



## Dances of Self-Development as a Resource for Participatory Democracy

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## **6. Dances of Self-Development as a Resource for Participatory Democracy**

Michael Houseman and Marie Mazzella di Bosco

*‘One solution may lie in rituals’ (Polletta 2002:224)*

This article explores the political dimensions of collective dance practices undertaken largely in the spirit of self-discovery and personal transformation: 5 Rhythms, Movement Medicine, Biodanza, Life Art Process, Sacred Circle Dance, and others. Sometimes glossed as ‘ecstatic’, ‘spiritual’, or ‘free’ dance, activities such as these first appeared in the 1960s, and have expanded over the last few decades to become a regular feature of most major European and American cities. They typically take the form of weekly two-hour sessions run by an ‘instructor’ or ‘facilitator’. A session, costing 15 to 20 euros, brings together between fifteen and fifty participants, predominantly middle-class Caucasians, three-fourths of whom are women, and whose average age is around forty (very few participants are under twenty-five).

These ‘focused gatherings’ (Goffman 1961) are neither therapy sessions, esoteric apprenticeships, dance classes, nor dance parties. As their practitioners often insist, while they may prove therapeutic, they are not therapy; they do not claim to be remedial treatments for psychological or physical disorders. At the same time, as practices immediately accessible to all, requiring little effort or commitment (regular participation, while encouraged, is not a prerequisite), they are not esoteric, initiation-based disciplines. Finally, in the course of these sessions, dance is treated less as an end in itself than as a means for attaining special, out-of-the-ordinary outcomes related to participants’ personal development and self-realization. As such, these activities can be distinguished both from those aimed at developing proficiencies in dance (almost none of the participants are trained dancers), and from recreational or social dancing undertaken within the context of mundane concerns such as seduction, companionship, physical fitness, and so forth.

According to the flyers, websites, and books that promote them, these practices allow participants to ‘rediscover’ their innate yet heretofore unrealized capacities for ‘spontaneity’, ‘creativity’, and ‘authenticity’. They are ‘an invitation to encounter and express one’s personal strength’, a way to find ‘a state of being present to oneself’, to ‘touch and taste one’s Being through dance’, to ‘find and experience one’s deepest self’, to ‘explore the wondrous and magical dimensions that lie within each of us’. These activities are thus explicitly oriented towards individual self-discovery and personal fulfilment. They number among the wide array of practices consistent with one of the hallmark expectations of Western individualism: the deliberate construction of the self (Giddens 1991, Taylor 2007, Le Bart 2008 among others). As such, collective dancing, along with other contemporary ‘alternative’ initiatives, can readily be seen through the prism of individualistic consumerism in which ‘seekers’ (Heelas 1996) ‘pick-and-mix’ (Hamilton 2000) from among a variety of commoditized offers (the ‘spiritual supermarket’) in keeping with what are presumed to be their personal needs and desires (cf. Luckmann 1996, Van Hove 1999, Roof 1999). Now, this may be true up to a point, but as has been argued for shopping (Miller 1998), ‘foodies’ (de Solier 2013), personal development books (Marquis 2014), and self-spirituality generally (Aupers and Houtman 2013), it is far from the whole story.

Discourse relating to these practices, as well as the dance sessions themselves, play up self-discovery, but they also emphasize mutual respect, collective sentiment, and the ideal of public commitment to a larger social and environmental assemblage. Hence the recurrent motif of the three-fold ‘connection’ these activities are presumed to promote: to oneself, to others (or ‘the group’) and to ‘the world’ (or to ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’). Dance sessions often enact these connections, not only during short-term partnerships and the studied expressions of gratitude that follow, but also in certain patterns of movement as when the partners of randomly formed couples are invited to divide themselves into ‘dancers’ and ‘witnesses’. The latter form a circle surrounding their dancing partners to whom they ‘bring support and deep attention’, before thoughtfully (but silently) thanking each other and exchanging roles. The same holds true for relationship to the group. Thus, persons who, because they are fearful, upset or just tired, prefer to stop dancing for a while, move to the side but are asked not to cut themselves off from the group. In the same vein is one 5 Rhythms instructor’s firm admonition upon seeing people dancing by themselves in spite of her repeated collective invitations to the contrary: ‘When I suggest dance movements involving two, three or more people, this is never an obligation! There are moments

when one needs to be alone. However, the idea in these sessions is that everyone should bring something to the community. If you really don't want to do this, there are plenty of other types of dances elsewhere' (all translations from the French are ours). There is indeed a subtle equilibrium to be found during these sessions between personal autonomy on the one hand and a feeling of responsibility towards those present and the community at large on the other. The day following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, a 5 Rhythms facilitator decided to maintain the scheduled session in order to 'put movement and life back into everyone, after the shock that froze us all'. Many people came, and one participant's testimony attests to this collective bond: 'I didn't really feel like dancing, but it was important to be here, together, with you all.' During the session, participants lit candles which they placed on an improvised shrine; at the end, they were invited to bring them to the nearby Place de la République 'to share our inner peace with the world'.

Also relevant is the prevalence of participants working in care-centred, other-oriented professions. In several 5 Rhythms and Movement Medicine groups attended over a two-year period, around one quarter the most assiduous dancers were employed in the fields of psychology and of health, and another quarter in that of education. A third quarter worked in various artistic professions, and a final quarter had a wide variety of occupations (engineers, office workers, etc.). Some participants said they had recently undergone training to look for new jobs in the fields of care or education. However, generally speaking, their professional orientations predated their involvement in these practices, and cannot be considered to have derived from them. Yet, dancing together has the enhancing effect of bringing together people with different but related social profiles, skills, and interests so as to create a loose, yet coherent network of altruistically oriented 'con-sequential strangers' (Fingerman 2009). At times, such as in the wake of the 2015 terrorist killings and the *Je suis Charlie* march in reaction to them, this complicity can assume a more political tone. In one Biodanza group, several participants who were schoolteachers, disoriented by the way their more disadvantaged students refused to be identified with Charlie, stressed how important it is to take a balanced ethical stance, and 'to provide young people with the means to think and feel with greater stability and security, so that they can express themselves without resorting to violence'. In another group, one participant suggested that 'We are all Charlie, but we are also all terrorists', and that 'we have to find the terrorist in each of us to be able to face the situation and act with wisdom'.

