

Transcript

Ben

Thank you all for tuning into Season Eight, Episode Five of the Rough Draft podcast, your favorite student-run literary, art, and cultural podcast here at York College of Pennsylvania. This week, I'm your host, Ben.

Sarah

And I'm Sarah.

Ben

And we are joined by York College's very own Dr. Smith and Dr. Cope. And they're going to be talking to us about the rhetoric behind protesting, and how it's kind of affected the way we look at things in today's society. Just a few notes before we jump into things, the election--the presidential election--happened this past Tuesday, three or four days ago. And hopefully by the time this episode comes out, we'll know who won. But as of right now, we still don't know. It's looking like Joe Biden will probably win. But hey, maybe Trump will get lucky. And depending on your opinions, America won't.

Sarah

Yeah. I'm like one of those people. I'm currently like, just sitting and like...I didn't sleep much election night. And then I went to--I got up and took a Spanish test. But I was like, constantly refreshing. And then like I woke up this morning to like, I had 1000 emails in my inbox telling me that like, Georgia flipped to blue, and I'm like, okay, that's exciting but like, why do I need 1000 emails to tell me that?

Ben

Right? I also heard Kanye officially conceded the race today. He received about 60,000 votes nationwide. I was I was kind of hoping he would pull through but unfortunately he did not.

Sarah

He would--he was still running?

Ben

Yeah, he was still running. I...let me, let me see. Uh, he--I found a quote from him earlier that I'll paraphrase.

Sarah

I had no clue he was even still in the race.

Ben

Yeah, he's he said, "I don't give a 'f' if I win the presidency or not. I am in service to God. God has a plan for us and his people can finally be free. Trump, Biden, or Kanye West cannot free us."

Sarah

Oh, my God. I like...okay, so like this is really stupid, but I like the Saturday Night Live episode. You remember a while ago, he went on there and he wore a Make America Great Again hat on the end of Saturday Night Live and everyone didn't know he was gonna do it? Well, Pete Davidson, the genius or idiot you consider him to be, got on Weekend Update, like the following weekend and his whole thing was like, he got a hat made and it said Make Kanye 2008 Again, he--and he talked about the importance of taking like your medication in Pete Davidson style. And...I don't know if that was the right place to say that. But like, yeah, like, why can't we Make Kanye 2008 Again?

Ben

He had an interesting campaign platform to say the least. He was anti-vax. Because apparently vaccines are the mark of the devil.

Sarah

Is that literally what it says?

Ben

That...yeah, he--I think it was on Twitter or an interview or something. He's an interesting guy. He also got mad at his wife, Kim Kardashian for vaccinating their children behind his back.

Sarah

That's a lot.

Ben

It's...it's not really any surprise that he only received 60,000 votes. In fact, it's probably more of a surprise that he received that many nationwide.

Sarah

Yeah. Hopefully, Dr. cope and Dr. Smith can tell us some more positive stuff about protesting the elections, and how protesting can benefit our country?

Ben

Yeah.

Sarah

Could you guys give us the importance and like the history, a little bit, about protests? Why should we care about this topic right now?

Dr. Smith

Okay, well, I can go ahead and start with that. The history of protest is long and may take several podcasts in itself to answer but I can say this. A lot of the, you know, good things we have today are because of protest in the past, whether it be, you know, you know, the right to vote to Civil Rights in general. I mean, we have footage, whether it's film or photographs of these things happening and we know today that good things came about because of them. So protesting is good, protesting works. That doesn't mean it always works. It has to be done correctly and doing protest correctly is a tricky endeavor. And maybe we'll get into why it's tricky a little bit later on, but that's my take on the history. My short take on the history of protests.

Dr. Cope

Yeah, I guess I would just add that...yeah, there's no way to talk about the history of protests as like a whole thing. But I would, I, you know, my own research is a little more focused on kind of women's protests and women's actions, and what I know from that history, especially in the US, is that protests are only sort of the tip of the iceberg, like they're the most visible thing in a lot of cases, but there's so much work that goes on behind the scenes, to achieve the goals that are being represented in protests. So you know, all of the advocacy, the writing, the, you know, just the relationship building, all of that kind of stuff is maybe a little less like sexy than protests, um, or certainly less visible. But it's part of what makes those protests ultimately effective.

