

Dance, play, laugh

What capitalism can't do

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Abstract: Using the theme of women’s ritual dance among Central African hunter-gatherers, this paper will examine an alternative kind of politics to that common in societies in which property, social hierarchy and corporatism have become the dominant structural principles. In a previous paper I described spirit performances known respectively as *mokondi massana* or *molimo* during which Mbendjele and Mbuti dancers organise into formal gender groups. These impromptu coalitions distribute social power by literally dancing it out. Here I go further in exploring the epistemological and political implications of this power-model. The part played by collective dance in releasing the socially productive power of desire is examined. And the kind of fluid sociality this movement generates is contrasted with the physical fragmentation encouraged by capitalist societies. A new model for power is developed drawing on the insights of deluze and guattari, Turner, Marcuse and recent dance and movement theory. The paper aims to demonstrate that the immediate somatic force expressed through the dialogism of ritual dance, and central to egalitarian sociality, is the antithesis of capitalism.

Keywords: hunter-gatherers, dance, ritual, play, capitalism

I want to begin with an old question: What would a truly non-violent society look like? What is it that produces well-being and equality within rather than between groups of people? This means looking at the concepts of justice and equality not in the defensive sense but in the relational sense. That in turn means giving a clear definition of what we mean by ‘violence’, because some recent writing on the theme, such as Stephen Pinker’s (2011) for example, are actually rather primitive. In making a case for the rise in non-violence (a result, he proposes, of the spread of strong centralised states, capitalism, the open market, liberal democracy, trade and literacy) Pinker (2011) sets up a kind of ideological arena in which the brutal savage versus State paternalism. Sidestepping the devastating global effects of the military-industrial complex, Pinker uses Hobbes’ *Leviathan* as a springboard to focus on the decline in physical violence throughout the twentieth century, though critics point to his questionable reasoning and methodology on this (Herman and Peterson 2012; Kolbert 2011). Interestingly, Pinker’s list of ‘violent hunter-gatherers’ does not include a single immediate-return egalitarian community. There are no Yaka; no Hadza; no Ju/hoasi on his list. He does, however, dwell at length both on the Yanomami headhunter and the American Marine ‘Ethical Warrior’, with the code of honour ascribed to the latter (representative of the American military) being to protect not only himself but ‘all others’. In this essay I will examine the ‘other’ to that ethical warrior, viewed as a byproduct of the benevolent capitalist State. I will propose that Pinker’s thesis – and his dismissal of hunter-gatherers – is premised on a narrow understanding of violence that gives precedence to male military impulses and the control of them. Drawing on my knowledge of the Mbendjele Yaka and on the ethnography of other specialists, I show that the alternative to State control is a far more complex and potentially egalitarian figure than Pinker allows. In order to make this point I expand the definition of violence to include not ‘metaphorical violence’, rightly dismissed by Pinker, but ‘structural violence’: the violence inflicted habitually and from birth onwards on individuals living

in hierarchical societies, using various forms of bodily manipulation, detachment and control. It is important to flag that I am not referring to isolated violent incidents (to which hunter-gatherers are no strangers) but to imposed structural violence – violence meted out strategically from above over the entire body of a people in order to intimidate and suppress.

We know that ‘egalitarianism’ is the result of a whole interlocking network of factors and influences. We know that ‘demand sharing’ is aggressive and relentless, and I witnessed many examples of this in Northern Congo. Older women in particular can be brutal in their shaming of would-be hoarders. But none of this issues from a small, powerful elite towards a socially passive population. Every individual has a right to object to the smallest act of material or ideological stinginess. The entire corporeal, social, political, territorial, ritual and cosmological field is therefore qualitatively different between societies premised on privatisation, and those premised on the movement against it. If we believe evolutionary experts such as Hrdy (2009) we have been coasting for several millennia on our deep evolutionary history of cooperative breeding, a history rooted in kin-based matrilineal communities where communal childrearing practices and female coalitionary bonds cultivated the emotional sophistication and mind reading faculties that later led to language and symbolism (Finnegan 2015, *in press*). The other to that marine ‘ethical’ warrior by this reasoning is not the Yanomami head hunter, but the collective egalitarian body.

The proposal that alternatives to monolithic models of political power exist has of course been around for a long time. Rousseau (1973[1755]) famously elaborated the belief as did Engels (1986[1884]) and Marcuse (1969), but in the last fifty years or so it has been explored more carefully by anthropologists with the empirical data to substantiate their claims (cf Clastres 1977; Leacock 1981; Sahlins 1972; Lee 1979, 1999; Barnard 2000, 2003; Woodburn 1980, 1982). The reason I cite ethnographers of hunter-gatherers specifically is because of what becomes visible in the cumulative ethnographic literature on hunter-gatherers, regardless of speciality: a current of power emergent from, though never restricted to, the material biological body. This is a corporeal politics, rooted in the tension between male and female bodies, between desire and responsibility, between community and the individual, and between the principles of hierarchy and egalitarianism. Throughout the paper I contrast this with the power-principle that comes through in some analyses of a benevolent and progressive capitalism (Friedman 1982; Sayek 2001; Pinker 2011).

