

# **Passionate Politics**

Emotions and Social Movements

*Edited by*

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and Francesca Polletta

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To all those who have pursued social justice with passion

this trend, reincorporating emotions such as anger and indignation, fear and disgust, joy and love, into research on politics and protest. Emotions, properly understood, may prove once again to be a central concern of political analysis.

Max Weber, more than anyone, set social scientists down the road of associating emotions with irrationality. Unlike “logical” action, he claimed, we understand emotion-laden action through empathy, or at least some of us do: “The more we ourselves are susceptible to such emotional reactions as anxiety, anger, ambition, envy, jealousy, love, enthusiasm, pride, vengefulness, loyalty, devotion, and appetites of all sorts, and to the ‘irrational’ conduct which grows out of them, the more readily we can empathize with them. . . . For the purposes of a typological scientific analysis it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behavior as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action” (1978 [1922]: 6). This places emotional action in a similar category as “traditional” action, in a gray zone “between meaningful and merely reactive behavior.” Of course, Weber recognized the possibility of “mixed” types of action, but he generally assumed that rational action could not be emotional, and vice versa. Social scientists have been traveling down this road ever since.

Until the 1960s emotions were considered a key—for some, the key—to understanding virtually all political action that occurred outside familiar political institutions. In nineteenth-century images of the mob, normal individuals were thought to be transformed mysteriously in the presence of a crowd, prone to anger and violence, and easily manipulated by demagogues. Well into the twentieth century, crowds and their dynamics were conceived as the heart of protest movements. Crowds were assumed to create, through suggestion and contagion, a kind of psychologically “primitive” group mind and group feelings, shared by all participants and outside their normal range of sensibilities. In Herbert Blumer’s (1939) formulation, crowds short-circuited symbolic communication, with participants responding directly to each other’s physical actions. As a result, they could easily be driven by anxiety and fear, especially when spurred by rumors. They were also, he believed, irritable and prone to excitement. Other scholars argued that frustration led inevitably or frequently to aggression, especially when reinforced by crowd dynamics (Miller and Dollard 1941).

Scholars also looked for peculiar individuals who might be susceptible to recruitment, even brainwashing. Most saw something like alienation (Kornhauser 1959) or a predisposition toward violence (Allport 1924). Freudian psychology was often appropriated to show that partici-

pants were immature: narcissistic, latently homosexual, oral dependent, or anal retentive. Harold Lasswell (1930, 1948) saw a political “type” for whom politics was an effort to fulfill needs not met in private life. Eric Hoffer (1951) likewise saw a desperate fanatic who needed to believe in *something*, no matter what. Because driven by inner needs, especially the lack of a secure identity, Hoffer’s true believer could never be satisfied. He hoped to lose himself in a collective identity. Participation itself was his sole motivation; the goals of protest hardly mattered. Fears of fascism and communism only exacerbated these dismissive tendencies in the 1950s.

Even the social movements of the 1960s did not always arouse sympathy, as they could be dismissed as the work of confused youngsters. Like many on the “other” side of the generation gap that appeared in the 1960s, Neil Smelser (1968) analyzed student protest as largely an Oedipal rebellion. Orrin Klapp (1969: 11–13) described the signs of “identity trouble” that led people to seek fulfillment in collective action: a feeling of being blemished, self-hatred, oversensitivity, excessive self-concern (including narcissism), alienation, a feeling that “nobody appreciates me,” a desire to be someone else, a feeling of fraudulent self-presentation, Riesman’s “other-directedness,” and an identity crisis. In academic traditions like these, protest was either a mistake, a form of acting out, or a sign of immaturity.

Among protestors themselves, there were other traditions—largely alien to the academy—picturing participants in a more positive light. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and their successors portrayed revolutionaries as rationally pursuing their material interests. For Marxists, the interesting questions had more to do with how to succeed than with explaining why people would rebel, which to them was obvious—at least until Gramsci and his generation were forced to explain the Western proletariat’s lack of revolutionary consciousness. If, in the academic portrait, there was nothing but a swirl of passions, in the revolutionary vision there were hardly passions at all. As the twentieth century progressed, however, community organizers such as Saul Alinsky were able to portray their followers as both rational and emotional; emotions were a useful strategic factor (which organizers could manipulate without necessarily having any themselves). For proponents of nonviolent direct action, who became influential in the radical pacifist movement in the 1940s and the civil rights movement in the 1950s, emotion management was crucial. If anger and indignation often spurred participation, a movement animated primarily by such sentiments was doomed to failure. Winning over opponents, or at least undermining public support for them, depended