Overlooked and Underused: The Power of Communitas in the ‘Flash Mob’

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Abstract:

Resistance to institutional values and defiance of social construction has often taken the forms of public performance and protests, in recent decades these attempts have included the ‘flash mob.’ This work examines these primarily peaceful cases, with historical reference to the Civil Rights movement in the Southern United States. Through anthropological insights from the literature on social movements, crowd psychology, and performance, I aim to arrive at a better understanding of the dynamics taking place when people join together for collective action, including manifestations of communitas and solidarity, as well as the contributions of non-hierarchical power on greater social change.
INTRODUCTION

If our race has concentrated on one task, and one alone, that of building a society in which Man can live – then the sources of strength on which our remote ancestors drew are present also in ourselves. (Levi-Strauss 1961)

When individuals and groups of people join together in public to take social action, a variety of phenomenon can result: everything from joyful celebrations and peaceful demonstrations to violent protest and revolutionary movements. Sometimes the goal is just to generate a few moments of surprise entertainment or to generate confusion through nonsensical actions. At other times the goal is more serious, to make a statement or give voice to a cause, or even to make demands on society’s institutions of power through claims of contention. Historically, the analysis of crowds has reached differing conclusions regarding whether they have an inherently violent nature. This work endeavors to better understand what mechanisms help or hinder positive social change through peaceful collective action. First, we examine the results of ritual that facilitate changes in individual identity through communitas. Then, we will see whether these diverse enactments, have or even intend to have, the power to affect changes in society. While the flash mob case and other protest movements are distinct; they are also comparable enough to be examined together. Keeping their distinction in mind, many of these events are still made of the same ingredients, namely groups of people acting toward a shared goal in public
space, so they do exhibit common characteristics. Where they do not, engaging this place of contrast can also lead to a more in-depth understanding of how social action works in groups.

Many forms of the mob were present throughout history in many places around the world, and especially prevalent during the 1960’s, but the characteristic ‘Flash mob’ first appeared and popularized a name for itself when a man named Bill Wasik sent persons, one after another, in a department store to ask for a non-existent object they were calling a ‘love rug’ for their pretend commune (Gore 2010). This turned out to be a telling symbol to begin with, for a movement that would be centered on emotions caring and hopeful social affects. While it is often argued that this was a meaningless act, in my analysis what was important is that they were making the establishment question what it knew. Their request made it appear that there was something obviously common to the public, whose existence the store was not aware of. For a retailer, whose business it is to know, exactly what the people are demanding so that they provide and charge as much money as possible for it, this was a small, but disconcerting jolt. It is possible to deduce a message from the item they consistently requested, if one sees the ‘love’ rug as an example of something that is missing from an environment that concerns itself only with profit. Within a seemingly meaningless act, there was indeed a deeper meaning encoded.

In my experience, to be able to live peacefully while also in relationship with others, to move through the inevitable conflict without resorting either to isolation or violence, is something that most of us seek. As was hinted by Levi-Strauss, what if the main purpose of humanity is just to remember how to live suitably in a society?
CHAPTER ONE: IDENTITY AND COMMUNITAS

A mob is a strange phenomenon. It is a gathering of heterogeneous elements, unknown to one another; but as soon as a spark of passion, having flashed out from one of these elements, electrifies this confused mass, there takes place a sort of sudden organization, a spontaneous generation. This incoherence becomes cohesion, this noise becomes a voice, and these thousands of men crowded together soon form but a single animal, a wild beast without a name, which marches to its goal with an irresistible finality.

(Urs Stäheli 2011:73)

One reason the flash mob is worth examining is because it plays for a few moments with joy in community, to capture just for an instant an image of what is possible. Meditation\(^1\) flash mobs serve as reminders of possible inner and outer peace. As one enters an otherwise usually busy place, in the rush of the city where people clutch their bags and check their wallets, one is shocked to find people actually sitting, with unguarded belongings, and their eyes closed. In Oprah’s surprise \(^2\) dance mob, her previously tame audience suddenly turned into a flash of hope. Before the performance everyone had stood apart, not touching but now they were holding hands in physical solidarity. These kind of flash mobs are eruptions of joy and playfulness for their own sake.

\(^1\) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRU-tmeixC0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRU-tmeixC0)

\(^2\) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CttB6FmMgT4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CttB6FmMgT4)
Besides them, there are other cases that express a specific message intended to affect a change in society, such as the flash mob marriage. In the public space of a shopping mall, marriage vows between a man and a woman, also contained a message of support for same-sex marriages. Whether performed for the reason of revolution or celebration, flash mobs intrigue us.

Durkheim said that “Because people do not perceive what the cause of the force of the collective conscious is, they believe it comes from a force outside themselves.” Canetti detects the unity present in a crowd: “the man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body.” (1962: 16) Admittedly, what is visually striking about Oprah’s surprise flash mob is that it yields the appearance of a single organism acting as one. However, I will argue that when the social becomes visible, it is not at the expense of the individual. Instead a complex negotiation begins between many parts of oneself, including the social aspect. The near-religious feeling of togetherness and ability to be in accord with one another is reminiscent of Durkheim’s search for solidarity in ‘secular substitutes’ for religious ritual. (Turner 1982: 118, Wolff 1960: 148) We find that his elusive solidarity is fully present in the flash mob, exemplified by the relating and meshing between the many individuals.

