

Ethics of Protest, Part Two

Sandra: Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Christiane: The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or The Prindle Institute.

[music]

Sandra: Hi Christiane.

Christiane: Hello Sandra!

Sandra: Hi listeners! So in Part One of our mini series on protests, we dissected how people should talk about protesters' methods.

Christiane: If you haven't listened to that one, you can go back to episode 18, which is called the Ethics of Protest Part One.

Sandra: So today, in Part Two of the Ethics of Protest we'll be exploring whether protests should be productive or not.

Christiane: For people who think that protests are a good idea, or who actually take part in protests, the idea of productivity comes up kind of a lot.

Sandra: And one of the ways you might have heard it come up is when protests are criticized because they're "not productive enough." For example, when Black Lives Matter protesters like block roads in Chicago, they are always criticized that like that's a stupid way to protest because it's not productive. So on the show, we wanted to get to the bottom of whether protests should be productive or not, and if so, what this productivity should look like.

Christiane: We talked to Tabitha St. Bernard, who is the designer & co-founder of Tabii Just, which is a zero waste woman's clothing company. We brought her into the discussion because she was the youth coordinator and one of the organizers of the Women's March.

Sandra: And we also brought back Derek Ford, professor of education at DePauw University and a long time protest organizer.

Christiane: We wanted to get a sense of how different organizers with different goals in mind approach this question of productivity. And later in the show, we'll sit down with Andy Cullison to talk more about productivity and its relationship to protest ethics.

The *Examining Ethics* podcast is hosted by Andy Cullison, the Director of the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University and is produced by Christiane Wisehart and Sandra Bertin.

Sandra: So I have a question. People who complain that protests are unproductive -- what do you think they're actually expecting in terms of productivity?

Christiane: I think most of the time, they think that protesters should be pressuring lawmakers for some like concrete legislative change.

Sandra: That's what I thought too, so I asked Tabitha if she thought that protests should focus on accomplishing some sort of legal goal. And she brought up the example of the recent protests against Bill O'Reilly and Fox News:

Tabitha St. Bernard: Those were people coming together, just just people from all over the world who were coming together to push back against one person and also a company and -- and they were able to to really push him out of his show and to get Fox to drop him from his show. So I think it's not always governmental. I do think that protests need to go past a point of just raising our voices and getting angry and getting in the streets. It needs to have a goal and it needs to be, it needs to have a path forward. We said several times that the Women's March was just the beginning. We see that we need, we need really really sustained action going forward. There are things coming up almost every day that require us to have organized actions to push back against it.

Sandra: There's a lot of things that we can fight for that aren't legislative at all, according to Tabitha. Here she is talking about the Women's March:

Tabitha: The goal was to create a truly intersectional gathering of women and to provide a space for them to let their voices be heard and to also I think it's important in any, in any mass protests for, for us to let ourselves be seen and for us to let the marginalized communities of people that we're standing up for so that they know that there are people that are standing up for them especially in the time that we were and still are in where there are people who are being targeted it's important for them to see that they're not alone.

Christiane: So the goal of the Women's March according to her was to be heard and to be seen standing up for marginalized groups. Its main focus wasn't necessarily on policy change.

Sandra: We asked Derek the same question we asked Tabitha: Should protests always be focused on achieving legislative action?

Derek Ford: It's very bad to judge a protest as a success or not if it achieves this like immediate objective, right, because there's very few things that can actually be achieved after like one protest. Right, I mean, maybe there's like a sit-in at someone's office for one particular thing that's pretty small.

Sandra: But sometimes small victories are important-

Derek: And like we do have to win concrete victories along the way. And I think that every, you know, every progressive change has always happened because of social struggles. It's very hard to like sort of delineate though, looking back like exactly what protest or what disruption

had what impact. And so the question of like what -- like you can't really draw like a sort of causal link between, you know, couple different actions that, "Yeah. That's what did it," right. There's really no way to sort of suss that out. So, I think that it's definitely counterproductive and debilitating to think always and only about like what's the immediate thing. Like what are we going to win tomorrow if we go out and protest tomorrow? We're not really going to... Then we're never going to protest, right, because there's very -- that's not really how social change works.

Christiane: It would be so difficult to figure out exactly like which protest gave women the right to vote.

Sandra: And if you can't draw those straight lines, then that really widens the idea of what productivity could be or what it could look like. Could a productive protest be something as simple as a space to blow off steam?

