



Introduction

Paris, August 1908. Emile Pataud of the Electricians Union dramatically darkens all of Paris during a strike, illuminating only the Bourse du Travail, the headquarters of the revolutionary syndicalist Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the largest union organization in France. Pataud, donning his working-class beret to full effect and appearing every bit the working-class revolutionary, cordially received journalists during the blackout, demonstrating the power of the CGT. Two years earlier, on May 1, 1906, syndicalist demonstrators engaged in a general strike, covering the streets of Paris, singing the proletarian anthem the “Internationale,” throwing rocks at police, and flaunting their working-class roots.¹ As a major player in an incipient proletarian public sphere different from its more staid bourgeois counterpart, the CGT combined socialism and anarchism with popular traditions of carnival and an avant-garde concern with individual authenticity and freedom through autonomously controlled labor unions. Syndicalists in France, like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), their counterparts in the United States, cultivated a distinctive working-class culture, integrating politics and aesthetics through their proletarian dress, playful and colorful demonstrations in the streets, and a language of labor based on personal fulfillment at the workplace. In opposition to reformist socialism or state-centered

Marxism, syndicalists contended that workers would be moved to action not by their economic interests but through the mythology of a general strike of all laborers that would usher in a new worker society. Their aesthetic politics pointed toward a democratic, playful, and participatory vision of society. Yet French syndicalist ideas of dramatic political actions, rejection of parliamentary democracy, sympathy for proletarian violence, and mythological thinking were embraced by the fascist leaders Mussolini and Hitler, who turned aesthetics and politics in a new direction.

The National Socialist Congress in Nuremberg, Germany, early September 1934. The enormous audience falls silent as Adolf Hitler strides to the podium to deliver a speech to his Nazi followers in a stadium decorated with a giant eagle and adorned with colorful, massive swastikas. Hitler enters the stage; a band plays the “Badenweler” march followed by Beethoven’s “Egmont” overture, as enormous Klieg lights illuminate the platform.² Hitler’s passionate speech amid a deafening chorus of “*Sieg Heils*” not only eulogizes the Aryan master race but also emphasizes the centrality of labor in creating the thousand-year Reich. Immortalized in Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous cinematic masterpiece, *Triumph of the Will*, the Nuremberg Congress represented what the Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin designated the “aestheticization of politics,” where the dramatic gesture and charismatic leader turn politics into theater, a nationalist spectacle based on a mythologized history of shared German blood and soil, severed from any connection to rationality and debate.³ Hitler and his forerunner Mussolini elaborated a new kind of aesthetic politics, a “politics of the piazza” where the public was conceived as a passive audience to be emotionally manipulated rather than persuaded. Hitler and Mussolini saw themselves as artists shaping the masses, their followers grouped around the all-powerful, hypnotic leader, where community and submission reinforce one another. Their fascist aesthetic politics glorified violence, demanded surrender to the leader, and idealized death.⁴

May 1968 in Paris. A student protest turns into a mass uprising in France, culminating in the largest strike in French history, as upwards of ten million workers left their jobs, and French society faced a social and economic crisis. Though syndicalist ideas, from demands for higher wages to labor control of the workplace, were important in this uprising, this was a new kind of protest, as postindustrial conflicts around

freedom of expression, communication, and information began to displace the labor battles between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Demonstrators identified not only with the labor militant, but with the third-world revolutionary who challenged the power of the West. Though demonstrators often used Marxist language to describe their demands, they engaged in a new kind of aesthetic politics that informed their alternative vision of society. The dramatic gestures of protesters were complemented by graffiti such as “Free the imagination,” “Workers of the World, Enjoy,” and “Take your desires for reality” that were scrawled on walls throughout the Latin quarter in Paris. Demonstrators wished to break free of the instrumental reason and bureaucratization of both capitalism and Soviet-style communism and create a new type of society. Many of them reinterpreted Leon Trotsky’s idea of permanent revolution to mean living life as a perpetual carnival, a playful and joyous continual celebration.⁵ Aesthetics and politics merged, as desires to realize an authentic self and live life as if it were a work of art were promulgated alongside demands for the overthrow of capitalism and the end of American imperialism. Criticizing mass media for creating a consumerist society of the spectacle, demonstrators wanted to found a new community outside of the manipulated and manufactured desires promoted by advertising and capital.