Finally, many participants are involved in one or more projects or associations that invest the public sphere in ways that resonate with what are usually recognized as ‘democratic’, anti-totalitarian (Arendt 1951) values: personal agency, pluralism, collective solidarity, social activism. In one 5 Rhythms group, for example, Nicole launched a ‘democratic school’, Jeanne was developing permaculture in Paris, and Julie, a professional photographer, had recently returned from a project in Africa combining photography and dance therapy to help abused women. Moreover, instructors regularly undertake initiatives that aim to take the restorative benefits of their practice beyond the private dance floor: one facilitator organized Biodanza sessions on the Place de la République during the *Nuit Debout* movement in Paris, a 5 Rhythms teacher is planning to set up dance sessions in a refugee camp in the Paris suburbs, while several other instructors have organized sessions to raise funds for the Red Cross, or for Standing Rock.

In many respects, then, the values voiced and acted out during dance sessions, as well as the professional and personal commitments of practitioners, suggest that these practices are not reducible to the consumption of a resource for individual self-fulfilment. They also mobilize a benevolent, negotiated openness to others, a feeling of personal responsibility towards the group, and an admittedly diffuse concern for broader issues. There is indeed general agreement among dance practitioners that one’s personal development can better enable one to bring about change in the world.

At the same time, however, these practices are not organized according to democratic principles. Decision-making and conflict resolution, for example, remains the province of the instructor or facilitator alone. Moreover, the group’s activities are not in themselves of a political nature. During two-hour weekly sessions, what participants mostly do is dance to music without speaking. In some cases (such as Biodanza), they are invited to undertake a series of choreographic ‘propositions’: dancing in a circle, walking hand in hand, coordinating one’s movements with one or more others, etc. In most cases, however, dancers are encouraged to move about freely, drawing inspiration from the music’s changing rhythms and tonalities, from each other, and from the leader’s occasional, somewhat enigmatic cues: ‘feel the energy rising through your body’, ‘find a movement you can trust and follow it’, ‘let go’, ‘that’s right’, etc. Although each session is a distinct, deliberately orchestrated whole, it usually starts off with slow, flowing music that becomes progressively faster and more rhythmical, reaching a plateau of intensity before slowing down and tapering off towards the end. In principle, each participant dances alone, albeit in the company of others. However,

following the leader's prompts or on their own initiative, participants often enter into short-term dance partnerships, seeking to coordinate their movements playfully or with impassioned diligence. After having danced (or in some cases before dancing), all are invited to form a circle holding hands and, if they wish, to 'share something with the group'. While participants may evoke public events or episodes from their personal lives at this time, they mostly voice their positive feelings towards the practice itself and towards the group.

How should such practices be understood politically? What relationship, if any, do they have to participatory democracy? They are neither 'pre-political' in the usual (Aristotelian) sense, nor can they be construed as 'infra-political' modes of informal resistance (Scott 1990) or protest (Marche 2012). Like many other 'alternative' or 'spiritual' practices, they are not instances of political activism in and of themselves, yet they call into play moral and social values that are consonant with the principles that democratically inspired political initiatives seek to put into effect. We propose to understand these practices as ritual activities that can be related to the recent restructuring of political activism in an increasingly decentralized public domain. The 1960s saw the emergence of new forms of activism that are more horizontally organized, more mobile, and less personally encompassing than traditional political associations such as parties, trade unions, or institutionalized interest groups. They favour a more bottom-up, looser, individual-based type of democratic engagement in which personal networks momentarily coalesce around particular events. Collective dance practices like 5 Rhythms, Biodanza, Movement Medicine and the like, we suggest, involve participants in extra-ordinary yet lived-through situations that enact a special mode of sociability, many aspects of which are immediately relevant to the functioning of social movements based on participatory democratic principles. By affording participants with 'privileged' experiences in which individual autonomy and collective solidarity are made interdependent, these practices can be a resource for democratic commitment in the political sphere.

A first section describes the individual engagement, interpersonal encounters, and conviviality characteristic of these collective dances. We then look at attendance rates and the way individuals participate in these practices. Finally, we consider the role collective dancing might play in participants' political lives.

*A Close Familiarity with Strangers*

We have described elsewhere how these dance practices progressively shape participants' experience (Houseman, Mazzella di Bosco, and Thibaut 2016; Houseman in press). Suffice to say here that, guided by music, by ambient sensory cues (soft lighting, the use of incense, loose garments, the presence of altar-like installations, etc.), by the instructor's directives, and by fellow dancers' behaviour, participants continually oscillate between two experiential poles. On the one hand, much of the time, they are made acutely aware of their deliberate efforts to move 'spontaneously', to interact 'authentically' with others, and to explore, emotionally and physically, what this might concretely entail. On the other hand, these on-going efforts are punctuated by episodes of 'letting-go' in which their movements and those of others seem to come together in a coherent, flowing whole. In the course of this process, participants regularly experience powerful moments of bodily presence and emotional intimacy. Attitudes and feelings presumed to be habitually kept in check can be expressed in outpourings of tears, screams or laughter, in a sudden rush of deep anger, in wild, sensual or bizarre facial expressions. This is what Frederic, a regular dancer, calls the 'somewhat crazy side' of these practices: 'free movement is a bit like a walk into madness... letting our emotions go, letting the madness overcome us! But this is frightening! People are afraid they'll break down if they let go.'

