

The Argument Culture: Agonism & the Common Good

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Abstract: Agonism – taking a warlike stance in contexts that are not literally war – pervades our public and private discourse, leading us to approach issues and each other in an adversarial spirit. The resulting “argument culture” makes it more difficult to solve problems and is corrosive to the human spirit. While examples from the intertwined domains of politics and the press may seem beyond individuals’ power to change, the domain of private interactions – where equally destructive effects of the argument culture are felt – is one in which individuals have power to make quotidian yet revolutionary contributions to the common good.

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When I was writing my book *The Argument Culture* in the late 1990s, I felt a sense of urgency because I believed that the moment for its message – that our public discourse had become destructively adversarial – might have peaked. How ironic that concern now seems. Today, “the argument culture” sounds like an extreme understatement; “the combat culture” would be more apt. I would be tempted to adopt that term were I not hesitant to become part of a problem that my book addressed: the ubiquity of war metaphors and their role in contributing to a widespread agonistic spirit. The phrase “combat culture,” though appealing for its crisp consonants and satisfying alliteration, would be a verbal analogue to the visual metaphor on the cover of the first edition of *The Argument Culture*, a cover to which I objected in vain: against a stark white background was a photograph of a menacing dark gray bomb with an ominously short fuse.

Though the threat represented by the bomb was real, I felt that the violent visual metaphor contributed to the destructive effects of conceptualizing everything as a metaphorical battle. That risk is even more real today, as I argue in this essay (but argue in the sense of making an argument, not of having

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one). The aspect of the argument culture that I focus on here is captured in a recent *New Yorker* cartoon. A hunter, rifle slung over his shoulder, sits at a bar beside a deer. The affable hunter says to the doubtful-looking deer, "If we should meet in the woods and anything happens, remember it's just hunting." The cartoon reminded me of an experience I had on a San Francisco television talk show following the publication of my book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. In the green room, where guests gathered before the show, an oddly dressed young man greeted me pleasantly. After telling me that he had read and admired my book, he said, "When I get out there, I'm going to attack you. Don't take it personally. That's why they invited me on the show, so that's what I'm going to do."

The show began like many others I was on at the time: I was seated facing a small studio audience, along with this young man and several women guests who had volunteered to come on the show to talk about frustrations they encountered in communicating with their husbands. But once the show began, it proceeded very differently. After I had made a few opening remarks about women's and men's ways of speaking, this young man leaned forward in his chair, thrust his arms out before him, and began to spew venomous invective. He directed his diatribe at me only briefly, then moved on to an apparently rehearsed litany of accusations against women in general. What stunned me was the effect this display had on the studio audience. Whereas audience members at other shows on which I had appeared matched guests' accounts of frustrations with similar anecdotes of their own, on this show (and no other), when invited to join the conversation, members of the audience turned vicious toward the unsuspecting women guests, accusing them of the offenses they had just heard described:

exploiting their husbands, failing to appreciate his sacrifices, generally revealing the evil inherent in their sex.

The TV show guest who had aimed his invective against women was like the hunter in the cartoon: he was taking part in a warlike ritual, shooting at a target against which he felt no personal animosity. He was just participating in a verbal game that the show's producers believed would increase viewership. (The producer said as much when I complained, afterward, about the destructiveness of turning the show into a fight; she said that the wisdom of her choice would be revealed when the ratings became known.) But just as hunting has dire consequences for the deer, so the ritual verbal attack staged by the producers of this show had dire consequences for the real-life women who had agreed to be guests. Furthermore – and this is the point I want to emphasize – it had dire consequences for the members of the studio audience who followed the belligerent guest's lead. Although they were the perpetrators and not the victims of the verbal attacks on the women guests, they, too, were losing out. They were losing out on the sense of community that was created on other shows, when studio audience members responded to the experiences described by women or couples by saying that they had had similar experiences of their own. Hearing that others' experiences match one's own can provide comfort or reassurance that one is not alone. In contrast, seeing those with similar frustrations being vilified reinforces a sense of shame and reluctance to voice one's concerns. It leaves everyone feeling even more alone. Moreover, audience members, both in the studio and at home, were losing out on the opportunity to learn ways to solve those problems, as the entertainment-motivated metaphorical battle replaced any other possible form the television show could have taken.

