

## **Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements**

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**Accepted for publication in New Political Science**

**Abstract:** *This article explores the growing use of mind/body practices like meditation and yoga in Left social movements. The analysis is rooted in interviews with activists participating in the transformative movement-building current: the growing number of organizations integrating subjective and social transformation practices. William Connolly's work on micropolitics is put into conversation with the transformative movement-building current. The epistemological assumption undergirding this article is that textual political theory, and the knowledge being produced by activists, can benefit from dynamic exchange. My argument is that Connolly's post-Nietzschean political theory offers a powerful justification for the political importance of mind/body practices, one that adds to activist justifications. I also argue that transformative movement-building contributes to recent theoretical debates by concretely demonstrating the integral importance of micropolitics for successful macromovements.*

**Keywords:** Mindfulness, Micropolitics, Social Movements, Occupy Wall Street, Angela Davis, William Connolly

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**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank everyone who generously took the time to be interviewed for this project. I would also like to thank Jessica Dempsey, Michael Ferguson, Farah Godrej, Mike Simpson, Trudi Lynn Smith, and the UVic Political Ecology discussion group for generously and helpfully commenting on earlier versions of this article. The anonymous reviewers for *New Political Science*, and co-editors Jocelyn Boryczka and Jennifer Leigh Disney, gave astute feedback that significantly strengthened the quality of analysis. Joanna Reid's editing expertise considerably improved the article. All analytical oversights remain my own. A grant from the University of Victoria helped fund this research.

## Introduction

By 2016, mindfulness has become a zeitgeist. Celebrity figures from former United States (US) President Bill Clinton to comedian Russell Brand have announced their mindfulness practices.<sup>1</sup> A recent *Time* cover story heralded a “Mindful Revolution.”<sup>2</sup> In Europe and the Americas, growing cultural interest in mindfulness has been largely propelled by new research emphasizing its psychological and physical health benefits.<sup>3</sup> Medical researcher and meditation popularizer Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”<sup>4</sup> The most common form that mindfulness practice takes is sitting meditation. Mindfulness can be applied more broadly, however, as the recent spate of books on everything from mindful sex to business suggest.<sup>5</sup>

Both the popular and scientific literatures on mindfulness generally focus on individual transformation and often separate mindfulness practices from their root in religious and ethical systems. There is growing interest in corporate mindfulness and yoga programs that potentially heighten worker productivity and maximize company profits. Mindfulness workshops at the World Economic Forum are now standard fare. There is a distinct danger that the transformational potential of mindfulness practice is being overwhelmed by a neoliberal discourse of self-help that reinforces rather than challenges egoistic behavior and capitalist institutions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Natasha Clark, “Boost Your Productivity and Profits with Mindfulness and Meditation,” *The Business Reporter* (June 12, 2014). <<http://business-reporter.co.uk/2014/06/12/boost-your-productivity-and-profits-with-mindfulness-and-meditation/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Pikert, “The Mindful Revolution,” *Time* (January 23, 2014). <<http://time.com/1556/the-mindful-revolution/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Claudia Blake, *The Joy of Mindful Sex* (Boston: Da Capo, 2010); David Gelles, *Mindful Work* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> William Davies, *The Happiness Industry* (New York: Verso, 2015).

Proponents of secularized mindfulness programs taught in schools, corporations, and the military argue that they are working as a “Trojan Horse.”<sup>7</sup> While managers might deploy corporate mindfulness for questionable ends such as profit seeking, the techniques themselves can transform institutions from the inside out by heightening the mindful awareness of participants. Both proponents and critics of the Trojan Horse hypothesis agree that it remains merely speculative; there is no definitive proof either way.<sup>8</sup> But it is reasonable to doubt that simple meditative techniques, absent any ethical or political container, can transform capitalist institutions, which have powerful structural incentives to pursue possessive and competitive ends.

Philosopher and activist Angela Davis recently engaged in a public dialogue with Jon Kabat-Zinn over the political value of secular mindfulness programs.<sup>9</sup> Davis first began practicing in prison in the early 1970s when a doctor working with the Black Panther Party gave her a book on yoga to help her deal with chronic headaches. Davis has experienced the benefits of mind/body practice and is interested in how it might support systemic change. “In a racially unjust world,” she earnestly asked Kabat-Zinn during their exchange, “what good is mindfulness?”<sup>10</sup> He responded by noting how the heightened awareness enabled by mindfulness practice can progressively awaken practitioners to the greed, hatred, and delusion that cause so much collective suffering. Kabat-Zinn rehearsed the Trojan Horse hypothesis, referring to mindfulness programs as a kind of “institutional aikido” that can change organizations from the

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<sup>7</sup> Norman Farb, “From Retreat Center to Clinic to Boardroom? Perils and Promises of the Modern Mindfulness Movement,” *Religions*, 5:4 (2014) < <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/5/4/1062/htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> Ron Purser and Edwin Ng, “Corporate Mindfulness is Bullsh\*t,” *Salon*, (September 27, 2015), <[http://www.salon.com/2015/09/27/corporate\\_mindfulness\\_is\\_bullsh\\*t\\_zen\\_or\\_no\\_zen\\_youre\\_working\\_harder\\_and\\_being\\_paid\\_less/](http://www.salon.com/2015/09/27/corporate_mindfulness_is_bullsh*t_zen_or_no_zen_youre_working_harder_and_being_paid_less/)>.

<sup>9</sup> The dialogue was a fundraiser for the East Bay Meditation Center, which is a leader in the transformative movement-building current. As son-in-law of the historian and social activist Howard Zinn, Kabat-Zinn is no stranger to processes of social change himself.

<sup>10</sup> See James Rowe, “Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance,” *Waging Nonviolence* (March 21, 2015) < <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/mindfulness-and-the-art-of-social-movement-maintenance/>>.

inside out. Davis, however, was not satisfied with his response, emphasizing that racism is not simply a set of personal attitudes, but a whole system. She pressed Kabat-Zinn, asking how practices focused on personal habits of mind could generate lasting systemic change. Near the end of the discussion, Davis answered her own question. She noted that mindfulness might become a revolutionary force if it is embedded in social movements that target oppressive systems. These movements provide ethical and political analyses that can guide the deployment of mind/body practices in the service of radical change.

Following Davis, I am interested in how mind/body practices can support and strengthen Left social movements that directly target capitalist, racist, patriarchal, and colonial institutions and cultures. Particularly, I am interested in how these practices might help activists embody their liberatory values, thereby improving personal and organizational effectiveness. As part of the more general mindful revolution, social justice activists are busily experimenting with how mind/body practices can support collective liberation.<sup>11</sup> While their efforts remain below the public radar, several organizations now work at the fold between subjective and social change. This intersection is increasingly called “transformative social change.”<sup>12</sup> The Movement Strategy Center, generative somatics, and the Center for Transformative Change are leading organizations in what I call the “transformative movement-building current”: the growing number of organizations integrating personal and social transformation practices.<sup>13</sup> Activists from these groups passed a resolution at the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan that read: “We

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Transformative Change, “Framing Deep Change: Essays on Transformative Social Change,” (2010) <<http://www.generativeomatics.org/gsresourcebook/framing-deep-change>>.