Ben

What's kind of the rhetorical situation surrounding some of the protests that we see going on right now in the US?

Dr. Smith

The rhetorical situation? Regarding the, you know, summer protests and things like that the rhetorical situation is, you know, speaking truth to power, right? You know, the oppressed, talking back to the oppressor, that's the--that's the narrative anyway, right? That narrative is being put forth in strategic ways. Unfortunately, and been you know, we've been talking about this throughout the semester, the audience is vast, right, there is the "oppressor" that we're being...that's being spoken to, but there's also the, the, eavesdropping audience, right? The other people beyond, you know, that oppressor who are listening in and trying to figure out, you know, what's going on and how their values may or may not overlap with the values of the

protesters. Sometimes they do, the value of, you know, equal rights, you know, individual rights, um, you know, dignity and things like that, we can all get behind, but then people see violence and certain requests that seem foreign to them, and that can be a little bit alienating. So, what I talked about before were some of the detriments of activism, you know, this is one of them: alienating the people you are trying to get on your side, the people you need to get on your side, in order to make some changes. I often think of the, the idea of defunding the police. Let's look at that for a second. There's this concept called the Overton Window. And what the Overton Window is...it's a collection of all the things that are palatable to most people, all the things that are not beyond the pale of reason, right? So reforming the police, that's within the Overton Window. Right, punishing police who behave badly? That's within the Overton Window. Defunding an entire police department or, or something like that, that's outside of it to most people, they can't really understand that. Sometimes people say defund police, they don't really mean literally defunding the police, they may mean something like, like what Camden, New Jersey did, you know? Basically, you get rid of all the police and replace them, the new cohort, a new fresh start, right? So that's one way of defining it. But when people hear the term "defund the police," that doesn't seem to make sense to them, that is outside the Overton Window. So when you're doing protest, and you're thinking rhetorically, you have to think about that window, and figure out whether what you're saying is in the center of that window, in the periphery, or beyond it. And if it is beyond it, you shape your rhetoric in ways that overlap with some of the things that are already within it. If you're talking about 'defund the police,' and people are comfortable with reforming the police, then you have to think about different ways of talking about that. Maybe not use the term 'defund?' Maybe use a different term that is more in line with what people expect and can get behind. So I see people doing that, I see people not doing that. So that's why it's so tricky.

Dr. Cope

So you guys asked about the rhetorical situation, and I mean, I don't know, to me, this is like--their rhetorical situation makes it sound like it's so discreet in some ways, but it's not. So like, if we talk about Black Lives Matter protests--which have been, you know, highly visible in the last five or so years--those, you know, they're sort of like...the background of that is the overall discussion about about oppression and about systemic racism in this country that's been going on...well, before Ferguson, but, but really kind of ignited around, around that time. And then every time an additional murder is committed, then that sort of creates a new accident. So it's not like, it's not like there's a totally new rhetorical situation for each protest, a lot of these are, you know, building on each other and connected to each other. So my own--I, you know, I grew up in Rochester, New York, and Rochester, this fall in September, became a new epicenter for the Black Lives Matter movement, because Daniel Prude was killed during his arrest, you know, by police officers. And so it's not that people in Rochester weren't aware of this or weren't engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement before, but it really became even more like immediately and urgently relevant in Rochester as a result of that. So, you know, that's one of the things that I think is making Black Lives Matter so successful, is that it's sustained over time, and they've kept the conversation going, they've kept up the pressure. And people, they've really changed public opinion. You know, now it's a large majority of adults who agree with the statement that Black Lives Matter. And that wasn't necessarily the case five years ago. So it's

slowly kind of dragging the public consciousness behind it. Not perfectly, and not everyone, but the sustained nature of it is one of the reasons that I think they've been so successful.

