

Debating Activism

August 8, 2009

Underneath any specific conclusions we come to on any subject, is a more fundamental framework consisting of our premises. Because premises are usually implicit in contrast to explicit conclusions, and because they often are shared by much of our surrounding culture, we tend to take them for granted. We may argue or discuss some specific government action, for instance, without even being aware that our agreement or disagreement is itself shaped by our underlying sense of human nature or what kind of society is possible or what difference we are able to make in the world. A debate over the legality of political protest and what it can and cannot accomplish became an occasion to challenge and attempt to change audience premises. Two months after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, I was invited to debate a prominent right-wing talk show host. The debate was a town hall-type public forum, after working hours and open to the community. Its organizers, impressively, were a group of students from the "Political Action Seminar" at their high school, star-struck by my opponent but scrupulously fair. The location was the school gym in a suburb of Portland, Oregon. Known as "little Beirut" to the first Bush administration, Portland had seen large and militant anti-war street actions on the eve of the war. It was these protests that prompted the debate. I have decided to write up my experience of the debate now because of the dropoff in public demonstrations against the war and the current reevaluation of protest tactics within anti-war and global justice networks. As the war drags on and we are further removed from the hopefulness of the international global justice movement that formed out of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, we seem to have a widening divide between theory and in-the-streets practice. The large MayDay mobilizations by immigrants and supporters in both 2006 and 2007 had an impact. But how do we understand what was gained beyond halting bad national legislation? What should our aims be, and how do protests fit with the rest of our political activities? My opponent was Lars Larson, as loud in his opposition to public education and government social services as he is adamant in his support of any military action undertaken by the United States. His advocacy for police crackdowns in minority communities is notorious. He is infamous beyond his political beliefs, however, for controlling the microphones on his programs, muting guests or callers who disagree with him and shouting down any opposition. In 2003, the opportunity to challenge the credibility of an antagonistic media star was tempting. More importantly, massive world-wide anti-war protests appeared to have been ineffective. The US government had ignored them, and the commercial media still claimed success for the invasion of Iraq. A rethinking of protest tactics was clearly in order then; its urgency has only deepened in the interim.

Considering the Audience

The easiest way to win the debate would have been to downplay my own activism and treat the topic with a sort of cool pseudo-objectivity, as if the audience and I were removed scholars pondering the phenomenon of protest from a distance. Adopting this tactic not only would have been distasteful, it would have undercut other objectives more important than mere victory in a verbal dispute. Throwing caution to the winds, I decided to approach the audience as if it consisted primarily of fellow activists or potential activists. At first glance, this may seem a risky decision with an audience I didn't know. But there was a strong strategic reason for taking this risk, for employing this "as if." The reason lies in how people's basic understandings of the world are formed and, more specifically, how organizers can help those understandings change. What I wanted to communicate went beyond any specific conclusions about the war or protest. It was really a world-view, a sense of personal and social potential. People oppose the war for many kinds of reasons, as we are increasingly seeing from conservatives and libertarians. Critics of US unilateralism, to take one example, may still

accept a vision of encroaching capitalist globalization led by US corporations. A position against the war is not automatically conducive to progressive social change and may still derive from hierarchic, jingoistic, racist, and sexist premises. Even while actively opposing the war, what critics argue and what they neglect to examine may have the effect of reinforcing a reprehensible framework of understanding. Swaying the audience toward some particular conclusion about the war or about protest more generally was a minor objective. Far more important would be to push them to see themselves and their world differently from how much of the surrounding culture does. The goal, then, was to get them to consider a new set of premises. The most effective way to do this is from inside a new framework, in other words from within the “as if.” In this instance, this meant giving them an opportunity to try on a new world-view in the safety of the school gym and see how it feels. Merely adducing facts, as happens in most arguments, cannot adequately challenge a framework of understanding. Facts are facts only by virtue of being embedded in a framework. What is a fact to me may not be to you if you have a different set of premises. In the same way that words with critical content like “democracy” and “equality” can be implicitly redefined and co-opted, new facts can be absorbed into old frameworks and take on distorted and inevitably conservative meanings. Treating the audience as if they were activists, engaging them in a discussion which presupposes radical premises, was the best way to get them to take seriously the possibility of social change and their own participation in it. Because I would see this audience only once, I was under no illusion that my appearance would result in a fundamental shift in anyone’s thinking. I did hope, however, that hearing a new voice could be a catalyst for people who were open to change. There was also a second, less theoretical reason for treating the group as if they all were activists. If even a couple of them heard me and were motivated to become more active, I would consider the event a success. I might have approached them yet another way: in terms of values we presumably share as US citizens. In fact, I used this tactic to some extent when I drew on the First Amendment’s right to free speech or when I told about my recent visit to the National Park Service monument to John Brown in Harper’s Ferry. But there is a danger in relying too heavily on those values. Simply affirming them is a way of legitimating the status quo. It pretends minorities and workers have consistently enjoyed First Amendment rights and ignores the extent to which our supposed freedoms have been invoked historically by governments and ideologues to cover abuses. Now, when Constitutional guarantees are being diminished through travesties like the Patriot Act, is no time to treat them uncritically.

