

# How to win!

Successful Procedures and Mechanisms  
for Radical Campaign Groups

**RADICAL  
THINK  
TANK**

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## Introduction

My name is Roger Hallam. Let me first introduce myself inasmuch as you may not know who I am. I have been involved in radical social movements since I was 15 - for over thirty years. I have worked at a trainer and organiser for much of that time, and in more recently as a social entrepreneur. For all of my adult life I have been primarily concerned with how to bring about radical social and political change. This has been an intensely practical as well as an intellectual project. I have been to prison several times for nonviolent direct action for peace movement activism, as well as spending many years reading about, researching and engaging in designing practical co-operative and participatory organisations. Going against that persistent sterile and tragic divorce between theory and practice, I have always seen the role of the genuinely radical intellectual to be embedded in campaigns, providing valuable and practical knowledge for groups fighting for radical political change. What follows here is an attempt to bring social scientific knowledge to bear on the practical task of winning campaigns for radical groups in the U.K. at the present time. This is a specific project not a generalised theory although obviously it has relevance further a field in both time and space. The focus of my concern is on problem solving – how to increase the effectiveness of collective endeavour. This is the primary task of every politically engaged scholar – not just to look at what is happening and leaving it there but at what is happening *and* how this bears on what is to be done. Without the second question knowledge is only of “academic interest”. It has lost to any connection with the real world of practical decision-making and it cannot be operationalised. I am working with and drawing upon the work of other researchers in what follows. A “Radical Think Tank” has now been set up in London to bring together researchers and activists to take forward this project of radical political empowerment. What I am writing here then is part of an incomplete but ongoing collective process of testing and sharing “what works best”.

The argument is this. There is now over 40 years of concrete social research on how to enhance the effectiveness of political action. By using modern scientific methods of comparison of alternative actions it is possible to make solid progress on which policies, procedures, tactics and strategies best further radical aims. Theory needs to grow out of practice and then there needs to be an empirical testing of that practice. My claim is that the opposition forces are in fact sitting ducks in the face of smart adoption of this freely available information. And conversely radical campaigns will continue to fail to the extent that they do not adopt and appropriate this knowledge. We need to realise that smart opponents have no qualms about using the latest social science research to maximise their profits and further undermine the social and political rights which are disappearing before our eyes. This project then is not some optional add-on for radicals. Smart adoption - a thorough application of what works - is in fact the key determinant of campaign success. It is therefore morally as well as politically disastrous for radical movements to maintain the actionist dogma that thinking does not matter and a myopic and traditionalist suspicion of intellectual developments outside the closed communities of radical culture. If social science has shown anything over the last two generations it is that closed systems are fucked – they get overwhelmed by smarter open systems. So the contention is a very serious one. The Left has sustained defeat after defeat over the past 30 years. For this to change activists need to get out of their mental comfort zone and do what successful underdogs always have done – swallow their pride, learn the tricks of the opposition, and use them in a progressive way against them.

This text is not primarily concerned with structural factors – changes outside our control. However I will briefly comment on these matters and why I have chosen to get actively involved in political action design again at this point. It is clear, even to many forward thinking clear-minded liberals, that we live a time of both dramatic danger and opportunity. Whether we get things right or wrong over next 30 years is set to determine whether humankind emerges into a period of genuine post scarcity or reverts into war and savagery in the context of a degraded ecological environment. The impending climate holocaust presents the greatest political challenge in the history of humanity. It's the greatest challenge because unlike the nuclear threat, nothing needs to happen for it to come about. Secondly capitalism seems to be entering another phase of creating ever greater increases in economic and political inequality and in the process it is eating up its social and political base. This, as in the past, will create a series of major political crises which will open up the dual possibilities of genuine social advance or regression into an authoritarian past. Strangely and confusingly however, we now have the material and technological capacities for what maybe naively, but no less correctly, to called a post-material social and political paradise. If modern technology is appropriated and socialised for the public good we can easily envisage a future without human deprivation and with a political system which is genuinely participatory and deliberative, aided by the amazing prospect of deep horizontal connectivity provided by digital communication technology. This is profoundly exciting. One key lesson for political success is that movements have to create hope and faith in a better future. Radicals have to have a deeply compelling and attractive story to tell of what our common and collective future will look like - what will happen if we take back what is truly ours and share this bounty with all of humanity. There is then all to play for. We are about to embark on a great political adventure – and if we are going to win we need to use every opportunity to maximise our progressive collective intelligence. It is a common comment by activists all around the world that radical social and political change “could not happen here”. And yet recent history is full of examples of movements succeeding in “impossible” situations. The near future will no doubt be full of similar “shocks”.

Of course there is much more that could be said about all this, but the task for activists is to concentrate our minds on the here and now. My main focus in this text then is to look at how bottom up grassroots and radical groups can win clearly defined small scale campaigns. This, as I explain below, is not because of a lack of political ambition, but, on the contrary, because the only way to win in a sustainable way the bigger political battles is to build up a mass culture of political confidence and a body of tried and tested strategic and tactical knowledge. This can only come from going through iterations (that is repeated instances) of localised political struggles. As with everything it's a matter of one step at a time. It is also the case that middle size institutions such as universities, local councils and capitalist companies are highly vulnerable to multi-directional, smartly organised mass campaigns of resistance. On paper they are sitting ducks. The issue is simply one of radical collective organisation.

A key question is then “what works”. But an even more important question is how do we decide what works. Let's be clear most of the time activists don't even take time to think about these issues. At worst they think activism is x y and z and it's just a matter of getting on with it. But this x y and z is just what has happened in the past. It is a deeply conservative position – what is called “path dependency” – we always do what we always have done for no other reason than this is what has been done in the past. And as they say, “if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got”. Given that we now are looking consciously at what we do, the question is how do we

decide what is better. We need to learn from other struggles in the past and other campaigns happening in other places at the present time. We have to actively widen the range of possibilities based on this widening of knowledge. At the same time we have to decide what is best for our particular local conditions. But it cannot all be worked out beforehand and this is where a profound change of knowledge culture is needed. Traditionally these empirical (i.e. what is happening in the real world) issues are overruled by notions of principle or dogma – subject to collective intuitions, based upon tradition notions of what is possible and acceptable. ***The key move that needs to be made is for new ideas to be tested in the real world.*** This is how the best advances are presently being made in areas such as science, business and government. It's how the smartest big corporate companies work out how to market their products and manipulate people to maximise their profits. There are two main ways of testing things.

First is randomised controlled trials. This is the gold standard of identifying causality – what causes what. In basic terms this is how it works. You take two random groups and then do X to the “treatment” group and nothing to the “control” group, and if there is a difference in the outcome, then X can be shown to have caused that difference. So if you use tactic A to mobilise a random group and simultaneously use tactic B to mobilise a similar group and B outperforms A then, other things being equal, A is better and should be adopted.

Secondly you can apply more general “field design” experimental processes through a number of iterations of a campaign. You try a number of changes sequentially through time and see what works best and so incrementally improve performance. For instance if you are canvassing, the approach used can be progressively changed in the light of how much various scripts create mobilisation. This field-tested knowledge can then be used to train future canvassers so they don't have to reinvent the wheel. Of course there are difficulties in the design of such tests but the name of the game is to do continual small tests and build up knowledge gradually over time. It is this incremental increase of knowledge of how to be effective which is the key. There is no quick fix and a need for close attention to detail. However the positive side is that this cuts out those endlessly boring armchair debates about what should be done and the bad feelings that result from the inevitable disagreements. Don't waste time arguing – go out and test it. As we will see this testing is an integral component to the overall design of campaigns.

An advantage of this approach then is that it gets around the problem of egos being attached to particular tactics and mechanisms. All these ideas are in fact contingent upon particular conditions. All the ideas presented here are totally falsifiable. I am only attached to them to the extent that they work. It is not a matter of my ego or some transcendent political dogma. If they don't work I as much as anyone else would want to drop them and try other ideas or combinations of ideas. The plan then is that we are all working together to find out what works best. This is essentially a collective task and the more we are trying things out and the less time spent in groundless debating in meetings the better. A classic example here is the choosing of slogans. It's these little details which often get meetings most bogged down. The answer is to get out and test them. Ask around 30 random people within the political community within which you are situated to rate the different slogans/designs and you will quickly get a broadly statistically significant feedback on what is the best option – with the always useful bonus of comments from what “normal” people think. You are out there in the field getting direct feedback from the very people you are trying to influence. This is the essence of

smart campaigning – getting out and engaging with people rather than huddled together in the self-reinforcing closed off dynamics of radical political culture.

This is not to say that what comes out of this process will not be messy. It is very easy when reading stuff like this to get seduced by the various clear and clean theoretical propositions. The key challenge of the embedded intellectual and activist is to realise that messiness is an unavoidable part of what happens in real life. The choice then is always between degrees of chaos. The plan is a guide or template, not the “answer”. But having a plan is a world away from having none at all and getting thrown one way and another by “events”. The key is the continual interaction between ideas about how to influence the real world we are situated in here and now, and feedback on how this world responds to these ideas being put into practice. On the basis of this feedback modification happens and the process moves forward and is repeated. This is how successful things work in practice. The notion of a successful imposition of a fully formed plan onto reality is the make believe of ideologists and ivory tower academics.

I am always in a continual internal debate when writing texts like this on how to pitch the arguments – to be down to earth and possibly lose important nuanced meanings – or be more academic in the language and concepts and lose touch with readers who are not familiar with various literatures which contribute the points I make. Of course there is a trade off here and I am trying for something in the middle. There are some complex points to be made and I will try to explain them as well as I can rather than over simplify them. On the other hand I will only use unusual concepts where I think I have to and in such cases explain them as I go along. But I will make my apologies now for any lack of clarity or for the explaining of ground you are already familiar with. As our research in the Radical Think Tank develops this text will be updated and I hope to present the ideas in a clearer and more precise way, based upon the feedback from ongoing field work.

I am however making a decision to go into some detail and this text is primarily aimed at existing activists looked to initiate or improve campaigns. It is easy to skim over stuff but this is no use for the practical activist. What is needed is detailed “micro” knowledge which clearly shows how it can be put into practice and tested. The devil, as all practitioners in the social change game know, is in the detail. It is a terrible indictment of the state of radical culture that there is so little of this detailed “how to” information available. This text is, I hope, an important contribution to this miserably small literature. It is also aimed at those small groups of committed activists who are the key to the design of successful political action. This is not an ideological point but an empirical one – it’s simply how things happen. This emphatically does not mean that the formation of traditional hierarchies are required but rather to state the obvious – that everything big starts small. And crucially it is these small groups that unavoidably set the parameters and “focal points” - the general structures, culture and norms, which then shape and confine the subsequent larger political organisational developments. These small groups then have enormous power and responsibility – the smarter and more thoughtful they are in designing these forms and processes the greater the potential success of what happen when thing get a lot bigger. As everyone knows who tries, fundamentally changing large established social and political groups is next to impossible. What is needed then is for knowledgeable small groups to design how campaigns work from the beginning – and this is the task this text addresses. As mentioned, it is not going to go to plan and no doubt, as with everything, it will go bad eventually – but in the meantime there is everything to play for. The world is more open to radical innovation than ever before and the “start up” costs of creating groups

and campaigns has collapsed. If groups are stuck in their ways you can design and set up way better alternatives. There is great fluidity out there and people are looking for answers and for things that really work – that can inspire them and give them hope for a better world. It is our job then to get on with this design challenge.

What follows falls into two sections. First of all I will identify several key mechanisms which I propose are critical to enhance political participation and mobilisation and thus raise the possibilities of campaigns being won. Each is, in a way, an entry point in the family of mechanisms in which they reside. How these mechanisms are used will depend upon particular contexts. However the real secret of effectiveness is not the use of a single supposedly big knockout mechanism but in the skilful combination of these mechanisms over a number of iterations in a confrontation. In the second section I will construct a number of hypothetical campaign progressions which combine all the mechanisms in order to show how much more effective they can be when combined – what might be called their “synergistic” potential.

What I write here is radically incomplete but my purpose is to try to inspire a process of design thinking as much as to encourage you to follow these specific mechanisms and processes. The activist reading this will consider putting into practice some of these ideas but should have no qualms adapting them to a real context, adding their own novel features and add-ons. What is written here then is far from exhaustive. It is a work in progress – both in the general sense that all social change is always unfinished – there is always more to be done - and in the more specific sense that I am presently in the middle of my PhD research project and fully expect the elements and emphases to change as feedback shows up the pluses and minuses. I am also not going to deal with some important areas of design here. For instance I only briefly deal with the construction of effective discourses – the use of humour and ridicule – and not much on the embellishment of these processes with art and visual effects. Nor am I saying much about the all-important area of participatory decision making which I am writing about elsewhere. And there are also areas where I am genuinely unclear how things are to be designed – for instance the tactics of negotiation seem to present a number of problematic trade-offs. So there are plenty of holes to be filled in. But through a collaborative process with activists and a programme of testing and observation we hope to progressively come up with better constructions.

A final disclaimer. In this text I am not making any recommendations about specific acts in real life situations. Nor am I necessarily making any value judgements about the goodness or badness of any particular strategies or tactics. My aim is to say these mechanisms work in many situations. Specific decisions have to be made by activists in specific situations.

## *Section one:*

### **Specific mechanisms**

I am going to look at three families of mechanisms; conditional commitment/personalisation, dilemma actions/political struggle, and open space/deliberative mechanisms. Each feeds into one another and, in the schemes I am going to propose, they are all used in close sequence to create an upward spiral of mobilisation. This is of course very neat but as a model it is there to be adapted and

battered around – a model is not an end in itself and we will do a fair amount of abusing of it in the coming pages.

## **Conditional commitment/personalisation**

Where one starts an explanation is always in some sense unjustified as there is so much to be considered all at once. So it is necessary then to create a bit of simple process – a fiction even – just to get going and then come back later and completely change it all around if needs be.

So it seems as good as any where to start with the question of what makes people decide to get up and act politically. In a simple model we can say this is a binary choice – to act or not to act. There are two approaches to this question as there are to all questions of action. One assumes that people consciously choose to act, in a way which promotes their own interests, and the other assumes people act according to some influences external to that conscious act – social pressures and personal habits for instance. A lot of time is wasted on which explanation is best when it is obvious that both are important parts of the story.

The best way to start looking at the attractiveness of conditional commitment is to assume that individuals are making conscious calculating decisions in their own interests. Conditional commitment is a mechanism where people make a provisional commitment to act with others on the basis that a critical mass of others will act with them. This is a creative response to a key problem which is identified in the rationalistic political science literature and is called the “collective action problem”. It goes something like this. People want a collective objective but it is only worth them acting if everyone else acts. As they don’t know that everyone else will act, they choose not to act themselves. Therefore there is a problem or paradox – what is in the collective interest is not in the individual interest. So to put some flesh on the bones – let’s say everyone wants to get rid of a dictator (collective good) but no one wants to turn up to a demonstration to overthrow him unless a critical mass of others do the same. If only a few turn up they more than likely will get arrested or worse and no change will happen. So everyone stays at home and the dictator stays in power (the collective good is not achieved). This problem applies across all scales and degrees of seriousness. So for instance the same basic problem applies to organising a football match with your mates. There is no point doing it if there are just 2 or 3 of you. You need say 10 people to make it worthwhile for those 10 people to want to do it. But if these 10 individuals do not know about each other’s willingness to play then no one bothers to turn up and nothing happens.

The solution to this is conditional commitment. This requires that people give a provisional commitment to act if a certain number of other people act. They are not going to act unless that minimum number of other people also commit to act. Then, if and when the target is reached, everyone acts in the knowledge everyone else in this provisional commitment group will also act. So in the football example – someone goes round saying “you want to play if 10 of us play?” – 10 people say yes and then he/she goes back round and tells everyone, “it’s on we’re got the 10” – and the game happens.

A big problem which you might have noticed here is that a lot of communication has to happen for conditional commitment to work. We can see there are three stages of communication.

1. A target of collective action has to be set (10 players)
2. People need to give a provisional commitment to act if that target is met (“I will play if 9 other people commit to play”)
3. If and when the target is reached then everyone has to be informed (“it’s on we’re got 10 people”)

Traditionally the cost of this communication has been very high and it has been argued this is why small concentrated groups can exploit larger more geographically dispersed groups. However the big change here is the internet. Now in principle a large group of people can be told about a collective target, indicate with the click of a mouse a provisional commitment to that target, and then get an email saying the target has been reached and the collective activity is going ahead. There is also the issue of people fulfilling their commitment which I will deal with below.

