Book Review

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The Production of Apathy

Nina Eliasoph, Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 330 pp.

A few years ago, "Students for Justice" at De Anza College held a speak-out on the Nike boycott. Students from the group denounced Nike for the rip-off of youth-of-color images to exploit customers of color here in the United States and workers overseas. They made connections between youth culture and advertising and between US foreign policy and the wages paid to workers in other countries. Many of those listening were interested and supportive, but some were angrily opposed to the Nike boycott. I could see that some of the arguments of the boycott opponents made sense given their worldview, but I was particularly intrigued to observe how important it was for some of them to prove the activists wrong. They were working hard to come up with ideas to convince themselves and others that the situation couldn't be as bad as it was made out to be; that paying the workers well in Vietnam would only raise prices here; that a boycott would only make things worse for the workers there; that the activists should work to solve the problems of people here, rather than those overseas; that our actions could never affect a company like Nike anyway; and that the activists were a bunch of hypocrites because they wore clothes.

Even more than the vehemence of the arguments, I was struck by the contradictory values that underlay them. Many individuals switched in

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their arguments from asserting a lack of concern for the workers overseas to such concern being the foundation of their argument. They jumped from saying that the boycott would destroy the jobs Nike created, to claiming that boycotts can never have an effect. Why were they so passionately trying to convince themselves and others that the activists should not be doing what they were doing? What then was motivating them? When I read Nina Eliasoph's book *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, I began to get some help in framing these questions.

Eliasoph uses communication theory and anthropological methods to analyze how people in several different subcultures within the United States see their relationship to the broader world of political concerns. More specifically, she wonders how Americans avoid politics. The opening chapter, "The Mysterious Shrinking Circle of Concern," poses two puzzles: how and why do people use the rhetoric of some issues being "close to home" to avoid working on issues of broad social concern; and, how do people avoid making political connections when speaking out on issues about which they care deeply.

In her discussion of the rhetoric of "close to home," she tells the story of two women who lived very near to nuclear ships. Privately, in interviews, both women expressed deep concern about the potential dangers of the ships. Asked why they didn't get involved in work to get rid of the ships, both women said that they were more interested in addressing problems that were "close to home." How did "close to home" come to be defined so as to include drug abuse, but to exclude the nuclear ships? As she analyzes the responses she realized that "close to home" is code for "something I feel like I can have an effect on." She finds her informants to be hyper-conscious of where they can have an effect. And, even more importantly, their notions of what is possible are severely circumscribed by popular ideas of what sorts of issues are considered polite to talk about.

The second puzzle is her observation that even the environmental activists she studied dropped their political analysis when they spoke in public. Instead, they resorted to what she calls, in one of the more memorable catch phrases of the book, "mandatory momism." That is, they were more likely to speak as parents (especially mothers) concerned for the safety of their children than as citizens concerned about the public good or as political actors wanting to challenge corporate power. Her

chapter on the media partially explains this "mandatory momism." When activists positioned themselves as experts and explained the technicalities of the struggles they were engaged in, they were considered boring. When they put the issues into a broader political context, they were simply ignored.

In trying to sort out the meaning of these puzzles, Eliasoph looks at how the lack of public expression of political concern is coerced by the micro-politics of conversation. She notes:

> The people I met did sound as if they cared about politics, but only in some contexts and not in others. They did not just think everything was fine as it was, but there were too few contexts in which they could openly discuss their discontent. Most of the time, intimate, late night, moonlight conversations were the only places other than interviews where that kind of discussion could happen. In group contexts, such discussion was almost always considered inappropriate and out of place; informal etiquette made some political intuitions speakable, and others beyond the pale of reasonable, polite discussion. (7)

Eliasoph uses communications theorist Irving Goffman's distinction between frontstage and backstage behavior. Goffman showed that people tend to put on masks and act polite frontstage, whereas backstage they can relax and be themselves. Goffman found backstage behavior to be regressive and vulgar. Eliasoph reverses the value judgments: she found people to be more engaging and to have a deeper concern for others backstage. Frontstage they seemed constrained to seem unconcerned for others (7).

