Introduction

I've spent the last fifteen years heading the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategy (CANVAS), an NGO that assists prodemocracy activists in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and also parts of the former Soviet Union.[1] For over two decades I have been an advocate for democracy and human rights. Since my freshman year at Belgrade University, as I have led struggles for democracy, I've been under surveillance, arrested, even beaten up. I've also traveled the world to train prodemocracy activists, written books, lectured internationally, and taught students on the topic.

I used to think I'd become famous for my music, not for activism. When I was just twenty, I released my first album with the goth rock band BAAL. I played bass guitar and I was pretty good. We had a following. But then it became too hard to ignore what was happening in my country. The next

thing I knew I was part of a student-led group that effectively took down Slobodan Milošević. Well, actually, that's not exactly right. We didn't just accidentally overthrow a dictator. We used unique and specific tactics. Over the years, as I've worked with activists across the globe, I've refined my approach to the most effective techniques for overthrowing autocrats.

I've had many thrilling experiences helping nonviolent shakers and shapers push for positive social change. In this process of turning my personal experiences into strategies and tactics I can teach others, I have come to realize that successful nonviolent movements tend to share a common ingredient: they use *dilemma actions* that force those in power into a lose-lose situation. In other words, if you can trap those in power in an irresolvable dilemma, the action is more likely to accomplish its goals. Those goals might include recruiting more supporters, spreading the movement's vision, attracting attention to the cause, pressuring unjust leaders to cede power, or advancing democracy. I realized that if I could explain how, why, and to what extent dilemma actions succeed in advancing democracy, I could help activist groups become far more effective—regardless of whether they were planning their next move in a café in Cairo or in a home office in New York City.

But before I explain all my goals for this project, let's take a moment and play one of my favorite games. It's called "Pretend Police." It's fun. Here goes. Pretend you're the police in

Ankara, Turkey. A few days ago, a couple of security guards in one of the busiest subway stations in town spotted a couple making out on the platform. Being strict Muslims, the guards were annoyed by such immodest behavior in public, so they did the only thing they could really do, which was get on the subway's PA system and ask all passengers to behave themselves and stop kissing each other. Because everyone in Ankara has smartphones, the incident reached the press within minutes; by the afternoon, politicians opposed to the ruling Islamist-based party realized that they had a golden egg in their hands. They encouraged their supporters to stage huge demonstrations to protest this silly anti-smooching bias.

This is where you come in. On Saturday, the day of the demonstration, you show up in uniform, baton at hand, ready to keep the peace. Walking into the subway station, you see more than a hundred young men and women chanting antigovernment slogans and provoking your colleagues. Someone shoves someone. Someone loses their cool. Soon it's a full-blown riot.

If you're seriously playing along, it's probably not hard to figure out what to do. You're a police officer, and you've probably spent a whole week at the academy training for situations just like this. It's what police all over the world do. You put on your riot gear, you move in, you get in formation, and you start to thump your baton on your shield to intimidate the crowd. You probably don't feel too bad about it, either.

You're only doing your job, protecting yourself and your fellow cops. It takes you an hour, maybe two, before thirty or forty of the protesters are in jail, ten or twenty are in the hospital, and the rest have run away. You return to the precinct house, drink a coffee with your buddies, and go to bed feeling content with a day's work.

That was easy. Now, let's play again.

It's Saturday morning. You arrive at the subway station. There are more than a hundred people there, protesting against the censorious announcement from the day before. But they're not saying anything against the government. They're not shouting or chanting. They're kissing each other loudly, making those gross slurpy sounds nobody likes, drooling and giggling. There are almost no signs to be seen, but the ones you do notice have little pink hearts on them and read "Kiss Me" or "Free Hugs." The women are in short-sleeved, low-cut blouses. The men have their button-downs on. No one seems to notice you—they're too busy holding each other's heads as they suck face.

Now what? Go ahead and game it out if you'd like, but let me save you the trouble. The answer is that there's nothing you can do. It's not only that the amorous demonstrators aren't breaking any laws; it's also that their attitude makes a world of difference. If you're a cop, you spend a lot of time thinking about how to deal with people who are violent. But nothing in your training prepares you for dealing with people who are funny and peaceful.

The story I have just told you really did happen in Turkey in May 2013. And it is an example of what we might call an *accidental* dilemma action. It was a protest that worked because the protesters instinctively understood that it would be effective. They lucked out. But what would have happened if they had thought through their tactic as part of a well-understood strategy? What if the kissing—and putting the police force in an irresolvable dilemma—had been planned from the start? Moreover, how can we ensure this kind of success for other nonviolent activists who want to strengthen democracy?

Turning Luck into a Strategy

Examples of accidental dilemma actions abound. Most smart activists know that if they can find a peaceful, creative way to put an authority in a tight spot, they will help their cause. But what would happen if we took these accidents and made them deliberate, well-constructed strategies tailored for a specific context? It might help even more.

Activists who have implemented dilemma actions know that success requires paying attention to several critical elements. You have to know how the repressive power works, and you have to know what will win the public over. Public outcry supporting your movement is critical.

This is what makes a dilemma action different from your average nonviolent protest—and generally more successful than other forms of nonviolent resistance. Not all types of nonviolent resistance force a response; if the authorities can ignore you, you haven't created a dilemma action. So, depending on the level of restrictions in your country and the number of people you draw to your vigil, rally, or march, you might put a lot of effort into something that the authorities can just blow off. Other times the authorities will shut your protest down, but no one will care. That happens when you haven't won over the public. Worst of all, a protest not crafted with public opinion in mind can backfire for the movement—leaving the public angry and irritated at the protesters. So, if you block a road in the middle of rush hour and keep a lot of average folks from getting to work, and then you get removed by the police, the public may actually be on the police's side.

