

DGR News Service
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A Taxonomy of Action

Excerpted from the book, *Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet* by Derrick Jensen.

We've all seen biological taxonomies, which categorize living organisms by kingdom and phylum down to genus and species. Though there are tens of millions of living species of vastly different shapes, sizes, and habitats, we can use a taxonomy to quickly zero in on a tiny group.

When we seek effective strategies and tactics, we have to sort through millions of past and potential actions, most of which are either historical failures or dead ends. We can save ourselves a lot of time and a lot of anguish with a quick and dirty resistance taxonomy. By looking over whole branches of action at once we can quickly judge which tactics are actually appropriate and effective for saving the planet (and for many specific kinds of social and ecological justice activism). A taxonomy of action can also suggest tactics we might otherwise overlook.

Broadly speaking, we can divide all of our tactics and projects either into acts of omission or acts of commission. Of course, sometimes these categories overlap. A protest can be a means to lobby a government, a way of raising public awareness, a targeted tactic of economic disruption, or all three, depending on the intent and organization. And sometimes one tactic can support another; an act of omission like a labor strike is much more likely to be effective when combined with propagandizing and protest.

In a moment we'll do a quick tour of our taxonomic options for resistance. But first, a warning. Learning the lessons of history will offer us many gifts, but these gifts aren't free. They come with a burden. Yes, the stories of those who fight back are full of courage, brilliance, and drama. And yes, we can find insight and inspiration in both their triumphs and their tragedies. But the burden of history is this: there is no easy way out.

In Star Trek, every problem can be solved in the final scene by reversing the polarity of the deflector array. But that isn't reality, and that isn't our future. Every resistance victory has been won by blood and tears, with anguish and sacrifice. Our burden is the knowledge that there are only so many ways to resist, that these ways have already been invented, and they all involve profound and dangerous struggle. When resisters win, it is because they fight harder than they thought possible.

And this is the second part of our burden. Once we learn the stories of those who fight back—once we really learn them, once we cry over them, once we inscribe them in our hearts, once we carry them in our bodies like a war veteran carries aching shrapnel—we have no choice but to fight back ourselves. Only by doing that can we hope to live up to their example. People have fought back under the most adverse and awful conditions imaginable; those people are our kin in the struggle for justice and for a livable future. And we find those people—our courageous kin—not

just in history, but now. We find them among not just humans, but all those who fight back.

We must fight back because if we don't we will die. This is certainly true in the physical sense, but it is also true on another level. Once you really know the self-sacrifice and tirelessness and bravery that our kin have shown in the darkest times, you must either act or die as a person. We must fight back not only to win, but to show that we are both alive and worthy of that life.

Acts of Omission

The word strike comes from eighteenth-century English sailors, who struck (removed) their ship's sails and refused to go to sea, but the concept of a workers' strike dates back to ancient Egypt.³ It became a popular tactic during the industrial revolution, parallel to the rise of labor unions and the proliferation of crowded and dangerous factories.

Historical strikes were not solely acts of omission. Capitalists went to great lengths to violently prevent or end strikes that cost them money, so they became more than pickets or marches; they were often pitched battles, with strikers on one side, police and hired goons on the other. This should be no surprise; any effective action against those in power will trigger a forceful, and likely violent, response. Hence, historical strikers often had a pragmatic attitude toward the use of violence. Even if opposed to violence, historical strikers planned to defend themselves out of necessity.

The May 1968 student protests and general strike in France—which rallied ten million people, two-thirds of the French workforce—forced the government to dissolve and call elections, (as well as triggering extensive police brutality). The 1980 Gdańsk Shipyard strike in Poland sparked a series of strikes across the country and contributed to the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe; strike leader Lech Wałęsa won the Nobel Peace Prize and was later elected president of Poland. General strikes were common in Spain in the early twentieth century, especially in the years leading up to the civil war and anarchist revolution.

Boycotts and embargoes have been crucial in many struggles: from boycotts of slave-produced goods in the US, to civil rights struggles and the Montgomery bus boycott in the name of civil rights, to the antiapartheid boycotts; to company-specific boycotts of Nestlé, Ford, or Philip Morris.

The practice of boycotting predates the name it itself. Captain Charles Boycott was the agent of an absentee landlord in Ireland in 1880. Captain Boycott evicted tenants who had demanded rent reductions, so the community fought back by socially and economically isolating him. People refused to work for him, sell things to him, or trade with him—the postman even refused to deliver his mail. The British government was forced to bring in fifty outside workers to undertake the harvest, and protected the workers with one thousand police. This show of force meant that it cost over £10,000 to harvest £350 of potatoes. Boycott fled to England, and his name entered the lexicon.

