

Mitchell's Musings: 1-12-15: Friendly or Unfriendly Persuasion (Or Something Else)

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Back in 1978-79, I was at the Brookings Institution on leave from UCLA. At that time, several years after the Nixon-in-China episode, (mainland) China was emerging from the Mao/Red Guard era and opening up to the west. But the process was at an early stage. A delegation from China came to Brookings, ostensibly to investigate how western think-tanks operate. A group from Brookings (including yours truly) met with the delegation in a conference room.

During the interaction, it occurred to me – based on the ensuing discussion – that the stated purpose and the actual purpose of the delegation's visit were not the same. In fact, the Chinese delegation seemed to be talking more to themselves than to us. They seemed to be engaged in a kind of self-expression – some might even say a kind of therapy – relating to having emerged from the trauma of the Mao/Red Guard period. We were more of an audience than a source of information. Nonetheless, we seemed to have a purpose; apparently the self-expression could not take place without face-to-face contact with an outside audience.

In more recent times, it has struck me that the same type of dynamic seems to occur with regard to protests and demonstrations related to contemporary social and political issues. Inherently, protesting by yourself or demonstrating by yourself alone and without any audience cannot accomplish anything. Whoever you are ostensibly trying to persuade won't be aware of your protest in such a circumstance. So there has to be an audience to provide some justification. But the question is whether you are really trying to persuade that audience or – as in the case of the Chinese delegation – you are engaged in some form of more personal self-expression.

For purposes of a blog I do for the UCLA Faculty Association, I watch (and record) live-streamed meetings of the University of California Regents. There is always a public comments period at such meetings. It is most frequently taken up by individuals who have some complaint about existing university policy or some proposal they want adopted. But I often have a sense – based on the conduct of those talking – that the speakers are conducting the exercise as part of

some personal self-expression rather than to persuade the Regents of their viewpoint or to achieve a change in policy. Indeed, one wonders whether changing policy is even the goal or whether the act of protesting is the goal. It's not even a question of the ends justifying the means. The means are the end and the justification.

It's largely a matter of tone. Yelling, demanding, denouncing, insulting, or following such conduct with a demonstration that temporarily disrupts the meeting (often ending in having police clear the room) doesn't seem to be an effort in persuasion. Sometimes, when done by unions represented at the university, the objective may be an attempt by leaders to show members they are doing something; perhaps the energized membership will then become more supportive of the leadership. So there may be a rationale in such cases that has more to do with internal organizational politics and perhaps indirectly a link to contract goal achievements. In those cases, motivating the membership may be the goal with the Regents as bystanders.

In other cases, however, the conduct seems to be pure self-expression without a goal of persuasion. If the desired end is simply self-expression, the fact that the approach is ineffective (or possibly counter-productive) at persuasion is irrelevant. Accomplishing a goal is not really an expected outcome. The real goal is therapeutic and cathartic.

But you don't have to go to public meetings to observe this phenomenon. A friend of mine with a Facebook account reported that an acquaintance of hers kept using the system to send her political articles and messages she had no interest in receiving. But the sending continued despite a request to stop. The fact that most folks go on Facebook expecting baby photos and travel pictures from friends didn't matter to the sender. Apparently, the self-expression need of the sender was greater than a need to persuade. (She eventually de-friended the sender.)

My impression is that there is more therapeutic self-expression and less persuasion going on these days regarding the political and social issues of the day, both in public (e.g., those Regents meetings) and personal (e.g., the Facebook example) than there used to be. I may be wrong, of course; perhaps some of the 1960s protests were similar instances of a therapeutic purpose. If

that is the case, you can view this musing as obviously unpersuasive and just an example of
purse self-expression.