

## Direct and Symbolic Actions, Violence and Legality

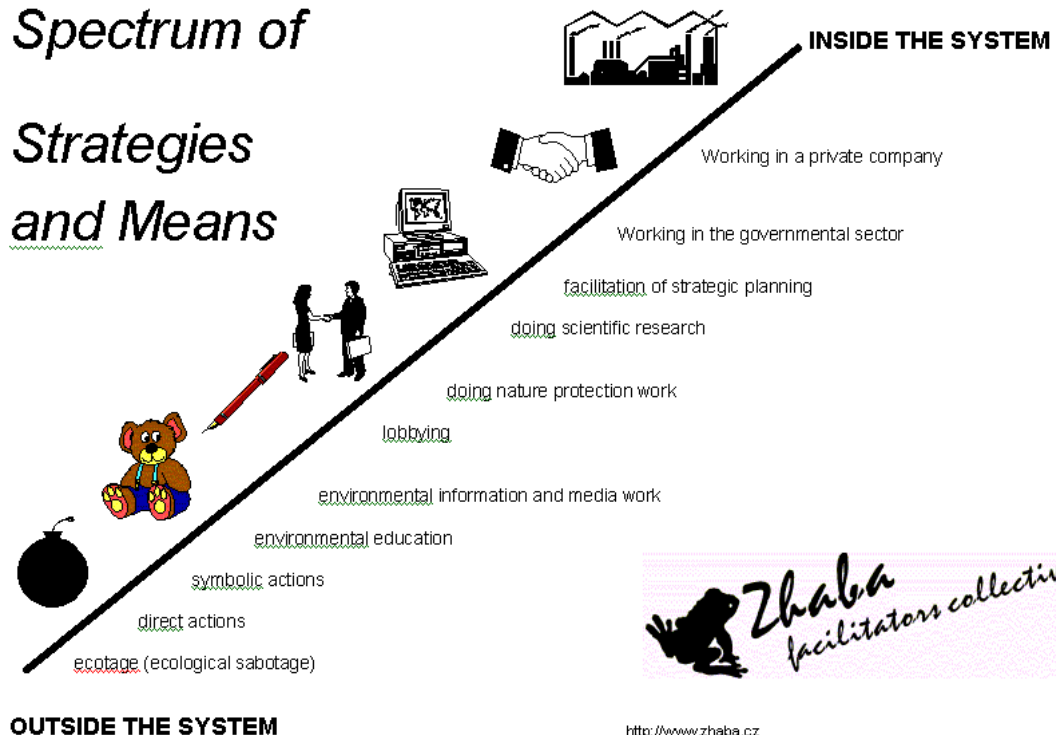
a worksheet for discussion

### Strategies and means

Social and environmental activities can have a lot of forms. Roughly they range from forms within the system (trying to change things within a polluting factory over politics, research and education) to forms outside the prevalent political system (blockades, ecotage).

### Spectrum of

### Strategies and Means



ZHABA is a collective of facilitators that cooperates with NGOs, to tackle barriers that hinder them in working for a change. ZHABA translates as FROG. Facilitators Reaching Out to Grassroots.

ZHABA is an affiliate of the



International Association of Facilitators  
[www.iaf-world-org](http://www.iaf-world-org)

Not all social and environmental active people have a similar opinion about use of or support from especially the "left" side of this spectrum. Main question is, which forms do we support and what is too radical to support. And also, in where would we be active ourselves, and where not anymore

When looking to the "left" side of the Spectrum of Strategies and Means, we are confronted with different terms and scales. I will not give distinct definitions here, as different people interpret the used terminology in a different way. I will try to give an outline of the terms involved. On the basis of this outline, we can discuss (preferably on the basis of concrete examples), where we set our limits. I will also not give any judgement here. The judgement of specific examples will be part of the discussion.

# TERMS<sup>1</sup>

## **Symbolic Actions**

Symbolic Actions have to be interpreted to be understood. This does not mean that the interpretation is difficult. For example a huge banner which says "Stop This" over a pipe that puts pollution into a river, is easy to understand (assuming it is visible and readable by the intended audience). But the critical distinction is that symbolic actions are for their overall effectiveness usually dependent on press (if the message gets through to the public, then the desired result is increased pressure on the polluter) or only resort success after intermediate action by authorities.