Ethnographers such as Nurit Bird-David (1990, 2005), Joanna Overing (2000, 2003), Megan Biesele (1993), or Laura Rival (1997) have been writing for some time about a preoccupation in hunter-gatherer society with ‘the property of relations’ as opposed to ‘the relations of property’. These authors draw the focus firmly back from an emphasis on property as the defining social principle toward the quality of relations. What has become clear through their work is that we have a whole other set of defining principles governing such societies, and that therefore almost all our terms – for the critical analysis of systems, networks, power, hierarchy, gender, or politics – are inadequate.

Foucault (1998[1976]; 1992[1984]) and Bourdieu (1990, 1991) respectively have transformed our way of thinking about physical discipline and its absorption into the lived experience of the body. What I want to look at here is how the body is experienced in structurally *non-violent* societies, and what this reflects back to us about our own experience of power. For the purposes of this paper I have found it useful to think in terms of the ‘personality’ of power, the broad characteristic terms allowing us to look closely at what it is that defines certain kinds of power-system in contrast to others. This approach also has the benefit of allowing us to challenge the ‘peaceful’ or ‘democratic’ ethical warrior who has come to serve as a figurehead for Euro-American State capitalism. Herman and Peterson (2012) make a powerful counter-case to this figure using historical and statistical data on Western imperialist violence, but here I’m more interested to contrast it with the power potential we find in certain egalitarian contexts.

Desire in the collective

Let me begin then by defining what I mean by ‘egalitarian power’ and ‘capitalism’. In Nietzsche’s (2003[1886]) classic ‘will to power’, the forces of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, positive and negative, affirming and abdicating power, are brought together. This is power as ‘the principle of the synthesis of forces’ (Deleuze 2006:46). Borrowing from the operation he describes in the context of ethnography on Central African hunter-gatherers, I propose that when two strong ‘bodies of will’ are brought into contact forcibly, as they are through ritual dance, the resulting chemistry, the force or energy released, can be understood as egalitarian power. I argued previously (2013) that this is so because only through that dialogical movement, where power is made to circulate by being kept in motion, can the hardening of authority into one set of interests be prevented. The motion that is kept running in any given camp by the continual singing and dancing of individuals and groups provides pleasure and the opportunity to express skill. But it is also a political move. Contrary to the kind of power endorsed by early industrial capitalism, based on mechanistic models and fundamentally separating by nature, this quantum power is released through the collision of bodies and forces.

Capitalism in this paper therefore refers to historical capitalism, with its roots in small-scale mercantilism, which flourishes gradually through colonialism, the Reformation and industrialisation, culminating in the state capitalism and corporatism that dominate the current global landscape. I refer particularly to the industrial capitalism which began to develop toward the end of the eighteenth century with its new repressive action on bodies. But I am also interested in the effects of the phenomenology of capitalism – the internalisation of capitalist hierarchies of desire into the body. One of the questions I pose here, using insights from the Mbendjele Yaka and others, is why industrial capitalism *needed* to isolate the biological body from the collective, publicly vocal body still active in late eighteenth century Europe.

Here, the work of Deleuze and Guattari is relevant. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983[1972]) they examine the relationship between capitalism and desire, placing the libido at the infrastructural root of systems. Because desire is a fundamental source of social power, they argue, capitalist societies must go further than straightforward repression. They must twist the relationship between desire, power and the body. The person created through the nuclear family – the primary ‘tool’ of capitalism – comes to desire self-repression, acquiring a taste for subjection. The nuclear or Oedipal family, they argue, is ‘the most powerful agent of psychological repression’ (1983[1972]:123–132). Capitalist society requires such a tool to counteract ‘the explosive power of desire, which has the potential to threaten its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy’ (1983:126–127).

Against this culture of repressed and exploited libido Deleuze and Guattari posit an alternative conception of desire – desire that is not lack. In this new perspective, desire is a positive force with the potential to produce reality. In speaking about the commodification of individual desire to the detriment of collective, ritually harnessed desire one of the problems is that we almost need another language. How, in societies that have developed along an industrial capitalist model, can we conceive of a public ritual language around desire? For that, I am suggesting we need to look at the systemic thrust towards social egalitarianism found among certain hunter-gatherers. Mass media and the ‘free’ market gives us the impression of being more liberal than ever before but I am arguing this is largely virtual. How many of us in our daily lives have physical access to the creative and subversive zone of carnival?

Connecting what writers such as Deleuze and Guattari argue regarding the fluid dynamics of power to the ethnography on egalitarian hunter-gatherers such as the BaYaka or the Mbuti can be a fruitful move. Danced culture differs from static culture in diverse ways of course. But holding the two kinds of systems together throws light on both. In this scale is not critical: we’re looking for type, character and the energy that feeds the system and maintains it. One way to do this is to look at how people manage their ritual cosmology and interact through it. For many forest hunter-gatherers song and dance are the core means of doing that. Lewis (2012) has described in detail how the distinctive, interlocked hocketing polyphonies characteristic of the BaYaka are actually structural devices, ‘inculcating values such as sharing and egalitarianism’ (Lewis 2012:100). He notes that the kind of harmonies demanded by this style of music preclude any one singer monopolising performances. Polyphony then is also a cultural strategy: the music is both reflective and constitutive of BaYaka social and political relationships (100).

