

# Deliberation at the Margins: Participant Accounts of Face-to-Face Public Deliberation at the 1999-2000 World Trade Protests in Seattle and Prague

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*Research on public deliberation overlooks imperfect forms of face-to-face deliberation that occur outside the mainstream. Such deliberation may be oriented toward the development of a counternarrative rather than a broader conception of the common good; however, it may have some of the same characteristics and effects ascribed to more refined deliberative forums. This paper explores the possibility of such deliberation by exploring the world trade protests that occurred in Seattle and Prague in 1999 and 2000. Participant observations and in-depth ethnographic interviews with three participants are used to probe the experiences of planning and participating in the demonstrations in relation to the qualities and effects of face-to-face deliberation. Despite portrayals of the protests as primarily violent street battles, the observations and interviews show evidence of public deliberation and, for the participants, increases in both political efficacy and future civic activity.*

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Conventional accounts of the millennial world trade protests portray them as a collage of tear gas, vandalism, shouting, and bloodshed – the antithesis of reasoned civic discourse (e.g., Kahn, 2000; Murphy, 1999). Yet amidst this chaos, one may find moments of genuine deliberation. To explore this possibility, we review relevant writings on public discourse then report on a small set of in-depth ethnographic interviews with participants in the 1999-2000 demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank that took place in Seattle and Prague.

## DELIBERATION AND COUNTERPUBLICS

There are two main academic conceptions of public deliberation. One views public deliberation as mediated by television, radio, and mass-circulation publications. As

Page (1996) explains, "In modern societies...public deliberation is (and probably must be) largely *mediated*, with professional communicators rather than ordinary citizens talking to each other and to the public through mass media" (p. 1). A second view focuses on face-to-face public deliberation. These theorists view deliberation as a valuable but rare form of political discourse (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Cohen, 1997). Ideal deliberation includes careful problem analysis, an egalitarian process with adequate speaking opportunities and careful listening, and dialogue that bridges divergent ways of speaking and knowing. Whereas mediated deliberation theories downplay the very existence of quasi-deliberative citizen discourse, ideal theories stress its inadequacy.

As a corrective to these two views, Herbst (1993, 1996, 1999) has drawn attention to how oppositional and minority voices express themselves outside both mainstream media and rarefied deliberative venues. Herbst (1996) points to instances of oppositional discourse, such as the "shadow mayor" in Chicago during the 1930s-1950s. In the midst of Chicago's smothering political atmosphere, the shadow mayor and the *Defender*, a powerful alternative newspaper, "constantly reminded readers that they had created a small nation, an 'imagined community'" (Herbst, 1996, p. 126). In the salons of 17<sup>th</sup> Century France, Herbst (1999) finds another example of deliberation within an oppositional community. Conversation in these alternative forums provided space for the development of new ideas, and the participants in these salons developed democratic skills, habits, and dispositions.

These examples show historical precedent for locating moments of deliberation outside the mainstream, and careful observation may reveal contemporary instances. Deliberation often occurs within a "counterpublic" (Asen, 2000) that seeks to develop internal coherence before entering a more inclusive public venue. Collectives using alternative political expression "are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Finally, imperfect deliberation outside the mainstream may still have some of the benefits ascribed to more refined deliberative forums. The increased knowledge, efficacy, and involvement Herbst (1996, 1999) observes resemble the effects that others have ascribed to more ideal forums (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

## METHOD

The ongoing world trade protests provide an ideal setting for exploring deliberation within oppositional communities because they permit an extreme case study approach (Yin, 1989). This method focuses on a case that appears unlikely to reveal the phenomenon of interest. If found, it is plausible that this phenomenon can later be found in more hospitable settings.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted to look at the communication produced within the protest community at the world trade protests. Fieldwork involves "research in which the numbers are small, the relationships are complex, and nothing occurs exactly the same way twice" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 19). The researcher's representation of the field must not only be valid but also sufficiently vivid to express subtle textures and hues of the phenomena being studied.

Toward that end, the primary data for this study are a series of in-depth interviews with three participants in the world trade protests—interviews during and after the demonstrations. Roughly fifty thousand demonstrators from around the world met in Seattle for the WTO protests; five to ten thousand converged in Prague (BBC, 2001).

