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052158759X - Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life

Nina Eliasoph

Excerpt

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The mysterious shrinking circle of concern

A puzzle: “close to home”

Lisa, a volunteer with an anti-drugs group, circled over and over again to the topic of the local nuclear battleships base¹ during an interview with me:

There’s probably at least four battleships over there at all times. You can *see* them . . . they’re black, and there’s scaffolding on them and stuff . . . They’re dangerous . . . scary . . . I mean, half those shipyard workers are on dope all the time. It makes me nervous. There’s a park on the top of the hill. They come up and smoke dope at lunch and go back to work on the battleship. They have spills quite often. I mean, we don’t know about it, but my husband was on a battleship working, so I know.

Another interviewee, Carolyn, lived closer to the base. A chemical plant just upstream from her had had a huge spill a few months earlier; oil lapped up onto her house, which jutted out on stilts over the bay. “The beach was *covered* with oil. You could see it on the rocks and in the water. It was sad,” she told me as we sat at her kitchen table with her eighteen-year-old son, in front of a picture window with an eye-level view of the nuclear battleship base and the glimmering bay, under a big sky of rainclouds streaked with sunlight. Every twenty minutes or so a battleship slipped by.

When I asked Lisa and Carolyn whether they would get involved in doing something about the battleships or the oil spill problems, they both said, in separate interviews, that those issues were “not close to home,” and did not really “touch” them personally. And they both said, in almost identical words, “and anyway, what would I do, bomb the place?” referring to the chemical plant and the battleship base. Carolyn said it twice (another interviewee said, “What am I gonna do – burn it down?”).

Instead, they were both involved in an anti-drugs group, in which I had been participating along with them for several months. Why were they involved in this group? What would they think of some of the other groups

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I studied – one that worked on nuclear issues and another that dealt with environmental issues? I asked the anti-drugs volunteers these questions, in a group interview. Six members sat in a shabby, linoleum-floored public room on the spindly fold-up kind of chairs that help make public meetings so uncomfortable. All agreed about their motives: “It’s close to home,” and “do-able.” One said that compared to nuclear issues, “this [the drug] issue’s a lot closer to home.” There was a chorus of agreeable murmurs from the others. He described the time his house was robbed, which he assumed had “something to do with drugs. So, it’s a lot more immediate than nuclear war. You know, that’s an important issue, too, but – ” and here, Lisa filled in, weaving together themes of “close to home” and power: “that just seems sort of distant. I can’t quite get to those people, to deal with – or even nuclear power. Shoot, with where we live, we can’t be too allergic to nuclear power. There’s six or seven plants on battleships here.”

Another member soon summed up: “It has to do with something that’s close to you. See, the nuclear stuff is all around us but it’s not in our backyard, or across the street, whereas *this is*,” referring to the drug problem.

Would they consider getting involved in doing something about a foreign policy issue? Carolyn said, “I would much rather look for something close to home, close to me.” But, she chuckled, she *was* very concerned about three whales that had been in the news that week, trapped in Arctic ice with an international rescue force trying to dig them out. “Now, whales, they were far away, but they’re *animals*,” she laughed, noticing that the habitual phrase “close to home” did not exactly fit. Lisa added, “You know, there’s only three of them, there are not thousands of them.” So, it was “do-able”: there were only three. Carolyn agreed, continuing, “But they’re defenseless and, I don’t know, I would rather help closer to home, I don’t know, that’s just – and then the other is just so large, political, and – ” and she trailed off.

Was this group unusual, in implying that whales on the North Pole “impact our lives” more than nuclear subs in our front yards? that down the street or on our front deck is not “close to home”? No. One interviewee explicitly translated “close to home,” showing how it worked to prevent discouragement, by making difficult structural problems invisible. George, a member of a country-western dance club I studied, lived in the same town as the volunteers. One cold rainy weekday when he was out of work, I interviewed him with his housemate, at home – about two miles from the proposed site of a toxic incinerator, four miles from the nuclear sub base, and a few blocks from a toxic landfill.

