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Review Essay

What Do We Do with Meanings?

James M. Jasper¹

It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics. *Francesca Polletta.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual. Edited by *Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle. *T. V. Reed.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism. *Clifford Bob.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929–1934. *Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

For 20 years, the cultural aspects of social movements and political action have been a hot area of research. Books and articles about frames, collective identity, and the social construction of this or that have poured forth. Even structuralists who dominated, even defined, the field of collective action before the cultural turn—giants such as Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow—now jokingly describe themselves as “recovering” structuralists and write extensively about culture. (Of course, these days, Chuck Tilly writes extensively on almost every topic.)

So what do we know? For one thing, we know that even the hardest structures are not objectively out there, free from any interpretation or ideological construction. There is hard work and struggle behind every political opportunity, behind every law and constitution, behind every

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hierarchy and official position. Meaning and interpretation are everywhere, although there are still some lingering questions about whether they are best seen via individuals or through more public embodiments. We also know a lot about the media that carry meanings, from concrete carriers such as songs and graffiti to more metaphorical carriers such as frames, identities, and ideologies. (Fortunately, too, we have learned not to contrast the illusions of ideology with the truth of science, as many on both the right and the left once did.)

Having participated in this great cultural turn, I am proud of what we have learned. And yet, and yet I worry that cultural interpretation is sometimes an excuse for sloppy thinking, for creative speculation about meaning that is not attached to institutions or individuals or clear methodological constraints. I can sit back and guess what animals “mean” in U.S. culture, or what nuclear power plants symbolize to protestors, but how can others test or challenge my interpretations? At their worst, French poststructuralism and U.S. cultural studies tolerate or encourage such playful interpretation.

I want more from cultural research. I want to understand how political groups and individuals use culture in different arenas, for different purposes. I want to follow the pathways by which meanings are embodied in sound waves or on the printed page and then heard or read by various audiences—with identifiable players creating and disseminating messages, and other players reacting to and interpreting them. I want to trace the encoding, the message, and the decoding, as Stuart Hall put it in reformulating Aristotle’s three-part approach to rhetoric. In my opinion, cultural research would be more rigorous if it were put in a rhetorical framework and if, more broadly, cultural efforts were seen as part of a broad range of strategies in structured arenas.

Vincent Roscigno and William Danaher demonstrate both the power of recent cultural work and some of its limitations in *The Voice of Southern Labor*. They neatly compare a small number of strikes by textile workers in 1929 with a much larger wave in 1934, arguing that the penetration of radio made the primary difference. They discuss the content of broadcasts in detail—in particular the rebellious lyrics of hillbilly music often directed against mills and mill owners, and FDR’s fireside chats, which made workers feel this president was on their side. But they also care about the medium, showing how it spread, and how at this point local station managers had considerable discretion about content. They usefully combine analyses of form and of content.

Unfortunately, not every article (or even, in this case, two or three articles) should become a book. The articles were about radio. The book is about radio and about the textile strikes—but it is much better on the

former. A lot more happened between 1929 and 1934 than radio, and the authors' account of the strikes is simply not rich and persuasive. Even the effects of FDR's chats, which Roscigno and Danaher claim provided the impression of a "political opportunity" for southern workers, probably pale beside the opportunity provided by the National Industrial Recovery Act. Plus, economic conditions were vastly worse in 1934 than in 1929. We cannot form a clear picture without much more research into the strikes. And for a short book, there is a lot of repetition of main facts and arguments and a surprisingly thin (and rather idiosyncratic) account of recent social movement theory. We also find the kind of statements (such as: "Yet, discontent remained intact and, if anything, intensified" [p. 100]) that helped spark the structural revolt against grievance-based explanations 40 years ago. Meanings are not enough.

Nonetheless, Roscigno and Danaher point in the right direction. They suggest that we concentrate on the creators of messages and meanings (and they are good on the musicians, better than on FDR), the messages themselves, and the audiences who heard them—Aristotle's classic triad again. The materials are here for a more strategic model that would place meanings in their political context more fruitfully. They discuss the reactions and perspectives of many mill owners. Even more interestingly, they find that the preponderance of songs demonize individuals rather than blaming the work process itself. (And, on the other side, there is a parallel tendency to blame Communists for labor unrest.) There is even a hint of a dilemma over whether to portray the mill owners as evil and powerful or as weak and ridiculous—a common rhetorical/strategic dilemma. When culture meets strategy in these ways, we will eventually have a powerful new way of understanding political action.

