The Aesthetics of Global Protest

Korkut, Umut, Jenzen, Olu, Eslen-Ziya, Hande, Erhart, Itir, McGarry, Aidan

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Korkut, Umut, et al.
Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76708.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76708
Part III

Conclusion
Conclusion: Reflections on Protest and Political Transformation since 1789

Jim Aulich

Abstract
This chapter contextualizes the nature of the aesthetics of contemporary political protest and public demonstration in their wider historical and theoretical contexts. It examines precedents in the French Revolution of 1789, the Spring of Nations of 1848, the ‘Turn’ in the former Soviet bloc nations in 1989, and the ‘colour revolutions’ in former communist states in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Theoretically, it attempts to extend Richard Grusin’s concept of radical mediation, Jacque Rancière’s politics of the sensible and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity through a reading of Karen Barad’s agential realism. The argument hypothesizes that not only the immediate aesthetics and performative actions of demonstrators, but the mechanisms and apparatuses of their mediation, carry the weight of ethical responsibility.

Keywords: performance, mediatization, communication, aesthetics, struggle, protest

Defining Protest: Performativity, Embodiment, and Mediation

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘protest’ is constituted by a public, formal and solemn declaration of dissent. Historically, it usually concerned the non-payment of a bill or some other commercial contract where a breach of trust incurred a sense of injustice. A protest is a demonstration, an appearance

1 For reasons of space I have concentrated on political movements connected with regime change rather than single-issue protest movements such as CND, Stop the War, Occupy, Black Lives Matter, or the Me Too movement, neither have I discussed protest of people’s under foreign occupation, such as the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

DOI 10.5117/9789463724913_CH13
in a public space that has always carried with it an extrajudicial and performative imperative of putting things to right. Today, protest not only takes many forms and has multiple components, but clearly signals the breakdown of the social contract between the ruled and the rulers. As such, it is habitually met with government legislation, police control, and all too often state violence.

In many ways the aesthetics of protest in terms of its immediate visual, aural and formal characteristics have not changed a great deal since the socialist and artist Walter Crane made the following description of a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in London in 1887. He describes large numbers of people, replete with music bands and banners, being met by the ‘enormous force’ of an ‘army’ of police and how:

The next business of the police was to clear the sides of the square. [...] The state of things was not improved by the frequent charges of mounted police on the inoffensive crowd. I narrowly escaped myself in crossing over to Parliament Street. There were broken heads. I saw one unfortunate man led by, bleeding; but, worse than this, one man was knocked down by the mounted police and so injured he died in the hospital shortly afterwards. I never saw anything more like real warfare in my life – only the attack was all on one side. [...] After every charge [...] they returned again. So the Guards were called out, and I remember in the gloom of that November evening the glitter of their bayonets, and the red line in front of the National Gallery. (Crane 1907: 267)

The day has been known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ ever since.²

It sounds all too familiar and we might even go so far as to understand protest as something in which we, as academics and observers, necessarily belong as parts in a panoply of components, which includes the location, protestors, organizational structures (in Crane’s case the English socialists, trade unions and the Labour Party), police, print media, the historical record and its interpretation. Not to forget the smell, the taste, the noise, the spectacle, the sheer existential experience that once mediatized, is always just out of reach. The sensible and the aesthetic are something in excess of the merely political, social, or economic.³

² The demonstration was designed to express solidarity with workers’ leaders on death row in Chicago because of a bomb which killed a number of police at a strikers’ meeting. Crane notes the presence of William Morris, Annie Besant, and H.M. Hyndman, among other prominent social radicals.

³ The analysis of protest in this chapter is founded on Karen Barad’s ‘notion of “intra-action”’ [which] queers the familiar sense of causality (where one or more causal agents precede and
For all the palpable emotions and physicality of protest and the important and impassioned contributions made to the debate by Judith Butler (2004, 2015) and Jacques Rancière (2004, 2010), for example, the writing of philosophers and academics can never quite connect or capture the collectivity of the crowd: the adrenalin, brutality, fear, bravery and solidarity (Hann 2013). We cannot reach the depth of feeling and the heritage of the cause at hand of whatever complexion. We wonder and make our studies, we unpick the mechanisms that underwrite appearance and configure the visual. We note its intersections and relations with other disciplines, aesthetic categories and each other. We pore over its archives and examine the routes by which its forms and iconographies have travelled in time, geography, and meaning. The new media scholar Richard Grusin has argued ‘that although media and media technologies have operated and continue to operate epistemologically as modes of knowledge production, they also function technically, bodily, and materially to generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of feeling among assemblages of humans and nonhumans’ (Grusin 2015: 124).

