

The Wollongong Love Festival: An Experimental Politics

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Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking my fellow organisers of today's event and everybody who has joined us for coming along. Nearly ten years have passed since this loose network of activists and researchers, who share an interest in the theory and practice of autonomy, gathered for our first conference at the University of Wollongong in November 2010. Our network, which is centred on Japan and Australia, has expanded to include comrades based in Europe, Indonesia and China. It has incorporated the cosmopolitan life journeys many of us have taken during this time as we stayed in one another's homes and shared meals and misery, protest and joy.

I mention our little network and our practices of mutual aid and care because the love festival, which is the topic of today's talk, is a political project that was conceived on the understanding that while contemporary forms of social life are precarious, they are also structured and supported by loose, overlapping networks of social solidarity. Nick referred to the notion of solidarity teams, a notion that he defined as: 'groups of people who care for each other and acknowledge the value of each other's efforts to make positive impacts on society'. These groups might be based on family or friendship links or on common interests, experiences and political commitments. I would suggest that the little research network that we have formed can be thought of as an example of such a solidarity team. In my own life it has certainly proved to be so - facilitating both significant personal growth as well as involvement in social and political realms that have taken me out of and beyond myself.

Background to the Love Festival

The story of the love festival begins, in some ways, in this room when our research group gathered for a previous conference titled 'Crisis and Commons' in December 2012. This symposium was a proud moment for me personally and one that I feel demonstrated the strength of our transnational solidarity team. The impact of that event, while difficult to measure, has reverberated over the years through our network. For two of the Australian participants, for example, it played some role in their decision to move to China for nearly two years where they made contact with local activists and took part in a project to translate autonomist texts into Chinese. For me personally it influenced my decision to return to Japan with my family late last year; a move facilitated by the support of members of this research group. The conference was also, however, an exhausting experience and one where I felt the formal trappings of academia inhibited the provision of care for self and others. More than one of us barely slept during the weekend of the event itself as we struggled to prepare academic performances that would be worthy of the event. Theory dominated much of our discussions and I was once again reminded of the significant barriers that exist to participation in academic spaces such as this.

Following the 2012 symposium I discussed with Nick the possibility of collaborating on a different kind of venture where we could jettison the trappings of academia in favour of a fun, festive environment. I hoped that this event would encapsulate much of the politics and practice

I had observed at work in the anti-nuclear movement and in the broader social movement scene in Tokyo. One of the highlights of the 2012 conference, for example, was the delicious meals we enjoyed thanks to a young Swiss activist who was at that time living with me and Taku. The conversations we shared over his food and the kindness he put into it helped inspire the central role food would play at the Wollongong love festivals. The original call-out for the event summarises this background as follows:

Inspired in part by two conferences held in 2010 and 2012 but seeking to break out of academic strictures and create an intersection wherein a variety of cultural practices of love might find common ground. The festival is also inspired by the recent upsurge of the global feminist movement, the global campaign for equal love and the Reading Love reading group taking place at Wollongong University.

Love: Art, Ideas, Music, Politics

The first step in the process of organising the love festival was to think more about the politics of love. Nick and I therefore adopted a tried and true method: we convened a reading group. The reading group seems to be a perfect format for the development of solidarity teams. In my political and intellectual life, reading groups have often played a key role in enabling me to experiment with new ideas and develop new relationships. The first major political grouping in which I was involved, a small activist collective in Wollongong called Revolutionary Action, started with a reading group with Nick and our friend Dave, who presented here in 2012. The research group behind today's seminar, too, is the product of reading groups in both Australia and Japan.

When we started the love reading group in 2013 we straight away noticed that something was different. First, the gendered composition of the group was more balanced. After having been involved in many highly theoretical reading groups over the years that were overwhelmingly male dominated, this was very welcome. I felt this pointed to something about the gendered politics of academic theory and how easily even radical theory tends to privilege the perspectives of highly educated men. Second, the group was better able to attract people who were not academics or students. Third, the discussions in the group blended the personal and the political in important ways. The love reading group was largely made up of people I already knew but it helped create a new collective, a sense of common purpose that eventually coalesced into a plan to organise the love festival, where the ideas that we were discussing in the reading group could be put into practice. We aimed at a fully embodied exploration of love in action, proposing in the original call-out for the event that:

The festival might be thought of as a temporary 'commune' based on a love ethic in which everybody is encouraged to look out for one another, pitch in with food preparation, childcare, cleaning and helping ensure everything runs smoothly.

Putting this idea into practice took nearly a year of planning before the first festival took place in April 2014. It was held at Minto Bush Camp, a property in western Sydney that once served as a retreat centre for the Communist Party of Australia. Ultimately we decided to call the event Love: Art, Ideas, Music, Politics. The event attracted approximately 70 people over two days, many of whom stayed on-site in cabins and tents. The positive feedback we received about the event motivated the organising collective to reconvene once more in 2016 to begin preparations for a second love festival. The second event was similar to the first but this time we held it

closer to home at the Kum-Ba-Yah Camp, a Girl Guides camp nestled in the foothills Mt Keira in Wollongong. We also decided to organise a more ambitious three-day schedule and to hold a lantern parade for which we prepared with separate public workshops in the lead-up to the festival. Our increased experience and grander ambitions for the second festival were repaid when more than 100 people took part over the course of the event.

