

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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A Dramatic Turn in the Public Construction of Reality

By Mary Gergen



January 21, 2017, the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump as U. S. President, almost 3 million people, most of them women, marched in solidarity. According to one source, there were 673 marches in all 50 states and 32 nations worldwide. Marches took place in such distant places as Nairobi, Macau, Melbourne, Tbilisi, Lima, and Belgrade. Such a dramatic outpouring struck me as amazing, given the size and simultaneity of the marches. This led me to question how such an undertaking could have been produced. It seemed to me that what was required for this gigantic, multi-faceted event to occur could not be explained using old top down theories of leadership, but rather it demanded a new understanding of organizing itself.

I spoke to many colleagues and friends about their experiences as marchers, and read widely about the event. I certainly didn't find a Central Committee behind it all! When asked how they learned about the march, participants seemed vague in their answers. A typical response by my friend Elizabeth Rubin, who marched in Washington, DC, was "by email." Another friend said her book club generated the energy to get together and go. Another's daughter had flown in from California to go to the march with close friends living in New York City. In my area, suburban Philadelphia, a group called FUSE (Fellowship of Urban Suburban Engagement) hired a bus to go to DC. (This group brings the rich and poor together "to create a shared sense of destiny and purpose.") A friend with a sprained ankle, stayed up half the night to knit pink pussy cat hats for her friends who were going.

Of central import to the creation of the marches was social media. Similar to a spontaneous combustion, the responses of many diverse groups of women were fired up by messages coming from a variety of sources. These also inspired smaller groups to organize. Women marched for many causes - Planned Parenthood, Black Lives Matter, environmental concerns, immigration issues, and more. The sign that said it best was "I'm with Her and Her and Her." The spirit of the event was joyful, assertive and fun (with no reports of vandalism, fist fights, or police action). In short, what occurred that day was a powerful form of "spontaneous mobilization," an organizational term I borrow from Sang-hui Nam's publication in *Qualitative Research*.

The implications of this event for a constructionist understanding of cultural change are substantial. Virtually any group, large or small, can generate an agenda, a narrative, and a public reality. Top down controls in society are eroding. No organization, however ensconced in history, financially powerful, or in control of our public institutions, is in charge. Public reality-making is open to all, and one result was the woman's march. I am reminded of the metaphor of the rhizome made famous by the French philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari. The rhizomatic structure describes plants that grow underground, spreading out in various directions, and sprouting up in different places. There are multiple clusters of intertwined roots, but no central one. (The roots of bamboo and ginger are rhizomatic). This is a useful metaphor to describe the functioning of our vast array of communication forms: television channels, cell phones, email, Twitter, other social media outlets, and more. Reality making is ever on the move, in countless contexts, potentially affecting our future. The implications for the Taos Institute are significant - not only in attempting to understand the emerging processes of reality making, but helping to ameliorate the resulting conflicts, and joining in efforts to collaborate for positive change.