<sup>13</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (2016) defines “current” as “a portion of a body of water...moving in a definite direction.” I use the phrase “transformative movement-building current” to name an emerging tendency on the Left that centers itself at the juncture between subjective and structural change. This usage of “current” is inspired by Chris Dixon’s recent book on the anti-authoritarian current, *Another Politics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

acknowledge that we as agents of change, having been deeply affected by our conditions of oppression, need a deep and abiding commitment to *embody* the revolutionary change we seek ... Revolutionary, systemic change is needed internally, in our relations and in our external conditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Embodied practices such as singing and dancing, along with spiritual forms such as prayer and ceremony, have been central to most successful social movements.<sup>15</sup> The integration of mind/body practices such as meditation and yoga into secular and multi-faith movements in the Americas and Europe, however, is a recent and growing trend that has yet to be effectively theorized. Political theory inspired by the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (sometimes called “post-Nietzschean”), with a conceptual toolkit that includes “arts of the self,” “techniques of the self,” and “micropolitics,” is particularly well positioned to help fill the gap. Key thinkers in this tradition are Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and William Connolly. In this article I focus on Connolly because he effectively integrates Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze into his work on micropolitics.

What are techniques of the self and micropolitics exactly? “By *relational techniques of the self*,” writes Connolly, “I mean choreographed mixtures of word, gesture, image, sound rhythm, smell, and touch that help to define the sensibility in which your perception, thinking, identity, beliefs and judgment are set.”<sup>16</sup> Micropolitics are such techniques “organized and deployed collectively.”<sup>17</sup> Techniques of the self that Connolly references include watching

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<sup>14</sup> “Defining Transformation for Social Change,” (2010)

<<http://hiddenleaf.electricembers.net/wpcontent/uploads/2010/06/TransformationPMA.pdf>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ongoing indigenous resistances to colonization, for example, have regularly integrated political and ceremonial practice. See Michael Yellowbird, “Decolonizing the Mind: Healing Through Neurodecolonization and Mindfulness,” (February 11, 2014), <<http://www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/content/decolonizing-mind-talk-dr-michael-yellowbird>>.

<sup>16</sup> *Neuropolitics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

particular films, dancing, meditation, tracking one's dreams, and invoking nontheistic gratitude for the sweetness of life.<sup>18</sup> For Connolly, techniques of the self and micropolitics can be deployed in the service of generous, pluralistic, and equitable political programs, but also towards more possessive and elitist agendas. His work argues for the importance of micropolitical interventions in helping shape the more generous dispositions requisite for successful Left macropolitics. For example, writing about resistances to neoliberalism under conditions of accelerated climate change, Connolly argues for "experimental micropolitics on a variety of fronts...to help recode the ethos that now occupies investment practices, consumption desires, family savings, state priorities, church assemblies, university curricula, and media reporting."<sup>19</sup>

In this article I put post-Nietzschean political theory, particularly the work of William Connolly, into conversation with the transformative movement-building current. In 2014 I conducted interviews with many of the leaders in this emerging current, and their insights are central to the case study developed below. My argument is that Connolly's work offers a robust theoretical explanation for the political importance of mind/body practices, adding a powerful justification to existing self-justifications among activists. I also argue that the transformative movement-building current provides new and powerful evidence that supports and furthers Connolly's account of micropolitics.

A growing number of critics worry that a focus on micropolitics distracts from needed shifts on the macropolitical plane.<sup>20</sup> I argue that the transformative movement-building current challenges these criticisms by providing robust evidence for how techniques of the self and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> See Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012); Adrian Johnston, "Think Big: Toward a grand neuropolitics – or, Why I am not an immanent naturalist or a vital materialist," in Frank Vander Valk ed., *Essays on Neuroscience and Political Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 156-177; Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

micropolitics can support Left macropolitics. Below I unpack five central ways that mind/body practices strengthen social movements: helping activists prepare for direct action, improving self-care/resilience, transforming trauma, embodying liberatory values and habits, and improving organizational effectiveness.

The transformative current also provides a concrete alternative to the Trojan Horse strategy advocated by proponents of secular mindfulness programs in corporations, schools, the military, and prisons. The Trojan Horse strategy assumes that dominative institutions and systems can be transformed without being explicitly targetted. Rejecting this assumption, transformative movement-building aligns with Angela Davis's vision of micropolitics embedded in macromovements that explicitly orient themselves against dominative systems.

### **Methodology: Movement-Relevant Research**

After reading about daily meditations used by activists during Occupy Wall Street, I travelled to New York in 2014 to interview occupiers. I spoke with eighteen activists, some who helped facilitate the daily meditations and others who had little to no engagement with this aspect of the occupation. A short description of the daily meditations in Zuccotti Park, found in the book *Occupying Wall Street*, helped me find initial interviewees.<sup>21</sup> I then used the snowball sampling method to find additional activists to interview. Interviews were digitally recorded and lasted roughly one hour. The recordings were transcribed and then analyzed in search of patterns and themes. These conversations resulted in a journalistic article on the role mind/body practices played during the encampment.<sup>22</sup> Discussions in New York also alerted me to the transformative

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<sup>21</sup> Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011), pp. 84-92.

<sup>22</sup> James Rowe, "Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance," *Waging Nonviolence* (March 21, 2015) <<http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/mindfulness-and-the-art-of-social-movement-maintenance/>>. A criticism of cultural appropriation appeared in the comments section. Robustly responding to this concern is beyond the scope of

movement-building current that took public shape at the US Social Forum in 2010, one year before Occupy. I learned during my conversations with Occupy activists that the San Francisco Bay Area is a geographic hot spot for organizations working at the intersections of subjective and social change. I visited the region in November 2014 and conducted twelve more activist interviews, for a total of thirty.

This project was designed to produce “movement-relevant” research.<sup>23</sup> For Richard Flacks, movement relevance means producing “useable knowledge for those seeking social change.”<sup>24</sup> Bevington and Dixon, who draw from Flacks, argue that particular research strategies can increase the potential that one’s work will be relevant for social change practitioners.<sup>25</sup> The primary principle they highlight is direct engagement with the movements and activists in question. They argue, “Scholars who rely too heavily on secondary sources are not contributing new information and more often simply perpetuate limited or outdated analyses.”<sup>26</sup> By conducting interviews with activists and putting their knowledge into conversation with textual political theory, I sought to make this research movement relevant. I now turn to ongoing academic debates over the value of micropolitics for what they can contribute to theorizations of transformative movement building.

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this article, but I will raise one important consideration. Key teachers of mindfulness in the West, like Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, have advocated for the widespread use of these practices by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Buddhism has long been a missionary religion. This history does not absolve crass uses of mind/body practices that shore up dominative institutions – what is increasingly being called “McMindfulness” – but it indicates that the question of intent and practical effect may be more important than the question of appropriation. See Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Flacks, “Knowledge for What? Thoughts on the State of Social Movement Studies,” in Jeff Goodwin and James Jaspers eds., *Rethinking Social Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 135-153; Doug Bevington and Chris Dixon, “Movement-Relevant Theory: Rethinking Social Movement Scholarship and Activism,” *Social Movement Studies* 4:3 (2005), pp. 185-208.

