Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum

By Barbara Sutton[1]

Abstract

This article draws on memories from the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil in order to examine the role of naked bodies in relation to politics. Focusing on a specific moment within the flurry of (embodied) activities at the World Social Forum, this piece explores the tensions, contradictions, and opportunities arising from the use of nakedness as a political tool. The naked body is examined as a subject of political resistance and as an object of repression, highlighting how the meanings of nakedness are marked by gender and connected systems of social inequality. The analysis shows that while turning human bodies into commodities, particularly sexual commodities, is acceptable under Western hegemony, naked bodies of resistance can lead to social outrage and violent punishment.

Keywords: Bodies, Nakedness, Political Protest

Introduction

The World Social Forum is a definite bodily experience: a site that overwhelms the senses with the colors of artwork and diverse clothing, the sounds of many languages and music, the aroma and taste of international food, its intense pace and dynamism, and the exhilarating feeling of joining thousands of active bodies organizing, marching, chanting, protesting, discussing, learning. Yet in my memory, the female body that stands out against the backdrop of multicolor flags, puppets, and scores of activists in movement is not mine, but the one of a young, light-skinned, naked woman, a body performing resistance. This performance took place during my last night at the 2003 edition of the World Social Forum, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, while celebrating the hope that "another world is possible." The intensity of the day was taking a toll on me as I processed the words of other activists, the lessons from political workshops and cultural exhibits, and the excitement, rage, and creativity I experienced at the closing march against war and neoliberalism. I savored the memories and ideas I would take back to Argentina, my native country, and share with others.

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In the evening, I was drawn to the festive atmosphere in the area surrounding the amphitheater where live music was playing and a large crowd gathered. Suddenly, I was surprised by the sight of people running, chased by police officers on horses. The police forces kept arriving: by motorcycles, in cars, on horses, and in big vehicles, perhaps destined to contain arrested activists. Then I saw a group of naked men running and chanting, "naked to the camp, naked to the camp!" A police car passed by at full speed, and a man in the back seat of the car (apparently detained by the police) waved his bare arms, saluting the crowd. Later I was told that the reason people were getting naked was in solidarity with a woman who was staying at the International Youth Camp. According to circulating accounts, the police hassled this woman because of her bathing outdoors without clothes.[2] Hundreds of people then got naked to protest the police action. As far as I could observe from the place where I stood, and as recorded on a short video of this event (CMI Brasil, 2003), the naked protesters seemed to be mostly men. In the video, one can see naked activists chanting against repression, jumping up and down under the outdoor showers, burning some clothing in a fire, and marching to other areas of the Forum.

In the midst of the chaos that followed activists' show of support and police intervention, I saw a different kind of performance by a young, full figured woman who spoke loudly to the crowd—the woman who stayed in my memory. Her body was completely naked, except for a mask on her face. Her nakedness was not about flaunting sexuality or selling anything. She exposed her body in a way different from supermodels, beauty queens, and showgirls—the kind of unclothed or barely clothed body that is more common to see in public spaces (e.g. mass media) in Argentina and other Western/ized societies. Also, she did not embody prevailing ideals of beauty. Her naked body stood proud as a way to convey a different kind of message. She said that "under our skins we are all equal, we are all humans," and then talked about pain. I listened to her words attentively, trying not to miss anything, but only being partially successful because she spoke in Portuguese (and I'm only fluent in Spanish and English). Yet I could understand the meaning of many of her words well enough, and most importantly, her body movements were eloquent. She put on a t-shirt with red stains, mimicking blood, and announced that we are all bleeding, and that the Earth is bleeding. Finally, she took off the mask, holding it high with her hands, and concluded that we no longer need masks.