George also said he would work on something if it was “personal, close by, in my neighborhood.” On the proposed incinerator and the nuclear issue, he said he would get involved if it were “close to home.” “I wouldn’t want

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a nuclear base in Amargo,” he said. His housemate Jolene laughed; George paused, and said there probably already was one. Jolene lit into him, saying “*Think* about it!” and “Do something about it – it’s *in* your backyard!” but then she felt sorry for him, and explained, “the point is, OK, I know what you’re saying.” I asked, “So, what’s he saying?”

“Well, it’s like: what do you think about nuclear – *all* the junk going on. They’re gonna, they’re gonna push a button while we could all just go up in – you know, what are you gonna – ?” She shrugged, completing the sentence.

Why did the volunteers say the nuclear battleships and environmental problems were not close to home? All were within a twenty-minute drive that could pass through a nuclear battleship base containing a thirty-acre toxic pit that the Environmental Protection Agency called “dangerous”; an Air Force site that shipped arms supplies all over the world, was rumored to contain nuclear waste materials and weapons, and was slated for a Superfund cleanup; two other toxic military cleanup sites; six chemical plants – there were four major fires or spills in the two and a half years of my fieldwork; a planned toxic waste incinerator; and two other big plants eight miles upstream that emitted carcinogenic and ozone-depleting chemicals. During my fieldwork stint, various environmental and disarmament groups held demonstrations at several of these plants. As one volunteer pointed out, nearly all the fish had died, and all the fishing clubs had died, too. The area was about eight miles downstream from two other factories that, along with several other plants, emitted cancer-causing or ozone-depleting chemicals. It would be hard to convince anyone that this area did not have some political, military, and environmental issues worth at least discussing, even if the conclusion of the discussion was that nothing should change. Certainly, these issues were not literally “distant,” or “removed.” Literally, these problems were in their backyards.

A second puzzle: “speak for yourself” in public

In every meeting of another local group, which had organized to oppose a toxic incinerator, someone raised the question of where toxic waste *should* go, saying explicitly that members were not just involved for their own families’ safety. Every one of the six core members of the group raised the question this way, some quite often. Typical was Maryellen, a mother of two, speaking at the very first meeting I attended: “If it’s not our kids, it’ll be someone else’s kids. People always ask, ‘Well, yeah, but what are you gonna do with all that toxic waste?’ That’s something we should talk about, since it’s not just a local issue. We shouldn’t just fight off the thing to have some other community that’s less organized get stuck with it!”

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In these meetings, and in casual conversations, broad political questions were foremost – the activists talked about where waste should go, why so much waste is produced (especially by the US military), what governmental policies could prevent corporations from producing more waste, why not to believe corporation or government statements about the proposed plant's safety, why to be in principle against incineration-for-profit.

In front of the press, though, group members spoke completely differently. Suddenly, the activists presented themselves as panicked “moms,” and self-interested property owners. The discourse would often shift the very moment the reporters turned on the cameras and microphones, and shift back again the moment the cameras and microphones went off. One activist said to every reporter she met, “She’s a new mom and I’m an old mom. That’s why we’re in it. We’re worried.” She had been an activist since the civil rights movement, but she always presented herself as a “Mom” in more formal settings.

In fact, activists were not simply “defending themselves,” as reporters and officials assumed; many believed that citizen participation was important, and found this issue to be a good one for illustrating a general principle to the rest of the community: that grassroots political participation is a better way of running the government than behind-the-scenes corporate control. Of course, they may *also* have been worried about their families or property values, but in casual conversations amongst themselves, these were not salient.

Introducing a petition drive to a bank of reporters, another member, Eleanor, repeated the pattern of privately voicing broad concern and publicly silencing her broad concerns. Publicly, she presented her motives like this:

I care about the people living here, and I especially care about the children that are growing up in this unique and wonderful place.

I’m also a concerned property owner. The only thing I own of any substantial economic value is the home I own in downtown Evergreen City. And what’s gonna happen to this investment when I have to sell it to support myself for my older years, older than I am even now? Nobody’s gonna come banging on my door to buy a lovely home, with a lovely view, with some lovely toxic pollutants in town.

But the very moment the cameras and mikes went off, she turned to me and a fellow activist to say, “This is getting to be more than a concern to *me*; it’s getting to be a matter of the lives of the future generations here.” Suddenly, instead of speaking only for herself, she could speak for “future generations”; instead of speaking only of self-interest, she could speak of her usual broad concerns.