<sup>24</sup> Flacks, “Knowledge for What?” p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> “Movement-Relevant Theory,” p. 189.

<sup>26</sup> “Movement-Relevant Theory,” p. 199.



## William Connolly, Existential Resentment, and Micropolitics

Drawing on work by Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault on “arts of self” and “care of the self,” William Connolly has developed accounts of how seemingly a-political, self-sculpting practices like meditation can support democratic politics.<sup>27</sup> While Foucault’s work on care of the self is important to Connolly’s approach, Nietzsche provides the more robust theoretical rationale for why self-sculpting practices that seek to develop virtue through the “faithful repetition of the same labours,” might matter politically.<sup>28</sup> For Nietzsche, a tremendous amount of internal human suffering and external vengefulness are caused by resentment in the face of our existential condition. Sickness, death, and contingency are parts of earthly life that are difficult to affirm. The challenge of deeply accepting our earthly condition led Nietzsche to describe the human condition as “a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves, at the earth, at all life, who inflict as much pain on themselves as they possibly can out of pleasure in inflicting pain – which is probably their only pleasure.”<sup>29</sup>

Core to Nietzsche’s project was developing an affirmative account of earthly life, of coming to “love the earth” in a deep and embodied way.<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche was vague on how this love might be cultivated, but talked about giving style to our character and treating ourselves as works of art to sculpt. Nietzsche was, of course, no egalitarian. He consistently forwarded elitist and misogynistic arguments in his writings. Nietzsche did suggest, however, that affirming our earthly lives could reduce individual and collective suffering. “As long as men have existed,” he

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<sup>27</sup> *Neuropolitics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), p. 326.

wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “man has enjoyed himself too little: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin! And if we learn better to enjoy ourselves, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm.”<sup>31</sup> The primary enjoyment Nietzsche references in this passage is an experience of human life free from primordial shame and doubt.

A key goal of Connolly’s corpus has been to apply Nietzsche’s analysis of existential resentment to Left politics.<sup>32</sup> “Nietzsche is the philosopher,” Connolly writes in *Identity/Difference*, “who exposes the roots of resentment in theism and secularism and who seeks to elicit a nontheistic reverence for life to combat the subterranean politics of resentment.”<sup>33</sup> The danger of resentment, according to Connolly, is that “those who resent the world too much are eager to find others to hold responsible for their condition. They easily become punitive and exclusionary.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, existential resentment is a force that shapes individual and collectivized performances of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy,” to use bell hooks’ articulation of the interlocking systems of domination that help shape our present.<sup>35</sup> Existential resentment is not the sole driver of domination, but, for Connolly, it makes individuals and institutions more possessive, exclusionary, and punitive than they might otherwise be.<sup>36</sup>

Connolly is concerned not only with the resentment generated by existential ambivalence towards contingency, but also with the secondary resentment produced by systems of domination themselves. As he writes in *Identity/Difference* “Today existential resentments and resentments

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<sup>31</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Connolly conceives of the Left as an assemblage comprised of diverse movements for ecological, economic, racial, gender, and sexuality justice. See. Bradley J. Macdonald, “Confronting The Anthropocene and Contesting Neoliberalism: And Interview with William E. Connolly,” *New Political Science* 37:2 (2015), pp. 263-264.

<sup>33</sup> William Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. xviii.

<sup>35</sup> bell hooks, “Buddhism and the Politics of Domination,” in Melvin McLeod (ed.), *Mindful Politics* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2006), p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 4.

against injustice in the social distribution of opportunities, resources, sacrifices, and burdens combine to tighten the grip of dogmatism upon the life of identity.”<sup>37</sup> Existential resentment contributes to domination, which can heighten secondary resentments, with both dogmatism and domination strengthened at each turn. Connolly proposes a solution to this problematic doubling of resentment:

The most general (and idealistic) idea is to subdue the politics of generalized resentment by moving on two fronts – first by removing social injustices that exclude a large variety of constituencies from the material and cultural life of the whole and, second, by criticizing modes of existential resentment that intensify social dogmatism with respect to identity, responsibility, and otherness. These two “fronts” are neither separable nor fully harmonious within this vision. They are interdependent in that a politics of freedom cannot make much progress on either without making some on both. They enter into strife in that each can easily become a staging area for infringements upon the other.<sup>38</sup>

Presaged by Connolly’s acknowledgement of tensions between projects that target systemic injustice and those seeking to transform existential resentment, there is currently a counter-movement afoot in political theory, one seeking to challenge the valorization of existential micropolitics. For thinkers such as Jodi Dean and Adrian Johnston, a focus on micropolitics distracts from needed macro shifts such as breaking up the massive concentrations of wealth that shape global politics.<sup>39</sup> The most sustained critique of Connolly’s valorization of micropolitics appears in Ella Myers’s recent book *Worldly Ethics*. For Myers, Connolly is at his best when he accounts for the dynamic relation between tactics of the self and macropolitical change. She worries, however, that he does not go far enough in insisting that micropolitical interventions must be shaped by liberatory collective projects if they are to have

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<sup>37</sup> *Identity/Difference*, p. 211.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> Connolly recently responded to these criticisms in a *New Political Science* interview with Bradley Macdonald: “I get impatient with people who say (without textual support) that theorists like me are only interested in ‘micropolitics.’ We are, rather, partly interested in the efficacies of such practices themselves, partly in how they help to entrench our beliefs and connections as they grow, and partly in how they can be linked to a series of corollary macro-movements.” “Confronting The Anthropocene and Contesting Neoliberalism,” (2015), 37:2, p. 267.

liberatory effects. Given the possessive individualism that marks neoliberal culture, Myers argues, a focus on the self can support rather than challenge neoliberal values unless that focus is conditioned by an alternative and collective project.

According to Myers, Connolly falters by sometimes prioritizing tactics of the self, suggesting that they are a precondition for democratic politics.<sup>40</sup> The danger Myers identifies is that prioritizing tactics of the self makes them “too easily absorbed, even co-opted, by a dominant culture that rewards forms of preoccupation with the self that do little to facilitate associative democracy.”<sup>41</sup> Myers’s fix for this danger is always to ensure that techniques of the self are guided by democratic and egalitarian movements that can give these techniques form and meaning. She writes, “There is simply no reason to believe or hope that paying focused attention to oneself will enable rather than disable collective action unless the labors of self-constitution are set in motion by a publicly articulated claim regarding shared conditions that resonates with that individual, sparking reflection, examination, and transformation.”<sup>42</sup>

Myers’s critique of Connolly has parallels with Angela Davis’s critique of the mindfulness movement. For both Myers and Davis, micropolitical interventions such as mindfulness programs need to be embedded within and guided by liberatory projects if they are to have systematic and liberatory effects. Yet missing from Myers’s account is any explanation of why techniques of the self and micropolitics might matter in the first place. A discussion of existential resentment is surprisingly absent from *Worldly Ethics*. This is the primary predicament that has driven Connolly’s interest in techniques of the self and their collective expression in micropolitics. Meyer’s silence on the question of resentment and the role it may

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<sup>40</sup> *Worldly Ethics*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

play in driving dominative behavior and institutions leads her to downplay the political importance of tactical self-care. For her, techniques of the self *can* support egalitarian politics, but are not ultimately necessary. If we accept Connolly's analysis of existential resentment, however, then techniques of the self are central rather than incidental to democratic and egalitarian politics.

