

Perspectives on Protest – Spring 2010

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This is a working document for use in our GNED 202 National Issues class, as I convey to you my thinking about political protest, a topic I plan to do more teaching and research on in the future.

The questions that fascinate me as I teach this class are . . .

What is protest? What is the nature of it?

What role does it play in a modern political system like ours in the U.S.?

Why do people protest? What do they hope to achieve by protesting?

And why do people choose to protest in the ways they do?

As with most things, the more I look into this question – the more I consider other views, examine and evaluate them, the more I observe and think about protest – the more complex I realize this question is. So as I explore this question, I'd like you to do so too – on your own as well as alongside me in class. . . . Why?

First of all, because protest hasn't always been possible in all times and places. Therefore, the relatively generous freedoms we have to protest in the U.S. should not be taken for granted. In fact, we can and should think more about what purposes protesting serves in our political system. And secondly, because protest is related to larger questions about the role and rights of individuals in society, about the rights/obligations of individuals to participate in political life, about the proper limits of state power, etc. These are questions that well-educated members of society, like you, should be well-acquainted with and be able to think through clearly as you start to play a greater role as adults in your community and/or in the larger society.

So then: What is protest?

Protest is a strange thing. People protest in all kinds of ways and for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they do so spontaneously, without even realizing or calling it protest. Sometimes they meticulously plan out their protest and map out a particular set of outcomes they hope to achieve. Sometimes they do so to be peacemakers. Sometimes they do so to be troublemakers. Let's look at protest a bit more closely, starting with the main **types of protest** that I've identified in the four years since I began working with Dr. Furr to plan this course. Then we can see what we think about protest when we're done:

Dissent

To dissent is simply to disagree and express your disagreement. A person can dissent by talking or messaging to friends about an issue that concerns them. Or they can expand their reach by blogging or tweeting about it. People who want to express their dissent more formally will write to policy experts and lawmakers, outlining their grievances.

Those who want to go public with their dissent will write to news editors or famous bloggers and try to get them to address the issue to their audience, too. [But I suspect many dissenters might prefer to become famous bloggers themselves through addressing their cause, not simply 'pass it on' to an already famous person!]

Some of the most famous dissenters convey their ideas through art and/or public media: Michael Moore, Glen Beck, Shepard Fairey, and Bono are examples.

Demonstration

Demonstration is one of the most well-recognized forms of protest. Formal demonstrations are generally planned and fairly carefully orchestrated. Protest organizers file for permits in advance, network with a coalition of like-minded activists/organizations to ensure a good turnout, get out lots of publicity well ahead of the event, and prepare flyers for demonstrators to hand out and signs for them to carry.

Demonstrations can be informal and spontaneous, too. This has happened most often when a political or economic event has enraged people who have then gathered in a public setting to express their dissent. And in these cases, demonstrations can turn into riots.

Demonstrations sometimes include a symbolic component, like publicly pouring [fake] blood on a fur coat to protest animal cruelty, or setting up 'tent cities' to illustrate the poor living conditions of black Africans in South Africa under apartheid in the 1980s.

Today, technology allows political activists to create flash-mobs that can descend on a site on short notice to demonstrate and disperse as fast as they appeared. This could end up making demonstrations more effective in the future, or at least morphing how they work.

Disobedience

Disobedience for the cause of social/political justice has a long history in America. In fact, the Revolutionary War began as, in part, a series of acts of disobedience. Protesters believe there is no obligation to obey unjust laws. In fact, they believe that people who want to resist government's potential to become an oppressive force have a *responsibility to disobey* unjust laws. There are two types of disobedience:

- 1) Breaking a law in order to symbolically draw attention to a larger matter of justice. One famous example is Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay taxes for six years as a form of protest against a government that allowed slavery and invaded another country [Mexico in 1846-48] and was sent to jail for it. Activists have used this method regularly since the 1960s – for example: getting arrested for trespass during a sit-in, for blocking roadways at a demonstration, or for defacing property at a nuclear weapons site.
- 2) Breaking the unjust law itself. One famous example is Rosa Parks' refusal to sit in the back of that bus in Alabama in 1955. Another is public draft-card burnings during the Vietnam War. These weren't just acts of defiance; they were violations of the laws in effect at the time.

