

What Prevents Radicals from Acting Strategically?

The following article was written by American Jonathan Smucker and made the rounds on Z Net and various Indymedia sites back in 2006, and seeks to address some very real problems with self-styled 'activists' engaging with those around them:

PART ONE

Ritual & Engagement

It's August and I'm back in San Francisco. I love this city. It's been over three years since my last visit – an extended stay that started a week after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At that time thousands of people in the Bay Area launched, and for many weeks sustained, a stronger show of resistance than could be seen anywhere else in the country. People put their bodies on the line to shut down San Francisco's financial district, as well as war-profiteering corporations throughout the region. I was proud to be a participant. I've spent most of the time since in my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, organizing with the Lancaster Coalition for Peace & Justice. Now I'm back in SF just a few days, already marching in an anti-war protest.

“Hey hey! What do you say? How many kids did you kill today?” the crowd chants.

I don't join in. We don't use chants like this in Lancaster. Actually, I can recall very few occasions where we have chanted at all. I used to chant as loudly and enthusiastically as the next person, but now something holds me back.

“Hey, hey, what do you say? How many kids did you kill today?” It strikes me as angry, grotesque and even a bit juvenile. I feel that most of the people I am trying to reach are more likely to be repelled by, than attracted to, this message, form and energy.

Is the anger justified? Hell yeah. But I have to ask myself, am I trying to reach people (in order to build power, to affect change), or am I just rattling cages? Is my aim to engage, or to vent? Is the purpose of this protest instrumental; a tactic within a strategy to achieve a goal? Or is it expressive; an opportunity for me to shout to the sky my frustration?

Why do we chant? Why do we carry signs? Why do we march? Who is it for? Is it primarily communicative or expressive? Meaning, are we trying to communicate something to someone, or are we merely expressing ourselves? If the former, then we should concern ourselves primarily with the meaning others will take from what we say and how we say it, strategizing around what methods, mediums and messages will most likely persuade our target audiences. If the latter, then our protests may be serving more therapeutic than instrumental purposes.

When we look at the state of the world we are frustrated, angry, even heartbroken, so we vent. We feel isolated in the dominant culture where destructive values and politics reign. So we find community – a sense of sanity and belonging – by coming together with likeminded people to express our alternative values boldly, loudly, and, most importantly, collectively.

I do not wish to disparage the therapeutic role social movements can play in participants' lives. We who hold progressive or radical values feel the lack of representation of these values in the dominant culture. This can cause a profound sense of isolation for us as individuals. Many of us, during the process of our politicization or radicalization, feel isolated within our communities – often for good reasons. As I came of age in Lancaster, I encountered resistance to my newfound radical notions, and not enough support to sustain me. So I went out looking for likeminded people.

Finding them and communing with them has been and continues to be both inspirational and therapeutic.

Coming out of isolation then is an important subtext to the collective social change work we engage in together. In this work the explicit purpose of coming together with likeminded people is to affect change, likely more effectively through joint action or mass action. A second and less explicit purpose is to come out of isolation by surrounding ourselves with reflections of our own values. We accomplish this by collectively creating projects, spaces, culture and ritual.

It is important to examine the collective ritual aspect of social change movements, and how it can be both critical and detrimental to strategic goals. By collective ritual I mean collaborative expressions of shared values that serve to further a collective narrative. By collective narrative I mean a story (or web of stories) through which we find meaning, filter information, and interpret events and experiences. Our narratives are the stories we tell ourselves about the world and our place in it. They frame much of our thought and action. Different narratives encourage different sorts of actions, behaviors and mentalities. For example, a person who believes that earth and everything in it was literally created in seven days, and is soon destined to end in dramatic apocalypse, may not see much point in recycling or reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Similarly, a person who holds a justice-oriented narrative is more likely to put faith in social change efforts than a person who sees humanity as inherently selfish or “fallen.” More than we tell these stories, the “stories tell us” what to do.

I use the word ritual to describe acts that affirm our narratives and the values they contain. In Christianity, for example, collective ritual typically includes church attendance, group singing, and Eucharist, but it can also be found in far subtler aspects of everyday life. In activist groups and subcultures collective ritual may include protests, events, gathering places, music, fashion, publications, vocabulary and much more. Collective ritual is hardly distinct from subculture itself. More precisely, subculture is little more than the sum total of collective rituals. Collective ritual is anything intended to affirm the group or subcultural identity and narrative. This is not to say that a protest has no instrumental purpose other than affirming an alternative narrative, but rather that this affirmation is part of what motivates protest participants. That said, without a consciousness of this motivation we run a greater risk of our protests truly having no instrumental value.