Additionally, an attunement with the surrounding crowd of onlookers is created through an element of pop culture. One tool used by the flash mob to bind the people together is music, not just any music, but popular music, the music that everyone around the world knows the words to,
that which immediately elicits those sentiments the people already have in common. Although everyone has their own associations, feelings, and memories embedded in them, the popularity of these songs simultaneously provide a place of overlap in pre-existing meaning, which makes it a powerful method of cohesion. The dancing and the music appear to be pointless or meaningless but they actually are needed to create comradery among strangers.

Flash mobs are often described as spontaneous in nature (White 2006) because of their affect on audiences, but we also know there is usually an organizer who gives general instructions to the people, to make the flash mob appear to be a spontaneous happening, beginning and ending in a quick flash, but this is still not the full story. The real spontaneity of the flash mob is found in its response to current events, or a sudden reaction spark of news in the environment. For example, at the death of pop star Michael Jackson, flash mobs started popping up all over the globe, across national boundaries, to express their respect through his songs.

**Defining the mob in a ‘flash mob’**

Indeed, anyone may “become a member of the crowd,” and “any member of the crowd could become a leader.” (Stäheli 2011) We will establish who constitutes this crowd in a flash mob, and scrutinize the importance of its having a leader. Most simply, a flash mob is a group of people who come together briefly in public to perform some out-of-the-ordinary collective action. With so many people standing around, passing by, or stopping to watch, as well as subsequent online or television viewers, it might be difficult to determine with whom our study begins or ends. Canetti has noted this tendency of crowds to grow: “As soon as it exists at all, it
wants to consist of more people.” (Canetti 1962) Here, I am limiting my analysis to those physically present, in the immediate circle of onlookers who stay to watch what is unfolding; as well as, to the actual performers of the action who congregate.

Le Bon claimed that “A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master,” but this is not as clear cut as it seems. Certainly in a flash mob the first person to start the performance gains the initial attention of the audience, but can hardly be called a leader, since s/he would likely be viewed as rather silly without the same actions from the others who join. Le Bon’s words can no longer be applied to most social movements, because they have no single leader, and especially because if anyone does try to step forward as a leader they are quieted or displaced, and “immediately put down by the movement itself.” (Castells 2011) Lead ideas can be more important than leaders, and this is made clear in Wasik’s first group of gatherings at the beginning of the movement now called flash mobs. Generally under flash mob etiquette, the lead organizer of the flash mob should remain anonymous in name, but there is usually someone who does something to get everyone’s attention and to indicate that something different is starting to take place. In one example, Wasik’s radio, with pre-recorded instructions for the mob, could not be heard over the noise of the crowd, so the crowd chose what it wanted to represent when it saw a man holding up his two fingers to make the peace sign. (Walker 2013) As the scene developed, everyone got behind this member and began to chant Peace, Peace, Peace, repetitively for about one minute before disbursing. It was instead an idea, which arose to lead the crowd, from within the crowd itself. Castells has noted that having “no leader means everyone is responsible.” (2011) See also Woods 2012. Therefore, the presence or absence of a charismatic leader with the rare gift to cajole the masses is not what is fundamental
to the flash mob. Alongside Tarde, I will argue that “Writers have frequently made the mistake of speaking of great men when they should have spoken of great ideas. (Stäheli 2011:74)

Instead, what matters is the individual identity of each member, through their relationship to the idea. Ants have been known to be extremely social creatures: “A single ant begins by leaving the others and undertaking the work; then it strikes its neighbors with its antennae to summon their aid”, and the process of imitation begins. It is not so obvious to what extent “the individuality of the single ant” matters, as reported by Stäheli, but we do know that this is prime for human beings because of the meaning involved in each one’s actions. This is what Weber said determined that an action was indeed social for humans. While on the surface, a description of ants working together presents a near perfect description of flash mobs, perhaps the analogy is extended too far, because humans add an extra element of the attraction to ideas that provide meaningful action in relationship to others.

In Le Bon’s view, the crowd “introduces a mode of collectivity without identity.” (Stäheli 2011: 67) However, I think it is important to notice that this is exactly the place where a particular individual conviction is available to meet another person’s similar coinciding conviction; first one other, and before long the entire group “moves toward one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou.” (Buber in Turner 1995: 127) Not as a confused mass or a wild beast, but perhaps intelligently. I offer that it is where convictions overlap, or match closely enough, that shared beliefs can mesh into shared meaning and shared actions, since one’s meaning is greatly tied to and aligned with one’s identity. (Castells 1997: 6-7) So let us examine individuality and identity in the crowd more closely.
Collectivity with Individuality

I am wary of the notion that “becoming a crowd means to produce de-individualized elements,” that crowds cause one to “lose their autonomy,” “relinquish their individuality,” and “cease to be individuals.” (Stäheli 2011: 67-68) Speaking of a crowd as if it is an entity which has a pre-formatted will and direction, toward some highest good, or to say that it wants something implies mystification, or personification. Positivism, perhaps unavoidably, has taken us away from the power of the individual, as Durkheim recognized of aboriginal cultures, that their totems and taboos represented not only their god, but their selves. The only undeniable fact is that the subject at hand is persons, with identities, interacting socially. The concept of “the social” so often mentioned in Anthropology has, often carried some vague ghost-like notion, ungraspable, without a location. This is perhaps because the concrete aspects of the social are not seen by means of institutional effects, but are most easily found amongst and within, each of the individual actions that compose it.