The sought-after sensations of physical and affective 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) that make these sessions so worthwhile can come about during solitary dance, as when participants are transported by the particularly fluid, self-evident quality of their own movements. At such times, fatigue and self-consciousness give way to the excitement of seemingly unlimited expressive freedom. However, as dancers readily attest, these 'moments of grace' often blossom while dancing with others. Philippe, for example, recalls 'a dance together with another dancer when I felt like we were communicating telepathically, without any effort. This was like... the music is great, my partner can hear what I'm doing, I hear what she's doing, and we are able to create things without touching each other, fully synchronous, extraordinarily beautiful... . This really was a state of communion with someone else, and with dance, all together.'

Such feelings of exalted intimacy also arise with respect to the group of dancers as a whole, bringing about a sensation of being part of an organic, dynamic community composed of a multiplicity of independent yet closely connected cells. 'The group' is often movingly thanked and affectionately acknowledged during talking circles, and Biodanza facilitators, for example,

often insist on how much 'the group' and 'finding one's place in it', contributes to a 'deepening of the experience' their practice affords. The quality of 'the group', along with the nature of the venue and the instructor's personality (her 'specific energy' or 'musical universe'), is among the top three or four reasons participants give for choosing one session over another. Philippe, for example, admitted he kept returning to one instructor's weekly sessions in spite of being somewhat unsatisfied with her, so as to continue dancing 'with the people there'. As we will see further on, 'the group' in question is not a closed, fixed set of individuals; newcomers are always present, and from one session to the next even the core of regular attendees is never exactly the same. However, one of the instructor's responsibilities is to instil this sense of heartfelt community in spite of the gathering's ever-changing composition. Facilitators who are most appreciated are those whose manner of guiding, and whose musical choices and choreographic proposals do this best. Such community-building proposals include various (slow or fast) circle dances, figures in which participants cross all together from one side of the room to the other, and ever more inclusive progressions. In the latter, the instructor, for example, may ask everyone to find a partner, 'no matter who, the one who is nearest to you', and to 'present yourself to them through your dance', and 'surprise them with your feet'. After a minute, participants are told that 'the group of two joins another group of two', and 'all four begin to create another dance', 'surprising each other with their knees'. After a short while, 'four and four make eight' and 'create a new dance together', then 'eight and eight make sixteen', and so on until the entire assembly has been gathered into a single circle of dancers. The instructor then invites everyone to move freely within and around the group, to cross empty spaces, to weave in and out, to come closer and then go further away, etc. The result is a flowing, playful circulation of all in a spirit of ostentatiously shared jubilation. Smiling dancers seek eye-contact with others as they lightly touch hands or shoulders in passing, demonstrating both their affectionate attentiveness towards each other and their sensitivity to the overall patterning of their shared dance.

One might expect experiences and behaviours such as these to occur in more private settings, with family members, lovers, or close friends. However, it is remarkable that those with whom participants have these exceptional encounters are generally distant acquaintances, sometimes even complete strangers. There are of course exceptions to this. Some participants know each other for having undertaken training workshops together. Others, having danced in the same groups for years, have become friends and see each other outside the dance context. But this is not the norm, and



such 'extramural' relationships are rarely linked to particularly intense dance interactions. Indeed, it is typically with people they are not ordinarily close to that participants feel free to experience powerful emotions and/or familiar connection during these dance practices. There is thus a surprising discrepancy between the intense intimacy characteristic of the experiences practitioners share while dancing, and the distance they maintain towards each other once dancing is over.

Many participants assume, or at least hope that their daily lives will be affected by the experiences they have while dancing: a new-found joy in the expressive capacities of one's body, an heretofore unrealized aptitude for deep and open engagement with others, the comforting force of feeling oneself to be an active part of a larger, supportive community. However, they are fully aware that the sociality they engage in while dancing is a special one, not to be confused with that of everyday interaction. Thus, while some more regular participants may go out for a drink or a meal together after a session, such gatherings are short-lived, 'the group' ceasing to exist beyond the bounds of the dance itself. This also appears to be the rule regarding danced encounters. Sophie, for example, says that dancing has taught her to stay true to herself while opening up to another person, so as to genuinely take him or her into account. However, she sees a real difference between the relationships she has with fellow practitioners during dance sessions and those she has with them outside of sessions. While dancing, she can feel 'moments of profound connection with other dancers, moments which have a very distinctive consistency and depth ... but after the dance session, if I try to speak and socialise with the persons concerned, it's as if everything has flattened out, the magic is lost'. Many others attest to this disparity. Lisa, for example, says that she has been disappointed several times after having met dancers outside of sessions: 'it was weird, we were awkward with each other... .When you dance with people, you know, you are able to meet up with them on a definitely other, higher, level. While dancing with someone, you get an idea about him or her, but then, outside, it's as if we suddenly don't speak the same language anymore! In the end, I think that maybe, while dancing, you get to know him or her better than in everyday life'. Eric admits to clearly separating these two relational registers: 'the dance' entailing encounters that go no further than the sessions themselves on one side, all his other relationships on the other. He does not go dancing to meet new friends or possible lovers for example. As he explains: 'If there's one thing I truly love [in these practices], it's the intensity of the encounter, even when it's brief. These moments are precious. For me, it's beautiful when

something like that happens even if we never see each other again. There is beauty in this fleeting, ephemeral, encounter’.

