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978-0-521-65479-1 - Theorizing the Standoff: Contingency in Action

Robin Wagner-Pacifci

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This book combines original theoretical analysis with real life case studies to examine the nature of the standoff. Starting with the standoffs of Wounded Knee, MOVE, Ruby Ridge, Waco, the Freemen of Montana, Tupac Amaru, and the Republic of Texas, the author explores the archetypal patterns of human action and cognition that move us into and out of these highly charged situations and seeks to theorize the contingency of all such moments. As an emergency situation where interaction is both frozen and continuing, the standoff evokes original ideas about time, space, and appropriate or anticipated action, and individuals and organizations often find their standard operating procedures and categories deflected and transformed. By tracking and analyzing such impositions and deflections, this book aims to develop a theory of the fundamental existential indeterminacy of social life and the possible role that improvisation can play in navigating this indeterminacy and preventing a violent and destructive conclusion.

ROBIN WAGNER-PACIFICI is a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. She has taught and researched in the USA and Italy and her previous publications include *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama* (1986) and *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia vs MOVE* (1994).

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to Adriano, Laura and Stefano
with all my heart

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[More information](#)

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>page xi</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | <i>xiii</i> |
| 1 Theorizing contingency | 1 |
| 2 The times of standoffs | 60 |
| 3 The spaces of the standoff | 96 |
| 4 The action of standoffs | 137 |
| 5 Endings and improvisations | 214 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 238 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 258 |
| <i>Index</i> | 268 |

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Preface

This book has had a double aim from the outset: to theorize contingency in social life and to analyze and extract the essence of real-life standoffs. By proposing the standoff as a privileged archetypal situation, the project has read contingency through the standoff and the standoff through its own contingency. Of course I am concerned with moments of danger and imminent violence for the damage they can do to lives and social systems. But I am also, and equally, concerned with ferreting out the “standoffish” aspects of everyday interactions and charting the various thresholds we all work hard to elude, thresholds that will take a conversation into the realm of the confrontation.

One of the striking aspects of researching responses to real-life standoffs is the discovery of the habitual connections made between situations and standardized categories. The book attempts to locate and theoretically press the idea of standard operating procedures as agents of the law and adversaries alike summon up their warrants, ultimatums, deadlines, electrical generators, fire engines, and so forth when an “emergency” has been declared. One category of standard agent, the “Hostage Rescue Team,” has particular theoretical resonance. As a specific group within the Federal Bureau of Investigation, this team is obviously trained to rescue hostages in situations of danger and potential violence. As will be explored, sometimes this team is sent into situations where there is no clear hostage (this was particularly true in the case of the Ruby Ridge, Idaho standoff of the Randall Weaver family). At such a moment, a kind of aporia opens up, a conceptual and strategic gap between the reality of the situation and the means determined to deal with it. Much of the book’s investigation will peer into that gap to try and understand it. But in a larger sense, if the claim here is that all social situations are working overtime to avoid becoming standoffs, then perhaps we do indeed need a kind of metaphorical Hostage

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*xii* Preface

Rescue Team to periodically rescue us hostages of social life from ourselves and each other. Ultimately, this study aims to suggest some strategies of rescue, though perhaps not of final reconciliation.

My analysis of the standoff aims to develop a systematic and three-dimensional understanding of the indeterminacy that is the existential stuff of such situations. I want both to begin and end with an image of the standoff as a moment of pure contingency and with an analytical stance that seeks to foreground action in the subjunctive mood.

It should be the goal of all analysis to make the phenomenon under observation simultaneously familiar and strange. We all have an instinct that we know what a standoff is and how it acts in the world. The goal here is to clarify and expose the lineaments of that instinct. In this regard, I'll end the Preface and begin the book with a quotation from Walter Benjamin who, in contemplating the exposed "standstill" of *dramatis personae* and plot, gives expression to my own analytical animus:

Again and again, in Shakespeare, in Calderon, battles fill the last act, and kings, princes, attendants and followers, "enter, fleeing." The moment in which they become visible to spectators brings them to a standstill. The flight of the *dramatis personae* is arrested by the stage. Their entry into the visual field of non-participating and truly impartial persons allows the harassed to draw breath, bathes them in new air. The appearance on stage of those who enter "fleeing" takes from this its hidden meaning. Our reading of this formula is imbued with the expectation of a place, a light, a footlight glare, in which our flight through life may be likewise sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers.¹

Acknowledgments

As is always the case, this book was imagined into life with the participation of many people and by way of many different institutions. Of course, I wrote it and must take responsibility for it as it makes its way in the world. But I'd like to express my gratitude to those who have talked with me about the project and who have allowed me to experiment with ideas in their presence. Jeffrey Alexander has long known about my interest in contingency and my continuing preoccupation with social narrative, language and violence. He encouraged this project in many ways with his intellectual insight and editorial support. I thank him for his friendship and his confidence. Various friends and colleagues have demonstrated interest and have contributed much to my thinking. Such colloquy is perhaps the greatest gift we can give each other and stands as a testament to the existence of a counter universe to that of social life framed as a series of standoffs and near standoffs. Thus I thank Courtney Bender, Harold Bershad, Roger Friedland, Pier Paolo Giglioli, Jeff Goldfarb, John Hall, Nancy Hirschman, Ron Jacobs, Alberto Melucci, Magali Sarfatti-Larson, Rich Schuldenfrei, Barry Schwartz, Phil Weinstein, Barbie Zelizer, and Eviatar Zerubavel. My friend and colleague Bruce Grant deserves special thanks here for his energetic support, his wide-ranging associational mind, and his critical reading.

I'd also like to thank scholars Jayne Docherty and Catherine Wessinger, who generously sent me their own manuscripts on related topics to read. Two Swarthmore College students, Mark Hansen and Jim Harker, did a great deal of investigative work on several of the empirical cases examined here. They both became so much more than research assistants and I thank them for all their efforts. Rose Maio struggled mightily to convert my old word processing program into one that is currently legible by computer-based printing technology. Her great skill and good humor have helped me every step of the way.

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Robin Wagner-Pacifici

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Acknowledgments

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Finally, and once again, I want to thank my husband, Maurizio, for all of his support and love. Our minds and hearts are joined in all sorts of ways – both directly and, through our children, indirectly. And to those children, with all my love, I dedicate this book.