Symbolic Interaction

INVITED REVIEW

The Social Movement Social Club: How Activists Form Tiny Publics

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Fair Share: Senior Activism, Tiny Publics, and the Culture of Resistance
By Gary Alan Fine (University of Chicago Press, 2023)

Before sociology, I aspired to be a good writer. Those like me will love Gary Alan Fine's prologue to his new ethnography, in which he draws a movingly adventurous scene of elderly Chicagoans questing to Wisconsin through a snowstorm in 2016. Using canes and walkers, these senior activists arrive and march through snow, protesting right-wing threats to social security emanating from then-Speaker of the House Paul Ryan's offices in Racine. The vividity with which Fine narratively weaves together his fieldnotes makes an implicit argument, certainly against ageism, but also for the importance of the craft of writing in sociology. Fine illustrates the angst and agency of his septa-, octo-, and a few nonagenarian subjects. Elderly progressives will require bathroom breaks, but they can fire up much like the young folk that occupied our screens during The Resistance. "Senior protest can smell like teen spirit (p. 5)," quips Fine, signposting the book's puzzle: How do the limits and possibilities of senior activism reveal the everyday particularities, promises, and limitations of attempting to make social change?

Fine's answer is that groups have local cultures, constituted by shared values like progressivism and memorable events like the march on Racine, transmitted by and within specific kinds of interaction and talk about what the group is and what it is up to. Chapters one and two discuss the progressive values and movement involvement of seniors. The next two chapters analyze elderly activists' actions and their politics of memory. A set of chapters covers the inter- and intra-organizational politics of Chicago Seniors Together (CST), particularly the fraught role of identity politics in forging networks of progressive tiny publics. Ethnographically demonstrating that local culture is the vital stuff of locally specific connections between the personal and the structural is a culmination and grounding of Fine's recent theoretical work on tiny publics and the hinge of society. In *Fair Share: Senior Activism, Tiny Publics, and the*

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Culture of Resistance, Fine makes an excellent case for and an example of observing a social movement as something like a social club. The meso-level of society, a middle and peopled realm wherein local values, interactions, experiences, and stories produce the necessary sociality for pursuing activism, shines through the book.

The book is about a social movement organization of senior progressives, anonymized as CST. As I noted, the first two thematic chapters tackle Fine's key concerns about local cultures of activism and the puzzle posed by elderly activists. Why and how do senior citizens put their aging bodies on the line? The answer is not only about frames, political organization, and the availability of resources. Fine starts somewhere that is often conceptually and intellectually thorny in the sociology of movements, taking seriously how beliefs and values explain the motivation and desire for the elderly to bond with like-minded senior citizens and come together to protect their cherished values of affordable housing and health care. A key contribution of the book is to understand how values relate to emotions, both undergirding particular kinds of injustice frames, those nebulous enough to bond individuals while targeting a specific out-group. The greedy rich failing to pay their "fair share" for a robust safety net are an infuriating threat to the group's values, despite individual preferences for how to protest and write policy. Fine also makes profitable use of interactionist concepts like "moral career" (Becker 1963) to explore the differently twilit paths to elderly activism. The Goffmanian idea of "interaction order" (Goffman 1983) gives purchase to how beliefs sustain norms of conformity that lead to dependable circuits of action. Values only go so far, however, as a community must also adapt and respond to its group's specific needs, by accounting for varying levels of mobility and sensitivity to life's contingencies, especially prominent for older Americans, in planning activist events.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how CST's culture creates local conditions for a specific set of political actions and how they are remembered. Certain public actions (the Senior Power Assembly, political endorsements, rallies to resist Trump, and civil disobedience) are more likely to be participated in, and they are collected by elderly progressives as stories that deepen communal bonds. To Fine, sociality is at the core of the group's actions and narratives, functioning in part to achieve political victories, but more so to enliven the group (and by extension, the movement), by establishing something pivotal for all social movements: a social tethering to the past, actively informing and enlivening the present, in a way that moves the group toward a more progressive future. For example, qua seniors, elderly activists embed political memory into group culture by their very existence. They recall and narrate past activism during times similar to the Trump Era, whether actively fighting in the 1960s against racial segregation and the Vietnam War or supporting social movements for women's and LGBTQ+ people's freedom in the 1970s and 1980s. In a slightly different temporal mode, political actions are most successful when they become stories of the most eventful experience. Fine suggests that the snow in Racine was relatively tame, that instances of civil disobedience in Springfield were mildly effective. Nonetheless, a heated blizzard of remembrances of canes lifted out of feet of snow and shaken

at sociopathic congressmen, of arrests and camaraderie in occupied governmental buildings, empowers and encourages old folk to keep up the good fight.

What Fine calls "eventful experience" (p. 23) or "politics of memory" (p. 87) is some of the best mesosocoiology in the book. It significantly contributes to and extends cultural approaches to social movements. Fine demonstrates how talk and action must be pleasurable and embedded in interaction to become narratives, which must be collected before they become collective. The idea of eventful experience highlights the interrelated processes of temporality and embodiment, viscerally seen in his elderly subjects, of both discourse and experience.

