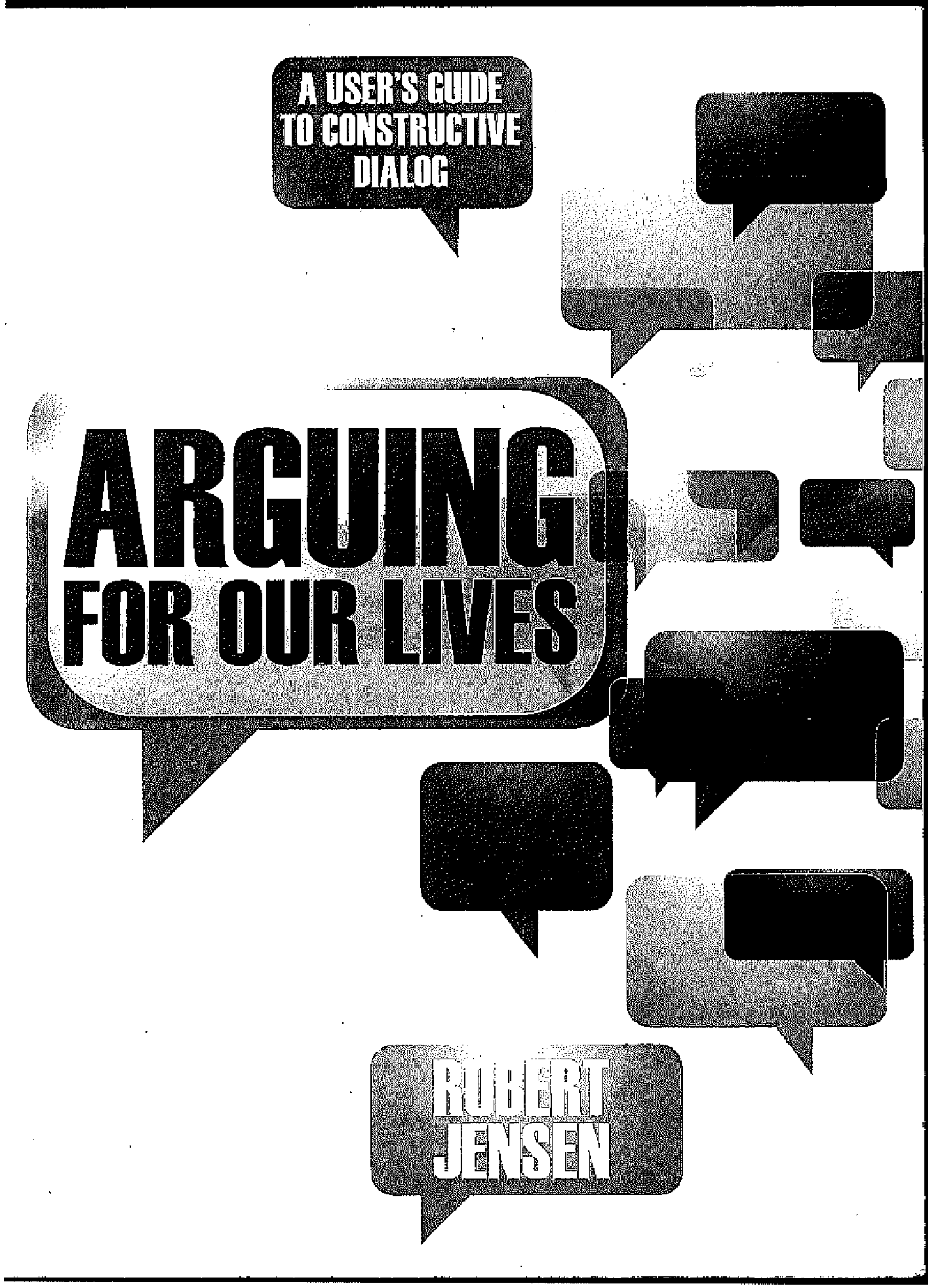

CHAPTER 3

Power Basics: Political but More than Politics

If democracy begins in conversation, as the political philosopher John Dewey often suggested, then we want to foster a culture in which ordinary people routinely talk in public about religion and politics—about those foundational issues concerning how to understand ourselves in relation to the world, and how to distribute power and resources. That public conversation is bound to be contentious, but it can be constructive when we engage each other as critically thinking intellectuals. If that conversation is to go beyond just spouting opinions at each other, we need to be able to make normative claims that we can support and that others can take seriously. Those claims should be based on empirical evidence we can trust and analysis that is sound, all rooted in good intellectual practices that are collectively maintained.

