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Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements

Francesca Polletta

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Freedom Is an Endless Meeting offers vivid portraits of American experiments in participatory democracy throughout the twentieth century. Drawing on meticulous research and more than one hundred interviews with activists, Francesca Polletta challenges the conventional wisdom that participatory democracy is worthy in purpose but unworkable in practice. Instead, she shows that social movements have often used bottom-up decision making as a powerful tool for political change.

Polletta traces the history of democracy in early labor struggles and pre-World War II pacifism, in the civil rights, new left, and women's liberation movements of the sixties and seventies, and in today's faith-based organizing and anti-corporate globalization campaigns. In the process, she uncovers neglected sources of democratic inspiration—Depression-era labor educators and Mississippi voting registration workers, among them—as well as practical strategies of social protest. But *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting* also highlights the obstacles that arise when activists model their democracies after familiar nonpolitical relationships such as friendship, tutelage, and religious fellowship. Doing so has brought into their deliberations the trust, respect, and caring typical of those relationships. But it has also fostered values that run counter to democracy, such as exclusivity and an aversion to rules, and these have been the fault lines around which participatory democracies have often splintered. Indeed, Polletta attributes the fragility of the form less to its basic inefficiency or inequity than to the gaps between activists' democratic commitments and the cultural models on which they have depended to enact those commitments. The challenge, she concludes, is to forge new kinds of democratic relationships, ones that balance trust with accountability, respect with openness to disagreement, and caring with inclusiveness.

For anyone concerned about the prospects for democracy in America, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting* will offer abundant historical, theoretical, and practical insights.

"This is an excellent study of activist politics in the United States over the past century. . . . Assiduously researched, impressively informed by a great number of thoughtful interviews with key members of American social movements, and deeply engaged with its subject matter, the book is likely to become a key text in the study of grass-roots democracy in America."—Kate Fullbrook, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Polletta's portrayal challenges the common assumption that morality and strategy are incompatible, that those who aim at winning must compromise principle while those who insist on morality are destined to be ineffective. . . . Rather than dwell on trying to explain the decline of 60s movements, Polletta shows how participatory democracy has become the guiding framework for many of today's activists."—Richard Flacks, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"In Freedom Is an Endless Meeting, Francesca Polletta has produced a remarkable work of historical sociology. . . . She provides the fullest theoretical work of historical sociology. . . . She provides the fullest theoretical picture of participatory democracy, rich with nuance, ambiguity, and irony, that this reviewer has yet seen. . . . This wise book should be studied closely by both academics and by social change activists."—Stewart Burns, *Journal of American History*

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