*Examples:*

- *GREENPEACE actions against Norwegian whaling: trying to influence the legislation in Norway by combining street-theatre around embassies and direct (symbolical) confrontations with whale hunters.*
- *Bulgarian students in 1989 carried communist symbols and slogans in demonstration to make the communist militias insecure and make the Party look ridiculous.*
- *Serbian students held their passports in the air in the late 1990s to make clear that the president tried to manipulate the population by saying that the mass protests were carried out by foreign infiltrators.*
- *Community organiser Saul Alinsky came with an idea that could put pressure on a large company that paid black workers structurally less than white workers. To change this situation, he described an action in which several thousands of black people would open and close thousands of small bank accounts to frustrate the bank's administration. Thus they could force the bank to start negotiations with the company, which drew most of its finances from that bank, to take an active anti-racial policy.<sup>2</sup>*
- *Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands) wheel-clamming the airplane of Euro-parliamentarians, wanting to leave from Rotterdam Airport: a protest against the air traffic expansion.*

## **Direct Actions**

Direct Actions somehow physically stop or slow down some activity that is being protested. A blockade prevents business from happening in the usual way. It is not necessary to have a big banner, although it is helpful for those being protested to understand what is going on. The protesters are clearly so enraged that they are actively stopping the normal work of those blockaded. The action does not have to be "interpreted" as such. Direct actions are not dependent on the media for their effectiveness, though the media often love it.

*Examples:*

- *During the Climate Conference in Berlin in 1995, activists blocked the busses of industrial lobbyists to the conference in order to hinder their participation in the negotiations.*
- *Organising police protection for a woman that is threatened by her abusive husband.*
- *Sea Shepherd (a radical split-off from GREENPEACE) blew up a pirate whaling-vessel in the harbour of Oporto, Portugal, to prevent its further activity.*
- *"Bulderbos": a newly planted forest by Milieudefensie (FoE-NL) has to delay directly the expansion of the Schiphol Airport.*

## **Civil disobedience**

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are radiant examples of people advocating a non-violent strategy, including elements of direct action and symbolic action strategies. Civil disobedience actions are essentially illegal actions. In direct action strategies they try to change existing laws and regulations by consciously and massively violating them. In symbolic action strategies they try to draw attention to unjust or environmentally unfriendly practices by violating certain laws related to these practices. Essential to civil disobedience actions is, that the people practising it accept the counter actions of their activities (arrest, penalties). Very often these counter actions are included in the strategy – the movement creates consciously "martyrs".

*Examples:*

- *A multi-thousand people action organised by Mahatma Gandhi to manually produce salt and thereby break the British salt making monopoly in India before its independence.*
- *Giro Blauw actions: refusal to pay a part of the income tax to protest nuclear power in the Netherlands in the early 1980s.*
- *Mass black-riding actions (taking bus and tram without payment) to protest unjustified raises in prices of public transport.*

## Ecotage and sabotage

Ecotage (ecological sabotage) is the act of damaging or destroying some machine or tool, which can be used for degrading the environment. Ecotage can be used in symbolic strategies as well as in direct actions. The strategies involved, mostly aim to cause so much financial damage that the company in question retreats from its activities; or to cause so much delay that activities can be stopped in another way. It is also used to draw press- and state-attention to a certain problem. It can also be used as symbolic strategy: symbolic destruction of one thing to draw the attention all a problem.

Examples:

- *Tree spiking (driving long nails in trees, which are about to be cut; this damages the chain-saw. Notice that unnotified tree spiking might be harmful to the loggers!).*
- *Destruction of the nose of a nuclear missile in the 1970s by the Ploughshare Eight in the USA to draw the attention on the effects of the nuclear weapons race.*
- *Throwing sand in the tanks of bulldozers to cause technical and financial damage to road-building, logging or mining firms.*
- *Sea Shepherd rams and destroys with their boat those parts of drift-net fishing boats in the Pacific, which are most expensive: radar equipment for instance.*

## Terrorism

Authorities or directly interested parties (industry, trade) sometimes use the word "terrorism" to describe more or less radical actions of the environmental and social movement. A recent example is the campaign of *hnutí DUHA* against the Temelín nuclear power plant, which was called "terrorist" by the then Czech Prime Minister Klaus. The term is often used to criminalize certain activists and often without real reason. Nevertheless it can be a useful term to describe a certain form of strategies. Terrorism uses *terror* as tool. Terror is spread by the use of heavy violence (bomb-attacks, hijacking, heavy sabotage) and mostly innocent people are amongst the victims.