That is what is doubly destructive about the argument culture: it makes it more difficult to solve the problems facing our society, and it is corrosive to the human spirit. By creating an atmosphere of animosity, it makes individuals more likely to turn on each other, so that everyone feels more vulnerable and more isolated. And that is why the argument culture is destructive to the common good.

Key to my notion of the argument culture is the term *agonism*, which I have borrowed from the late Jesuit scholar Walter Ong. From the Latin term for war, *agon*, agonism is taking a warlike stance to accomplish something that is not literally a war. Agonism underlies our conviction that opposition leads to truth, so the best way to discuss an idea is to have proponents of two opposing sides face off in a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople for the most extreme, polarized views and present them as “both sides”; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other, with a winner-take-all result; the best way to frame an article is an attack; and the best way to show you are really thinking is to criticize.

Agonism surrounds us in the form of ubiquitous military metaphors: the war on poverty, war on cancer, war on drugs, war on terror, and so on. War metaphors come so naturally, and are so catchy, that we barely notice them. A survey of recent reality TV shows reveals those entitled *Weed Wars*, *Whale Wars*, *Shipping Wars*, *Storage Wars*, and *Parking Wars* – and these are only a few of innumerable examples. War metaphors are also everywhere in coverage of political campaigns. For example, an exhibit at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., traces the history of press coverage of presidential elections. It begins with a plaque saying: “Every four years, Americans elect a president. And every four years,

battle lines are drawn as presidential candidates face off in the conflict zone known as the campaign trail.” “Battle lines,” “face off,” and “conflict zone” seem self-evidently appropriate ways to frame presidential campaigns; indeed, the word *campaign* itself derives from a military action. The next plaque goes on to say, “This exhibit examines the tactics used by politicians – and illuminated by the press – to put democracy to the test and a candidate in the White House.” This formulation casts the press as a mere observer – illuminating politicians’ tactics – whereas in fact the role played by the press is far more active. This is acknowledged in a later plaque, which also makes use of war metaphors: “In the 20th century, new rules of engagement were drawn up between candidates and reporters. . . . The battle for control of the story and image was on.”

There is ample evidence in coverage of any electoral season that the press does not just observe and report but also creates and reinforces the agonistic framework through which we view events. Any day’s news contains a multitude of examples; here are just a few. A typical talk show host begins a discussion by saying that President Obama “came out swinging” on the payroll tax cut. A *New York Times* headline reads, “The Calculations that Led Romney to the Warpath.” And visual metaphors reinforce verbal ones. When *New York* magazine featured a story entitled “2012: The Bloodiest Campaign Ever,” the cover displayed a photo of Romney’s and Obama’s faces literally bloodied, black and blue, and plastered with band-aids and sutures. It would be as telling, I think, to show the American people similarly bruised and bloodied, because that is the result of the escalating agonism in our public discourse.

Why, you might wonder, be concerned about metaphors? They are just words – or, in the case of visual metaphors, just

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pictures. But metaphors seep into our thinking and shape our responses.

I am not against debate, opposition, controversy, or disagreement. Quite the opposite: I agree with the Yugoslavian-born poet Charles Simic, who wrote, “There are moments in life when true invective is called for, when it becomes an absolute necessity, out of a deep sense of justice, to denounce, mock, vituperate, lash out, in the strongest possible language.” What I am questioning is agonism – the automatic, ritualized, knee-jerk use of opposition which has become pervasive in our lives. In *The Argument Culture*, I describe agonism in politics, the press, law, and education. Here I address only politics and journalism, and the ways that they are intertwined.

Agonism takes two forms in the press. The first is the more obvious: an ethic of aggression that places the highest value on attack. A second and perhaps less obvious form of agonism is the conviction that opposition leads to truth; this conviction accounts for the widespread belief that “balance” is the primary goal of coverage – indeed, that the journalistic job is done if and only if “both sides” of an issue have been presented.