The characteristic sociability of these practices can be qualified as one of ‘distanced intimacy’ (Houseman *in press*) in two related ways. First, as the above quotations indicate, participants are fully conscious that the sentiments and interactions that occur while dancing are at a remove from those of everyday intercourse. It is clear for all concerned that the aim of these practices—whose quality is often explicitly appraised, sometimes critically—is not to encroach upon participants’ private lives. Rather, it is to provide them with enjoyable, well-delineated experiences that can act as sources of inspiration in their everyday worlds. Second, while participants may momentarily be carried away by the intensity of their emotions or the ‘flow’ of the dance, they are constantly incited to be self-conscious observers of their own feelings and behaviour. Their exceptional dance floor experiences thus readily become the object of reflexive scrutiny. As previously mentioned, sensations of awkwardness, weariness or annoyance continually rise to the surface of dancers’ awareness, resulting in doubts and confusion, as the following excerpt from our (M. Mazzella di Bosco) field notes attests:

After two or three partnerships, we are invited to ‘circulate through the entire space and share this dance with the group’, to ‘present ourselves to others, to say who we are, through our dance’. While trying to discover how to do this, I can’t help thinking that if we are supposed to dance to present ourselves, we should also be paying attention to others’ presentations and welcome them. So, I should also be a person who looks at a person who is presenting. But I can’t do both at the same time, so what should I do? All these questions keep turning in my head the whole time.

Such a reflexive attitude is further encouraged by instructors’ expectations that dancers circulate to form partnerships with people they are not familiar with. One Movement Medicine teacher always ends his sessions by inviting participants to ‘hug at least one person you don’t know’, and Biodanza facilitators often explain how a wide variety of partnerships, in causing practitioners to negotiate and explore new ways of feeling and interacting, lets them better experience what they are capable of. Indeed, this type of self-consciousness can also have a more positive side, as Gilles’ account suggests:

For me, these dance workshops are experimental laboratories. The dance becomes interesting for me when I somehow add a consciousness

of the energy involved, when I can feel not only what is happening within me, but also what is happening within the other in front of me, and what is happening in the interaction between others and myself, on a conscious *and* unconscious level. That is, when I begin to play with the energy in a certain way, I can *see* how the others around react, and when there is like a delicate attunement of the other's movement... I can feel when the unconscious or the body of the other has sensed that something is happening, even if the person in question is not fully conscious of it. And for me this is interesting to observe.

One consequence of the distancing these practices put into effect, and the ongoing negotiations with oneself and with others it implies, is a strong emphasis on participants' individual selves. Personal autonomy, and respect for the personal autonomy of others, is one of the basic values these practices enact. This applies especially to interactions between dancers. 'Respect others as well as yourself', for example, is one of the 'three rules' of Biodanza that are repeated at the start of almost every session (the others are 'enjoy yourself' and 'no speaking'). But it is also made manifest during choreographic proposals involving the entire group. It often happens that a number of participants remain at odds with the intense communal connection they bring about. While almost everyone is sharing a complexly coordinated, joyous dance, one person, for example, might be moving in a subdued, self-absorbed manner off to the side, another might run through the room at full speed, while still another might be sitting on the ground in the middle of it all. No one seems overly concerned about this, although there are limits to what is felt to be acceptable. In general, dancers adapt their movements so as to integrate these individuals who move at their own rhythm, and who sometimes explain afterwards that they needed to 'live through the moment by themselves before coming back to the group'. In this way, individual disparities are demonstrated and integrated into the whole. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of these practices is the degree to which personal specificity is accentuated, not only in instructors' discourse and in participants' movements, attitudes and interactive styles, but also, for example, in the weight given to the use of personal names and individual gestures during talking circles. This ideal of personal independence within the context of a larger, well-disposed and supportive community, and the creative heterogeneity it fosters is not always achieved. However, it comes out clearly in the two reasons Eric gives to explain his passionate participation in these practices: first, there is 'a great and unconditional respect for people, for everyone', and second, as a result, there is 'an unparalleled level of freedom

and therefore a great, great, diversity'. After a 'magical' session, he posted the following, telling message on the Parisian dancers' Facebook page:

I believe that many of us do 5 Rhythms, Movement Medicine or Open Floor just like these sticks [he has just described an altar-like installation in which four sticks are arranged so that they point out in several directions from a common centre]: building on these dances' universe to open up to the world and bring something special to it. [The dance floor] is a microcosm where we can find freedom, tolerance, individuality, encounters, sensuality, dynamism, savageness, strength, light, tears, laughter, loneliness, attentiveness, intimacy and oneself.

The aim of these practices is less to promote authentic, heart-felt relationships between participants or with the group as a whole, than to provide dancers with memorable, embodied experiences of what such interpersonal and collective connections might be. Participants are incited to explore ways of acting and feeling that these relationships are presumed to imply: spontaneity, self-respect, adaptability, responsibility, openness to others, trust, collective engagement, etc. By enacting these qualities through their movements and interactions they demonstrate, to themselves and to others, their heretofore-unrealized capacity for entertaining relations of this nature. It is this newly revealed personal potential that they are then expected to put into practice in their daily lives. In this respect, the music, the instructor's directives, one's own bodily sensations, and interactions with fellow dancers and with the group can be understood as so many resources participants draw upon in the service of their personal 'development'.

In principle, then, the exceptional experiences these practices provide are destined to be 'disembedded' (Giddens 1991) from their immediate social context—the dance floor and relationships with fellow dancers—to be applied elsewhere. Practitioners' ways of feeling and (inter)acting during dance sessions can thereby become a resource for other, more everyday situations. This transposition is made possible by the distinctive sociality these practices entail, in which feelings and (inter)actions are intimate, intense, and embodied, yet at the same time transitory, sharply circumscribed, and reflexively distanced. However, it is worth stressing that the out-of-the-ordinary, somewhat ambivalent sociability characteristic of these practices has two complementary entailments. 5 Rhythms, Biodanza, Movement Medicine and the like enable dancers to experience the ongoing, purposeful production of their individual 'selves'. At the same time, participants also experience close, positive interactions with ostensibly independent, self-directed persons like themselves who, together, compose a caring, supportive

collective. Indeed, within the context of the distanced intimacy these practices put into effect, personal specificity, social relationship and group membership are often felt to become reconciled in ways that routine interaction rarely allows. Actively partaking in exceptional situations in which affectionate familiarity and personal independence are deemed mutually reinforcing, participants can feel free to indulge in the heady joys of what might be called ‘collective individualism’, that is, of being autonomous together.