The formal event programme was based mainly on workshops in which we asked facilitators to maximise the participation of all of the attendees. The subjects of these workshops were diverse. We encouraged both discussion-based workshops and workshops that engaged people in creative practices. At the 2017 love festival, for example, creative workshops included explorations of love through singing, creative writing and dance. Discussion-based workshops looked at topics such as compassion, protecting oneself from abuse, love sex and democracy, death, the politics of love, men in love, permaculture and love of the earth and the question 'What is love?'. We issued an open-call for workshop presenters through our networks but we also invited many individuals whom we thought might connect the festival with their solidarity teams and communities and thereby facilitate wider participation. Another important part of the formal programme was the provision for all-in sessions at the beginning and end of the event so that potential strangers could get to know one another better to further facilitate participation in the workshops and informal social interaction.

We organised a food team to keep bellies full and tried to create a programme that balanced workshops and formal content with ample time and space for people to do the informal work of love. This included night time concerts at both events as well as film screenings of a selection of films that related to different struggles around love. We were pleasantly surprised by how successfully our 'temporary commune' functioned. There was no shortage of volunteers to help with the food preparation, childcare and cleaning mentioned above. In the final all-in sessions at both festivals, participants talked about their experiences. For many, the festivals helped them to rethink and reintegrate experiences of activist burnout and reconnect their political ideals with their desires for love, fun and community.

Organising Solidarity Teams

At a time when many people around the world are embracing exclusionary forms of love based on racial and national solidarity in the face of global uncertainty, many of us are struggling to articulate alternative conceptions of community with which we can identify. Revolutions in the concept of identity over the past few decades have shown how problematic identity can be as the basis of organising solidarity. Many now turn to notions of subjectivity to explain the many overlapping, unstable and complex identities and practices of identification through which we constitute ourselves as individuals within broader communities. While some contemporary understandings of love see it as an exclusive union between two individuals or as locked within other unified and unifying relationships of identity and sameness, the concept of love we have been exploring is inclusive and open-ended. Rather than settling for a fixed definition of love we have sought to explore multiple meanings and practices of love. The two festivals we organised have enabled this by embracing an open approach with multiple workshops hosted by volunteers with an interest and passion in exploring particular aspects of love.

One of the important bases in my thinking about the love festival was the understanding of the structure of the contemporary proletariat as a multitude. Wollongong has a long history of labour and communist movements but these movements were in serious decline by the time I

came of age in the late 1990s. Out of the crisis of these older movements, however, a wide variety of social movements have arisen which lack a central organisational structure but do overlap in numerous ways to produce a collective culture of rebellion. This is a pattern that I have seen mirrored here in Tokyo and which others have reported from around the globe. How, then, to organise politically in this context?

Looking around Wollongong on my return to Australia in 2013 I observed a huge amount of organising and a huge amount of social solidarity. However, much of this activity appeared fractured and the sense of alienation and loneliness felt by many within these separate movements was palpable. The optimistic vision of love that Nick presented today is challenging for most of us given widespread experiences of isolation, loneliness and despair. Part of the vision of the love festival was to remind ourselves that we are not alone and that there are other people like us who are struggling for social change and more democratic and equal social relations in a multitude of ways. The festival was conceived as a project of commoning - of drawing together the various individuated experiences of social solidarity and create a temporary space in which they could find one another. Its aim was to recognise and to celebrate the existing forms of love in these overlapping networks and solidarity teams and to facilitate the further inter-weaving of these networks as an act of love expanding love.

Conclusions: A place to talk about love

It is not every day that one hears the term 'love festival', particularly in an academic venue such as this. In my experience and that of my fellow love festival organisers, the most common reaction to mention of our project is one of uncomfortable smirks and sniggers, presumably prompted by the idea that the love festival must be some form of orgy. This image seems to be tied to our stereotypical understandings of the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s, when sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll were said to form the basis of student and peace movements. However, the discomfort people experience when talking about the love festival also seems to have a deeper meaning and to be symptomatic of a more general discomfort we all feel when talking about love. In modernity, love has been largely privatised and confined within the romantic couple and the family. We called our love festival 'Love: Art, Ideas, Music, Politics' because we wanted to make explicit the link between love and all of these diverse social practices. We wanted to re-inject politics with love and love with politics by creating a space where people could come together to talk about love in a serious way.

Over the course of organising two Love festivals in 2014 and 2017 we have assembled a group of committed organisers, a broader network of participants and supporters and a body of knowledge and experience concerning love and its practice. We drew on our existing networks and solidarity teams and invited them to join in loving conversations with one another. By doing so, we helped to strengthen the bonds between the multitude of smaller loving communities that makes up Wollongong. Today we are continuing to nurture this network of solidarity teams by working on a book about the festival and the ideas behind it. The love festivals have been important events in all of our lives and our ongoing work on this project continues to give our lives meaning as we integrated the knowledge, experience and relationships generated at the festivals into our lives and struggles.