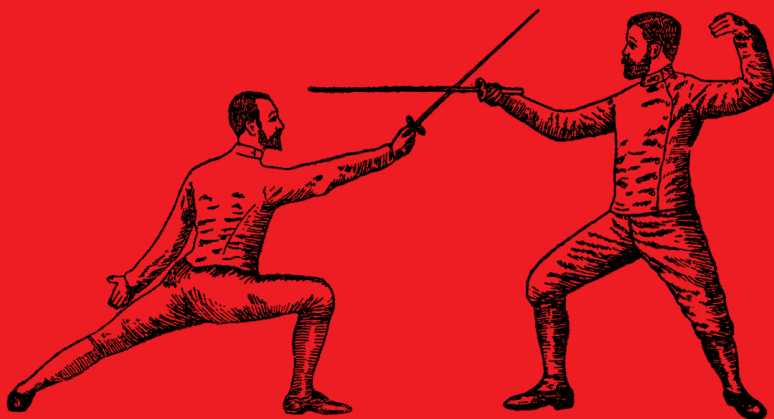# Players, Counter-Players & Non-Players

A note on the politics of change

ZAID HASSAN

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A note on the politics of change

By Zaid Hassan

"I had tasted the bait and knew that there was nothing more attractive and more subtle on earth than the Game. I had also observed fairly early that this enchanting Game demanded more than naïve amateur players, that it took total possession…"

– Herman Hesse, The Glass Bead Game

I. PLAYING THE GAME

During an Oxford Cambridge University boat race, the coach for the Oxford team explained his motivational strategies. He asked his team, most of them over 6-foot tall, muscle men, to imagine trampling the faces of their opponents.

Such is our desire to play and win. The role of the coach becomes that of a cheerleader driving his team to annihilate the opposition. Meanwhile the rules of the game and hapless referees attempt to ensure that annihilation is not total and permanent.

As we contemplate our social systems, we can also discern a game with rules, players, counter-players, and in turn winners and losers (not that they're correlated…are they?). We can discern slow-moving, toothless regulatory bodies attempting to rein in the desire for annihilation of the one side by the other and maintain an adherence to the rules of the game. In some contexts players abandon the agreed rules and start shooting each other.

As citizens, change-agents, managers, organizers, activists and entrepreneurs we typically make a decision to play in some form or the other. Sometimes this decision is highly conscious and principled and sometimes we are simply born to a side and grow-up unquestioningly accepting our role in the game.

Regardless of the case, we often pick a side, choosing either to be players or counter-players. That is, we either choose to play the game for the dominant side or we choose to play as counter-players, holding a critique of players and their adherence to upholding the rules of the game.

If we choose to play as players we largely play by the rules of the game, even when we break the rules we are playing within the rules. When we choose to play as counter-players, our goal is to change the rules of the game and we choose to either play by the rules or not.

II. PLAYERS

Players believe that most progress can take place within the rules of the game, even when they believe the rules of the game need to change. For players, the rules of the game are a bulwark against the forces of chaos.

Players see in the word "anarchy" the ultimate Hobbesian nightmare. Their interpretation of the rules of the game may well be sufficiently broad so as to appear that they are rule-breakers but they are not.

Henry Kissinger is an archetypical example of a player, albeit one who does not come from the business or private sector. His statement, "The real distinction is between those who adapt their purposes to reality and those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes," reflects the archetypical attitude of a player and Kissinger, of-course, being one of those people who mold reality to suit his purposes.

Deeply enmeshed in the machinations and realpolitik of US foreign policy for many decades, Kissinger accepts and plays by the rules of the game, even as he is accused of being a war criminal. Or as another player rather shamelessly put it, "There is no conflict of interest because we define the interest."

The notion of a player is deeply tied to the idea of power. Players are those who are perceived to be the holders of hard power in our society. They control resources; they have easy access to money and they decide what shade the corridors of power are painted in.

