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# Commentary on Hardy Merriman The trifecta of civil resistance: unity, planning, discipline

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**Discipline is a key problem in the organization of mass actions of civil disobedience. Some may even call it a paradox that individualistic "disobedient" protesters would discipline themselves in such actions, but experience shows that exactly this is happening. I would like to give three examples from the Anti-Nuclear power movement in Germany, who organized mass actions with thousands of participants to blockade the (Castor) nuclear waste transports to "Gorleben".**

In the mid nineties "X-Tausendmalquer" (X-thousands blockade) was founded to organize mass sitting blockades against the Castor. To overcome the problem that many people were ready to protest & blockade but in the decisive moment would not dare to sit on the street, they created a very transparent and open structure, defining an "action consensus", asked thousands of people to sign it in advance, organized trainings far in advance and directly before the action, saw that people were organized in affinity groups, set up a speaker council etc. Since then many thousands of protesters took place in these blockades. The largest blockades combining up to 4-5000 people. Since more and more people (and also the police) understand and adopt to the concept, such actions now require far less preparation. In 2010 for example another group (Widersetzen) of just 15 persons was able to organize a sitting kade with up to 5000 people, and as the organizers were absolutely knocked out by the success, the participants filled the organizational gaps by own initiated speaker councils etc...

The five finger strategy was developed as a tool to overcome police chains (as far as I know it was first tried 1997 also by X-Tausendmalquer to bring its thousands of blockaders to the railroadtracks). Its main idea is to spread the protesters in a way that they meet the police chain not on one point, where the police can concentrate their forces, but along a long area, so that the police chain has to thin out and the protesters can just walk through the gaps in the chain. To reach this aim the affinity groups are divided into several fingers (military people might call them brigades) and follow leading "flags". Protesters avoid to run, but walk in a firm and decisive way, with more experienced groups walking in the front line to clear the path (either by occupying the policemen's attention and letting themselves be arrested, since each policeman can only hold one person at a time new gaps open up and/or by quickly moving through the gaps, until the bulk of protesters are behind the chain and the police has to give up.). Since 1997 the strategy is working better and better and now many groups are even using it to flow through police chains in urban areas, where chains are tighter and gaps are smaller. Under these circumstances success is not guaranteed, but the discipline of the activists always prevented escalation.

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After these strategies and experiences had been spread to other movements and successfully used in the blockades of the G8 summit and of local Nazi-marches, in November 2010 "Castor? Schottern!" went a step further and organized a mass sabotage action, bringing thousands of people (including many activists from so called "autonoms" or "black block") to the railway track to move away the stones under the tracks. The police had criminalized the action from its first announcement and attacked the protesters on sight with brute force, thereby preventing the undermining of the tracks. But even as the main goal of the action wasn't reached, the protesters acted within their action consensus and remained peaceful, moving to the tracks again and again, being beaten, pushed and hit by pepper spray again and again. I am sure the next time will be even better organized...

Concluding these experiences I would say that discipline follows strategy and preparation. The key to reaching discipline in individualistic societies is (a) the creation of a very transparent and clear action, where every participant understands what he/she needs to do (and what she should not do !) to make the action a success and (b) the self organization of the mass of protesters in small affinity groups (and speakers councils) to allow the self-organization (e.g. making of group decisions) of the masses.

*Post-scriptum :*

<https://www.x-tausendmalquer.de/>

[www.widersetzen.de/](http://www.widersetzen.de/)