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Joy in Movement

Prepared for Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation on “Theology of Joy as a Transformative Movement,” October 9-10, 2014
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(Consultation on “Theology of Joy as a Transformative Movement,”
Yale University, October 2014)

At first glance, it seems odd to ask an analyst of social movements to contribute to a consultation on the Theology of Joy. After all, social movements have their origins in the opposite of joy: feelings of unhappiness, frustration, anger, resentment, alienation, shame – often rooted in situations of injustice, discrimination, deprivation, exclusion, oppression, violence or misery. People engage in social movements because they want to change the situation of suffering in which they find themselves – or in which, via the human capacity for empathy and solidarity, they view others as being unjustly caught or constrained. If anger and injustice are our stock-in-trade, how do we contribute to a reflection on the opposite of this, a concept that gestures toward the plentitude of life, love, and human fulfilment?

In short, joy is not a category that I am used to seeing or using in my work as a political and cultural sociologist. Recently, however, I have been wrestling with two other concepts – hope and peace – which perhaps touch on the concept of joy, or at least provide some pointers about how and where we might proceed with these reflections. I have a longstanding interest in the sociology of hope; in fact during my very first year in graduate school, freshly back from three years on a journalistic fellowship in Brazil, I worked at a non-profit in NYC called the “Center for the Science of Hope.” Part of my job was to do a lit review of work on the dynamics of hope across different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, medicine, economics, politics, and sociology. At the same time I volunteered at an educational project for inner city
youth and interviewed young people on their hopes for the future. These experiences sent me on to 20+ years of interest and study of the role not just of hope, but of future projections in general in people’s choices and actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische and Pattison 2000; Mische 2001, 2009). I have explored both individual and collective hopes – in fact I am currently analyzing future-oriented discourse in the civil society debates surrounding the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), an event that was focused on imagining “the future we want” (Mische 2014). What I have learned from these studies is the real social power of the future imaginary to pull us forward, to both sustain and steer us as we confront the difficulties and challenges of modern life.

But hope is a very different kind of emotion than joy. It is based on the “not yet,” on the sense of potentiality, that “another world is possible,” or that “things can be better” than what they are right now, even if the now is characterized by suffering and constraint. The Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves (1972), expresses this understanding of hope:

What is hope?
It is a presentiment that imagination is more real and reality less real than it looks.
It is a hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word.
It is a suspicion that reality is more complex than realism wants us to believe
That the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual;
and that in a miraculous and unexpected way life is preparing the creative events
which will open the way to freedom and resurrection.
The two, suffering and hope
must live from each other.
Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair.
But, hope without suffering creates illusions, naïveté, and drunkenness.
Let us plant dates
even though we who plant them will never eat them.
We must live by the love of what we will never see.
That is the secret discipline.
It is a refusal to let the creative act be dissolved
in immediate sense experience
and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren.
Such disciplined love is what has given
prophets, revolutionaries and saints
the courage to die for the future they envisaged.
They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope.

(Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child*)

Clearly hope is essential to social movements, otherwise why would anyone engage in
the costly, risky, slow, frustrating, and often painful work of trying to change the world?

However, hope in this sense involves discipline, patience, self-denial, postponement of
gratification until an as yet undefined future moment, perhaps a future that remains outside of
our own lifetimes. Joy, however, while related to hope (and possibly even dependent on it),
seems more grounded in the experiences, sensations, engagements and pleasures of the
*present*, rather than the future. It would seem the opposite of self-denial, focused on
enjoyment of the actual rather than envisioning the possible.

Perhaps, then, joy is more closely linked to *peace*, another concept that I have been
wrestling with recently. Last year I joined the faculty of the Kroc Institute for International
Peace Studies at Notre Dame. Among other things, I have been charged with helping peace
scholars and practitioners understand the role that social movements play in what we call here
“strategic peacebuilding.” I am finding that this is a tricky task; peace researchers have been
historically uneasy about contentious popular uprisings, especially those that cannot be
contained under the rubric of “nonviolent civil resistance movements.” Their disruptive
tendencies, flirtation with (and sometimes open adoption of) violent tactics, and frequent unwillingness to engage in compromise and dialogue – along with a tendency toward strident and confrontational communicative styles – can run counter both to the security concerns of the “realist” camp of peace science, as well as to the foundational values of conflict resolution and intergroup dialogue that underlie the “normative” branch of peace studies.