Other Decisions Ahead

After deciding how to think about the audience, I needed to make some decisions about content. The way the debate was set up, protest pro or con, it would be easy to fall into the trap of defending protest in the abstract - all protest. My opponent was likely to raise some of the more thoughtless acts that sometimes happen at protests, acts aimed less at reaching others or solidifying our own ranks than just expressing outrage. (In our area I had seen protesters jumping up and down on the cars of motorists blocked by our marches, for instance.) As a spokesperson for the validity and necessity of protest, I did not want to be defensive about the politically indefensible. Acknowledging my own reservations could be a way to engage the audience in developing political standards and criteria. I wanted to give them a feel for a thoughtful, self-reflective civic activism. Too often, progressive political practice jumps from one task to the next (there’s so much to do!), with little priority given to evaluating our effectiveness or longer-term objectives. This was an opportunity to step back and consider what we mean by “success” or “effectiveness.” Finally, I decided to challenge the debate topic itself. “Protest” is too limiting. In its most common usages, it signifies a reaction to someone else’s initiative. It implies that we are merely responding (to the government, for instance, or to international capitalist agencies like the WTO or World Bank, or to corporations directly) and ignores the elements of our activism aimed at creating alternative institutions and affirming alternative values. I would try to broaden the topic to include the aspects of our activism that build toward a vision of what could and should be. Ten minutes before the scheduled start, the moderator

handed us each a list of the four questions he would ask, plus the three historical case studies we would be asked to address. I quickly and provisionally decided which points I wanted to make in response to which questions. Final decisions would depend also, of course, on what my opponent said. Then, surprising both of us, the organizers said they would not introduce us but rather give us three minutes each to introduce ourselves. We flipped a coin to see who would begin. My opponent insisted on being the one to call heads or tails, and lost. To his openly expressed chagrin, I elected to go second. The unexpected self-introduction was an opportunity to shape the terms of the debate. I wanted to hear him first, then define the contrast between us right from the start. At this point we leave the realm of plans and intentions and get to what actually happened. My opponent's memory of the event obviously may be different from mine. (A full video record does exist, however.) On a level playing field, not controlling the microphone and in front of a fair audience, Larson seemed a bit at a loss. More useful than a detailed blow-by-blow account, therefore, is a look at the strategic choices we both made in responding to the situation and the questions.

Laying Out the Issues

My opponent introduced himself by telling of his network job, his wife and his pet. His aim seemed to be to win audience sympathy, to get them to see him as a regular person as well as media star. I, too, wanted to be seen as a normal person but in a different way. I wanted them to see that my political involvements and the ways I think about them do not require any special bravery, knowledge or talents beyond their own grasp. I told them of the era I grew up in, one of widespread patriotism and seeming consensus about public goals, and of my generation's disillusionment through the civil rights struggle and opposition to the Vietnam war. I cautioned that one of the dangerous consequences of the many exposés we generated was an unintended cynicism about the possibility the world could be different. And then a conservative reaction deliberately promoted cynicism as a way to induce apathy and discourage activism. This cynicism, I said, is manifest now in public life, where the level of discourse is the lowest I remember. Politicians and radio talk show hosts (here I was not-so-subtly inoculating the audience against what I expected from my opponent) say things not because they believe them to be true, but because it strengthens the interests they represent if they can persuade others of their truth. Rhetoric rules the airwaves, along with made-up "facts" like the phantom link between Al Qaeda and the regime in Iraq or the supposedly vast expenditure of social services on immigrant workers who lack legal status. Fortunately, it has not been easy to force my generation and subsequent ones back into complacency. At this point, I mentioned some of the political actions I had been part of over the years. My aim was not to present myself as a model, but rather to give them a sense of me the way I wanted to be known, in terms of my commitments. It was also to raise the issue of effectiveness. With each example, I briefly discussed the ways in which it had been successful. I was posing an implicit problem: What did these different kinds of political acts, from going onto military bases to talk with soldiers and "volunteers" and draftees, to working around workplace health and safety issues, to rallying against the World Trade Organization or Free Trade Area of the Americas, have in common? One of the criticisms raised against political demonstrations the last few years is the diversity of causes represented. Coming out of an era of single issue politics, some political observers seem befuddled by the range of issues present in protests. I expected my opponent to try to mock antiwar protests by treating them as a catchall for dissatisfactions, a way of saying people are protesting not because they really care about the issues but simply for the sake of protest. (Indeed, this turned out to be one of his tactics.) What links our issues and actions, I concluded, is a vision of a world fundamentally more just and democratic. "Protest," then, needs to be thought of not simply as a negative action, but as a shorthand expression for all we do toward building that world. Because I had gone second in the introduction, the moderator called on me first for question number one: *What Are the limitations of the First Amendment in regards to protesting? (Focus on flag burning)* My intention here was both to challenge the question's limited premise and play off it to take the audience inside an activist

