

# Sparking consciousness

Daniel Mathews

24 March, 2008

There is a legitimate discussion the anti-war movement needs to have with itself. It is a question facing all social movements: what do we actually do? How do we grow our movement? How do we get more people to care, convince more people that the war is wrong, get more people to be active in their opposition to the war — and then, for those who are active in their opposition to the war, what to do?

The situation confronting the anti-war movement is not monolithic. It's not binary; it's not the case that people are either anti-war activists, or pro-war reactionaries. Rather, for our purposes, if we regard people in their relationship to the anti-war movement, we could say something like the following. I am a little reluctant about doing this, because it is essentially a creation of stereotypes, but I think this is still a useful framework — sociologists should think of these as Weberian ideal types — :

First, there are those who are in favour of the war, or are undecided about it. Public opinion in the US has been decidedly against the war for some time, but that does not mean that pro-war elements should be disregarded. As long as people exist, having feelings and reason, they can be persuaded to a just cause. In the Bay Area and at Stanford, anti-war sentiment is even further concentrated, but the same considerations apply. We should be trying to convince pro-war people to become anti-war.

Second, there are those who are disengaged or non-committal in their stance to the war. In a highly atomised, consumerist, individualist society, this is a huge number. Preoccupations in blithe and superficial entertainment, or careerism, or cowardice, social/family pressures, individual avarice, pecuniary gain, dispositions of mindless obedience, all play a role here. We should be trying to convince people to care about the world they live in, and opposing an illegal and immoral war is a vital component of caring about the world.

Third, there are those who oppose the war on minimal or contingent grounds. There are those who oppose the war because “we are losing” — whereas if the US government had established a stable Iraqi subsidiary, had a pliant puppet regime there, and had claimed the stupendous strategic prize of control over middle eastern oil reserves (to paraphrase US government planning documents), they would not oppose it. There are those who oppose the war because it costs

too much — whereas if it could be carried on with fewer American deaths and lower fiscal expenditures, they would not oppose it. There are those who oppose it because it represents the policy of the extreme right of the American foreign policy elite — “the neocons” — whereas if Iraq continued to suffer under a continuation of the policies of Bush I and Clinton, with genocidal sanctions continuing, sporadic bombings over a unilaterally imposed “no fly zone”, the Iraqi population further weakened, and Saddam Hussein strengthened, they would not oppose the policy. There are those who oppose the war as an instance of a misguided foreign policy — whereas if the US were simply to dominate the world by “soft” force, through “Dovish” policies, they would not oppose it. Again, this is an ideal type, and I do not want to create straw men or stereotypes. Every individual’s opinion may be infinitely nuanced. Opposition on such grounds is not enough. It does not entail any respect for international law, which outlaws the use of force in international relations except in strictly specified situations; it does not entail any respect for the principles of national sovereignty and self-determination; and does not entail any respect for the democracy of nations which have been manipulated, subverted or influenced by outside powers. Such matters should not really be controversial, they are minimal statements of principle; respect for international law is not a radical proposition, indeed it is quite conservative, it is mere respect for law and order. That it may entail a total re-formulation of US foreign policy, as applied in bipartisan fashion, is a reflection of the criminality and moral bankruptcy of those policies.

At least from my point of view, we should be trying to convince people who are not apprised of the barbarity of US foreign policy about it, we should be educating people about human rights and international law, and in the process we should ourselves be learning more about the history and politics of the world we live in. We should be trying to convince those who oppose the war on minimal grounds to oppose it on stronger and more principled grounds. And as we do it, I suspect we should also find ourselves more prepared to take action.

It goes without saying that even such a conservative critique of US foreign policy — and of course there are much more radical critiques — is an absolutely unspeakable matter in the mainstream media, and often even in “liberal” discussion; in respectable conversation these concepts are reduced to an Orwellian “doubleungood” word, namely “anti-Americanism”. (Note! This goes down right to the level of morphology: “un” = “anti”, “doublegood” = “American”.) This, I think, is the main reason for the demonisation of Jeremiah Wright in the mainstream media in the last week or two; he raised these unspeakable matters, and hence must be denounced by all respectable opinion, including Barack Obama, the presidential hope of some progressives, who regards Wright as a great mentor. His recent speech denouncing Wright and refusing to raise these unspeakable matters seems to be fairly good evidence that he will never speak truth on these matters, at least so long as he seeks power.

Fourth — and this category overlaps with the previous ones — there are those who oppose the war but feel too powerless to do anything about it. Here the problem is not persuading, but inspiring. Here the problem is not revealing the truth, but showing that they can make a difference. Unlike our approach to

those within the first three categories, the question here is not one of fact or law or morality, but one of perceptions. Questions of collective action are bound up with paradoxes of self-reference. A widespread belief in the impotence of social action creates its own truth; a widespread belief in our power to change the world also creates its own truth. Perceptions can become truth, in this sense. Beliefs that the government is all-powerful; that our supposed democracy is useless; that there is no alternative to the horrors of the present; that our protests in the past have not achieved their goals; all these lead to hopelessness, inertia, and inaction.