Late November and early December 1999, Seattle. Seemingly out of nowhere, at least 40,000 people took to the streets to protest the policies of the World Trade Organization. Demonstrators pointed to the lack of democracy and accountability of this international organization and how its practices of globalization favor corporations over workers and impoverish poor countries throughout the globe. Labor unions were well represented, but environmental activists, farmers, students, and many other groups from countries all over the world also participated in these demonstrations. Marxist language among participants all but disappeared as concerns about economic exploitation were joined by a new postmodern vocabulary of respect for difference and indigenous rights. Artistic ideas and practices were everywhere, as a carnival mentality ruled the streets. With drums beating in the background, the group Dyke Action playfully reworked media images of women, marching topless through Seattle. Members of the Humane Society dressed as human butterflies on stilts or as cardboard sea turtles paraded through the streets, performing for the television cameras, while

the “Raging Grannies” sang protest songs dressed in shawls, long skirts, and bonnets. All of these different groups were allowed to develop their own type of protest, their own distinctive style, with little centralized control of the demonstrations. Though largely peaceful, the dramatic aesthetic gestures of these demonstrations sometimes took a violent turn, as black-clad anarchists trashed stores owned by multinational corporations such as McDonald’s and Starbucks.⁶ The Seattle demonstrations were followed by a much larger protest of 200,000–300,000 people at the meetings of the G-8 in Genoa, Italy, in July 2001. Later rallies also took place in Prague, London, and other cities where the governmental leaders of the wealthy countries met, though these demonstrations weakened after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. This global justice movement gave rise to a new organizational center, the World Social Forum, as a meeting place for discussions regarding alternative visions of globalization.

These are four examples of major social protests that dramatically challenged the dominant capitalist society, often in the name of labor (even the Nazis cynically used socialist ideas in their propaganda). But they are more than labor movements; they reveal the ambivalent ties of labor, aesthetics, and politics that have increasingly characterized many social movements in Europe and the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They raise some central questions for our era. First, what does it mean for public life and social movements when politics is increasingly characterized by the dramatic gesture, the resonant image, and the search for an authentic and fulfilling experience, alongside the adjudication of interests or rational debate? As politics and drama have come together, art and performance often provide new and creative ways of understanding self and society and influence the very structure and dynamics of social protest, as in the 1999 Seattle global justice demonstrations and May 1968 in Paris. But the “aestheticization of politics” can diminish political and rational discourse, with the worst-case scenario being fascism or the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by the September 11 terrorists, whose mass killings were also a symbolic attack on the bastions of American capitalism and militarism. The aesthetic politics of these movements also challenges fundamental notions of the nature of democratic public spheres that are ostensibly based on rational debate and a search for consensus, as public spaces take on aspects of theater

and become sites of performance and playful activity, which can take progressive or xenophobic and racist forms.

Second, what are the historical origins of this aesthetic politics, and how does it become manifest in social movements? I tie the rise of modern aesthetic politics to the crisis of modernity, especially regarding debates about the nature of subjectivity and knowledge in the wake of industrialization and the decline of tradition in the West. Aesthetic politics owes much to avant-garde artists, who were central participants in this crisis. They elaborated critical versions of art and individualism, and rethought everyday life in terms of aesthetic categories. While aesthetic politics draws on bohemian notions of expressive authenticity and living life as a work of art that opposes bourgeois, commercial culture, it is also defined by its relationship to popular culture, especially traditions and practices of carnival and play. These aesthetic ideas and practices were politicized in contested public spaces and social movements from revolutionary syndicalism to the global justice movement, though this aesthetic dimension takes on varied meanings in different social contexts. If we follow these four movements chronologically, they gradually drop a Marxist or nationalist language of revolution in favor of a more postmodern discourse of respect for difference and local concerns. While these changes mirror the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism, and transformations in the notion of art from an emphasis on authentic self-expression to postmodern criticisms of the idea of the artistic subject, aesthetic ideas and practices remain central to each movement. Indeed, the aesthetic dimension becomes even more important as mass media pervade postmodern capitalism.