Disruption

Some forms of protest involve simply disrupting the machinations of the social/political/legal system activists are fighting against. The idea here is that the best way to resist unjust laws or practices is to make it impossible for 'the system' to support them.

Activists who go to this level of protest have an extremely high commitment to their cause. They have to be extremely well-organized and enforce a code of confidentiality for their members. They also have to guard against infiltrators who will turn them in to authorities. Their offenses can be construed as treasonous, after all, which is considered a high crime against the state. Some examples of disruption as a form of protest include . . .

- Breaking-and-entering to destroy military draft records during Vietnam;
- Sabotaging nuclear weapons deliveries or damaging military facilities in the 1980s;
- Providing 'sanctuary' to political prisoners considered enemies of U.S. allies in Latin America in the 1980s.

Dissidence

The dictionary definition of 'dissidence' differs very little from that of 'dissent', but I am going to use it in a very specific sense here. For our purposes it will refer to aggressive political activities that not only disrupt but actually subvert the power of the state. [By the way, dissidence is the activity; dissidents are the people doing that activity.]

Political dissidents believe that the government they live under has neither *validity* [its systems are shoddy or corrupt] nor *legitimacy* [its power was unfairly derived] nor genuine *authority* [it exercises its power unjustly]. Thus, political dissidents refuse to consent to live peacefully under the government's rule.

Some examples of dissidence are . . .

- The Declaration of Independence by the American colonies in 1776;
- Nat Turner's Rebellion to overthrow slavery in 1831;
- John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry in an attempt to end slavery;
- South Carolina's secession from the United States in an attempt to maintain slavery;
- The Weather Underground's bombing of the Pentagon to protest Vietnam in 1972;

We've gone some way to explore what protest is – at least what the different types of protest are. Now let's look at why people protest: What motivates people to protest – but not simply in the psychological sense of 'what makes protesters tick?' What I'm interested in are the purposes protesting serves for activists. Why do they protest? What do they want to achieve? Let's look at this question first in terms of the process: What are the purposes of protest?

Expression of Conscience

Politically concerned people are often motivated by deeply held values. So their protest/activism may involve expressions of conscience which they may or may not join with others to express. Expressions of conscience can range from lifestyle choices, which aren't necessarily made public [like vegetarianism as a "protest" against the unjust treatment of animals], to completely public acts [like self-immolation in the public square to protest the war in Vietnam (to use a way-extreme example)].

Communicating Ideas

Almost all forms of protest involve communicating ideas on some level. Usually, the whole idea is to make your cause/issue known to as wide an audience as possible, but protesters may want to target a special audience, too – like-minded activists, opponents, or politicians, for example.

In the U.S., we have a long tradition of protecting the communication of ideas, because the theory is that this allows for dialogue across different generations, ethnicities, and interest groups, which allows us in turn to discover the truth. It also allows us all to 'vent' when/if we're upset about something. It's when ideas/expression become action that speech needs to be curtailed, like shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre [when there is, in fact not a fire, but your words cause a stampede that injures people] or burning a cross on a person's front lawn [which involves not only damage to property, but serious intimidation as well].

Consciousness-Raising

This is a term borrowed from psychotherapy by feminists in the 1960s-70s who wanted women to become aware of the everyday ways women's freedoms were limited because of sexism. The idea behind consciousness-raising is that if you can show people that they have reasons to be concerned about the issues you're concerned about, they'll be motivated to join your cause.

Consciousness-raising involves both educating people and persuading them to adopt your views. Feminists made some advances in making changes through their consciousness-raising efforts. For example, women used to automatically quit their jobs when they married and had children. The feminist movement led women to realize that they have every right to work while raising a family, if they want to.

Coalition-Building

Coalition-building involves bringing like-minded people together to network and create solidarity so they can fight together for the same cause. Coalition-building also serves to show those outside the movement – be it the general public, the coalition’s opponents, or policy makers/politicians – that the cause has ‘strength in numbers’ and thus real, or at least potential, political clout.

Campaigning

Campaigning involves making ongoing and coordinated efforts to ensure that your cause is kept in the public’s view and on the policymakers’ agenda. Campaigning can take place within formal political frameworks [circulating petitions, lobbying legislators] or outside of them [using online networks, forming independent organizations]. But in either case it involves a high level of commitment to a cause and strategizing to bring about change.