In order to understand the point I make concerning the political importance of collective dance, and the structural quality inherent in it, it is useful to take a look at some recent ideas from dance and movement theory. It is equally important to touch on Herbert Marcuse’s (1969) understanding of the critical use of the term ‘Eros’, and to connect this to a later theoretical push from within French feminism (Cixous 1976; Kristeva 1981; Irigaray 1985) toward a defense of materiality. French feminism

is notable for its insistence on the possibility of a new body politics even at a point where social constructionism has undermined any stable perspective on ‘women’ or ‘the body’. It is important to reflect on Western theoretical attempts to salvage the body because these are relevant to how we then understand the communalising of biology by huntergatherers. I’ll discuss some generalities in the ethnography on ritual dance in Central Africa, and from there progress to the centrality of the play element in egalitarian social politics. Because I am talking about power in a general sense, I will not focus on an analysis of the content of individual dances. I want to listen instead to a kind of background noise – a hum or buzz experienced when you spend time in an Mbendjele camp – and which I’m going to propose is the voice of power made audible.

David Graeber (2004) in his writing on anarchism illustrates how facing down riot police with giant puppets and clowns is one of the most effective ways to throw light on two distinct power-personalities: on one hand we have the moral, disciplinary father-figure appearing in Pinker’s (2011) analysis as the guardian of the ‘Long Peace’ (manifest in reality as lines of men in black clutching batons). On the other side we have carnival, the power of paradox, the trickster, and central to that the expressive, and potentially explosive, power of the desiring body. I’m proposing that at Mboule, and in other Yaka camps throughout Congo, these principles have been kept live as a social tool for achieving political equality.

Subversion and the body

Norman Bryson (1997), a dance and movement theorist reflecting on the historical suppression of the body, has written an interesting analysis from the perspective of dance theory on the break between Enlightenment conceptions of dance as a kind of popular language, and later capitalist understandings of dance as circumscribed spectacle to be consumed. In the latter conception, dance no longer has the power to subvert or mobilise on a large scale. We slip from large public ritual dance performances to the lone female dancer subjected to the collective male gaze. Bryson (1997) further notes that changes in the perception of movement were accelerated drastically by the Industrial Revolution, where economic and technical abstraction conspired to remove the body from its sensual relationship with the environment. He writes:

The meshing together of economic and kinetic abstraction in industrialisation represents, in anthropological terms, an epochal change in the history of socially structured movement and in the human object world....The industrial object comes into being by a fundamental withdrawal of craft and touch from the object world. *It entails a deep severance of the body from the world*’. (Bryson 1997:71–72)

Concurrent with this, he argues, is the evolution of the idea that

the individual harbours a secret life that consistently...cuts across the formal arrangements of society, a core of energies that finds outlets in dreams, obsessions, perversions; the seat of this secret life is the body, and above all the body's sexual desires and drives...In European societies this secret body, with its lava of libido, is theorized as governed by repression'. (ibid:74)

Here we have industrial capitalism rendering the final separation of body from world, with the accompanying anxiety about the 'primitive' body and its potential to disrupt civilisation. This is pertinent in light of the insights of French feminism over the last three decades where the return to the 'grotesque' feminine as an articulate outsider to cultures of dominance has the potential to disrupt concentrations of symbolic power.

Which is essentially what the Marxist political philosopher Herbert Marcuse was describing in his book *Eros and Civilisation* (1969). Like Deluze and Guattari, Marcuse (1969) used Freud's (1983[1913]; 1961[1920]; 1930) insights into the essentially repressive nature of civilisation, where freedom, happiness, sexuality and culture become antipathetic. But he brought an historical Marxist interpretation to this so that the sexual neurosis Freud described was the consequence of one particular form of civilisation – namely, industrial capitalism. 'Humankind under capitalism', he declared, exists 'only part-time' (quoted in Morris, 1991:339). Marcuse viewed the concept of Eros as fundamental to resisting what he termed 'the logic of domination', which was the core characteristic of industrial capitalism. Under the logic of domination, emotion, sensuality and imagination are systematically devalued and repressed. But given the relationship between capitalism and the violence of physical dissociation, we can see that this is not about the straightforward repression of desire. The question raised by the existence of non-capitalist societies is what happens to all that surplus energy? That immense fund of raw sexual power and collective physical *jouissance*? Because as we've seen, capitalism by its nature will not simply repress, it will capitalise on what has been stolen.

