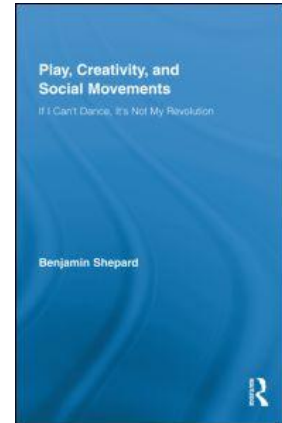


Benjamin Shepard, **Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution**, New York: Routledge, 2011, 330 pps., \$110.56 (hardcover).

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As a young activist, I had a very clear understanding of what constituted an effective politics of social change. A world-changing practice, in my militant Marxist opinion, had to have, at its core, a sober understanding of real, material conditions and employ a thoroughly rational analysis of *what is to be done*. My position, thankfully, was not the only one amongst the activist set I was part of. Other comrades tried to convince me that the cultural was as important as the material, that means were as important as ends, and that The Revolution could only come about if the whole person—their emotions and their pleasures, as well as their anger and intellect—were engaged in the struggle. When, at late night bull sessions, I channeled V. I. Lenin and warned against the dangers of “spontaneity” and other revolutionary frivolities, my adversaries quoted Emma Goldman (apocryphally) back to me: “If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.” Earnest and serious, I was not convinced; Lenin was a realist, while Goldman was merely a dreamer.



Decades of activist practice and the study of social movements have changed my mind. I’ve come to realize that to be a realist, you need to take dreams seriously. The political topography of today is made up of signs, symbols, stories and spectacles, and the neat distinction between the material and the cultural no longer holds (if it ever once did). The first rule of guerilla warfare is to know your terrain and use it to your advantage, and contemporary activists have learned to navigate this new landscape. Take the Occupy movement for instance. Much of the protest this past year was as much about communications as it was about wresting power or making policy. Seen from this perspective, the sometimes curious, but increasingly common, activist tactics such as occupying public space, articulating a multiplicity of messages, using tools like the “people’s microphone,” and integrating props and performance into protests, begin to become legible. To be effective, activists have had to become keen students of communications; consequently, communications scholars might profit by studying these new forms of activism.

Benjamin Shepard’s book *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution* is an excellent guide to this new mediatized political terrain as well as an engaging introduction to the actors and groups who have learned how to wage their battles upon it. (Full disclosure: I make a periodic appearance in the study as both activist and academic.) “Play,” the author argues, is a key, yet undervalued, component of social movements. Shepard uses “play” as “a shorthand way of describing free activities, often finding expression as a gesture, performance, or ritual,” (p. 20) this includes practices like pranks, performances, and parties; dressing up as a flower or setting up a sound system and

dancing in the middle of a street; and using irony, satire and other forms of humor in internal and external communications.

Shepard begins his book with an informative dash through some of the 20th century's playful politics: the aesthetic hijinks of the Dadaists and political forays of the Surrealists, Johan Huizinga's master-work *Homo Ludens*, as well as the spectacle-savvy actions of the Situationists in Paris and the Yippies in the U.S. For those interested in the intersection of culture and politics, this is familiar territory. But Shepard then also includes groups like the Young Lords Party in his analysis, arguing that through their dramatic actions and use of poetry and music, this group of Latino gang members-turned-activists from the late 1960s and early 1970s were actually enacting a politics of play. By viewing "serious" activists like the militant Young Lords through the lens of playful politics, Shepard helps us to see that play and creativity are, and may have always been, a part of all activist work.

