

## Formal Charges: Mass Mobilizations and the Politics of Form

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After driving a full afternoon, night and the following morning from Chicago to the east coast, I surfaced from a subway station and entered “The March.” It was a little past noon on Sunday, August 29, 2004, and the United for Peace and Justice demonstration had transformed Chelsea into Mass Mobilization—a new, different space formed inside but independently of the city that hosted it. It was no doubt awe-inspiring: a sea of people as dense as a sold-out rock concert—stretched on for blocks and blocks and blocks. With a few square miles of Manhattan mostly closed for business, the stores that remained open served happy if overheated throngs of people full of the spirit of the times. I was pleased it would make a good picture.

At the same time, I just couldn’t force myself to be part of the spirit. The heat was unbearable, and the sensation of being carried blindly forward in an overheated and emotional mass was uncomfortably close to the embodiment of the nation’s recent history. Like many people I talked to during the week-long protests against the Republican National Convention, the demonstrations seemed like the option of last resort: we’ve run out of tactics to defeat the hard-line right; the media are so conservative and consolidated that we can only hope to provide a nice picture and an impressive number; we are so heavily policed and surveilled that the only expression of our rage is to march in polite phalanxes between portable fences, which might be repositioned to arrest us at any time. And yet, I felt compelled to go. I justified it to myself by making the RNC an assignment: I would try to sort through my contradictory thinking about mass mobilization as a viable formal model for considered and responsible dissent.

The mass mobilization—usually called in this country a “demonstration”—has three core formal features. The first is to visibly demonstrate that a large number of people share a common political sentiment. The event must have ‘energy’—and preferably a lot of it—to offer emotionally engage both the people who are there and those who are watching at home. Lastly, the communicative impact of the message and the ‘energy’ is realized through transmissions by the media, so the event’s form must be mediagenic.

In considering these three features of the mass mobilizations—its mass-ness, its cathartic expressivity, and its mediated, communicative orientation, I’d like to avoid questions of political efficacy, on which many doubts about the value of mass mobilization (particularly in the US) have been based. It’s both too easy and too hard to analyze protests in terms of what they accomplish politically. On the one hand, the February 2003 mass demonstrations around the world to prevent the imminent invasion of Iraq by the US clearly failed in their declared objective. On the other, any claim of protest’s irrelevance is counterfactual: it is impossible to prove a policy would be no different in the absence of a demonstration against it. Lawrence Wittner in the *Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists* argues persuasively that anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 70s and 80s were effective slowing down nuclear weapons programs and made it politically impossible *not* to support nuclear arms control, even if treaties and slow-downs were not the immediate result of any given protest. Similarly, who can determine if demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 had any impact on the recent successful collaboration of developing countries to negotiate more favorable WTO rules, even if that ‘success’ falls far short of the goal of dismantling the WTO?

I'd also like to leave aside for a moment the question of the Spectacle as it relates to large protests. Mass mobilizations have been both attacked and defended for their collaboration with Debord calls the Society of the Spectacle, in which events only become realized and deemed important through their representation to non-participants, whose continued non-participation is ensured by their ability to consume the event-as-spectacle. Critics of the protest as spectacle dismiss marches as merely another spectacle in a steady diet of spectacle—a blip on the media radar not worth the considerable time, resources, and energy required to stage them. Proponent of protest as spectacle tend to argue that, since spectacle is what gets attention, making highly seductive spectacles is the only way to reach outsiders, who may be seduced enough to eventually become insiders. While I do touch on questions of media and spectacle, it is less to consider their persuasive or collaborationist effects than the consequence of such strong emphasis on external effects at all.

Rather, I'm interested in a more subjective, difficult, and perhaps even less defensible analysis. What is the usefulness of the *form* of the mass demonstration for articulating a powerful oppositional vision of society, for providing a laboratory for the exercise of liberty-in-community, for proposing models of what democracy might look like? In investigating these questions, I assume that form is neither a natural nor neutral carrier of content. The history of the mass mobilization, the language surrounding it and the sorts of individual experiences it engenders are today inextricably bound up in the form and have inescapable significance for the sorts of proposals the mass mobilization can make.

