

Demonstrations, protests, petitions, boycotts—and universities

The Cranky Professor

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Politics: voting, of course, but also demonstrating, protesting, picketing, signing petitions, boycotting, striking—all as ways of pressuring administrators or officials to do what we would like them to do.

Discussion: talking and listening, writing and reading, inviting others to go here, to see this, to listen to that, and ourselves accepting invitations to go, to see, to listen, all the while thinking hard—all as part of the endeavour to understand things accurately and fully and to help others understand things accurately and fully. Reaching agreement is not the point of discussion, though often agreement is reached. Agreement is not the point especially when the discussion concerns what to value or what to do. Rather, the point of discussion is for one and for others to come to understand the matter better—and, even more, for one to appreciate the hopes and worries of others regarding the matter.

We could not do without politics. We're never all going to agree on what to do and yet we need, as a department, a union, a club, an association, a board, a university, a city, a province, a country, a world, to make decisions and to implement them. We must take whatever effective carrots or sticks lay ready to hand and use them to get the powers that be to do what we would like them to do.

On the other side, though, we could live, and we might live well (though we wouldn't flourish), without discussion. Our concern could be exclusively to organize politically and to act politically. We could, that is, place ourselves within the ranks of people who think and value as we do, listen to those we oppose simply in the spirit of knowing the enemy, and then vote or demonstrate or whatever in service of our goal.

Though we needn't engage in discussion, politics without discussion is a dismal thing indeed. And yet politics without discussion is pretty much our way these days. (Maybe it has always been pretty much our way.)

Politics without discussion is dismal in many ways. In the absence of discussion we are less likely to get the facts right or to find the efficient policy. And so our policies can easily fail to attain their goals or, by attaining their immediate goals, make things worse overall. It is also dismal as talk that isn't discussion is merely manipulative. Without discussion no one can accept as fair an outcome she dislikes. Winners in politics must be contemptuous of losers and even of many of their own comrades, and losers must feel aggrieved and resentful.

Of course, those of us who want to understand things or who like discussion for its own sake

will find politics without discussion a sorry thing indeed independently of any of its bad consequences.

Universities, one might think, should be especially concerned for the care and feeding of discussion. They are places of research and investigation and teaching. That's why it is always distressing to find professors and students abandoning discussion in favour of politics, and even treating discussion contemptuously. Here are some recent cases: the protest march in reaction to Peter March's posting the Danish cartoons and the complaint launched against him; the movement to boycott Israeli universities; the planned vigil outside the debate with Jared Taylor; the petition announcing embarrassment over Shiraz Dossa's participation in a conference in Iran. The professors and students who marched, boycotted, or petitioned turned against discussion and the possibility of changing people's minds and behaviour by argument and opted instead to use social or economic pressure to try to get their way. Rather than explaining their views and responding to criticism, and letting their position stand or fall on the strength of argument, they sought to build numbers and to create a spectacle.

The preference for politics over discussion reveals itself in the practice of castigating a view or a system as racist or sexist, rather than showing how it is opposed to whatever value is in question—respect, say—or showing how it works to harm people. It also reveals itself in asking whether someone should have said something (that is, in asking whether it was insulting or ill-mannered of him to have said it), rather than in asking whether what he said is true or well evidenced. “To say that the schools aren't doing their job is to insult the teachers, who work long and hard to....”

But perhaps the matter at hand is too important for us to bother with discussion. Perhaps the urgency of the situation requires politics right away. That can happen. If pouring sand in the bulldozer's gas tank is the only way to save the copse, then leave discussion for later and pour some sand.

So what's distressing is that professors and students shunned discussion in these cases and turned quickly to politics where nothing was urgent and where their political gestures would have little effect anyway. Marching in reaction to March's posting of the cartoons wasn't going to bring them down (the Vice-President Academic, shunning discussion, had already removed them) nor was it going to put anything right (supposing the posting had put anything wrong). Expressing one's embarrassment isn't going to do whatever in the world the petition's organizers hoped that it would.

And in the meantime the questions whether March should have posted those cartoons and whether Dossa should have gone to that conference went undiscussed. As politics, these events can be placed only in the ugly category of showing the world that one has the right sentiments.

These political gestures could have had only little effect on their immediate target. They well might, however, have had larger and lasting effects. They serve to create an atmosphere of intimidation and worry. Professors and students don't want to be the target of public scorn and hostility and, so, they might keep their views and their questions to themselves. Demonstrations, petitions, and the rest, then, are not always just irrelevant to the care and feeding of discussion—sometimes they are poison to it.