However, as I have found out in my research, there is still the big problem of attention – getting people to attend to the target in the first place. To deal with this problem I have come up with a hybrid mechanism which is as follows: activists canvass people to ask if they would do collective action X if a specified critical mass of others do the same – so for instance would they go on rent strike if 2000 others did the same. If an individual says they would then their name and email is taken and they are told that they will be contacted if and when the target is reached. If and when it is reached then a mail shot is sent out telling everyone it is on, and everyone acts collectively. So here digital technology is still used but it is kick-started by good old fashioned face to face canvassing to get the required initial attention. Of course there could be variations on the theme. Once a certain number of people have provisionally committed it could be put on line and more people could start to commit to the collective action via the internet. Conversely some people may not respond to the email saying a critical mass has been reached and may need someone to go and knock on their door to draw their attention to this fact. Activists will have a list of names and addresses of those who have made the conditional commitment. An additional exciting possibility is that once the target has been reached, more people hear about collective target having been reached, and commit to the collective act themselves – so the collective action takes off of its own accord. This is what has actually happened with many online conditional commitment collective actions. Example???

So far we have assumed that people will act rationally if we can get their attention. However as mentioned many people usually don’t think about things in this conscious cost-benefit sort of a way. Or more accurately we might say different people do so at different times. People are more often influenced by what other people are doing and, increasingly in our society, what counts is what the people we know are doing – our friends – rather than big authority figures or establishment institution announcements. In response to this reality it is necessary to supplement the rational conditional commitment approach with this other lever – what is called “personalisation”. For instance, to continue with the football example, I may not have thought about or really care how many people turn up to play, but if I know my mates Jo and Beth are playing then I’m in as well. So in terms of campaigning we might want to pursue the following tactics.

Face to face canvassing is good because not only does it get attention – from competition with all the on and off line “noise” in people’s lives – but it also establishes a human connection. A real person is asking us to do something and this in itself is much more powerful than we often suppose.

An additional move would be to ask a key person in a friendship network to promote the collective action. She is known and trusted and so what she does will have a key influence on what people in her small network do. Alternatively the canvasser can identify a friendship network and look out for these key influencing people. Depending on the situation this can be formalised into an explicit small “affinity” groups. For instance, on each floor of a building of flats, where people are committed to going on rent strike, a small collective could be organised, with a coordinator who is known and trusted by the other tenants. Conditional commitment could be used initially to get agreement to go on strike if a critical mass of other tenants do likewise. The coordinator of each floor would communicate that the target of provisional commitments has been met, and be responsible for making sure everyone is reminded not to pay their rent. The problem of people getting the benefit of the collective action without joining in the collective effort (what is known as “free riding”) is much reduced by this personal visibility to one’s friends and peers. However my research shows that often the real issue not so much some cold conscious calculation to free ride – but just the more mundane problem of making sure people don’t forget and get distracted by other demands for their time and attention. In this situation then the traditional big collective action problem is broken down into human scale mini collective action problems on each floor of the building – and so the advantage of small group interaction kicks in and thus this personalisation mechanism become a key mechanism.

As I have written elsewhere (see references) a variation on the conditional commitment question “will you act if X other people act” is the smarter “how many people will act for you to commit to act as well”. This gives activists the full picture of the willing to act collectively at all the various levels of mobilisation. Rather than choose a random target of collective action – like a 1000 people. They can find out the maximum level of mobilisation which is possible for that number of people to be prepared to act collectively. For instance if 2000 people are prepared to act if 2000 others would do the same, you are missing a trick if you just ask people to act if 1000 others do likewise. It also shows how many more people are needed to act for the largest possible collective action to take place. Maybe 1800 people will act if 2000 others will do so. In which case the activists can publicise this fact and encourage another 200 to change their minds and make it up to 2000. The name of the game is to maximise this collective mobilisation and this open question – how many need to act for you to do likewise – is the key phrasing.

## **Dilemma actions/Political struggle**

The common way of thinking about political confrontations is see them as a collision of two blocks of force where the biggest block wins. There is military analogy here and I will use similar analogies in what follows. But just to be clear, what we are looking at here is nothing to do with physical violence – but there are close structural similarities between the dynamics of warfare and those of radical political confrontations. There are, for instance, two forces and the aim is to win the “campaign”, that is to get what you want rather than what the opponent wants.

What I want to look at here however is some key moves which go beyond the “clash of two blocks” model. We need to look more closely at the dynamics involved in these contests. There is a key difference between physical dynamics and human psychological dynamics.

Contrast then these two simple examples:

I want to move a big rock so I will push hard against it- then I get other people to help me. There is a critical point where the force of the pushers becomes greater than the inertia of the stone and it moves.

A campaign wants to remove a dictatorial regime and needs to get 1 million people on the street. It gets 1,000 people on the street and the regime arrests half of them. This leads to outrage and next week there are 10,000 people on the street to protest in response to the arrests. The regime then shoots 500 people and next week a million people are on the street and the regime collapses.

In the first case success comes from the simple accumulation of force – there is no reciprocity between the two forces. The stone is dead – it does not think or react. In the second case the response of the regime’s actions is more mobilisation – its actions backfire. The effect of its repressing action directly leads to the opposite of what it intends.

With dilemma actions the aim is to pro actively design this backfiring dynamic - to use the greater force of the opponent against himself. There is a profound paradox here which is that the stronger (and, more often than not, over confident and arrogant) the opponent, the more likely they are to fall into our trap. Let’s look at the precise design requirements of dilemma actions in some more detail. It’s exciting stuff!

The most effective dilemma actions exist in a “sweet spot” zone which is between a non-contentious action and an overly-contentious act. Again let’s work with a simple example. A demonstration is held and 300 people go. It is not contentious – the authorities can easily let it happen and there is no additional mobilisation. Compare this with five people going and shooting the boss. Everyone is horrified and the people go to jail. Everyone thinks it is totally over the top – no additional mobilisation occurs. The third example: 100 people occupy the boss’s building – they are pulled out of the building by their hair and arrested. People see it and are appalled. Next week 5000 people turn up to occupy the building – i.e. extra mobilisation has happened.

We can see then that dilemma actions exist in this middle zone. It is important to realise that the position of this middle zone is entirely relational. It depends directly on the political context and the relations between three key groups: the actors, the potential supporters, and the authorities. The move we are looking for is for the authorities to “overreact” – and thus provoke greater mobilisation during the next iteration of the contest. The dilemma then for the authorities is that, despite whatever formal power they have, the activists have put them into an lose-lose situation - do nothing and concede political ground or repress and risk provoking greater mobilisation.

There are two elements to the design challenge:

- To design an act which transgresses the opponents power – usually something nonviolent but illegal or close to illegal
- To provoke the opponent to overreact – defined as a reaction which provokes outrage and thus great mobilisation.

Note that even if the authorities do nothing they risk greater mobilisation by being seen to *not to* take strong action. The classic example here is events Leipzig in East Germany in 1989. A few dozen

protestors gathered in the city each week. Each week they were not arrested and more were encouraged to come. The order came from the government to break up the demonstrations and shoot the protesters if necessary. However by the time orders came through to the local police chief, the crowd had risen to 20,000 and he decided he couldn't disperse them without unacceptable violence. The following week, encouraged by this inertia of the regime, 70,000 showed up. And within a few days following the regime collapsed.

We can see here then a back and forth progression of continual and escalating dilemma actions. In some ways this is another resolution to the collective action problem referred to above. No one wants to act because no one else is. However if some people act and are repressed and/or allowed to get away with it – another small group of people, who were previously very close to action, will be encouraged to join them for the next iteration. Then once this larger group is repressed or allowed to go ahead – another group, who are very close to deciding to act because of the greater numbers involved, is tipped into joining in with the collective activity. This progression is usually “exponential” – that is, it gets to a tipping point when mobilisation will increasingly take off. The number taking part may go 10, 50, 500, 10000, rather than 40, 80, 120, 160 etc. This rapid increase in growth is what often throws the authorities off balance. Human brains are biased towards progressions that grow in a straight line – 2 4 6 8... – We find it very difficult to cope with 2, 8, 32, 128.... This is why often when an opponent decides to act it is too late – the curve has sped off upwards out of reach. This is what happened in Leipzig.

The smartest activists then will consciously design these dilemma traps for their opponent. A classic example here is Rosa Park not giving up her seat on a bus during the Civil Rights struggles in 1960s America. It looked like she refused on the spur of the moment not to accept the humiliation of giving up her seat for a white person after a hard day's work. In fact it was a complete set up by the civil rights activists. They knew she would be arrested and this would spark a wave of indignation and hopefully a mass mobilisation. The authorities fell into the trap and this event became famous for triggering the struggle for desegregation of transport in the American South. As often happens, the trap is successful because “the authorities” are not a single actor but made up of many individuals, some of whom often do not see the trap and are undisciplined or particularly ruthless. Unwittingly they help the activists' cause by being (often caught unawares) outrageously aggressive towards the oppressed group.

The key dynamic then is essentially an emotional reaction. The repression – seeing people of one's own group (e.g. black people, students etc) humiliated and unjustly treated, triggers a deep sense of outrage and solidarity amongst those who themselves suffer the same injustice but have not yet taken collective action to protest about it. There is a surge of feelings of solidarity. The thought is “these terrible things are happening to my group. I cannot stand by and do nothing any longer”. In the later stages of a struggle a second dynamic opens up. It often happens that some members of the authorities will start to lose confidence in their actions. Splits between the decision-making take place, at first behind closed doors. Some will want to do nothing – others will want to repress. As escalation mounts up, this tension can lead to some people in the opponents' camp passing information to the campaign, resigning their position, or even defecting to help the campaign explicitly. The acute dilemma on how to respond splits the opposition while the action does the opposite for the oppressed group which experiences greater solidarity. The task then is to precisely design actions which maximise these two responses.

There are also two variations or add-ons to these dilemma actions which I want to highlight.

### **Attrition Actions**

These are actions which, when undertaken by lots of people or over many iterations, – gradually wear down the opponents' material resources. While if a few people do them they are not a big deal, if lots of people do them they cause major headaches for the authorities.

An example is to look at the dividing line between legal and illegal. Often it is this zone of activity that provides the greatest potential for maximising the cost to the authorities without incurring the cost of arrest of the campaigners.

One way of assessing a confrontation plan then is to see each side undertaking costs and gaining benefits. For the campaign the key aim is to come out of each iteration of collective action with an excess of benefits over costs. We often make the error however of thinking that a big one off gain is better than a large number of small gains. We might say a confrontation which has a benefit of 1000 and a cost of 700 i.e. a net gain of 300 is better than 20 smaller actions which have a benefit of 50 and a cost of 30. In fact in the latter case the net gain is 400 (20x20). This is another one of those human brain problems. So we might have the option to do something illegal which will get a net gain of 50 per participant. But being illegal not many people want to do it – say only 10 people – so the net gain is 500. However there may be another option which is annoying to the authorities but not actually illegal. This might result in a gain of 5 per participant but 300 people might be willing to do it as they are not likely to be arrested. The net gain here is 1500 (5x300).

So let's take two concrete examples.

A campaign involves 5 activists painting a slogan on a wall. They get arrested and suffer heavy costs. No one else wants to suffer such costs. So instead 10 people go with chalk and write the same slogans on a wall in chalk. The police arrive and are in an immediate dilemma action – arrest people for writing in chalk and risk looking ridiculous and/or provoking outrage and greater mobilisation.

Let's say then they do arrest them. Then next week 10 more people show up with chalk and move their hands with the chalk to the wall but do not write on it. The police are called (you want them there to get the dilemma action!) and we have now found the extreme sweet spot of a dilemma action in this particular context. They cannot arrest people for simply holding up their arms but they are having their time wasted (i.e. it's costing the authorities money) and they are being seen to let an anti-authority action happen if they do not arrest the people. They are now on the knife edge of a dilemma and really do not know which option to go for – arrest or not arrest.

Let's say they don't arrest the people. Next week, encouraged by this clear success of doing something costly to the authorities which does not involve getting arrested, 10 groups of 10 people decide to turn up at different times with chalk in their hands. Same thing happens, no arrests, and so next week 500 people show up in 50 different groups (in small groups so they cannot be arrested for public assembly).

There is then "war of attrition" which progressively increases the authority's costs through high participation low risk action (defined as just below what it takes to get arrested). If this process

continues at some point the total costs will increase to the point at which the authorities will be forced to concede to the campaign.

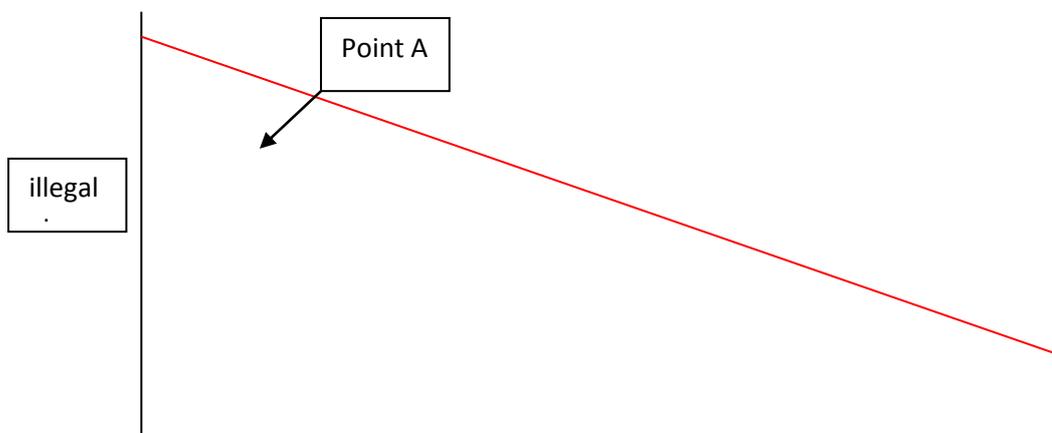
In all confrontations there is this line between getting arrested and not getting arrested and of course this changes from context to context but this line always exists. Acting just under this line always creates a small cost for the authorities but not enough to justify arrest and this is always the case. However if done on a mass scale a major dilemma is created. The costs to the authorities are very high but arrests cannot be sanctioned or justified. If they overstep the mark then the repression will be seen as “out of order”, and/or illegal, and will lead to further protest. A key activist aim then is to identify this precise “sweet spot” of maximum net gain. This requires a series of “pilots” or trial tests – an estimate of where the line is made and then a small group try it out and see what happens.

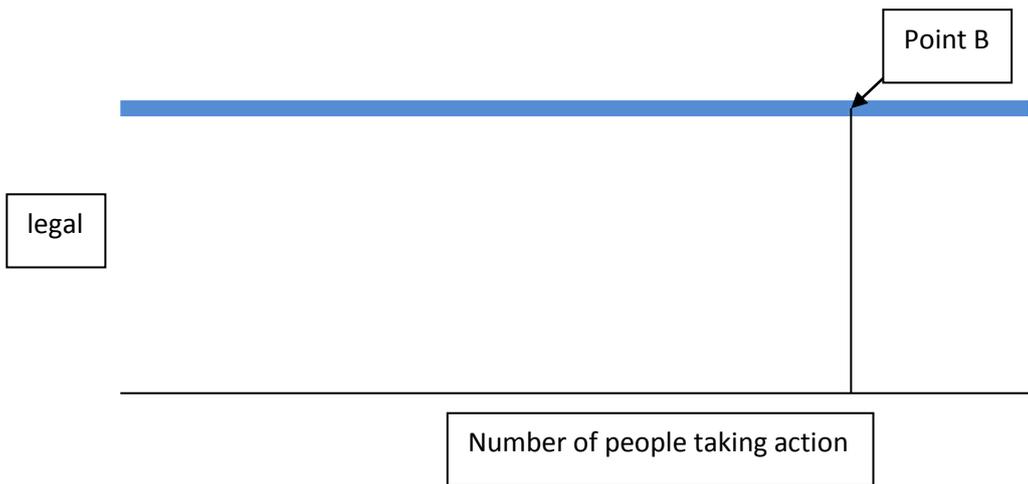
Another example.

A group of 10 activists plan to disrupt the work of the authorities by occupying their office. They occupy for 30 minutes, cause major disruption in that time, and then are arrested. Other people do not want to be arrested so no more people will act. However it is decided to telephone the office with miscellaneous requests. There are 5 telephone lines in the office and every hour 40 people phone each number once - so each number is called on average every one to two minutes. Every day 40 different people take on phoning the offices’ 5 numbers each of the 8 hours the office is staffed. So 8 x40 people are involved – 320 people. This happens every day. The authority’s phone lines are blocked continuously with enquiries and requests. The office grinds to a halt. After a week the authority’s costs start to grow at an increasing rate and they give in to the campaigns demands.