Half a century ago sociologist C Wright Mills referred to them as the power-elite. Traditionally they have been holders of high political office and their advisors, captains of industry and finally, high-ranking military officers. This has changed dramatically in recent years though.

Janine Wedel, a professor and author, argues that we are witnessing the birth of a new breed of player, one she calls the "shadow elite". She says,

"…a new breed of players has arisen in the past several decades…whose maneuverings are beyond the traditional mechanisms of accountability.

They, for example, play multiple, overlapping, and not fully disclosed roles. They have their people and work themselves individually [as] government advisers, think tankers, consultants to businesses. They appear in the media. And it's very difficult for the public to know who exactly they represent… They are all about the interdependency between government and business, so the intertwining of state and private power. And they get government benefits to use to the advantage of the market."

Conversely those who believe that the rules of the game are fundamentally flawed, take on the role of counter-players.

III. COUNTER-PLAYERS

Counter-players come in a number of shades. There are those who believe the rules of the game are patently unfair and take a non-violent approach to changing it. Then there are those who hew to the assessment as inherently rigged and unfair and believe that violence and collateral damage are inevitable in order to change the rules of the game.

Al Qaida is a typical example of such as counter-player, as were the Red Army Faction and so too were a number of political parties in South Africa during Apartheid.

Or as counter-culture writer William Burroughs put it,

"The people in power will not disappear voluntarily; giving flowers to the cops just isn't going to work. This thinking is fostered by the establishment; they like nothing better than love and nonviolence. The only way I like to see cops given flowers is in a flower pot from a high window."

Counter-players who advocate violence largely do so because they perceive the game to be rigged via an asymmetry of violence. That is, players fall back to the utility value of violence as the ultimate backstop in the maintenance of their self-interested position and in defense of the rules of the game. This happens again and again.

So players will therefore utilize violence in an instrumental way and often rely on the hegemony of the state to legitimize such violence. Kissinger's position during the Vietnam War is an example of this, as are any number of military adventures in the name of freedom and justice and the increasing use of quasi-militarized police forces in domestic contexts.

Players believe that the democratic mandate gives them the right to legitimately exercise violence as an instrumental tool when needed. In the eyes of players, counter-players have no such right. This fallback to violence is thus denied to counter-players. If they revert to violence they are swiftly declared terrorists and insurgents.

The classic strategy deployed by players against counter-players is, in the case of non-violent counter-players, marginalization and in the case of violent counter-players, criminalization and pathologization. Prisoners at Guantanamo are not accorded the status of prisoners of war, accorded to fellow "players" or state-actors. Instead, they are criminal counter-players. After 9-11, when George Bush declared "you're either with us or against us" he was essentially deploying the classic strategy by sending a warning to the counter-players to watch their step or else face the consequences.

Henry David Thoreau articulated clearly the counter-player position when he said, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

Activists are classic counter-players. The Chicago activist and organizer Saul Alinsky wrote a classic playbook for counter-players, "Rules for Radicals." His stance is captured by the statement "My aim here is to suggest how to organize for power: how to get it and to use it."

Non-violent counter-players rely largely on advocacy, self-organisation and negotiation. When that fails they may undertake what are known as "actions" such as blockades, protests or strikes. Counter-players who rely solely on dialogic approaches are sometimes hard to distinguish from players, as both share a practical adherence to the rules of the game, while potentially having substantial attitudinal or rhetorical differences.

It is deeply fashionable for prominent players to speak and dress in the language of counter-players. Thomas Frank, in "The Conquest of Cool" explains,

"Today, there are few things more beloved of our masses than the figure of the cultural rebel, the defiant individualist resisting the mandates of the machine civilization…the rebel has become the paramount cliché of our popular entertainment, and the pre-eminent symbol of the system he is supposed to be subverting."

The bad boy image of the rebel, the counter-player, is carefully cultivated by a range of super-star players, from Bono to Steve Jobs.

