

# Play, Creativity, and the New Community Organizing

Benjamin Shepard

**ABSTRACT.** In recent years, a new breed of organizing has ignited campaigns for peace and justice. Many of these campaigns utilize innovative approaches to organizing diverse communities against a broad range of local and transnational targets. This new form of community organizing emphasizes elements of play, creativity, joy, peer-based popular education, cultural activism, and a healthy dose of experimentation. Themes of community building and renewal of democracy run throughout. A lively element of openness and learning from past mistakes while empirically testing new approaches propels the new organizing. A spirit of trial and error keeps it fresh. Much of the innovation in question finds its inspiration in the global justice movement's spirit of joy, pleasure, and play. Multiple illustrations of creative play in relation to social work practice bear evidence to creative play as a forward-leaning approach to social work practice. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The author would like to thank Harold Weissman, Kelle Moore, and Larry Bogad for their careful readings and suggestions for this article.

Journal of Progressive Human Services, Vol. 16(2) 2005  
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JPRO>  
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doi:10.1300/J059v16n02\_04

**KEYWORDS.** Play, creative direct action, cultural activism, community building, democracy renewal, popular education, carnival, community organizing

*Play, like dreams, is not a secondary state of reality . . . but has primacy as a form of knowing.*

—Brian Sutton-Smith (1997/2004, 134).

*The true object of all life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground.*

—C.K. Chesterton

Saul Alinsky (1971) once wrote that in order for protest to remain effective, organizers must keep their tactics fresh and creative. In recent years, a new cohort of political actors has taken this advice to heart (Prokosch and Raymond, 2002; Shepard and Hayduk, 2002; Solnit, 2004; Yuen, 2004). In so doing, these actors have helped revitalize approaches to community organizing (CO). Much of the current writing on political organizing finds its inspiration in the global justice and peace movements' ups and downs from the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in 1999, through the 9/11 backlash and the mobilization against war in Iraq, to the organizing against the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, as well as local campaigns in communities around the world. In the United States, only a small portion of this organizing comes from social workers. Instead, a brief survey of writing on social work CO reveals works on historic struggles including the settlement house movement (Elshtain, 2001), social workers involved in welfare rights (Abramowitz, 1996; 1998), and tensions between professional and activist voices (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

Still, CO is enjoying a pulsing resurgence, propelled by the global justice movement's emphasis on creativity, joy, and play. Movement emphasis is placed on creating open spaces for dialogue, experimentation, community building, and direct democracy. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) notes that social work has "achieved its greatest successes when it has regarded change in a broad perspective, linking the improvements sought through social and economic reforms with larger cultural, legal, political, and ideological dimensions of the

issues it has addressed” (1993, p. 54). The profession’s mission thus calls for social workers to fight for social justice from just such a perspective (Reisch & Andrews, 2002, p. 6-7). Given that contemporary CO is enjoying a revitalization, social workers could do well to consider this new activism.

Professional social workers face an array of problems, including isolation from a larger society which is increasingly dominated by neo-liberal social and economic policies aimed at privatizing everything from health, to water to basic services. The field faces a corporate globalization “which promotes a destructive competition in which workers, communities, and entire countries are forced to cut labor, social and environmental costs to attract mobile capital. When many countries each do so, the result is a disastrous ‘race to the bottom,’” (Brechtner et al., 2000, p. 5). Thus, Aronowitz and Gautney (2003, p. xxx) suggest corporate globalization becomes context in which future struggles over poverty will be waged; unfortunately social workers are often isolated from movements opposing this trend. Instead of joining larger popular struggles, social workers and clients contend with an onslaught of social controls which restrict their movement as social and political actors (Garland, 2001, p. xii). Simultaneously, policy trends emphasize increasingly punitive moralistic interventions based on criminalization rather prevention of problems (Abramovitz, 1996, pp. 13-17; Davey, 1995; Monroe, 2003; Shevory, 2004). Mechanisms which control the body (sex, appetite, movement, pleasure, etc.) are entrenched in these politics; they directly affect clients, who are turned away from services and modes of political participation because of personal histories with sex, drugs, or the criminal justice system; yet many social workers remain at the sidelines. From time to time all professions require reinvention. Social work could benefit from just such a revitalization of its approach toward CO. Play offers just such an opportunity.

Much of the appeal of the global justice and peace movements stems from their emphasis on diversity, flexibility, creativity, and minimal barriers to participation. This new CO offers fresh approaches to organizing diverse communities for social change. It does so through a low-threshold emphasis on elements of play, innovation, peer-based popular education, and respect for pleasure. As Eddie Yuen explains, “[T]he movement has been most successful at exorcizing the legacy of the hairshirt left while simultaneously critiquing the empty satisfactions of consumer culture” (2004, p. xii).

