

IN THIS PUBLICATION, Gary Alan Fine (hereafter GAF) synthesizes a lifework of theory-driven ethnographies. These are studies like no one else's. One way to say it is that GAF is an ethnographer of the overlooked middle class. These are not our usual adventurous or polemical research topics of gangs and the under-classes, careers in deviance or exposés of hidden injuries. GAF's subjects are not troubled, but content with the idiosyncrasies of debating teams and chess clubs, mushroom gathering or weather forecasting. Much of this might be called the sociology of nerds, kids who immerse themselves in fantasy games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, adults who spend their time teaching themselves to paint and form associations trying to market their erstwhile folk art. Unlike most sociologists, GAF seems uninterested in class and power. True, one of his finest books, *Kitchens: the Culture of Restaurant Work* (1996), might be described as being about a working class occupation, but the interest is that of the upper-middle class foodie, investigating what goes on behind the scenes in the restaurants avidly sought out and discussed in their favorite leisure cult. (Yes, GAF is an excellent methodologist and he compared his hip upscale restaurants with some mundane and corporate ones, but he is not about to relate restaurant cooks to coal miners.)

Despite this middle-class subject matter, he has no interest in the middle class per se. This is not Bourdieu-esque cultural capital or struggle for distinction; nor a neo-Marxian critique of consumer culture. What GAF describes are not people under cultural oppression or in resistance, but happily creating local cultures. Outsiders may not understand what they are doing; if mainstream money-makers, party animals, and power-seekers notice them at all it is probably to label them as nerds and losers. But GAF's world is not Bourdieu's; its main characteristic is freedom to do your own thing by doing it collectively, and thus to create a group-butressed culture that absorbs our selves and screens out everyone else. At least for sufficiently affluent and leisured Americans of the last half century, only our self-chosen, pleasant pastimes count; we have successfully dissolved class and power and these no longer exist for us. Pot-smoking hippies used to say it is all in your mind, but that did not last because they had to live on something

* About Gary Alan FINE, *Tiny Publics. A Theory of Group Action and Culture* (New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2012).

and their parents' money eventually ran out. GAF describes a more stable version of living in realms of chosen fantasies, where our leisure activities are not full-time, but they are the central meaning-sustaining rituals of our lives.

Turning away from social class may be GAF's subtext; his most important explicit concepts are *idiocultures* and *wispy publics*. In his study of Little League baseball teams, GAF showed that structurally identical groups have their local customs and recirculated lore; one team prohibits eating ice cream on the bench during a game; some swear and make racial jokes; others confine themselves to wholesome nicknames. The concept of *idiocultures* envisions society as full of local particularities, little centers of conformity with their own tiny, encapsulated struggles. This implies theoretically rejecting mass culture, at least in its omnipresent form; indeed culture cannot be the dominant force shaping society, since local groups recreate their own histories. But now GAF wants to claim something grander; hence the concept of *wispy publics* – groups that are bigger than small associations of amateur painters or mushroom-gatherers, yet meet only occasionally, and have only a weak sense of who belongs to them. “Fans” are the archetype of this – those who gather for a few days each year at the Burning Man Festival, for a gem and mineralogy show, or for Grateful Dead revivals. One might define fans as enthusiasts who do silly things when they gather around their idols, and have a socially-available license to gush and lose all perspective. However, they do so within bounds; this remains a leisure activity, a periodic break from the mundane social and economic world. But GAF has a higher theoretical aim: wispy publics, he declares, are the intermediate structures between small personal groups and society at large, that hold the whole thing together. Tocqueville extolled America for having, and castigated France for lacking, voluntary associations; GAF now argues that it is not so much formal organizations that do the job, but wispy publics. Putnam may be right that formal memberships are on the decline, but it is precisely the culture of fans of various sorts that weave America together.

