

FROM CONNECTION TO SEPARATION (AND BACK): SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MAY DAY

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The following considers the interplay between connection and separation in social movements. Exploring the example of the May 1, 2007 police raid on the Immigrant Rights rally in MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, the following considers the ways the Global Justice Movement has benefited and suffered from such an interplay. In addition, the work reviews recent contributions to the social movement literature. Particular attention is given to concepts of failure, collective joy, suppression, interconnection, separation, and connection.

It was great. There was a band playing *cumbias* on a large stage, and all around there were thousands of people doing festival stuff. The kids that play Son Jarocho were there getting into the spirit with their Jaranas, traditional instruments from Veracruz, Mexico that look and sound a little like ukuleles. There was a theatre group doing a silent skit that looked something like the statue of liberty in a sweatshop. . . . Spanish speakers from many countries, Asian Pacific natives, Aztec dancers, Anglos and others. . . . It was colorful and celebratory. There was no alcohol and everybody seemed to be in good spirits and mellow. I saw someone I knew standing there, and I asked her if she had been there for a while, and if she had any idea what was going on.

'Yeah,' she said, 'The kids were dancing and drumming in the street when the cops just charged them. There was no warning,' she said, 'they didn't need to do it like that. Everybody was cool.'

Anna and the Indymedia Collective,
LA Independent Media Center, May 1, 2007

I just want to point out that despite the tragic end; the march was beautiful and it was filled with people from all backgrounds marching for worker's rights no matter if they have "legal status" or not. We all should try to understand that worker's rights have no borders. We all are in this struggle together. We all want to live and enjoy life in peace. We are all human and I think some forget this fact. Sometimes we lose a bit of our humanity and I think that it is time for people to take care of one another. In this world we only have each other. If we do not take care of each other then who will? I think Katrina showed quite well

that we cannot rely on our government when it comes to taking care of the people. . . . Know your neighbor; know your community. Take care of each other. There seems to be no justice in this cold system. Just us.

Nick Napolitano, *LA Independent Media Center*, May 1, 2007

As the previously stated accounts of the May Day rally and ensuing police raid at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles last Spring attest, social movements are made and broken within the interplay of social connection and separation, contact, and isolation. If the May Day immigrant rights rallies were about anything, they were about the rejection of calls for more separation. This divide includes proposals for physical walls across the U.S. border. Yet, instead of debate about connection, the current immigration debate is characterized in dichotomous terms: naturalization versus criminalization, legal versus illegal, citizen versus immigrant, and deportation versus amnesty. In response to such polarities, supporters of immigrant and workers' rights have flowed into streets in cities across the country to call for cross-border solidarity. As the quotes earlier attest, these actions have been characterized by social Eros, an awareness of the interconnection among differing movements, workers and immigrants, and citizens and noncitizens.

This consciousness, of course, is what propels social movements. "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham," Martin Luther King (1963) wrote in Letter from Birmingham Jail. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," King continued. After all, for King every living person is "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Such a worldview has deep philosophical underpinnings. Yet so does the politics of separation and fear. "Without an order to disperse or a warning shot all hell breaks loose," Napolitano (2007) wrote to the LA Independent Media Center after the May 1, 2007 raid of peaceful parade attendees in MacArthur Park. He wrote about the scene as the police moved in:

LAPD is now firing rubber bullet kisses into a crowd of families gathered for a peaceful cause. LAPD uses absolutely no discrimination in whom they choose to shoot; women, children, men, the homeless, the media, and those whom cannot walk without assistance are not safe. LAPD continues to fire round after round until MacArthur Park starts to resemble a scene in a horror film where a monster has just showed up and everyone is running for their lives and safety grabbing whatever they could to try to get to a safe place without getting hurt.

In the days after the May Day actions, many suggested that the police attack was intended to stifle movement progress. Of course, this politics of fear has long supported social, cultural, and racial separation which buttresses support for the War on Terror (Marable 2003). Naomi Klein (2002) has long argued that separation of people—with borders or fear—remains a central ingredient of neoliberalism. Connection is thus the antithesis of such a politics. Immediately after the May Day attacks, witnesses noted that those who participated in the rally at MacArthur Park provided mutual aid, helping the old and young, those

with kids, and everyone else get out of the park and away from the police. A politics of separation would have allowed participants to leave the weak, while this practice of connection, buttressed by an I-thou view of interconnection (see Buber 1970), allowed participants to remain together. A politics of connection builds on the IWW's notion that an injury to one is an injury to all, while a politics of separation allows the strong to leave the poor to fend for themselves as their fate has nothing to do with them. A politics of separation supports the view that we owe nothing to each other as human beings; while the politics of connection suggests we are all part of one sprawling mass of workers, parents, students, homeless people—humans.