Combining Connolly's work on existential resentment with Myers's critique, we arrive at the following guiding principle for the deployment of liberatory micropolitics: techniques of the self devised to transform existential resentment are central to systemic change, but only when they are embedded in political projects that direct themselves towards this systemic change. While Connolly emphasizes the importance of articulating micropolitical interventions with macro movements, he does not argue as strongly as Myers for the importance of embedding micropolitics within Left movements. Myers's critique is thus a helpful supplement to Connolly's ideas, one that aligns with lessons being learned by activists about the limits of "disembedded" micropolitics.

My interviews with activists revealed multiple ways that participants in social movements are experimenting with mind/body practices. These findings challenge doubts that both theorists and activists might have about these practices' macropolitical value. My interviews revealed five primary benefits of mind/body work: preparing for direct action, self-care/resilience, transforming trauma, embodying liberatory values and habits, and improving organizational effectiveness. These benefits focus primarily on relating to the effects of systemic domination; they are not centered on why systems of domination might arise in the first place. Connolly's post-Nietzschean political theory adds to activist self-justifications by emphasizing

the politically determinative effects of existential resentment. If there are existential drivers of domination then the political importance of mind/body practices is even clearer.

### **Preparing for Direct Action**

My coffee-shop meeting with Kazu Haga, founder of the East Point Peace Academy in Oakland, California helped me unravel the long and syncretic history of mind/body practices being deployed in support of social change. East Point offers nonviolence trainings – in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. – in prisons, schools, and social justice organizations. Haga explained how trainers in the Civil Rights movement used contemplative techniques to prepare activists for nonviolent action in the face of verbal and physical abuse. Extensive role-plays would involve activists enduring cigarettes being ashed on them, or coffee being poured over their heads. Haga said: “They didn’t call that mindfulness but that is what it is essentially...learning to gain more agency over our reactions.”<sup>43</sup> Haga incorporates mindfulness techniques into the trainings that he offers. He learned these techniques at the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in a program that taught mindfulness practices to social justice leaders.<sup>44</sup> While these Buddhist-inspired meditative techniques might at first appear to be a recent addition to the Kingian nonviolence tradition, there is historical precedent for this interweaving of techniques. King was deeply influenced by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who drew inspiration from a variety of sources including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and the Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy.<sup>45</sup> For Gandhi to “be the change” –

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<sup>43</sup> Interview, November 14, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> The program was called Practice in Transformative Action, and was taught by Mushim Patricia Ikeda, a senior teacher with EBMC. The program was funded by the Hidden Leaf Foundation, a key funder of the transformative movement-building current.

<sup>45</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi Before India* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

to deeply embody nonviolence in impulse, word, and deed – required “rigorous spiritual, political, and social training.”<sup>46</sup>

Philosopher Richard Gregg is a key figure in the dissemination of Gandhian praxis in the Euro-Americas. His 1934 work *The Power of Nonviolence*, when it was reprinted in 1960, included a foreword from Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>47</sup> Gregg’s book includes numerous mentions of mind/body practices such as dancing, singing, and group meditation to help craft collective unity and moral courage. For Gregg:

The unity and sense of common purpose and common values developed by these methods will of course make a team more effective in both joint and individual action. That is why, in the army, so much time and detailed care is taken to instill a strong sense of unity in each squad, platoon, company, and regiment...By choosing for meditation such themes as tolerance, the unity of all mankind and love for all people, the sense of unity will be widened.<sup>48</sup>

When Haga teaches Buddhist inspired meditative techniques in his Kingian nonviolence trainings in Oakland, he draws from the braided streams that sustain the living and cosmopolitan tradition of nonviolent resistance. King himself was an admirer of the peace practices of Buddhist traditions. In 1967 King nominated the Vietnamese peace activist and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thich Nhat Hanh is a key force in the ongoing integration of meditative praxis into the Euro-American mainstream, an integration that now impacts the conduct of political organizing.<sup>49</sup> Thus, while the transformative movement-building current itself remains relatively young, it has historical precedents; mind/body practices (such as those in Buddhist practice) and nonviolent techniques of collective action have merged and influenced one another in different ways at different times.

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<sup>46</sup> Manfred Steger, “Searching for *Satya* through *Ahimsa*: Gandhi’s Challenge to Western Discourses of Power,” *Constellations* 13:3 (2006), p. 347. See also Farah Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration,” *The Review of Politics* 68:2 (2006), p. 296.

<sup>47</sup> Thanks to James Tully for introducing me to Gregg’s work.

<sup>48</sup> *The Power of Nonviolence* (Canton, Maine: Greenleaf Books, 1960), p. 163.

<sup>49</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Good Citizens: Creating Enlightened Society* (Berkeley: Parallax, 2012).

## Self-Care/Resilience

In a recent report on transformative movement building, authors from the Movement Strategy Center argue that “[t]oo often the prevailing culture of organizing seeks social transformation at the expense of personal well-being and sustainability, especially of organizers and leaders.”<sup>50</sup>

Healthy movements require organizers to be engaged for the long term. “How do we maintain healthy movements that support each other?” asked Benjamin Shepard, an activist and social movement scholar with whom I spoke in New York.<sup>51</sup> Shepard explained the importance of building healthy movement cultures that support people when they get sick or need to take a break. “There is a rugged individualism that pervades mainstream culture, and it can impact social movements, perpetuating burn-out models of organizing. We need to look out for each other and take better care of each other.”<sup>52</sup>

Dawn Haney, now co-director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, previously worked at a rape crisis center. She described her position as a burnout job in a burnout field. She turned to meditation to build ongoing resilience: “I needed continual practices that could help support me and my work. Even after a restful vacation I still needed to return to a job that could be quite painful.”<sup>53</sup> Mind/body practices such as meditation and yoga can play an important role as techniques to help people to thrive and remain resilient amid challenging work. A number of activists I interviewed hypothesized that one vector that has brought these practices more into movements is an increasing number of organizers individually turning to mind/body practices for

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<sup>50</sup> Kristen Zimmerman et al., “Out of the Spiritual Closet: Organizers Transforming The Practice of Social Justice” (2010), <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/zimmerman1.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. “Power is everywhere,” argues Michel Foucault in the *History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990, p. 93). As Shepard emphasizes, dominant social norms like rugged individualism and the Protestant work ethic can find expression in the movements and activists seeking to upend these very norms. Techniques of the self can help transform embodied norms that obstruct collective liberation, in this case by promoting exhaustion, ill-health, and burnout.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, November 10<sup>th</sup> 2014.



self-care. There is a danger, however, that social movement organizations will see these techniques as temporary fixes that can enable intensified productivity without burnout (a critique increasingly made of corporate mindfulness and yoga programs).<sup>54</sup> To be effective at building long-term resilience and collective well-being, mind/body practices need to be part of the wider cultural change within movements for which Shepard advocates.