Ritual is important – vitally so for social change workers. Our rituals represent the survival of alternative values within a dominant culture that under-represents and represses such values. Through collective ritual we gather strength and build solidarity by surrounding ourselves with reflections of our alternative values and visions.

However, expressing values and living principles is not the same as engaging society and affecting systemic change. It is important to draw a distinction between collective ritual and strategic engagement.

By engagement I mean the work of engaging the broader society and power structures in order to affect change. Strategic engagement can and does overlap with collective ritual, but the two are substantively distinct, and it would be advantageous to develop a consciousness about when and how we choose to utilize one or the other or both.

Both agendas are essential, and social change movements suffer when either is neglected. Collective ritual serves as a remedy to the paralysis caused by isolation. It provides sanity and a sense of belonging. However, strategic thought and action in social movements is retarded when participants pursue insular ritual to the neglect of broader engagement.

DC activist and punk Mark Anderson describes the distinction in terms of subjective and objective:

...if we are to really contribute to change, much less revolution, we must distinguish between the “subjective” (internal: seeking personal identity, meaning, purpose) and the “objective” (external: actually helping to change power relations, structures, and values that uphold oppression of the many by the few) aspects of our activism. ...I am not saying that one is important and the other is not. Both the subjective and the objective are critical, at different times and in different ways. They are even interconnected—i.e., I begin to feel personal power, which enables me to take actions that might help striking workers get better pay and working conditions or, more fundamentally, help to build power to alter social structures. However, the two are not the same.

While both are important, these two motivations for participation in social change efforts are often in tension with each other. By developing an active consciousness of these two motivations, social change agents might become more intentional about when and how we fulfill each motivation, and by doing so we may increase our effectiveness while still attending to our wellbeing (personal and communal).

Another way to think about the distinction between collective ritual and strategic engagement is this: collective ritual expresses an ideal among people who already believe, long for, and/or live it; strategic engagement aims to meet everyone else where they are. We can create our own spaces where we speak our own internal language, but we must not lose our ability to speak the languages of the people who are all around us.

PART TWO

Encapsulation

While in Argentina in 2004 I interviewed Maba and Valde, a sister and brother from one of the Movements of Unemployed Workers groups, MTD Solano. Interviewing them separately, I asked them what they value most about their work with the MTD. Both answered that they like how integrated their lives are now. Maba said that while many join MTDs out of necessity, she joined by election, because her life felt too fragmented before. Now nearly everything she does is related to MTD Solano; her work at a collectively run cafe, a children’s workshop she organizes, her neighborhood, her family, etc. All of her activities share a meaning and purpose.

Political Science Professor Emily Stoper describes a similar cohesion experienced by members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”) during the Civil Rights Movement:

Many SNCC members report that before 1964, they often experienced a sense of harmony and certainty that is rarely felt by other Americans. Their lives were not fragmented. Instead of filling a series of largely unrelated roles (parent, employee, citizen), they filled only one role: SNCC worker. Instead of balancing in their heads a multiplicity of values, all of them tentative, they had one certain, absolute set of beliefs. The group provided a world order that is far more complete and stable than any that individuals could assemble for themselves.

I can relate to this sense of harmony. I felt it intensely during the Minnehaha campaign and land occupation in Minneapolis to stop the controversial rerouting of a highway through a neighborhood, parkland, and sacred sites to the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community and the American

Indian Movement. For sixteen months we did everything together; cooking, eating, cleaning, building tree houses and barricades, meeting, working security shifts, singing, sitting around the campfire, getting arrested or beaten up by cops, etc. When I would leave camp, it was to go produce or distribute flyers for events related to the campaign.

While this sense of harmony and integration can be deeply fulfilling to those experiencing it, it can be equally alienating to those on the outside. In his examination of the implosion of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the emergence of the Weather Underground, Frederick D. Miller describes the phenomenon of encapsulation:

Encapsulation occurs when a movement organization develops an ideology or structure that interferes with efforts to recruit members or raise demands. ...members may develop such strong cohesion among themselves that outsiders become unwelcome. In prolonged interaction, a group may develop an ideology that is internally coherent but virtually unintelligible to recruits and outsiders who do not share all of the members' assumptions. Such groups are not uncommon in movements; they constitute the fringe of organizations that appears strange to outsiders. An encapsulated organization may find it easy to maintain its dedicated core of members, whose identities are linked to the group and who may have few outside contacts, but such groups have little chance of growing or increasing their influence. Most strikingly, they may lose interest in such things, contenting themselves with maintaining their encapsulated existence.