Understanding of the aesthetics of protest in terms of the sensible and the performative is extremely important in developing our knowledge of how we act in, and give shape to, the world. The look of things is more than mere appearance. In other words, the visual contributes to a cacophony that engages our interest, seduces our feelings, produces our reality and demands responsibility in action. Patrick Cockburn, the independent journalist and expert on the Middle East, described how Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo, which concerns many of the essays in this collection, became emblematic for the events of 2011 in Egypt and more broadly for the Arab Spring. He relates how accounts are mediatized and embellished by inspirationally spectacular photographic and filmic evidence elaborated by interviews with English-speaking participants and nominal opposition leaders. To choose a word from Barad’s vocabulary, Cockburn points out how part of what we produce an effect, and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places). [...] [I]ntra-action goes to the question of the making of differences, of “individuals,” rather than assuming their independent or prior existence. “Individuals” do not not exist, but are not individually determinate. [...] [Likewise] “Phenomena,” in an agential realist sense, are the entanglement – the ontological inseparability – of intra-acting agencies. [...] It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of “individuals” within the phenomenon become determinate and particular material articulations of the world become meaningful. [...] The notion of intra-action marks an important shift in many foundational philosophical notions such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, meaning, knowing, being, responsibility, accountability, and justice’ (Barad 2012: 79).
might call the ‘apparatus’, that is, the mechanisms for the capture of events such as the official and unofficial reporting of the cyclical stand offs between protestors and security forces, create certain versions of events. Cockburn noted, ‘none of this was necessarily phoney, but it was a highly sanitized version of developments’ (2019: 22). For him, it presented a metropolitan version of reality where the freedom and democracy emblematic of the Arab Spring obscured sight of the geographical and political hinterland and the fact that the state and the military had never really lost control. Similarly, Meg McLagan and Yates McKee have argued that the subject’s perception and cognition of the world are not naturally given or programmatically determined but are the product of an historical and ‘shifting assemblage of technical and social forces’ (2012: 12). Jacques Rancière framed the same phenomenon in terms of aesthetic practices and the distribution of the sensible which ‘parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed’ (ibid.: 12, note 14).

As we can see from the example outlined by Cockburn above, the aesthetics of protest are Janus-faced. There is the aesthetic form of the protest in its present: the crowd, banners, posters, speeches, chants, songs, and actions of protestors and police. Then there are the aesthetics of the trace of the demonstrations in analogue and digital media, in the imagination and memory, and in their systems of distribution and wider cultural contexts. The ‘phenomenon’ and its ‘image’ are in an entangled relationship, each feeding the other to embody a collective act of protest. These can be difficult to prise apart, not least because the observer contribution to the reportage, archive, and historical record is in itself part of the phenomenon. The activist, interpretant, and participant share in the production of knowledge surrounding the protest, at the time and subsequently. In this way protest is dramatically enacted and embodied in the experience of certain kinds of reality embodied in action and mediation. Taking Barad’s agential realism\(^4\) as a starting point, Grusin regards the medium supporting the representation as an object subject to processes of intra-action, where the boundaries between people, matter, materials, nature, and discourses emerge as phenomena in the world:

\[^4\] Agential realism offers a way of thinking about the politics, agencies and ethics of any act of observation and the nature of knowledge production. Barad proposes that everything is entangled with everything else. The observer is complicit and therefore ethically responsible in any apparatus of observation making impermanent ‘cuts’ between the included and the excluded to produce a particular phenomenon in the world. The familiar Cartesian subject object relationship is no more. See Barad (2007).
I have meant to emphasize that all mediation entails an appropriation of prior acts, processes, or experiences of mediation and that mediation cannot be understood in a fixed, lifeless, static sense but can only be understood dynamically or relationally as it appropriates prior media formations and events. [...] Mediation becomes immediate and relations are all the more real in what they do or act rather than what they represent. (Grusin 2015: 142ff.)

