Conceptualizing Culture in Social Movement Research

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Embodying Protest: Culture and Performance within Social Movements
Jeffrey S. Juris

Cultural approaches to the study of social movements are by now well ensconced in the pantheon of social movement theory as the field has moved beyond the overly rationalist, materialist, and institutional biases of resource mobilization and early political process traditions. Responding to the challenge of new social movement theorists and the general trend towards cultural approaches across a range of fields over the past two decades, social movement scholars have produced numerous accounts of the relationship between culture and political protest (see, e.g., Fantasia 1988; McAdam 1988; Melucci 1989; Laraa, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks 1995; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Jasper 1997; Rochon 1998). Despite critiques of the overly strategic and static notions of culture in many of these accounts, as well as a recognition of the productive, contested, and dialogical nature of culture (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Polletta 1997; Steinberg 1999), there has been little attention paid to the role of performance in forging alternative emotions, meanings, and identities among activists (but see Fine 1995; Eyerman 2006; Tilley 2008; Hohle 2009).

This chapter explores the links between culture and performance in social movements. Based on my observations of recent movements, including Occupy and the movements for global justice (see Juris 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2012), and other relevant writing on protest and performance, I argue that it is through cultural performance that alternative meanings, values, and identities are produced, embodied, and publicly communicated within social movements. A focus on cultural performance also helps to bridge the mind/body divide that, with the exception of the literature on social movements and emotion (see Goodwin,
Jasper, and Polletta 2001), continues to plague accounts of movement cultures. In particular, emphasizing how protest performances are embodied allows us to explore the way meanings and identities are expressed through the body (Scheper-Hughes and Locke 1987), as well as the body as a lived subject and agent (Lyon and Barbalet 1994). After an opening section that lays out the theoretical framework, I examine the links between culture and performance through an analysis of different modes of protest performance and then conclude with some reflections on the political limitations of performative protest.

First, however, an important proviso is in order regarding the danger of over-extending the concept of performance. As Goodwin and Jasper (1999) have suggested in relation to the idea of political opportunity, the notion of performance can be used in so many ways and to cover so many things that it becomes meaningless. As Burke (2005) writes, “It is surely necessary to ask whether social life does not count as a scenario or a performance?” (43). In some sense, this is the point. To the extent that culture is performative, any practice that involves the production of alternative meanings, ideas, or identities has to be understood as performance. Nonetheless, there are certainly activities less directed at public audiences. In the realm of social movements, these include letter writing, phone calling, and other direct forms of lobbying; recruiting members of a community to attend a meeting; or the ongoing work of maintaining radical bookstores, squatted social centres, and urban gardens. Such practices have a performative dimension, but they are not performances in the same sense as a mass direct action, street march, protest song, or guerrilla theatre presentation. It may thus help to think about social movement practices as arrayed along a continuum from more to less performative. It is also important to point out that performance is not unique to social movements, but given activists’ need to communicate with a larger public and to produce oppositional discourses, social movements often make use of performance as an important strategic and tactical tool. In this chapter I explore the more performative dimensions of social movement practice with a particular focus on the most highly visible performances that are meant for wider audiences, including other activists, policy-makers, and the general public.

**Culture, performance, and social movements**

According to Ann Swidler (1995), the sociology of culture has been characterized by two basic theoretical traditions, each of which has been applied to greater or lesser degrees in the cultural sociology of social movements. On the one hand, the Weberian tradition has focused on meaningful action at the individual level. The goal of such analysis is to grasp how particular ideas or world views – such as the Protestant ethic – shape individual behaviour. The Weberian influence can be seen, for example, in social-psychological accounts of social movement culture, such as the literature on framing (see Snow et al. 1986) or studies of how movements shape individual values and beliefs (see Rochon 1998).

On the other hand, the Durkheimian tradition understands culture in terms of publicly shared symbols and collective representations, which constitute rather than merely reflect group life (Swidler 1995). Although he was greatly influenced by the Weberian problematic of culture, Clifford Geertz (1973), whose work ushered in a cultural turn across the humanities and social sciences, is perhaps more indebted to Durkheim in his view of culture as a system of meanings embedded in public symbols as opposed to ideas that exist inside people’s heads. On this view, the role of the analyst is to interpret cultural meanings as texts, not to explain how ideas motivate action. As a cultural anthropologist, my own view of culture is more Geertzian, although Geertz’s hermeneutic approach requires some adaptation. As William Roseberry (1989) forcefully argued, viewing culture as a text removes it from the material process of its creation and implies greater uniformity than warranted. In this sense, attention should focus on the process through which cultural meanings are produced and the struggles over meaning waged by differently situated actors within complex fields of power (see Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Burdick 1998).