To these people, we must convince them that a better world is possible; we must convince them of their own power; we must not chide them or denounce them, but appeal to them; we must work with them; we must show them what we can do and what more they can do if they join with us. We must prove that the future is never preordained; the future is what we make it. We must provide visions of a better world, proposals for what that world looks like. We must show them that government is not all-powerful; that it can respond to the needs and desires of the population; in a democracy, government is accountable. Government is not magic; we should not be scared of the government; we should civilize the state, one way or another.

Fifth, even within those who oppose the war and actively do so, there are differences on what should be done. There are those who are more militant, and less. There are those who advocate mere voting, those who advocate education, those who advocate peaceful protest, those who advocate civil disobedience, and more. There are again infinitely many shades of action against the war. Among those who actively oppose the war, we should be discussing effective tactics and strategy, and refining our actions accordingly. Well, that is what we are doing now.

Note that one way to see this is as a set of nested subsets, concentric circles, of people with different levels of relationship to the war, different levels of support, different levels of activity. We should be trying to do all of these things; pulling people in from the periphery, urging them to come closer to action against the war. Simultaneously, we must try to make war-mongers into at least war-ambivalents or at least minimal war-opposers; make minimal war-opposers into principled war-opposers; make apathetic war-opposers into active war-opposers; and make active war-opposers into a growing and vibrant social movement that pressures the government, or becomes the government, and ends war and unjust foreign policy.

In the Stanford says no to war group, we see quite a stunning realisation of these concentric circles of support and activity. If I recall correctly, some 4,000 people signed the anti-Rumsfeld petition. This is one click of the mouse. The next click of the mouse was to join the facebook group — and there are about 300 members of this group if I recall. The next thing you could do is get on the email list — and even that is still passive, not really active. There are currently 115 people on this list. And then, the next thing you could do is come to a meeting. We had a regular attendance of about 6 people at our meetings this last quarter — moreover, we are all busy, often overwhelmed. So these are also

a set of concentric circles, in some sense, and we need more people moving into the more central circles.

How do you do that? If that question were easy, we would have done it already, all social problems would have been solved, and we would be living in utopia — or at least, a relative utopia, a world in which basic standards of human rights and international law are observed. So it is a difficult and interesting question.

It is an intrinsic, structural problem with any sort of activism whatsoever that events tend to be attended by those who are already convinced. At least you are doing something, going to this event, but if the group stabilizes in size while the injustice remains, the movement is failing. Moreover, endless discussion between this limited grouping that never leads to any action, or reaching out to a larger community, is stagnation. In general, it is not the size of a social movement which is important, but whether it is growing; not the value, but its derivative.

So, “merely educational” events that amount to preaching to the converted may still enhance the education of the converted, but if they do not attract a wider audience, they do nothing for growing the movement. On the other hand, “disruptive civil disobedience” events by definition affect the non-converted, but may not always have the educational or inspiring effect, may merely annoy.

If we are to continually attract new people, we must continually interact with new people; talking to them, arguing with them, reasoning with them, informing them — and moreover, being informed by them, learning from them. We must never be dogmatic; never claim omniscience; we will advocate for truth and justice, and the chips will fall however they may.

In some sense, there *is* a binary split. You can try to get people to listen to you with their consent — come to an antiwar event or speech or movie showing or whatever; or just talking in everyday conversation. Or you can try to get people to listen to you without their consent; this is where activism can become confrontational. I am not sure that the first avenue is enough; though we should also do more of it. Give more lectures on world history, world politics, international relations, sociology, international law, and human rights, by all means. Moreover, get people talking about important issues. Hell, go into sports bars and talk to people there about the state of the world! But I am not sure that is enough. The confrontational aspect of protest not only can annoy people who are blocked in the road; done effectively, it can shut down part of the social machine of death that underlies the war and other injustices; done judiciously, it sparks thinking about issues by those who would not otherwise. I think it is a difficult question, to be answered in the individual case. Direct action can be effective in many different ways, but is not always effective. We should make proposals, and we should all evaluate them!