*“We'll transform the streets of NYC into stages of resistance and forums for debate. We'll draw our examples and inspiration from the brave shapers of history who came before us<those who put their bodies on the line to gain the vote, win independence, end apartheid. We'll harness the spirit that puts our city at the center of the world: creativity, ingenuity, social conscience, grit. We'll show the world what real democracy looks like.”*

-A31 call to action<sup>1</sup>

Over the past five years, much has been written about the differences between old-fashioned large marches and the ‘new’ protests, which include more opportunities for celebratory art and a diversity of autonomous actions. While some differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms may be somewhat exaggerated (a century ago, anarchist and IWW campaigns included music, pageantry, and street theater; Paris in May of 1968 was a wellspring of spontaneous direct action; anti-nuclear protests in the 70s and 80s included choreographed, participatory public ritual plays), the infusion of technology and carnival spirit is a notable feature of contemporary direct action. The weeklong counter-convention events included a bit of the traditional march and decentralized “creative resistance,” kept scrupulously separated. On Sunday, a half-million people joined United for Peace and Justice’s large, traditional march through Chelsea past the Madison Square Garden convention site. Tuesday was designated for a network of autonomous direct actions, which could be joined (or busted, depending on which side of a NYPD badge you were on) by subscribing to a number of cell phone text-message systems.

Despite substantial differences in the look and feel of the two variations on mass mobilization (the large march and the cluster of autonomous actions), both approaches rely on getting as many people as possible to say something similar about a timely political issue in one place and at one time. The tendency for large marches to agglomerate individual political subjects into a mass receptacle for the ideas of a few

experts (and celebrities) has been addressed by the proliferation of decentralized, clustered events, which offer more people the chance to exercise their subjectivity through composing and organizing autonomous actions. Where a large, univocal march remains the central form, ‘creative actions’ end up having a decorative rather than structural function: to provide interest on a long, hot, dull event, to break up the monolithic space with pockets of intimacy, to revitalize protester’s flagging energy. Conversely, a loose network of decentralized, autonomous actions have more poetry (and Deleuzian cool) behind them, but affinity groups may be (understandably, given the extent of police surveillance) secretive, the uninitiated may find it hard to participate, and, most significantly, activists can remain in isolation with those with whom they already share an ‘affinity’ so that arguments about tactics, vision, and politics can be avoided. Certain types of content are ruled out by the very form: to discuss anything in such depth that protesters might vehemently disagree, to address the governing metaphors (rather than ‘issues’ or even ‘conditions’), to adequately represent the complexity of day-to-day organizing and the sometimes tense relationships between groups.

Now, it might be argued that mass mobilizations are not the place to collectively work out our differences of vision. A movement that wears its internal ideological divisions on its sleeve may find it hard to communicate, persuade, and seduce. Internal differences can be worked out by seasoned activists and erstwhile intellectuals. At risk is the temptation to recapitulate old, Catholic dogma of truths for the initiated and truths for the masses. And there is something downright uncanny about a mobilization that embraces a variety of tactics and issues, age groups and lifestyles in which everyone is saying more or less the same thing—a mental monoculture of dissent. When I asked

people on the street why they thought what we were doing was important, I got hackneyed soundbites: we need to send Bush a message, we need to let the country know millions oppose the Bush agenda, we need to tell the Republicans they're not welcome in New York, we need to say NO to capitalism/corporate democracy/business as usual. Its no surprise these clichés were so consistent: rank-and-file protesters simply spouted back what had been on the organizers' websites for months. No one seemed to have the language to describe specifically why it was important for her to be there, what he hoped the march would accomplish, or what role she saw it playing in a broader or ongoing struggle. And there is a palpable reluctance to admit being bored, having low energy, or feeling despair. Only the one first-time protester in my affinity group had the courage to say on Sunday afternoon, "I'm not having fun. I'm tired. I need to sit down." The rest of us felt the pressure to stay 'on message.'

*"Welcome to Democracy"*

-Sign in New York, August 29, 2004

The structural requirement of univocal protest suggests a troubling and surprisingly conservative view of political democracy: unanimity. Part of the purpose of a demonstration is to "demonstrate" that a significant number of people, feel a particular way about a particular issue. Hopefully that number will be significant enough to suggest a majority, but at least it will call into question the existence of a unanimous voice on the other side. In order for the protest to be powerful, it must be coherent and in agreement. The popular protest chant, the nicely syncopatable "This is What Democracy Looks Like," then defines democracy in terms of this univocal protest, in which everyone is staying on message and on beat. Other popular slogans, "Reclaim our Democracy" and

“Save Democracy: Defeat Bush,” has arisen in response to the linguistic violence done by the Republicans who have used the pursuit of “Democracy” to gussy up everything privatization to warfare. But just as Bush makes “freedom” something that can be granted or taken away (the liberation of Iraq, the terrorists who hate our freedoms), liberals and progressives continue the process of reification; democracy is made a thing to (re)claim, to protect. The mass mobilization is positioned as the protector of a reified democracy so completely that it becomes synonymous with the ‘thing’ itself.

