

Talking politics

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1

Political consciousness

Place: A home in Mattapan, a town in the greater Boston area. Five adults, all of them black, are seated in a circle in the living room. A tape recorder and microphone rest on a table in their midst.

Time: February 1987

Characters:

Aretha, in her thirties, a facilitator hired by researchers at Boston College.

Vanessa Scott, in her forties, a teacher's aid.

Mr. B., in his fifties, the owner of a small restaurant.

Roy, in his twenties, a food service worker at a hospital.

Nicole, in her twenties, a manager at a fast food chain.

Aretha: Another topic in the news is the issue of affirmative action – programs for blacks and other minorities. There's a disagreement over what kind of programs should we have, if any, to increase the hiring, the promotion, and the college admissions of blacks and other minorities. When you think about the issue of affirmative action, what comes to mind?

Mr. B: Ms. Scott, you always like to lead off. [*laughter in group*] I love listening to your voice.

Vanessa: When I think about the issue of affirmative action, what comes to mind? Well, basically, affirmative action, the affirmative action programs were instituted to redress past wrongs, right? All right. And I think that – was it in the, was the sixties when Martin Luther King and his movement? [*nods from others*] Okay. I think that the gains that Martin Luther King made during that time have all been taken away. And now they've come out with this thing about, what is it –

Roy: Reverse discrimination.

Vanessa: Reverse discrimination – meaning that because there were certain slots of certain programs allocated for black people to bring up the quotas in certain positions, and so on and so forth – it's discriminating against white people. But you have to understand that for centuries, black people have been discriminated against, all right. And the only way that you can redress that – address that issue – *is* to set aside slots for black people or for minority people, where they can at least, you know, be on par somewhat with the larger society. When I say larger society, I mean white people.

The way I see it now, all the gains that we have made and all the things that we have fought for have been taken away by your president, Ronald Reagan. All right. And I see black people now going back to the time of slavery. Because that's what it – it's institutional slavery. I mean, we're no longer – we don't have signs on doors that say "Black here" and "White here." We don't lynch black people anymore. But it's institutionalized. We go to get a job, we can't get it.

And now we can't even get into college anymore, because the Reagan administration has really – he has – what is – cut down on the – eliminated the financial aid, which makes it impossible for poor people, and black people in particular, to even get into these institutions. Which means that if we cannot get the education, we cannot get the jobs. All right. So I see the doors being slammed in our faces again, and we're going back to the time of slavery.

Aretha: Any other –

Mr. B: – Ms. Scott?

Aretha: – Mr. B?

Mr. B: It couldn't have been said no better.

Vanessa: Why, thank you.

Roy: I agree with Vanessa's views, too. 'Cause if you look at some of Reagan's appointments to the Supreme Court, for instance Chief Justice William – [*pause*]

[*whispers*] Rehnquist.

Roy: Rehnquist – some of his views that – some of the things that he stood for – he was a very, I mean he *is* a very racist person. And I don't think he should have been nominated for the Chief Justice.

Vanessa: When you look at, you know, the Bakke decision. You know, this man brought charges that he was discriminated on the basis that he was white because he could not get into a medical school,

okay – and that because they have set aside certain slots for black people. And when you read the information on this man – he was turned down from five medical schools, not because he was white but because the man was just not competent. Okay?

Nicole: Not qualified.

Vanessa: That was a whole turnaround, when that Bakke decision. That was the first time they brought a case about reverse discrimination. How in the world can something be reversed when we've been discriminated against all our lives? It cannot be reversed.

This play is unrehearsed, with the characters playing themselves, writing the script as they proceed. Here we watch them attempting to make sense of a complex issue that has been the subject of public discourse since the late 1960s. And, in my judgment, succeeding quite well.

I say this not because I agree with the general thrust of their opinions on affirmative action – which I do. Even if I disagreed, I would acknowledge the coherence of their discussion. The conversation is informed and shaped by an implicit organizing idea or *frame*. This REMEDIAL ACTION frame (see Gamson and Modigliani, 1987) assumes that racial discrimination is not a remnant of the past but a continuing presence, albeit in subtle form. It rests on the abstract and difficult idea of institutional racism, which Vanessa skillfully articulates and makes understandable and concrete. In this frame, affirmative action programs are an expression of an ongoing, incomplete struggle for equal opportunity in American society.