In the highly charged partisan atmosphere of the contemporary United States, many people not only are frustrated with the contentious nature of much of the mass-mediated debate over these questions but are deeply distrustful of all claims being made. Students routinely tell me that they don't believe anything that anyone on any side of these debates says, that they assume everything is skewed by people's political positions—in short, that it's nothing but politics, implying a dishonest and untrustworthy process. I hear the same complaint from older folks as well. If people believe there is no way to find any solid ground on which to base a political position, then political discourse rooted in rationality appears to be impossible. The problem is not simply that people don't like conflict but that they have lost faith in the possibility of honest argumentation in public and hence lost faith in finding an honest way to resolve political conflict.

Especially in a hyper-mediated world that treats everything—politics, art, sports—as mass spectacle entertainment, such disgust with the level and nature of debate is easy to understand. But our fatigue with a degraded culture doesn't eliminate our obligations as citizens. We still need to come to our own normative judgments, especially about how to distribute power and wealth, and discuss those options collectively to decide on public policy. When we aren't part of that process, others speak and act for us, and we often don't like what they say and do. Unless we want to abandon our world to the very people we believe to be the least trustworthy among us, we need to be critically thinking intellectuals.

These concerns about political partisanship and intellectual integrity are crucial to the quality of our public debate, but they also raise a more basic question. If we are worried not just that political spinmeisters knowingly falsify evidence and bend logic, but also that well-intentioned folk end up skewing the world to fit their own politics, we may wonder whether we can trust ourselves. Everyone has a theology and

a politics—even those who have no interest in such matters base their lives on some assumptions and assertions about what people are and how society should be organized. All of us have some foundational understandings of what it means to be human, which we use to build our worldview, our way of understanding ourselves in relation to others and the living world. If other people's critical thinking might be swayed by their theology and politics, as they sometimes clearly are, then it stands to reason that my own could be similarly affected.

There are several common ways people handle this challenge. Some simply ignore the questions and keep asserting that their own knowledge claims are obviously superior to the opponents' claims. This is a common response of political partisans who strive to carry the day simply by force of will, rhetoric, or power.

Others acknowledge the questions and offer themselves as knowledge specialists who can transcend the political sphere by following special procedures and practices. Mainstream journalists, university professors, and independent researchers in a variety of fields routinely offer their services to society as professional sources of knowledge who can be trusted precisely because their professions are designed to remove them from political struggles. They claim to be neutral and non-ideological.

A more sensible position is to recognize that our knowledge seeking is inevitably shaped by our theological and political commitments, a situation that is simply a part of being human and not a reason to abandon hope of defensible intellectual practice or retreat into false claims of neutrality and life beyond ideology. While there's a theology and a politics undergirding everything we claim in an argument, those claims can be more than "just politics."

Neutrality

Is neutrality necessary to find truths we can defend? Should we expect intellectual specialists to be neutral when they communicate the truths they believe they have found? The questions assume that neutrality is possible, that there is a vantage point from which a person can observe the world free from political, moral, or theological values; and that we can communicate to others in language that is value-free. Neither assumption holds up.

First, the question of point of view. No one is, or can be, a neutral observer of the world. Take a simple example of eyewitness testimony. Imagine that a scuffle breaks out between two men on a crowded street corner. One of the men is white, middle-aged, and wearing a suit, while the other is black, younger, and wearing casual clothes and a hooded sweatshirt. There is pushing and shoving, voices are raised and insults exchanged, a gun drops to the ground, and the young man runs away. Police arrive to take a statement from the ten witnesses, all of whom had an equally clear view of the incident. Who started the altercation? What was the nature of the fight? What was said? Which man had the gun?

Will all ten statements be the same? Not likely, based on what we know about memory fallibility. Would the inevitable discrepancies between the witnesses have anything to do with their politics? It is plausible that the witnesses' views about race and class might influence their perception of the incident, without any of them even being aware of those influences. Can we train ourselves to transcend our assumptions?