Tellingly, one of the best recent books on culture and politics barely uses the term "culture" at all. In *The Marketing of Rebellion*, Clifford Bob examines the remarkable success of the Ogoni in Nigeria and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, both of whom managed to capture the imagination of audiences and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) around the world. By comparing them directly to nearby and similar groups and indirectly to hundreds or thousands of other insurgent efforts around the world, Bob can highlight a handful of factors that allowed these two groups to market themselves so effectively.

Bob offers a table of "structural factors" that affect a movement's chances of success. Six are movement characteristics: standing with various audiences around the world, personal and professional contacts, knowledge about donors and supporters, material resources, organizational resources, and leadership. Two are opponent characteristics: the identity of opponents, and their reactions. The list seems quite reasonable.

What is less so, however, is the label “structural.” For one thing, there is no other list of factors that are *not* structural. For another, none of the factors on the list seem particularly structural to me.

Instead, the explanatory factors seem strategic, in that groups make choices about how to change all of them, reshaping them during the course of mobilization and conflict. None have the durability, placing them outside the control of parties to a conflict, which the term structure would imply. I dwell on this odd labeling not because it is unusual, but because it is common in political analysis.

However, there is a greater disjuncture between Bob’s theoretical language and his empirical materials in what is clearly the most important factor to both movements: the presence of a leader (Ken Saro-Wiwa among the Ogoni and subcomandante Marcos for the Zapatistas) who embodies the group’s moral aspirations and can speak the languages of the relevant audiences the group wants to reach. Saro-Wiwa and Marcos were both prolific writers, and both were articulate not only in the language of their followers but in the English so useful for attracting international audiences. Bob devotes enormous attention to these remarkable men in the chapter on Nigeria and that on Chiapas, but three theoretical chapters give no special attention to the role of individuals. In the world of “structural factors,” they become “leadership.” We lack the language to fully appreciate Bob’s marvelous research descriptions.

The theoretical limitations of social science also prevent Bob from analyzing the full cultural saturation of his analysis. His root metaphor of marketing could be given a structural, a strategic, or a cultural tone. Bob sometimes falls back on more structural terms, such as “matching,” which often seems to imply a process by which preexisting entities are either brought together or not brought together, but his empirical presentation clearly shows the many strategic choices made on both sides of the match. Insurgents rethink their identities and images, just as NGOs think hard about the potential risks and benefits of supporting various groups. Both sets of players face innumerable dilemmas in trying to please more than one audience. (The most common is a version of the extension dilemma: you want powerful allies, such as NGOs with money to disburse, but those allies may reshape you as much as you use them. Attention from news media poses much the same conundrum.)

“Marketing” can also imply active selling of oneself to an audience, as in advertising. Some ads are aimed at creating a general impression about a group or product: these people are good, they are victims, while the state is a villain oppressing them. Other ads try to inspire a purchase: someone buys a product or an NGO decides to support a movement. Here, marketing sounds very much like rhetoric, the art of persuasion,

and far from the exchange imagery that has dominated political science in recent years. (Epideictic rhetoric was precisely about the creation of general impressions, especially about people, as in funeral orations.)

In this battle of rhetoric and of imagery, insurgents face the “hero or victim” dilemma. For purposes of recruiting members, they need to project power and agency, a sense that they will not be easily crushed. But to attract outside sympathy and aid, they need to appear more passive, as victims who have suffered a great wrong. To be a victim, you need a villain, and the Ogoni were lucky enough to cast Shell Oil in that role, until the Nigerian government brutally repressed the Ogoni and grabbed the leading villain role. The two villains together allowed the Ogoni to appeal to environmental and human rights NGOs at the same time.

The extension and the hero or victim dilemmas are both related to the Janus dilemma, in which leaders must appeal both to internal audiences of members and factions and also to outside audiences of other players. Tradeoffs like these force analysts to recognize both strategy and cultural meanings, showing meanings and feelings deployed for a purpose. Even though his theoretical frame often hides this, Bob presents two rich and important cases that highlight these dynamics.

If Bob shows us a lot about how culture operates without telling us this is what he is doing, T. V. Reed trumpets the centrality of cultural meanings but does less than he might to advance our understanding of how they work. *The Art of Protest* should prove useful as an undergraduate text, as it provides basic information about nine important movements or groups from the past 50 years of U.S. history. In contrast, scholars of politics, who do not need these basics, will be disappointed as they search for theoretical insights into the role of various arts in inspiring, constraining, and shaping the movements that use them. Reed, who teaches literature rather than political science or sociology, seems unaware of the past 15 years of research on the cultural aspects of politics.