A lively element of openness and learning from past mistakes while empirically testing new approaches propels this new CO, with a spirit of

trial-and-error keeping models of engagement fresh. Harold Weissman (1990) describes such work as “serious play.” Much of this innovation finds its inspiration in a recognition of the social necessities and authentic possibilities of play. If isolation, the location of social problems in individual rather than structural flaws, and the turning away from CO are what ails contemporary culture in general and social work practice more specifically (Specht & Courtney, 1994), then elements of creative play and joyful participation cultivate the networks that allow actors to engage in new forms of CO. This essay outlines some theoretical and practical applications of the use of creative play for engaging citizens, organizing communities, sustaining campaigns, and running innovative programs, followed by case examples to illustrate their application.

### *ON PLAYING—THEORETICALLY*

“All play means something,” explains anthropologist Johan Huizinga (1950/2004, p. 117). While it may not be everything in social movements, a playful spirit helps. Weissman (1990, p. xxi) suggests that the mere act of imagining alternative visions of the world witnessed in movement activity offers important clues for social work organization and practice. Social movements and movement organizations promote adaptability and innovation in the profession. Playing gets us out of our theoretical ruts. While creative social workers can still find themselves stifled in organizations that fail to appreciate their ideas, play nevertheless helps social actors to move outside conceptual cul-de-sacs.

George Bernard Shaw once observed, “Life does not cease to be funny when people die, any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh.” Similarly, play is not always recognized or appreciated. Huizinga (1950/2004, p. 120) notes that while in Shakespeare’s day “[i]t was the fashion to liken the world to a stage” on which everyone plays a part, that did not mean that the play element in culture was openly acknowledged. Whether acknowledged or not, play involves creating, experimenting, and finding ways of reconsidering intractable problems. Henry Bial writes, “To play is to do something that is neither ‘serious’ nor ‘real.’ Yet play is nonetheless important, for it demands risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives” (2004, p. 115). An essential element of play is its use as a route outside of “everyday experience, if only for a moment.” Here, actors are free to “observe a different set of rules.”

Given its liberatory character, spaces where spontaneous play occurs are often highly contested and regulated. Some types of play, such as organized sports, are highly ceremonial; “Play may involve an erosion or inversion of social status (as in the Trinidad Carnival),” (Bial, 2004, p. 115). For this reason, authorities often seek to close spaces where improvised play takes place, such as Falun Gong practitioners’ spontaneous appearances for breathing exercises in China. Such play has been known to invert social hierarchies. This is where these activities find their subversive social movement character.

This essay differentiates five elements of play as it relates to movements aimed at social change. The first is social and cultural play, where culture is the dependent variable to be manipulated. The second type is creative play, where elements of play offer spaces to consider different ways to improvise with inductive rather than deductive reasoning. Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott writes, “in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative,” (1971, p. 53) “We play to explore, to learn about ourselves and the world around us,” Bial explains. The third element, play as performance, involves the creative use of different kinds of stages for various aspects of social and political performance—Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage.” Countless performances contain some element of play (Bail, 2004, p. 115). The fourth element, serious play, takes place when the stakes involved include larger social structures such as political structures. The fifth, therapeutic play, is present when the subject of play involves more “micro” issues involving individuals and small groups. Here, play is understood as “the rehearsal of agency over life’s barriers, while practicing and rehearsing, ego mastery,” (Sutton-Smith, 1997/2004). Winnicott elaborates on the social and therapeutic implications of play:

[I]t is play that is universal, and that belongs to health; playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships in psychotherapy; and lastly, psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others. (1971, p. 41)

In the following sections, these themes emerge as they are addressed in relation to a number of distinct elements of organizing—cultural activism, creative play, performance, direct action, popular education, community building, and democracy renewal which all serve to connect participants to organizing work. A final section will consider creative

play in relation to social work practice. The aim is to conceptualize creative play as a forward-leaning approach to social work.

### ***PRACTICES–CULTURAL PLAY AND THE JOY OF PROTEST***

Social change generally accompanies changing conditions within a culture, as social arrangements considered unchangeable or “just the way things are” come to be understood as both unjust and mutable. Advocates, including social work pioneer Jane Addams (1910/1998, pp. 238-55), have historically recognized the important role of culture in creating social change. Unfortunately, all too often cultural activism is considered an “add-on” to the task of changing the material conditions in people’s lives. While social actors emphasize a model of education that relies on intellectual analysis, challenging entrenched systems of oppression requires shifts in emotional as well as intellectual attitudes. As long-time organizer Si Kahn (1995, p. 575) explains, “Culture-poems, songs, paintings, murals, chants, sermons, quilts, stories, rhythms, weavings, pots, and dances can make such emotional and visceral breakthroughs possible.” The idea of culture can be thought of as both a set of meanings, ideas, and ways of acting as well as a product or performance, which contains and communicates a message (Duncombe, 2002).