mode of thinking. I started by telling them that I've always been intrigued by Constitutional law. One of the main things I learned is not to treat the First Amendment or any part of the Constitution the way this question risks doing, as if the document were written in indelible ink or etched in stone. Constitutional interpretations change, and do so partly in response to protests. The Constitution does not so much define the boundaries of our actions, as those actions push and pull the boundaries in an on-going tussle with the forces of the status quo. In that context, I said, flag burning is a relatively simple question. The Supreme Court has held and reheld that the US flag is a symbol and that burning it is a symbolic act protected by the First Amendment. It would take a Constitutional Amendment to change that decision, and such an Amendment is unlikely. More interesting than the Constitutional question, however, is the political one: Why, and in what circumstances, should we consider burning the flag? Is it a political act designed to have an impact, or just an expression of moral outrage? If it is a political act, whom are we trying to reach and with what content? I told them that I sometimes address union meetings or community groups and, as guest of honor, am often asked to open the meeting by leading the Pledge of Allegiance. Groups ask me to do this, I believe, for two reasons. One is that they mean this request as an honor. The second reason, and this is pure inference on my part -no one has ever told me so- is that it is a sort of test. Their leaders are apprehensive about what I might say and want the reassurance that they and I have important values in common. The US flag has given cover to many actions in the world that I find reprehensible. Nevertheless, I am always pleased to accept the invitation and provide the asked-for reassurance. I lead the pledge and affirm the flag because I do have a lot in common with the union members or community groups, and I want them to be able to hear what else I have to say. Burning the flag is legal, I went on. It is a foolish act, however, if it alienates people we should be trying to reach. Moral outrage is something different from thinking politically. When it lacks strategic political thought, outrage is concerned only with self-expression, not with accomplishing something or making a difference. The timekeeper showed I still had a few seconds left, so I added that the Bush Administration itself cannot seem to resist desecrating important symbols. Then-Attorney General Ashcroft draped the Spirit of Justice, the statue that has been in the Justice Department for decades, because he was distracted in his public appearances by its naked breast. The State Department insisted on covering the copy of Picasso's anti-war painting, Guernica, in the United Nations when Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared there to make his pro-war arguments. Surprisingly, my opponent didn't touch the issue of flag burning or mention the Constitution. Instead, he talked about walking among the tens of thousands of protesters here in Portland the day the US launched the invasion of Iraq. His point was that all the different reasons people expressed to him for protesting did not add up to a coherent statement. He attacked further on the basis that our numbers and tactics could have meant that emergency vehicles might have had difficulty getting through were there to have been an emergency (complex syntax based on utter unreality). And he rose to John Ashcroft's defense. The Attorney General was not really distracted by the statue, he said protectively, but was driven by esthetic considerations. *What do you need to do to protest in Portland and is that a violation of your First Amendment rights?* This question came out of a particular history here, where the permit process for demonstrations has been especially contentious. For years, the permit requirements were designed to be so onerous as to deter protest or give police an excuse to attack "unpermitted" marches and demos. Protesters were required not only to pay a sizable fee, totaling tens or even hundreds of dollars per person in the case of small events, but also to post bond sufficient to cover all possible damages, the amount left to the imaginings of alarmist bureaucrats. A police assault on the large MayDay march in 2000 was so egregious, the video footage so revealing and the community so outraged, that the process came under review. The following year, when MayDay marchers again refused to go through the permit process, the City Council stepped in and paid the permit fee itself to uphold the pretence that the process was still in effect. After that, requirements were reduced. This is a good instance of how committed defiance of an unjust regulation resulted in changing the regulation. The question still remains among protest organizers, depending on the issue and what groups are involved, whether or