Reed examines one art or medium for each organization or movement, at least implying that different forms operate in different ways under different formal constraints: song for civil rights, theatricality for the Black Panthers, poetry for feminism, wall murals for Chicano rights, Hollywood movies for the American Indian movement (AIM), rock music for international philanthropy, the graphic arts for ACT UP, literary criticism for environmental justice, and the Internet for the global justice movement. Some of the contexts are movements, others formal organizations, and at least one is an academic subdiscipline. The arts, too, are a somewhat mixed bag, including the metaphor of theatricality (not theater) and several forms that are controlled by large corporations, rather than

by the movements themselves. In the case of the movies, Reed examines examples made long after AIM's peak.

With a more explicit rhetorical framework, this farrago might have allowed Reed to theorize productively about the relationships between different kinds of producers of messages, the messages themselves, and the audiences. Instead, we get something all too typical of cultural approaches to politics: well-written stories, with occasional interpretive insights into the movements or the arts, largely outside a strategic or structural context. There are no constraints on interpretation, no way to link meanings to other dynamics, and no way to test the claims. There is little that we might take with us, to build insights into the mechanisms by which meanings matter. (Not to mention feelings: Reed altogether ignores emotions, which have become a large part of cultural research in the last decade.)

Just as market metaphors come all too naturally to Bob the political scientist, so interpretation alone is fine for Reed the literary critic. Too much strategy in one case, too much meaning in the other. With Reed, we also get a tone of moral earnestness, leavened only rarely by a sense of humor. Neither book rises (or descends?) to the level of history, by which I mean a sense of events and actions in a clear order so that we can see who responded to what and how. Bob has more of this, especially in showing how Saro-Wiwa learned from early mistakes and recast his presentation of the Ogoni identity to outsiders. But in neither case do we get a sense of players reacting to each other, anticipating what others will do, taking advantage of blunders, and so on. Again, a better strategic sense might have made cultural meanings into rhetorical intentions, placing them in a broader political context. (Not all meanings are conscious and intentional, but it matters whether they are or not.)

The "Dilemma of Powerful Allies" reappears in Reed, who dismisses as "selling out" to the media musicians' efforts to use the recording industry to purvey a political message. With *ACT UP* he encounters the "Dilemma of Stigmatized Identities," as queer activists use as a mobilization tool the very cluster of expectations and feelings they also wish to challenge. But with an interest in cultural meanings, and less sense of strategic choices beyond the production of art, Reed does not recognize dilemmas and tradeoffs for what they are.

Because Reed concentrates on cultural meanings in and of themselves, embodied in artifacts (and thus entirely open to his interpretation), he does not think rhetorically about the audiences for those artifacts or about the likely effects on those audiences. Concerts such as Live Aid targeted potential contributors in the West, so portraying Africans as victims was a reasonable move—although if the audience had been African it might have undermined the sense of agency. Audiences for Hollywood

films are not the same as audiences for neighborhood murals, and there are tradeoffs in trying to reach the two.

Similarly, Reed insists on the value of fiction as evidence of strategic players' intent when he insists that John Trudell's words in a movie might have been made in one of his political speeches. But they were not. Hollywood movies and political speech are produced in different ways, presented to different audiences, and are understood differently. We will fool ourselves, taking cultural meanings as somehow objective things to interpret, if we forget these rhetorical differences.

The lack of a better strategic or rhetorical sense gets Reed in trouble at the end of the book as well. He distinguishes—albeit analytically—cultural, social, economic, and political domains or levels. But to the extent he uses the distinction at all, he applies it to concrete actors. It would have been more useful to distinguish arenas of struggles, each with its characteristic stakes and rules, and to distinguish different strategic players who enter various arenas. Then we might have seen the goals and the means they use, to what purpose, and with what ultimate effects. We might then set cultural meanings in a strategic framework that appreciates the full range of political action.

An essay on new books about culture and politics has to include Francesca Polletta's *It Was Like a Fever*. In the interest of full disclosure, I should admit that she is a dear friend and that I read this book in manuscript, so the reader will not necessarily trust my judgment that this is a terrific book—bad news for the reader. But the good news is that Polletta ignored most of my suggestions, which leaves me something to say in this essay about some areas in which she and I disagree about narratives.

Each empirical chapter of *Fever* is a gem examining a different rhetorical setting. One, based on a famous article of Polletta's from which the book's title comes, explains why black college students who began sit-ins at segregated stores in 1960 were so insistent that their actions were spontaneous rather than organized and planned. This story emphasized a break with more established civil rights organizations, dramatized the moral urgency of the students' actions, and helped create a new collective political player. The following chapter revisits the group that formed out of these sit-ins several years later, SNCC, as debates over group structure led to the expulsion of whites. Polletta focuses here on metonymy, especially how particular strategies came to "stand in" for white or for black members of the group. Another chapter examines the rhetorical uses of stories in online debate over what kind of memorial to build on the World Trade Center site. My favorite chapter discusses the dilemma that battered women and their advocates face between presenting themselves as victims or as competent, even heroic actors.