### *A Distributed Mode of Participation*

We have argued that these collective dances are organized in such a way that assumes a systematic complementarity between individual freedom and diversity on the one hand, and collective participation and commitment on the other. A similar complementarity applies to the strikingly diffuse, distributed patterns in which dancers take part in these practices.

A remarkable feature of these dances is that continued participation does not seem to favour assiduous attendance to the exclusion of other pastimes, but exactly the opposite. Most participants become involved in 5 Rhythms, Movement Medicine, or Biodanza for relatively short periods of time, generally no more than several years, before moving on to other things; most participants are also simultaneously engaged in a variety of other activities, often in the fields of personal development and contemporary spirituality<sup>1</sup>. Louise, for instance, experimented with different types of (contemporary, African or Latin) dance but which she considered too constraining; when, following a friend’s recommendation, she tried 5 Rhythms, she felt she had ‘found something’. While attending 5 Rhythms classes, she tried Biodanza once, but ‘was not convinced’, and began Contact Improvisation. Now, she occasionally practices 5 Rhythms and Contact Improvisation, but also goes to meditation classes, belongs to a ‘clown-theatre’, and regularly swims and runs; she is interested in ‘inner child therapy’, and is an active member of a support group for women who have been victims of violence. Nelly also tried out many bodily practices when younger (ballet, karate, surfing, salsa, etc.), but ‘was never completely satisfied’. Her discovery of Authentic Movement

1 This has also been pointed out in connection with other ‘alternative’ spiritual practices such as neo-shamanist workshops (Lombardi 2016), New Age style Afro-Brazilian spirit cults (Teisenhoffer 2015), and local New Age or contemporary Pagan ‘scenes’ (e.g. Prince and Riches 2000, Wood 2007); see also Corrywright 2003 on ‘webs of practice’).

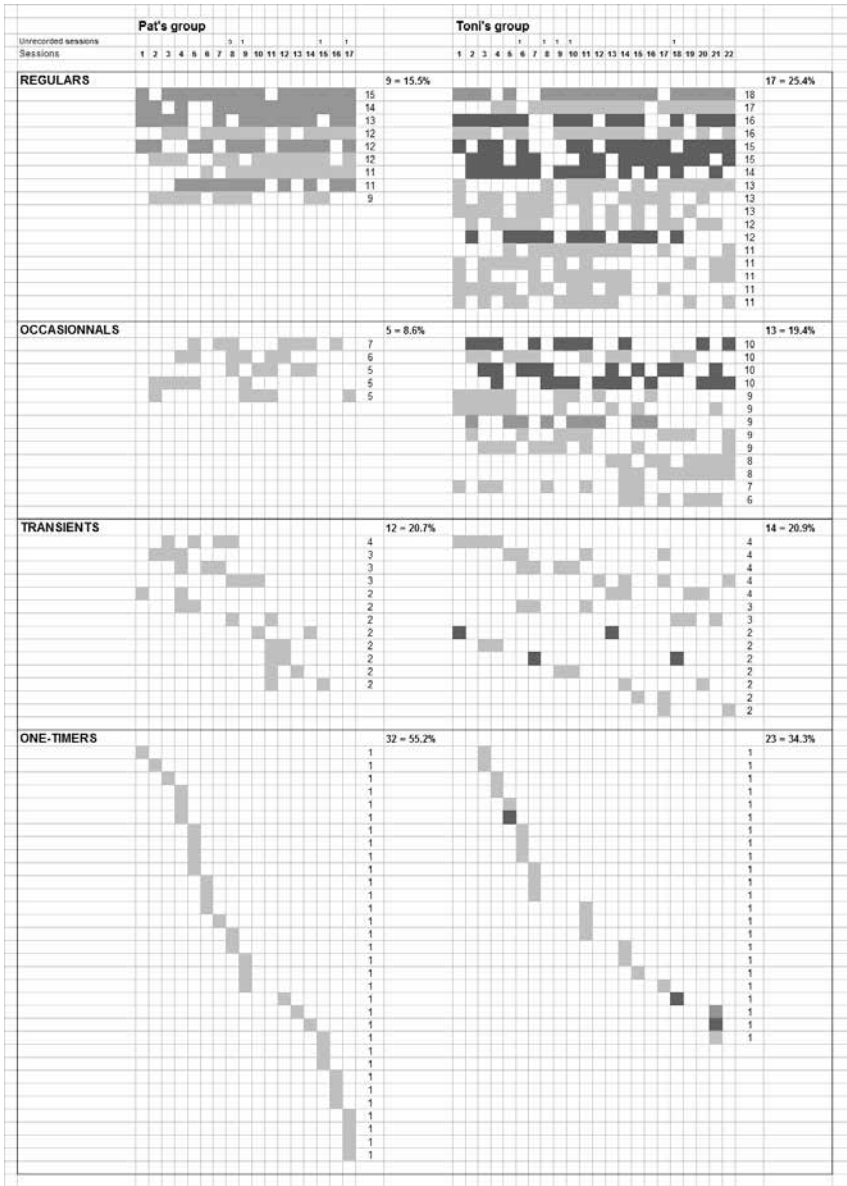
was a 'revelation' through which she came to know Circle Dancing and Dances of Universal Peace where she met a Movement Medicine teacher. She started practicing Movement Medicine, and then 5 Rhythms. In parallel, she explored Chinese body practices such as Tai Chi and Qi Gong, and has become a certified teacher of these techniques. She also belongs to a women's circle, practices meditation 'of the Full Moon', and at the time of the interview, was about to begin Fasciatherapy and Sensory Movement. Philippe, after practicing martial arts for years, tried Malkowski Free Dance on a friend's advice. Concomitantly, he began attending Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) meditation classes, where a fellow participant told him about 5 Rhythms sessions which, like Louise and many others, he found to be 'a revelation and real liberation'. At present, in addition to 5 Rhythms, he occasionally attends Movement Medicine sessions, Contact Improvisation classes, and keeps doing MBSR meditation 'because they are complementary'. Some dancers are also (often unpaid) teachers of other somatic or self-development techniques. Clarisse, for example, is a yoga instructor, while Daphné, once her working day as a psychoanalyst is over, teaches Mindfulness Meditation, and so forth. Finally, because it is so difficult to earn a living as a free dance instructor or Biodanza facilitator, almost all of them, if not fully employed elsewhere, also conduct a variety of other self-discovery initiatives. Given this diversity, it would be misleading to think of practices such as these as analogous to religious sects or cults. While it is extremely difficult to evaluate their healing or transformative effects, one consequence they do seem to have is to encourage participants to explore a wide range of other, comparable activities.

