THE POWER OF DISCOURSE:
SILENCING DISSENT THROUGH DEBATE ABOUT…DISSENT

A Thesis in
Sociology

by
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ABSTRACT

Reactions to events of the past several years, including the attack on the World Trade Center and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have reawakened public and academic concern with emancipatory politics, political freedom, and transformative or revolutionary change. In particular, the anti-war demonstrations raise the question of whether contemporary forms of cultural politics are capable of disruption, or simply reaction. I use this manifestation of political dissent to engage contemporary and critical theoretical claims about agency and structure, the proper location and shape of politics, and the production of meaning.

Newspaper coverage of dissent between 2001-03 provides the empirical basis of these case studies, with individual investigations focusing on newspaper articles about dissent, reports on protest events, and letters to the editor about dissent. Discourse analysis is used to study news media frames about dissent: I reconstruct the discourse about dissent in the context of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, outlining the major themes used to frame discussion of the political debate between pro-war and peace activists. Like other studies of protest coverage, this investigation substantiates the conclusion that news coverage tends to focus on event characteristics (violence, arrests, numbers of protesters), radical or fringe elements, features of events (mobilization and logistics) and frequent crowd actions (“waved signs and chanted”) rather than the substantive claims being made. I explore the effects and power of these frames, illustrating how the discourse of dissent established certain subject positions (the dissident) as deviant and interacted with powerful post-9/11 rhetoric to reinforce notions of patriotism and unity. This discursive construction of dissent effectively restricted the
space in which debate over war could occur. Genuine, critical discussions were sidetracked by raising the phantom of dissent as the issue in need of debate.

“Letters” sections of newspapers and magazines served as a valuable link between “official” discourse and individual understanding and use of the language of news; they provide a vantage point (though not a perfect one) from which to observe the contentious interactions that take place among individuals (and between individuals and institutions like the newsmedia) throughout the process of discourse formation. Letters challenged the ultimate primacy and power typically granted to news text. Although a dominant discourse about dissent was evident in official journalistic accounts, the same is not true of letters: vigorous debate was ongoing. Nonetheless, letter writers were rarely able to reorient the debate once the parameters were established: readers were not substantially able to critique the discourse about dissent that served as a distraction from real debate over the march to war.

Finally, I examine the representation of protest activities and dissident individuals in reports on protest events in order to understand how the increasing emphasis on “the visual” and “cultural politics” (including parody, culture jamming, etc.) – in social theory and in our everyday lives – impacts the possibility for social transformation. Through the aestheticization of dissent, political opposition is increasingly trivialized, individualized, rendered ineffective and emptied of meaning in newspaper coverage. The language and actions of a cultural politics were easily manipulated by journalists, resulting in the cooptation of oppositional messages. The spectacle of protest events was clearly emphasized during this time, contributing to the marginalization of dissent.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES** ........................................................................................................................................ vii  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................................................ viii  
**CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: CONFORMITY, RESISTANCE AND THE CULTURAL TURN** .............................................. 1  
  - Dissent: A necessary evil? ................................................................................................................................. 3  
  - Academe and “Dissent” ........................................................................................................................................ 6  
  - Critical Theory ...................................................................................................................................................... 7  
  - Negative Thought and the Culture Industries .................................................................................................. 7  
  - The Problem of the Mass ..................................................................................................................................... 9  
  - Art and Resistance ........................................................................................................................................... 10  
  - Cultural and Feminist Studies .......................................................................................................................... 13  
  - Expanding Notions of Dissent ........................................................................................................................ 13  
  - Politics is Cultural, Culture is Political ........................................................................................................... 17  
  - Identity Politics .................................................................................................................................................. 21  
  - Bridging the Theoretical Gap: “Agency” or “Structure”? ........................................................................... 23  
  - Overview of the Project ................................................................................................................................... 33  
**CHAPTER 2 - PATRIOTS AND TERRORISTS: DISSENT AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH** ......................................................... 38  
  - Dissent and War ............................................................................................................................................... 43  
  - Producing the News .......................................................................................................................................... 45  
  - News Outlet, Outlet Mall, or Theme Park? ....................................................................................................... 47  
  - The Propaganda Model ..................................................................................................................................... 48  
  - Dissent in a Post 9/11 Context ......................................................................................................................... 54  
  - Methodological Approach of Study .................................................................................................................. 55  
  - Media Studies, Discourse, and Dissent ........................................................................................................... 56  
  - Method ............................................................................................................................................................. 58  
  - Tracking Dissent ............................................................................................................................................. 58  
  - Discourse Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 60  
  - Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................................... 69  
**CHAPTER 3 - MANUFACTURING ‘DISSENT’: DISCURSIVE EFFECTS OF PROTEST COVERAGE** .................................................... 72  
  - The Discourse of Dissent .................................................................................................................................. 73  
  - Issue Areas ....................................................................................................................................................... 77  
  - Dominant Frames in News Discourse ............................................................................................................ 79  
  - This “Patriotic Time” ....................................................................................................................................... 79  
  - Dissent Dédà vu ............................................................................................................................................... 87  
  - A Cease-fire on Dissent During War? ............................................................................................................. 93  
  - Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................................... 104  
**CHAPTER 4 - DISSENT AS A PROCESS: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR** .................................................................................. 107  
  - Letters to the Editor as a Discursive Site ....................................................................................................... 109  
  - Dialogical Patterns in the Debate over Dissent ........................................................................................... 116  
  - Freedom ......................................................................................................................................................... 117  
  - The Suppression of Dissent, or Lack Thereof ........................................................................................... 118
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Average number of articles per paper citing dissent and number of papers in sample each year, 1985-2003 .................................................................................................40

Figure 2: Number of articles citing dissent per year in major U.S. papers, 1985-2003 ............................................................................................................................................40

Figure 3: Coverage of dissent in major U.S. papers, September 2001-September 2003 ....................................................................................................................................42

Figure 4: Percent of total coverage of dissent and war in major U.S. papers, September 2001- September 2003 .............................................................................................................42
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Conformity, Resistance, and the Cultural Turn

Reactions to events of the past several years, including the attack on the World Trade Center and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have reawakened public and academic concern with emancipatory politics, political freedom, and transformative or revolutionary change. Questions about the possibilities for radical social change have been raised in light of the relative failure of the peace movement – one of the largest mobilizations since the 60s – to alter the course of a march toward war. This project investigates the web of late modern social, economic, political, and cultural elements that shaped not only the outcome of global protests against the invasion of Iraq but the influence of political opposition generally.

These essays engage the work of Herbert Marcuse, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Wendy Brown in order to reflect upon the ability of their work to adequately depict a picture of dissent today. They each attempt to understand whether resistance is possible given the ways in which many of the ostensibly democratic institutions of modern western societies work, paradoxically, to inhibit dissent and encourage conformity. The point of this chapter is not to present a totalizing, deterministic picture of human agency or emancipatory politics so often associated with the Frankfurt School’s perspective on liberation, but to draw attention to the power inherent in aspects of social life that have been taken to be the source of a new and transgressive version of radical politics. This study necessarily spans a number of academic disciplines but does not attempt to create a theoretically integrated program. Rather, this work attempts to occupy
the spaces in-between, establishing dialogue among three theoretical perspectives that have vested theoretical and practical interests in emancipatory politics. With the explicit aim of revealing the world *as it is* and suggesting that we need to look beyond the world *as it appears to be*, this work is a critical endeavor. It does not seek nor advance the ideal of value-free science, but an understanding of the mechanisms that create, sustain, challenge, and change social life. Through critique these essays hope to envision an alternative world.

Though it seems decidedly out of vogue to work within a Critical Theory perspective – unless, perhaps, the referent is Habermas – the concerns that guide this work are precisely those that drove Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer. Is ‘the great refusal’ still possible? Can radical political transformation occur? Posing such questions need not imply that the answer lies in discovering a ‘revolutionary class’ or the ‘revolutionary subject’ – an alleged failure of the Frankfurt School. The issue, in this work, is not whether one can identify a particular set of individuals with a particular mindset inclined toward negative thinking and capable of achieving autonomous personhood. Nor must the investigator take an overly pessimistic outlook on the ‘culture industries’ or the valuation of “high” art. Critical theory is neither monolithic nor unified as a body of thought – neither, of course, is any single critical theorist’s work across their lifespan – and one can find a variety of stances on culture across the corpus of critical theory texts. Furthermore, these issues need not determine the course of research driven by such theory.

Rather than asking whether non-conformity is possible—as Marcuse and company might have—this investigation uses critical theories to understand how the
structural mechanisms that limit individual dissent and radical social change are resisted. Do recent protest events indicate that the possibility for radical social transformation still exists? Was their relative inability to affect political decision-making an indication that dissent remains a futile venture, as Marcuse suggested decades ago? Equally important, what was the role of various aspects of cultural, social, and political institutions in inhibiting or encouraging dissent? What are the implications for dissent, the free exchange of ideas, and wide-ranging debate over political issues of the increasing concentration of power in television and news media? Can mainstream print journalism act as an avenue for change given its reliance on the very structures that many modern movements reject? What is the media’s role in the production of knowledge and of subjects and thus in regulating dissent through its definition of the issues? Has the news media’s framing of the freedom to dissent and the need for dissent affected the U.S. public’s support for political protest? What are the implications for future dissent?

Dissent: A Necessary Evil?

Given the alleged United States attempts to “bring democracy to the Middle East” and to depose “fascist dictators” so that Iraqi citizens can “enjoy their freedoms,” considering that January through April, 2003 saw the largest peace protests since the 60s, it might seem ironic to suggest that dissent is in jeopardy or that social theorists should be concerned anew with dissent and conformity. Dissent is on the rise, one might argue; the

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1 Of course, the concept of ‘ineffective” also needs to be evaluated. Were the protests ineffective because the war took place? Might one see them as effective, considering the change in heart many have had since the revelations about WMDs, Abu Graib, and other events that have challenged the basic justifications given for the war? “Effect” is notoriously hard to ascertain in any study of a social movement. This work aims only to understand the place of dissent and protest in the U.S. context and to utilize contemporary social theories to explore the discursive consequences of protest coverage.
anti-globalization movement seems to be achieving some victories, and the
democratizing efforts in the Middle East must reflect newfound freedoms. Such a
paradox, however, is precisely the predominant concern for many “liberal” commentators
when they characterize the events of the past few years. U.S. troops have been fighting a
war for the freedom of another nation of people while the government has been placing
limits on free speech, access to information, and other “anti-American” or “terrorist”
activities at home. While Americans celebrated the “free elections” in Iraq, the courts in
our country refused to hear challenges of voter fraud raised after the 2004 presidential
election.

The subject of dissent or political protest, of course, has a complicated and
conflicted history in the U.S. To begin with, the place of the dissenter in society is
precarious: “dissenters seek to define and occupy an in-between space, resistant to
prevailing orthodoxy but engaged with it nonetheless” (Sarat 2005). The dissident is both
within and apart from her society, she confirms her allegiance to it as she extends her
critique. While most individuals accept the general need for political dissent, many are
uncomfortable with the specific challenges posed by protesters and are resistant to the
ideas raised by dissidents. Americans, and the U.S. news media, are clearly supportive of
dissent in other countries – both groups tend to promote the need for dissent or lament the
lack of opposition in certain countries – but often advocate limits on political speech or
encourage unity of opinion in this country.² Furthermore, there are clearly times when
dissent is deemed more appropriate and others, especially times of “war,” when speaking

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² For data on the print news media’s tendency to cover international stories about dissent vs. opposition
within the U.S. see the discussion of Table 2 in Chapter 2 of this document.
out in opposition is marked not only as inappropriate but also as damaging, immoral, and possibly illegal.

The long tradition of “curtailing the rights of dissent” during times of crisis in this country include such government actions as the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, the suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War, and, of course, the McCarthy hearings in the Fifties. Public opinion polls reveal the internal discord felt about dissent during war. During the first Gulf War the public stopped short of suggesting that protests should be banned when military action began, but only 34% percent of respondents to a poll in 1991 thought it was “a good thing that those who disagree with the government are speaking out” (Gallup 2003). In January 2003, before the invasion of Iraq, 70% of Americans thought it was okay to protest; that number fell dramatically to 57% just as military action began (Gallup 2003). Americans are even divided on support for the dissent of the 1960s. Though it seems as though our collective memory of that decade is largely romanticized—nostalgic representations of that time usually emphasize hopefulness and possibility, portraying the student movement as a positive collective action aimed against the ills of society—public opinion on Vietnam War protesters remained divided even in 1990, with 39% of individuals having a favorable opinion and 39% an unfavorable opinion (Gallup 2003).

September 11th has raised similar concerns about the place of dissent in a democracy like the United States. In the context of an attack on this country and the “circling of the wagons” that occurred immediately after these events, questions about dissent during times of crisis (of which war is only one example) take on a decidedly different tone. This environment has led to an increasing concern with dissent in
academic literatures (see for example Lucas 2004; Sunstein 2003; Sarat 2005, Eagleton 2003). Compounding the issue, “dissent” has recently become associated with left-leaning radical politics, discredited as a “liberal” activity. Despite these challenges to dissent, it is still recognized as an integral component of a fully functioning democracy, where debate is valued as central to establishment of political priorities and policies. Further attempts to restrict or criticize anti-war dissent could erode its place of acceptance as an American value, however, with future consequences for democratic processes and social transformation.

Academe and “Dissent”

The tension surrounding dissent felt within public discourse is paralleled in theoretical and academic treatments of the subject. “Dissent” is a complicated concept, capable of taking many forms and central to a variety of theories regarding the dimensions of social change and political struggle. In *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse (1964) argues that “real” dissent is essentially impossible: “Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole” (2). The prevailing forms of social control in modern industrialized societies, through the immediate identification of the individual with society, reduce the individual subject to a state of one-dimensionality in which non-conformity or dissent are rendered impossible. That is, “the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down” (10). Like the rest of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse believed that the conditions of modern capitalist
society destroyed the capability individuals have for “negative thinking”—distinguishing between existence and essence, fact and potentiality, appearance and reality.

**Critical Theory**

*Negative Thought and the Culture Industries*

The equation of “dissent” with the ability to question or oppose the status quo through the exercise of critical thinking typifies traditional social theories about dissent. The Frankfurt School argument about whether critical thinking is possible goes something like this: given the organization of our world, it is simply impossible to critique, to negate the existing state of affairs. This condition is accomplished through the creation of “false needs,” which distract us from the realities of the world and inhibit our ability to see through the surface to the inequalities that lie beneath, and through an increasing reliance on image, which impedes conceptual thinking (Marcuse 1964). Furthermore, the “reign of one-dimensionality” works to co-opt various forms of nonconformity when they do arise: “modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative” (14). Horkheimer also promoted the need for a “critical attitude” toward the categories that organize social life. Critical thinking would enable an individual to transcend the artificial opposition between man and society, revealing the web of relationships between people and with nature. By breaking down the illusion of factual reality, critical thinking was supposed to remove the conflict between individual and self (Horkheimer 1999 [1968]).

The emphasis on critical or negative thinking stems from a general discomfort with mass culture typical of critical theory. Mass culture, to Horkheimer and Adorno, is
an affirmative culture: it affirms dominant bourgeois values and is unable to significantly
challenge them (1993 [1944]). They characterized the cultural industries (radio, music,
television, film, etc) as the enlightenment manifest as mass deception. By creating the
illusion of choice, promoting the false identity of the general and the particular, stunting
imagination, merging reality with image, promoting technique over content, and blurring
the distinction between genuine and artificial style, the production of mass culture
ensures that “No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product
prescribes every reaction: not by its natural structure (which collapses under reflection),
but by signals” (137).

For Horkheimer and Adorno, dissent is precluded by the obsession with
consumption and the preoccupation with leisure and the fulfillment of needs (for
consumer goods) predetermined by the culture industries themselves: “Seemingly free,
the individual] was actually the product of its economic and social apparatus” (1993
[1944], 155). The possibility of the negative moment is never fulfilled because the
“culture industries” are dominated more by exchange values than by use values.
Precapitalist music, for example, allowed for a certain amount of autonomy and
expression of an authentic subjectivity. Modern popular culture, however, is imposed
from above. Adorno’s essays on television are perhaps the best illustration of this
mechanism. The technical aspects of television (speed of images, compression of ideas,
etc) create a situation in which the images and ideas presented are not contemplated:
“reflection can no longer catch its breath” (Adorno 1998 [1953]; 50). Television has
transformed individual consciousness such that image becomes reality, appearance
becomes ideology, and identification with images supercedes identification with others.
For Adorno, television reduces people to unconscious modes of behavior, in which conformity is conveyed and authentic expression is limited if not eliminated.

**The Problem of the “Mass”**

Frankfurt School critical theory is not alone in its alarm over the power of the “culture industries” of the 1950s. There has been a tendency within sociological theorizing to treat dissent as the opposite or negation of conformity, the antagonist of individualism. In these theories, conformity is “the idea that yielding to group pressures is bad—whether or not such conformity is against one’s own inclinations and whether it is a matter of surface behaviors or deeper convictions” (Thomson 2000; 14). This conception of conformity emphasizes the inability to resist or to maintain beliefs that counter the status quo:

> “the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be. The discrepancy between “I” and the world disappears…” (Fromm 1964, 196).

Problematizing “mass” culture has taken the form of criticizing the “tyranny of the majority” (Tocqueville), the “organization man” (Whyte), the “lonely crowd” (Riesman), and “obedience” to authority (Kohn). Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, for example, argues that popular culture and other standardizing mechanisms of society exert a measure of social control over the individual, erasing individual differences in favor of adherence to the group. In such conceptualizations of conformity, dissent appears implausible—the two terms are set up not only as polar opposites but as the negation of each other. In a
recent thesis on conformity, Patrick Colm Hogan equates conformism with consent—“the acquiescence of ordinary people in an unequal social and economic system [and] their positive support of and contribution to the maintenance and extension of that system”—positioning conformism against dissent and rebellion (2001, 1). This dichotomization of dissent and conformity is problematic – an argument I return to shortly.

At the time of their formulation of the culture industry thesis, Horkheimer and Adorno were becoming ever more pessimistic in their view of politics and resistance. This pessimism caused them to situate resistance within “critical individuals” rather than social groups, movements, or oppositional practices; essentially giving up on politics (Kellner 1997). Marcuse’s perspective, however, changed drastically over his academic tenure. His involvement with the student movement in the late sixties produced a more hopeful outlook in An Essay on Liberation unparalleled in other Frankfurt School texts. Counterrevolution and Revolt, however, marks a return to a more pessimistic take on dissent as it contemplates the right’s counter to the civil rights and sexual liberation movements. In general, though, Marcuse is much more hopeful concerning political transformation than Horkheimer and Adorno.

Art and Resistance

Where Horkheimer and Adorno did hold out hope, however, is with regard to the “negative function” of art and its ability to manifest the “force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and otherwise, no less than it reflects their objective stance” (Adorno 1945, 678). The ambiguity of art, which allows it
to transmit more than its actual content, creates a disruption or syncope; a moment of reflection at the point of disjuncture.

Marcuse also advocates the political potential of the aesthetic dimension. Art’s political function rests in its ability to subvert the dominant consciousness and can be revolutionary in the way that it represents radical change in its style or technique as well as through the way that its form transforms reality. That is, the power in art lies in its ability to define what is real, transcend what appears to be real, and reshape language and perception (Marcuse 1978). By creating a “fictitious world” art is able to demystify, and ultimately, to help foster change by changing individual consciousness. For Marcuse, art’s ability to create an alternate reality is what can potentially lead individuals to a new vision of the world and thus to revolutionary change.

Another line of thought regarding the relationship between radical social transformation and art suggests that it is more than just its form or content that can be political. For Walter Benjamin, a close cousin to the Frankfurt School, “dissidents out of necessity resort to politicizing the arts, where some access remains open” when faced with decreased access to traditional political mechanisms (cited in Nehring 1997, xiii).

Within a critical framework, however, the political potential inherent in art is always juxtaposed with the power of capitalism. Thus, just as nonconformity can be co-opted, taken back up into the system of capitalist production to serve the profit motive, so can art and aesthetics. Countercultural ideas, rather than fueling change, are susceptible to cooptation or absorption into mainstream culture—taken up and used in the service of maintaining “life as usual.” This argument suggests that “[w]hat we understand as “dissent” does not subvert, does not challenge, does not even question the cultural faith of
Western business (Frank 1997, 44). Business culture has been particularly adept at capitalizing on the “hip,” “rebellion,” and “non-conformity” in product advertising to promote consumerism. Even politically-oriented art is susceptible to such commodification. For example, the early Nineties saw the institutionalization of graffiti artists in gallery space and the recognition of tagging as a form of sellable—and for a short time highly profitable—art.

In fact, numerous cultural theorists have pointed to the fact that much of what enters mainstream fashion each year is based on the styles of a variety of oppositional working or lower class and street subcultures (McRobbie 1999). Rather than original ideas, many of the designs found in the Paris and New York fashion shows are in fact inspired by the punk and hip hop street styles observed by designers. Russell Berman argues that the aestheticization of everyday life not only allows for the potential for change but can also be a mechanism of control:

As aesthetic manipulation expands into all facets of social activity, manipulation can be confronted from any point within aestheticized society…culture may potentially undergo a politicization that will transform it into the primary terrain for social conflict and reveal the fundamental weaknesses in a cultural defense of the heteronomous order (1989, 94).

Foucault, in his work on the effects of knowledge and power, suggests that “insurrectionary knowledges” and the subjects and practices of marginalized populations are always at risk of being co-opted and re-subordinated.
To the extent that this diagnosis is accurate, can we conclude that dissent is futile?

If protest or images of protests are routinely used to sell mass-produced cultural products, does this mean that the effectiveness of resistance is compromised in some way? For many contemporary theorists the answer is, emphatically, NO! Using a Foucauldian notion of power, they suggest that resistance, as constituted in relation to dominant lines of understanding, can work to challenge the status quo. That is, resistive practices transgress by pushing on the boundaries of understanding. It may be that the more the illusions created by the culture industry come to dominate capitalist production, the more the system is compromised and opened up for critique (Berman 1989). Dissent thus becomes capable of taking a wider variety of forms than ever before, and the potential objects of critique are limitless.

**Cultural and Feminist Studies**

*Expanding Notions of “Dissent” and “Resistance”*

This expanded definition of resistance developed at the same time as the increased attention to the relationship between culture and politics. The cultural turn in social theory has reformulated the relationship between culture and politics: if “culture is seen as constitutive of social relations and identities” it “must also be seen as the site of politics.” Culture, it is argued, is a political realm in as much as it is where social meanings and truth claims are constructed and negotiated by individuals, groups, and institutions. Consequently, recent work has concentrated on exploring what is now known as “cultural politics.” Kate Nash suggests that a model of cultural politics

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3 Nash, Kate (2001) “The ‘Cultural Turn” in Social Theory: Towards a Theory of Cultural Politics.” *Sociology* 35:1, pg.78. Nash suggests that the cultural turn in sociology takes two forms: “Firstly, the idea
requires a fundamental rethinking of politics: reformulating “the political” to incorporate non-traditional forms of political participation and action. Feminist writers have been working for a number of years to reformulate the concept of resistance in a way that recognizes the diversity of forms it can take, particularly the everyday resistance exhibited by women. Feminist conceptualization of resistance encompass everything from the lobbying efforts of NOW to young women’s efforts to reject dominant messages about traditional femininity as they construct their own image of the adolescent experience.

In many ways, theoretical understandings of emancipatory politics have shifted in order to take this insight into consideration. In recent feminist theory, dissent is typically associated with the idea of resistance and with a corresponding recognition of many forms of contesting relations of power. That is, there is a wide variety of ways in which individuals—especially women and girls—refuse to go along with dominant (gender) messages and norms. Resistance or dissent is, in this context, not adequately conceived of as the opposite of conformity; rather, it is more often equated with transgression—pushing on the boundaries of understanding, challenging the status quo. In many ways, for example, the actions of dissenting individuals do not always appear to be explicit rejections of social and cultural expectations (Macleod 2001).

However, in the context of the particular oppression being resisted, the particular form of dissent (discursive, performative, organizational, and everyday dissent) and the many locations in which it can take place (communities, households, workplaces) may be disruptive. Holloway Sparks (2001) argues that it is “marginalized dissident citizens who

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that culture is universally constitutive of social relations and identities…Secondly, the claim that in *contemporary society* culture plays an unprecedented role in constituting social relations and identities” (78). She labels these, respectively, the “epistemological” case and the “historical” case for culture.
address the wider polity in order to change minds, challenge practices, or even reconstitute the very boundaries of the political itself, engage in a form of democratic citizenship that is essential for the continuing revitalization of democratic life” (445). She creates a typology of nondemocratic and democratic practices that she considers resistant, ranging from using violence, to formal channels of contestation such as lobbying, to addressing the state through noninstitutionalized channels like demonstrating or committing acts of civil disobedience. Feminist scholarship has brought significant attention to the forms of everyday resistance, challenging what counts as political participation. Work on young women’s politics suggests that allegations concerning young people’s lack of political involvement reflect a gap in how politics is studied, not a lack of dissent itself. Anita Harris (2001) argues that, rather than having no politics, they are instead utilizing different spaces for their political expression. One of her interviewees comments: “We don’t always need a movement to express our politics. I think we can all start our own revolutions from our bedrooms with a common goal.” Conceptualizing politics as existing only within the realm of the public misses out on many alternative forms of resistance. Going “underground” allowed young women to develop forms of resistance that reject commodification. Harris points to the importance of independently printed and circulated fanzines in which young women agitate for

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4 As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the cultural turn – as it is manifested in recent work in feminist theory and political science – has called into question traditional notions of ‘politics’, ‘the political’, and ‘political participation.” “Politics” usually brings to mind the traditional channels available to citizens for participation: voting, lobbying, institutionalized political organizations. There is work, particularly within feminism and cultural studies, which argues for the political potential and importance of cultural politics, including but not limited to identity-based movements. The discourse on politics has expanded to include consideration of the body, emotion, and community, for example. Attention to expanding the notion of what counts as politics has also led the way to re-examining how resistance is conceptualized. Here, the work of feminist scholars on women’s activism that advocates recognizing the importance of ‘everyday resistance” is particularly important.
change. Zines have emerged as one avenue for escaping the co-optation of young women’s culture, style and politics.

Judith Butler’s (1993) conception of the political potential of parody is perhaps one of the most influential challenges to what counts as resistance. Butler argues, “Subjects are constructed through exclusion, that, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view” (1993, 12). Subjectivity emerges from the negation of what one is not; I know who I am because I can identify who or what I am not.

Also important is work on the abject as discussed by Julia Kristeva. The abject, for Butler, serves as a negation in the creation of a subject while Kristeva’s discussion of the abject suggests a more radical exclusion of the other in which the body is central. The abject body in her theorizing lies outside, at the margins; the subject depends on the abject to constitute its border, constantly articulating the boundaries of the self. If we take Kristeva’s theory to its logical conclusion, then the body of dissenter, wrapped in clothing that signals its marginality, can be considered an abject body and such images—such popular cultural objects—might challenge or transgress dominant discourses. In this way, there emerges the possibility of dissent from within the realm of business capitalism, a gap through which the commodification of dissent breaks down. Clothing may be used as a tactic in a politics of opposition, in which the body serves to bring into consciousness dominant discourse as it creates a tension at the margins of the mainstream.

But the reach and influence potential in transgressive acts such as parody is also questionable. In the realm of gender transgression, “drag” is especially problematic.
While one might argue that cross-dressing does in fact call attention to the unconscious regulation of gender, there is also a case to be made for recognizing that this jarring realization may only occur in certain, controlled circumstances or spaces. So, while drag shows may cause individual audience members to be aware of the gender rules being parodied, the same act of cross dressing presumably takes on a different meaning and an altogether different effect in different circumstances. Contrast, for example, walking in drag down the street of a small rural town with walking down the streets of New York City and one is confronted with an extremely large range of potential political practices and effects. When one also considers that dressing in drag tends to entail performing exaggerated stereotypical masculine or feminine behavior and wearing gender appropriate styles of clothing, drag may be seen as reinforcing rather than disrupting gender displays. This is not to say that parody or transgression be rejected as modes of resistance but that their limitations must be acknowledged.

**Politics is Cultural, Culture is Political**

The concept of dissent is expanded further when one considers the wide range of cultural practices that could be considered political; aspects of culture generally, not just “art,” can challenge or uphold social meanings and can serve as acts of resistance. Significant social change can thus occur in the realm of culture and politics, in discourse and in material conditions. Whereas critical theorists held popular or mass culture in disdain, work in cultural studies clearly asserts even that realm’s political potential.

A cultural politics recognizes the symbolic meaning of cultural objects within the larger cultural system of signification. Television, music, movies, books, and news
media have expansive audiences; the influence of their messages is far ranging, and thus their potential political power. While most television programs, musicians, or movies operate within mainstream discourse – offering stories and lyrics that do not challenge “life as we know it” – there are many that do not. The lyrics of bands like Pearl Jam and Rage Against the Machine and musicians like Ani DiFranco contain explicit political commentary: they sing about the harmfulness of capitalist exploitation, rampant consumerism, racism, sexism, and harmful environmental practices. Their lyrics challenge dominant ideologies directly, producing a critical space that disrupts the status quo and (hopefully) stimulates critical reflection in their audiences.

However, it is not just the lyrics but also the music itself that is political. Movement music “challenges the boundaries of linguistic consciousness” and modern Western subjectivity, “raises consciousness, unsettling cultural identities as it politicizes society” and “undermines the will to consensus…engages audiences” (Love 2002, 74). Angela McRobbie echoes that sentiment, suggesting that hip-hop or drum and bass music in both its form and content are socially and politically subversive. And Neil Nehring suggests that the most successful radical politics at present are found in the angriest forms of popular music: “acerbic music has been the most conspicuous public voice of protest, almost single-handedly keeping visions of humane social change alive in the mass media” (1997, xiii). He argues that emotion is the key, here, in the politics of music. It is the anger inherent in the music that is important to political change. According to Nehring: “Political ideas and programs alone, that is, will be powerless to effect change unless they have an unmistakable basis in anger at injustice” (xviii).
This disruption is called “code-breaking” and can operate in many ways (Kellner 1997). For Dick Hebdige, for example, style is much more than merely aesthetic. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, he explores the relational meaning of cultural objects and codes, especially those that exist in between mainstream culture and a sub-culture. Subcultural violations of mainstream codes or norms work, politically, to challenge, provoke and disturb.

The artists and their lyrics discussed above are examples of the emancipatory potential of counter-hegemonic forces that both Frankfurt School theorists and British Cultural Studies focus on. But such overtly political messages appear infrequently if one looks to the whole of the contemporary music industry, and the audiences these artists reach are comparatively small. Furthermore, interest in popular culture as a political terrain does not rest solely upon those movies, television programs, books, news media, etc. that offer alternatives to dominant messages. Given the reach and influence of popular culture, there is not just a concern with the alternative spaces of culture – for the margins are where opposition is found and articulated – but also the oppositional potential of mainstream culture itself. Because the media provide audiences with definitions of social and political realities, they are storytelling institutions, not merely reflections of the existing social order.

Again, however, there are problems with making assumptions about audience reception and interpretation. Can one ever be sure that an individual perceives mainstream or even overtly political messages as counter-hegemonic? How can we tell? And is it even fair to generalize across individuals and audiences with regard to their

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5 Pearl Jam is somewhat of an exception to this statement, as the group was extremely popular in the early 90s. Although the group maintains a fairly large following and can still fill medium to large concert venues, their music does not consistently reach extremely large audiences.
interpretation of listening to movement music, as an example? Even if we approach the subject cautiously, careful not to make assumptions about the agency of individuals or to avoid conferring meaning on a particular cultural object or act, where does a politics of transgression, parody, or cultural politics get us? Is it enough to read resistance into cultural practices? Will this lead to the large-scale changes that radical political transformation requires?

Though concepts of resistance within critical research on audience reception of media texts avoid defining readers as passive recipients of media messages, they “frequently ignore the amount of cultural work necessary to construct an oppositional reading, while simultaneously failing to trace the degree to which these critical readings are representative of wider patterns of interpretation” (Carragee 1996, 127). Wendy Brown suggests that resistance may be more a “symptom of postmodernity’s crisis of political space than a coherent response to it” (49). Dissent formulated as resistance “does not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organized collective efforts” (Brown 1995, 49). Though the emphasis on resistance may be a necessary stage in articulating a politics that is able to account for postmodern challenges to the subject, history, and Truth, it does not appear to be a sufficient stopping point. Rather than disrupting systems of power, resistance is an effect of power; a reaction to it but not necessarily a disruption or subversion of it.

Studies that fail to “distinguish between significant forms of resistance and trivial forms of “oppositional” decoding that are divorced from or remote to questions of political power” produce a depoliticized definition of cultural resistance (Carragee 1996, 127). Wendy Brown’s (1995) reading of Foucault emphasizes the confining and all-
encompassing effects of power through the production of subjects, knowledge, and discourse that more positive interpretations found in postmodern and feminist theorizing ignore. In doing so, Brown extends her critique of resistance to include the strategies of identity politics, another form dissent in late modern culture has also taken.