Note here, even more clearly, a small legal act, when undertaken by a significant number of people, can impose an unsustainable cost onto the authorities. And yet no one can be arrested – it is clearly not acceptable to arrest people for phoning (if they did it would have major backfire risks). It is true that a small but dramatic illegal act can often catch people’s attention such as a major disruption for an hour or two from an occupation. But it is the high participation low risk tactics that carry the day. It is worth noting that major studies of how civic resistance works have shown over and over again that the most effective action to bring down authorities is precisely that – many people doing small acts which together add up to major disruption (see references)

This general point can be shown on the following diagram:





So the thick horizontal line denotes the point at which actions become illegal. Above the line they are illegal and below they are legal. However the closer from below you come to this line the greater the costs to the authorities. And the further upwards, above the line you go, the “more illegal” the actions are. The downwards sloping line denotes the “winning” points at which the costs mount up to such an extent that the authorities are forced to give in. The line moves lower as more people take action and so the costs inflicted to the authorities rise. We can gain two crucial insights from this diagram. First a small group of people taking illegal action might create a major cost from each individual taking part but, because of their small numbers, the total cost does not cross the sloping “winning” line. An example of this is point A. However at point B, where many more people take disruptive action but this action remains just below the horizontal “arrest” line, the total cost passes the downward “win” line and the authorities are forced to give in.

Obviously this is simplistic and needs to be seen in the context of a wider campaign using a variety of tactics and I will look at such scenarios in detail below. But the point being made here is that point A has special significance. Many people will not do illegal actions but will cause disruption as long as it remains legal. Aiming to get to point A then becomes a key achievable strategic objective.

### Swarm Actions

A related element to this tactic is to look at the effectiveness of small semi-autonomous activist groups. A classic illustration of this phenomenon, which brilliantly combines attrition and swarming, comes from a famous historical “battle” (as we will see this might not be the best word for it). In the middle ages the Mongols invaded Europe. A large army of 30,000 knights rode out to confront the Mongol horsemen. The knights were suited out in heavy armour and could easily slaughter the lightly armed Mongols in face to face combat. The Mongols however could move more quickly than the knights and fire arrows at them from a distance. The Mongols had a knockout sweet spot. Not close enough to be caught in hand to hand combat by a knight charge – but not far enough away that their arrows could not kill the knights. They stayed in this sweet spot zone for seven days. Every time the knights advanced and charged they would retreat faster than the Europeans. At the end of this time the knights were exhausted and were picked off by the Mongol mounted bowmen. The whole army was slaughtered without any significant casualties to the invaders.

The point we want to take from this story has nothing to do with violence or the particularities of medieval warfare. It is that in confrontations, even if one side has overwhelming strength, it can be overwhelmed by numerous small but successful confrontations where a sweet spot favours the “weaker” opposition.

As well as using attrition tactics, the Mongols worked in small groups with specific but simple instructions and so needed no central coordination. The rules were – stay in the sweet spot zone and fire arrows at the knights at will. With this information each group chose its own actions and territory. Similarly, in our previous scenario “semi- autonomous” groups form with the intention of pretending to write on the wall – they do not need to be centrally coordinated. They just need to follow the simple rules: go to a wall and pretend to write on it with chalk and make sure the police come and check you out. The authorities cannot take out the leaders. There are no leaders only a set of simple rules and you cannot arrest information.

Like the knights, militarised police are similarly “heavily armed” yet they are confronted with a situation in which their “strength” is useless. The authorities are confronted with a situation where they cannot win despite of or even because of these strengths. Swarming around sweet spots is potentially so effective because of the dilemmas it presents . If the police choose to ignore the chalk holding protester power has been given up and so the protesters move forward in order (e.g. makes small marks on the wall) in order to remain in the centre of the sweet spot (remember the sweet spot is always where there is the maximum dilemma for the opposition – it moves as balance of power moves). The tactic aim them is what will get the police most confused. Similarly if the knights do not charge then the Mongols move closer and take out more of the knights with their arrows.

So despite the supposed massive power of the knights/police, if the Mongols/protestors clearly understand a few simple rules *they cannot fail to win ground*. This “win” is not gained through what might be called THE BIG WIN – i.e. a big single confrontation – like a pitched battle between the Mongols and the knights. The “win” is in fact a large number of mini-wins – which add up in time to the equivalent to the big win. In a disturbing sense there has of course not been a battle at all. The knights never get to fight. This is precisely the point. *The issue is not to go to “battle” but to get the win*. Because of “path dependency” – i.e. unintelligent thinking – we think that the battle is what we are after but in fact the “battle” is just one means of getting to the real objective of a win. The battle is not an end in itself but only one possible means. We change the form of confrontation to get this win. This is a vital creative challenge for the design of campaigns. It follows the classic guerrilla advice – “know your terrain and use it to your advantage” .

Swarm actions then have to be designed in a particular way to maximise their effectiveness. If groups are totally autonomous they may choose ineffective means of confrontation or even undermine the whole campaign. The best design is to provide a few key rules and then give tactical autonomy within these limits. There are three areas where rules should apply:

How to engage:

We would want to specify no violence or abuse; respect for the opposition as human beings.

Tactics allowed:

Writing on wall, telephoning, flash occupations – sweet spot activities – seek them out and exploit at will.

When to finish:

When the campaign's specific aims have been achieved – or a participatory democratic mechanism has agreed to the terms of "peace" (I will mention this more below).

There is not a cumbersome command and control structure here. The parameters of the swarm action can be democratically decided and so - people do not need to go regular meetings and can act with tactical freedom. After a thorough training and briefing, people can form small groups and then manoeuvre at will. We therefore get the efficiency of potentially lots of action with minimal organisational costs – a high action to organisation ratio. Many people would like to act but don't like going to meetings and/or being closely managed. We neutralise the disadvantages of chaotic autonomous action by instituting a few basic rules which have the legitimacy of collective democratic decision-making – no violence – the means of confrontation – and when to finish. This last "rule" means that the opposition knows that if they concede to the campaign's demands the swarming actions will finish in a coordinated way. If they think these actions will carry on they may be less inclined to negotiate. It also prevents conflicts arising over a lack of collective discipline. We use this semi-autonomous swarm tactic then we creatively combine the benefits of decentralised action and collective discipline.

In this section on political struggle we have looked at three interlocking nonviolent mechanisms of effective political confrontation – dilemma, attrition and swarm actions. They provide a welcome contrast to the stale notion that these conflicts are a linear and binary conflict between two blocks. This does not mean the old tactic of having a big force and going into a head to head battle is intrinsically flawed. If the campaign can organise a traditional mass demonstration which overwhelms the police and achieves its aims then obviously it should go for it. No tactic is intrinsically good or bad. The key test is whether it leads to a sustainable move towards a win or not *in the particular context*. More often than not the head to head tactic will not work because this is where the opposition is most strong. The three mechanisms above change the rules of the game – they fight on a terrain of our choosing where we can win – maybe small wins – but over time they add up.

## **Open Space**

Open space, like dilemma actions, is a mechanism which is part of a wider family of processes. While dilemma and related actions deal with the dynamics of political struggle, open spaces and related designs deal with the process of recruitment and empowerment used by a campaign.

The conventional conception of empowerment is that it is a rational, mental or cognitive process. A convincing argument is put to a person and they coolly and consciously weigh up the pros and cons and because your position is more rational and/or moral they accept your argument and join you. This idea is closely related to the notion of the conscious rational actor we came across in the section about conditional commitment. While this model of human behaviour is true for some people some of the time – it is in fact only a small part of the story. We have already identified two other ways in which people are empowered and mobilise.

1. First, with conditional commitment, if a critical mass of people agree to take collective action then more people will join simply because this critical mass has occurred. This is what has been referred to as a “herding mechanism” – and in its pure form there is nothing rational, moral, or even conscious about it. The idea is they are doing it so I will do it. People will act because of “demonstration effects” – something has worked and the “demonstration” of this in actuality empowers people to repeat it. The power of action (something is seen to have worked) for most people is more motivating than the power of words (rational conscious argument).

2. With dilemma actions another “non-rational” mechanism comes into play. People from your group with whom you identify with are humiliated and subject to violence and injustice. The actuality of this happening creates emotions of outrage and this in turn creates feelings of empathy and solidarity, which in turn empowers people to act. The thought is “I cannot stand by and let this happen – I feel I have no choice but to act”. The implication is that this might be against one’s “rational self interest” but this is no longer important. The emotional reaction trumps “rationality”.

With open space then we tap into another key mechanism of empowerment and thus mobilisation. This is to create a safe space where people can talk freely with each other about what is bothering them politically. This then gives rise to two key processes.

One is that the very physical act of talking freely is empowering. This makes people feel better – getting stuff off their chest – but it goes beyond that. They feel a new wholeness in realising what they really think. Before speaking, subconsciously they may be conflicted – “I think the situation is bad but I have to keep my head down otherwise I will get into trouble”. The act of speech itself creates a new internal resolution: “I have said what I really think and so this is what I really think – that the situation is bad”. And this in turn moves the person towards the position of “if this is what I really think, and now I am consciously aware of it, then I should do something about it”. A similar process takes place in talking therapies and in participatory education. With therapy people are encouraged to speak about their situation freely without judgement. The process of actually talking makes people feel better and this in turn creates a new clarity about who they are. This leads to a resolve to act in way which is congruent with this new idea of themselves. In participatory education people are encouraged to name and describe the world as they see it without anyone telling them “how it is”. This act of naming leads to a new sense of empowerment that the world can be understood by the person. And this leads to a new self-created enthusiasm to learn about the world.

There is a second dynamic in open spaces and this arises from the interaction with others in small groups. Again, as happens in group therapies, hearing that others think and feel the same as oneself can come as a big surprise. You realise you are not alone (or silly or mad) and that there are other people out there who are like you. This realisation can be profoundly exciting. One’s isolation is overcome and something positive occurs – a new group identity – “I am part of a group that thinks

like me". This then, in a political context, sets the scene for mobilisation- "we now realise we all think this is a bad situation so as a group we feel empowered and obliged to do something about it".

What is happening here is fundamentally non-rational and non-cognitive. It is easy to fall into the classic top down trap of thinking of "yes we need to be radical and so, instead of having people work that out themselves, it's much quicker and easier for an "knowing" leader/activist to stand in front of the group and tell people how it is". This idea fundamentally misunderstands what needs to go on because it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of human beings. It thinks that all that needs to happen is the transfer of information between conscious rational individuals. But this is not an effective process of empowerment because this is not how empowerment actually works in the real world. With real people it is the action of speech not the content of speech which is what causes empowerment. It is a physical and emotional act. The point is the traditional wisdom that "people need to learn things for themselves". This reality then goes to the core of a fundamental problem with traditional radical activism and strategy. Most key activists make the classic error of thinking other people tick in the way they do and therefore should be mobilised in the way they have been. Often this has been through reading books and "rational" argument. However the vast majority of people do not tick like this or very rarely. Once we understand this it becomes clear that there requires a paradigm shift or revolution in how radical strategy should be approached. What we need to realise is that people telling other people how things are and what they should do is largely ineffective and often counter-productive. Information alone is largely useless. So open spaces need to replace speeches and leaders, one to one conversations need to replace flyers and leaflets, and top down instructions need to be replaced with bottom up horizontal communication. For instance instead of having a demonstration which finishes with speeches from the platform, groups could be formed so people can share their thoughts and emotions with like minded people. This can then lead to processes which get people involved in organising and expanding the campaign.

So let's look more closely at various open space designs. As mentioned there are a number of variations on the theme. The basic principles need to be adapted to the particular context. A basic procedure could be as follows:

A significant political event which is evidently unjust has recently happened. Via social media, flyers, and word of mouth a meeting is called for people to discuss the situation. 100 people come. A facilitator gives a short introduction which describes the reason for the meeting (no rhetoric) and then goes through the structure of the meeting. People are split into groups of 6-8 people with one facilitator in each group. People go round and say who they are and why they have come. Then there is a general discussion in these small groups about what each individual thinks and feels about the situation. Testimonials are allowed, as is emotional communication – expressions of fear, anger, sadness etc. A trained facilitator encourages everyone to speak and relate to each other, and if someone is going on too long, and thus preventing others from speaking, they are asked to allow others to speak as it is important everyone is allowed time to participate in the group. The small groups then get back together and one person from each group (not the facilitator, nor a white man (ideally!)) summarises the collective thoughts and feelings (including naming the emotions) of the group. The main points raised are written on a sheet on the wall or on a screen.

At this point if the meeting is the first main gathering of a campaign, then ideas might be brainstormed on where to take things from here – i.e. what collective action should we take. The

ideas can be brainstormed back in the small groups, then when the full group gets back together the ideas are written on the big sheet, each person ticks 3 ideas they like best. This produces a democratically decided priority list of several ideas to turn into action. If the meeting is being held when a campaign is up and running, the participants can be offered a choice of ways to take actions (from very low to higher risk/commitment) which are already part of the campaign and they can sign up to what they want to join.

This is a basic outline. The fundamental design elements are that individuals have time to say what they want freely in small groups. Then there is some process through which this new sense of collective empowerment is converted to commitment to take collective action – or join in various established collective activities. It can be a short process or take place over a day depending on the number of people and the other aspects of the particular context. If regular open space sessions are held then there can be a feedback system which enables improvements to be made for future sessions which enables progressive iterations of the spaces to be incrementally improved.

This mechanism is part of a wider range of meeting designs which aim to do two things which often are seen as contradictory – to encourage small group creativity and empowerment – and to decide on an agreed plan of collective action (i.e. to “aggregate”). There are various designs then that firstly create small groups which do brainstorming. Then all the small groups contribute their ideas to the wider group. Then the group democratically selects the best ideas and these are prioritised by some rating system which everyone participates in.

There is no traditional “leadership” here, where some people tell what others should do, think or feel, what might be called a “leadership on content”. However there is a clear “leadership on procedure”. People are not given a choice about the process of the meeting. There are clear rules about what happens when. There are also clear norms for the small groups – a facilitator is in each group to encourage participation – asking people to tell the group how they feel and think – and making sure there is time for participation by all, i.e. one or two people do not dominate. There are no “rulers” but there are “rules”.

The key outcome of this process is not that people come to agree with the campaign's aims but that they emotionally own the campaign as well. This emotional connection is what will feed into further mobilisation – for instance as dilemma actions happen. It is this emotional “non-rational” commitment which is much more important for most people most of the time – the feeling that “this is our campaign”. The “rational – information-convincing” model needs to be replaced by this “emote – share – and solidarity” model. Open space puts into place the latter.

We have covered then a good spread of complimentary mobilisation mechanisms. However there is no guarantee that any particular tactical plan will work. A key problem is how to actually get people to do these things. Most descriptions of campaign effectiveness would finish the text here. The narrative is “here are the means to do it – go and do it”. This, as any seasoned activist knows, is pretty useless. What practically we need to know is how to create processes which go from no mobilisation to mass mobilisation and then to a win. Knowing various tactics is fine but how do we get them into action? If we read, as one famous radical commentator recently asserted, that to bring about change we need 100,000 people to march on parliament, we are no closer to knowing what to

do than if we are being told “in order to win you need to win”. The response is “so fine lots of people march on parliament – so how do we get that to happen?” So in the next section I will bring these mechanisms together and lay out potential (though simplified) sequences which creates progressive increases in mobilisation. From nothing happening to lots happening.

## *Section two*

### **Bringing it all together**

Before going into detail about the big question of how to get things off the ground and on the go, I want to look at three background “principles” which will help in working out how to create these mobilisation processes.

#### **The Olympic principle**

I am naming this principle after the Olympics because I heard a good explanation of it from a coach on the radio. Asked why the British team had done so well he explained it was because of many small incremental improvements across a wide range of areas. There were various tiny improvements in psychological coaching, in physical training techniques, and in the design of clothes and equipment (e.g. bike design). The point was the say 30 small improvements added to up to enough of a total improvement to beat the other teams. The lesson to be learned by radical campaigns is this: focusing on one big idea is likely to be unrealistic and delusionary. It’s nice to think things are simple and black and white (back to the biases of our brains) – that one big thing makes another big thing happen – but this is not how the world works. The name of the game is to use all the above mechanisms – and no doubt others – each of which will no doubt have limited effects but together will add up to a political win.

