

Does breaking the rules change the world?

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In order to explore the hypothesis – that whether breaking the rules changes the world – I intend to argue that first it is necessary to understand the definition of ‘rules’ in this context. Having stated this definition, I will then apply it to different events in recent history, as a way to explore ‘rule breaking’ in changing the world. I am going to suggest that in essence, the act of breaking the rules has a relationship with power, as an excess of power, or indeed a lack of it, is a driving force for individuals and groups in society to begin challenging and breaking the rules. I will show how rule breaking has been a vital factor in shaping world history but has been a force for both positive change and negative change.

The Cambridge dictionary definition of a rule (as a noun) is as follows:

“An accepted principle or instruction that states the way that things are or should be and tells you what you are or are not allowed to do.”

So, rules can be written or unwritten, apply to games but also expectations of behaviour. They can be influenced by custom and practice or tradition and shaped by dominant opinion.

One type of rule is the rule of law, which implies that it covers all individuals and refers to a political situation rather than specific laws. In a national context, countries have their own legal system, set within that individual country or state, which typically include criminal, civil, common and statute, and are ultimately matters for a court of law. International law operates across borders, it is inter-national and includes private and public organisations. These are found in conventions, treaties and agreements, and include examples such as the Geneva Convention, originating in 1864 and significantly updated in 1949, and the United Nations’ conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

There are also rules that govern religious practices, including rules on moral choices, for instance those that are applied in respect of assisted dying. In Islam for example, followers believe that all human life is sacred because it is given by Allah and only Allah chooses how long each person will live. Another example of this is Catholicism’s stance on abortion laws and female priests, although it is possible that some religious ‘laws’ like this are dictated by changing times - as was seen when women were given the right to become priests in Britain in the Church of England, even though Catholic and other come other Christian groups continue to oppose the right of women to have an abortion.

More instances of things that may be classed as rules are the traditional and personal values that people hold, such as etiquette and consideration, which a person may choose to live their life by. These types of rules are more flexible than the more rigid structures such as national or international laws, and are structured around an individual’s personal qualities and beliefs – so you may try to live based on the principle of being compassionate to those around you, even though, inevitably, there will be days when you fail to live up to this standard.

As a fourteen-year-old female, there are some rules - whether they are laws or social constructs - that I live by and some that I’d like to break or have broken. For me personally, a rule I would like to see broken is the stigma –and in some places the illegality - that surrounds abortion. As a young woman, I carry a strong belief in women having the right to choose, regardless of our situation, and that what happens in our bodies should be under our control, ‘my body, my choice’, and in my opinion that includes whether someone wants to be pregnant or not. I see abortion laws as a way for the government to control women, so for the benefit of women and girls across the world that is both a law and an ideology that I would like to be broken.

Sticking with the theme of rules that affect women, there have been hundreds of women who have broken rules and boundaries throughout history – particularly in the last 150 years or so. Of course, there is the suffragette movement, which shaped the future of women and girls forever by challenging many of the then contemporary social and traditional values, as well as winning the right to vote, in order to have a voice in society. More recently, a movement of females across the globe started by Tarana Burke called the #MeToo movement have been speaking out about issues of sexual violence and uncovering the androcentric side of society. MeToo is a fundamentally good idea, giving women a platform to speak out against their attackers and offer words of support and encouragement for other women too afraid to speak out. However, even a movement as positive as this one can have its downsides. If you've been accused of any crime, you have a right to a fair trial and to defend yourself, and when a small amount of the women involved in the movement are naming men and using the platform to pursue a personal vendetta, but not taking legal action, the men involved are being stripped of their right to defend themselves. That said, a shocking statistic that has recently been widely reported is that which highlights that the proportion of reported rapes that actually lead to a prosecution is at an all-time low, plummeting to only 1.7% in England and Wales.¹ This highlights the fact that, even though legally in the UK women are equal to men, much more change in social attitudes- and also changes in government policy and the criminal justice system- are needed in order to ensure that misogyny and unfairness in the justice system is completely removed. However, even if there is still a long way to go, all the women who broke the rules and pushed the boundaries brought us to where we are now and without this occurring, who could say how different our lives as females would be today?

Another current example of a group of people breaking rules to change the world is the Extinction Rebellion. A peaceful protest group, they use civil disobedience to raise awareness and protest about the effects of human activity on climate change, and how this will impact on ecosystems and biodiversity, and indeed the viability of life on the planet. Recently though, protests have been causing havoc in major cities such as London, not least because Extinction Rebellion's strategy to get so many people arrested that the police will be overwhelmed and politicians forced to act, and in consequence the legal threshold for 'serious disruption' has been broken on multiple occasions. The recent protests in London have seen the police arrest over 1,200 protestors,² while the April protests have resulted in 850 prosecutions and 250 convictions, so far.³ So far the protestors have been willing to accept the consequences of breaking the law, and the arrests have generated a surge of arrestee support online, with multiple highly followed activists adding their voices in support of Extinction Rebellion's goals. In this case, although politically there hasn't been any massive changes, public support for their agenda has grown, and in time this occurrence of rule breaking may change the way governments feel about preserving our environment.