Tabitha: Well I think that letting off steam sort of trivializes something that is very profound when people get in the streets and they march or they protest they're standing up for people who many times can't stand up for themselves and who need the support. Through some ways a protest is an action that- that is really productive in and of itself. But many times we have to push forward and create a path to something else and to, to sort of continue working towards towards like other actions. So we want to make sure people have the energy to show up but to continue to organize past that point.

Christiane: So in a lot of ways, focusing on the productivity of one single protest is kind of missing the point. Something that kept coming up again and again with Tabitha is the necessity of sustained action.

Tabitha: Even if you have a protest where people just show up with signs, I think that is productive. But I think it's also super important to note that there has to be sustained action afterwards. I think that the protesting is important and it's really necessary to show up and to show up for other people that may not be able to show up for themselves. That may not be able to stand up for themselves but there needs to be some sort of plan for action afterwards. I think that's why we kept saying that the women's march is just the beginning of the like of a resistance against, against policies that did not start with with the election and things like things that were in place for a long time before that we were pushing back against.

Sandra: Derek also highlighted the importance of looking beyond the excitement of a single action or protest.

Derek: And a lot of protests happen spontaneously. And so in that, so we also have to be prepared to lead those spontaneous struggles, right, so that they -- so they can be as, you know, as sort of momentous as possible and also, so that we can absorb them into some sort of longer lasting organization because ultimately people have to go home, right. We do go to work. We do have kids to raise. So we need really revolutionary organizations that are able to take these moments of spontaneous sort of outrage and also yearning for a collective, different collective world and organize it and keep it going, right. Hold it there. Hold the gap open.

[music]

Sandra: So Christiane, we sat down with Andy to talk about the ethics of protests. And I asked you guys: Should all protests be productive? And if so, what should that productivity look like?

Andy: I find myself with two minds on this actually. So there's...Here's something on the, "No way it doesn't need to be productive at all." Actually, if you look at the Prindle Post article by Bob Fischer about why get involved when it's not going to make a difference, there's a really, really good point there about sometimes the act of protesting is just a matter of standing in solidarity with someone who is suffering or someone who is suffering a grave injustice and you may have excellent reasons to believe that nothing will come of it, but it's just a good, a human social good to stand in solidarity with people who are oppressed. And so it may-- it may be that you have good reasons to protest even when you *know* that it won't be productive. So that's a, that's a reason for the... like, it doesn't matter if it's productive or not. But on the other side, and I think I'm maybe more sensitive to this when it involves all those acts of disruption and discomfort and when you're really like causing harm to people's property and certain kinds of things. Then maybe you do have some kind of reason to think about, "Well, wait a minute, if I'm going to cause all this disruption maybe I ought to consider how likely it is this thing could succeed." So, I can kind of feel myself being pulled in two different directions.

Sandra: So, my history with this is that I grew up in New York City and so I was in high school when the Occupy Wall Street protests were occurring and I remember just being so like turned off by them because I kept seeing... the people who I kept seeing protesting had like really dumb signs, in my humble opinion. Like, 'bring back Arrested Development'. But even the signs that were on message like, 'bring down the rich' or something like that. Even that seemed sort of annoying to me because it felt so abstract. Like how could you possibly achieve anything with this protest. I remember just being like really, really annoyed by the protest itself and all of the people who were protesting. You're occupying this space and you're bothering people and all you want is a stupid TV show? Like ugh!

Christiane: Right, but that person wasn't literally ... like he didn't like— he or she didn't... Like that wasn't the purpose of them being there, just to hold that stupid sign. They probably wanted to be there to occupy, but then also have kind of like a funny thing happen at the same time, right?

Sandra: Yeah, and I think looking back to it now, I have all these different ideas about what like productivity might look like. And so initially, I was upset that like it didn't seem like there was a cohesive goal of the group and that it couldn't be solved. Like they weren't asking for a specific bill to be passed or for a specific regulation to be put in place. It just seemed very abstract and that really bothered me.

Christiane: And I think that -- I think that's a common criticism against a lot of protests. You know, the Women's March. "What policy changes are you trying to make?" I read a whole book that said, you know, like you should never protest, you should be spending your energy trying to make policy changes and voting. And I would say, and I wasn't at Occupy, I don't know the organizers, but I would say that that wasn't their goal. Like the reason that they didn't have a single policy change come out of that is because they didn't... that wasn't what they wanted.

What they wanted was to raise consciousness about, I mean in part, about wealth inequality in America and in the world.

