

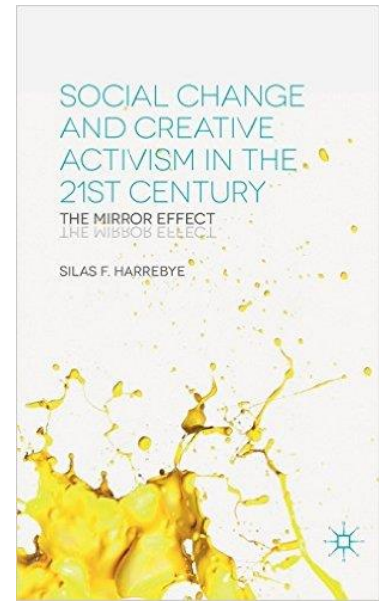
Silas F. Harrebye, **Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century: The Mirror Effect**, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 251 pp., \$105.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Far from merely producing an already much-needed primer on global creative activism today, Silas Harrebye presents an illuminating discussion of the evolving and intertwining makeup of contemporary activism, critique, creativity, and social change in his book ***Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century: The Mirror Effect***. Positioning creative activism as a kind of meta-activism and as an expression of two particular types of critique (immanent and utopian), Harrebye argues that the spectacular, creative critiques put forward by a broad and diffuse group of modern-day activists have the capacity to disrupt the routines of everyday life in the interests of promoting a utopian imaginary that presents alternatives to already deeply entrenched ways of living. In what is a lively and engaging study, Harrebye explores key aspects of the phenomenon, maps the field through a rich theoretical overview, examines established and emerging forms of activist praxis, and reflects on the impact these practices may have on social change.



To begin, Harrebye characterizes creative activists as a rich and diverse set of facilitators, disruptors, and tricksters who pose inconvenient questions and trigger broader action and reflection through the creation of “temporary spectacular happenings” (p. 189). The practitioners of creative activism discussed are politically and geographically diverse, ranging from Billionaires for Bush, Greenpeace, Pussy Riot, Danish Bicycle Union, and the Yes Men (see [actipedia.org](http://actipedia.org) for a sense of the work being done across the globe). They harness cynicism, irony, humor, and utopian thinking in the conception and elaboration of project-based and “*process- rather than result-oriented*” actions (p. 95, emphasis in original). These groups consistently produce civically minded actions that speak to the notion that “‘the political’ must include the stages that come before what is openly declared as politics” (p. 64). In this way, activist work of this stripe can be cast as prefigurative or prepolitical, acts that prepare the way for future activist, civic, political, or legislative action. They are practitioners of “small politics” (p. 122), often critiquing minor matters while highlighting fundamental structural critique. In this regard, Harrebye suggests, they have a closer affinity to the cultural than the political elements of social movements. What’s more, the tone of this activist work is decidedly utopian, an orientation that attempts to address the political demand that if you are wont to critique the order of things, you should also be prepared to present viable alternatives. Much of Harrebye’s insights here complement and build on previous research on civic engagement by the likes of Dahlgren (2009), Bennett and Segerberg (2013), and Banaji and Buckingham (2013), but his work is also indebted to figures like Duncombe (2007, 2012) and Fournier (2002) who situate utopian politics as a guiding light for creative activists.

To understand some of the characteristic dynamics of these newly emerging activist endeavors, Harrebye moves from a broader discussion of social movement theory to a more detailed typological study of present-day activism. For readers unfamiliar with social movement theory, Harrebye offers a refreshing framework for contextualizing recent shifts in the field and on the terrain. By situating creative activist work in relation to resource mobilization theory, theories of structuration and political opportunity structures, framing theories, and theories of values and norms, Harrebye not only guides the reader through, at times, difficult conceptual and philosophical content, he also presents an original framework that bridges and supplements traditional theories of social movements. Careful to distinguish social movements from activism, creative activists assume the overlapping roles of “political party crashers” (p. 56), provocateurs, facilitators, and “triggers of dissatisfaction” (p. 66) that often act as first movers within the circular cycles of political contention. Thus, the book presents a sustained focus on the microlevel aspects of activist work—in lieu of periods, he emphasizes episodes, small cadres of activists over large scale movements, and moments of disruption over institutional reform processes.

By exploring this line of inquiry, Harrebye prepares the way for a critical theory of reflection, one that posits that creative activists are oriented in such a way that they are able to offer diagnostic critiques of (global) capitalism and to develop counterreflexive strategies designed to mobilize alternative paradigms. He suggests that if capitalism is cast as both a system and mechanism through which we are more or less forced to see the world, and because capitalism has shown an impressive propensity to absorb and redirect critique, creative activist groups have increasingly adapted tools, strategies, and tactics to liberate alternative spaces for critical reflection. Harrebye’s contribution on reflection functions as a pertinent addition to Fraser’s (2009) theory of social justice, which includes redistribution, recognition, and representation as core elements. The mirroring practices of 21st-century activists (mirrors operating simultaneously as reflectors and radiant projectors) represent bold counter strategies that enable citizens and groups to see the machinations of life under capitalism from a different vantage point (a satellite position), a feat that opens up new spaces for critical reflection and alternative worldviews (some of which assume a utopian sheen). That said, an inherent risk within these activist communities is that the current push to professionalize activism (the subject of chapter 7) makes them vulnerable to co-optation by the state and social enterprise, a turn that could soften their critical edge.

For the amused, bemused, and ambivalent observers of contemporary activist activities, Harrebye poses a crucial question: What constitutes success and how do we adequately measure the impact of creative activist work? Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data—participatory observation, interviews, statistical data, distributed questionnaires, case studies, and activist workshops, among others—this interdisciplinary and self-reflexive methodological approach offers an excellent point of departure for revisiting theories of social change. In sampling from an exhaustive range of data sets, Harrebye makes a general claim: Namely, that the efforts of creative activist clusters are best measured through their impact on culture and conduct, not on law and letters (p. 200). As the following two examples suggest, impact is difficult to gauge: The deployment of cynicism, irony, and utopian thinking can be polarizing both within and outside activist communities, and the temporal and fleeting quality of much creative activist work makes it difficult to mobilize momentum. Just as he argues that no one kind of activism is better than another, he affirms that both formal and informal interventions into political life are needed (institution-focused lobbyists are just as important as on-the-ground protesters). If outcomes are

contingent and unpredictable (short-term versus long-term; policy-oriented versus consciousness-raising), and if cultures are slow-changing, creative activists can be seen to prepare the way for the time when social change will be possible. This is what Harrebye refers to as his "*structurally pragmatic but agent optimistic standpoint*" (p. 219, emphasis in original). As Harrebye concludes, the book's most important contribution lies in its exploration of how creative activism cultivates the conditions upon which better societal alternatives may be articulated and realized. With such conditions in place, citizens are afforded the opportunity to reflect on their responsibility to move humanity forward, and activists are provided a space to push forward "a valuable revolutionary ethics of political imagination" (pp. 220–221).

### References

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