

## The Value of Techniques

BRIAN MARTIN

**T**echniques are ways of doing things. There are techniques involved in organising a rally, designing a building and washing the dishes.

In promoting social alternatives, the usual focus is on problems, solutions, policies, visions and strategies — with little attention to techniques. The focus is on what to do, with how to do it being a matter of routine detail. However, techniques shouldn't be neglected. They are an integral part of the alternative being pursued.

Consider the question of how to oppose oppression and repression. Activists following the tradition of Gandhi have long argued that actions should reflect the goals, so if the goal is a peaceful society, then violence should be avoided in trying to achieve it. In other words, the means should be compatible with the ends or, in a tighter relationship, the means should embody the ends. How something is done, namely the techniques used, should be based on the same principles as the goals being pursued.

Techniques are everywhere and need to be part of the alternative. This applies to the language of opposing repression, the way meetings are organised, the way activists relate to each other and many other areas.

Scholars have neglected the study of techniques. It is far more prestigious to investigate social structures, to study why things are the way they are. Studying theory is the way scholars distinguish themselves from practitioners, who usually know far more about how to do things. Furthermore, scholars usually look at things from the outside, as observers looking in, rather than from the point of view of a practitioner trying to get things done. For example, there is a lot of research on social movements, but not much of it is useful to activists. Quite a bit of the research looks at what happens to movements and why; very little of it looks at the strategic choices facing movements and how they can more effectively achieve their ends.

Practitioners also at times have neglected the examination of techniques. Those who become adept at doing things often do so at an intuitive level: their practical knowledge is tacit rather than explicit. This may be because practical knowledge is not valued as much as knowledge about

issues. Being able to articulate why something is worthwhile is a more common conversation topic than how to do it.

Activists in social movements have a wealth of practical skills in organising events and interacting with people, but these skills are seldom the focus of attention. Instead, activists are more likely to talk about issues and personalities. Those with most experience in thinking strategically are likely to talk more about strategy than about the practicalities of carrying it out. The doing may be taken for granted.

The articles in this themed section are about techniques for social change, covering diverse topics.

- Sharon Callaghan on behind-the-scenes work in activism
- Lyn Carson on running a World Café
- Ian Miles on negotiating needs in activism
- Colin Salter on selecting and using cybertechniques
- Kathryn Flynn on leaking of information
- J K Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink on using diverse economy framing
- Andrew Monk on promoting organic standards
- Sandrine Thérèse on dissident scientists maintaining their reputations

How to do something is often best learned by doing it. The next best option is seeing it done. However, in *Social Alternatives* we're restricted to text, so conveying how something is done is assisted by practical examples. I asked the contributors to illustrate the use of techniques using an extended case study. Readers are then able to generalise for themselves about using the techniques for other sorts of situations, including ones the authors never thought of.

These articles show the value of looking at techniques. Looking closely at how to do things inevitably raises questions about the articulation of methods and goals, the

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old question of means and ends. I hope these explorations will encourage others to give more attention to the how of social alternatives.

### The editing process

I sent prospective authors a standard framework for structuring articles in this themed section. Authors sent their initial drafts to me and I offered comments. After making revisions based on my comments, authors sent their papers to other contributors for comment. After further revisions based on feedback received, they sent their revised articles to me. I sent the entire group of articles to two external reviewers, Jørgen Johansen and Liam Phelan, who each offered numerous constructive comments on each article and on the collection as a whole. After making changes in response to the referees' comments, authors again sent their articles to me, and I went through them a final time, attending to all sorts of details.

I thank the reviewers Jørgen Johansen and Liam Phelan for being so prompt and helpful and each of the authors for persevering through a long journey.

### Author

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong and author of many books and articles on dissent, nonviolence, scientific controversies, democracy and other topics.

## Guest Editor for Poetry

JOHN KNIGHT

John Knight is founder and manager of *Post Pressed* ([www.postpressed.com.au](http://www.postpressed.com.au)), an indie publisher of academic books, verse and fine arts since 1995. An accomplished and internationally recognised haïjin, he is a foundation editor of *Paper Wasp*, an Australian journal of haiku. He also served as poetry editor of *Scope* and *Social Alternatives* for a number of years. His published verse includes *Wattle Winds: an Australian haiku sequence* (Paper Wasp, 1993), *From Derrida to Sara Lee* (Metro Arts, 1994), *Extracts from the Jerusalem Archives* (Sweetwater Press, 1997), *big man catching a small wave* (Post Pressed, 2006) and *Letters from the Asylum* (Sudden Valley Press, 2009). In a previous life he was an Associate Professor in The School of Education, The University of Queensland, with a particular interest in policy studies and social and literary theory. Retreaded after his retirement, he has worked in a mentoring relationship with doctoral students at QUT and elsewhere. Now 75, he is still writing verse and the occasional academic paper.

### From Derrida to Sara Lee

in the courtyard  
marianne dissects derrida

beneath her chair  
rosie the dog licks the plate clean  
and the baby is not talking

behind us coffee  
and what's left of the croissants

the poem is a pain in my chest  
and the playing fountain  
hides five golden fish

outside a philodendrum is  
climbing the mango  
and round the porch  
some violets grow

JOHN KNIGHT,  
MT. GRAVATT, QLD

### Blind Worm and Greedy Time's Decay

[1979 Oliver William Knight]

I scraped the stubborn blade  
across my father's face  
at his request. My sister's hair  
fell on his chest. My mother  
held his hand and willed him life.  
'I want to wee,' he whispered half-asleep.

[1993 Blanche Marybelle Thirza Knight]

Blind worm and greedy time's decay  
may waste that shrivelled womb and foul  
the withered breast. Where I once sucked,  
and on the arm that cradled me  
vile cankers spread. But the raven hair  
you shook out for his pleasuring  
endures, and the plain ring on your finger.

JOHN KNIGHT,  
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