Identity Politics

According to Kevin Hetherington (1998), new social movements, youth subcultures, and alternative lifestyles (all referred to as “neo-tribes”) are the main sources of identification in postmodernity. Belonging is an important part of identity (both from a consumerist standpoint and a radical expressive outlook, argues Hetherington). The emphasis on identity and identity politics is the recognition of “the relationship between marginalisation and a politics of resistance, and affirmative, empowering choices of identity and a politics of difference” (Hetherington 1998, 21). Hetherington argues that the loss of fixed identity characteristic of modernity is a sign of possibility: the shift toward ambiguity, fractured identities, and difference opens up new possibilities for resistance and rebellion.

However, this manifestation of dissent in identity politics is problematic. Brown (1995) is concerned in States of Injury with the relative loss of the Left’s ability to generate substantial political and social transformation. Identity politics, she argues, is unable to truly deconstruct the identity categories that generate injury and oppression. Calls for freedom and recognition based on the injuries experienced by workers, blacks, or women are constitutive of identity categories—various forms of recognition politics are “constrained by and potentially even require the very structure of oppression that
freedom emerges to oppose” (Brown 1995, 7). Identity politics generates a paralysis: in order for the women’s movement to demand gender-based rights, for example, it must petition the state—which itself is a source of domination—ultimately re-inscribing the differences the movement seeks to erase. Furthermore, it is not the postmodern turn away from Truth, history, or the modern subject that impedes the development of an oppositional politics, “but rather from certain “material” features of our age: the expanding hegemony of technical reason, cultural-spatial disorientation, and a political tendency produced by this disorientation—“reactionary foundationalism”” (Brown 1995, 33).

Like Marcuse, Habermas, Weber, and Foucault, Brown argues that technical reason—particularly the disciplinary discourses of instrumental rationality—makes the critical articulation of domination extremely difficult because the system at fault is not easily identified or challenged. The decentering and diffusion of power creates conditions under which it is easy to get lost (without fixed means of orientation, normalized) so individuals increasingly need to invent “identities” in order to know who, where, and what they are. Identity politics is a reaction to “cross-cultural meldings” as well as the commodification of cultural practices and icons which in turn creates a return to what Brown calls foundational narratives. These narratives—”the traditional family,” “great books,” “the American flag,” etc.—are, however, without a reference to a fundamental truth and are used to argue that all other positions are subversive. Thus, it is argued that feminism threatens the American way of life or granting homosexual couples the right to marry jeopardizes the “traditional” American family. These reactionary stances are responses to the uncertainties, disorientation, debilitating, depoliticizing
characteristics of postmodernity that ultimately discredit and call into question the reputability of a variety of “left” political movements. Brown’s solution involves the creation of feminist political spaces where dialogue can take place – spaces that emphasize partiality of understanding and expression – and she suggests that the conversations within those spaces should be oriented toward the common world rather than toward self (translating one’s situated experiences into public language).

Could editorial sections of newspapers function as such spaces? Certainly, one would not easily characterize most national or regional newspapers as feminist spaces given the political and economic realities of information production industries. However, given the relatively free access to letters pages, one might stretch the imagination to at least consider their political potential as well as their power to define the situation.

**Bridging the Theoretical Gap: “Agency” or “Structure”?**

This examination of “dissent” points to the concept’s tenuous and challenging place in popular discourse as well as within theories of radical social transformation. Why do we value dissent at some times but not others or under certain conditions but not all? Why do critical theorists generally locate themselves in separate camps, which either see the promise of social change in cultural practices or fear the conformity-producing structures of late modern capitalism? More importantly, why, when addressing dissent, do such questions seem so diametrically opposed—with one side emphasizing the agency of individuals and other side the structures and constraints of society?

Perhaps this sets up a bit of a straw man, here; the fact that these questions are commonly formulated in this either/or format is problematic. But a general tendency
remains: many students of social transformation either fail to contextualize movements and actors, thus overemphasizing agency and resistance, or they tend look exclusively at the political, social, and economic context and fail to recognize the contributions of individuals. The apparent contradiction between critical theory and cultural/feminist studies apparent above revolves largely around their location at either end of the structure-agency dichotomy as it has been thusly constructed. For example, cultural studies research that emphasizes the active participation of consumers is a reaction to critical theory’s failure to fully acknowledge individual agency; critical theory placed too much emphasis on the critical meaning inherent in cultural products rather than at the moment of audience interpretation and use. Moreover, the popularity of a cultural studies perspective on the relationship between popular culture and politics inhibits work like that of critical theorists. If one works from the idea that individuals actively produce meanings through their consumption and use of cultural products, it becomes difficult to talk about conformity to the mechanisms of cultural production. If cultural objects and popular culture are, in large, viewed as potentially political, attention is deflected away from notions like “false individuality” and “false negativity” that Marcuse and Adorno identified. The question, “Is there room for agency?” becomes impossible to ask and to answer.

It is dangerous, in general, to let the pendulum swing to either extreme: the dismissal of individual agency or a fetishization of it (or to do the same with regard to structure and constraint). Feminist work has pointed to the problematic nature of dichotomies—the (potential) harm of stabilizing such categories and the ways in which most dichotomies rest upon a normative gender hierarchy (Hartsock 1997; Weedon
Most, though not all, of the various theories of conformity treat as unproblematic an individualism/conformism dichotomy—they do not recognize the ambiguous nature of the relationship between individualism and conformism. While they are perceived, ideologically, to be opposites, there is a strange compatibility between individualism and conformism that even Tocqueville recognized. Adherence to the principles of individualism is essentially conformist. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) noted in *Habits of the Heart*, “There is no moment when the therapeutically inclined sound more similar than when they are asserting their uniqueness” (141).

Indeed, the realities of social life show that the “structure vs. agency” debate, as it has been constructed in social theory, is more theory than fact. Individuals are most accurately depicted as embedded in societies, shaped but not determined by our cultural surroundings. This perspective – the recent push toward a “third space” or the recognition of the inability to reach any sort of resolution of the structure-agency dichotomy – is not particularly new to social theory. Symbolic interactionism, for example, has long advocated a “choices within constraints” type of perspective, deconstructing both poles of the debate. The work of Giddens (structuration theory) and Bourdieu (*habitus*) are only the most recent manifestations of this argument.

Decades after theorists like Marcuse wrote there is an increasing sense that “the problem is perhaps more pressing now than ever, for after the great upheavals of the 1960s, the United States has not witnessed a further expansion of robust individual and collective equality” (Hogan, 2001: 1). The recent focus on the agency side of this debate is particularly troubling for any work that aims to address dissent in a comprehensive way. In a matter of four decades, social theory has moved (though not uniformly, of
course) away from a disapproving critique of mass culture and its conformist tendencies to embrace mass or popular culture, accentuate its subversive potential, and emphasize the agency of individual actors.

This trend begins to appear in the academic literature of the 1980s. A brief search of books published in the last half-century shows that the subject “conformity,” which preoccupied many theorists of the 1960s, appears less frequently in scholarly work since the eighties while the subject “agency” appears with increasing frequency. I conducted a search of LIAS-The CAT at Penn State University of the subject heading “Conformity” that yielded 58 titles, 40 of which were published before 1980. The same catalogue yielded 54 titles under the subject heading “Agent (Philosophy),” 48 of which were published after 1980 (3/2/03). These data may capture a shift in the purchasing priorities of one particular university library. However, assuming that academics within departments at a particular university remain on top of recent theoretical trends and influence the purchases made by their library, this change in the books on library shelves can be taken as a reflection of those trends.

Of course, Marcuse might argue that the academic and theoretical emphasis on the liberatory potential of popular culture is but one more instance of the cooptation of resistance, the ability of a capitalist consumer culture to neutralize opposition through incorporation. Cultural Studies has been central to this theoretical shift, arguing for the political potential of “culture” as an important terrain of struggle, opposition, and subversion. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to write about conformity in contemporary U.S. culture in spite of the fact that “conformity” to the status quo appears everywhere.
Conformity takes many forms but I am mostly concerned with conformity to what I would call dominant cultural ideologies. Some examples will help clarify my perspective. I think immediately of politically based ideologies: The recent events surrounding the “War on Terror” and “Operation Iraqi Freedom” indicate that while many Americans are willing to stand up in dissent when faced with the possibility of war, the majority supported the ideology and policies of the President even when faced with evidence that called the government’s actions into question. Or, economically based ideologies: Despite the overwhelming negative evidence concerning SUV safety and glaringly low fuel efficiency people continue to buy these vehicles at record levels, evidence that the legitimacy of rampant consumerism and concern over status symbols has not been swayed by commonly acknowledged evidence of environmental effects. Belief in the primacy of private consumption, as a capitalistic ideological system, thus continues to trump ecologically based belief systems that might allow us to truly challenge the legitimacy of the marketplace as a source of satisfaction. And, finally, ideologies we might situate in the cultural realm, proper: The recent popularity of home decorating and individual “makeovers” indicates an ever-widening concern with the aesthetic of space and body for both men and women, further diverting individuals’ time and energy away from other (perhaps political) activities.

The overwhelming adherence of people to certain powerful cultural ideologies (private accumulation and the legitimacy of the marketplace) in spite of arguments that strongly contradict them (ecological understandings of global warming) indicate that conformity should remain a theoretical concern. Reading David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* is powerful reminder that, while it feels as though U.S. culture today has changed
significantly since he wrote in the fifties, in many ways, little has changed. The other-directed character of society remains a dominant feature of life, as are the conforming influences of mass media and the peer group. And, as Foucault argued, political resistance and insurrectionary knowledges are always at risk of being co-opted and re-subordinated because they are figured by and within regimes of power. Cultural critics take recent political events like the ridiculing of anti-war protesters, in combination with the continuing influence of an increasingly concentrated mass media, to indicate the pervasiveness of the problem of conformity.

The theoretical retreat from issues of conformity and the co-optation of dissent stems, in part, from criticisms of critical theory and the ideas of the Frankfurt School – many of which have been extremely compelling and influential within social theory. Many of these ideas were formulated in the shadow of the fascism of World War II Germany and in reaction to the particularly standardized U.S. culture of the late fifties and early sixties. There is a sense that the Civil Rights and Student Movements of the late sixties call into question the bleak report that dissent is impossible in contemporary Western society. It is argued that theories regarding the character and effects of the Culture Industry are overly monolithic and deterministic. That all popular culture is regarded as inferior is considered elitist and the account of the manipulative control of the culture industry is considered extreme in its denial of individual agency.  

Feminists take issue with the Frankfurt School’s inattention to the experiences of women and to their emphasis on aspects of the “liberal subject” of the Enlightenment. Both individualism and conformism, as belief systems, have been erected around an autonomous, independent, irreducible rational subject that is the ultimate source of truth and experience: a subject that feminist theorists have critiqued as overtly masculinist. The individual is seen as able to develop only in isolation from society and the harmful influence of “the mass.” The coercive and constraining forces of society and groups of affiliation are taken to compromise the possibility for individual self development.

The independent, autonomous self thus stands in conflict with society—a notion of the self that individualism brings to the center of U.S. culture, valuing independence, choice, and individual beliefs and values. It is under the liberating conditions of individualism that the individual is thought to have the freedom to reach full potential and under the conditions of conformism that the individual is seen as constrained. This belief system masks the structural conditions in which each individual finds herself—an insight missing from most mainstream sociological theories of individualism or conformism. Belonging is an important part of identity (both from a consumerist standpoint and a radical expressive outlook, argues Hetherington) so a more nuanced discussion of conformism should recognize interdependency as a key feature of human societies. The Frankfurt School’s emphasis on negative or critical thinking is seen as problematic in light of the deconstruction of the masculine, rational, liberal subject.

Finally, in general, contemporary popular culture is considerably more varied than in the past; the marketplace has expanded, producing more “choice” in cultural products.

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7 Marcuse is the exception here. He wrote a considerable amount on the women’s movement and women’s issues throughout his career. However, his work on these subjects remains relatively obscure and unrecognized in feminist work on critical theory.
Thus, it is questionable whether such a pessimistic view of the standardizing and conformist tendencies of the culture industry applies to the current cultural context. Recent theory also indicates that it is important to recognize that both “modernity” and “culture” are contested processes rather than unified, homogenous entities. It is important to resist the temptation to view, unproblematically, the current historical context as inherently conformist and as more conformist than past historical periods. By the 1980s much of the sixties counterculture had been dispersed into mainstream culture (Martin 1981) such that, now, it is “as difficult to locate the mainstream as it is the alternative to it” (Hetherington 1998, 5). Constant interaction between mainstream and alternative cultures creates a blurring of boundaries; therefore it is difficult to represent the world as a single and simple whole.

The subject of social change must be approached from the standpoint that one must pay equal attention to the local and plural, as well as the intended and unintended changes cultural politics might bring about—an insight that could be appropriated by theorists of conformism. The importance of symbols and knowledge-claims in the production of conformity must be recognized but we must also resist the urge to assert that individual mechanisms of consent necessarily preclude the discussion of a culture of conformism or of the development of a new type of society. This implies acknowledging the importance of situated practices (Haraway 1991).

The abandonment – and at times the outright dismissal – of critical theory seems premature to me, however. In light of the ever-increasing control by media conglomerates of the cultural products available to us, the loss of cultural critique within
mainstream social theory seems problematic. While there is surely more choice out there on the cultural market there seems to be no choice to resist the mandates of lifestyle and aesthetic demands (consider the flood of home decorating and makeover shows on television). Given the power of the capitalist economy to absorb culture into its matrix (indeed, cultural products are one of the strongest sectors of the U.S. economy) why has the message of critical theory lost salience?

Work within both critical theory and cultural studies raises important questions about identity and subjectivity, “political” and “cultural” practices, and dissent and resistance in contemporary society. The answers given by each discipline are often vastly different but it is impossible, I think, to argue that either perspective has nothing to contribute to theorizing about contemporary society. Certainly with regard to dissent, one must recognize both structural forms of constraint and individual agency.

The turn away from critical theorists like Marcuse and issues of conformity, co-optation, and the commodification of dissent is a result of a number of factors: feminist and post-structural critiques of modern assumptions about truth, history, and subjectivity; the ensuing turn toward cultural resistance and agency; and changing notions of politics and radical social transformation. But this shift leaves us in a sort of limbo. Having simply swung to the other side of a problematic and artificial dualism that pits structure against agency, and vice versa, we are no closer to being able to answer questions about dissent today. Rather than prioritizing either pole, a dialectical relationship more accurately describes the connections between the two: one must understand human

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8 Cultural critique has not disappeared altogether of course. Cultural studies theorists such as Henry Giroux call their work ‘critique.’ Thomas Frank and others associated with his publication The Baffler certainly write within the realm of cultural critique. Giroux’s writings definitely lean more toward cultural studies, however, and the work of Frank is often dismissed for its conservativism.
agency in order to also understand constraint, resistance in order to understand conformity, and dissent in order to understand consent. Concentrating on the agency of individual subjects and their resistant “readings” ignores the big picture: a complex, tangled set of phenomena that work toward conformity not freedom, agency, or change. Doing the opposite traps individuals in that structure.

Marcuse’s work epitomizes the interdisciplinarity and embraces the contradiction and complexity of human life – and thus theories of it – that this recognition suggests. Work on dissent must attend to political economy as well as sociological, cultural, aesthetic, and psychological aspects of the social world, concentrating on the dialectical tension between domination and liberation. Without one, the other would not exist. Furthermore, it is important to be mindful of the construction of conformism and dissent, the structures of power within which these concepts are embedded (the social and historical context), and the ways in which these ideas constitute subjects in U.S. culture.

A next step in understanding conformism and dissent may be to see them as disciplinary mechanisms, a la Foucault, which work to produce certain subjects as conforming and others as capable and legitimate sources of dissent. Rather than seeing conformism as an indication of the condition in which modern subjects are situated, it is more accurate to describe the mechanisms of conformism as particular aspects of modernity through which individual subjects must navigate. These “mechanisms” are embedded in a political, social, and economic context that distributes power unevenly. “Mechanisms” includes both direct (through laws like the Patriot Act) as well as indirect (discourses and the power of language) forms of control of individuals. And the
relationship between individuals, disciplinary mechanisms, and dissent must be seen as complex and often paradoxical.

Overview of the Project

I want to pursue some of these theoretical debates by way of three case studies concerning the conditions of contemporary political dissent. The most recent manifestation of the peace movement serves as a kind of test case for thinking through poststructuralist and cultural studies challenges to critical theory. The reason that this movement seems so favorable to such analysis is that its activities are typical of the postmodern conditions of social life that have produced so-called New Social Movements and have led social theorists to reformulate their conceptualizations of resistance, politics, agency, and social change. Because of its relatively short life span, yet significant level of participation, the movement against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq presents an opportunity to understand whether contemporary forms of dissent today are capable of disruption, or simply reaction. Therefore, I use this manifestation of dissent to contemplate contemporary and critical theoretical claims about agency and structure, the proper location and shape of politics, and the production of meaning. Newspaper coverage of dissent between 2001-03 provides the empirical basis of these case studies: with individual investigations focusing on newspaper articles about dissent, reporting on protest events, and letters to the editor about dissent. Discourse analysis is used throughout because I use “talk” about dissent as a vehicle for exploring the issues presented in this introduction.
In Chapter Two I present findings concerning trends in coverage of dissent over two time periods: throughout the last two decades and between 2001 and 2003. I also outline my methodological approach and discuss some important socio-political and cultural factors that shape thinking about dissent and the production of knowledge more generally. Because I rely on newspaper accounts of dissent and protest events, I also discuss the political economy of the newsmedia in the U.S.

Chapter 3 reconstructs the discourse about dissent in the context of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Relying on newspaper coverage of dissent, I outline the major themes used to frame the discussion about the political debate between pro-war and peace activists. Like other contemporary movements, anti-war organizations relied largely on public demonstrations and news coverage of its claims. Thus, the way peace movement claims were framed by the media is particularly important. Dissenters, for example, were often ridiculed, suggesting that the space for nonconformity is restricted. Analysis of newspaper coverage of the protest events reveals a small number of issue frames that journalists relied on when reporting on demonstrations and the movement in general. Like other studies of protest coverage, investigations of anti-war coverage from 2001-2003 substantiates the conclusion that news coverage tends to focus on event characteristics (violence, arrests, numbers of protesters), radical or fringe elements, features of events (mobilization and logistics) and frequent crowd actions (“waved signs and chanted”) rather than the substantive claims being made by protesters (Earl et al. 2004).

This may help explain why the message of the protests never seemed to resonate with a majority of the American public and the movement was clearly not effective in
deterring the government from invading either Afghanistan or Iraq. It is probably true that the message itself and its transmission by the anti-war coalition are partially to blame. In fact, there has been a small degree of internal and external criticism that explains away the failure of the movement to stop the war as a consequence of the movement’s inability to generate a consistent and persuasive case against the war. However, media frames of dissent tend to treat it as the preserve of radical activists, ignoring the criticisms being expressed. I explore the effects and power of these frames, illustrating how the discourse of dissent established certain subject positions (the dissident) as deviant and interacted with powerful post-9/11 rhetoric to reinforce notions of patriotism and unity. Through the discursive construction of dissent, I argue, structural factors continually worked to shape and constrain individual agency.

Finally, Chapter Four looks to letters to the editor to assess the influence of the discourse about dissent on individuals. Taking into account the voices of individuals reveals that the establishment of discourses does not occur in a vacuum but in a contested space in which the power of certain organizations and individuals is paramount. It becomes clear, from my analysis, that discourse formation cannot be studied in the abstract. Furthermore, the news articles and editorials indicate that negotiations over the right to dissent and limits of dissent reveal that “discourse” is best understood as a process. It follows that studies of the production of discourse should take precedence over descriptions of a discourse (a problem inherent in Foucault’s discussion of the rules that coalesce to form a discourse). It becomes clear that the production of meaning is a particularly complex process: though there are certainly structurally imposed constraints
on discussions about dissent, letters to the editor cast doubt on the power and primacy of news text.

I move from analyzing letters to the editor about dissent to looking at reports of protest events. Chapter Five engages theoretical debates over the shape and location of politics. I examine the representation of protest activities and dissident individuals in order to understand how the increasing emphasis on “the visual” and “cultural politics” (including parody) – in social theory and in our everyday lives – impacts the possibility for social transformation. My initial theorizing suggests that the increasing prominence of “the aesthetic” within social movements and its representation in the news media may have dire consequences for dissent. It appears that the more the form of political opposition is emphasized over the content, the more contentious the idea of dissent becomes and the more that concept is emptied of political meaning.

Examining anti-war demonstrations as a form of cultural politics, I explore the various theoretical arguments for and against the transformative power of this type of dissent. Though the anti-war movement is not purely an identity-based movement, it is not exempt from the variety of issues new social movements face. (Certainly, this peace movement was a coalition of a variety of social movement organizations and many individuals active in those demonstrations may have played a prominent role in feminist, LGBT, or racial/ethnic organizations. But the claims made by the movement were not identity-based; the call for more inspections or the exile of Saddam Hussein as alternatives to war were not made based on rights or justice for particular disadvantaged groups. The other prominent movement of the last several decades, the anti-globalization movement, does not fall neatly under the umbrella of identity politics either but it has
been similarly criticized.) This chapter theorizes whether or not tactics that fall into the realm of “cultural” politics, such as theatre, puppets, and a variety of artistic displays, are able to challenge common understandings about capitalist exploitation by using images and aesthetic presentation to transgress or subvert. It also addresses the criticism that Brown levels against contemporary liberal movements. Insofar as it looks to the state for justice, can the peace movement escape or disrupt the domination that states enact? Can a cultural politics escape the mechanisms of cooptation? Is dissent today capable of creating social transformation, a significant disruption in the status quo?
Chapter 2

Patriots and Terrorists: Dissent after September 11th

Millions literally stood in opposition to the impending war on Iraq on February 15, 2003, in a globally organized anti-war demonstration – the largest mass protest movement in history according to the Guinness Book of Records. It was the first of its kind, with people in cities on every continent expressing opposition to a war that had not yet begun. An estimated 10 million dissenters participated in a public display of anti-war sentiment that had been captured by numerous opinion polls – a majority of the European public opposed the war unless sanctioned by the United Nations (UN) (Schell 2003). In the U.S., where opinion was much more mixed, many also favored war only with UN backing. In September 2002, only a third of Americans favored invading Iraq in the face of UN opposition (Gallop 2002). And, a majority of those polled (65%) favored exiling Saddam Hussein in order to avoid the ensuing invasion (Gallop 2003). In fact, until the declaration of war in March 2003, opposition to the invasion remained fairly steady at about 40%. With few exceptions, opposition to war, as measured at least bimonthly, ranged from a low of 35% (in November and December 2002) to a high of 43% (in January 2003).

Given Saddam Hussein’s infamous reputation among most Americans – he has the notoriety of being the lowest rated public figure in Gallup Poll history (Gallup 2002) – and the consistent attempts to tie Iraq to September 11, it is not entirely surprising that the American public would generally favor Hussein’s removal from power. Indeed, levels of support and opposition have fallen along similar lines since after the Persian
Gulf War ended in 1992. However, support for the war has decreased drastically as the occupation continues, with the American public now split over whether going to war was a mistake (Gallup 2005). Some sources, in fact, cite polls which suggest that an overwhelming majority (70%) of the public thinks the war was a mistake (FAIR).

This day of global protest was an impressive show of the growing opposition to invading Iraq. For students of social change and activists working to transform society, the series of protests that occurred in the months preceding and during the war were a beacon of hope. There was a renewed belief in the possibility that dissent – disagreeing with established opinions or practice – could emerge and that organized social action could take place even in the shadows of a period of extreme consensus and unity. In the wake of September 11 and during the war in Afghanistan, the country had been “united” behind the war on terrorism and nearly all of the Bush administration’s policies and actions; few dissenting voices were heard in the mainstream media. In fact, many of the government’s anti-terrorism policies (e.g. the Patriot Act) worked—and continue to work—both directly and indirectly to silence political dissent (Chang 2002). That we have witnessed, within a span of less than two years, the extremes of unquestioned support and widespread dissent is incredible.

September 11th and the subsequent “war on terror” created a significantly greater concern with dissent between 2001 and 2003 than in the years immediately preceding this period (see Figures 1 and 2). In general, coverage of dissent has remained steady since the early nineties – with a substantial jump in 2001⁹ – but there has been a rather

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⁹ For example, Figure 2 shows that in all U.S. papers there were 179 articles in 2000 versus 288 articles in 2003. The first series in Figure 1 tracks the number of articles on dissent over the last twenty years, divided by the number of newspapers included in the database each year.
dramatic decrease from peak coverage of dissent in the late eighties proportionate to the number of papers in print.

![Graph showing articles citing 'Dissent'--all papers from 1985 to 2003](image1)

Figure 1: Average number of articles per paper citing dissent and number of papers in sample each year, 1985-2003.

**LEXIS/NEXIS keyword search “dissent” in headlines/lead paragraph/terms**

![Graph showing articles on dissent by year--Major U.S. Papers from 1985 to 2003](image2)

Figure 2: Number of articles citing dissent per year in major U.S. papers, 1985-2003.

**LEXIS/NEXIS keyword search “dissent” in headlines/lead paragraph/terms**
I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about the other glaring spike in coverage of dissent around 1989. This spike captures events like the student protests in Tienanmen Square, radical changes in Eastern Europe (especially the Czech Republic), a rise in anti-abortion protests, labor movement protests, and anti-apartheid protests. What is telling is that the current increase in attention to dissent in no way compares to this time period. This difference could be due to a larger number of events at that time, which focused news reports on issues of dissent. But the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have certainly created a strong focus on dissent in the last two years. I think there are two other things to consider. First, newspapers in the U.S. may be more inclined to cover dissent when the story is based in foreign countries. So, Tienanmen Square, the changes in Eastern Europe, and the anti-apartheid movement may be deemed more newsworthy. In the sampling of articles I have read, dissent is more favorably presented when in the context of people of other nations exercising their right to political dissent: indeed, there is talk about encouraging democratic development and political opposition in these circumstances. Second, this could be evidence of a news media that is less free to raise the issue of dissent now than in the past. This would certainly match allegations by reporters that they have been discouraged recently from discussing certain issues, or have in fact been fired for reporting information that might generate dissent and protest.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there were several spikes in attention to dissent in both international and U.S. newspapers: directly following September 11 and around the attack on Iraq, and a small rise around the September 11\textsuperscript{th} anniversaries (Figure 3). I think it can be safely argued that the increase in attention to dissent we saw in Table 2 is probably due to the spikes in attention to dissent that we see around these two dates. This
pattern is mirrored when we look at the proportion of dissent articles that concern “war.”

Over the past two years, the events of September 11\textsuperscript{th} and the attack on Iraq generate a clear increase in concern over dissent during times of war (Figure 4).

![Articles Citing 'Dissent' by Month in U.S. Papers](image)

Figure 3: Coverage of dissent in major U.S. papers, September 2001-September 2003.

**LEXIS/NEXIS keyword search “dissent” in headlines/lead paragraph/terms

![Articles Citing 'Dissent' & 'War': Percent of Total](image)

Figure 4: Percent of total coverage of dissent and war in major U.S. papers, September 2001- September 2003.

**LEXIS/NEXIS keyword search “dissent” and “war” in headlines/lead paragraph/terms
Dissent and War

That dissent should enter into the national dialogue during a time of war is not necessarily surprising. In many ways the discourse about dissent before and during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq sounds eerily similar to other war-time discussions about dissent and resistance. In general, war tends to provoke debate over the need for and right to dissent, especially to oppose government policy. In other contexts, dissent is decidedly uncontroversial. Only in times of war are discussions of dissent likely to take on the form that we have witnessed most recently with the occupation of Iraq. For example, in times characterized by relative peace, public opinion and discussion of dissent is not likely to invoke notions of nation, patriotism, freedom, and security. This trend has resurfaced with nearly every armed conflict of the past century. The anti-war protests against the Vietnam War are the most prominent in the minds of most Americans, but conflict over dissent during the War of 1812 provoked Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience and Woodrow Wilson’s suppression of dissent during World War I triggered criticism (Kloppenberg 2003).

Spikes in attention to dissent in news coverage of the War in Iraq, however, do not indicate that newsmedia dedicated an extensive amount of airtime to the anti-war message. Though no study has empirically documented the breakdown in coverage yet, it is probably safe to say that official discourse (pro-war, government, “expert”) garnered an overriding share of broadcast time and newspaper column inches. We can use coverage of the first Gulf War as a proxy. In that case, only 13.3 minutes of television news coverage was devoted to protests, anti-war demonstrations or dissenters, versus 2,855 minutes of overall time spent reporting on the war (Kellner 1994; 118). Although
there was more coverage of opposition to the second invasion of Iraq, this staggering lack of dissenting voices during the first war probably indicates that we would arrive at similar findings if we replicated that study. Whether the discussion of dissent during the last several years is significantly different from previous times of war is not the focus of this paper – although a historical comparative analysis would be intriguing, time permitting. Rather, I am interested in documenting media coverage of dissent and understanding its effects on audiences.

Increased coverage of dissent also does not mean positive coverage: news media coverage of protest events was seen as far from flattering by many on the left – especially in light of the massive showing of opposition. Mainstream avenues, it was argued, were not open to dissenting political viewpoints. How accurate is this account? How much was dissent covered? Was it fairly documented and discussed? Noam Chomsky—perhaps one of the strongest left-leaning spokespersons and opponents of the war—has stated that he had “considerably more access to even mainstream media in the U.S. than ever before” (2001, p. 118). Looking back at newspaper coverage of U.S. anti-war protests necessarily highlights the capabilities and deficiencies of memory. As we are well aware, though often overlooked, the passage of time and our own selective processes of remembering shape our memories. In particular, times of great upheaval are perhaps most subject to distortion. Each person’s political, social, and cultural values and beliefs should produce a different remembering of the events between September 2001 and September 2003, for example. The polarization of American politics during the time means that the different sides of the war debate probably tell inconsistent or contradictory accounts of the anti-war protests and of dissent itself. A social researcher is not exempt
from this phenomenon. In fact, I have found that my recollections of press coverage of
the protests do not match exactly to my recent re-readings of articles published at the
time. A few words about the political economy of news production are necessary here.

Producing the News

The “battle” over the definition of dissent, of course, does not occur on uncontested
territory. We should not be content to just describe the patterns found in discussions
about dissent. Theoretical elaborations of the framing process have suggested that the
political and economic context is central to understanding how various frames might
resonate with potential sympathizers (Steinberg 1998). The coverage described above
thus illustrates the undulating patterns of newsmedia interest in the subject of dissent and
is a reflection of changes in cultural context: it points to times when dissent was deemed
a newsworthy and profitable story. Modern news organizations are fundamentally profit
oriented, and their concern with the bottom line not only influences what news will be
covered, but how it will be covered. Stories are framed not just with regard to resonance
but also to advertising and government interests.

In today’s global marketplace, even news is a product, like a car, an appliance or
clothing. The media marketplace is appropriately thought of as a bazaar, with an
incredible amount of variety for consumers to choose from. 10 Newspapers, news
magazines and television or cable news channels are concerned with the marketing and
selling of their brand of news. The aim, of course, is to attain the rather elite status that
brand recognition confers – of the thousands of magazines, newspapers, television and

10 Tungate (2004) mentions a store that sells upwards of 7000 different magazines.
cable channels, few are “household names.” Newsmedia like CNN, the BBC, The New York Times, and Wall Street Journal, however, are some of the world’s most valuable brands (Tungate 2004). One cannot analyze the content of the news, then, without taking into account that the survival of an organization like the New York Times depends on building brand loyalty, attracting customers, and selling newspapers. Given the recent challenges of the internet and satellite television, “traditional” news outlets have had to respond to decreases in advertising revenue by figuring out how to market their product in a new news environment.

The internet, in particular, has been viewed as a threat to print news: the ability to access “up to date” news “around the clock”—as well as being able to find a large number of alternative sources for news—has made the internet a popular mechanism for gathering information. Major organizations like CNN and The New York Times recognize the opportunity offered by the World Wide Web and have created their own companion sites. The verdict is not in, however, regarding how much websites will take away from more traditional news sources. A survey in 2000 revealed that only 33% of U.S. adults go online for news at least once a week—15% daily—usually for weather, technology, business and sports information (DiMaggio et al. 2001). It appears, for right now, that the audience for internet news sites is a fairly select group. Individuals who seek political information on the internet, for example, are already fairly well informed, utilizing a variety of other sources as well as the internet (DiMaggio et al. 2001). In fact, it appears as though the internet serves as a supplement to rather than replacement for traditional sources of information.
News Outlet, Outlet Mall, or Theme Park?