When one sees the first person take a bold action, alone, s/he must surely, ask themselves: is this act in accordance with who I am, is stepping out a risk I worthy of taking, can I support this? Otherwise there would be no glue, to keep the group acting in the same direction. Even when the action becomes violent, it is not because of the inherent nature of crowds, but that actors are inspired by a common idea of injustice.

This is most true for the flash mob, where attendance is planned ahead of time, and one can consciously decide to ignore the invitation or not make the effort to get there. Even onlookers,
by their interest and decision to stay rather than walk away are not passive participants. They seem to have found a place where identities already overlap, and where a pre-existing collective unity can be recalled and utilized for the task.

I have taken issue with the premise that spontaneous crowds have been hypnotized to imitate action, mindlessly. In Tarde’s work, the [hypnotized] person does not submit himself to the other person, but becomes the other, or comes to be like the other. (Stäheli 2011: 74) The resulting phenomenon is not the same as the simple experience of being part of an everyday community. Thus the debate about whether or not the social is an emanation “greater than the sum of its parts,” as though some extra new thing could “emerge.” Perhaps the answer is that we become what we already are, but aware of our whole selves in a new way that we might not know without the others. As Turner has said, “The notion that there is a generic bond between men, and its related sentiment of “humankindness,” are not epiphenomena of some kind of herd instinct but are products of “men in their wholeness wholly attending.” (1995: 128) I argued that, instead it is a self with individuality intact that must be in some agreement.  

As we make room for the individual within a crowd, we must also ask to what extent does his/her identity shifts inside the flash mob crowd. “The question people most ask themselves is not ‘what kind of world do I want to live in’, as ‘who are we?’ ” (Slocum 2008: 220) See also Tarrow 2011, and Polletta & Jasper 2001.

4 Metaphors for this early philosophical theory of emergence were primarily drawn from chemistry, notably the emergence of water by combining hydrogen and oxygen. (Stäheli 2011)
Identity Politics

It is widely agreed upon that identities are made, but less widely discussed that these identities are continually dynamic. We see the group versus group conflict, “portioning the world into types of people” but on the other side is the fact that a variety of diverse identities are able to co-exist, if not thrive as seen in the flash mob, depending on which identity is invoked. I use the term invoke, in contrary to Slocum’s evoked, because it highlights the responsibility required to call upon ourselves to act in accordance with another, regardless of what is passively evoked by another’s narratives. This nuance leaves room for the likelihood that a person does not blindly accept the identities strewn on him by society, but is able to discriminate, which of what is offered, is authentic to who s/he is. One can form new identities, or accept none, just as in gender, some people now categorize themselves as neither especially masculine nor especially feminine, as well as related ranges from bisexuality to asexuality because individual people have demanded it. This more malleable view of identity, places me firmly on the agency side of the structure-agency debate. Despite what has been evoked in us by another person, or by our culture, we can still consciously choose an overlapping identity from which to relate. While it is helpful to give attention to the reigning discourse as described by Foucault, we cannot ignore the non-dominant discourses, because: “Naturally identities that start as resistance may...along the course of history, become dominant in the institutions of society.” (Castells 1997: 8)

In the meditation flash mob, one sees Indians wearing American-styled jeans, Americans draped in Indian saris, alongside someone’s Irish child, someone’s Chinese grandmother, with Muslim hijabs throughout. What is it about these gatherings that enable the same groups who might
otherwise feel alienated from each other, disparate in age, ethnicity, religious adherence and economic status to join together and act toward a common goal? These are, afterall, some of the most common ways to divide. I suggest it is an active choice of identity. I propose that with the aid of music or an ideal, it is the feeling of being of one accord that alters the way each one sees himself, and how each one sees oneself in relation to the one beside them, and the way that these two features of identity resonate in all involved. If as Slocum asserts, people tend to have multiple identities which they can emphasize in various contexts and different times, then admittedly, those same people in one flash mob may disagree on another social issue, but for that moment, they are working in the same vein, finding an echo in one another.

I have argued that this is not as likely as it is that they are finding another sense of themselves. The example of Oprah’s surprise flash mob is a good example:

“It was kind of an out of body experience because I was watching myself and my mother, and I didn’t really feel like there was anybody else there in that moment, I felt like it was our moment.”

“At one point we all turned around and put our hands on eachother. I had no idea who was touching me or who I was touching, but it was all like we were one.”