Sandra: Yeah, it's crazy, Derek Ford actually brought this up when I talked to him, so let me play that clip:

Derek: Yeah, I definitely think that Occupy Wall Street was productive. I think that one of the primary things that Occupy Wall Street did was introduce or reintroduce class antagonism as a fundamental feature of society that's open for discussion and that people are talking about, right. So to, to name the 99% versus the 1% and to enact the 99% versus the 1% is definitely due to the legacy of Occupy Wall Street. Because we didn't leave the space and we held the space for a long time, we had discussions. And this shows you a lot of opportunity for political discussion and so a lot of consciousness was developed and a lot of leaders came out of that, a lot of fighters came out of that, and it transformed the discourse in the United States today. I definitely, you know, if you look at the polls right now of how unpopular capitalism is and how popular things like socialism are, especially amongst young people, you know, that's definitely due to legacy of Occupy Wall Street. Yeah, no, I definitely think that Occupy Wall Street was incredibly productive.

[music]

Andy: I find it baffling to criticize someone for raising awareness of a problem, for not having a solution to that problem. I mean imagine if a bunch of people got together and said, "Hey we all have cancer. We need help and we need you doctors to help us." And the doctors said, "Well, go do cancer research. Go figure out how to cure cancer." I mean that's weird, right? To point out that people who have a problem and need help fixing it, to like put the burden on them to then go fix the problem especially when they might not have skillset or the power to do it.

Sandra: Yeah I mean, it is weird when you put it like that, but I think it's like maybe the most common thing ever for people to say. Like even like in job situations or like people say like you're a hindrance to a group if you bring up a problem without a solution.

Andy: So here's an argument by analogy that could be put forward to anybody who raises this objection. It would be weird to tell people with cancer, or have some other kind of like physical ailment, who just want to raise awareness, that there's this problem to then say, "Okay, go, go do research and fix the problem don't just sit around telling doctors about the problem." It'd be weird to criticize them. There's not really a morally relevant difference between them and protesters who don't have the knowledge or the power to go about drafting or passing or enacting legislation. As in the morally relevant difference if it would be wrong to criticize here, it'd be wrong to criticize over here.

Sandra: Yeah. It almost makes more sense for people to not have-- go in with a solution or a goal in mind when they protest.

Andy: Yeah. I mean suppose you're not good at writing policy, that's just not my skillset, but I am good at organizing people. I am good at getting a bunch of people gathered around in front of Capitol Hill and getting them to raise awareness about issues. That's the thing I'm good at. I'm good at making noise, I'm good at getting the message out.

Sandra: So, going back to your example of that Bob Fischer piece where like it might not be productive to stand with your friend and maybe nothing comes out of it, but standing in solidarity is sort of important regardless. And then the example of Occupy where, you know, it did produce this sort of mindset change. It named a problem at least. Maybe like, maybe we call those things productivity, like I think it is productive to stand in solidarity with your pal or be an ally to a group. I think it is productive to name a problem for the rest of the country or in the rest of the world.

Christiane: Yeah I think people just need to maybe shift their definition of productivity or enlarge what they can include in productivity or what a protest might produce. And understand that a lot of times, what protests end up producing is something for the group that's protesting, right? Like a certain affect, a certain way of feeling about something or each other. Or even it produces a change in how you see yourself. And so I think the... I think what a lot of outside observers, they can't see that, right? Like an outside observer, unless they ask, can't see that student that I talked to at a DePauw protest one time who said that this was important for her because it made her feel like she could... it just gave her the sense that she could move forward and that she could do more like this and do more work for social justice, right? That it inspired her. You can't see that if you're watching CNN, right, unless CNN happens to like you know, interview a particularly magnetic person.

Sandra: And you can't see it either if protesters are in the street blocking traffic on your way to work and you think, "Well, I'm not the one who caused your problem, why are you disrupting me?" Whatever this creates, it might not be right now -- like the value that this creates, it might not come right now and it might not come tomorrow, and we might not understand what it creates until later. But where it gets tricky is when we start talking about anything in the gray zone that we established in our earlier episode, which is things that are not clearly 100% peaceful, but they're not hurting any person physically. And I think--

Christiane: So like destruction of property might be in the gray zone?

Sandra: Right, destruction of property or blocking traffic maybe even if it's particularly harmful to the people who are there. I think, in there, that's when productivity sort of ... Well, I guess that's a question. Does productivity become more important when you're raising the risks to other people?

