

BOOK REVIEW

For the wild: ritual and commitment in radical eco-activism, by Sarah M. Pike, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2017, 1-308 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780520294967

In a novel application of religious studies to the science of social movements, Sarah M. Pike emphasizes the vital role that emotion and ritual play in the making of protest. *For the Wild* examines the construction of what she terms ‘protest rites’ and accomplishes this with an extensive qualitative case study of radical animal rights and environmental activism.

For some years now, the social movement field has benefited from a wave of emotion research with theorists underscoring the importance of individual and group-level emotion in mobilizing and sustaining social movements. Pike’s contribution to this dialogue is predicated on the *ritual* nature of emotional engagement in collective action. In a deconstruction of movement community-building efforts, affective protests, framing techniques, and the childhood histories of activists, she argues that activism takes on a spiritual quality. This is particularly so given the predominance of young people in radical movements. Radical activism offers a crucial rite of passage according to Pike’s analysis. Imbued as it is with meaning, it shapes the very identity and life course of young activists.

Although it is not a novel argument to suggest that movements are fueled by emotion, the ‘consecration’ of activism is more provocative. To bolster the claim, Pike retraces the histories of both environmentalism and anti-speciesism, arguing that they are rooted in the spiritual practices of indigenous populations, Transcendentalists, and religious revivalists. As a result, she observes: ‘Trees and nonhuman animals, or even the Earth itself in a more abstract sense, are regarded by activists with awe and reverence’ (p. 7). Thus, even though few of Pike’s respondents actually identify as believers, she reinterprets their relationship to activism and nonhuman constituents as distinctly religious.

Pike is correct to describe the animal rights and environmental movements as comprised of activists who take a more reverential attitude toward the natural world and nonhuman animals than is perhaps usual, but the evidence for this being literally religious or based in spiritual ideas is limited and thus needs greater explanation with regard to her thesis. In fact, little research has been conducted on the correlation between religiosity and animal activism (likely due to the movement’s desire to avoid association with the heavily stigmatized atheist demographic), but what research does exist suggests that atheists (and, to a lesser extent, agnostics) constitute the movement’s majority. Spirituality features only sporadically, far eclipsed by the movement’s favored frames of animal suffering, freedom, fairness, and rational discourse. The less radical professionalized animal rights movement does engage religious frameworks (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA] and Compassion in World Farming [CIWF], for instance, sometimes produce leaflets, billboards, and blogs advancing anti-speciesism as a religious matter), but very little of this explicitly religious claim-making emerges in the *radical* flanks which Pike examines. These examples show that the characterization of animal rights activism as religious can be confusing, and it is not clear how far and how literally Pike wishes to push the relevance of religiosity to secular activism.

There is also a problem with over-generalising across the quite different factions of radical animal rights and environmental activists. Vegan ecofeminists, who comprise an adjacent faction which would also be considered quite radical in comparison to mainstream animal rights activism, are often influenced by religiosity and spirituality. However, they are largely overlooked in *For the Wild*, which focuses more on punk rockers and direct-action protesters who may overlap with but are generally distinct from the ecofeminist community. Consider also radical abolitionists. These animal activists experience some of the greatest marginalization in the movement given their demand for total liberation, rejection of violence, and criticism of welfare reform. They are not motivated by religion but rather values of social justice and the charismatic leadership of intellectuals in the early 2000s. These radicals, too, go unexamined by Pike. The overgeneralization of radical animal rights effectively muddies important factional divisions in the movement.

Despite the lack of sampling nuance, *For the Wild's* ultimate relevance lies in its analysis of ritual as a key element in the structuring of protest, sustaining of motivation, and shaping of identity. Indeed, 'ritualistic' is an apt description given the tendency for protests to take on a predictable nature, replicating, and transmitting across groups and even countries. *For the Wild* will likely be of interest to scholars and students of social movements and environmental protest, but also for social change makers such as non-profits, community organizations, and grassroots activists seeking to better understand their own histories and motivations.

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