Creative play has long been a strategy of cultural activism. American poets and philosophers, including John Dewey, William Carlos Williams, and Walt Whitman, have long suggested that the imagination is the best source for revitalizing U.S. democracy. They envisioned a political project in which an alienated world was overwhelmed by an aesthetic activism as art and life, culture and society, become interwoven in a single democratic interplay (Beck, 2001, p. 35).

Social work acknowledges that culture emerges as both a strength and a stressor for organizing groups. Many communities—including the Chicano community to name just one example—use culture as a CO tool (Takaki, 1993, pp. 334-40). In the years before the Haymarket Affair in Chicago, labor groups made use of cultural activism, including theater and games, as strategies for organizing (Bogad, 1998). While play and culture have long been interwoven, their connections are rarely acknowledged. Yet, “pure play is one of the main bases of civilization,” Huizinga explains (1950/2004, p.120). To this end, a handful of activist groups such as Reclaim the Streets, the Hungry March Band, and count-

less others have made use of cultural play including theater, music, bikes, and the arts as core parts of a new form of CO.

### *Reclaiming Streets*

Charlie Fourier (2003, p. 59) describes the development of a protest over public space by the group Reclaim the Streets: “Within moments what was empty motorway, hot strips of tarmac, utterly dead, is living and moving, an instant joyous celebration. It is our moment; everyone and everything seems incredibly and wonderfully alive.” Moments after the sound system “fires up,” an urban possibility is kindled “in the certainty of the dancing crowd.” Born in London in 1995, Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is a worldwide movement that utilizes street parties as both protest against neoliberal economic policies, including the privatization of public space, and as a living example of what public space can be. The group’s work involves a simple principle: “taking back those things which have been enclosed within capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as a commons,” (Notes, 2003, p. 54). For RTS, the best way to accomplish this is with a buoyant cultural activism, which relies on street parties rather than pamphlets, lectures, or boring speakers. RTS favors a Groucho-Marxist approach closer in style to the Situationists and other pranksters. The point is to use culture—music and performance—to involve people in playing and building community, rather than telling them to do so. A simple description of RTS London’s first action illustrates the point: “Suddenly people begin to surge out of the anonymous shopping crowd. . . . Before anyone has time to catch their breath, 500 people emerge from the underground station and take over the street, reclaiming it from commerce . . . for people and pleasure” (Notes, 2003, p. 60). Addams (1910/1998) relates finding a similar caring space in her CO work. She described this feeling as “the sum of all treasures, a joy hitherto unknown in the world.”

Steve Duncombe, (2002, pp. 5-6) an organizer and theorist with RTS New York, suggests that culture provides a focal point around which to build collegiality and connection, while functioning as “the stepping stone into political activity.” As actors support each other and gain new tools, engagement in more formal political work becomes feasible. RTS New York has involved itself in successful campaigns to save community gardens, win back pay for immigrant workers, and push the New York City Council to denounce the Patriot Act after 9/11 (Ness, 2002; Shepard, 2002b, 2004). Through such engagement, players discover new approaches to organizing, as actors develop new repertoires for po-

litical action. The model of “party as protest” is simple enough: “The magical collision of carnival and rebellion, play and politics is such a potent recipe and relatively easy to pull off that anyone can do it” (Notes, 2003, p. 61).

### ***A Hungry March Band***

If one looks back at the most powerful social and cultural activism over the past five years in New York City, many of the highlights include performances by the Hungry March Band. The first time I encountered the band was in a community garden during the winter of 1999. Activists from RTS New York converged with the band for a successful parade/street party to defend the community gardens. Later that fall, the band led activists from Union Square through the subway to emerge and take over Times Square in a solidarity action before the WTO meetings in Seattle. The following April, the band led a group dressed as loan sharks in their rendition of “Mack the Knife” during protests against the World Bank meetings in Washington, DC. The Hungry March Band functioned as the catalyst for the street party’s transformation into a social movement with a carnival’s goals: “to turn the world upside down with joyous abandon and to celebrate our indestructible lust for life” (Notes, 2003, p. 175).

Just as protest was intersecting with a global movement aimed at reclaiming public space through a burlesque festival of possibilities, the Hungry March Band was there to provide a soundtrack. And most of the time, the band brought its Kurt Weill/Brechtian Weimar boogie-woogie to their actions/performances. Its sad yet ecstatic tone seemed to echo a cultural demise as high culture clashed with low, combining Ornette Coleman harmelodics with Guy Debord spectacle to create something new. Their performances created stages out of subway cars, concert halls, and beaches. Their horns and drums escalate with a throbbing, lunging, yearning frenetic quality reminiscent of the best ska and punk shows, but they combine this with a marching band tradition which borrows from the best of world music, overlapping into global sensibility and culture.