## SCALES

### Violence - non-violence

A strict definition of violence, used for discussion during the Direct Action Conference in Berlin was:

**"Violence** is the act and/or threat of physical and/or psychological harm to a person or other living creature. There are numerous issues, which affect the definition of violence: Is the use of force to protect yourself violence? Is pornography violence? These issues can be debated, but what this definition is designed for in the context of the conference is distinguishing violence from property destruction. By this definition, it is not violent to cut a fence to get into a secured area (for example), nor is it violence to damage a weapons system (providing it is done in a way which does not threaten the people who are working with or around it)."

In strict definitions of **non-violence**, any physical or psychological harm to any living creature *or property* is disqualified. In these definitions, cutting fences, blowing up whaling boats or sabotaging draglines is seen as violence.

One can also see these strict interpretations of violence and non-violence as extremes on a scale - a spectrum of violence:

### violence

### non-violence

physical harm to people	physical harm to other living creatures	psychological harm	physical harm to non-related property	physical harm to related property	minor physical harm to infrastructure	no physical or psychological harm to living creatures or materials whatsoever
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## Legal - illegal

I overheard someone once, who said: "I don't want to support illegal actions." This is of course a very general statement. There are illegal actions that nobody of us probably ever will support. But there are also illegal actions that even you will like. An example is the blockade of the Temelín nuclear power plant, where several tens of people were arrested. This action was explicitly announced as being illegal (although its illegality was related to violations of law done by the operator of Temelín, CEZ). It took place in the tradition of Civil Disobedience.

Arrest-actions form, by the way, a strategy in itself. They are designed in such a way, that it is certain that people will be arrested. This can be to show via the media (which always will record arrests!) a strong message, in which people are willing to suffer state violence in order to show a large injustice.

Also here we can see a scale - a spectrum of illegality:

legal actions			illegal actions		
no laws broken	only minor misdemeanours	major misdemeanours	only minor crimes	major crimes	state / international crimes
<i>petitions</i>	<i>temporary blockades, trespassing</i>	<i>mass black-driving action</i>	<i>minor damage to property</i>	<i>heavy ecotage</i>	<i>blackmail with plutonium</i>

## A story

From a workshop on "The history of the environmental movement; from Jesus Christ to now" during Ecotopia 1991 in Estonia, I remember the following anecdote, which offered me a lot of food for thought. Whether it is real or not - I never checked it. But it is a good story...

It takes place around 1976 or so in Iceland. Somewhere in the countryside, near a village, a large dam was built for electricity production. The reservoir, created by the dam, would flood the village's vegetable gardens. Growing vegetables in Iceland is not an easy thing, and there was a unanimous opposition from the village. However, none of the petitions and pleads and actions yielded any result.

At the date the dam was finished, the whole village had a party, which went on through the night. In the morning all the villagers went to the dam and..... blew it up with dynamite!

Of course the Icelandic government was not happy with this and sued the whole population for court. In Icelandic law, however, for such crimes an independent witness is needed to provide evidence of who took part. In the village there was one man, who did not take part in the action: the local police officer.

He was summoned to stand witness, but when the judge asked him to plead the oath, he refused. Asked for a reason, he answered: "I could not take part in this action on the basis of my function. But I cannot testify against these people, as I profoundly agree with what they did."

The state could not do anything else than drop the charges and the dam was never rebuilt.

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19 January 2003

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1. As a basis for many of the here used definitions, I used a text, written by Paxus Calta, for the Direct Action Conference in Berlin, March 1995.

2. Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals; a pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*, New York (1971) Vintage Books; page 162 "New Tactics and Old".