Andy: When you're dealing with these gray zone, more disruptive kinds of protest practices that's where I start to be a bit more sympathetic to the idea that maybe actually achieving a result would be important, or productivity would be important. So, so my view about protests is that they are kind of like a non-violent analog to military intervention or conflict. That is, you know, you think about...they're sort of like a, a, they're a way for people to be disruptive when they're dissatisfied with the way society is headed without resorting to violence or armed conflict. And so I think protests serve an important social good. It's a way to cause discomfort or disruption to get people to take seriously and it's you putting your flag in the sand and saying this or you drawing a line in the sand and saying, "This thing is so important to me that I am willing to be disruptive. I'm willing to put myself in the awkward, uncomfortable position of causing discomfort because the issue is so important, because this is such a systematic injustice that it warrants this kind of discomfort."

With that view of protest, if we take the analogy to military intervention seriously then you might think there are certain kinds of rules like the amount of disruption should be proportional to the amount of injustice caused, that there ought to be-- in military terms, we tend to think that there ought to be some achievable goal that merits the violence, and if there weren't some achievable goal that merits the violence, if you were just raising awareness by causing violence you might think, "No." And so you might think that there's pressure to have more tangible achievable goals as you amp up the level of disruption and discomfort that you're willing to cause quote unquote bystanders.

Christiane: In your view, a protest where people break the windows of like Starbucks and McDonald's, they have to have -- in order to do that, they have to have some goal that they're... like some achievable goal or...?

Andy: Yeah, I mean I don't -- I don't want to put it on-- like on a specific -- like in order to break a window you gotta have this goal, but ...

Christiane: Well, but you were talking about proportionality, so I think at some point, like... You know what I mean?

Andy: Right. I mean it depends on the very specific circumstances of the window breaking, but I want to endorse an even more general principle that the degree of disruption might increase the degree of, I'll just say, prima facie obligation to have some productive goal in mind.

Sandra: But can you specify what you mean by productive goal? Is it the new definition that we made up or is it productive goal as society sees it, which is like you're asking for a bill?

Andy: ...I don't have a firm view on it. I mean, I guess, prima facie like there ought to be some kind of... prima facie obligation, have there be some kind of result in mind.

Christiane: Right, but what's the result? Or, or what type of result?

Andy: Some steps toward like rectifying the injustice that you're protesting.

Christiane: And is it acceptable for you to have one of the steps be mobilizing affect and like?

Andy: Yeah. That might be.

Christiane: Okay.

Andy: If it's-- if it's an issue that's just like no one's even aware of it, it's not on anybody's radar, that kind of thing then that, that may well be it. It may be that the disruption like, you know... it may be that the discomfort is just a megaphone to people to say, "Hey, look, pay attention!" Right? That might be, that might be sufficient.

Christiane: Yeah 'cause like I think... and the reason I was pushing you on that is because I think a lot of times when people say, "You got to have a goal. You got to have a result." It's like what Sandra said, they mean a bill, right, they mean policy changes or something like that. And

I think... I think like we said before it'd be useful to kind of expand what we mean by result or expand what we mean by goal.

Andy: And I'll add, it also depends on the degree to which you think... earnestly, self-reflectively whether or not you have a candidate solution in mind that you could push for. So, I can imagine two persons. One is, I have no idea how to fix this so I'm going to make as much noise as possible and hopefully I catch the attention of someone who can fix it. For them I think the goal is permissibly just the raising of awareness. But I think other people sometimes make noise, but also have means to start actually getting to the business of solving the problems. And I think if they have the capability of doing so, or if they've got some things that they could be pushing for, then I might think, yeah, if you have the means to start actually getting some positive change, then you might have a responsibility to be thinking about that.

[music starts]

Sandra: Based on your means, what you're capable of, what your talents are, you might have different responsibilities.

Andy: Absolutely.

[music ends]

Christiane: We have a little bit of an announcement. So Sandra, you are not going to be on the show as much anymore right?

Sandra: No, unfortunately. I'm getting married.

Christiane: Congratulations!

Sandra: Thank you! I'm going traveling. I'm going to be traveling across the country and to the UK and I'm going to be doing some freelance work.

Christiane: We'll still hear from you though, right?

Sandra: Yes, I will be contributing to Examining Ethics, but me and Christiane and Andy will not all be in the same room together.

Andy: But we might sometimes be on the phone together.

Sandra: Yes, and maybe... *maybe* sometimes we can be in the same room.

Andy: Yes.