Vanessa is clearly the senior author of this part of the script, but there is evidence that her frame is collective and a property of the group. She is prompted and encouraged at various points, and others express agreement and attempt to develop her remarks, working within the same frame. Notice how readily Roy presents the correct prompt, “reverse discrimination,” a catch phrase from the public discourse on affirmative action, when Vanessa falters with a vague “this thing.”

No one disagrees during this segment or introduces some alternative way of framing the affirmative action issue. Later on, some disagreements arise and the group discusses the plight of poor whites with some sympathy, but in ways that are consistent with the REMEDIAL ACTION frame.

In the segment quoted here and in other parts of the conversation, the group members draw on media-generated knowledge about affirmative action. Vanessa is able to invoke the Supreme Court's Bakke decision, which took place more than eight years earlier, and Roy alludes to information featured in William Rehnquist's recent confirmation hearing. Vanessa's rhetorical question about reverse discrimination does not sound

very different from that of Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), on *CBS News* (July 4, 1978), who asked, “How can there be reverse discrimination when the black and brown population of California is 25 percent but the [minority] medical school population is only 3 percent?”

But the mass media are not the only source the players use in writing this script. In other parts of the conversation, they bring in the experiences of friends who cannot afford to go to college, as well as their own and others’ work experiences. They draw on shared subcultural knowledge and popular wisdom about race relations in America. Mass media commentary is an important tool in their framing of affirmative action, but it is not the only one.

This book focuses on a particular kind of political consciousness, one that supports mobilization for collective action. It is a fleeting thing at best in this conversation, but one can see elements of it. First, the frame presented here has a strong injustice component, one that breeds a sense of moral indignation. It is carried in terms and phrases such as *institutional slavery*, *racism*, and *doors being slammed in one’s face*. Furthermore, there is a sympathetic allusion to the civil rights movement, with its images of people acting collectively to bring about change, acting as agents and not merely as objects of history. Their conversation is divorced from an action context, and the civil rights movement is history; nevertheless, their frame has important collective action components.

Central themes

Three themes run throughout the analyses of political talk in this book:

- a. People are not so passive,
- b. People are not so dumb, and
- c. People negotiate with media messages in complicated ways that vary from issue to issue.

The phrases *not so passive* and *not so dumb* refer to the way mass publics frequently appear in social science portraits. Of course, this is another case of whether the glass is half-empty or half-full. One could read the script quoted earlier to make different points. Vanessa’s grasp of history is so weak that she is unsure of the decade in which the civil rights movement reached its peak. Roy does not remember the name of the chief justice of the Supreme Court without prompting. The full transcript from which the excerpt is taken contains plenty of evidence of gaps in knowledge, confusion, and passivity if one is looking for them.

The story told here is a selective one, intended to correct or balance a misleading picture that emerges from much of the literature on public understanding of politics. “The problem of what the political world means to the average American citizen has been fairly well resolved in the minds of many political scientists,” Bennett (1975, 4) writes in a book that challenges the conventional wisdom. “The consensus seems to be that political issues and events do not make much sense to most people.” Neuman (1986) calls “the low level of political knowledge and the pervasive inattentiveness of the mass citizenry” a fundamental given of American electoral behavior. Converse (1975, 79) comments that “Surely the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys in all countries is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low.”

The mystery, for those who accept this conventional wisdom, is how people manage to have opinions about so many matters about which they lack the most elementary understanding. “The challenge of public opinion research,” Iyengar (1991, 7) writes, “has been to reconcile the low levels of personal relevance and visibility of most political issues with the plethora of issue opinions . . . that large proportions of the population profess to hold. How do people manage to express opinions about civil rights legislation, economic assistance for the newly-freed nations of Eastern Europe, or President Bush’s performance at the international drug summit, when these matters are so remote from matters of daily life and so few citizens are politically informed?”

If the mass citizenry appear as dolts in mainstream social science, they hardly fare better in critiques of American political institutions and culture. The critics, of course, don’t blame people for their false consciousness and incomprehension. They are victims of a consciousness industry that produces and encourages a conveniently misleading and incomplete understanding of their world. The victims, in fact, make few appearances in analyses that emphasize the power of the sociocultural forces that put scales on their eyes. The implicit message seems to be: Of course people are confused and unable to make adequate sense of the world; what can you expect?

