



# THE FOUR ROLES OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM



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## WHAT IS YOUR ROLE?

**Activists need to become aware of the roles they and their organizations are playing in the larger social movement.**

There are four different roles activists and social movements need to play in order to successfully create social change.

Each role has different purposes, styles, skills, and needs and can be played effectively or ineffectively.

# What are the Four Roles?

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## Citizen, Reformer, Rebel, Change Agent

- Social movements require *all four roles*
- Understanding a social movement's need to have all four roles played effectively can help reduce antagonism and promote cooperation among different groups of activists and organisations.



# CITIZEN



## EFFECTIVE

- Promotes positive national values, principles, symbols (eg. democracy, justice)
- Normal citizen
- Grounded in centre of society
- Promotes active citizen-based society
- The active citizen is the source of legitimate political power
- Examples: King and Mandela



## INEFFECTIVE

- Naive citizen: Believes the 'official policies' and does not realise that the powerholders & institutions serve special elite interests at the expense of the majority and the common good
- OR**
- Super-patriot: Gives automatic obedience to powerholders and the country

# REFORMER



## EFFECTIVE

- Parliamentary: Uses official mainstream institutions to get the movement's goals
- Variety of means: lobbying, lawsuits, referenda, rallies, etc.
- Professional Opposition Organisations (POOs) are the key movement agencies & nurture grassroots
- Watchdogs successes to assure enforcement & protect against backlash



## INEFFECTIVE

- Dominator/patriarchal model of organisational structure
- Organisational maintenance over movement needs
- Dominator style disempowers grassroots
- "Realistic Politics": Promotes minor reforms rather than social changes
- Co-optation: POO staff identify more with official powerholders than with movement's grassroots

# REBEL



## EFFECTIVE

- Protest: Says NO! to violations of values
- Nonviolent direct action and attitude
- Target: Powerholders and their institutions
- Puts issue and policies in public spotlight
- Actions have strategy and tactics
- Empowered, exciting, courageous, risky
- Holds relative, not absolute, truth



## INEFFECTIVE

- Anti-authority, anti-organisation structures
- A lonely voice on society's fringe
- Any means necessary: disruptive tactics
- Tactics without realistic strategy
- Ideological totalism: Holds absolute truth & moral, political superiority
- Strident, egocentric; self needs before movement needs

# CHANGE AGENT



## EFFECTIVE

- Organises People Power: creating participatory democracy for the common good
- Educates and involves majority of citizens and whole society on the issue
- Involves pre-existing mass-based grassroots organisations/networks
- Long-term tactics & structures
- Promotes paradigm shift

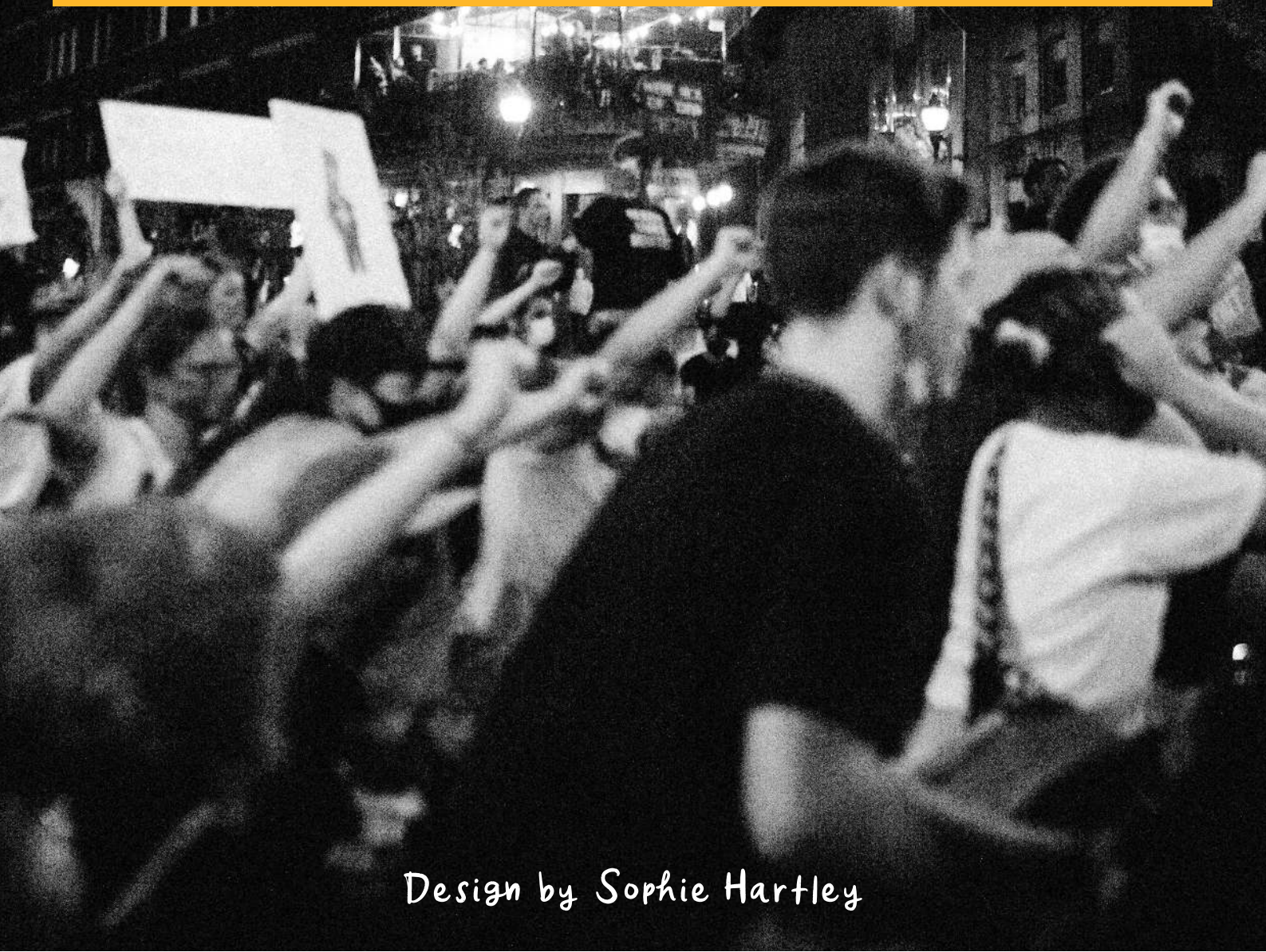


## INEFFECTIVE

- Too utopian: Visions of perfectionist alternatives in isolation from practical political & social action
- Promotes only minor reform
- Leadership based on patriarchy & control, not participatory democracy
- Single issue tunnel vision
- Ignores activists' needs
- Unconnected to social & political social change and paradigm shift

Find out more at  
**commonslibrary.org**

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