This resonates with my own experiences of activism, particularly in younger social movement groups and activist subcultures. It plays out in the simplest ways, but tends to spiral. Many anarchists, for example, have explored ideas and theory, and have had experiences, that have led them to identify with this label. For (many or most of) them anarchism means self-organized decentralized societies, without hierarchy or oppression, based on solidarity and mutual aid. This is, after all, a definition of anarchism as a political philosophy. Many anarchists, associating primarily with each other – constructing together a separate narrative – lose sight of the fact that many people think that anarchism means chaos. While it is possible to give a description of the principles of anarchism that is intelligible to most anyone, the term itself often is not. Add to it a vocabulary that regularly references syndicalism, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-neoliberalism, anti-statism, etc., and you have an ideology that may in fact hold much in common with many people, but whose description is incoherent or repelling to outsiders. When participants in anarchist groups insist on using their group's internal language to talk with outsiders, they are more likely to encounter unfavorable responses. Such negative experiences reinforce their feelings of social isolation and draw them deeper into an encapsulated existence.

It is important to realize that encapsulation happens for understandable reasons. Technocratic society alienates many people who seek to construct and live a different story – an alternative narrative. Participation in a collective struggle can be a deeply fulfilling and integrating way of doing this. However, because activists' alternative narratives exist in opposition to the status quo, they tend to create barriers between the activists and the broader society. Collective ritual (that furthers an alternative narrative) often builds group cohesion by drawing attention to how the group is different from the status quo (which often comes to mean different, generally, from everyone else). The further developed a group's alternative narrative – the longer it has been alive within a particular group or series of groups – the more it will tend toward isolation and encapsulation, unless specific mechanisms or intentionality prevent this from occurring.

Full-scale encapsulation could not occur in the context of the Minnehaha occupation for the same reasons that it could not occur with SNCC or SDS. These were political campaigns with regular interaction with a larger public. Still, in each of these cases a core group developed a strong

cohesion that, at least at times, tended toward encapsulation. In the case of SDS many core members broke with public organizing to form the Weather Underground, which had virtually no dialogical interaction with any public.

How prevalent is this phenomenon within social movements? While full-blown encapsulation is relatively rare, still, the tendency of social change agents to create identities that distinguish them from others, and to become insular, is very common. The negative impact of encapsulation is disproportionately detrimental, because it tends to occur especially among the most dedicated social change agents; people who give all or nearly all their time and energy to social change efforts, and who are often ready to sacrifice even more. Movements need these people to be successful. That is, movements need some people who are heart-and-soul dedicated to the cause, flexible and free from other commitments or distractions. Critical as these people are, still, they comprise a very small percentage of any successful social movement. To be successful, movements need tens of thousands – if not millions – of people who are willing to give something. To get plugged into movements in ways that build capacity, these folks generally need, first, to feel welcomed by, and then, some direction from, the more involved change agents. If these dedicated change agents fail to engage the next tier of potential movement participants, they will certainly fail to engage the broader society. These potential participants are not even the base, but rather the start of the base needed to affect the kind of systemic overhaul we imagine. Therefore, the interplay between these tiers of movement participants is of critical importance. Encapsulation and the general tendency of activist groups to self-isolate, prevents this needed relationship, creating an unbridgeable chasm where there should be a continuum of levels of involvement (as well as levels of political analysis), and leaving dedicated radicals cut-off like lone guerrilla fighters in enemy territory. It may feel glorious, but it's a suicide mission.

To prevent self-isolation and encapsulation in social movement groups, activists first need to recognize the problem. We need to examine how our groups' collective rituals and alternative narratives, if unchecked by an imperative to strategically engage society, will tend toward self-isolation. We need to see how profoundly this limits the potential power of our movements. When protest tactics become primarily collective ritual without regard to a strategy for broader engagement, then much of the nonparticipating public is likely to associate the given issues with the particular ritual, or the "type" of people who perform the ritual. People who sympathize with the issue or goal may not become active in the cause because they are not interested in assimilating into – or being identified with – a fringe subculture, or because they see a lack of strategy.

Many of us, when we become disillusioned with the dominant culture, we develop an inclination to separate ourselves from it. When we begin to become aware of racism, sexism, capitalism and whatever other forms of social, economic or ecological oppression, we don't want to be part of it. This often comes from a moral repugnance and a desire to not cooperate with injustice.

However, this desire to separate ourselves from injustice can develop into a general mentality of separation from society. In other words, when we see the dominant culture as a perpetrator of injustice, and we see society as the storehouse of the dominant culture, then our desire to separate ourselves from injustice can easily develop into a mentality of separating ourselves from society. With society seen as bad, we begin to look for ways of distinguishing ourselves and our groups from it. We begin to notice, highlight, exaggerate and develop distinctions between ourselves and society, because these distinctions support our justice-oriented narratives. The distinguishing features often go far beyond nonparticipation in those aspects of the dominant culture that we find offensive. We adorn ourselves with distinguishing features to express separation, and also to flag likeminded people and establish ourselves in – and assimilate into – oppositional subcultures.

