

## **Serious Politics, Serious Consequences: Transforming Motivational Speaking**

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“But, I had changed, and in so many ways. I was no longer the wide-eyed, romantic young revolutionary who believed the revolution was just around the corner. I still appreciated energetic idealism, but I had long ago become convinced that revolution was a science. Generalities were no longer enough for me. Like my comrades, I believed that a higher level of political sophistication was necessary... We could never afford to forget the lessons we had learned from COINTELPRO.” – Assata Shakur

The use of motivational speeches is a practical necessity for strengthening our movement. In this article, we want to discuss how this form of political outreach can be treated in a revolutionary manner and tied to a well thought out strategic plan of action. A central goal of this plan of action, we believe, must involve a priority on education because of the serious nature of our politics and because too often motivational speeches lack a focus on the potentially serious ramifications of engaging in direct action. In our opinion, this attempt to mobilize others without also instilling critical self-reflection in them can help to generate the sort of weak links in our movement that are at least potential and partial causes of more serious consequences still that can undermine us all.

From outrageous prosecutions, such as of the SHAC7, to governmental attempts to curtail free speech, as occurred when Dr. Jerry Vlasak and Pamelyn Ferdin were banned from entering the United Kingdom for a liberation gathering, liberation activists are everywhere being met by repressive forces in the age of Terror War against “violent extremism.” Grand jury questionings, senate hearings, and various levels of indictments intend the further intimidation of direct activists, as well as their eventual incarceration as political prisoners whenever possible. Happily, some in the movement have repeatedly refused cooperation with the legal system when it works as a ruse for police and corporate agendas. Others, unfortunately, have not proven as stalwart. Thus, one of the most frustrating of the various repercussive problems faced by today’s direct action militant may be the existence of a political “Hall of Shame” – those individuals who have snitched to authorities about underground actions and activists in exchange for a judicial plea. Finally, though there have not been many direct activists killed for their principles in the histories of the animal and earth liberation movements, the larger culture of silence produced through the constant threat of State-sponsored murder casts perhaps the greatest challenge to the direct action cause.

While the way in which modern institutions function under capitalism is often highly irrational and aggressive, one might argue that, as direct action politics is generally revolutionarily militant and a proponent of illegal activity waged in accordance with a super-legal ethics, its repression is to be expected. In this respect, the no compromise mentality declares, “Whatever consequences there may be, I will not back down. I will not undermine the movement. I will not disregard my comrades in harm’s way. I will work for the earth and the animals and I will not go silently into the night!” But, still, its enemy will stop at nothing to send it into the night all the same. It is important to think

about what direct action activists are doing, then, when attempting to consider how to mitigate counter-revolutionary responses by the State. However, as such responses to direct action are essentially a given, it is equally necessary to contemplate what direct action activists are *not doing* as well. That is, what capabilities do activists have to limit their repression that they may not be presently using? Again, here our focus is on motivational speeches.

It is common to hear political rants of a motivational variety, urging in their fist-raising conclusion, “If not you, who? If not now, when?” These gut appeals to the semi-politicized to get more deeply involved in critical social issues can often be both jazzy and immediately effective. But this form of conscientization can also lead to people – often youth – joining the movement under the auspice that they should freely engage in militant activity, even when they lack a larger social, political, and historical understanding of the issue for which they act. More dangerous still, both for them and the movement in general, is that radical newbies can seek to commit serious illegalities without understanding the possible consequences.

Joel Capolongo, long time animal liberation activist, strikes to the root of the issue:

“While the need for action for the animals and the Earth is great, the need for more prisoners is not. Whenever I am explaining direct action to an audience that is unfamiliar with it, I always point out that the consequences of such illegal action are always much more severely punished than non-politically motivated crimes even though the non-politically motivated crimes may involve even serious injury or death to human life and safety. That's just the way our society works; property, especially property owned by corporations and institutions that make a profit off of the destruction of the Earth and it's inhabitants, always supersedes the value of any individual's life and "crimes" against such property will be punished accordingly. The consequences are very real and I try to make sure people understand that before they take action based on any romanticized ideals of direct action they may be dreaming up.”