Again, victimhood gains sympathy but undermines images of power and rationality. Another excellent chapter is a detailed study of the ways that African-American congressional speakers refer to Martin Luther King Jr. in a manner that hides his radical activism. All these chapters are rich studies in how meanings are made.

If Polletta's book has a flaw, it is that it is framed too modestly. It is not simply about storytelling, one particular means for persuading others and shaping understandings of the world; it is about more general processes of meaning. Metonymy has nothing special to do with narrative, for instance, although stories often contain it. Indeed, by fixing the characteristics of players, it essentializes them in ways that actually take them out of narrative and change. Only in the last section of the conclusion does Polletta suggest that we should move "toward a sociology of discursive forms." But she has already provided many of the raw materials—and potential comparisons across settings and audiences—for this project.

Polletta tends to hide her rhetorical roots. For instance, she denies any difference between "narrative" and "story." But narrative is often used to refer to more formal qualities of a text or story, to how the elements are internally related, leaving storytelling as a more social, interactive engagement. The latter is more sociological and potentially more strategic and rhetorical. In another example, Polletta dismisses the classic distinction between deliberative, forensic, and epideictic rhetoric as too neat for the real world, but later (p. 177) implicitly relies on the contrast between epideictic and deliberative in discussing congressional speeches. I suspect that embracing rhetorical traditions rather than dismissing them would take us further, more quickly, toward that sociology of discursive forms.

The book that comes closest to a rhetorical framework is *Social Performance*, largely inspired by the work of social theorist Jeffrey Alexander. It shows a number of strategic players—especially the media, states, and social movement organizations—conveying cultural meanings through performances of various kinds, including reactions to 9/11, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Willy Brandt's falling to his knee at the Warsaw ghetto memorial. Although the authors' approaches vary somewhat, they all see theatrical metaphors as avoiding opposed tendencies in the analysis of culture: reducing cultural actions and artifacts to strategic intentions, and seeing cultural meanings as durable, autonomous structures little affected by these pragmatic actions. They usefully find these cultural performances across institutional arenas.

In a theoretical and historical chapter, Alexander traces the rise of self-conscious performance, as opposed to unreflective ritual, to the ancient Greeks. I am sympathetic to this argument, as the Greeks also invented the great tradition of reflection on rhetoric. I am not sure which of these two is

broader, but there is no attention to rhetoric in this volume, which is characterized by an overly heavy reliance on performance theory taken perhaps too directly from theater theory (especially the work of Richard Schechner). Like the elaboration of any metaphor—marketing, narrative, or any other—this seems useful but rather limiting. We need a number of perspectives, not the dominance of one metaphor taken to stand in for all the processes of cultural meanings. Even more am I troubled by the great historical theory, in which ritual is replaced by performance, that Alexander presents. Although he warns against nostalgia for primitives, naively following their rituals, because he lacks untainted evidence about participants' attitudes toward their own rituals he cannot help but sound patronizing in the tradition of Durkheim or Lévi-Strauss. But a performative approach remains useful even without the Big Theory of History.

Ron Eyerman, who has done as much as anyone to promote a cultural approach to understanding social movements, has a chapter in which he asks what actually is moved as a result of social movements. A movement, he says, consists of performances in public, "as it requires an audience which is addressed and must be moved." More than one audience, in fact, especially audiences inside and outside the movement. Performance theory, he says, "adds a new dimension to the study of social movements in linking cognitive framing, narration, and discourse with the practice of mobilization." I would have said the same about rhetorical theory, as long as it was broadened to include nonverbal messages. It is especially emotions and identities, Eyerman specifies, that performances help create. All this sounds right to me, but in the end, I am not sure a new term is necessary. Scholars have been studying meanings and emotions and interactions in public for a while, often pulling these together into a single analysis.

A performative approach seems to me better than most approaches for getting at the coding and decoding of meanings, just as rhetoric is good at this. But they both may need to be set in a broader strategic setting of institutional arenas and purposes. That view is largely lost here, as in all these works on culture. What do strategic players think they are doing when they create or use cultural meanings? What are the limits of these usages? Against whom are they deployed? What are the means and goals and the tradeoffs?

Polletta rightly complains (p. 168) that "sociologists have tended to style themselves literary critics in studying storytelling. They have spent more time interpreting texts than studying the distribution of storytelling authority or identifying the social epistemologies of storytelling that guide its use." This is true of cultural approaches to politics more generally. When we see culture as more rhetorical, and politics as more strategic, we will be able to fill in many of these gaps and make culture a more useful set of tools than ever before.