Barad recognizes that the object of observation and the mechanism or apparatus by which it is measured, encapsulated, evaluated, and interpreted are not distinct but coexistent. Entities, agencies and events 'are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements' (Barad 2010: 267, note 1). The action of the protestor, the greater cause and its mediation are not separately determined. Their relations or intra-action determine their boundaries and properties, they are not there to be found as if they were pre-existent, the ‘object’ and the ‘agency of observation’ are inseparable: ‘Concepts do not refer to the object of investigation. Rather, concepts in their material intra-activity enact the differentiated inseparability that is a phenomenon’ (Barad 2010: 253). Leading to the observation that things and identities are not fixed or predetermined, rather they are performed differently under different circumstances.

Performativity, embodiment, and mediation finds early theoretical exegesis in classical rhetoric, which points to a significance for the visual and the generally sensible beyond appearance. Subjective bodily experience produces forms of knowledge and, in turn, physical familiarity with the world to mould our understandings and our relations to it. At the same time, in classical rhetoric expressive verbal and visual demonstrations were often understood to dissolve into what they describe. The distinction between the representation and what it seeks to represent is less than firm. According to the art historian Caroline van Eck, Aristotle and his followers took a psychological approach which stipulated ‘that thought takes place in and through mental images, […] which are stored in memory and can be reactivated’. As Grusin would have it: ‘Mediation should be understood not as standing between preformed subjects, objects, actants, or entities but as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world. Mediation is not opposed to immediacy but rather is itself immediate’ (Grusin 2015: 129). As acts of imitation, mediations of protest recreate in the mind’s eye the experiences of something no longer there (Van
Political Protest in Modern Times

Protests in the name of democracy and freedom are not all generated from the emancipatory universal values associated with the Enlightenment and models of Western thought established in the French Revolution of 1789. Some issue from their archaic corollary, and some might say equally modern populist views, that spurn notions of universal equality in favour of chauvinistic versions of nation, ethnicity, religion and gender. Much contemporary dissent, for example, finds its sources of discontent in neoliberalism, monopoly capitalism, and the breakdown of social democracy and civil society as the result of the unequal distribution of opportunity and increased precarity. The point is that the apparatuses of opposition are not the exclusive preserve of socialists, liberal democrats, and the political ‘left’, and can equally belong to individualist neoliberals, religious fundamentalists or ethnic purists and the political ‘right’ (Butler 2015: 91). Protest and dissent originate with discontent arising from perceived exclusions and inclusions, injustices and inequalities in society with regard to, for example, employment, tax, civil rights, religious freedom and political representation. The Gilets Jaunes in France, the English Defence League in the UK, Fidesz with its origins in popular protest under communism in Hungary, and Pegida in Germany were all born of powerlessness, suppression, and a lack of voice and opportunity experienced by large sections of society. The under-reported protests of the Gilets Jaunes, for example, do not have an identifiable political agenda beyond an apparatus that deploys certain myths of patriotism and gender, a suspicion of foreigners, resistance to neoliberal austerity and what they see as the complacency of the political
establishment to articulate certain ways of being in the world, where certain realities have authority over others.\textsuperscript{5} Their aims are not, except in the most limited sense, the pursuit of the universal Enlightenment and Republican ideals of \textit{liberté, égalité, fraternité} and an inclusive citizenry regardless of social, ethnic or religious background and relationship to dominant elites.

It is useful to take a step back and to consider the appearance of civil protest in its historical context. The French Revolution of 1789 is a significant precedent for protest and civil disturbance as a political and potentially emancipatory phenomenon capable of contributing to the framing of alternative and ethically responsible realities. Often characterized as a ‘media event’ stimulated by the lifting of censorship, the popular journalism of daily newspapers, wall newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, handbills, and print complemented and amplified by ‘virtue of their characteristic emotionality, captivating melodies and visual presence, the political songs and graphic satires had a much stronger impact on the collective consciousness than texts and speeches’ (Reichardt 2012: 6). Significantly, a lasting connection and structural element to protest was forged in 1789 between the free press, the ‘mass’ or ‘public’ where the body of Enlightenment thought and the Rights of Man transformed themselves into ‘a new set of cultural practices based on the freest and most extensive possible public exchange of ideas’ (Landes 1991: 97).\textsuperscript{6} Protests are generated in wider webs and structures from which social and political identities emerge; they are not strictly speaking spontaneous, although they may appear to be so. The public establishes its momentum through affiliations in physical and intellectual spaces defined by a variety of historically specific factors such as social class, ethnicity and occupation, for example. Historically, such identities were communicated and acted upon through print, theatre, song and other performative cultures and in networks of consumption in cafes, reading rooms, public meetings, and other social spaces amenable to conversation and debate, not least the demonstrations themselves. Trade associations, trade unions and organized religious, political and social affiliations were also important in carving out an arena for the display of solidarity and

\textsuperscript{5} See Ramdani (2019a, 2019b); O’Neill (2018); Mortimer (2019).

