

# Dancing for Our Lives

## An Introduction to Paul Halmos

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The following essay ["The Decline of the Choral Dance," FE #361, Summer 2003] couldn't have entered my consciousness at a better time. It was 1962, and I had spent my late teens and early twenties reading intensely in an attempt to discover the fundamental qualities of existence.

Reality seemed pretty bleak. Rigid conformity, compulsory patriotism, fear of atomic annihilation, and a cultural wasteland of bad movies and boring music predominated in 1950s mainstream society.

However, on the margins existed counter-critiques: Beat fiction and poetry, black artistry producing jazz and rhythm and blues, classic left and anarchist writings of bygone eras, and a bulk of literature spanning the previous 80 years which suggested that something other than what Henry Miller dubbed an "air-conditioned nightmare" was possible.

Still, most of what I read wasn't particularly cheering and much of my sense of life was shaped by the fiction I was devouring. My view of the world as bleak, cold and devoid of meaning was reinforced by writing such as Thomas Wolfe's frontispiece to *You Can't Go Home Again*, where he wrote, "that all man's life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness..." or life as absurd as I went through Camus' *The Stranger*, Sartre's play *No Exit* or even (looking for a respite) Vonnegut's whimsical *Sirens of Titan*.

Rebellion—as the alternative to conformity—appeared admirable and ethical but seemed always to end either in insanity ("I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness..." in Allen Ginsberg's famous first clause in "Howl,"), death (as at the end of teen-gang fiction such as Harold Robbins's *A Stone for Danny Fisher* or Bud Schulman's *The Amboy Dukes*), or defeat ("He loved Big Brother," the final words of Orwell's 1984). Decidedly gloomy choices: go crazy, get killed, or be vanquished.

Fortunately for me, in that same period, assaults on the structure and culture of the dominant society were emerging that brought much of what I had been reading into question. Rebels were marching and organizing for civil rights all over the American South and refusing to back down even when confronted with lynch mobs and the iron hand of the state.

The Beat critique of the 1950s "plastic culture" made more sense as artists began to poke their heads up after the stifling McCarthy Era. Watching all of this unfold from sit-ins at Southern lunch counters to listening to obscenity-laced attacks on censorship and frank onstage discussions of sexuality by comedian Lenny Bruce, suggested maybe there was something here other than the "maw of the all-engulfing night" (Wolfe).

It was at this point of dawning realization of other possibilities that I read Paul Halmos' somewhat plodding academic essay, "The Decline of the Choral Dance," which jumped out at me from among the others collected in *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (Dell 1962).

The book includes a range of writings from Marx (his solid early work), James Baldwin, Lewis Mumford, Eric Fromm and others describing the human condition and what we have lost under capitalism and civilization, I was delighted. Not only were my feelings of dread and loathing about this society confirmed, but the authors all

suggested that the emptiness (the “Horror,” in Joseph Conrad’s phrase) was not the innate human condition at all, but something socially imposed.

Halmos’ description of primal people integrating the mysteries and passages of life through mass community dances filled with rich symbolism (or reality, as they assert) and their almost universal appearance throughout the world suggests a socio-biology of emotion and bodily motion that had to be destroyed in order to make people willing to sit at desks and stand in front of machines for hours each day. The reflection of this, and the longing for it, can be seen in the maintenance of group peasant dances up to modern times where they increasingly only exist as memento.

But Halmos’ prediction that communal dancing would be excluded entirely by couple-istic formality may have been somewhat premature. The free-form, mass, psychedelic dances of the 1960s spoke to the longing for ecstatic motion and community but also functioned as resistance to the dominant culture which prescribed dancing in couples in set patterns. These same qualities exist in the rave culture among young people today described elsewhere in this issue, but no less so than in some punk scenes and even among those who attend performances of bands like Detroit’s Layabouts which are more like community festivals than concerts.

I would urge a cautionary note here, however, that we not allow ourselves to become too self-congratulatory over our gestures towards reassertion of communal dances. I say, gestures, because contemporary communal dancing can easily devolve into commercial styles, devoid of any radical impulse such as some disco of the 1970s. (For example, what we called the Brownian Bump, the former word referring to the physics principle of the random collision of molecules and the Bump being a goofy, but fun dance where people, well, bumped butts).

Even the most superficial disco can be fun, but it’s not the stuff of which Halmos writes. Our dancing will become imbued with more importance and deeper meaning the more we are part of the process of destroying the culture of death that now controls the planet. Casey Neill sings about “dancing on the ruins of multinational corporations,” which sounds good enough as long as we are also building another world where we will all dance together.

Make it so.

# fifth Estate

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