What was the meaning of this performance? How were other people around this woman viewing and interpreting the scene? Was nakedness effective in articulating her point? What were the broader implications of her naked protest in terms of her own subjectivity, the impact of this action on others, and its connection to the larger context of

[2] There is some divergence about the basic "facts" that triggered the generalized naked protest. An account from the Independent Media Center (English version) reports that this woman was "bathing nude in the river" and was "arrested with charges of 'obscene acts'" (IMC, 2003). Yet another report in Portuguese—posted in the Brazilian Independent Media Center by a journalist who had been a target of police aggression during the protest— suggests that the woman was bathing naked in the public showers at the International Youth Camp (Andrade, 2003). This report says that police officers forced her to leave the area and put her clothes on, which then prompted the protest. The local newspaper *Zero Hora* (Dias, 2003) does not specify whether the woman had been arrested or not, just mentioning that she had been approached (*interpelada*) by the police. One of the messages posted in the Brazilian Independent Media site (CMI Brazil, 2003) disputes the basis of the "official version" and states that it was not true that the protests were a response to police repression of a naked woman.

the Forum? I interpreted this embodied performance as a critique of the social system we live in, one that is exploitative and turns human beings against nature and against each other. This naked action may also be understood as a challenge to dominant images of female bodies without clothes. This woman's performance implicitly struggled to reclaim and resignify the slippery terrain (both material and symbolic) in which unclothed female bodies usually inhabit—expanding its expressive possibilities and asserting its right to take space, to speak, and to be heard.

With the threat of the police on horses a few meters away, other people started to surround the woman, forming a circle, perhaps to listen, perhaps to look at her body, and perhaps to protect her from the police. Any minute the police could come our way with their horses. A cold shudder traveled through my spine as I imagined worst-case scenarios. If people started to run in a generalized mode it would be a disaster. The area was boiling with humans, including children, food vendors with hot kitchens, artisans selling handicrafts, and very close, a large crowd listening and dancing to the rhythm of music at the amphitheater. The scene was dizzying: the police threat, the naked activists, the music coming loudly through the speakers, and the sight of people dancing with wild enthusiasm. In the area where I stood, a smaller group surrounded the police, confronted them with their presence, and refused to move. A few threw bottles at them, screaming "pigs" and other insults.

I pondered the reasons behind the deployment of police force. Why was there such a strong investment in chasing naked people? Why did naked protest seem so threatening and destabilizing? After all, diverse groups had been protesting for many days against war and militarization, the global capitalist economy, fundamentalism, imperialism, environmental destruction, patriarchy, and all sorts of interrelated social problems. As far as I knew, things had been developing in a relatively peaceful manner. Why did naked bodies then cause so much agitation? What fears did these out-of-control, rebellious bodies stir? Why the need to discipline them with raw force? What boundaries were they crossing? From the protesters' side, we can also ask the following: Who could "afford" to protest naked? That is, what were the risks and "rewards" entailed in such actions for people in different social locations?

Nakedness

Nakedness is filled with multiple, context-bound, historically-specific meanings (Bordo, 1999c; Cover, 2003). Nakedness can be a pleasurable experience, a mundane activity, or a humiliating event depending on the situation, on who is shedding the clothes, on whether there is a spectator, and in that case, on the spectator's relationship to the naked person. The significance of a naked body is particularly difficult to disentangle in an international, multicultural arena such as the World Social Forum. Indeed, the meaning ascribed to the exposure of specific body parts, and to nakedness in general, varies according to time, place, and culture. In the case of Brazil, while the sight of near-naked people on the beach does not seem to elicit a generalized moral outrage, lack of clothing in certain public places (e.g. city streets) apparently is a violation of the law, resting on the assumptions that such acts are obscene. The local newspaper, *Zero Hora* (Dias, 2003), reported that the reason for the police intervention at the World Social Forum protest was that nakedness in public places is considered morally offensive (an "*atentado ao pudor"*).

The ways in which this event was formally and informally reported—particularly in relation to the ethnic identity of the woman whose repression allegedly motivated the naked protest—raises questions about the meanings and contexts of nakedness and how disrobing is viewed when enacted by different kinds of people. The circulating accounts about the protest did not yield a clear picture about the mentioned woman's ethnicity, specifically whether she was a person from India, the country, or whether she was an indigenous person, "Indian," from the Americas. While a report from the Independent Media Center (IMC, 2003) states that this woman was a *Mapuche* (an indigenous group in South America) other accounts that simply use the word *indiana* (indian woman) (e.g., Andrade, 2003; Dias, 2003), may be referring to someone from India, since that is the meaning of the word in Portuguese.[3] These narratives connote an underlying cultural exoticization of women both from India and from indigenous communities, and to some extent place these women as interchangeable. The implication is that in the culturally diverse context of the World Social Forum, even "exotic" customs attributed to women who are "different" (e.g. whose cultures supposedly support their bathing naked in public) are accepted and, in fact, necessitate the solidarity of large numbers of people, many of them (naked) men. Regardless of the protesters' intentions,[4] one may consider whether the naked protest that ensued (and its representations) recreate dominant notions of exotic, vulnerable women who need to be "rescued" (Rosenberg, 2002), this round, by largely male activists. At the same time, this action provided protesters a chance to express a variety of grievances in an unconventional (naked) way—one mixing anger and pleasure. I wonder whether police hassling of a naked man would have elicited the same kind of solidarity that a naked woman seemingly inspired, and whether perceptions and reactions to the naked protest that followed might have been different had only women enacted it. Are female and male naked bodies equally destabilizing or possibly threatening? In what contexts might they be so?

