

Topic Page: [Activism](#)

Definition: **activism** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

The attempt to influence political change through direct action rather than simply by theory and debate. It is a central belief of revolutionary and radical parties. Activist methods include civil disobedience and syndicalism.

weblinks

Undercurrents



Image from: [This indigenous political group called the... in Green Politics: An A-to-Z Guide](#)

Summary Article: **Activism, Social and Political**

From *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*

Activism is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine. The action might be door-to-door canvassing, alternative radio, public meetings, rallies, or fasting. The cause might be women's rights, opposition to a factory, or world peace. Activism has played a major role in ending slavery, challenging dictatorships, protecting workers from exploitation, protecting the environment, promoting equality for women, opposing racism, and many other important issues. Activism can also be used for aims such as attacking minorities or promoting war.

Activism has been present throughout history, in every sort of political system. Yet it has never received the same sort of attention from historians as conventional politics, with its attention to rulers, wars, elections, and empires. Activists are typically challengers to policies and practices, trying to achieve a social goal, not to obtain power themselves. Much activism operates behind the scenes.

There are many varieties of activism, from the face-to-face conversations to massive protests, from principled behavior to the unscrupulous, from polite requests to objectionable interference, and from peaceful protests to violent attacks. Activism is not well defined, so different people often have somewhat different ideas of what constitutes activism.

Activism is not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. It all depends on the cause and the actions, and a person's judgment of what is worthwhile. One person might say that a protest is a valuable defense of freedom, and another person might say that it is a dangerous attack on human rights.

Activism and Conventional Politics

Activism is action that goes beyond conventional politics, typically being more energetic, passionate, innovative, and committed. In systems of representative government, conventional politics includes election campaigning, voting, passing laws, and lobbying politicians. Action outside of these arenas includes neighborhood organizing, protest marches, and sit-ins. The boundary between activism and conventional politics is fuzzy and depends on the circumstances.

Action on behalf of special causes such as animal rights or anti-abortion goes beyond conventional politics. Sometimes, though, political parties are set up to promote special causes, such as labor parties in many countries in the 1800s and early 1900s or green parties since the 1960s. In this way,

activism becomes conventional politics. Often activism and conventional politics operate side by side, such as the labor movement—including unions and rank-and-file activities—alongside a labor party or the environmental and peace movements alongside a green party.

It is also possible to speak of activism inside an organization, such as a corporation, government department, political party, or labor union. Organizations have their usual ways of doing things, such as senior executives making decisions in corporations. If employees organize to challenge a decision or try to alter the usual decision-making process, this can be called activism, though it is much less visible than activism in public places.

What counts as activism depends on what is conventional. In societies in which free speech is respected and protected, making a posting on an e-mail list complaining about the government is a routine occurrence. But in a dictatorship, such a posting might be seen as subversive, and both the sender and the list manager might be punished. Similarly, when strikes are banned, going on strike is a more daring form of activism than when they are legal and routine.

Activism is typically undertaken by those with less power, because those with positions of power and influence can usually accomplish their aims using conventional means. But sometimes those in positions of power might be called activists, when they go beyond normal expectations, such as an “activist president” who pushes through an ambitious agenda or an “activist court” that interprets the law in new ways. Most of the entries in this encyclopedia, though, are about activism from below, often called grassroots activism.

Methods of Activism

The most common image of activism is a public protest, such as a rally, a march, or a public meeting. This is a useful starting place in looking at methods of activism. Researcher Gene Sharp divides the methods of nonviolent action into three main types. First are methods of protest and persuasion, such as speeches, slogans, banners, picketing, protest disrobings, vigils, singing, marches, and teach-ins. To count as nonviolent action—and activism—these need to go beyond conventional behavior. Singing in a choir is not activism, but singing as a protest, for example in a prison or in a church, certainly can be.

The second type of nonviolent action is noncooperation, such as religious excommunication, disobeying social customs, protest emigration, rent strike, producers’ boycott, withdrawal of bank deposits, international trade embargo, and a wide variety of strikes. The third type is intervention, including sit-ins, nonviolent occupations, guerrilla theater, fasting, and setting up alternative economic and political institutions. All of these, and more, can be methods of activism—of the nonviolent variety.

Another option is violent action, such as beatings, imprisonment, torture, killing, and bombing. Conventional violent action is carried out by police and military forces. Violent activism would be carried out by those not authorized to do so, who might be called freedom fighters or terrorists. However, this is usually called armed struggle rather than activism.