The band’s shows create a participatory quality of performance, play, dancing, politics, joy, and sweating bodies, and a cultural activism which rightfully speaks to the hopes and possibilities of a holy American landscape, a world in which we’d like to live. The improvisation of jazz is a metaphor for democracy itself. If the call of the movement is to globalize democracy, not corporate rule, the Hungry March Band has

embodied both the sorrowful, empty promises of this project as well as its more hopeful possibilities. When the band jams, their playful mix of cultural play and protest offers a glimpse of the kind of “new humanism” and “praxis” Henri Lefebvre must have imagined when he called for urbanists to demand a new “right to the city,” which could be achieved through sensual pleasure, free conscious movement, protest, carnival, theater, rent strikes, and recognition of the radical possibility of a lived moment (Merrifield, 2003, p. 84).

### ***CREATIVE PLAY, DIRECT ACTION, AND ACTIVIST PERFORMANCE***

In an essay written shortly after the WTO protests in 1999, movement activist Andrew Boyd (2002) wrote about building a movement one joke at a time. Over the next few years, a new series of groups and activist protects—including RTS, the Yes Men, RTMark, the Billionaires, and Critical Mass, among others—built on this notion. As activists, they understood that little in life does more to help folks get by than a good laugh. As such, they built on this spirit of irony, play, joy, pranks, and humor to create a new approach to political performance as cultural mobilization.

#### ***Billionaires for Bush, Rev. Billy, and Participatory Performance as Protest***

Paul Bartlett works with the Billionaires group, which lampoons the role of money in American politics. He explains: “Performance with humor can disarm fear. When we laugh, we can listen, we can learn. Our audiences are not passive; we engage them. When people participate in a play, opportunities for new perspectives and transformation emerge” (quoted in Soloski, 2004). For the Billionaires, who have long worked with groups including RTS and the Hungry March Band, the point is to mobilize play and creativity. At most appearances, the Billionaires for Bush sport props such as gaudy cigars, fake jewels and gowns, and tuxedos and top hats. At pro-Bush rallies, the group chants slogans such as “Four More Wars!” while uncorking champagne bottles. “I’m a Billionaire and I’m for Bush” is a frequent sound bite. It’s not uncommon to see the Billionaires carrying signs suggesting they are there “Because Inequality is Not Growing Fast Enough.”

Boyd [a.k.a. Phil T. Rich], the Billionaires' founder, is a veteran of United for a Fair Economy. With that group, he made use of countless creative tools and theatrics to illustrate the ongoing problem of income inequality. One of the exercises in Boyd's 1999 manual, *The Activists Cookbook*, is a game called "100 chairs." In it, the jester and the people get very few chairs, while the king owns a majority of chairs. The point, of course, is to dramatize the concentration of wealth in the United States, illustrating where tax dollars are going. In his introduction to Boyd's book, Jim Hightower explains, "If we want to reach the hearts and minds of America (and we do) we need to unleash our imaginations, take creative risks, and explore new forms of communicating besides lecture and press release."

To a degree, social movements and protests are essentially constructions of countless performances. To the extent that protest seeks to recreate or represent another view of reality or social problems, it becomes a performance of democracy. As Boyd and Duncombe (2004, p. 39) explain: "There is a counter tradition on the Left that has long understood that all politics, at some level, is a kind of theater. This practice continues on today." If a protest is sterile and boring, it gets bad reviews. The aim of performative protest is to represent the idea that another world is possible, and to do it with style. Performative approaches to activism thus play on postmodern narrative approaches to culture in an attempt to challenge and disrupt countless oppressive certainties of modern life (Irving & Young, 2002, p. 19). With its emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation, protest as performance breaks through barriers to shift public opinion and create change.

Protest as performance is not entirely new. Martin Luther King was a master of this form of strategic dramaturgy. By courting violence from police while restraining themselves, activists with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference framed stand-offs during the civil rights movement as theatrical confrontations. Acts of civil disobedience were thus framed as performances between "righteous petitioners" and an "oppressive system." Part of the strength of this immensely effective tactic was its use of performance rather than mere pronouncements. Media coverage of the SCLC's confrontations helped King generate support and compel the Kennedy administration to move (McAdam, 1996, pp. 343-55). Continuing in this tradition, today's colorful street theatrics, full of hope for a better tomorrow, offer effective ways to meld alliances, garner media attention and produce results.