Many social movement scholars have also criticized the tendency towards reductive, static views of culture, particularly in relation to theories of framing, viewing movements as sites of cultural contestation and meaning production in the context of ongoing political struggle and dialogical interaction (see e.g. Tarrow 1992; Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Polletta 1997; Steinberg 1999). The important point for our purposes, which has been neglected in the social movements literature, is that alternative cultural meanings and identities are largely produced via embodied cultural performance. As Jeffrey Alexander (2004:531) has suggested, “cultural texts are performed so that meanings can be displayed to others”. A focus on performance allows us not only to appreciate the dynamics of cultural production and communication but also to move beyond the mind/body dualism that underlies so many accounts of social movement culture.
The theme of performance has not been entirely absent from mainstream work on social movements. Indeed, Charles Tilly has long written about the importance of protest repertoires—public meetings, demonstrations, rallies, petition drives, and so on—to the sustained, organized forms of claims-making that characterize social movements. A given repertoire involves a particular “ensemble of performances” (2004:3). This theatrical metaphor signals the “clustered, learned, yet improvisational” nature of claims-making routines between the aggrieved and the object of their claims (Tilly 2008:14). Repertoires may vary, yet, “on the whole, when people make collective claims, they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair” (ibid:14-15). Nonetheless, as he has himself admitted, Tilly (2008:xv) did not engage the wider literature on performance, and thus never explored the finer details of performance in a way that might shed theoretical light on the relationship between performance, specific bodily movements, and the production of particular cultural meanings and identities.

Social movement theorists influenced by the dramaturgical tradition have explored how ritualized symbolic performances express conflict and communicate power (Taylor and Whittier 1995:176). Specifically, social movement dramas demonstrate how antagonists have violated cultural norms regarding the proper use and distribution of authority (Benford and Hunt 1992:38). Performing in the context of movement dramas also has an emotional impact, generating feelings of agency and experiences of self-transformation (see also Jasper, this volume). Such dramaturgical models begin to get at the intersections of culture, emotions, and performance, but the links between them remain undertheorized. Recent approaches to performance involve a more fluid view of culture than the fixed cultural scripts of the dramaturgical model (Burke 2005). Writing on ritual and social movements has done a better job of specifying the links between emotions and protest (Jasper 1997; Collins 2001), but the performative dimension is often obscured. It is only in recent work on social movements that engages the wider literature on performance (e.g. Reed 2005; Eyerman 2006; Jurs 2008a, 2008b; Hohle 2009; Bogad 2010; Haugerud 2010; Shepard 2010), where the links between protest performance, bodies, and cultural creativity is coming more fully into view.

It is in the domain of cultural performance that the production of alternative meanings and identities is brought together with image and emotion through the enactment of embodied tactical repertoires. Hymes (1975) defines performance as “cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience” (Burke 2005:38). Performances are composed of “strips” of “restored behavior”, learned repertoires that are both symbolic and meaningful and can be creatively arranged and rearranged to express particular ideas and identities through rehearsal, adaptation, and experiment (Schechner 1985). Performances thus communicate verbal and non-verbal messages to an audience (Bauman 1975; Beeman 1993), while allowing participants to experience symbolic meanings in the context of ritual interaction (Schieffelin 1985).

At the same time, performances are constitutive of meanings, identities, images, feelings, and even bodies (see Butler 1997). As Debra Kapchan (1995) maintains, “To perform is to carry something into effect” (479). Moreover, the enhancement of experience and heightened intensity of communicative interaction associated with performance make it a powerful vehicle for social change efforts. Richard Bauman (1975) put it thusly, “Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience... When the performer gains control in this way, the potential for transformation of the social structure may become available to him as well” (305). Moving beyond overly cognitive approaches to social movement culture and identity, Eyerman (2006) contends that performance “adds drama and activates emotion... [It] focuses on corporeality and presence; performance is what makes a movement move and helps it move others. The performance of opposition dramatizes and forcefully expresses a movement through designed and stylized acts, communicating protest beyond the movement itself” (198).