I am not convinced. What would it mean empirically for a society to be held together, or to fall apart? Montesquieu, Tocqueville's predecessor, said that intermediate groups were the bulwark of freedom against the despotic state. For those theorists, it was not a question of society falling apart but rather existing in an authoritarian form. The United States, designed along division-of-power principles right out of Montesquieu, is in little danger of that at the moment. Wispy publics, especially fans, are essentially an invention of the 20th century, becoming

in its later half a major source of personal identities. What dependent variable has changed as the result of this growth? What would be the empirical indicators of one society falling apart more than another? Civil wars and secession movements? Riots in the streets? Mutual hostility, like a New York subway on steroids? Or just bland opinion polls about patriotism and respect for shared institutions? GAF may not be totally off the mark, with the theory that wispy publics of fans have changed the larger structure of society, but it is doubtful that the difference they make is a culture of citizenship. The key point may be that American fans are so apolitical that they act as a damper on militant minorities at the edges of the spectrum; the majority of Americans could not overthrow the government or riot about anything serious because they are too concerned with getting their next heroin-fix of sports events or pop music. Whatever the theory is about, it cannot be straight Tocqueville. And it needs to be sharpened and tested, both over time and between different nation-states.

Finally, a riposte to GAF's criticism of my theory of interaction ritual (IR) chains. GAF declares he is reversing the micro-foundations of macro-sociology, since any micro-situation is embedded in macro-structures that constrain what can be done; restaurant workers undergo time pressures between boring slack times and grinding speed-ups as customers ebb and flow, and cooks get laid off or rehired as chefs fit their schedules to economic and demographic shifts. More generally, individuals can never do just what they want, since they always act in a context of local idiocultures and larger legal constraints. But the polemic is off the mark. IR theory does not rest on individuals but on situations, and these are full of constraints, the pushes and pulls of mutual attention and entrainment in shared emotions. Constraint is micro as well as macro, and what individuals experience as confidence and pro-activeness – AKA “will power” – is a variable quantity of emotional energy from successful IRs. One of the memorable passages in GAF's *Kitchens* is when cooks are all caught up in the rhythm of just the right amount of pressure, orders coming in on top of each other, all the cooks swinging into their tasks and delivering the dishes just in time; this is the Durkheimian collective effervescence of the kitchen, and by GAF's account the main thing that attracts a dedicated cook to the job. This is how local idiocultures are created – out of moments of particularly intense focus and shared emotion, that become remembered as symbols of the group and its distinctive identity, and hence of individual selves.

The point of the micro-foundations of macro-sociology is not that macro-structures do not exist, but that they exist as chains of

micro-situations. Aside from a few pages of polemic, I think GAF agrees with me; his argument for idiocultures implies that whatever is macro must go through the filter of the local group, *i.e.* its chain of experienced situations. My argument is that micro-situations, structured locally as IRs of varying degrees of intensity, are the glue that “hold things together” (*i.e.* make them repeat in the same form) and sometimes energize people to turn to something else. Wispy publics in the form of gatherings of fans are a type of IR that attracts large numbers of people, without much formal bureaucratic structure, providing them with huge emotional arousal; and this re-energizes the sacred objects of the fan-group and makes them look forward to reassembling, if only next year. The 20th century invented new kinds of mass IRs; consumerist theory, which sees only top-down macro imposition, misses out on how local gatherings can create new kinds of IRs that are more successful than what existed before. The “liberated zones” of 1960s counterculture discovered the techniques: bring together a big enough crowd so that police and conventional authorities are unable to penetrate it, then use that crowd as a shield for ostentatiously breaking taboos (about drugs and public sex, originally), thus generating a symbolic claim that we stand outside of mainstream structure. Many of GAF’s wispy publics are attempts to recreate this distinctively antinomian collective effervescence, although their symbolic focus has become monopolized by celebrity musicians, turning the self-celebration of the liberated crowd into fan-identities.

This is a microcosm of how history moves: the Protestant Reformation, the fall of the USSR, the alienating aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and other structure-breaking events were generated at the level of focused crowds, which de-legitimated older centers of social order, and put new sacred objects in their place. Polemic aside, GAF sees that local interaction is a crucial site for what reproduces larger patterns and what changes them. His theory of wispy publics is incomplete, but GAF has highlighted an important point about what hyper-modern societies have created that propagates chains of local enthusiasm outwards to the macro-structure.

R A N D A L L C O L L I N S