An example of cultural change towards long-term resilience in social movements is a recent initiative launched by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). The NDWA represents nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly across the United States, pushing for “respect, recognition, and inclusion in labor protections.”<sup>55</sup> The Alliance is powered by fifty-three affiliate organizations that collectively represent approximately twenty thousand domestic workers. In 2011 The NDWA partnered with two leaders in the transformative movement-building current – generative somatics and Social Justice Leadership – to launch the Strategy-Organizing-Leadership (SOL) initiative. The SOL program trained a cohort of rank-and-file leaders with NDWA-affiliated organizations from across the country. The initiative integrated mind/body practices into its intensive curriculum, which included political education and grassroots leadership development. These mind/body practices included meditation, martial arts like Aikido, and a number of techniques developed by the organization generative somatics (centering, hand-on-chest, grab-center-face).<sup>56</sup> As program evaluators from the University of Southern California ask in their recent report: “Is it possible to take a cohort of domestic workers and organizers through a two-year process and change how they show up in their own lives, in

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<sup>54</sup> See Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 81-107. Sharma draws on Foucault to make sense of how corporate yoga programs shape employee subjectivities, inuring workers to sedentary office life. Her analysis helps clarify that mind/body practices are not inherently liberatory – they can be deployed as neoliberal micropolitics. Sharma provides powerful ethnographic evidence to contradict the Trojan Horse hypothesis forwarded by proponents of corporate mindfulness and yoga programs.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.domesticworkers.org/who-we-are>

<sup>56</sup> For a description of the practices see <http://challengingmalesupremacy.org/our-work/study-into-action/somatics/>.

their organizations, and in the Alliance?”<sup>57</sup> The evaluator report offers a sustained answer in the affirmative. Self-care was a key theme in SOL. As the evaluators write:

SOL reframed the notion of self-care, which was particularly important for the domestic worker community and for community organizing more broadly. Often, self-care is associated with taking time to get massages, seek therapy, go shopping, or leave movement work altogether. In contrast SOL’s approach to self-care was about possessing the concrete skills of setting limits and boundaries, of being able to trust oneself thus to trust others, and of having more ways to respond to pressures than automatic reactions.<sup>58</sup>

Mind/body practices are not only useful for restoration amidst a challenging workload, but as the SOL initiative reveals, they also nurture somatic awareness of what our limits are, and when they are being approached.<sup>59</sup> This embodied awareness can help organizers set priorities, avoid over-commitment, and better achieve balance in their lives. Collectively nurturing this balance is integral to building movement cultures of care, sustainability, and flourishing.

## **Transforming Trauma**

A central focus of the SOL initiative was to take seriously the embodied effects of trauma and oppression. According to SOL’s evaluators: “The vast majority of domestic workers has had experiences with trauma, intimate violence, and/or state violence and oppression. Integrating an understanding of trauma, its impact and healing, is vital for successful organizing and campaigns.”<sup>60</sup> While a trauma-informed organizing lens is especially germane for the NDWA, it has broader applicability among Left social movements. Brenda Salgado who directs the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in Oakland explained during our interview: “Many people in

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<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Ito et al., “Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building: Lessons from the National Domestic Workers Alliance Strategy – Organizing – Leadership (SOL) Initiative,” (2014), p. 41, <<http://www.soltransforminglives.org/>>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> According to SOL’s evaluators, “Throughout the initiative, the somatic practices were the most commonly and consistently cited highlight and take-away participants gained from the retreats.” Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

social justice movements have had trauma in their lives, their families, their ancestral histories and they often run away from that and try and fix the world. But if they haven't done their own liberation and healing work, they can cause a lot of collateral damage.”<sup>61</sup>

Habitual hyper-vigilance, aggression, distrust, and appeasement often result from traumatic experiences.<sup>62</sup> These survival responses can fuel the collateral damage of which Salgado warns. Spenta Kandawalla from generative somatics (gs) explained to me that trauma and oppression are factors that can limit agency.<sup>63</sup> Kandawalla believes people can be shaped into believing that they risk isolation and harm if they do not react to situations in the habitual and defensive ways they have learned. “And yet choices often abound,” she told me. “If we can remain present, even when being triggered, our options expand.”<sup>64</sup> Using mind/body practices to heighten awareness and presence can address the repeating cycles of trauma noted by Salgado and undo the restricted agency highlighted by Kandawalla. SOL's facilitators noted, for example, that appeasement was a common tendency among the domestic workers participating in the program: “To the extent they fight back, they risk getting abused physically or sexually or losing their job or pay.”<sup>65</sup> Over the course of the program, facilitators noticed greater participant capacity to address conflict in productive ways, rather than defaulting to avoidance and appeasement.

In dominant culture, trauma is typically represented as an individual psychological concern. For example, the American Psychological Association describes trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” and notes that

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, November 10<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Ito et al., “Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building,” p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> Interview, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ito et al., Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building,” p. 40.

“Psychologists can help these individuals find constructive ways of managing their emotions.”<sup>66</sup>

A trauma-informed organizing lens, on the other hand, attends to the political and systemic drivers regularly conditioning traumatic experiences. Domestic and sexual violence cannot be sundered, for example, from structures and histories of patriarchy. Much state violence is conditioned by logics of white supremacy. Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by a workplace superior cannot be separated from capitalist exploitation. Moreover, daily experiences of oppression and exploitation along the axes of race, gender, class, sexuality can have profound psychological impacts. The language of trauma is a way for activists to name the intimate effects of interlocking systemic dominations.<sup>67</sup> Attending to the intimate effects of structural violence through mind/body practice can strengthen movement building by improving the health of participants, slowing cycles of trauma and expanding collective agency.

Situating traumatic experiences historically and structurally may also be helpful for personal healing. Unlike most psychological modalities, the SOL initiative addressed embodied trauma with a systemic lens, offering: “[A] political education component on third wave feminism to help move the understanding of trauma beyond a personal experience and place it within a societal and historical context. Participants were able to see...individual trauma in the context of the perpetuation of oppression and history of resistance.”<sup>68</sup> We can hypothesize the de-alienating effect of seeing one’s personal pain linked to larger structures that impact others, and can be collectively targeted. Kandawalla told me how the staff at generative somatics has accomplished its deepest healing work with individuals when that healing occurred in a

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>.

<sup>67</sup> It is important to remember that the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) only arose thanks to the organizing efforts of veterans from the Vietnam War. These vets were experiencing the intimate damage wrought by militarism. In 1980 they successfully lobbied the American Psychiatric Association to create the PTSD diagnosis. See Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Viking, 2014), p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ito et al., “Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building,” p. 47.

collective environment Similarly, Staci Haines, who founded generative somatics, explained how the organization's theory of change integrates personal, community, and systemic transformation. "If we don't work at transformation on all of those levels, aligned inside of a larger vision, we just won't be as powerful."<sup>69</sup> Personal transformation can strengthen social movements, but political analysis and engagement are arguably integral to individual healing. While this article is focused on how mind/body practices can support social movements, more research is required on the personal healing potential of critical political analyses – critical frameworks that may help individuals gain additional agency over the pain and/or trauma they are experiencing.