Although many activists are highly aware of the performative dimensions of protest and, in my experience, social movements are often extremely self-reflexive about the strategic pros and cons of different types of protest performance, it is true that not all of the practices I examine here are interpreted by all activists as performances. For example, a mass counter-summit blockade may have clear performative dimensions from the point of view of the analyst, but for many activists the blockade may be viewed in practical terms as an effort to shut a meeting down, to disrupt the functioning of an institution viewed as illegitimate, or to prevent a particular policy from taking effect. Such interpretations will vary according to the performative tactic (guerrilla theatre is more likely to be perceived by activists in performative terms than, say, a sit-in to disrupt the operation of a nuclear weapons factory) or to the particular activist group involved. For example, some groups may be more open to mass media-oriented strategies that rely
on performance for achieving visibility, while more militant collectives may reject media strategies in favour of producing more direct effects such as those highlighted above. Here I am using performance from an analytic rather than an emic perspective, although many activists I have worked with recognize the performative and "practical" dimensions of their protest tactics.

Social movement performances vary in relation to the identity and goals of participants, the specific practices and forms, the degree of formality and improvisation, the level of danger and intensity, and the context and scale. Different modalities of protest performance use bodies and space in particular ways to produce alternative cultural meanings, identities, and forms of emotional experience. In what follows I explore the dynamics of performance in relation to four types of performative protest: macro-level protest events, micro-level embodied performances, protest theatre, and musical performances. These categories have been distinguished for heuristic purposes, and in practice they overlap. However, separating them this way allows me to analyze particular features associated with each type. The first two categories refer to scale and level of abstraction. On the one hand, focusing on macro-level protests allows me to examine the wider logics and cultural dynamics of mass actions as strategic social movement performances. On the other hand, exploring micro-level embodied performances, which often (but not always) take place in the context of mass actions, allows for a consideration of the particular mechanisms and effects of specific embodied tactics. The final two categories are actually subsets of the latter, but their particular features – the higher degree of planning and formality in the case of theatre; the rhythmic and vocal qualities in the case of music – make it appropriate to treat them separately.

**Macro-level protest events**

The largest-scale social movement performances are the macro-level protest events that activists use to make their struggles visible to a wider audience and to generate powerful emotions and identities. These are the marches, rallies, public meetings, direct actions, and riots that comprise Tilly's protest repertoires. These large-scale cultural performances constitute social processes "by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander 2004:529). The two most significant strategic innovations in recent decades have been the rise of the mass-counter summit action within the global justice movements and the emergence of extended physical occupations of urban space that ushered in the recent Occupy movements. Although using different mechanisms – one relying on direct confrontation within a delimited time-space, the other on simultaneous extended non-violent occupations of multiple spaces – each of these tactics uses performance to communicate dissent via media spectacle and to produce and embody an alternative set of cultural ideas, identities, practices, and forms.

Compared to institutionalized protests, relatively free-form mass actions and occupations are more visually and emotively potent. This is so because activists use their bodies to physically enact confrontation and occupy space through ritual performance, and because they introduce elements of danger, uncertainty, and play, generating a "liminoid" space (Turner 1982) where alternative worlds can be imagined and political utopias prefigured through lived experience. The difference between scripted demonstrations and unpredictable actions is captured by Don Handelman's (1990) distinction between events that "present the lived-in world" and events that "re-present the lived in world". The former, including marches and rallies, directly display, declare, and reflect the world as constituted. The latter, including open-ended performances such as carnival, entail comparison, contrast, and critique. Events of re-presentation have a distinct liminal quality involving a lack of hierarchy and strong egalitarian sentiments, or "communidades" (Turner 1969). As events of re-presentation, large-scale public occupations and mass actions shine a critical light on the existing socio-political order and make visible alternative forms of organization and sociality. The novel cultural and political forms produced within Occupy and other recent movements, including the consensus-based decision-making processes, the General Assemblies, and the "horizontal" camp and affinity group structures (horizontal in theory, if not always in practice), have a clear egalitarian and communitarian thrust. At the same time, mass actions and more confrontational moments during public occupations, such as evictions of Occupy encampments, are shot through with liminoid moments of terror, panic, and play, elicit high levels of "affective solidarity" (Juris 2008a, 2008b).

Counter-summit protests and public occupations are complex ritual performances that involve "imagined resistance": struggles that are at once embodied and mediated (Routledge 1997). In this sense, the kinds of protest performance examined in this chapter have a symbiotic relationship with the mass media (see Gitlin 1980). Externally, large-scale direct actions are performative terrains that allow protesters to produce and communicate alternative cultural meanings and ideas.
to an audience comprised of other activists, policy makers, and the general public. Such “critique through spectacle” (DeLuca 1999) conforms to prevailing media logics, a way of seeing and interpreting the world via the production formats and modes of transmission of mass media as entertainment (Altheide and Snow 1991). In an era of “inforainment” unusual, spontaneous, dramatic, and emotionally satisfying events often garner significant media attention while less visually and emotionally compelling incidents go unnoticed (Ibid; Castells 1996). By staging spectacular “image events” (DeLuca 1999), protesters make unequal power relations visible and challenge dominant symbolic codes (Melucci 1989).