\textsuperscript{6} Alongside print media, ‘Rolf Reichardt argues that illustrated broadsides, like other pictorial representations helped mobilize a broad social base that made the Revolution’s political process, and its radicalization, possible in the first place. [...] Together with the nonwritten media of public speeches and songs, they approached the man and woman in the street in the terms of their own oral or semi-oral culture. They not only rendered the revolutionary message accessible but also drew ordinary people into the communication and opinion-making process of a widening public sphere, with its tendency toward democratization’ (Landes 1991: 92).
discontent. Since the mid-1990s such affiliations have been in some cases augmented, and in others replaced by social media platforms supported by the physical materiality of the mobile phone. As an instrument the mobile or smartphone has prosthetic qualities, as an artificial device it does not so much replace something missing from the body, as augment its capabilities for communication, orientation and documentation. Held in the hand, it is an intimate extension of the body and its sensorium. Over time, protests as apparently spontaneous explosions of frustration have developed into sets of media tactics across different platforms ‘weaving together the semiotic and the ethnographic, the political and the poetic, in a total campaign’ (McLagan and McKee 2012: 15).

Protests invariably involve the deployment of the power of the state against the ‘people’ to exert different degrees of control, violence and lethality such as we saw in the former communist regimes in Europe in 1989, for example, and at the time of writing, continue to see in Israel/Palestine, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Venezuela and France.7 As Judith Butler has pointed out, making the claim for ‘we the people’, is defined by appearance in public. In a protest the crowd is the materialization of a public coming together with a shared purpose. The mechanisms through which that is achieved are therefore paramount: ‘If the people are constituted through a complex interplay of performance, image, acoustics, and all the various technologies engaged in those productions, then “media” is not just reporting who the people claim to be, but media has entered into the very definition of the people’ (Butler 2015: 20). The media have to be understood as something more than mere reporting or the record of gestures of resistance found in the contemporaneous and historical record on the one hand, and the paraphernalia of handbills, banners or posters, on the other. Protest extends as a phenomenon into the many performative fields which constitute that vital appearance through speech, song, gesture, and the simple act of being present to bear witness and protest.

There is also the possibility that protest and the struggle for the demos and human rights can be institutionalized and to a certain extent naturalized.8

---

7 The three-sided engagements of the forces of the state with supporters of the right and left have characterized the historical antifascist movement. Such oppositions are nevertheless structural, whether they are democratic or not. Democracy simply eases the path for alternative views to be expressed through protest.

8 Contemporary organized protests are carefully choreographed. In British law, for example, routes are agreed and stewards required, and even as protestors develop different and more spontaneous tactics through the use of social media platforms and smartphones, the authorities develop countermeasures by surveillance of electronic traffic and physical measures such as ‘kettling’.
In some cases we can see how the ‘apparatus’ and the reality it produces shifts, making it more formulaic and safe within the terms of state sanctioned and economically viable versions of national heritage.⁹ In the light of the 2019 bicentenary of the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester, its prominence is rising in the public discourse. This highly disciplined and rehearsed peaceful demonstration in 1819 for the reform of parliamentary representation was undertaken in the name of cleanliness, sobriety, order and peace. The men and children wore their Sunday best, many women dressed in white. The protest was broken up by the authorities with armed force, resulting in the death of 18 and the injury of some 700 demonstrators in a crowd of some 60,000. Jacqueline Riding’s (2018) book-length account, and the Brechtian didacticism of Mike Leigh’s feature film (2018) reclaim the important and half-forgotten Peterloo Massacre for history at a time when in the UK, the notion of the ‘will of the people’ is contested.¹⁰ Contemporaneously, and in the very same city of Manchester, the National Museum of Labour History was renamed The People’s History Museum in 2001 and rebranded in 2017 with the addition of the words: The National Museum of Democracy. The notion of a working-class or labour history has been subjected to a process of effacement. I do not denigrate these important interventions and institutions but it is important to note how the mediation of history carries dangers of appropriation. The Peterloo Massacre, for example, in reality, a murderous defeat for the cause of civil rights, is celebrated by various contemporary cultural institutions as a victory for democracy. Interestingly, Jeremy Deller, the artist commissioned in 2016 to design the projected Peterloo Memorial in Manchester,¹¹ made the film The Battle of Orgreave (2001),¹² a re-enactment of a notorious mounted police charge against pickets which took place during

---

⁹ ‘Gone are the days when people learned about history simply from reading books. People are increasingly looking for experiences that bring history to life in an engaging way and nothing beats standing on the spot where history happened. We offer a hands-on experience that will inspire and entertain people of all ages. Our work is informed by enduring values of authenticity, quality, imagination, responsibility and fun. Our vision is that people will experience the story of England where it really happened’ (English Heritage 2019).