Take New York's Reverend Billy, a theatrical character invented by Bill Talen (2003). Through his joyous, self-deprecating street per-

sona—a preacher guilty of the sin of shopping too much—Talen has created a playful messaging device used effectively in campaigns addressing sweatshop work conditions, protecting community gardens, preserving historic sites, and defending the First Amendment. After the Rainforest Action Network won environmental concessions from Citibank, member Ilyse Hogue specifically acknowledged the efficacy of street theatre in the long campaign. She explains: “The real action of the four-year Citigroup campaign took place on the mean streets of New York City. From a mid-town New Orleans-style funeral procession led by the infamous Reverend Billy [to other more conventional CO], it was the grit, resolve, determination, and creativity of New York City activists that made this campaign a success.” The utility of political theater involves its joyous, playful, subversive character, which challenges the powers-that-be while offering creative, workable solutions for a more sustainable world (Sanders, 1995).

### ***PLAY, CARNIVAL, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING***

As the examples of RTS and the Hungry March Band illustrate, it is useful to consider protest as a form of carnival. This concept is a core component of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work. Bakhtin uses the carnival metaphor to consider issues of empowerment, knowledge construction, and the embrace of justice. Further, by breaking down power hierarchies, carnival helps actors dream of and act on a more equitable brand of democracy than standard forms of political participation: “Carnival is a nonviolent form of social transformation as it breaks and reverses established orders of power” (Irving & Young, 2002, pp. 20-25). The metaphor of protest as carnival creates a space for participants to design interactions of their own invention. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people,” explains Bakhtin (1984, p. 7). Thus, the carnival offers the possibility for liberating the “lower orders” of society. Social boundaries are lost in a “joyous, outrageously humorous demonstration” (Bogad, in press, b).

The carnival model of protest begins with recognition of the possibilities of pleasure. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 177) explains that “play, struggle, art, festival—in short eros—are themselves a necessity.” These forms of transgression cultivate an energy which creates new kinds of spaces and social relations. In con-

trast to models of scarcity, this approach assumes that violations of social norms create new forms of space. As Lefebvre explains, “A productive squandering of energy is not a contradiction in terms: an expenditure of energy may be deemed ‘productive’ so long as some change, no matter how small, is thereby effected in the world.”

Much of the utility of play as a community-building strategy involves its capacity to create open spaces where new sets of rules and social relations emerge. Huizinga suggests that countless human activities are organized like games. Play that is competitive, goal orientated, and orchestrated takes place in closed, occupied space, whereas cooperative, improvisational, and open-ended play takes place in open space (Bial, 2004, p. 115). Bogad (in press, a) breaks down political performance into contrasting frameworks: monological (“occupied/closed space”) and dialogical (“open space”) public protest. The difference between these two approaches highlights the contrast between what Victor Turner differentiates as authentic, transformative ritual, in which social change is possible, and status quo-reinforcing ceremony, which is repeated without shifting power relations. In terms of practice, the problem with occupied spaces is that closed minds usually inhabit them. As Weissman (1990, p. 252) explains, “An oppressive environment lowers the odds on the gestation of creativity and innovation.” In contrast, open-space models “open a space for collective-individual, Do-It-Yourself creativity.”

One small example of this sort of change in space is the community gardens in New York City—a space created within a spirit of do-it-yourself innovation. These spaces have become playgrounds for creative play, protest, and community building. For New Yorkers, community gardens function as directly lived “representational spaces” and spaces of “difference” used by city residents (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Community gardens are spaces that once were litter-filled vacant lots, now transformed into open urban green spaces for plants and vegetables. A statement of existence by the More Gardens Coalition explains: “We are gardeners—and students, artists, senior citizens, workers—living in New York City who believe in more gardens in all urban areas worldwide.” The advocacy group continues:

Community gardens are the revolutionary fruits of caring neighbors, taking back our land one seed at a time. Most of the community gardens were created in the 1970s as a response to the city government’s systematic abandonment of all critical services;

firehouses, hospitals and police stations disappeared from the barrios and ghettos, and so did garbage removal and the expectation of safe mail delivery. This allowed the poorest of neighborhoods to be burnt down by greedy landlords and filled up with garbage, rats, needles, and broken glass. The community gardeners brought safety, food, beauty, fresh air, and *comunidad* back to their streets and people.

Today, there are some 500 gardens in New York City, including 50 in the East Village alone, which have attained permanent status (More Gardens; Earth Celebrations, 2004). The struggle to save these gardens has taken many forms over many years. In 1999, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani planned to auction off the community garden sites. Advocates, such as the More Gardens Coalition and the Lower East Side Collective Public Space Group, organized throughout that year in response to the city's announced plans to sell off all 750 then-existing community gardens. For garden activists, this was seen as a short-sighted approach to city planning. An essential element of their response was creative, playful direct action. After countless acts of civil disobedience—including the unleashing of crickets at a garden auction, street parties, pageants, and community actions, all while lobbying city council dressed as giant vegetables (Shepard, 2002b)—gardeners were able to celebrate a victory. In 1999, Bette Midler and a group of garden supporters paid over \$4.2 million (\$1.2 by Midler alone) to put the gardens in a public land trust. This action saved 114 gardens. After years with a temporary restraining order against bulldozing community gardens, another 200 gardens were made permanent park space in the fall of 2002 in a settlement between State Attorney General Elliot Spitzer and Mayor Michael Bloomberg (Earth Celebrations, 2004; More Gardens).