### **Embodying Liberatory Values and Habits**

During our conversation, Kandawalla introduced me to the language of "shaping." From a somatics perspective, individuals and collectives are all deeply shaped by their social conditions. According to generative somatics: "There are multiple forces that 'shape us' and have us embody these worldviews and ways of relating and acting. Experiences within our families and intimate networks, communities, social norms, the broader economic and political systems we live in, our material conditions and the landscapes in which we find ourselves, all shape us."<sup>70</sup> In particular, the language of shaping communicates the unconscious and embodied ways that social norms and scripts animate our actions and reactions. Given that North American society is conditioned by interlocking systems of domination, it should not surprise us when dominative values unconsciously inform individual and collective decision-making, even among politicized constituencies. According to Claudia Horowitz, a leader in the transformative movement-

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<sup>69</sup> Interview, November 11, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Ito et al., *Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building*, p. 32.

building current: “Hatred, division and separation get internalized in us. We see it so much that we take it in and manifest it in our organizations and collaborations... There is competitiveness with people who respect and like each other. We have turf battles with people we share values with. We aren’t abundant in our thinking and feeling.”<sup>71</sup> The somatics approach aims to help individuals and organizations discern their “current shape” as a precondition to embodying their “intentional shape.” When individuals and organizations can assume their intentional shape, they are better able to prefigure liberatory social relations. According to SOL’s evaluators, “knowledge of and responsibility for one’s shape tends to lead to more intentional actions, which create more possibilities for change.”<sup>72</sup>

A key way that current shaping limits the effectiveness of social movements is the replication of oppressions within movements themselves. Adreanna Limbach helped organize daily meditations in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street. Her initial intention for these sessions was to provide a service to Occupiers by offering space and time for centering and rejuvenation amid the bustle of the park. During her engagement with Occupy, Limbach noticed that the divisions along the axes of race and class that the movement was seeking to transform were being replicated in the very geography and interactions of the encampment itself. For example, the northeast side of the park was primarily inhabited by middle class white people, and came to be called “The Upper East Side Sacks.” The southwest side, however, was largely black and Latino.

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Zimmerman et al., “Coming out of the Spiritual Closet,” pp. 14-15. Following Nietzsche, Connolly emphasizes energetic abundance as an ontological condition, but one that requires micropolitical cultivation for it to manifest in our dispositions, particularly as generosity. See *Neuropolitcs*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. 170). Connolly’s theoretical work is very much aligned with Horowitz’s call for more “abundant thinking and feeling” in Left social movements.

<sup>72</sup> Ito et al., *Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building*,” p. 32.

“About three weeks into my experience at Occupy,” Limbach explained, “I began to think of meditation practice less as a service, and more a strategy, since we are bound to recreate structures of injustice in our daily interactions if we are not working with internal belief systems, and how they are shaped by power, privilege and positionality.”<sup>73</sup> If, following Foucault, we accept that relations of power are everywhere, we should not be surprised when oppressions get replicated within social movements, even among those seeking to challenge dominative power relations.<sup>74</sup> Mind/body practices such as meditation can help activists notice embodied thought-patterns and behaviours that interrupt the pursuit of justice.

One interviewee, angel Kyodo williams, founder of the Center for Transformative Change and author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, spoke with me about how meditation can help people notice transphobic, racist, or sexist thoughts as they move through our bodies. According to williams, by observing and examining our unconscious prejudices, we can start to rewrite the oppressive scripts circulating in our movements and communities. Organizations that do anti-oppressive training to build movement power, such as the Catalyst Project based in San Francisco, California, have begun integrating embodied awareness and mindfulness practices into their organizing work. In general, however, the tactical integration of mind/body and anti-oppression work is underdeveloped; it remains a site of great transformative potential.<sup>75</sup>

Mind/body practices are not only useful for interrupting the replication of oppression; they can also help heal the embodied wounds to dignity inflicted by systems of domination.

Salgado from the EBMC explained: “We live in a society that teaches people to devalue

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<sup>73</sup> Interview, October 18, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality” in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 187.

<sup>75</sup> See Beth Berila, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

themselves, their cultures, their skin colours. For me mindfulness, whether it is in a Buddhist context or an indigenous ceremonial context, is about learning to love yourself. It is liberating to not ask anyone permission to be who you are.”<sup>76</sup> Mind/body practices can help heal the wounds of oppression by facilitating embodied appreciation for the parts of ourselves that have been marginalized. They can also go deeper, connecting people to a basic human dignity that precedes and exceeds efforts to diminish particular identities. Meditation, yoga, and other somatic techniques can nurture self-acceptance from an internal and primal place, untouched by the systems of domination that work to belittle particular humans in the service of privileging others.

In *Being Black*, williams writes:

There is a place that we find when we look deeply into ourselves that allows us to be completely free of our histories, our stories, our hang-ups... We don't have to live in the shadow of anyone's expectation of us. Not those of white America, nor those of our parents or lovers. Instead, we can live our lives for the sake of the experience itself... The experience of life, the actual doing it, living it, is what we have to savour. We actually have a freedom spot in our brains!”<sup>77</sup>

The Buddhist term for this “freedom spot” is “Buddha nature.” According to Buddhist philosophy, everybody is animated by Buddha nature. This is to say that our basic humanity is empty of a fixed concept or storyline, while simultaneously full of potential for realization. In basic terms, “realization” is about seeing and feeling the impermanent, interdependent, and rich nature of earthly reality, and affirming it, deeply loving it. In one of his more informed observations about Buddhism, Nietzsche noted how it “is not a religion in which one merely aspires after perfection: perfection is the normal case.”<sup>78</sup> One of the rationales for meditation is that it helps practitioners gain experience with basic reality without an over-determined story

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, November 10, 2014

<sup>77</sup> *Being Black* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 174.

<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols & The Anti-Christ*, (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), p. 131.



line.<sup>79</sup> Gaining phenomenological experience with fundamental reality can reduce the fear, suffering, and resentment it is easy to feel in the face of our existential condition. It can be healing to experience the basic perfection that is always already composing our experience (a perfection that includes challenging data such as impermanence and death).<sup>80</sup> Encountering the “basic goodness” of existential reality is healing in general, but can be especially the case for communities who have been systematically pushed to doubt their dignity.<sup>81</sup> Salgado, for example, explained why – even as Buddhism emphasizes the universality of suffering and Buddha nature – the EBMC maintains a separate group for people of color. “When your identity has been so devalued you need a space where you can learn to value that again, and then you can begin to let it go, more easily connecting to the fundamental interdependence of human experience.”<sup>82</sup>

## **Organizational Effectiveness**

When organizations are marked by high levels of burnout, trauma, and replicated oppressions, we can predict limited political success. Similarly we can hypothesize improved effectiveness when movements build cultures of care, seek to heal and transform trauma, and work to embody liberatory values. Speaking generally about the effects of burnout, trauma, and oppression, activist Mordecai Ettinger argues that “trauma impacts our ability to connect.”<sup>83</sup> For Ettinger, who is also a holistic healer, this disconnection can manifest in limited somatic awareness along

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<sup>79</sup> Claims to fundamental impermanence, interdependence, and richness are themselves conceptual overlays. Buddhist philosophy insists that phenomenological practice is required to experience the nature of reality that concepts can only point towards, or obfuscate.