Nakedness carries gendered connotations that are embedded in the history and cultural baggage of different societies and are intertwined with the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression. Feminist scholars show how the representations of naked women of color in the United States and Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—bodies raped, paraded as spectacle, treated as breeding machines, and/or experimented with to advance Western "science"—became fuel for colonialist fascination and white men's desires (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 2002; hooks, 1998; Roberts, 1997). In the context of the United States, bell hooks (1998) points out that this history continues to permeate dominant representations about African-American women, to the point that it is hard to imagine alternative imagery, to "articulate a vision of resistance, of decolonization that provides strategies for the construction of a liberatory, black female body politics. Black female bodies are almost always framed within a context of patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualization" (67).

In contemporary Western capitalist societies, scantly clothed or unclothed female bodies are commonly visible in magazine covers, TV shows, and advertisement selling fantasy and sexuality. The lack of clothing in these cases can be understood as female

[3] I am indebted to Brazilian scholar, Patricia Pinho, for pointing out this to me.

[4] For example, whether their motivation was to challenge police repression, protest against conservative morality, defend nakedness as a "natural" state of being, or simply show solidarity with a fellow activist.

nudity, that is, the display of the unclothed body in a way that turns the woman into a sexualized object that can be consumed by an implicit male spectator (Berger, 1972). According to John Berger's (1972) conceptualization, while nakedness refers simply to the body without clothes, nudity entails a level of sexual objectification. He argues: "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (54). Dominant representations of women's unclothed bodies—particularly those conforming to dominant standards of beauty or exoticized as part and parcel of racialized colonial legacies—often display women as objects, catering to male sexual desire (Jhally, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000).

While men's bare bodies and body parts are also increasingly objectified, appearing in advertisement, men's health magazines, and pornography, men's nakedness often carries a different meaning from women's disrobed bodies (Bordo, 1999a, 1999c). Male bodies without or with few clothes have generally been represented in ways that convey virility, strength, and sexual agency or even universality, the measure of humanity (as in some Western scientific portrayals and artistic pieces). At the same time, the representation of male naked bodies with exposed genitals in contemporary Western culture triggers more ambivalence and anxiety than female nakedness does (Bordo, 1999a, 1999c). Race, class, and sexuality constructs also mark interpretations and representations of male nakedness. In situations of abuse like those displayed in the infamous photos of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, U.S. military—male and female—perpetrators forced captive men to be naked and perform sexual acts, feminizing them by drawing on racist, misogynist, and homophobic scripts (Mann, 2005; Petchesky, 2005). As in other cases of sexualized torture against men, the imposition of nakedness can be a way of undermining masculinity by creating sexual vulnerability, which is already coded as a feminine characteristic in many cultures (see also, Taylor, 1997).

In Western culture, the male body has also been conceived as infused by almost uncontrollable—animal-like—sexual urges (Bordo, 1999b). These notions are readily available to excuse male violence and sexual aggression against women. Racism has given a special spin to this perception by advancing a rhetoric of excess that portrays the bodies of men of color as too animalistic and as sexually deviant (e.g. the image of African-American men as overly sexual, inherently lustful, and with huge "dangerous" penises). These stereotypes have been effectively wielded to justify white supremacist violence against those men, as exemplified by the lynching of African-American males accused of rape in the United States post-Civil war period, supposedly to protect white women's "purity" (Schmitt, 2002). Thus, in men's cases, too, the meanings associated with their naked bodies and sexuality are shaped by relations of power and inequality beyond gender.