As we have discussed, consumer spending is a small lever for resistance movements, since most spending is done by corporations, governments, and other institutions. If we ignore the obligatory food, housing, and health care, Americans spend around \$2.7 trillion dollars per year on their clothing, insurance, transportation, and other expenses. Government spending might be \$4.4 trillion, with corporations spending \$1 trillion on marketing alone. Discretionary consumer spending is small, and even if a boycott were effective against a corporation, the state would bail out that corporation with tax money, as they've made clear.

But there's no question that boycotts can be very effective in specific situations. The original example of Captain Boycott shows some conditions that lead to successful action: the participation of an entire community, the use of additional force beyond economic measures, and the context of a geographically limited social and economic realm. Such actions helped lead to what Irish labor agitator and politician Michael Davitt called "the fall of feudalism in Ireland."⁷

Of course there are exceptional circumstances. When the winter's load of chicken feed arrived on the farm today, the mayor was driving the delivery truck, nosing carefully through a herd of curious cattle. But most people don't take deliveries from their elected officials, and—with apologies to Mayor Jim—the mayors of tiny islands don't wield much power on a global scale.

Indeed, corporate globalization has wrought a much different situation than the old rural arrangement. There is no single community that can be unified to offer a solid front of resistance. When corporations encounter trouble from labor or simply want to pay lower wages, they move their operations elsewhere. And those in power are so segregated from the rest of us socially, economically, culturally, and physically that enforcing social shaming or shunning is almost impossible.

Even if we want to be optimistic and say that a large number of people could decide to engage in a boycott of the biggest ten corporations, it's completely reasonable to expect that if a boycott seriously threatened the interests of those in power, they would simply make the boycott illegal.

In fact, the United States already has several antiboycott laws on the books, dating from the 1970s. The US Bureau of Industry and Security's Office of Antiboycott Compliance explains that these laws were meant "to encourage, and in specified cases, require US firms to refuse to participate in foreign boycotts that the United States does not sanction." The laws prohibit businesses from participating in boycotts, and from sharing information which can aid boycotters. In addition, inquiries must be reported to the government. For example, the Kansas City Star reports that a company based in Kansas City was fined \$6,000 for answering a customer's question about whether their product contained materials made in Israel (which it did not) and for failing to report that inquiry to the Bureau of Industry and Security.⁸ American law allows the bureau to fine businesses "up to \$50,000, or five times the value" of the products in question. The laws don't just apply to corporations, but are intended "to counteract the participation of US citizens" in boycotts and embargoes "which run counter to US policy."

Certainly, large numbers of committed people can use boycotts to exert major pressure on governments or corporations that can result in policy changes. But boycotts alone are unlikely to result in major structural overhauls to capitalism or civilization at large, and will certainly not result in their overthrow.

Like the strike and the boycott, tax refusal has a long history. Rebellions have erupted and wars have been waged over taxes; from the British colonial “hut taxes” to the Boston Tea Party. Even if taxation is not the cause of a war, tax refusal is likely to play a part, either as a way of resisting unjust wars (as the Quakers have historically done) or as part of a revolutionary struggle (as in a German revolution in which Karl Marx proclaimed, “Refusal to pay taxes is the primary duty of the citizen!”).

The success of tax refusal is usually low, partly because people already try to avoid taxes for nonpolitical reasons. In the US, 41 percent of adults do not pay federal income tax to begin with, so it’s reasonable to conclude that the government could absorb (or compensate for) even high levels of tax refusal.

Even though tax refusal will not bring down civilization, there are times when it could be especially decisive. Regional or local governments on the verge of bankruptcy may be forced to close prisons or stop funding new infrastructure in order to save costs, and organized tax resistance could help drive such trends while diverting money to grassroots social or ecological programs.

Through conscientious objection people refuse to engage in military service, or, in some cases, accept only noncombatant roles in the military. Occasionally these are people who are already in the military who have had a change of heart.

Although conscientious objection has certainly saved people from having to kill, it doesn’t always save people from dying or the risk of death, since the punishments or alternative jobs like mining or bomb disposal are also inherently dangerous. It’s unlikely that conscientious objection has ever ended a war or even caused significant troop shortages. Governments short of troops usually enact or increase conscription to fill out the ranks. Where alternative service programs have existed, the conscientious objectors have usually done traditional masculine work, like farming and logging, thus freeing up other men to go to war. Conscientious objection alone is unlikely to be an effective form of resistance against war or governments.

For those already in the military, mutiny and insubordination are the chief available acts of omission. In theory, soldiers have the right, even obligation, to refuse illegal orders. In practice, individual soldiers rarely defy the coercion of their superiors and their units. And refusing an illegal order only works when an atrocity is illegal at the time; war criminals at Nuremberg argued that there were no laws against what they did.

Since individual insubordination may result in severe punishment, military personnel sometimes join together to mutiny. But large-scale refusal of orders is almost unheard of because of the culture, indoctrination, and threat of punishment in the military (there are notable exceptions, like the mutiny on the Russian battleship *Potemkin* or the mass mutinies of Russian soldiers during the February Revolution).