This is what makes a dilemma action different from your average nonviolent protest. Our 2007 CANVAS Core Curriculum states, "Dilemma actions are designed to create a 'response dilemma' or 'lose-lose' situation for public authorities by forcing them to either concede some public space to protesters or make themselves look absurd or heavy-handed by acting against the protest."[2] Dilemma actions—as part of a structured, strategic direct action—are a valuable component of effective nonviolent struggle. And humorous ones, or laughtivism, in particular, can be even more successful

in advancing particular goals than nonviolent resistance in general. This route offers you great opportunities for success.

I have spent a lot of time learning about dilemma actions worldwide through my work at CANVAS, the organization we founded after our Serbian movement's success went global. With colleagues, I have spent over fifteen years training and consulting with democracy and human rights defenders from across the globe. And yes, very often part of this training process is focused on how to implement creative tactics that include a dilemma element and a dose of humor for the direct action my fellow activists are planning to perform.

Receiving a Brown Medal for Democracy moved this passion to a new gear. In January 2020, I teamed up with my colleague and friend, Sophia McClennen, a global expert on political satire. We assembled a team of researchers to put dilemma actions under a microscope and test our concept within a more rigorous, data-based, academic foundation.[3] My personal experience had shown me that, as a tool, dilemma actions can and do make a difference for democracy, but what would happen, we wondered, if we could prove it? This essay attempts an answer, and in the process, you'll read about the origins, nature, background, use, and effects of dilemma actions. We pull results from analyzing forty-four case studies of a century's worth of dilemma actions. We selected such a geographically and temporally wide series of examples so that we could analyze how dilemma actions

work across diverse historical and cultural contexts. As you read this, we'll explain why and how dilemma actions work. And you'll learn how to think like an effective organizer. If you already are an organizer, you'll learn how to design actions that are fun, funny, and effective.

A Dilemma for Every Aspiring Autocrat

Our research, as well as the world arena in which the struggle for democracy takes place, is not limited to autocracies. It is no small paradox that Western democracies long considered at "low risk" for an erosion of democratic institutions now require new and vigorous protection. We have seemed to forget President's Reagan words, "Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction."[4] Of course, pushing a warmongering autocrat out of power is different from defending established democracies that have recently come under threat. But the risks for democracy remain real and global. We are currently witnessing democratic backsliding in countries that are relative newcomers to the European Union, including Poland and Hungary, which joined the EU in 2004. Human rights are also threatened in established "traditional" democracies like France, the United States, and the United Kingdom as immigrants and refugees have been denied basic rights and protections. The rising tide of illiberalism, racism, and

xenophobia is a grave concern from Cape Town and New Delhi to Paris and Minneapolis.

When seeking to end any dictatorship anywhere, the task is to erode the tools and institutions that serve the autocrat who abuses power. Indeed, the goal is to upend the status quo. *Defending* democracy, however, means finding ways to defend democratic institutions and principles from those who want to undermine them, even if they're elected officials. It means creating leverage to block governments or political forces that seek to dismantle the pillars of democracy—such as an independent judiciary, parliamentary oversight, minority rights, and a free press. This is why we'll look at many examples of dilemma actions coming from countries with developed democratic traditions and institutions, including Germany, Finland, Canada, Spain, and the United States.

Dilemma actions are an effective tool for a range of situations. They have been used to advance democracy, human rights, and accountability struggles across the globe. They break down fear and apathy and offer the public an energizing way to resist oppressive authority. They can shift public narratives of mighty opponents from "scary and powerful" to "weak and laughable." They also work as a recruiting tool for new members because they show the public that engaging in nonviolent resistance can be fun and satisfying. They lead to media coverage and social media awareness because these tactics make for entertaining stories—authoritarians look

foolish and the protesters look creative, cool, and unafraid. Dilemma actions succeed: they often lead to social change and advances in democracy. And, even more important, groups that engage in dilemma actions inspire others, leading to replication of their tactics, adjusted for different contexts and types of struggles.

But to what extent? Are there examples of times when a group succeeded in only some of these outcomes? What happened when they failed? As we think about nonviolent ways to advocate for a future we want to live in, it helps to learn from the past. This essay's goal is to offer more specific accounts of model dilemma actions and to assess their success across a range of metrics. We know that some of you may be reading about dilemma actions for the first time, and we want you most of all to become familiar with the idea by reading a lot of clever examples and learning the basics of how they work. But if you are interested in having a deeper understanding of dilemma actions, whether to advance your activism or your understanding of nonviolent resistance, at the end we talk briefly about how some of these metrics support or impede one another. For instance, did some examples attract new supporters and media attention but fail in other ways? Did others succeed in ousting an autocrat but only at the expense of violent reprisals for the movement's leaders? Do dilemma actions that include elements of humor and irony—what we call *laughtivism*—have a higher success rate? Does laughing at dictators deflate their power?

We argue that dilemma actions, performed by nonviolent movements around the world in a wide variety of circumstances, are a valuable component of successful nonviolent struggle. They produce outsized benefits for the practitioners, catch their opponents off guard, and even trigger self-harming responses from opposing stakeholders. Furthermore, dilemma actions— especially when they include humor—can counteract fear and apathy, two underestimated enemies of reform. Fear and apathy drive the status quo and block positive social change in any society that hopes for a better future. But humor melts fear and earns goodwill, often adding a "cool factor" to activism that draws support.