It is also worth noting here that in the Olympics there is a clear binary division between winning – being better than the other teams – and not winning. This of course is not so clear for radical politics. However there are “tipping points” – where a campaign will take off and fly of its own accord. So the aim should be to use all the mechanisms to push the campaign to this take off point.

#### **The Sequencing Principle**

A related error to the “big idea” fallacy is that campaigns should push idea X with all our efforts. We get into big debates about whether to do X rather than Y. Both seem very important. A common debate for instance is between action and organisation. The smart move however is to do a bit of one then a bit of the other and build up sequences of moves between several different mechanisms. So we might have a small open space meeting – then a small dilemma action – then a small action using conditional commitment. Then move onto with a slightly bigger open space meeting and so on. We cover all bases and then repeat. The danger with running with just one idea is that it is successful but not sustainable. Like going on a journey, you can charge on ahead but if you forget to stop for water you will soon come to a grinding halt.

#### **The Investment Principle**

This refers to the idea that any action has two aspects. It is an end in itself and a means to an end. It can acquire success but at the expense of destroying the resources needed for future success. Or it can be less successful but build up the resources for future success. The challenge is to design actions which do both – and here the devil is in the design detail. For instance it might be a good idea as an end in itself to have a demonstration but a smart move would be to have people collect email addresses and talk to people about the campaign (i.e. build a human connection) and then

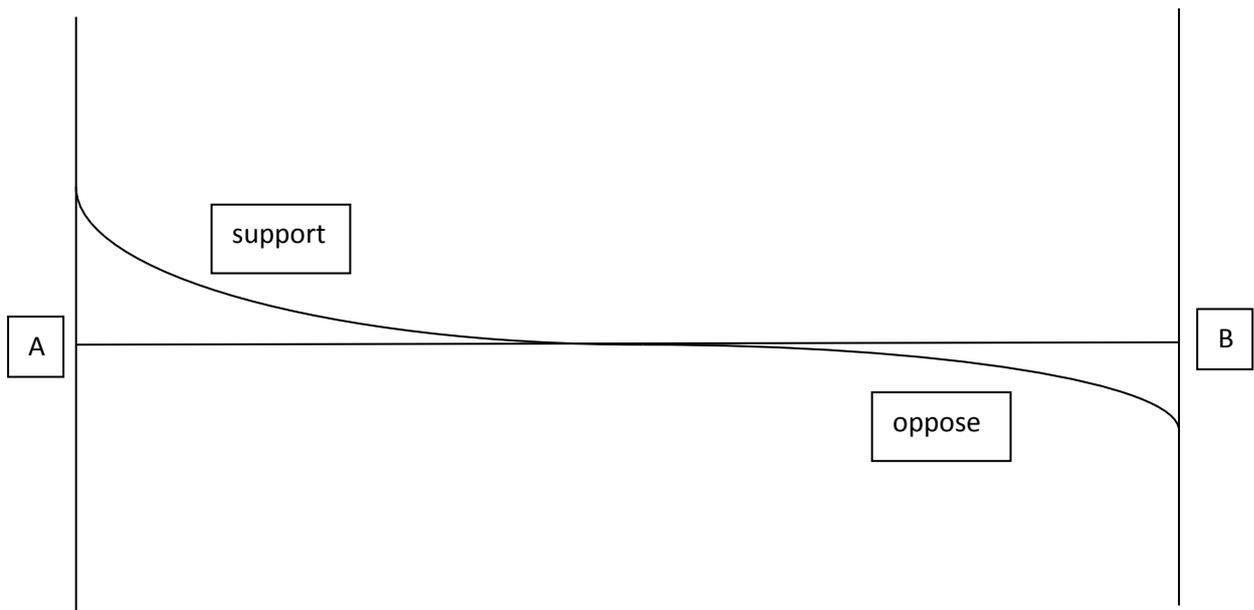
encourage them to come to the next campaign meeting. The demonstration then also becomes an “act of investment” – it is a means to build up more people with time to help run the campaign. More broadly a campaign needs to be seen as having two aims: to win the campaign and to build the political organisation and culture for the next and bigger campaign. Then the aim should be to “move slow because we are going far” – though not so slow that things stop moving. This is a delicate design challenge and the specifics are dependent upon the particular context but it is a balance to be constantly aware of.

These “principles” are closely related and together they all deal with the broader issue of “complexity”. This refers to the fact that reality is much more complicated than simple ideas or models make out. Society is not just one thing but millions of individuals all with their own particular preferences and opinions. And all these individuals are not atomistic blocks but are themselves composed of different rational thoughts, emotional tendencies, using different rules of thumbs often in conflict with each other and liable to change day to day in different contexts.

### **Mapping the territory**

A key starting point then is to map out what is going on in the “political field” in which a campaign is taking place. This means setting down what the state of play is with all the people who are going to be politically connected to the issues involved in a campaign. For instance a campaign for better pay in a university would potentially involve all the people who teach, work or study at the university. Of course there can be grey areas but for the sake of argument we can say that there is a reasonable clear division between being in or out of the relevant political field.

It is crucial to look at a political field not in terms of black and white positions but in terms of a continuum. The task is to map out the spread of opinions about the campaign issue in question. A second related mapping out task is to find out the willingness to act in favour of or against the campaign. This mapping out will always reveal one of the few golden rules about political participation. This is that the “line of commitment” (however defined – either opinion or willingness to take action) will follow a “power law curve”. This simply means that a few people will be really committed and the vast majority hardly committed at all. At the other end of the continuum many people might be vaguely opposed to the campaign and a very small minority really opposed to it. This then will produce a negative power law curve. Both curves are shown below.

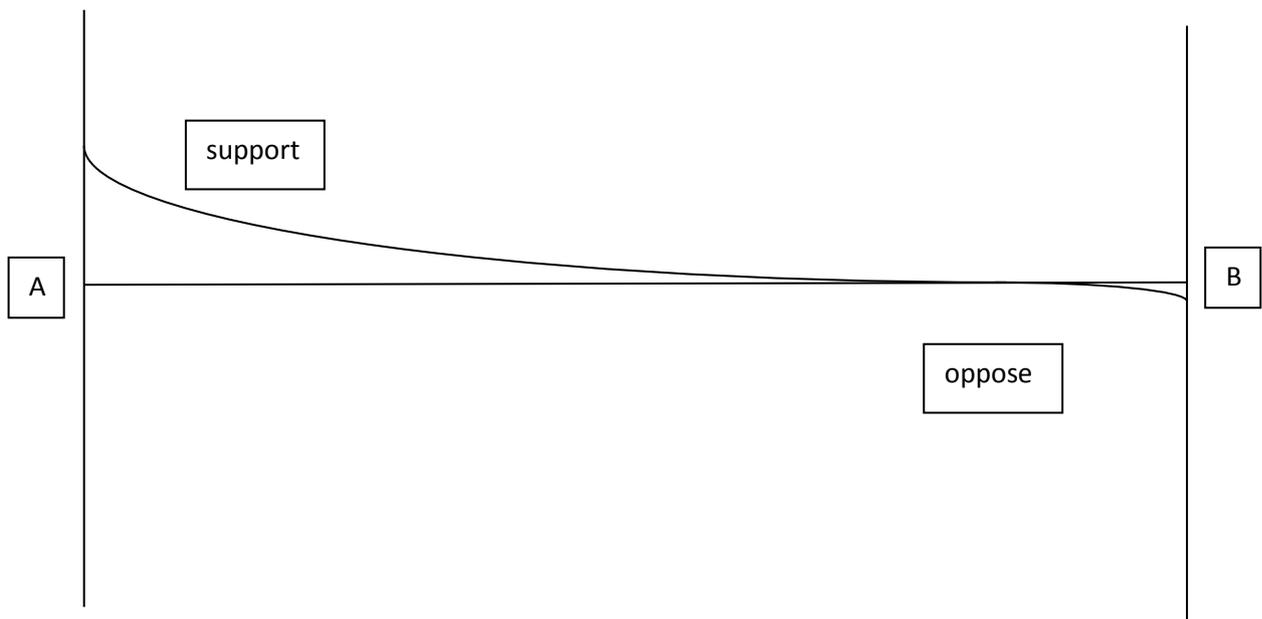


On this diagram the distance along the line between points A and B represents the whole political field in question – say the 10,000 people at the university. The more people support the campaign the higher they are represented on the curve above the AB line and the less they support it the lower they are represented on the curve below the line. In a similar way opposition to the campaign aims is represented by the curve going downwards under the AB line. We have then a “power law curve of political participation” which means that the curve will go steeply upwards at the left hand vertical axis and then stretches out along the horizontal axis, often in a much more extreme way than shown in the above diagram. *We have then what is called a “vertical tail”, a few highly committed activists, and a “horizontal tail” – the vast majority of people who are only mildly supportive or committed to the campaign position.* A real world example from my own research is support for the fair graduate teaching assistant (GTA) pay at Kings College where I am doing my PhD. When the campaign is explained to people and they are asked if they support GTAs getting paid fairly over 90% say they support it. However out of 25,000 students only 5-10 students are involved in the organising the campaign and willing to engage in direct action in support of it. Thus we have a massive flat horizontal tail and a tiny upward tail at on the left hand vertical axis. Welcome then to the starting point of radical campaigning!

Before moving on to the key challenge of how to get this curve to move, it is worth noting that before starting a campaign we need to check that there is democratic support for the campaign. In all of this text the assumption is that most people will support a campaign. This support needs to be assessed in two ways. Firstly we need to identify the point at which slight support turns into slight opposition. This has been called the “line of division”. For a campaign to have democratic legitimacy this line has to be more than halfway over to the right hand side of the diagram. The other assessment to be made is the total area under the upward curve down to the AB line (i.e. the total level of support) compared with the total area above the downward curve up to the AB line (i.e. the total level of the opposition). For there to be democratic legitimacy the support area should be much greater than the opposition area. This is not just a moral issue (although some might argue the level

of initial support should not come into it, the issue being whether the campaign is right or wrong in itself). The point for our purposes is more pragmatic. For a campaign to win it helps enormously if there is already clear majority support for it within the relevant political field (of course some campaigns, which fight for minority rights for instance, may not have this but still should be pursued. It is these situations that this text is dealing with - where the vast majority support the campaign but, because of the power structure of the political field, this democratic voice is thwarted by the imposition of the collective action problem on the mass of people.

So in most campaigns the political participation curve of the political field will look something like this.



Here then we can clearly see the state of play in many politically unjust situations. The vast majority support the campaign position but nothing is happening and mobilisation is very low. What this single curve does not show is the intensity of the collective action problem. We would need two curves – one for action and one for private opinions – the more the distance between the two curves the more the intense the collective action problem. The classic intense collective action problem would be a dictatorship. The vast majority of the population are totally opposed to the regime but hardly anyone apart from a tiny upward tail on the left hand side are actually committed to doing anything. The distance between the “opinion” curve and the “action” curve would be very wide.

### **The sequencing process for raising the political participation power law curve**

So we need to have a map of the territory. A survey will give the specific detail. For instance and extrapolation of the survey data might be that 8000 out of 10000 people at the university support the campaign position. 50 people are interested in the campaign. 10 people are interested in doing direct action. We have a rough power law curve of this specific context mapped out.

*The next step and the fundamental key to success is to maximise the growth in both tails. So I will outline below a simple progressive sequence to achieve them and then draw out some crucial design principles. I will then add more elements which make it more complex but also more effective.*

Let's continue with our university example:

First sequence:

So the 10 people willing to do direct action do a sit down protest in front of the main entrance – they get up when the police come but it gets in the student newspaper and photos are spread through social media. There is a campaign website with a single demand on it. Then the 50 people involved in the campaign create a petition and each collects 100 names by talking to people at the university, producing 5000 names. 10% of these people, 500 of them, are very annoyed about the issue and/or have read about the protest and give their email addresses to the people collecting signatures. The people collecting the signatures invite these 500 people to an open space meeting where they emphasise that there is no big political agenda but just a space where people can get together to talk about the issue. The following week 50 people (10% of the 500) go to the open space meeting. 20 people from this want to join the campaign 5 of whom are willing to do direct action.

Second sequence;

Encouraged by the growth in support for the campaign 5 people do a roof top protest and get arrested. 10 people occupy the admin building but get up and leave when the police come. 100 people go out collecting 100 signatures each – 10,000 people. 10% - 1000 of them are very annoyed and invited to the open space meeting. 300 of them turn up and 150 of them commit to the campaign, 50 of them to doing direct action.

We can do the rough maths for the third sequence. Other things being equal we can see two things happening – the various adopted mechanisms are combined sequentially to increase the support for each other. Dramatising action on the vertical tail kick starts more interest on the horizontal tail. This in turn encourages and empowers more people to do actions on the vertical tail and so on. In principle there is an exponential growth in each of the type of action with each sequence round. This means that growth comes not from the addition of absolute numbers of people but through a multiplication of the numbers put in. For instance an open space meeting results in 10% ( $\times 0.1$ ) of the numbers getting involved in the campaign, rather than a set figure of say 30 people getting involved, regardless of the numbers going to the open space meeting. As with the Leipzig example there is a feedback loop going on which results in an increase in growth of the amount of people getting involved with each iteration.

There is a point where the area under the support curve increases the costs of the authorities (moral and economic) to such an extent that they are forced to concede to the demands of the campaign. Assuming we can create an exponential feedback system, as just outlined, then logically it is only a matter of time till this “winning point” is reached. How this is negotiated will be discussed below. At this point we simply need to acknowledge the logic of this simple model.

The first crucial lesson of this model then is that action *on each tail – both the horizontal and vertical* is essential for growth. This goes against two common strategic errors of many campaigns.

First is the error that horizontal tail action is the only legitimate or appropriate action. The problem here is twofold. Firstly it is very possible whatever horizontal tail action takes place it will simply never achieve the needed area under the curve to get to the winning point. It will not be enough without the extra area of an activated vertical tail. It's like a two engine aeroplane just running with one engine – it is not enough to get it off the ground. But secondly and more crucially to the argument here, *the horizontal tail will only thicken and grow to the degree that vertical action occurs*. Vertical action is needed to dramatise the issue – to bring it into people's consciousness and grab their attention. If it has a dilemma action aspect it, it will create empathy and thus greater solidarity from people on the horizontal tail. The two tails are not opposed to each other. The growth in one depends upon growth in the other. This does not mean that all campaigns using only horizontal tail methods will lose but significantly more will win than if they combine with vertical actions. Examples of pure horizontal tail action are campaigns that just use petitions, leafleting, rallies and other mass participation but low impact mechanisms. It is commonly remarked, correctly by observers, that these actions are simply not enough to push to the winning line. They do not "come alive" and take off because of a lack of vertical actions. People then become cynical about petitions and think horizontal methods "won't get us anywhere". A classic example is 38 Degrees. It overwhelmingly uses only one tactic – online petitions. The obvious success and ease of the online mechanism tragically blinds the organisation into a path dependency mode which sees "more of the same" as the only means of enacting change. The issue is not petitions per se, it is the problem of the "one big idea" fallacy as discussed above.

So the same problem is mirrored with concentration only on the vertical tail. Here again dramatic actions may push up the vertical curve increasing the total area beneath the curve and again it is possible this alone will get the area up to the winning point. However what is more likely is that it will fail because the horizontal tail is not activated. And again the more crucial point is that *without activating the horizontal tail the vertical tail will not get the people with enough empowerment to push further up and widen out the vertical tail*. This failure is seen in many activist-oriented campaigns. An occupation can happen (vertical tail action) by a small number of people. This can lead to hundreds of people coming to the occupied space but then there are no horizontal activities for them to do and no way for them to meet each other. Horizontal tail people feel intimidated by the macho and exclusive culture of the vertical tail high risk activists and feel the campaign is not for them and can even become resentful about being excluded – even if this is not the intention of the campaign. The vertical tail activists also suffer from their own version of the "big idea" fallacy – believing that more daring actions are the only way to victory. However the height of vertical tail in itself is a false measure of success. Area is two dimensional – height and thickness. Ironically as the activists push for height they neglect and even self sabotage the other dimension – thickness. In extreme cases the emotional stress of this sort of high risk activity creates closed and exclusive bonds among the small group of high risk activists which unconsciously and in some case consciously ("need to be like us to join us") excludes those further down the curve with less commitment.

Often then focusing simply on one tail creates a vicious cycle of limited growth and ultimately a declining area under the curve – the exact opposite of the virtuous, i.e. upward cycle, described when the two tail work synergistically – that is where each encourages the growth of the other through positive feedback. Often you find a campaign stuck in a no man's land between not working at all but also never winning either– stuck in a path dependency situation. Such campaigns suck up

valuable energy and in these cases it would be best to start new campaigns which follow the synergistic strategy I have outlined.

