



Emily Post-Capitalism and the Revolutionary Etiquette of Crowdfunding

A conversation with Annie Danger by Ezra Berkley Nepon

CROWDFUNDING TOOLS LIKE KICKSTARTER, Indiegogo, and GoFundMe have quickly become popular tools for raising funds for everything from art projects to emergency healthcare to organizational budgets. While these tools can and do help people and organizations raise lots of needed funds, this interview explores the limits and ethical challenges of the fast-evolving medium.

EBN: *Annie, you created a performance art character named Emily Post-Capitalism. Can you tell me about her?*

AD: I was invited to participate in an annual event where people open up their homes as theaters. I had been thinking a lot about revolutionary etiquette. Etiquette is usually defined as a loose code of social cues aimed at creating a welcoming space. Etiquette as we perceive it nowadays can reinforce oppressive dominant paradigms, but at its heart, there is an understanding that if we make some agreements, we can move forward as a group. And in theory, making people feel welcome is a big part of traditional etiquette.

So how do we make people feel welcome in the movement, in revolutionary work, in really changing this world in the drastic ways that it needs? Revolutionary etiquette! I thought we should have some prim and proper revolutionary lady teaching about it, and Emily Post wrote the book on etiquette. So why not have Emily Post-Capitalism take the new mantle?

For the piece itself, I would make crumpets from scratch. I'd get out a lot of doilies and lace, and I would dress as Emily.

People would come in, and we would just have conversations on revolutionary etiquette. When it started, there was this character, Emily, but I realized pretty quickly that if I remained in character I was holding power in the conversation that I felt wasn't useful toward the goal of productive dialogue. It wasn't helping the group conversation move forward or increasing everyone's agency. So I stopped being in character and just started being in costume.

EBN: *In the spirit of those conversations, let's talk about the need for revolutionary etiquette around crowdfunding. I was inspired to ask you for this interview because of a very lively and insightful Facebook thread you initiated by asking questions about the lines between projects that are and aren't ethically appropriate for an on-line public crowdfunding campaign.*

AD: It's pretty recent that we've started seeing crowdfunding for anything and everything. I have this conversation with a lot of people because we see campaigns come up that we react to with... "really?!" It brings up all of these feelings, and if you sort them out, you realize that on an emotional level, crowdfunding campaigns often read as asking people to assert your project's legitimacy. Which leads directly to wondering if these projects are legitimate. We live in a capitalist society, and money is intense, important, painful, and necessary—and rarely given away without strings attached. So when it is given away, that carries a lot of meaning: If you're donating to something, it must be exceptionally important. And the language of crowdfunding follows suit, claiming urgency and importance for anything and everything that is being funded. Emotional dissonance arises when something that is clearly not

massively important is asking for a valiant marshaling of community resources (especially when those communities have mixed class backgrounds).

EBN: *In the online conversation, you asked, “How can we approach crowdfunding in a way that takes account for the fact that it is inherently racist/sexist/classist/(dis)ableist because it functions on cultural capital and our cultures and subcultures are all of those things?” Given that people with access to privilege are more likely to have access to the social capital that drives success in this medium, are there revolutionary etiquette issues to consider before launching or supporting crowdfunding campaigns?*

AD: The tone and constituency of crowdfunding are both communal, and I feel that this means we must crowdfund for projects that are in some way also communal—meeting a certain threshold of “for the greater good.” I find it offensive when campaigns seem to be personal whims for art that doesn’t seem to be particularly transformative or for someone’s popularity fun-time project. When people are outraged by online fundraising, I think they’re asking, “Why is that important enough for this request for collective support?” For instance, there is a website whose focus is almost purely glamour and culture around trans masculine identity. They ran a \$20,000 Indiegogo campaign to alter their website, received \$23,000, refused transparency in their accounting, and produced an updated website nine months later which used a \$159 Wordpress theme (not even customized!). Those resources are coming from a community with limited means and lots of real difficulties around social justice. So....really?!?!

I mean, let’s be clear: Individual crowdfunding can be really important in our communities. Pretty much any time a broke person is trying to fund something for their kid, I feel receptive. I’ve also encountered lots of people who feel very strongly that medical things should not be crowdfunded and an equal number who seem to think that medical things should always be crowdfunded. For example, a friend of mine who is low-income and enduring a major health crisis is doing a relatively low-goal campaign for one of his kids to attain an important educational opportunity. I think this campaign should be getting way more support. It doesn’t necessarily benefit the entire community, but it is a communal action to give to this. It’s about a community benefiting a person in a way that, in theory, communities should.