There is nothing to say that genuine counter-players are not adapting the strategy of donning the uniform of players. However, such a strategy is much harder to discern then its reverse as the revelation of ones allegiance as a counter-player is likely to lead to either marginalization (at best), ejection from the field of play or far worse – as Bradley nee Chelsea Manning discovered.

In some instances though, former counter-players genuinely become players. This is usually by mutual agreement. Nelson Mandela is perhaps the most famous example of this, as his journey from convicted terrorist to president testifies. Other examples include Mao, Fidel Castro and Jascha Fisher.

IV. ENDING THE WAR

The nature of the relationship between players and counter-players, at least historically, is at best competitive "cold war" and at worst combative, highly kinetic and destructive.

According to James P Carse, the nature of the contest is generally assumed to be a zero sum or "finite" game, with a declared beginning, and a declared end leading to a declared winner where both sides agree to abide by said declarations. If one side refuses then either the game is not over or it must be abandoned as unfinished.

Counter-players who refuse to accept that they have lost, are of-course scorned as uncivilized; as terrorists or as insurgents.

Social challenges, unlike zero sum games, typically have no clearly pre-defined end, even when one is desired. For example, the World Bank's mission statement is "A world free of poverty" but clearly we do not have any idea when this will happen or even if it will happen. Similarly the Global Commission on Drug Policy recently declared that the decades long War Against Drugs has failed and a new strategy is needed. The War Against Drugs represents an attempt to pursue, at great human cost, a competitive finite game strategy in a game that will not end, so to speak, when a referee blows a whistle.

In the midst of the fury of contemporary games, we must remind ourselves that social systems cannot simply be treated as zero sum games, with winners and losers, simply because the nature of the game is unpleasant and we want it to end.

Carse distinguishes between two types of games, finite and infinite games. Finite games are played for the purposes of winning and infinite games are played for the purposes of continuing to play. Seeing social challenges as an infinite game means inviting more and more people to "play", that is, to take responsibility for addressing the challenges at hand, recognizing that a whistle will not be blown ending play.

Pretending that poverty will be alleviated or injustice wiped from the face of the planet is at best a naïve, dubious claim and at worst a falsehood, a political lie designed to elicit a sacrifice, be that of dollars or of blood.

While social conditions may change, for example through the eradication of slavery or of smallpox, suffering is part of the human condition. Pretending it can be otherwise, that a class of technocrats will wipe out suffering, is a recipe for bloodshed, as in the case of the Soviet Union. This is the reason why the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Into this Boolean mix let us introduce a new idea, the idea of collaboration between players and counter-players engaged in infinite games.

At least in the context of social contexts both players and counter-players profess an allegiance to a higher goal than their commitment to defeating the other side or even adherence to the rules of the game. The point of playing, ultimately, is to improve the human condition. Neither side has a monopoly on such goals. The differences between players and counter-players thus stem not generally in the end-goals, such as addressing injustice, alleviating human suffering and misery, or increasing equality and fairness in society and so on, but in the nature of their play.

The nature of finite games means that the frenzied nature of competitive play, the "fog of competitive play" if you like, often obscures these common end-goals. Neither side believes the other side shares anything in common with them. Players see counter-players as losers and counter-players see players as inherently corrupt. If, however, you can imagine the nature of social games as different from a football game or a tennis match, to be more like say, a long-distance bicycle ride, with a common end-goal then we can start to imagine the nature of collaborative play.

Players and counter-players may disagree vehemently on strategies (or routes) for achieving the end-goals but they are heading in a shared direction, sometimes over common terrain. From a practical point of view, some strategies may be more effective than others, especially

when terrain is common. In which case, if we are genuinely committed to the end-goal of improving the human condition then we should we open to a critical examination of our strategies and be open to adapting better strategies.

A failure of such openness is an indication of one of two things. Firstly, that some secondary goal, often hidden, is more important, that is, an actual lack of commitment to the end-goals. Or, secondly it is an indication of cynicism, that is, a failure of imagination, a potential lack of faith in achieving end-goals, as in we'll never get there no matter what we do.