In between nonviolent action and armed struggle is violence against physical objects, of which sabotage is one variety. This can include damaging a pipeline, destroying genetically engineered crops, or defacing a website. These are activism if done on behalf of a cause. Like other forms of activism, sabotage can be praised or condemned. The Boston Tea Party, a signal event during the American Revolution, involved economic sabotage.

The methods of activism will continue to evolve along with political opportunity and developments in culture and technology. To challenge consumer culture, for example, a new practice has developed called culture jamming, involving a transformation of conventional symbols, such as those used in advertisements, to create a new, confronting message. Cell phone messaging systems are now used to organize rallies. Online activism, called cyberactivism, involves using the Internet to communicate and organize traditional actions and as a direct form of activism itself, such as bombarding a website or sending large files to slow down a system.

Groups and Movements

Many activists are members of groups, which can be small or large, local or global. By operating in groups, activists gain several advantages. They can undertake larger tasks, such as organizing a citywide campaign. They can benefit from specialization, such as when one person responds to queries, another sets up a website, another handles memberships, and yet another talks to the media.

Another vital function of groups is to provide mutual support. Many activists lose heart or burn out through constant struggle and slow progress. Working with others can give a feeling of solidarity and often leads to lasting friendships. Most people who join activist groups do so because they are invited by someone already involved. Groups serve personal and social purposes as well as getting tasks done.

A century ago, nearly all activist groups operated face to face, with coordination between groups via visits, the postal system, and public notices. The telephone allowed rapid coordination across greater distances, and the Internet has made it much easier to coordinate globally.

Activist groups, like groups of any kind, from families to corporations, can have problems, including miscommunication, personal animosities, and power struggles. Getting group members to work well together is vital. Skills like listening, summarizing, and conflict resolution are called maintenance functions, whereas skills for undertaking action outside the group are called task functions.

Many small activist groups are made up entirely of volunteers. Large groups often have some paid staff plus many volunteers. International activist organizations like Amnesty International or Friends of the Earth are made up of numerous local groups, with some paid staff in national or international offices.

Paid activists seldom receive a large salary, though there are exceptions. Because they are committed to a cause, activists are often willing to work at much lower wages than if they took a conventional job. The term *professional activist* can apply to a paid staff member but also—sometime pejoratively—to volunteers who spend so much time doing activism that they are as experienced as a full-time worker.

The easiest way to learn how to be an activist is to join a group and become involved. There are few courses in educational institutions about activism, and even fewer teaching practical skills. Some activist groups run training sessions for their members and others, but most learning occurs on a person-to-person basis, through direct instruction, learning by imitation, and learning by doing. This is supplemented by manuals on community organizing, campaigning, nonviolent action, and other skills, with an ever-growing amount of material available online.

Groups are the main way that activists are organized to get tasks done. In many cases, groups are part of what is called a social movement. A social movement typically includes many groups and individuals acting toward a common goal to change society in a particular way. A movement is broader than any single organization and it has a broader, less precise vision than most groups.

The peace movement, for example, includes a wide variety of groups, including local groups campaigning on a single issue such as against a particular war, national groups with an agenda such as nuclear disarmament, professional networks such as Physicians for Social Responsibility, and international organizations such as War Resisters' International. The peace movement also contains a diversity of general themes, such as opposition to wars and inhumane weapons.

Within any movement, there can be many different beliefs and emphases. Some people and groups in the peace movement oppose any involvement in war or war making, whereas others are primarily concerned about nuclear weapons, land mines, or a particular war.

Other social movements include the labor, feminist, environmental, gay and lesbian, animal rights, and disability movements. Movements provide an important context for activism in several ways. They constitute a network of individuals and groups that is a source of communication, advice, and inspiration. They provide a learning environment, with activists drawing on the experience of other groups to find out what works. And they provide a framework or perspective for understanding society, its problems, possible futures, and ways of bringing about change. This framework, or belief system, develops out of the experience of activists, combined with the ideas of writers and leaders, some who are part of the movement and some who are largely independent of it. For example, the feminist movement has supported activism through the network of individuals and groups, has fostered learning about tactics, and has offered an understanding of the problem of patriarchy through women sharing their experience and through feminist writers presenting ideas that illuminate and inspire their readers.