Sarah

Dr. Smith, you talked a little bit about things that could be improved in the movement. Is there anything else that you'd say that could help the rhetorical situation surrounding the movement?

Dr. Smith

Yes. We talk a lot in Advanced Composition about this concept of prefigurative politics. And initially, that term meant that you are performing the world you want to see, right? As you're bringing that world about, unfortunately, people will settle for the performance and won't do the necessary tactical moves to actually bring that world about. And I see that a lot. We're currently reading a book in Advanced Composition called [inaudible] which is a chronicle and--oh, there it is. A chronicling of, you know, this phenomenon in activist circles. People get together and the camaraderie and alleviation of anxiety that comes with that is so strong, that they forget to actually do things to bring a better world about. And that's understandable, you know, when you feel alienated from society, and suddenly you feel like you're a part of a group, that can be intoxicating, to the point where you kind of forget everything else, and you settle for that, you know, very familial bubble, right? You have to be careful not to do that. And the best way to be careful not to do that is to not be as insular as a lot of these groups can be. I speak from experience. When I was in graduate school, I, I flirted with the Communist Party a little bit out of curiosity, right? And I just wanted to see what was going on. And I...PLP, I believe it was, the People's Labor Party. I started to spend some time with them. And we'd go to, you know, rallies and things like that. And I see other groups, other Communist groups, and I say to myself, why have I never heard of them? Why don't we talk to them? And they say, well, they're not...we don't, we don't hang out with them. You know, it was it wasn't an ideological thing. They just weren't cool. And I was like, "Okay, so are you guys a fraternity or something? What's really happening here?" And I mean, that's a that's an egregious example, but it's a real example. And John Smucker, an activist in Lancaster, talks about his experience with Occupy Wall Street and how he saw the same things there. So we have two issues, right, the prefigurative politics, people settling for performance, and the insularity, right? Opening up your--you know, borders and working with other people, other groups with similar goals will not only end the insularity, but it will, you know, kind of stave off any kind of prefiguration as well, right? So I see those issues as as very important.

Well, there's a lot of movements going on right now, so that's...and, um, and I guess, you know, I, well one thing I want to say is that we, um...is that there is a lot of movements that that I don't celebrate right now, too, right? So like, like Dr. Smith was saying before, that the basic kind of, like trope of protest is that it's the the oppressed speaking out against the oppressor speaking to the oppressor, right? But the thing is, there's a lot of groups that think they're oppressed, and like maybe they're not, right? You know, are you truly oppressed because you have to wear a facemask? I mean, does that make you like an oppressed population? Right? Well, there are some people in the state of Pennsylvania who would say yes, and they, um, they view

themselves as the victim right or as, as marginalized. And it's really like...it's very troubling for me to see that kind of use of the victim status, when, in many cases, these are in fact, not marginalized people, right? These are the people who make up the majority in lots of different ways. So just want to say like, while protests can be super effective, and we can really celebrate the achievements that protest has brought, there are a lot of people who use that mode and that trope who like, really don't have a lot of claim to being marginalized for one thing, right? But in terms of the, the sort of, I think, you know, one of the bigger movements that we've been talking about here, Black Lives Matter, as sort of a whole, you know, I'm not, I don't feel able, in any way, to really criticize that as a, as a middle aged, middle class white lady, like, I, you know, I think that some of the things that, that the movement has been doing has been really great, but I know, it's also received criticism from within and without, so for example, I'm part of a church here in York. And, you know, it's a somewhat multiracial church, more than your average church, but that's still not saying much, right? And we have, you know, done some reading together. So books focused on the problem of whiteness, right? And hegemony and things like that. And, you know, the fact that some leaders within the Black Lives Matter movement are using religious arguments and working with faith communities is, you know, really smart to me. Like that's, that's, you know, a huge part of the Civil Rights Movement earlier, you know, and it's going to be an important part of that today. But that certainly like, that makes it uncomfortable for other people within the movement too, right? So, so all I can say is that, is that as an audience member in this protest kind of scenario, I'm thankful for the fact that they are speaking to, you know, to American Christians, because that's an important audience that needs to change and needs to listen. But again, that probably causes some discomfort within the movement as well.