Because of the ethic of aggression, an article that attacks needs no justification, while praise or support is regarded as suspect. A November 2011 *Newsweek* article about the Penn State scandal used the word *shameless* – not to describe the behavior of Jerry Sandusky, the assistant coach who had sexually molested children over many years, nor to describe the behavior of the university and law enforcement officials who had failed to punish Sandusky or limit his access to underage boys despite having been informed of his behavior. No; *shameless* was used to describe an article that had cast the governor of Pennsylvania in a favorable light. The *Newsweek* essay pointed out that the governor, who

had been praised for his swift action in the latest accusation against Sandusky, had been state attorney general when investigation of complaints against Sandusky had been dragged out over three years, during which time the coach had been allowed to continue in his position and his criminal behavior. In that spirit, the essay called a *New York Times* article praising the governor a “shameless puff piece.”

“Puff piece” is one of several expressions that are regularly used – and feared – by journalists to mock and berate articles that praise without also attacking. In another *Newsweek* article, Peggy Noonan repeatedly cited her editor’s insistence that her article must attack its subject, thus fulfilling that requirement while pretending not to cave in to editorial pressure. This provides a revealing glimpse into the ethic of aggression that is common among journalists. Noonan’s essay was about the “comeback” of film producer Harvey Weinstein after a film he had produced, *The Artist*, won a slew of prizes and dominated the 2012 Academy Awards. Noonan begins by saying that Weinstein’s reputation had previously been for “coarse, threatening” and “thug”-like behavior, but that he now seems to have reformed. She then steps outside her narrative to raise the puff piece specter: “Here I must note that my editor fears I’m getting rolled. He wonders if I shouldn’t include the testimony of an old Weinstein associate who doesn’t quite buy the story of Harvey’s permanent rebirth.” She then quotes that associate as saying, “The day after the Oscars he will fall into his old bad habits.” Noonan thus does exactly what she says her editor wanted her to do, to avoid the accusation of “getting rolled” (itself a fight metaphor).

Later in the article, Noonan writes: “Here another request from my pest of an editor: there are rumors in Hollywood that Weinstein has been throwing his

weight around behind the scenes to be given the Irving G. Thalberg Award. 'He's using muscle to get an award for gentleness! Shouldn't we mention this?' No, I say, leave it alone. He sweetly pronounces it won't make the final edit." Noonan thus mentions what she says she argued should be left alone, including what she has just said would not make the final edit. In addition to being an impressive literary sleight of hand, her inclusion of her editor's injunctions illustrates journalists' fear of the puff piece accusation.

It is no surprise that Noonan puts the agonistic ethic in the mouth of her editor. Like the producer of the television talk show who assumed that the arbiter of success would be the show's ratings, newspaper editors must be concerned with readership. But just as raising ratings by turning a television show into an attack on women has consequences, so does assuming that journalism requires attack on its subjects. Consider the case of Bobby Ray Inman, who in 1994 withdrew as a nominee for secretary of defense. In explaining his decision, Inman said that although he had previously served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, nothing had prepared him for the attacks he was now experiencing, the effects of which he felt were not worth the privilege of serving again. He quoted an editor who had told him, "Bobby, you've just got to get thicker skin. We have to write a bad story about you every day. That's our job." The statement chillingly encapsulates the agonistic nature of the attack culture in the press. The daily "bad stories" were not sparked by specific wrongdoing that journalists uncovered but were triggered automatically by a perceived requirement. Also telling is the journalist's advice that Inman had to get thicker skin. In that regard, the longtime *Washington Post* editorial page editor Meg Greenfield once wrote, "Thin skin is the only kind of skin human beings come with."

Bobby Ray Inman's withdrawal of his nomination stands out because his personal experience dramatized that the nomination process had become far more agonistic than it had been in the past. His case, however, highlights one surely unintended effect of the press's ethic of aggression: fewer and fewer people are willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to engage in public service. As political scientist Norman Ornstein has pointed out, public service has always required financial sacrifice (one's income usually goes down) and personal sacrifice (whether one's family moves to Washington or stays in a distant home state), but the sacrifices were counterbalanced by the prestige that accrued to holding public office. Now, increasingly, that prestige is significantly reduced because the continual attacks on public figures have resulted in widespread disdain for those in public life. Furthermore, individuals who enter public life now risk the destruction of their reputations and their lives because of the widespread conviction among journalists that their jobs require them to write "bad stories."