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5 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoUY3PHas1o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoUY3PHas1o)
The participant feels she was not there. This can be seen variedly, either something mystical took place and her person qualities no longer existed, or as I will argue, she saw another aspect of her identity become accessible via what it was like to be with others in a way that left behind her everyday sense of self. She, as she would normally perceive herself, that is. Is her identity truly being lost or just shifted?

Many causes and cults have urged us to give up or identity for the sake of the community, but I think this is neither advisable nor necessary. One can instead experience another aspect of her collective identity, made visible through this interaction with others. In short, the situation does not have to be an oppositional question of individual identity versus social identity. It is perhaps better viewed as a continuum of identity.

The existence of this other, with shared ideas, empowers the individual to step out, literally, in the flash mob. Hence, rather than a loss of identity, there is a gain of a collective identity through that same individual identity. It is not that the individual somehow loses control, and ceases to have a self; rather one gains a broader sense of it, and seeing that self as an individual is not at the forefront. The individual consciously finds within himself, something of the other that s/he can also identify with and take agreeable action with, and that something is overlapping meaning which opens the door to experience of unity.
Communitas for Its Own Sake

As Jasper (1997) has pointed out, “many of the different emotions that trigger protests are inseparable from the moral order.” Emotions experienced in a flash mob include utter surprise, togetherness, and hope. Experiencing a flash mob could be one of the most exciting things to happen in your day. Those who are watching once they realize that something out of the ordinary is happening start to question if what they are seeing is real.

“What was that? I’m telling you that is what I was thinking the whole time: what is this and how did it happen? It was everybody coming together, uniting, harmonizing, synching it all up together.”

The meaningfulness of the experience is founded on the solidarity discovered with all these different others.

“Most importantly, we wanted to show how we can communicate our message that climate change can be spoken about in a positive manner by a wider audience, communicate our message that climate change is relevant to all of society and communicate our message that young people from a diverse range of backgrounds can be united on this issue, by doing things like this to inspire us all in a creative, energetic and passionate manner.” (Gore 2010)

Mobsters are allowed to feel free for a moment—and this might only serve to reinforce the norm—as Gluckman proposed, acting merely as release valves. This seems to be the case in the

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoUY3PHas1o
wearing no pants\textsuperscript{7} on the train flash mob, mobsters for one day can have their release—then thereafter, they put their pants back on for 364 more days, or until the next flash mob.

Often the mobsters’ intention is to influence the public, to make them stop to think or change their minds, to shock them out of a sleepy existence. They simply open up the possibility that maybe other extraordinary things could happen again. We could dare to connect with strangers; in fact, look, we are doing it now! Dilthey also saw “every act” itself as an “execution of a purpose. The act was not done to express the purpose but to fulfill it; nevertheless to an outside observer it does in fact express what it fulfills.” (Turner 1982:14)

\textit{From Affect to Effect}

Jacobsson and Lindblom have gone as far as placing “morality” and “sacred ideals” at the heart of social movements. (2012) Since Durkheim’s delineation between psychology and anthropology, we have been careful not undermine the importance of social aspects of humanity; but, we also do not want to make the opposite mistake of denying the role of the individual person. Just as anthropologists are beginning to work with neuroscientists to incorporate other understanding into its own field\textsuperscript{8}, I also advocate moving toward an interdisciplinary approach. Aminzade and McAdam, have taken the lead in re-introducing emotions into our conversations (2001). Goffman adds, “when an individual appears before others, he knowingly and

\textsuperscript{7} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GI-AIRJYrLo

\textsuperscript{8} http://scan.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2009/12/03/scan.nsp032.full.pdf+html
unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part.” (1959:3)

According to Canetti:

“There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. In the dark, the fear of an unexpected touch can mount to panic. […] All the distances which men create round themselves are dictated by this fear. They shut themselves in houses which no-one may enter, and only there feel some measure of security.”

This sense of fear and isolation, alongside the dual burdens of the bureaucracy of state, and of our very lives, can find release in a flash mob. Even if the feeling of wonder is only transient, for that moment the experience widens the idea of what is possible in life. From the standpoint of onlookers, the normal expectation has been disturbed, and the humdrum of everyday life shifted to excitement seemingly without a cause. Partly because of the loss of the nuclear family, and in the west the separation of households from other generations and extended family, there is a hunger for connection to others. Having learned the way things will seemingly always go, to the extent of becoming suppressed by the norms and order, people seek relief from the boredom of office jobs. For those first few seconds, the walls between humans living in modern times become malleable, and the sense of loneliness produced by mundane norms of the enclosed city living are, at least momentarily, forgotten.
“The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is
pressed to body; a crowd, too, whose psychical constitution is also
dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses
against him. As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he
ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count…”

(Canetti 1962: 16)

Canetti continues to describe the fear of being touched in “the way we move in a busy street, in
restaurants, trains or buses” and to prescribe the crowd as the only solution to these problems. I
do not agree that it is only within crowds that man can become free of this fear, being touched by
a stranger in a massage session for example, does not make most people afraid. However I think
his point is salient, that this fear has been deeply ingrained in most of us through socialization,
and that being in a crowd provides a special permission to access multiple others. The fear
Canetti talks about and the excitement of the flash mob are closely related; each emotion can
meld into the other depending on the circumstances. Both from the viewpoint of the performers
and the audience, emotions play an enormous role in the unfolding event. The quality of sheer
joy exhibited is overwhelming. “Some emotions - such as love, loyalty, and reverence - clearly
are more mobilizing than others. Optimism and confidence are frequent accompaniments to
protest, but so are anger, and indignation, fear, compassion and a sense of obligation.”