Sarah

I guess a follow up question, I would have to that is, Dr. Cope, I know you're teaching digital writing this semester. How do you think that the internet or like, Twitter campaigns have helped shape how we view protests, or gotten the message out about especially Black Lives Matter over the summer to a more general populace of people?

Dr. Cope

Well, I--I really want to hear what Dr. Smith has to say about this. But I will say as someone who's used Twitter to study, to study rhetoric, one of the things we know is that it's easy to look at Twitter as like a little mini version of our society. And in some ways it is, it's a proto-public. I mean, people have discussions and debates there. But there's also a lot of research that shows us that it's not like, it is not representative of our society as a whole. So you know, people on Twitter tend to, especially people who are active on Twitter, let's say, tend to, like be more highly educated than the average population, more kind of liberal and white. Right? So that's not--and again, that's vastly oversimplifying the demographics of Twitter, but in other words, it's not totally representative. And I guess, so I guess what I'm saying is that no social media platform is representative. But if we kind of take the environment together, I think we might get to something more like that. So in other words, you know, different age groups and demographics use different sort of social media accounts, and they can overlap and ideas can circulate across and through those in a in a lot of ways. And so like, the fact is that actually Black Lives Matter

started as a hashtag, right? And then it became a protest movement because it was a rhetorically effective hashtag, right? And so it does allow for ideas to spread and circulate. And it allows for some really creative and interesting tactics as well. So one of my favorite stories I heard kind of about things happening over the summer--and you guys can laugh at me because I really don't know much about this--was a K-Pop band? Do you guys know the band that I'm talking about? Like this whole sensation?

Sarah

Is it BTS?

Dr. Cope

Yeah. What is it, BTS? Okay, BTS, so you guys can just laugh at me for being old. Okay. Anyway, so BTS has been, like basically activating their fans to take over white supremacist hashtags over the summer. So anytime, like a new white supremacy hashtag kind of took off, they would like use the hashtag, but then use it to basically dilute the power of that hashtag, right? And often to present content that would be, you know, the opposite of it. And so to me, like, that's a really interesting new tactic that is happening online. And I am fascinated that it's, like kind of being practiced by a K-Pop band and their fans? But it's, you know, it's sort of an American political system. So there's lots of ways, obviously, that protests happen on and offline. But yeah, I mean, I think, you know, we've talked in Digital Writing about the idea of rhetorical velocity, how quickly, things can take off, ideas and concepts can circulate in our culture. And obviously, you know, digital media has just made it more possible for things to circulate. The flip side, of course, is that it's made it more possible for bad ideas to circulate. Right? And for misinformation to circulate. So for things to be kind of remixed in a context that is misleading, right? And we're also seeing that, but yeah, there's almost no separating protests from Digital Activism right now.

Dr. Smith

I agree wholeheartedly with everything Dr. Cope just said, I would only add misfortune of this inhibition on the internet, and how it affects the [inaudible] as well as the audience. I often talk in several of my classes about the effects of anonymity, invisibility, a concept called solipsistic introjection, in which somebody says something and you project this voice onto it, right? Like, if somebody says--ask you what time it is, you hear "What time is it?". And for some reason, that person thinks that you're testing their ability to tell time or something, right? And we project all these things onto people because we're--things aren't immediate. Ideally, the internet would be a supplement, you know, to IRL communication. Right? It would be a supplement to that and not a replacement for it. I think the fact that it is a replacement in so many ways can be really problematic, and can contribute to miscommunication, right? And misinterpretation of things. So, I often tell people, I think, you know, we weren't ready for the Internet. You know, the Internet is like giving a gun to a three-year-old. It wasn't, you know, we weren't ready for that. The gun went off a couple of times, but we're still here. And perhaps the three-year-old is learning how to wield that gun, clean it, stuff like that. This is an awful image I'm painting right now, but you get

the point I'm trying to make. So the internet is potentially a good thing but it has its detriments. And I think more people need to be talking about that. Because I think if we are cognizant of those documents, maybe, just maybe, we can avoid them.