To the extent that individuals' participation is generally distributed over an array of related practices, sequentially and/or simultaneously, they partake in any given practice in a markedly diffuse fashion. Attendance patterns reflect this. Consider the somewhat extreme case of Biodanza in which regular attendance with the same small group of practitioners is strongly and explicitly encouraged. Figure 1 provides attendance data for two Biodanza groups over a six month period (from mid-September 2014 to the end March 2015): 17 sessions (out of a total of 23) for Pat's group which averaged 13 participants per session, and 22 sessions (out of 27) for Toni's group which averaged 20 participants per session (participants are ordered vertically and sessions horizontally). Although both groups were open to persons discovering this practice for the first time, they also included a number of experienced practitioners. Among them, five persons who regularly attended Pat's sessions had recently started a (three-year) training programme to become facilitators themselves. The presence of accomplished practitioners was

even more pronounced in Toni's group which included half a dozen dancers who had just finished their training together. Although the activities of both groups were organized according to the same principles, the way people talked, moved, and related to each other was quite different, reflecting the personality of their respective leaders. Pat's sessions tended to be more easy-going yet formal and fairly cerebral, whereas Toni's, perhaps because the group was larger and included more people who had known each other for a longer time, were warmer and more emotionally expressive, but also more confrontational. One person who had attended both groups described the first as 'aerial' and the second as 'earthy', adding that she found the latter more challenging but that it allowed her to 'explore herself more deeply'.

In spite of the differences between the two groups, their attendance patterns are remarkably similar. In both cases, four types of participants have been distinguished: (1) 'regulars' who attended at least half of the sessions, (2) 'occasionals' who attended less than half but who were intermittently present during the period concerned, (3) 'transients' who attended several sessions, either consecutively or not, and then stopped coming, and (4) 'one-timers' who attended only once. Persons belonging to the first two categories saw themselves and were seen by others as being committed to the shared practice of Biodanza and to the group itself, this being especially the case of 'regulars' who, when unable to attend, usually phoned or sent an SMS accounting for their absence to the facilitator (who subsequently relayed the message to the other participants during talking circles). On the other hand, attendees of the two latter types, especially 'one-timers', were more curious visitors than anything else (although accomplished practitioners passing through have been included in this category as well). Inspired by Internet sites or word of mouth, or accompanying more regular practitioners, they came to give Biodanza a try, deciding that it was not for them after several or just one session.

In both groups, the core of 'regulars', persons who attended at least half the sessions, was surprisingly small: 15.5 per cent of all participants in Pat's group, 25.4 per cent in Toni's. 'Regulars' and 'occasionals' together, that is, more or less 'committed' dancers, make up less than half the total number of participants: a mere 24.1 per cent in Pat's case and 44.8 per cent in Toni's. In short, the overwhelming majority of dancers were occasional participants at best. Most attended either several sessions or a single session before moving on. In 5 Rhythms and Movement Medicine groups, which assemble a larger number of people (forty on average, with a maximum of eighty) and in which participation is both more diverse and more open-ended, the proportion of first-timers per session was even higher than for Biodanza: 13 per



■ = Participant   ■ = Participant in training   ■ = Participant having finished training  
Figure 1.



cent on average, with a maximum of 22 per cent (based on 38 sessions over a six month period). However, for all practices, because committed dancers ('regulars' plus 'occasionals') represent the majority of participants for any given session, this overall predominance of 'transients' and 'one-timers' goes largely unnoticed. While 'transients' and 'one-timers' see themselves as new-comers to a well established group, 'regulars' and 'occasionals' perceive such short-term dancers as exceptional visitors, offering new interactive possibilities to be explored. All concerned have the impression of an ongoing collective of devotedly engaged persons, whereas in fact, for the most part, it is a continually recomposed assemblage of intermittently participating parties. In the case of 5 Rhythms and Movement Medicine, this illusion of stability derives in part from the presence of the instructor's 'team' in charge of cleaning and setting up the dance floor, welcoming the dancers, collecting entrance fees, and orienting newcomers. Data regarding three teams (numbering ten, five, and twelve individuals respectively) over a six-month period show that a majority of team members attend at least half of the sessions, two or three of them being present almost every time. Participants changing their clothes or waiting in the queue to pay before sessions, can see that team members know a great many dancers and have a long-standing familiarity with the group. They say attendees' names, give each other long hugs, and ask for news about people who are absent. Because they are among the most assiduous attendees who establish special relationships with a large number of participants, 'regulars', 'occasionals' and 'transients' alike, one may imagine that quite a number of dancers feel a stronger connection with team members than with the instructor. As a result, even if many of them do not always attend, their supposed presence, as evidenced by those who do, gives a sense of continuity to a series of successive sessions even if the group is a brand new assemblage every time.