(Tarrow 2011)

Just as Morris has noted the importance of individual agency (2000), Turner “tended to regard
the social dimension of the individual as communits, essentially a liminoid, voluntaristic mode
of relating, a choosing of one another by total, integral human beings with limpidity of consciousness and feeling resulting, and sometimes the spontaneous generation of new ways of seeing or being.” (1982: 118) I too have intended to stress the importance of the individual within social movements, the individual’s identity itself, and the role its construction plays in providing the power to join solidly in communitas. Analysis of civil rights movement is rich in application to many of the concepts and problems here in evaluation; particularly in terms of identity constructions, communitas through music, as well as its violent and non-violent components. We will look at communitas in this movement and the Occupy movement in comparison to flash mobilization.
CHAPTER TWO: COMMUNITAS AND POWER

The conditions of our times, as the Occupiers show, do not simply require new policies, but hope, new visions, and a resurrection of utopian thinking. (Langeman 2013: 520)

Gluckman maintained that allowing women the opportunity to exert power over men, not only protested the status quo but strengthened it. "Allowing people to behave in normally prohibited ways, gave expression, in a reversed form, to the normal rightness of a particular kind of social order." (Gluckman, 1956: 116) Conversely, I tend to agree with Turner who saw that those involved in ritual were not yet what they would be: “Liminal phenomena are not merely reversive, they are often subversive, representing radical critiques of the central structure and proposing utopian alternative models. (Turner in Moore et al 1977:46) Afterall, some changes, as great as revolutions do in fact occur, and the structures don’t bend as easily without some spark of resistance. Perhaps flash mobs are not yet what they will be.

Flash mobs can be viewed as rites of passage in the sense originally defined by Van Genep: “rites which accompany any change of place, state, social position, and age.” (1977) Perhaps this is why so few study the flash mob, it cannot easily be held by one name. Is it a ritual, a ceremony, a celebration, a protest, a performance, and/or a marketing ploy? Of course the

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9 It should be noted that some instance of flash mobs show other unintended consequences. Attempts to co-opt the flash mob’s power for other causes, include violence, media-misrepresentation and as marketing ploys, such as the existence of some overly-planned commercial flash mobs which are mainly being “co-opted” as marketing tools. (Anderson 2013) Nevertheless, this does not diminish the power of these activities to connect individuals in solidarity. Some of the rehearsed flash mobs, can be some of the most touching. They are recognized as aberrations, and such attempts do not overshadow the original intention and only help to prove the power inherent in the solidarity of the flash mob. For example, The popular London’s Liverpool Street Station flash mob in January
answer is all of these, and more, but for our purposes, the focus is not on institutional aims to maintain its neo-liberalism.

The essence of liminality is that it “evades ordinary cognitive classification” being ‘neither-this-nor-that.’ One quality that Turner emphasized was that in post-tribal instances, the ritual has become a matter of choice, something for the individual to do with their leisure time. While the flash mob is not the same as a typical Ndembu initiation, few would dispute that there is a sense which our society is either seeing or desiring to see many changes, in the economy and the environment, for example, and they are often described as crises. Therefore, some aspects of the liminal threshold can relevantly be drawn upon to illuminate the flash mob.

Flash mob affects remain longer than the initial event, through subsequent online views and comments. As “seed crystals”, they also have the power to build the repertoires that can change the conversations in the wider discourse. (Calhoun 2005:13) Individual influence on society is not minimal, when all of these institutions consist of individual people who, from inside, can carry out or can resist carrying out its goals. Individuals influence is particularly useful as institutional structures start to weaken and fail, such as the banks around the world, and the U.S. auto industry for example.

Many Flash mobs may not necessarily take on institutions of power directly, or try to wield the same power as those institutions. This is deliberately in consideration that institutions such as

2009 became a target for mimicking by T-mobile’s television advertisement, but less than one month later 12,000 people turned up to reclaim the station for a fun, less choreographed flash mob. (Gore 2010)
the laws and courts are far too heavy and slow-moving. In contrast, flash mobs are more nimble, malleable, and able to influence their communities, directly.

The power debate is often framed as people fighting over the same finite resources. Some would argue that flash mobs can only have short-term surface effects. However, if we think instead, of power in terms of changing minds, then we understand the power of communitas as quite fine a result on its own. A Flash mob has immediate result as a powerful reminder the togetherness and cooperation we seek. But could flash mobs go the way of movements like occupy?