When critical accounts do take notice of the victims, they attend to the cognitive and linguistic incapacity of working people. Mueller (1973), drawing heavily on Habermas and other critical theorists, describes different forms of “distorted communication.” *Constrained communication* denotes the successful attempts by corporate and governmental actors “to structure and limit public communication in order that their interests prevail.” *Arrested communication*, however, refers to the “limited capacity of individ-

uals and groups to engage in political communication because of the nature of their linguistic environment (a restricted speech code) and not because of any apparent political intervention” (Mueller, 1973, 19). This time, it is not the consciousness industry that victimizes them, but a class structure that denies them the linguistic and conceptual ability to discern the political nature of problems that are disguised as individual or technical ones. In sum, critics and defenders of American society argue over who is to blame for the ignorance of working people – but the message in this book is that they aren’t so dumb.

I do not deny the handicaps or argue that people are well served by the mass media in their efforts to make sense of the world. The limitations that media critics have pointed out are real and are reflected in the frames that people are able to construct on many issues. Frames that are present in social movement discourse but are invisible in mass media commentary rarely find their way into their conversations. Systematic omissions make certain ways of framing issues extremely unlikely. Yet people read media messages in complicated and sometimes unpredictable ways, and draw heavily on other resources as well in constructing meaning.

Collective action frames

As a student of and a participant in various social movements, I have had a continuing concern with the development of a particular type of political consciousness – one that supports participation in collective action. There are many political movements that try in vain to activate people who, in terms of some allegedly objective interest, ought to be up in arms. Like many observers, I watch in dismay as people ignore causes that are dear to my heart, obstinately pursuing their daily lives rather than making history.

I know, of course, that collective action is more than just a matter of political consciousness. One may be completely convinced of the desirability of changing a situation while gravely doubting the possibility of changing it. Beliefs about efficacy are at least as important as understanding what social changes are needed. Furthermore, we know from many studies of social movements how important social networks are for recruiting people and drawing them into political action with their friends. People sometimes act first, and only through participating develop the political consciousness that supports the action.

Personal costs also deter people from participating, notwithstanding their agreement with a movement’s political analysis. Action may be risky or, at a minimum, require foregoing other more pleasurable or profitable uses

of one's time. Private life has its own legitimate demands, and caring for a sick child or an aging parent may take precedence over demonstrating for a cause in which one fully believes.

Finally, there is the matter of opportunity. Changes in the broader political structure and climate may open or close the chance for collective action to have an impact. External events and crises, broad shifts in public sentiment, and electoral changes and rhythms all have a heavy influence on whether political consciousness ever gets translated into action. In sum, the absence of a political consciousness that supports collective action can, at best, explain only one part of people's quiescence.

Lest we be too impressed by the inactivity of most people, the history of social movements is a reminder of those occasions when people do become mobilized and engage in various forms of collective action. In spite of all the obstacles, it occurs regularly and frequently surprises observers who were overly impressed by an earlier quiescence. These movements always offer one or more *collective action* frames. These frames, to quote Snow and Benford (1992), are "action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns."¹ They offer ways of understanding that imply the need for and desirability of some form of action. Movements may have internal battles over which particular frame will prevail or may offer several frames for different constituencies, but they all have in common the implication that those who share the frame can and should take action.

This book looks carefully at three components of these collective action frames: (1) injustice, (2) agency, and (3) identity. The *injustice component* refers to the moral indignation expressed in this form of political consciousness. This is not merely a cognitive or intellectual judgment about what is equitable but also what cognitive psychologists call a *hot cognition* – one that is laden with emotion (see Zajonc, 1980). An injustice frame requires a consciousness of motivated human actors who carry some of the onus for bringing about harm and suffering.

The *agency component* refers to the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action. Collective action frames imply some sense of collective efficacy and deny the immutability of some undesirable situation. They empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history. They suggest not merely that something can be done but that "we" can do something.

The *identity component* refers to the process of defining this "we," typically in opposition to some "they" who have different interests or values. Without an adversarial component, the potential target of collective action is likely to remain an abstraction – hunger, disease, poverty, or war, for

example. Collective action requires a consciousness of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed and a “we” who will help to bring the change about.

