



Interview with Eric Rofes by Benjamin Shepard

This interview was provided by Benjamin Shepard as part of his tribute, "Goodbye to Eric Rofes"
2006-06-28 17:46:27

BS: Age and place of birth?
B. Manhasset, NY, 50 years of age, b. 1954.

BS: What brought you to this type of community organizing? Biography question...

Well, I grew up in a kind of Jewish left family on Long Island and was exposed to a great deal. And I went to a Jewish kind of social work camp in the 1960's that was putting together Black kids and Jewish kids that was very much about activism and we did service work. And then when I got to college, I became a left organizer. And have been organizing since then.

BS: Have you utilized elements of creativity, play, direct action, or performance in your organizing?

Very little. I think I have a dawning consciousness about this now. When I think back to key moments in organizing, for example work at Gay Community News in the 1970's and working on AIDS in the 1980's, I wouldn't say it was around play, I would say it was around community building.

One of my challenges as an activist, and as an activist who structures his life in an alternative way, has been about understanding when something is work and when something is community or family. And I think because I came right after the 1960's into organizing, I carry with me the belief that the people I did organizing with were going to be my friends and in some ways my family and my community. And yet by the 1980's that was an idea that was pretty old for most people and one that wasn't true. But what I had with me in my organizing is people from the 1970's who I had done organizing with in Boston and in the March on Washington in 1979. I feel towards those people an odd kind of loyalty and community and family that sometimes they don't feel. And so what I'm saying about this is that so much from organizing in college and right after, it was about having meals together and going to concerts and sharing Patti Smith albums together and going to bars together and going to sex clubs together and stuff like that.

So then you fast forward beyond that. I've often realized that most people who sustain themselves as organizers need to have fun and need to get social and cultural and pleasure needs met through organizing. And so my more recent organizing around gay men's health for example has often included elements that are around that specifically. So for example when I have organized gay men's health summits, they've included pool parties and fashion shows that are kind of drag and campy.

Now I'm someone who can sustain myself as an organizer almost entirely from intellect. But I've realized to be an effective organizer, most people are not like that. And they have broader needs that must be met so I build them in. Rituals, relationships...

BS: When I first heard about you, you were making use of performance to defend pleasure at government hearings.

Yet, that was 1989, Testimony at National AIDS Commission. They were doing hearings in San Francisco. And it was at a point when we were feeling like the gay piece of it was becoming kind of bureaucratized and mainstreamed and away from authentic gay male subcultures. And at that time I was a new executive director of an AIDS group and felt that it would be much more impactful to give testimony first in a suit and then in leather as a way of pushing the issue of culture and community.

BS: And how did the audience respond?

I don't think they knew what to make about it. I don't remember much. But I do know that I got flack for it cause people thought it was disrespectful and unprofessional. This was when I was thinking AIDS groups were still community based in the real terms. I later learned how wrong that was. But I was trying to bring an organization closer to grassroots gay male cultures. And I think it was at a time when that was a tension within AIDS organizing, about whether that was appropriate or not.

BS: Having worked in one of those organizations. There was a sense that your personal growth was part of the work.

Many organizations were a great examples of authentic communities that by 1990's were inauthentic communities. And I think that's an important distinction to make.

Because there are moments within community organizing where authentic community forms around people coming together in crisis within a particular moment and being there for each other for that growth, which you are talking about. And then there are the times when people are trying to emulate or recapture that authentic moment. And my experience at least with some organizations is that they are really not there for you when push comes to shove, that they are around in rhetoric or representation.

Community organizing is the hardest thing to do. Its hard to do among like minded and like culturally people. Its really hard to do across differences. What we need – especially between White people and People of Color – is how to build community over the long haul that can sustain huge wrenching divisions that occur.

BS: When reading about sex panic, I had never heard about a group which made its central argument about the importance of pleasure. When were you aware that pleasure could be part of organizing?

I think that came out of Gay Liberation. I feel like I got that from my years at Gay Community News, from being next door to Fag Rag, which was putting that out really boldly. But also in Gay Liberation as I found it in the mid-1970's, there was a commitment to challenging the Marxist notion that pleasure was a bourgeois kind of indulgence. And I really do feel like gay men in particular contributed a lot to that. And to me, everything from public sex to drag and gender performance to Joan Crawford movies to the opera for some people.

