



Politics

Protest

In this course we wanted to look at the role of protest and environmental action because we were especially interested in getting students to think about the issue of participation, and the different forms of participation in the political process that people can get involved in. Generally speaking people probably will think about political participation as being about voting, for example, perhaps at the very most writing letters to their Member of Parliament or their local council, or something of that sort, maybe getting on the telephone, sending an email, but one of the things we were interested in doing is trying to get people to think about the various other opportunities there are, the various other ways that people can, as it were, insert themselves in the political process and the issue of direct action is certainly one way in which they can do so. There's a discussion here which is very interesting about the nature of direct action, and especially about the nature of whether direct action can or should be violent or non-violent. And of course even within the violent bit there's a distinction to be drawn – is it violence against people or violence against property? And what we have here is a person very robustly outlining that no violence of any sort is justifiable, but not so much justifiable in moral or ethical terms, but really tactically naïve as he sees it, and he thinks that the best way to make an impact is by using direct action but which is explicitly non-violent both against people and against property. Breaking windows in Starbuck's is the one that he feels that isn't appropriate or isn't effective in any way, because it tactically it turns people off and brings protestors too close to terrorism, I think as he puts it in one point, so he's in favour of other kinds of direct action, the kinds of symbolic action that sometimes you see people indulging in. And if one remembers, or one sees very often pictures, for example, of when the Russian tanks entered Czechoslovakia, and the Czechoslovak protestors were putting flowers down the gun barrels of the people who were coming into the city, that's non-violent direct action of the symbolic sort that this man Steve Duncan feels is especially important and impactful, if that's the right word, and so the examples he gives are of people dressing up as clowns and so on, and doing theatre outside political conventions and party gatherings, and so on, which he feels are effective ways of drawing the attention of people to the issues that they're trying to raise but in, as I say, in a non-violent way, and what he feels is that that way of going about things draws the sting, in effect, or would not legitimise any violent action on the part of the State or Government forces against those kinds of protest.

One example of protest is that we give in the audio, is environmental racism. It's a really, really, really good example, particularly in the United States of America. This is all based in what's come to be called the Environmental Justice Movement which in general has pointed out that when it comes to environmental bads, as it were, like landfills, one tends to find them disproportionately located in or near poor communities; that's regarded as an act of environmental injustice and you might say that the environmental bads should be more fairly shared out. It's interesting to think about it in connection with environmental sustainability which might or might not be related because, after all, sharing out the environmental bads from one point of view is OK, but from a sustainability point of view what you'd want to do presumably is to reduce the amount of environmental bads there were; in other words, for example, reduce the amount of landfills there were rather than just share them out more equally.

The study of protest fits into the rest of the course because of issues around participation fundamentally. The movement itself, is another example of the way in which people have found themselves looking for alternative ways to participate in the political process when, as it were, more traditional ways of doing so have been exhausted or haven't worked as well as they would have wanted. Protest is a form of political participation and we were trying to get students to think about that element of it, and it also links in with the relationship between evidence and argument, because protest is undoubtedly more effective when it's backed up by effective evidence and effective argument. The act itself is clearly very important but if the

actors are able to bring to bear arguments around their case which appear persuasive, then inevitably that's going to make a massive difference to the way in which the case is received. And of course the study of protest links very well with the study that we were doing of the GM debate. The farm scale evaluations, that's to say the growing of the three crops that the Government was interested in having assessed, a number of the farms were trashed by activists, for example Greenpeace activists who would walk in in their big white suits and just simply uproot the plants, this is a form of non-violent direct action, at least non-violence as regards people anyway, but violent to the plants evidently, and not very good for the people who are trying to grow them either commercially, at least in terms of their financial interests, so those two elements: the GM examination on the one hand, and the debate throughout protest on the other, were two parts of the course that we felt fitted together really well.