

TACTIC

SUBVERSIVE TRAVEL

Subversive travel seeks to defy and subvert unjust travel restrictions. It can be used to facilitate freedom of movement, challenge militarized borders, break a siege, deliver aid, or attract media attention.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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“BY PUBLICIZING POLITICIZED BARRIERS, SUBVERSIVE TRAVEL CAN MAKE THESE TYPES OF UNJUST RESTRICTIONS VISIBLE TO A BROADER PUBLIC.”

“I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”
—Harriet Tubman

Subversive travel seeks to defy, subvert, and expose unjust travel restrictions. It can be used to facilitate freedom of movement, challenge militarized borders, break a siege, or deliver aid. Subversive travel may provoke a response by authorities and can garner mainstream media attention, as in the case of travel ban challenges, or lend safety to communities at risk, as in the case of “human shield” delegations.

Important subversive travel antecedents include the Underground Railroad, a network of covert routes and safe houses used by 19th-century enslaved people of African descent in the United States escaping to free states and Canada, and the Kindertransport (Children's Transport), a series of rescue efforts that brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1940.

From El Salvador to Sri Lanka, when facing extreme violence and state repression that seems insurmountable, movement organizers have invited Western activists to join them in solidarity, offering some protection as international observers or human shields, and helping to shine a global news spotlight on the issues (see: PRINCIPLE: Seek safety in support networks). US-based

POTENTIAL RISKS

Risks may include detention, denial of entry, deportation, abuse, and harm. Also, without a clear anti-oppression analysis, the story that emerges from a subversive travel act may focus on the actions of, and potential repercussions on, the Western participants, rather than exposing ongoing repression and lack of freedom of movement for the most impacted population (see: THEORY: Anti-oppression). For example, an activist gets arrested at the Israeli airport in Tel Aviv and, when interviewed by the media, instead of using the spotlight to direct an interview to a Palestinian activist, dramatizes their own experience without acknowledging that indigenous Palestinian people can't enter the country (see: PRINCIPLE: Follow the lead of

organizations such as Global Exchange and CODEPINK have coordinated civilian delegations to Cuba, in violation of the US embargo, as a means of protesting the economic strangulation of that country. Women On Waves (WOW), a Netherlands-registered ship, sails to countries where abortions are illegal, in order that WOW medical staff can safely provide early-term abortions aboard the ship, while in international waters.

The Israeli government's strict travel restrictions have made it a frequent target of subversive travel actions. The Free Gaza Movement launched flotillas carrying only humanitarian aid and human rights workers that attempted to break the naval blockade imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip. Birthright Unplugged turned the tables on "Birthright Israel" trips by inviting all people, not just Jews, to travel to Israel and Palestine, while Birthright RePlugged facilitated trips for Palestinian children living in refugee camps to travel through checkpoints without documentation to see Jerusalem and their ancestors' lands (see: STORY: Birthright Unplugged/Replugged). In the cases of the Free Gaza Movement and Birthright RePlugged, this travel is legal under international law but denied by Israel. In such cases, the journey becomes the destination.

Welcome to Palestine is yet another example. In 2011, Palestinian civil society invited internationals to visit Palestine. When asked by Israeli border security, travelers were encouraged to say they were going to Palestine (knowing they would be refused entry). As a result, 130 activists were denied entry, deported, jailed, or coerced into signing documents pledging not to participate in political actions. This action made headlines and helped educate people on Israeli injustices (see: STORY: Welcome to Palestine).

Finally, the UndocuBus tour brought people living in the United States without documentation together to openly tour the country, declaring, "No one is illegal." By outing themselves as undocumented people, these activists courageously exposed themselves to potential arrest or deportation in the name of calling attention to the urgent need for immigration reform.

Diverse acts of subversive travel are ubiquitous in activist practice, both past and present. Not only is it a way to challenge the authorities when they deny the fundamental human right to freedom of movement, but it can also engage the revolutionary imagination to envision what a future state of freedom might look like.

LEARN MORE

The UndocuBus
<http://nopapersnofear.org/>

Women on Waves

the most impacted).

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Birthright Unplugged/Replugged
- Trail of Dreams
- Welcome to Palestine

Tactics

- Civil disobedience

Principles

- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Make the invisible visible
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Seek safety in support networks
- Solidarity, not aid
- The real action is your target's reaction

Theories

- Action logic
- Anti-oppression
- Direct action
- Postcolonialism
- Prefigurative politics

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Spectrum of allies

TAGS

Colonialism, Dictatorship, Direct action, Education, Human rights, Immigration, International solidarity, Militarization, Racial justice, State violence, Student activism, War and peace

<https://www.womenonwaves.org/>