Later, Eleanor told me, “My mind goes blank when I get in front of an audience like that. I just sit there and forget what to say.” What exactly

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“blacked out” of her mind? In the context of speaking to the press, she “forgot” what she said about “the future generations.” In front of the press, she could not say that she had been involved in successful grassroots campaigns for decades, but listen to the stories she told me while we were driving through town one day. She had an inspiring story about every spot on the landscape: “See that creek? We organized and saved that from being covered over in the ’60s when the country thought that creeks were bad. We worked hard on that one.” And, as we wheeled around the corner,

Over there, on the other side of the river, that’s where there used to be some industry that left mercury in the land and water. And our kids [she herself did not have children, but talked of all children as if they were her own] go fishing off the pier there and you could sometimes see the mercury in the fish. And years after the industry left, horses started mysteriously dying over across the river. Then they sold off the horses and now they’re building new tract houses there, on top of the stuff [George, from the Buffalo, lived in one of them]. Up river from that is the old ChemFill dump, of course. At least we finally got rid of them!

In the context of speaking to the press, she “forgot” what she said about “the future generations.” She also forgot what she and others had been saying in meetings for over a year, that the government and corporations should invest in research to prevent the production of toxic waste. She forgot that the local group was part of a loose national network whose project was to change industrial policies. One day, an organizer from a national environmental group came to give a short presentation about his group’s lobbying effort, to pass laws that would make corporations minimize production of toxic waste. Eleanor gratefully exclaimed,

I applaud your coming here. It really solves a lot of problems for me. When people ask where should it go, I’m hard pressed for an answer . . . It would make us fragmented, it would be community against community, one saying “Put it there,” and the other saying “Put it there.” This gives us an answer: “It shouldn’t go anywhere.”

And she enthusiastically nodded and agreed when another member said, “You [national lobbyists] are saying that it’s not incumbent on us to come up with a national level solution. We just have to work locally, and know that you’re working on the national level.” After a discussion about the connection between local activism and national policy, the lobbying group representative summed up: “We’re helping make your short-term goals have long-term consequences. While you’re here, defending yourselves, we’re over there, lobbying, saying, ‘Look, no towns want these incinerators, they’re dangerous, and we have to have a better solution.’” Eleanor enthusiastically nodded, and said afterwards that she would start being more involved, now that she had an answer to the problem she described.

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Behind the scenes, Eleanor was eloquent about her broad political commitment, so the group often begged her to make public speeches, but since she worried about “blanking out” in public, she usually said no. All the activists who spoke at demonstrations and to the press made similar speeches, emphasizing their seemingly natural, “unpolitical” motives, and silencing their public-spirited motives and policy suggestions. They assumed that the public forum was a place for plaintive individuals to expose their side of the story, to “speak for themselves.”

Political evaporation

The puzzle in both of these cases is that citizens’ circles of concern shrank when they spoke in public contexts. In both cases, broad political concerns surfaced and then mysteriously vanished behind very personal-sounding concerns: “my house,” “my children,” “close to home.” People implicitly know that some face-to-face contexts invite public-spirited debate and conversation, and others do not; in contemporary US society, most do not. Examining where and how citizens can comfortably talk about politics might help us understand how so many Americans manage to make the realm of politics seem irrelevant to so many everyday enterprises.

We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs. But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it; to curtail feelings of empathy as to extend them; to feel powerless and out of control as to exert an influence; to stop thinking as to think. There is no exit from the political world, no possibility of disengagement; human, political decisions permeate human life, whether we like it or not. Few Americans vote, many tell survey interviewers that they have little faith in the government,² many are astonishingly ignorant about the most basic political issues:³ yet all are touched by this untrusted, ignored government. If there is no exit from the political world, then political silence must be as active and colorful as a bright summer shadow.

Apathy takes work to produce. This book shows how some Americans produced it in the course of conversations that engage, or push away engagement, with the wider world; many of the people portrayed here spoke, in intimate whispers, of a vague concern for homeless people, the environment, and even faraway victims of distant wars. Many had their own private analyses of the problems; many said in interviews that they had never voiced these ideas before. Empathy for foreign victims of war; worries about the environment; horror over injustice: only by speaking do people give these meaning and form, providing socially recognizable tools for thinking and acting.