Now let’s look at what protesters want to achieve in terms of outcomes. What are the **goals** of protest?

Rebuke

Activists are sometimes simply interested in rebuking leaders for the practices/policies they’re protesting against. There’s a ‘shame on you!’ quality to this goal of protest. It involves a negation, not an assertion. Those protesting may not even have an alternative to the practice/policy they object to in mind. They just know that they don’t like the practice/policy in question and want the world to know the government is wrong.

Examples: MSNBC on the War in Iraq when George W. Bush was President.
 Fox News on Healthcare now that Barack Obama is President.

Reform

Protesters whose goal is reform attempt to work with and through the system to change unjust practices/policies. Inherent in this approach is a high level of trust in government systems and procedures. Reformers’ aim is to use public opinion, legislation, and the courts to effect incremental, but lasting, change.

Example: The Women’s Rights movement in the 1960s-70s, when Congress passed equal education and employment legislation, and the Courts began addressing sex discrimination and sexual harassment.

Resistance

Activists whose goal is resistance refuse to accept government authority. Their aim is to reject government practices/policies they object to, so as to weaken the government that enforces those practices/policies. Often this goal is adopted when ‘the system fails.’

Example: Coordinated efforts in the Civil Rights movement to sit-in at lunch counters, boycott buses, register voters, and expose fraudulent leadership.

Rebellion

Rebellion involves specific, directed [violent] action that is meant to subvert government authority. Activists who favor rebellion aim to pose a threat to government leaders and point to the possibility of widespread unrest in order to force leaders to take these protesters/their cause seriously.

Example: Sporadic bombings of government buildings by the Weather Underground.

Revolution

Revolution is just what it sounds like: a full-scale effort to undermine the government in power and replace it with a new one. Revolution almost always involves violence.

Examples: American Revolutionaries in the 1760s-80s.
[Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Not in America, but a good example of a non-violent revolution.]

So now, why all this categorizing? Because when we look at each category in relation to the others, they can in fact be seen as parts of a whole. But now we can see that whole in a new way, as a complex set of activities with components that relate to and interact with each other:

Types	Purposes	Goals
Dissent	Expressing Conscience	Rebuke
Demonstration	Communicating Ideas	Reform
Disobedience	Consciousness-Raising	Resistance
Disruption	Coalition-Building	Rebellion
Dissidence	Campaigning	Revolution

And in my view, looking more carefully at protest in this way serves three main purposes:

First, it allows us to look at protest more pragmatically: Which types of protest are best to advance which purposes? Which goals? For instance, are mass demonstrations going to be enough to effectively resist injustice? Or do protesters need to intensify their efforts and move to disobedience or disruption to reach their goals? If protesters are communicating ideas simply in order to rebuke government leaders, will this really ‘make a dent’ in the system, or are they essentially just ‘spinning their wheels’?

Next, it allows us to look at protest from an ethical point of view: Under what circumstances are the various levels of protest justifiable? Or in more familiar terms: When do the ends justify the means? For example, is it acceptable for anti-war activists to disobey and disrupt the political/legal system by destroying military draft records – when they are doing so out of a deep sense of conscience and in order to resist the war? When personal values and social ideals conflict with government policies, as they certainly did during Vietnam, how far can/should activists go to make sure the voice of the people is heard?

Finally, it allows us to look at protest from what I think is the very most fun point of view – that of political philosophy: Why do we accept some types of protest as a kind of political vocabulary that any variety of individuals or groups have the right to engage in? And why are other forms of protest curtailed by the state? For instance, dissent and demonstration are fully protected under the U.S. Constitution. And there is even a “right” to disobey the law as a form of protest. Similarly, each of the purposes of protest I’ve discussed above are protected as forms of expression, association, and assembly. Our government is open to being rebuked, and has formal mechanisms in place for reform. But it’s a rare government that invites people to become disruptive or dissident, especially not if their goal is to resist, rebel, or revolt, and the U.S. is no exception in this regard. What does this tell us about the government we live under – about its validity, legitimacy, and authority?

I have my own thoughts on this, but the point of writing this paper is to give you some things to think about, some concepts to ponder and/or critique. Once you’ve had a chance to do this, you can then bring your ideas to class, so we can all discuss them as a group. Until then, I’ll look forward to hearing your thoughts and/or seeing them on paper.