¹⁰ The so-called Brexit crisis where the ruling party claims the result of the Referendum of 2016 and the ‘will of the people’ as its own.

¹¹ See http://peterloomassacre.org. The design was unveiled in November 2018. Instigated by the Peterloo Network, it ‘grew out of a Manchester Histories Festival event five years ago and is led by Manchester Histories and People’s History Museum and including Manchester City Council, Historic England, University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, various other cultural institutions, historians, campaigners and individuals’. See https://ilovemanchester.com/peterloo-massacre-memorial-artist-jeremy-deller-unveils-design/, accessed 15.01.19.

¹² See https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/the-battle-of-orgreave/, accessed 15.01.19.
the UK miners’ strike (1984-1985), to make the precise point that state violence against protestors continues. Tamed by heritage and celebrated in terms of social change rather than political transformation, protests of certain kinds are becoming embedded in the national consciousness through institutions such as the National Trust and Arts Council England. A themed public arts programme titled *Peoples’ Landscapes* led by the artist Jeremy Deller ‘will involve artists engaging with sites where people assembled to stimulate significant social change.’ Some of our most interesting radical public intellectuals are engaged in a careful dance of words and practices that unsurprisingly obscures political significance in precarious times. Jacques Rancière warned of such processes in his notion of dissensus where once we recognize how notions of freedom and democracy function aesthetically, we can understand how these sensibilities begin to act in formulaic ways to undermine the chance of real political change (Jazeel and Mookherjee 2015: 354). Much as the dissidents in former communist Europe disrupted expectations and loyalties through refusal, it is possible to see how the disruptions to aesthetic expectations employed by the opposition organization Otpor in Serbia (see below), for example, and their use of social media in advance of the state deployment of technologies of surveillance were so effective, if only briefly.

Kurt Weyland (2014: 1) has made a useful genealogy of so-called democratic revolutions since 1848, identifying social phenomena that challenge established orders ‘in clusters that advance like waves’ from a point of origin to other countries. In this context, and for the purposes of this short chapter, I’d like to briefly examine three people’s democratic revolutions that in their own ways threatened the international political status quo: the ‘Spring of Nations’ of 1848; the ‘Turn’ in the former Soviet bloc nations

13 Addley 2019. The sites include the Tolpuddle Martyr’s Tree in Dorset; the mass trespass in 1932 at Kinder Scout in Derbyshire; also in Derbyshire the connections between Quarry Bank Mill and Dunham Massey stately home with the Peterloo Massacre; and the former mining community of Easington, Durham. Interestingly, the trust insists it is not making a political point but simply aims to tell stories of human suffering and joy in order to ‘connect the local with the national’ (Addley 2019: 3).

14 People’s Landscapes, https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/how-we-are-challenging-our-history, accessed 18.01.19. Unobtainable when re-visited on 09.02.19, as if to confirm the point, it is now called Landscapes: Explore the places that have shaped the nation: Unearthing stories of passion and protest. See https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/peoples-landscapes-explore-the-places-that-have-shaped-the-nation.

15 The revolutions of 1848 began in Sicily and spread to France and across Germany, Italy, the Austrian Empire and South America and eventually had a direct effect on some 50 countries, all of which ended in failure but succeeded in laying the deep foundations for modern democratic reform across Europe.
in 1989 which saw the fall of communist regimes in the region; and the role of Otpor in the Bulldozer Revolution of 2000 in Serbia, the first of the non-violent pro-democratic ‘coloured revolutions’ of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Comparing 1848 with the Arab Spring of 2010/2011, Weyland contends that protestors took inspiration from events in one country, not on rational decisions based on the available evidence, but as more or less spontaneous responses ‘to particularly vivid, striking, easily accessible events, such as regime collapse across the border’ (Weyland 2014:7). Essentially, this led to an aesthetic of cognitive shortcuts in pictures, song and declarative slogans capable of encapsulating revolutionary events and it is easy to see how Twitter conformed to this pattern with its 140 characters and attached visual material and how important it was for the Arab Spring. Weyland does not address how in 1848 the news of revolution and protest travelled or what specific forms it took. Certainly, word of mouth, oratory, the handbill, pamphlet, almanacs, illustrated broadsides, the popular print and songsheets played their part, not least because of the relatively advanced modern communications industry in Paris, itself largely stimulated by the Revolution of 1789 (Landes 1991):