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The people I met did sound as if they cared about politics, but only in some contexts and not others. They did not just think everything was fine as it was, but there were too few contexts in which they could openly discuss their discontent. Most of the time, intimate, late night, moonlit conversations were the only places other than interviews where that kind of discussion could happen. In group contexts, such discussion was almost always considered inappropriate and out of place; informal etiquette made some political intuitions speakable, and others beyond the pale of reasonable, polite discussion.

Following sociologist Erving Goffman, I call the main group interactions “frontstage,” while peripheral interactions that participants do not count as part of “what is going on,” that are deemed beside the point, whispered, out of the spotlight, or hidden are “backstage.” Goffman says that we often carve out a “backstage” space for ourselves, in which we can relax and stop paying so much attention to the impression we are making on an audience. Waiters in the kitchen of a fancy restaurant, for example, can shed their smooth aristocratic demeanors and yell at the cook; salespeople off the floor can make fun of their product and customers; teachers in the lounge can cuss and smoke:

The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks . . . use of dialect or sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and “kidding,” inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence . . . [B]ackstage behavior has what psychologists might call a “regressive” character.

(1959: 128)

Surprisingly, I found the opposite pattern. People sounded *better* backstage than frontstage; at each step in the broadening of the audience, the ideas shrank. In a strange process of political evaporation, every group fell into this strictly patterned shift in discourse: what was announced aloud was less open to debate, less aimed at expressing connection to the wider world, less public-spirited, more insistently selfish, than what was whispered. Focusing on the remarkably consistent pattern will tell us what Americans consider “public” to be, and why “public” speech is so often less generously open-minded than private.

When good manners prevent publicly minded speech in the potential contexts of the public sphere, the public sphere has a problem. In families, workplaces, and schools, we assume that open, forthright, active communication matters, as a good in itself; why do we value everyday political conversation so much less? Theorists since Aristotle have argued that regular political

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conversation is a defining feature of a healthy democracy; that in a democracy, the substance of political life is public discussion; that the ways we can talk about our concerns go far in shaping them; that the ability to discuss politics allows citizens to generate power together. So, how did public-spirited, open political conversation come to seem “out of place” in so many places in Amargo? Paying attention to the dramatic shifts in discourse from frontstage to backstage made it clear that citizens were not just lacking in public spirit, but lacked it only in some contexts. Most people did not usually talk about their concerns to an audience larger than one, in a voice louder than a whisper – how did their publicly minded ideas evaporate out of public circulation? Listening to citizens conversing about politics in everyday life can reveal how some cultivate concern for the wider world, and how so many manage to convince themselves and each other not to care.

In search of the American public

To observe how political ideas circulate in everyday life, I participated in a wide range of civic groups – volunteer, recreational, and activist groups, spending about two and a half years with the groups.

Volunteer groups included two anti-drugs groups, a high school parents’ group, a recycling center, and a few meetings of the League of Women Voters. I went to the anti-drugs groups’ meetings, and parties, and helped with their petition drives. I helped work the high school Parent League’s concession stand at track meets, sell raffle tickets (at events like a Halloween Festival, a Farmers’ Market, and other spots around town on weekends), folded envelopes, and otherwise did what members did. I also attended city meetings and other meetings intended to publicize officials’ and volunteers’ efforts – several Just Say No rallies, an anti-drugs parade, some family events that the volunteers announced in their meetings. I also informally interviewed people who were trying to set up a homeless shelter in a suburban mall. Volunteers’ meetings are portrayed in the first half of chapter 2.

Recreational groups included a country-western dance club that alternated between meeting at a bar that I will call the “Silverado Club” and a fraternal organization (like the Moose, Eagles, or Redmen) that I will call the “Buffalo Club”; and another country-western dance class. I went to rodeos, fairs, horse competitions, barbecues, theme parks, and other events with groups of country-western class members. I describe two different subgroups at the country-western clubs: one group’s conversations are portrayed in the first half of chapter 4 – I call this group “the Buffaloes,” or “the private people”; the other subgroup, which I will call “the cynics,” is very briefly sketched in the short chapter 6.