Attendance, then, is characterized by a high turnover, but also by a distinctively diffuse, decentralized mode of participation. A core of regular participants does exist, but it is remarkably small. Moreover, those who make up this core are fairly inconstant. In the case of Biodanza, for example, they participate only 50 per cent or more of the time, and miss, on average, between one third and two fifths of their group's sessions. However, their participation is staggered in a mutually complementary fashion, each attending person filling in as it were for what is presumed to be the momentary absence of others. This stochastic, distributive principle applies not only to 'regulars' and 'occasionals', but to all attendees, the increasingly intermittent participation of a progressively expanding number of persons compensating for the periodic absences of more assiduous dancers. Thus,

while it remains that some individuals participate more than others, as a general rule, the group persists as an identifiable entity less because some members participate most of the time, than because most participate some of the time. In other words, a dance group's viability as such is not founded on the existence of a strong, stable centre supplemented by a weak and largely superfluous periphery. Rather it relies on another, more complex, distributed dynamic in which most participants tend not to pursue a single activity to the exclusion of others, but to be successively or simultaneously involved in a plurality of loosely interconnected practices.

This distributed mode of participation can be seen as the expression, on the level of overall social form, of the ideological premise that has been shown to underlie much of the content of these dance practices, namely the idea that personal autonomy and collective solidarity go hand in hand. By partaking in a diversity of more or less related practices with others, participants explore and exhibit, in ways that are coherent with their personal histories and desires, both their capacities for individual freedom and expression *and* their propensities for constructive social interaction and group sentiment. This diffuse mode of participation is of course congruent with Gerlach and Hine's (1970) concept of a Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network (SPIN), a non-centralised reticulate social structure whose many, continuously emerging and evolving constituent groups are linked through cross-cutting connections. York (1995) has argued that this organizational model applies to New Age and Neo-Pagan movements (and on a higher level, as a SPIN of SPINS, to the contemporary 'holistic movement' as a whole), and the attendance patterns characteristic of dances of self-development clearly bear this out. However, it is important to note, as York also points out, that the concept of the SPIN pertains to 'change-oriented movements' in general, and was developed in connection with a study of US social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. From this point of view, in spite of the apolitical nature of the dance practices we have been looking at, there exists a definite formal affinity between these practices and those explicitly advocating participatory democracy, in which individual freedom and collective commitment are also posited as interdependent principles. In the following section we try to clarify, in the light of the preceding analyses, the relationship between dances of self-development and contemporary forms of political activism.

***Dance as a Ritual Resource***

New forms of political engagement have flourished over the last fifty years. Increasingly, organizational principles typical of more traditional political structures—hierarchy, impersonal allegiance, representation, male dominance, enduring membership—have given way to more direct, egalitarian and personalized patterns of activism. As a number of analysts have suggested, the restructuring of political activism since the 1970s is related to a progressive decentralisation of the public sphere, but also to an increased emphasis placed on individual agency. For example, Ion (2001, 2012), in arguing against the widely held view that contemporary individualism has caused a decline of interest in political matters, reminds us, citing Singly (2003), that the abstract, ‘anonymous’ individuals of the Enlightenment endowed with statuses and roles have been increasingly replaced by reflexive, ‘singular’ individuals whose value is supposed to reside in their autonomy and distinctive personal qualities. Drawing on this idea and on his own extensive empirical work, he contends that this process of individuation at work in present-day Western society has brought about a more widespread degree of activism, notably through new forms of political engagement entailing highly mobile, informal, individual-based assemblies and networks. In social movement communities such as these, he suggests, personal autonomy and collective solidarity are deemed inseparable, such that ‘nothing would be more mistaken than to oppose the individual and the collective’ (2012:73). Indeed, ‘the collective ...is less an aggregate than a site where individualities meet up, where, in the absence of pre-established roles, they come to find others who might resemble them, and to comfort their own ever-evolving identities’ (2012:56).

Dances of self-development and democratically inspired social movements are comparable in some respects, but not in others. They imply analogous, ‘distributed’ patterns of participation, for example, that attest to a common concern for making personal autonomy and collective commitment as compatible as possible. At the same time, in these dance practices, decision making, conflict resolution, and the recruitment of leadership teams are pointedly not organized along democratic lines, but remain the sole responsibility of the facilitator. Similarly, the ideological and performative precepts that underlie most social movements—individual freedom, diversity of opinion, openness to others, collective solidarity, etc.—are not unlike those enacted during dance sessions. However, the latter replace speech with music and bodily movement, and are organized around intense interpersonal encounters rather than shared political action. So how might we understand

the relationship between radically democratic political activism on the one hand, and dances of self-development and other 'alternative' spiritual and/or well-being practices on the other? In a functionalist nutshell, we see this relationship as potentially two-fold: while the former provides a supportive context for the latter, the latter provides an essential resource for the former. On the one hand, radically democratic movements configure the encompassing social milieu in terms of issues and contrasts—oppression vs. liberty, socialization vs. creativity, exploitation vs. generosity, insensitivity vs. feeling, secrecy vs. openness, etc.—that contribute to the ongoing relevance and legitimacy of these dance (and other) practices. On the other hand, and it is the possibility of this second causal arc that is of special interest to us here, the distinctive sociality these practices put into effect can act as a widely accessible touchstone for the relational underpinnings that participatory democratic initiatives require: a sociability in which individual autonomy, heart-felt consideration of others and collective responsibility are expressively melded.