For an extended meditation on the politics of connection and separation, readers need to look no further than two spirited new works on social movement practices: *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* by Barbara Ehrenreich (2007) and *Failure: Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices* by Nicole Antebi, Colin Dickey, and Robby Herbst (2007). In their own ways, both works intimately address the challenges of participating in social movements, which aspire to collective joy, while living in a world that seems hell bent on separation, destruction, and failure.

Certainly, the Bush years have presented us with years of failure and connection. The era began with a Global Justice Movement on the ground and running. Cultural play and collective joy were primary ingredients of this global democracy movement. Much of Barbara Ehrenreich's new work reads as a historical response to the do-it-yourself burlesque of energy and possibility which characterized the movement of movements convergence actions through the years before Bush's ascent and the terrorist attacks which followed. For a while there, cities including Genoa, Prague, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and, of course, Seattle, witnessed a collective encounter with a movement characterized by unbridled wanderlust as countless actors embraced the quirky alliances and pleasure of building a better world, one prank at a time. This is not to suggest that there was not a give-and-take between connection and separation, movement advance and repressive police baton with each new convergence action. Yet, rather than 9/11, Barbara Ehrenreich dates the killjoys, the forces of social and cultural repression which appear dead set on ending episodes of collective ecstasy, with the days of Rome and attacks on the Dionysus cults. The sentiment plays out again and again and again. Cultural and communal pleasure emerges and the Savorolla and Comstocks follow, especially when these acts of "communitas" as Ehrenreich quotes from cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), create carnival-like conditions which threaten the status quo. The powers find ways to shut down moments of collective connection. They rolled tanks into Tiananmen Square in 1989, just as cops in riot gear cleared out MacArthur Park last May.

Yet, in the early months of Bush's first term in 2001, the space for collective action felt like it was expanding. Living Wage campaigns were gaining steam at home. Terms such as "eco terrorist" failed to maintain currency before 9/11. The rhetorical link between activist community building and terrorism just did not

play as well. Yet, with 9/11 all that changed. And the politics of separation reentered the fold. And the discursive link between protestor and terrorist gained steam. People needed to be separated and profiled. Bombs dropped. Protest pens found new popularity. And instruments of music, which once brought people together, were viewed as a threat. At least, this is what I thought when the police confiscated the drumstick I was using with a giant samba band during the World Economic Forum actions of February 2002. People had been dancing, yet without music they could have been left with a cold day to march separated from others by rows of police. Fortunately, others kept the beats going.

And the movement lurched toward one of its greatest moments of collective connection. With simultaneous actions in cities across the globe, the “World Says No to War” actions of February 15, 2003 are considered by many to be the largest day of protest in world history (Cartright 2005). For many, the day was a triumph of collective connection and opposition toward the global lurch toward war. Yet, when the bombs started to drop just a few weeks later, others considered the action, like much of the global justice movement action before it, an act of collective failure.

Others countered that social movements are not football matches. Movement actors do not always score the goal and win the match in linear progression. Victory often comes in such simple forms as collective celebration of a moment in time, a scream for peace echoing through time. This certainly was the sentiment expressed by Rebecca Solnit (2004) in her work *Hope in the Dark*, written specifically as a response to the skeptics who suggested February 15, 2003 was a failure.

Yet, as the years churned forward, the body bags continued to accumulate, and Bush was reelected, some, such as New York City (NYC) organizer Stephen Duncombe (2007), suggested that many of the organizing tactics which had propelled movement of movements needed to be reconsidered. This was especially the case after the Republican Nation Convention protests of 2004 in which some 1,800 arrests, mass action, and political participation still failed to sway the election. Others, such as myself, suggested we all take a little rope-a-dope with history and watch as Bush produces the noose, which will undermine his message. Yet, the pain of the moment, the losses of lives, and political momentum did wear on the global peace and justice movement.