Branding a cable television news channel is apparently more like marketing Disney World than establishing an academic or intellectual institution. CNN is located in a mall, has a souvenir store, and gives tours of its studio. This type of marketing and promotion is not unique to CNN, or cable news networks for that matter. The business model of cross-ownership utilized by most major news agencies is always concerned with the bottom line, emphasizing cross-media advertising packages and promotional “synergy” between the news organization and product advertisers. For example, The New York Times has a promotional agreement with Starbucks to sell only the Times in its stores in return for placement in national ad campaigns—and although not included in the deal, the paper has also printed several favorable news stories on the coffee chain (Hart, Coen and Jackson 2003; the authors cite four such articles on the incredible business success of the chain the U.S. and internationally).

Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a media watch-group, regularly reports on the influence advertisers have on news organizations in their annual report, Fear and Favor. Deal-making includes negotiations over product placement, promotional packages, and the underwriting of news talkshows, ensuring that articles critical of a particular business do not run next to its advertising, and hinting that organizations might get better coverage if they advertise with the paper. Moreover, incidents where editors or owners influence the content of papers or news programs, from declaring some news item off limits to establishing the angle of the story to quashing journalists’ controversial stories, firing or disciplining journalists for refusing to go along, or bowing to government or other pressures to run certain stories and not others, are far more common
than one might suppose. In a review of the 2002 news year, for example, FAIR documents 20+ incidents, including every major U.S. newspaper and television or cable news organization. Their list for the year is not exhaustive, they admit, merely representative of recurring pressures that “push and pull mainstream journalists away from their fundamental work of telling the truth and letting the chips fall where they may” (2003).

In a survey of the Society of American Business Editors and Writers in 1992, 80% of individuals said that advertising pressure was a growing problem; 45% reported that news coverage was directly compromised by advertisers (Soley 1997). Not only do advertisers attempt to influence the content of stories, they also use monetary leverage to have stories withdrawn, threatening to withdraw their advertising, and unfortunately, television stations and newspapers are often responsive to such pressures (Hart, Coen & Jackson 2003).

The Propaganda Model

News media have become particularly adept at creating what Herman and Chomsky (1988) refer to as a “propaganda model” that fixes the premises of discourse, shapes what the public sees, thinks about, and hears, and manages public opinion. The political and economic organization of the news industry (centralization, monopolistic control, obligations to advertisers, reliance on government and business sources, fear of offending the public) translates into a vastly scaled down version of the news, limiting what we hear about and how the news is broadcast (Herman and Chomsky 1988).
News organizations, paradoxically, are continually attempting to avoid controversy while claiming an “adversarial” stance when reporting the news. Attempts to do so in the wake of protests against the war in Iraq elicited a number of firings or sanctions for reporters critical of the march toward war. Peter Arnett of NBC was fired for discussing “personal observations” about the conduct of the war in an interview with Iraqi TV. The most prominent case was that of Phil Donahue – whose talkshow was cancelled by MSNBC for his “delight in presenting guests who are anti-war” – but journalists from smaller papers and television channels also report being fired for attending anti-war rallies, writing anti-war columns, and posting images of POWs or Iraqi casualties (Hart, Coen, and Jackson 2003).

Can the newsmedia serve as an outlet for dissenting opinions? Chomsky (1989) thinks not. The media serve to train the public, to shape their minds, to serve as an instrument of propaganda for elites so that they may impose their will. They must create “necessary illusions” to “keep the ignorant and stupid masses disciplined and content” (Chomsky 1989, 18):

What is at issue here is not the integrity of those who seek the facts but rather the choice of topics and highlighting of issues, the range of opinion permitted expression, the unquestioned premises that guide reporting and commentary, and the general framework imposed for the presentation of a certain view of the world. (Chomsky 1989, 12)

One of the necessary illusions is that the newsmedia is by nature “adversarial”; a claim emphasized regardless of the evidence that the newsmedia is anything but adversarial, liberal, pro-communist, etc. On the contrary, journalists must conform, or risk being
fired or alienated, and conformity to a patriotic agenda is pushed at all levels. According to Chomsky, "the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly" (1989, 10). Like Marcuse, Chomsky argues that there is no longer a reasonable alternative to "the way the world is," as presented in this case by the news media; no longer an "articulate alternative" picture presented.

One can see evidence of a "propaganda" model at work in coverage of the first Gulf War by examining the rhetorical strategies employed to bound debate over the war. FAIR argues that television journalists and news anchors treated military officials with "kid gloves," rarely engaging in tough questioning. The journalistic use of "we" to refer to U.S. forces, juxtaposed with the use of "him" rather than "them" to focus attention on Saddam Hussein as the target of military action, effectively silenced debate. That is, a united "we" and a particular evil target narrowed established agreement rather than expanding discussion in journalistic discourse (Naureckas 2003). "Expert" opinion offered by the Pentagon and other government leaders went unchallenged. Indeed, their pronouncements were often repeated verbatim and rarely contrasted with differing opinion or countered with an anti-war or at least critical "expert." Fetishized discussions of military weapons and bombings far outweighed coverage of anti-war perspectives. Representation of objections to the war and U.S. foreign policy was left in the hands of random protesters during coverage of anti-war demonstrations, concerns that were heard on the nightly news about as often as those of people worried about disruptions to their travel plans (Naureckas 2003).
War, of course, presents a particularly contentious time for governments, and the need to regulate how and what the news covers is only intensified. The measures enacted during the first Gulf War were exemplary in the lengths to which a government, even the U.S. government, will go to control the flow of information. Through the establishment of a pool system, military officials were able to control not only what journalists were able to report but also who was able to report. Able to control where pool reporters went, to remove uncooperative reporters, and to block interviews, military officials had the ability to control what was said about the war, even to the extent of having the final say over final copy and footage: “The pentagon actually flew in, at its own expense, 450 local U.S. reporters to cover their “hometown troops.” Meanwhile, foreign and alternative press reporters who would not produce such predictably favorable coverage were almost entirely excluded from the pools” (Spin 2003).

Control over the flow of information during the first Gulf War had a decided impact on public opinion. A survey administered during the Gulf War showed that the more a person watched television, the less likely they were to “know about the underlying issues, and the more likely they were to support the war” (TV 2003). Although most individuals had difficulty answering questions about Middle East policy, they were able to identify the name of the missile used by the U.S. to counter Iraqi scuds.

A small but growing literature on the second Gulf War is slowly emerging. And one issue that is receiving attention already is how the news media represented opposition to the war. It has become apparent that while there was a significant attempt by the U.S. government to control the message about the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the “pro-policy” coverage and near blackout on news media coverage of dissent achieved during the first
Gulf War was never achieved during the second (Reese 2004). Media censorship, military and administrative manipulation, and ideological rhetoric were common in the framing of dissent before and after the invasion, but the now routinized relationships between newsmakers and the military was not able to completely marginalize and delegitimize opposition. Reese (2004) speculates that it was the new “globalized public opinion” created in the wake of 9/11 that forced newsmakers to pay attention to global or world opinion that was manifested in the form of massive, though underreported, protests.

Is the fact that *The Corporation* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* were both released by major production studios evidence that Marcuse and Chomsky are wrong? That the propaganda model cannot, in fact, eliminate all oppositional views? Certainly, the “greed loophole in the culture industry that allows dissenters to exploit the system to their own ends” seems to support the idea that dissent can affect the culture industries, and subsequently the culture at large (Walker 2004). However, there is something unsettling about this argument as well. When one takes into consideration the amount of money made on these two films, the potential for “disrupting” the system seems limited. Granted, a significant audience (in the millions for *Fahrenheit 9/11*) was exposed to information and fact available only outside of the mainstream press, but is dissent in the marketplace enough? Are these films evidence that the culture industries can anticipate and incorporate the dissent inherent in such films? Is it threatening to dominant ideologies?

Thom York of *Radiohead*, a rock group that though not admittedly political definitely writes socially conscious lyrics and makes political statements, admits to the limits activist artists face: “It’s idealistic to think that artists are able to step away from
the power of the media and the way it controls things, and go on doing their own things. Again, we only have license to do that because we sell records and they want the money” (Burton 2003; interview with York). So, the capitalist system may find it difficult to suppress all forms of dissent because of the potential revenue even radical artists can generate. However, it is also “harder for artists now to rebel than in the era of Dylan and the Beatles, because the control by media, by government—especially now in the Bush administration—is so overwhelming,” says Howard Zinn, “Harder, but not impossible” (Burton 2003; interview with Zinn).

In the early stages of the anti-war movement, news media in the U.S. virtually ignored protests against military action against Iraq. While coverage by the London Independent lauded a September 28, 2002 rally in London as “one of the biggest peace demonstrations seen in a generation,” neither the Washington Post nor the New York Times covered the story (quoted in “Fox” 2003). FAIR points out that, ironically, a march against a proposed ban on fox hunting that same day—which attracted a similar crowd as the anti-war demonstration—did apparently warrant attention by both newspapers. Coverage of the peace rally in U.K. newspapers was largely positive, referring to the broad base of the Stop the War coalition, diversity of the crowd, and the ability of the coalition to organize and activate such a large march. Even if they covered the anti-war protests, however, major U.S. news organizations often seriously downplayed the size of demonstration crowds (“Times” 2003).
Dissent in a Post 9/11 Context

Following 9/11, the combination of the Patriot Act, other government and FBI actions, and the public discourse about dissent made many people fearful of speaking out. But these are only the most recent in a series of actions hostile to free speech. Most alarming is a steadily increasing judicial crackdown on dissent in general. In recent years, judges have been sentencing activists in order to silence their dissent. From banning certain activists from taking part in demonstrations and protests to requiring demonstrators to pay damages to private corporations, the judicial system is limiting the right to free speech and the right to protest. Targeted companies are also using the system to deflect protest, filing suits claiming that animal rights and environmental groups are violating racketeering laws by forcing changes in business practices (Potter 2001). The “corporate use of RICO to fight activists has become fairly common,” a strategy that targets the financial base of activist groups in order to silence dissent (Potter 2001). The lawsuits challenge an organization’s 501(c) status on the grounds that they engage in “lawless” activities.

By equating civil disobedience tactics – nonviolent attempts to disrupt a particular company’s organization – with “terrorism” and illegal acts like arson, vandalism, and theft, legislation could end up making protest illegal. In fact, several proposed laws would largely limit the activities of activists: “safety and security concerns that have been used to justify eco-terrorism laws have also been used to justify crackdowns on activists in the streets at mass demonstrations. This has included massive fences around demonstration sites, confiscation of protest materials like signs and banners, and border closings” (Potter 2001, 14). A media discourse that separates individuals into groups...
based on their stance toward protesting and that uses a rhetorical strategy that establishes an us-them, Americans-others dichotomy takes on particular importance in a political environment that has been attempting to silence dissent in recent years.

September 11 also created a set of powerful tropes about patriotic duty and speaking out. In *The Selling of 9/11*, Dana Heller characterizes the current historical context as a “complex cultural relation[s] of commodification and commemoration, marketing and militarism, commercial patronage and patriotism” (2005, 2). 9/11 became a trademark; an easily sellable commodity and marketing dream for advertisers. Citizenship was connected almost exclusively to “consumer rituals” reinforced by “commercialized myths of self-actualization” with the result that “patriotic kitsch functions less as a statement of national solidarity than as a capitulation to conformity, with a gag order on expressions of democratic dissent” (18). Dissent, as discussed above, is a concept that has been on shaky ground throughout this country’s history. In a context that allows only for expression through consumption and dismisses the need for critical contemplation, the idea of dissent itself is challenged further.

**Methodological Approach of Study**

Using articles from the print newsmedia as an impetus for discussion, I hope to document the discourse surrounding “dissent” and the media’s construction of dissenting subjects within the context of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Paying attention to the ways in which “dissent” is framed by journalists, citizens, and social movement actors, I will explore how the newsmedia influence culture in terms of content, messages and agenda. What follows provides interesting insight into the interaction of social structure and
individual agency with regard to social change. It also, I think, offers a glimpse at a particular moment in the social construction of meaning.

**Media Studies, Discourse, and Dissent**

Why focus on a discourse about dissent? What is to be gained? What justification is there for emphasizing discourse? Moreover, why pay attention to media? What can we learn from news media coverage of dissent? Why talk about the discourse about dissent and the way it was framed in news? What effect does such coverage have on dissent? And what might the implications be for social transformation?

Media studies across a wide range of disciplines suggest that the mass media play a significant role in “defining the situation.” That is, mass media like print and broadcast news are central to shaping what we think about and discuss, the language we use in doing so, and the interpretive frameworks we use to understand the world around us. Although many studies have shown that more often than not the news media generally reinforce rather than challenge existing attitudes and behaviors – because of the selective perception of viewers (Gans) – it is generally accepted that the media do play a part in shaping culture. For example, there are a significant number of studies that find that public opinion is closely aligned with news media accounts of particular events (see especially Gamson & Modigliani 1989; also Fishman 1980, Surette 1998, Taschler-Pollacek 1990, Warr 1983, Zhondang & Kosicki 1993). In all of what follows, I am not necessarily concerned with the newspaper industry itself as being responsible for discouraging or limiting dissent – or influencing people’s opinions – but about the discussion surrounding dissent during that time. I cannot argue that the newspaper
discourse itself influenced people – though it probably did to some extent – because I can’t measure this directly. I treat mainstream daily newspapers as “discursive battlefields” or “sites through which societies imagine themselves” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001).

There is reason, then, to suspect that the news media played an important role in shaping our understanding of dissent during the war on Iraq through its coverage of the anti-war protests. Thus, it is crucial to pay attention to the role the media might have played in influencing public opinion about dissent and encouraging or silencing dissenters. Particularly important, I think, is inquiring into the discourse of dissent presented throughout the news media coverage of protest events. The media’s one-sided coverage of the case for war and the administration’s rhetorical manipulation and presentation of misleading information are cause for concern. The monopolistic control of television networks and news media has resulted in a narrower range of opinions, voices, and programming – especially limiting the coverage of dissent or oppositional voices (Kellner 1994, 1997; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Post-September 11 anti-terrorism measures also work to silence dissent. But the news media, in as much as they are the primary means through which these government policies are conveyed to most people, play a critical role in translating, challenging or supporting such government policies.

It is important to note that what follows is only one of many possible versions of the story about dissent during this time period. I do not claim to have a monopoly on the truth about discussions surrounding the protests against the war in Iraq, nor do I deny the many possible other versions this account could take. I offer a descriptive and
interpetive account of the discourse of dissent cognizant of my own situated positioning and political, cultural, and social standpoint (Harding 1992; Haraway 1991). Though I analyze a sample of newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor as “data” from which to extrapolate several conclusions about the discourse surrounding dissent during the specified time period, my goal is not to provide a systematic, empirical, or statistical analysis of newspaper coverage of dissent as is common in the traditional social science or social movement literature. This work is interpretive, instead, and tries to embody a critical feminist method that does not prioritize an “objective,” “rational” method of approaching the subject. I utilize a variety of sources as “data” and attempt to include voices of people active in the debate surrounding the anti-war protests.

Method

Tracking dissent

My analysis focuses on national media discourse, especially major U.S. newspapers. The approach I have chosen essentially tracks the use of the word dissent throughout the two years during which the protests against the war in Iraq occurred (with some limited findings regarding coverage of dissent from 1985-2003). I have attempted to gather all relevant material on dissent during the specified time periods that I sampled. Included in the sample are articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from over forty newspapers, both national and local. Tracking the word dissent throughout this time period and across different news media has created a quantitative and qualitative data source that I hope serves as an indicator of the national-level negotiations over the meaning and possibilities for dissent (Altheide 2002; Gamson & Modigliani 1989).
Based on evidence of decreasing newspaper readership, I cannot assume that all people have read the articles I have sampled let alone written a letter to the editor to these particular newspapers. But I do assume that this sample reflects patterns of attention to dissent during this time. And, as van Dijk (1988b) notes, print news media still serves an important role in mass communication, in spite of the massive popularity of television. It is noteworthy that while the proportion of individuals who actually participate in demonstrations may be minute—less than 1% of Americans surveyed by Gallup in 1967 had ever participated in a peace rally and that number grew to only 5% in 1991—the number of people reached by newspaper coverage of such events is significant (Gallup 2003). The discourse surrounding dissent within newspapers thus has an appreciable potential to shape (and re-shape) public views about opposition and political protest.

I have three sets of data from which I draw my analysis. Using LexisNexis to search all U.S. papers between 1985 and 2003, I found just over 16,000 articles in the “general news” category related to the subject “dissent” (used in Tables 1 & 2). The same search yielded 3000 articles on dissent throughout the main period of interest, September 2001-September 2003, in all general newspapers, but only 1200 articles on dissent in U.S. newspapers (Tables 3 & 4). Finally, I selected around 300 articles from major U.S. papers for closer reading, using the search terms dissent, war, and protest, to narrow this sample. Though I am not concerned with carrying out an intense, quantitative analysis of newspaper coverage of dissent, I have found the methods advocated and employed by content analysis and framing theory to be useful in guiding my empirical endeavors. Part of my analysis is based on a systematic content analysis of

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11 The number of individuals who learn about protest and dissent through television news is even more impressive, of course, but gaining access to transcripts from the major news networks is a far less practical venture.
the articles sampled. Based on an initial survey of the articles selected for content analysis, I developed a protocol for coding relevant information. Data recorded included: date, location within paper and section type, format (editorial, letter, article), length (number of words), topic/theme (context of discussion of dissent), and whether or not the article mentions “Vietnam,” “the Sixties,” or “patriotism.” I recorded each instance of the word “dissent” within each article, including the surrounding portions of text. I used EXCEL to perform qualitative and quantitative analyses. However, most of my analysis is interpretive in nature. EXCEL is used to ease the organization and exploration of selected documents, to follow patterns in the discourse on dissent, and to retrieve and analyze specific articles.

**Discourse analysis**

Having “tracked” use of the word dissent throughout coverage of anti-war protests, I utilize various methods of content analysis to draw out the deeper, underlying message found within the discourse about dissent. “Dissent” appeared in print frequently throughout the entire two years that I tracked its reference, indicating that concern over the subject matter was consistent throughout 2001-2003. The first report on dissent occurred in a January 21st article on protests against the inauguration of George W. Bush. But I am not interested merely in how the concept of dissent is used, in what context, and what meanings are invoked; this study’s aim is not to create a typology but to analyze what was said about dissent. Thus, my analysis is further influenced by a number of approaches to the study of media message (of which there are many, of course). I draw upon social movement scholars “elaboration of framing strategies and cultural studies”
method of discourse analysis primarily. In what follows, I first review framing theory and discourse analysis as they relate to print news.

Framing. According to framing theory, news organizations utilize a variety of strategies that attempt to create familiarity but also restrict discussion of a particular issue. Frames “help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford & Snow 2000). In media studies the concept of framing usually refers to the ways in which journalists determine “what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and, above all, how it will not be discussed” (Altheide 2002). In social movement literature, framing is generally taken to refer to the collective negotiation of shared meaning. Both senses of the concept raised in the literature are relevant to this study, as will be seen shortly.

Framing theory suggests that a social movement’s ideational tactics help to expose hegemonic belief systems by identifying injustice, blame, responsibility, and appropriate actions. In doing so, movement actors are able to break down such belief systems in face-to-face interaction. However, hegemonic processes are so successful that oppositional meanings are frequently unavailable. Therefore, “collective action frames” are used to create new meanings. Collective action frames connect social movement messages to cultural meanings and symbol systems familiar to the audience, thus enhancing resonance. Public discourses (media discourse, issue arenas, interpersonal interactions, public opinion) then serve to anchor such frames, shaping meaning construction on three levels: public discourse, communication by social movements, and

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12 This perspective emerged in response to resource mobilization theory, which argued that a movement’s access to resources largely determines its success or failure. Framing emphasizes the importance of the movement’s message and its resonance with the larger public as an equally important factor contributing to the ability to accomplish goals.
consciousness-raising. Social movements both draw from and attempt to influence public discourse by the way they frame issues, define grievances, and stage collective actions.

Framing theory is not limited to the realm of social movements, of course. A number of studies have focused on the framing strategies of media organizations (e.g. Cooper 2002) and states (e.g. de Volo 2004). However, while frame analysis has allowed social movement theorists to highlight the ideological processes involved in constructing and disseminating salient messages, there remain several important deficiencies. First, by treating frames in the abstract, many analyses of media frames tend to ignore the political economy of news production and the underlying cultural and ideological concepts upon which specific frames are based. I have attempted to avoid this problem, as much as possible, in this work. Other fundamental criticisms of frame analysis have also been raised, the most important of which is that the perspective is not able to adequately capture the collective and contested nature of frame formation, salience, and reception. Marc Steinberg (1988) suggests that a turn toward discourse enables framing theory to account for “the production of meaning as a dynamic and often conflict-riven process tied to particular socio-historical contexts and patterns of interaction” (862). His model of “discursive repertoires” acknowledges the “instability within discourse itself” and “the elusiveness of meaning.” Control over the meaning within various discourses is a dynamic process through which opportunities for contesting hegemony emerge. Thus, “to understand the framing process we should center our investigations on the discursive fields within which the framing process takes place” (856).

I appreciate Steinberg’s modification of framing analysis, and the ability of a “dialogic model” to grasp more adequately the process of frame formation. However, the
effects of frames remain conspicuously absent from both the Snow & Benford and Steinberg models of framing. It is the power exercised throughout the process of discourse formation and the effects of such discourses that is of utmost importance in this study. Discourse analysis allows the researcher to dig deeper into the debate over dissent. Moving beyond a useful but limited explication of how the media talked about dissent, I take up questions about the effects of this discourse. Discourse theories, though not without their own problems, are able to present a fundamentally more interesting story about the need to pay attention to the power of media as well as its resistant capabilities.

Discourse analyses. Nancy Fraser (1997) argues, in *Justice Interruptus*, that the discourse models of Foucault, Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Habermas, and Gramsci better serve feminist theory than those versions attributed to Lacan, Kristeva, Saussure, and Derrida. The structuralist model – developed in France by Lacan, derived from Saussure – “studies language as a symbolic system or code” (154). For Derrida, commonly identified with this model, discourse entails “a system of differences within which the play of signification extends infinitely due to the absence of a transcendental signified” (Torfing 1999, 40). Meaning is never fixed; that is, there is not some privileged center that is the signified. The model also claims “our cognitions and speech acts become meaningful only within certain pre-established discourses” (84). Fraser lays out a number of critiques of this model, the most important of which is that a structuralist approach is not attuned to social agency, social conflict, and social practice. By extracting “discourse” from the social context of communication, Lacanian theories analyze language, linguistics, symbolic systems and codes in the abstract – as static and atemporal.
Pragmatic discourse theories, as Fraser names them, “study language at the level of discourses, as historically specific social practices of communication” (Fraser 1997, 155). This model focuses our attention on the construction of meaning and takes discourses, not structures of language, as its object of study. The advantages of this model, for Fraser, are that it treats discourses as contingent, it recognizes the existence of multiple discursive frames, and that it focuses on the communicative acts of agentic subjects. A pragmatic approach “rejects the assumption that the totality of social meanings in circulation constitutes a single, coherent, self-reproducing “symbolic system,”” revealing the conflict, negotiation, power, and inequality inherent in the process of establishing a discourse (Fraser 1997, 160).

I find Fraser’s pragmatic model for interpreting, analyzing, and understanding discourse and discursive practices most suitable for my own theoretical concerns in this work. Like Fraser, I believe that a discourse theory can help us to understand a number of things, especially with regard to the discourse of dissent and the “cultural hegemony” of dominant ideas as established by the news media.

Media such as the print news offer an obvious source for studying discourse and its effects. Approaches to studying media, however, are as numerous and varied as are theories of discourse. Theorists working within cultural studies have developed perhaps the most influential or popular model for studying news and other media (see for example van Dijk, Fairclough, Melucci, Kellner). In Fairclough’s formulation, this model aims “to produce explicit and systematic descriptions of units of language use that we have called discourse” (1995, 24). Such descriptions should concern textual (structures of discourse) and contextual (the relationship between structures of discourses and various
properties of cognitive, representational, or sociocultural factors) dimensions. The cultural studies model of discourse pays far closer attention to the linguistic structure of discourse than the pragmatic model, analyzing syntax and semantics as well as larger discursive structures: “We thus describe sound forms, word forms, sentence forms, and meanings, respectively, both of sentences and of textual sequences of sentences” (Fairclough 1995, 25). Sentence forms, meanings, and speech acts, as well as style and rhetoric, are important.

But, media studies also pay attention to the power of mass media to shape governments and parties, to influence knowledge, beliefs and values, and to represent things in particular ways (Fairclough 1995, 2). Power is central; research questions should ask “how the mass media affect and are affected by power relations within the social system, including relations of class, gender, and ethnicity, and relations between particular groups like politicians or scientists and the mass of the population” (12). It is the ideological work of media language in constructing a particular world, particular identities, and particular relations that Fairclough recommends paying attention to. Studies should thusly be concerned with whether a text is working ideologically, though the question is more relevant for certain kinds of texts. In assessing the ideological functions of a text, the researcher is questioning the motivations, origins, and interests involved in the embedded representations. The researcher is not implicitly after the “truth” of such representations, cautions Fairclough, though it may be important to judge the truthfulness or falsity of certain claims.

Audience reception of a particular text is also an important component in this model. Indeed, criticism of text-based approaches have led to a tremendous increase in
concern with how individuals and groups interpret and give meaning to particular texts. Ideally, one should be concerned with both creation and reception. In general, however, the tendency within media studies has been to focus either on the text itself or audience reception of it by particular audiences. Doing both is often difficult and sometimes impossible. Fairclough and many others involved in media studies advocate textual analysis in spite of its apparent tediousness and lack of generalizability (an effect of its emphasis on fine detail and few texts). The benefits – focus on contradiction and tension, attention to the framing of texts, the ability to track shifting social contradictions – far outweigh the cost.

Ignoring the text itself is an equally dangerous approach. For Fairclough, audience interpretation is self-evident, but “[t]he range of potential interpretations will be constrained and delimited according to the nature of the text” (16). That is, the discourse itself as manifest in a particular text plays an important role in shaping an individual’s interpretation of that text. Interpretation surely takes place—that is impossible to ignore—but textual analysis cannot be neglected and is an important factor in analyzing reception. Such analyses, however, should investigate media language as discourse and must pay attention to the production and reception of texts as well as to the ways in which media texts are distributed at the situational, institutional, and societal levels.

In many ways, like framing theory, the textual analysis central to this approach entails little more than paying attention to themes and patterns. Several versions of textual analysis within this perspective, however, are closely aligned with semiotic and linguistic studies (semiotic codes and categories, micro-level scrutiny of clauses and sentence structure, etc). While I appreciate the attention to language studies advocated
by this approach, it is the critical aspects of the media studies model that I find most useful:

The focus, then, is upon how events, situations, relationships, people, and so forth are represented in texts. A basic assumption is that media texts do not merely “mirror realities” as is sometimes naively assumed; they constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them (Fairclough 1995, 103-4).

Fairclough’s strategy is to analyze how events are represented in the linguistic structure of sentences: the structuring of propositions and the combination and sequencing of propositions (“what precedes or follows what, and why”). It is important to pay attention to what is in the text as well as what is conspicuously absent: presuppositions, backgrounded information, foregrounded information, etc. Essentially, the media studies approach poses several questions: 1) how is the world represented? 2) what identities are constructed?, and 3) what relationships are set up between those involved?

In general, then, there are three possible approaches for a discursive theory of media (Torfing 1999). The first is a focus on the discourse about mass media. Such an approach analyzes the macro-sociological role of media in society, including but not limited to their productive and ideological function within the political economy of mass media. A second approach involves the investigation of the discourse of media, focusing on various texts, linguistic codes, and messages (semiotic or linguistic study). The third strategy looks to media as discourse, and is the most appropriate for a project that emphasizes a pragmatic discourse theory. Ideally, a discursive analysis would take a
three-fold approach: study of the text and its presentation and organization; the
institutional forms of production, distribution and consumption; and the political and
economic regulation of mass media.

Taking my cues from the framing literature as well as the various discourse
theories just discussed, I focus on the “discursive terrains” in which meanings, rules,
norms, procedures, values, and knowledge forms are discursively constructed (Torfing
1999, 213). Essentially, this requires paying attention to ideological functions of
particular discourses (as power-knowledge complexes that define what can be said, how,
and when), the discursive construction of would-be and real communicators (who is
permitted to talk and for whom in the designation of insiders and outsiders), and the
effects on audiences (are individuals empowered or disempowered through the discursive
construction of the audience) (Foucault 1978, Fraser 1997, Torfing 1999, Fairclough
1995).

I am particularly concerned with the effects of such discursive constructions. In
the context of studying the discourse about dissent, it is particularly important to move
beyond analyzing what is said and what particular identities or relations are established
within the text – a move that is not always made in media studies. For example, I have
alluded to the fact that the discourse about dissent set up a particular subject position of
the dissident as traitor, using the rhetoric of patriotism to question the right to disagree
during a time of war. How does this affect individuals and their ability to dissent?
Notice here, I am not particularly concerned with audience reception of a text in a
traditional sense. Rather, I hope to understand how the discourse about dissent has
influenced beliefs and attitudes about political opposition and, in turn, dissent itself.
Following a combined framing/discourse approach I first pay attention to a number of patterns or themes that emerge from a reading of the smaller sample of documents. I also discuss press reporters’ *representations* of dissent during 2001-3 and their reliance on particular frames and metaphors to construct an account of dissent. I pay particular attention to the mythologies and metaphors used in newspaper coverage to “actively fix the necessarily unstable meanings in an abstract theme, and to fix them in ways derogatory to the protest” (Young 1995; 123). What emerges from this analysis are a variety of “packages” or particular themes or ideas that accompanied *discussion of dissent itself* (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). For example, a recurring theme throughout these articles referred to the “freedom to dissent” in a democracy like the U.S., or the tradition of dissent in this country. A significant number of articles also commented on how government or police policies worked to “stifle dissent.”

**Conclusion**

As will become evident soon, the discourse of dissent in newspaper coverage of the protests against the invasion of Iraq centered on frames that tended to demonize protesters, romanticize the 60s, present polarized opinions of dissent, and in many ways tended to discount dissent. Throughout this two-year period, public discussion of dissent tended to focus on the freedom or right to dissent, the suppression of dissent, the appropriate forms of dissent, and the need for dissent. Clearly, the discourse about dissent, especially allegations that protesters were un-American or unpatriotic, made individuals feel that they couldn’t speak out, silencing and limiting dissent through the production of fear. The consequences of publicly expressing anti-war sentiment made
many people feel as though speaking out was wrong. Certainly, facing real legal and
criminal punishment, or monitoring, also made people wary of being active in anti-war
organizations. There have been many reports of individuals being questioned by the CIA
or FBI because of their involvement in particular groups, or of groups being infiltrated by
government agents. It is no accident that attempts to silence dissent drew on the rhetoric
of patriotism and national loyalty.

This reaction to dissent against the invasion of Iraq is surely tied to the
militarization of U.S. culture. Cynthia Enloe (2000) suggests that criticizing this trend,
especially in the form of anti-war protest, is often viewed as an act of disloyalty. Crafting
such diversionary narratives about whether dissent is appropriate served to demonize the
protesters themselves, taking our attention away from the substance of anti-war
sentiment. In this form, the discourse of dissent served not only to limit the possibility
for critique but also to channel debate away from the rationale for going to war. By
indulging in or directing the discussion of dissent this way, the news media functioned to
constrain dissent and to encourage conformity to the status quo.

Given the fact that news is produced within a system marked by politics and
power, it is important to move beyond description of a discourse about dissent to an
appraisal of its potential effects – a step not always taken in sociological or framing
studies of media. Taking this step is particularly important in today’s climate of
increasing legislative and judicial attempts to restrict or punish dissidents in general and
protesters in particular. The recent attempts to renew the USA Patriot Act also renewed
concern about free speech and the first amendment. Allegations of extensive use of
wiretapping by the government (FBI, CIA, and NSA) only added to those concerns, as
did other legislation that allows for the classification of many protest activities as
“domestic terrorism.” And the effects of 9/11 on dissent are only beginning to be
understood. What does all of this mean for the possibility of dissent?

I do not mean to suggest prematurely that “dissent” is futile or that protest is
ineffectual. The mere presence of millions of people in the streets on February 15, 2003
suggests the possibility for dissent has not disappeared. Moreover, the emergence of
scores of chat rooms, magazine forums, editorial columns, and blogs devoted to
discussion about the war, the reasons for attack, debate over the idea of dissent, and the
place of the U.S. in the world is evidence that this time period allowed for – perhaps even
provoked – critical analysis and debate. Understanding the way the discourse of dissent
was structured and its potential effects is crucial to understanding why protests against
the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were largely ineffective. Developing and
defending this assertion is the aim of the next three chapters of this work.
Chapter 3

Manufacturing “Dissent”: Discursive Effects of Protest Coverage

If we take seriously the idea, within social theory, that language and discourse play a powerful role in the construction of meaning in the everyday lives of individuals then we have to understand how discourse comes to have such power and how that power operates on individual persons. Having laid out the basic framework of discourse analysis, I turn now to describing the discourse of dissent and theorizing what power that discourse might exert through its operation. While cultural studies and critical theory both emphasize the power of the media within popular culture to create and disseminate mainstream discourses – and, I will suggest, they are a primary means through which the meaning of “dissent” is conveyed – it is often less clear exactly how that happens, a process I hope to illuminate here and in the next chapters.