In this book, I discuss the distinctive aesthetic politics that developed within these four movements. I define aesthetic politics as the use of aesthetic criteria from notions of authenticity to the resonance of dramatic images that provide “the common faculty of feeling, of experiencing” for a social group. It informs the understanding and practice of politics, the latter defined not only in terms of representative institutions but also concerning a broadly “politicized” public life.⁷ Aesthetic politics appeals to and relies upon identification with emotions, visual styles, and images when constructing political activities and ideas. While I am most interested in the role of aesthetic politics in social movements, I also examine the relationship between aesthetics and

public life, the rise of a distinctive aesthetic sphere, and the importance of popular culture for social protest.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is an indeterminate term, and it becomes even more complicated when tied to politics. Philosophers and art historians have traditionally defined aesthetics in terms of the nature of beauty and taste. Art historians often take a specialized approach to art, viewing the history of aesthetics in terms of changing perceptions of beauty, tensions between high and low art, and subjective versus objective and formal understandings of the art work. Aesthetics has always been tied to the senses, concerned with how we know the world through our bodies, respond to sensation, and form judgments of taste.⁸ Most abstractly, aesthetics refers to the analysis of form apart from content. Kant's equation of aesthetics with the particularity of sense perception rather than universal conceptual thinking clarifies this perspective. To be aesthetically intelligent and sensitive means developing a distinctive sense of taste or judgment, where the unity of disparate parts is not trapped within the boundaries of preexisting conceptual categories, but the subject imaginatively weaves different meanings into new and contingent wholes, based on the particularity of the aesthetic experience.⁹

While aesthetics claims its own laws and logic, in the modern era it has frequently been tied to politics. No doubt the use of dramatic aesthetic imagery and display from pageants to parades has always been a part of the repertoire of ruling elites, but only in the modern era does aesthetic politics become self-consciously thematized, infused into everyday life, and deliberately appropriated by oppositional movements. We have already encountered Benjamin's interpretation of Nazism as the "aestheticization of politics," the undemocratic construction of a repressive social unity through aesthetic means. More broadly, nationalists everywhere have attempted to enlist art and aesthetic projects in constructing a nationalist identity, and in this capacity art can sometimes become an elitist endeavor that reinforces existing social inequality. Aesthetics may create a sense of common culture that transcends particular histories while camouflaging social conflict, opposing popular culture, and acting as a defensive block to public discussion of issues of race, gender, and class.¹⁰ Yet others see aesthetics as an almost

a priori form, a kind of politicized Kantianism, based on the harmonious ordering of the chaos of political and social life. Hannah Arendt argues that aesthetic judgment allows people to move beyond the limitations of their individual selves, that an aesthetic capacity allows citizens to see the world through the eyes of others. An aesthetically sensitive citizenry can grasp the common good, live together in a vibrant political community, and create shared culture and ethical thought.¹¹ Elaine Scarry echoes this idea, contending that those citizens who develop an appreciation for aesthetic categories of balance and proportion also develop a disinterested taste for fairness, justice, and equality in political life.¹² Finally, the aesthetic emphasis on creativity and respect for the integrity of particular experiences and identities can be counterposed to the instrumental, bureaucratic world of contemporary society. Aesthetics can be transformative and transgressive, “defamiliarizing the world” and inventing a sense of new political and social possibilities. Like its sister activity play, it can take to the streets, parks, and other public venues and inform a vision of social life that opposes capitalist and bureaucratic instrumental reason in favor of a qualitatively different social, political, and personal world.

I emphasize both the creative and order-giving aspects of aesthetics in my discussion of public life and social movements. In my view, aesthetic understandings privilege sense perception over universal conceptual thinking and advance particular judgments attuned to specific contexts and objects over more generalizing approaches to knowledge. Yet aesthetic experience occurs in a communal and social context and provides a specifically social awareness that has more to do with the processes, feelings, and activities involved in “living aesthetically” rather than with the representational meanings of the artistic object itself. Aesthetic ideas from authenticity to living life as a work of art are not properties of an essential individual, but are socially constructed visions of self and society that arise in particular social circumstances, and were elaborated in the aesthetic sphere.