Internally, mass actions and public occupations provide multiple “theatrical spaces” (Hetherington 1998) where alternative identities are performed and emotions are generated via ritual conflict and the lived experience of prefigured utopias (see also Flesher Fominaya this volume). Image is specifically linked to emotion through embodied performances that generate powerful feelings and prepare activist bodies for action. As Randall Collins (2001) suggests, mass protests are characterized by “high ritual density”, resulting from the bodily awareness of co-presence among ritual participants who are physically assembled and share a mutual focus of attention. As performatives rituals, mass actions and occupations operate by transforming action: amplifying an initiating emotion, such as anger or rage, and transferring it into a sense of collective solidarity involving feelings of exhilaration, passion, and euphoria. Throughout a protest action, activists often experience periodic intervals of fear, panic, and even boredom as confrontations with the police give way to long hours of waiting and anticipation, contributing to the emotional diversity and complexity of performative protest rituals.

Mass global justice actions such as the 1999 blockade of the WTO Summit in Seattle, which prevented delegates from meeting during the first day of the proceedings, or the 2000 protest against the World Bank and IMF in Prague, which blocked delegates inside the congress centre, involved multiple embodied confrontations that generated spectacular images and communicated powerful cultural critiques of the socio-political order (Jurus 2008a, 2008b). At the same time, the shifting feelings of excitement, uncertainty, danger, and play, together with the sense of co-presence and common purpose among so many individuals and groups engaged in radical dissent and egalitarian forms of organization, generated a great deal of affective solidarity.

Although less confrontational, the mass performances of the recent Occupy movements achieved similar, if less intense, media and emotional effects by extending public occupations across space and over time, producing the sense of a powerful, rapidly growing movement that elicited comparatively positive media coverage while generating emotional attachments and the rise of a new subjectivity (the 99%) across, but not erasing, important differences of race, class, and generation. The occupations were a performative terrain constituted by a massing of bodies in space that allowed protesters to communicate alternative cultural meanings and ideals with respect to the distribution of political and economic power and to experiment with new forms of horizontal democracy and direct democratic decision-making (Juris 2012). In this sense, large-scale protest events such as mass global justice actions and occupations generate alternative meanings, identities, and emotions while bringing together cultural and embodied practices. In relation to the other types of protest performance examined here, macro-level protest events are uniquely suited to producing feelings of belonging to a larger movement and eliciting images that convey the existence of a mass-based collective actor.

Micro-level embodied performances

The protest actions described above are large-scale cultural performances, but they also provide terrains for myriad micro-level performances and struggles. The difference here is primarily one of analytic abstraction. In Tilly’s terms (2008), “ensembles” of small-scale performances bundle together to constitute larger repertoires of dissent. Whereas in the last section I was concerned with broader cultural logics and mechanisms, here I am more interested in the specific dynamics of embodied spatial tactics. At Occupy Boston, for example, protesters frequently engaged in performative struggles with the police and city authorities over the placement of their tents, the boundaries of their camps, and the kinds of materials that could be used. Sometimes groups of protesters would use undressed, non-violent bodies to peacefully resist attempts to move them or prevent them from circulating, while on other occasions protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks and black hoods would assume more defiant postures. Such performative militancy was more pronounced at Occupy Oakland, given the aggressive stance of the police there and the widely circulating images of black-clad “anarchists” tangling with riot cops, but similar performances were also apparent to varying degrees at other camps.

More common at Occupy Boston were the creative, festive, and ironic performances of colourfully dressed protesters communicating their
messages to drivers and pedestrians through the diverse signs carried by individual protesters ("Banks get bailed out, we get sold out!"); "End the Wars and Tax the Rich!"; "Make too much money for government assistance, but enough to support myself. I AM THE 99%!") and visually arresting scenes like a group of young men at the camp's permanent vigil decked out in red Speedos holding placards conveying messages such as "Speedos Now!" or "1% of this SPEEDO is covering 99% of my?" [this symbol is referring here to 'ass']!" The use of Speedos was meant to create a visual spectacle while the associated slogans were largely nonsensical, using humour and absurdity to capture the attention of onlookers, although the creative adaptation of movement imagery might also be read as a whimsical metaphor suggesting the disproportionate influence of the 1%. At the same time, struggles over the legitimacy of tactical performances (militant vs. non-violent, ludic vs. serious, mobile vs. rooted in place, etc.) reflect internal cultural-political differences within movements that may result in the generation of competing ideas, meanings, and identities.