In fact, sociologists rarely theorize about peace – just as they also rarely address hope or joy. As I was struggling to think about how sociologists might conceptualize peace, I decided to crowd source it – I took it to my academic friends on Facebook. Some were quite skeptical about the notion; one person said that she associates peace with “containment,” while another said even more bleakly, “when I think of peace, I think of death.” The implication here – and this is important for a sociology (or theology) of joy – is that if we understand peace as the absence of conflict or tension, then one of the primary sources of dynamism and energy in social life – and thus its potential joyfulness – is stripped away. Peace was clearly not seen as the equivalent of joy; in fact, peace in its negative sense was seen as joy’s negation.

On the other hand, several other colleagues pointed towards quite different understandings of peace, which I think may have some relevance for understanding joy as a transformative movement. Two in particular stand out for me (both, incidentally, from friends who study social movements):

> “Sounds similar to Simmel’s entry into his essay on conflict, where the latter is not an absence but type of social relationship. Conversely, peace would not be an absence of conflict but a certain configuration of opposing and attracting forces. But I'm not sure who studies peace in this way.”

> “Could it be visualized as a decentralized pattern of interactions as opposed to interactions that activate a boundary? Sort of a context where many boundaries are activated, rather than a dominant one?”
What is interesting in these two responses is that both focus on *relationships*, conceived in a dynamic, multi-faceted, and generative way. Peace here is not the absence of conflict, but the harnessing of social tension in such a way as to generate new action and relation building. Moreover, peace does not entail enclosing or containing oneself within a (literal or figurative) boundary, but rather the act of reaching out beyond the relative safety zones of well-trodden networks and narratives. A positive peace, in this sense, involves embracing new relations, ideas, and possibilities of action.

How can these reflections on hope and peace steer us toward an understanding of joy? I would argue that when these concepts are considered dynamically and relationally, rather than as static attributes or states (whether of individuals or collectivities), then we can more clearly see the connection between them. If hope involves a loosening up of the constraints of the actual so as to see the transformative potential in the current situation – and peace involves the de-activation of boundaries and the construction of bridges across social divides – then joy can be understood as the deep pleasure and emotional energy generated when these two types of movement converge. That is, joy comes from the immersion in and enjoyment of simultaneous motion *forward* in time and *across* social space.

Moreover, joy is heightened by the keen awareness of the opposite of these motions, i.e., not by ignoring or evading boundaries and constraints, but by recognizing, engaging, and even confronting these. Joy is generated via the feeling of learning, challenge and transcendence that comes from overcoming boundaries and barriers, while encountering new possibilities of thought, relationship, and action (even if this overcoming is always partial, incomplete, and subject to new iterations and challenges). I am reminded here of
Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of “flow” – which involves the experience of learning and challenge via deep immersion activities at the edge of one’s abilities and understanding. This is what I mean by “joy in movement” – although I would like to make the perhaps unusual move of extending this to political movements, or collective efforts at social change.

Joy is what is missing

There are three quite different ways in which we can understand the role of joy in transformative movements. First, as I mentioned in my opening paragraph, social movements arise in situations characterized by the denial or the thwarting of joy. William Gamson (1992) talks about three kinds of “collective action frames” that are essential to social movement activism: injustice, agency and identity. Injustice frames are what generate the “hot cognition” of anger, critique and repudiation. They posit motivated actors who are responsible for the situation of grievance and suffering, and who have the capacity to reverse or improve the situation if sufficiently confronted. Framings of injustice can vary widely – from inequitable access to material resources (land, water, jobs, housing, clean air); to political exclusion, autocracy and repression; to discriminatory policies along racial, gender, ethnic, religious or sexual lines; to arbitrary violence or violations of human rights. In theorizing joy, we should confront head-on the many political, economic, and cultural factors in society that denigrate human dignity and reproduce exclusions and inequalities. The implicit claim in any injustice frame is that the situation of grievance thus articulated is an impediment to joy – that is, to integral human development, to human creativity and connection, to the possibility for growth, engagement and learning. These conditions – varying forms of structural and cultural violence
– strip away hope, undermine peace, and generate alienation, bitterness, and victimization instead of joy.