These distinguishing features take on particular flavors in different subcultures. Activist

and movement strategist Michael Albert describes student activists he encounters at college speaking engagements, “As compared to their classmates, the activists look entirely different, have different tastes and preferences, talk differently, and are largely insulated from rather than immersed in the larger population.”

Mark Anderson describes in tribal terms the same phenomenon in punk:

The punk subculture has many of the hallmarks of a tribe...piercings, tattoos, more. These markers, also including hairstyle, dress, music form, even slang, help to demarcate the boundaries of the group, to set it off from the larger populace. In this way, appearance can even be a form of dissent, a strikingly visual way to say, “I am not a part of your corrupt world.”

Many such subcultures – consciously or not – prize their own marginalization. If society is unjust, then our justice-oriented narratives are reaffirmed when we are rejected by society (or more accurately, portions of society). If society is bad, then marginalization in society is good. We tell each other stories of how we were ostracized in this or that group, how we’re the outcast in our family, how we were the only revolutionary in a group of reformists, etc. We swim in our own marginalization. This is the story of the righteous few.

One of the largest barriers to strategic thought and action in many U.S. social movements today is that, in the story of the righteous few, success itself is suspect. If a group or individual is embraced by a significant enough portion of society, it must be because they are not truly revolutionary or because their message has been “watered down,” rather than because they’ve organized or communicated their message effectively.

Here we see the importance of checking our narratives for faulty components. If we allow the story of the righteous few to hold a place in our narratives, then our social change efforts are likely to be greatly hindered by a general mentality to separate and distinguish ourselves from society and to retreat from success. To organize effectively this mentality has to turn 180 degrees to a mentality to connect with others, to notice commonalities, “to weave ourselves into the fabric of society,” and to embrace being embraced by society. This is a profound paradigm shift that most radicals have yet to make. It intensely challenges us because it requires nothing short of getting over ourselves.

The dominant is not all of society, and often it’s not even the majority. Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire comments:

Sometimes, in our uncritical understanding of the nature of the struggle, we can be led to believe that all the everyday life of the people is a mere reproduction of the dominant ideology. But it is not. There will always be something of the dominant ideology in the cultural expressions of the people, but there is also in contradiction to it the signs of resistance – in the language, in music, in food preferences, in popular religion, in their understanding of the world.

We often make the mistake of assuming that everyone subscribes to the dominant ideology, or even that those who seem to subscribe do so completely. However, a lack of visible resistance to a dominant ideology does not necessarily signify an enthusiastic embracing of the ideology. Submission or acquiescence to a dominant ideology is not the same as ideological alignment. For example, many people, though aware that a new Wal-mart would harm their local economy, may still refrain from participating in a grassroots campaign to stop it. A small turnout for a counter-Wal-mart protest does not necessarily mean that the entire town – or even the majority – is happy about the development. It could be that people lack faith in the feasibility of stopping something as big as

Wal-mart, that the tactics or rhetoric of the campaign seem inaccessible or extreme to them, or even that they perceive a lack of strategy in the campaign (among many more possibilities). While each of these possibilities still poses a challenge to organizers, these challenges are of a different type and quality than the challenge of reaching someone who is explicitly pro-Wal-mart. By exploring alternative explanations for lack of participation, organizers can develop better strategies. But if organizers see the lack of participation as an inevitable popular embracing of Wal-mart, then they will feel – and likely be – defeated, and if they continue in their resistance, they are likely to be taking a stand more than waging a struggle; consciously or unconsciously adopting the storyline of the righteous few.

Social movements should aim to succeed. Fighting an advantaged opponent without the intention of success is not so much fighting as it is coping. The tendency of the outgunned resister to run headlong kamikaze-style into enemy lines is the tendency of someone who wants to be righteous – not of someone who seeks to affect change. We must ask ourselves if our intention is to bring about real change, or if it is to act out righteous narratives (either as individuals or in small enlightened groups).

The tendency to think “that all the everyday life of the people is a mere reproduction of the dominant ideology” is detrimental to movement building. We need to shift our mentality to one in which we actively look for forms of resistance to dominant ideologies, however subtle, and encourage these forms. While it is important to recognize the limits of often subtle and uncoordinated expressions of resistance to dominant ideologies, it is equally important to recognize the existence and value of such expressions. By encouraging such expressions we can affirm and therefore strengthen people’s anti-dominant values and identity, which can lead to a broadening of our base.

While we challenge the dominant storyline, we must also challenge some components of our own narratives. We must scrap the chapter of the righteous few, and replace it with a story of collective liberation in which, instead of setting ourselves apart, we engage in the hard work of bringing people together.