The question makes sense only if we believe we can live without any assumptions. Certainly we can learn to identify and assess our assumptions—that's part of critical thinking—but we cannot live in the world as truly blank slates.

Every attempt to gather information to understand the world is based on an understanding of the world and how it works. Again, no knowledge is pre-theoretical. When we are trying to understand people and societies, every inquiry comes with a set of assumptions about the nature of human beings, relations among humans, and the place of humans in the larger world. There is no neutral ground on which to stand to view the world.

This is compounded when we describe the world to others using language, which also undermines our attempts at neutrality. To make this point in my class, I put on the screen a simple sentence with a request that students fill in the blank:

"Columbus __________ America."

When I was a grade-school student in the United States in the mid-1960s, we filled in the blank with "discovered," but today that word would be hotly contested. If we say Columbus discovered America, we imply that other humans had yet to set foot on the island of Hispaniola, since a claim to discover something is a claim to be the first person to arrive. But Columbus found the island inhabited by the Arawak-speaking Taino people. Suggesting that he and the other Europeans with him discovered America is to suggest the Taino were not fully human, not capable of discovery. To use the word "discovered" in this context, then, is racist and ethnocentric. There is a politics to the choice of "discovered."

Sometimes students will respond that "discovered" is just shorthand for "was the first European to discover." But if that's what is meant, then why not use the full phrase? Is it really crucial to save those five words? And if that is the case, would we be just as likely to describe the first indigenous Americans' trip to Europe by saying those folks discovered Europe? Even in the most charitable interpretation, the claim that "Columbus discovered America" is European-centric, and that is a political stance.

When I ask students to suggest another term, some come back with "conquered," "colonized," "destroyed," or similar terms. A strong case can be made for choosing such words, but they just as clearly have political implications, primarily a judgment that the actions of Columbus and other Europeans were immoral, illegal, or illegitimate in some fashion. There are obvious political judgments in the choice of those terms.

Students then offer a variety of terms that, on the surface, seem to avoid judgment: "encountered," "engaged with," or—my favorite of all the ones ever offered in class—"stumbled upon." But those words, despite the appearance of neutrality, also carry a politics. I offer the students an analogy: Suppose some folks from another neighborhood roll into your part of town, make their way through the houses of you and your neighbors, steal everything of value, and kill or work to death everyone. Would you say that those newcomers "encountered" or "stumbled upon" your neighborhood? Such a seemingly neutral term would obscure the violence, and therefore would favor the marauders.

Moving forward from that historical example, consider any number of contemporary choices. Is waterboarding "torture" or "enhanced interrogation"? One term suggests criminal

and/or immoral activity, the other an action that is legally and morally permissible. Both are political, as would be any word created for the action; even new words we might create in an attempt to be neutral would eventually come to carry a judgment through the way they would be used.

Should the U.S. military action in March 2003 be called "the Iraq War" or "the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq"? The former implies a legitimate conflict, the latter an illegitimate intervention. Was the federal legislation passed in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown a "rescue package" or a "bailout"? Again, whatever word one chooses, it will carry political connotations. Perhaps the most often cited example of this is the recurring debate about whether members of a political group that uses violence, including violence against civilians, are "terrorists" or "freedom fighters." People will argue for one or the other of these terms, or opt for other choices. The only thing we can say for sure is that all are politicized terms.

This does not mean that we should give up on any attempts to identify and understand the effects of our preconceived notions when we collect data about the world; such self-reflection is a part of good intellectual practice. In our attempts to report the results of our inquiry, we should avoid language that skews the case for or against a proposition based only on emotion or existing prejudice; such a commitment to honest communication is also part of good intellectual practice. The fact that there is no neutral place to stand does not mean we should not do our best to be honest in our attempts to gain knowledge and convey that knowledge to others. It just means we shouldn't be naïve.

Ideology

The desire for knowledge untainted by theological or political commitments also is expressed in the claim of some people and professions to being non-ideological. To evaluate that claim, the first step is to define the term, which is routinely used in three different ways.

