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## **Rebellion Management Theory**

Review of ‘The art of insubordination:  
How to dissent & defy effectively’  
by Todd B. Kashdan

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1,592 words of texts  
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*Insurrection is an art, and like all arts has its own laws.* – Leon Trotsky

*Mom. Cringe.* – White Lotus

The sciences, and psychology is no exception, pose questions to nature and seek to move toward increasingly accurate and efficient models of reality (Popper, 1972). Science is fruitful when it offers effective applications. We can use what we have learned to craft interventions to get what we want. Psychological science has made many contributions to human welfare, education, therapy, the management of people, among other things (Forgas et al. 2020). These improvements do not require the assumption that human nature is fundamentally flawed. Human nature just is, and yet we might tweak things to our advantage. We are perfect the way we are, and we could use a little improvement. This is the Zen of psychology.

*The art of insubordination: How do dissent & defy effectively* is presented as a cook-and handbook intended to promote an attitude of resistance to society’s “unhelpful norms” (p. IX) and to provide insight into the skills that enable the “principled insubordinate” to prevail. Such an attitude, at least if shared by many, we are told, can deliver technological progress, individual happiness, and social harmony. Why is a revolution of insubordination necessary? In psychology, a narrative of original sin and redemption is not uncommon, and it is most evident in the rhetoric of bias and error (Krueger & Funder, 2004; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Wikipedia, the author reports, lists over 100 psychological biases. This deluge of irrationality is critical to the narrative because now we can ask what if all these biases were eradicated. Many debiasing researchers have cut their teeth on this challenge – and broke a few – only to learn that many biases are features of a well-honed system (Krueger & Massey,

2009). Is an end run around the business of debiasing possible, such that “Principled insubordination neutralizes our cognitive biases” (p. 44)?

How might this be accomplished? Principled insubordination, we are told, promotes creativity, curiosity, and well-being. We are left wondering, however, if there are things that principled insubordination cannot accomplish. If it is the source of all that is good, beautiful, and true, we must rush to master and apply it. Why haven’t we? Perhaps we haven’t because many social norms have their uses (Sunstein, 2019). Majority opinions are often correct (Hastie & Kameda, 2005), and traditions can be empowering (Bicchieri, 2005; reviewed by Krueger, 2006). False majority opinions and oppressive traditions are – by definition – a problem, but the question is *which* social norms are false or oppressive and how we know the difference. Why might we want to assume that with all the cognitive biases infecting the ordinary mind, people are adept at telling insubordination-worthy social norms from beneficent ones? Assuming that people can, at least some of the time, tell the difference, are they still flawed by being overall too timid or too complacent with what is familiar?

Some people do not lack courage. “A tribe of heroic bias bashers live among us” (p. 46), the author declares and reviews the works of some exemplary rebels, innovators, and catalysts of social change. An ideal type of rebel is Charles Darwin, who outmaneuvered the Church of England as well as his competitor Alfred Russell Wallace. Darwin, it seems, had mastered *The Art of Principled Insubordination* without having read it. Other historical thinkers were less fortunate. We read that al-Jāhiz was executed for his heretical ideas. although according to another tradition he died a scholar’s death when a pile of books fell on his head (Ashtiani, Johnstone, Latham, Serjeant, & Smith, 2008). At any rate, the author

announces that “*The Art of Insubordination* is what Darwin’s thirty unlucky predecessors wish they had read before embarking on their lonely quests” (p. 9).

The methods of insubordination work well, we are told, and “published studies provide the scientific evidence explaining why” (p. 7). Again, however, there is little guidance as to when to rebel and when to hold back. It is doubtful that rebels-in-waiting simply “know the difference between reckless and principled insubordination” (p. 15). Likewise, it is tautologically true that “dissenters boost the odds of convincing others if they take a careful measure of society’s prejudices and calibrate their speech and actions accordingly” (p. 6); the question is how would-be-rebels can gauge the risks they run in advance.

