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13 December 2017

AS.070.132 Invitation to Anthropology

In contemporary liberal politics, there is a desire to get people to start caring about others. It is believed that a lack of care is where our political woes stem from; if we could just get others to be less selfish, more accepting, more generous, then our nation would be able to come together and solve some of the larger problems that plague us. As Catherine Fennell demonstrates in her book *Last Project Standing: Civics and Sympathy in Post-Welfare Chicago*, care and sympathy are important but cannot serve as substitutes for proper politics.

Some might consider it sympathy when someone is “imagining how he himself might feel were he to be placed in the exact same situation” (Fennell 2015, 21) as someone else. However, Fennell argues, since this person is only *imagining* this situation and is not *in* the situation, this would be more adequately described as empathy. Per Fennell, sympathy is beyond just feeling *for* someone; it is feeling *with* them. Sympathy means that you can reason with someone’s state, but you can also get down to the level of their state, drawing from a set of shared conditions and experiences. When experiencing sympathy, you and the other person are resonating on the same wavelength; you just *get* each other. Fennell cites psychologist Théodule Ribot who believes that sympathy is “the existence of identical conditions in two or more individuals of the same, or different, species” (Fennell 2015, 7). Ribot believes that sympathy is a connective fluid; once you experience it, it enters your body and “forges expansive bonds and moral obligations” (Fennell 2015, 217). The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) believed that, by forging sympathetic bonds between people, they could address and mitigate many of the problems which public housing residents faced.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the US government came to understand its role in society through the rationality of biopolitics; it began to see its role as ensuring the security of people’s *zoe*, “protect[ing] citizens against common problems, like old age and its infirmities, and extraordinary ones, like the Great Depression and the mass unemployment it unleashed” (Fennell 2015, 14). With this came the expansion of welfare and the beginning of public housing with two major housing acts, the National Housing Act of 1934 and The Housing Act of 1937. Backlash against welfare rose later in the 1970’s and 80’s, culminating in the “end [of] welfare as we have come to know it” (Fennell 2015, 15) by 1996. The government now began to transition away from the rationality of biopolitics.

To substitute this fleeting state care, the CHA sought to reinvigorate social belonging through sympathy. The replacement for the Henry Horner housing complex, Westhaven, was built on the New Urbanist idea that a mixed-income assemblage would facilitate sympathetic encounters; “the more physically and socially integrated citizens were within their neighborhoods…the more likely they would be to identify with these entities and commit to their needs” (Fennell 2015, 146). Westhaven failed to facilitate sympathetic encounters between transitioning Horner residents and “newcomers”, their middle-class neighbors, partially because of the established habitus of transitioning Horner residents. Their history of living through Horner had been deposited in their body, becoming second nature to them. For example, transitioning Horner residents were familiar with “stoop culture”, characterized by a tight-knit community without barriers. In Westhaven, stoops had been eliminated because the CHA thought that “In a middle-class neighborhood it’s not considered appropriate…to have your business out in front of everybody. It’s not a middle-class lifestyle” (Fennell 2015, 151). The elimination of stoops did not destroy the previous assemblage, but it changed how people interacted within it profoundly. Former Horner residents felt uncertain and vulnerable in this changed assemblage. This meant that “Rather than being pleasing…cross-class encounters [felt] only ‘burdensome and painful’” (Fennell 2015, 145). In this changed assemblage, interactions between transitioning Horner residents and newcomers were often jarring instead of sympathetic. For example, Mr. Green, someone who had spent years of his life in public housing, one day found himself napping on a mat in the exercise room of the Westhaven Park Tower after an exercise routine. He woke up to see a young white woman using an elliptical just a few feet away from him. This incident was disturbing because “had Mr. Green actually been hurt and passed out on the mat, his neighbor would probably have left him there” (Fennell 2015, 155-56). Another transitioning Horner resident, Jeanie, commented on how her neighbors “don’t want to be bothered. They want to walk on the sidewalk and not have to say ‘excuse me’ to people standing out…but they *do* like playing with dogs…that’s when they come out of the shell” (Fennell 2015, 163). In an assemblage built to foster sympathy between two groups of people, it seems as if divides and conflicts have instead been created. Westhaven is proof to New Urbanists that feeling together is not a sufficient solution to society’s problems; further, city planners should realize that it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible to engineer and control the interactions within large communities.

Legal activists who fought for the rights of public housing residents also tried to employ sympathy, in their case to draw attention to the terrible conditions that these residents faced. These activists worked to create a sympathetic encounter between judges and residents who lived through the decay of public housing by using photographs, testimonials, and other forms of visceral evidence. Using decay in such a manner is defined by Fennell as a “decay narrative.” As Fennell describes, these narratives “affect us viscerally. They impinge on bodies and sensibilities in ways that help us understand our own feelings…Such understandings can even open up novel courses of…action” (Fennell 2015, 82). These narratives were crucial in legal challenges against the CHA and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), where legal activists argued that even as these housing units stood as structures, their abysmal conditions meant that they could not stand as homes. Federal courts and Congress, through a series of decisions, amendments, and laws, eventually put in place serious protections for the nation’s public housing, demanding that housing authorities replace every demolished unit with another inhabitable unit (the one-to-one replacement rule). Fennell summarizes how “decaying things had finally exerted enough ‘transformative pressure’ on the systems of meaning that governed the enforceable rights of public housing residents” (Fennell 2015, 88). These protections enabled Horner residents to approach the CHA about Horner’s state of decay. The Henry Horner Mother’s Guild, with the help of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago, brought charges against the CHA and HUD, again supporting their case with visceral evidence. One example of this evidence was Donald Kimball’s report, which uses photos and writing to document how terrible the conditions were in Horner. The report details how “this writer had the opportunity to put his hand on the handrail, which then came off the wall and fell to the floor…the handrail could be set in place, albeit temporarily” (Fennell 2015, 90). Through hearing this account, a judge could place themselves in this situation of unsteadiness and could infer that anybody placed in this environment of decay would be threatened by its instability. The evidence brought to the judges in these cases “could *go* ‘into [their] ears, [their] eyes’ and just stay there. Even at a remove, Horner’s decaying things could sympathetically augment a bystander’s perceptual repertories and with them, his moral imagination” (Fennell 2015, 92). The sympathy that this evidence elicited proved to be effective, as it helped to establish a consent decree which has protected Horner residents during redevelopment. The success of legal activists in Chicago, however, made HUD nervous and pushed them to lobby Congress to remove the one-to-one replacement rule from law. Sympathy worked to protect public housing residents on a small scale in Chicago, but ultimately failed nationwide.

Sympathy is a powerful force, but one that is difficult to actualize. The CHA tried and failed to use sympathy to reinvigorate social belonging in Chicago, while legal activists were successful in using sympathy to push Chicago housing reforms through courts, but ultimately failed to use it to protect the rights of public housing residents nationwide. These results point to the conclusion that morality, ethics, and sympathy are all inadequate replacements for good politics. They produce a nice show and get people to feel good about what they are doing, but they by themselves cannot solve the large problems that society is facing.

Works Cited

Fennell, Catherine. *Last Project Standing: Civics and Sympathy in Post-Welfare Chicago*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.