Mass global justice actions made particularly evident the links between distinct modes of embodied performance, alternative meanings, and space. At the mobilization against the World Bank and IMF in Prague in September 2000, for example, protesters divided the urban terrain into colour-coded zones to accommodate diverse modes of performative protest (see Juris 2005, 2008b and Daphi in this volume regarding similar terrains of protest in Genoa). The Blue March involved high-risk militant action featuring masked black-clad protesters encounter scenes of violent confrontation with the police; the Yellow March an innovative mode of confrontational yet non-violent protest led by the Italian White Overalls wearing absurdly decorated helmets and foam padding and advancing behind large plastic shields; the Pink March a space for traditional non-violent sit-ins; and the Pink and Silver Bloc a mobile terrain for playful theatrics, drag, and burlesque dancing in the spirit of Reclaim the Streets and queer protest, from the gay liberation movements of the 1960s to Act Up and the struggle against HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s (Reed 2005; Shepard 2010). Competing cultural meanings were embodied via diverse protest performances, inscribing distinct messages on the urban and media landscapes (Juris 2008a, 2008b).

During such actions the activist body is transformed into a site of political agency, as protesters produce and disseminate diverse ideas, meanings, and identities through "incarnate sign practices" (Halton 1995), resist disciplinary control through struggles over urban space, and express divergent political messages through alternative forms, styles, and spatial configurations of protest. Diverse tactics involving contrasting activist "techniques of the body" (Mauss 1973) reflect more than instrumental choices; they also help produce and embody alternative political visions, discourses, and identities. At the same time, myriad micro-political battles are waged around the distribution of bodies in space (Feldman 1991) in the context of struggles over the production and control of physical territory. During counter-summit actions young activists also enact alternative "subcultural styles" (Hall and Jefferson 1976), appropriating, recombining, and assembling diverse commodity signs to express distinct identities and political messages.

The use of activist bodies in political protest has a long history, particularly in the context of the non-violent civil disobedience popularized by Gandhi and southern Blacks during the US civil rights movement. Randolph Hohle (2009) has written about the role-playing trainings that taught Black civil rights activists how to control their emotions and use their bodies to maintain a neat, orderly appearance of "good citizenship" and to most effectively absorb the physical blows meted out by the police. Physical performances such as "covering up" were meant not only to shield the body but also to "to minimize affect outbursts, thus, ensuring idealized citizenship was embodied in all performances" (295). Albeit in a different setting and with a distinctive set of meanings attached, I have participated in similar trainings that prepared activist bodies for performative action leading up to global justice mobilizations. As with the larger protest events they are often a part of, micro-level protest performances thus bring together meanings and embodied practices in ways that generate alternative cultural forms, values, and identities. However, whereas macro-level protest events produce larger collective affects, subjectivities, and representations, micro-level protest performances generate particular embodied images, meanings, and emotions that are specific to and often serve to differentiate between different kinds of activist groups.

Protest theatre

The embodied performances I have been considering thus far are theatrical, but they lack the higher degree of formalized staging that characterizes theatre as an art form. In this sense, they are relatively spontaneous and tactical and tend to make sense only within larger protest events. Other kinds of social movement performance are more explicit in their adoption of the structure and format of theatre, including a clearer
(but not complete) separation between the performer and the audience, greater levels of previous rehearsing, and a more significant likelihood of repetition. These relatively formalized theatrical routines are just as likely to stand on their own as they are to form part of macro-level protests and marches. Moreover, they may be tactical in the sense of being designed to accomplish an objective (interrupt a meeting, hijack a press conference, etc.) but they are less likely to be coordinated with other tactics to achieve a specific strategic goal (blockade a summit, resist an eviction, etc.). However, the line dividing theatrical protest from "protest theatre" is a fine one, and the division is relative and porous rather than absolute. Again, these distinctions are meant to be heuristic and they are frequently violated in practice.

Protest theatre encompasses diverse kinds of more or less highly formalized performative political interventions, ranging from agitprop, street and puppet theatre, to elaborate media stunts and culture jams. Since the late 1960s protest movements in the West have regularly employed highly visible forms of "guerrilla theatre", a term coined by Ronnie Davis of the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1966 to refer to a mobile, simplified form of theatre enacted by small bands of activist performers to shock, surprise, and raise awareness about an issue (Schechner 1970). The goal is "to make a swift action or image that gets to the heart of an issue or a feeling – to make people realize where they are living, and under what situation" (Ibid:163). Guerrilla theatre can take place on a pedestrian thoroughfare, during a protest march or action, or at a site targeted to maximize political and/or media impact such as when the Yippies dropped hundreds of dollar bills on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange or when Jerry Rubin attended a House Un-American Activities Committee Hearing dressed in Revolutionary garb. Guerilla theatre has been used over the years to bring visibility to US-perpetrated or supported war atrocities in Vietnam, El Salvador, and Iraq; to raise awareness about the indignities and violence of apartheid; and to dramatize the harm wrought by neoliberal globalization and corporate greed.