<sup>80</sup> See Sakyong Mipham, *The Shambhala Principle* (New York: Harmony Books, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Interview, November 10, 2014. See also Mark Oppenheimer, “Finding Path to Inclusion Through Exclusion at an Oakland Meditation Center,” *New York Times*, (October 2, 2015), [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/us/finding-path-to-inclusion-through-exclusion-at-an-oakland-meditation-center.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/us/finding-path-to-inclusion-through-exclusion-at-an-oakland-meditation-center.html?_r=0).

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Zimmerman et al., “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” p. 16.

with limited interrelational awareness. “When we are disconnected, we don’t know how we are impacting others or how we’re being impacted.”<sup>84</sup> The optimal emotional and somatic state for Ettinger is “flexible, open and non-defensive, with a larger capacity for conflict and disagreement that allows us to hold intense emotions.”<sup>85</sup> The primary benefits of transformative movement-building that activists reported during my interviews align nicely with the “flexible, open and non-defensive” state that Ettinger identifies as being enabling for individuals and organizations.

A number of the activists with whom I spoke noted how mind/body practices cultivate more expansive and flexible thinking. Brenda Salgado from the EBMC told me: “when people start practicing individually and as an organization the way they move together changes. They increase their ability to see different perspectives, partner with unlikely partners when it makes sense, a lot more expansive thinking.”<sup>86</sup> Evaluators for the SOL program had similar findings: “SOL cultivated the capacity to hold contradictions with more complexity.”<sup>87</sup> This more expansive (versus defensive) praxis contributed to successful alliance formation and maintenance: “Many organizations concluded the trainings with more openness to working through challenges with other organizations rather than simply walking away, ignoring, or being destructive or polarizing...Given the need to build collective power to succeed, these capacities are essential.”<sup>88</sup>

Organizational charisma is another possible benefit of cultivating an expansive, open, and flexible outlook. Spenta Kandawalla from generative somatics noted how “when individuals and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, November 10, 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Ito et al., *Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building*, p. 45.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 15. These findings are supported by experiences activists had in the context of Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Sandy. See Rowe, “Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance.” For an analysis of Occupy in the context of recent Left history, see James Rowe and Myles Carroll, “Radicalism or Reform: Left Social Movements from the Battle of Seattle to Occupy Wall Street,” *New Political Science* 36:2, 2014, pp. 149-171.

collectives move towards integration, when their thinking, feeling, and actions start aligning, they become more trustworthy and compelling. We can measure this attraction in membership growth and success pursuing organizational goals.”<sup>89</sup> Leaders from the Movement Strategy Center share Kandawalla’s theory. Opining about Left social movement culture, they argue that:

We have been unable to engage the large numbers of people necessary to effect real change...Rather than opening our doors wide for all to enter, we close ourselves off from the world, making ourselves less relevant and more elitist. By developing our ability to embrace difference, meet people where they are at, forgive past mistakes and progress forward with unity and strength we will find people drawn to work with us.<sup>90</sup>

I heard reports from activists about how weaving mind/body practices into their daily organizing work helped them be more present for exchanges by enabling them to better connect with the individuals and communities with whom they were working. Buddhist teacher and author Lodro Rinzler explained how mindfulness helped him with organizing during a recent electoral campaign: “I was taken aback to see how meditation training was a tool that gave me a leg up in the organizing world. Being really engaged and present with someone, showing up authentically for them helps people feel heard and respected and more likely to contribute.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, SOL’s evaluators noted how the somatic techniques shared during the program helped organizers center themselves before meetings.<sup>92</sup> They were tools that improved their organizing.

### **Micropolitics and Collective Liberation**

The transformative movement-building current reveals myriad ways that micropolitics can vitalize social movements; it challenges doubts that both activists and theorists might have about their macropolitical value. The above case study helpfully supplements post-Nietzschean political theory, especially the work of William Connolly, by offering new and robust evidence

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<sup>89</sup> Interview, November 11, 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Zimmerman et al., “Out of the Spiritual Closet,” pp. 17-18.

<sup>91</sup> Interview, November 6, 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Ito et al., Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building,” p. 49.

for the political value of techniques of the self and micropolitics. The rationales activists use for turning to these practices focus primarily on relating to the effects of systemic domination (trauma, replicated oppressions, the need for tireless work that can compel burnout, preparing for direct action). These rationales are not focused on why systems of domination might arise in the first place. Post-Nietzschean political theory offers a compelling account of what we can call the “existential drivers of domination,” and why we need micropolitical interventions to address them. It is easy to feel small, servile, and resentful in the face of an existential condition marked by impermanence, contingency, and death. It is equally easy to compensate for felt servility and resentment with vengeful bids for control and domination. Neither Nietzsche nor Connolly claims that existential resentment is the sole or even primary driver of dominative behavior and institutions. Their work, however, introduces existential experience and how it is mediated by culture as *central* political considerations. If existential resentment is a driving force in politics, then we need practices for transforming it.<sup>93</sup> From a post-Nietzschean perspective, seemingly apolitical practices such as meditation, ceremony, and ritual have vital political value in their capacity to transform resentment into deep affirmation of our earthly condition.

Theoretical work on techniques of the self and micropolitics adds a powerful justification to those shared by the activists I interviewed. Activists need not read Nietzschean or post-Nietzschean political theory to appreciate the power of existential resentment (although Nietzsche’s work is one important archive for understanding its force). Some activists interviewees who identified with Buddhism, referred to the power of existential suffering (and the resentment that can flow from it) when I asked about root causes of domination. Adreanna Limbach, for example, described insidious self-loathing and doubt. “I think a feeling of not

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<sup>93</sup> A discussion of existential resentment is largely absent from Foucault’s corpus, even though he located himself in a Nietzschean lineage. Nietzsche’s analysis of existential resentment offers more robust explanation for the pervasiveness of dominative power relations than we ever find in Foucault.

enoughness that is woven into our culture, and then harnessed by our economic system, plays a key role in a number of the political challenges we face, like the ecological impact of runaway economic growth.”<sup>94</sup>

Like Nietzschean political theory and Buddhism, the Black prophetic tradition also emphasizes the political force of resentment. When asked about the root drivers of domination, Kingian nonviolence trainer Kazu Haga talked about a human desire to dominate, one that harkens back to MLK’s famous sermon on the “drum major instinct.” “There is deep down within all of us, an instinct,” King argued:

We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade...Do you know that a lot of the race problem grows out of the drum major instinct? A need that some people have to feel that they are first, and to feel that their white skin ordained them to be first...[T]hink of what has happened in history as a result of this perverted use of the drum major instinct. It has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man’s inhumanity to man.<sup>95</sup>

If we accept that there are existential drivers of domination, then techniques of the self and micropolitics become central to liberatory politics. Even if not suffering from trauma, oppression, or burnout, activists and organizations can still benefit from micropolitically working with resentments that can flow from existential realities. These micropolitical interventions can transform the drum major instinct, minimizing the replication of oppression within movements but also curtailing challenging behavior that does not necessarily graft onto political axes of power (bullying, ego trips, aggression). These micropolitical shifts can improve organizational effectiveness.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview, October 18, 2014. Similarly, for Buddhist teacher Sakyong Mipham: “We are shopping and eating in an attempt to fill a void. However, on a subliminal level, these activities only feed our feeling of inadequacy...When we feel inadequate, we consume the world around us rapaciously.” *The Shambhala Principle* (New York: Harmony, 2013), pp. 107-108.