Play, Creativity, and Social Movements does its proper historical duty, but the bulk of the book is based on social movements in the 1990s and early 2000s, most of which were based in New York City and many which Shepard was personally involved: Lower East Side Collective, Reclaim the Streets, More Gardens!, Absurd Response to an Absurd War, Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, among others. As the names of some these groups suggest, these were activists who reveled in revelry. Shepard, however, takes their politics seriously and in a series of well-organized chapters, lays out the different ways in which play has been utilized as a sober strategy for building movements and bringing about social change. In more than one chapter, Shepard discusses how activists staged playful media stunts in order to compensate for their small numbers and limited access to media, performing a cultural jujitsu with the mass media in order to communicate more widely their marginal messages. In an extended chapter on "Play as Street Party," Shepard explores the politics of the spectacular, and demonstrates how activists employ the lingua franca of our spectator society and turn it to their own radical ends by erasing the lines between those who perform and those who watch.

In social movement scholarship, play and creativity are finally getting the attention they deserve, but oftentimes the studies stay at the level of tactics: focused on a particularly performative protest or the adroit adoption of street style, ignoring the other ways in which these cultural aspects are integrated into social movements. Shepard goes further. Discussing the seminal AIDS activist group ACT UP, he develops an argument about how play and pleasure are used by activists to steel out, and rise above, the daily despair that comes with the disappointments (and, in the case of ACT UP, the deaths) that can be part of activist life. Here, as well as in the successive chapter on "Play as Community Building," Shepard underscores the role of culture in organization building, reminding us that social movements are not purely instrumental organizations, but human communities where participants look for pleasure, company and a creative outlet. The author's own activist experience, as well as the methodology, are what form the core of his book (he interviewed more than 50 activists for his study) and give him the material to pay astute attention to this very human, and often overlooked, component of social movements.

If there is a weakness in Shepard's book, it is not his alone, but one shared by the whole field of study (*mea culpa*). The lacuna of creative activism is the question of efficacy. If we are to take this form of political activity seriously, then the question that must follow "What is to be done?" is "How do you

know if you've done it?" Shepard does an admirable job discussing the limits of playful action in his last few chapters, wherein he details what happens when carnival-ready activists are faced with the tragic horrors of terrorism and war, or the grim realities of racial discrimination or worker exploitation, and hints that there may be a time to shed the clown noses and pick up more traditional organizing tools. One old activist tool that playful types might want to pick up is a yardstick with which to measure success. Does creative activism work? Does it work better than traditional organizing tools? And just how does one measure success, anyway? Arriving at answers to these questions is a difficult endeavor—which may be why they are rarely asked.

A grassroots organizing campaign to, say, elect a politician suggests a fairly clear set of metrics: the number of people who joined the organization, the number of people in the district who turned out to vote, and, when all the votes have been tallied, the result: Did the politician win or lose? These are material facts that can be empirically confirmed. But what to do with a street party thrown in the name of rekindling the imagination and reclaiming an ideal of public space? This sort of activism is working on another register—that of hearts and minds, communications and consciousness—and its success or failure must be considered differently. While, at times, playful politics is directed at immediate goals and thus results in a discernable material effect that might easily be measured, the larger war that creative activists are waging is often over how people *make sense* of their world, that is, what constitutes public space, individual liberty, or politics itself. What is at stake is nothing less than what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible," that is, "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (p. 13). Needless to say, a measurement of such a radical shift in sensibility, one that may take decades to manifest, is exceedingly hard to construct. (And, if one were to devise such a tool, it is unlikely that it could measure, or even recognize, the new coordinates that a recalibration of reality would bring into being. The goalposts would have moved.) As Shepard puts it, "different kinds of social relations are produced when people play with politics and power" (p. 23).

The inherent difficulties in determining the efficacy of a playful politics does not, however, detract from Benjamin Shepard's book. Indeed, it is exactly the author's extensive participant-observation, and his willingness to let activists in these movements describe their actions and motivations in their own words, that provides the essential material with which we might develop definitions of "success" appropriate to creative forms of activism. And *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements* provides more than this, it suggests that any success of social movements in the current cultural-political environment depends upon a playful practice, and reminds us that in these times, dreamers may be the real realists.

References

Rancière, J. (2004). *The politics of aesthetics*. London: Continuum.