

## Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century

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**The Mirror Effect**

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palgrave  
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SOCIAL CHANGE AND CREATIVE ACTIVISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE MIRROR EFFECT

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-49867-0

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First published 2016 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978–1–349–69824–0

E-PDF ISBN: 978–1–137–49869–4

DOI: 10.1057/9781137498694

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harrebye, Silas F., author.

Title: Social change and creative activism in the 21st century : the mirror effect / Silas F. Harrebye.

Description: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037099 |

Subjects: LCSH: Social action. | Political participation. | Social movements. | Social change.

Classification: LCC HN18.3 .H366 2016 | DDC 303.4—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015037099>

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

*To all the real heroes out there*

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# Preface

My earliest memory as an activist is one of me lying in a pram that I am way too big for. I hear clanking beer bottles underneath me. Looking up at the blue sky above, a red flag is blowing in the wind. According to Bob Dylan the answer, then, was right in front of me. It was the 1st of May in early 1980s Copenhagen. On International Worker's Day my parents always met their socialist comrades, with whom they also shared a farmhouse in Sweden, to commemorate the historical struggle with which they sympathized and identified. I later realized that I did not. Not in the same way, at least. I did not grow up in a working-class family, as opposed to them, but in a middle-class family of intellectuals. Already as a child, therefore, I started to question the answers hovering above me and strategies applied all around me. The question of whether my generation's political struggle is different than that of my parents still resonates.

My first participation in a *creative* activist happening took place in the very early days of my life – and it happened in the mayor's office. My parents couldn't find daycare for their child because the local politicians didn't provide any. Their reaction was to have a sit-in – with a twist. They brought their child, placed him on the mayor's desk and left. So there I am looking up at the mayor. The direct action disrupted business-as-usual and in a way that made it impossible for those responsible to just shrug their shoulders and leave – as I was probably hungry. The strength of the action was a combination of undamaging pressure tactics (it might have left me emotionally scarred, though) with a prefigurative statement clearly illustrating my parents' problem, their need, and who (in their mind) was responsible.

Time passed and I didn't grow up to be much of an activist. I was active in the periphery of Børne- and Ungdomshuset, and I do participate in the occasional demonstration. I have also been part of starting up two new political parties and continually use my writing to express my opinions. I guess we try to make a difference the best way we can. For some it is organizing rallies, for others community gardening maybe. Today I am a board member of the new Danish movement and political party Alternativet (The Alternative).

When I finished my masters degree in political philosophy I went on to work as a consultant in Ramboll Management with donor-financed

development projects in Eastern Europe and Africa. During those years I joined a small independent research group, Critical Sociology, and we would meet every other Wednesday night to discuss critical theory and map the current local terrain of creative activism. These meetings began to function as therapeutic sessions for me, since my doubts about my involvement with the neo-liberal management regime of consultancy were only strengthened by talking to this group of skeptics. My participation in this group not only encouraged me to pursue a PhD, but also suggested the issues it would address.

During my time in New York I got in contact with a bunch of veteran and cutting-edge activists. One of them was Andrew Boyd who was in the process of editing a book together with relevant organizations and inspirational single campaigners from around the world. I was fortunate enough to be invited to participate and to make a minor contribution. Beautiful Trouble is a toolbox for the next generation of change-makers as it lays out core tactics, principles, and theoretical concepts that drive creative activism while also providing case studies to illustrate just how these may be applied in practice (Boyd, 2012 and beautifultrouble.org). When the book and living web archive was launched in 2012 I was thrilled that the world had finally got a systematic, approachable, and practically inspirational coverage of creative forms of activism. Beautiful Trouble is a fun and useful entry into the world of creative activism for budding social entrepreneurs and offers plenty of suggestions for further exploration in books, films, people, websites, and organizations. I was also a little worried, though, that this ambitious project would make my work seem needless. I am glad to say that I don't think that's the case. Much work still needs to be done in this ever-evolving field of activist artistry and participatory democracy.

My motivation for doing this project has been threefold: firstly, a fundamental belief in the importance of the social bottom-up struggle against injustice; secondly, a curiosity about theory's relevance for our understanding of these struggles; and, thirdly, a sense of being part of a new generation's own way of expressing discontent and experimenting with alternatives to the dominating way of life – the global social movements and the local 'project politics' of creative activists are both expressions of that development.

With this book I question, not the legitimacy of my parents' struggle, but the relevance and sufficiency of its form and intention today. Different forms of open capitalism and closed totalitarianism have to create new forms of repression and exploitation; thus new forms of protest emerge – they have to. That is my short story of *Self, Us, and Now*.

This dialectic process has always challenged and developed democracy, and thus necessitates empirically based and theoretically inspired analyses that enable us to reflect upon how these power struggles affect our society. Creative activism as a particular type of engagement and facilitation of other's participation today seems to do so, balancing as it does between critique, cooperation, and cooptation on the margins of the repertoire of contention.

# Acknowledgments

First of all I would like to thank my colleagues at the Institute for Society and Globalization at Roskilde University for their professional support in research groups and seminars – not least Thomas P. Boje, who has not only been a patient, critical, and open-minded advisor, but also become a dear friend.

In the spring of 2011 I attended the New School for Social Research in New York where I studied under Nancy Fraser. Thank you for agreeing to become my co-advisor in the last phase of my PhD fellowship. It has been an honor to have one of my heroines challenging my ideas – as I challenge hers here.

Stephen Duncombe (NYU and Director, Center for Artistic Activism) has headed the way into this particular field and continues to be a trusted collaborator. Your insistence and ability to combine academic research and political activism is exemplary.

My time in New York also snowballed into a series of interviews with renowned creative activists and leading scholars in the field from around the world. I want to thank all of them for taking the time to talk to me – not least Jacques Servin (aka Andy Bichlbaum, co-founder of The Yes Men), Srda Popovic (leading figure in Otpor! and co-founder of CANVAS), Andrew Boyd (behind the Billionaires for Bush campaign, founder of The Other 98%, and AgitPop), John Jordan (co-founder of Reclaim the Streets and Clandestine Insurgent Rebels Clown Army), David Solnit (main organizer at the Battle of Seattle and co-founder of Art and Revolution), Sixten Kai Nielsen and Martin Rosengaard (founders and directors of Wooloo), along with Evé Chiapello, Marshall Ganz, Nancy Fraser, Deva Woodly, all the people in Action Aid and Alternativet, and many other organizers and change-makers whose voices can be heard and whose bravery is present throughout the book.

I also wish to thank Palgrave Macmillan for their professional collaboration in making this book. The editors have shown me why scientific meticulousness must be combined with narrative and persistency in order to have value.

I also need to thank the editorial teams at *Comparative European Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *Culture and Organization* (Taylor & Francis) for allowing me to reuse parts of articles that I have published here – the former for “European patterns of participation – How dissatisfaction

motivates extra-parliamentary activities given the right institutional conditions,” co-authored with my colleague Anders Ejrnæs, and the latter for “The ambivalence of creative activism as a reorganization of critique.”

Finally, I am grateful to my family who support me with patience and curiosity, not least my children, Joël and Lilja, who have taught me so much more than I will ever be able to teach them. I owe this work to the love of my life, Stine. Thank you for your love, your smile, and your dreams. You have been a healthy counterbalance to the instrumental rationality of academia throughout this process. You inspire so much more than words.

This book is the fruit of years of work. I hope it tastes ripe.