Activist groups such as the Black Panthers were particularly known for their use of guerilla and other forms of protest theatre. As T.V. Reed (2005) has argued, the Black Panther Party and the wider black power movement of the late 1960s largely operated through theatrical performance, building on Black Nationalist art and theatre. The party's theatrics, which included sensational speeches, press conferences, and protest arrivals, involved "highly dramatic, stylized confrontations, often involving guns and the police" (42). Guns were meant to convey a symbolic rejection of the state's monopoly on the use of force and a public affirmation of the right to self-defence in the face of violent acts of white supremacy by citizens and agents of the state. Among the most famous acts of Black Panther guerrilla theatre was the televised entry (and subsequent press conference on the capitol steps) of 30 young Black men and women, armed with loaded handguns and dressed in black berets and leather jackets, into the assembly chamber of the California Legislature while lawmakers were considering gun control legislation targeting the right of the Panthers to carry weapons. Such mass-mediated performances used strategically assembled, adorned, and decorated bodies to convey particular cultural meanings and identities.

In contrast to the serious and militant images displayed by the Panthers, playful and ironic street theatre troupes such as Billionaires for Bush have used humour and satire to protest corporate globalization and growing economic inequality during elections and anti-corporate protests. At the 2008 National Republican Convention, for example, Billionaires performed as "Lobbyists for McCain", wearing suits and top hats and displaying signs such as "No, you can't!" and "Loyal to Big Oil". During the financial crisis that same year activists attended protests against Wall Street as "Billionaires for Bush Bailouts", posing as wealthy bankers and declaring, in reference to President George W. Bush's bailout of the US banking industry and his neglect of ordinary workers, "Thanks for the $700bn check!" (Haugerud 2010:114). Such performative guerilla tactics break down the divide between performer and spectator, as spirited exchanges often ensue between actors and audience. Participants can always interpret the meaning of such exchanges differently, but such interactive performances open up a space for questioning received assumptions and, at least potentially, developing alternative cultural-political understandings. Like other modes of activist performance, protest theatre attests to the generative nature of social movement culture and its capacity to move beyond the divide between mind and body, the cultural and the physical. In contrast to other forms of performative protest, however, formally theatrical types of protest are capable of producing more targeted messages, of more directly engaging an audience, and of being deployed in more diverse and everyday settings.

Musical performances

Perhaps no artistic form has been more central to contemporary social movements than music. Whether consumed during live performances,
enjoyed within more intimate movement settings, or performed by activists during public meetings and protests, music works on a visceral level, providing an emotionally vibrant site for condensing, reflecting on, and generating alternative cultural ideas, values, and identities. Moreover, the shared, deeply embodied nature of musical production and consumption makes it an ideal mechanism for eliciting powerful emotions and strong feelings of affective solidarity. From the folk music of the Popular Front in the 1930s, the great civil rights songs of the 1960s, the folk revival and burgeoning rock scene in the anti-war movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the emergence of anarchist punk in the 1970s and 1980s, to the popularity of Musica Mestiza in many global justice networks in the 1990s and 2000s, particular musical traditions have long been closely linked to specific movements.

Musical performance helps to disseminate movement ideas and values into wider socio-cultural contexts and forms. In this sense, music is a mode of cognitive praxis, “contributing to the ideas that movements offer and create in opposition to the existing social and cultural order” (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:24). Music provides a way for social movements to mobilize past traditions and generate new ones by depositing alternative meanings, feelings, and identities as sedimented cultural memories. In this sense, the traditions encoded in music constitute “a river of embodied ideas and images between generations of activists” (Ibid:2). Music was a particularly important dimension of the US civil rights movement, but also helped to link that movement to past and subsequent traditions and struggles. For example, as Eyerman and Jamison (1998) point out, the song “We Shall Overcome” was originally a spiritual first put to overtly political use in the labor movement and transmitted to civil rights activists via their contact with labor organizers at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. After becoming a civil rights movement “anthem”, the song found its way into the musical repertoires of movements globally, often reproduced as embodied ritual performances where participants sing together with their arms linked (2–4).