The argument for competition as being the dominant strategy for play is weak, despite the motivating power of competition. It is weak because the stakes of the games we are involved in are getting higher and higher, more and more complex. Simply grasping the nature of social games requires us to consider diverse positions and options and to share key lessons in pursuing our common end-goals.

The competitive nature of contemporary play means we are largely unable to fully assess strategies for achieving end-goals or the motivations behind them. This is because strategies also consist of tactical moves designed to defeat the other side, which obscure the field and may well contribute nothing to achievement of the end-goals. This again is "the fog of competitive play" distracting us from achieving our stated end-goals in a more effective manner.

In such cases, play becomes a series of tactical moves with no strategic value except that of short-term personal or political gain. At its most insidious, entire generations are born within this form of play, never considering notions of life or play beyond short-term tactical moves.

V. THE RISE OF THE NON-PLAYER

If we accept the possibility that our contemporary situation requires a degree of collaboration between players and counter-players, then another role becomes necessary. This is the role of the non-player.

Non-players are those who refuse to be either players or counter-players and they traditionally come in two very different varieties.

There is the active non-player, a role that could be thought of as historically that of a referee or an umpire. Historically non-players could be thought of as those who attempted to ensure adherence to "fair play", adherence to a set of rules and declaring a winner and hence the cessation of play. This role was reflective of nature of play as inherently competitive.

Then there is the inactive non-player, otherwise known as the spectator. As the nature of the games we play become more and more competitive and more and more complex, increasing numbers of people either elect to put themselves in the role of spectator or find themselves cast in that role. While this can be seen as an inactive or passive role, the sheer numbers of people playing this role mean spectators have profound impacts on the nature of play.

Entire industries are dedicated to servicing the needs of spectators. The nature of play becomes distorted as both players and non-players alter their play in order to serve the entertainment needs of spectators. A protestor at a recent May Day parade reported there were more people at the protest taking pictures of protestors then there were protestors.

The nature of play becomes spectacular, that is, relationships between players and counter-players are determined and mediated through the production of images, the spectacle. The US Presidential Elections are an example of this phenomenon at scale, although arguably some declining percentage of spectators do exercise the vote.

If the nature of play is to become collaborative, then the role of non-players is changing. Instead of ending play, non-players can play a role in

figuring out how to support both players and counter-players to continue to play for the greater common good. There are several implications to such a changed role.

Being honest to ourselves, we would admit that no one really knows when end-goals such as eliminating poverty or achieving justice or addressing environmental degradation will be reached nor exactly how. We must face up to the fact that the games we now play are emergent by nature, where historically they used to be more clearly planned and deterministic.

Non-players must then take on the role of facilitating play on a field where both the features of the field and the tactics of play are emergent. Because they are emergent, players and counter-players must both become adept at evaluating the state of play and changing direction. In other words, everyone on the field must be able to learn their way to more effective unfolding and emergent strategies based on an evaluation of tactics against stated goals.

While it is usually assumed that non-players are agnostic to the outcomes of play this is not that case. Umpires are often suspected of being biased in their decision-making and neutrality is sought in non-players.

Another way of understanding the stance of non-players in terms of the outcomes of play, is that they put their faith in the nature of collaborative play, as opposed to instrumentally manipulating the outcomes or promoting an outcome which sees one side winning and another losing.

In other words, non-players, also sometimes known as facilitators, may well be as attached to particular outcomes as any player or counter-player. They are as concerned as any player or counter-player about outcomes, about the environment, injustice, or poverty.

Non-players, however, consciously make the choice of setting aside their anxieties and attachment to instrumentally engineering particular outcomes in the interests of facilitating a superior outcome, that which

is the product of genuine collaborative play. They also take a pragmatic position that complexity cannot be commanded or controlled, instead another approach is needed, a facilitative approach.

