

# The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control

## An Interface

A useful theory should generate precise predictions. This chapter proposes a theory outlining the interaction between agitation strategies and control strategies—a theory drawn from earlier theoretical discussions and case studies.

This theory has two principal values for the student of agitation and control: (1) to make and test predictions about outcomes during specific instances of agitation and control and (2) to distinguish which instances of agitation and control are worth studying—the instances that are likely to yield useful insights and refinements of the theory itself.

We will discuss the evolution of the theory in three stages. The first stage involves isolating three critical variables for agitation (actual membership, potential membership, and rhetorical sophistication for agitation) and three for control (power, strength of ideology, and rhetorical sophistication). Second, we manipulate each variable in combination with all the others to see whether the differences explain what takes place in actual encounters between agitation and control. Because each variable has two levels (high and low), there are eight possible groupings of the three variables for agitation and eight for control, or a grid of sixty-four possible combinations of variables. The grid is presented in tabular form after the descriptions of the variables below (see figure 1). Third, given the sixty-four paper-and-pencil encounters between agitation and control, some theoretical generalizations can be extracted. These generalizations constitute a system for predicting instances of agitation and control and are the principal content of this chapter.

The chapter does not discuss all sixty-four generalizations. Some are uninteresting. For example, an agitation group with initially high actual membership probably does not exist and therefore is not worth pursuing. Actual membership typically reaches high numbers only after petition, promulgation, and other agitation strategies have been employed. Other

possibilities can be combined into more powerful generalizations, which we have tried to demonstrate.

## The Variables

### Agitation

The three critical agitation variables are (1) *actual membership*, (2) *potential membership*, and (3) *rhetorical sophistication*.

Actual membership means the number of active members in a dissenting group. The membership is almost always initially small. However, as the generalizations will show, other variables make it possible for actual membership to grow. Like all the variables, actual membership has only two levels: high (relative to control) and low (relative to control).

The potential membership of an agitative group, disregarding strategies adopted by control, depends on two elements: the strength of its ideology and the number of people in a society susceptible to that ideology.

One component of ideological strength, *logical consistency*, involves the unity and coherence of beliefs within a value system. In other words, it is a measure of the internal validity among beliefs. For example, most university administrators believe that those students who pay their fees and maintain a certain grade point average are entitled to the rights accorded to the status of a student, such as serving on student-faculty committees, being active in student governments, etc. When a student who is taking only online courses and who is also an avowed agitator is elected to student office, the logical consistency of an administrator is quickly put to the test. Some groups appear to have little logical consistency in their belief system.

The other component of ideological strength, *empirical validity*, refers to the external truth or falsity of a group's ideological statements and assertions. For example, extreme right-wing groups, flying-saucer devotees, and end-of-the-world cults almost always are logically consistent in their documented reasoning. However, the realities of a communist plot, UFOs, and the final days are suspect, and the statements of members of these groups lack empirical validity. Some people, nonetheless, are susceptible to ideologies having low external validity. Again, potential membership is either high or low.

The rhetorical sophistication of an agitative group is the extent to which its leadership is aware of and able to apply general rhetorical principles in communicating about the group and its goals. This factor also is either high or low.

### Control

The three control variables most useful to an analysis of this kind are (1) *power*, (2) *strength of ideology*, and (3) *rhetorical sophistication*.

The power variable is a general one, although it primarily is based on the two types of power that can be most easily eroded: referent and expert.

Strength of ideology means the same for control as for agitation. To the extent that an ideology has logical consistency and empirical validity, it is likely to be secure and not open to attack by agitators.

Rhetorical sophistication, again, means the extent to which an establishment's leadership is aware of and able to apply general rhetorical principles to its communication.

Figure 1 (on the following pages) presents the sixty-four possible combinations of variables—theoretically representing all of the possible encounters between agitation and control. Each cell is numbered and the letters in the various cells refer to the corresponding generalizations (outlined in the following section) that predict the probable outcome of an encounter.

### The Generalizations

A. *An agitative group low in rhetorical sophistication uses the strategies of nonviolent resistance, escalation/confrontation, Gandhi and guerrilla, or guerrilla prematurely, before the possibilities of petition, promulgation, solidification, and polarization have been exhausted.* This premature agitation lessens the potential of the agitative group and enhances the power of the establishment.

For example, the Women's Liberation Front agitated (nonviolently) for free birth control pills on college campuses during the early 1970s. Yet, as their own solidification literature pointed out, birth control devices were already available in any drugstore. This fact alone considerably weakened many of their arguments that women were being denied sexual freedom; most college health centers merely avoided any response, and the agitation movement dissipated. The "Days of Rage" staged by the SDS Weathermen in Chicago in 1969 was a violent agitation that was successfully suppressed in large part because the violence was prematurely staged. The Weathermen believed that traditional strategies did not work and that change could only come through violent confrontation. Their refusal to follow the normal pattern of dissent gave the establishment justification to suppress the group.

Even if the agitative group is high in potential, a rhetorically sophisticated establishment can often successfully avoid (if the agitation is nonviolent) or suppress (if the agitation is violent) such a group. Many potential movements in the South in the 1960s met this description. For example, the Albany Movement in 1962 to combat segregation at bus stations, libraries, lunch counters, voter registration, etc. in Albany, Georgia, successfully mobilized thousands of black citizens and attracted national attention but achieved few concessions. A sophisticated establishment leader had carefully studied nonviolence and was able to defeat





the movement. This generalization predicts the outcomes for cells 17, 21, 22, 24, 25, 29, 30, and 32 in figure 1 and sometimes (see generalization C) for cells 9, 13, 14, 16, 49, 53, 54, and 56.

