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Review of Amenta and Caren, Rough Draft of History

Karen Miller Russell

University of Georgia, karenm@uga.edu

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Edwin Amenta and Neal Caren. *Rough Draft of History: A Century of US Social Movements in the News*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 360 pp. \$99.95 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-0-691-23278-2; \$32 (paperback) ISBN-13: 978-0-691-23277-5.

Reviewed by Karen Miller Russell, University of Georgia (USA)

Is journalism really the rough draft of history? In their review of press coverage of twentieth century U.S. social movements, Edwin Amenta and Neal Caren conclude that it is not – but the reasons are complicated. The authors began by amassing a list of 1,500 social movement organizations and tracking all mentions of them in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*. They then parsed this data in different ways to study various aspects of press coverage, focusing particularly on 30 social movements and 100 organizations that garnered the most attention.

The first chapter reviews coverage of the most newsworthy organizations by time period. At the beginning of the century, that included labor, anti-alcohol, and veterans' groups that carried over from the 1890s. After World War I there was a noticeable shift to more conservative interests, including three groups that remained in the news for the rest of the century: the American Legion, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Another major swing, this time to the left, accompanied the Great Depression. After World War II, veterans' and labor organizations were most notable; in the 1960s Black rights and anti-war groups predominated; and by the end of the century, the Christian right, gun owners, and senior organizations gained traction. Overall, the groups receiving frequent coverage in the highest number of years were the American Legion, the League of Women Voters, and the United Autoworkers. Amenta and Caren conclude that all of the frequently covered groups had high membership (although this changed over time), strong capacities to be disruptive, and an orientation toward political engagement.

The next two chapters look at the quality of news about organizations and about social movements broadly. In chapter two the authors identify four primary ways movements attracted press coverage: taking politically assertive action (such as promoting a new law), labor strikes, civic action (holding meetings, sponsoring events), or becoming the subject of an investigation or trial. They then classify news in four categories based on high or low substance and favorable or unfavorable sentiment, concluding that most news was not good for the movements. In chapter three the authors demonstrate that over the entire century, labor dominated movement coverage in the press, followed by women's rights and veterans' rights. Over time, though, there were waves of coverage shaped by large-scale political changes, particularly in the 1930s and 1960s, and, using

qualitative comparative analysis, the authors argue that changes in media and political institutions shaped what was possible for movement actors, even as movements tried to change those institutions. No single factor but rather a simultaneous confluence of factors at the organization, movement, and political levels explained these waves.

Chapters four and five offer deeper analysis of two specific movements, the Townsend Plan and the Black civil rights movement. Each is worth further attention, and together they demonstrate that scholarship fails to mirror journalism's first draft. The Townsend Plan, which promoted old-age pensions during the Depression, was dismissed by news media during its time and largely forgotten by scholars since, yet was important enough to have been investigated by Congress and, by calling attention to the plight of the elderly poor, to help pave a path toward passage of the Social Security Act. Civil rights is the movement most frequently studied by scholars, but Amenta and Caren's analysis shows that at the time, newspapers were often dismissive and focused especially on controversies and failures. Civil rights organizations with modest goals and tactics, they show, got the most substantive news coverage, while those farther outside the mainstream, such as the Black Panther Party, dominated news coverage with violent demonstrations and legal issues with its leadership, doing little to further its cause. The civil rights case demonstrates again that coverage varied with changing political and media contexts, combined with the forms of action taken by movement organizations themselves.

After a chapter on changes and continuities in the press coverage during the 21st century, which found that long-standing patterns in the coverage remain even though the media environment has significantly changed, the book concludes with a warning that "current imbalances in media and politics not only mainly benefit conservative movements and campaigns, but they also threaten democracy as we have known it" (265). People have often contended that "journalism is the first rough draft of history," but Amenta and Caren conclude that in the case of social movements, it is not. There is a noticeable disconnect between the most covered movements and organizations and those most frequently studied by scholars of sociology, political science and history, as well as between movements that were hardly covered at all during their times but later become important in academic scholarship.

The book has its flaws. Analyzing four "national" newspapers is problematic given that most Americans got their news someplace else, first and foremost local newspapers. The absence of mass circulation magazines and network radio and television is a gap, and the presence of strategic publicity and public relations as a factor in press coverage is

completely overlooked; hopefully, this book will inspire further research in those areas. Additionally, assumptions about media effects may sometimes raise an eyebrow.

Overall, however, *Rough Draft of History* makes a robust contribution to the literature on 20th century social movements and the press. Amenta and Caren correct the historical record by providing a much more comprehensive picture of U.S. social movements of all stripes, and more importantly they identify and explain how and why movements and organizations were covered (or not). Their evidence is ample, its analysis even-handed. Moreover, they go beyond simple case studies to view the rise and fall of media interest in various social movements over time. In so doing, they keep the focus on the needs and interests of ordinary Americans rather than political or professional leaders, including newspaper editors.