Inherent within this movement is a struggle to maintain spaces for citizens to meet and discuss common problems, especially as gathering places for public deliberation become more restricted. Without a public commons, there is little room for democratic participation. Without spaces for community to grow, it is difficult for democracy to thrive (Shepard, 2002b). This is not a new observation. Jane Addams (1910/1998) taught new immigrants to engage in civic culture through the concept of “socializing democracy.” And she built spaces—Settlement Houses—for this democracy renewal to thrive. Today, the global justice movement continues to struggle to create spaces where citizens can engage, connect, play together, and build communities from the bottom up.

**SERIOUS PLAY AS DEMOCRACY RENEWAL**

If there is anything essential about play, creativity, and community building, it is that this sort of interaction sets the stage for democracy renewal. While the Billionaires have lampooned the role of money in the U.S. political process, over the past decade countless groups—from drag king Murray Hill, who ran against Mayor Giuliani in 1997, to drag queen Joan Jett Black, who ran for president in 1992 representing the Queer Nation Party—have used elements of play, theatre, and performance in their campaigns for political office. Their aim was less about being elected than challenging institutional inequalities. Drag queens, anarchists, and other marginalized groups use the tools of camp, stand-up comedy, and agit-prop theater to challenge the legitimacy of their opponents. “This is serious play,” author Larry Bogad explains. At the core of this play-acting is a series of experiments in democracy, the aim of which is to expand a political dialogue between spectators and actors. Thus, electoral guerilla theatre becomes a tool of democracy renewal. “In play, there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action,” Huizinga explains (1950/2004, p. 117). For our purposes, the subject in play is the state of the democracy.

The central goal of the global justice movement is to globalize democracy while slowing the encroachment of corporate globalization. The movement works from the vantage point that the American political system is deeply flawed and often undemocratic. This sentiment was only confirmed during the recount in Florida after the 2000 presidential election in which people of color were physically barred from voting. A central lesson of the fiasco was the need to find more compelling ways to make the system responsive to regular citizens (Hayduk & Mattson, 2002). Given the assumption that U.S. democracy is broken at the top, many activists work from the bottom up, concentrating on forms of direct democracy in their own communities. “Direct democracy is about ‘originating’ ideas as much as it is about ‘approving’ them,” explains activist Shawn Ewald (2003). The goal is to create non-hierarchical structures to break down the relationship between the leadership and the grassroots.

To this end, the global justice movement emphasizes a deeply democratic political tradition. “Play as protest” thus becomes an invitation to be part of a more inviting democracy. As actors embrace this notion, what emerges is an organizing model based on freedom, abundance,

equality, and redemption (Irving & Young, 2002, p. 25). Boyd and Duncombe (2004, p. 46) look at Brecht to elaborate:

‘We pin our hopes to the sporting public,’ Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1926 in an essay directed to his fellow playwrights . . . bemoaning the fact that the masses preferred soccer matches to serious theatre. Instead of whining about the general lack of taste, the radical dramaturge believed that artists could learn something useful from sporting events; the primary lesson being that people participate in what they enjoy, and unless theatre was made enjoyable the people wouldn’t come.

### *The League of Pissed-Off Voters*

The same principle must be applied to activism. Indications are that the left is learning this lesson. Take the League of Pissed Off Voters, a group of youth activists, mostly of color, who have won elections from Oakland to Boston. In order to create a world with more democracy and less Bush, they have organized a campaign that builds on Boyd and Duncombe’s “put the party back in party” strategy. Adrienne Maree Brown, (2004, p. 20), an organizer with the League, looks to the possibilities of pleasure and fun as an organizing principle. Her approach finds its roots in her experience in the harm reduction movement. “Some people think I’ve spent the last several years of my life working with raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, destigmatizing drug use, and ending overdose, but really it’s about breaking down barriers to pleasure. So I’m a pleasure activist.” For Brown, “Its not really about politics at all. Its about my life.”

