Book Review/ Compte rendu

Sara Cobb. 2013. *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict Resolution*. New York: Oxford, 297 pp. $82.95 Hardcover (978-0-19-982620-9)

As I was finishing Sara Cobb's book, CBC News (Paris 2014) reported a statement by Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird, commenting on increasing violence between Israel and the Palestinians. '"The buck stops with Hamas,' Baird told reporters in Ottawa. 'Hamas started this bloodshed. Hamas can end it.'" That way of framing the issue--Baird's narrative of the conflict's origins and its possible solution--exemplifies what I believe Cobb understands as a "bad story". Developing ideas from Hannah Arendt, Cobb writes: "there are narratives that, in and of themselves, shut down alternatives to themselves ... they tell a narrative of wrongdoing and provide an account of violation, but this narrative perpetuates and deepens the kind of discourse that contributes to destroy rather than open public debate and deliberation" (37).

Cobb is Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, located — significantly for the book she has written — in Washington, D.C. She is a practitioner of conflict resolution, but this particular book is less a guide to practice than "an effort to provide a theoretical foundation for narrative practice in conflict resolution that links it to critical theory and thus builds a normative framework on which we can create/describe an ethics for critical narrative practice" (227). In line with that objective, Cobb delays presenting a full case study of conflict resolution until late in the book, around page 200. That is not the editorial decision I would have recommended, but it reflects her intentions for the book. Readers might want to begin with this case study in Chapter 7 and then return to the beginning to unpack the theory that underlies the practice.

Cobb's writing is grounded not only in extensive practice but also broad scholarship. Her eclectic version of critical theory begins with Hannah Arendt but then turns to French authors. Lyotard's idea of *differend*, "the space of suffering that cannot be described in the current idioms available to the Self" (153) figures significantly, as does Foucault's conceptualization of discourse. Sociological theories of conflict appear rarely if at all, but that should be more reason for sociologists to attend to Cobb's writing. Her broadly interdisciplinary approach opens

up new ideas and resources, just as her conflict-resolution practice seeks to do. In particular, her practice-based thinking requires sociologists to consider whether theories of conflict have a responsibility to contribute to the "normative framework" (227, quoted above) that is capable of distinguishing good stories from bad ones. That framework is Cobb's most singular contribution, on my reading; although, a book with as broad concerns as this one will appeal to different readers for multiple reasons.

Cobb gains my immediate appreciation because of her presupposition that "our stories capture us" (184). Conflict resolution begins by recognizing which stories have captured participants, to their detriment as human beings. "From a narrative perspective," she writes, "it is interesting to consider the nature of a 'hard liner'— the term refers to a person-narrative who not only *tells* but existentially *is* a narrative that exhibits a very simple storyline" (81). Conflict resolution practice seeks to free people from storylines that have captured them by replacing simple storylines with complex ones. The opposition between good and bad stories rests on a difference between simple and complex storylines. Cobb rehearses and expands this opposition throughout the book, making distinctions based on both theoretical sources and reference to different practice situations.

The core characteristics of simple storylines include having linear plot lines — characters' effects on each other are not mutual but unidirectional — and one character being demonized as the source of conflict and thus delegitimated as a speaker. Sociologists will hear arguments from Harold Garfinkel's classic article "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies". More recently, Philip Smith (2005) presents demonization of the Other as enemy as a constituent feature of stories that move countries to engage in wars. These simple stories are real in their consequences. Cobb emphasizes that "it is important to note that these narratives are not in the heads of individuals, but are material practices — they are written onto bodies, inscribed onto the dead, onto the imprisoned ... those who take up arms..." (92). Thus she argues, convincingly and significantly, "violence is narrative in nature" (198).

Cobb's core proposition, repeated in variant forms throughout the book, is that conflict escalation is the inverse of narrative complexity; for example, "conflict escalation can be understood as itself a process of narrative simplification ... in fact, we can define 'winning' itself as maintaining the closure of one's narrative.... They maintain their closure through their simplicity, their refutation or refusal of any recontextualization, and their threats regarding noncompliance" (86). And later in the book: "Conflict intensifies certainty and reduces complexity, two

trends that combine explosively to generate and perpetuate violence" (197).

Complex narratives begin with witnessing participants' specific histories of injury. People come to conflict resolution, she writes, "to tell their story, to be heard, to relate their suffering and address the injustice" (177). Witnessing renders each character more complex to the other characters; it displays action to be mutual in its effects. Circularity replaces linearity. Participants develop "a complex and multilayered sensibility, knowing that things are not as they seem" (197). What Cobb calls "thickening" of narratives has several dimensions, but in particular: "People must be able to disclose, not just describe, but disclose, the norms they are using to guide their actions ... 'disclose' refers to unveiling something that was hidden" (220). Disclosure operates with and through destabilization, another key process of Cobb. Simple narratives present situations as stable in their cause/effect relations. In complex narratives, as quoted above, "things are not as they seem". On Cobb's account, people who operate based on destabilized narratives are less prone to violence; they are capable of listening.

Cobb offers several lists of criteria for "better" stories. The core features are that in these stories, "the Self ... is ironic ... twinned to its shadow" (223). This ironic self understands its fate as "forever interdependently connected to Others" (ibid.), who thus cannot be demonized. Most important on my reading, " the moral frameworks emerged through the creation of the better-formed story ensure that the value system is more diverse — good and evil can be clearly identified, but those judgments are complicated by the multiple ways in which people/things can be good or bad" (ibid.).

At the end of a process of conflict resolution, "both parties are positioned as legitimate, both have elaborated the Other as legitimate, and there is an increase in contextualizing stories.... The moral frameworks have multiplied, so the value system as a whole is more complex" (254). By the end of the book, Cobb has provided valuable specifics about how the practice of conflict resolution enhances the complexity of participants' value systems. She has presented a normative framework for good and bad stories that must be contestable — otherwise, her presentation would contradict her objective of narrative complexity — but this framework is sufficiently specific to provide a basis for future dialogical refinement, and that is all an academic can be asked to accomplish.

Cobb's richly annotated, nuanced, and detailed study deserves the widest readership among those concerned with conflict, how persons are marginalized and delegitimated, the dynamics of reconciliation,

and how narratives not only affect but even constitute persons. One can hope that some version of these arguments might reach politicians like Mr. Baird. Their inattention to Cobb's argument is more than a lapse; it's a tragedy.

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References

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