

Conclusion: learning from struggle

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Each of the six preceding chapters has described a challenge to a powerful establishment. Since I invited most of the contributors independently of each other, they do not necessarily agree with the positions or methods adopted by the others. What they have in common is the experience of challenging the experts.

Drawing on these case studies, this final chapter has three main points. The first is that it is incredibly difficult to dent an establishment position. A second important message, in direct contrast, is that even a few critics can make an enormous difference. The third message is that most people are excessively acquiescent, and that more should be done to increase the possibilities of debate.

The power of establishments

Establishment experts are in a powerful position. Typically, they have superior numbers, prestigious positions, high credibility with the media and the public, control over professional and academic journals, and links with powerful groups. Faced by a challenge, their usual initial response is simply to ignore it. Harold Hillman, for example, published many papers critical of biological orthodoxy, but for many years it appeared that no one took any notice. Only an establishment can get away with this. The standard view is so completely taken for granted that critics are assumed to be misguided.

When a critique is “ignored,” often there is suppression involved, such as the prevention of publication in key journals or a refusal to review writings by critics in suitably prominent fashion. In other words, to say that the critique can be “ignored” often means that suppression is working in a quiet, behind-the-scenes fashion. If, in spite of this, critics

become too noisy, too credible or too influential, then they are liable to be suppressed in a more overt and heavy-handed fashion, for example by personal attacks on the dissident.

This is a pattern found over and over again in challenges to expert establishments. For example, when Hillman simply published his critiques of standard methods in biology in scientific journals — and often that was hard enough to achieve — other scientists could simply decline to take notice. But when he issued challenges in prestigious scientific meetings or obtained publicity in the media, then “quiet” suppression was not enough. He was met by deceitful “refutations” of his views, bureaucratic slights and “mistakes” that hindered presentation of his views at scientific meetings, and a major threat to his laboratory and his academic career. His experiences are replicated repeatedly in other challenges to establishments, though with innumerable variations depending on the situation and issue.

If being ignored or being suppressed were the major problems in confronting establishment experts, this would not be such a difficult business. There is something more involved: vested interests behind the establishment position. Indeed, vested interests are crucial in making a position into one called an “establishment.”¹

For example, Edward Herman confronted not just a few establishment experts on terrorism but also an entire political system that benefits from the orthodox position on terrorism. This includes the US government agencies and businesses — including spy agencies, diplomatic corps and multinational corporations — that want to keep on good relations with murderous regimes, and so

prefer that the label “terrorist” be reserved for something else. This establishment provides the sponsorship for intellectuals who defend the orthodox view. All in all, there is enormous material benefit for supporting the standard view on terrorism versus little reward, and possibly a lot of loss, by questioning it.

The link between experts and vested interests is even more obvious in the case of the nuclear establishment in India. Dhirendra Sharma, by challenging nuclear policy openly, came up not just against nuclear experts and bureaucrats but also against a close-knit political and economic elite with a stake in nuclear developments. Indeed, the nuclear scientists and engineers would not have been a formidable force without their connections with some of India’s most powerful figures.

Because the power of establishments is so great, many of the most effective critics come from the outside, where they are less tied to the main professional bodies or patronage system. For example, Sharon Beder was not a Water Board engineer, Mark Diesendorf was not a dentist or doctor, Edward Herman was not sponsored by the US government, Michael Mallory and Gordon Moran were not from Siena or even Italy, and Dhirendra Sharma was not a nuclear scientist. Ironically, this independence of vested interests is often criticized as a lack of proper credentials or expertise. When an expert establishment holds sway, being coopted by the official patronage system actually adds to an expert’s credibility.

But it would be too crass to attribute the strength of the establishment simply to money, jobs and power. These are the material foundation for a position, but to be really effective, psychological commitment must be involved. In every case, the establishment has a comprehensive world view to which leading figures are intensely committed. Most of the establishment experts believe that the critics are wrong, misguided and even dangerous — in fact, in the view of many, sufficiently misguided and dangerous to warrant the various actions taken against them.

In the case of terrorism, the establishment experts believe they are addressing the greatest

threats to peace and freedom. In the case of sewage, the establishment engineers believe that their approach is the only effective way to proceed. And so on through every case study.

An establishment based on cynicism would not last long. Most people seek to mesh their beliefs with their actions. An establishment position heavily based on conscious deception or consciously unfair behaviour would quickly lead to defections. Personally, even though I may consider the behavior of some experts to be underhand or reprehensible, nevertheless I have always considered them to be sincere — though that sincerity may be based in a world view quite contrary to mine.

No doubt some establishment experts consciously lie in order to defend orthodoxy, but this should be put in context. The power of rationalization is enormous, and so it can be expected that most experts (like other people) are likely to adapt their beliefs to a world view that serves their self-interest. Furthermore, for some, lying occasionally may be a means to a greater end, namely defending a position they *know* is best.

