



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

Direct Action

Lady: We're the Infernal Noise Brigade. And we formed specifically to go out and provide musical support, and a sound track for the insurrection on November 30th in Seattle. I believe this movement has already begun changing the world. It certainly changed me.

Narrator: However, trying to change the world can involve putting yourself in harms way.

Lady 2: The Global Action Express, which is the train that is going to bring hundreds of Italian to the demos in Prague, against the IMF and the World bank, is just about to leave. Our method is civil disobedience. We put our own body at risk. We do wear protections. Because we proclaim our right to defend ourselves, without harming anybody. But protecting my own body.

Narrator: Make no mistake; dissent can be a dangerous business.

Male: If there are going to be large street actions, people are going to use peaceful demonstrators as cover for violent actions. Then there's a lot of people who are going to be thinking quite seriously about the way forward for mass protests.

Steve Duncan: Particularly in the United States, it's a very scary time to be an activist. Just last week 2,000 people were arrested. Most not in civil disobedience actions, but literally for walking down the street. Or protesting where they weren't suppose to protest, but in legal ways.

Narrator: Steve Duncan, Professor of Media Studies, at the Gallatin School of New York University, uses high visibility dramatic stunts to get his point across, and avoid being hurt.

Steve Duncan: One of the things people have realised is that one of the things we can do is use culture as a way to one, not threaten the powers that be, physically. So that they can't justify using physical power back. More importantly, is that people use culture as a sort of political jujitsu tactic. And what do I mean by that? Well, say you're dressed up as a bunch of clowns. I was part of this group, called the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. And we were at the Republic Convention. And what happens, we're doing our sort of clown stick in flight suits, like our President George Bush. And if the police did arrest us. If the police did beat us up. And it was on public television. What would that look like? The police weren't beating up a bunch of clowns. Or the police grabbing puppets out of people's hands. Or the police basically going up to people that were dressed as flowers. And carting them off in paddy wagons. It looks very bad for the police. However, if you're dressed in sort of black, and you've got a black bandana. And you've got a molatoph cocktail in your hands. If the police roust those activists, most people across the country would applaud. They'd say 'Ah, look these people are a threat.' What sort of a threat are clowns?

Narrator: Does this mean that non violent tactics are now the preferred option for dissenters?

Steve Duncan: I think that one of the reasons for the growth of using culture as a tactic, within the direction action movement. Is an understanding that we can not use any sort of force, or show of force against the powers that be. No respected anti corporate globalisation activist condones violence. Every meeting I've ever been to, the first principle we agree on is no violence against people or animals. And that's just written off. However, there's a debate about whether smashing a Starbucks window for example is something which constitutes

violence. And people agree to disagree. But we have to respect, because it's this movement of movements. That there is a diversity of tactics. For myself, I like to think less morally about this than tactically. That is, is smashing a Starbucks window, really going to push the movement forward. Or is it going to be used as it recently was, in the Republican National Convention, in the United States, as this boogie man, which could be held up and used to say how out of touch these activists are. And how out of tune they are, and how dangerous they are. And how close they are to terrorists. So I always think of this in tactical terms. Is it going to help the movement? Is it going to harm the movement? Personally I think smashing a Starbucks window doesn't help the movement. And so I'm actually against the destruction of property.

Narrator: So what would be a contemporary version of this kind of peaceful and non violent direct action?

Steve Duncan: A great one is this Zapatista. Partly because it is both violent and non violent. The Zapatista are of course a rebel group from southern Mexico. And they do carry arms. And they use those arms. But they use those arms very very rarely. In fact they use those arms more like as political theatre, than they do as a real sort of tactical army. And it's very smart of them. Because they would be wiped out almost immediately if they used it as a tactical army. And so what does Zapatista have done is created this imaginary revolution. In that they have this very charismatic spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos. Who weaves tales of sort of magical realist about a beetle and about ancient Mayan myths. And weaves it all together into a story about what a better Mexico may look like. That sort of story is very hard to suppress. The Mexican army can crush a rebellion. The British Army can crush a rebellion. The American army can crush a rebellion. It's very hard to crush an imagination. And as Zapatista understand that. And so while they carry arms, they use them symbolically. And they use words symbolically. They use actions symbolically. Because they know that that actually speaks to a wider audience. And it speaks more effectively when the odds are forced or not in your favour.

Narrator: Steve himself has taken cultural tactics onto the street in New York.

Steve Duncan: Street Party essentially is an illegal gathering. Usually in the middle of a street. With a sound system. Which for all intents and purposes, a large party. That reclaims public space. And really the group that pioneered this, was the UK group 'Reclaim the Streets' in the early 1990's. And then that model has spread throughout the world. And I myself was part of Reclaim the Streets in New York City. And what we would do is we would get together a sound system. Put out a lot of feelers out there, in the sort of underground political and cultural worlds. And say 'Hey, we're going to meet up at three o'clock, in a certain place. We'd all meet up. And then from there we would go and take over a public space. Usually in protest. For example in New York, against our mayor at that times 'Quality of Life' campaign. In which regular everyday practices of urban life, things like hanging out with your friends on a stoop and drinking a beer, were all of a sudden being criminalised. And what we would do is we took over Broadway. This was the main thoroughfare, through Manhattan. And set up a couple of tripods. Used thirty foot high poles. Put people on top of them. And then just trundled out a sound system, and turned the whole entire block into a party. And then we handed out propaganda. And propaganda saying this is an action of Reclaim the Streets. We're against the sort of draconian Quality of Life campaigns of our mayor. But what was interesting about the demonstration was two things. One is the propaganda we handed out, was relatively redundant. Because the protest itself, said volumes about the sort of thing that we were working towards. In other words, it wasn't just like a protest where you're standing in line; you're listening to a speaker, and saying 'we should be liberated.' This was a living breathing example of liberation itself.