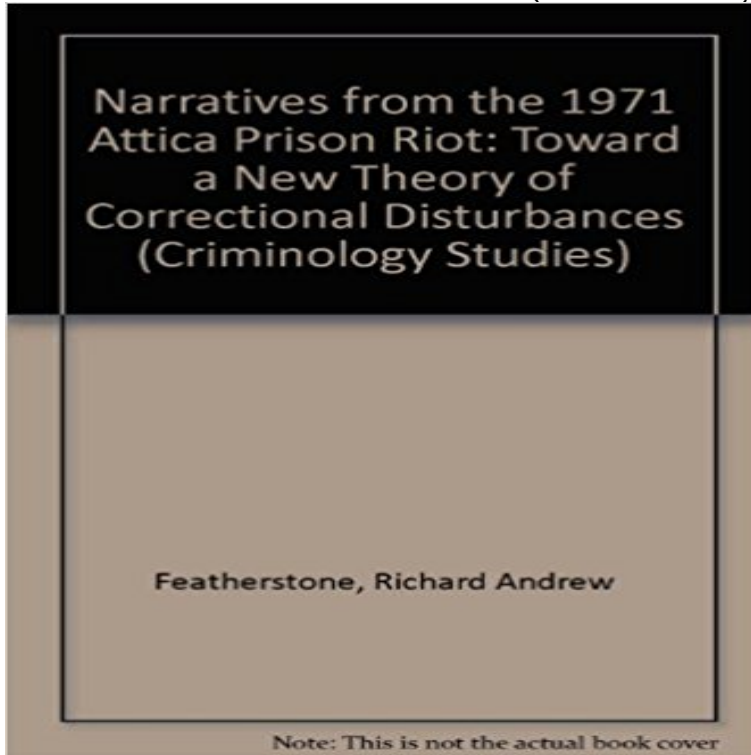


Narratives from the 1971 Attica Prison Riot: Toward a New Theory of Correctional Disturbances (Criminology Studies)



In this work, six major published narratives on the event are examined, each written by a major participant. The author analyzes the discursive aspect of each narrative and excavates four common themes providing the basis of each narrative. He then illustrates how each narrator used these themes to craft unique stories of the event, each shaped by their occupational and social positions. In 1972, the famous French philosopher Michel Foucault visited the prison in Attica, New York, as part of his research on the history of punishment. A year prior, Foucault had formed a research group on the prison system, Groupe d'information sur les prisons, which led to various critical studies and reform proposals of the French prison system. In 1973, Foucault edited a book containing the memoirs of a murderer, and, two years later, he published his famous study on the history of the prison, *Discipline and Punish*, a work that has been extremely influential for the study of the prison and other forms of social control until this day. What struck Foucault the most when he visited Attica was the entrance of the prison building. The entrance appeared to Foucault, as it might to us, to resemble that of a make-believe medieval fortress, the kind one could find in Disneyland. Behind this spectacular entrance was a grand sophisticated machine that was based on principles of efficiency and calculation to know and see each and all. Whereas the exterior architecture of Attica was kitsch, its inside presented a cold, hygienic, and well-organized machine of exclusion and supervision. In the fall of 1971, however, the Attica prison machine had broken down, and its Disneyesque facade would be forever marred. From September 9 to 12, 1971, inmates of the Attica Correctional Facility took control of the prison. Holding some forty guards hostage, the prisoners presented the authorities with a list of demands that sought better living

conditions as well as improved educational and vocational opportunities. After four tense days of negotiations, the uprising ended when several hundred agents of the state stormed the facility and placed it back in the hands of the authorities. Thirty-nine men died in the recapture of the prison. Richard Featherstones study on the Attica prison uprising provides a fascinating examination of what happened during those fateful days in 1971. Based on innovative insights from the sociology of narrative analysis, Featherstone examines five different first-hand accounts of the prison riot, each of which provides a unique insiders view of the pattern and dynamics of the uprising. From these various stories Featherstone identifies four central themes: the use of military metaphors involving war and battle between opposing groups; racial friction between whites and blacks; an underdog theme revolving around the estimated strength and weakness of others and selves; and, finally, a theme of the attribution of responsibility to other people and circumstances. Though the four identified themes are present in all the narratives that are analyzed, Featherstone thoughtfully extends the identification of themes to incorporate a sociological inquiry of the characteristics of the social structure in which the various authors of the narratives are located. As Featherstone aptly argues, the diverse positions of the authors determine the manner in which the themes are articulated in their respective stories. In the very best tradition of a structurally oriented sociological analysis, Featherstone attributes the meaning and articulation of the four identified themes in each analyzed narrative to the social and occupational position of their respective authors. The structural component of Featherstones work also pushes the narrative analysis further to ponder the conditions that led to the uprising itself. Specifically, Featherstone convincingly argues that the differences in social location among inmates and guards contributed to the reciprocally corrosive nature of their

relationships. This dynamic explains how certain general characteristics of the social structure play out in the interactional context of the concrete dynamics that exist among the inhabitants of a prison. What is insightful about this component of Featherstones work is that it not only broadens a narrative analysis of meaning to a structural analysis of the conditions of narrative, but it also situates this narrative component in the social-structural conditions of the disturbing events that gave rise to those narratives in the first place. Featherstones study is not a mere intellectual exercise in the study of words, but a profoundly sociological narrative analysis that is placed in the context of the socio-historical conditions of an important social event. In many ways, the events of Attica are still with us today. Attica has become a metaphor that is now part of our collective consciousness, popping up regularly in movies, music, and other forms of popular culture. Yet a continued need to investigate the conditions of our prisons today is an important part of the legacy of Attica. The prison population in the United States has grown exponentially in the decades since the events in Attica. Time and again, new ways are sought to reform the prison and, as many times, reforms are said to fail. Prison riots are not uncommon.

As total institutions with highly regimented lives, Michel Foucault argued, prisons will always invoke resistance. But the sociologist is in need of a methodical analysis and a theoretically guided inquisition of relevant facts much more than the philosopher. Featherstones study provides exactly that. Thanks to the penetrating work of Featherstone, the events of Attica may affect us today in a way that is both meaningful and revealing.

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