Most movements have activist and nonactivist aspects. The feminist movement, for example, has included plenty of activism, including confrontation and noncooperation with sexist practices. There are also many important parts of the movement that are less activist or nonactivist. Women's consciousness-raising groups—in which women share their experiences—were a key part of the second wave of the Western feminist movement, starting in the 1960s, but most of these groups did not engage in action. Similarly, liberal feminists who operated through the system by pushing for equal opportunity laws and procedures were at the less activist end of the spectrum, as were those who put all their energy into feminist scholarship.

This again raises the issue of the boundaries of what is called activism. Someone working on a campaign might spend time listening to the news, reading and sending e-mails, phoning others, participating in a meeting, and writing a grant proposal. None of this is out in public, such as joining a rally or blockade, but it is all an essential part of what makes such public events possible. It is useful to distinguish between "direct action" or "frontline action," in which people are putting their bodies on the line, and support work, which is usually behind the scenes. Without the support work, the frontline action could hardly occur. This is analogous to military forces: Only a few troops are engaged in fighting, with vastly more personnel involved in accounts, cooking, maintenance, and a host of other support activities.

Those involved in behind-the-scenes work, in support of a cause, can either be called activists or supporters or members of an activist group or movement. This is a matter of definition but has a wider significance. For many people who are concerned about the world's problems, and especially in social movement groups, there is status in being called an activist. This can lead to a valuing of dramatic and visible direct action and a corresponding devaluation of routine, less visible activity such as answering

correspondence or handling accounts. On the other hand, some people who take action do not think of themselves as activists: In their minds, they are simply doing what is necessary to address a pressing problem.

It is useful to think of an ecology of activism, in which a flower or fruit can only exist with the support of nutrients, roots, stems, pollinators, and sunlight. Analogously, effective direct action depends on prior learning, supportive group members, resources (including funds), and communication. Many people can contribute to making activism effective without necessarily being activists themselves: financial contributors, resource people, teachers, supportive friends and family members, and journalists, among others.



Source: Photo by dbking, Washington, DC.

There are some activists who operate on their own, largely or entirely independent of groups. They might produce their own leaflets and hold a single-person vigil outside an office. Such individuals, if campaigning on a relevant issue, could be considered part of a social movement. A few such individual activists take up issues that no one else is concerned about. Most activists find it much easier to be part of a group, but this is not an obligation.

Areas of Activism

Activism can be on behalf of a great many causes, such as labor, religious, or environmental goals. Some people associate activism with “progressive” causes that promote equality and the rights of those with less power, but activism can just as well be used to attack the weak. Tim Jordan usefully proposes three types of activism, oriented to the past, present, and future.

Past-oriented or reactionary activism seeks to protect the interests of those with more power, often at the expense of those who are weaker. Examples are men who assault gays, vigilantes against illegal immigration, and campaigners for aggressive wars.

Present-oriented activism is aimed at changing policies. This is also called *reformism*. Examples are campaigns for laws and regulations, such as on election financing, gun control, or whistleblower protection.

Future-oriented activism—called by Jordan “activism!” with an exclamation point—is about changing social relations, not just policies. Examples are greater equality in the family, worker participation in decision making, and treating animals as valuable. Most of the entries in this encyclopedia are about future-oriented activism.

The idea of the political left and right is often used to classify activism. It is most appropriately applied to labor (left) versus capital (right), but does not work so well as a way of classifying positions on other issues. The so-called new social movements—student, feminist, environmental, and others—that developed in the 1960s and thereafter do not comfortably fit within the left-right classification system.

Those on the left are often called progressives or radicals and those on the right conservatives or reactionaries. But if conservative means maintaining the status quo and reactionary means harking back to an earlier age, then movements do not always line up in a predictable way. For example, environmentalists campaigning against a waste dump or chemical factory are seeking to maintain the status quo in the face of industries trying to change it. Environmentalists seeking to return a region to earlier vegetation patterns, before human settlement, could be called radicals, because they are challenging the logic of industrial development, or reactionaries, because they want to re-create an earlier time.

It is possible to see activism as a spectrum from the local to the global, both geographically and in relation to the person. Local activism is often about protecting the quality of life of a family or small community, such as when local citizens campaign for better schools or hospitals or against a factory or freeway. This is sometimes disparagingly called NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) activism.