Music is thus not only a site for the production of alternative ideas, values, and identities; it is “deeply physical”, generating and conveying particular feelings and serving as a “rehearsal for, and in demonstrations as an act of, putting your body on the line” (Reed 2005:29). Musical performance within social movements is at once cognitive and affective, generating powerful feelings of solidarity while preparing activist bodies for action. One of my most deeply ingrained memories from global justice mobilizations was the time I sat with dozens of protesters from

around the world in a mobile eatery at the Piazza Kennedy convergence center in Genoa during the mobilization against the G8. It was 18 July 2001, two nights before the “siege of the red zone”, and we were both exhilarated and terrified given the climate of repression and fear (Juris 2008b). Huddled together and drinking beer under a tin roof to avoid the rain, we began to sing “Bella Ciao”, the song of the anti-fascist resistance in Italy. I still recall the sense of togetherness, determined commitment, and even love for my fellow “combatants” as we sang, O partigiano, portami via o bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! Bella, ciao! O partigiano, portami via, ché mi sento di morir (Oh partisan, carry me away, oh goodbye beautiful, goodbye beautiful, goodbye beautiful! Bye! Bye! Oh partisan, carry me away, because I feel death approaching).

Like guerrilla theatre, embodied musical performances can also be deployed as protest tactics. For example, in the civil rights movement, singing was often used to portray an image of organized, non-violent resistance as opposed to disorderly mob action (Reed 2005:29). Musical performances frequently become the focal point of actions, helping to guide protesters through the streets while generating passion and energy. In this sense, activist marching bands such as the Infernal Noise Brigade from Seattle and Pink and Silver samba troups including the UK-based Rhythms of Resistance played important roles in guiding protest actions during the height of the global justice movements (Juris 2008a, 2008b; see also Bogad 2010). Their musical, drumming, and dance performances embodied a stark contrast to the aggressive style of militant protesters and the violent demeanour of the forces of law and order while convening a “rhythmic crowd” capable of generating intense passion and excitement. In sum, musical performances bring together the physical-emotional and cognitive-ideational dimensions of protest, eliciting powerful feelings even as they generate alternative ideas, meanings, and identities. With respect to other kinds of protest performance, music operates on a unique corporeal-sensory register, producing deeply felt and ingrained rhythmic and harmonic effects that link activists and movements together across spatial, generational, and oppositional-popular culture divides.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the dynamics of cultural performance within contemporary social movements. A focus on protest performance allows us to move beyond overly static and reified conceptions of social movement culture. I have specifically argued that it is through
cultural performance that alternative meanings, values, and identities are produced, embodied, and publicly communicated within social movements. I have also suggested that an emphasis on cultural performance can help bridge the mind/body dualism that characterizes much of the literature on social movements and culture. In this sense, as the examples considered here demonstrate, cultural meanings are not only cognitive; they are embodied and experienced emotionally in the context of social movement performances. Moreover, as we saw in the case of contrasting micro-level performances during mass occupations and global justice mobilizations, alternative embodied tactics generate competing ideas, values, and identities, reflecting internal cultural diversity, tension, and struggle within particular movements.

What about the impact of performative protest? As I have suggested, large-scale protest events produce both internal and external effects, and the same is true for other modes of activist performance. With respect to their external dimension, social movement performances generate new ideas, images, and cultural practices that may call attention to an issue, shape public debate, introduce new frameworks, motivate further action, and potentially help transform wider cultural patterns. As Angélique Haugerud (2010) writes, cultural resistance more generally “can be a vital step in helping to destabilize political categories, reframe debates, introduce new ideas and norms, rewrite discourse, and build new political communities” (126). In terms of their internal dimension, activist performances can produce more or less powerful emotions and help forge new identities, playing a key role in the emergence of new subjectivities and the creation of the affective solidarity needed for ongoing organizing. To the extent protest performances contribute to new meanings, discourses, and identities they may contribute to longer-term cultural change, while the feelings of collective agency they produce can help to sustain movements.

At the same time, performative protest also has several major limitations. First, the ever-growing influence of infotainment means ever-more spectacular performances are often required to break through busy news cycles, while protesters and observers may lose interest over time as once-compelling performances lose their visual and emotional novelty. Arguably, this is what happened with global justice counter-summit protests (Juris 2008a, 2008b) and may have occurred with the public occupations of the Occupy movements in the absence of the evictions in the late fall of 2011. Activists are thus under pressure to constantly innovate in order to develop protest performances that maintain public interest and remain emotionally compelling for participants, a dynamic that can often detract from the underlying socio-political, economic, or cultural issues that motivate protest in the first place. The reliance on emotion and spectacle is thus a double-edged sword: not only can it help movements develop and expand, but it can also detract from their ability to develop more sustainable structures that allow movements to survive over the long haul.