Protest

The body (clothed or unclothed) is the tool of protest *par excellence*. Most political protest is enacted through the body—from marches, to political theatre, to the chaining of the body to a tree or building. The body is a key vehicle of protest. The body also serves as a symbol, a text that conveys political meanings (see De Lucca, 1999; Laware, 2004; Parkins, 2000; Peterson, 2001; Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003). In the events at the Forum, nakedness as an act of rebellion was reportedly directly tied to nakedness as an object of repression (i.e. in relation to a naked woman hassled by the police). Yet naked protests are not new and have been used in a variety of contexts as a social change

strategy, particularly in the last few years. In his article, "Naked Protest and the Politics of Personalism," Isaac Soweine (2005) points out that contemporary naked protesters

> include anti-globalisation activists of all colours: British men and women protesting fox hunting, South African women protesting slum clearance and Indian women resisting police and army brutality. Even the naked anti-war movement is diverse enough that on one weekend in March 2003, the California women (60 people spelling "Peace") and Australian women (250 people spelling "No War") were outdrawn by the Chilean unisex group photo (300 people – no word spelled); Aussies take the weekend prize only if the separate men's photo (250 people spelling "Peace, Man") is included in the tally. In an era where modes of public dissent have experienced a surge in popularity and innovation, naked protest is undoubtedly ascendant (526-527).

Because prevailing norms in most contemporary societies prescribe the use of clothing in public spaces, naked bodies can be used in quite sensational ways to call the public's attention to a social problem, particularly in the information age, when media resonance is a crucial political strategy.

In some cases, naked protest dramatically enacts protesters' willingness to put their bodies on the line to advance a political cause, such as opposition to powerful capitalist and military interests in a context where this kind of protest may trigger violent responses against activists. Such actions embody the dialectic between power and vulnerability, defiance and risk. For example, women in Nigeria used the "curse of nakedness" to stop the damaging effects of multinational oil companies on basic subsistence (Turner & Brownhill, 2004):

> [B]etween July 2002 and February 2003, women's organizations occupied ChevronTexaco's export terminal and several flow stations. Their weapon was their nakedness. In much of Africa, women throw off their clothes in an ultimate protest to say 'this is where life comes from. I hereby revoke your life.' Nakedness by elderly women, in particular, is used in extreme and life-threatening situations. Women wielding the weapon of the exposed vagina could be killed or raped. It is therefore with knowledge of the act's life and death implications that women enter into such protest (169).

Turner and Brownhill (2004) narrate how Nigerian women's naked protests inspired other protesters around the world to engage in similar naked performances. Feminist scholar Janell Hobson (2006) points out some of the drawbacks, both in terms of tactical effectiveness and colonialist implications, of Western appropriations of naked protest strategies that were first enacted in non-Western contexts. She suggests that the women's naked protests sponsored by Western based groups, such as Baring Witness, may not be very effective partly because they feed a media space already flooded by images of unclothed women—most often sexualized and commodified. Therefore such protests lack

the power that similar actions would carry in cultures where female nakedness has a different meaning, beyond the titillation of Western media.[5]

The naked woman with the mask at the World Social Forum implicitly had to grapple with hegemonic constructions of nude female bodies as commodified *objects*. With her naked action, this woman perhaps strove to reclaim a position as an active *subject* and reconfigure nakedness on her own terms—away from objectification—in order to convey a broader political message. But what about the "stickiness" of dominant interpretations of unclothed female bodies? Would this woman's unconventional use of her naked body be enough to circumvent its sexualization and objectification? Was she at risk of being sexually assaulted (e.g. by the police or by someone in the crowd)? While I was drawn to the performance, and watched this woman like many others at the site, I also felt somewhat uneasy. I wondered about what other spectators would make of this naked action—whether they would try to understand the performance's message or whether their gaze would be merely voyeuristic.

The power and vulnerability of women's sexual/ized bodies have been grounds to justify violence against women in many societies. A woman with scant clothing, a woman with clothing deemed "indecent," a woman who chooses to assert her sexuality, or a woman who resorts to sexuality as a means of survival, may be judged as morally suspect and therefore "deserving" to be physically punished, raped, or murdered. While this kind of violence occurs regardless of women's sexual demeanor or appearance, a woman's unclothed body can be readily invoked to justify violence against her. "She asked for it" may be easily attached to a naked woman. Thus, in certain contexts, women's naked protest may entail particular risks, especially in a *solo* performance. No matter her own wishes, a naked woman cannot completely control the interpretation that others will ascribe to her naked performance. The slippage from nakedness, to sexualization, to objectification, to violence is always a possibility.