Ben

That was a really interesting metaphor that you just brought up. So I want to shift gears and kind of talk about the election a little bit. I think it's pretty clear that the protests throughout the summer kind of had an influence on the election, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. There haven't really been too many elections in my lifetime. I think this is the fifth since I've been born. But have protests really impacted elections as much as they seem to be this year in past elections?

Dr. Smith

I will be better able to answer that question when I find out who wins this thing, because then I could speculate about why they won, and figure out what the protests had to do with it. That's a--that's my humorous attempt at saying I have no idea. I mean...but I have seen the effects of the protests on people leading up to the election that gave me some concern, especially when it comes to protests. Now, when I say protests, I'm speaking broadly, not just, you know, the protests in the street, the protests outside of police departments and things like that, but um, 'protest' as in, you know, on-campus activism as in racial sensitivity training and things like that. This year--I mean, this has been happening for several years, but it really took off this year, especially with the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and things like that. There's been you know, a stark contrast between the good guys and the bad guys, right. Kindy comes out saying that you're either racist or anti racist, there's no in-between. Right? You're either oppressor or oppressed. There's no in between. White people are--America is irredeemably racist and white people are irredeemably complicit in that racism. those Stark dichotomies have alienated people who do want to help, who do want to, um, you know, do what they can to, to improve situations. So I think that I was worried that when election time came along that those people who were pushed away who wanted to help, would have a different take on things by the time November 2, or 3rd, whatever, came around. Whatever Tuesday was. Even the Executive Order that the Trump Administration put out that apparently banned diversity training, the title of that was called an Executive Order against Race and Sex Stereotyping. It didn't ban diversity training, it banned a certain kind of diversity training, one based on what's called critical race theory, which puts people in certain boxes, oppressor or oppressed, right, and does a lot to actually divide people instead of bringing them together. That's what was bad. And that says a lot to me, not not--I mean, say what you will about the the Trump Administration, but it says a lot about how people are looking at these, you know, diversity training formats, and how they're taking them. They want to help. But the format, the structure of these trainings aren't conducive to that. Right? Long story short, I was worried that certain manifestations of activism would push people away. Instead of bringing them together. I'm still worried about that. In fact, my research currently is about alternatives to such diversity trainings, but I guess we'll see, even if Biden wins, that issue is still here. And, you know, it's still gonna manifest the way is it manifest? So we still have some work to do.

Dr. Cope

Yeah, I agree. I don't--we don't know exactly the outcome of this election right now. What is it, Friday? The election was Tuesday, right? But I think that it's not surprising to me. I mean, there are so many reasons why we saw so many highly visible protests this year, so I don't want to oversimplify that. But it also doesn't surprise me at all, that protests have become almost a feature of life in America during like, the presidency of Trump. Because Trump is a celebrity president, right? Like he, he, his whole thing is creating spectacle and, and stirring people up, right. And so, so to me, it's, it's sort of like everything has become louder and bigger. And the great thing about protests, or the--in particular, like Black Lives Matter protests right now is that they're not focused on individual person. There's not like, you know, a celebrity leader of that movement is a highly collaborative, you know, group in a lot of ways. And so I think it's a good antidote to that kind of celebrity style of the presidency that we've been seeing this year. On the other hand, though, Trump seems to thrive on that kind of like sense of antagonism. And so again, that might be like, not, not a problem of protest, but just--one of its inherent limitations is that if you take somebody who is already really predisposed to feeling marginalized somehow, as the President of the United States, then you, you know, protest will like, make that feel even more so. So I...yeah, so I don't know, I guess I'm just saying that protests have become just so commonplace in our culture. And I don't, you know...and at least in the media coverage of them, it's not that protests haven't been as pervasive but they haven't maybe been as visible in some parts of our culture, um, as they are right now.