To conceptualize this decision problem, let us consider a sketch of a *Rebellion Management Theory* conceived along the lines of standard frameworks (Heck & Krueger, 2015; Swets, Dawes, & Monahan, 2000). This theory would have us look at the intersections of reality and action. Reality may offer a friendly or a hostile environment (Soyer & Hogarth, 2020; reviewed by Grüning & Krueger, 2021). A friendly environment provides a stage suitable for change; a hostile environment does not. Action consists of either rebellion or conformity. If the would-be rebels have their wits about them, they will rebel in a friendly environment and conform in a hostile one. It is a psychological and an empirical question of whether they can tell the difference. If they cannot, then those who rebel in a hostile environment commit a Type I error, a fool’s errand, and those who fail to rebel in a friendly environment commit a Type II error, a missed opportunity.

This could be the end of it if a modest version of decision theory carried the day. But the author wants more. In his “cookbook” (p. 9), he aims to enable the would-be rebel to turn

a hostile environment into a friendly one. That is, a pre-rebellion is necessary before the rebellion proper can hope to succeed. The author describes ingredients of such groundwork, reviewing research on how minorities can organize themselves, how allies can be won and kept, and how, to paraphrase his words, “a culture of dissent can be cultivated.” This is a strong claim, and a cautious reader would note that even if research produces statistically significant results, the prospects of turning a hostile environment into a friendly one remain highly uncertain. As a self-help book, “Insubordination” leans heavily into a can-do attitude. *Caveat*, one wants to warn, *emptor*.

If victory is achieved, there is still a dark side. George Orwell (1945) worried about successful rebels coming to resemble the oppressors they overthrew. Leon Trotsky called for a continual state of revolution (Trotsky, 2010/1906). The author shares the worry about what might happen when principled insubordination succeeds too well. Recalling the breaking-bad of Robespierre and former Bolivian president Evo Morales as poignant examples, he homes in on the contemporary scene, which is rife with attempts at cultural revolution performed in the name of social justice (see for critical discussions Pinker, 2021, reviewed by Krueger, 2022a; or Stanovich, 2021, reviewed by Krueger, 2022b). Examples of power grabs and vengeful overreach are readily observable in today’s world.

How can insurgence be domesticated into reconciliation? The author counsels the well-established strategies of intergroup contact, inclusive categorizations, and humor. Jokes, by their very nature, will make *someone* uncomfortable, especially those earnest creatures who have forgotten the lightness of being (Watten & McGraw, 2016). The author rightfully wonders: are we prepared to abandon all humor? There is more interesting science in this book, as, for example, research on self-regulation techniques such as purposefulness (Kang,

Strecher, Kim, & Falk, 2019), moral courage (Goodwin, Graham, & Diekmann, 2020), or self-distancing (Gainsburg & Kross, 2020). Alas, the style in which “Insubordination” is written detracts from the message. There is inappropriate hyperbole and cringeworthy attempts at humor, as when we read that some folk “lacked cojones” (p. 19), that others were “*pissed*” (p. 38, italics in the original), or that “bad shit goes down” (p. 92). There is an excess of profanity, as when “other important dimensions of daily life either totally suck, suck despite some recent improvement, or only moderately suck” (p. 40), when the Urban Dictionary is consulted to reveal that a particularly colorful expression refers to a “fucked up situation” (p. 56), or when the author asserts he is “not making this shit up” (p. 136). He hectors the reader, as when he exclaims “I want you to behave more rebelliously [. . .] As I like to say after a whiskey or two, insubordination is a portal to the adjacent possible” (p. 52), or “Don’t be a naysaying asshole” (p. 67). “Disregard these principles,” he warns, “and you all but ensure your failure” (p. 60).

If this were not enough, the author opens a window into his own world, taking a full paragraph (p. 102) to list ways in which he has failed to exercise prudent coping mechanisms. These admissions are unsettling, especially their aggressive tone and their being written in the present tense (“I provoke verbal altercations with strangers and loved ones. I attack people relentlessly online.”). The reader will be forgiven for being astonished. This intemperate style is a pity because some of the presented science is interesting and potentially important. To reiterate, the critical flaw in its presentation is the lack of attention to its limitations and boundary conditions. The reader interested in learning about the science and practice of dissent and rebellion is better served respectively by Sunstein’s (2003) and Gino’s (2018; reviewed by Krueger, 2019) work. The self-conscious and inappropriate style in

which “Insubordination” is written might be a feature of a rebellion the goals of which are difficult to discern. It is fair to say, however, that such unregulated prose does a disservice to psychological science and to the communication of its findings to the public.

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