Before taking office, Obama, clearly a player, early on somewhat simplistically spoke of the center, of transcending the partisan politics of Washington to forge a new bipartisan politics. In that, he failed. Interestingly though, the style he adapted, in the face of a hostile opposition, in the face of his failure to will a center, was facilitative. As one commentator in the New Yorker noted, "Obama, like many presidents came to office talking like a director. But he ended up governing like a facilitator, which is what most successful Presidents have always done."

Over the coming decades we are bound to witness unimaginable challenges. Our systems are more entwined and coupled, so that a problem in one part of the globe has knock-on effects unseen in slower, less connected times.

We will witness both players and counter-players heaping blame on each other while at the same time coming to grudging acknowledgements that we have no choice but to work together. It's in this white-hot crucible that the discipline of the non-player will be forged.

While we will always be called to throw in the towel for one side or the other, the fate of collaborative play may well rest with those who have the fortitude not to choose sides.

VI. THE CHOICE OF HOW TO PLAY

"Why did I want power in the first place? I had almost no sense of political vocation, and I certainly didn't have a good answer to the question of why I wanted to hold high office. What drew me most was the chance to stop being a spectator. I'd been in the stands my whole life, watching the game. Now I thought, it was time to step into the arena."
– Michael Ignatieff

If all of this sounds a lot like an invitation to choose sides, to cast your lot in with one role or the other – it is not. The desire to pick a side may well be the central fallacy surrounding what it means to play.

Play, at its best, is an exercise characterized by fluidity, by flow, by being "in the zone." It is not an exercise that can be pre-scripted and pre-determined. When it is, then the quality of play seems fake, stilted, forced, sort of like wrestling on television. This is true of finite games but doubly true of infinite games.

The roles we play within the context of a game would ideally also be fluid and flow with the unfolding of the game. Our role within the game would change, depending on the state of play, pivoting on our awareness of the field.

There may well be times when we are called on to act as players but equally, there are times when we are called on to act as a counter-weight to the machine, to be counter-players and then there will be times when we simply cannot do either and must declare ourselves non-players.

The trouble, of-course, is that this fluidity is hard to achieve in practice. We are indeed being called on to declare our allegiances, to respond to the provocative and binary logic of "you're either with us or against us."

Once a side has been picked, it is hard then to escape the label. However, in the face of this binary logic, in the face of societal demands that we nail our colours to the mast and pick a side, it takes courage to say "no"

to such demands for fealty. In this "no" however lies not a refutation, not a lack of courage but rather the space for birth, for the creation of new paths and the will to forge new ways of being.

The point of infinite games is not winning or losing but the continuation of play. If we have a true choice it is to play as finite players, focused on ending the game in favour of one side or the other, or playing as infinite players, focused on expanding the realm of play. Carse, reminds us,

"The paradox of infinite play is that the players desire to continue the play in others. The paradox is precisely that they play only when others go on with the game."

ZAID HASSAN

Zaid helped found Reos Partners in 2007 where he serves as Managing Partner of the Oxford office. Reos Partners is an international organization dedicated to supporting and building capacity for innovative collective action in complex social systems, which also has offices in Cambridge (MA), The Hague, Johannesburg, Melbourne, Sao Paulo and San Francisco.

Zaid has worked around the world, on issues ranging from the sustainability of global food systems, child malnutrition, re-designing financial systems, climate change, and countering violent extremism. He is currently leading on a major effort to reduce global emissions; on a UK-wide strategy to practically increasing the resilience of communities and an effort on preventing state collapse in the Middle East.

Over 2009-10 Zaid was an Associate Fellow of The Institute of Science, Innovation and Society, Said Business School at the University of Oxford. He has been a contributing author to the innovative green website, worldchanging.com since its launch and writes columns for the Islamic Monthly and Religion Dispatches. He tweets @zaidhassan

Zaid is author of "The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving our Most Complex Challenges" (Berret-Koehler, 2014).