Mainstream newsmedia today function as one of many disciplinary mechanisms that exert a measure of control over the lives of individuals. The power of print journalism, as an example, lies not in any sort of coercive power. Newspapers do not force individuals to adopt a certain set of beliefs as propagated by the news industry. Of course, one might characterize the influence of advertisers and government agencies on the shape and scope of the news covered discussed in the last chapter as one of forcible compulsion. For the time being, though, newsmedia influence on the public remains a normalizing force.

The key lies in the power of the newsmedia as perhaps the most powerful producer of discourse in contemporary society. Or, at the very least, the most powerful
re-producer of discourse in as much as it is the primary medium through which other discourses are portrayed, transmitted, or refracted. The media serve, as Gramsci (1971) articulated, as a hegemonic tool that upholds state dominance (Gitlin 1980). Language works to create and uphold dominant relations of power.

This chapter discusses the potential power inherent in the construction of a discourse about dissent in mainstream news outlets. Michel Foucault’s theories of power and discourse come immediately to mind as a useful framework in which to situate any discussion of the coverage of dissent and to make sense of the potential control exercised by print journalism’s framing of resistance. He offers us perhaps the most comprehensive understanding of how it is that discourses operate as power-knowledge complexes in the social construction of meaning. Foucault’s method or outline for a study of discourse (specifically, that pertaining to human sexuality) suggests that one must first identify the way in which subject matter is put into discourse, then locate the polymorphous techniques of power that permeate that discourse, and finally, bring about the “will to knowledge” that serves as a support and instrument to either truth or falsehoods that conceal the truth (Foucault 1978, 11-12). Applications of discourse theories (feminist, sociological, and cultural studies approaches) inform my interpretation of the effects of media discourse about dissent. This chapter focuses in on articles that were specifically about the idea of dissent.

The Discourse of Dissent

In his now famous treatise on the repressive hypothesis and the history of sexuality, Foucault argues, “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (1978, 73).
A topic does not exist on its own as an area of investigation or discourse; it is only because “relations of power had established it as a possible object” and because “techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investing it” (98). The context of war has produced “dissent” as an area of discourse repeatedly. The prospect of invading Iraq certainly produced a substantial rise in the coverage of dissent, as shown in the previous chapter, suggesting that a variety of factors must have led to its establishment as an object of concern. The list of “factors,” of course, could be endless—government officials, 9/11, the Patriot Act, talk show hosts, journalists, etc—and it would be impossible to pinpoint one particular “relation of power.”

Foucault, in fact, suggests that knowing who holds power and who does not is secondary to understanding the relationships of force implicit in the process of establishing a discourse. Discourses (and Foucault argues that we must recognize the fact that there are a multiplicity of discourses at work in each context) act as a transfer point for relations of power. That is, power is exercised through discourse. Dissent’s place in the headlines is evidence that it was a subject the American public was highly invested in. Thus, it is important to discover what lies hidden beneath the surface, to identify the underlying mechanisms of control: the ways in which the deployment of dissent had its reason for being in “proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (Foucault 1978, 107). Foucault thus turns our attention away from the substance or message of a particular discourse to its effects and the social need it fulfills.
Initially, debate over the issue of political dissent went hand in hand with public discussion of the arguments for or against the particular wars themselves. Despite allegations by many “media-watchers,” there was a dialogue about the “case for war” regardless of whether it achieved national prominence in the U.S. public sphere. As discussed earlier, access to a public audience was easier for intellectuals like Noam Chomsky than during previous times. It is probably the case that the pro-war side achieved much greater media saturation than the anti-war side (if previous media analyses are any indication), but there was some discussion nonetheless. What seems much more pertinent is the fact that debate over dissent itself soon came to greatly overshadow this substantive argument. Public forums, from alternative publications like The Nation to mainstream papers like USA Today, all eventually engaged in the dispute over whether dissent was appropriate, to the relative neglect of policy issues.

This shift is important for a number of reasons. This post 9/11 atmosphere and the prospect of two wars (as well as the ongoing war against terrorism) enabled an environment in which resistance to the war was effectively silenced, placed outside the realm of controversy. In doing so, the anti-war movement was marginalized and the discourse about dissent began to assert control over not only public dialogue but also the actions of individuals (through a fear of speaking out and being labeled a “Saddam lover,” for example). Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, reversing of Foucault’s notion of the “incitement to speak,” argues that the same technique is at work in the anti-globalization movement: “the rationality of power is well served by an “incitement to silence” about the effects of globalization, and [that] the discourses identified here are among the chief mechanisms for hushing up resistance to globalization, placing it outside the “sphere of
legitimate controversy”” (Wahl-Jorgensen 133). The bounds set up around discussion of the war and opposition to it functioned as an “institutional incitement to speak,” in a Foucauldian (1978) sense, in that the newsmedia encouraged public speech about dissent during this time by providing space for the issue to take center stage in many papers. Numerous op-ed pieces raised the idea of dissent, and an emphasis on the topic is seen in the immense number of column inches on editorial pages devoted to citizen discussion of it.

But that incitement to speak (about dissent) also functioned as an incitement to silence (about whether the war was necessary). This may appear to contradict what I have argued above. On numerous occasions I have claimed that, far from opening up to a discussion about dissenting opinions, the mainstream newsmedia constricted or remained shut off to the anti-war position. To be clear: it is not that the incitement to speak brings about an increasing preoccupation with anti-war sentiment. Many studies have indicated that the opposite occurred, arguing that the nationalist sentiment that developed after September 11th precluded any meaningful self-critique on the part of Americans; a debate over U.S. foreign policy and its profound influence on why “they hate us,” for example (Žižek 2002, Foster 2005, Heller 2005, Spigel 2005). Rather, the mainstream newsmedia made “dissent” itself the topic of the day, not the substance of the opposition. Very few articles covering either dissent or protests and demonstration presented detailed descriptions of the arguments of anti-war organizations or individuals. This is not to say, again, that such arguments were not presented elsewhere. But, the debate over dissent took place in isolation from the substantive arguments for or against war. First, allow me
to describe the variety of contexts in which dissent was used throughout the years analyzed.

**Issue Areas**

In general, the use of the word dissent tended to cluster around four basic themes or meanings. During the time of study, “dissent” was used in 1) coverage of court cases (especially the opinions of a panel of judges), 2) to describe disagreements generally, 3) to indicate widespread political opposition or protest, and 4) within the context of the debate over dissent in a time of war—what I will refer to as the *discourse of dissent*.

These meanings were culled from a close reading of the smaller sample of documents selected but are an accurate reflection of the meanings found within the larger sample of articles throughout this two year period. In the first instance, the use of dissent generally takes the form of describing the “dissenting” opinion of a particular judge (most often a Supreme Court case is the focus) on a particular case. This use makes up the smallest percent of articles discussing dissent (<1%). Invoking the word “dissent” in a report on a particular disagreement (for example, “request sparked dissent” in a school board meeting or “the decision was met with little dissent” during a city council meeting) is the makes up only a small percentage of the articles found (6%).

The vast majority of articles about dissent during this time fall into the last two categories. Discussions of the need for, legitimacy of, or limits of dissent during a time of war (what I have called a discourse of dissent) make up the largest category (65%). This discourse about dissent is obviously the central concern of this chapter. About a third of
articles about dissent report on particular protest events or opposition to government policies (27%). I draw heavily on articles from the “event” category in the next chapter.

The first mention of dissent in the context of what I would identify as a discourse about dissent actually dates back to March 5, 2001. In a letter to the editor regarding new legislation allowing for the use of taser-like weapons to disperse crowds, an Indianapolis resident utilizes language and rhetoric that became characteristic of later discussions about dissent raised before and during the invasion of Iraq. Arguing “Dissent makes a nation stronger!” and “Freedom to dissent, whether by one person or 5,000, should not be against the law in a democracy,” this individual invokes two of the most often repeated themes of the pro-dissent side of the debate (Corya 2001). Of the nearly 300 articles I coded, however, only seven prior to September 11, 2001 mention the word “dissent.” Five of those fall neatly into what I have categorized as discourse about dissent during the time of interest. Overall, articles that focus on dissent itself represent a majority of those coded, making up roughly 65% of the sample.

Most articles covering the issue of dissent consistently referred to a small set of salient rhetorical constructs. They discussed dissent in relation to “patriotism” and “treason,” the need for free speech, fear and the suppression of dissent, the appropriateness of dissent during war, and the anti-war movement of the 60s. In a

13 Many times, articles, editorials, and letters relied upon a combination of these strategies. For example, in an interview with Ms Magazine, Janeane Garofalo states: “Still, we should be alarmed that there have been so many attempts to shut people up…The accusations of un-Americanism and the bashing of anti-war celebrities are just a way to try to suppress everyone’s freedom of speech. Right wing television and radio hosts may be leading the campaign, but they are essentially following the administration’s line” (Hawkes 2003). The interviewer, Ellen Hawkes, writes, “It is this very idea of dissent—the core of the right to “free speech” that the amended U.S. Constitution guarantees—that is under attack in our culture today, so much so that it has affected not only celebrities like Garofalo but everyone else.” We see within this short excerpt the use of patriotism, free speech, and fear of speaking out. I do not maintain a strict division of articles based on these three themes, preferring instead the freedom to reference particular articles whenever appropriate.
slight twist on both Foucault and Wahl-Jorgensen’s interpretation of the incitement to speak/silence, I would like to suggest that, in this context, debate over the war was silenced through the discourse of dissent. That is, incorporating rhetoric about patriotism (supporting the troops, need for unity after 9/11), the nation (with us or against us, aiding and abetting the enemy), free speech (democratic right to disagree, constitutional protections) and drawing analogies to Vietnam-era protests (liberal hippies, veterans against the war) effectively silenced debate about the war by making dissent itself off limits. An overwhelmingly negative portrayal about the idea of dissent and dissidents created an environment in which speaking out, acknowledging disagreement over the war, or taking on the identity of “dissident” was risky. I turn now to a discussion of how these strategies operated.

**Dominant Frames in News Discourse**

**This “Patriotic Time”**

Constructions of dissent consistently drew upon discourses of the nation, using rhetoric held in common by most if not all Americans and well documented by social theorists. By far, the most common way of talking about dissent during this time invoked ideals of loyalty, patriotism (and its polar opposite, treason), and “Americanness.”

Wrapped in nationalist rhetoric, the discussions about dissent and patriotism and nation were the most poignant. There was a clear attempt to define what “America” stood for and what being “an American” meant. As one editorial writer put it, “a dangerous falsehood is circulating our country--that it is unAmerican and unpatriotic to question the policies of our government and its war on terrorism” (Ramsdell 2003). The
sentiment was real, however, and widely used to condemn criticism of the government. In a widely covered event, Janis Heaphy’s (publisher of the Sacramento Bee) commencement speech at California State University was ended prematurely by “boos and jeers” from the audience (Hallet 2002). Hallet’s diagnosis: “for daring to dissent during a time of nationalist pride, [Heaphy] was challenged by students of today for being unpatriotic.” A letter writer from the same paper stated that she was disappointed Heaphy “tried to inflict her unpatriotic views on [the students]” (Gose 2002). Christian Parenti (2003) writes, “America has once again entered a season of reaction, fear mongering and repression. In the wake of 9/11, hundreds of immigrants have been detained without charges, federal powers of investigation have been enhanced and in many quarters dissent and protest are cast as un-American.”

Dissenters are often portrayed as not loyal, or as traitors (Sarat 2005). This was certainly true throughout the two-year period being studied. Loyalty was established as a problem early on. In an October 2001 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article (headline: “What does “loyalty” really mean?”), the writer clearly problematizes what she sees as the demand for unity when she says “both Democratic and Republican leaders now regard patriotic duty as not disagreeing with the president.” Then, as protests peaked in January, February and March of 2003, the conversation shifted even more dominantly to questions of patriotism and loyalty to America. The growing wave of dissent provoked a counter reaction that, when coupled with a variety of other events (the infamous reaction to the Dixie Chicks anti-war statement in Germany and Bush’s refusal to meet with anti-war poets for example), shifted the discourse to concerns about the need for unity rather than dissension. Bush’s infamous “you’re either with us or against us” literally defined
loyalty as compulsory adherence to government decisions. Coverage of dissent began focusing on questions like: “if you're against the war, are you against America?” (Poe 2003).

Patriotism, defined as loyalty, attained its strongest elaboration in the efforts of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA, co-founded by Lynn Cheney) to maintain a list of statements made by professors and campus personnel that it considered unpatriotic. Like the McCarthy files, ACTA attempted to encourage loyalty by branding those who questioned America’s response to September 11th as unpatriotic. More dramatically, it was not just agreement that was called for: “the demand for silence as proof of patriotism” was required (Nelson 2002).

The demand for patriotism and loyalty in this post-9/11 environment is by no means unique to this situation. The general trend toward the containment and dispersion of dissent and critique is amplified during times of national crisis. The implicit (and often explicit) argument is that times of war should provoke feelings of patriotism – that they, in fact, require the intense emotional connection or devotion to nation. Patriotism is a sentiment based in love, confirmed by identification with the group, and represented in objects such as the flag (Sarat 2005, Brown 2005). Brown argues that it is a dangerous attachment “likely to glory in the power of a nation…rendered as relatively passive and uncritical adoration of this power” (2005, 36). Critique appears to threaten a nation’s idealization of itself, a threat that is alleged to be particularly harmful during war.

Critique is threatening not only because such speech tarnishes the reputation of the idealized object but also because it appears to threaten the group attachment created through worship of that object. Dissent articulates the aggression sublimated by
idealization of and undying devotion to the nation. Criticism turns aggression inward, toward the nation, rather than outward toward some Other that is opposite of and threatening to the citizenry. Group solidarity requires reversing this turn, refocusing critique on the dissenters. It is no accident that attempts to silence dissent drew on the rhetoric of patriotism and national loyalty. In this form, the discourse of dissent served not only to limit the possibility for critique but also to channel debate away from the rationale for going to war. By indulging in or directing the discussion of dissent this way, the news media functioned to constrain dissent and to encourage conformity to the status quo. The equation of dissenters with terrorists or as “Saddam lovers” thus allows for the reestablishment of group harmony, and the patriotic re-idealization of the nation. This threat and its reversal are clearly illustrated by the frequent attempts to frame dissent as un-American in the previous paragraphs. It is even more explicit in allegations of treason.

Though not as common as reference to unity, loyalty, and patriotism more generally, the rhetoric of treason entered into the public discourse about dissent on several occasions. The menacing language of treason was particularly evocative: “I think people are afraid that a dissenting voice is somehow treasonous or disrespectful to the dead” (Strauss 2001). According to a San Diego Union-Tribune writer, “the right to debate is now being seen as an act of disloyalty, and dissent as an act of treason” (Gonzales and Rodriguez 2002). “Many protesters say they’re genuine patriots. But critics consider them traitors, providing a boost to the enemy and endangering U.S. troops marching on Baghdad” (Poe 2003). Leading the drive to condemn dissenters was Ann Coulter, who argued in her book *Treason* that liberals are traitors (Parenti 2003).
The language of treason produced a fear of speaking out and served as a disciplinary mechanism, controlling and regulating critique. The language of letters to the editor and journalistic reports can be seen as an attempt to informally sanction those who spoke out against government actions after 9/11. This informal sanctioning was perhaps even more important than the formal actions taken by employers and government offices discussed earlier. The subtle coercion of the discourse of dissent effectively “trained” individuals not to speak out and normalized hegemonic patriotism (Foucault 1979). Linking patriotism to loyalty and dissent to being anti-American separates dissidents out from “normal” Americans and makes it possible to identify and correct this “other” way of thinking. In much the same way that the prison coerces by observation, dissent is controlled through the possibility of being found out, of having one’s critical stance exposed. The marginalization of critique, through the rhetoric of patriotism, established silence as the norm and meant that real debate was replaced by polemical posturing by both sides of the debate. The disciplinary potential of the patriotic arm of the discourse about dissent also suppressed critique through the effective use of a number of prominent figures: the patriot and the terrorist. Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai suggest that “docile patriotism” is produced through the figure of the “terrorist-monster” prominent in mainstream media rhetoric and images post 9/11. The construct of the terrorist-monster is a racialized and sexualized “other” used to normalize a heteronormative patriotism (Puar and Rai 2002). The patriot, portrayed as the ideal figure (albeit race, class, and gender specific), stands in stark contrast with the dissident, portrayed as traitor or

14 I treat the idea of discipline, here, as being nearly identical to the idea of control posited by Elias. Discipline carries with it a connotation of coercion or force that self-control does not, but is essentially the same as that concept—mainly as it refers to the order or rules imposed on individuals. Foucault is illustrating the degree to which disciplinary tactics at the societal level are internalized and serve to regulate individual conduct.
terrorist. One normal, the other a monster, excluded: these figures are clearly employed in the marking of critique as out of bounds, off limits. Dissidents were also portrayed as liberal fanatics, a representation discussed further in the section on discourses of spectacle.

The framing of dissent as un-American is particularly dangerous, the consequences especially worrisome. Questioning one’s patriotism is a serious charge, especially in a country in which pride in “old glory” and the “red, white, and blue” are expected. Patriotism’s general intolerance of critique is amplified during a time of war “because of the volatility and aggression in this kind of patriotism [and] because it breeds anti-intellectualism, contempt for thoughtfulness and collective introspection, and disdain for peacemaking” (Brown 2005, 40). This rhetorical technique proved to be a particularly effective distraction from critical reflection on the place of the United States in the world and its global responsibilities.

Furthermore, questions of patriotism not only directed media attention away from these issues, but it also proved to be a powerful distraction for the peace movement itself. Patriotism is based in love of country, but so is dissent: for dissidents it is a love for the nation as it could be. This love is expressed through critique rather than through unquestioning support. Protest organizers and activists found that they, too, had to turn to the rhetoric of patriotism in order to confront accusations of treason and calls for unity and patriotism in the context of the 9/11 attack and the ensuing wars. The simple rhetoric of “nothing is more patriotic than dissent” provided a ground from which to disagree and critique while at the same time professing affection for the United States. As one editor for the Omaha World Herald put it: “It’s wrong to use patriotism against dissenters, to
say that anyone who disagrees is un-American and betraying the troops. (You can protest the war and still support the people who are fighting it)…Sometimes, it’s an act of patriotism to stand up and say, “I disagree”” (3/28/2003). Often invoked was the idea that suppressing dissent went against American ideals and that the “Founder's insistence on dissent” was “a part of the democratic dynamic or citizen's natural right” (McCarthy 2003). Many times, dissent was described as “the solemn duty of those asked to fight, fund and support this unjust and unnecessary war” (Galizio 2003) because “America was born in dissent and controversy” (Schoettler 2003). In the San Francisco Chronicle, an editor remarks: “Ironically, many of the men and women who shaped our patriotic legacy were dissenters” (7/4/2002). “Dissent” as one letter writer put it, “is as American as apple pie” (Columbus Dispatch, 4/8/2003).

The adoption of “patriotism” by the anti-war movement was also, in part, a reaction to media criticism that its message did not resonate with the general public. One editorial suggests, “the left's cynical attitude toward Americanism has been a terrible mistake,” another that “a left that scorns the very notion of patriotism is wasting a splendid opportunity.” The shift was also a reaction to increasingly negative public reactions to the protests. Letters to the editor during the time contain statements like: “They are not anti-war rallies, they are anti-America rallies,” antiwar sentiment “dishonors our fallen patriots,” and “I am sickened by the disgusting displays of anti-war demonstrators.” Protesters were described as a “liberal fringe group of Clinton loving, America hating, president Bush hating true believers that has banded together to stand against the United States” (Columbus Dispatch 4/8/2003).
By forcing anti-war protesters to justify their right to dissent, the movement was effectively thrown off of its agenda: making the case against the war. Instead, both sides of the debate engaged in a contest about whether dissent was patriotic. That is, the rhetoric of patriotism unites both dissenter’s and their opponents in the belief in American superiority and exceptionalism—a belief that renders critique powerless, merely an “ornament of hegemony.” Questions about dissent helped to reaffirm American values without having any real chance of changing policy (Sarat 2005, 11). Both sides were forced to claim their national allegiance and their support for “American” values like patriotism and loyalty. Distracted from the issue at hand, the anti-war movement had little hope of dissuading the push toward war if its main stance had become “dissent is patriotic.” Criticism instead turned inward and was aimed at dissidents themselves and their un-patriotic behavior. As Brown (2005) suggests, if dissent “were received differently, if it were not castigated as disloyal, un-American, or destructive—and thus placed outside legitimate political discourse—perhaps this would incite popular critique itself to more thoughtful, less moralistic or rebellious codes of conduct. It might then inhabit the dignified and authoritative voice of belonging, rather than the moral screech of exclusion” (42). Instead, the figure of the dissident as terrorist and friend of the enemy was used to discount dissent altogether. Meaningful debate was further restricted by the tendency to treat recent anti-war protests as, simply, a reincarnation of the Vietnam-era peace movement – with a far less reasonable or meaningful agenda.
Dissent Déjà vu

If discourses of the nation were responsible for displacing inward critique of the nation, discourses of spectacle served to further justify the aggression toward protesters that replaced it. Discourses of spectacle refer to the tendency for news coverage to emphasize the bizarre behavior that takes place at protests or the oddities of individuals who participate in them. The underlying assumption is that exciting news sells and one way to make news exciting is to focus on spectacular events (Gitlin 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen 2003; Kellner 2005). But to treat something as a spectacle invokes more than this desire to sell the news. Attention to particular aspects of protest events and an interest in portraying them in a particular way exercises a subtle influence over public awareness of social movement activities. Treating protesters as “irrational threats to the social order” has become a common practice in news reporting. Social movements require the mass media as an arena for political struggle and for the attention paid to their cause.

Movement dependency on news media attention is a double-edged sword, however, as coverage of events is neither always positive nor always helpful. In the case of the global justice movement, for example, “creative street happenings” consistently attract media attention but reporting on those “spectacular events” has largely focused on violent protests that sometimes accompany the peaceful demonstrations (Wettergren 2003). Focus on violence has shadowed coverage of the anti-war movement since 9/11 too (Colburn 2002). The rhetorical strategies utilized by journalists, which emphasize the strangeness of protest, “becomes the proof of the movement’s irrationality and thus its illegitimacy (Wahl-Jorgensen 2003, p. 140).
In what follows, I concentrate on one particular aspect of “discourses of spectacle”: consistent comparisons made between anti-war protests in 2001-3 and anti-Vietnam war protests. I discuss this phenomenon of the spectacular in more detail in the last chapter, when I concentrate on reports about protest events and theorize how spectacular accounts of the aesthetic elements of demonstrations (descriptions of people in attendance, reference to figures like the “liberal hippie” and the Vietnam veteran, and narratives of protest activities) work to further discredit dissent itself.

An effective frame, comparing protests occurring between 2001-3 to those of the Vietnam era, was commonly found in newspaper coverage of dissent—though less consistently than the rhetoric of patriotism. This comparison took a variety of forms. First, icons of the 1960s peace movement were used to “set the scene” of what dissent looks and feels like: “old Volkswagen buses still wheeze along the streets like ghosts wistful for the good vibrations of the 1960s” (Campbell 2001). Anti-Vietnam war leaders like Abbie Hoffman were resurrected from their graves, and their followers, though “[t]he long hair may be graying or gone…the fire in the belly still burns,” reappeared peace placards in hand (“Paltry Turnout” 2002). And college campuses seemed to rise from the ashes: “as the campus rallies of the Vietnam era taught us, universities can play a key role in providing a forum for the free and open exchange of ideas” (“Dissent on Campus” 2001). “For anyone who spent part of the Vietnam War on a college campus, the sense of déjà vu is profound” (Campbell 2001). Clichés ran rampant: “Thirty years ago, as the war in Vietnam raged, all they were saying was give peace a chance. Today…in a case of dissent déjà vu, the old sentiments and slogans are surfacing again” (Albrecht 2002). The 60s had paved the way for the protests that were taking place today: “lessons of
Vietnam laid ground for continued dissent” declared headlines (Albrecht 2002). “Not since the Vietnam era has anti-war sentiment hit such a fever pitch so quickly” (Tinsley 2003). As one protest organizer noted, “it's like the 60s is the only lens through which many people grasp protest” (Clemetson 2003a).

Some accounts (usually from organizers of the marches themselves) focused on how different today’s protests were from those during the Vietnam War. Protests against the invasion of Iraq were the “first of its kind”—the first large scale anti-war protests to mobilize before a war had actually started: “it wasn't until the body bags started coming home that people started to see the light and speak out about Vietnam.” Protest was “broader and louder than at any time since the Vietnam War” (Kazin 2003). Frequently, accounts of protests talked about the diversity of today’s demonstrations, as compared to 60s protests. There was a “broader cross-section of dissenting Americans than in Vietnam era” and a “new generation” of anti-war activists was coming out to voice concern (Albrecht 2002). The current wave of the anti-war movement was “using updated tactics to spread antiwar message” and trying to “distance themselves from the stereotypical images of angry flag burners or scruffy anarchists” (Clemetson 2003a). And its message was clearer: “Oppose the Bush administration but support the troops. There was little effort to make that distinction between soldier and policy makers during the Vietnam War” (“Healthy Dissent” 2003). For others, the argument for opposing the war was not as straightforward: it was easier to see Vietnam as a case of wrongdoing (Salamon 2003). “This is not a political war like Vietnam. This war is what we as a united people believe in, including the right to say what you want without being tortured for doing so” (Brookfield 2003). John Searle, a Berkeley philosophy professor and
Vietnam War protester said “the campus and the city are far more divided over this budding conflict that they have been about others” (Sanchez 2001)

Like the rhetoric of patriotism, protest organizers eventually took up the “Vietnam” frame in order to justify and give credibility to opposition to the war. Many organizers of the January protests suggested that the diversity of the crowds “shattered the false myth of consensus” and that it was “important for ordinary middle-aged middle class people to show up at these things because we can't be dismissed as campus radicals.” Organizers also appeared to be adapting their message in direct response to the framing of dissent against the invasion of Iraq as simply a repeat of the 60s. As one organizer put it, “these are not wild-eyed liberals who are waving daisies” (Tinsley 2003). Leaders and activists in the anti-war movements saw the depiction of protesters in news accounts as a tactic for dismissing anti-war sentiments: “when you select out the socialists or marxists, the point is to demonize and divide and diminish a massive growing movement” (Clemetson 2003b). Some even alleged that such actions amounted to “McCarthy era red-baiting.”

References to Vietnam era protests function in particularly influential ways. The decade of the sixties has attained such a predominant space in the collective representations of American history that nearly all people, whether they were alive during those years or not, have some sort of (romanticized) recollection of the anti-war movement. Accurate or not, depictions of the sixties arouse within individuals a common set of images, icons, and meanings with regard to protest. Therefore, such references amount to a particularly effective way of framing – and one that is consistently drawn upon in nearly all descriptions of demonstrations – protest events, especially with regard
to the anti-war movement. The power of anti-Vietnam protests in defining how we think about dissent, demonstrations, and social movement organizations is, to be honest, quite amazing. The influence is necessary in many respects; social movement organizations need to establish a language that resonates with the public in order to begin to hope for change. However, the language of Vietnam era protests also conjures negative images and in many ways serves to divide and suppress. Just as the rhetoric of patriotism demonizes activists as unpatriotic, Vietnam conflates dissent with grossly exaggerated claims about the treatment of soldiers returning from the war and with a movement often depicted in contemporary film and television as silly or frivolous, a “love-in.” Hippies, peace signs, daisies and other symbols of the decade have been commodified, trivialized, and denigrated. The movements of the time (except perhaps the civil rights work associated with Martin Luther King, Jr.) are seen in a completely different light today, after years of conservative and anti-feminist backlash. The spectacle of protests, especially the re-presentation of contemporary events through a nostalgic 1968 lens, associates dissent with the irrational. The resurrection of photographs of Jane Fonda visiting Vietnamese POW camps during the 2004 elections serves as an excellent illustration of this point. The anti-war stance of Fonda as well as all activists during the time is represented as aiding and abetting the enemy; it marks the dissident as the enemy and their ideas as treasonous.

In a culture already cynical about the possibility for real social transformation—to people who already distrust the work of movement organizations and government officials—this representation of dissent becomes particularly problematic. Thomas Foster, in a piece called “Cynical Nationalism,” raises the question: what is new about the
post 9/11 resurgence of nationalist and militaristic rhetoric? (2005). His answer is that the shift from a deliberately superficial pre-9/11 consumerist environment of “reality” TV and senseless programming to the “heartfelt sincerity” of post-9/11 television is:

a symptom of the recontainment of popular cynicism and distrust of official culture by a form of cynical reason that has learned to take that distrust into account in advance, to build its strategies on the idea that everyone knows we are being lied to, and tries to convince us that we have no other choice but to affirm the lies anyway (259).

Cynical reason (borrowed from Zizek’s work on the same topic) refers to the inability or refusal “to acknowledge any distinction, any incommensurability between these two gestures, of self-critique and self-aggrandizement” (269). A distrusting public, cued in to the posturing of politicians and the opacity of a suspect political establishment, is able to see through the lies of advertising, reality television and political rhetoric. And yet, Foster argues, those same people and institutions anticipate this fact and are able to convince most individuals to believe the rhetoric anyway. Foster’s study, specifically, is able to illustrate how the Bush administration was able to convince the public of the need for the war on terrorism in spite of public concern over both terrorism and U.S. responses to it by dehistoricizing the conflict and reducing it to the level of existing between two men (the entire conflict boiled down, for instance, to a fight between Bush and Bin Ladin). The implication is that a “strategy of saturation” replaces the need to gain consent from the public. That is, “the whole point of cynical nationalism’s saturation of public discourse with empty rhetoric and exploded national myths is to bypass the need to obtain people’s informed consent. The goal is not to convince, but to make persuasion
and public debate seem irrelevant, if not positively unpatriotic” (277). The result—here is where this argument becomes particularly relevant to this study—is a disengagement from politics in general.

Regardless of the public’s ability to distinguish today’s protests (anti-war or otherwise) from the sixties, those images still manage to dominate public representations of dissent. A cynical public surely sees through the representation of protest through the rhetoric of Vietnam, but there is a refusal to depict dissent in any other way. To the extent that people recognize this as rhetoric and yet are constantly confronted by these images, resistance itself is contained within this particular portrayal. As much as the realm of hippies, peace signs, and VW buses remains either in the past or among college students, the idea of dissent is further associated with the irrational, the young and rebellious, the marginal or trivial. The image of the protester as “crazy activist” (as many of my undergraduate students confess to holding) is grounded in this image of Vietnam-era protest. The act of going against the grain is associated with either a different time or a difficult and demanding lifestyle.

*A Cease-fire on Dissent During War?*

Elevating the right to dissent while condemning the practices of dissenters is a common strategy taken in dangerous times to dissuade or censor critical speech (Sarat 2005). As one reporter put it, “The U.S. political system protects freedom of speech from formal suppression better than any other nation on Earth. But American culture is less tolerant of aberrant views and behavior than many others” (Kinsley 2002). Suggesting that dissent should be protected, while condemning what is said, however, raises the
possibility for or the need to delimit and draw boundaries around critique. By far, the
discourse of dissent was dominated by discussions of whether free speech was a
democratic guarantee during a time of war. As mentioned above, patriotism and freedom
of speech were often times drawn together. In part, this is due to the fact that anti-war
individuals and movements were reacting to attacks leveled at their cause. Their
response was to take up the simple argument that dissent, as a basic freedom in the U.S.,
is inherently patriotic. This conflation makes it impossible to avoid using the language of
patriotism discussed above, but I concentrate here on statements about the freedom to
dissent.

Democratic freedoms. The nature of “democratic freedom,” of constitutional
rights, and of human rights were some of the many contested ideas raised during the
debate over dissent. Characteristic of this way of framing dissent, which relies on the
constitutional protection of free speech, one letter writer argues that The First
Amendment “was written specifically to allow citizens to peacefully assemble and voice
their dissent with government policy” (VanRyzin 2003). Others invoked a general idea
of freedom in defense of dissent: “remember what freedom means. It means nothing if
dissenting opinions are not tolerated” (Gailey 2003). The argument most often made was
based on the notion of free speech. But, sometimes, other freedoms or rights were
invoked. As this letter writer states, “This “patriotic time” is also a time to remember that
tolerance of a free press keeps our democracy vibrant” (Cooper 2001).