Joan and Marty were present at the November 30, 1999 demonstrations in Seattle against the WTO, and Joan was present at the September 26, 2000 demonstrations in Prague along with Helena. (All names are pseudonyms.) The three were selected because they approximated a cross-section of the two protests' voices: one an American student, one a European wage laborer, and one a self-employed American artist. While the genders of the interviewees may have some bearing on the emergent data (all three are women), their level of involvement in the demonstrations likely is more pertinent to the study, as each was significantly involved in the planning and implementation of activist events.

The interviews were loosely structured and broken down into shorter sets of queries. For instance, participants were given a simple definition of deliberation and asked whether the term had relevance to their own experiences at the protests. Each interview explored whether interviewees had encountered talk in which different points of view were present, arguments were made in terms of a common good (at least within the community itself, if not a larger public good), space was made for voices from the margins, and a significant amount of give and take was present over an extended period of time. At the close of each interview, the interviewer asked interviewees about the impact of their experiences on their civic beliefs and future plans.

This study also involved participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989). By entering the field, an investigator can develop a more in-depth understanding of what people are doing and saying in the research setting. The investigator in this project attempted a broader understanding of the protests by triangulating his own involvement with that of the interviewees, and with the larger body of demonstrators who framed the mis-en-scene. In Seattle, the first author spent two weeks enmeshed with the protesters as they prepared for the arrival of the WTO delegates, and the author remained involved day and night during the full week of demonstrations. For the Prague protests, the author flew to the Czech Republic and spent the week attending the demonstrations.

### **ACCOUNTS OF DELIBERATIONS AT THE PROTESTS**

Dialogue between adversaries in the heat of a protest could not be expected. One need only picture a typical collection of Seattle activists: A dozen sit in the street locked to each other, arm to arm, in what protesters call "lock boxes." One activist at each end of the street locks her or his neck to a stationary object like a light pole, and the rest link extended arms end to end in impenetrable PVC pipe, connected by hidden, releasable steel chains attached at the wrists.

For Helena in Prague, facing the police called for courage and stamina. Deliberation was of little use. Helena recalled how after a long standoff, the police charged the seated protesters:

I convinced myself not to move. But their brutality shocked me. Then I got really mad after the beatings, and tried to negotiate, calm them down, but there was absolutely no response except the middle finger....Protesters asked them not to repeat the reaction of the police during the seventeenth of November, 1989 [the Velvet Revolution that toppled the communist regime], but they did even worse...

In Seattle, Joan described the atmosphere of one line of lock boxes she was assisting a block from the Seattle Convention Center: "I didn't converse at all, really. I was

having a pretty profound spiritual experience, and I didn't feel like talking, philosophizing, at all."

Nonetheless, in the midst of one such setting, Marty recalled at least one fruitful exchange with a delegate attempting to cross the line of protesters:

This one guy from the World Wildlife Federation came up and said, "You don't understand, I'm on your side, I'm one of the good guys."...This guy actually wanted to talk. So people asked him, "What do you do, who are you with, what are you here to discuss?...What do you think of the policies of the WTO, why do you want to get in?"...Then we basically said, "Okay, you've shown us that you're on our side, now we'll decide." We did a consensus, because some people were very adamant about letting *no one* through. Eventually everyone decided to let him pass.

Such an event was rare, however, and the quasi-deliberation reported by the interviewees was more commonly talk that occurred *within* the activist community. As Marty explained, "With the WTO coming to town, and [with us] deciding to participate in a direct action," there was a "catalyst" for conversations. At one pre-protest meeting Marty remembered discussing the possible consequences of different tactics:

We were trying to decide if we wanted to cross police lines. We decided to discuss all options, including property destruction, rather than just sitting peacefully...Who does it hurt—if it's property destruction, and especially if it's corporate business windows? Does it even get noticed? For the amount of negative publicity it receives, does it really get a benefit?...It didn't feel like a debate at all. It was like us bringing all the issues to the table. All of us had different feelings, and we'd raise them, and that was a valid feeling if we could support it with words.

As the discussion continued, a sharp disagreement arose between "the property destruction people and the non-property destruction people. Then we realized that we were buying into the same dichotomy. And we questioned that." The conversation became more reflective, and Marty recalled the group acknowledging that "there was a lot of fighting going on, which was not necessarily productive, and we talked about that, about the fights within the movement both inside and outside the room." Tensions slowly eased, and they "agreed to disagree, and recognized that there was more to it" and that violence and property destruction were "complex" issues for the activist community.