Even though breaking the rules can cause monumental differences in history for the better, it can also –especially in a high-tension post-conflict situation – have huge negative impacts on the course of history. A prominent example of this is when Hitler broke the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty was an agreement made after the end of The First World War that, in essence, stripped Germany of the majority of its military, destroyed the German Empire, made them pay £6,600 million in reparation to the allies who won the war, and forced Germany to take full responsibility for the start of the war. In time, coupled with the financial crash in the early 1930's, this left the German people poor and desperate. It was while the country was in such a weak place that Adolf Hitler manipulated his way to the post of Chancellor, and gradually to the position of Führer. After Hitler was secure in his power, he gradually started to break clause after clause of the Treaty of Versailles, until Britain declared war on Germany for invading Poland on the 1st September 1939. This instance of rule

¹ *The Independent*, 25 April 2019.

² *The Observer*, 13 October 2019.

³ See *The Guardian*, 30 September 2019 and *The Independent*, 2 October 2019.

breaking, which kick-started the deadliest conflict in human history, demonstrates the potentially negative power of breaking rules and what vast repercussions it can have on the world.

Even in the context of something as awful and oppressive as the Nazi regime, the willingness of individuals or small groups to defy rules demonstrates both how relatively small actions can make a big difference on other individuals' lives – literally the difference between life and death – whereas in other ways, people take similarly huge risks, hoping their actions will have a positive effect, but where this desired outcome is far from clear. In the former case, one example is Dutch graphic artist Alice Cohn, who forged Jewish identity papers in World War Two and positively impacted the lives of hundreds of Jews who she gave the chance to evade the Nazis and start a better life elsewhere. Conversely, the German White Rose group were a non-violent resistance group in the Third Reich led by a group of students and a professor from the University of Munich. To oppose the Nazi regime, they printed out pamphlets and distributed them in the local area and eventually to other cities nearby which spoke out about the brutal and immoral actions of the government. The core of the White Rose - siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl, Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graph, Christoph Probst and Kurt Huber, a professor of philosophy and musicology - were eventually caught by the Gestapo and were sentenced to death by Guillotine in 1943. The White Rose group came to be seen as having played a key role in raising awareness about the indoctrination of the population of Germany and helped to bring to light the corruption of the Nazi party, but this outcome would have been far from clear to the brave people who were part of the group at the time.

The Civil Rights movement is arguably one of the most well-known and influential circumstances of rule breaking changing the world in history. In 1861, a civil war started in America. One of the main causes of the war was that the Southern states wanted to continue participating in slavery whilst the Northern states wanted to abolish it. Even though eventually the northern states prevailed, and slavery was officially abolished in America, many white southerners were still unaccepting of equality and this led to a policy called segregation, which in turn led to a movement which protested against it. This was the Civil Rights Movement. The black American community had nonviolent principles, so their protests were mostly peaceful on their side. Examples of things people did to peacefully protest against the unjust and dehumanising treatment of black Americans include 'sit ins' in white only establishments, bus boycotts, marches, speeches and demonstrations. This is evidence of black people breaking the rules of what was socially accepted of them, and influencing a massive change in intersectionality, equality and freedom. However, some of people who held the opposing view had a very different approach to protesting against different viewpoints. A series of tragic acts such as police brutality, fights and even murder showed the dark side of America. White supremacist extremist groups such as the Klu Klux Klan blew up innocent people's cars and home; publicly humiliated; framed and, in some cases, lynched innocent black people in the streets. Even though here breaking the rules led to such devastating acts of violence, all it did was inspire and mobilise protestors to carry on fighting for a better, more humane America.

So, does breaking the rules change the world? In my opinion, yes, it does but in some circumstances, it can create a negative effect on the world, for example the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany and the broken rules that led to the start of World War Two. So, if rule breaking can be a force for good and for evil, solutions to issues and conflict should ideally be found through a common dialogue, negotiation and even compromise before a conflict arises. Ultimately, the act of breaking the rules highlights an imbalance of power in society: people break the rules to gain power and influence in order to make a change, and people who feel or are powerless break the rules for the purpose of making their voices heard and creating opportunity for themselves and others like them who are suffering. In the words of Russian-American journalist, Masha Gessen, activist and outspoken critic of the presidents of both Russia and the United States, "Words can break cement." They should therefore be handled with care.