Chantal Mouffe proposes a radically different concept of democracy. For them, democracy is at its heart a paradox: a system of organization that derives its sovereignty from an “empty center,” a perpetually unstable locus that can never be claimed by a state, an elite, or a group purporting to represent ‘the people.’ The formation of democratic groups is always imperfect, as every group is defined by its constitutive outside, and the encounter between agonistic groups in the “empty center” of sovereignty is the practice of democracy. Any attempt to hold up a group, policy, or procedure as naturally, inherently, or self-evidently democratic is an act of violent occupation of democracy’s necessarily empty center.<sup>2</sup>

Mouffe’s formulations require a reconsideration of the mass mobilization’s claim to be what democracy looks like. Insofar as the claim is made in the context of powerful political forces working to restrict democracy to the act of voting, it represents an important attempt to redraw the field of democratic activity to include dissent, agonism, and instability. Insofar as the claim presents protest as self-evidently democratic, however, it threatens to ignore the very real (and, in Mouffe’s conception, essential)

division within “the movement” to impose a forced consensus and unanimity that recapitulates in microcosm the forced unity of the dominant order.

*“We felt that art shouldn't be just an ornament, but rather an integral part of the movement. Everything is theatrical. Traditional protest—the march, the rally, the chants—is just bad theater.”*

–David Solnit<sup>3</sup>

Much ‘new’ protest has perceptively noted that if demonstration is spectacle, then it is that brand of spectacle that is theater. Street theater as political tactic is not particularly new, but the proliferation of costuming, ritual, puppets, and caricature of recent years is impressive. At the RNC, Billionaires for Bush presented faux heiresses, bankers, debutants, and assorted bluebloods engaged in over-the-top praise of Bush for safeguarding their fortunes against the interests of the middle class. The Pink Bloque brought its customary sassy, carnivalesque criticism to the streets, while the Khaki Block modeled radical politics burning beneath business casual. But if protest is theater, then it draws simultaneously from several conflicting theatrical traditions.

The most commonly listed desired responses to the theater of protest—identification with the demonstrators and their cause, an opportunity to express political outrage and pent-up emotion—link the protest with the Aristotelian cathartic tradition. The “fear and pity” to be purged in protest might be fear of political isolation and pity for the politically helpless. By joining with our fellows (or by vicariously witnessing our fellows joining together), we temporarily overcome our isolation and helplessness, and it is hoped this catharsis might bring some longer-term change in the individual. Bertolt Brecht, however, criticized the Aristotelian tradition as politically complicit by allowing the audience to cathartically release its political rage, rather than directing it to more revolutionary ends. After the emotional release of the theatrical

event, the conditions and structures that engendered “fear and pity” might persist undisturbed. Brecht’s living theater sought to render its world strange, artificial and alienating in order to suggest to the audience that that world is a construction that might be altered by the agency of the audience.<sup>4</sup>

Insofar as mass demonstrations alienate, to use Brecht’s term, the street and the city from their ordinary uses, they might point to the agency of people to redefine these spaces themselves, in other times and other places than simply during The March. If as in Michel de Certeau’s formulation, the use of the city is a constant counter-text of space implicitly resistant to the imposition of text, map, history, and control from above, then the demonstration is an intensive case of the collective writing of this counter-text.<sup>5</sup>

Hakim Bey, a.k.a Peter Lamborn Wilson, writes of the ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone,’ which sidesteps both the Aristotelian and Brechtian traditions by suggesting the demonstration might be temporary exercise in the practice of freedom, a space where rage and fear can be cathartically expressed while creating a space that offers a form of liberation achievable only in time.<sup>6</sup> But the TAZ is an idealized and fleeting form, and it is meant to never take up residence in space over time. Few demonstrators find the performance of the march fully satisfying as either catharsis or temporary liberation, let alone to bring about the sort of social transformation for which Brecht hoped. The threat of arrest and the fear of brutality hang in the air like omniscient censors, and the march dissolves back into the fabric of everyday life when the last trash is picked up, with neither violent emotional expression nor illustrative possibility ever glimpsed.