The Aesthetic Sphere

Drawing on Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas, I utilize the analytical tool of a distinctive aesthetic sphere to provide historical and social contexts for these issues. The aesthetic sphere, arising alongside the

scientific and normative realms in a differentiated modernity, is a counter-rationalizing realm of pleasure, play, and creativity, characterized by influences as diverse as the practices of bohemian artists and Kantian and Nietzschean philosophy. It is particularly important in developing distinctive ideas of the self and knowledge that play an increasingly prominent role in personal and public life. As Habermas argues, a specific understanding of individual authenticity oriented toward particular experiences emerges in this realm. In his words, the aesthetic sphere involves the “authentic interpretation of needs, interpretations that have to be renewed in each historically changed set of circumstances.”¹³ Yet Habermas and Weber do not adequately delineate the history of the aesthetic sphere, grasp the distinctive tensions around ideas of subjectivity and knowledge that arose in this sphere, analyze the role of image and performance in the aesthetic realm, nor address the importance of marginal urban spaces that allowed artists to develop their work outside of institutions such as the art school. I turn to thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Michel Maffesoli to address these issues, for they examine the imagistic and performative dimensions of the aesthetic sphere neglected by Habermas and Weber. I also explore how the artists and intellectuals within this aesthetic sphere reflected upon and thematized the political implications of aesthetics, and the ways in which their ideas and practices were deployed outside of this realm.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, philosophers and bohemian artists developed ideas of aesthetic authenticity emphasizing wholeness and sincerity in opposition to the cynicism and shallowness promoted by the commercialism of capitalism. Yet this modernist notion of authenticity, important to theorists as diverse as Marx and John Dewey and recast as a critique of worker alienation by many labor militants, was not the only notion of the self developed within the aesthetic sphere. The avant-garde also drew on a kind of postmodern view philosophically expressed by Nietzsche that critiqued all notions of an essential, authentic self as a seat of action, embracing instead a celebration of a fluid self of transgression and fragmentation. This latter approach became increasingly prevalent after 1960 in the aesthetic sphere. This postmodern vision of the self has an ambivalent relationship to commercial culture, for it enjoys playing with images and finds pleasure and delight in such activities.¹⁴

I also see the aesthetic sphere generating unique ideas about knowledge. In this aesthetic realm, knowledge is oriented toward the particular case rather than the universal generalization and toward sense experience rather than abstract concepts. Though aesthetic ideas are oriented toward particular circumstances, they are not always consistent. The history of the aesthetic sphere demonstrates a continuum from a modernist, Kantian orientation toward the self and knowledge based on the search for coherence and harmony and Nietzschean post-modern, transgressive understanding of the self and knowledge that emphasizes the centrality of fragmentation and difference in our experience. Theorists such as Castoriadis also point to the role of fantasy and desire in structuring postmodern knowledge.¹⁵ These different types of aesthetic orientations have influenced both the ideas and practices of social movements. As art critics and historians from Clement Greenberg to T. J. Clark state, modernist art beginning in the nineteenth century developed a critique of capitalist society as alienating and inauthentic that meshed well with socialist criticisms of society.¹⁶ Later postmodern criticisms of representational artistic practices moved away from this socialist orientation, intersecting with post-modern philosophical and social critiques of essentialist ideas of subjectivity and the repressive homogeneity and normalizing logic of contemporary disciplinary societies.

Popular Culture and Carnival

The goal of the aesthetic sphere is not a communicative consensual community, but the cultivation of an authentic self and/or varied and distinctive experiences. Such practices are often created in marginal spaces in the interstices of cities, as artists attempt to avoid the commercialization of their craft. Yet as artists and bohemians have left their specialized enclaves and mass media have become increasingly pervasive, themes from the aesthetic sphere have reshaped public life. But these aesthetic ideas could become politically powerful only when tied to communal and solidaristic practices and social movements outside of the aesthetic sphere. Popular culture, especially its traditions of carnival, provided the terrain and context for such a politicized aesthetic politics to be cultivated. Popular culture historically supported a distinctive type of playful and emotional practice, a form of mutual

display that is not based on shared traditions or scientific discourse. This type of theatrical solidarity differs from Habermasian communicative action or functionalist normative integration. It is less coherent, more indeterminate, more visual, and more experiential than these other understandings of social cohesion. The idea of play best captures this social practice, for it is a form of doing as well as speaking and encourages creativity and the emergence of new identities. Deriving especially from traditions of carnival, this playful solidarity informs public arenas that foster diverse visions of public life. It is tied to actual spaces such as streets, parks, and other areas. Though often created for commercial or transportation purposes, these spaces provide arenas of display where style is created and presented.