Many times, the need for dissent was justified by pointing to nations that,
allegedly, do not enjoy the same freedoms as Americans. Anti-war activists equated the
crack down on dissent in the U.S. with conditions in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, saying that
the “suppression of dissent is tyranny” and that it is “incorrect to discourage Americans from demonstrating their dissent.” Couched in the rhetoric of a “war against terror” journalists also drew upon stereotypical generalizations about The Muslim World as whole, suggesting that as “symbol of democratic freedoms, including the freedom to criticize the government” the U.S. is fundamentally different “from most of the Arab and Middle Eastern countries that spawned al-Qaida operatives” (Tucker 2002). The ability to engage in genuine critical reflection about government policy separates “us” from “them”; “Muslims” who “live under corrupt, undemocratic governments that crush political dissent” (“Lines in the Sand” 2001). Dissent, critique, and disagreement were regularly established not just as patriotic duty, as discussed above, but as a fundamental component of a democratic nation. Free speech, a right granted to a people by its government was established as something that exists solely in a “democratic” society, which stands in stark contrast to a “Muslim” society.

Since the war on terror, including the liberation of both Afghanistan and Iraq, was sold as a mission to bring democratic freedoms to despotic nations responsible for breeding terrorism, it makes sense that conversations about dissent should center on the idea of rights and liberties. The ramifications of the Patriot Act and statements from government officials calling for unity of opinion stood in stark contrast to the promise to deliver freedoms to the women of Afghanistan, of which speech was surely a priority. Therefore, arguments for dissent reflected on the ironies of a war fought to bring freedom to other nations. As one letter writer opines, “It would be chilling if one of the first casualties of our war for freedom was our right to debate all opinions vigorously” (Blakeman 2001). The development of “crowd dispersal weapons and moves to censure
activists or to limit the movement and positioning of movement demonstrations were countered by arguments that “[f]reedom to dissent, whether by one person or 5,000, should not be against the law in a democracy” (Corya 2001).

It is rare to find an author of a letter, editorial, or article claiming that free speech isn’t a fundamental right in the U.S. And it is the exception rather than the norm to find an individual willing to advocate complete trust in the government or to suggest that dissent itself is reprehensible and should not be allowed. Rather, even those who disagreed with the anti-war position supported the right to dissent. One subtle tact was to argue instead that there hasn’t been “any crackdown on dissenting opinion – the dissenters have been speaking their “daring” thoughts with ease on a regular basis” (Patton 2001). Or that “[f]reedom of speech does not promise the speaker immunity from reaction to or consequences from that speech” (Palmer 2002). If one wanted to dissent, then, one could certainly do so with the recognition that although such statements are protected speech the speaker must face the consequences of voicing their opinion. As another letter writer suggests, “it seems perfectly fair to point out that people expressing such sentiments are acting in an unpatriotic manner” (Taylor 2003). At other times, anti-war sentiments were portrayed as evidence of freedom out of control: “we have lost our restraint, our exercise of free speech has become more reckless” (Halicks 2003).

The consequence of a debate over the right to dissent lies more in what is disguised than by what is discussed. As Wendy Brown has suggested, rights discourses function both to emancipate and dominate, to protect and regulate. The discussion of whether or not one has a democratic right to dissent functioned both as justification for political protest and for regulating such behavior. A discourse of rights privatizes the
idea of dissent. Furthermore, the language of rights depoliticizes material conditions of inequality by granting rights rather than addressing inequalities. Questions of “rights” mask social power and construct an illusory politics of equality (1995, 114). In a similar way, news coverage depoliticizes dissent by addressing the right to protest rather than substantive issues raised by demonstrations. The discourse of rights masks social power by concentrating on individual opinions rather than effects of government actions on other states/people—with regard to either the march toward war or the efforts to quell dissent—and masks the use of fear to prohibit protest. The ruse of liberty to or freedom to dissent disguises the power of the government and news media to limit access to dissenting opinions, access to the public sphere, the feeling of truly being free to express an alternative view of reality.

**Limiting Dissent During “War.”** Wars have been used repeatedly to justify infringements on civil liberties or to try to stifle dissent (Dionne 2003; Franzen 2002; Poe 2003). After military operations began in Iraq, support for anti-war protests dropped significantly. In January 2003, 70% of Americans thought it was okay to protest the war. That number dropped to 57% after the invasion (Gallop 2003). Unsurprisingly, the tone of the conversation about dissent also shifts dramatically. One journalist characterized the sentiment at the time as the ““Yes, but” standard – “Yes, I believe in free speech, but now’s not a good time”” (Duryea 2003). With the finality signaled by the start of the war, the issue of whether the anti-war protests could or should continue became contentious. Bill O’Reilly (2004), for example, characterized dissent during war as potentially noble, but also irresponsible.
It is during this time that the interests of the troops in Iraq were used to justify placing limits on dissent—what is appropriate, when, how much, etc. The argument that opposition would endanger the troops persuaded many that dissent was dangerous. “We are at war” one letter writer says, “and we must do what it takes to win this time” (Gose 2002). One writer suggested that the peace protests actually aided Saddam Hussein: “in wartime, dissent is needed to make sure the government is still asking the right questions…[b]ut it behooves us to consider that if the antiwar movement can take credit for giving [him] more time to disarm, it also gave him time to prepare” (Hawkins 2003). One journalist suggested that upcoming protests will “test the limits of the city's tolerance for free speech, political dissent and civil disobedience” (“Dissent” 2003). Sometimes the limits to dissent were defined in terms of patriotism: “civil disobedience will only make protesters look unpatriotic.” Others held an entirely utilitarian view, suggesting that protesters are “entitled to express dissent” but not to “shut down the city.”

In an attempt to adapt the salience of its message to a time of war, the anti-war camp tried to incorporate the idea that it was “un-American” to stifle dissent into its argument that dissent is necessary in a democracy and is guaranteed by the right to free speech. The discussion turned to criticizing the “war on dissent” that many felt was occurring. Many suggested that “war need not force cease-fire on dissent” or “this idea, that you shouldn't question the president or voice any dissent when we're at war-that's crazy.” Simply put, one editorial claims: “healthy dissent, at any time, is the essence of democracy” (Poe 2003). Another: “And so should Americans be free. Even during wartime” (“Those who speak” 2003).
Contesting the argument that war justified limiting dissent was only part of the conversation about stifling or suppressing dissent couched in the language of freedom. Depending on who you believe, re-reading the articles about dissent during this time would lead one to believe that either everyone was against the war such that pro-war individuals were discriminated against, or that the pro-war movement was so oppressive that anyone for peace was forcibly compelled into silence. Some argued that “[t]he contention that dissent is being suppressed is nonsense” (Sherman 2002). Others, that “[a]verage citizens have been verbally bludgeoned into unquestioning silence” (Nelson 2002). This type of rhetoric – the tendency to characterize the time in visions of black and white – is evident early on. Though the “war on terrorism” had not even been officially declared, peace activists began organizing marches as early as September 2001. The line from this side of the fence was that dissent was not being heard anywhere, anytime. Adam Eidinger, a peace march coordinator, says: “You need street demonstrations to break through what is essentially a TV blackout on dissent” (Fernandez and Dvorak 2001). Though Eidinger is not entirely inaccurate (unity, not critique, was the norm), it is not true that the peace movement’s stance was not represented at all.

What this indicates, though, is that the conversation about dissent began almost immediately following the events of September 11, 2001. While most Americans felt united behind the government and the perceived need to respond to the attack on the country, there were a few voices urging caution in rushing to war – even if government intelligence agencies were reasonably sure that the enemy at the time was Osama bin Ladin and Al Queda. For the most part, however, the general sense about dissent is
illustrated in an editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle about a “national climate of intolerance for dissent.” Here, the writer states that “dissent's a dirty word” and that there is a feeling that people should “just shut up and go along with president” during this (1/6/2002). At this time there is limited exchange between newspaper discourse and responses in letters to the editor about dissent—a fact aptly represented by the headline of a New York Times article: “In Patriotic Times, Dissent is Muted” (1/29/2001). Much of the news coverage in late 2001 and early 2002 actually emphasizes the lack of dissent or paltry turnout at protests. The tone, however, is not one of lamenting but more of a matter-of-fact reporting about the unity of opinion within the country: “hardly a word of dissent has been heard publicly.”

This changes around the one-year anniversary of September 11th and amidst increased talk of invading Iraq. Newspaper coverage takes a decidedly different tone with regard to coverage of dissent: as individuals begin to take to the streets to protest, journalists begin to emphasize the stifling of dissent. The protest events that took place in October 2002 sparked a small flurry of reporting – mostly on the events themselves – but articles also begin to emerge that question the consequences of speaking out and of government attempts at limiting debate or suppressing dissent. “Let us not justify government-supported illegal and secret acts – extremism – as a means to deal with dissent” writes a team of journalists (McNish and Lacey 2002). Government attempts to “quash dissent” were portrayed as the unjust targeting of “people who seek to protect our civil rights and liberties” (“Dissent the American Way” 2002). And increased attention was paid to those allegedly “trying to limit not only dissent, not only debate, but even discussion on the matter of war with Iraq” (McCammon 2002).
While many individuals expressed exasperation at public “attempts to silence any form of dissent or questioning by accusations of being unpatriotic” others were more concerned with actions taken by the FBI and other U.S. government agencies. The Patriot Act, though not always explicitly mentioned, was seen as “squelching dissent in the name of security.” And protest organizers said that attempts to fine protesters was “an attempt to stifle legitimate political dissent, including peaceful civil disobedience.” Efforts to “clamp down on political dissent by filing criminal charges against a group for the nonviolent actions of its followers” were questioned (Garofoli 2003). One letter writer felt that “such misguided censorship only deceives ourselves” and that the American government “needn't be coddled by a public that hides its concerns and pretends that disagreement is nonexistent” (Pare 2003).

This stifling of dissent was not just felt; it has also been documented. For example, Andrew Perrin (2005) found that the events of September 11 brought about an increase in authoritarian sentiment – the tendency to “repress, censor, or punish others” – in a review of letters to the editor. Compared to letters to the editor the month prior to 9/11, letters after the “threatening event” were substantially more likely to contain rhetoric, hyperbole, and comparisons that correspond to elements and themes in Adorno’s (1950) Fascism scale as developed in *The Authoritarian Personality*. One individual said, “it has a really chilling effect on what I'm going to do or what I'm going to say.” Another suggested: “I would think twice about expressing dissent” (Stannard 2003). The penalties and tactics used by the FBI and city police during protests were criticized as stifling valid dissent because all “law abiding citizens become suspect.” Others suggest that government officials, political pundits, individual citizens, and some journalists in
the news media have relentlessly launched allegations of anti-Americanism or anti-Patriotism toward those politicians, celebrities, and citizens who had the courage to question the actions of the U.S. government since September 11, 2001 (Reese 2004).

Obviously, the discussion of attempts to suppress dissent and the feeling of fear such actions generated represent the clearest and most concrete evidence of the disciplinary function of the discourse of dissent and the incitement to silence. Ironically, a significant level of contemplation among journalists about censorship and the suppression of dissent actually emerged later in the time frame studied. “As a writer and editor, I have been censoring myself and others quite a bit” writes Michael Kinsley (2002) in an article titled “Many Americans tune in to their “Inner Ashcroft.”” Another editorial, reflecting on the post 9/11 environment argues:

overzealous officials…have suppressed civil liberties and violated
fundamental rights in their quest to root out terrorists and prevent future
attacks…debate has been muted because politicians and public officials
believe they will pay a high price for even mild criticism…journalists, too,
have been cowed by the speech police (Tucker 2003).

An editorial from the Christian Science Monitor at the time entered the debate over dissent, saying “Some people see conformity and unity as building blocks of strength, but I tend to view them as indicators that fear or intimidation is stifling helpful dissent” (Wallace 2003). But none of these writers recognize the power of the rights discourse to further prevent discussion about the war and the foreign policy of the United States. None are able to connect the stifling of dissent, the fear and the intimidation to a deliberate need not to debate the administration’s basis for waging a war on terrorism.
Talking about it, of course, would threaten the hegemonic power of the state. Thus the power of rationality was able to keep such debate off the agenda (Wahl-Jorgensen 2003). If the discourse about dissent had served in some small part as a will to knowledge, the discourse of rights could have been coupled with some sort of truth-telling about political opposition to the war on terror. Instead, this discourse of the freedom to dissent served to restrict the legitimate realm of dissent and limit its relevance.

There is a general tendency during times of war toward moralizing discourses such as this discourse of the freedom to dissent. Sonya Rose (1999) argues that “Moral discourse especially intensifies…when perceptions of difference and diversity are particularly problematic. War is just such a time” (231). She suggests that cultural panics over moral issues serve to solidify community or national identity. Her study pertains to perceived crises in sexual morality during World War II – particularly women and young girl’s sexuality. During WWII, concern over women’s sexuality and the perception of sexually adventurous women as subversive to the war effort served to re-establish the national unity and identity that wartime threatened to disrupt. Outpourings of moral discourse can be seen as indicators of times “when questions about community or national solidarity and homogeneity become highly charged” (231). War is but one time when moral discourses are used to manipulate patriotic sentiment and generate loyalty. The discourse about dissent, which was essentially a moral discourse about appropriate political speech, can also be read as an attempt to reestablish community identity and imagined unities.
Conclusion

Noam Chomsky writes, in *Necessary Illusions*:

In the democratic system, the necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means...Debate cannot be stilled, and it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns (1989, 48).

This is accomplished by setting the framework within which debate can take place and restricting the agenda to certain topics; that is, making sure that certain issues are not seen as central to the discussion and thus needn’t be raised. During the two years of coverage I have studied, journalistic reports, editorials, and letters to the editor effectively restricted the space within which the people of the United States could discuss the impending wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I have cited data that indicate that genuine, critical discussions about the substantive ideas of the peace movement were side tracked by raising the phantom of dissent as the issue in need of debate. The discourse of dissent, involving questions of patriotism, protests, and freedom, dominated editorial columns and opinion pages throughout the two years of news items under study. As mentioned, this does not indicate that discussion about the case for war was not occurring, but it
raises the important question of why a debate over political dissent itself took center stage.

The anti-war movement and the collection of demonstrations that took place between 2001 and 2003 certainly weren’t illusion or delusion (or evidence that the empowerment that dissent requires is false) (Brown 1995). However, the power and resistance articulated through this movement did not result in the capacity to alter the course toward war (in spite of the fact that many claims about the need to go to war have proven to be false). Brown (1995) suggests that modern individualism and the association of freedom with the individual, apart from any notion of responsibility, creates a permissiveness and lightness that is particular destructive of a collective project and political freedom. In addition, within a society immersed in superficiality and consumerism, this representation of dissent and dissidents could not help but present both as useless and empty concepts. All of these factors call into question the possibility of effective dissent. It is this larger cultural context in which the discourse of dissent is embedded that I turn to in chapter five. I use newspaper representations of protest and protesters to enter into the debate over social transformation created by postmodern and critical theories of resistance.

It is important to note, before doing so, that an alternative reading of this discourse might suggest that news media coverage of dissent did not function only in this way. Letters to the editor show a degree of negotiation over the meaning of dissent in the context of war: a rich example of the contested nature of discourse creation. Coverage of the anti-war protest illustrates the give and take present in defining dissent during this time. We do not see one frame clearly dominating news coverage of dissent
over the entire two years. Rather, the shape of the story of dissent changed as events unfolded. Social movement organizations and activists are seen responding to changes in public attitudes, adopting the language of patriotism for example in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience. The conversation about dissent is an illustration of how a discourse is created and challenged, its power negotiated. This issue is taken up in the next chapter, in which I analyze letters to the editor about dissent.
Dissertation Chapter 4

Dissent as a Process: Letters to the Editor

Discourse analyses within communications studies or cultural studies are typically concerned with both the structural dimensions of news media analysis and also with aspects of audience reception. Most studies, while claiming that both sides of the communication process are crucial to full understanding, are really only able to examine either macro level processes of production (in the case of framing studies) or micro level processes of communication (decoding, studies of textual meaning, for example). Combining these two sides of the process, or going beyond this methodological and theoretical division, is often difficult if not impossible.

In the case of newsmedia, for instance, the restraints of data collection often lead a researcher to only having captured one side of the process. There are a plethora of content analyses that “code” newspaper articles, news broadcasts, or other mass media genre, according to a particular variable (gender representation, violence, strikes, protest events, etc.). Once having collected such information, the researcher often has a tremendous amount of “data” that only captures the media side of what makes it into the news, how issues are framed, and, perhaps, how patterns of representation change over time. The researcher can infer editorial decision making from that data, or incorporate outside information in order to speculate about other production processes beyond the textual analysis performed. However, that researcher ventures into pure speculation once she attempts to infer anything about audience interpretation.
Systematic analysis of newspaper data has provided a rich source of information for a wide-range of sociological work. Social movement scholars have benefited the most, perhaps, from using newspaper data to study collective action (for a comprehensive review see Earl et al. 2004). Other sub-fields, such as the sociology of gender, however, have also utilized this media form. Gender scholars have used newspaper data to understand gender inequality in newsmedia, the underrepresentation of women’s issues in newspapers, and gendered patterns in advertising images (Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* established a method for investigating such images that other scholars, such as Jean Kilbourne, have replicated). Despite its relevance to a range of topic areas, interdisciplinary appeal, and the prevalence of research using newspapers as a source of date, one potentially rich source of information contained in this genre has heretofore been relatively neglected by much sociological investigation—letters to the editor.

“Letters” sections of newspapers and magazines could serve as a valuable link between “official” discourse and individual understanding and use of the language of news; they provide a vantage point (though not a perfect one) from which to observe the connection between macro and micro aspects of communication. Almost accidentally, my exploration of the discourse about dissent led to a consideration of “letters” as an indispensable element in understanding both the power and scope of newsmedia as a disciplinary mechanism in contemporary capitalist society. Reading letters to the editor opened up an alternative way of looking at journalistic framing of the idea of dissent that led me to question determinate models of the power of discourse. By looking beyond the dominant frames, letters challenge the ultimate primacy and power typically granted to news text. Attention to individual interpretations of and argument over the meaning of
dissent, acknowledges the “reader”’s contribution to the process of producing a reading of
a text (Radway 1991). They also reveal the contested nature of discourse formation. In
this chapter I describe the discussion about dissent that took place in letters to the editor
between 2001 and 2003 in order to illustrate key aspects of a dialogic theory of discourse
formation. I explore the relative strengths of using letters to the editor to tap into micro-
level patterns of discourse formation. I conclude by offering some initial conclusions
about incorporating letters to the editor into formal methodological approaches to frame
analysis.

Letters to the Editor as a Discursive Site

There is no identifiable body of literature, really, that is engaged in examining Letters to
the Editor. There have been several small-scale studies that assess the composition of
letter writers, editorial bias in the selection of letters, or the attitudes editorial staff hold
about letter writers, but that work is limited and no large-scale analyses have been
attempted (Perrin 2005). Work that analyzes the content of letters to the editor has thus
far been used predominantly to contribute to discourse or framing theory. The few
studies that have emerged are proof of the range of other theoretical problems these
documents may also apply to: race and affirmative action (Richardson & Lancendorfer
2004), nationalism and authoritarianism (Perrin 2005), media and civil society (Morrison
and Love 1996), and prejudice and negative-othering (Richardson 2001).

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15 There are, however, a variety of interesting historical collections: volumes of letters to the editor either
from a particular person (as an example, see Letters to the press by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; The Sherlock
Holmes letters, 1st ed. by Richard Lancelyn Green; Agitations: letters to the press 1875-1950 by Bernard
Shaw) or a particular paper (as an example, see Marriage or celibacy?: The Daily telegraph on a Victorian
dilemma by John M. Robson; Dear editor: Letters to Time magazine, 1923-1984 by Phil Pearman; Letters
to the editor: Two hundred years in the life of an American town by Gerard Stropnicky).
From the outset, it appears as though letters to the editor allow access to a
particular section of the public sphere in which debate is allowed to develop. It might
also serve as an outlet from which alternative discourses are able to emerge. However, it
appears as though the type of publication plays a large role in which voices are allowed
access to this “public.” Andrew Morrison and Alison Love (1996) examine letters from
two Zimbabwean magazines throughout the 1990s, using critical discourse analysis.
Their work suggests that letters to the editor in independently owned magazines “provide
a site for non-elite writers to engage in an alternative discourse to the “celebratory”
discourse of the state-controlled daily press” (39). John Richardson (2001) uses a
“pragma-dialectical” theory of argumentation in his discussion of letters printed in the
elite British broadsheet press. But his use of a genre accessible only to elite constituents
(usually “predictable” sources such as government officials) suggests that letters to the
editor can also function as a site that reinforces rather than challenges institutionalized
discourses.

It is important to note, however, that neither of these studies utilized mainstream
newspapers for their research. Andrew Perrin (2005) uses published letters to the editor
in seventeen U.S. daily newspapers in documenting authoritarian discourse following
September 11. He suggests that letters to the editor are a particularly instructive
“documentary byproduct of everyday civic life and forum in which citizens choose to
participate in a public sphere” (171). Indeed, editorial pages make newspapers one of the
few media formats that are accessible to the public (Lasn 1999, Perrin 2005). With the
exception of the Internet, with its relatively “democratic” nature and low cost, most other
mass media genres (film, television, publishing, etc) have become increasingly
inaccessible—especially due to increased entrance or production costs, monopoly control, etc. Despite the potential influence editors and other gatekeepers may yield over the content of editorial pages—though, no incontrovertible evidence of selection bias exists, especially in mid-size papers—it appears as though letters to the editor are a good way to study political expression (Hart 2001). Letters typically present the range of views on an issue and “represent the relative numbers of letters received on each side of a controversy” (Perrin 2005, 172; see also Hart 2001). They offer a more robust indicator of public mood, moreover, than opinion polls. And it does not appear that letter writers are significantly different from non-writers, nor are they chronic letter writers (“churning out letters by the dozen”), despite myths to the contrary (Hart 2001).

Letters to the editor, then, allow us to leave the anonymous discourse of news to enter into the realm of individual expression (Martin-Rojo 1995). That is, we are able to move from simply exposing the power of language presented in the news to examining individual-level interpretations, negotiations over, and reiterations of discourse. This vantage point assumes an active audience rather than a passive consumer: instead of seeing a mass of individuals passively receptive to discursive frames and dominant cultural meanings, letters to the editor reveal an active audience of readers who write in order to express their political views. Thus, letters to the editor offer researchers interested in media effects a means through which “to reassert the essential dependency of meaning upon the interaction between the reader and the text” (Radway 1991). While text oriented theories emphasize the confrontation between text and reader and rely on a simple “transmission-reception” model in which the sender’s message is transmitted—
accurately—through the text, reader theories “conceive of reading as “production” or “construction,” as opposed to reception or even simple consumption” (467).

Seeing reading as a productive process means that, as Umberto Eco argues, “the same message can be decoded from different points of view and by reference to diverse systems of conventions” (qtd. in Radway 1991, 468). Letters to the editor, I think, offer a glimpse into this process of first decoding media messages and then interpreting and creating a new and meaningful reading of media frames. Therefore, discursive analysis of letters to the editor allows for a “bottom-up” approach by using “texts produced by “non-elite” writers” and by “embodying a “popular” critical discourse” that sees this as a site for social transformation (Morrison & Love 1996). Individual letters can be seen as political expressions of the writers’ interactions with the discourse about dissent found in earlier newspaper articles and editorials. Using letters to the editor alongside content analyses of newspaper articles allows us to understand both the micro- and macro- levels of discourse production.

This approach also escapes a problem inherent in Foucault’s genealogical method: his focus on the creation of discourse stands in contradiction to his use of established discourses as evidence of that creative process. His work on the history of sexuality, as one example, utilizes recorded accounts of a particular discourse (psychiatric textbooks, intellectual writing, novels, etc.) as his source material and infers from this written work the creation of a discourse of sexual repression. In drawing out the various ways in which Victorians seemed, in actuality, to be obsessed with talking about sex, Foucault certainly exposes the ideological nature of the “puritan” condemnation of sex and, especially, talking about such matters in public. But his work on the history of sexuality
seems to fall short in terms of accounting for the negotiation over the discourse about sexuality. Marx, most famously, argued that the ideas expounded in official discourses (such as those taking places in the legal and academic fields) are appropriately thought of as the ideas of the ruling class. As such, these discourses must be approached with a skepticism attuned to the function and the maintenance of power served by elite ideologies. Studying the ruling ideas of the Victorian era with regard to sexuality—if we are correct in supposing that such ideas are most likely to find prominence in published academic material—does not allow us to see the formation of ideas about sexuality. Such analysis captures only the codified form of the result of that process. In other words, by looking back at the official history of sexuality in psychiatric publications, Foucault is not able to capture the process of discourse formation.

Letters to the editor reveal the contentious interactions that take place among individuals (and between individuals and institutions like the newsmedia) throughout the process of discourse formation. The patterns found in exchanges surrounding a particular issue suggest, as do recent efforts to better understand collective action framing, that a dialogic approach is better able to accommodate the dynamic, conflict-ridden, and dialectical nature of discourse formation. Social movement scholars have thus far embraced the cultural aspects of movement organization and the “meaning-work” that is accomplished through framing processes, acknowledging that this is a contested and constantly evolving process (Esacove 2004). But this acknowledgement has not led to empirical examples of the process of meaning-making, leaving the privileging of master frames, or the depiction of them as relativity stable systems of meaning, unchallenged (Steinberg 1998; Esacove 2004). Sewell (1999) suggests that the process of meaning
making, or the creation of cultural coherence resembles a “dialectical dance” in which “Dominant and oppositional groups interact constantly, each undertaking its initiatives with the other in mind. Even when they attempt to overcome or undermine each other, they are mutually shaped” (Sewell 1999).

In the case of discourse construction or framing processes, “frames and counterframes evolve in relationship to each other and cannot be disentangled from each other…the frame/counterframe are jointly created and recreated by social movement actors through an iterative, dialogic process” (Esacove 2004, 72). Discourse formation, then, is not unidirectional; it is produced through the interactions of individuals, groups, or institutions.

The work of the Bakhtin Circle has had a tremendous impact on the reorientation of discourse analyses. Bakhtin (1994), in his work on “dialogic discourse,” articulates a theory of discourse that asserts the production of meaning through social interaction. For Bakhtinians, language and meaning are not fixed or free-floating. “Signs” as carriers of meaning come into being only through interaction, on “interindividual territory.” Language is not embedded in individual cognition but in the material conditions that determine the discursive forms of social interaction across a range of communicative events. Changes in the forms of speech interchange, then, offer a glimpse into changes in social and ideological formations. Words become the grounds for class struggle – “different classes seek to reaccentuate a word with their meaning” (Bakhtin 1994, 54). Therefore, “[b]ecause words are involved in every sphere of social intercourse and activity they offer the most sensitive index of social change” (12). Discourse, in this sense, “is inherently dialogic…utterances are always in complex ways responses to other
utterances” (Bakhtin 1994, 13). It is also oppositional in that a word provokes a counter word; a frame provokes a counterframe, discourse provokes a counterdiscourse. There is a constant struggle between actors to invest discourse with their preferred meanings. That struggle often leads, however, to the establishment of hegemony: “an essential part of the power produced through discourse, and a cornerstone of hegemony, is the capacity to construct silences within common sense” (Steinberg 1998, 855).

Steinberg (1998) suggests that the work of the Bakhtin Circle offers an equally valuable reorientation for framing theory, arguing that we cannot see discourse “as a simply instrumental process of collective action” (856). Rather than seeing “framing” as the use of external meaning symbols in order to generate resonance, it is better conceived as a process of organizing a confluence of voices. In addition, Steinberg says, “dialogic theory focuses our attention on the pull and tug of hegemony and counter-hegemony between [movement activists and media processes], rather than a more uni-directional analysis of how media processes or organizational communication establish the boundaries of political discourse” (858). We should be focused on the context specific processes through which meaning is produced, frames and discourses created.

By studying the dialogical patterns evident in social movement framing processes, we can observe the creation, negotiation, and evolution of particular discourses. I suggest that the same examination be extended to analysis of letters to the editor. My hope is that we will be able to capture the negotiations over particular frames as well as moments of individual meaning creation. If frames are in fact created dialogically, we should be able to see the negotiation or interactions that take place between various movements and countermovements. We should also see dialogic patterns of discourse formation taking
place between movements or groups of individuals and news media—a fact that I think is evident in the discussion of dominant frames in the “official” discourse about dissent described in Chapter Three. And, thirdly, at the intersection of news media, individual readings, and movement activity, we should be able to pinpoint individual level negotiations over discourse formation. Thus, by incorporating letters to the editor we are able to capture a third level of complexity in the framing process: individual negotiations over discursive meanings and the potential impact of such micro-level processes on movement or media frames and the boundaries set up by the discourse itself. Using letters to the editor that comment about dissent against the U.S. led invasions against Afghanistan and Iraq, I hope to illustrate the additional analytical strength this type of newspaper data can add to both framing and discourse theory. That strength lies in the ability to track dialogical patterns that occur throughout the process of discourse production, to explore negotiations over discursive meaning, and to track the type of context that may lead to stabilization of a discursive formation.

**Dialogical Patterns in the Debate over Dissent**

What is immediately noticeable about the content of letters to the editor between 2001 and 2003 is that there is a clear pattern in the themes found in the content of the letters. Work with letters to the editor thus far has focused on specific issues or particular events, in which case one would expect to find increased preoccupation with that particular topic within sampled letters. However, it is not necessarily the case that one would expect to find either prolonged attention to a topic or evidence of discursive progression: shifts in the content of letters, theme, or tone throughout a particular period of time. There is evidence of both in the sample of letters to the editor about dissent. In fact, the same
themes found in the mainstream discourse about dissent, as evident in journalist accounts of dissent, are repeated throughout the sample of letters to the editor that parallel “official” accounts. However, the thematic pattern in the micro-level debate over dissent does not replicate the pattern found at the organizational level. Letter writers were prone to utilize themes found in newspaper discourse more generally, but they did not appropriate all themes raised in journalistic accounts nor did they introduce them at the same historical junctures.

**Freedom**

For example, the notion that dissent is a valuable American freedom is raised almost immediately following the events of September 11, 2001. Letters to the editor immediately begin to take up the question of whether or not “dissent makes a nation stronger.” Initial concern over dissent in letters to the editor suggests notions like: “This “patriotic time” is also a time to remember that tolerance of a free press keeps our democracy vibrant” (Cooper 2001). Other letters that appeared as early as September 2001 argue that it “would be chilling if one of the first casualties of our war for freedom was our right to debate all opinions vigorously” (Blakeman 2001). One writer pleaded, “May this terrible time in our country not usher in our own era of repression. May we never forget the value we place on dissent, one of our most cherished blessings” in a letter titled “Dissent is one of our most valued freedoms” (Moore 2001). Some letter writers disagreed, however, saying that there is no guaranteed right to freedom to dissent. One writer says, “I do not believe there is a “rightful place” for dissent in America and do not find that stated anywhere in the declaration of independence” (Scanlon 2002).
Individual responses to the Heaphy speech described in Chapter Three also indicate that not everyone adhered to the fundamental “right” to freedom of dissent: “Heaphy tried to inflict her unpatriotic views on them…I applaud those students who forced her from the podium with boos and jeers! I think that these young people understand that more is at risk than unlimited civil liberties” (Gose 2002).

Though the question about freedom to dissent is also found in journalistic accounts immediately following the events of September 11, 2001, the predominant concern is over a lack of dissent. According to journalist frames, while most Americans felt united behind the government and the perceived need to respond to the attack on the country, there were a few voices urging caution in rushing to war – even if we were reasonably sure that the enemy at the time was Osama bin Ladin and Al Queda. Much of the news coverage emphasizes the lack of dissent or paltry turnout at protests. The tone, however, is not one of lamenting but more of a matter-of-fact reporting about the unity of opinion within the country: “hardly a word of dissent has been heard publicly.” Freedom, though an obvious concern of letter writers early on, does not dominate news coverage until late 2002 and early 2003.

The Suppression of Dissent, or Lack Thereof

The question of whether or not there has been a significant crackdown on or suppression of dissent emerges as a predominant theme of letters to the editor in late October 2001 and continues until about March of 2002. Interestingly, public debate over the suppression of dissent foreshadows journalistic appropriations of that frame. “Suppression” or lack thereof was clearly a hot-button topic for public expression about
the rightful place of dissent in U.S. society. Though a majority of writers claimed that
the suppression or stifling of dissent was a significant problem, a number of writers
argued to the contrary. “I haven't noticed any crackdown on dissenting opinion” one
writer says, “the dissenters have been speaking their “daring” thoughts with ease on a
regular basis” (Patton 2001). That writer continues, “As for dissenters, I respect their
right to dissent…But that doesn’t mean that much of that dissent is intelligent or useful.”
Others are less balanced, suggesting that peace activists are confusing “suppression” with
simple criticism. Dominic Palmer (2002) argues, “Speech today is every bit as free as it
was six months ago. It is merely that the far-left-wing speech that previously went
unchallenged is now drawing criticism. Freedom of speech does not promise the speaker
immunity.” Indeed, letter writers are far less constrained that journalists when it comes
to talk about dissent:

How sadly ironic that those on the left are being shouted down by those
who don't want to hear dissenting viewpoints. Sad, because it truly is a
blow to our precious tradition of free speech. Ironic, because after years
of treating conservatives and libertarians in just such a manner, politically
correct liberals in academia, politics, and the arts are outraged to receive
similar scorn now. Maybe the silver lining will be that when the current
mood of “I don’t want to hear it” dies down, there will be a greater
willingness to treat all voices, from all parts of the political spectrum, with
respect” (Hitchcock 2002).