not to apply for a permit. My opponent spoke first on this question, focusing on the visit he took to downtown merchants and what they told him about the drop-off in customers during protests. His lack of vehemence surprised me, especially given his outrageous reputation. I had been prepared for his response to the first question, his attack on the lack of a single vision among protesters. This is a standard critique of the left which I anticipated in my introductory remarks. But I also expected him to attack protest on grounds of patriotism, for instance by insisting this was the time to rally around our country's leadership or scolding that our protest actions undermine military morale. At the very least I thought he would argue that permits are somehow necessary for the orderly functioning of democracy. Instead he focused on consumerism and profits and was still telling anecdotes about the one protest he apparently had ever visited. In rebuttal, I expressed my wariness of having to ask permission to protest from an institution I might well be protesting against. Aside from that irony, however, I said the key issue again is strategic, centering on why we have public demonstrations. We do not demonstrate merely in order to put in an appearance or so the media will acknowledge us. Nor do we demonstrate primarily to vent our anger, frustration or outrage (though I acknowledged those emotions do form part of our motivation). One of our goals is to build solidarity among those who protest. An aspect of that goal is to arrange the speakers, leaflets, chants, etc. so that they enhance the understanding we have in common. But a major objective also is to reach others we encounter outside the protest, to persuade them to consider our views or enable them through our actions to take a step they may have been too timid to take on their own. I mentioned that at nearly every demo I've been to in forty-five years of demo-going, bystanders make supportive gestures (as well, of course, as the other kind). Interaction with them is often spirited. Sometimes people leave the sidelines and join us. In contrast, I have been on "permitted" marches in which the route was organized and the schedule set by the police to isolate us from anyone else who might be around, and on which police "escorts" surrounded us toward that same end. With a goal of reaching others, asking for a permit that ends up preventing that contact is counterproductive. Finally, I drew on history. I told them of the earliest "permitted" protest that came to mind, told by one of its organizers, my friend H. L. Mitchell of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. In the 1930s, tenant farmers in Missouri realized that federal money that was supposed to be passed on to them to subsidize cutbacks in agricultural production they were forced to make, was being kept by the landowners. Black and white together, the new STFU lined the sides of a major highway to make their protest visible. State authorities immediately removed them by force to a back road where they were lucky to see more than one mule-cart a day. There, state officials decreed, they had permission to protest to their hearts' content. Only when they defied this restrictive process did they gain exposure, become an effective movement and get some measure of justice. Replying directly to my opponent, I asked the students in the audience whether they remembered their studies of the American Revolution. Had they thought of analyzing the Revolution as a case study of an at least partially successful protest? Did they recall, even so, the bitter complaints by colonial shopkeepers and merchants that citizen mobilizations were interfering with commerce and profits? *What are the social effects/dangers of protesting?* My turn to lead off again. I told the audience I had been eagerly anticipating this question because both sides of it, the dangers as well as what could be accomplished through protest, were worth serious thought. A starting point might be the recent British study -perhaps they had seen it?- reported in newspapers and on the internet under the optimistic headline "Protesting May Be Good for Your Health." Researchers at the University of Sussex found that people who join demonstrations gain a feeling of solidarity which, in turn, results in psychological well-being. The experience of mutual support that comes from collective action has become rare in our competitive and atomizing society. Political activism, according to the study, is a good tonic for socially-induced stress, pain, anxiety and depression. Having recommended activism as personal therapy, I was ready to turn to its positive effects on the health of the larger society. First, however, I admitted that there are dangers associated with protest and suggested that a candid look at them might reinforce a responsible way of thinking about their own participation. The first danger I highlighted is that it is too easy to settle for salving one's conscience. Some people