While this is a simple model, it does provide a basic structure for understanding how best to win a campaign. Having established its basic usefulness it is now possible to give it some more sophistication drawing upon more elements of the mechanisms we are looking at in this text.

In particular there is the choice of different intensities of vertical and horizontal actions which are appropriate to a particular point in the growth of a campaign. Let's look at each tail in turn at the beginning of a campaign. Looking at the horizontal tail it might be tempting to try and ask people to do something hardly any of the people on this tail will want to do. So for instance we might ask people to phone the authorities to complain. This very possibly might be too much (remember the 'can't be bothered' factor as much as the fear factor) – so it would be better to start with a petition which might be seen as the lowest rung on a “commitment ladder”. This might be the right place to start. Looking on the vertical tail it is possible too dramatic an action at this stage will actually confuse and alienate the people on the horizontal level. So for instance a roof top protest might be seen as “over the top” and people will not want to be associated with it or even understand it<sup>1</sup>. The point then is that the actions in a sequence round need to be carefully honed to the political realities of the particular stage of a campaign's development. There is a sweet spot for the vertical tail action at any stage – not too dramatic to put people off but dramatic enough to get attention and sympathy- and again, using a dilemma action element heightens this dramatisation and moral appeal. If designed correctly, this will energise the horizontal tail to the maximum possible extent in the limiting context of a first round sequence. People will now have read or heard about the direct action and be more willing to sign the petition. Of course all action at this stage will also be limited by the small numbers of the founding activists of the campaign. But it is important things don't get off to a bad start by doing too dramatic a direct action or asking too much of people on the horizontal tail. We need to take a whole process perspective which takes account of our “investment principle” rather pushing too hard to maximise short term gains.

The next question here then is how much is too much? This is an important practical question and of course it cannot be answered without being in a particular context. But even if situated in a particular context it is still a question which can create disagreement and uncertainty. The answer, as with other issues when precision is needed, is trials and testing, specifically run a “pilot” and see what the response is. A pilot is where you ask a small but statistically significant number of people (say 50-100) for a response and then you have some concrete data upon which to make a decision. With horizontal activities you can actually do the activity and measure the response. With vertical activities you may have to go for the second best, which is to ask people how they would respond if action X happened. Of course how they actually will react may be different but it is better than having no information at all. A campaign should also have a good intuitive idea from conducting a general survey of attitudes on the campaign position. If say 80% of respondents are angry or very angry about the issue then it's a fair bet that a strong direct action would be supported compared to a situation where most people are unaware of the issue or don't understand it.

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<sup>1</sup> On a bit of tangent, highly aggressive direct actions can split a campaign off from its potential horizontal tail supporters – this I call failing to “hold the line” – the movement splits and the horizontal line gravitates to the authority's camp. This as I argue below is the tragic outcome of violent struggles.

This then leads us onto developing more sophistication and complexity into the second and subsequent sequence rounds. Initially because of resource limitations and limits on support in the political field we may just be looking at a single direct action and a petition. Then we can introduce the open space meeting into the mix. This then creates the resources (time/people) for more direct action and more petitioning. But as the vertical and horizontal tails increase in length it is important to focus on thickening the area where they both join – “the corner area”. So for instance, some people who have signed the petition will now be prepared to phone the authorities. Phoning is still a horizontal tail type of activity but it clearly is moving higher up the commitment ladder. Similarly some people would be willing to do direct action but don’t want to get arrested. This then is a vertical tail position but as high up the tail as a direct action which will result in arrest. And again as the total area under the curve increases (thickens) there will be more intermediary positions opening up which need to be planned for and full utilised as they appear. So below is a table showing the growth over three sequences. The number next to the actions is the number of people doing that action.

	1 <sup>st</sup> sequence	2 <sup>nd</sup> sequence	3 <sup>rd</sup> sequence
Vertical tail activities	direct action arrests 0	direct action arrests 5	direct action arrests 20
	direct action no arrests 5	direct action no arrests 20	direct action no arrests 60
Horizontal tail activities	telephone blockage 0	telephone blockage 30	telephone blockage 100
	emailing 0	emailing 0	emailing 500
	collecting petitions 10	collecting petitions 50	collecting petitions 200

Obviously this is simplified but we can see that the middling activities expand as more people are brought into the campaign as a result of each sequence. The sequences in real life will be more mixed up but I use them here to show a clear progression. And in real life more options may well occur in sequence three – such as helping to organise open space meetings, facilitation, talking to groups, media work etc. But the same basic structure applies.

An important principle implicit in this more sophisticated model is that people only move along the commitment ladder in stages and one of the developments which occurs as the campaign increases in size is it is possible for this ladder to start to contain more rungs. It is therefore easier for people to move up it. So for instance people who have signed a petition will feel willing to go to an open space meeting. This will encourage them to help with the admin. After mixing with and getting to know activists they may feel willing to do their first direct action as long as they know they will not get arrested. And so on. People do not one moment jump from signing a petition to blockading buildings. That said it should not be underestimated how quickly people can be radicalised in the face of authorities falling into dilemma action traps – particularly if they personally know the people involved in these actions. There is then implicit in this process a moment of “take off”: an explosive exponential dynamic which can unbalance a campaign with too much success if not carefully planned for in advance.

## **Dilemma action and Conditional commitment – two embellishments to propel forward the process of a well organised escalation**

Now we add yet another element of sophistication. I have already discussed these two mechanisms in some detail above and we can now apply them to our structure of progressive sequencing all along the participation curve. The beauty of dilemma actions, from the point of view of thickening up the curve, is that they are mainly a design challenge rather than a resource challenge. Their effectiveness is mainly dependent upon smart creative thinking, research, and piloting rather than brute material resources. So for instance two occupations might both take up one day and involve ten people. However if one is not visible and people are quickly arrested with little publicity then this is far less effective than an occupation in a more public place which makes it more difficult for the authorities to remove without seeming to be heavy handed. Both take the same resources but the mobilisation outcome of each is very different.

Similarly with conditional commitment – the enhancement of mobilisation potential requires little to no extra resources. It is a function of creative design. So for instance if people are asked to go on rent strike – you can just ask them to strike or you can ask if they would if 500 hundred other people to do likewise. The difference is simply a difference in phrasing. So even if the actual difference in mobilisation is slight it is still totally worth doing. Drawing on the Olympic principle – any low lying fruit should be picked regardless of how small they are. *The key calculation then is the difference between input cost and output benefits – not the size of either in isolation.* Conditional commitment also has the advantage of being applicable at all scales, as collective action problems are scale free – from preventing global warming – to going on demos – to having a football match with mates.

So let's first look again at how conditional commitment can be used. On the vertical tail activists could be asked "would you be prepared to do an action in which you have an appropriate 50/50 chance of being arrested if 100 others do the same?" If say 80 people say yes their names can be kept on record and as more people enter the campaign they can be told we need 20 more people to say yes to this conditional commitment for this action to go ahead. As soon as 100 commitments are reached the action goes ahead. As mentioned above, a smarter question to ask is "how many people would need to do an action with you for you to take part in it if there was a 50/50 chance of being arrested". The beauty of this question is that you get the full range of conditional preparedness to take action rather than just the one data point of 100 people. So you might get the following results from a survey:

Do it if 10 people do the same – 5 people

Do it if 30 people do the same – 20 people

Do it if 100 people do the same – 120 people

Do it if 300 people do the same – 250 people

What you notice here is that, yes, you can already get going with 100 people taking part as 120 will be involved, but you are only 50 people short of getting 300 people to take part (250 will do it if 300 do so). If this information is given back to people then it is likely the 250 people will find the extra 50

to make it a goer on 300. The open question gives you the whole picture and the maximum possible collective action. This very possibly can make a great difference.

It can be particularly useful for vertical tail higher risk collective actions where the collective action problem is likely to be more acute – i.e. “I want to do something high risk but only if a decent number of people do it as well”. Critically it is these high risk actions which are often such a crucial game changer in dramatising an issue for the people on the horizontal tail.

The mechanism can be used lower down the curve as well. So questions might be:

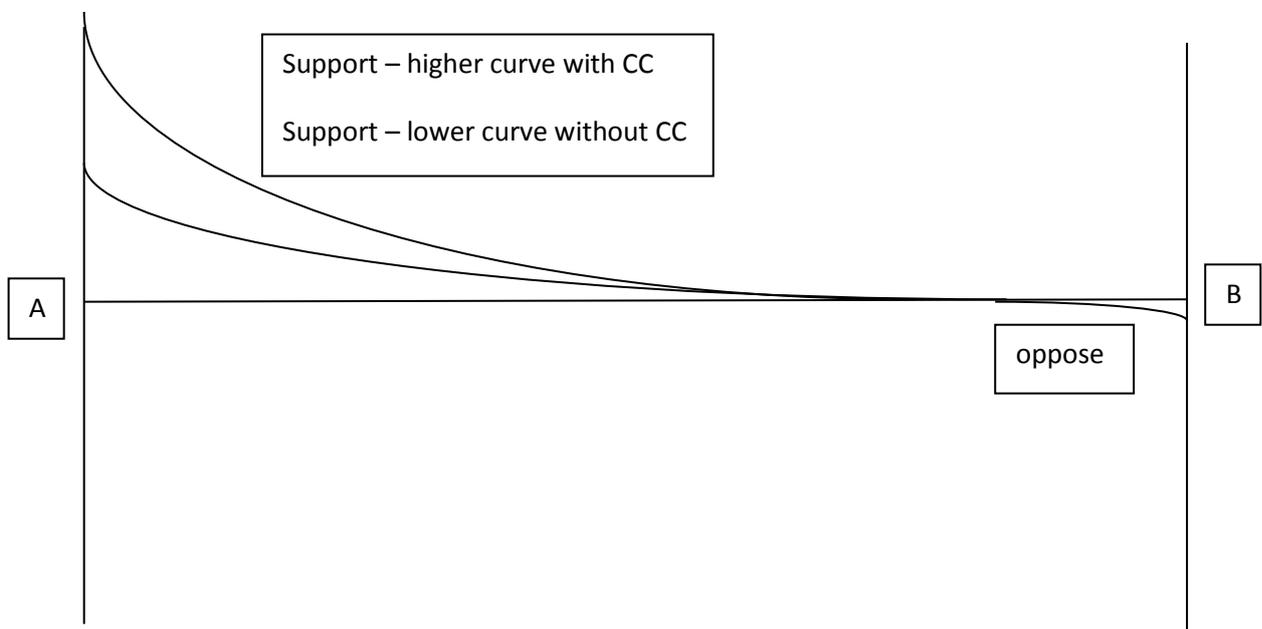
How many other people would need to be involved in a telephone blockade in order for you to do it as well? – 5, 10, 50, 100, 500, 1000

How many other people would need to be involved in a rally in order for you to go it as well? – 5 10 50, 100, 500, 1000, 5000

How many other people would need to be involved in a emailing the authorities for you to do it as well? – 5, 10, 50, 100, 500, 1000, 5000

And so on. *Whenever a collective action is to be organised in any sequence round at any point on the curve, then conditional commitment **can** be used to remove the collective action problem and mobilise the maximum number of people who would act if a minimum or more people also would act at that point on the curve.*

Looking about at the participation curve then we see that conditional commitment (CC) will raise the commitment levels all along the line as shown below.



## Other factors

The model has been made more complex by adding in the powerful effectiveness of dilemma actions and conditional commitments. However it still remains a simple framework. What for instance is often left out of discussion of effectiveness is the more humdrum requirement for administrative and organisational efficiency. The effectiveness of the elements in all these sequences relies upon the quality of the organisation, making sure everyone is clear about what is going on, and how to act during various actions and activities. Meetings need to be run well and effectively facilitated. The key to doing this is to create procedure documents and institute a training programme which is compulsory for key roles such as facilitation. I have written more about this elsewhere (see references) so I will not go into more detail here but just raise it as a necessary part of the complex design of effectiveness we are constructing.

The model also remains simplified in that I have only included our three iconic mobilisation mechanisms - conditional commitment, dilemma/attrition/swarm actions, and open spaces. There are obviously other mechanisms and skill sets which could be integrated into the model. I will briefly deal with three other important areas.

### Humour and ridicule

Similar to dilemma actions the use of humour and ridicule are psychological mechanisms which undermine the authority and credibility of the authorities. They also aid mobilisation. While dilemma actions create emotions of anger and solidarity if the authorities overstep the mark, humour and ridicule make people laugh at authority and realise its ridiculousness. This psychological mechanism removes fear and people may mobilise because it is fun, hip and sexy – for positive non political reasons. Of course both mechanisms in practice get mixed up and different people will react in different ways. In terms of our model however we could add this mechanism to the checklist or toolkit of things to include when designing actions. Like the other mechanisms it can then be inserted into the sequence rounds at various points.

### Media and publicity

Much attention has been given to media and publicity so I have not gone into it in much detail here. However it goes without saying that social media enhances the communication of campaigns, both directly through messaging, and also via the mass media. The design challenge then is to make sure all actions get maximum publicity. *However the important point here is that studies show that it is not the outside world that has the most influence creating successful struggles but rather the activation of people within the political field of the struggle – i.e. people on the horizontal tail.* It is therefore important not to get distracted by the seduction of mass media (not least because of its corporate agenda) and focus on getting the message and more importantly the emotional content communicated directly to the people on the horizontal tail. Interest by the outside world could be called a “vanity metric” – we are seen on telly etc. The real metric/measure is the area under the curve and this should be the key focus of sequential action design.

## **Cultural/art and Fun activities**

The mass of people on the horizontal tail are not nerdy political rationalists – they react to herding mechanisms, demonstration effects, emotional communication (seeing the humiliation of others in their group) and also cultural/fun activities. This last issue too often gets dropped off the list. Like open spaces, cultural/fun events make people relax and think it good to be part of the campaign scene. Just as in open space people enjoy the freedom of being able to speak and thus unconsciously start to identify with others in the campaign – so the experience of enjoying a cultural activity makes one feel more like you want to be part of the campaign. Both these psychological orientations are of course very much first steps on the commitment ladder but first steps are crucial. Once a first step is made than the next feels easier and if designed gradually a new person coming to a first step event, within a few months or even weeks, can be getting involved in direct actions. What cultural and fun events are organised depends upon the cultural context – but common activities are educational days and courses, film nights, theatre and art events, group meals or picnics, rallies and games, and of course gigs, cabarets, and last but not least parties.

No doubt readers could think up other elements – this list is not meant to be exhaustive. However any new element needs to be assessed on where it belongs on either or both tails. If it just belongs on one tail a decision needs to be made on which sequence round to bring it into play. In so much as this is not clear then tests should be carried out – either testing in the field and/or asking people what they think of it in surveys.

## **Negotiation and Endgames**

Before looking at the wider context, I would like to at least acknowledge a major area which is critical to the study of how campaigns can achieve their objectives. This is the question of how to end the campaign with the maximum gains and ideally a clear win. In the above model I have assumed that the area under the curve represents the total political leverage or power deployed by the campaign. I then assume that if this area passes a certain point the authorities will give in and agree to the campaign's demands. This of course is an over simplification. While it is reasonable to assume that such a point does always in actuality exist – there are plenty of examples such as the removal of dictators where there is a clear binary division between the moment when he is still in control and the point he has been overthrown – more often than not the situation is more blurry. On the one hand before complete capitulation the authorities may well offer to enter into negotiations (they may not call it that of course but that is what it effectively is) to see if they can cut a compromising deal and/or, more maliciously, appropriate the energy of the campaign into an administrative quagmire – a process which gets ever-extended. This then undermines the immediacy of the campaign and it loses force while “we wait for them to get back to us/produce a report” etc. On the other hand it may be objectively the case that the area under the curve is looking unlikely to get to the winning point and then there may be a case for getting a partial win this time round and build on the demonstration effects of the semi success to create another campaign at a later date – such as the following year in the case of universities.

Both these moves – by the authorities and by the campaign raise the problem of who should the authorities be talking to. “The campaign” is an abstraction. While key activists can rightly take a leading role in procedural organisation and training (as mentioned above on leadership) – entering

into negotiation “on behalf” of their supporters in the political field is democratically problematic. I do not have “the answer” to this as there are clearly pros and cons. So as with any design challenge the aim is to take the plus and minus’s of a conundrum and maximise the pluses and minimise the minuses. Here are pointers to good design on three possibly viable options.