Perhaps a greater cause for hope is the potential that military personnel, who often have very useful skills sets, will join more active resistance groups.

Shunning and shaming are sometimes used for severe social transgressions and wrongdoing, such as domestic or child abuse, or rape. These tactics are more likely to be effective in close-knit or low-density communities, which are not as common in the modern and urbanized world, although particular communities (such as enclaves of immigrants) may also be set apart for language or cultural reasons. The effect of shunning can be vastly increased in situations like that of Captain Boycott, in which social relations are also economic relations. However, since most economic transactions (either employment or consumption) are mediated by large, faceless corporations and alienated labor, this is rarely possible in the modern day.

Shunning requires a majority to be effective, so it's not a tool that can be used to bring down civilization, although it can still be used to discourage wrongdoing within communities, including activist communities.

Civil disobedience, the refusal to follow unjust laws and customs, is a fundamental act of omission. It has led to genuine successes, as in the civil rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. In the 1960s Birmingham was among the most racially segregated cities in the US, with segregation legally required and vigorously enforced. The Commissioner of Public Safety was "arch-segregationist" Bull Connor, a vicious racist even by the standards of the time. Persecution of black people by the police and other institutions was especially bad. The local government went to great lengths to try to quash any change; for example, when courts ruled segregation of city parks unlawful, the city closed the parks. However, civil rights activists, including Martin Luther King Jr., were able to conduct a successful antisegregation campaign and turn this particularly nasty situation into a victory.

The Birmingham campaign used many different tactics, which gave it flexibility and strength. It began with a series of economic boycotts against businesses that promoted or tolerated segregation. Starting in 1962, these boycotts targeted downtown businesses and decreased sales by as much as 40 percent. Black organizers patrolled for people breaking the boycott. When they found black people shopping in a target store, they confronted them publically and shamed them into participating in the boycott, even destroying purchased merchandise. When several businesses took down their segregation signs, Commissioner Connor threatened to revoke their business licenses.

The next step in the civil disobedience campaign was "Project C," the systematic violation of segregation laws. Organizers timed walking distances between the campaign headquarters and various targets, and conducted reconnaissance of segregated lunch counters, all-white churches, stores, federal buildings, and so on. The campaign participants then staged sit-ins at the various buildings, libraries, and lunch counters (or, in the case of the white churches, kneel-ins). Businesses mostly refused to serve the protesters, some of whom were spat on by white customers, and hundreds of the protesters were arrested. Some observers, black and white, considered Project C to be an extremist approach, and criticized King and the protesters for not simply sticking to negotiation. "Wasteful and worthless," proclaimed the city's black newspaper. A statement by eight white clergymen called the

demonstrations “unwise and untimely,” and wrote that such protests “incite to hatred and violence” when black people should focus on “working peacefully.” (Of course, they blamed the victim. Of course, they cautioned that an action like sitting down in a deli and ordering a sandwich is only “technically peaceful” and warned against such “extreme measures.” And, of course, it’s never the right time, is it?)

The city promptly obtained an injunction against the protests and quadrupled the bail for arrestees to \$1,200 per person (more than \$8,000 in 2010 currency). But the protests continued, and two days later fifty people were arrested, including Martin Luther King Jr. Instead of paying bail for King, the organizers allowed the police to keep him in prison to draw attention to the struggle. National attention meant the expansion of boycotts; national retail chains started to suffer, and their bosses put pressure on the White House to deal with the situation.

Despite the attention, the campaign began to run out of protesters willing to risk arrest. So they used a controversial plan called the “Children’s Crusade,” recruiting young students to join in the protests. Organizers held workshops to show films of other protests and to help the young people deal with their fear of jail and police dogs. On May 2, 1963, more than a thousand students skipped school to join the protest, some scaling the walls around their school after a principal attempted to lock them in. Six hundred of them, some as young as eight, were arrested.

Firehoses and police dogs were used against the marching students. The now-iconic images of this violence drew immense sympathy for the protesters and galvanized the black community in Birmingham. The situation came to a head on May 7, 1963, when thousands of protestors flooded the streets and all business ceased; the city was essentially defeated. Business leaders were the first to support the protestors’ demands, and soon the politicians (under pressure from President Kennedy) had no choice but to capitulate and agree to a compromise with King and the other organizers.

But no resistance comes without reprisals. Martin Luther King Jr.’s house was bombed. So was a hotel he was staying at. His brother’s house was bombed. Protest leader Fred Shuttlesworth’s house was bombed. The home of an NAACP attorney was bombed. Some blamed the KKK, but no one was caught. A few months later the KKK bombed a Baptist church, killing four girls.