On the one hand, women's enacting nakedness on their own terms and for their own political ends may disrupt dominant notions that depict women's bodies as passive, powerless, or as sexual objects for sale. On the other hand, in the context of Western, media saturated societies, women's naked protests may risk re-inscribing dominant discourses onto women's naked bodies by emphasizing that disrobing is the only means of expression available to women. Under these circumstances, many spectators might not pay attention to whatever these naked women have to say, but may impose "nudity" on their "nakedness." In her book, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality,* Lynda Nead (1992) discusses the dilemmas posed to feminism by female performers' deployment of their bodies and sexuality, and their potential to subvert or reinforce patriarchal scripts. She argues that "[f]or feminists to reclaim the female body means to

[5] An example of this kind of titillation is provided by TV celebrity Pamela Anderson's anti-fur naked protest in a London Boutique window at the end of June 2006. While the message of this event—featured by gossip blogs and in tabloids like *The Sun* (Brooks, 2006)—was that she "would rather bare skin than wear skin," one may wonder whether that message is compelling at all when so many other images of her barely-clothed body, mostly as a (hetero)sexual symbol/object, have been already circulating over TV, magazines, and the internet. Her stripping naked in this protest follows that same line, perhaps more powerfully reinforcing sexist scripts than challenging people to stop cruelty against animals. In fact, some feminists would argue that there is a strong correlation between the cultural objectification of women's bodies and social violence against animals (e.g., Adams, 1990).

challenge the authority of patriarchal boundaries—boundaries of gender and identity, between art and obscenity, the permissible and the forbidden" (107).

It is interesting to note that in the potentially volatile context of the World Social Forum—in contrast to the more controlled environment of a picture shot of naked people spelling the word "peace"—the different stakes for male and female naked protesters (and for those differently racialized and from different social classes) were probably heightened. At least from what I was able to see and as reported by the newspaper *Zero Hora* (Dias, 2003), female naked protesters were a minority. One cannot assume that it was simply female "modesty" that prompted many women to keep their clothes on in comparison to a larger number of male naked protesters. Ideas about danger, vulnerability, and sexualization in the context of gendered and racialized histories probably played a role in these protests, influencing who protested, how they did it, how events related to the protest were represented, and the authorities' response to these naked actions.

The naked protests at the 2003 World Social Forum coincided with a time in which these types of performances were proliferating in different regions due to the imminent U.S. led invasion of Iraq. Even though the naked protests at the Forum emerged as a response to an event specific to that place, one may speculate if these demonstrations were just a coincidence or part of a broader trend in naked protests. Furthermore, the chants that protesters voiced included not only slogans against police repression at the site, but also improvised phrases linking nakedness and globalization issues, such as "*pelados, sim, ALCA não"* ("naked, yes; FTAA[6], no") (Andrade, 2003). A man of color at the scene, apparently Brazilian, used the Forum's naked actions as a platform to criticize the U.S. government through a flippant remark challenging U.S. president George W. Bush to come to the Forum, take off his clothes, and show his "white butt" (CMI Brasil, 2003).[7] The woman with the mask focused her naked performance on people's common humanity and pain in contemporary society. Protesters drew on their nakedness to extend the systemic critiques that they had expressed throughout the Forum. At the end of the day, and keeping in mind the police repression that followed the protests, it becomes apparent that while in the Western world it is acceptable to turn human bodies into commodities, and particularly into sexual commodities, naked bodies of resistance, may be too much to bear.

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[6] Free Trade Area of the Americas.

[7] This remark is particularly significant in relation to an administration accused of systematically hiding the truth (for example, concerning the war in Iraq). In some contexts, nakedness—revealing oneself— may symbolize that one has nothing to hide. Thus challenging George W. Bush to take his clothes off may be a way of demanding that he reveals himself and what's behind his administration's covers. From a different perspective, references to Bush's private parts and to whiteness, expressed by a man of color situated in the Global South, may also strive to subvert the hierarchy of male bodies implicit in white supremacist capitalist patriarchies under the hegemonic power of the United States.

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