Sarah

What would you--if a student was planning on going to the protests or taking place in a protest, what's something you would like them to possibly know before going, to maybe have--be more effective or feel like they have a voice in the protest?

Dr. Smith

Well, what initially comes to mind is to treat it like you're going on this, you know, expedition, right? Bring things that will help you physically as well as mentally, you know? Anything from bottles of water to, you know, friends, music, we talk in class a little bit about the power of ritual. And we see that a lot, you know, from certain chants to certain bodily movements, the sparkle fingers in lieu of clapping or things like that, Mic-checks to make sure people's voices are heard and things like that, that can build camaraderie, and that can create some energy and resilience, right? They say, pain shared is cut in half, you know, and joy shared is doubled. That's lovely, but it's true. You know, it's true in a lot of ways. So I would, I would, I would say that initially, anything else, you know, I'm just--just be pragmatic and practical and know, you know, that people are watching. So just know that people are watching this, not just you versus the people you're directly talking to, there's a, there's another audience out there. And the interpretation of that audience, in many ways, if not every way, is more important than the direct audience. So that's what I would say.

Dr. Cope

Um, I have very little experience participating in protests other than some of the Women's March events. But I guess I would say that it's important for people who aren't part of the marginalized group, whatever, again, in whatever sort of context that is, to, to listen and follow the leadership of members of that group. I think that's one of the things that, you know, has really come out in the feminist movement in the last few years is the importance of listening to, to non-white leaders of the feminist movement, and, and not, not always having to be the one to talk. So, so in real simple terms, that means like, letting other people start chants, right? And, and just following the lead of, of the people whose voices really need to be heard at the time.

Ben

I think that's a lot of really good information for our audience to think about, especially in the upcoming weeks. Thank you guys for coming on and talking to us. I really appreciate you guys taking the time out of your day to share with us some of your thoughts on protests and rhetoric.

Dr. Smith

No problem.

Dr. Cope

Thanks, guys. I know anyone protesting right now should be wearing a mask, so...there you go.

Dr. Smith

That too.

Sarah

Well, that was a very interesting discussion that we had with Dr. Smith and Dr. Cope about protesting. Um, the importance of rhetorical strategies surrounding protesting and how they can be beneficial to us. As a group overall, um, I know we talked a lot about Black Lives Matter--I am not black, but I can support Black Lives Matter, but I think the most important thing that was brought up is about listening to how other people feel, who are in these protests.

Ben

I think that was a pretty interesting, not interesting but important statement that Dr. Cope made towards the end of the interview about, you know, if you're not someone who falls into the category of the oppressed, but you're going to the protest, you need to give those people room to share their opinions and their feelings about the situation that they unfortunately find themselves in.

Sarah

Yeah, everyone carries a truth with them. And it's important for us to step back and hear what that truth is from other marginalized groups. I know both Ben and I are mainly in the majority.

And I know, it might be easy just to retweet a hashtag or like something on Instagram or whatever. But the importance is to sit back and really listen to what people have to say.

Ben

And I think it was also really important to have, you know, two people who have studied rhetoric, and who've kind of participated at least a little bit in activism throughout their lives to come and talk to us because, you know, you and I are both, you know, white college students who kind of have our own experiences. But I think Dr. Smith and Dr. Koch both have a lot of different experiences that they brought to the table that hopefully, some of our audience can either relate to or learn something from.

Sarah

Yeah, I hope some of you out there can take away something that they said and apply it to how you view the world going forward from here. That being said, I guess this has been Episode Five of Season Eight of the Rough Draft podcast. Don't forget to submit any print work you might have on our York Review website. We're accepting work for our print edition until November 16. So make sure to get that in there. Give us a comment or a like on this episode, or engage with us on social media. The York Review has Instagram, they have Facebook, they have Twitter. If you have any ideas moving forward for maybe future seasons of the podcast, shoot us those. If not, this has been Sarah.

Ben

And Ben!

Sarah

Thanks for stopping by!