* norms.

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“ALL OF US FACE UNWRITTEN CULTURAL LAWS THAT FEEL OPPRESSIVE; ALMOST ALL OF US REBEL AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES.”

“If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”

—Maya Angelou

Civil disobedience is the deliberate violation of unjust laws. In a similar spirit, cultural disobedience bravely subverts dominant *cultural* norms. We may think of culture as softer and more malleable than institutions and laws, but in many places cultural taboos are so strong that they become entrenched as law, while in other places, cultural taboos function as de facto law.

It takes both a strong will and calculated strategy to subvert oppressive cultural norms.

In the land of Ankole, like other parts of western Uganda, women are prohibited from a number of activities that most of the world considers normal to the human experience, including whistling, tree climbing, and riding bicycles. On International Women’s Day 2018, a group of young ladies organized taboo-breaking competitions, including a bicycle race. The events were considered so rebellious against the patriarchal norms of the region that the women received widespread media attention. Encouraged, a number of the lady cyclists went on to form the Rukararwe Women Riders’ Club, which used the taboo-breaking empowerment of women’s cycling caravans and other activities to curb domestic violence, elect local female leaders, and convince many male neighbors that rather than being a threat to the community, women’s empowerment made it better.

According to a 2012 United Nations survey, more than half of

POTENTIAL RISKS

Cultural disobedience takes many forms; precise risks will depend largely on the particulars of one’s context. Radical acts of cultural disobedience stand to incite trouble not only from state authorities, but from the conservative vigilanties of society. Throughout history, women have been shamed, beaten, raped, and even murdered for trying to do things typically reserved for men. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American was brutally lynched in Jim Crow-era Mississippi for “looking the wrong way” at a white woman. Social change is a process that takes courage and the wise calculation of the risks involved.

Acts of cultural disobedience may also be misunderstood by onlookers, or stir up distracting public conversations that are

Malawian girls are forced to marry before 18 years old. A female chief in central Malawi, Theresa Kachindamoto, has fought against sexual initiation camps and has annulled over 850 child marriages. For this she has been dubbed “The Terminator.”

For LGBT+ members of most African societies, existence is resistance. While a few pride parades and festivals have popped up around the continent, two South African men went so far as to tie the knot in a traditional wedding ceremony in 2013. In addition to professing their love, they also hoped to send a message that “being gay is as African as being black.”

Why might you use cultural disobedience?

1. To make an invisible oppression visible.
2. To publicly shatter a taboo, or to inspire its total elimination.
3. To normalize something that should be normal in the first place.
4. To prefigure life without an oppressive cultural norm; and show that “another way of living/being is possible.”
5. To be in solidarity with those who cannot safely disobey culture.
6. To draw attention to a larger social injustice in spectacular fashion.

But acts of cultural disobedience don’t have to be spectacular. In fact, many of us are engaged in small, everyday (and sometimes quite subtle) acts of cultural disobedience all the time, whenever we deviate from the expected norm. The frequent targets are dominant gender and sexuality paradigms, but cultural disobedience can take on stifling cultural taboos around almost anything: age, class, ability, race, religion, language, or the dominant ideology.

In the 21st century, as progressive organizing becomes more intentionally intersectional, cultural disobedience is becoming an increasingly strong vehicle for social change. When we can cohere our individual acts of rebellion and self-expression into a larger force, cultural disobedience can ignite not just a public dialogue about what is right and wrong, but also social changes that are both profound and lasting.

All of us face unwritten cultural laws that feel oppressive; almost all of us rebel at some point in our lives. Our rebellion can be stronger when we have a plan and act together.

LEARN MORE

irrelevant to the main purpose of your action. In planning an act of cultural disobedience, consider how people will react (right or wrong), and try to make sure their reaction (see: PRINCIPLE: The real action is your target's reaction) helps move forward the conversation *you* want to have. Either make sure the point of your action is obvious — or in the case of a deliberately confusing act of cultural disobedience, that it produces enough intrigue or controversy to get people talking in a productive way.

Another danger of cultural disobedience is attracting more attention to the cultural transgression than the main problem. When NFL Quarterback Colin Kaepernick “took a knee” during the national anthem to protest police brutality, public dialogue revolved around his supposed disrespect for the flag, although police brutality was the issue he was aiming to highlight. Practitioners of cultural disobedience should expect opposing propaganda and prepare for it.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Birthright
- Unplugged/Replugged
- Boxing Gender Oppression
- Mining the Museum
- Miniskirt March
- Orange Alternative
- Round Dance Revolution
- Standing Man
- Stripping Power in Uganda

Tactics

- Civil disobedience

- Culture jamming
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Identity correction
- Invisible theatre
- Storytelling

Principles

- Don't dress like a protester
- Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Joy is a revolutionary force
- Know your cultural terrain
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Reframe the issue
- Show, don't tell
- Solidarity, not aid
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Use your cultural assets

Theories

- Abolition
- Action logic
- Alienation effect
- Critical multiculturalism
- Cultural hegemony
- Ethical spectacle
- Framing
- Memes
- New Pan-Afrikanism
- Prefigurative politics
- Society of the spectacle
- The social cure
- The tactics of everyday life

Methodologies

- Art of Hosting
- Story of self, us, and now
- Theory of change

TAGS

Action design, Art, Gender and sexuality, Humour, Language, Pranks, Women's rights