[W]ith the revolutionary forces gaining ground, revolutionary texts, images and hymns were exported on a large scale since the autumn of 1792, and even more so between 1796 and 1799, from the Austrian Netherlands and Brabant to Switzerland and the Italian ‘sister republics’. (Reichardt 2012:12)

Importantly, the conviction was that the printed word, music, drama, festivals and the flood of images would help create the new people for the new society. It is easy to see how the blossoming of communications and a ‘flood of images’, identified with civic education and notions of individual liberty became a foundational myth for a free press and the fourth estate up until the first years of the twenty-first century. Although it has to be

16  Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania.
17  Bulldozer Revolution, Serbia October 2000 – Otpor; Rose Revolution, Georgia November 2003 – Kmara; Orange Revolution, Ukraine November 2004 – PORA; Purple Revolution, Iraq, Jan 2005; Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan, February 2005; Cedar Revolution, Lebanon, February 2005; Blue Revolution, Kuwait, March 2005, and many others were to follow (Finkel et al. 2013).
18  They believed that, combined with republican schooling, printed words in various formats, revolutionary music, didactic plays, civic festivals, and public monuments, the flood of images could contribute to an educational environment which would create a nouvel homme for the new society (James Leith, quoted in Landes 1991: 92).
admitted that even in the eighteenth century many had warned of the dangers of what Jeremy D. Popkin called hidden subsidies and the fact that the print media, including pictorial and aural modes could be corrupted and used to undermine the development of democratic consciousness (Popkin 1990, 2002).

The ‘turn’ of 1989 in East-Central Europe, while only effecting five countries, forced governmental change and was the last wave of popular protests that spread like wildfire across national boundaries without the aid of social media. For that reason alone, it is worth some attention. Protestors demonstrating against repressive one-party states were given license by a signal from the then president of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev that he would not interfere with the internal affairs of the countries of the Soviet bloc. Inspired by the lasting success of Solidarity in Poland since 1982 and the contemporaneous student protests in Tiananmen Square against the Chinese authorities, demands for free elections, a ‘return to Europe’, and freedom of expression and movement resulted in widespread mass civic unrest in urban centres such as Prague, Berlin, Leipzig, Budapest and Bucharest. Even without social media the communications landscape was complex and the political atmosphere of 1989 allowed the proliferation of open print media in all of its various forms and a corresponding growth in the number of political parties: ‘One reporter noted in April 1990 that Polish writers were keeping practically every printing press, mimeograph machine and photocopier in Poland working round the clock’ (Goldstein 1999). Printing presses and other means for the mass reproduction of material were controlled by the state, which also had a monopoly on news distribution in the mainstream press, radio and television. As a consequence, their offices were often the first target for the protestors. At the same time the BBC World Service and the American Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, and for those who could receive West German television broadcasts, provided Western accounts of the demonstrations to large swathes of the population which remained largely unreported or misreported by state-owned organs. Aware of their audience and in need of at least moral support from Western peoples and governments, many of the protestors’ banners were written in English. Martin Arends, the East German writer, observed how ‘[i]n front of the humming cameras they hit upon grand gestures they had learned from television, because they were going to be on television too’ (quoted in Aulich 1993: 27). Internationally, broadcast reports signalled tacit international support even if they fed into Western propaganda efforts to undermine the Soviet bloc during these late days of the Cold War. They were a vital component to the ‘apparatus’ of protest as a means of mutually reinforcing
the ‘will of the people’ across national boundaries, just as it had been in 1968 for the anti-Vietnam War movement, Civil Rights, the student protests in Paris and the Prague Spring. ‘News’ carried with it the validation of the ‘demos’ and perspectives inherited from 1789 that had, by this time, been fully integrated into the notion of a free press capable of projecting the ‘good’ of a fully functioning liberal democracy.

