

Francesca Polletta.

It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics.

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Francesca Polletta's latest book, *It Was Like a Fever*, tells a story as richly textured, complex and ambiguous as the various political narratives she analyses. Her premise is that social movement scholars have not fully explored the ways in which movement collectivities use storytelling to mobilize for social change. Standard wisdom has it that disadvantaged groups use their stories — “give voice” to their struggles if you will — to gain valuable political resources in the public arena. Polletta provides a more nuanced view. She maintains that using narratives is often a double-edged sword for such groups, with both benefits and important risks. Further, stories are received differently, depending upon who is telling the story, when they are telling it, and for what reason. This opens the way for Polletta to develop a “sociology of storytelling” in social movements.

Drawing methodological inspiration from literary theory, psychology, legal theory and sociolinguistics, Polletta builds a framework for a sociological understanding how narratives work politically. This framework mixes culture and structure: cultural norms of storytelling constrain the internal logic of stories while the larger institutional and organizational context limits them from without. Social conventions and social organization shape how narratives are both delivered and received. Depending on who tells the story, when, and in what manner, narratives can challenge the status quo, opening up possibilities by putting otherwise settled understandings into question. Polletta maintains that while we — scholars as well as the public — are often ambivalent about where storytelling fits into our social world (compared, for instance, with reasoned argument and empirical evidence), its undeniable power makes it a social activity worth analyzing.

These insights she applies to five substantive case studies. Each provides a unique puzzle that Polletta shows can be solved with a “sociology of narrative.” The first puzzle is the difference between the story social movements scholars tend to tell about the 1960 student sit-in movement for Civil Rights — namely that it was well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed — and the narrative told by the participants at the time. The latter emphasized the spontaneous character of the sit-in actions: “It was like a fever,” many claimed. Polletta's analysis reveals that by “spontaneous” the students meant urgent, moral, local, and radically different than anything that had come before, not that it was unplanned. Her second puzzle is related empirically to the first. Between 1960 and 1964 the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) developed and refined the notion of “participatory democracy.” By 1965 however, SNCC appeared to completely abandon this mobilizing form, as hardliners took over the organization and pushed for a more centralized, bureaucratized, even exclusionary structure. This fundamental about-face Polletta explains using the literary concept of metonymy, which refers to an image or term standing in another, whether a part and a whole, or a cause and an effect. For SNCC “participatory democracy” became associated with the all that was negative in the white student movement (e.g., self-indulgent, undisciplined, ideological). SNCC made decisions about organizational structure based on these perceptions.

For her third case Polletta analyses twelve groups deliberating over the future of the World Trade Centre site. The puzzle here is related to the effectiveness of personal storytelling a public forum trying to achieve consensus over what to do with the space left by the destruction of the twin towers. Her analysis of the online discussion is fascinating and surprising: participants from disadvantaged groups were no more likely to use personal stories than those from socially privileged backgrounds,

although women were more likely to do so than men. More to the point, Polletta argues that storytelling's ambiguity was effective in moving towards compromise because it opened up possibilities. Her fourth case, an analysis of the campaign for legal reform in the battered women's movement, reinforces the ambiguity of storytelling. Battered women's personal stories rely on normative conventions that typically cast such women as victims. While stories of victimization are important, Polletta argues, they also prohibit viewing battered women as strong, independent agents. This is problematic, she points out, for drawing recruits to the movement, securing legal reform and pursuing equality. Certain narratives can be harmful for a movement. Finally, Polletta conducts a content analysis of the US *Congressional Record* to establish the ways in which institutional forces influence how Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement are represented. African American legislators use King in one manner (emphasizing his pluralism, his focus on community service and his institutional politics) while those outside the legislature use him in another (emphasizing his radical social change agenda). Her institutionalist approach here is most convincing, demonstrating how social and political position influences what one says.

The book is full of little insights that often delight. One is the idea that black student protesters claimed their acts were spontaneous mainly to avert any suspicion of larger communist backing. Another is the way binary thinking is implicated in legal arguments for gender equality: either women are just like men and therefore entitled to similar jobs, or women are different than men and therefore uninterested in such jobs. This way of thinking, Polletta points out, inhibits the possibility that women are different from men but interested in similar jobs. Throughout the book Polletta weaves together sophisticated sociological insights with erudite, seamless writing. She is an excellent, almost poetic writer.

The central question, of course, is whether she is claiming too much for the role of narrative compared to the practicalities of social movement action. Her sociologically based approach to storytelling is compelling and important. If the goal is to have us pay closer attention to the way stories are told within movements then certainly this is a welcome addition to the movement literature. If the goal is to lay claim a large part of the explanatory pie for culture, then it will be a much harder sell.

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Jeffrey Cormier does research on social movements, civil society and the state. With Philippe Couton he has recently published a *Sociological Quarterly* article looking at how the state-civil society nexus can lead to violence. His book *The Canadianization Movement: Emergence, Survival, and Success* was reviewed in *CJS Online* in 2004. For *CJS Online* he recently reviewed *An Anatomy of Power: The Social Theory of Michael Mann*, edited by John A. Hall and Ralph Schroeder.

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