

DISSENT Without Dis

THE scene is the auditorium on the campus of one of our state colleges. It is Friday night and the hall is filled with students and townspeople now intent upon the words of the speaker. The subject is controversial. The speaker is adamant in presenting his point of view. Pockets of applause greet many of his assertions, but constrained rumbles of disagreement arise from other groups. The speaker plies on, but with each statement the rumbles become more audible, until at last one earnest young man can no longer contain himself. He jumps to his feet and emotionally demands of the speaker, "How do you know? Were *you* there? I was and. . . ."

Another figure has risen—an official of the college. His quiet voice is a reprimand to the emotional outburst. His words apologize to the speaker and remind the audience that participation comes only if questions are called for, and that anyone wishing to express an opinion has the privilege of directing a letter to the speaker.

The young man sits down. The speaker resumes from the point of interruption. Emotion has been constrained. Only passive faces now look up from the rows of listeners where dissent was previously shown.

With relief the college official notes the change of atmosphere. There will be no repetition of the outburst tonight—no jeering, no booing—not even a walk-out. His quick ac-

tion has assured that scenes occurring on other campuses will not be replayed here—scenes that show General Lewis Hershey quitting the podium in the face of hooting Howard University students; or at Cornell University, Secretary of State Dean Rusk being heckled and jeered until officials ask for the expulsion of 25 of the most vociferous dissenters; or at colleges throughout our land, Presidential candidates being booed and hissed so that thousands of others in the audience are denied their right to hear the candidates.

But not tonight. Here in this auditorium the students have responded to the unwritten code that governs our behavior in assembly. Freedom of speech has been assured. Democracy has been served. But has it? Consider the words of Adolf Hitler:

At a mass meeting, thought is eliminated. And because this is the state of mind I require, because it secures to me the best sounding board for my speeches, I order everyone to attend the meetings where they become a part of the mass.¹

Do the customary procedures we use for expressing opinion in assembly help us meet the goals we should expect for democracy? Customarily the speaker plays the predominant and active role when we meet, whether the purpose of the meeting is to be entertain-

¹ Hermann Rauschning. *The Voice of Destruction: Hitler Speaks*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940. p. 212.

SENSATION? Perhaps . . .

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ing, informative, or controversial. He is allowed to develop his theme in the tone he desires, and to the conclusion he desires.

A Passive Role

The members of the audience, on the other hand, conventionally take a passive role. Custom prescribes that those in agreement with statements of the speaker may show that approval—they may applaud. The length and strength of such applause is taken as a measure of the amount of approval. Unfortunately, custom offers no correspondingly acceptable action to the members of the audience who are in disagreement with the speaker.

No sanctioned method for showing dissent other than by silence exists in our culture. The verbal outburst described in the opening paragraph is deemed immature. Booing, hissing, stamping of feet, catcalls (to mention a few actions that show dissent) are considered not only rude, but undemocratic to the degree that others are denied their right to hear.

Such actions seem to defy the principle of free and full expression of opinion which has been painstakingly developed in all of us to ensure the adequate airing of all views. This unfettered free aeration of ideas is a necessity in a society which governs by the consent of the governed. The customs by

which we conduct ourselves in assembly are designed to enhance this free expression. Therefore, it is demanded that we adhere to the customs, whether the speaker is a respected senator proclaiming the virtue of our land or a member of the Communist Party denouncing the very rules by which he is permitted to speak.

Now the question being asked here is: "Do our customs provide as good a vehicle as is possible to obtain and ensure the full and free expression of ideas?"*

In order to investigate the question in context, let us return to the young man whose emotional involvement compelled him to suspend custom and interrupt the domination of the speaker. It is probable that throughout his life the student was urged to be "democratic," and to confront in a gentlemanly way those views that are in opposition to his own. Often this advice conflicts with exhortations to the youth of our land to "commit yourself." Recent student demonstrations indicate that a portion of today's youth is committing itself and likes to be labeled as "active." But perhaps the young man is not of this group. And he obviously does not iden-

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tify with the other-directed young person of America described by David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*.²

Methods of Enactment

These are not the only elements of the problem. With today's news media scrambling for the attention of the listening masses, any minority view deemed "news-worthy" can have a majority circulation. While such an explosion of voiced opinions is to be lauded, from the listener's point of view, this kaleidoscope needs to be ordered into some comprehensive array. Hubert Humphrey held that a right to be heard does not guarantee the right to be taken seriously.