I do feel like Gay Liberation really showed that culture and politics really had to come together.

BS: You don't read about a book about San Francisco without reading about people dancing to Sylvester. It seems like that was a really big part of that experience.

In doing my research, I have found that there is a division there. The activists tended to be sober and tended to be anti bar, anti disco. It was a kind of Marxist left. I felt like because I had this interest in kink and masculinity, I did the leather bars, I did the sex clubs in a way that put me next to people who generally had total disdain for the political activists. My political activist friends often had total disdain for them.

In my research, I ask all these men what was their relationship to gay political, social, religious, and cultural organizing in the 1970's. And basically they had no relationship to it. They were getting laid. They were going to the bars or the baths or the parks. They were doing something else and the activists were going on fear. And I do think that there's a misrepresentation in what you said. I don't think that activists did a good job of bridging it at that time. I don't think the people dancing to Sylvester in San Francisco... I think that there was more of a class division and a certain fragment of the middle class did the activism and we thought why aren't more people coming?

BS: I was just recalling that many of the random sample of people which turned into a snowball were both organizing and organizing parties with michael molletta, etc... if you look at the first chapters of my white nights book. This is part of that. It's part of the difficulty of finding a generalizable sample with qualitative research, yet my sample of 35 seems to acknowledge your point but mention many examples where the party people used those structures to do organizing.

There seems to be an inherent tension between the people that are doing some of the pleasure stuff and the people who are doing the sortof serious work of organizing.

I want to read you a paragraph from Scott Tucker who was writing about a frustrating moment he was having at a GLBT organizing conference (the 'National Organization of Lesbians and Gays (NOLAG).')

During the conference, a "disgruntled caucus" went out one evening to a denim and leather bar called the One-Way. It was packed and steamy. While we nursed our beers and wounds, three fascinating men entered the bar together. Plainly dedicated body builders, all three were stripped to the waist, their muscles oiled and gleaming. All three wore black leather boots, jeans strained at the seams with flies half-undone, and black leather executioner's hoods laced tightly at the napes of their necks and fitting their skulls like skin. In the United States, where the cops blow people away like flies, it freaks some folks out to see grown gay men play with power. I am increasingly drawn to the pure theatre of leather bars and leathermen (Tucker, 1997, 15).

I just want to see what year this was. I was there for this. This was actually the NOLAG post march on Washington Meeting at UCLA in 1979. I was actually in that caucus and at the One Way that night.

BS: What was your experience of those guys and their contract to the formal conference business?

Well, what was interesting to me was that meeting was the meeting that split around the sex issue. And I'm not even sure what side Scott was on. I have to figure now and when he later became Mr. Leather and all of that stuff. But that was conference in which the issue was 'kink' and 'leather' and then 'boylove.' And people lined up on two sides of the room. Robin Tayler, the head of this caucus. Maybe Gayle Rubin and me, the head of this caucus. Amber (L. Hollibaugh), this was some of the first work we did together. Scott I hope was here... It basically killed the organization. Our side, I remember that because Michael Marrell was getting a blow job in the bath room while it was happening. There was a lot of pleasure that was going on there.

And it was just a question about the role of sex and pleasure in the movement overtly.

And that was a famous weekend. I don't think it was the same bar that I later went out to some other sex club and went to piss on the guy in the bath tub and it was this man who on the other side arguing (the anti sex line at NOLAG) getting pissed on. People's practices were different from this kind of thing.

BS: Later in the essay Tucker says it would have been nice if those guys had been invited to the conference.

But those guys wouldn't have been there because they have nothing to offer them. Those guys would come to a kink weekend, maybe. They might come to International Mr. Leather. What does it mean that International Mr. Leather gets 10,000 people and the annual Creating Change (the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Meeting) gets two or three?

BS: Folsome Street Fair (another leather event) is bigger than the Rose Bowl Parade.

Its bigger than gay pride these days, at least it feels that way.

BS: Why do you think people are reluctant to defend spaces where people have fun together, play together, and have moments of affect?

In fact in New York, people can support certain kinds of pleasure and not others. People will keep movie houses open playing Stallone movies. People will keep theatres on Broadway open. Its a certain kind of pleasure, particularly erotic or sexual pleasure, that people won't defend.