<sup>95</sup> “The Drum Major Instinct,” (1968), <<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/drum-major-instinct-ebenezer-baptist-church#>>. One of King’s primary references for his theory of the drum major instinct is Alfred Adler. Adler drew heavily from Nietzsche’s “will to power” in theorizing a drive to superiority. See Walter Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind: Freud Versus Adler and Jung* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

Taking seriously the force of existential resentment should also broaden what the Left means by cultural politics. The project of promoting liberatory norms, values, and ideas should be accompanied by efforts to ritualistically cultivate and embody, what Connolly calls, “existential gratitude” for earthly life.<sup>96</sup> This cultivated appreciation for basic reality can transform compensatory self-seeking into more generous and open affects. For Connolly: “[T]he cultivation of nobility cannot be attained by intellectual argument and acts of will alone... The self, rather, nudges the organization of its proto-thinking, mood, and prejudgment by artful means... [T]he generalization of such arts, and the negotiation of a generous ethos between constituencies who honor different ethical sources, forms the micropolitical dimension of life in a pluralist culture.”<sup>97</sup> Social movements are key sites for experimenting with, and prefiguring, new ritual forms. Broadening what the Left means by cultural politics, however, should not diminish the importance of directly targeting dominative systems. Micropolitics disembedded from anti-systemic social movements are unlikely to have much structural impact.

American Buddhism is a helpful case-study of how mind/body practices, on their own, do not automatically lead to political change. Buddhism provides an ethical framework that guides efforts to overcome existential resentment. Meditative practice, study and community participation, are key techniques for incorporating more generous dispositions and progressively overcoming suffering and resentment. The very fact, however, that a distinct “Engaged Buddhism” has emerged suggests that without an organized catalyst Buddhist praxis does not tend towards an outward and egalitarian politics. bell hooks notes how racism and class privilege are replicated within Euro-American Buddhist communities. According to hooks, “Buddhism has yet to capture the attention of masses of black folks in the United States precisely because of the

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<sup>96</sup> *The Fragility of Things*, p. 181,

<sup>97</sup> *Neuropolitics*, p. 166.

way in which a politics of race and class exclusion permeates the dissemination of Buddhist thought in the West.”<sup>98</sup> Buddhism, and the alleviation of existential resentment which it enables, does not automatically generate an anti-racist and socialist politics.

Moreover, without a critical analysis of dominative structures such as capitalism, it is easy to get pulled in the general direction of those structures even as one is progressively relating to existential resentment. Buddhist teachings on generosity, for example, can easily feed into a charity model that is compatible with massive concentrations of wealth. Teaching mindfulness with an explicit Buddhist ethic can forestall the co-optation of mindfulness practice for neoliberal ends, but is no guarantee that the practice will challenge neoliberalism.<sup>99</sup>

More theoretical and empirical work is needed on the causal linkages between existential resentment and dominative social systems. Even if it could be determined that aggregated resentment was a *primary* cause underlying domination, a position I support, this finding would not change the importance of directly challenging dominative systems with macromovements. Regardless of their root causes, systems such as capitalism have their own relatively autonomous logics that need to be targeted directly.<sup>100</sup> Their ability to co-opt or overwhelm resistance was a concern that arose consistently in my interviews.

Kazu Haga, for example, voiced worries that mindfulness and yoga being deployed in marginalized communities could have pacifying effects: “Mindfulness programs in schools and prisons often emphasize the importance of individually controlling anger, versus examining why these people might be angry in the first place. There is a difference in anger

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<sup>98</sup> “Buddhism and the Politics of Domination,” p. 58.

<sup>99</sup> This is not to deny the inherent value of reducing existential suffering through Buddhist praxis. My claim is that spiritual and secular efforts to transform suffering and resentment are unlikely to have systemic effects unless they are joined by social movements seeking systemic change.

<sup>100</sup> For a nuanced view of capitalist logics and how they interface with other axes of power see David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

manifesting as rage and anger manifesting as righteous indignation. Righteous indignation towards injustice is something we should be using mindfulness to cultivate, not squelch.”<sup>101</sup> Without an accompanying structural analysis, micropolitical interventions can easily responsabilize subjects for their public feelings, with pacifying effects.<sup>102</sup> Evaluators for the SOL initiative noted the importance of a structural analysis for how it allowed “the individual healing and transformation to fuel systemic change and vice versa.”<sup>103</sup> Without the structural analysis provided by macromovements, micropolitics can easily be absorbed into the cultural and institutional status quo.

## Conclusion

The transformative movement-building current is a case of micropolitics being effectively articulated with macromovements. It challenges academic and activist skepticism towards the liberatory potential of micropolitics in general and mind/body practices in particular. Activist justifications for the turn to mind/body practices focus primarily on transforming the intimate effects of oppression and exploitation. William Connolly’s work adds a powerful justification: the political force of existential resentment. If there are indeed existential drivers of domination, what Martin Luther King, Jr. calls the “drum major instinct,” then micropolitics that work on the existential plane are more central than incidental to processes of social change.

The broader Left has much to learn from work already being undertaken in the transformative movement-building current. The Movement Strategy Center, for example, maintains a space in their office for individual and collective practice. Similarly, Forest Ethics

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<sup>101</sup> Interview, November 14, 2014.

<sup>102</sup> See Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Ito et al., *Transforming Lives, Transforming Movement Building*, p. 37.



makes time at the beginning of meetings and conference calls for participants to practice meditation, with the aim of facilitating more centered and productive conversations. Creating time and space for mind/body practice is a concrete way in which Left organizations can address themselves to the intimate effects of oppression and exploitation, begin transforming the “drum major instinct,” and improve organizational effectiveness in the process.<sup>104</sup>

According to post-Nietzschean political theorists like Foucault and Connolly, power relations are everywhere, including our thought processes and embodied habits. Achieving deep and sustained liberation requires movements that address the intimate and embodied ways that power sculpts and shapes us. Mind/body practices are politically crucial in this regard. Critics such as Ella Myers and Angela Davis are right, however, to question micropolitical interventions disembedded from liberatory macromovements. Activists, too, worry that mind/body practices deployed without an accompanying structural analysis are susceptible to co-optation.

Mind/body practices and their proponents will not power a political revolution on their own, but when joined with actual revolutionaries, they can expand all of our possibilities for freedom. During the dialogue in Oakland, Jon Kabat-Zinn noted his original skepticism towards Davis’s radical stance on prison abolition. “But then you gave me your book, *Are Prisons Obsolete*, and I’ve changed my mind. I think it’s a fantastic idea.”<sup>105</sup> More mindfulness proponents awakened to the importance of critical and structural analysis, and more Leftists opened to the transformative power of mind/body practices, are helpful steps on the path to collective liberation.

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<sup>104</sup> For a list of groups that consult with social justice organizations on how to best integrate transformative mind/body practices into their work see: <http://hiddenleaf.org/about-field/other-resources/transformative-training-and-consulting-organizations/>

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Rowe, “Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance.”