Second, there is also the question of how protest performances are understood by a target audience. Audience interpretation is an interactive process (Alexander 2004:564), involving not only the production of new meanings, values, and identities, but also their reception by members of an audience. With respect to social movements, Eyerman (2006) has suggested that “the gap between performance, the messages which movements wish to convey, and its reception is a problematic which both activists and sociologists must ponder” (199). In this sense, despite their best efforts, even the most playful and non-threatening activist performers such as Pink and Silver samba dancers or Billionaires for Bush may leave their observers as confused as they are delighted. More problematically, as Bauman and Briggs (1990) point out, performances can be extracted as texts, removed from their initial setting, and reinserted into new discursive contexts. In relation to social movements, for example, journalists, police, government officials, local business elites, and other power holders can create or influence media packages (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) that manipulate images of protest, decontextualizing and reinserting them into alternative narratives that may trivialize, marginalize, or disparage protesters. Indeed, activists who rely on performative violence such as Black Bloc or Black Panther members are often constructed in public discourse as dangerous criminals or even terrorists (Juris 2005, 2008a, 2008b; Reed 2005). Social movements thus have to negotiate the strategic tension posed by the need to generate spectacular images and the potential loss of control over the meaning of their performances.

Even when activist performances achieve their intended cultural effects, making conflicts visible, framing political debates, and helping to shape public opinion, the question remains as to whether and how this might lead to tangible gains. As Bogad (2010) reminds us, in and of itself, carnivalesque protest, for example, “does not change the fundamental relations of production or distribution in the greater society” (555). The gap between discursive and material change thus represents a third limitation of performative protest. Indeed, as Reed (2005) points out, to the extent the Black Panthers succeeded in helping to empower black communities, this depended as much on their
grassroots organizing and social programmes as their protest theatrics. In this sense, protest performances may be necessary, but they are not sufficient to bring about social change. Similarly, social movement performances may create the conditions for policy change by raising awareness about particular issues and influencing public debate, as well as by generating the identities and emotions needed for sustainable mobilization, but it is up to elected officials to translate that potential into actual legislation. For example, the public occupations of the Occupy movements may have shined a critical light on the negative impact of inequality, but bringing about material change will require either more institutionalized political action (though not necessarily by movement actors) and/or long-term organizing efforts to build support for and generate the directly democratic institutions capable of effecting more radical transformation. In this sense, performative protest should be understood as an important strategy and tactic of mobilization that is best employed in the context of a range of other tactics and strategies, but performance itself should never be seen as the raison d'être of social movements.

Notes

1. Somewhat confusingly, Johnston and Klandemans (1995) refer to more Weberian approaches to culture as “performative” in that individuals can use particular cultural “tools” (Swidler 1986), be they symbols, worldview, stories, or rituals, to develop specific strategies of action. Rather than performance, however, it seems to me that such a view involves the enactment of culture. Although I agree with their critique of “systemic” approaches to culture as articulated by Geertz for overlooking differentiation and meaning construction, I do not believe the culture as tool-kit metaphor (see Swidler 1986) is a convincing alternative. Instead, a more adequate conception of culture as performance, as argued here, would focus precisely on the construction of meaning embedded in public symbols and discourses, as well as struggles over such meanings.

2. For Turner (1982), the “liminal” is a functional requirement of premodern societies, which compensates for the rigidity of social structure. The “liminal” corresponds to dynamic industrial societies and is often associated with social, even revolutionary, critique (52–54).

3. The Guy Fawkes mask, an image of resistance appropriated from the film and novel "V for Vendetta" by members of the Anonymous hacker collective, became an early symbol of Occupy Wall Street.

4. The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army is another recent example of innovative and playful guerrilla street theatre that challenges the divide between performer and audience by inserting its “targets” into the structure and flow of the performance itself (see Klepto and Evil 2006; Bogad 2010). For more on the use of camping humour, wit, and ridicule in the context of creative direct action protest see Shepard's (2010) analysis of Act Up and the group's use of performance to combat the AIDS/HIV epidemic.

5. Musica mestiza is a fusion style of music popularized by musicians such as Manu Chao that features politically charged lyrics and mixes traditional rhythms and sounds from regions such as North Africa, Latin America, and Europe with contemporary rock, punk, ska, reggae, rap, and rap among other genres (Jurus 2008b).

6. The Infernal Noise Brigade played a fusion-oriented, musica mestiza-like mix "including elements of drumline, taiko, Mughal and North African rhythms, elements of Balkan fanfares, breakbeats, and just about anything else" (cited in Bogad 2010:545).

References


