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*By Majken Sorensen*

We usually use nonviolent action about serious problems. Thinking about an action in humorous terms may therefore seem to be a strange way to deal with the issue, and not your first choice. However, humour and seriousness may be much more closely related than at first they appear. Almost all good humour thrives on contradictions and absurdity, and nonviolent action often tries to point out the contradiction between the world as it is, and the world as we want it to be. Humour is powerful because it is turning the world as we know it upside down and escapes the logic and reasoning that is an inevitable part of the rest of our lives.

## **How to start?**

If humour doesn't come to you easily, don't despair, it can be learned. Watch your opponent: If there is a contradiction between what he says, and what he does, might this be the basis for a good joke? The closer you stick to the truth about what your opponent is saying and doing, the better the humour will work. Almost all dictators will say that what they are doing is "for the good of the people". That kind of statement might be contradicted by their actions.

Using humour wisely

- Don't overdo it – humour should be used with moderation and works best if it is complemented with a serious message.
- Choose the object of your humour carefully!

If you are making a political action, you want a political message, and you want to stick to the point. How people look, their way of speaking or sexual habits are not good subjects. Making jokes about such things may be fun within your own group, but are usually not the way to reach out to other people and take attention away from the political point you want to make. At the end of this section, you can read two examples of actions that stick to the political points and don't get sidetracked.

## **Why use humour?**

Using humour in your actions can be useful in a number of ways. First, it should be fun for those of you who participate in the action. Humour has a potential to prevent and counter activist burnout, although it is not a magic solution.

Using humour is also a way to increase the chance of getting attention from media, potential supporters and bystanders. Journalists who know that they will get good images and a lively story from your group are more likely to show up when you announce that something is going to happen.

If you are part of a small movement that wants to expand, humour will be a way of showing potential members that although you work on a serious issue, you are still capable of enjoying life.

## **The power of humour**

Humour is a powerful way to relate to your opponent, as the 'absurdity' of your actions will change both the relationship and the logic of rational argumentation. Good humorous actions are difficult to respond to for both the police and the opponent himself. It can give you a perfect opportunity for creating a "dilemma action", which means that no matter what your opponent does, he has lost and is likely to appear weaker in the eyes of both bystanders and the people on "his" side. But be prepared for harsh reactions if you humiliate anybody. When you make it difficult for your opponent to find an "appropriate" reaction (adequate from his point of view), frustration might cause a violent reaction.

## Examples of humorous actions

Two examples can illustrate some of the points above. We don't recommend that you copy them directly, as your context is likely to be very different. But they can show how powerful humour can be:

In Norway in 1983, a small group of total objectors organised in the group "Campaign against Conscription", (KMV in Norwegian) were refusing both military and alternative service. They wanted to create public debate and change the law that gave them 16 months in prison. The state refused to call it "prison" and instead labelled it "serve their service in an institution under the administration of the prison authorities". To avoid having political prisoners, there were officially no trials, no prisoners, and no punishment. The cases of the total objectors went through the courts only to identify the objector, and the result was always the same, 16 months in prison. Sometimes the prosecutor never showed up because the result was clear anyway, so KMV exploited this in one of their actions:

One of the activists dressed up as the prosecutor and overplayed his role and demanded that the total objector get even longer in prison because of his profession (he was a lawyer). During the procedure in the court, nobody noticed anything wrong in spite of the "prosecutor's" exaggerations, and one week later KMV sent their secret video recording of the case to the media and the result was that most of the Norwegian public was laughing.

This example clearly illustrates the power of turning things upside down. A friend of the accused playing the prosecutor, and demanding a stronger punishment than what the law can give, is a parody of the court. In this action, KMV activists satirised the absurdity of having a court case when there is nothing to discuss, and succeeded in getting attention from both media and "ordinary people". In addition to turning the roles upside down, the parody of the court also exposed the contradiction between what the Norwegian state said and what it did. If the politicians call Norway a democracy, and claim that it doesn't have any political prisoners, why are people sent to prison for their beliefs? And how come that the imprisonment is not even called a prison sentence, but an administrative term for serving their alternative service? This is an absurd situation, and through dramatising it in a humorous frame, KMV could cut through all rational explanations and make people understand that this did not make sense.

However, this case can also serve to make the important point, that the activist using humour should be aware of the context it is used in. If you want to avoid long prison terms, imitating this kind of action cannot be recommended.

In the other example, we move from democratic Norway, to dictatorial Serbia in the year 2000 before the fall of Slobodan Milošević. To support agriculture, Milošević was placing boxes in shops and public places asking people to donate one dinar (Serbian currency) for sowing and planting crops. As a response, the youth movement [Otpor](#) arranged its own collection called "Dinar za Smenu". Smenu in Serbian is a word with many meanings; it can mean change, resignation, dismissal, pension and purge. This action was repeated several times in different places in Serbia, and consisted of a big barrel with a photo of Milošević. People could donate one dinar, and would then get a stick they could use to hit the barrel. On one occasion, a sign suggested that if people did not have any money because of Milošević's politics, they should bang the barrel twice. When the police removed the barrel, Otpor said in a press release that the police had arrested the barrel, and that the action was a huge success. They claimed they had collected enough money for Milošević's retirement, and that the police would give the money to Milošević.

This is an example of a dilemma action, because Otpor is leaving both Milošević and the police with no space for reaction. If the police do not take away the barrel, they lose face, and when they do something, Otpor continues the joke by calling it arrest of a barrel and saying the police will give Milošević the money for his retirement. No matter what the regime does, it has lost.

You can find Majken's dissertation on humour and nonviolence at:

[the website of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Coventry University](#)

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