A broader focus brings concern for groups subject to disadvantage or discrimination, including women, ethnic minorities, the poor, and people with disabilities. Much activism is carried out by people in these groups, supported by some from more privileged groups. For example, some men are pro-feminist activists and some able-bodied people advocate on behalf of those with disabilities.

Traditionally, most activism within a country focused on issues affecting that country. But there is an increasing orientation to issues transcending national borders. Sometimes this is because the issues are global, such as climate change. But in many cases, it is simply because the scope of concern has widened. Torture, a problem in numerous countries, is challenged by human rights groups, often from outside the country where torture takes place.

Local and global forms of activism sometimes pull in opposite directions but can be mutually supportive. For example, NIMBY opposition to a nuclear waste repository assists, and is assisted by, the global antinuclear movement.

Traditionally, most activism focused on humans. The animal rights and environmental movements have broadened the area of concern beyond humans to other forms of life and even to inorganic nature. In the future, the boundaries of activism will continue to expand to domains that are now hardly recognized, including human technological creations.

The domain of activism has also expanded inward, from the public sphere into personal and private realms. Examples include sexual harassment, bullying, and domestic violence. These often take place between individuals, out of the public eye. Activism has been central to the response, in two ways. First, activists have identified these as social problems and have campaigned to raise awareness about them. These efforts sometimes have led to laws and procedures being introduced. Second, individuals

and small groups have developed techniques to deter and challenge sexual harassers, bullies, and batterers.

Leaders

Leaders play an important role in activist groups and movements. They can play a variety of roles; for example, as figureheads, spokespeople, role models, strategists, and theorists. A few activist leaders become famous. Probably the two most famous activists in the 20th century who did not become heads of state are Mohandas Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement from 1915 until independence in 1947, and Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the U.S. civil rights movement from the late 1950s until his death in 1968. But few activist leaders are as well known as presidents, prime ministers, or dictators.

Activist leaders are important both externally and internally. To the wider public, they are symbols of social concern. Due to their formal position in an organization or to their personal visibility, they receive disproportionate media attention. Inside movements, charismatic leaders can attract and retain members and hold a group together. Wise leaders can give guidance on strategies and internal dynamics. Leaders often come under attack by opposition forces: Discrediting a leader is a way of discrediting an entire movement.

Leaders can also be a source of tension within movements. Some leaders develop their own agendas that clash with the desires of members. Leaders can be co-opted by their opponents, for example, by being given a position in government or industry. The importance of activist leaders is reflected in this encyclopedia, with entries for individuals such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Rosa Parks. Learning about a leader is a useful entry point for learning about an entire movement.

Nevertheless, focusing on leaders can be somewhat misleading, because most activism is a collective activity. Leaders would not exist except for the quiet, unheralded efforts of hundreds of ordinary activists. Furthermore, in some groups and movements, there is a commitment to sharing power and an opposition to formal hierarchy. Such groups might adopt consensus decision making and encourage everyone to develop a range of skills and play a variety of roles. Leadership still exists in such groups, but it is leadership based on contributions and respect, not formal roles.

Much of the feminist movement operates this way. There are certainly quite a number of prominent feminists, but they are more commonly writers and commentators than leaders of activist groups. This can be contrasted with political groups with official leaders. For example, Nelson Mandela was the leader of the African National Congress in South Africa, an activist political movement, and later became head of state, entering the formal political system, where he achieved vastly greater visibility.

Most activist movements contain a combination of formal structure and egalitarian dynamics. In writings about activist movements, it is worth remembering that there is usually much more attention to formal structures and leaders than to ordinary activists and everyday activities.

Theory

Activism, despite its importance historically and in struggles every day, has received relatively little attention from scholars. Most history is written about powerful and prominent people and about official systems and activities, such as governments, elections, militaries, and wars. Even when the focus is on a social problem, such as slavery, there is consideration attention to official actions, such as President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The vast amount of individual and small-group activism may be

given only a brief discussion or be entirely ignored.

News reports give a distorted picture of activism, with vastly more coverage of violence than peaceful activities. In reporting on Israel and Palestine, there is extensive coverage of suicide bombings but hardly any mention of the great amount of nonviolent activism that occurs all the time by both Israelis and Palestinians.

The research most relevant to activism is about social movements. As well as telling the stories of movements, researchers have looked at social structures that influence their origins and survival, resources that movements can use, political opportunities that they can take up, and systems of meaning that enable them to get their message across. However, little of the research on social movements tells much about what activists do and how they can do it better. Few activists pay much attention to research on social movements, because so little is oriented to their practical concerns. In addition, most scholarly research is written in a style that is not attractive to activists.