think that merely by turning out for occasional protests, they've done their share in combating social ills. In fact, public protests are only a small part of political work-again, as I pointed out, showing the limitations of focusing so specifically on protest- even if the media give them the most attention. They are mainly the surface manifestation of the more important day-to-day organizing. The latter consists of talking with the people around us, pulling them into small groups to address immediate grievances and, through our actions and our studies, figuring out together how those grievances interrelate and how they tie to the larger social fabric that surrounds us. Protests make sense only if the real political work is bubbling along underneath. A second danger that protests incur is the risk of alienating people who are potential supporters and participants. Sometimes this danger is unavoidable, as in the case of impatient commuters delayed from getting home by a march that crosses their path. In other instances, as I mentioned earlier, small numbers of demonstrators can act thoughtlessly in ways that unnecessarily antagonize non-participants. I guessed that this would be a major point of attack for my opponent, so wanted to stress that most protesters should not be tarred with the brush of the thoughtless few. Turning to the positive social effects of protest, I told them a long list would be possible. At the head of the list, of course, are our occasional victories (but they add up) making for a better society. Each of the examples of my own activism I had mentioned in my introduction, from confrontations on military bases to picketing with farmworkers to preparing testimony on health exposures in industrial settings, had resulted in some sort of recognizable success, from aiding the anti-war movement within the military to banning workplace exposures to toxic chemicals. Every political reform we can point to which made life better in some way, whether it is abolishing slavery, limiting the hours of work, winning female suffrage, creating a system of social security, or establishing public education, was won through political pressure and protest. The Bill of Rights itself, I reminded them, was not simply a grant from a beneficent elite but the product of political activism. Then I listed other positive effects, including the way activism develops a sense of community among participants and the ways it enables people from different backgrounds to realize what they have in common; how it enables people to take a more active role and engage with society rather than being passive or apathetic; how, out of that experience of community and active engagement, it begins to generate a vision of ways society could be fundamentally better; how it develops the ability to trust one's own judgment and stand up for one's own beliefs in the face of seeming social disapproval; how it carries with it the wonderful feeling of being able to make a difference in something important like the quality of people's lives; and how that feeling and the effort on which it is based can give meaning to life itself. Tactically, this would have been the time for my opponent to hit back hard. I had claimed the American Revolution in support of my position and even the Constitution. I did not expect him to come out against abolitionism or female suffrage, but if he wanted to oppose protest, he needed to present a coherent alternative account of how these desirable reforms had occurred. Or at least he needed to argue that history's lessons no longer apply. Or that some of protest's accomplishments, like contributing to stopping the Vietnam War, were somehow bad, or that the bad things that occasionally happen in protests outweigh the good. He did none of these. Instead, he told again about his one visit to the one protest and to the merchants who were inconvenienced. This time, however, he retreated further. He had advice for us on how protests could be more effective. Instead of massing, protesters should spread through an entire downtown area, one per corner, silently holding signs. Whatever the deficiencies of this idea, even raising it was already acknowledging the validity and legitimacy of activism and protest. He had conceded the main point, and the debate was only half over. It was that concession I wanted the students to see. In my rebuttal, therefore, rather than discussing tactics I simply told them about my visit the previous month to Harper's Ferry. At the site of John Brown's raid, the National Park Service has created a monument to the entire glorious national tradition of protest. Malcolm X is presented positively there alongside struggles for the rights of the disabled. The Boston tea party is part of the same display as protests promoting freedom of sexual orientation. *When is protesting appropriate?* This was the final question, and the student organizers decided -for no apparent reason, since they were doing a good job of keeping us to the allotted times- to skip it. I, too, was

eager to get to the historical case studies, but bypassing this question created a problem. In quickly sketching my responses ahead of time, I had held back two significant points for this part of the debate, points I now would have to leave out or scramble to fit in elsewhere. First of these was the age-old debate about representative government. I intended to line up authority on my side by citing Tom Paine and other favorite political thinkers who argued that citizens do not simply cede their responsibility once elections are over. Activist forums, continuing pressure on representatives, mobilizations and protests are needed in any sort of democratic process. At the time of the debate, we were being slammed, in newspaper columns as in Congress, with the false-patriotic argument that once the President makes his decision it is time for the rest of us to fall in line. We should do nothing, so the argument goes, to undermine national resolve. Our enemies supposedly gain strength from the sight of our disunity. I wanted to confront this would-be gag order with the contrary suggestion that our forms of pressure and protest are needed even more in contentious times and in deciding whether we have an enemy and who that enemy might be. Second, I wanted to raise issues of class. The most common form of political protest in our society is not the public gathering of the relatively powerless. Instead it is the behind-the-scenes phone call from those who have direct access to government officials, threatening to take their capital elsewhere. They'll be forced to take their ball and go home, they say, unless a particular policy is enacted or withdrawn, a particular course of action decided or revoked. This is the petulant protest of the powerful, often requiring no more than an implied threat or a whisper. The rest of us unfortunately do not have that special phone number. It is the exclusion of the majority that reduces our participation to the realm of public demonstration. Until we create a more inclusive process -itself a major goal of protests- protesting will always be appropriate. This is a fundamental issue that I thought would make a strong closing to the first part of the debate. But the moderator skipped ahead, and my intended points went unsaid. I would have protested, putting theory into practice, but the opportunity was lost. Before I could react, the lights dimmed, the screen lit up, and we had moved on. *Greensboro sit-in, 1960* This film clip showed the first day of the sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter by four African-American students. Its main focus was on the protesters as heroically stoic in the face of harassment. By default, it stressed the spontaneity of the sit-in, and gave no sense of the planning ahead of time, the tactical choices that had already been made and those that would be generated in subsequent days, nor the political ferment out of which the protest arose. As a way of enlarging the focus, I began by emphasizing that, even though we had seen four young men in the film clip, this was in important ways an issue driven by women. In meetings ahead of time, it was women who argued for targeting these department stores. They spoke of the "accidents" and humiliations they faced in shopping with children who were barred from the whites-only bathrooms. They told of their own pain in how their sons and daughters looked at them when they had to suffer abuse meekly; when store managers and counter clerks swore at their kids who had innocently hopped up on a stool hoping for a snack; when their only possible response was undignified submission. As the primary shoppers, they pointed out the political leverage an economic boycott by the black community could bring. My intention here was not only to redress the historical record gender-wise. More than with the other two case studies, the audience would already have a sense that the outcome of this protest was successful. They might be aware of continuing racial discrimination but would likely think of the end of legal racial segregation as a major victory. I wanted them to see that such victories do not stem simply from the righteousness of the cause, but require thoughtful preparation. As an example of that preparation, I pointed out that protesters had done careful reconnaissance of the different stores in town before sitting-in. They had sent, for instance, small, racially mixed teams to lunch counters to test the managers' response. A key finding of these scouting expeditions was that stores with out-of-town (out-of-South) ownership seemed less committed to blatant segregation. Managers in these stores were less adamant in calling the police or evicting the scouts. A national chain like Woolworth's might not only react less harshly, giving protesters a foothold until less intrepid reinforcements could mobilize, but might also be vulnerable to civil rights pressure elsewhere in the country. The young men who sat-in did so "spontaneously," I