EBN: *You and I have talked about situations where we felt it necessary to keep fundraising out of the public sphere and instead rely on calling or emailing people in our networks personally and asking them to donate. Would you share an example of this kind of etiquette decision?*

AD: Last summer I was involved in a group that wanted to get a paid float slot in the San Francisco pride parade, which is attended by millions of people. The idea was to use one of the large shuttle buses the major tech companies are using as a shadow transit system across the Bay Area and glossy, professional banners and props as a Trojan horse to address displacement and gentrification in a way that sparks productive public discussion.

It was going to cost around \$2,000. At one of the meetings, some people said, “Okay, so we should crowdfund this!” and there was a collective “wait a minute” instinct. We had a good conversation and couldn’t really guarantee raising \$2,000 for this action would do more good than just giving those funds to some organization that actually works to stop evictions. We came to two important points: One is that we would not turn this into a campaign encouraging everybody give us white people (it was a mostly white group) money to go print some unnecessarily expensive and professional banners, rent a bus, and pay to get into the parade and be like, “Look at us!” That felt completely unethical. But the action felt useful enough to do, so we came up with a compromise: we set up an Indiegogo, but we kept it private. It wasn’t publicly listed; we just sent it around to specific people. The second point we agreed on was that regardless of how we got the money, if we were marshaling those resources, we felt we had to work in collaboration with other groups so that we were accountable to a slightly greater community responding to the housing crisis in San Francisco. This didn’t fully address the ethical questions about these high-cost expenses, but it mitigated the impact on the larger movement.

EBN: *Josh MacPhee raised issues of labor ethics in his 2012 article, “Who’s the Shop Steward on Your Kickstarter?” He points out that we are providing real labor that raises funds for our campaigns, and that labor also raises significant money for the corporations that run these sites. One of the critiques of crowdfunding that resonates with me is that the proliferation of these campaigns often feels like poor people are passing \$10 back and forth, but each time we pass these funds, \$1 leaves our community and goes into corporate wealth. Our generosity and our networks of mutual aid are put to work for profits. Are there other fundraising platforms that are less about bolstering corporations?*

AD: We all used to throw fundraisers. Actual events where people would come and meet other people face-to-face, have a social engagement, and build up our movements and communities. That money would still be coming from our own incomes, but it wouldn’t be paying out to anyone except the intended beneficiary. And the fundraising event would have a social and community benefit beyond the money raised.

You have to have enough social capital to make a rent party work if you want to pay your rent that way, but it's not just social capital. The thing about the internet is that it distills social capital into actual money. So while you might need social cache to throw a rent party or a benefit for your kid's soccer team, you are actually participating in something larger. And maybe that's what creates political and emotional dissonance when crowdfunding a

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project that doesn't seem very communal. We're just monetizing social capital, monetizing our culture. That's a very disturbing thing about the internet—that socially interacting and loving each other becomes a way of commodifying each other.

EBN: *In this moment, crowdfunding is being used to try to meet the needs created by the dismantling of public resources for health-care, education, housing, and other basic issues as well as the lack of funding for creative and artistic work. For me, it raises a question about how grassroots fundraising, a model based on many people giving, can respond to the needs of people who don't have wide social networks or networks with varying income levels?*

AD: My brain immediately says “Create a fund! Like, a big one!” People could donate to the fund knowing the general criteria for projects that it supports and have the option of earmarking for specific types of projects. People with a potentially-fundable project could apply to the fund and become funded through a peer-review or other just process. Not unlike Bread and Roses or similar social justice funding organizations, but for a wider array of projects and needs. I would think of this as a necessary maturation of the culture of crowdfunding. It's here to stay, so let's talk about how to do it best.

EBN: *Right, so that people who care about something widely can support it, even if we don't know the individual. Which brings us back to the missing social safety net. When I get frustrated about a lot of the individual fundraising campaigns I see among my friends and networks, I'm not mad at people for asking for help. I'm mad that I don't know of any collective way to meet all these needs. So only the people who can talk themselves into “deserving” it and have wide networks with expendable income can access it. In theory, though clearly not in practice, we pay taxes in order to ensure col-*

lective access to resources like public education, parental leave, and other basic needs. As more and more elements of the social safety net are cut or dismantled, we are all trying to figure out workarounds, and this one is inaccessible for many people.

AD: I think the only times I've ever been mad at people for crowdfunding is when the project feels like it's beyond the realm of asking for help that you really need. And some of that anger is my own perception of scarcity, knowing that there are people who really need the money. I fear people think about crowdfunding as an opportunity for free money. I mean, if you're not a huge Nonprofit Industrial Complex organization, it's often way easier to crowdfund a full budget than throwing a bunch of benefits or writing a bunch of grants.