Performativity and consistent physical presence over a period of time were essential. Xeroxed handbills and photocopied photographs of police brutality were widely circulated on the streets. In Czechoslovakia, for example, in emulation of the Bolshevik agit-prop trains, self-appointed cadres of students would go out to the countryside to distribute oppositional material and to bring news about the demonstrations. Civic and cultural centres such as theatres, universities and art galleries and other establishments relatively free from state interference such as trade union premises and churches, became places where the opposition could organize and produce posters, handbills and banners. In Prague, Civic Forum, formed in response to the state repression of student anti-government demonstrations, conducted their business from the Magic Lantern Theatre. In spite of the seriousness of the situation and the uncertainty surrounding what actions the local or state authorities or even the Soviets ultimately might take, there was often something carnivalesque about the demonstrations. Under communism, opposition had found expression in labour, cultural, artistic and religious circles in clandestine meetings, unofficial publications, performances and exhibitions to the extent that it created a relatively well-established counterpublic sphere which emphatically did not accept the wholesale adoption Western consumerist values any more than it did communism to provide a solid foundation for achieving political change (Kemp-Welch 2014). Posters expressing oppositional views flourished, often within and on the fringes of an official culture advertising theatre and film, and they soon developed into critical genre of its own: the ‘Poster of Perestroika’ (Sylvestrová and Bartelt 1992; Aulich and Sylvestrová 1999). Commonly, the symbolism of power was turned against itself and often engaged in elaborate processes of over-identification: in 1989 what Communist Party official could possibly deny the right of citizens to celebrate the bicentenary of the French Revolution?

Typically, mass demonstrations occupied important and large public spaces such as Wenceslas Square in Prague. As a location it was deeply symbolic for Czech national identity, it had been significant for the national movement during the nineteenth century and in 1918 it was the site of the declaration of national independence. Shop fronts and the equestrian statue
of Charles II which teemed with protestors were decked, for example, with posters in which ’68 became ’89 in a numerological reference to the Prague Spring of 1968 and ‘Socialism with a human face’ (a short period of mass protest and political liberalization, crushed in the autumn of 1968 by the military invasion from the other Warsaw Pact countries). Throughout the region symbols of state power were subverted. Self-celebratory images of the crowd itself emblazoned the streets and civic buildings alongside romantic national and religious iconographies. Other imagery exposed the crimes of Stalin and hammers smashed sickles, while national flags with communist symbols torn from their fabric were paraded in public to be featured on television and depicted in the popular media of posters, postcards, cartoon and illustration, for example. The Berlin Wall was the symbolic divide between the East and the West, and it provides an illuminating focus. West German coverage of the initial demonstrations and the iconic ‘Fall of the Wall’ on 9 November 1989 as East Berliners flocked into West Berlin had a contagious effect on the protestors across the region and created a sense of euphoria. Graphic artists from both sides of the divide produced satirical postcards, posters and comic books many of which were for sale. These helped to create debate and, in true Habermasian fashion, contributed to the generation of a public sphere (Habermas 1989) close to that experienced in 1789 and 1848 to sustain the campaign for liberal democratic freedoms (Aulich and Sylvestrová 1999).

The public spectacle of resistance was underwritten by a culture of dissidence embedded in civic institutions, the cultural elite and the young. As a highly developed counterpublic sphere it provided the bedrock for these popular uprisings and made reinforced the strength and sustainability of the protests. Championed in the name of democracy in the West, in reality they represented a far more complex consciousness where active citizens avoided communist structures and made risky play with the rhetoric of the state, nation, church and liberal democracy. Beneath the claims for freedom, democracy and the all too brief calls for a ‘third way’ that might have preserved the best of communism and consumerism, lay an unbreakable connection with long suppressed grand and romantic narratives of national destiny and Christianity in its various forms. Solidarity in Poland and subsequently the protests in Leipzig in East Germany both had close connections with the church. Driven by a radical conservatism born of romantic individualism and independent nationalism, in the long term these protests represented a nostalgia for a past that never was and has found an afterlife in a reactionary reality that has captured the imaginations of peoples worldwide in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.
Protest and Neoliberalism