At a session Joan attended the facilitator "had us line up on a scale, like a thermometer, and we were asked questions like, 'Is property destruction violence?'" Using a one-to-ten agreement scale, participants "would go to the ends and sort of stare at each other. And then after some separate discussions, a spokesperson would emerge and explain their, or our, perspective." Joan also recalled similar meetings at the "Counter Conference" protest meetings in Prague, where activist leaders explicitly called for internal deliberation. The main conference theme was stated as follows:

Where is this going? How can we do this better? And what are our weaknesses? We need to talk about this, something feels awry, we're

fragmenting... There was a specific call to deliberation and dialogue, so we could repair our broken places.

These issues were not always resolved. Joan recalled a personal instance of disagreement with her boyfriend, though it was tempered by a growing mutual respect:

When we got home, I asked, "How do you see property destruction as non-violent?" I remember at the time being genuinely curious, not accusatory or debating. I listened to what he had to say. It was a similar experience as during the [earlier group] exercise. By the end of that conversation, I found that both of us were a little more to the middle.

Helena, coming from a formerly communist society, had a different perspective on hearing "diverse" voices during the Prague demonstrations. In her view, she and her fellow citizens were recovering mentally from a half-century of totalitarianism, and this new concept of critical thinking meant that *any* voices constituted "voices from the margins" in the Czech Republic. As Helena explained,

My original plan was to go through the demonstrations more as an observer and a guide for my guests than an active participant. I grew up in a society which taught me to keep my eyes and mouth shut. Like for most of Czech people, for me it is very difficult to say my opinion out loud.

Though debate took place within the activist community in Prague, Helena did not choose to take part in those conversations. For her, attendance itself was sufficiently bold, and speaking out—even among activists—was a step that would only come later.

### EMERGENT THEMES

Two themes consistently appeared in the interviewees' reports, the first author's own experience, and the participant-observation in Seattle and Prague: the use of deliberation to develop internal coherence within an emerging counterpublic (Asen, 2000) and an increased sense of political efficacy for future political involvement with an imagined—and real—community (Herbst, 1996).

The demonstrations and the quasi-deliberative experiences within the protest community appeared to have an impact on those who took part. The Seattle protests exposed Marty to a variety of people and oppositional perspectives, and they gave her a sense of common purpose. The protest was "a way for us...to discuss policies, and the alliances between...environment and labor." Marty described the protest as a "job fair" for global issues and causes. She emerged with a "raised awareness and knowledge of issues such as human rights" and a commitment to future activism.

Though previously more an artist than an activist, the year after the Seattle protests Joan attended similar actions in Washington D.C. and Prague. Joan also continued to discuss issues and activism with the people she met in Seattle. "We did have many, many conversations," Joan explained: "It's getting messier in the process. Muddier...Are we a movement? If we are, how do we sustain it? It intrigues me, I want to be involved, and to help answer these questions."

Helena reported similar changes in herself and her fellow activists, especially among human rights advocates who thought the Czech Republic's "Velvet Revolution" was

complete. She said that she and her fellow Prague activists lost the battle for public opinion about world trade and civil disobedience, but it was “not too late for people [to be] thinking about it and being better prepared next time.” In the weeks that followed the Prague demonstrations, Helena became a more active participant in her republic’s emerging democracy: She engaged in discussions with the legal observers from the protests, she translated testimonials by victims of police beatings and kept in touch with human rights groups, and for the first time, she discussed these and other political issues with friends and family.

The Seattle Convergence Center, and perhaps the Prague Counter Conference, acted as separate zones of deliberation (Herbst, 1996, 1999). The property destruction discussions in these and other settings frequently had the marks of deliberation—give and take, sustained over time, sought a common good, and welcomed marginalized voices, at least within the oppositional community. Though deliberation was not the practical focus of the protests, it occurred with sufficient frequency and intensity to have left an impression on the protesters. Interviewees spoke directly about the role of deliberation in changing their minds and habits, and two reported that deliberation was one of the forms of political discourse they hoped to employ in the future.

Deliberative theory can learn much by widening its frame of reference and looking for encounters such as those reported here. In addition to celebrating mediated deliberation (Mutz, 2001; Page, 1996) and orchestrating public forums (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Gastil, 2000), it would be useful to examine informal associations already in existence. If quasi-deliberation can appear even in the events surrounding international protests, it is likely that the public, sub-publics, and counterpublics are already deliberating, even if they do so imperfectly and sporadically.

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