Joy is what we create

And yet, to quote Rubem Alves once again, “the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word.” The second important collective action frame, according to Gamson, is that of agency, that is, the sense of collective efficacy, or the possibility of changing the undesirable situation. Doug McAdam (1988) describes this process of discovering agency as “cognitive liberation” – that is, moving beyond self-blame to an understanding of the systemic nature of injustice, at the same time as one moves toward understanding oneself as an “subject” rather than an “object” of history (to paraphrase Paulo Freire). Despite the moral outrage that often accompanies this realization, there is joy, pleasure and exuberance in this process, coming from a sense of rapidly expanding possibilities, of accelerated learning, of engagement with new people, ideas and repertoires of action. McAdam vividly describes this process among the young white college students who volunteered in Mississippi in 1964 during Freedom Summer. Despite the intensive encounter with danger, violence, poverty and discrimination – and despite their own experience of stress and exhaustion – the summer was exhilarating, mind-expanding and personally transformative for them. The “Freedom High” – or feeling of joyful learning and engagement – experienced during that deeply challenging summer immersion generated a commitment to social equality, nonviolent change efforts, and community engagement that lasted through their lives.

Certainly we have seen this kind of exuberant joy in public squares and streets around the world over the past five years – from Tahrir Square and the Arab uprisings to Occupy Wall
Street, the Spanish *Indignados*, Gezi Park in Turkey, and the streets of Santiago, São Paulo, Sofia, Kiev, and most recently, Hong Kong. These movements have not all ended equally well – some in fact are still unfolding tragically, raising difficult questions about the persistence, institutionalization and repression of social change efforts. But if we focus here for a moment on the generative elements – i.e., the exuberant discovery of collective agency; the pleasure in the movement into new forms of solidarity and community; the challenge of dealing with a risky, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding situations; the relief of transforming shame into pride, or humiliation into dignity; and the satisfaction of creating opportunities where before there were only blockages – then one has, arguably, the elements of joy. Yale political scientist Elisabeth Wood (2001) describes precisely this kind of “pleasure in agency” (coming from the recovery of dignity, pride, and a sense of accomplishment) in her work on peasant mobilization in the Salvadoran insurgency in the 1970s. She describes such “emotional-in-process benefits” – both a sense of moral outrage and pleasure in agency– as being the key factors in motivating peasant resistance, above and beyond the material benefits of insurgency. Joy is mobilizing, and is generated in the process of mobilization itself.

*Joy is what we communicate and spread*

Finally, we should acknowledge that joy in movement cannot simply be about the emotional energy generated in the peak experiences of large scale mobilizations, extended insurgencies or intense emersion experiences such as Freedom Summer. Flow does not last forever; we come in and out of it almost definitionally. We go back to our day-to-day experiences of mundane tasks, obligations, distractions, pressures, fragmentation, and
constraint. At this point the question changes to how we incorporate this kind of continuing joy in movement into our networks, institutions, and public settings.

Here we have to go back to the dynamic components of hope and peace described earlier: the engagement of flexible and expanding possibilities (hope), as well as the ability to cross boundaries and build bridges across sectarian or parochial divides (peace). If we understand these as continuing, everyday challenges – often confronting barriers due to institutionalized power arrangements and cultures of violence and exclusion – then joy becomes a communicative mandate. How do we unlock a sense of agency, possibility or forward motion when it is blocked by ossified relations and routines? How do we take the risks of brokering and cultivating cross-cutting social ties – or what I call “cross-talk” (Mische 2003) – with people who differ from us on salient identity dimensions, particularly when those divides activate histories of grievance, inequality and exclusion? Can we actively pursue and nurture heterogeneity in possible futures, as well as in human identities and relationships? And can we build these challenges and pursuits into our families, our workplaces, our political arenas, and our spaces of artistic creation and recreation?

These are the everyday processes of imagination and connection – of hope-making and peacebuilding – that, I would argue, communicate and disseminate joy. These are not easy processes; they are certainly not always happy processes. But the joy comes from movement – from risk, challenge, confrontation, connection, learning and imagination of alternative forms of political and social organization, on both smaller and larger scales. As a sociologist of social movements, this is the dynamic and relational understanding of joy that I can put to good use in my own networks of research and practice.
References