We are used to hearing that small voluntary organizations are the backbone of the public sphere. Many believe that as people gather in small community-based organizations, they will begin to talk about issues that concern them, and through this they will develop a civic consciousness or a sense of concern about political issues. In a dramatic reversal of this hopeful scenario, Eliasoph found that people in these groups worked hard to police the boundaries of their own conversations.

> Thus, in group meetings, volunteers never drew connections between their everyday acts of charity and public issues. For example, when requesting volunteers to watch over children at the pre-dawn playground

> [where children are left alone by parents who must drop them off before going to work, often in a dark place without adult supervision], Julie never wondered aloud whether there were any larger issues involved—perhaps long work hours and short vacations; perhaps the commuting patterns that left parents with an exhausting, sooty, two-hour commute....But volunteers assumed that there was no sense sacrificing precious, scarce time complaining and feeling bad about something that could not be fixed; and here was a small, upbeat, hands-on solution that could work right away if enough people could help. Every group meeting presented an example of this method of inspiring good feelings and avoiding discouragement. (24)

Eliasoph's study shows how people in the US work actively in their everyday lives to undermine the public sphere. We are shown the gaps, elisions, self-contradictions, and silences that constitute the work of making the political evaporate. "Inside of 'apathy' was a whole underwater world of denials, omissions, evasions, things forgotten, skirted, avoided, and suppressed—a world as varied and colorful as an undersea bed" (255).

The main strength of *Avoiding Politics* is the rich texture of this discussion of how apathy is reproduced in conversation. Eliasoph's use of communication theory is great for revealing the fascinating details of how this political evaporation happens. But, her unwillingness to switch theoretical tools at this point leads her, in the book's conclusion, to a rather empty call to respect the power of talk. She claims that open-ended discussions about what is important to us as human beings will lead to a revaluation of the political. This open discussion will help us to develop the political culture necessary to sustain our commitments.

Given the lengths to which Eliasoph's informants went to avoid just this sort of discussion, this exhortation rings hollow. The book got me questioning, more strongly than ever, why it is that people in the United States are so strongly compelled to avoid politics. The answer to this question calls out for an investigation of cultural politics. Surely the answer has something to do with the ways that capitalism and capitalist culture lead to alienation and fragmentation, the ways that corporate-dominated media encourage a view of ourselves as passive observers of life, and the pervasive culture of possessive individualism. In my teaching, I am always struck by how much of a challenge it is to get students to even perceive social phenomena. One of my main goals, and one of

my hardest tasks, is to help students see that we are connected to one another through networks of social forces, that our fates are not simply determined by our individual wills. This invisibility of the social is part of what we are up against.

We can see its workings in the ways that social movements are portrayed in the mass media. Whether it is the *Mary Poppins* representation of suffragists as ridiculous, or more recently *Amistad*'s representation of abolition as being driven by the moralistic speech-making of the great individual, the positive effect of social movements is almost always erased from our popular representations of history. History is moved by great individuals, by reason, or by accident.

I also wonder if this overwhelming apathy might not just be a problem of the particular historical period Eliasoph is investigating. In my work with student activists, I have seen a dramatic change in the ways that radical messages are received just in the past year. Suddenly labor-based activism, whether anti-sweat shop work or campus union organizing, suddenly seems almost fashionable. The same calls to activism that generated hostility among student audiences a few years ago, suddenly seem to resonate more deeply. Is this because the economy is better and students are less frightened about their own individual futures? Is it because there is an accumulated effect of these messages seeming more familiar to this particular body of students? Is it because the world situation is so bad that the ideological scales are falling from people's eyes? I am both pleased and mystified about what I see going on around me.

If we want to get a handle on why radical arguments sometimes fall flat and at other times resonate deeply, we need to work to understand the cultural forces at play. Eliasoph's book cries out for another one in which the question of why apathy is so often the response of people in the United States to political discourse could be explored more fully.

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