The group aims to cultivate a sense of celebration, joy, and connection in order to bring new people, especially young voters, into the process. To do this, the group heeds Brecht’s advice to borrow from the lessons of a soccer game. In their call to arms, *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*, they look to Puerto Rico, where elections are treated like the World Cup. The group aims to create an emotional, inclusive party, which engages one voter at a time. As Jim Hightower explains: “Our events should feed the soul as well as the brain, and we should laugh and celebrate even as we speak the truth. As an old Yugoslavian proverb puts it: ‘You can fight the gods and still have fun.’ The core understanding is that if organizing, elections, and campaigns are about anything, they are about relationship building. Thus, the League of Pissed-Off Voters build on studies suggesting that the best way to boost

voter turnout is peer-to-peer organizing. One way they do this is through connecting with “party as protest” groups, such as the RTS New York offshoot, Complacent, a culture jam organization that throws very large parties and events. The League’s July, 2004 fundraiser with Complacent linked just this sort of cultural play with community building. A July 29 dispatch from Complacent reflected:

Between the hooka pipes and the fire spinners—between the heat on the dance floor and the rockstars in the loading docks—between the Siccarus ride and the political poetry—between the nudists and the roving provocateurs—between way before dusk through far beyond dawn—something immense and incredible and indescribable manifested on the broken banks of Brooklyn.

The point is really to create a prefigurative politics encompassing interaction, care, creativity, joy, and generativity. As Brown (2004, p. 20) explains: “In fact, elections are important only inasmuch as they determine how we live our lives. Really, I just want folks to get along so we can all survive and, dare I say, enjoy this whole experience.”

### ***PLAY IN GROUPS— A FRAMEWORK FOR PLAY AS A CO STRATEGY***

A key subtext of this essay is the mechanisms of everyday social movement activity. The work seeks to highlight the best practices of movement activity that encourages experimentation, risk taking, and joy within a caring democratic process in which oppressive systems are rejected in favor of egalitarian engagement and playful creativity. Thus, a further subtext is that process counts. In *Mind, Self and Society*, social psychiatrist George Herbert Mead (1963) suggested that our sense of self emerges as a process of communication and interactions, out of which we produce meanings; thus, our sense of ourselves is constructed in process with others. Humans are meaning-creating animals; for CO to work, it must be done in an egalitarian fashion. For social movements, this means breaking down systems of imagination-crushing domination, while respecting dialogue and difference.

Building on these sentiments, the global justice movement assumes that how the movement organizes itself is as important as the results. Therefore, the emphasis is on organizing within affinity groups and loosely-coordinated “spokescouncils.” This model was revitalized dur-

ing the organizing efforts of the late 1960s and again with the advent of the global justice movement. Lesley Wood and Kelly Moore (2002, p. 30) explain that this approach emphasizes “intentionally nonhierarchical organizing mechanisms which date back to radical feminist, civil rights, antiracist, environmental, and anarchist movements. . . . These approaches to organizing are attempts to overcome histories of sectarianism, internal sexism, racism, and other forms of domination.”

The utility of this model is its informality—actors are able to experiment, create, and play with alternative possibilities. Within such spaces, we consider different ways of playing with and manipulating the social work data. As Schechner explains: “Ordinary life is netted out of playing. . . . Work and other activities constantly feed on the underlying ground of playing, using the play mood for refreshment, energy, unusual ways of turning things around, insights, breaks, opening, and especially looseness” (quoted in Sutton-Smith, 1997/2004, 135). A spirit of openness and willingness to learn from others presents a stark contrast to humorlessness and self-importance, which have dogged left-leaning community organizers and stifled social change movements for a generation. The lesson is that without a conscious appreciation for play, movements lose these necessary elements of “refreshment, energy . . . and especially looseness. . . .”

When the ability to dream fades, so do possible solutions to intractable problems. Today’s activism emphasizes the integration of theory and practice (Hanna & Robinson, 1994, p. 42). A willingness to rely on evidence takes precedence over ideological certainty. Jane Addams (1910/1998) always emphasized the importance of sound research, data collection, and presentation to make the case for advocacy. Her insight is just as relevant today. Empirical testing, observation, assessment, and reassessment became central elements when ACT UP recognized that injection drug users were dying from AIDS because they did not have clean needles. So, members of the group got arrested for distributing clean needles in New York’s Lower East Side, brought data to court showing that clean needles save lives without increasing drug use, argued for the medical necessity of syringe exchange, got their charges thrown out, and changed public policy (Shepard, 2002a). It is one of countless examples of the use of experimentation, testing and a new approach toward praxis. If someone has an idea, they try it out in the real world. If it works, great! If not, they don’t get scolded; rather, they learn from the lesson with their group and try something else.

**PLAY AS NARRATIVE, COMMUNICATION,  
AND DIRECT SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Much of this essay has discussed ways to incorporate aspects of play into creative direct action. Direct action-based social work practice is “characterized by active resistance to existing or proposed laws or policies or living conditions. . . . People may join together, as temporary mobilizations during a crisis or large-scale movement (such as during civil rights or anti-Vietnam war movements)” (Hanna & Robinson, 1994, p. 10). In looking at the role of play in contemporary social movements, Bogard (in press, a) explains: “serious play is meant to communicate, but is also meant to inspire desire, culture, stories, group cohesion and identity formation.” Thus, creative play also extends into the arena of group work, including the use of affinity groups discussed above, as well as clinical practice. As Winnicott (1971, p. 41) notes, “playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication.”