Sandra: Yeah. That would be really cool. So...

Christiane: Yeah! We're going to miss you, Sandra.

Andy: A lot.

Christiane: Well thank you for giving us your time.

Sandra: Thank you for giving me your time. [laughter] I'll miss you guys soooo much.

Christiane: But thankfully we still-- we'll still -- listeners, you'll still hear from Sandra and, and we still get to interact with you... just not as much.

Sandra: Well...

Christiane: Well listeners, you can, you can send your complaints. I have a complaint, which is: why are you leaving?

Sandra laughs

Christiane: That's my complaint. But yeah, you can, you can send your well wishes, or "Good luck traveling" or whatever kind of wishes you have to us at examiningethics@gmail.com.

Andy: And if you want to follow what's going on in the exciting life of Sandra Bertin, you can follow her [@SandraLBertin](https://twitter.com/SandraLBertin) on Twitter.

[music]

Sandra: So I have a question for you today.

Christiane: Yes.

Sandra: Which is: what is your favorite iTunes review that we've ever gotten?

Christiane: I'm so glad that you've asked. My favorite iTunes review is a 5 star review from [rosiegrrl2000](#) and she says: "A very well done podcast that does a deep dive into interesting and difficult questions." And that was a very nice thing to say and I thank Rosie for that. What's yours?

Sandra: My favorite is titled: "This is a Sharp and Compelling Podcast." Also 5 stars, by Mit-cal-fee-in?

Christiane: Mit-caf-ee-in?

Sandra: Mid-cad-fee-in? Not sure. "I loved the production value of those podcasts." Thanks. "It is both educating and entertaining. There is a nice pointy headed clarity and a human responsiveness. Both wonky and fun." So many compliments packed into one!

Christiane Mmhm, and I'm like, somebody's finally noticed how pointy my head is.

Sandra: Yes.

Christiane: And I love it.

Sandra: And I like that our wonkiness and fun is actually appreciated, and not just like... I always wonder if we are annoying our listeners but... I mean maybe it's a healthy mix of both.

Christiane laughs

Sandra: You never know.

Christiane: So, wherever you listen to your podcasts, it's actually very important for the visibility of our show to rate and review the show in iTunes, in, you know, the Apple podcast world.

Sandra: Yeah, it just helps us out a *ton*. And we would really appreciate you doing so.

Christiane: Yes.

Sandra: And we appreciate all people who have already done so.

Christiane: Yes, absolutely, yes, thank you so much. We are available to be reached in many places. [laughs] There's that pointy headedness [laughs]

Sandra: There's that pointy headedness! So yeah, we're on the web guys. You can find us--

Christiane: [laughs] On the web!

Sandra: [laughs] you can find us on www online at Twitter, Facebook, Instagram...

Christiane: All the channels.

Sandra: ...under the name Examining Ethics that you might have guessed. And we also have the old fashioned email address: examiningethics@gmail.com. Please reach out to us for every-- anything you have thought about this episode or the ethics of protest. Something we missed, something we got wrong, I want to hear everything.

Christiane: Yeah, even though this is a-- we did a two parter on the ethics of protest, part of me thinks, probably going to talk about protests again, at some point in our show's life, so...

Sandra: Believe it or not, I don't think we covered all of the ethical implications of protest.

Christiane laughs

Christiane: Nope okay, well...

Sandra: We'll let you go.

Christiane: Until next time folks!

Sandra: Byeeeee!

Christiane: Good byeee!

[music starts]

CREDITS:

Christiane: Say exactly what I say, are you listening? Okay ready? Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison...

Kid: Exan-ing ethic with Anny Cullen

Christiane: is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

Kid: ...Is accessed by the university of... umm...I don't know.

Christiane: Sandra Bertin and Christiane Wisehart produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Cory Gray, Blue Dot Sessions, and the Heftone Banjo Orchestra and can be found online at freemusicarchive.org.

Kid: Okay, the come o-r-g we have...the.. say...

Christiane: Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners.

Kid: ahhhh

Christiane: [laughter] You want to try it one more time?

Kid: Ye... mmmm...no. Let's go on the rest of our trip.

Christiane: *laughs* okay

[music ends]

Bonus:

Christiane: We do that every show

Sandra: It just makes you wonder....

Christiane: It makes you think...

Sandra: Doesn't it make you think?

Christiane: I just... I'm just thinking right now!

Sandra: I have no conclusions just thinks

Christiane: Thinks! [laughs]