It is easy to find evidence of all of these components when one looks at the pamphlets and speeches of movement activists. This book asks about their broader cultural presence in understanding public affairs. Looking closely at four quite different issues, it asks about the presence of these collective action components in both mass media commentary and the conversations of working people about them. To what extent do the dominant media frames emphasize injustice, for example? To what extent do the frames constructed in conversations emphasize this component? The answers to these questions tell us both about the mobilization potential in popular understanding of these issues and about the contribution of media discourse in nurturing or stifling it.

The four issues

Each of the four issues is the subject of a long and continuing public discourse: affirmative action, nuclear power, troubled industry, and Arab–Israeli conflict. Each is enormously complex in its own way and quite different from the others. Arab–Israeli conflict is relatively remote from the everyday experience of most people compared to affirmative action. Troubled industry and affirmative action have a high potential for tapping class and ethnic identifications, but nuclear power does not appear to engage any major social cleavage in American society. Nuclear power, more than the other issues, includes claims of privileged knowledge by technical experts.

In the course of the research, I learned what I should have known from the outset: These apparent characteristics of issues that my colleagues and I used in selecting them were our own social constructions and not an intrinsic property of the issues. Whether an issue touches people’s daily lives, for example, depends on the meaning it has for them. One person’s proximate issue is remote for the next person; with a vivid imagination or a convincing analysis of structural effects, an issue that might initially appear remote can be brought home to one’s daily life. Similar observations can be made about the other dimensions as well. Whether an issue is technical or not is a matter of how it is framed, not an intrinsic characteristic; the relevance of social cleavages is a matter of interpretation.

This complicates the analysis but, in general, the issues did provide substantial variety. Our a priori construction of meaning on these issues was close to the mark for most people, in spite of a few surprises. The

issues we thought most likely to engage social cleavages did; the ones that we guessed would be most proximate tended to tap people's daily experiences more than did the foreign policy issue. Most important, there was substantial variety in the appearance of collective action frames and in how people used mass media materials from issue to issue. The story of how people construct meaning is, in fact, a series of parallel stories in which patterns emerge through juxtaposing the process on different issues.

Labeling these issues is itself an act of framing. *Affirmative action* is not a neutral term to define this domain but reflects a labeling success by supporters of affirmative action programs.² The positive connotation of the label suggests the REMEDIAL ACTION frame described earlier. But once a term becomes established in public discourse, it is difficult even for those with a different frame to avoid it. To do so runs the risk that the listener won't know what one is talking about. Those with a different frame may try to distance themselves from such a label by the use of *so-called* and quotation marks, but if they want to communicate their subject matter to a general audience, they find it difficult to avoid established labels.

Hence, labels frequently and appropriately become the target of symbolic contests between supporters of different ways of framing an issue domain. Affirmative action programs developed out of the efforts of the civil rights movement, and the movement was successful in establishing its label in public discourse. Neoconservative and other challengers entered the fray later and sponsored an alternative label, *reverse discrimination*. But it was too late for this term to appear as a neutral description of the subject matter instead of as advocacy of a particular position on a controversial issue. *Affirmative action*, through conventional usage in public discourse as a descriptive phrase, had become the official label in spite of its lack of frame neutrality.

This is not an advocacy exercise, and frame-neutral labels are best for analytical purposes – to the extent that they exist. *Arab–Israeli conflict* and *nuclear power* are relatively problem-free labels. Those who see the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as the heart of the former issue might prefer to call it the *Arab–Israeli–Palestinian conflict*, but the label chosen here does not contradict such a framing. Similarly, those who see nuclear power and nuclear weapons production as integral parts of the same more general issue are not discouraged from doing so by the label chosen.

Troubled industry, on the other hand, is a more problematic label. There is no generally accepted term in the public discourse about this issue domain. We might have labeled it *plant closings*, for example, since this concrete manifestation is the form in which it frequently arises in media commentary and conversations. Perhaps the term used here already implies

some form of industrial policy frame, plus a grand overview that diverts attention from the human consequences of the troubles. To mitigate this problem, when people were asked to discuss *troubled industries*, we provided three concrete examples of what the label was intended to cover – including the closing of a shipyard at Quincy, Massachusetts, the problems in the domestic automobile industry, and the closing of shoe and clothes factories in New England (see Appendix A for fuller details).