A week or so before the November election of 2004, Robby Herbst and Colin Dickey planned to organize a session on the theme of collective failure in Los Angeles. They knew someone—either Bush or Kerry followers—would end up feeling like the election was a collective failure. Little did they know how much the feeling of collective failure would envelop them and the participants of the global justice movement in which they had participated and chronicled with the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, which Herbst helped cofound with his brother Marc in Los Angeles. While the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* is typically viewed as a forum for “possibilities” of the intersection between art and activist practices, the group of essays and interviews, which constitute *Failure*, looks squarely at the implications of the wreckage of our modern social and

cultural movements. While the volume framed as a reader on failure, it reads as an exploration of existentialism. Like rolling a rock up a hill only to watch it roll back down, the image presented herein involves a struggle for authenticity and intense engagement. “In working towards a provisional definition of how the term failure is used in this book, it seems necessary to first differentiate it from two closely linked concepts: futility and defeat,” the editors, Nicole Antebi, Colin Dickey, and Robby Herbst, explain in the introduction (Antebi, Dickey, and Herbst 2007, 11). While gesture has no chance of success while the defeat is often interconnected with success, part of the road to a positive outcome, etc., failure speaks to a different experience. They explain:

In contrast to defeat and futility, our use of failure designates those earnest actions undertaken in good faith, with a hope for success, which not only ended poorly but were subsequently disavowed either individually, culturally, or historically. The used-up, the embarrassing, the misguided and foolhardy who wagered much and lost, the ventures which led nowhere and which don’t serve as rallying cries or symbolic gestures, but are quickly buried away with no hope for a second act or redemption. If we think of history as a forward trajectory, a narrative of steady progress in which each new development further the narrative that much further, inevitably there will be aborted off-shoots from this narrative line, dead spurs off of the timeline of history which are either forgotten or actively repressed by the narrative of progress. It is these missteps and false starts, these dead spurs of history which are the focus of this book. (pp. 11–12)

Certainly, the last seven years have certainly done away with any narrative of an enlightened historic trajectory of progress. “We Are So Fucked,” posters could be found throughout NYC in the months after the *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court decision of Fall 2000. The old expression, the first time Napoleon happened it was tragedy; the second time it’s farce, seemed to resonate.

I spoke with Robby Herbst about the collection only a couple of days after the May Day police attack in MacArthur Park, which took place within walking distance of his apartment in Los Angeles. We spoke about the struggle to keep a perspective on social movements, collective action, and historic progress. “That’s why the Zapatistas are so powerful,” he explained. “We haven’t been conquered. We’ve been around forever,” he continued in reference to the global justice activism extending from Chiapas to Los Angeles immigrant rights movements. “So much of the view of failure is not abjection but saying, ‘fuck it’ and carrying your beliefs forward, this prank forward.” Herbst suggested this is what Rebecca Solnit (2004) was referring to in *Hope in the Dark*. History and social change moves forward in strange and less than linear ways. Yet, as Harvey Milk preached during the 1977 San Francisco Gay Pride March, “[Y]ou gotta give em hope.” From here, history chugs forward, even when the gesture fails to achieve immediately apparent goals.

Yet, hope runs smack dab in the face of stark realities, the weakness of the flesh. In one of *Failure’s* more vexing contributions, Alex Juhasz considers the limitations of her attempt to film a friend recall his life story before his AIDS

dementia sets in, without success. The result is a broken story. “The death of the flesh trumps the life of the image,” Juhasz, a professor of media studies, suggests, acknowledging the limitations of a craft, a capacity for reflection, and a movement whose aim was to end carnage now raging around the globe (p. 135).

Still, AIDS activism and activism continue with success and failure, even in the face of gestures which occasionally parallel the attempt to roll the rock back up the hill. Colin Dickey and Herbst locate just such a sentiment within their interview with filmmaker Sam Green, director of such works as *Pie Fight 69* and *The Weather Underground*. His work considers the limitations of gestures such as a pie in the face or a violent reaction in opposition to war, even when its subject pays dearly for such an impulse. “[W]ith the Weather Underground piece, it starts off with ‘it is a forgone conclusion, these people didn’t succeed’ but you still feel hope?” Herbst asks the director, who explains:

Yea, its weird because when I got interested in the Weather Underground I always expected them to be bitter and cynical, but they were really hopeful in some weird way. At some point, I was at a party and I was arguing with somebody and she was saying “the world’s so fucked up,” it was around the time of the elections . . . and I said “You have to have hope irrationally” . . . and I thought to myself “What am I saying? I don’t believe that, since when do I think that?” And I realized that these people had rubbed off on me and somehow I had become a person who has hope irrationally. Which I am happy about. I never had experienced that. To me it seems that if you are just rational you are never going to have any hope (p. 135).