The first is ideology-as-insult, probably the most common use of the term in everyday language. When someone suggests to another, "don't be so ideological," an ideology is understood as a belief system that is abstract, rigid, impractical, or fanatical. People using the term this way typically are suggesting that an ideology is something other folks have, which keeps them from seeing things clearly. The assumption behind this view is that there is a commonsense way of interpreting the world without resorting to a reality-distorting ideology.

We have all been in discussions where it seemed clear that the other person was not trying to look at all sides of a question but simply pressing a position out of an unreflective commitment to a belief system. If we were to be honest, we could identify times in our lives when we exhibited the same rigidity. So, if we all have the capacity to get lost in our ideology, who exactly are those people we can trust to have the undistorted commonsense vision? The fact that we all know people who argue fanatically and seem incapable of real dialog—people we tend to label "ideologues"— should not lead any one of us to think we have the crystal-clear, non-ideological view.

The second definition is ideology-as-worldview. This more sociological perspective understands ideology as the set of social, political, and moral values, attitudes, outlooks, and beliefs that shape a social group's interpretation of the world.

Understanding ideology as the framework within which we make sense of the world, it's clear that everyone has an ideology or ideologies. The assumption here is that there is no neutral inquiry into the world.

When the word is defined this way, it's difficult to argue that anyone is non-ideological or beyond ideology. Rather than hurl the label at others as an insult, this definition encourages us to think not only about other people's frameworks but about our own. By suggesting we develop our ideologies as part of a social group, this definition also encourages us to look at the larger context in which our views develop, rather than see them as the product of a purely individual effort.

The third definition is ideology-as-power. This critical view understands ideology as the beliefs of a ruling group, which are imposed on a subordinate group so as to make the ruling ideas appear to be self-evident. From this perspective, ideology is a tool of the powerful that obscures the truth of social relations. The assumption in this case is that ideology should be critiqued to help people better understand their real place in society and resist injustice.

Many people identify this view of ideology as Marxist, the view that a ruling class in capitalism uses its control over the ideological institutions (schools, universities, churches, mass media) to maintain this dominance and allow it to govern without the need for continuous coercion and violence. A similar argument is made by some feminists analyzing male dominance, or critical race scholars and activists analyzing white supremacy. In most cases, these critics don't suggest that the dominant group's ability to control ideas is so powerful that it cannot be resisted, but simply that those in charge have more powerful tools at their disposal.

In some sense, all three definitions are accurate. People, on any side of an issue, can fail to see how they are caught in an ideological box that prevents them from recognizing evidence and analysis that challenges their views. We can counter that self-indulgence by recognizing that we all have an ideology, or ideologies. And we can at the same time realize that all ideologies do not come with the same force behind them, and that sometimes an ideological box is constructed by people in power to try to keep the rest of us trapped.

We can see some aspect of all these conceptions of ideology in this excerpt from the congressional testimony of Alan Greenspan. Many believe that Greenspan, who was chair of the Federal Reserve of the United States from 1987 to 2006, bears much of the blame for the 2008 financial meltdown. Although he rejected responsibility, Greenspan did acknowledge that some of his assumptions about how the economy works—and his predictions about the effects of his policies—proved inaccurate. In this exchange, California Democrat Henry Waxman raised a question about Greenspan's ideology:

> **Waxman:** The question I have for you is, you had an ideology, you had a belief that free, competitive—and this is your statement—"I do have an ideology. My judgment is that free, competitive markets are by far the unrivaled way to organize economies. We've tried regulation. None meaningfully worked." That was your quote. You had the authority to prevent irresponsible lending practices that led to the subprime mortgage crisis. You were advised to do so by many others. And now our

> whole economy is paying its price. Do you feel that your ideology pushed you to make decisions that you wish you had not made?
>
> **Greenspan:** Well, remember that what an ideology is, is a conceptual framework with the way people deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to—to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not. And what I'm saying to you is, yes, I found a flaw. I don't know how significant or permanent it is, but I've been very distressed by that fact. . . .
>
> **Waxman:** You found a flaw in the reality?
>
> **Greenspan:** Flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak.
>
> **Waxman:** In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right, it was not working?
>
> **Greenspan:** That is, precisely. That's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I had been going for forty years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.[1]