*“While mass media brings its viewers the world, the world is also held at bay while the viewer commits h/er gaze to the screen, forever separated from others and from communal space.”*

-Critical Art Ensemble<sup>7</sup>

Even if the mass demonstration is unresolved about what type of theater it is, it's pretty clear for whom it exists. The goal of the protest is to "get the word out," and mass media are required to communicate that word. The media, it is assumed, require a unanimous demonstration for epic aerial photography and succinct examples of colorful images of clever, if slightly outré, events supplied by practitioners of decentralized, creative action. The form and variations of mass mobilization are *designed* to be mediagenic, and many calls for the overhaul or abandonment of the practice have been predicated on the considerable evidence that mass protests do not get the kind of media coverage they used to or that would justify the energy and expense of organizing them. A host of tactical responses have been devised to cope with the problem of the media, bias, and representation, from the creation of Indymedia to autonomous art projects like the Bureau of Inverse Technology's crowd count project, which scientifically computes the attendance at a protest via a balloon-borne video camera and computer algorithms.

The structure of the mass mobilization assumes an external locus of control: the representation of the event is more important than the experience or the content because it has the assumed ability to communicate to "middle America." The politics of crowd counting, in which organizer and police estimations compete for media authority, is based on the belief that a large number will be more persuasive, and in New York, one cynical protester laughed, "I just came to be a body, to stand here and be counted and go home." The arguments, passions, and successes of the activists were irrelevant: what remain influential are only the image and the number. Perhaps responding to the increasing unresponsiveness of government and deterritorialization of capital, the emphasis of mass

protest has shifted from changing government (or corporate) policy directly to changing something far more nebulous: ‘public opinion.’

There is, of course, a much more dynamic relationship between the protest-as-experience and the protest-as-picture. Charles Shaw, an organizer of the effort to send Chicagoans to the UFPJ march, differentiates between the communicative function of the mass mobilization—the need to tell the world a unified no—and the reflective function—the need for new activists to be recruited, the need for old activists to be re-energize, the need for everyone to overcome the isolation of their marginalized political positions. Everyone who has ever been to a large protest recognizes this dual role, but discussions of tactics tend to emphasize the ‘message,’ of which the spectacle of a well-attended or colorful event becomes the vessel.

When the demonstration is treated simply as a vehicle to change vague ‘public opinion,’ many significant questions are ignored. What is the relationship of the demonstration to the site, to local constituents, to day-to-day, specific organizing around particular and local issues? At best, ignoring these questions can mean ‘The March’ exists, as it did at the RNC, as a new geography atop the existing space. The skyscrapers of midtown and the brownstones of Chelsea, the bodegas and the bookshops all became a mere backdrop for the march and the impressive and persuasive picture that would be printed (if all went well) on the next day’s front page. How different is that from the Republican Party, which also hoped to get some impressive and persuasive pictures in the city that experienced 9-11 most traumatically?

There must be a way for mass demonstrations to exist dynamically and supportively with host cities and local organizing. The march from Imolakee to Miami

that preceded the 2003 anti-FTAA demonstrations spatialized the connection between particular labor struggles and the more abstract struggle against the macro-institutions impacting it. Charles Frederick, an artist who worked with gay Catholics at the height of the AIDS crisis, offers another. He defines ‘community animation’ as the type of activist and cultural work that helps a community come into an understanding itself as a historical subject, even as immediate, material needs are addressed. At some point, the communicative function—the telling of the story to the world—become necessary, and the demonstration of that newfound sense of subjectivity will arise organically within the organizing process. This type of demonstration might conflict (ideologically, tactically, or aesthetically) with demonstrations created by groups for whom demonstrating is the primary form of activism. Frederick claims the communicative aspect of the Cathedral Project, in which the gay Catholic group Dignity conducted months of parallel masses outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral as a demand for recognition in Catholic ritual and theology, was destroyed when ACT-UP staged a demonstration outside the cathedral to protest the Church’s policy on AIDS. ACT-UP’s demonstration ignored years of organizing and transformed the space from one of radical ritual practice to strident protest.<sup>8</sup>

At the RNC, the particular work of groups based in New York too often was elided under the mass mobilization’s imperative to send a unified ‘NO’ to the Republicans. When local issues were mentioned, they were used as illustrative examples of the venal acts of the Bush administration, not as opportunities for the worthy, underappreciated, and difficult daily practice of democracy. When mass mobilizations claim to be what democracy looks like, what is the place in the movement for less spectacular activities?