Popular culture supplies a fruitful terrain for alternative constructions of social identity. The practice of carnival from medieval times to early capitalism was one such space for opposition to discipline and social control. In the contemporary era, scholars from Donna Gaines to Paul Willis and Dick Hebdige demonstrate that unconventional identities are constructed in marginal urban and suburban spaces, where distinctive forms of culture that draw on media and popular culture provide common symbolic meanings, a rhythm of life, and a playful solidarity for subgroups from bike boys to goths and punks. Style becomes a symbolic code that expresses these new identities. Punk music and appearance contributed to an alternative public space for white youths, defined more by style than by discourse. Much the same can be said of rap and hip-hop. They provide a form of common literacy for many young African Americans, helping to reawaken them to their Afrocentric traditions.¹⁷

In my view, popular culture and the aesthetic sphere merge on the terrain of civil society and social movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bohemian ideas of the self and knowledge intersect with a new playful solidarity. This intersection recasts public spaces as realms of dramatic performance and mutual display. In these aesthetic public spaces, meanings are fluid and particular rather than stable and universal, deriving from emotions as much as from rationality. There is little idea of a shared public or mutual interest within these realms. Public life increasingly appears to take on the form of theater, and an aesthetic politics becomes increasingly prominent.

Aesthetics and Social Movements

These notions of theatrical public spaces and aesthetic politics have especially important implications for the dynamics of social movements. Aesthetic politics provides alternatives to the material and cultural incentives usually invoked as reasons for engaging in political activity and social movements. It supplies new strategic options for social movements, for dramatic images and street performances can be used to draw attention to the movement, recruit new members, and satirize the state and other powerful elites, while implicitly prefiguring a new society. These images often provide the “frames” by which movement participants perceive the world. The aesthetic politics of social movements views public life as a public stage, where mutual display and performance often trump rational debate, and urban streets become sites of festival and carnival. It redefines politics to mean changing everyday life as much as devising particular policy proposals or seizing state power.

My discussion of social movements seems to mirror the familiar argument that issues concerning aesthetics and culture become more important as “new social movements” based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like replace the labor movement as major contributors to social change. My view certainly has affinities with this perspective, though it is a bit different. I emphasize the distinctive aesthetic moment in social movements. I also discuss historical changes in the types of aesthetic politics associated with these different movements. While I stress that there was an aesthetic dimension to many labor movements in the past, the aesthetic politics of these labor movements were tied to critiques of alienation based on ideas of authenticity and an expressive subjectivity that were not allowed free rein under capitalism, and secondarily to more transgressive ideas about ruptures with dominant cultural forms. I will examine the French syndicalist CGT in the Belle Époque in this context, as well as the American IWW.¹⁸ The tie of aesthetics and politics has also contributed to some of the most vicious movements in history, as Nazism demonstrates. I will explore the fascist aestheticization of politics and its role in the Nazi ascension to power. While aesthetic ideas of authenticity and expressive subjectivity remain important in contemporary social movements, as in many forms of identity politics, the transgressive dimension of aesthetic

politics, with its emphasis on identification with images, respect for cultural differences, and stress on the overturning of accepted identity categories, has become more prominent in the context of a new post-modern culture and society. Movements from ACT UP to the global movement for justice transgress conventions and re-create and recode private relationships in a new forum, often utilizing theatrical and playful forms of performance in their demonstrations. Modern culture becomes a contested arena, from fashion to music. The playful dimensions of public life do not necessarily adapt to existing values, but transform them. They can change the very ways that we conceive of the self, sexuality, dress, and language creating a new aesthetics of existence, in Foucault's terms.¹⁹ The nature of human rights, globalization, and the like will also be affected, as neoliberal or universalist understandings of globalization are challenged by groups that have different visions of social and public life.²⁰ Like worker and populist movements of the past, they offer the possibility of breaking into history and "turning the world upside down."²¹ I will explore in particular May 1968 in Paris and the contemporary global justice movement as examples of these new kinds of movements. Finally, in this book I hope to bring sociological thinking, especially regarding social movements, into a dialogue with postmodern approaches. Such conversations have been far too infrequent, to the detriment of a vibrant contemporary sociology, in my view.