

Sexualities

<http://sex.sagepub.com/>

**Book Review: Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest*.
New York: Routledge, 2010. 320pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-96096-0, and**

Matt G Mutchler

Sexualities 2011 14: 125

DOI: 10.1177/13634607110140011002

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sex.sagepub.com/content/14/1/125.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Sexualities* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sex.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sex.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 320pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-96096-0, and

Queer Political Performance and Protest is not the definitive analysis of the correlation between political performance and social movement outcomes. Instead, it is a 'playful' exploration of the role of political performance or 'play' in queer social movements in the U.S. over five decades and well into recent history. As Shepard states, his objective is to consider "... the role of creativity, pleasure, and play in urban protest in general, and queer community-building practice specifically" (p.1). As he contends, this book does offer useful insights into political performance as one of many protest mechanisms used by activists for social change.

Shepard draws on participant observation and interviews with a range of movement activists to interrogate historical accounts of case studies within queer social movements. He explores the complex relationships between play, performance, pleasure, and social change. To achieve this aim, Shepard begins with analyses of the role of play in postwar San Francisco, focusing on interviews with the 'empress', Jose Sarria. This is followed by rich ethnographic details regarding the historical significance of play and performance in various 'gay liberation' activist groups such as ACT UP, the Radical Faeries, Gay Liberation Now!, the Church Ladies for Choice, the Cockettes,

SexPanic!, and other less and well known national and local protest groups that should be part of the standard curricula for students of social movements. Intertwined throughout these case studies, Shepard 'plays' around with various definitions and meanings of political performance, eschewing a deterministic understanding of 'play' for a richer analysis of multiple ways in which play and performance have been used by political activists for various purposes. Ultimately, he settles on a concept of play and performance as one tool within a 'toolkit' that can be utilized by social movement actors to work toward social movement goals, noting that political play cannot stand alone. His work details how political performance and protest can yield outcomes above and beyond movement goals such as community-building, art, and personal growth. Yet, Shepard clearly wants to avoid producing a static analysis or the final word on the subject, instead allowing a full range of possibilities to entertain.

In *Queer Political Performance and Protest*, Shepard seeks to advance social movement scholarship by providing "... an alternative framework for an understanding of social movement activity... and to... name a few novel organizational and political practices found within social movements." (p. 17). While he accomplishes these aims, he also makes several other claims for this work such as to "... trace the history of the phenomenon within gay liberation and queer movements." (p. 16), but this effort and other stated aims are less successfully reached, as the sampling of cases for inclusion in the study is based somewhat on Shepard's own lived (and ethnographic) experiences and somewhat on more purposeful methods. At times, Shepard over-promises (such as over-'playing' the role of performance' in struggles for social justice and democracy without knowing the potential impact of other factors), and under-'plays' contributions already made in social

movement literature regarding play, pleasure, and performance in political protest in general (and by non-queer activists) and specifically within queer social movements literature. Yet, he ultimately backs off from such lofty distinctions for his work; instead, summarizing the strengths and limitations of play and performance in queer political protest and within social movements in general in his concluding remarks.

The book also contains many hidden historical gems, uncovered through careful attention to the sometimes humorous and sometimes heart-wrenching details characterizing the case studies of queer political performances analyzed. *Queer Political Performance and Protest* demonstrates how sexual politics have shaped various social justice projects, while simultaneously revealing the political nature of sex and sexualities within political protest organizations. As a side-note, Shepard sometimes considers how gender, racial, cultural, economic, and other social inequalities can make playful political protest cause some to become disenchanted due to in-fighting and insensitivity. He is careful to point out, though, that using play and performance as a political tool should be part of a thoughtful process in which the message matches the movement.

Ultimately, this book raises some additional pressing questions such as: Under what circumstances, should political protest be playful and by whom? What sorts of creative performances are likely to have the desired effect for specific kinds of queer social change projects? Shepard clearly shows the meaningfulness of political performance and play for social movement actors, arguing that pleasure is in fact essential for bringing in new members and for sustaining the ongoing work of social movement activists. Still, what do such activities mean for non activists such as potential allies, opponents, and mainstream actors on the side-lines? Shepard's own agenda includes further analyses of the role of play and creative in social movements. *Queer Political Performance and Protest* provides an important prelude to further analytical performances in the context of serious, ongoing challenges to our collective right to pursue playfulness. Shepard's work vividly illustrates how connections between politics and play can and should lead to multiple, interconnected outcomes such as social justice, pleasure, and community. The importance of Shepard's work is that it is the first to 'seriously' examine the role of political performance, protest, play, and sexualities within queer social movements as the central theme of analysis; this is a much needed and refreshing perspective.

Matt G Mutchler

California State University, Dominguez Hills, USA