said, in the sense that no organization, no meeting, had picked that particular day to start the protest. Their casual call to arms: "We might as well go now," has become the stuff of spontaneity legend, just as their action caught all the careful planners by surprise. But their target had already been selected, and the quick mobilization to support them testified not only to a growing willingness to contest blatant discrimination but also to the extensive preparation. In his remarks, my opponent used the case study to repeat his earlier advice to protesters that we stay dispersed and not form large groups that might interfere with others. The protesters ended segregation, he conceded, but it was because there were only four of them. Here as with the next case study, it was apparent he did not know the history and was relying on the film clips for all his historical information. *Kent State, 1970 I*, on the contrary, thought I knew the history well and did not rely enough on the next film clip. Busy pondering my next remarks, I apparently paid insufficient attention to the screen. As a result, I committed a bit of a faux pas. My opponent went first. What stood out for him was how the protesters had provoked the Ohio National Guard by throwing stones. He was careful not to excuse the subsequent slaughter. But presenting it as retaliation implicitly justified the shooting. He also took occasion to repeat his earlier scold of Portland activists, that anyone who brought children to demonstrations was irresponsibly putting them at risk. It is what he did not do that surprised me. He did not deny that the anti-war movement of what we loosely call "the sixties" was a success. The US war on Vietnam has remained such a touchstone even for contemporary politics that I expected him, as a supporter of every US military action, either to defend the war and condemn us for having hindered its successful conclusion, or reject the idea that protesters had anything to do with the outcome. Instead, he restricted his remarks to what he had seen in the film clip. I began by telling the audience I was in Ohio at the time of Kent State and still recall the state of siege we experienced. Just days after the massacre I spoke at a rally in Columbus opposing a high-level international conference there. The conference topic was counterinsurgency, specifically how to undermine and repress the struggles of people in the Third World and also protesters in our own society. I remember the feeling of vulnerability as National Guardsmen and police with rifles menaced from surrounding rooftops. By the time of Kent State, I reminded them, the Vietnam War had been going on for several years. A large student anti-war movement already existed, and there was increasing resistance to the war among US troops. Soldiers were becoming insubordinate, refusing orders. Instances of "fragging" (throwing a live grenade into an officer's tent or bunker) already had occurred. That resistance would only grow as the Vietnamese fought on, ultimately forcing the United States to pull out. Just a few days before, President Nixon, who had been elected on the promise of a secret plan to end the war, announced its escalation and extension into a new country, Cambodia. Protest surged and then grew incrementally after both the massacre at Kent State and the killings at a black college, Jackson State, ten days later. The Jackson State deaths were the result of the Mississippi State Patrol shooting into student dormitories. Hundreds of college campuses shut down or converted into organizing centers for their surrounding communities. The campus at which I taught, Antioch College in southwest Ohio, coordinated student activism regionally, sending students into the schools to do workshops on the war, and raising discussions on the reasons behind the war by joining militant workers on their picket lines. This was a movement, I observed, that forced two presidents from office. Its organizing with draftees and in the military itself made it increasingly difficult for the government to pursue an unpopular war. Its success eliminated the draft and continues to limit the way subsequent administrations are able to fight their wars. The movement which included Kent State was in important respects a success. This was an opportunity, however, to carry the discussion of what we mean by "success" a bit further. Success in the real world, I told them, is nearly always ambiguous. At a minimum, it brings countermeasures. For instance, in reaction to the soldiers' rebellion, the military was rebuilt to rely on a "volunteer" army for which a deteriorating job market has guaranteed a continued supply of enlistees. (Here I suggested that along with the burgeoning US prison system, the army is a major means for coping with an economy unable to provide an adequate number of jobs.) Just as with businesses faced with resistance by their workers, the military turned to higher technology as a replacement. The newer