The exchange starts with Waxman suggesting that Greenspan's overly zealous commitment to free-market ideology, with its presumption against government regulation, had led him to advocate policies that contributed to the meltdown. Greenspan reminds Waxman that ideology is not a slur but simply a way we organize our thinking. What is left unsaid is that that the dominance of free-market ideology—not only in Greenspan's worldview but in the whole culture—is the product of years of efforts by the corporate sector to make that free-market view the common sense of the society.[2]

Greenspan is simplifying a bit too much when he says the question is whether an ideology "is accurate or not." Some ideologies prove to be based on more accurate data and more compelling interpretation of data, but no ideological framework can guarantee a correct answer to every question in such a complex world. Better to say that some ideologies do a better job than others in guiding our actions, but that in the end no ideology completely captures the world.

Teaching and politics

This complexity doesn't mean we should abandon our quest to understand the world, but rather reminds us that we shouldn't pretend that we can transcend our ideological framework and find a neutral place from which to understand the world. Instead, we can work to cultivate our ability to be critically self-reflective, so that we can evaluate the ideologies of others and be more aware of our own.

Applying this reasoning to my job as a university professor, I put it this way: All teaching about human affairs has a politics, but teaching is more than just politics. In the classroom my goal is not to persuade students that my political judgments are correct but to pose challenging questions and encourage critical thinking. Rather than feigning neutrality or pretending to be beyond ideology, I try to make visible

the political implications of the class, which are reflected in every decision I make. Why did I organize the course this way? Choose these textbooks? Lecture on these specific topics? Highlight these points of view? Most faculty members have years of professional training that guide us in these decisions, but the decisions can't be reduced to purely professional judgments.

Every professor's politics come into play, but it's not always obvious how professors' politics influence a class. When instructors' politics reflect the dominant culture's conventional wisdom, they look apolitical. To teach a course in the United States that is based on the assumption that capitalism is the proper way to organize an industrial economy appears neutral and beyond ideology. To teach a course that assumes socialism is the proper system will appear politicized. Both courses are political, in the sense I'm using the term. Either course might be taught badly or taught well; in either course the professor could inappropriately harangue students and demand that they adopt the professor's view. That's bad teaching, not because a professor's politics are out in the open but because the professor is undermining the students' critical thinking.

Here's another example that works particularly well on my campus. In the class before a football weekend, I will tell students that I hope they will boycott the game as a protest against the way in which big-money intercollegiate athletics undermines the integrity of the university as an intellectual institution. After a pause, I ask if anyone thinks that statement inappropriately injects my political views into the classroom. Many agree that it does. Then I pose this question: If I had ended the class with a suggestion that they show some school spirit by going to the game and helping cheer the Longhorns to victory, would anyone have accused me of inappropriately politicizing the classroom? Probably not, because on our football-obsessed campus such sentiments are the norm, and one hears the pro-football position stated over and over. Yet both statements are equally politicized assessments of the athletic program, one critical and one supportive.

As a teacher, I reject both the retreat to illusory neutrality and any assertion of aggressive advocacy. My goal is open and honest engagement with students based on critical self-reflection and mutual respect. As the professor, I clearly have more power than the students and therefore have to be careful not to undermine their critical thinking. But I can do that best by making visible my ideology and, when appropriate, explaining the evidence and reasoning that led me to adopt these positions.

I tell my students that they can expect three different modes of address from me during a semester. Sometimes I will present relatively uncontroversial information that is the consensus of scholars in the field. Other times, when scholars disagree, I will survey the different interpretations, presenting each view as accurately as I can while making my own position clear. And there are times when I will present to the class a proposition and make an argument for it, presenting my evidence and reasoning. I do that to model the process of critical thinking, which is so rare in our public political discourse. I tell students their job is not to accept my position but to think about the assumptions I am making, definitions of terms, quality of the evidence, validity of the logic, and soundness of the argument.

My one overtly political goal in my teaching is the desire to politicize students who are depoliticized, to encourage

them to apply their intellectual skills to the political world not just to understand but to participate. I offer them the often quoted line from Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living," which I supplement with a less well-known quote from the U.S. political activist and theologian William Sloane Coffin Jr.: "Socrates had it wrong; it is not the unexamined but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living."[3]