I don't like to get into matters of culture or perception, because I don't trust that my perceptions are like those of others. Nevertheless, I will indulge myself briefly. It seems that there is a general perception that the antiwar movement is often based on emotions, rather than fact; on pictures of dead babies than on a picture of the overall situation; on screaming irrational rants than on reasoned

arguments. I do not think this is true; I think there is plenty of all of this, and that it is appropriate. I think it is often perfectly appropriate to have pictures of dead babies and raging denunciations — because wars like the present one do in fact kill babies, and the injustice is of such diabolical moral turpitude that rage is justified; emotions are aroused because emotions should be aroused. For some, facts, statistics, and long narratives of complex history are persuasive; for others, the gruesome details of atrocities shock them to attention. I do not think any is better than any other; there are nuanced truths and there are simple truths. International law, for instance, is extremely simple; ethnic history and internal politics of the middle east, often complicated.

It is true, however, that any anti-establishment movement is held to a higher intellectual standard in establishment discussions. Pro-war reactionaries can make all sorts of claims and get away with them, much more so than us. Just last week Stanford Says No to War was emailed by someone claiming that the figures on our “one day in Iraq” e-flyer were “blatantly false”; of course they were not, and I justified them, but the point is clear. This person thought they could debunk our claims in one sentence; whatever his personal motivations, even though a presumably highly intelligent Stanford student, it’s clear enough that he lives under the assumption that the antiwar movement is based on lies and half truths, when in fact it is pro-war forces that started the war based on lies and half-truths. But this is why, for instance, people like John Pilger or Michael Moore are bluntly called liars, even though they essentially tell the truth; it is the reason books by Noam Chomsky are full of meticulous footnotes. Lies and half-truths regularly come out of the state; they are repeated and reinforced ad infinitum from its spokespeople, its mouthpieces, and its propaganda organs. To correct them takes effort; well perhaps not so much effort if we watch or read enough reliable sources, but to combat the misinformation regularly fed to us requires effort. We need all to develop inoculation, to have our own intellectual self-defence mechanisms. So I am all for putting footnotes where they are required. But to some, other approaches are more effective. At a place like Stanford, perhaps there is a bias towards the ultra-rational approach; but this is just a speculation, and I am after all a mathematician!

Nevertheless, this ideology, or set of perceptions, about the antiwar movement is general: it is exactly how the corporate media portrays any movement threatening to established interests. We have a whole pantheon of established mythology complete with such chimeric objects as “aging hippies”, “hopeless dreamers”, “anti-Americans”, and the “disruptive”. In all my experience with the antiwar movement and other social movements, I have seen no such things. I have seen people, people with varying backgrounds, varying ethnicities, ages, opinions, and positions. I have seen liberals, conservatives, social democrats, greens, capitalists, socialists, communists, anarchists, and the politically unlabelled — we are all poorly politically labelled. I have seen principled people acting according to their conscience. I have seen people so moved by the horrors of the world that they have taken time out of their busy schedules to speak out, or protest, against it. I have seen people who have put their bodies on the line to stop a vicious, nasty, death-mongering, soul-destroying, body-destroying so-

cial machine. I have seen none of the corporate media categories. Almost every time I have been to a protest, my experience of it and the corporate media or “mainstream” account of it are so removed as to be unrecognisable from each other. People are not any of these labels, people are not ever labels; people vary, people have opinions, people have consciences and they act according to them. The corporate media categories dehumanise the act of protest; portray it as something not done by normal people. But it is done by normal people; everybody shares similar hopes and dreams, has family and friends, and hopes for a better world for their children. The only difference is that some people do something about it. Our actions create the social world.

Our perceptions must be realigned; and the essential grounding of any true perception of society is that it consists of nothing more than what we do. Perceptions based essentially on fear of the government, the benevolence of state or corporate power, and adherence to state and corporate propaganda are largely illusions: they produce, in turn, such particular illusions as the evil or misguided protester; the omnipotent or mighty or magical state; the illusion of our own powerlessness. We must reject the notion, often propagated by various powerful institutions, that taking positions outside that of established power is dangerous, morally questionable, or intellectually deficient.

Most humans, it turns out, are fundamentally similar to us; and especially, those dehumanised or marginalised by the informational apparatus of power. This applies equally to Iraqis and other victims of US foreign policy, as it does to dissidents in the US itself. One can easily argue that the spread of justice and morality around the world is simply the realisation that the alien, the unfamiliar, the outsider, the dehumanised, the victim, the sufferer, is in fact just like us. The exotic, as it turns out, is not so exotic; and the flourishing diversity among humanity turns out merely to be variation within the family. Nobody can call themselves fully human who does not feel injustice anywhere as a personal insult against themselves; nobody can call themselves fully human who does not live within the entire life of humanity, as part of the human project, as part of the stream of evolution, part of a vast, brilliant and tragic species rapidly approaching a point of no return. It is no exaggeration, given the state of the global environment, the state of the United States as a political entity of global influence, and the state of the global economy and its energy resources, that the present is a crucial and decisive time in human history. We have to figure out what to do, and do it soon, very soon.