The incorporation of the concept of Eros into a Marxist critique by Marcuse (1969) was a way to highlight that theft, and to reclaim the range of senses stolen – creativity, fantasy, the erotic, intuition. In contrast to earlier philosophers who had stressed the asocial features of the libidinal instincts and elevated the ascetic tradition, Marcuse asserted the erotic energies as the very principles of creative life. Like Deluze and Guattari (and indeed Marx originally) he emphasised the need of the body to be active upon the world. Their own desire was a reality from which most people had been severed in order to produce compliant workers and consumers. Marcuse however proceeds to lump together procreative sex and repressive 'monogamic institutions' (quoted in Morris, 1991:138) so that the desexualisation of the organism he describes is fundamentally related to reproduction. It is an inveterate assumption that later traveled into much of mainstream feminism. But it is essentially a male-oriented critique, for as we will see, where women do maintain a strong public voice they tend to emphasise the desire inherent in procreativity. A focus on procreative sexuality is only reductive

under capitalism, where the entire body is deflated, broken down into units of value and use and forcibly separated from its collective expression.

Hence the French feminist advocacy of a ‘new physical symbolic’, where combining the dancing body with a graphic female-driven lexicon has the potential to break up old patterns. This, in Irigaray’s terms, is the raising into cultural visibility of ‘what was supposed to remain invisible’ (Irigaray, 1985:76). Reflecting on the body politics advocated by writers like Irigaray (1985) or Kristeva (1981), Wolff (1997), a dance and movement theorist, identifies the schism between the classical ‘docile’ body and the ‘grotesque’ body in European history as a feminist question, in which the re-instating of corporeality through a specifically female-centered discourse (rooted in dance performance) offers radical potential. She argues that the marginalisation of the body in Western culture, inseparable from the denigration of women as a group, ‘is closely related to the needs and ideologies of bourgeois capitalism (its construction of a particular notion of subjectivity, its requirement for a reliable, docile workforce, its dependence on the self-regulation of its subjects)’ (Wolff, 1997:85). Arguing against the charge of essentialism often used to dismiss the kind of body politics advocated by Irigaray or Kristeva, Wolff insists that ‘the critique of essentialism does not amount to a proof that there is no body’ (Wolff 1997:94). And she asks a crucial question: If the body, and specifically the female body, has been systematically repressed as part of the political project of capitalism ‘does it follow that the irruption of the “grotesque” body, the explosion into visibility of its suppressed features (sex, laughter, excretion and so on) constitutes a political revolution as well as a moral transgression’ (Wolff 1997:86)?

The argument I made in a previous essay (Finnegan 2013) is that where women dance spontaneously and collectively as a routine part of social life, we no longer need to reconstruct the world. The body becomes both material and discursive. One of the compelling conclusions of Wolff’s essay is this assertion that the physical pushing out into public language and consciousness of the suppressed features of the specifically female body ‘constitutes a political revolution as well as a moral transgression’ (Wolff 1997:86). The rationale for the collective female body at Mboule or elsewhere in Congo is not the social or political suppression of that body but it may well be the *potential* social and political suppression of it. While the milieu in which action occurs is not the same, the movement is. Similar to Bakhtin’s insight about the grotesque material body and its ability to speak back to power, Wolff has hit on a core issue. It happens that the kind of operation she describes – the publicising of that graphic female sexual body as a check to male power – is precisely what we find at Mboule, where the circulating sexual currency harnessed during ritual dance is a cultural statement driven by women; an insistence on valuing both the labour and the hunger of the collective female body. As Emily Martin’s still highly relevant 1987 study of the female procreative body under capitalism shows, the estrangement of women from their own reproductive processes and labour is simultaneous with the denigration of that labour on a cultural level. The extent to which a break is maintained between materiality and culture, the extent

to which the body remains separated from its own labour (and cut off from its own voice) indicates the extent to which one is disempowered on every other level. On that understanding, to dance from a female anatomical topography, using the stripped back language of sexual desire, using the pelvis and the buttocks freely, using sexual innuendo and ribaldry, could be viewed as the original body politics.

If we couple the yearning of French feminism to retrieve a specifically female-centred symbolic field – the desire for a pre-patriarchal discourse – with the literature on BaYaka women's dance choreographies and lyrics, or the Mbuti with their ritualised sexual teasing, or the Mbendjele *mokondi* of *Ngoku* and *Ejengi* as described by Lewis (2002), or even Bieseke's (1993) data on the Ju/hoan trickster and his wives, it is clear that so much lucid Western political philosophical writing was crying out for context. When Wolff urges feminists to 'work towards a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body' (1997:97) advocating a body politics that will 'speak about the body' (1997:96), all that is missing is the ethnography.

The privatisation of power

In order to properly understand what capitalism is, then, we have to understand social contexts that thrive in its absence. As Clastres (1977) argued of the State, we have to understand what capitalism is not. What would be the principles that restrain or subvert it? For example, should corporate capitalism be founded on a philosophy of connectedness, fluidity, empathy? Should it encourage and value play? Laughter? Joy? Should it put collective dancing at its centre? Or should it seek to marginalise precisely those principles, those expressions of collective somatic power? Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b) is very clear on this: he argues that the project of elite power from the end of the Middle Ages onwards was to break apart the collective body, rooted in and sustained by carnival. To silence that folk laughter that so threatened the new puritan order in which people would be made to submit to authority rather than to lampoon it, openly, wherever they congregated. Basically to wipe the smiles off their faces. Bakhtin (1984a) argues convincingly that the communal laughter of that bawdy, dancing body was more threatening to the emerging hierarchy than all the violence commanded by it.