In other words, while the context in which political outreach and speech-making occurs will always be a determinative factor for the form which it takes, it is possible to motivate people in a way that is also rigorous and self-determinative and so it may be high time to begin de-emphasizing the “revolutionary rah-rah” from our rhetoric in favor of challenging people to engage in the many complexities of militant issues. Melissa, of North American Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network (NA-ELPSN), speaks to the heart of the matter when she says:

“Motivational speeches have only a limited role in expanding the reach and effectuality of the direct action movement. They put clarity to something someone already feels. They fan the flames, but do not start the fire. If the direct action movement is to increase in strength and seriousness, which it must, the suffering of the Earth and animals must be the sole motivation. It is those realities that gave birth to the direct action movement, long before there were motivational

speeches...If motivational speeches seek to motivate without explaining the realities and consequences of participating in direct action, they are creating the conditions for snitching by leading people to believe that direct action is a lot less serious than it is, in effect, sending people to slaughter. This is because, unfortunately, some will seek out the illusion of glory and stature, rather than the goal of liberation. Motivational speeches, which glorify direct action, and in the process remove the average activist from those types of actions, only aggravate this. By creating an illusion of glory, by elevating underground activists to the level of super-heroes, speakers are doing the underground a disservice. Direct action is not fun, exciting or the business of super-heroes, but rather a necessary element of any struggle for liberation. Since when did crawling through mud and shit, witnessing tortured animals and clear-cut forests, and risking your safety, freedom and life become glamorous anyway? Liberating animals, destroying logging equipment and setting fire to the industries which rape the Earth and murder animals is a necessity, not something reserved for glamorized, super-activists.”

Therefore, Melissa promotes a more rigorous and realistic form of political outreach. Specifically, she suggests:

“Those who seek to motivate have an obligation to include information on the realities of engaging in direct action, as well as the very real possibility of prison sentences and the hardships of a life of secrecy. Motivational speakers must also take the time to address necessary steps underground activists can take to improve their security, as well as strategies for avoiding typical pitfalls such as: getting rid of all incriminating materials after an action, what cell structure involves and the importance of choosing people to work with carefully, and procedures for safely releasing any type of communiqué all of which can be done in a way that is legal and unspecific.”

As a form of political outreach, motivational speeches may be a radical tool of the trade for direct activists, but it does such activism a disservice if practitioners generate a psychology of spectacle at militant events. A revolutionary politics requires a revolutionary psychology and must demonstrate that its counter-culture is not just a challenge to the norms of the status-quo, but a transformative realization of a culture that is qualitatively different and better than the mainstream in turn. Still, this utopian challenge can be met by the most straightforward of practices. In this respect, Leslie James Pickering, former spokesperson for the Earth Liberation Front, has developed his own approach to public speaking that stresses his own de-mythologization as a celebrity on the margins, as he evokes the vision of a common humanity involved in emancipatory aims as his political narrative. Pickering explains:

“When I give public presentation I try to incorporate personal experiences, or otherwise personalize my presentation. I'm working to pull an audience into a revolutionary perspective so part of the way I go at it is to work to put them in my

shoes, or to show that we wear similar shoes. There has got to be an emotional draw as well as a practicality to it. Slogans and rhetoric are played out. In today's world people need something real, something to believe in. I try to show that I'm a real person, with a heart. A regular person, just like anyone else and that anyone could be as heavy in the struggle.”

