

Non-Cooperation as a One-on-One Strategy

Written by Wendy McElroy.

Non-cooperation is most often associated with social movements but it can function on the individual level to preserve personal freedom. A person is as free as his ability to say “no.” But criminals who would compel compliance often respond with punishment backed up by force. It is far from clear how an individual should react to the threat of force because circumstances vary from person to person. A bachelor might be willing to say “no” and be imprisoned for doing so; a family man might not be willing to deprive his children of his income. For the family man, a better alternative might be a display of consent that is backed by the reality of non-cooperation.

This display is not “deceit” in the normal sense of the word. Murray Rothbard explained in *Ethics of Liberty*, “Lying to the State...becomes a fortiori morally legitimate. Just as no one is morally required to answer a robber truthfully when he asks if there are any valuables in one’s house, so no one can be morally required to answer truthfully similar questions asked by the State, e.g., when filling out income tax returns.” If you were a Jew in Nazi Germany, would honesty compel you to tell the Gestapo where your family was hiding? Lie in words or in deeds to whomever is using force against you; they have forfeited the moral ‘right’ to the truth. Beside which, no one has a right to demand information from you.

But try to lie in a manner that prevents the criminal from discovering your duplicity. The goal of non-cooperation is to deprive the state of the benefits of aggressing while experiencing as little backlash as possible. Some forms of non-cooperation can be as almost effective as saying “no” and yet they carry far less risk of punishment. Other forms involve altogether avoiding situations that demand obedience and so avoiding the need to say “no.”

One-on-one non-cooperation with the state

The following tactics are a sampling of how to non-cooperate with agents of the state who knock on your door.

Slow and obstructive obedience. This is the act of obeying a law or a demand as slowly as possible and with an utter lack of thoroughness. For example, paperwork can be submitted at the last moment or later (depending on the penalty), and necessary information can be omitted or filled into the wrong blank. If the paperwork has a hard deadline, then use the system against itself to apply for as many extensions as possible. Be as unhelpful as possible. Purposefully but plausibly misunderstand an authority’s explanation of what is expected of you. Or politely ask to see the legal authority upon which a demand is being

made; state your reason as a desire to be absolutely certain that you are in 100% compliance.

Withhold information. Never offer information over and above what is necessary to avoid punishment. There is or should be no positive obligation to give information to anyone but, if penalties are threatened, various strategies could be useful. For example, you should officially forget the answers you know to many of the questions you are asked. If an authority wants to know about your neighbor's habits, then simply do not recall the information. Or give misleading answers along the lines of "I'm not sure but I think X lives in the next town over" when you know X lives 5 blocks away. Act confused. Be ignorant. Appear stupid.

Provide inadequate obedience. If the state requires you to perform a service, then do so in a manner that does not rise to the state's standards. For example, if you are drafted into jury duty and don't want to refuse outright, then give 'wrong' replies to the screening questions that will be asked by lawyers on both sides. If the witnesses in a case are likely to be police officers, then explain the difficulty you have in believing anything the police say because there are so many news stories of officers lying, being brutal and fabricating evidence. If the case revolves around psychiatric testimony, then explain your belief that psychiatry is junk science.

Render only supervised obedience. When an authority figure is present, obey. When he is absent, then you do as you peacefully please. A common example of "supervised obedience" occurs in occupied countries in which the native population obeys the orders of a foreign occupier only as long as soldiers are present. Today, the American state is occupying power in its own land. Another example, one with which most people are familiar, is obeying the speed limit. Drivers slow down to the legal limit when they see a police car poised on the side of the road; a mile or so later, drivers resume the higher speed.

Display false obedience. This occurs when a person pretends to obey but acts in a manner that constitutes thinly veiled disobedience. An example is a newspaper that the state declares to be seditious. An editor may may obediently close his doors only to reopen them to publish a newly-named paper with an altered appearance but with the same content.

Non-cooperate by avoiding the state

The following tactics are a sampling of how to non-cooperate with the state by avoiding the need to confront the issue of obedience.

Withdraw from activities for which obedience is required. There are certain activities that you know beforehand will require your active obedience. Airplane travel is one of them. Buying a plane ticket notifies the TSA to do a prescreening of public records on your

personal and professional life. Walking into an airport invites questioning and screening by law enforcement. It involves lining up like cattle to obediently have your rights violated, and a prudent person will submit without raising a complaint or expressing a 'bad' attitude. If it is feasible for you to travel by an alternate means, then do so.

Withdraw from voluntary government institutions. Participating in many government institutions is optional in that there is no legal penalty for refusing to do so. A classic example is the public school system. If you enroll your children in the public schools rather than home schooling them, then you are subjecting not only your children but yourself to the rules of that system. Parents are subject to a wide range of sanctions for issues ranging from truancy to packing peanut butter sandwiches for lunch. Indeed, a child's truancy can lead to the parent being imprisoned. Eschew government 'services' if possible.

Try to avoid the mechanisms of the state in your daily life. By mechanism, I mean an established process by which something takes place. The use of money is an example; it is the established state process by which goods are acquired. An effective form of non-cooperation is to minimize the use of state-issued money in preference to barter, alternate currencies or other forms of counter-economic trade. This minimizes the myriad intrusions of the state that revolve around the use of money, banks and officially sanctioned investments. There can be no better place to start learning the art of such avoidance than Samuel E. Konkin III's presentation of counter-economics in his work *New Libertarian Manifesto*.

Non-cooperation is a vital aspect of active non-violent resistance. This is a vast, dynamic and evolving field. For people who wish to live as state-free as possible with as little risk as feasible, passive non-cooperation offers one of the best methods to avoid the wrath of the state while embracing personal freedom.