In a thought almost cogenerative with Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari write:

If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive...desire is revolutionary in its essence...and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised'. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972:126–127)

And here we get to the crux of things. Where two complex, multivalent bodies are assembled and brought into contact, desire does indeed produce reality. But what was missing for so long, and what the literature on African huntergatherers invaluable contributes, is the specific velocity and power of female desire. The body Bakhtin (1984a) describes throughout his writing is not only archetypal but generative. It is the mutable, irreverently cackling body of the hag-mother. It thrives on paradox as it flows and dances through medieval market places and festivals, slurping up the posturing of elite power, spitting it back out again as the clown, the trickster, the mad woman. Its language (some would say its poetry) is visceral; scatological; lewd. The ‘great generic body of the people’ (Bakhtin 1984a) is all about sex and menstrual blood, semen and milk, excrement and pus and saliva. Everywhere the body is capable of leaking or overflowing, it speaks. The language of the lower bodily stratum is the direct, guttural language of the body itself. Which is also the language of carnival. The language of festival.

The interesting point, as I’ve noted elsewhere (2013), is that ethnographers working with hunter-gatherers throughout Africa describe precisely this kind of ritual language between the sexes. During *Ngoku*, Mbendjele women’s main *mokondi massana* or spirit association, women link arms and storm the central camp thoroughfare, clapping, yodelling, cackling, cracking open the major social space with their bodies. Jerome Lewis (2002) describes the *Ngoku* dances as intensely erotic events that are clearly energised by the presence of male spectators, but nevertheless cordoned off from them. Michelle Kisliuk (1998) similarly describes a BaYaka performance of *Dingboku* where thirteen women, including grannies and mothers with infants, choreograph a performance of sexual intercourse, while singing at the top of their voices to the male audience the single word *Dumana* – ‘let’s fuck’! Meanwhile, in the Mbuti *Ekokomea* as described by Turnbull (1978), coalitions of women and men hurl sexual insults back and forth at one another. This dance, Turnbull points out, is used to diffuse tension and appease *akami* – sexual conflict.

In addition to these physically provocative choreographies there is also a condensed somatic language audible during dances that stubbornly draws the eye back to the procreative body: ‘Eloko tembe ya polo!’ (The penis is no competition!), ‘Eneke ganye!’ (The vagina wins!) (Kisliuk 1998), ‘Mapindi ma mu bola’! (Their testicles are broken!) (Lewis 2002). This is the language of a collective body that has at its fingertips the fund of raw sensual energy referred to earlier. They are the voice of Wolff’s ‘grotesque’ body as it explodes into visibility. These songs – continually reiterated by women (like an alarm going off under the culture) – keep the issue of reproductive labour and the value accorded to it, live. At the same time, they animate a collective body which is key in choreographing ritual exchanges with men. So they function on dual levels, keeping the issue of sex and power live, pushing that body defined by its graphic materiality out into the public consciousness, and simultaneously gathering women into a coherent ritual body. It is this ‘body’ of women, constantly reforming despite a large degree of community fission and fusion, that enables women to maintain a

public, ritual conversation with men – a kind of pendulum that swings power back and forth between gendered poles. I propose (and I believe it is there in the writing of Bakhtin or Marcuse as well as in the ethnography of anthropologists such as Turnbull (1978), Kisliuk (1998), Joiris (1996), McCreedy (1994) or Lewis (2002; 2008), or further afield Biesele (1991), Rival (1997) and Overing (2000) that it is in the drawing back of the collective eye to the anatomical nature of power that the increase happens. The ‘biological’ body radiates out into a collective, political body. Recall both Marcuse (1969) and Bryson (1997) with their thesis that the repressed erotic body is always threatening to erupt into cultural visibility; Bakhtin’s (1984a) development in *Rabelais and His World* of the intense social power of the public lower bodily stratum; Deluze and Guattari’s (1983[1972]) political economy of desire. Turning this back to symbolic power as theorised by Bourdieu (1990) or indeed Strathern (1988), the objectification of individual female bodies seems to be a corollary of the loss of that public vocabulary for female sexual and reproductive energy. Where the current of power emergent from a collective female body is lifted out of women’s hands and turned against them you can almost guarantee that feminist resistance will respond with a denial of the female body. It is a strategic move that, in the light of huntergatherer ethnography, turns out to be a phenomenal own goal. As Lewin recently remarked, ‘feminist anthropology’s fate seems to be to deconstruct itself’ (Lewin, 2006:28).