As happens in all social clubs, paradoxically and especially in those claiming progressive values, the next few chapters find CST in a tension between conflict and conformity. There is some to like in how Fine covers the inter- and intra-organizational politics of CST, but I had questions about Fine's approach to elderly activists wrestling with contemporary identity politics. An ethnography centrally about activists and their progressive values raises similar questions about our values as ethnographers and how they shape our doing of ethnography. Fine inconsistently addresses this problem, which manifests in uneven analyses of whether and how CST addresses different kinds of diversity. The issue resides in the overlapping theoretical and methodological terrain between identity politics and conformity to the culture of a group, whether it be a group of activists or sociologists attempting to study them. Let me try to explain, because this problem is at the core of both current progressivism and current sociology.

When he was Erving Goffman's undergraduate student, Fine mentioned that he might take fieldnotes at his own wedding. Goffman retorted, "Only a schmuck studies his own life" (Fine 2009). The story could serve as a joke about when to ignore advice, because, at long last, Fine shows that he can poignantly study himself. "Although I was not a red diaper baby," he tells us, "[M]y nappies were light pink (p. 7)." But he too quickly retreats to the position of friendly onlooker of progressive politics. Later, Fine promotes a value-neutral approach, following Georg Simmel to reveal different kinds of content of a similar form (in Fine's case, activists' group culture). There are, of course, groups of ethnographers that would suggest otherwise. I would have liked some engagement with them, some of Fine's excellent writing brought to bear more directly on debates about the relationship between our identities and values as sociologists and how to observe politics. I do not know that ethnographers, each with a self that is structured by particular sets of identity codes, could participate in any social movement group's culture, no matter its political alignment. Take the Proud Boys as an example. Given Fine's analysis of joking's importance to group culture, I wondered what would it take for a Proud Boy to trust a sociologist enough to joke about feminists and "weak" men? What would be our ethical obligations should we hear such jokes? Perhaps an unfair preference, I wanted Fine to stay in a space that he admitted was uncomfortable, to further unpack the historicity of his progressive socialization and to let Goffman roll away in his grave.

This is not to dwell too much on the personal. Ethnographically studying the inevitable conflicts that arise in activist clubs might require concerted effort to couch, not bracket, our standpoints and identities in the analyses that follow, in order to capture the totality of an observed phenomenon like progressive conflict. I especially would have liked this clarity when reading with great interest the chapter entitled "Diversities." I found the argument of the chapter mostly convincing, that too much conflict jeopardizes group conformity, depresses motivation, and risks dissolution of the group. In contemporary groups of activists, however, identity politics abound. Fine analyzes the varying ways this matters, for what it means to be progressive and elderly, and how it implies potential for group conflict in some cases but not others. The chapter indirectly addresses a paramount problem for current American politics, not just for contemporary social movements but for contemporary sociological projects to understand them.

In Fine's telling, the dimensions in which identity politics are mostly absent in CST accentuate which identity politics threaten its solidarity. The group is middle-class and predominated by women. Its members are disinclined to pursue class diversity, comfortable with their high cultural capital and the stable interaction order it provides, and men are mostly fine being a gender minority. Members are less okay about being (mostly) White. Self-conscious about how to be an anti-racist group, CST allows some racial conflict in its group culture, and Fine illuminates the difficult questions this raises for the group. Should they remain colorblind, as they learned to be in the 1960s, or should they examine how being colorblind might enable systemic racism? Should they admit that the organization is White and seek to ally with progressive groups of color, or should they transform the structure and culture of the group so it can possibly become multiracial? But while CST's members explore the group's conflicted racial identity, questions about its sexual identity prove to be a bridge too far. As Fine describes it, they outright rebel against acts of announcing preferred pronouns at their meetings.

I do not doubt the veracity of Fine's observations. I do think his sympathy with the conformists rumples the conflict analyses that follow. While there is some conceptualizing of the group's culture as White-dominant and heteronormative, it's unlinked to how and why that seems to lead to attrition for non-white and non-straight members (and what this means for bridge building in the group). This fuller account is missing from the final analysis of how CST struggles to build a multiracial coalition and why it wages "pronoun wars" (p. 174). I would have liked some time spent with Denise, a queer person whose preferred pronouns were the impetus for a sequence of events leading to group instability, and Sheila, a Black woman whose efforts to help CST become antiracist impressed Fine, after both left the group, and more ink spent on their respective allies that Fine seems to make quieter than the conformists. More time with the outsiders might have provided more totality to understanding the tension between group conformity and CST's identity conflicts, particularly within and about contemporary definitions of progressivism.

This critique should in no way lampoon the broader arguments and accomplishments of the book. In fact, it's a credit to Fine, "an ethnographer who, as a senior citizen, belongs to the generation [he] describes and functions as an amiable spectator of the politics [he] encountered (p. 7)," that he centralizes and navigates the problem of identity politics in senior activism. Fine points us toward some intellectual horizons for thinking about how ethnographers can understand when, why, and how White progressive groups more or less balance conformity and conflict. After all, it's clear that CST does not oppose people of color nor LGBTQ+ folk. In the end, Fine gives us a well written and excellent set of arguments about the role of group culture and sociality in sustaining activists, seen in how elderly progressives vulnerably and joyfully antagonize a society that lets the rich keep an unfair share.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

J. L. Johnson is an Instructor of Sociology at the University of Maryland. His publications have contributed to an emerging line of research focused on individuals occupying privileged social locations who identify as allies for marginalized groups, documenting the interactional mechanisms of their listening to social movements and the social construction of their moral identities.