1. No negotiation. The campaign puts in the demand and avoids danger of confusions, appropriation, sapping of time/energy etc. by just focusing on building the area under the curve even if it looks unlikely that the area will reach the winning point. A ridiculing variation on the theme is to send a person to “negotiate” who obviously has no conventional political/social status in the eyes of the authorities who simply states the demands and brings back a message of whether or not they agree. The person could be a teenager, an ethnic minority manual worker, a new first-year philosophy student(!) This provides a dramatisation element to the idea that the campaign will separate itself off from mainstream political machinations and stick “with the people”. It reframed a supposedly serious and powerful position of privilege into its opposite.

2. Delegates from the activists. This is the conventional option and for the reasons already mentioned is fraught with dangers and difficulties. However to the extent that they are known they can be lessened. So it can be clear that the delegate is just that – there to send a message and receive one. Secondly the decision about compromises can be delegated to a small representative group so that the main group can get on with the main business of activism. To prevent appropriation, members of this group could be rotated. If and when a compromise looks promising a general meeting can be held and with strict time limits. Agreement can be sought with consensus or large majority vote. These and other designs can then lessen the problems with appropriation, sapping of energy, and creating splits. The negotiations are compartmentalised by conscious design and not allowed to take over the whole creative process of the campaign.

3. Sortition from the political field. This is a theoretical proposition inasmuch as it has rarely been practiced – and therefore may be rejected on cultural grounds, even though it has a lot to recommend it on design grounds. “Sortition” is the process of political selection by lot or chance. So a random representative sample of the supportive part of the political field is taken and they enter into negotiations with the authorities. A day session could be arranged when pro and con parties put their cases like a debate and expert witnesses are called. At the end of this part of the session the group withdraws like a jury in a trial and through deliberative process decide whether or not to accept the offer. The advantage of this, like all sortition mechanisms is that it is undeniably democratic. A truly representative sample of the field has spoken. As such the decision has a powerful legitimacy and so post-decision acrimony of being sold out are minimised (assuming that the process is air tight – an important point but only a technical challenge and so doable).

A final comment is it might be best to look at the problem from a completely different angle – and that is for the original designers of the campaign aims to create demands which are realistic. This has two advantages. One is that it is more likely that the area under the curve will hit the winning point and so the problem of negotiation can be ignored – the campaign just focuses on getting to that point. And second the campaign is assured of getting the demonstration effect of a win. As will be discussed in the next section a “meta” strategic design task is to work on a progression of small but growing campaign wins which produce demonstration effects which then build political power, enabling a movement to take on bigger opponents and make greater demands. Failing this the other

advice should be to collectively decide beforehand on the endgame strategy so there are not big arguments when it happens. The danger, as often is often case, is not about what decision is taken, but in failing to make a clear decision.

## **The wider strategy for social and political transformation**

This document is sharply focused on one objective – winning. It might seem obvious that people want to win campaigns but, as I have argued, more often than not activists unthinkingly fall into the path dependency of following what has been done before and thus get the same miserable results. Still worse many people sub-consciously are not overly concerned with winning, either because they are more concerned with taking part in a group process – because it gives identity. It is cool, sexy and at best fun. It gives moral purpose or simply a reason to get up in the morning. There is nothing wrong in all this in so much as it has been and most likely always will be the case. Most people most of the time are not concerned with radical political change. And even those that are, are often not focused on thinking creatively about getting to a win. Surveys have shown that most people think about politics for around 4 minutes a week. This is the reality of the very long horizontal tail! If you are reading this text you may think about politics maybe up to 10 hours a week. If so then you are probably in a group that is less than 1% of the population. You and I are up there on that tiny sliver on the vertical tail. Of course we can argue about how these measures are constructed and defined but the basic structure of the participation power law curve is an undeniable empirical fact. This does not need to be a problem but the whole of the mobilisation strategy has to be based upon the relationship between these two extreme tails. Only later in a campaign can we start to benefit from a thickening in the corner area where they meet. More broadly we need to accept that the point of a progressive society is not in fact to politicise all of society. To do so is to confuse the means with the end. The end is to get rid of politics, in the sense that the goal is a society where people can get on with their lives without economic and political inequalities of power. Of course this end will, in an absolute sense, never come and we will always need to be vigilant, but it is worth bearing in mind the intrinsic goodness of a non-political life. The reason we want to mobilise is to make a better society not because we think mobilisation and politicisation are goods in themselves. We therefore have to have respect for the preferred cultural priorities of “normal people” to live normal lives.

Having set the scene – the power law curve of political participation – we can move onto the underlying principles of successful radical political action. The fundamental rule here is that in any confrontation or iteration of a confrontation the output must exceed the input – there needs to be a net gain. This is cost-benefit analysis taken from economics and applied to radical politics. Of course this idea is controversial in some quarters and it is certainly true that humans do not think in such terms most of the time but rather have “non-rational” orientations; I have spent much time integrating these realities into the models above. However as behavioural economists acknowledge – the utility-maximisation function – that is wanting the best we can get – does not go away. It simply needs to be integrated with other factors to show a more realistic and holistic picture of what is happening in society. For the rational radical actor I am hoping to address in this text then it is important to keep a keen eye on this goal – to get a net benefit from each iteration. We know this is important because overtime this is what wins campaigns – and winning campaigns is the act of making concrete political changes we want to see in society. Our job is to work out ways to bring about the progressive political aims most people want (particularly those they discover they have when they are free to discuss them with others in open spaces and other deliberative contexts) but

are unable to obtain because of feelings of disempowerment, isolation and the perennial collective action problem.

Having established this need for rational analysis, using this power law curve of participation as a basic structural model, and informing micro design decision with data feedback from the political field, it is important to focus on what I think is the key challenging move I am proposing in this text. *In blunt terms things do not change unless people cause trouble.* What this means that the rules of the political game have to be broken. There has to be a transgression in the social fabric of what is acceptable. This is because the rules of the game and what is “acceptable” are, in any social system, crucial parts of what sustains that political system. I am not making an ideological point here but a social scientific one – based upon the empirical evidence. Radical political action which is successful in the historical record is always action which breaks with the conventional political activity of that time – and this usually involves breaking the law. The reason for this should now be clear. This sort of action does several things depending upon how it is designed and the particularity of the context in which it takes place, but here are the key points.

1. It raises the costs of the authorities in significant way – hence the reason it is illegal – the occupation of an office prevents that office from operating.
2. It create significant political stress for the authorities because, if designed right, it puts the authorities into a dilemma as to what to do – repress and risk more mobilisation or concede ground.
3. It dramatises the campaign aim – and people on the horizontal tail love drama. Something is happening and they want to know all about it. Attention in the first step to mobilisation.

Of course, as has been discussed at length, there is good and bad vertical tail action – if violent or over the top it can create alienation on the horizontal tail. If too timid it can be less than optimally effective. Also it needs to use conditional commitment to maximise the underlying collective preparedness for significant action and dilemma action designs need to find the best sweet spot. Lastly it needs to take place with good organisational preparation.

The reason I am saying this is not because of any macho attraction to causing trouble – not because such actions have any intricate value necessarily. I am simply looking at the empirical facts – and these contradict conventional “radical” practice of playing within the rules – petitions, demonstrations, rallies etc. This is the main reason why so little progress is being made at the present time. Our historical moment could be compared with the beginning of the civil rights movement in 1950s America. At the beginning of the movement there was still the general feeling that people should play by the rules – legal and conventional political activity – letter writing, meetings and speeches, leaflets, and the odd march – respectfully lobbying the powers that be. The big game changer was the introduction of political transgression – to break the law, engage in powerful dilemma actions and do all the stuff that Martin Luther King and his activists are now famous for. The point is that this does not replace the conventional activity, but that this galvanises the movement. The civil rights movement was a classic case of the synergistic positive feedback mechanisms I have described in some detail in this text. So in our context, we have websites encouraging petitioning, we have radical groups organising lobbying, rallies and marches – and we have very little progress. Like the moderate black campaigners in the 1950s we are suffering from path dependency – we think more of the same will get us somewhere even though all the evidence

that is that nothing is changing. In fact in our present context things are clearly getting worse – benefit cuts, housing crises etc. against a background of rapidly increasing inequality and loss of genuine political democratic control. This lack of success demoralises both activists and those thousands on the horizontal tail who are left only to conclude “that’s just the way it is.”

We have to accept then that the aversion to vertical tail action is our key strategic weakness and so the question moves on to how to design it – and much of the information and argument in this text deals with this question. Note it does not necessarily involve breaking the law. Indeed one of the great structural opportunities of our present moment is the extreme weakness of our opponents – their inability to cope with mass high participation low risk (i.e. still technically legal) action.

### **The key vulnerabilities of medium scale institutions in modern complex social systems**

Some scholars have rightly pointed out that the success of the American civil rights movement was dependent upon not one but two things. The first, as discussed, was the willingness of the movement to non-violently violate the social and economic norms of racists – refusing to give up seats on a bus, sit-ins in all white cafes etc. But there was also what has been called a structural opportunity. The US government was keen to be a beacon of freedom and democracy around the world as an effective opponent to the Soviet Union. Therefore it was extremely sensitive to global attention on the gaping hypocrisy in its own back yard - the denial of basic political rights to its black citizens. The combination of these two factors led to the federal government intervening to force the southern authorities to give blacks the formal rights they were demanding. The point of this story is that many scholars maintain that however heroic and organised a specific campaign is, if there are no “structural opportunities” for it to succeed, then it will fail. These big structural things outside our control really determine whether radical political change happens.

As it happens this view is being increasingly challenged on the basis of the historical evidence. It seems that the skills and organisation of civic resistance campaigns seem to be more important. But for the sake of argument let’s assume the structuralists are at least partially right. In which case are there structural opportunities in our context?

I would argue there is and this is related to the changing structure of power in our globalising and digitalising society. Without going into detail about the whys and wherefores one thing should be clear - that the world is increasingly interdependent. Specifically this means that institutions are reliant upon many more material and electronic flows in and out of their organisations – this can mean material goods, utilities, people, and of course information via digital technologies. Along with this change is the increase in “just in time” organisational structures. To increase “efficiencies” organisations have just sufficient financial cashflow, goods, people and time to maintain their operation. Thirdly organisations are increasingly homogenous in terms of reducing their political and cultural aims down to the financial accounting analysis of their bottom line; namely how much profit they are making and maximising this in the short term.

All three factors mean that they are highly vulnerable to the well organised, transgressive actions. There are many more flows that can be blocked by mass legal actions (e.g. telephone and email blockages). Because of “just in time” structuring institutions cannot cope with significant “oscillations” – variations in the levels of inputs and outputs. They quickly raise economic costs to unacceptable levels. And increasing this is the only measure – financial cost - that these institutions

are concerned with. They are therefore more likely to make a simple cost-benefit analysis of whether to agree with the demands, rather than take an ideological stand against them because of traditional conservative considerations. The thought is “these people are raising our costs– give them what they want and let’s get back to normal”. An additional factor here is that in an era of rapid and global communication – the power of bad publicity is ever greater and the threat of “reputational” damage amplified by digital communication. The embarrassment of well-orchestrated dilemma actions then is intensified and this quickly translates into economic costs which affect the all important bottom line. In a broader context a successful campaign can then create collective action problems for opponents. Once one is taken down, none of the rest will want to individually incur the costs of being the next loser in a conflict with the collective power of well organised activists. All will change their practices to avoid being picked upon even though it is not in their collective interest to do so. (It’s payback time!)

As discussed then, the most effective tactics are mass transgressive actions which are just below the illegal line. It enables mass participation because there is little threat of participants undertaking the cost of getting arrested. Careful research into discovering and designing such actions then will have particular effectiveness against these new types of institutions in our interdependent globalised society.

### **Start with medium scale institutions - One at a time**

So given this significant “structural opportunity” it is important to look beyond the internal dynamics of a particular campaign and focus on the broader political potential that our situation opens up. A key consideration here is the power of wins to empower others to take action, that is “demonstration effects”. An important analytical error is to mistake inactivity for indifference. Inactivity can be because people genuinely don’t care. But more often the external behaviour of an inactivity is due to the collective action problem which then tends to solidify into a self-reinforcing habit of non-activity. People want change but don’t act because other people don’t act. Or they act for a while but burnout because of lack of support or success. They then get into the habit of not acting and not thinking about what they want – the thought is “what’s the point”. The antidote to this is seeing change happen. Suddenly, at least for those more consciously conflicted by being subject to the collective action problem, there is now hope. Reality has shown something is indeed possible. It is important to note here a common cognitive error which is that it is the existence of “a win” that attracts attention not so much the degree of that win. Our minds are more sensitive to this binary division – “win or not win” rather than spending time thinking about “how much”.

What this means then is that on the larger scale of strategic design, the aim needs to be to create wins even if they are “objectively” quite small. Far more than slogans, arguments, and online debating, this is what really gets people mobilised – the real deal is winning. *So the strategy has to be to pick institutions small enough to win against and make demands which these they can realistically be forced to give in to.* The plan should be clear – focus on medium size institutions: things like local councils, universities and companies. The big fish – like governments and big multinational corporations – need to wait. A central strategic error which wastes a lot of energy is lobbying government to do things which you don’t have the resources to make them do – even with vertical action. Or rather not yet. Of course nothing is certain – it is always possible a campaign can sudden strike lucky and beat a big opponent it should not be able to win against. And again it is no

doubt important that at least some people are attempting to hold these big operations to account, not least because as and when movements grow into a position to realistically take on these people, there need be a campaigning foundation to build upon.

However the key point here is the “domino theory”. For feedback systems to grow they need to be designed so that the gap between each feedback stage is not so big that the knock on effect fails to happen – that the space between two dominos is not so big that when a domino is knocked over it falls to the ground without touching, and so not knocking over the next domino in the line. If so, as we all know, the whole process suddenly stops. If we are trying to get somewhere quick the temptation is to make the gaps as wide as possible but this is a false economy – as we risk the gap getting too far and the process stopping half way through. Better then to focus our attention on making sure the gaps are airtight so the knock on effect will always happen. It may take longer to design but it makes it much more likely we will get to our destination. So the analogy has clear implication for both vertical tail and horizontal tail action design within campaigns and with the broader strategy of picking opponents and calibrating demands. Both need to be the biggest we can deal with, without jeopardizing the need for as certain a win as we can predict.

In our present context the focus of activism should be on getting wins against these medium size institutions, and making demands they will be able to agree to, given our limited campaigning resources. Given that this is accepted, the next smart move is to be able to see that it makes sense to concentrate campaigning resources on one campaign at a time. Again the same points can be made about keeping at least some oppositional presence against other opponents and, practically speaking, the rational strategic arguments I am making here are unlikely to have much sway with activists emotionally committed to their own particular campaigns. However for readers prepared to look at the collective action problem for what it is, the rational argument here is a no-brainer. To simplify matters let’s say there are 10 campaigns each with a strength of 6 against 10 for the opposing institution. All 10 campaigns are failing – all match 6 against 10. However if two campaigns lend a strength of 3 to another campaign then the strength of this campaign rises to 12 (6+3+3) and then they get a win against their opponent with a strength of 10. The same is then done again and in no time all ten campaigns go from not winning to winning. We can also assume the demonstration effects will bring strength to other campaigns, making it even clearer that rational campaigners should combine their efforts on a single campaign. In military strategy this is the oldest trick in the book. In all battles where weaker forces win against stronger forces, it is because of the success of this “concentrating forces on the opponent’s weakest point” strategy. Historically the divisions between radical groups has undermined their collective strength and their ability to follow this clear strategy for success. But this is one of the easiest things we have the power now to change if we are serious about winning.

So we have then two key elements for a grand strategy. Focus on highly interdependent and thus vulnerable middle scale institutions. And focus the maximum resources on one or a few campaigns to ensure wins start to be created.

## **An emerging model of endogenous bottom up growth and the dangers of “heroin” short cuts**

If the strategies and tactics outlined above are as effective as claimed then it would seem that in principle we have the outline of a viable “endogenous” radical political growth model. What this means is that the process of progressive internal sequences created by campaigns, combined with the rational strategy of inter-campaign co-operation laid out above, creates growth that is generated *internally* by the movement from its own resources. It does not need some external support or some major structural opportunity, event or breakdown to make to it work (though as mentioned we can argue that the nature of modern institutions certainly is a welcome structural development). If this is correct the smart radical energy needs to be keenly focused on the nitty gritty of optimising these various growth mechanisms rather than being distracted by large scale dramas which we do not yet have the resources to exploit. This is not a conservative or unambitious strategy. I will briefly outline the contours of the longer term plan for more wholesale social and political transformation below. The point here is that campaigns can, if well designed, create their own growth by converting the strength of their opponents into their own strength and mobilise their dormant horizontal tails. This is the promise of dilemma action orientated campaigning which I have described.

