

## Work & Play: A Synchronicity

Mercury, the god of communication and the trickster-god of synchronicity, was serving as a radio god last week when the Gypsy Scholar was presenting the first installment of his multi-part musical essay series “Beltane/ May Day: A holiday For Pagans and Workers.”

Here's the background to how it happened.

I presented introductory remarks to explain why he was going to argue for seeing the two separate commemorations—one for neopagans and another one for workers—as historically related, i.e., having a common historical root. Offering an explanation for this separation, I went on to further explain that there are certain historical factors to account for this, but that at the bottom of them all was the ontological dichotomy or dualism between work and play; in other words, an artificial dualism that is not

universal but unique to Western culture. In support of seeing no dualism between work and play, I cited the work of three authorities on the subject.

One defense of “play” is the influential 1938 book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, by the Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga, who argued that play is a fundamental and primary element of human culture, essential for its development, rather than a trivial pastime. Play, then, is not just a biological function but a necessary condition for culture to emerge and flourish. He defined play as a voluntary activity with its own rules, separate from ordinary life, and traced its influence through law, art, and politics, suggesting civilization itself arises from play. The book posits two crucial descriptors: “Man the Player” (*Homo Ludens*) and “Man the Maker” (*Homo*

Faber). It challenged the idea that human culture is solely driven by reason or making, emphasizing the importance of play.

Another challenge to the dualism between work and play is seminal 1959 book, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* by Prof. Norman O. Brown, a classicist and visionary social philosopher, who presented a radical critique of work and a defense of play. Prof. Brown advocated for (a) the life of “play,” which he defined as the free, un-repressed expression of human potential, unburdened by the need to create economic value or comply with societal demands, (b) reclaiming erotic energy, (c) a return to a “Dionysian” state where the body and its desires are freed from the bondage of “work” and “perpetual, un-productive effort.” In essence, Prof. Brown viewed the necessity of “work” as a byproduct of a sick, repressed society and argued for a shift toward “play” to achieve a state of

“paradise” or true freedom. (Although I didn’t mention at the time the famous neo-Marxist critical theorist, Herbert Marcuse, the so-called “Father of the New Left.” He shared Brown’s neo-Freudianism and also brought the concept of “play” into this political theory. According to Marcuse, as apposed to the Old Left’s reality principle or realpolitik, real revolution should be guided by the repressed values of the pleasure principle — “play, enjoyment, sensuousness, beauty, contemplation, and spiritual liberation.” One of the alternative mythological culture heroes Marcuse identifies is Orpheus, who reveals a new reality: “His language is song, and his work is play. He does not command, but sings.”) The final most important authority (since the synchronicity is about him) I cited on the subject on work and play was Alan Watts, whose talks can be heard right here on KSQD at 5 am, after my program. I told my listeners that I thought, although I couldn’t be certain of the title, since it had been quite a while since I

heard it, Alan Watts had tackled that issue in a talk called “Play and Survival.” This talk critiqued the depreciation of “play” in Western culture because it’s not a “serious” thing and argued for seeing play just as important as work, or even more important; that there was such a thing as “serious play,” and therefore work can be play.

Turning to Eastern culture, Watts shows how the concept of play can be raised to a higher ontological level by introducing the East Indian non-dualist doctrine of “*lila*,” (“divine play”). The concept of *lila* asserts that creation, instead of having an objective for achieving any purpose (like “music”), is rather an outcome of the playful nature of the divine. As the divine is perfect it could have no want to be fulfilled, thereby signifying freedom instead of necessity behind the creation or even human survival. Watts has taught me that the unification of work and play also implies the unification of the opposites of seriousness and play,

which means there can be a serious playfulness and, conversely, a playful seriousness.

Well, the upshot of this off-the-top-of-my-head reference to the “Play and Survival” talk turned out to actually be *a mind-blowing synchronicity*, because, when the Alan Watts hour aired at 5 am, it presented none other than the “Play and Survival” talk! (I couldn’t have known this prior to the broadcast,)

So, it looks like the trickster-god Mercury was “playing” with the Gypsy Scholar’s mind!