In her ground-breaking study of American social movements, Francesca Polletta insists that effective participatory democracy entails less a principle of strict equality than it does 'a more complex equality in which different skills, talents, and interests are seen as equally valuable' (2002:viii). Parity of this order, she observes, is found in a number of familiar relationships that have provided normative frameworks for the structuring of deliberative processes within social movements: family ties, religious fellowship, tutelage, and especially friendship. By treating each other as friends, activists introduce 'not only broad injunctions against competition and manipulation but also micro-interactional rules about how to raise issues, frame disagreements, formulate (and even feel about) dissent' in ways that treat 'differences in skills and preferences as sources of mutual learning rather than as obstacles to equality' (4). The 'participatory democratic dilemma', however, is that 'the very relationships generating trust and respect that democracy requires may also come with norms that undercut a democratic project' (221). For example, intrinsic qualities of friendship such as exclusivity, conflict avoidance, and antipathy for rules pose challenges that many social movements have been unable to overcome. Polletta concludes that because formal procedures are not enough to ensure cooperative, egalitarian decision-making, it is necessary 'to develop new kinds of democratic relationships, ones that maximise the mutual respect, trust, and concern characteristic of formally nonpolitical relationships but avoid their weaknesses' (218). She mentions various attempts to do this (affinity groups, consciousness raising groups, workshops, residential clusters, etc.) and outlines a number of

guiding principles such initiatives might follow. Participants of successful social movements must behave in ways that are unlike conventional political interaction. At the same time, however, they must also behave in ways that are unlike what is expected of them in their everyday interactions at work, as family members and as friends. In light of this, Polletta assumes that innovative democratic patterns need to be created more or less from scratch, and warns against the difficulties raised by introducing such unfamiliar and therefore fragile relational forms.

Here, we venture to suggest, collective dance practices, and more generally, the entire SPIN of interrelated ‘alternative’ spiritual and well-being activities, may play an important role as sources of inspiration for the ‘new kinds of democratic relationships’ Polletta recommends. Self-development practices like collective dancing afford practitioners with memorable, highly reflexive, bodily experiences of mutual respect, trust, and concern in social settings in which individual autonomy and collective solidarity are made to systematically converge. Moreover, these settings are upheld by decentralized, distributed modes of participation formally similar to those characteristic of contemporary activism. As such, these practices would seem to be particularly well-suited to act as references for the political implementation of interactive forms that aim to ‘maximize solidarity without denying differences’ (224).

Normative relational frameworks other than friendship exist for the structuring of deliberative processes within social movements. In a recent review article on ‘Participatory Democracy in the New Millennium’ (2013), for example, Polletta herself identifies the influence, but also the possible deleterious, diluting effects of both online networks and the increasingly widespread, pragmatic recourse to decentralized, consensus-based decision-making in for-profit, non-profit, and governmental organizations. Here again is evidence of the aspirations of participatory democratic movements being subverted by features of the relational models they make use of. The *ritual* character of self-development practices like collective dancing, however, may be a hedge against this ‘participatory democratic dilemma’. As argued elsewhere (Houseman, Mazzella di Bosco, and Thibault 2016, Houseman in press), 5 Rhythms, Movement Medicine, Biodanza and the like are crafted as rituals. Participants are enjoined to feel and act in ways that engender and/or express emotional and intentional dispositions that are held to have value in and of themselves: spontaneity, personal creativity and autonomy, respect and concern for others, solidarity towards the group, and so forth. However, these injunctions also lead participants to adopt the paradoxical posture of being purposefully spontaneous, distantly intimate, and collectively

individualistic, such that, as we have seen, their exemplary experiences are perceived as clearly distinct from those of everyday interaction. They become imbued with a measure of self-referential authority and efficacy that allows them to be 'disembedded' from their immediate social context and brought to bear in circumstances beyond the dance sessions themselves. However, when these extra-ordinary ways of feeling and acting are mobilized beyond the dance floor, it is not as normative frameworks to be directly applied. Indeed, ritual experiences can rarely if ever act as realistic, viable models for routine interactions and relationships. Rather, they intervene as touchstone *revelations* or sources of inspiration, that is, as largely irrefutable yet difficult-to-define, 'privileged' (Bell 1992) yardsticks in the light of which routine interactions and relationships can be conventionally assessed (Houseman 2006).

It is important to stress that these 'revelations' are not about how participants should act, but about how they can be. Many social movement theorists, especially those concerned with emotions (e.g. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001), stress the importance of ritual, both as an authoritative basis for deliberative procedures, and as an expression of shared identity addressed at once outwards and to the actors themselves. This is surely true for social movements as it is for many other collective undertakings. However, the type of ritualization that occurs in dances of self-development and other 'alternative' spiritual and well-being practices is of different order, one perhaps more adapted to the collective individualism that contemporary forms of participatory democracy seem to imply. Unlike more canonical ritual performances, these practices do not consist in undertaking mysterious yet 'archetypal' actions (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) that delineate special relationships, but in evincing enigmatic yet exemplary dispositions that distinguish special subjects (Houseman 2007, 2016). They do not consecrate the doing of what more authoritative others are supposed to have done, but the becoming of what more authoritative others are purported to have been. To the extent that these 'more authoritative others' are deemed to be aspects of the participants themselves (e.g. their 'inner child', 'spiritual side', 'potential for growth', etc.) such ritual practices afford them with the experience of becoming whom they feel they are meant to be. More concretely, these rituals do not define particular ways of being creative and spontaneous, of entertaining authentic, respectful relations with others, or of being committed to the group. Instead, they make manifest individual participants' capacity for finding their own personal ways of doing so. Dances of self-development, then, as part of a SPIN (of SPINs) of similarly ritualized practices, may be seen as a special, familiar and extensively developed

resource for participatory democracy. They provide less regulatory models of behaviour in which personal freedom and collective solidarity are reconciled, than experienced individuals in whom this integration of opposites is supposed to have occurred.

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