Writers concerned about the suppression of dissent were equally passionate, however,
and eventually won out over those arguing that suppression was an illusion. That is,
more writers expressed concern over the stifling of dissent than argued that speech was freer than ever. A group of writers from the Boston Globe expressed the following apprehensions: “I believe that there are many people who feel that it would be unwise to voice their legitimate opinions and concerns in the current atmosphere” (Rossow 2002); “a former history teacher of venerable age, said she hadn't felt such a repressive atmosphere in our country since the McCarthy area” (Alderman & Alderman 2002); “I value all of the sacrosanct rights I am entitled to as an American…if we as a nation can be intimidated into no longer tolerating differences of opinion, then we have become no better than they” (Miller 2002).

Concern over the suppression of dissent does not enter the official discourse about dissent until around the first anniversary of September 11 and with increased talk of invading Iraq. Around this time newspaper coverage takes a decidedly different tone with regard to coverage of dissent. As individuals begin to take to the streets to protest, journalists finally begin to emphasize the stifling of dissent. The protest events that took place in October 2002 sparked a small flurry of reporting – mostly on the events. Articles begin to emerge that question the consequences of speaking out and of government attempts at limiting debate or suppressing dissent.

**Patriotism**

Questioning the patriotism of dissidents also emerges in letters to the editor prior to concern in mainstream journalistic accounts. Throughout late 2002 and early 2003, the predominant theme in letters sampled emphasized the problem of “patriotism” discussed in the previous chapter. These letters to the editor suggest that the label of dissent as
unpatriotic emerged in popular discourse before it was taken up in mainstream journalistic accounts. It is not until protests peaked in January, February and March of 2003, that newspaper articles relied on questions of patriotism and loyalty to America in the framing of dissent.

**Courage.** Interestingly, letters to the editor also took up the question of whether or not dissent was “courageous” at this time—a framing of the issue that never emerged in journalistic or movement organization speech. One writer suggests that dissidents “will never know the meaning of courage. It takes courage to stop a homicidal dictator…Sleep well, dissidents, because America’s bravest and most courageous will make sure you wake up (Nevin 2003). On the opposite side of the spectrum, movement supporters praised the couragelessness of protestors’ willingness to stand up for their beliefs: “He has obviously researched his options to thoughtfully voice his opinions, has gone through the correct channels and is being allowed to speak up for peace and social consciousness…He shows the original American spirit in every way…I am proud” (MacMurdo-Reading 2003).

**Duty.** References to the need for dissent, as a fundamental democratic duty (or as a right and freedom the Founders fought for) reemerges in letters to the editor in tandem with similar journalistic framings of dissent. Throughout February, March and April, both letter writers and journalists simultaneously raised concern over troop safety, aiding and abetting the enemy, and the freedom to dissent during a time of war with equal consistency. Often invoked was the idea that suppressing dissent went against American ideals and that the “Founder's insistence on dissent” was “a part of the democratic dynamic or citizen's natural right” (McCarthy 2003). Many times, dissent was described
as “the solemn duty of those asked to fight, fund and support this unjust and unnecessary war” (Galizio 2003). Because dissent is a core American value, one writer thought “Even if James Madison (architect of the Constitution and Bill of Rights) approved of going to war with Iraq, he would applaud the peaceful protest of war” (VanRyzin 2003). He also recommends reading the Federalist Papers. One writer remarked, the “flag represents both right and obligation to dissent” (Citret 2003).

Supporting the troops. Finally, the question of the relationship between supporting the troops and protesting the war was very controversial in writers’ letters. One writer asks, “Are both soldiers and protesters patriots?” and suggests that “it behooves us to consider that if the antiwar movement can take credit for giving Saddam Hussein more time to disarm, it also gave him time to prepare. I wonder how the men and women of our military, some of whom will not return from Iraq, would greet the conclusion: ‘Both U.S. soldiers and war protesters are performing a public service. And both are patriots’” (Hawkins 2003). Others argue that not all speech, especially that which might harm the troops, should be constitutionally protected speech (Taylor 2003). Many more letters to the editor suggest that dissent does harm to the troops or gives aid to the enemy than not.

Settling on a Final Theme?

The last group of letters to the editor, from the end of March to the end of April 2003, does not fall into any particular category or theme within the discourse about dissent. It appears as though the start of aggression against Iraq created quite an upheaval in public debate over dissent. It also appears, in popular discourse, that no single frame
dominated discussion; no particular discursive framing was able to attain hegemonic control. In fact, during this time, the notions of freedom, suppression, patriotism, endangering the troops, and aiding and abetting the enemy appeared equally in letters to the editor. Whether this is a problem of the timeline of this study, I am not sure. It is possible that, had I looked beyond September 2003, I might have found that one theme had come to define the discourse about dissent. However, it is important to note that discourse about dissent trails off significantly after April 2003. Though I gathered newspaper articles and letters to the editor through September, the search yielded few cases of either.

What is most noticeably absent from letters to the editor is any reference whatsoever to anti-Vietnam war protests or to the student movement of the sixties. Although it appears as a dominant frame in journalistic discourse about dissent, references to Vietnam Veterans or “hippies” is almost entirely absent from writers’ expressions about the legitimacy or appropriateness of dissent throughout this time frame. Very few Vietnam-era protesters or Vietnam veterans themselves were represented in editorial pages. I think it is fair to assume that although journalists found this to be a particularly easy way to discuss and frame the anti-war protests in 2001-3, it was not of interest, necessarily, to the public debate over dissent. We can assume that either individuals were not swayed by insistent references to Vietnam-era protests or that the particularly compelling issue was not whether present-day dissent was or was not a replication of the sixties-era peace movement. Although movement organizations found themselves involved in a struggle with newsmedia over the definition of their efforts in relation to anti-Vietnam War protests, the comparison did not gain much traction,
apparently, in public discourse. While news coverage of the protests or of the anti-war message almost always used the 60s as a way to tell the story of dissent, concern over this issue simply did not make it into editorial pages. The complete absence of “the sixties” from letters to the editor leads me to believe that this absence is more than a matter of gatekeeping. However powerful that era might be in terms of our understanding of “protest,” it did not, apparently, have as strong of an influence over individual-level definitions of dissent or the boundaries of a discourse about dissent.

It is evident that, as a whole, letters to the editor about dissent illustrate an observable pattern in political expression. In large part, the points of contention in letters mirror the larger discourse about dissent represented in journalistic reports on anti-war protests. However, letter writers were also clearly concerned with issues that led the discourse about dissent in editorial pages to veer away from “official” speech. Letters to the editor establish a unique historical account of the discourse about dissent.

Negotiations: The Interplay of Discourses of Dissent

Interesting details also emerge from close readings of particular exchanges in letters to the editor. Editorial pages are not simply a site from which to view public involvement in an ongoing discourse about dissent. While they provide a particularly rich environment for observing larger patterns of political expression among engaged letter writers, there is more we can glean from this source of data. Letter writers can be seen as raising pressing concerns about dissent as they grappled with the meaning and place of anti-war protests in the current socio-cultural context. That is, they provide an arena for formal expression
of critical discourse heard in public realms other than political rallies, official debate, or in organizational frames. They permit “access to a “popular” form of political discourse voiced by contributors from the wider society” (Morrison and Love 1996, 49). Though many studies of letters to the editor have concentrated on the linguistic configurations, “lexico-grammatical” features, or argumentative structures of the letters themselves, I prefer a strategy that concentrates on broader discursive features of letters. Linguistic analysis of letter structure has tremendous potential for understanding political expression. However, I focus on ideological aspects of letters to the editor and suggest they also offer a picture of the argumentation that takes place during public debate over discourse, the individual-level, context specific moments that work to establish the meaning of dissent, and the resonance of particular frames among the populace.

In the following section I analyze three exchanges that took place in editorial pages. These exchanges were chosen because they encompass a relatively large number of letters about dissent within a single daily circulation paper. They represent three unique points in the stages of the anti-war movement, from March 2002 to March 2003. Some of the letters are provided in full to allow readers to develop a sense of their tone, content, and form. Attention is paid to the content of letters (especially the presence or absence of dominant media frames of dissent), the debate established through the writer’s exchanges (the particular boundaries set up through discourse), as well as patterns in the selection of letters for publication (with an interest in the diversity of viewpoints available).
Arguments about Dissent

The first set of letters was published in *The Boston Globe* on March 10, 2002. This selection represents a particularly unusual case in that the exchange involves 10 letters in total, all in response to the same article in *The Globe’s* Sunday Magazine. Mark Jurkowitz’s article in the January 27th edition of the magazine, “The Big Chill: One casualty of the war on terrorism is America’s boisterous discourse,” sparked tremendous public attention according to “Letters” standards. The Jurkowitz article provided a very substantial analysis of the presence or absence of dissent in the post-9/11 environment.

While he presents the case for both sides of this argument, the balance of the article indicates that Jurkowitz finds that protest, contrary views, and unpopular thoughts have been limited because of explicit political moves, organizational decision-making, and self-censorship at all levels. All letters, in response, were expressly about dissent, specifically whether or not the “suppression of dissent” was reality or illusion.

The Jurkowitz article fits neatly into the prevailing official discourse at the time of its publication. During late 2001 and through March 2002, as mentioned above, journalistic reports about protest framed dissent in terms of whether or not controversial speech was being suppressed, usually commenting on its notable absence from public discussion or argument. Letters to the editor tended to do the same. In fact, the letters in this exchange were evenly divided into two camps: dissent *is* being censored versus

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16 I base this mainly on my observations of letters to the editor in this sample. Only the two other exchanges discussed in this section represent cases where a particular story incited significant reaction. Most articles generate a modest 3 to 5-letter response rate – that is, 3-5 letters submitted to the paper were selected for publication. I assume that “letters published” is representative of the “tip of the iceberg”: the greater number of letters regarding a particular topic that appear in print are an indication that a greater number of letters were received. I have an inclination that this is true, though no concrete empirical evidence of this fact. This conclusion, however, seems consistent with other findings regarding editorial decision-making.
dissent is not being censored. Here are two particularly inflammatory examples from this ten-letter exchange that typify this bifurcation.

**Example 1:**

I read "The Big Chill" (January 27) with wry amusement. Author Mark Jurkowitz, however, is dead wrong: Speech today is every bit as free as it was six months ago. It is merely that the far-left-wing speech that previously went unchallenged is now drawing criticism. Freedom of speech does not promise the speaker immunity from reaction to or consequences from that speech. The problem is that the sanctimonious left-wingers cannot stand it when someone questions their proclamations. For years, those of more conservative bent have endured this type of opprobrium from those same self-styled prophets who now caterwaul about unfairness. Globe readers know the drill. Antiabortion: misogynist. Question affirmative action: racist. Cut taxes: kill poor children. Pro-religion and prayer: fundamentalist. The worm has turned. Clearheaded Americans now question what they once accepted. For those whose skin is too thin or whose arguments are too weak to defend their free speech, here is some free advice: Shut up.

–Dominic Palmer, Needam (The Boston Globe, March 2002; 3)

**Example 2:**

President Bush's advice, shortly after the World Trade Center attacks, was to go on with our lives, spend freely, and, essentially, to continue to be American. I say we should take that advice to heart. Let's see if our Constitution still stands - or
did the terrorists actually score a victory against freedom on September 11? So, while I acknowledge that this may seem like an inflammatory suggestion, I think we should all put "Vote for bin Laden" signs on our front lawns, just to show those zealots that we, as Americans, can still stand tall and refuse to be intimidated. I value all the sacrosanct rights I am entitled to as an American. However, if we as a nation can be intimidated into no longer tolerating differences of opinion, then we have become no better than they.

–Meg Miller, Newburyport (The Boston Globe, March 2002; 3)

The most provocative letters to the editor illustrate just how deeply entrenched the debate over dissent really was. Outside of the realm of “objective” journalism, there was a real, vigorous argument over free speech and censorship. Not all letter writers relied upon such pointed argumentative strategies for expressing their opinion, of course. The following letters represent less pointed arguments about how receptive the public was to dissent.

**Example 3:**

Mark Jurkowitz and many of the sources he quotes either don't understand the difference between criticism and censorship or won't acknowledge that there is a difference. Freedom of expression does not imply or guarantee freedom from criticism. The contention that dissent is being suppressed is nonsense. One need only pick up any number of publications, turn on the radio or TV, or visit antiwar Web sites to see the president roundly and personally criticized and to hear the latest criticism of the American efforts against terrorism. The fact that so many
dissenters have retreated in the face of criticism says more about the lack of
courage of their convictions than any pressures for conformity. Perhaps some of
those decrying censorship should identify whom they are being censored by.
Jurkowitz wonders when dissent will once again be popular. The answer: When
the dissenters can present coherent arguments instead of complaining about
nonexistent censorship.

—Steve Sherman, West Roxbury (The Boston Globe, March 2002; 28)

Example 4:
Mark Jurkowitz accurately assesses the public response to September 11 and a
general willingness to suspend civil liberties for security in the abstract, even
among liberals. However, the article does not explicitly discuss which
constitutional rights are being abrogated and how this affects all of us. As long as
issues are discussed in the generalities of sound bites, the real nature of what is
being taken away by the USA Patriot Act and other measures is covered up by the
"If you're not with us, you're pro-terrorist" rhetoric of the Bush administration. It
is irresponsible to write on this topic without documenting how our hard-won
rights to free speech, free press, due process, privacy, and free association and our
rights to know what our leaders are doing are being stripped away. As the
American people become more aware and emotions subside, I predict a shift
again in public attitudes.

—Marilyn Levin, Newton (The Boston Globe, March 2002; 28)
The ground upon which writers on both sides of this debate stake their claim is interesting, and distinct from the majority of writing about dissent by journalists in the newsmedia. Letter writers who argued that speech was not being suppressed consistently suggested (in 4/5 letters) that the liberal left was simply reacting – irrationally – against criticism of its position. It was not that individuals were no longer free to express oppositional ideas, but that the left was getting a taste of its own medicine; people were questioning left-leaning proclamations and the ideas were not gaining any traction. These writers – drawing upon a rhetorical opposition between democrats and republicans, Left and Right – all claimed that The Right had been experiencing similar treatment from The Left for years. With the tables turned, and few people dissenting against the invasion of Afghanistan, The Left was now finally experiencing criticism over its anti-war position. Liberal fantasies about the retraction of civil rights were simply attempts to drum up political support. Criticism, these writers argued, is different from censorship: speech was not being censored, and “freedom of expression does not imply or guarantee freedom from criticism” (Sherman 2002).

Writers arguing that freedom of expression was being censored took a decidedly different position. Their letters made no reference to a left-right political divide in the country’s politics. Rather, they referred almost uniformly to the post-9/11 environment. Writers agreed that Jurkowitz “accurately assesses” the willingness to revoke civil liberties, the emphasis on “security” over free speech, and the “repressive” atmosphere in the country. Less argumentative in nature, these writers reflected on their own fear and the fear others had expressed of speaking out. Nearly all predicted a future time when,
after the effects of September 11 fade, public debate and dissent would be tolerated again.\textsuperscript{17}

It seems clear that during the time the newsmedia were framing the issue of dissent as a question of whether or not speech was being censored, public debate also focused on this discussion. Discourse about dissent was constructed around the question of suppression in journalistic accounts and taken up in that form by individuals. The published letters also give readers the sense that only one of two positions can be taken up: suppression is nonsense or there is an atmosphere of fear of speaking out. What is particularly interesting to me is how incompatible arguments on both sides are given that they are involved in ostensibly the same debate. Neither side is really talking to the other, but past each other. One cannot contest the statement that September 11 has silenced debate by recourse to the argument that freedom of speech does not entitle someone to immunity from criticism, or vice versa. These letters, at least, are not evidence of “debate” in the sense of directly engaging and critiquing a point of view.

I think we see evidence, then, of the influence of media frames on public discourse – letter writers all engaged the question of whether dissent was being suppressed – but we also have proof that individuals did not merely adopt this construction of the debate. Individuals clearly grappled with the question at hand, and their arguments for and against are sometimes outside of the range of those typically given in mainstream discourse about dissent. This is especially true for letters to the editor that argued against suppression; less so for those that advocated the reality of censorship. Personal reports of a fear of speaking out, coupled with concern over civil

\textsuperscript{17} Interestingly, all five letters supporting the idea that dissent was being suppressed were written by women, all five against the existence of censorship were written by men.
liberties post 9/11 were commonly found in newsmedia discourse about dissent when the issue was framed in terms of a question of suppression. These letters, however, are the only place where I have found the argument that the left was, in essence, “getting what it deserved.”

What Dissent Means

Letters to the editor can also serve as a way of assessing what people “do” with the texts they read. Unlike ethnographic studies that attempt to identify interpretive communities and then use interviewing techniques that explore text selection and readings (Radway 1991), access to editorial pages provides similar information without the tremendous amount of work involved in conducting such research. Though not a perfect stand-in for interviewing, letters to the editor provide a much larger range of this type of data than even the largest interview project. Letters could also be an excellent source for preliminary investigations, which would then contribute to the structure of ethnographic fieldwork. Using several examples from an exchange in The Star Tribune (Minneapolis) from March 9, 2003, I explore a particular moment in constructing the meaning of dissent: in this case, writers are responding to journalistic discourse about dissent that utilizes the “patriotism” frame. Using the content of these letters to the editor, I try to “discover what they did with the text to produce their characteristic interpretation” and “to explore the nature of their reaction” to this framing of dissent (Radway 1991).

Two letters appear below, representing a positive and negative reaction to the definition of dissent as “patriotic.” In order to provide additional context, I have also
included the full text of the editorial to which letter writers were responding; it appeared in the *Tribune* on March 2, the previous Sunday.

**Original Editorial**

*Patriotism; What it is, what it isn't*

A curious and contradictory perspective on "patriotism" is abroad in the land, and it deserves to be debunked. You see it in letters to the editor, in personal conversations and in yard signs.

It goes something like this: Those protesting against a possible war with Iraq should be very thankful they have the freedom to speak out. They also should remember that if they lived in Iraq, they could be killed for opposing Saddam Hussein's policies in a similar manner. That they can speak out so openly they owe to millions of American men and women who risked and often gave their lives fighting to protect that very freedom.

So far, true and good. But then comes the kicker, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit: Americans owe a debt to those who fought for their freedoms that must be repaid by forswearing those very freedoms. Protesting may be an individual right, but it dishonors the sacrifice of many.

There's a new lawn sign around that says, "Liberate Iraq. Support our troops." The implication is that in order to support "our troops," you must be for liberating Iraq through military force, on Washington's timetable.

That logic is flawed. The debt Americans owe those who have fought on their behalf - really a sacred debt - is to participate fully, robustly in the public life of
this nation. Nothing dishonors the many generations of American troops more thoroughly than refusing to take seriously the freedoms they preserved. Just waving a flag or a protest placard won't do; too many do one or the other without really having a clue about what's at issue.

Americans who honor their debt take their civic responsibility as seriously as troops take combat. They study the issues; they agonize over policy choices; they listen to all sides; they express themselves vigorously.

And they never, ever challenge the patriotism of someone with a different point of view. (Star Tribune (Minneapolis) 2003; 4AA)

Example 5:

Not all dissent is patriotic

Your March 2 editorial on patriotism argues that Americans who take their civic responsibility seriously should "never, ever challenge the patriotism of someone with a different point of view." Certainly there is no reason whatsoever to challenge the patriotism of someone for arguing "No War with Iraq" or "Give Peace a Chance." But what if someone is carrying a sign that says "America: Axis of Evil"? Or carrying a sign that identifies Uncle Sam as a war criminal or a Nazi storm trooper? Or if someone burns the American flag? Such statements should be constitutionally protected speech. But if patriotism is the expression of love and devotion to one's country, it seems perfectly fair to point out that people expressing such sentiments are acting in an unpatriotic manner. Moreover, it seems perfectly fair to challenge the patriotism of people who apparently have no
difficulty in marching beside such unpatriotic sentiments, even if their own signs happen to say something different.

—Timothy Taylor (*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) 2003; 4AA)

**Example 6:**

*Democracy 101*

Thank you, Star Tribune, for your excellent editorial of March 2 on what patriotism is, and what it isn't. Strangers and family members alike have attacked me for being anti-American simply because I vigorously oppose U.S. foreign policy decisions. Patriotism involves more than slapping American flags on your vehicle. It is not unpatriotic to look closely at an issue and then protest a government stance that one truly believes will harm U.S. interests and other human beings. I am also tired of being told that I shouldn't protest because people in nations like Iraq or Pakistan don't have the right to protest. What rational thought is behind that? The American experience is defined by the freedom to express differing points of view. It is profoundly disturbing, even chilling, that so many citizens today can't comprehend this important and basic principle of democratic government.

—Kristina Gronquist (*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) 2003; 4AA)

These two letters serve as excellent representatives of the discussion of patriotism contained in this particular group of letters. They also illustrate the larger conversation about linking dissent to patriotism in a time of war that I have described in this and
previous chapters. I argued earlier that the closer in time we get to the start of armed conflict with Iraq, the more frequently dissent is discussed in the context of patriotic duty and the need to support the troops. In this sense, these letters and this editorial mimic broader discursive patterns. There appears, then to be a significant connection between the patriotism-dissent link established in journalistic coverage of dissent and individual writers’ formulation of their ideas about political opposition. Although overall patterns in the discourse about dissent differ between newspaper articles and readers letters, these letters illustrate that many individuals took up reporter’s framings of dissent as a question of patriotism.

For readers, however, the answer to the question is complex. Both of the above examples illustrate the important distinctions made on both sides of the debate. For the reader who argues “not all dissent is patriotic,” there is a line drawn between what should be “protected speech” and what should not: advocating peace vs. calling Uncle Sam a war criminal, for example. He essentially arguing that dissent in general should be protected as free speech but some speech crosses the thin line of patriotism to one’s country. The same is true for the reader who argues that dissent is a patriotic duty. She wishes to draw a distinction between what counts as patriotism also, though for her the bigger question seems to be where one draws the line between “real” vs. “superficial” patriotism (protesting vs. magnetic flags on cars).

The elaborations on the question “Is dissent patriotic?” found in these and other letters indicate to me a fairly substantial level of interaction with official discourses about dissent. As in the previous section, the individuals here are not simply regurgitating newspaper text. They are engaging with, questioning, and generating a conceptualization
of dissent as they read, write, and debate. The meaning of dissent they articulate in their letters is certainly shaped by journalist frames but not limited to them. This, I think is an important piece to understanding contemporary discourse about dissent. Whereas the previous chapter indicates the power of discourse to limit and constrain our understanding of dissent, these letters show that this is neither a complete nor a totalizing power. Nonetheless, it is equally important to acknowledge that once the question was raised, articulating the connection between notions of patriotism and free speech pushed much of the actual substance of dissident claims to the margins. Letter writers rarely attempted to reorient the debate once the parameters were established: readers were not substantially able to critique the discourse about dissent that served as a distraction from real debate over the march to war.

Making it Stick: Frame Resonance

To what extent did the various ways of defining dissent throughout 2001-03 become part of the common language individuals use in daily discourse about dissent? Let us turn to two letters from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, written on March 23, 2003:

*Example 7:*

*Time for unity*

Continuing public opposition to war damages troop morale, and morale is more important to effectiveness than equipment or technology. It's difficult to kill someone while doubting your cause. In war, if you do not kill the enemy, he will kill you. Arguments can resume after the troops are out of harm's way. I know of
no other support the public can give the troops.

—Don Hedden (The Atlanta Journal- Constitution 2003; 3C)

**Example 8:**

*Dissension is healthy*

I read with interest and alarm about local radio stations refusing to play the Dixie Chicks’ CDs because of the antiwar remarks one of them made in England. If these stations think they are being patriotic, they are sadly mistaken. They may not agree with what the Chicks said, but they should be defending to the death their right to say it. Dissension is healthy in our republic, and it is a right guaranteed by our Constitution/ Bill of Rights. The radio stations’ actions are, at the least, vindictive and, at the worst, despotic.

—Norm Daudelin (The Atlanta Journal- Constitution 2003; 3C)

These two letters appear toward the end of the period sampled, at a time when, paradoxically, discourse about dissent was most inflammatory and yet on the verge of dying down. If we were to witness a culmination to the debate, it would be now. As I mentioned previously, hegemonic control over popular discourse about dissent does not appear to have been established at this time. However, surveying the discourse about dissent over the course of the two years studied, it becomes possible to construct two distinct framings of dissent that indicate a fairly strong level of frame resonance. First, couched within portrayals of the anti-war position, dissent was portrayed as a “freedom” that is being “suppressed” despite the fact that it is both “patriotic” and a “responsibility”
handed down to Americans. Although “freedom,” “suppression” and “patriotism” were used at separate times throughout this two-year period, I think it is evident in these letters to the editor that, cumulatively, they form one discursive construction of “dissent.” The other “cumulative” frame is one in which dissent is “unpatriotic” because it “endangers the troops” and “aids the enemy.”

If we take these two letters to be illustrative of the entire corpus of letters to the editor, which, I maintain, is accurate, we see that the discursive framing of dissent in official accounts of anti-war protest was incredibly effective in influencing public dialogue about the issue.

Conclusion

I think it is clear from the discussion above that letters to the editor indicate that the establishment of a hegemonic discourse about dissent never occurred within this particular context. An “end” in the conversation about dissent doesn’t appear to have been reached. In fact, letters to the editor in March and April of 2003 indicate that, rather than establishing a particular meaning of dissent, vigorous debate is ongoing. This could be due to the timeframe of the study; the stabilization of a particular meaning about “dissent” might lie beyond newspaper coverage of the issue in late 2003. A more probable cause, however, is the interruption caused by the invasion of Iraq. As I have argued previously, war or crisis tends, repeatedly, to provoke silence on the topic of dissent. It is widely accepted that once military action has begun, protest will cease. What this case does show, however, is that immediately after the conflict began the conversation about dissent actually got more heated and more complex. A wider range of
opinions was heard and more varied arguments for and against dissent appeared in the news media, especially in letters to the editor.

This case is especially effective in illustrating the dialogical nature of discourse formation. In debate over “dissent” we find not only conflict over the stabilization of meaning but also a conflict that is still ongoing. True to the idea of the dialectical nature of the production of meaning, argumentation over the meaning of, need for, and limitations of dissent is an interactive process that remains unresolved. Patterns found in letters to the editor contradict the pattern of themes in mainstream journalistic accounts of the discourse of dissent. If we were to focus solely on newspaper article reports on dissent, we would be led to believe that immediately after 9/11 concern was over a lack of dissent. The intermediary period, late 2002-early 2003, indicates that the discourse about dissent was largely preoccupied with discerning the similarities and differences between contemporary protest and the student movement in the sixties. Then, final negotiations over the meaning of dissent were settled in February and March 2003: dissent should be understood in terms of patriotic loyalty and fundamental freedoms granted by democratic rights.

This simplistic account of the discourse about dissent is not at all evident in individual interpretations as represented in letters to the editor. There are questions about what it means to dissent that emerge out of letters to the editor that do not surface in mainstream newspaper coverage. And, there is much more fluidity in micro-level dialogue, more slippage between thematic frames. Writers more easily move from freedom to suppression and back to freedom again, suggesting the complexity and the push and pull among a variety of competing ways of understanding and defining dissent.
Lastly, letters to the editor demonstrate that conflict over framing occurs not only between movement and countermovement or between movements and media organizations. There are several instances throughout this time period that suggest, that perhaps, micro-level dialogue influences either movement or newsmedia frames. Though we cannot infer causality concretely, there is evidence that concern over suppression emerged within the public sphere before penetrating official frames. Patriotism, too, emerged as a frame for shaping public debate over dissent before it materialized in newsmedia discussions of protest.
Chapter 5

Representing “Dissent”: Transgression or Cooptation?

There have been numerous attempts recently to diagnose the source of what has come to
be known as the failure of New Left politics or of liberalism more generally. That is, in
the wake of a conservative backlash, many theorists have undertaken the task of
reformulating the basis of left-leaning politics in order to account for their perceived
inability to sustain a consistent and strong movement. A wide variety of factors have
born the brunt of this critique. For example, Wendy Brown (1995) argues that the
identity-based politics that developed out of the sixties is essentially unable to challenge
the structures of power that create injustice in the first place. Other critiques of identity
politics echo Brown’s concerns, suggesting that attempts to redress representations of
race, sexuality, and gender do little to confront social inequalities. Naomi Klein (2000)
writes, “We were too busy analysing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice
that the wall itself had been sold” (124). The collapse of socialism (Fraser 1997), the
cooptation of identity politics by market forces (Frank 1996), and the media’s spectacular
treatment of left-wing politics (Gitlin 1980, Kellner 2005) have also been rallying cries
for the reconstruction of New Left politics.

The alleged “failure” of the left is debatable of course – one could easily argue
that the accomplishments of groups fighting for women’s, African American, and
gay/lesbian rights have significantly altered U.S. culture. Nonetheless, there has been
significant, and building, alarm over a conservative backlash and the Left’s inability to
curtail its progression. Understanding this state of affairs is a daunting task.
Comprehensive attention to all the factors that influence a movement’s success is not possible in the confines of this dissertation. However, it seems clear that it is not just the relative disillusionment with identity politics that hinders a liberal political movement; the prevailing celebration of symbolic politics within the academe and in political movements also deserves scrutiny. Left-leaning political theory and practice has, in large part, failed to overcome the problems of capitalism identified in Marxist and Critical Theory because of its recent emphasis on symbolic forms of political action. There is a place for cultural politics but it must find a way to address the power inherent in the state and capitalist consumer economy.

In this chapter, I use coverage of anti-war protests as an entry-point into this theoretical debate. In particular, I add to it by exploring how media representations of dissent and resistance – and thus the meaning of these ideas – affect movement success. Given the spectacle made of protests, I explore the question of whether or not resistance is truly possible. In the context of an increasing cooptation of images of dissent and resistance, I contemplate the subversive potential of cultural politics. Theorists influenced by the cultural turn have put forward a significant number of challenges to our way of understanding issues central to dissent. My aim is to take these challenges seriously, while also treating them critically; I hope to balance contemporary equations of resistance with transgression in light of critical theories of artificial negativity.

Symbolic Politics: Postmodern Protests

The “semiotic challenge” of the linguistic turn, the “personal is political” of identity politics, and the “transgressive politics” of postmodernism have all led to a fundamental
re-shaping of the political, in both theory and praxis. Many scholars argue that we have entered a fundamentally different historical time in terms of the characteristics of contemporary social movements. Not all agree that this form is particularly “new,” but these types of movements are often categorized in the academic literature as New Social Movements. These organizations, usually seen as emerging from the student movement of the 1960s, are said to differ from movements of the past with regard to ideology, goals, tactics, structure, and participants (Pichardo 1997; Dalton et al. 1990). The uniqueness of New Social Movements lies in their identity-based political claims and self-reflexive nature, disruptive tactics, anti-bureaucratic organization, and largely middle-class participants. Pichardo (1997) disputes the claim that New Social Movements (NSMs) consistently exhibit these features, but, nonetheless, the prevailing claim is that these are generally the features of contemporary political organizations.

Of particular interest for this work is what Pichardo characterizes as the anti-institutional tactical orientation of movements today: “NSMs prefer to remain outside of normal political channels, employing disruptive tactics and mobilizing public opinion to gain political leverage. They also tend to use highly dramatic and preplanned forms of demonstrations replete with costumes and symbolic representations” (1997, 415). Political fights, essentially, are being waged increasingly on the symbolic and cultural level, based on common identification. This does not mean that social movement organizations are not involved in more traditional, institutionalized politics. However, their most visible fights – those that individuals are most likely to be aware of – take place in the public sphere, usually in the shape of marches or demonstrations. These types of movements have spawned a number of other increasingly popular types of
tactics, most noticeably “culture jamming,” which have garnered substantial theoretical attention as well. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have turned to analyzing and understanding the symbolic politics of contemporary movements, emphasizing concepts like “spectacle,” “carnival,” and “parody” in order to explain social transformation or to suggest its possibility.