*“Colorful demonstrations and weekend marches are vital but alone are not powerful enough to stop wars. Wars will be stopped only when soldiers refuse to fight, when workers refuse to load weapons onto ships and aircrafts, when people boycott the economic outposts of Empire that are strung across the globe.”*

--Arundhati Roy<sup>9</sup>

For several years, I’ve been intrigued by the words for ‘demonstration’ in various Latin-derived languages: manifestación in Spanish, manifestazione in Italian, manifestação in Portuguese. “Demonstration” sounds clunky and downright didactic next to “manifestation,” with its links to terms like the polemical “manifesto” and the spiritual “made manifest.” If we thought of our mass protests more as manifestations of ongoing work being done elsewhere, rather than as political work themselves, how would they be different?

In some ways, the demonstrations against the RNC *were* manifestations of widespread sentiment and existing organizing. The mobilization against the Bush administration has been vast and unprecedented: retirees, union members, and students travel to faraway swing states to do the sweaty and sore-footed work of campaigning; teachers educate each other and their students about ‘No Child Left Behind’ and the economic draft awaiting many young people after school; librarians compile folders full of material about foreign policy; artists, writers, and documentary-makers produce a vast body of work pillorying the Bush administration. But this work remains primarily electoral in focus and isn’t the sort of direct action and generalized disobedience Arundhati Roy suggests is necessary to defeat not just Bush but wars of all kinds—those fought with bombs and laws alike.

What is the difference between telling and embodying? The mass mobilization is surely a part of embodying—the being in common with others, even if it is merely ‘against,’ the creation of temporary spaces to taste the sorts of thrill and spontaneous generosity of liberation, the communication of that experience to others are all vitally important. How to make the visible protest to spring organically from and be enriching of more mundane, survival-driven organizing is still an open question. Inclusion is also at stake here: as long as demonstrations are ‘big events’ that make invisible or even disrupt community organizing, those involved in the hard work of daily survival are unlikely to bother to join, and protests will stay as young, white and middle class as they often are.

My favorite part of the week of counter-convention protests suggests part of what manifestation might look like. After the main march on Sunday, ten thousand demonstrators converged on Central Park to contest the city’s refusal to allow the protest to take place there. The convergence was not a demonstration but rather a gathering of people united in a common cause but coming from radically different places politically and geographically. The park became a space to engage in discussion with other protesters that the march’s chanting, crowds, and heat had made impossible. The gathering was not militant or disobedient, but it marked a particular refusal to allow the State to monopolize the definition of a particular public space for its own ends. While it wasn’t going to stop any wars or even change the outcome of the election, the gathering suggested that similar gatherings in public spaces throughout the country might go a long way toward disrupting anti-loitering laws, for instance, or schemes to sell public property to private interests. The gathering made no claims to be the work of politics or the site of

democracy; rather, it was an imperfect coming-into-embodiment of the work we're engaged in every day of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> A31 Action Coalition, "A31 Call to Action." <http://www.a31.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe, Chantal, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Andrew Boyd, "The Birth of a Movement: Extreme Costume Ball," *The Village Voice*, July 19, 2000. <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0029/boyd.php> (accessed October 11, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, "Short Organum on Theater," trans. and ed. John Willett, *Brecht on Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Bey, Hakim. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York, Autonomedia: 1985), [http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz\\_cont.html](http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html) (accessed October 11, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Critical Art Ensemble. *Electronic Civil Disobedience And Other Unpopular Ideas*. (New York: Autonomedia, 1996), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick, Charles, "The Cathedral Project" (lecture, Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, Urbana, IL, June 26, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Roy, Arundhati, "Tide? Or Ivory Snow? Public Power in the Age of Empire" (speech, American Sociological Association, August 16, 2003), [http://www.democracynow.org/static/Arundhati\\_Trans.shtml](http://www.democracynow.org/static/Arundhati_Trans.shtml) (accessed October 11, 2004).