In musing over this truly astonishing synchronicity, I realized that the GS’ Tower of Song program also subverts the dichotomy between work and play because it doesn’t do the serious thing with knowledge that Prof. N.O. Brown called

“Protestant scholarship” (an aspect of the Protestant work ethic), but instead “plays with knowledge” (as stated in the Tower of Song program manifesto and webpages).

Now, I would add, in anticipation of the rest of my series on the unknown relationship between the ancient, seasonal May Day and the modern political May Day, that this separation between work and play has also been at work in the political movement of socialism itself, particularly Marxist socialism, which was all about securing freedom—freedom from a capitalist society that enchained the working class—and commands (not “sings”) workers to unite and secure rights against the capitalist bosses, who enforced upon them what the great sociologist Max Weber identified as the “Protestant Work Ethic,” which made them slaves to the capitalist system—denying them less and less time for “leisure,” i.e.,

time off for “play.”

Do you detect an irony here?

From the late 19th-century into the 20th, political action to secure labor unions and to generally demonstrate for worker’s rights on the part of Marxist groups was an all-too-serious political activity, which meant that any element of “play” —joy or fun—was outside the parameters of proper political agitation for the Old Left. (This is the Left that Marcuse wanted to transform.) This was basically the case well into the mid 20th century, even with the New Left of the 60s. This began to change with the influx of Counterculture frivolity in political demonstrations, most notably with the rise of the Yippies (masks and costumes, street theater, music, and general clowning around, such as parading a pig as a presidential candidate). However, the

outstanding example of this is not in the leftist political action in the United States, but rather in France. On a revolutionary scale, the Situationists, the anarchist group, turned the streets of Paris into a theater of revolt in May 1968, almost bringing down the government. And the element of “play” was best manifested in their political slogan: “All Power to the Imagination.”

Perhaps the best example of the on-going legacy of N. O. Brown’s and Herbert Marcuse’s introduction of “play” into political theory was the late great journalist and political commentator Molly Ivins, known for her humorous writing, which often used satire and wit to critique political figures and policies. Going against the grain of traditional political action, she maintained that working for social change can—and should be—fun. Hence, giving the keynote address of the annual 2004 Mario Salvo

Memorial Lecture in celebration of the Free Speech Movement's 40th anniversary, Ms. Ivins had this important message to pass on to college activists: "You people need to work harder at having fun. You are fun-challenged." At another time, she also counseled the following to young activists: "Keep fighting for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't forget to have fun doin' it. Lord, let your laughter ring forth. Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidycats, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce."

Therefore, as far as organizing political action groups to change the world goes, if the utopian ideas of N.O. Brown are to be taken seriously—as "play"—there still needs to be a complete overcoming of the separation of work and play within progressive political groups themselves, most especially the traditional Marxist ones.

That said, my experience in attending political rallies, demonstrations and marches has shown me over the decades that the progressive Left has come a long way in overcoming the separation. These political events are, by and large, festive in nature, with costumes, street theater, pithy and witty homemade signs, giant puppets, joyous chanting, music and dancing. Hence, brings them on par with the festive nature of the seasonal May Day events.

Another one of Prof. Brown's utopian ideas, connected with the function of Dionysian play in achieving a new paradise is his call for an "erotic revolution in political thought." (Once again, this idea was shared by Herbert Marcuse, whose work, particularly in the 1950s and 60s, argued that a "new type of human being" could be achieved through an erotic revolution, transforming work into play and society into a

non-repressive entity). Therefore, thinking again about the separation of the neopagan, seasonal May Day and the workers' political May Day celebrations and the role of "play" in overcoming this separation, the erotic element in political revolution would link the worker May Day up with the seasonal one because of its strong cultural association with erotic love during the month of May; "the lusty month of May." (I should note here that the Counterculture—perhaps inspired by Prof. Brown's writings—had already brought in this erotic element to 60s political revolution: "Make love not war!" )

Such a unification of work and play, I believe, will enable people to see how the seasonal May Day and the political May Day are twin celebrations that manifest an existential and collective *joy* (as per Friedrich von Schiller via Herbert Marcuse) that is essential to the on-going project of the fulfillment of human freedom.