Play as counter-power

So what relationship does the kind of subversive collective body I have described have with play? Arriving at Mboule in Northern Congo one hot April afternoon in 2005 what most impressed me was the intense social solidarity of Mbendjele women going about their daily work. It only became clear as the days passed that the persuasive force of this corporate body was largely in its good naturedness: it was inherently, infectiously happy. Interestingly, most of the singing and dancing I observed was not on the scale of the formal dances described by Lewis (2002) such as *Ngoku* and *Ejengi*, though truncated versions of those also occurred. What I was seeing on a daily basis instead were what have been classified by some ethnographers as ‘joyful play’ (Bundo 2001:23), or ‘dances purely for amusement’ (Tsuru 1998:92), or games for women and children. And it seemed there was a slightly dismissive note in the categorisation of this ongoing current of song and dance, maintained by women in particular, as ‘play’. Rather than argue with that I began to think about redefining ‘play’, exploring its radical potential in contexts where it is anything but frivolous.

In *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Turner asserts that the disjunction between ‘work’ and ‘play’ as two separate domains set up against one another, and consequently between serious and frivolous ritual activity, is largely a result of the Industrial Revolution with its Calvinist redefinition of work. When ethnographers create a split between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ rituals not generally made by locals, and mark down ‘joy’, ‘play’

or ‘amusement’, they assume that these things have the same personal or flimsy connotations they do in societies in which they have ceased to belong to a domain of collective, subversive power. Indeed this is another important achievement of capitalism in the last couple of hundred years, this privatising of the play element, to the point where Marshall Sahlins in a recent paper identifies the effect of capitalism on society as ‘the history of sadness’ (1996:42). So although we have seen a gradual separation of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, ‘work’ and ‘play’, with the concurrent illusion that people ‘play’ more, this is better understood as the development of leisure as market strategy: people who in their day-to-day lives are being crushed by the demands of accumulation and production, and by a subsequent lack of home-made happiness, or carnival, might occasionally take a sanctioned (and usually expensive) break. Biological anthropologists such as Hrdy (1999; 2009), Hewlett (1989), or Small (1999) for their part have all demonstrated how the privatisation of childhood, the early instillation of the principles of separation, discipline and control, feeds perfectly into the kind of divisive system capitalist society requires.

This is all highly relevant in showing up whether we recognise another way of playing, closer to the definition used by Huizinga, where ‘the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness...ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community’ (Huizinga 1955:25). At Mboule and later, as I worked through my doctoral thesis, it became clear to me that there was a dual nature to dance and performance in the Mbendjele community. There were the formal, community wide *mokondi massana* that I was looking at in the thesis, where a clear ritual dialogue unfolds between women’s and men’s collectives. This is true also of the Mbuti honey-bee dance, or in *ekokomea*, and in the BaYaka *Dingboku*, where there is a continual injection and contraction of power. But there was also this more diffuse buzz of song and dance running through any given community and directed specifically by adult women. The seemingly innocuous flood of dances for amusement.

In a couple of anecdotes that are worth recounting, Kisluik (1998) in fact illustrates the inseparability of dance for amusement and dance to summon spirits as well as the subversive nature of play. During her narrative on the flexibility of BaAka women’s dance she describes a spontaneous performance of *Dingboku* during a funeral *eboka*. A few women began by singing on the periphery of the celebrations, and soon a formidable group had taken command of the central dance space.

Singing a sparse and eerie melody to one word, ‘*dumana*’ (sex)’ women moved rhythmically back and forth in a single line using cross-rhythmic calls, claps and exclamations to enliven the beat, through which Kisluik (1998) heard ‘a sound like an owl hooting; I later learned that this was the sound of a *dingboku* spirit’. (Kisluik, 1998:41)

Just as suddenly, the dance reached its conclusion with women ‘spiralling into a coil, like a giant hug’ (1998:41). From a few women singing on the periphery, there was an unbroken movement into a full-blown spirit dance, which ended just as abruptly.

This becomes particularly meaningful when Kisluik later describes the destructive impact missionary influence has had on BaAka spirit dances. In one camp, because of *mondo wa nzapa* (the matter of god), all the major spirit rituals, including *Ejengi* and *Dingboku*, had been abandoned. Left without their main source of medicine and disarmed of their powerful spirit allies, BaYaka at Dzandza in the Central African Republic were disoriented and vulnerable.

In the climate of fear instilled by evangelical threats that spirit dances and traditional medicines were ‘satanic’, Kisluik (1998) speculated that: ‘The threat of cultural annihilation for BaAka at Dzandza was looming not because of change...but rather because of a campaign that threatened to dismantle the cultural tools to cope with change’ (1998:166). In the midst of this crisis, women confided to her that they were in fact still regularly dancing *Elanda* under the noses of the evangelists who considered this ‘non-spirit dance’ a harmless game (1998:161). The courtship dance slipped through the missionary net but kept the door open for BaAka dancers. When Kisluik (1998) returned to the same community many years later, expecting to find them fully assimilated, they had reinvented most of their traditional spirit dances and *eboka ya nzapa* (the god dance) was now poised uneasily within a wider, dynamic BaAka repertoire (1998:179). We can see how effective the continual stream of singing and dancing is here, both in terms of keeping bodies moving, and in terms of the political fluidity it signals.