weaponry cut down on the number of US troops and on the number of body bags, and increased the subsidy to corporations while tightening links within the military-industrial complex. With the changes, and especially without the draft, our political challenges now are different. Countermeasures and new challenges, though, do not detract from the historical success of that earlier movement in helping to stop an unjust war and inspire future generations. Returning specifically to the historical case study, I reminded the audience of where we had started: the debate's first couple of questions and what I had called their narrow focus on legality and constitutionality. Upholding the Constitution was precisely one of the objectives of the Kent State students. Their protest action the day before the massacre was to stage an elaborate symbolic burial of the Constitution. They did so to protest both the President's use of military force in circumvention of Congress and the domestic repression. In response to that affirmation of legality the Ohio governor, echoing President Nixon, called the protesters "bums" and "the worst type of people." The stage was set, and the National Guard was turned loose. Then I directly challenged my opponent and, in doing so, committed my faux pas. Students hadn't thrown rocks, I said. They were shot in the back after the Guard had marched away, some at a distance far beyond what a rock could be thrown. And this was a college campus, I went on. There weren't likely to be babies even if people were inclined to bring them to confrontations. Afterward, an audience member told me the film clip indeed had shown a few students throwing rocks, though perhaps on a different day, and also had mentioned the presence of babies. Perhaps the audience assumed I actually had been paying attention and was contesting the version in the film clip. Neither my opponent nor anyone from the audience publicly called me on my mistake. Finally, I took a few seconds to rebut my opponent's conclusion about Greensboro. I was glad he agreed the protest had been successful. But lunch counter segregation had not ended the day the four students sat in and certainly not because the protest was limited to four. The next day nineteen protesters showed up, and eighty-five the next. After that there were hundreds each day at Woolworth's, while this form of mass protest spread to thirty-one other cities in the South. Success resulted directly from numbers and carefully-considered disruption. *Iraq Protests, 2003*

The final film clip was not from our own Portland protest, one I had participated in and the one my opponent had visited, but from San Francisco the day the invasion was announced. Since I was speaking first, I figured I would need to anticipate my opponent's justification for the invasion. I began, therefore, by acknowledging that the world might be better off without Saddam Hussein leading Iraq. The real issues, I said, were how he was removed, what motivated his removal and what would replace his leadership. In other words, our evaluation of the protest would depend on our understanding of what is behind the war. I told them it was too early, just months after the invasion, to offer a definitive analysis, but I wanted to offer a tentative interpretation. Access to oil and its control by US corporations undoubtedly is a factor. But it is a factor in the larger context of political economy. Even more important than oil (or control of Middle Eastern water or other such single factors), the invasion of Iraq represented a shift in strategy on the part of the world's ruling elites. For the past few decades, I said, the world has been restructured economically and politically through entities like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the North American Free Trade Agreement. The outcome has been to expand the capitalist market into new geographic areas, draw in populations that until now had been only marginally affected by the market, and turn ever more areas of life into products that can be owned by corporations and sold on the market. The leading edge of that expansion has come from the United States, but it has involved coalitions of corporations and ruling elites from other advanced capitalist countries. Now the US government was acting unilaterally, seemingly in defiance of other governments that had been US allies. Additionally, in its plans for post-war Iraq, it was acting more exclusively on behalf of US corporate interests. It was not that the multilateral version of elite strategy was better for the world than the other. Both try to deflect or repress any meaningful expression of democracy; both are based in unsustainable exploitation of labor and resources; both are driven by greed. Rather, the differences have implications for the likelihood of wars, both economic and military, and for tensions within the ruling elites. The