Clearly, emotion is a healthy foundation for direct action politics and a primary ethical connection to the oppressed. The point, however, is not to couch one's emotions in a self-contradictory and reactionary cultural politics of irrational passions. In his lecture “Compassion and Action,” Steven Best, Professor of Philosophy at University of Texas, El Paso, points out the necessity for bridging emotion and reason in militant struggle. “Passion,” he notes, “... can easily be manipulated through poisonous ideologies such as racism and xenophobia. Compassion too is subject to manipulation, as one could be persuaded to have compassion for one group in opposition to another.” He presciently concludes that a liberation ethic:

“... rooted solely in feeling lacks the ability to justify values and thus opens one to the charge of arbitrariness. No one in this movement wants to find themselves in the unfortunate position of one of Socrates' interlocutors who cannot explain why they uphold values such as justice to be right and true...We need a multidimensional ethics that uncovers the history of ethical sensibilities, that identifies the proper place of emotions in human action and motivation, that provides cogent reflections on what is right and wrong, and that supplies strong justifications for animal rights.”

In this sense, we would argue that support for the ALF, or the ELF, is much less important than the ability to support them smartly. One is not a militant until one has seriously begun the process of becoming thoroughly educated in the history of these groups and in the larger social structural problems that have helped to give rise to them. This, then, accords education a revolutionary role greater than sabotage because it is through the educational process that sabotage (and other direct action militancy) takes on its truly ethical character. As we have attempted to illuminate, however, such education should not be conflated with either rote dogmatism or other forms of brute authoritarianism, on the one hand, or spectacular appeals to emotion, on the other. Favoring a vision of education as set forth by the radical teachers like Paulo Freire and Peter McLaren, we favor a politics of education grounded in rage and hope that allows people to ground transformative understandings in their own practices, but which centers self-reflection and a language of critique as a guide to future action.

The form of such education needs to be radically reinvented, much in the way that the animal and earth liberation struggles have managed to bring so much new information to light through their direct actions and ability to ask unique questions about society based on those uncompromising politics. Traditionally, education has favored the authoritarian and industrial models developed in schools, while radical politics has extended this to include the soapbox, the public protest, and the teach-in. Freire himself utilized the “cultural circle” in which a community came to dialogue and name its own powers under

the partnership of a political mediator trained to ask probing questions. Indeed, in a related move, we see question and answer time becoming more crucial in lectures on direct action. Notably, at the recent 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Animal Liberation Philosophy and Policy Conference at Syracuse University, Benjamin Persky, Moe Mitchell, and Andy Stepanian resisted standing on the stage and speaking at the audience altogether. Instead, they asked the audience of some 50 people to sit on, or around, the stage in order to discuss political prisoner support, direct action, the problem of snitching, and the necessity of security culture. While the discussion was passionate and motivational, it hinged on a well-reasoned and collective understanding of the importance of direct action for animal liberation, political prisoner support, and their inevitable consequences. This was a positive development.

To re-cap: political outreach is of course a necessity for our movement. We need greater numbers in our base and the grave threats of planetary ecological crisis and unprecedented mass extinction demand that we promote our message anywhere and everywhere. However, we also cannot afford to forget the many individuals who once became involved in our movement after hearing our message and that have since snitched, burned out, or otherwise broken to the will of the State. Therefore, we must teach people that direct action is a tool in a long-term project for social change and that it has serious consequences because of the actuality of dangerous power in the oppressors' hands. Those getting involved in the movement need to come to grips with the reality of the consequences oppressors can bring to bear – for every direct action there is a reaction, and as Andy Stepanian always notes: don't do the crime, if you can't do the time. Additionally, we cannot expect individuals involved with the movement to derive the sort of critical consciousness necessary for truly combating the horrors of transnational capitalism in its current form without an equally enduring evidence of grassroots political leadership and a revolutionary cultural base. There is much evidence that, despite the beating taken by the Left under Bush, that direct action militants are primed for substantial gains in these respects. As long as the movement continues working to build a more thoroughgoing radical educational identity amongst itself, one that is capable of delivering political mentorship and intellectual rigor as part of a deeper investigation of the socio-historical nature of the political, our gains will be realized.