It is the combination of vested interests and commitment to a world view that makes the establishment position so hard to dent. The material factors (the vested interests) provide the basis for power and the mental factors (the world view) provide the willingness to use the power. Critics often begin by thinking that if they can find and demonstrate holes in the arguments used to defend orthodoxy, then its position will collapse. But picking holes in arguments neither changes the vested interests nor, in most cases, undercuts the prevailing world view. Furthermore, if the critics only occasionally get a chance to be heard, the establishment position may be accepted purely through repetition: it is so often stated that it seems to be “common sense.” Is it any wonder that critics can so easily be ignored?

The power of critique

The second message from the cases in this book is that a small number of critics — sometimes just one — can make an enormous impact. Indeed, suppression of dissent is a

signal that dissent can make a difference. If there is no dissent, suppression is not required.

A crucial part of the critic's effectiveness is strong arguments. In every case, the critics have begun by mustering powerful intellectual attacks on the orthodox position. This is not just a matter of moral conviction, of standing up and shouting "You're wrong!" in the face of the establishment. No, the secret of every successful critic is good arguments, based on collecting information, carrying out careful analyses, preparing well thought-out written and verbal presentations.

All of this requires a lot of hard work. Reading the case studies is not likely to give a full sense of the amount of work involved. A chapter recounting days in the library would hardly be interesting, and every author inevitably emphasizes the more dramatic events in the story. But without the long hours of study and preparation, the highlights would never have occurred.

There seems to be a contradiction in my argument: I said that establishments are held together psychologically through a world view and yet I'm saying that the arguments of critics can be effective. How can arguments puncture the world view? The resolution to this apparent dilemma is that the arguments of critics are most effective in convincing third parties, namely people who are not part of the establishment position. This might be politicians, media, experts in related fields, or members of the "general public."

Both establishment experts and critics are engaged in a contest over loyalties. The establishment, by definition, has the advantage of the loyalties of the most powerful and authoritative experts. The establishment, to maintain its power and authority, has to keep it this way. The critics can make inroads by winning over a few recruits, for example from new or marginal members in the orthodox camp, from groups that are not officially part of the establishment, or occasionally even a convert from the mainstream of orthodoxy. In all these cases, arguments can be effective, though they are not enough on their own to win the day.

The visibility of just a few critics turns unanimity, or at least the appearance of complete agreement, into a debate. From the point of view of outsiders, this is enormously important. Instead of the orthodox view being taken for granted, it becomes simply one point of view. This weakens the position of the establishment dramatically. For example, Sharon Beder describes the crisis at the Sydney Water Board when sewerage issues became of widespread interest, with the media reporting critics as well as establishment views.

None of this would make any difference if the critics had only arguments. To be effective, these arguments need to be linked to interest groups, in the same manner that establishment experts are linked to vested interests. For example, the arguments of critics of Sydney sewerage policies were taken up by environmentalists and beach-goers. For establishments, critics alone are not much to worry about. It is their potential to aid and help to mobilize interest groups that is a real threat.

It is for this reason that critics are likely to be attacked. If the credibility of the critics can be undermined, then their threat to establishment legitimacy can be minimized. Each case study has plenty of examples of attempts to discredit dissidents, such as accusing Dhirendra Sharma of being a CIA agent, and to suppress them or their work, such as forcing Sharma to move from his science policy post. But suppression, however damaging it may be for the person or position attacked, can also be counterproductive for the attacker. Suppression can backfire because it is perceived to be unfair. Many people believe, in principle anyway, in the value of open debate. When they are informed that debate is being suppressed, they may become more sympathetic to the suppressed position. Michael Mallory and Gordon Moran give some excellent examples of this phenomenon.

The key players in these confrontations include the mass media. If the establishment is unquestioned, there is no story. Even a single critic who has sufficient credibility, such as the appropriate credentials, turns the situation

into a debate that is, therefore, newsworthy. The media has played a big role in the disputes over sewerage, fluoridation, the Guido Riccio and nuclear power, among others.

The involvement of the media is especially potent in cases where establishment experts normally operate in the background without scrutiny, as in the case of most scientists and engineers. These experts generally detest media coverage. Ironically, it can force them to become more media savvy, as in the case of the Sydney Water Board, which has launched publicity campaigns defending its policies. But at least this visibility also makes the issue more available for debate than before.

The case of terrorism shows a different pattern. Here, a central feature of the establishment position is use of the media to inculcate the orthodox view of terrorism and to authenticate the establishment experts. In this situation, it is not a simple matter for the media to “open up the debate” because a key part of the “debate” should be the ways in which the media shape perceptions of terrorism and of expertise about it. In this situation, the “alternative” media, including community radio and small independent magazines and newspapers, become more important.