And the compromise was controversial. Some felt that King had made a deal too soon, that the terms were less than even the moderate demands. In any case, the victorious campaign in Birmingham is widely regarded as a watershed for the civil rights movement, and a model for success.

Let’s compare the goals of Birmingham with our goals in this book. The Birmingham success was achieved because the black protestors wanted to participate in economy and government. Indeed, that was the crux of the struggle, to be able to participate more actively and equally in the economy, in government, and in civil society. Because they were so numerous (they made up about one-third of the city’s population) and because they were so driven, their threat of selective withdrawal from the economy was very powerful (I almost wrote “persuasive,” but the point is that they stopped relying on persuasion alone).

But what if you don't want to participate in capitalism or in the US government? What if you don't even want those things to exist? Boycotts aren't very persuasive to business leaders if the boycotts are intended to be permanent. The Birmingham civil rights activists forced those in power to change the law by penalizing their behavior, by increasing the cost of business as usual to the point where it became easier and more economically viable for government to accede to their demands.

There's no doubt that we can try to apply the same approach in our situation. We can apply penalties to bad behavior, both on community and global scales. But the dominant culture functions by taking more than it gives back, by being unsustainable. In order to get people to change, we would have to apply a penalty proportionally massive. To try to persuade those in power to make serious change is folly; it's effectively impossible to make truly sustainable decisions within the framework of the dominant system. And persuasion can only work on people, whereas we are dealing with massive social machines like corporations, which are functionally sociopathic.

In any case, what we call civil disobedience perhaps is the prototypical act of omission, and a requirement for more than a few acts of commission. Refusing to follow an unjust law is one step on the way to working more actively against it.

The most generalized act of omission is a withdrawal from larger society or emigration to a different society. Both are common in history. These choices are often the result of desperation, of a sense of having run out of other options, of the status quo being simply intolerable. Of course, if the culture you are leaving is so terrible, good people leaving is unlikely to reform or improve it. Which doesn't mean people shouldn't emigrate or try to leave intolerable or dangerous social situations. It just means that leaving, in and of itself, isn't a political strategy likely to affect positive change.

Perhaps the biggest problem with withdrawal as a strategy now is that civilization is global. Where are you going to go? Where do you think you can escape climate change, for example? And what real effect will withdrawal have on the dominant culture? There is no shortage of labor, so huge numbers of people would have to withdraw in order to make a difference. Not buying things will not end the capitalist economy, and refusing to pay taxes will not bring down the government. If you did have enough people to do such things, you would become a threat, a dangerous example, and would be treated accordingly. As soon as enough people withdrew to become a bad example, civilization would go after them, thus ending their withdrawal and forcing them to engage with it, either by giving in or by fighting back.

History already tells us that withdrawing is not an option that the civilized will allow. First Nations people across Canada and the US, for instance, were not allowed to remain outside of the invading European civilization. Their children were taken by force to be abused—"enculturated"—and forced into settler culture.

It's a paradox. Withdrawal can only persist when it is ineffective, and so is useless as a resistance strategy.

Other acts of noncooperation can operate in smaller contexts such as individual religious temples, for example, or romantic relationships (as in the Lysistratan example). These smaller social structures may not have as great an impact on society at large, but smaller numbers of people are required to affect change. If nothing else, it's good practice.

All acts of omission require very large numbers of people to be permanently effective on a large scale. There are plenty of examples of strikes shutting down factories temporarily, but what if you don't ever want that factory to run again? What if you work at a cruise missile factory or a factory that manufactures nuclear warheads? Is everyone working there willing to go on strike indefinitely? The large pool of unemployed or underpaid working poor means that there are always people willing to step in to work for a wage, even a relatively low one. Failing that, the company in question could just move the factory overseas, as so many have. All of this is especially true in a time when capitalism falters, and attempting to bring down civilization would definitely make capitalism falter.

The same problems apply to economic boycotts. You and I could stop buying anything produced by a given company. Or we could stop buying anything that had been sold through the global capitalist economy. We probably will see widespread acts of economic omission, but only when large numbers of people get too poor to buy mass-produced consumer luxuries. But because of globalization and automation, these acts of omission will be less effective than they were in the past.

Which isn't to say we shouldn't undertake such acts when appropriate. Acts of omission are commonly part of resistance movements; they may be implicit rather than explicit. Pre-Civil War abolitionists would not have owned slaves. But this was an implicit result of their morality and political philosophy rather than a means of change. Few abolitionists would have suggested that by refraining from personally owning slaves they were posing a serious or fundamental threat to the institution of slavery.

An effective resistance movement based on acts of omission might need 10 percent, or 50 percent, or 90 percent of the population to win. One in a thousand people withdrawing from the global economy would have negligible impact. Acts of commission are a different story. What if one out of a thousand people joined a campaign of direct action to bring down civilization? Seven million brave and smart people could ensure the survival of our planet.