B. *An establishment low in rhetorical sophistication either avoids excessively (when suppression is impossible, as when the agitative group's strategy has been petition) or suppresses prematurely, as soon as suppression is possible (in response, for example, to nonviolent resistance).* This excessive avoidance and/or premature suppression, especially if violent, lessens the power of control and enhances the actual and potential membership of the agitative group.

The Birmingham case study in chapter 4 illustrates and amplifies this generalization. If the agitators are high in potential membership and high enough in rhetorical sophistication to exploit control's lack of sophistication, the outcome is likely to be capitulation, although the agitation might be protracted and bloody, depending on control's initial power base. This generalization predicts the outcomes for cells 2, 4, 7, 42, 44, and 47 in figure 1.

C. *An establishment high in rhetorical sophistication adjusts as soon as it perceives that the agitative group is high in potential membership, especially—but not only—when the agitative group's potential is buttressed by rhetorical sophistication.* Most often, control adjusts as a response to the petition strategy, thus avoiding agitation. When it fails to perceive the high potential of an agitative movement, a rhetorically sophisticated establishment uses the strategy of avoidance initially, adjusting as soon as the agitative group's potential becomes clear. Many significant changes brought about by the normal legislative process can be used to exemplify this generalization. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling that desegregated public schools illustrates how an establishment adjusts because of the power of those arguing for change. Also, the dramatic events surrounding Anita Hill's testimony against the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court in 1991 illustrates this generalization. Although originally denied the right to speak to Congress, Hill was allowed to testify after members of the U.S. Senate were faced with tremendous pressure to allow her to speak. This generalization predicts the outcomes for cells 5, 6, 8, 41, 45, and 48 in figure 1; sometimes (see generalization A) for cells 9, 13, 14, 16, 49, 53, 54, and 56; and sometimes (see generalization D) for cells 1 and 46.

D. *Although an establishment sometimes adjusts voluntarily to an agitative group high in potential (see generalization C), it can always successfully avoid or suppress agitative movements when the three variables are balanced between agitation and control.* The establishment always holds the advantage in legitimate power. For example, if both agitation and control are high in the first two variables but low in rhetorical sophistication, agitation will escalate prematurely and control will suppress prematurely. Both sides will lose power by this exchange, but agitation will lose proportionately more than control will, and suppression is likely to be successful. This generalization predicts the outcomes for cells 10, 19, 28, 55, and 64 in

figure 1; sometimes (see generalization C) for cells 1 and 46; and sometimes (see generalization E) for cell 37.

The success of the government's apartheid policy in South Africa is an example of how an establishment can be successful for a long time because it has legitimate power. Once that power begins to weaken, as happened in South Africa, suppression is unsuccessful, and the establishment may have to capitulate.

The events surrounding the collapse of communist governments in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union illustrate what happens when governments are unable to use avoidance or suppression successfully. The crushing of militants by the Chinese government, however, illustrates how the establishment can defeat a movement if it retains legitimate power.

E. *When the agitative group is low in actual membership, low in potential membership, and high in rhetorical sophistication control always successfully uses the strategy of avoidance.* A rhetorically sophisticated agitation group always begins with petition. Even an establishment that is rhetorically unsophisticated avoids petition from a group low in potential.

Examples include groups like the American Communist Party (it never had a significant membership) and the Prohibition Party (which lost its appeal after repeal of the laws outlawing the sale of alcohol). Because the agitators' ideology has low potential, or because few people are susceptible to it, avoidance is successful. This generalization predicts the outcomes for cells 33 through 40.

F. *The most protracted and bloody agitations occur when control is high in power, low in ideological strength, and low in rhetorical sophistication, while the agitators are low in actual membership, high in potential membership, and high in rhetorical sophistication* (cell 43). Such a movement is likely to take the following form: (1) Agitation begins with the strategy of petition; control uses avoidance. (2) Agitation uses the strategies of promulgation, solidification, and possibly polarization; control continues to use avoidance. (3) Agitation uses the strategy of nonviolent resistance; control responds with violent suppression, weakening its own power and enhancing agitation's actual membership. (4) Agitation, now higher in actual membership, uses escalation/confrontation; control continues to respond with violent suppression. (5) Agitation continues through the strategies of Gandhi and guerrilla, guerrilla, and revolution, building its membership at every step when control responds with violent suppression. Eventually, the establishment capitulates.

History provides numerous cases of such encounters: the American and French revolutions, the union movement in the United States, the Vietnam protest movement (which the Chicago case study illustrates in part), and the protests against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, resulting in violent suppression at Kent State University and at Jackson State College in 1970.

The six generalizations account for the outcomes of encounters between agitation and control in forty-four combinations of variables. The other twenty cells consist mainly of two unlikely situations (such as those in which the agitative group is initially high in actual membership) or obvious outcomes.

The study of agitation and control—attempts to gain access to power or to use it to maintain the status quo—is a fascinating, continual process. We hope the case studies have helped illuminate the theoretical premises and that the interface has provided general guidelines for conducting your own analysis of issues encompassing agitation and control.