

1999

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

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Recommended Citation

Joshua Gamson , "Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life by Nina Eliasoph," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1999). DOI: 10.1086/210337

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larly regarding the applicability of Herbst's state-level findings to the often poll-obsessed national political scene. But in raising complex questions about working definitions of public opinion and their relationship to a mass-mediated political world, Herbst has helped to map a research agenda and paved the way for further inquiry.

Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life. By Nina Eliasoph. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. x+330. \$64.95 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

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I read this smart, energetic, slightly odd book about political apathy at the tail end of the Bill and Monica saga, when even the observation that citizens were uninterested in the impeachment trial elicited widespread disinterest. Read against Nina Eliasoph's concern for the sparseness and thinness of what she calls "public-spirited political conversation" (p. 14), what was striking about the recent scandal was how much people were talking about politics for once, even if it was just to say they wished people would shut up about them already. All the bored chat about public life underlines the important phenomenon Eliasoph tackles: how and why people "keep politics at arm's length in so many situations" (p. 10) and how and why, as she puts in it her central metaphor, American political discussion tends to evaporate so quickly and easily.

Many people have pointed out the impoverishment of American political discourse, but what distinguishes *Avoiding Politics* is not just that Eliasoph refuses simple explanations (television has made people dumb, for instance, or major institutions inhibit political engagement), or her facility with public-sphere theories, but that she actually went out and talked and listened. The book is the result of two-and-a-half years of ethnographic research with a range of civic groups in a "post-suburban" region: voluntary associations such as antidrug groups, a recycling center, and a high school parents' group; recreational groups such as a country-western dance club and a fraternal organization she calls "Buffalo Club"; and activist groups such as an antitoxics group and a peace vigil. While it exhibits some of the minuses of a converted dissertation—a tendency to pack in too much and to include tangential, so-and-so-might-argue discussions of too many other scholars—the book makes an innovative contribution to the important, ongoing discussion of American public discourse.

What Eliasoph found, most significantly, going to meetings, dance sessions, lodges, and in both her interviews and day-to-day conversations, was the puzzling, ironic disappearance of publicly minded talk, especially in more public contexts. It is not that people had no communal concerns but that they tended to speak about politics "backstage, in hushed tones"

(p. 16) and that “citizens’ circles of concern shrank as they spoke in public contexts” (p. 6); at “each step in the broadening of the audience, the ideas shrank,” she observed, such that “what was announced aloud was less open to debate, less aimed at expressing connection to the wider world, less public-spirited, more insistently selfish, than what was whispered” (p. 7). The core argument of the book is that the kinds of political disconnections and silences so often bemoaned by critics are actually rooted in the contexts available for political *conversation*. The “informal etiquette” in her field settings, for one thing, “made some political intuitions speakable, and others beyond the pale of reasonable, polite discussion” (p. 7). Indeed, ideas about what counts as “political” change from one context to the next, and in the American public sphere, this leads to a paradox: what marks a context as “public” is “often precisely the fact that the talk there is so narrow, not at all public-minded” (p. 230).

The rest of the book is a heavily detailed, closely observed account of the way talk does and does not work in Eliasoph’s various settings, along with a chapter on the role of local newspapers in the “cycle of political evaporation”—which picks up, not incidentally, on an explicit, critical, and insufficiently considered link between local conversational contexts and the larger structures in which they are embedded, be they media structures, gender structures, or governmental ones. The level of detail, which is the book’s strength, is also at times its deficit: unsurprisingly for a book that seeks to focus attention on talk, *Avoiding Politics* is quite talky, and not always in ways that further clarify; while it is wonderful to hear the many voices of her subjects joining the author’s, sometimes the conversations recounted simply contribute banality rather than revelation.

Nonetheless, using solid qualitative research coupled with sharp, quirky insights, the book poses terrific challenges to those interested in the workings of political discourse, political belief, and the public sphere. *Avoiding Politics* makes a strong case for the everyday effort that goes into constituting and marking off a “public sphere,” the ways that enterprise varies from place to place, each with its own set of talking norms, so many of which uninvite, or slowly vaporize, politically minded conversation. “Apathy takes work to produce” (p. 6), Eliasoph argues, and her book is a big, innovative help in the ongoing attempt to think and rethink strategies for producing something else, for creating spaces in which “public” talk is neither trivial nor inhibited.