There are then some traditional approaches to campaigning which we no longer need to consider and which, in most contexts, actually undermine the reliability of our endogenous growth mechanisms. These I provocatively call “heroin short cuts”. They promise and indeed reliably deliver massive short term benefits – the ecstasy of massive political high – but in a broader and longer term context undermine the structural dynamics of what will make the campaign get to a win and make a movement grow in a sustainable way. The bottom line point however is that even if they are great – they are no longer necessary if we can now follow the more reliable strategy outlined in this text.

The most obvious example is violence against people. Although few people want to be called absolute pacifists, for all practical intents and purposes, the argument about political violence has been effectively settled. People may wish to argue about context of extreme repression, and others may wish to present a performative and provocative attachment to the idea of violence, but when it comes down to it self-interest (who likes getting beaten up) and practical considerations means people rarely want to go out with the explicit aim of causing physical harm to others. The point I wish to make here however is that, in so much as the argument has been won, it is useful to see why these arguments can begin to get transferred to other areas where matters are more debatable. The key arguments here are more empirical and practical than moral. Violence quickly attracts attention (maybe too fast) and gives actors a feeling of personal power. So far so good. However soon the unintended side effects kick in. The intensity of the acts creates a significantly more exclusive bonding between violent actors than even high risk nonviolent action. This cuts off people who may want to do stuff but don’t want to be violent. Violent actors start to act in a self-reinforcing bubble cut off from the wider political field and so make less smart design calculations – most often an over-estimation of their own success and power to create change. Meanwhile the horizontal tail can quickly be alienated by the extremity of the violence, and even if they support it, they do not have the time, skills, resources, or bravery (willing to accept the high risks) of engaging it themselves. Last but not least the opponents are not undermined by violent attacks but actually gain from the basic evolutionary animal dynamic of heightening internal solidarity and resolve in the face of a violent or

mortal threat. Given that opponents have control of the media and cultural reproduction in most contexts this “us and them” narrative can be spread to the nominally supportive horizontal tail to create at first ambivalence, and then often recruitment to the opposition. The longer term outcomes, as can be seen in many places around the world, and in the historical record, is a hopeless stalemate between two highly closed off opposing violent forces while the horizontal tails of both sides - i.e. the various majority of people suffer the worst of all worlds. It is hardly then an attractive or risk free model.

There are similar if less dramatic dynamics involved in the deployment of leaders and celebrities. Again leaving aside the moral arguments about leaders (they do not speak for us – not democratic etc.) there are important practical problems. Again, as with violence, there are obvious short term and significant benefits. Leaders can galvanise support, articulate the emotions and rationale of the campaign aims, and attract support from the non-political horizontal tail – i.e. it is hip, sexy and feels good to follow a leader (and not have to think for oneself). We all have these psychological tendencies to a greater or lesser extent. However in terms of creating bottom up empowerment processes it is easy to start to see the problems. People think the leader will sort things out for them and so think they need to do less themselves and so are less empowered to own the campaign themselves. Remember it is the *act* of participation which creates empowerment – not the other way round. We support him and we will put our hopes in him (the Obama experience is a key example). This then leads to disappointment and disempowerment when a win is not achieved. And crucially while we are waiting for the leader to come up with the goods no one has prepared a bottom up plan B. So when failure occurs the habit of inaction continues and is reinforced. At worse this leads to bitterness and cynicism, and opposition to the very idea of political activity. Instead of being supported by and supporting one’s peers in a horizontal fashion – emotional energy is put in one leader and drained from peer to peer solidarity. We can see then that the whole structural dynamic of progressive empowerment sequences are at best disturbed and at worse undermined. Then there are the more familiar problems of leaders not being accountable to activists or the horizontal tail, getting appropriated by the powers that be, or, and this is so often underestimated, getting corrupted by their own power. The position of power almost deterministically leads to inflated egos, even in formally sound people, and this leads to bad decisions, a lack of listening, and embarrassing and at worse antisocial and immoral/criminal behaviour (sexual harassment and rape) which severely undermines the whole campaign’s credibility. Again we can see short term advantages to having leader or a leadership group, but we can do it without them and by doing so we are on safer ground. This emphatically does not mean there is no requirement for activist activity. Designing and promoting sound procedures, aims, and mechanisms is a vital function of the strategy laid out in this text – and of course in practice there are some messy cross overs between this sort of activism and the conventional leadership. However the basic division between “procedural leadership” and “content leadership” (telling people what should happen and why) should be a clear enough guide in tricky borderline situations.

Much the same can be said of celebrities. Again there are clear advantages of the “quick hit” – celebrities can amplify a campaign and activate the horizontal tail. But the same longer term disempowerment dynamics kick in. In particular, with celebrities, the campaign message can get lost as followers and the mass media increasingly focus on the personality rather than the issues. And as aspects of this personality inevitably appear less than perfect then the campaign gets associated with these “flaws”, the message of the campaign is compromised, and the internal growth

mechanism neglected and disrupted. We can see the similar dynamics with the attractions of mass (corporate) media. Again there is the quick hit – suddenly the campaign goes from a local affair to a national story viewed by millions of people. But we know by now that sudden jumps and changes in the internal growth system we are constructing are always dangerous and threaten the smooth functioning of this dynamic, particularly if not planned for. Again initially the coverage is gratifying but the profit motives of the corporate mass media create the need to follow what is “news” i.e. what is new. This is most easily created by building something up and then knocking it down – and exaggerating both the news / new element of each development. The power of mass media to enhance a campaign’s power then, like with leaders and celebrities (and armed violent groups), all takes power and accountability away from the activists and horizontal tail. When coverage turns bad there is no control over the undermining consequences. In the meantime limited resources are sucked into chasing the “heroin” hit of mass coverage and thus taken away from the careful attention to detail required to optimise the more reliable and sustainable growth mechanisms - of increasing the real and critical source of radical political power – a mobilised horizontal tail.

Similar dynamics can be identified in dealing with negotiations. As mentioned above there are the same problems of appropriation, loss of control, and the damaging redirection of resources. The best resolution seems to be to design campaigns which will get to a clear win rather than ones which will require prolonged periods of bureaucratic (read boring!) activity.

In the real world things of course things are not so neat and the present reality is that, even if the debate on violence is effectively settled, most campaigners are, to varying extents, wedded to the other “heroin’s” I have outlined above. It is important not to be simplistically dogmatic – these variables exist on a continuum. It is not a matter of black and white. The dividing line between activism and leadership is never so sharp. At the end of the day however these matters should be viewed in an empirical and practical frame if we are going to move forward rather than getting bogged down in abstract moral arguments. The proposition is that these elements resemble heroin – but “the quick hit/longer term damage” dynamic is something to be tested and researched.

Returning to structural issues however, there does seem to be good reason why these traditional hierarchical means of achieving political power are now losing their radical effectiveness just as violence largely already has. Society, as noted, is becoming much more complex and interdependent. This is the big structural change of our time. One of the reasons this is undermining the “big man” leader model is that no one person or group can command significant attention and support in an increasingly complex and segmented political field. There are too many things going on and too great a diversity of opinions – both politically and aesthetically (any top down mass approach will turn some people on and others off). Secondly there is the much commented rise of digital communications. This is having myriad of interconnected effects on the practice of political confrontations. Important information is harder to hide and, if politically significant, travels faster around the political field – making dilemma action all the more effective. But most significantly, people in the horizontal tail can communicate more effectively with each other – horizontal connectivity is deepening. People spend much more time (and attention) communicating with friends rather than listening to leaders or mass media attractions. Their commitment to traditional sources of authority is much more fluid and passing. What their friends are doing is much more important. This raises the question of what in fact their friends are doing! And this is the key advantage of our strategies for mobilisation of the horizontal tail. Conditional commitment, dilemma

actions, open space and related mechanisms *all create and deepen the importance of friend to friend communication*. Central to all of them are people communicating with other “normal” people and making their own decisions with these other people rather than following the traditional model of a leader, party line, or traditional social or political norm. All these interrelated factors add up to a profound change in the structure of political communication and power. The full extent of what is now technically possible is far from fully appreciated and so is not yet being acted upon. Fifty years ago it was far from obvious that political violence was an ineffectual way of bringing about political change, while now this is largely accepted. Similarly while now many people still believe in the top down leader /mass media/negotiation team model, it is more than possible that in 50 years time we will have largely accepted that the best strategy for political change is the through people communicating with each other and deciding on actions – strategies and tactics – themselves, making full use of the new communication technologies, rather than the “old model” of top down command and control. All humans are deeply prone to path dependency – we are hardwired to think that what exists today will still exist tomorrow. But any look at the history of the last 200 years shows how wrong this always is. New developments always shock people – “how could that have happened”. But this is not to be unexpected. In fact it is normal that the unexpected and even the “impossible” happens . The smart activist needs to understand this and be “ahead of the curve”.

Before finishing I want to make some final comments on what some people ask when they read about these mechanisms – “couldn’t all this be used by right-wing conservative groups to further their aims”. Underlying this is the worry that if every political group starts to undermine the status quo with these disruptive actions then won’t there be chaos. The first thing to say about this is to be straight up and say of course these mechanisms can be used by any political group. It is also true that grassroots direct action upsets and disrupts the traditional model of representative democracy which has been promoted as the best system of government for over 200 years. The point is however that, for a number of reasons, this system is not working and another system would now work better. We now have the cultural and technological capacity to make it happen. In a way it is only a matter of time before this transformation happens. This of course is disturbing and confusing to people who think that the traditional democratic structure we have had for the last 200 years is the final deal. But again this is path dependency – thinking what we have today is best and will obviously be here tomorrow (and by implication for ever).

But to return to the question of right wing people using these mechanisms, there are some subtle but profound characteristics of these strategies and tactics which undermine the effectiveness of traditional right wing ideology. The most obvious is that they all involve lots of people participating in a political process. As such they are intrinsically democratic in a cultural and organisational sense. There is no room for top down command and control – the traditional organisational form of right wing forces. In so much as these traditional organisational forms are used, people will not feel involved and therefore less easily mobilised. So a right wing position is in a bind – the best mechanisms of mobilisation are biased against their own ideology. The same is true of dogmatic top down hard left political ideologies. What is happening when right wing forces (and hard left groups) do attempt to use these mechanisms is that lots of splits and disagreements emerge. People are encouraged to participate and be in control and get to like this. Then they are confronted with a top down culture and naturally they resent this and internal dissent rises up. There are lots of examples of this happening in last twenty years in both traditional far left and far right groups. In the digital age the game is up for the traditional political authoritarian movements. People no longer want to

be told what to do and crucially they can now organise horizontally with each other to resist these structures. As the start up costs of creating their own group or campaign have collapsed (text those who agree with you and set up a website) then when problems and frustrations occurs they can easily exit the organisation and create their own set up.

The second issue of political chaos is a more serious problem. Of course for some this may be preferable to the present situation. However assuming that we accept a definition of politics as the process a community requires in order to decide upon matters which need collective decisions, then a chaotic situation is likely to lead to bad collective decisions (making no decisions is a decision in itself which is likely to be less beneficial and certainly not what most people want and so not actually very democratic). However we need to accept that there is no going back to the old representative model with all its problems of corruption, co-option, and most especially its lack of accountability to and involvement of the mass of ordinary people. So *what we need is to design some transitional process to a new genuinely participatory democratic system.*

### **From campaigns to bottom up deliberative participatory democracy**

As a general rule, there is no point starting a campaign for something which does not already have majority (and ideally a big majority) support. The common situation will be that institutions will create policies which most people do not agree with but feel they cannot alter because there is no democracy and/or because of the collective action problem – leading to the habit of disempowerment - “there is nothing I can do”. Our campaign model, through sequences mobilises people to the point where the authorities give into the demand. The model then is particularly democratic in the deeper sense of the word. The “will of the people” is enacted – as opposed to the degraded conventional model in which the representatives are co-opted by elite forces and/or the system ensures that limited options are presented in elections and the representatives have limited power.

In a possibly near future scenario where many bottom up campaigns are using these mechanisms it is possible to design the move towards a new political order which is based neither on the old representative model – nor on the chaos of competing campaigns and “special interests”; a model that returns to old basic democratic notion of the “will of the people”. Mechanisms which identify this “general will” are closely related the intrinsic biases of our campaign mechanisms of participatory democracy – namely the direct involvement of people in the political decisions they care about. In terms of specifics this principle can take various forms and combinations but all come under heading of deliberative, participatory and/or direct democracy.

However the descriptions of these models often suffer from the comparison of two static situations – the present degraded representative model we have now and then a semi-ideal model of the future. It is more useful and realistic in the short term to envisage and detail *transitional scenarios* which are created in the messy context of contemporary political struggles.

Here then is a sequence scenario to use as a base line for designing strategies.

A campaign uses our mechanisms to create small wins in a few institutions. Demonstration effects lead to more wins in bigger institutions. Campaigns then create more structural demands which start to institutionalise the power of general assemblies, giving them a role in deciding what happens in

these institutions. Two transitional mechanisms can be used. Firstly part of the budget of the institutions can be distributed in a way which is decided by these general assemblies. Proposals come from the assemblies and through a deliberative process (again there are variations on theme) priorities are set and the institution (or local or city council) agrees to them. This assumes the institution has agreed to this new hybrid system due to previous campaigns. A second scenario would be that the institution or council has not yet agreed to this “participatory budgeting”, as it is called, and so the campaigners hold their own general assembly in parallel and in competition with the official “representative” body. If the latter enacts policies which go against the will of the general assembly then campaigns are started using our mechanisms to force the institution to follow the policies of the assemblies. The campaigns will have the great advantage of having the greater democratic legitimacy of a transparent, accountable and participatory democratic process behind them. These processes of course can be made easier, cheaper and more transparent through the capacities of digital communication technology.

Obviously in many contexts these exciting developments may well be some way off (though don't fool yourself - they may happen sooner rather than later). However such variations on these systems has been enacted in various parts of the world (Porto Alegre in Brazil in the most famous example) and there are numerous examples of halfway house as well as many attempts which have so far been thwarted by conservative political forces. The point is such systems are now politically and technologically possible. And it is quite plausible to envisage these transitions moving, in time, to fully deliberative/participatory democratic systems and the old corrupted representative model disappearing or being “dignified” (that is still existing in form but having not effective political power) – in the same way democratic systems gradually took over from autocracy and aristocratic forms of government in the nineteenth century Europe. Of course much more could be said about the details of these transitions and much work needs to be done on the details. However my point in touching on them here is to show that these mechanisms do not lead to a big problem with right wing appropriation and nor are we looking at a dead end of political chaos. What is needed is for the key activists and designers in these movements to be aware of the road map I have outlined. *The long term strategic aim has to be to push beyond just get “our people into office” or “get the powers that be to do what we want”.* The only long term viable option is the change the system itself into one which is fundamentally compatible with the political and technological capacities of our digital age.

The mechanisms I have outlined here then have an intrinsic democratic bias, broadly and fundamentally defined as the enactment of the will of the people – or more specifically the will of the vast majority of people in a particular political field in which the confrontation occurs. The key advantage of these mechanisms is that they are scale-free. This means they can be applied on any scale - a campaign in a local school or a campaign in a company or university, up to campaigns on a city, national, and ultimately the international level. Unlike using the old conservative hierarchical means to bring about radical political change, there is no point where a fundamental contradiction occurs between means and ends which blocks further genuine political process. This “changing of gears” problem does not exist because with our mechanisms there is a fundamental compatibility between the means and ends of radical political change. In an important sense the means and ends are merged into a single process. This notion has always been a morally attractive idea but the argument in this text is that it is now a supremely practical one as well.

The basic dynamics and structure of power are the same at all scales. There are two opposing forces and the majority/good guys need to combine their power and confront the opposition using our mechanisms. I have largely concentrated on examples and the particularities of medium scale institutions because at the time of writing these contexts present the best sweet spots and winnable iterations. However as and when such campaigns succeed and grow then bigger fish will enter the frame. There is no structural reason why such mechanisms cannot be used to take over the formal political power of councils and the state and give it to participatory and deliberative assemblies (on and off line) of normal people. An underlying implication of this scale-free nature of political struggle however is that the work of social change is never finished. There is no binary before or after the revolution in this model, just as there is also no context in which these mechanisms do not apply and where the situation is hopeless. There is not going to be a situation where “the battles have been won” and we can all relax into some political utopia. All political power is relational, it can neither totally disappear nor become totally dominant. There is always a line where submission to power can be collectively challenged. All power relies ultimately on the freely given willingness of people to submit to it. If this is the case then we also have to accept that, while power is also always present, it can also always be challenged. The work of holding power to account and democratising it to the maximum extent then is a perennial human challenge. Of course there is a continuum – some political arrangements are clearly better than others – but no arrangements are perfect or even close to it. They all can be challenged and all can and will degenerate if they are not continually challenged.

