

Disrupting a talk

The Cranky Professor

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What in the world were the people who disrupted Jose Ruba's presentation thinking to accomplish?

They certainly meant to cause a disturbance and, perhaps, to shut the presentation down. They got what they wanted on those scores. But what good could they have reasonably supposed might come from causing a disturbance or shutting down that presentation?

Those who disrupted the presentation were moved by the awful thought of women being forced to remain pregnant and to deliver babies against their will. They were moved by the terrifying thought of women maimed or killed while having abortions illegally. Fine. Maintaining and extending abortion rights is a noble cause. Yet how could someone expect that cause to be advanced even an iota by disrupting a pro-life presentation?

By disrupting his presentation, the protesters expressed their contempt for Jose Ruba. Not their contempt for Ruba's views—but for Ruba himself. They expressed their contempt for Ruba's audience—for pro-choice members just as much as for pro-life and undecided. And they expressed their contempt for a wonderful way of life, the way of life central to which is coming to form one's views and emotions and plans—and allowing others to come to form their views, emotions, and plans—through the force of argument and example. The disrupting protesters, that is, were happy to bully people out of asking certain questions or pursuing certain discussions as they wish.

Well, maybe, at least now and again, acting contemptuously toward somebody or other is just what's called for. Maybe an important cause can be advanced effectively by bullying people—and without that bullying causing damage to a social fabric otherwise marked by respect for individuals and unimpeded discussion. Again, that pregnant women not be forced to remain pregnant and that women not die are certainly important causes.

Yet whatever cause might be advanced effectively by shouting people down, abortion rights isn't it. First, in Canada today, abortion rights are not in peril. We must remain vigilant, of course, and there's much work still to be done to make abortion easily accessible to all women, both in Canada and elsewhere. But serious restrictions on abortion are not in the offing in any direction. Second, and most important, the work we need to do protecting and extending abortion rights requires patient discussion. A couple well-wrought questions or well-considered anecdotes in the period following the

presentation would have been much more likely to have had a good effect than shouting down the speaker. And asking these questions or offering these anecdotes would have been consistent with respect for individuals and for our social fabric. The disrupting protesters, so far from advancing their cause, actually squandered an opportunity to advance it.

Still, even were abortion rights in Canada under some threat and even were shouting down a speaker an effective tactic in meeting this threat (I can't for the life of me imagine how this could be true, but let's just suppose), the good achieved would have to be at least equal to the harm caused for the use of that tactic to be justified. So what's the harm? Respect and liberality are not only wonderful in themselves, but they are also our best hope for identifying and solving fairly whatever social problems we face. And yet, despite these facts, respect and liberal attitudes are not easy to foster and maintain in a community. It's hard to think disinterestedly about matters of value or public policy. It's much simpler and more immediately gratifying simply to react without thinking, to follow the like-minded herd. Disrupting a speaker, then, puts at risk much that we value, much that we value both for its own sake and for the goods it makes possible.

Think for a minute about democracy. One thing to value about democracy is its fairness. When a decision is made democratically, even those who think it the wrong decision can accept it as fair and, thus, as legitimate, as binding on them. But a decision isn't made democratically when some people are prevented from trying to change minds by presenting their views. To shout down pro-life speakers, then, is to subvert democracy and, thereby, to render pro-choice customs and institutions illegitimate. We love democracy for its own sake, of course, but we also prize it for the peace and security it brings, peace and security that are threatened when people are denied public avenues through which to influence policy.

Those who set out to disrupt Jose Ruba's presentation must have known all of this. They understood that contempt was their tactic. They understood that this tactic wouldn't serve the cause of protecting or extending abortion rights. They understood that their tactic would put at risk our fragile commitments to disinterested thought and dispassionate discussion, and would coarsen the social fabric here at Saint Mary's and beyond. And yet they chose contempt and shouted down the speaker.

All they could reasonably have thought to accomplish, then, was to display to the world their self-righteous sentiments. That's not politics. That's cawing and strutting. How pathetic, how ugly.

Students and faculty members at Saint Mary's who sympathize with the disrupting protesters either have failed to think hard about the matter or are just as disdainful of respect, discussion, and democracy as are the bullying roosters themselves.