Political commentator Larry Sabato has described the evolution of journalism this way: the press used to be like a lapdog, failing to criticize those in power when criticism was warranted. Their role should be that of a watchdog, alert to malfeasance when it rears its head. Now, however, the press is like an attack dog. And this is another way that agonism results in less rather than more genuine opposition: a dog that is busy attacking is not watching. In other words, the result is a rhetorical boy who cried wolf: because we have scandal inflation, true scandals are more likely to be overlooked. If you hear a fight outside your window, you rush to open the window to see what is going on. But if there is a fight outside your window every night, you shut the window and try to block them out.

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The second form of agonism that characterizes the press is the “everything has two sides” ethic. This sounds at first eminently reasonable. The problem, though, is that most issues have more than two sides – and some have only one. Religion scholar and historian Deborah Lipstadt experienced the fatuousness and destructiveness of this conviction when her book *Denying the Holocaust* was published. The producers of one television talk show invited her on, but only if she agreed to appear alongside Holocaust deniers. When Lipstadt refused, saying she did not want to provide a platform for the propagation of the very lies her book condemned, the producers challenged, “Don’t you think viewers have a right to hear the other side?” Among the tactics deniers successfully employed was taking out ads in college newspapers. The editor of one such newspaper was explicit in explaining why he accepted the deniers’ ad: “There are two sides to every issue and both have a place on the pages of any open-minded paper’s editorial page.” The ability to masquerade as the other side in a debate has resulted in Holocaust denial having more success in the United States than in any other country.

This is just one of many problems that result from our overreliance on the “two sides” metaphor. Another is that it creates the impression that both sides are equally valid: for example, when one side, such as scientists providing evidence of global climate change, is “balanced” by a tiny minority of scientists (typically funded by the fossil fuel industry) who deny that claim. A recent interview with the Detroit TV reporter Charlie LeDuff highlighted how the commitment to providing “two sides” can give credence to false information. On the NPR show *Fresh Air*, LeDuff, who had a successful career with both *The Detroit News* and *The New York Times*, was asked why he gave up writing for news-

papers. Among his comments about the limits of print journalism, he said, “There’s this construct, equal credence to what you think the truth is and what’s probably false, but they both get some stature.”

The “two sides” metaphor also creates the appearance of moral equivalence, such as the case where the Unabomber’s deranged manifesto was published side by side with the writings of a university professor who was maimed by a bomb he sent. Indeed, so immutable is the assumption that every story must have two sides that some journalists find their stories rejected if they cannot find an opposing side to provide “balance.” This parade of agonism has many unfortunate effects on members of society and on the common good. Readers often throw up their hands, concluding that it is impossible to know where the truth lies. It becomes difficult for policy to be informed by research, because findings seem to be questioned as quickly as they are reported. Perhaps most destructively, whereas democracy requires an informed electorate, the argument culture creates the opposite, as more and more people are so alienated by the agonistic rhetoric of political coverage that they cease to listen to it. Indeed, Dr. Andrew Weil recommends that people go on a “news fast” to preserve their equilibrium and mental health.

The agonism in politics that I described in the late 1990s has now reached unforeseen heights. In 1996, fourteen senators left Congress voluntarily, an unprecedented event that Norman Ornstein documented in his book *Lessons and Legacies: Farewell Addresses from the Senate*, a collection of essays by thirteen of the departing senators. Many named the increasing agonism of the Senate as their reason for leaving. Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine, who had been one of the few remaining centrist Republicans, has recently left Congress. In explaining her reasons for leav-

ing, she decried the destructive extremism that has made it impossible to craft legislation, because every vote has become “a take-it-or-leave-it showdown intended to embarrass the opposition.” In other words, whereas political campaigns once were staged only in the run-up to elections, we now have campaign tactics year-round, and they pervade the daily work of governance. The rise of the filibuster is often cited as evidence. In the 1950s, the use of this tactic averaged one per Congress. In the 110th Congress (2007–2008), it was employed fifty-two times. A supermajority is now required to pass almost any significant legislation.