As well as the media, there are some other key players. Social movements are vital in a number of cases: the environmental movement in the case of sewerage, the antfluoridation movement, the peace and Central American solidarity movements in the case of terrorism, and the antinuclear movement. Movements are eager recipients and disseminators of work done by critics. Also important are quiet sympathizers or facilitators of debate. This can include an editor who decides to publish an article by a critic in a journal normally monopolized by the orthodox, or the organizer of a conference who makes a special point of inviting critics as well as defenders of the establishment. Some of these individuals may sympathize with the critics but be unable to make a public stand; others simply believe in the value of open debate. In either case, their efforts, while seldom dramatic, are vitally important in opening up the issue.

To become an effective critic of establishment experts, I think the following are crucial:

- lots of hard work, in order to understand the issues and develop the critique;
- a commitment to accuracy, since critics are more easily attacked and discredited by errors than are establishment experts;
- a willingness and ability to take the arguments to broad audiences, especially through the media;
- persistence;
- courage to disagree with peers and to continue in the face of attacks;
- a secure livelihood.

The last item, a secure livelihood, is far from trivial. Many potential critics are deterred because of worries about their jobs. The most secure position is one completely independent of the establishment being confronted. Edward Herman is closest to this situation. The most risky position is to attack the establishment that provides one’s livelihood. Harold Hillman is in this category and found that even academic tenure was insufficient protection.

In summary, even a single critic can do a lot against a seemingly impregnable establishment. By developing cogent arguments and raising them wherever possible, an undisputed orthodoxy can be turned into a debatable issue. In this, the involvement of a range of individuals and groups is important, including social movements, the media, and inside sympathizers. The critic is likely to encounter various forms of suppression but, on the other hand, may be supported by neutral parties who believe in fair play. Finally, in order to become an effective critic, there is a need for hard work, accuracy, taking the arguments to wide audiences, persistence, courage and a livelihood. There is certainly room for more to join their ranks.

An acquiescent society

In any study of critics versus establishments, there is a great temptation to focus on the personalities of the critics. This might be to discredit them by pointing to psychological quirks or to praise them as exceptional human specimens. Of course, personalities are fascinating and worthy of study, but I think it

is just as important to ask why there are so few critics. In Western liberal democracies there is much rhetoric about the importance of individual freedom and autonomy, but the reality is that most people are highly reluctant to openly challenge their superiors or even their peers, whether in corporations, governments, professions or whatever. Most people are quite comfortable conforming to the prevailing views.

That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. What is worrying is the limited support for open, vigorous *debate*. The contributors to this book each think that their position is correct, but they would not want a dictator to enforce their views by fiat. Rather, their wish is that the issues be debated openly and fully, allowing individuals to make up their own minds. For any society that calls itself free, this seems like an obvious and essential requirement. Honest debate often generates new positions and insights which are not available to any individual or group working within its own framework. Debate thus is essential to any society that aspires to be creative in the widest sense.

As I've indicated, becoming a critic requires a considerable commitment, and is certainly not for everyone. Furthermore, many people are quite satisfied with either the establishment position or a particular alternative position. But there is still an important role for those who do not want to join the debate as participants, and that is to be supporters of *debate* itself. Journalists can do this by seeking out minority viewpoints. Editors of newspapers and journals can do it by being more receptive to submissions by critics, or by setting up special for-and-against columns. Teachers can promote debate by collecting materials by critics to counterbalance establishment experts, and by inviting speakers from both sides of issues. Indeed, anyone can promote debate by organizing a public meeting with speakers from different viewpoints or having a meeting of friends to discuss conflicting writings.

Promoting debate sounds easy in principle but it can be difficult in practice. In most bureaucracies, including corporate, govern-

ment, church and trade union bureaucracies, suppression of dissent is the usual pattern.² Even within social movements such as the feminist or environmental movements, which themselves are engaged in challenging establishments, internal criticism is often unwelcome.

To support debate is often seen a tantamount to supporting the critics, since debate gives the critics a platform that the establishment would prefer to deny. But this is no excuse for acquiescence. Without debate, no position is worthy of the unreserved support that establishments come to expect. That is precisely why it is necessary for more people to learn how to confront the experts.

Notes

1. In some cases, the main body of experts is opposed to the primary vested interests, as the case of nuclear winter scientists versus the military establishment (see Brian Martin, "Nuclear winter: science and politics," *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 15, no. 5 (October 1988): 321-334). This creates a somewhat different dynamic to the one presented in this book.

2. Deena Weinstein, *Bureaucratic Opposition*, New York: Pergamon Press (1979).