Lewis’s (2002) analysis of the Mbendjele term *massana* brings this out well, encompassing children’s informal play, children’s role-play, women’s informal dances, and full-blown community rituals involving same-sex clusters of initiates with spirits (Lewis, 2002:125–126). According to Lewis, all *massana* activities are defined through a relational lens – ‘the joking, laughter and cooperation between the participants enjoying the activity’ (2002:125) is what is most significant. Mbendjele themselves don’t differentiate between these ‘levels’ of *massana* activity, viewing them rather as a continuum through which people learn appropriate modes of behaviour. The stress seems to be simultaneously (in general terms) on fluid interaction and mutuality, but also (in precise terms) upon roles dictating the affinities of the sexes (2002:132). Even within the *mokondi massana* of *Ejengi*, when adult men get to play at dominance, there is a complimentary motion turning between the sexes as *Ejengi*’s ‘raw’ energy is delivered by men into camp where women’s dancing ‘cooks’ the male so his energy can be distributed (2002:190). The spirit compels people to share not only in the practical sense, but to share social power. Initially epitomising the ‘raw’ power of male force, *Ejengi* is cooked by the irresistible Eros of women.

Through the continuum running from children’s *massana* to the ongoing song managed by adult women to large-scale *mokondi massana* we see this buoyant collective body, this muscular power that thrives where bodies remain in motion. What has remained a boundary potential in State societies is here a central principle. What is particularly interesting is the way in which both the southern African trickster figure and the corpus of Central African forest spirits bring cosmological weight to all this,

keeping that muscular, kinetic power turning through the society. Against the proposal that without the paternal power principle represented by the State and its defense of boundaries society flounders, we have this other power-complex asserting the opposite: that true society – true prosociality – requires full corporeal motion in the world.

Here we can begin to see the intense politics in the dancing collective that appears across the Central African ethnographic record, that audio-sensual onslaught that is never allowed to settle for long before someone else picks it up. After a while in an Mbendjele camp, you do experience this as a kind of engine humming away under the fracas of daily life. And there is a vigilance to it. It keeps people continually mobilised, so that when a more formal dance or *massana* occurs, it's a case of revving things up rather than starting from scratch.

My use of the term Eros – expressing desire, joy, velocity – was part of an attempt to describe this 'other' kind of power that comes into play in contexts where the basic principles of ownership, property and social hierarchy are not only not the dominant structural principles, but where there is a very different relationship between bodies and power. There is no discordance between these ideas and, for example, Bourdieu's (1990) writing on habitus (and the body generally). What is interesting is the way in which the egalitarian body reverses the relationship between bodies and power. The basic theoretical frame of Bourdieu's writing on the embodiment of political mythology stands. But what is instilled through a long process of bodily comportment is an open, active relationship with power, a situation in which individuals assimilate an aggressive corporeal orientation to the outside, to the society, and to motion as the expression of autonomy. Many ethnographers of Central African huntergatherers – and Sawada (1990) is notable – describe that feeling of motion through which, after hours of communal dancing, even the poles seem to collapse and people enter a realm of pure power. He describes the way in which dancers, intoxicated by the collective energy, stagger out of the dance circle to recover (Sawada, 1990:189). This, then, is radical joy. We're not talking about 'leisure time', endorsed by corporate capitalism and hedged about by expensive paraphernalia. For an understanding of this kind of laughing, this kind of play, you need someone like Rabelais.

It's crucial to remember that this open, ludic body, when you contextualise it is energised to an even greater extent by being plugged into a matrix of other dynamic bodies. And African cosmology in particular shows up the kinetic nature of symbols where a series of dualities are being continually woven through one another, echoing the male/female ritual opposition. Turner (1969) emphasised that there is a kind of locomotive energy here, where things are always turning through circles and emerging in different pairs. These are live elements – 'molecules' – which achieve meaning through their continual dynamic relationship with other symbols. The relationship between entities is what gives them meaning. By being tethered to a series of environmental or cosmological indicators – game blood, spirits, hunting luck, specific medicinal or ritual plants, the moon – female reproductive power is thereby amplified. In short, 'the body'

is just one piece in a larger cosmological tapestry vibrating with kinetic power. Its connectedness to all those other sources is what makes it culturally potent.

Likewise, tearing the body out of that tapestry deflates it down to the object familiar to natural science. It is easy to see why we'd arrive at a place where Western feminism is in a state of disarray over the question of the body. But if we listen to what Bakhtin has to say again: 'The body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all people's character; *this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualised*' (1984a:19 emphasis mine). He shows how over time, as the new culture took hold, the popular folk body was reconceived as

a strictly completed, finished product...It was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation, were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed...Its apertures closed. (1984a:29)

Here we begin to see the logic in early capitalism's cutting off of the female procreative body from the ritual language in which it was embedded. A language which, we can hypothesise on the basis of the Central African ethnography, potentially forged the raw material of sexual desire and reproductive processes into a coherent political complex. A form of power.