These aspects of the argument culture are well known and frequently observed. As I said at the start, the aspect I would like to point out here is the way this increasing agonism is affecting our personal lives, perhaps the most deeply experienced aspect of the common good. I recently had occasion to witness an example of this while a passenger on the Acela, the high-speed train that connects Washington, D.C., and New York City. At one point during the ride, a man seated two rows in front of me turned to a teenage boy seated behind him and began shouting angrily, berating the boy for talking too loudly on his cell phone. The boy seemed genuinely puzzled and asked meekly, “What did I do?” This seemed to stoke the shouter’s anger, as he railed, “You consider yourself a man and you don’t know what you did?!” Two other passengers spoke up to ratify the attack: “It bothered me, too,” said a woman seated across the aisle from the boy. “That’s right,” joined a man seated behind him. Like the studio audience members who echoed the misogynistic verbal attacks on the television show, these passengers were joining the chorus of attack.

I had not been bothered by the boy’s cell phone conversation. The loud voice that

intruded on my train ride was the verbal attacker’s. And the boy’s offense was simply the volume of his conversation, whereas his attacker was filling the train car not only with the volume of his diatribe but with its venom. The incident has stayed with me because I blamed myself – at the time and ever since – for not speaking up in the boy’s defense. In asking myself why I did not calmly point out that the man could have asked the boy to please keep his voice down without egregiously upping the ante of disruptively loud rhetoric, I realized that I feared that the angry shouter (the word’s similarity to *shooter* is not, I think, irrelevant) would turn his wrath on me. And that is another example of how the argument culture makes everyone feel vulnerable.

Many readers will regard with a sense of despair the rise of adversativeness in politics and the press, feeling that there is nothing they can do to change it. But that sense of helplessness need not apply to the rise of agonism in our personal lives. We have daily opportunities to change the spirit with which we approach each other (a change suggested by the wording I just chose, *each other*, in contrast to the alternative, *others*). To illustrate, I end with two examples of how individuals learned to resist agonism in their daily lives. Both were mentioned at the memorial service of a dear friend and colleague, Pete Becker, a scholar and professor whose Quaker background infused his personal and professional life.

During Pete’s memorial service, his son Andrew rose to recall a brief conversation he had had with his father when he was in his teens. Andy came home from school one day brimming with anger about a “dumb rule” that the principal had announced. After explaining his indignation, he told his father that he was going to fight the rule. His father listened respectfully to Andy’s account, then asked if it

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would be hard to comply with the rule. Andy said that it wouldn't, but he reiterated what seemed to him the main point: the rule was dumb, so he was right to fight it. "If you do that," his father said, "you'll be right, but you'll turn the principal into your adversary." He went on to point out that the principal might well be under pressures that Andy did not know about, and that there would be nothing to gain by turning him into an enemy when there was no need to do so. Recalling this brief conversation as an adult looking back, Andy explained that by shifting his attention from the rightness of his indignation to the consequences of turning someone into his enemy, his father had taught him a perspective that remained a touchstone for the rest of his life.

Later in the memorial service a woman rose to tell a story with a similar conclusion. When she was a graduate student, she recounted, she had served as a teaching assistant working with Pete. When the students turned in their first set of papers, Pete suggested that they meet to grade the papers together. As they began the task, she would pick up a student's paper and read aloud something she found foolish or baseless, assuming that Pete would laugh along with her. But he declined to join her in mockery or contempt. Instead, he picked up one after another student paper and read aloud sentences in order to praise their insight, inviting her to join in with his respect and admiration. It was a lesson, she said, that made her a better teacher – and a better person.

Key to both these anecdotes is a shifting of alignment with regard to others: in place of an agonistic stance – seeing others as “dumb” and therefore different from and opposed to oneself – this wise Quaker taught his young charges to see good in others rather than stupidity. He also taught them to try seeing the world from others' perspectives. By pointing out that the principal might be subject to pressures unknown to students, and that undergraduate writers came up not only with infelicities but also with insights, Pete taught his son and his teaching assistant to see others – those in authority as well as those in subordinate positions – as fundamentally human. This subtle change of stance transforms the world from a place of hostility to a place of community, in which we are connected to rather than separated from the many strangers we encounter daily. That is a change we all can aspire to – and one we can begin to enact. We have the power to resist taking adversarial stances toward each other in our private interactions. And who knows, if enough of us resolve to do this, by a strange alchemy, it might begin to defuse (yes, metaphorical reference to the bomb on the cover of my book is intended) some of the destructiveness of the argument culture. In this way, we all can make quotidian yet revolutionary contributions to the common good.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of the material in this essay is drawn from Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Random House, 1998).