A sophisticated analysis of radical social change in a complex modern society then has no place for the black and white notion of “before and after the revolution” where everyone works for the big battle and then everything is sorted after that. The reality, as any quick survey of revolutions shows, is that the day after is in many ways much more important than the day before. It is in the days after the upheaval that everything goes badly pear shaped. Ultimately for the smartest activist the day of the revolution is just another day! The big advantage of the process outlined in this text is that there are no big upheavals and but nor is there just reformist tame agitation. The abstract stale debate between reform and revolution, between being “out of power” and being “in power” is transcended by a grounded pragmatic analysis of the maximum realistic political gains that can be made in any iterative struggle, with the political resources and mechanism we have in hand. This calculation is ongoing in a series of never ending iterations. The good news is that there is never a situation where human political power cannot be successfully challenged – and there is never a situation where that challenge is no longer needed. Humanity as someone said is radically “unfinished”. We are a project in process!

## Appendix:

### **A detailed worked up hypothetical example of a successful campaign**

Having read the above text it is now necessary to go back to the beginning and look at it all in more detail. Even though I have explained the mechanisms – when it comes to using this text as an aid to design an actual campaign then more details are needed. The devil is in the design detail. The challenge is getting precision into the balanced decisions required in any situation and then getting the decisions effectively implemented by solid efficient organisation. This is difficult – things will not go to plan and at times it will look chaotic. Welcome to real life! The point here is that planning has been done – there needs to be a road map so when things go a bit pear shaped activists can return to the plan, reconnect again with where they are going, and then design the best response they can to the problems at hand in the light of this plan and with the resources (people time knowledge, legitimacy) they have built up.

So here is a story of a campaign which uses the mechanisms. It is still simplified but it shows how sequences of escalation build mobilisation and lead to success.

*In a modern global big city a local community is under pressure from a speculative surge in house prices. House prices have risen 100% in five years. Local landlords have increased rent by 50% in the same period and in the last year over 800 tenants have been evicted by the local council so that their homes can be sold off to make a vast profit and so help the council's short-term finances.*

*A small group of activists who are friends from a previous campaign meet in a café and all are depressed and feeling powerless about the situation. They would know the vast majority of the local community are against these developments but nothing is happening. They have read stuff about the collective action problem and understand that it is entirely possible that many people can be very angry about something and still do nothing. One of the activists has read a version of this text as well having experience of other successful community campaigns in the past. They decide to meet again with other activists they know to discuss starting a campaign.*

*At this meeting six people turn up – several others were supposed to come but apparently have other commitments. The six decide to go for it anyway. They decide to hold a general assembly meeting in the local community. Other such meetings have happened in other parts of the city as a way to start campaigns. It is advertised through social media and existing neighbourhood and community organisations and through word of mouth. Poster and leaflets are produced and put up in local community organisation premises and any places which will take them.*

*At the meeting one of the activists stands up and gives a summary of who the people are that have organised the meeting and the general theme. There is no big speech and it is made clear that the organising group has no special status or power – “we are just here to get things going and to see what together as a group we think and feel about the situation”.*

*There are 21 people at the meeting and they split into 3 groups of seven people with one of the organising activists facilitating each group. The groups follow an open space format. People spend 15 minutes talking in groups about who they are, why they have come to the meeting, what they are angry about. Testimonials, stories and anecdotes are encouraged. Then the groups come back*

*together and one person from each group summarizes the feelings of their small group. It is clear everyone is angry about the situation and a number of key stories about the crap things which have recently happened are shared. It is clear there is common ground between everyone. Then there is a presentation about the sort of actions which have the most effect – which have limited aims and thus would have very high support and be winnable. They need to put the opponent in a dilemma – i.e. it should be possible for them to accept the demand even though they will be resistant to it.*

*Again the meeting splits back up into the same small groups. People know each other better now and ideas flow back and forth in each group with plenty of animated discussion. After 15 minutes the groups come back together. A different person from the small groups (a balance is required – i.e. women and minority people) lists the three best ideas their small group has come up with. Each idea has to include a specific demand (i.e. clear when achieved or not) to a specific opponent (i.e. clear who has the power to make the decision to accept the demand). All ideas are listed on the board and all three groups mention an upmarket estate agents which sells to wealthy international buyers/speculators and which set up a shop on the local high street. Each person in the meeting has three ticks and everyone ticks the three ideas they like most. After this has happened it is clear that the top opponent is the estate agents and their high street shop. The specific demand that people like most is that the company gives £10,000 to a local homeless charity to help people recently evicted from housing that the estate agents now is responsible for selling. The aim is clear, limited and achievable.*

*Another meeting is held to agree on tactics and in the meantime ideas are brainstormed on line. At the next meeting a list is put on the wall. A presentation is made which makes the point that the strategy needs to be able to involve the whole community and so include low commitment tactics as well as more high commitment ones. The list is added to by a group brainstorm and again everyone has three ticks. It is then clear that the three tactics will be a petition, a campaign of wasting the estates agents time (phoning to see properties and no showing up, taking lots of paper details of properties from the shop and flash occupations of the shop), and a daily picket outside the shop to collect signatures. Conditional commitment is used to get the commitment of 50 people who will commit a minimum of 3 hours a week to take part in these tactics – working groups for each tactic are formed to coordinate the activities. It is made clear on and off line that this is an organised community based campaign and all types of tactics and decisions are made democratically at community open space meetings.*

*Another open space meeting is organised for new people to go to before they get involved in the campaign. The following week 50 people turn up – from word of mouth and from talking to people on the picket and signing the petition. A conditional commitment mechanism is used for 80 people to organise 8 flash occupations of the shop each hour it is open (10 people each hour). The police are called on the 3<sup>rd</sup> occupation. Press are at the occupation and a small crowd of people gather. More people go in to take copies of all the details of the places for sale/rent. Several talk to the staff and video conversations on their mobile phones. The manager says to a group of local black women – “poor black people like you shouldn’t be in here, get out now – get the fuck out of here now”. The video is put on line within minutes. It goes viral in the local community and beyond. Below the viral video are the details of the next open space meeting – and reminder that all action is democratically decided upon at community open space meetings.*

500 people show up for the meeting. Organisers have prepared for this tipping point and brought in trained facilitators for the meeting. Small groups again discuss people's reactions to the situation and there is clearly great anger and much feeling of empowerment that this is the biggest community meeting that has been held in living memory. The feedback from the small groups is that the estate agents are no longer wanted in the community and the shop should be shut down. A number of new demands are put on the wall and each group collectively has three ticks to prioritise demands on the list. The "close down the shop" is clearly the winner. All the groups have included it as one of their three ticks.

The facilitators suggest this is made the new main goal and a list of tactics to be officially adopted by the meeting are written up on the wall. Again the three tick method selects six tactics to be adopted - giving options for a greater range of commitments. These are: the petition, the picket, the removal of materials, the phoning in for appointments, daily occupations, and a big street party in the street outside for the following Saturday. Separate meetings and groups are organised for each tactic and conditional commitment used to maximise mobilisations. Over the next week all materials are removed from the shop each day and police are regularly called to remove sit down occupations. 10,000 signatures are collected along the street calling for the company to close the shop. At the weekend 1000 people gather for the street party with a vast array of self organised community activities – music, dance, games etc. the high street is closed down. The director of the company is on TV claiming he will not give in.

The following week the occupations result in over 200 arrests. The company has now not been able to any trading for over two weeks. Due to the publicity over the arrests and the street party, 10,000 show up to the following Saturday's party. The police advise the company that they cannot continue to police the shop in the face of such opposition. The staff no longer show up for work. The company is losing money and reputation by the day. That evening the director says that the shop will be closed temporarily while the situation is assessed. The shop however never re-opens and the estate agent decides to not return to the area.

The activists have been making detailed notes of each stage of the campaign and these are put together into a pdf "how to" document online so other activists can download the full details of the campaign strategies and tactics. Open space meetings are held in the other districts of the city where ordinary residents involved in the successful campaign give testimonials, tell people how they were successful and how the campaign can be repeated. Within three months there are eight more campaigns happening to remove the estate agents from their local areas. Within six months the company has withdrawn from the city. The local open space meeting evolve into neighbourhood assemblies using the same principles of direct participatory democracy to create an empowered bottom up political culture. Collective deliberation leads to a city wide campaign to bypass conventional political parties and put up ordinary local people to stand for election to the city council. Wins in the elections lead to a programme of co-operatives being funded to build social housing, rent controls, and the beginning of participatory budgeting so that the neighbour assemblies control part of local council budgets directly. Within two years of the first open space meeting concrete bottom up political power has been achieved in the city.

## Comments

This story then shows how the mechanisms described in this text can be used in combination to create a back and forward upward process of community empowerment and control. There could be many other combinations and details and the reader might like to make up similar stories for their specific situations (it's fun and a good role play). A key part of the story to note is the critical turning point of the recorded racist comment from the shop manager. This could not have been predicted precisely but an organised campaign will be waiting for it- this is the whole point of provocative dilemma actions. An undisciplined opposition will overstep the mark – show their “true colours” and the resultant humiliation will trigger a tipping point of mobilisation within the political field in which the confrontation is situated. If this catalytic event is prepared for in advance (so it does not come as a shock for informed activists) then the resultant surge of anger can be organised democratically to undertake mass collective actions which will overwhelm the opposition. The overall success depends upon a continual interplay of open space meetings, conditional commitments, and dilemma actions. These are then supplemented by on and offline publicity and embellishments of cultural and artistic activities which bring in more people.

More experience of these types of progressions will provide more detailed advice and information on how win campaigns. This text provides only a beginning – a statement of the “state of the art” at this moment in time. Hopefully you will be inspired to believe we “ain't seen nothing yet!”

## References and further reading

I am PhD researcher and am happy to recommend further reading and informational links about themes covered here. My research involves doing workshops for campaigns and helping to design and test mechanisms and plan sequences of escalation. I am part of a growing network of activists/academics involved in the active design of radical social and political transformations to bring about a more genuinely participatory, democratic and equal society – check us out on the Radical Think Tank on Facebook . Send me a message on the page if you want us to do a workshop or need advice. I can send you a text called “Conditional commitment for radical activists” which goes into more detail about this mechanism as well as checklists of what is needs to done to organise campaigns effectively in a participatory way – for example how to hold an open space meeting.

So here are a few great reading options. Remember the more you know the smarter you can be! I have identified the four or five best texts by searching (ctrl + F) “**KEY TEXT**”. You will not find references here to the thousands of book telling you have bad the world is. The knowledge promoted here is a very different subject – how to make change happen. And for this we need to understand how people actually behave and think not how we would like them to. This list is by no means complete and see the radical think tank site for an expanded – and ever expanding – list of references and links – and comments on them.

Ackerman P. & Kruegler, C. (1994). *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. London. Praeger. This text is derived from Gene Sharps classic “The Politics of Nonviolent action” (see below). Along with much of the literature the context is assumed to be fighting a dictatorship. But insomuch as real democracy and free expression are effectively being removed in western “democracies” readers will quickly see how the approach can and should be applied to these contexts.

Alinsky, S.D. (1971). *Rules for Radicals*. New York. Vintage. The classic text on community and union activism. Dated but still relevant.

Arquilla, J. & Ronfeldt, D. (2000). *Swarming and the Future of Conflict*. California. Rand. These guys are by no means supporters of radical activism but their explanation of how and why swarm action is so effective is spot on.

Bennett, W, L. and Segerberg, A. (2013). *The Logic of Connective Action. Digital Media and the Personalisation of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. The **KEY TEXT** in the last few years on how new communication technologies are changing the structure of radical political activism. It outlines the nature of the bottom up politics which is emerging all round the world

Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Castells is the main theorist of the emerging political power of participatory social movements which gain their power through these new communication technologies

Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M.J. (2013). *Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategy of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York. Columbia University Press. The game changing, knock out text which scientifically assesses the 300 plus civic resistance campaigns of the last hundred years to show the tactic of violence is simply less effective than nonviolent methods across all contexts. The real key to success is the creation of high participation low risk mobilisations and highly trained activists with a clear strategy. These are the empirical facts so the abstract debates can end – the strategy and roadmap is clearly shown by this **KEY TEXT**.

Earl, J. and Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally Empowered Social Change. Activism in the Internet Age*. Cambridge Mass. MIT Press. Another great book of empirical research on how digital technology is increasingly enabling bottom up low cost activism

Easley, D. and Kleinberg, J. (2010). *Networks, Crowds, and Markets. Reasoning in a Highly Connected World*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. Good text book on network theory and how social and political systems actually work.

Fishkin, J.S. (2009). *The People Speak. Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. A classic text on the practicalities of participatory deliberative democratic assemblies.

Freeman, J. (1970). *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*. Available at <http://www.anarres.org.au/essays/amtos.htm>. Accessed 3rd August 2013. The **KEY TEXT** for any people still under the illusion that structurelessness is cool and radical. No it's a mess and creates hidden hierarchies.

Fung, A. and Wright, E. (2003) *Deepening democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*. London. Verso. The main text in the last few years of how a synthesis of radical social movement action and state control can create innovative participatory structures. Details the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting system – the world's most inspiring real world example of participatory democracy.

Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York. Continuum. The classic text which showed that people become radicalised by being given the space to describe and collectively name their own political realities. The inspiration behind open space designs.

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The Tipping Point. How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*. London. Abacus. The popularising book which brought to the world the reality of tipping points. Focuses on business and social areas – but the implications for radical politics should be obvious.

Martin, B. (2007). *Justice Ignited. The Dynamics of Backfire*. London. Bowman and Littlewood. Unfortunately the only book of I know of which explicitly examines examples of dilemma actions and the backfiring and subsequent mass mobilisations that happen when authorities overstep the mark. So the **KEY TEXT** on dilemma actions.

McAdam, D. (1982). *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago. Chicago University Press. A good examination of the high developed organisation and strategising behind the American black civil right movement

Mullainathan, S. and Shafir, E. (2014). *Scarcity: the true cost of not having enough*. London. Penguin. An example of the growing literature on behavioural economics and cognitive psychology, which shows how people really behave and why they do so. Not directly about activism but this literature has profound implications for the design of mobilisation. In this case the evidence shows that people are dumb because they don't have enough attention. This is why we need to attract that attention and through open spaces direct that attention to realities of people's political situation and to their collective ability to change it.

Olson, M. (1965). *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press. The key political science text on why the masses – poor and marginalised – are buggered by small concentrated groups of elites who create collective action problems. The moral is that all activism has to work out how to overcome key problem in order to proceed.

Oswald, A. (2011). *Herd Behaviour and Keeping up with the Jones*. LSE lecture. Available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=1270>. Accessed August 5<sup>th</sup> 2013. A fun but informative podcast which is a good introduction why people in groups act the way they do. I love the bit about dinosaurs entering the lecture theatre!

Popovic, S. (2015). *Blueprint for Revolution*. London and Melbourne. Scribe. The **KEY TEXT!!** A must read on how good organisation and a determination to have fun are the key to mass participatory action to bring down autocratic regimes – from the people who have done it, so you can't argue with that! Again note that the context is taking on dictators – but as the subtitle implies – these mechanisms and techniques enable you to “change the world” – and increasingly they apply to the political realities of the western “democracies”

Sharp, G. (1973). *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. The classic text of all time! So a **KEY TEXT**, the three volume work which updated nonviolent direct action as a hard hitting real world mechanism for the achievement of political power requiring military style strategy and organisation. No fluffy hippy stuff here. It's straight talking and pragmatic – this is how power works and this is how best to get it. Inspired thousands of activists around the world and the main text behind the taking down of many oppressive governments and authorities. Includes the famous list of 200 plus nonviolent tactics – strikes, boycott, demo etc – and many many more. A bit dated now but a good introduction to anyone who doubts that well organised mass participation, community based nonviolent direct action carries all before it.

Shirky, C. (2008). *Here Comes Everybody. The Power of Organising without Organisations*. London. Penguin. The main text on how digital technologies open up new possibilities of bottom up organisation. Cheerfully liberal but a discerning reader can see the revolutionary potential which the author largely misses!