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Activist groups included a group that was trying to prevent a toxic incinerator from being built in town, and a permanent peace vigil intending to block US arms shipments to other countries. The activist group on which I most focus, the anti-toxics group, changed so much during the time I studied it, it offered in itself a good range of activist approaches to public life. I went to their rallies, hearings, press conferences, meetings, informal gatherings like poster-making sessions and subcommittee meetings, and parties. These groups are the topic of the first half of chapter 7.

To trace the connections between these groups and the wider world, I listened to the anti-drugs groups', schools group's and anti-toxic group's encounters with social service and regulatory agencies. I observed how powerful institutions influenced members' understandings of the role of citizen involvement, and vice versa – how citizens sometimes challenged the official definitions of citizen involvement: On what grounds did social service agencies, the media, police, schools, elected office-holders, and other institutions and cultural authorities surrounding the groups ask for citizens' political discussion? Where did they invite expressions of public spirit, and where did they shut it out? How did groups interpret these invitations?⁴ The story of each group's interactions with larger institutions is told in the second halves of chapters 2, 4, and 7.

I also spent time with members of all three sorts of group outside of the group contexts – on the phone, and at movies, watching TV with them, going for walks, or doing whatever they did in their spare time. I taped semi-structured interviews with at least ten members of each category, and gave interviewees a questionnaire asking demographic questions and some political opinion questions taken from national surveys; and I taped their efforts at deciphering the questions. I also conducted group interviews in each category. In interviews, activists' speech was similar to their speech in informal group settings. But interviews with volunteers and Buffaloes often revealed ideas and feelings that went unspoken in group contexts. Interviews with volunteers is the topic of chapter 3; interviews with Buffaloes is the topic of chapter 5.

To address the question of how groups are connected to the wider world, I also followed reporters around, as they covered local citizens' involvement and local issues in general; interviewed the local newspaper reporters; and analyzed their stories to examine how they talked about grassroots citizen involvement. This is the topic of chapter 8.

Most Americans live in suburbs, and the region I portray is no exception. The region surrounding the cities I will call Amargo and Evergreen City was typical of a new kind of "post-suburb" that is growing especially rapidly, and is very different from the stereotypical small, homogeneous, white,

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middle-class bedroom town facing a vibrant central city.⁵ These new, ethnically and class-diverse dwelling places are criss-crossed by giant 6-, 8- or even 10-lane highways, going through malls and business parks, instead of having one downtown with a main street, as earlier suburbs did. Orange County, near Los Angeles, is the prototype of this kind of suburb. Amargo and Evergreen County fit the mold perfectly. They had tiny downtowns with no grocery stores, no clothes stores in which people normally shopped, no movie theaters, no home supply stores, no hardware stores, no variety stores for practical kitchen items; everyone drove to giant regional malls for food, clothes, entertainment, and the rest (while I was doing fieldwork, though, activists colonized the back room of a pizza place in Evergreen City, and made it into an informal meeting ground – the presence of the activists transformed the setting).⁶ In all of the volunteer and activist groups combined, only three regular members had gone to high school where they now lived. Over half had lived in the county less than eight years. Recreation group participants drove from a two-hour radius to get to the clubs.

I listened to political conversation and silence in a wide range of contexts, to find out how people manage so often to keep politics at arm's length in so many situations, and whether there were any contexts in which political conversation was possible. I do not make a causal argument here, but do hope to help society reflect upon itself in new ways, to refresh the usual ways of thinking about political disconnection, to offer a new question – a mental peppermint clearing out stale thoughts, a “sensitizing concept . . . an idea that suggests directions along which to look” (Blumer 1986 [1954]). My question is: *how do citizens create contexts for political conversation in everyday life?*

The concept of the public sphere

To examine this question, we have to fine-tune our ears to the unsaid, the taken-for-granted, and listen carefully to citizens creating “the public sphere” in practice. Many scholars have called for studies of the public sphere⁷ or have argued for its theoretical importance, in very abstract terms.⁸ Some have studied interaction in the public sphere historically.⁹ No studies systematically ask, “How do – or don’t – people create everyday life contexts for political conversation? How do civic groups create and enforce manners for political conversation?”¹⁰

Discussion, debate, disagreement: public life is hard work, not something for which every society or individual naturally comes equipped. As John Dewey put it, in *The Public and Its Problems*, “Faculties of effectual observation, reflection, and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the