**Defining Power**

Power has been described as zero-sum, where there is always a loser (Giddens 1982), as well as interdependent and cooperative (Piven 2008), or with an emphasis on relation through networks (Castells 1997). I examine the nature of power in the flash mob, as a different kind of power than the “power over” someone or something, but will also examine the “power to” influence minds of those not a part of the group. (Castells 2011) Even when these authors try to step away from traditional notions of power, they still revert back to framing the properties of power in terms of “power over” how it can be used to “dominate” but what of the thousands of people who struck, marched, rioted and demonstrated on behalf of interests other than their own?” (Piven 2008; Castells1997; McAdams et al 1997: 2)

Piven speaks of power as interdependent, but she has forgotten that some have more to lose than others, or a greater consequence to their loss. She uses the example of people with more assets still needing those “below” to “clean toilets”. While this is true, that the elite depend on the non-
elite for some things, it should be emphasized that there is still an imbalance of power. The imbalance is to be found in the consequence of not having the need met for which you are dependent.

While I see power as more interdependent than not, there is something missing in Piven’s account. To continue her landlord-tenant example, “landlords have power over their tenants because they own the fields the tenants till, but tenants have power over landlords because without their labor the fields are idle.” Idle fields and loss of money considered to be extra, is not such a heavy burden to one who has had many years of profit from ownership of fields, but for those who work in those fields and depend year to year on its success for their basic needs the consequence is heavier. Piven prescribes the temporary giving up of what one needs from the other. However, since the imbalance of power is so often in favor of the landlord, labourers may not be able to afford to forego income when sustained action is required to make an impact. In short, interdependent power does not hold equal power for all parties.

That is, the things for which the elite depend on are weighted less-heavily than the things they can keep from the non-elite. An unclean toilet, or the lack of a babysitter is a small issue compared to the impact of losing one’s entire job. Because loss of lifestyle is not as detrimental as loss of livelihood, in the civil rights bus boycott example, people organized carpools, so that they could continue to get to their jobs. While they had the resources through cooperation to stand against the bus owners; they did not dare put their jobs, in service to the elite, in jeopardy. According to Morris, mobilizations must develop rapidly” and “time itself is a crucial resource”. (2000) This may be true, but more emphasis should be placed on the fact that movements gain
validity through repeated action, and “scripts” sustained over time. (Piven 2008) As well, Piven relates the importance of acting at certain moments, when broader changes are more possible due to other environmental factors present at that time. A moment like this was seized with the fall of the Berlin Wall. At a time when the government had temporarily relaxed the rules of crossing from east to west, one ordinary man took an ax to the wall in frustration, and he was followed by others, until a mass of ordinary people were tearing it down. In the days thereafter more people would become aware of their power, and encouraged to continue this action in other places along the 111.9 km wall. At some point, even the guards of the wall joined in.

In Piven’s thought, there are simply times when the status quo is more open to a shift, and thus there are in history more opportune moments to withhold consent. (2008 )

It is true there are certain times when chance is more favorably oriented toward change. (2008) However, King stressed the importance of not waiting for the right time to pursue equality in his Letters from a Birmingham jail. He also argued “We come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than ‘freedom and justice’.” (King 1958:62 in Morris 2000 :448) This statement is used by Morris to support the idea that Christian values were already naturally in support of the movement, and “grafted onto” an already existing framework of beliefs. Instead, I argue that with this statement, King actually turns these traditional beliefs upside down, re-interpreting and re-defining them to fit the current need. The highly valued

10 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK1MwhEDjHg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK1MwhEDjHg)

“patience” of the biblical psalmist, is turned on its head and made to serve its near opposite, which is the “freedom” to have what you want now. Other beliefs are entirely at odds with the idea of resistance, such as the doctrine that one should “turn the other cheek,” if wronged. When Rosa Parks was arrested for sitting in the white section of the bus, igniting the bus boycotts, it was her humanity that allowed her to defy the driver. Rather than quoting lofty religious values, she said that she was simply tired from a long day’s work.

**Power of Communitas**

It is as though each of us has a “peace” face and a “war” face, that we are programmed for cooperation, but prepared for conflict. (Turner 1982:11)

The score-keeping models assume that people are most motivated to act based on self-interest, but I offer that there is still a different kind of cooperation than these. What if people can be motivated to act based on the interest of the entire crowd? This is closer to what is seen flash mobs today. Flash mobs, seem not to be the former, that is, they are not based on Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest. Instead they are often through mutual interest, celebrating amongst themselves, but the greatest impact is the hope they share with their audience of onlookers, as well as the potential for their ideals to reach into institutional values. Some whites did support the black members of their community. According to Tarrow, “equal opportunity was a useful bridge…while white liberals were most offended by the contradiction between the value Americans place on rights and the denial of equal opportunity to African Americans.” (2011: 146)
Morris described the church in the civil rights movement as agency-laden; this is an overstatement of their power, in my view (2000). His use of the term agency-laden, inaccurately suggest that there existed an overwhelming burden of power held by the church, but that doesn’t make sense in light of the fighting for rights, imprisonment, and loss of life that occurred among blacks. While the black church might have had relatively more power than a black family alone, its agency was only beginning to infiltrate other institutions like the systems of law and education, which was still primarily partial to whites.