Society of the Spectacle: The Playful Art of Dissent

Influenced by Guy Debord’s (1967) *The Society of the Spectacle* – though the theoretical connections are often superficial – movement scholars are increasingly using the language of “the spectacle” in discussions of protest events and media coverage of them. This is especially common in exploration of “culture jamming” and other symbolic political movements inspired by The Situationists of the 1950s. Debord, the self-proclaimed leader of that group, articulated the strategy of détourner: “turning around” or “turning upside down” (Wettergren 2003). The expanding consumer culture and emergence of mass media make for a “seductive capitalism,” for Debord and the Situationists, in which individual interactions and our society more generally is mediated by images. The consumption of commodities ensnares us in the society of spectacle; the trap is difficult to avoid, with alienation the end result. It is through a radical break from the image – refusing the spectacle – that resistance is possible. This is where culture jammers take their inspiration. Through their use of graffiti, ironic alterations of billboard advertisements, independent media, computer hacking, subvertisements, and other guerilla style tactics, culture jammers hope to disrupt and deconstruct dominant discourses (Lasn 1999; Wettergren 2003; Littler 2005; Klein 2000). The most famous
organization employing these techniques is The Media Foundation Adbusters. Founded in 1989, it publishes the magazine Adbusters (with a worldwide subscription base) and sponsors “Buy Nothing Day” and “Turn off TV Week” (see www.adbusters.org).

Culture jamming, as one manifestation of a Situationist attempt to expose consumer culture, uses spectacle, in a sense, to expose the spectacle society has become. Its tactics and related forms of symbolic politics have acquired a central place in the anti-globalization movement (Wettergren 2003) as well as within the larger anti-consumerism movement (Lasn 1999; Klein 2000). Anti-war protests, like most public political activity today, were also aesthetically oriented: demonstrations, artistic displays and other cultural political tactics were designed to pack a powerful visual punch. As aesthetic events, anti-war demonstrations used “die-ins,” for example, to challenge common understandings about the impending war by drawing attention to the reality of war rather than simply reinforcing the administration’s arguments for going to war. We get very detailed descriptions of the goings-on at protest events even in newspaper coverage of them. Obviously, the visual is more powerful in broadcast journalism, but newspaper journalists are adept at making images come alive in their text-based presentations of them. For example, a Seattle-based reporter wrote the following description of the crowd at a January 2003 demonstration:

Energized by the British band Chumbawamba, which opened the Washington demonstration with a performance of a new antiwar song, a swelling crowd, packed densely to stave off the winter winds, filled several blocks west of the Capitol carrying signs, waving banners and chanting…in San Francisco, swarms of demonstrators filed off buses,
ferries and up from the subways along the waterfront for a
march…Among the protesters were a caravan of environmentalists in
electric cars with signs that read “Go solar, not ballistic,” and the Stroller
Brigade, a group of Bay Area parents pushing their children through the
crowds (Clemetson 2003).

And, a February march was described as including giant puppets, mock coffins,
drumbeat, skeletal Uncle Sam (Oppel 2003).

This type of event or action, in order to resonate or be meaningful to a particular
audience, “relies on a presumed ability for critical thinking, for the development of a new
consciousness on a personal and individual level” (Wettergren 2003). This presumption
is highly problematic for many who study culture jamming and its incorporation into
other symbolic forms of protest. Lasn (1999) emphasizes the idea of revolution and the
revolutionary impulse, a liberation of suppressed emotions: “Once you experience even a
few of these “moments of truth,” things can never be the same again. Your life veers off
in strange new directions” (xiv). But claims to the Truth about “our illusionary
existence” go against the postmodern rejection of institutionalized claims over truth that
culture jamming is largely based on. Wettergren (2003) is skeptical:

irony can be used as a strategy to effect structural changes…to release the
pressure of ambivalent positions [but] the understanding of irony rests on
shared experiences and knowledge…the effectiveness of irony is uncertain
[because] the ironic message can be hard to detect or appreciate by people
who are not familiar with the originally intended message, or simply do
not recognize the need for or value of the critique (36).
I am skeptical too. How much can the “fun” or “play ethic” of culture jamming be a source of resistance? Much of the scholarly work that attempts to address this question, especially in the realm of cultural studies, tends to focus on audience reception or communicative competency in order to generate potential answers. However, I believe the answer to this question lies beyond whether or not audience members are able to accurately negotiate and interpret the meaning of actions like “die-ins” and giant puppets. For most individuals, the “meaning” that movement actors are trying to convey to them is filtered through news media reports of the event and actions. In these mass-mediated times, the politics of spectacle is not immune to the spectacle society has become: protest too is consumed through television and news representations of events. Individuals come to see and understand dissent in mediated form.

**News Media and the Politics of Spectacle**

For decades now, “what defines a movement as “good copy” is often flamboyance, often the presence of a media-certified celebrity-leader, and usually a certain fit with whatever frame the newsmakers have construed to be “the story” at a given time” (Gitlin 1980, 3). The rise in image-conscious actions must, in part, be due to the fact that social movement organizations find themselves in a relationship of dependence with broadcast journalism. In order to capture precious news media attention, the tactics of political organizations have grown increasingly cultural, performative, and theatrical in nature.

Unfortunately, much of the coverage of dissent focuses on protest as a spectacle. Protest in general tends to rely on spectacular events to garner media attention, however, so it is not entirely illogical that the media should in turn also concentrate on them.
particular concern for movements scholars is the fact that what is most often deemed interesting are violent protests, or rather the few violent acts that might arise during the course of a protest (Gitlin 1980, Wettergren 2003, Skolnick 1969). Indeed, emphasis on “violent” protest has been a journalistic preoccupation since at least the sixties, often distorting the level and extent of the violence. Many studies find that with regard to coverage of the Global Justice Movement, “reportage has focused almost exclusively on the spectacle and violence that erupted. Meanwhile, the substantive issues raised by street activists have received little or no mainstream news media attention” (Opel and Pompper 2003, xiii).

The protests against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were also framed as potential disruptions of the social order – especially of the economic functioning of cities across the U.S. The mayor of San Francisco is quoted as saying “I just wish they would stay in their own communities and protest rather than putting the expense on us” in regards to protests held there on March 20, 2003 (Zernike & Murphy 2003). Protests that day, held in most major cities across the country after the initial bombing of Iraq, drew particularly heavy coverage. And, in the sample, nearly every article appearing the next day led off with some mention of violent activities or police response to the day’s disruptive events. Though organizers’ intention was to use civil disobedience to draw attention to their cause, and the fact that the movement would not stop making its case against the war simply because military action had begun, news reports made it seem as though seven major U.S. cities had descended into chaos (including Portland, OR, Madison, WI, St. Louis, Atlanta, San Francisco, Boston, and Washington D.C.). Most of the day’s activities involved school walkouts, marches that blocked major roads, and
gatherings at federal buildings, though the emphasis was on tempers flaring, arrests being made, and citations written for lighting fires or destruction of property. Even before the protest events began, one editorial writer for *The Oregonian* predicted “havoc” and warned against it: “Peaceful demonstration is one thing. Civil disobedience is another. Riot is yet another. We expect demonstrators and police to understand the distinctions, and behave accordingly” (“Editorial” 2003). Incidentally, though Portland’s demonstrations did close down major streets and highways, there were few reports of injuries or property damage (as noted in a subsequent editorial on March 22).

Emphasis on the militancy of a movement produces several outcomes. Obviously, it can lead to their marginalization as it becomes easier to discredit an entire group of people – and their issue claims – as radical: outside of the mainstream and thus not relevant to public discourse and opinion. Importantly, this tactic also alienates moderate individuals who otherwise might be movement participants. The monetary contribution of these members is most clearly felt. Finally, the “violence” frame also works by “marginalizing the most radical aspects of movements and setting them against the more moderate. They cover single-issue movements, but frame them in opposition to others: feminists against blacks, blacks against chicanos” (Gitlin 1980; 286). In this case, we saw advocates of civil disobedience pitted against moderates who disavowed such tactics after the war began. Fearful of retribution (by authorities and public opinion) for being viewed as a “radical fringe” group, many in the anti-war movement pushed for major disruptive action to cease after the invasion.

Coverage of these protest events, then, lends support to Gitlin’s (1980) argument that news media consistently represent demonstrations, themselves, as “a potential or
actual disruption of legitimate order, not as a statement about the world” (271).

Furthermore, we know that organizational attitudes toward resistance within newsmedia have “force[d] journalists to reconsider their representations of dissent” (Opel and Pompper 2003, xiv). These trends are surely a consequence of the political and economic context of the production of news. During the sixties, for example, the demand for objectivity and balance, “presse[d] reporters to seek out scruffy-looking, chanting, “Viet Cong” flag-waving demonstrators and to counterpose them to reasonable-sounding, fact-brandishing authorities” (Gitlin 1980; 4). We see this pattern being repeated nearly forty years later in coverage of the most recent manifestation of the peace movement.

Though I run the risk of repeating some patterns in crowd description noted in previous chapters, allow me to offer one more striking example of the extreme to which reporters went to emphasize the spectacle of protests and protesters during this time. Describing a protest in Washington on September 29, 2001, P.J. O’Rourke describes the attendees as “vegetarian demonstrators,” “of college age, with subdermal ink, transdermal hardware, and haircuts from the barber college on Mars,” a “hippie in a walker wearing a hearing aid.” “There was a momentary geyser of funny clothes, odd hairstyles, and flopping tattooed limbs,” he writes. The title of his editorial, “Squishier than thou,” quite suitably illustrates his opinion of the protest event. Describing the scene, he condescendingly reports:

The Bread and Puppet theater troupe was carrying a score of what appeared to be eight-foot-high papier-mache baked potatoes. Asked what this was about, one of the troupe said it represented “naked people being oppressed by clothed people.” Asked again, she said the same
thing…Snappy protest rhymes seemed as yet inchoate. Drumming and pogo dancing accompanied the chant “Stop the war/In Afghanistan/While we/Still can! (30).

O’Rourke’s (2002) comments about a subsequent protest – this one was designated as a Palestinian Solidarity March, but it also contains the early beginning of actions against the invasion of Iraq – are even more scornful: “The Palestinian Solidarity March had almost all the elements of a classic modern American political demonstration…Its representatives looked respectable. They conducted themselves with dignity. They had a grievance. The only thing missing was an intelligible demand” (28). O’Rourke proceeds to document, for his readers, a laundry list of “demands” he saw raised while “The marchers trampled the grass on the Ellipse”:

MORE GARDENS, a sign read. Other posters and banners declared,

GIVE COMMUNISM A CHANCE, PEACE IS PATRIOTIC, END ASHCROFT’S POLICE STATE, REPUBLICANS FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, STOP CALLING PALESTINIANS TERRORISTS,
REAL PROFITS FROM PEOPLE, CORPORATIONS ARE KILLING THE WORLD, THE U.S. STARTED IT ALL, DOWN WITH ALGERIAN FASCIST REGIME, PEACE TREATY IN KOREA,
LEAVE CHAVEZ ALONE, and FOCUS YOUR DISCONTENT. Indeed.

“What united these people, other than a general loserish quality?” he asks. “[M]aybe it was only that. They’ve made every question a political question, because in politics—as this political demonstration proved—there is no quality control. But the Arab-Americans
didn’t look like losers. That’s all right. Staking a claim to victimhood has value for even the most successful Americans. Witness Oprah.”

P.J. O’Rourke, of course, is a former left-leaning hippie who “saw the light” and has since been converted: his political and satirical work today is decidedly anti-left and typically characterized as libertarian or conservative. We would expect, then, that someone like O’Rourke would not write a glowing review of a largely left-leaning political demonstration. However, his writings are instructive. Clearly focusing on the aesthetic elements of both marches and the variety of issues raised during a single march, these editorials illustrate both the ambiguity of symbolic forms of politics and the power of media interpretations of them. Surely, the march for Palestinian Solidarity did contain a modicum of consistency in terms of message. And I’m sure that the protest against military action in Afghanistan contained more coherent artistic displays that the Bread and Puppet theater troop. The singling out of these aspects of the protests, however, signals that news media emphasis on the spectacle of protest, as presented in the media, often translates into ridicule of the movement message. It also points to the ease with which symbolic politics can be manipulated. O’Rourke’s attempted manipulations are plain. But it is the often subtle, not deliberate, way in which the media spotlight can “divide movements into legitimate acts and illegitimate sideshows, so that these distinctions appear “natural,” matters of “common sense” (Gitlin 1980; 6). Because the use of metaphor, stereotype, and cliché in the representation of protest events is well documented (Gitlin 1980, Gamson 1992, Puar & Rai 2002, Young 1990), it should come as no surprise to us that similar mechanisms were used to define and discuss dissent
against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—and, in the process, distort and decontextualize movement events and messages.

But the media, despite their antagonistic role in disseminating information and images of social change movements, remain important as an arena for political struggle. Gitlin (1980) writes,

In the late twentieth century, political movements feel called upon to rely on large-scale communications in order to matter, to say who they are and what they intend to publics they want to sway; but in the process they become “newsworthy” only by submitting to the implicit rules of newsmaking, by conforming to journalistic notions (themselves embedded in history) of what a “story” is, what an “event” is, what a “protest” is. The processed image then tends to become “the movement” for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it (3).

Social movement organizations, then, are at the mercy of editorial decisions and journalistic framing of their issue and its importance. The symbolic actions of movement actors are also, thus, at the mercy of those same people; the meaning behind a sign, a chant, a theatrical performance, or a puppet is not only open for audience interpretation but is mediated through media frames. We have already discussed how powerful those framing mechanisms can be in terms of constraining the definition of meaning. Gitlin (1980) suggests that media attention to the student movement in the sixties had a direct effect on it; the spotlight exposed its vulnerabilities and took away the peace movement’s ability to define itself. Media messages are rarely what movements intend their projects,
their identities, to be. Coverage of demonstrations, therefore almost always “divert coverage away from critical treatment of the institutional, systemic, and everyday workings of property and the State” (Gitlin 1980, 271).

However, because of the extensive knowledge most culture jammers and others involved in symbolic politics usually have about the structure of mass media, one could argue that they “may succeed in “advertising” critical messages that normally would have been selected out” (Wettergren 2003, 37). And, because street demonstrations increasingly implement the use of culture-jamming-like tactics in protests, we need to explore in more detail whether media coverage of demonstrations is completely able to divert attention away from those critical messages. One of the most compelling concerns about symbolic politics is whether the messages conveyed through such tactics are able to withstand the society of spectacle and its ability to consume everything.

**Spectacle and the Cooptation of Dissent**

Debord (1967) argues that as people become more entrenched in mass-mediated consumer culture, the ability to resist “the spectacle” becomes increasingly difficult. His claim echoes Marx’s elaboration of the continually expanding scope and power of capitalism. At base, both suggest that a capitalist consumer culture has the ability to absorb even the most radical objections or alterations to its functioning. This poses a fundamental problem for cultural forms of politics, especially “culture jamming.” To what extent are tactics such as “subvertisements” able to resist or outmaneuver this aspect of the capitalist system? Given that subvertisements play off of traditional advertising strategies in order to disrupt the capitalist system, how much do they resist rather than
recognize and substantiate that system? Simply put: since culture jamming relies on the mass mediated consumer capitalist system in order to carry out its campaign of resistance, can it destroy it?

Like identity politics, cultural politics in general might not be able to escape a system of power that establishes some meanings as dominant and others as “other.” This is a feature of culture, however, writes William Sewell (1999), in “The Concept(s) of Culture”: “the act of contesting dominant meanings itself implies a recognition of their centrality. Dominant and oppositional groups interact constantly, each undertaking its initiatives with the other in mind. Even when they attempt to overcome or undermine each other, they are mutually shaped by their dialectical dance” (57). Yet, I do not think this means we must totally abandon the question of co-optation. It is one thing to argue that cultures are contested—to acknowledge the fact that organizations whose aim is social change are often involved in conflict and that conflict results in both cultural change and coherence simultaneously—and quite another to recognize that conflict with a powerful cultural and economic system is not the same thing as the mutually shaping dance of dominant and oppositional groups. Attempts to fundamentally alter capitalist consumer society are, I think, much more complicated.

Taking into account the institutional and economic aspects of the culture industry complicates the suggestion that culture jamming or other tactics of a cultural politics (including clothing or style) may have transgressive potential. Thomas Frank (1997) suggests that advertising’s commodification of dissent calls into question the effectiveness of opposition. He is particularly concerned with oppositional clothing styles, suggesting that any resistant moments they might embody are constantly co-opted,
commodified by the capitalist economy and thus rendered ineffective. This is because of the relative ease in which clothing styles can become commodified and sold as “cool.” This process has occurred over and over again, as different fashion cycles have made hippie, punk, beatnik, or gypsy styles—all associated with rebellious groups—The Trend for a particular year. Advertising has often flexed its muscle, showing its power to tame rebellion and to sell it to a public constantly in search of the next hot trend.

Douglas Kellner (1991) suggests that advertising also exercises control over non-advertising media content and provides giant corporations with increased power over consumers, perpetuating capitalist hegemony and substituting a private citizen consumer for an inquiring public citizen. That is, advertising’s trends “contradict democratic ideals and goals” by not provoking thought about social and political issues: “Advertisers recognize that stimulating consumer audiences to think critically does not promote the happy atmosphere necessary for their persuasive advertisements to work or sink in” (59).

Kellner, of course, draws his perspective from critical theorists who have long suggested that the cooptation of dissent by the capitalist system renders resistance futile. Countercultural ideas, rather than fueling change, are absorbed into mainstream culture such that they actually work to further capitalism rather than subvert it. In his classic work, *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse argues that the forms of social control in modern industrial societies make non-conformity an impossibility—opposition to the status quo simply cannot develop. Individuals are incapable of critical thought because the standardization and commodification of mass culture only affirms dominant bourgeois values. There is no room in this system for disruption, for imagining the world as it might otherwise be.
Marcuse thus provides a method for understanding the disciplinary power of newsmedia. News media accounts of protest events served as one of many “societal processes” that “have determined and “closed” the established universe of discourse” about dissent (Marcuse 1964, 195). Implicit in their descriptions of protest events, characteristics of protesters, and even the viewpoints of dissidents is an equating of dissent with the irrational. Treating protests as if they were silly events neutralizes the seriousness of movement claims and circumscribes the potential range of a discourse about whether or not to go to war. By co-opting movement messages, news discourse eliminates, or at least establishes as “out of bounds,” the possibility for what Marcuse (1964) calls negative thinking: dialectical thought that is capable of producing and understanding an “is” (the way the world is) and an “ought” (the way the world ought to be). Reports of protests clearly focus on the “is” without reporting the “ought” spoken by anti-war organizations. For example, the “support the troops” mantra is characteristically positive, in Marcuse’s thinking: it reaffirms the dominant framework. Rather than questioning “war” we question dissidents’ motives in protesting. The anti-war stance is presented as mere speculation, dreams or fantasies (Marcuse 1964, 172). In fact, it is in the repetition of established rhetoric in letters to the editor that we can most easily see the power of the established discourse about dissent. Though we can see how anti-war discourse was limited through news coverage of protests, we can identify the news media as a participant in the social process of creating this discourse through the ordinary language used to discuss dissent in public debate.

Marcuse also provides a framework for suggesting that the news media, as a central mechanism through which “understanding” is mediated or transmitted, may also
serve to co-opt dissenting viewpoints. Contemporary standards of “objectivity” require news organizations to cover oppositional movements. According to Gitlin (1980), the standards of “newsworthiness” are loose, and thus “the hegemonic routines of news coverage are vulnerable to the demands of oppositional and deviant groups. Through the everyday workings of journalism, large-scale social conflict is imported into the news institution and reproduced there: reproduced, however, in terms derived from the dominant ideology” (270; italics in original). But, managing the contradictions embodied in oppositional movements (as discussed above) allows news agencies to contain that opposition. Like the hegemonic ideology of bourgeois culture, newsmedia, as capitalist organizations, are able to domesticate the criticism that they convey through coverage of movements like those we are studying. “Organized as a distinct pyramid of power” news networks utilize a “strategy of neutralization, incorporating the competing forces in such a way as to maximize its audiences and thus its profits, its legitimacy, and its stature” (Gitlin 1980; 259).

Thus, we can explain shifts in the tone of media coverage during our study as a function of public opinion: as the general public moved toward the anti-war stance, the media was forced to turn to a discussion of acceptable and unacceptable opposition. In order to contain anti-war sentiment, opposition was channeled into a debate over the idea of dissent itself. Thus, news agencies had to cover opposition in order, first, to achieve objectivity. But as opposition to the war was building, there was a secondary pressure to cover the movement in order to maximize audience and profit. In the process the news media were also able to bring the message of the anti-war movement under its jurisdiction. In so doing, it played a significant role in shaping perception of the
movement and its substantive argument. It was also able to shift coverage away from the anti-war position to a discussion about dissent itself.

The cooptation of dissident messages is further accomplished through news media processes that tend to convert leadership to celebrity, to highlight extravagant rhetoric, and to exaggerate movement actions. Radicals in the peace movement thus “become “good copy” as they become susceptible to derogatory framing devices” and “what made them “good copy” may make them dangerous to the State and subject, directly or indirectly, to blackout” (Gitlin 1980; 286). The more radical or unique the actions and participants, the more likely these framing devices are to be applied to a particular movement. This tendency is exemplified by the practice of describing exceptional events rather than explaining their sources in everyday life: “Increasingly outrageous action led to increased media coverage and selective amplification, and to police suppression, which in turn fueled the movement’s anger and paranoia, inspiring still more police reaction and still more stereotypic coverage of outrageous symbols” (Gitlin 1980; 186). The everyday routines of commercial journalism thus lead to the extraction of movement activities from their context and to the radicalization of particular movements. By emphasizing the weird or extravagant tactics of the anti-war movement—and “cultural” tactics are most susceptible to this kind of treatment—its position was increasingly associated with “radical” ideas that presumably threaten the social order.

The treatment of protest as spectacle and the resultant cooptation of dissent is epitomized by contemporary narratives of the 1960s and ingenious marketing of the legacy of “cool.” 18 The last forty years or so have witnessed a conservative backlash.
against the so-called cultural values that emerged during the sixties: “The period has been trivialized, commemorated and castigated ad nauseam. It's been reduced to a risible relic, a series of clichés about hippies and protesters and lost idealism” (Taylor 2006). The media has played a central role in this portrayal of the decade; a construction that many suggest is intended to serve the interests of business (Frank 1997, Taylor 2006).

Trivializing the civil rights and anti-war movement by emphasizing its threat to traditional American values has effectively alienated people – especially young people – from the ideals and spirit the 60s embodied. Using “misinformation campaigns,” Astra Taylor (2006) argues,

> [t]he reactionary right defines itself in opposition to a sensationalistic, exaggerated stereotype of the 1960s and its excesses. The basic building block of the "great backlash," to use Tom Frank's phrase, is victimhood. In this version, millions of moral Middle Americans have had their values trampled by hedonistic hippies, latte-drinking liberal elites, raving antiwar protesters and black power advocates, while hardworking blue-collar guys are laid off because of reverse discrimination. The '60s marked the beginning of America's great moral decline, the story goes, and the conservatives are here to set the country back on track.

Recasting the sixties as a time of decadent individualism and activists as “raving antiwar protesters” is a persuasive narrative, and one that holds tremendous consequences for the socio-cultural perception of social movements today. The distortion of the 1960s peace
movement and the treatment of protesters today illustrate the particular vulnerability of dissent to the power of discursive manipulation, especially within the context of cultural politics and journalistic processes that emphasize their spectacular nature.

The Politics of Style: Images and the Aestheticization of Dissent

One of the most powerful images of protest against the Vietnam War – though there are certainly many – is that of veterans returning home only to be spit on by anti-war activists. Ironically, though, there is literally no “image” of a veteran being spat on. We have an abundance of images of hippies protesting, men burning their draft cards, and veterans returning their medals of honor. We even have doctored images of protest events – most notably, of course, the insertion of John Kerry into a photograph of Jane Fonda at an anti-war demonstration. But there is no photographic evidence of any single veteran being spat upon, let alone the scores of them we are supposed to believe experienced such treatment after returning home after the war.

According to Jerry Lembcke, the image of the “spat-upon Vietnam veteran” is largely myth: veterans that he interviewed recalled friendly relations between protesters and soldiers, many returning veterans became anti-war protesters themselves, and, according to the head of Vietnam Veterans against the War, there is no documentation “of any incidence of anti-war activists spitting on veterans” (1998, 3). Incidents reported by the press during the time veterans were actually returning home typically involve pro-war activists spitting at or abusing anti-war activists and veterans. Reports of veterans being spat on by anti-war protesters emerge years later and have not been verified as accurate even after being given “serious consideration.” Yet Vietnam vets have testified
about having been spat upon and it continues to be a prevailing image of the sixties in the American psyche.

The continued use of this myth fulfills a dual purpose: discrediting the anti-war movement and stigmatizing veterans. Lembcke argues that it was used to call into question the stance of anti-war veterans during the Vietnam war and was particularly effective before the Persian Gulf War. During this time, the Bush administration equated opposition to the war with the “spat-upon veteran.” Exploiting the image of anti-war activists spitting on war veterans, “the administration was able to discredit the opposition and galvanize support for the war. So successful was this endeavor that by the time the bombing of Iraq began in January 1991 President Bush had effectively turned the means of war, the soldiers themselves, into a reason for the war” (Lembcke 2006, 2).

The image was resurrected in the discourse about dissent that took place surrounding the anti-war protests against Afghanistan and Iraq. Though not always made explicit, the concern over “supporting the troops” documented in previous chapters clearly evokes fears of the mistreatment of veterans upon which this myth was erected. The image proved particularly effective again. This time, the peace movement tried to neutralize this rhetoric by framing its position as against the war but not the troops, but I think its message got lost in the process. Concern for the soldiers and a worry over giving aid to the enemy garnered support for the war and marginalized the voices of anti-war activists. The start of armed conflict made opposition to the war seem particularly silly in the eyes of the American public even if the movement was claiming to “support the troops.”
The “spat-upon-veteran,” fabricated or not, points to the importance of images and metaphors in the definition of reality. It is a cultural myth, but also a story that symbolizes societal values and serves political interests. It is a myth that holds tremendous power over media portrayals of protest, social movement actors’ identities of themselves as dissidents, and public opinion about political dissent. Concern over the treatment of veterans resurfaced in 2002 as a key thread in protest event analysis. Presumably a legitimate concern, its emphasis in press coverage played into the historical and continued misrepresentation of interactions between anti-war activists and Vietnam Veterans. It also served as a convenient stereotype through which journalists could easily frame coverage of protest events. The increasing visibility of this “image” must also have played some role in peace activists’ attempts to circulate its “we’re for the troops but against the war” message. Finally, the presumed hostility between war veterans and anti-war activists was consistently raised in letters to the editor from individuals advocating the cessation of anti-war protests.

It is not just nostalgic tales about the 60s that shape the contours of discourse about dissent. The rise of the image in general is also central to this treatise. As many theorists have pointed out, ours is an increasingly image-centered and image-driven culture; dissent is not immune to this trend and neither are social movement sponsored protest events. Discourse about dissent is tied to the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movement through repetitive use of clichéd images of protest and mythic representations of that decade in our aesthetic and intellectual understanding of dissent. As noted above, the use of these images of rebellion in advertising and business culture represent a
significant problem for many critical theorists. More generally, the equation of dissent with “style” could have particularly deleterious consequences for social transformation.

The Style and Substance of Dissent

Style, aesthetics, and image have generally become more important in a world dominated, as many argue, by visual culture. A recent bestseller title, The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, & Consciousness, alludes to the increasing centrality of appearance in contemporary culture. In this book, Virginia Postrel, a journalist and author, argues that we have entered the Age of Aesthetics. This declaration is consistent with claims by philosophers and social theorists that we have encountered a “cultural turn” and witnessed the rise of the image. In the early nineties, for example, Fredric Jameson proclaimed that culture was the logic of Late Capitalism—he cited “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet untheorized sense” (1999, 345).

Postrel, unlike those theorists who suggest that the rise of the image is the rise of simulation (Baudrillard 1999), argues that increased attention to the look and feel of people, places, and things is more accurately an increase in creativity and freedom. Aesthetic pleasure is important, according to Postrel: the inundation by style in everyday life and the democratization of taste allow for individual expression and social communication.

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19 I refer specifically here to Thomas Frank (1997) but the contributors to his publication, The Baffler, also fall generally into this category of critics. See especially Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler, edited by Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (1997).
Dissent in general is not immune to the “rise of the image” described above. Dissent is often presented as an “aesthetic” state. Anti-war protest events almost always included marches, demonstrations, theatrical performances, costumes, and artistic displays. At one demonstration, for example, a protester dressed in the latest in Homeland Security Fashion: a suit covered in duct tape (Pollitt 2003). Demonstrations, artistic displays, and other cultural political tactics used by anti-war organizations were supposed to challenge common understandings about the impending war by using images and aesthetic presentation to “transgress” or “subvert.” They called into question mainstream discourse about the war through visual re-presentation of images of war and terrorism.

Images of dissent and protest also became increasingly prevalent across the whole range of cultural media during this time, especially within advertising. Dissent has emerged in the last two years as an increasingly “sellable” advertising strategy. There was a growing prevalence of images of protest within advertising and a discernible pervasiveness of alternative lifestyles (particularly punk), especially within the realm of popular music (the bands being marketed, their clothing and image in pictures and music videos). One advertising campaign for a clothing company, for example, depicted “protest events” in its marketing of jeans, drawing on images and meanings of dissent to make its product stand out from others. The most absurd of these is a group of young, pseudo-anarchic looking college students demanding that we “Free the Goldfish.”

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20 This fascination appears cyclical: advertising in the 1960s regularly used the language of nonconformity and rebellion to market products and the early 1990s also saw the popularization of images and clothing styles that exemplified an oppositional stance toward mainstream culture.

21 The clothing company, Diesel (www.diesel.com) ran this advertising campaign in major fashion and style magazines like Maxim in Fall/Winter 2002. This “Taking Action” campaign is part of their regular “Guides to Successful Living” in which the company not only advertises is product line but also endeavors to impart wisdom and advice. (There is a ‘How To” section, which promises to help customers “Solve
Another advertisement, which I found in an alternative feminist magazine, suggests that
the underwear it sells is able “subvert the dominant underwear.” Both ads seem to
suggest to their audience that clothing, style, and image are (at least) an element of
dissent and are (at most) resistant in and of themselves. Gap storefronts featured the
word RESISTANCE behind their new clothing collections, suggesting that wearing a
peace-sign t-shirt and the right jeans was a significant form of dissent. One needed only
watch television or look through magazines and pay attention to storefronts to notice that
it had become increasingly popular to be a “nonconformist” or rebel.

Micro-level analyses of dissent might theorize these aesthetic elements of protests
as resistant. In contrast to theories about advertising discussed in the context of
cooptation, Russell Berman suggests that the illusions manipulated by advertising
actually create opportunities for criticism and resistance: “the transference of social
conflict into the cultural sphere due to the aestheticization of everyday life implies that
societal contradictions will take on a visible concreteness…any struggle over images
becomes a struggle for power” (1989, 96). The cultural studies view of agency and
cultural consumption suggests that individuals are able to resist the messages of
advertising, for example. Capitalism is not able to simply erase the possibility of
opposition through a process of cooptation.

Camping Problems” or “Uphold Family Values”). The “Taking Action” line of online and print-based
advertisements are incredibly blatant in their cooptation of dissent: “If you want to live a successful life,
you have to fight for it/Shout/This is a wake-up call for the rebel inside you!” If the reader is interested,
she can also “Test your Protest Skills”.
22 That ad can be viewed in Bitch: feminist response to pop culture and online on the company’s website
www.wackijac.com. The use of the language and images of dissent or nonconformity in product
advertising is not necessarily a new trend. Thomas Frank (1997) documents the prevalence of such an
advertising strategy during the sixties in The Conquest of Cool. It is not my intent, here, to provide an
historical comparative account of advertising strategy.
Cultural resistance is complicated, however, and theories about audience reception “frequently ignore the amount of cultural work necessary to construct an oppositional reading” (Carragee 1996; 127). An observer of a “die-in” does not approach that scene as an empty observer, but as a participant with a whole range of culturally produced ideologies, attitudes, beliefs, etc. What they see is not the pure intent of the protester or the social movement organization. For example, a resurgence in punk-influenced style took place in 2001-2 in which clothing retail chains like The Gap to Abercrombie and Fitch were selling “rebellion.” This was accompanied by a parallel trend within the music industry, in which rock and punk-inspired music replaced the pop scene that dominated the late nineties. In the worlds of fashion and music it seems that it had become increasingly popular again to be a rebel or nonconformist. But the emphasis was on looking the part without having to act it. Do consumers see through the use of dissent to sell jeans in advertisements? What sort of cultural and social tools or information do individuals need to do so? Can images convey an oppositional political message, especially within an advertising age that exploits dissent in order to sell products? To be clear, I do not mean to imply that aesthetic or artistic representation is not a real, meaningful aspect of dissent. However, I want to trouble the easy association of aesthetic expression and political resistance.