From oral tradition to popular education, play is a cornerstone of communication. In a treatise on the history of western attitudes toward laughter, Barry Sanders (199, p. 190), explains: “Play and language, jokes and literature—the connections may seem odd at first. But play is so basic to animals—humans and nonhumans alike—why shouldn’t it inform the very foundations of communication itself?” (1995, p. 190).

Through its easy incorporation of multiple narratives, dialogue, and popular education techniques popularized by Paolo Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal (1990), creative play offers social workers a useful tool for working with diverse populations. “[F]or the moderns play is framed as not real, for Hindus it is one of multiple realities,” Sutton-Smith explains (1997/2004, p. 135). In honoring multiple perspectives on reality, notions of play are consistent with postmodern conceptions of social work practice that recognize that life is made up of many communities, cultures, and perspectives, which see life in extraordinarily distinct ways. People are, after all, different. If modern identity emerges as a life story, modern life and social work practice are made up of countless competing narratives. Postmodern social work practice is most effective when it seeks to engage, and understand different elements of these life stories. A core part of CO is listening.

At its best, social work practice aims to create a light, playful context for these stories and the dialogue between storyteller and community listener. Freire (1970) framed an entire mode of practice around listening and responding to such stories. He called this form of practice

popular education. Allowing players to tell their stories serves three purposes: (1) it allows group members to learn about each other's histories; (2) it allows different members to narrate their own stories on their own terms; and (3) it offers a playful outlet for group development and cohesion.

Take as an example the South Bronx syringe exchange program called CitiWide Harm Reduction. Here, the use of Freire's techniques of popular education combine with new technology to offer effective means for empowering socially vulnerable populations. CitiWide runs peer education programs for HIV-positive people to organize to prevent the spread of HIV. Each peer class is responsible for a group project. The most recent peer class organized a project to tell the story of injection drug use, syringe exchange, and the agency's role in the struggle in the South Bronx. Peers made use of a video camera to tell each other's stories, edited the footage, and created an important document for community education and prevention.

Another example is instructive. Richard Elovich, who directed prevention programs at New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis, recalls a similar video project organized by a group of gay and bisexual Latino immigrants in Jackson Heights, Queens called Projecto PAPI. In it, the project's organizer (Angie) taped all the gatherings and activities of her group of friends. From time to time, Angie invited everyone over for dinner to watch the videos of themselves on television. In so doing, Angie's tapes became a sort of mirror for these friends and their stories. By watching their stories, it made them feel real, important and valuable. "I have seen other men do the same with an oral history project, sitting for each other as they related their experiences of sex and desire," Elovich explained. "A lot of the guys say they feel like they've just shared in something sacred. . . . In many communities, particularly those hardest hit by AIDS, there are enormous silences that need to be questioned." The point of popular education and the sharing of life story narratives is mutual exchange which breaks these silences. This use of oral history and open communication functions as a form of liberatory play.

The point is that through language and play, human creativity and open creativity emerges. Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas (1971) suggests that perhaps the greatest ailment of contemporary society is the failure of people to communicate with each other. Those who can play with each other do so by learning to communicate along the way. Thus, creative play is a useful tool for social work practice.

**CONCLUSION—PLAY, PARADOX,  
AND A DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

This essay addressed the use of play through a number of distinct elements of organizing—cultural activism, creative play, performance, direct action, popular education, community building, and democracy renewal—to connect participants to organizing work. Movement approaches to play offer tools for social workers to fight forms of social control and isolation. Approaches to play acknowledge the need for joy, pleasure, and fun. Such approaches connect social workers to broader movements for social and economic justice, while speaking to the broader movement and policy publics. Currently, the global justice movements could benefit from the tools that social workers possess to connect the movements' broad critique with specific policy changes. Social workers are uniquely qualified to speak to this challenge, while supporting these new movements.

In essence, play becomes a metaphor for a healthy form of creativity and exchange. "The play is the thing," Hamlet said he could use to reach the king. Yet play is not without its limitations for a culture that emphasizes outcomes and the bottom line. The paradoxes of play are what make it so essential for social workers struggling with the competing dialectics of social work practice in late capitalism. In 1926, Jane Addams warned of the pitfalls of social work practice framed "too steadily from a business point of view" (quoted in Franklin, 1986, p. 518). Her point was that social workers need not be so limited by professionalism if it meant restricting the tools necessary to make the democracy more responsive to the needs of the poor.

Yet still, the ideas of play and social work sometimes appear contradictory. Walt Whitman once wrote, "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms." These two terms may sometimes be contradictory as well. But their source bears an important lesson about play and community building. Think of poetry—it could not be less important, or more meaningful. As a source for reinvention, the play of social work may involve a similar spirit.

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