Morris is right that churches have impressive social networks of fellowship with each other and close relationships among church members (2000). However, the argument that the moral beliefs of the church are what enable social justice movements is not entirely accurate. Morris’s argument also assumes a unified idea of what these terms mean, when in actuality they vary with the number of separate denominations, and also from person to person.

One easily finds contradictory notions and advice, in various denominations, and texts contain elements of attention to this earthly world and another heavenly realm. The commitment to brotherly love may have worked to cement a non-violent approach to the action that was taken, but “the church’s transcendent belief system” itself could just as easily have been used to support a logic of inaction\(^{12}\), to leave the world as it is, since after all it was not meant to be one’s eternal\(^{13}\) home. We are all aware of cases where religious values have been distorted

negatively and used to justify violence instead, such as Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army, Islamic suicide bombers, and the Christian inquisition, for example. Therefore I argue that it was the flexibility and amenable nature of religion that was most applicable to the struggle because it could be used toward support of multiple narratives. But not this alone, like flash mobs, it was the singing together and the prayerful music that united the churches.

“The singing, testifying, preaching, and praying at the mass meetings mobilized the emotions such that "the enthusiasm of these thousands of people, swept everything along like an onrushing tidal wave" (King 1958: 61 in Morris 2000)

Within the many definitions of power, is the question: “What is a particular amount of power used for?” (Giddens 1982:228) I agree that people do want their basic needs met, but I offer that they also want something more intangible than material goods and institutional change. If it can be said that they challenge anything consistently, it is the isolation of modernity. One can have a meaningful experience, with a group of people you have never met.

In the “Here Comes the Sun” flash mob, for example, they just wanted to bring inspiration in and of itself, to simply encourage a group of people who are unemployed.

13 http://biblehub.com/niv/ecclesiastes/1-2.htm

14 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHK2lxS5Ivw
“I hope the performance brought smiles and hope to the people who were at the office. What a beautiful song - perfect choice for this flash mob.”

“Sometimes you need more than just bread and beer to live. Sometimes you need something that makes you smile, something that makes you happy.”

The Oprah’s surprise participant is also confident that she has experienced some form of power. The energy was something that I had never ever experienced in my whole life. It’s like if you could have plugged each one of us into an electric socket, we could have electrified the entire city for a year.

Similarly, in the No Pants flash mob, not to wear pants is enough, to be suddenly present in a world where one does not have to conform to a pre-determined normal mode of behavior. Sometimes a great change is attempted. Sometimes the action is playful and seemingly not purpose-driven. But it is difficult to capture the effects of a flash mob on the people throughout their day, the actions they take, choices they make differently, or the feelings they take away. Not just to their homes, but to their jobs, their jobs in institutions, and perhaps positions of power.

**Breaking Habits**

Indeed, what is most often required is not only a transformation of habitus themselves through a perhaps arduous retraining, but also transformation of the very conditions, emotional and otherwise, of the production and reproduction of those habitus. (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005)
Communitas as an emotional power is useful in providing an experience of meaning overlooked by usual society. (Langman 2013) It can also help to break the patterns of habit that are continually reconstructed based upon precedent. (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005) Instead of repeating the same old habits, through a new repertoire of demands, communitas can be the power that fuels invention of different messages and actions whose aims that are more beneficial to the whole, since they were born out of the experience of communitas. “A considerable effort at consensus mobilization is often necessary to break constituents of their inherited habits of thought.” (Tarrow 2011: 145)

We don’t really know if flash mobs will remain a means to a specific end, solidarity, or if it might mutate into something more focused on institutions. What we do know, is that whether it is the power to create community alone, or the power to affect change more directly, there is a power underutilized and sometimes forgotten, in the event called a flash mob. Flash mob goals usually involve fun first, and then highlight the importance of a different set of values than the ones currently practiced by institutions. Deep joy and mischievous play are the means by which they get their values across, whether it is riding the subway together without wearing pants, or freezing\(^{15}\) in place at a busy train station, however ridiculous the action seems, they are always challenging the norm in some way, and they are powerful reminders that we can together do so, that there is a safety in numbers to challenge the status quo. Flash mobs are often criticized for not using this power more constructively, to put their energy toward challenging a

\[^{15}\) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwMj3PJDxuo
specific change. Sometimes they do, such as when people suddenly disrobed their outerwear Heathrow airport to reveal t-shirts\(^{16}\) with the same message printed onto them:
“STOP Airport Expansion.” But true to the nature of the unpredictability of a crowd, flash mobs do not allow themselves to be held by a single agenda.

**Building Repertoires**

Movements “innovate around that basic script, much as jazz musicians improvise on a basic tune. (Tarrow 2011: 118) It takes many such enactments of resistance, sustained over time to affect change. Tarrow and Tilly’s work on cultural repertoires of contention can also be helpful to understanding flash mobs, even though the flash mob focus is more utopian than economic in nature. Using existing public infrastructure such as trains, squares, parks, and other communal spaces, flash mobs have enacted their performances, most often of popular music.