transition from one set of policies to the other may also create openings for political opposition. The shift puts the United States more at odds with other countries. It embodies a greater willingness to engage in trade wars, to use military force and to undercut domestic social programs. It makes continuing war more likely, even while it cuts the health and welfare benefits of ordinary soldiers. It pours money into armaments and military subcontractors while giving tax rebates to the wealthy and starving education and public health. Further, it damages our own moral fiber by turning us into the world's bullies. It will only get worse unless our protests are effective and we begin to build a more humane alternative. The war itself, I said, is therefore a symptom of larger policies, a product of larger hierarchies and institutions that need to be changed. Protesting the war is only the first step. What matters, too, is what understanding of the war we project, its causes and its true costs. In other words, how we protest is as significant as the fact of protest. How we talk with people, how we draw others together and show the links between different issues, is as important as being out in the streets. I did not have to remind the audience (but I did) sitting in a public high school, how close we in Oregon had come to losing weeks from the school year because of a lack of funding. Money had been (partially) restored due, in significant measure, to student walkouts, sleep-ins and other creative forms of protest. Did they realize why school funding was short, why the state health plan was shutting people out, where the tax dollars were going? By any immediate measure, I admitted, this year's antiwar protests had not worked. Most obviously, they had not caused the government to stop the war. Even more than the invasion and killing were at stake, however. At the Portland protest, a couple of students had carried signs linking cutbacks in public education to war expenditures. Perhaps they were on the right track. If the war was linked to all our other problems and caused by the way our society was structured, then it was that very structure that needed to be changed. It would take years and our own expanded efforts before we could tell whether or not we had made a difference. The important thing about Greensboro and Kent State, after all, was not the events themselves but the way they formed part of larger and longer-lived movements. In conclusion I said the real issue is not whether protest can be justified. Even my opponent had conceded that point. Nor is it whether demonstrations can stop government or corporate actions we don't like. The true question about protest is how to make it effective in building toward something very much better. To answer that question will require all our best thinking and active participation. My opponent had the last say in this formal part of the debate. This case study was the one with which he was familiar, the one on which he already had focused most of his remarks. He asked whether the protesters would have fought against the Nazis. This could have been a rhetorical question, implying cowardice on the part of protesters, but he didn't make it a challenge to me or the audience, just left it hanging. Hussein was evil, he said, and therefore any action to remove him is justified. Then he chose to reiterate his themes, as if repetition were validation: Protests are disruptive. They interfere with commerce and could block emergency vehicles. They're best done by individuals or in very small groups. Then, with minutes still remaining to him, he relinquished the microphone.

Questions

Larson had been growing visibly more irritated. The video shows him attempting to interrupt or speak over my words on three occasions during the debate. I had been prepared for this, given his reputation for bullying, and had found it easy to stop him by laughing at his breaches of decorum or insisting that the moderator intervene. By the question period, then, my opponent was frustrated. He showed his vexation by responding impatiently and even yelling at two of the questioners. With the exception of one rambling speech by an adult member of the audience, the questions were thoughtful and worthwhile. By and large, they revolved around two themes: sexual orientation and high school activities against the war. A student spoke, for example, about trying to organize a Gay-Straight Alliance at the school, and being refused permission to become an official school club. Questions about the war similarly related mainly to what the school would permit or facilitate. We talked about student rights and how to organize. (I was able to draw on my son's experience in

creating a middle school newspaper and then leading a student walkout in a successful effort to resist censorship.) For most of the students, it was clear, school is the sphere in which they express their politics. The final question provided the opportunity for a wrap-up statement. I didn't know, I told them, what they had studied in their history and social studies classes. But however sympathetic those classes, they undoubtedly shortchanged the role of protest in history and society. Protest, and activism more broadly, are far more widespread and pervasive than they might expect. Since the United States was at war and we had good reasons to oppose this war, we needed to look at the hidden history of how wars conclude. Take the end of World War Two, for example. Their history books give a date, as if once the German and Japanese surrenders occurred, the soldiers were allowed to come home. What actually happened was far more complex. Fearing a resumption of economic depression if the soldiers were to return, the US government tried to keep them overseas, mobilized against enemies yet to be created. It was only with the SOS ("Send Our Ships") movement among troops in the Pacific, and formation of soldiers' unions and physical attacks from within the ranks on officers in Europe, along with widespread popular agitation in the United States, that the soldiers were demobilized. There was a lesson in this history for when and how US troops in Iraq might be allowed to come home. Our debate today, I concluded, is in some respects like a microcosm of the larger society. We live in an adversarial system, one that requires organizing support among others and making noise to be heard. When I was in college, I used to keep on my desk my own handwritten copy of a quote from Frederick Douglass with which some of the audience might be familiar. I couldn't quote it word for word from memory, but part of it said, "Those who profess to favor freedom yet deprecate agitation ...want crops without plowing up the ground," and ended with this insight: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Thoughtful protest, aiming at a better world, constantly reevaluated for its effectiveness, is always justified. Even more, that kind of protest is an obligation of democratic citizenship.

Afterthoughts

I set out to change premises. I wanted at least some members of the audience to see themselves and our world differently, to come away strengthened in their belief that fundamental social change is possible and they can play an active role. A more comprehensive Left versus Right debate might have let us get at underlying premises more easily. We could have debated human nature or the lessons of history on how societies change. Our more focused debate, however, let us concentrate on activism, and therein lies the real challenge in evaluation. If audience members gained something, it would not reliably show up in their thanks to me nor in the resolutions they took after the debate, but in their enhanced level and kind of activity. This is appropriate since the real lessons about their own capability and the world's ability to change cannot be learned by listening to a debate or only engaging in intellectual discourse. Those lessons come through a more active process of joining together, testing the world, learning from the results and starting again with greater understanding and, if we are effective, greater numbers. They come, in other words, through an activism that is both thoughtful and reflective. Norm Diamond is former President of Pacific Northwest Labor College and co-author of *The Power In Our Hands* (Monthly Review Press).