

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

ELLIS JONES

Empowering Everyday People: Democratizing Access to Social Change

On April 22, 1990, something changed for me. It was a Sunday. I was a student at the University of Southern California, and a friend invited me to walk down to a fair that was going on nearby. I did not have any plans, so I decided to join him. Apparently, it was something called Earth Day. There were tables and booths everywhere, and people were excitedly milling about from one to the next. Every booth I visited offered me a different way to make a positive environmental impact: recycling, composting, conserving water, reusing old clothes, and the list went on and on.

At the end of that day, I felt absolutely inspired to make the world a better place. In my mind, the environmental movement had experienced a stroke of true genius. They were not asking people to join groups, attend meetings, or organize rallies. Instead, they had opened up a completely new realm of action for people—their own everyday lives. By engaging people in microactivism rather than asking them to commit to the much more intensive work undertaken by full-time activists, they were essentially democratizing access to social change. It was a way to expand the environmental movement to almost anyone, despite their limits of time, money, skills, or circumstances.

The more I thought about this potential, the more I became convinced that what people really needed was a book that would collect as many of these actions as possible around environmental protection, human rights, social justice, animal rights, feminism, and LGBTQ issues into a single resource.

I was absolutely sure that someone would write it and that I, in turn, would be first in line to buy it. Ten years later, I was a sociology graduate student at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I had waited, patiently, for the imaginary author of this hypothetical book to appear, and she or he had yet to step forward.

I decided right then that I had waited long enough. So I roped in two of my closest friends (also fellow sociology grad students), and we spent the next year writing a book that collected all of the actions we could find, from every source we could get our hands on, and distilled the results into a single book. We added a section summarizing the latest data on some of the most significant social and environmental problems we seemed to be facing at the beginning of the 21st century, and the result was *The Better World Handbook: Small Changes That Make a Big Difference*. It has since sold 25,000 copies, been added to more than 300 college and university libraries worldwide, and been adopted in sociology classrooms across the country. The website (betterworldhandbook.com) has had over 550,000 unique visitors since it was created. In a very practical sense, sociology provided the three of us with the tools we needed to uncover, understand, and translate our world's social and environmental problems into a form that allows each of us to personally contribute to their resolution.

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