But I think part of the problem is that both the right and the left have been anti pleasure...

The left refute it as a bourgeois notion and the right say its anti-Christian and things like that. They live in this Neverland. I mean, we settled this at the Gay Community News in the late 1970's: what was the role of fun. And what could it mean that after we did layout on Thursday night, the guys would be in Herbie's Ramrod Room their knees suckin' dick all night? Was that, an informal part of it, something to be ashamed of? I mean, I just feel like sexual pleasure had not been on anyone's agenda.

People are looking for productive activity and orgasm is not seen as productive or some can argue that it is. Pleasure is not seen as productive. And I think that goes into deeper areas of the kind of the kind of social glue that is needed to pull organizing together in the long hall.

BS: John D'Emilio... pleasure is not viewed as productive, doesn't contribute. Doesn't create wigs, labor, or kids which need products to contribute to the economy.

But also coming from the left perspective, the left have not been there as advocates of pleasure in their organizing or their politics.

BS: What best experiences with the use of play and creativity in your work? How have you created the world in which you wanted to live in your organizing? Can you talk about where that has been effective?

This is the Maffesoli stuff. I would look at the places around intense political experiences where people get the real meaning. **For example, at creating change after the workshops are done at 6:30 or 7 at night, the bar where Carmen Vasquez and Amber Hollibaugh and other activists are just hangin' out smoking and drinking and telling stories and gossiping. And how meaningful and pleasurable that is for people.** You know Creating Change always tries to have a dance going on. I haven't been for years. But from what I can tell, the dances never work. But people will go to the local disco or the local circuit party or the local sex club and do their own dance there.

I think there is an attempt to cleanse. I think that that is problematic. I think that its like trying to create sex spaces now that are cleansed of barebacking and risk.

You know, we have to include a discussion of risk in this cause to me risk is pleasure and risk is meaning. And yet we continue to try to create safe spaces that don't have authentic risk to them – no drugs, no unprotected sex, no other things. And its not what people like, where people can take risks and go and enjoy it.

BS: How do you define success and find meaning on this work?

Well, for me most of my meaning is in community organizing for a while now has come from being part of a movement. I am someone who has been able to work it for myself so that I find it meaningful to be part of movements that change the world or resist things. And to me that's a very sixties notion. But to me that is where I've had to find satisfaction and where I could actually find it. So for me there's an identity piece thats around being part of a movement... My most meaning kinships have emerged out of that movement.

And that I put my body, you talk about embodying stuff, I talk with my students about putting your body in those icky places that are going to challenge you and be meaningful to you in the long run. Last night I went to 'Big Love' which is a bar night once a week for really, really fat guys, of kindof masculine fat guys in New York. I was there and I was uncomfortable... I feel like lot of the growth is putting yourself in those uncomfortable places where growth can occur.

BS: Are you fighting to build community or create external changes? And are these aims mutually exclusive?

I fight mainly to resist and change the world. And I will do organizing for the long haul with people that I do not have relationships with if I believe in it. But I think that I am really unusual.

Like one of the things that I have been really good at that I'm really skilled at ...

Lets talk about the San Francisco Study Group on Sex and Politics, now in its twelfth or thirteenth year. Its a group of kindof egg head type people who have formed a community of some kind. Some of us are new and some of us have been around for twelve or thirteen years just getting together once a month over food and a book and a reading or an article or a video we've seen to discuss it. I specifically could have planned that as simply read the book and come and talk. Cause I could do that and I find that meaningful. I had to add food. I had to add social events and field trips. And I had to find a way to sustain it for the long haul, cause other people need that.

And so good organizing of that, and not at all perfect, involves a careful mix of community building, food, people kindof hearing about landmark events in people's lives – all through this fairly artificial ritual of study group.

BS: To what extent is the community you are seeking to create embodied in your protest tactics?

I try to. I try to embody most of my organizing collectively, which is really against the grain these days and which people like to resist and which really has its head aches and problems. But I try to do that. I try to build in fun and pleasurable activities. I feel like I walk a line. My life's issue is when is it community and when is it work? I feel mixed about it.

BS: How do you think that theater, creativity and play work to effect change?