“This is one of the most powerful demonstrations of solidarity I have seen in many years of activism. Not only has it renewed my faith in the cause of social justice but inspired me to attempt something of a similar nature.”

Global flash mobs have been done. It starts the way a single flash mob in the macro state does…except of course it is groups rather than single persons. One starts it, another couple join in the same country perhaps, then before you know it, there are mobs taking place in multiple countries around the same themes, in the same timeframe. This is coordination across the usual boundaries, in the same way that it happened with a single flash mob, only it is occurring across the globe. That is power.

\(^{16}\) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3z3DImohLU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3z3DImohLU)
Disruption, Violence, Contained: Tarrow uses these three categories of contention, but the flash mob shows that “to break with routine, startle bystanders, and leave elites disoriented for a time” is a form of disruption that does not have to take place by violent means. (Tarrow 2011:99) Tarrow allows for “overlaps and combinations“ of them, but limits the “variety” of forms of disruption to “the threat of violence, or “moving together aggressively in public space.” Flash mobs are positive routes to “threaten public order”, or rather disrupt it in a way that is not so threatening or dangerous. (Tarrow 2011:101)

This has been shown to be untrue by Juris (2005). Why not clearly differentiate between nonviolent disruption and violent disruption, and then compare them to an accepted containment. Otherwise, there is an unspoken assumption that the violence is senseless. Rather than making violence a separate category to itself, it is more useful to set out the force of the disruption itself, such as the buying and selling in a department store, so that we can see the outcome more clearly. To see if peaceful action can be just as productive as violent means, or whether change comes through the juxtaposition of the two images, working alongside eachother.

There is power in communitas, whether it is used as fuel for building social movements, or consumed, as basic as the water we need. The question is, is the flash mob going to become just another “routinized” way to be social, form bonds with strangers, an outlet which keeps things the way they are on the whole, or could it be transmuted into something which can be use to get at the root of such loneliness by attacking the systems that have helped to isolate us from eachother. We don’t know, but we must be careful not to discount “this diversity and the
interrelationships among different movements…by overly narrow definitions of social
movements.” (Calhoun 2005:175)

**An Alternative to Violence**

Identities are constructions, delineated by psychological borders, which can enable
certainty, or peace-promoting thoughts and actions.” (Slocum 2008: 209)

Some mobilizations do stick around to obstruct traffic, sit-in, or occupy, but the quick flash of
activity is usually over in four to six minutes. In fact one successful rule of the flash mob is to
keep it shorter than ten minutes, so that they can disband before police have time to arrive. The
actions of police tend to be the determining factor in whether initially peaceful gatherings will
turn violent. In other forms of resistance, simply “labeling a crowd a riot authorizes repressive
forces to intervene against the crowd.” (Tilly 2010:49) They remain by far primarily peaceful,
despite the early reputation of crowds as being dangerous, irrational, and thus violent. In fact,
without strong police interference, it has been shown that crowds are “highly rational” and will
more often “cooperate than panic”. (Bond 2009)

While violence is not the very nature inherent to resistance, it often-times has been provoked, in
cases of riot, crowds will take advantage of this method. “Brutal night time raid against sleeping
protestors” by police incite violence, too. (Juris 2005: 413) Flash mobs, on the other hand,
usually successfully avoid “images of tear gas, burning cars, and black-clad protesters hurling
stones and Molotov cocktails …“ (2005) One might argue that another route to deal with police
is through the typical nonviolent protest methods, but this is not as effective as never
encountering the police at all. As we see in the Genoa: “Though elites may attempt to divide
protesters into peaceful and violent camps, police tactics in Genoa did precisely the reverse: creating terror by mixing violent and non-violent protesters to justify indiscriminate attacks […] once violent performances have been physically enacted, they can be appropriated for other ends, such as misrepresentation in the media. Officials can manipulate violent images, decontextualizing and reinserting them within narratives that frame protesters as dangerous criminals or terrorists,” providing incentives for disruptive or violent elements in otherwise peaceful movements.” (Tarrow 2011: 149) However, flash mobs often escape media attention and thus cannot be so easily reformatted to fit the institution’s ends. (Juris 2005: 413) This avoidance of police and related media misrepresentations is the way that flash mobs can offer an alternative to violence.
CONCLUSION

In and of themselves, as a means alone, Flash mobs are powerful forms of mobilization and innovation, which create meaning for participants and produce solidarity through identity; they also carry the power of building repertoires and offering an alternative to violent means of contention. Individuality is important to the flash mob because it is intensely involved in the experience of shared identity and communitas. Emotions are important to the flash mob because of joy among members, and especially because of how it spreads out to onlookers. Flash mobs aid change via being the change they want to see, and providing an outlet for the frustrations of modernity. They also can build successful repertoires, which are necessary to change norms, and alter paradigms. This can happen through the interruption of habitus, or by interrupting the identity construction analysis process. The occupy movement bears close resemblance to the flash mob’s ability to change the conversation, but lack the same ability to avoid police engagement and potential violence. It remains to be seen what humanity will do with the power of communitas.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