The capacity to imagine thus lays the ground world for collective dreams of a better world. Social change activists have to believe there is another route to a different kind of experience. After all, former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers (2001) explains: “Knowing now that thoughts of Elysian fields can lead to the garrote and the guillotine and the gulag, I still can’t imagine a fully human world without utopian dreams. Why would anyone go on?”

Yet, the challenge remains how to connect the means with the ends? Is it possible to prefigure a better world in the here and now? For Barbara Ehrenreich, the creation of this better world, this kingdom, in the here and now is through the practice of “collective joy.”

She described the term during a talk at the Commonwealth in San Francisco last January. After years of writing about labor issues, she became interested in the practice of bonding among groups, families, even masses:

[T]he kinds of bonds that hold communities together and can even bring strangers together. . . . Ritual, organized ways that people can make each other not only happy but joyful, delirious even ecstatic. . . . Dancing, music, singing, feasting -which includes drinking- costuming, masking, face paint, body paint, processions, dramas, sporting competitions, comedies. (quoted in Gardner 2007)

The expression “collective joy” is the term Ehrenreich uses to describe the phenomena.

Dancing in the Streets presents a compelling history of the practices of collective joy and its relation to state power.

These activities are almost universal. When Europeans fanned out across the globe from the 15th to 19th centuries conquering people, they found rituals and festivities going on everywhere from Polynesia to Alaska to Sub-Saharan Africa to India. Everywhere there were occasions for dressing up—often in a religious context but not always. The Europeans were horrified by what they saw and described it as “savagery” and “devil worship.” They thought it showed the inherent inferiority of indigenous people that they could let go in this way. The truth is, these traditions were European, too, but forgotten. The ancient Greeks had a god for ecstasy, Dionysus. Women especially worshipped Dionysus

There is evidence that Christianity until the 13th century was very much a danced religion. The archbishops were always complaining about it. When dancing was eventually banned in the churches it went outside in the form of carnival and other festivities that filled the church calendar. In 15th century France, one out of four days of the year was given over to festivities of some sort. People didn’t live to work, they lived to party. . . . The techniques—the dance steps, the musical instruments, the costumes—are cultural, but the capacity for collective joy is innate. We are hardwired to be party animals. . . . (quoted in Gardner 2007)

Unfortunately, today the opportunity to engage in such a collective dance is too often stifled. People sit in cars on their own; they take Prozac when depression hits; and isolation proceeds. Separation sets in. Still the learning for collective contact lingers.

Just as humans cling to the impulse to dance, the compulsion among those not dancing is quite often the suppression of such activities. From Comstockery to Prohibition, such suppression has long been a part of U.S. political culture. And much of it involves fear of the power of crowds. Today, suppression of crowds is exemplified within the Miami Model of crowd control named after the police preemptively arrested activists during the Free Trade Act of the Americas meetings in Fall 2003. There are countless reasons for such social controls. Ehrenreich suggests that they date back to the Roman Empire.

It was not a concern about crowd size that led to Pentheus’s crackdown on the maenads or Rome’s massacre of its Dionysian cult. No, the repression of festivities and ecstatic rituals over the centuries was the conscious work of men, and occasionally women too, who saw in them a real and urgent threat. The aspect of “civilization” that is most hostile to festivity is not capitalism or industrialism—both of which are fairly recent innovations—but social hierarchy which is far more ancient. When one class, or ethnic group, rules over a population of subordinates, it comes to fear the empowering rituals of the subordinates as a threat to social order. (p. 251)

As those in positions of power are quite aware, the kinds of rituals Ehrenreich refers to, help groups create a bond, or “*communitas*” as Victor Turner (1969) describes. Yet such group formations are a threat to a status quo. Revolts are

often born of such activities. “Ecstatic rituals still build group cohesion, but when they build it among subordinates-peasants, slaves, women, colonized people—the elite calls out its troops,” (p. 252). Recent examples of such repression include May 1, 2007 in Los Angeles, or May Day 2001 in NYC when the New York Police District (NYPD) arrested immigrant workers and their supporters for staging a street performance in support of undocumented workers (Bogad 2003), or even October 19, 1998 when the NYPD attempted to shut down a funeral march for Matthew Shepard that did not have a permit (Feinberg 2002). On all three occasions, the police provoked protests and civil disorder. These are all occasions—police moved in to crack down collective rituals among disenfranchised people.