What follows

In order to follow the story, the reader needs to know more about the nature of the media materials and conversations examined here. Chapter 2 describes the media samples, the participants in the conversations, and the circumstances and setting in which their interaction took place. The media products are varied, including visual imagery as well as words, with television accounts and editorial cartoons as well as more conventional print media. The conversants are a broad and heterogeneous group of working people without higher education credentials and with only an average interest in public affairs. The methodological detail that professional scholars need to evaluate or replicate this work or to use it in their own research is included in Appendix A. This chapter attempts to establish both the generalizability and the limits of what I am claiming about political talk.

Part I explores the presence of collective action frames and their components in media discourse and popular conversations about the four issues. Chapter 3 addresses the presence of ideas of injustice and targets of moral indignation. There is a strong overall relationship between the prominence of injustice frames in media and popular discourse. On affirmative action, where the injustice theme is central and highly visible in the most prominent media frames, it is equally central and visible in the attempts of working people to make sense of the issue. On nuclear power and Arab–Israeli conflict, where injustice frames have low prominence in media discourse, conversations about these issues rarely express moral indignation. The causal relationship, however, is complicated and indirect.

Chapter 4 explores the ways in which the idea of grass-roots action by working people appears (or fails to appear) in media and popular discourse. The conversations examined provide abundant evidence of cynicism about politics and government, belief in its domination by big business, and the impossibility of working people like themselves altering the terms of their daily lives. Again, there is enormous variability among issues. Media coverage frequently and inadvertently keeps alive and helps transmit images

of group protest. On nuclear power, in particular, there is a strong case that media discourse has been more of a help than a hindrance to the antinuclear movement. Media-amplified images of successful citizen action on one issue can be generalized and transferred to other issues. Despite the differences in media discourse, sympathetic discussions of collective action occur at least as often on troubled industry as they do on nuclear power.

Chapter 5 examines the extent to which media and popular discourse analyze issues in collective terms and, more specifically, the extent to which adversarial frames are emphasized. The foremost concerns of working people are with their everyday lives, but this does not mean that they think only as individuals and family members in making sense of political issues. Nor does the fact that they strongly affirm every person as a unique individual who should be judged as such preclude them from thinking collectively. A variety of larger collective identities are brought into play as they talk about politics. Chapter 6 examines the relationship among the three components of collective action frames and explores the implications of the findings for political mobilization.

Studying collective action frames forces one to recognize that, in many cases, one is dealing with more basic processes of constructing meaning. Part II explores these more generic issues about how people make sense of the news. Chapter 7 looks at the strategies they employ and, more specifically, how they combine (or fail to combine) media discourse, experiential knowledge, and popular wisdom in constructing an integrated frame. Which of these resources they rely on most varies from issue to issue.

On issues such as nuclear power and Arab–Israeli conflict, people almost always begin with media discourse; often they bring in popular wisdom as well, but they rarely integrate media frames with their experiential knowledge. On affirmative action, in contrast, they tend to begin with experiential knowledge but, in due course, bring in supporting media discourse as well.

Chapter 8 explores the importance of broader cultural resonances in enabling people to integrate different resources in support of the same overall framing of an issue. More specifically, it looks at broader cultural themes – for example, the cultural belief in technological progress and mastery over nature. Such themes are invariably linked to counterthemes: In this example, harmony with nature and technology run amok. When the framing of a particular issue draws on popular wisdom that resonates with themes or counterthemes, it is easier for people to connect media discourse with their own experiential knowledge. Furthermore, it is especially the more adversarial counterthemes rather than the mainstream

ones that are central for working people's understanding on three of the four issues.

Chapter 9 explores the complicated connection between issue proximity and engagement and their relationship to the resource strategy used to understand an issue. Proximity, it turns out, is only one factor in promoting issue involvement, and an interest that is stimulated by media discourse can lead to increased attention to proximate consequences.

Chapter 10 attempts to weave together the different threads of the argument. More specifically, a resource strategy that integrates direct experiential knowledge and media discourse facilitates the adoption of an injustice frame. The injustice component, in turn, facilitates the adoption of other elements of a collective action frame.