I think the hook of crowdfunding is that there's a secret capitalist glee in “free money.” For a lot of people, intentionally or unintentionally, there's this promise involved in crowdfunding that it is a workaround to the pains of capitalism. But crowdfunding's “free money” is actually coming from a mass of specific individuals who do or do not have access to a fair amount of money. Statistically, people donate because they believe in a cause or have connection to the people raising money, not necessarily because they have lots of money to donate. To view crowdfunding as a low-input, high-output income stream is exploitative, in my opinion. Crowdfunding is not just another source of income. There are people behind those dollars and they are people within the beneficiary's community. The line between mutual aid and easy scam is very fine when the anonymity and commodification of the internet are at play, but the line is there nonetheless.

EBN: *There has been much public discussion about questions of accountability once funds are raised. Many of us have donated to something and never received the “perk” we were promised. Large sums of money are channeling through these mediums with very little oversight. What are the revolutionary etiquette issues that come up here?*

AD: There is a responsibility to be very transparent about accounting when you're asking tons of people for money for a project that is Important For The Community. I think that is a basic ethical mandate because money is so tricky. People often feel a little attacked or defensive when asked for their accounting after a crowdfunding campaign because they feel like, “I'm not stealing your money!” For many people, it also brings up a dynamic in other forms of charity where you can have resources you need—for free—but only if you constantly prove and re-prove that you're not a criminal. Look at how intrusive the surveillance state has

become for welfare recipients. But it doesn't have to be like that. You can be transparent because you're acting with integrity.

It's important to share income and expense budgets in advance, and then, again, be transparent about how you spent the money. No one ever reports on how crowdfunding money was spent, but we should.

I also think the detachment inherent in internet-only fundraising exacerbates many of these issues. Certainly this can show up regarding "perks." I have never received a perk for a donation and (full disclosure) only sent out about half of the ones I owe. The thing is, though I feel terrible about not getting perks out, I, and many people I know, have a mixed history of actually receiving the promised perks. I think that says something about what's going on when people donate.

EBN: *The IRS hasn't quite caught up with crowdfunding in terms of regulation. The fear of getting busted for not doing the thing you raised money for is less present with this medium than with a traditional business venture or foundation grants. Our internal integrity sensors have to drive us to ethical behavior here, which is a great example of revolutionary etiquette.*

Let's talk a little more about the role of the internet, and internet culture, in this specific fundraising model. In the conversation on your Facebook thread, you asked, "Can we accept crowdfunding as a new constant in our lives and move away from emergency language/hierarchy of perceived importance and toward an understanding of this phenomenon as an organized tool for strengthening our communities?" Can you say more about that?

AD: The marshaling of community resources for this important thing is using the constant crisis language that comes out of internet sensationalist culture, right? We might as well be BuzzFeed. And that, I think, springs from the commodification of attention. It's real—people make money off attention, off the number of clicks that something gets. I find this disturbing, but I always look to the points of potential in any situation. What could it look like to shift how we interact with internet donations? What could it look like to write our own, radical platform for fundraising that accounts for all these ethical issues? From what other sectors/strategies/tools can we take lessons as we define a better way of doing this? Because it's likely here to stay.

EBN: *I think it's cool that with crowdfunding we get to see each other collectively supporting the organizations and projects we love. There's often a perception that a few rich people outside of the community are giving privilege-guilt money, when the reality is that it's a wide range of mostly low and middle-income people. Lots of people of color, lots of queer and trans people, lots of people who*

value the work for connected reasons. We don't often get to witness that outside of the context of these public campaigns.

AD: I agree with that to an extent (though I rarely, if ever, look at the list of who else has donated), but a cynical part of me wonders if we are living in a culture where we're just silently witnessing, which is hardly witnessing at all. Has this devious placebo of the internet taken the place of more meaningful action? If so, that's not crowdfunding's fault, it's bigger than that.

When we're hustling in all of the million ways we know how to get money to people and projects who need it, that need is almost always for systemic reasons. It's so impossibly rare that someone would lack necessary resources for any reason that is not oppression in some way. And if I let myself think about it, it's so easy to tap into the fury of, "Why are we having to do this? You screw us over all the time and we're hustling to pay each other money we don't have, to fix the problem you caused and that you won't help us fix!" That's an outrage that I think is maybe less visible with the internet, both because the internet is a pacifying device—it's click and forget—but also because it is less effort. So I think there's less investment in all directions. And that makes it harder to notice how hard we all work to cover our a**es and solve intense issues that are created by the system. That's just one of the invisible outrages of this society that if people really stacked up, made a list about, and tapped into the gravity of it all, our outrage would break loose!

This conversation raises questions about how we, as fundraisers concerned about social justice, can build a shared understanding of the uses and limits of crowdfunding. What are our expectations of each other regarding the tension between individual and collective needs? What level of income and expense transparency is required in this fundraising medium? While we use the tools available to us, can our clarity about their limitations help us to imagine other models that truly undermine inequality? ■

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