Yet, there is more to this repression than fear of uprisings. The suppression of collective joy is also a distinct form of social control.

[E]lite hostility to Dionysian festivities goes beyond pragmatic concerns about the possibility of uprising or seduction of the young. Philosophically, too, elites cringe from the spectacle of disorderly public joy. Hierarchy, by its nature, establishes boundaries between people—who can go where, who can approach whom, who is welcome, and who is not. Festivity breaks the boundaries down. (p. 252)

Hierarchies establish boundaries, while collective play breaks it down. For this reason, the powers find it in their vested interest to maintain a politics of separation, which maintain social hierarchies. “At the height of festivity, we step out of our assigned roles and statuses—of gender, ethnicity, tribe and rank—and into a brief utopia defined by egalitarianism, creativity, and mutual love” (p. 253).

In recent years, urban festivals, which included collective joy, such as Halloween in NYC, used to involve free interaction between the participants and spectators along the parade route. In one of his first moves as Mayor of New York City, then Mayor Giuliani set up boundaries to separate the two and thereby limit the possibility for collective intermingling and role play. Certainly, there is opposition to such a politics, yet it faces a profound disapproval.

“There appears to be no constituency today for collective joy itself,” Ehrenreich accurately notes. “In fact, the very term collective joy is largely unfamiliar and exotic” (p. 257).

Rather than identify carnival as social phenomena, something many have done in recent years (Bogad 2005), Ehrenreich considers its utility as a movement strategy. She thoughtfully assesses the limitations of “collective joy” within movement activity—such play cannot be consistently relied upon to stop tyrants as Victor Turner (1969) assures us, at least not in and of itself. And sometimes it merely releases a pressure valve, creates a space for leisure, and then allows the system to continue unchecked. While these critiques are familiar, they are necessary to understand in order to make the best use of collective ritual, pranks, and play in movements. In order to best make use of a tool, it is best to understand its best applications, which Ehrenreich highlights.

[W]hatever its shortcomings as a means to social change, protest movements keep reinventing carnival. Almost every demonstration I have been to over the years—antiwar, feminist, or for economic justice—has featured some element of the carnivalesque: costumes, music, impromptu dancing, the sharing of food and drink.” (p. 259)

Such forms of play are a vital part of movements and organizers recognize the fact that it offers a useful complement to an ongoing organizing campaign. Yet, it does have a distinct role, which movement scholars are starting to recognize (see Reed 2005). Without it, movements often are limited. “The media often deride the carnival spirit of such protests, as if it were a self-indulgent distraction from the serious political point. But seasoned organizers know that gratification cannot be deferred until after the ‘revolution,’” Ehrenreich explains (p. 259). Thus, movements have aimed to put the right to party on the table; herein the right to pleasure, as well as its uses are recognized as vital part of movement tactics and campaigns. Such a strategy also increases means and motivation for long-term participation. It is a point in which Stephen Duncombe (2007) concurs. Without some form of pleasure involved in organizing, people simply fail to stay involved over the long term. From 1998 to 2004, Duncombe helped organize NYC’s Reclaim the Streets (RTS) group, which held street parties as political interventions. Here, the parties were also used to communicate political messages through an “ethical spectacle.” With RTS, the point of such acts of collective joy was thus twofold, with purpose to sustain the troops and speak to multiple publics. “People must find, in their movement, the immediate joy of solidarity, if only because, in the face of overwhelming state or corporate power, solidarity is their sole source of strength,” Ehrenreich concurs (p. 259).

Yet, beyond rational ends and movement strategies, the experience of collective joy allows social actors to find a way to share in the experience of being fully human. In a world of neoliberal economic policies, which depend on walls, borders, hierarchies, and isolation, the impulse to connect remains. As separation recedes, social dichotomies disappear. Victor Turner (1969) said it. Ehrenreich describes it. She concludes with an image from Brazil.

[T]he samba school turned into a huge crowd and the crowd turned into a momentary festival. There was no quote point to it, no religious overtones, no ideological message, no money to be made. Just the chance -which we need much more of on this crowded planet- to acknowledge the miracle of our simultaneous existence with some sort of celebration. (p. 261)

Anyone who has seen the mariachi bands, flags, and intergenerational connection taking place at one of the recent Immigrant Rights rallies knows that such actions are a driving force bridging the wanderlust of the Global Justice and Immigrant Rights Movements. Despite the obstacles, the collective joy, which characterizes these movements, feels irrepressible.

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