So it seems that our student is faced with this multi-pronged question: "How can I give attention to the full spectrum of opinion that abounds today; how can I determine which deserves serious attention; and how can I demonstrate my reaction effectively?"

Once the question is explicit, it is readily seen that the advised action by the college official (to write a letter) is in every facet disjoint from the desires held by the young man. It was not his wish to say in private to the speaker, "I disagree." It was not his wish to tell another group at another time of how he felt. His desire was to say before that assemblage at that very time, "I'm disagreeing with what the speaker says!"

Since the customary behavior in assembly allows no sign of dissent, and because of the desire to demonstrate involvement, today's students are investigating methods of enactment that lie outside of present-day institutions—they march, they sit-in, they lie-in, they riot.

One could easily digress at this point and discuss the effectiveness of these demonstrations and their consequences, but that is not the purpose here. Our concern should be with that far larger group of students who feel that any expression of opinion will be meaningless and as a result armor themselves with silence, or even worse, unaware-

ness. The contention here is that this silence, this lethargy, is caused to a great extent by the failure of custom to provide a sanctioned vehicle for showing dissent, and because custom permits a mass of mankind to sit benumbed and comparatively choiceless before a cascade of contentions.

We can attempt to answer our student's question by beginning with the premise that the qualifications of self-government in society are not innate; that they are a result of habit and long training and their acquisition will require time and probably much suffering. But what habit shall we incorporate into the existing procedure which will allow expression of dissent and yet ensure the freedoms now allotted the speaker?

A study of the theory of change³ reveals that such an invention will be viable if: (a) it can easily be joined with the existing institution; (b) its values are congruent with those underlying the existing institution; and (c) the action entails a relatively small amount of relearning or economic outlay. It has also been discovered that when the need for change is apparent and an innovation arises which fulfills the conditions mentioned above, its adoption is both rapid and continuing. With these factors in mind, we approach the problem.

A search of other cultures reveals little incorporable practice. Passing the council pipe as did the native Americans would be impractical. The English seem to relish the practice of heckling. But heckling, to Americans, seems to invade the domain of a fair hearing. The reader may suggest the well-instituted practice of debate. But a debate for every assembly is not feasible and lacks the important feature that we wish to include—the participation of the audience.

A New Behavior Model

Yet, from the principles of debate we find an idea for use in the formation of a solution—the idea of equal time. Indeed, the provision for a distinct time expressly for demonstrating audience reaction and opinion

³ See, for example, Benne, Lionberger, and Rogers.

² David Riesman *et al.* *The Lonely Crowd*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1953. pp. 32-41.

is a primary requirement in the solution we seek. A second requirement is for an appropriate method of declaring audience reaction. In view of these requirements and the existing order of procedure, the following model of action is suggested as one solution.

The speaker completes a vital point of his message and is applauded. Those in disagreement with the point stand quietly during the applause to indicate their dissent. Should the speaker receive a standing ovation, those in disagreement will turn their backs to the speaker while standing quietly.

Such a model meets our two requirements as well as the criteria for change mentioned earlier. However, only time and constant application of even such a simple model as this can integrate the behavior with present custom. Such application must be made throughout our land in our public schools and institutions if the model behavior is ever to become acceptable, expected, and automatic.

A limited application of the model has proven successful in college classes of more than 100 in enrollment. The students in these classes at New Mexico State University evaluate the procedures as desirable and helpful. They definitely prefer it to the limiting customary procedures which failed to provide acceptable avenues for dissent. Also, overt apathy has decreased in the classes be-

cause the student who is neither applauding nor standing is either announcing his indifference or his disagreement with both groups—the quantity and quality of the “silent center” can be judged.

If the incorporation of such action is the beginning of effective and sanctioned methods of dissent, then never in the United States will the occasion arise that can foster an assertion such as made by Adolf Hitler and quoted at the beginning of this article. Never again need a student cry out against a speaker in such a way as to violate “rules” established by custom.

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Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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