Clothing appears, to me, to be one of the easiest media through which to observe and critique the aestheticization of dissent. To the extent that reports on protest events increasingly pay attention to what the crowd looks like and what they are wearing, clothing increasingly becomes a marker for dissent. In fact, clothing has long been considered an avenue for visually representing political dissent, but recent theorizing
about resistance and political opposition brings appearance and clothing to the forefront of understanding social change. In particular, cultural studies and feminist theories advocate the political potential of the body and clothing (display) as sites of resistance through which dominant meanings and ideologies can be challenged. Clothing, however, is inextricably tied into the political economy of the fashion industry. Therefore, the potential of clothing as a means of expressing political dissent in the context of advertising campaigns that exploit images of resistance, needs to be investigated. So, is clothing a mechanism of social control or a medium for the expression of political dissent?

Answering this question cannot ignore the fact that clothing has historically been a very powerful device of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment. Diana Crane (2000) writes, “Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity…In previous centuries, clothing was the principle means for identifying oneself in public space.”

Clothing is an extremely normative form of culture, used to portray occupational, regional, religious, and class differences between people—as well as instilling gender and sexual norms. Uniforms, for example, have been especially effective as instruments of social control. Until the advent of mass-produced clothing, new clothes were only accessible to the fairly wealthy. Thus, class differences were easily recognized and maintained in public interactions. Now, age and lifestyle differences are more saliently expressed through public appearance. Nonetheless, clothing has been an extremely visible way of maintaining social boundaries and reproducing class cultures based on taste.

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23 While the meaning of clothing today is not as strong as in the 19th century, Crane does not argue that clothing is an insignificant cultural and social marker.
Fashion also functions, through the fashion industry as a “hierarchical observer,” surveying and determining public taste. The 1950’s were a particularly strong era for control by the fashion industry. As White and Griffiths (2000) note, the post-war era “usher[ed] in an atmosphere of conformity and paranoia. As one American advertisement for men’s clothing put it: “You’re being watched! Dress right – you can’t afford not to!” (9). The fashion industry has the power to create “The Look” for a particular year, and through advertising and fashion magazines the power to discretely control how people dress. The pressure to adopt a certain look is carried out by peers and other institutions like schools and business (mandates of casual Fridays for example) and internalized by individuals.

The hegemonic “look” or style, however, has slowly loosened its hold on society as the fashion industry has fragmented. The power of the fashion industry has not declined. Rather than announcing a particular fashion trend, the industry now works to actively create “lifestyles” or lifestyle “tribes” (Crane 2000, White and Griffiths 2000). Rather than marketing one particular identity through clothing (with lower classes forced to settle for cheap knock offs) the industry has responded to the breakdown of class cultures and a fragmented society by marketing clothing to particular niches of society.24 Marketing research and technologies like “electronic point of sale” allow clothing producers to design and produce clothing specific to various groups of people (Ewan and Ewan 1982). We thus have a top-down implementation of power in which, while the industry is ‘attuned’ to the desires of its customers, it is determining the style of dress for various groups of society and controlling the identities available for people take on.

24 Massive amounts of marketing research have led to a classification of the population into eight groups based on personal orientations and resource constraints: traditional, believers, makers, strugglers, actualizers, achievers, experiencers, and strivers (Crane 2000, 12).
Hilfiger, for example, has lines for every age bracket and class, which sell very well because they are “worn by the right people” (Wilson 1998). Marketing and selling in the market is predicated on uniformity—of understanding the generic individual and which styles will appeal to him or her.

Equally important in an age of mass-produced clothing is, then, understanding the mechanisms of power through which the fashion industry determines what objects will eventually confront the public as clothing styles. Given the increasing corporate monopolization of the culture industry, especially in America, it becomes important to look to who decides what gets produced. In the clothing industry, fashion experts mediate the reception of styles. New firms find it increasingly difficult to enter the industry, assuring the continued hegemony of large firms in determining clothing styles. And it is difficult for new, small firms to get attention from fashion experts who determine the selection of clothing for sale in stores and for advertisement in fashion magazines (Crane 2000).

If clothing is indeed one of the ways (if not the most important way) individuals attempt to create a public identity, these trends indicate that surveillance by the fashion industry is limiting the options available to people. The fashion industry rests on the idea that there is “an identity” waiting out there on the racks, ready to be bought. It has the power to normalize, to induce conformity. As alluded to earlier, the fashion industry today markets lifestyles and in so doing, individualizes the consumption of cultural goods. Just as the examination and normalizing judgment make certain individual characteristics salient and measurable, the fashion industry, too, normalizes and objectifies. Style tribes, and their clothing, attitudes or behaviors become normalized.
Homogeneity is generated within these various groups. The clothing industry sees style or personality, including the idea of dissent or rebellion, as something that can be objectified and manifested in clothing. According to Crane (2000), consumers use various discourses to interpret the connections between their personal identity and a social one based on groups that wear similar clothing. Fashion is presented as a choice; the individual is expected to construct an individualized appearance from a variety of options. The range of choices and identities, again, are largely determined prior to reaching the consumer.

Of course, the clothing industry does not blatantly sell stylized images and identity to its consumers—it requires the “reconciliation of individuality and standardization” (Ewan and Ewan 1982). That is, the connections to the mass are denied and individual freedom is sold to consumers; mass produced clothing is transformed into a symbol of the free individual. This is because, according to Foucault, “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms”(1978, 86). The fashion industry thus masks its power to produce a mass with the ideology of individuality.

The irony of the emergence of “individuality” from out of the need to control the mass sheds light on contradictions within the fashion industry. Fashion appears to mirror the pinning down of the individual and his/her own particularity that the examination induces (Foucault 1978). The very selling of lifestyles rather than one particular clothing style targets and exploits individuality as means of selling fashion—in doing so, it also creates individuality. This shift in the fashion industry is applauded as freeing individuals from tradition. But it seems more dangerous than the more homogenous
styles of the 19th century due to the very fact that these styles are marketed as “choice,” as if providing the opportunity to develop a “unique identity.” It may be argued that the fashion industry has created a notion of individuality predicated on clothing choice and style. As Ewen and Ewen write, “The atomized self becomes the vehicle for general conformity” (1982, 265).

In a similar way, the marketing of particular clothing styles as “rebellious” also equates the dissident identity with a particular look. This is fashion at its most ironic, of course, as individuals conform to a mass produced image of rebellion. Even more ironic, the corporate takeover and homogenization of clothing is itself presented as an opponent to conformity (Frank 1998). Advertising seems able to sell any cultural product as “alternative.” It uses images of production lines, gray clothes, and muzac to sell its products as unique, originary. In fact, corporate America admits consumerism is a sham as it advertises products that will liberate you from the bonds of rampant consumption—it is waging a “rebellion through style” which channels dissidence into the marketplace.

The problems embodied in the cooptation of dissent by advertising and news are exacerbated in a post September 11 environment characterized by the commodification of patriotism. In Leslie Heller’s (2005) assessment, the post September 11th political economy is characterized by “the complex cultural relations of commodification and commemoration, marketing and militarism, commercial patronage and patriotism” (2). 9/11 has become a trademark, an easily sellable commodity and marketing dream for advertisers. Citizenship has been connected almost exclusively to “consumer rituals”
reinforced by “commercialized myths of self-actualization” (3). In this sense, patriotism has become a lifestyle in as much as democracy has (Ewen 1988).25

Heller (2005) sees the marketing of the flag as a strategy that “effectively empties the flag of any overt political signification and redefines it as a symbol of style and choice, the two ingredients of marketing success” (18). In effect, what has often represented rebellion, e.g. in images of burning the flag, has become the penultimate symbol of patriotic style. The flag, as “patriotic kitsch,”

functions less as a statement of national solidarity than as a capitulation to conformity, with a gag order on expressions of democratic dissent…In this context, the flag erupts upon the national scene like a neurotic symptom, a repetition of our hysterical deafness to any criticism or any idea that might get in the way of our rights to unlimited consumption, and our national duty to employ military measures, if necessary, to protect that right (Heller 2005; 18).

She suggests, furthermore, that “marketers and advertisers can only attempt to direct consumer desires and sympathies by refocusing the dissonance of consumer energies onto unifying concepts such as joy, freedom, healing, and heroism” (19).

According to Heller (2005), “images have come to define international events, but they often do so out of context, or in contexts that blur the lines between history and the partial truths reiterated by media corporations, news agencies, and their international affiliates” (8). She also sees profiteering and the selling of 9/11 as “the compliant

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25In All Consuming Images, Stewart Ewen writes, “democracy itself becomes a style; popular political involvement becomes structured by a pattern of spectatorship and consumption” (268). I’m thankful for the reminder of this work. From here on, citations are from the original. This particular quote however was cited in Heller’s introduction.
recontainment of political ambivalence and dissent within one of the only available forms sanctioned by the culture and not liable to be labeled unpatriotic” (10). The irony is that patriotism, though advertised as an opportunity for individual expression, was conveyed uniformly through consuming mass produced American flags. Dissent, as portrayed in fashion advertising and journalistic reports of protests, similarly reduces political opposition to a particular look or style. Without providing sufficient context in news coverage of demonstrations or marches, free standing descriptions of the “styles and passions” of protesters effectively empty dissent of meaning.

The Politics of Parody: Individualizing Dissent

Concerns over the right to dissent and limitations to free speech are most acute during times of national “crisis.” In these restrictive historical contexts, wartime especially, demands for patriotism and unity tend to produce concern over political opposition that is not typically controversial. That is, dissent occurs all the time, often over substantial governmental actions, but it does not usually generate anything near the controversy that anti-war protests between 2001 and 2003 produced. A quick perusal of the “current events” section of a bookstore is but one indication, for example, of the alarm over wartime legislation and the threat that Patriot Acts I & II pose to American civil liberties. Questions about nationalism and citizenship, patriotism and loyalty are simply not central to other times of dissent. The unique form of the discourse about dissent I have documented is most aptly confirmed by comparison to other recent protests.

For example, the proposed guest worker program initiated by the Bush administration sparked tremendous controversy in May of 2006. Immigrant rights groups
staged several very large protests during that month, stirring up debate over amnesty, the
rights of illegal immigrants, the place of immigration in U.S. society, and even whether
or not the Star Spangled Banner should be translated into Spanish. Importantly, coverage
of both the protests and the larger dialogue taking place between congresspersons,
political pundits, and citizens never went too far off task. There was, of course, the usual
disparagement of the protests and their lack of “message” but in general the discourse
stayed within the boundaries of talking about the issue of illegal immigration and the
proposed bills generated in the House and Senate. Indeed, most coverage of even highly
controversial issues and social movement actions tend not to devolve into a debate over
the issue of dissent itself. This tendency seems reserved to the issue of political
opposition during times of war but appears consequential for the understanding of social
change movements; dissent and resistance cannot be fully theorized without attention this
connection and its effects.

How can we explain the considerable narrowing of “appropriate speech” in the
public sphere during times of war? Margaret Somers (1999) suggests that part of the
problem lies in the privatization of citizenship that has taken place in political argument.
Rejuvenated in contemporary liberal political thought, “the concept of civil society was
called on to break apart this dichotomous closure [between state versus market, public
versus private] and to liberate a new social and political space…where people can
participate in the collective decision-making processes that shape their lives” (123).
According to Somers, “Civil society has thus come to represent the flourishing of a
seemingly novel political and social terrain, a space of popular social movements and
collective mobilization, of informal networks, civic associations, and community solidarities all oriented toward sustaining a participatory democratic life” (1999; 122).

In the process of attempting to successfully capture the spirit of democratic practices, however, the concept of civil society has increasingly been associated with the private, antipolitical, market side of the public/private divide. Attempts to theorize a “third space” and to protect “real citizenship from both the competitive individualism of the private market and from the administrative apparatus of the coercive state” have failed, reinforcing what Somers calls a demonization or fear and loathing of the public and the state. The public sphere embodies coercion, domination, and constraint while the private sphere is the supposed realm of freedom: “we have inherited the ineluctable connection established between freedom, the naturalism of market exchange, and individual rights on the one side; potential tyranny in the institutional domain of the state on the other (Somers 1999; 153). Citizenship practices have been privatized and individualized – reduced to market choice and public opinion – rather than expanded to encompass participation, solidarity, and a robust discourse of rights.

If we extend “citizenship practices” to include political speech and dissent, which Somers would surely agree to, we can begin to see that such practices have also become privatized and individualized. In the same way that expressions of dissent are unable to resist the rise of the image and aestheticization, they are also not immune to processes of individualization. Letters to the editor described in Chapter 4 reveal the tendency of individual readers to attribute the decision to dissent to “individual choice” and the substance of the anti-war position to “personal opinion.” Journalists, emphasizing the actions of individuals over the anti-war messages of organizations, also seem to locate
dissent at the individual level. Ironically, even though participation in mass
demonstrations could be framed in terms of democratic participation and citizenship,
dissent was treated as an individual act based on a privately held opinion about the war.

But I do not want to argue that the individualization of dissent during this time
occurred only through the news media’s disproportionate concentration on events or
participant demographics and not on the case against the war. True, we heard little about
the behind the scenes action or the real debate that took place in developing the anti-war
argument or why we should not rush into either of these armed conflicts, especially in
reports about protests. However, Somers’ argument hints at the fact that the
individualization of dissent is couched within a larger social process of disengaging
citizenship from the public realm. In both theory and practice, culturally based political
movements rely increasingly a notion of activism that is highly dependent on the
individual as a mechanism for change. The subversive tactics of both culture jammers
and identity-based movements are essentially those of individuals acting alone (though
sometimes coming together to act simultaneously). For example, Klein (2000)
documents a common practice in the anti-globalization movement of using billboards in
urban areas to “advertise” the harms of global capitalism. Mimicking traditional, glossy
product advertising, this technique draws individuals to these fake advertisements in the
hope of educating the public about the consequences of unlimited consumption. Renting
billboards, creating advertisements, and installations can (and usually are) be
accomplished by a small group or even a single individual. Moreover, these tactics leave
much of the intended impact of culture jamming open to individual interpretation. This
open-endedness is not necessarily a bad thing. However, as discussed above, the
messages of these actions are often misrepresented in the media and thus may be distorted by the time they reach the public.

The transgressive tactics increasingly used by culture jammers and embedded within protests and demonstrations against globalization or war are an attempt to accommodate an increasingly individualized world in which power seems more diffuse than ever. Like a politics of style, they recognize a potentially infinite number of “points of resistance” to the system as well as the need for a multitude of ways to register opposition. They are the real world manifestations of a theoretical turn towards a politics of performativity or parody (Butler 1990, 1993) that seems to celebrate resistance in and of itself. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) advocates parody as a potential source of resistance to heteronormative gender formations. She argues persuasively for the “performativa” nature of gender: femininity or masculinity is an act we repeatedly perform throughout our daily routine; it is not a characteristic that individuals have. Parodic repetition (playing with gender roles) is able to expose the ambiguities and incoherences inherent within discourses and practices that establish gender as a given, as an essential biological category. That is, we can show that gender is a “regulatory fiction” that is enforced from without by performing gender differently from how it is scripted. As such, the meaning of gender (and sex) is created at many points and is a “contested site:” “the very multiplicity of [its] construction holds out the possibility of a disruption” (Butler 1990, 43).

This form of cultural politics, however, relies heavily on the individual as an agent of change (Littler 2005). Though there is an infinite number of places and times and ways to challenge the gender system, it is up to individuals to perform these parodic
repetitions. And, as even Butler notes, parody by itself is not subversive; we have “to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (1990, 177).

Are social change strategies that emphasize play, pastiche, or parody resistant? They become particularly problematic when reinserted into the context of increasing individualization we have been discussing. News media, already accustomed to emphasizing dissent as a matter of individual opinion, thus detracting from movement messages, seem more than capable of neutralizing the disruptive acts of individuals. Moreover, the emphasis on the individual activist seems to play into the image of “someone who dissents” circulated through the aestheticization of dissent. Increasing distrust of the public sphere seems to suggest that political discourse will be further relegated to the realm of the private, potentially weakening the claims of social change movement organizations.

Furthermore, we must inquire into whether or not such “spontaneous” acts can challenge the authority of hegemonic discourses about war or consumption or gender. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse argues “Spontaneity does not contradict authority: inasmuch as revolutionary practice is the explosion of vital needs…it is rooted in spontaneity—but this spontaneity can be deceptive” (1972, 47). What is needed, he writes, is intensive counter-education and organization. Liberation is not a spontaneous act, something arising from within the individual, *purely*, but something that requires education by another. One may *self*-educate, but even that presupposes the education of others – one can be inspired by Butler or Marcuse’s words, for example, but any new
consciousness brought about by that reading is dependent upon the education Marcuse received and the education of those from whom Marcuse learned, *et cetera ad infinitum*.

The unequal access to education in a hierarchical social structure is clearly important here, and is certainly not neglected in *Counterrevolution*. Education is political not just in its accessibility, but in the responsibility of those educated to use their knowledge responsibly. For Marcuse, “All authentic education is political education, and in a class society, political education is unthinkable without leadership, education and tested in the theory and practice of radical opposition” (1972, 47). There can be no individual liberation without larger social transformation. Change must occur at both the individual and social level for any meaningful change to really occur, it is not just a matter of individual agency but also structural transformation. “Personal refusal” must act in concert with “radical critique of the Establishment within the Establishment” (Marcuse 1972, 49). “Do one’s thing, yes” Marcuse writes, “but the time has come to learn that not *any* thing will do, but only those things which testify (no matter how silently) to the intelligence and sensibility of men and women who can do *more* than their own thing, living *and working* for a society without exploitation, among themselves” (1972, 50).

To be sure, Marcuse would not be arguing today that cultural politics should be abandoned. In fact, he argues in much of his work for the political potential of art (1972, 1978). Marcuse criticizes spontaneity and argues for the need for organization within movements that intend to challenge (really challenge) capitalism, yet he also esteems the ability for art to provide a transformative platform, a way to challenge the “prevailing reality.” He praises the “strong emphasis on the political potential of the arts which is a
feature of this radicalism” of new social movements and its “effort to find forms of communication that may break the oppressive rule of the established language and images over the mind and body of man—language and images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (1972, 79). This theoretical language is common in feminist and post-colonial theorizing, of course. In fact, prefiguring (perhaps) Butler and Foucault, he suggests that effective communication of radical ideas requires a language that “will necessarily depend on the subverting use of traditional material, and the possibilities of this subversion are naturally sought where the tradition itself has permitted, sanctioned, and preserved another language, and other images” (1972, 80).

For Marcuse, art was meant to serve as oppositional in its ability to present dissenters in a positive light while disavowing or denigrating the oppressors and the system of oppression. It held the possibility of subverting the dominant culture through political tactics similar to those popular today. However, he makes an important distinction between artistry and subversive art: “Certainly, there is rebellion in the guerilla theater, in the poetry of the “free press,” in rock music—but it remains artistic without the negating power of art. To the degree to which it makes itself part of real life, it loses the transcendence which opposes art to the established order—it remains immanent in this order, one-dimensional, and thus succumbs to this order” (1972, 101).

In order to obtain the liberation of humanity “the theater must leave the stage and go on the street, to the masses. And it must shock, cruelly shock and shatter the complacent consciousness and unconsciousness” (Marcuse 1972, 112). But it must also be more than a private ideological revolt. In order for any type of cultural political
movement to be effective it must move out of the realm of the private sphere. This obviously requires a resurrection of the public sphere, a realistic conception of civil society, and the ideal of public participation as a positive good and an essential aspect of citizenship.

The privatization of citizenship, then, can be seen as contributing to diverting attention away from the substantive content of the anti-war movement – and thus, real critique of the government itself – toward questioning the private rights of citizens to express political opposition. Questions about dissent effectively draw attention away from government actions by raising the ruse of freedom or patriotism. Furthermore, as a moral discourse, debates about dissent served to solidify the imagined community and to create unity behind the march to war.

Conclusion

The recent discourse about dissent documented in previous chapters reveals the precarious place of particular forms of political opposition in American society. Teetering on the narrow precipice of acceptable speech, the debate surrounding anti-war protests pushed dissent over the edge and into the realm of anti-American, anti-troop, excessive free speech. But it has become increasingly clear, through my research, that it is not just discourse about dissent that is central to understanding political opposition both in practice and in theory. Beyond what is said, who says it, and how it is said – beyond discourse, that is – there is a cultural world of context and meaning that shapes speech and its interpretation. Belief in the ideal of freedom as an “American Value” betrays the fact that the idea of dissent and the right to disagree publicly with government
actions has often generated controversy throughout the history of this country. What these protests exposed, I think, is the tremendous baggage that the concept of dissent carries with it today. The socio-historical account of protest most often told to the American public has tremendous implications for the effectiveness of dissent. That account includes the legacy of suppression during wartime, the legacy of the sixties counterculture, and the impact of the cultural turn on social movement organizations, all of which tend to marginalize and keep dissent in check.

These three contextual factors come together most clearly in coverage of and discussion about the protest *events* that occurred throughout the two-year period studied. Through the subtle mechanisms of mass media and the concrete ways in which protest is regulated, social movements’ strategies of resistance are easily manipulated, distorted, and ridiculed. The cooptation of oppositional messages by the news media and advertising, in combination with a pervasive demonization or trivialization of the sixties, exacerbates central problems in culture jammers’ formulations of resistance. The ideas of a cultural politics are fundamentally individualist, yet activists do hope to create a movement. Furthermore, their desire for a society characterized by freedom of information contradicts their belief that they are bearers of objective truths: “Besides an expression of a contemporary dilemma of the collective versus the individual, perhaps what we see is the well-known conflict between revolutionary and reformative strategies in the construction of a movement identity” (Taylor 1991, 33). New forms of resistance and protest seem to be ever more individualized, more likely to give in to the play of consumer society. It is difficult to assess, but they appear, as a result, to be less effective. Freedom of expression, shared struggle, the deconstruction of hegemony, radical
pluralism, irony, “fun ethic,” presentation and representation, and ambiguity do not appear to play very well in newsmedia coverage of cultural politics. Therefore the messages of movements that use such tactics run the risk of being distorted if not co-opted. According to Wettergren (2003), “The question is whether the “fun ethic” can be a source of resistance to the spectacle and consumer culture” (34). While Lasn (1999) is correct in saying that postmodern cynicism and its attitude of resignation makes resistance difficult to achieve, “the hold of consumer culture and the mass mediated illusion of democratic freedoms conceal a reality of conformist resignation under hegemonic neoliberal ideology” (Wettergren 2003; 29). A strictly cultural politics masks social power by concentrating on individuals and opinions rather than effects of government actions on other states/people—a call to the right to protest masks the power of the government.
Conclusion: The Meaninglessness of Dissent?

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor (1991) argues against the tendency to either bemoan the crisis of modernity and its relativism and nihilism or celebrate the conditions of life as libratory and progressive. Both sides are wrong according to Taylor. The “knockers,” as he calls them, are overly critical of the narcissism, self-indulgence, and permissiveness they see as pervasive today. They have lost sight of the moral force behind the idea of self-fulfillment and the freedom that has brought about. The “boosters,” in their celebration of authenticity and freedom, neglect the restrictive nature of modern institutions and structures and the primacy of instrumental reason. In an attempt to avoid becoming entrenched in arguments over a variety of alleged Trends in culture, Taylor advocates leaving the debate itself behind; it is, after all, likely to remain unresolved when framed in this polarizing language. “What we ought to be doing is fighting over the meaning of authenticity, and from the standpoint developed here, we ought to be trying to persuade people that self-fulfillment, so far from excluding unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self, actually requires these in some form. The struggle ought not to be over authenticity, for or against, but about it, defining its proper meaning. We ought to be trying to lift the culture back up, closer to its motivating ideal” (1991, 72).

Dissent, like authenticity, is mired in the debate over whether modernity is essentially freeing or restrictive. I have attempted to resist the tendency to see agency, resistance, or authenticity in dichotomous terms by focusing on what we mean by dissent rather than on questions of whether or not individuals are capable of opposition. Unlike
Marcuse, a la *One Dimensional Man*, I do not believe that the conditions of modernity have rendered individuals completely unable to dissent. The millions of individuals who protested military action against Iraq and Afghanistan are proof that people are not totally unable to question the decisions government officials make or the policies under which we are governed. However, it is important to examine the place of dissent in modern culture in order to understand how socio-cultural context influences the possibilities for resistance.

Social movement and political theorists regularly study the iron triangle (legislature, government bureaucracies, and special interest groups) to understand the face of power in American politics today. By examining the connections between newsmedia and the anti-war movement in this work, I have come to see the crucial role this fourth piece plays in policy- and idea-making. Contemporary media have effectively created an argument culture and this approach to dialogue is clearly evident in the discourse about dissent (Snow 2003). The rising value of debate for the sake of debate generates particular consequences for the idea of dissent and for the dissident. Marcuse argued decades ago that any movement advocating social change must be able to effectively communicate its “indictment of established reality” in ways that resonate with society and yet “break the oppressive rule of the established language and images over the mind and body of man—language and images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (1972, 79). Today, of course, this power lies primarily with the newsmedia and other communication systems. Marcuse also suggested that if one wants to challenge the current system one must in some sense be outside of or marginal to that system: “Communication of the radically nonconformist,
new historical goals of the revolution requires an equally nonconformist language (in the widest sense)” (79-80). However, this language cannot be invented, it will necessarily depend on the subverting use of traditional material: communication of nonconformist ideas requires broadcast and print for transmission. There is simply no escaping this powerful medium or its powerful effects in shaping dissident ideas as well as the meaning of dissent itself.

However, the need to draw upon “traditional” material clearly also has its drawbacks. As social movements and news media increasingly emphasize the framing of issues, the business of social change takes the form of a corporate public relations model. Incredible energy is spent on how the message is delivered rather on constructing the message itself. In the context of an argumentative culture, the focus is on discounting the other side of the debate rather than on a substantive, balanced discussion about the issue. With regard to the coverage of the issue of dissent, drawing upon discourses of patriotism, war, and national security have proved effective tactics for limiting the extent to which debate about foreign policy can take place. The reach and power of the patriotism discourse is illustrated perfectly in the case of Cindy Sheehan, the mother of an American soldier killed in Iraq. Although newsmedia coverage of her protest outside of George W. Bush’s Crawford, Texas ranch during the summer of 2005 was initially somewhat favorable, it took only a few short weeks of being in the media spotlight before questions of her patriotism, and the potential danger her protest generated for troops currently stationed in Iraq, began to circulate. However absurd the allegation, the idea that mothers whose daughters and sons were injured and killed in Iraq could not rationally support the withdrawal of troops gained momentum. Other mothers and
fathers of troops publicly condemned Ms. Sheehan. In the end, the discourses of patriotism and motherhood served to disparage the anti-war protesters themselves and the camp they had created a few hundred feet from the President’s house. Arguments over whether parents of service personnel could oppose an ongoing operation displaced debate over Ms. Sheehan’s stance against the war – a stance she articulated beautifully on several occasions only to have the news media focus on pundits who questioned her loyalty to this country.

The power of the rhetoric of patriotism – within the context of a war on terrorism post September 2001 – lies in its ability to demonize dissent, to reduce debate to senseless argument over the bounds of critique, and to circumvent discussion of foreign policy. The incitement to speak about dissent raises the question of whether opposition is possible. Reliance on symbolic references to freedom, patriotic duty, and Vietnam era anti-war protest traps dissident ideas within the established language of meaningful metaphors that drastically confines conversation rather than opening it to multidimensional debate. The discourse described above is reminiscent of the idea of one-dimensionality Marcuse described decades ago:

Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of individuals through the way in which it is organized. Such a society may justly demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies within the status quo” (Marcuse 1964, 1, italics in original).
The news media today seems able to satisfy the need for debate and public discussion through its creation of an argument format for presenting the news, while at the same time it reduces the scope of discussion. Selling the news means that a debate over the patriotism of a mother protesting the war is far more controversial and more likely to generate audience attention than intense debate over the intricacies of a real debate over the need for war, and the invasion of Iraq in particular. Elaborate debate over the effects of troop presence in Baghdad (including the nuances of the socio-cultural and religious history of the region, imperial relationships with the western world, as well as controversial interpretations over motivations for the invasion) is far less exciting than heated arguments over what it means to be a mother.

Furthermore, the discourse of dissent seemed able to “reduce opposition to the promotion of alternative policies within the status quo.” Calls for unity and patriotism, in combination with concern over dissent during wartime, forced anti-war protesters to utilize the language of the nation as they got out their message. As Chomsky writes, these “operations of domestic thought control” are common in the wake of wars: “turmoil tends to encourage the “crisis of democracy” that is the persistent fear of elites, requiring measures to reverse the thrust of popular democracy that threatens established power” (Chomsky 1989, 32). Unable to stand apart, to offer a strong and subversive critique of U.S. policy, the argument against invading either Afghanistan or Iraq was never allowed to gain much ground as an alternative response to the 9/11 attacks. Alternatives to the war were never fully developed in the realm of public debate – though there were a number that circulated widely in the alternative press – and were clearly not elaborated upon in coverage of dissent. Importantly, the discourse of dissent, in its coverage of the
idea of dissent, presented the opposition as simply that: a movement against the war that was not able to articulate a real alternative to invasion and no policy that it seemed able to implement that could alleviate the need for war.

Beyond this, the discourse described above established dissent itself as out of bounds: the very idea of disagreeing was itself eliminated, impossible in the context of war. What enduring effects might this debate over dissent have for political opposition in the future? Marcuse suggests that the ability for dissent is slowly whittled away under the forces of the culture industry and the one-dimensionality of modern societies. Does the discourse described above function as a force that further chips away at the ability for individuals to dissent? Resistance, Foucault says, “marks the presence of power.” But it is never outside of or subversive of power. The very presence of an anti-war movement should indicate the presence of resistance and, hence, contradict the idea that dissent has become impossible. Nonetheless, the news media apparently exercised a significant level of control over the dialogue about dissent. Social movement organizations and anti-war activists can clearly be seen reacting to newspaper representations of dissent in press interviews and letters to the editor. And, as documented, the language found in letters to the editor tended to mimic the language used in articles about protests. For example, the rise of the language of patriotism and the need to “support our troops” follows an increase in journalists’ rising attention to the appropriateness of dissent during a time of war. It is not possible to prove causation here, but the correlation between public discourse and the emergence of news media frames is powerful. So, while on the one hand, news media did provide space for dissent, on the other hand, that space was quickly
closed off by discussions about dissent itself. Room for contradiction emerged, but was quickly limited.

Furthermore, recent discussion about dissent, including but not limited to questions about how much dissent is good for the country, is merely one episode in a continuing string of similar concern about social and political deviations – it is evidence of a continuity in vocabularies of moral discourse about dissent. The fact that war tends to provoke discussion about dissent seems proof of the continued tenuous place of opposition in contemporary society. It also seems to be evidence of the sometimes none-too-subtle ways in which resistance is diverted at best, co-opted at worst. Discourse about dissent becomes an easy way to discredit the opinions of the dissenting group and to create consensus and support for war or military action.

Though our modern notions of authenticity and agency center on development of our unique selves, we see the social nature of subjectivity in the debate over dissent. News articles and letters to the editor during this time illustrate the social production of “dissent” and the “dissident.” Negotiations over the expression of oppositional ideas and the establishment of a particular dissident identity occurred during this time period and were mirrored in letters to the editor. The social nature of this process is evident in the back and forth of discourse about dissent as well as the shifts in dominant definitions.

The real power of what has been theorized here lies, I think, in the combination of how the discourse about dissent was framed and the aestheticization and individualization of dissent. “Dissident” is a difficult position to take up. The desire to fit in or feeling a sense of national loyalty, no matter how weak or strong, makes critique difficult. Add in the threat of ostracism, treason, challenges to one’s patriotism or national loyalty and fear
surely inhibits most people from ever criticizing one’s government. Especially in a time of war, the very idea of disagreeing itself is eliminated or established as out of bounds. The aestheticization and individualization of dissent seem to further weaken the power of critique to offer any possibility for radical social transformation. Reduced to a look, a style, or an individual opinion, dissent is emptied of the deep meaning it should carry.

As people come to see themselves more atomistically and as instrumental reason is emphasized, a connection to ‘society’ or to their fellow citizens becomes exceedingly difficult to foster. “They may indeed feel linked in common projects with some others, but these come more to be partial groupings rather than the whole society” (Taylor 1991, 113). The discourse about dissent serves to increase fragmentation rather than creating a sense of common purpose and ability to act:

A sense grows that the electorate as a whole is defenceless against the leviathan state; a well-organized and integrated partial grouping may, indeed be able to make a dent, but the idea that the majority of the people might frame and carry through a common project comes to seem utopian and naïve. And so people give up. Already failing sympathy with others is further weakened by the lack of a common experience of action, and a sense of hopelessness makes it seem a waste of time to try (Taylor 1991, 113).

Dissent does not necessarily become impossible. But the formation of oppositional ideas and the ability to act on them appear restricted.
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