Well, first of all, I think theatre and performance and cultural work is much more effective for putting across ideas and dispersing them in the culture than a panel of smart people. I feel like its more effective if its done culturally. Its accessible to more people.

I feel like if you do things intellectually or through narrow political means, you might be working with self defined opinion leaders or change agents, but you are not getting at any masses. And cultural work does more of that.

BS: Yet, sometimes understandings of pleasure and play and community building are culturally bound. Rofes explains...

I feel like when I've been working with communities of color, I remember one particular incident working with a bunch of Latinos. And I was on a diet and I didn't want a lot of rich oily food especially when I did my organizing. And I said, 'Can we please not have food?' And people ate me alive. I learned the value of what it meant in that particular culture, which is primarily Mexican, to share food and in true Native American Culture as well. I was invited to a jump dance at a local tribe. And I wanted to go to the jump dance, which would be the culturally safe political side of it, but then I didn't want to stay for the food because I didn't have time. It turned out that my Native American friends ended up telling me that they told me the jump dance was secondary to eating the food with people. That was what was meaningful. And the fact that I was invited was a huge deal and you don't say no to that. Luckily I hadn't said no yet. To me that was a lesson in what's meaningful to people and understanding what regular people, and what other cultures and communities of people need. And I don't think its a color thing. I think in a lot of working class communities and cultures, thats where the action is.

BS: Can creative playful fun approaches to organizing practices result in practical shifts in people's lives?

Well, lets talk about the people doing the organizing. I think more people need more diverse methods of organizing, including culture and pleasure and singing and stuff like that than can sustain it if you have a narrow single narrow method which is narrow Marxist political rhetoric. I think particularly people outside of white straight males need other things.

So how, well I just know that things like pot luck draw more people, comedy and things like theatre and play and performance... You reach more people through that.

I come from a narrow culture that thinks smart people rule, Jewish middle class culture. But I've always been interested, when I take that into gay organizing that the people that get the power are more cultural people and are more cultural workers than the intellectuals. I've often railed against it but I think its true. And I think there are good reasons for that.

BS: Thats the head vs. the heart and also who gets the bodies. Prefig question, creating images of a better world.

I think its all about identity for people. For example, I don't think that creating images of a better world does anything other than give people identities as people doing fun and good things. To me its about multiple points of access for different types of people that can be sustained for the long hall.

BS: What are the strengths vs the limitations of playful, creative protest and direct action?

I don't like the word play. So I resist the word play. I go back to Winnecott and to other people who look at children and play. With play, there is often an unconscious working out of learnings and growth and lessons that then become sustained in the psyche or whatever you want to call it. I think what you are talking about when you are talking about more conscious things or interventions that are being playful, I would argue that this is around cultural work.

Like I hate the use of the word play in SM and other cultures. I think play often disrespects the seriousness of what you are working on. And especially with kink I think that's dangerous. Today when I was at the library doing my 1970's research at the library of a clone in 1970's, '78 or so talking to someone in the window of a brownstone and he says something like, 'can your lover come out and play with me?' something like can a boy come out and play. Its really an interesting kind of use of the word play then. And I see what they mean.

First off, I do want to say that I do think that people get their needs met or book. For example, I think that recent research in San Francisco around gay men and serosorting is really interesting in this way. I've long suspected that rank and file gay men are getting what they want sexually and doing it as safe as they can, even though prevention and research has told them to do something else. And the research is showing that in fact, these people at UCSF have done this research looking at why is there an increase in syphilis and gonorrhea and there is not an increase in HIV among gay men. Its because gay men who are getting fucked without condoms are generally fucking with people in the same antibody status. To me, this is revolutionary. In era when being fucked without a condom is seen as unsafe regardless of the issue, rank and file gay men by the thousands have found a way to get their needs met, have their fun, get their sexual meaning despite it. The lesson this means is that in fact people will get their meaning, and their fun, and their play and they go to sites where its provided. And if your organizing project doesn't include it, you will only effect the sites among people who get their needs met through that particular site. And that will be a limited group culturally and number wise. People won't show up if they don't get their needs met. People don't get fooled. They will come to one or two events or meetings but if its not meeting their needs, why come? For me the question is how to create organizing spaces and social justice spaces that are really doing that.