Far more relevant to activists are manuals that give advice on community organizing, analyzing power structures, group dynamics, decision making, fundraising, and conflict resolution. An example is Coover, Deacon, Esser, and Moore's *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*, widely used in nonviolent action training in several countries.

Many activists learn about issues—corporate globalization, genetic engineering, or whatever—in a manner analogous to grassroots educator Paulo Freire's method of teaching reading and writing through politically charged words. Activists learn what they can about issues so they can be effective in their actions, and they take action because of what they have learned about issues.

Activists tend to draw on whatever information is useful for their immediate practical purposes. If the problem is homelessness, then they want information about the local situation and what is effective for dealing with it. At the same time, many activists are inspired by eloquent writers.

One of the major interactions between academia and activism is via individuals who are involved in both, including students and academics. These individuals provide a bridge for taking ideas from activism into theory and vice versa.

Activist Trajectories

In parallel with activism are debates about activism. If a particular form of action alienates too many people, then it is hardly worth doing. Therefore, convincing people that forms of action are acceptable is a key part of making activism viable. Debates about activism take place in the media, in everyday conversations, and not least among activists themselves.

Individuals can enter and exit activist roles in a variety of ways. Some begin with a small involvement, such as helping with a street stall or attending a public meeting, and gradually become more engaged over the years, perhaps becoming regular participants or even full-time activists. Others become heavily involved very quickly but drop out of activism due to burnout or other commitments.

It is difficult to maintain a high level of activism in addition to other major commitments, especially a conventional job and a family. Some sorts of activism—crewing on a peace voyage or attending a vigil lasting weeks—are virtually impossible for those with heavy family or job commitments, so it is easier for students or retired people to participate. One of the challenging tasks for social movements is to develop campaigns that allow many people to participate, not just those able to drop all other

commitments.

Just like individuals, social movements go through cycles, though there is no fixed pattern. Movements sometimes start with a surge of innovative action, as many people join, attracted by the exciting feeling of change and making a difference. After the first several years, though, the initial enthusiasm can decline, media attention fades, and the movement appears to lose momentum. Activism can become routine, like ritual May Day marches organized by the labor movement.

Some movements fade away entirely. Others are institutionalized; that is, their purposes are incorporated in formal systems, such as welfare services or equal opportunity offices. In these cases, some former activists may become leading officials in the system. There are also movements that maintain their levels of activism over many years or decades, continuing to innovate and attract new members.

The peace movement has followed a pattern of rapid expansion and decline. For example, the movement against nuclear weapons surged in the late 1950s and faded away in the early 1960s; then in the 1980s, it surged and declined again. There are some antinuclear activists who continue even when the movement is at a low level, but the pattern is one of boom and bust. There is little institutionalization of peace movement agendas; for example, there are few government disarmament departments.

In contrast, the environmental movement has maintained a more consistent level of activism, with a variety of groups that attract members and support. The mix of urgent environmental issues can change—from pesticides to nuclear power to climate change—but the level of involvement has not varied dramatically. Environmental agendas have been institutionalized, with government environment departments and industries adopting environmental programs.

The Future of Activism

It is safe to predict that activism will continue, both with current activist campaigns and branching out into new issues and using new tactics. Activism may decline when institutionalization is seen to address social problems, but new problems keep being brought to attention. Furthermore, some old issues reappear. For example, slavery was thought to have been abolished in the 1800s, but today it occurs in new forms—and there is a contemporary anti-slavery movement.

There are two important reasons why activism is likely to expand and become more sophisticated. First, activists learn from and are inspired by each other; the amount of information available about activism is dramatically increasing, thus laying the groundwork for further activism. Second, people are becoming better educated and less acquiescent to authority, and therefore better able to judge when systems are not working and willing to take action themselves.

Today's political systems of representative government are themselves the outcome of previous activism. If these systems were fully responsive to everyone's needs, there would be no need for activism, but this possibility seems remote. For political systems to co-opt activism, activism would need to become part of the system, with techniques such as strikes, boycotts, and sit-ins becoming part of the normal political process—a prospect as radical today as voting was in the 1700s. When that happens, new forms of activism will arise, challenging the injustices of whatever system is in place.

See also

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