The ability of the female procreative body to *become* a collective ritual body capable of instigating an ongoing dialogue about power is central. Strathern's (1988) classic analysis of gender in Melanesia examines a situation where male power turns ultimately on individual men's recourse to a collective ritual body. In the societies I have described there is a fundamental difference, one which generates an alternative kind of system: we have two equally strong collectives.

The whole cultural emphasis, from labour activities to parenting practices, from cultivated speech styles to the cosmology of the body, is about maintaining openness and fluidity, ensuring the flow experience survives. It is in that context that we can see how social power *could* be negotiated by being literally danced out. What is critical is that nothing settles in the hands of any one group or individual because, to echo Clastres (1977) again, what societies like this are implicitly recognising is that where power settles with one elite, becoming a fixed and abstract fact, prosociality is immediately undermined.

Why the State can't laugh

The ongoing movement for economic localisation has taught us that bringing the sensual awareness back into the market and the ethics of production offers a direct challenge to the monoculture of corporate capitalism. Reducing the scale to the local community level is where we begin to have an awareness of our own power. But it also offers a model: where thought is drawn back to the body, and embedded in cyclic

material processes, it remains accessible to the people who enact it. Lewis (2008) and others have recognised the embodied nature of knowledge in non-literate societies. What has been made less explicit is the way power grounded like this in bodily processes is then something routinely experienced by the body. The potential political effects of physically experiencing power as a matter of course is what I am trying to get at. Graeber (2004) writes of structural violence that its primary effect is to deprive us of our own free movement in the world. The network of invisible but potentially violent constraints by which most of us live most of the time leads to a situation in which we routinely experience the *absence* of power. This is why we are teetering on the edge of a vast precipice here. In order to fully critique the effects of capitalism on the body (and on happiness), you would need to incorporate Western child rearing practices and child socialisation, all the ways in which power is drawn out of the body early on. You would need to take account of the habitual closing down of so many other fields of sensual awareness, and the concurrent opening of a vast domain of sensual dissatisfaction, sensual hunger and sensual violence.

What is the relationship between power, desire, play and dance? How do the fluid dynamics of dance push the socially productive body out into a public domain where no-one is excluded from the experience of power? What can we learn from the Mbendjele Yaka, the BaYaka, or the Mbuti? Can it be applied to capitalism in order to illuminate two rough power types? One of the enduring questions in anthropology is whether we can feasibly contrast small-scale societies with the massive global apparatus that is capitalism. I have argued that if we approach this with a structural lens, identifying the organisation of relationships within groups, we can highlight a situation in which power has not been frozen in the hands of one elite. Nor do we have the more subtle infusion of daily life with the potential punitive violence of the State. Instead what is happening is that power, as a live element, is being continually churned up and funnelled back and forth between coalitions.

When Mbendjele women dance *Ngoku* through camp, they monopolise the main thoroughfare completely. As we've seen, *Ngoku* songs are extremely sexually aggressive, peppered with references to the inept penis, and the clearly superior vagina. Then in another moment men might rush *Ejengi* into camp in a blaze of leaves, intimidating the uninitiated and generally flexing the muscles of the male collective body. These dances have a function for the Mbendjele and are used as another kind of social technology in the whole complex of forms. But if you stand back, what you see is an open body in process at every moment, an unending physical dialogue that pulls things back from the abstract, breaking open concentrations of power across the social landscape. The Mbendjele themselves say one of the explicit purposes of dancing is to open the forest (Lewis 2002). Because of the refusal of this complex speaking body to be broken apart, to be silenced, to *stop* laughing, the negotiation about and distribution of power remains in the hands of the people. There is a physicality to these dances and their lyrics that remains unrefined. Once you see this body, or system, it is hard to stop seeing it. It is hard not to be struck by the contrast with other kinds of system, in

which society is founded, whatever form the political machinery takes, on the principles of privatisation, hierarchy, and above all, the cultural silence of the body.

So here we have two personalities of power. We have the rigorously accumulating patriarch, the po-faced autocrat who can't dance, can't laugh, can't play. Then we have Eros – the all-dancing, all-singing, slippery trickster ruthlessly lampooning that father figure who emerges in Pinker's (2011) analysis, that ethical warrior defending his democratic rights while engaging in a bit of 'gentle commerce'. If you contrast what I have called 'the politics of Eros' with the 'drone economy' currently represented by global capitalism, founded on the principles of distance, alienation, coercive power and ethical myopia, you begin to see the level of structural violence we are dealing with. Capitalism, no matter how suave its rhetoric of democracy, has to suppress diversity. It has to suppress full corporeal motion in the world (and here you see its military nervousness around the question of boundaries). It has to privatise the sensual, the playful, the erotic, in order to subvert the expression of those through the collective body. As the recent movement for economic localisation is demonstrating, true prosociality cannot flourish under these conditions. It might survive, as Sarah Hrdy (2009) has shown, but the question she raises is: for how long? Now, more than ever, we need an alternative model for political power. Societies such as the Mbendjele Yaka or the Mbuti who are organically and deliberately non-capitalist offer us new theoretical perspectives. Through the lens of these danced cultures we are able to look closely at power, and how it is being circulated, in contexts where to the majority of people it still feels good.

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