Since the mid-1990s new media played an increasingly important role in establishing global communities of interest, on the one hand, and the local organization of protest, on the other. In Serbia, Otpor (Resistance) supported, financed and trained by Western NGOs such as the International Republican Institute (York 2013) and Gene Sharp’s Albert Einstein Institution was the core of the non-violent opposition movement that motivated the Bulldozer Revolution (1998-2000) to bring down the dictator Slobodan Milošević (Cohen 2000; Helvey 2004; Popovic and Miller 2015). Driven by an increasingly influential oppositional elite with technical knowhow and empathy with contemporary Western youth cultures, Otpor grew out of the universities, civic institutions, and a counterculture of music clubs, the radio station B92 and an alternative arts and media scene. Organizationally, fluid and flat without obvious figureheads it had a Hydra-like flexibility: once one centre of opposition was closed down it simply rose up again somewhere else. Under conditions of state propaganda and censorship of the mainstream media the opportunities provided by new media, even as they were in 1998, were ideal for such an organization. The regime had little interest in new media, at first believing computers were only for making calculations, and paradoxically their own censorship of the mainstream encouraged the protestors to take advantage of new media, although this was by no means without its problems with sporadic attempts by the authorities to close these outlets (Aulich 2011).

Otpor quickly established a sophisticated website and made good use of email and SMS mobile phones. The website listed future protests and documented past demonstrations and events with photographs and film. Many of these were agitprop events specifically designed for posting and communicating online. Significantly, picking up on the carnivalesque aspects of 1968 (in the West) and 1989 (in East-Central Europe) these actions often relied on over-identification with the symbols of power and Otpor’s logo of a black clenched fist mimicked Milošević’s red fist, for example. In this they were probably inspired by the actions of the Slovenian multimedia arts group Neue Slovensiche Kunst, which had been provoking the authorities with a subcultural strategy in Ljubljana since the 1980s (Aulich 2011: 12ff.; Čolović 2002; Monroe 2005). Under these conditions, protest no

---

19 Cohen (2000) provides a partial and informative account of Otpor, its funding, training and hedonist youthful ideology: ‘part political movement, part social club’, it had 130 branches and 70,000 members.
longer relied on exterior third-party intervention to create its mediated presence but generated its own. Significantly, this was executed within the aesthetic logic of the newly available digital technologies, which even at this embryonic stage had an individualized networked form suited to single issue politics and individual choice. In other words, it was very effective at telling the establishment what you do not want, but perhaps less effective at disseminating and introducing a consistent political programme. Since 1789 the print media had been closely associated with civil rights and the emancipation of the individual, but with the inception of new media, communications were now implicated in neoliberal ideologies and neo-conservative discourses of resistance and freedom, rather than genuine liberal democratic ideals of political liberty and social revolution associated with 1968 and the widespread unrest followed by political change in East-Central Europe in 1989. This ideological distinction and the nature of the apparatuses deployed to produce these various revolutionary realities is extremely important since under these circumstances it can be seen how the reality of genuinely felt revolutionary desires for freedom of movement

Figure 13.1. Darko Vojinovic, Opposition Rally, Belgrade Yugoslavia, 14 April 2000. Members of Otpor (Resistance), a student organization, arrive in central Belgrade's Republic Square during an antigovernment rally. In one of the biggest protests against the autocratic rule of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, over 100,000 opposition supporters streamed into central Belgrade to demand democratic elections and an end to state oppression. Source: Darko Vojinovic/AP/Shutterstock.
and expression can easily be subverted by neoliberal and corporate interest. As I have pointed out elsewhere, contrary to claims by Gene Sharp (2005), Robert Helvey (2004) and others, this insight is particularly significant in the light of the failure of the opposition to Milošević to successfully transform mainstream politics in Serbia (Barnes 2018). The ‘colour revolutions’ in post-communist states and during the Arab Spring in the early twenty-first century saw new media play a much larger role and shared a similar fate (Beissinger 2007).

Flushed with success in 2003, Otpor transformed itself into The Centre for Applied Non-violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) to advise and train pro-democracy activists worldwide: versions of Otpor’s clenched fist logo appeared in Georgia in 2003, Russia in 2005, Venezuela in 2007, and Egypt in 2011 (Popovic and Miller 2015). CANVAS has faced criticism because of its close associations with US security agencies and the private intelligence firm Stratfor (Gibson and Horn 2013) which might suggest that in spite of its best intentions, CANVAS may well be regarded as an harbinger of what Sushana Zuboff (2019) has characterized as surveillance capitalism rather than social democracy.

Conclusion

The mobile phone and the smartphone have played a vital part in protest and, to a large extent new media platforms, have replaced print media. Apart from the mobile phone’s communicative powers, it is capable of recording the user’s immediate experience aurally and visually and provides instantaneous access to the Internet and potential worldwide audiences. It increases the potential presence of the protest exponentially. Among many other things, it can also identify where you are geographically and

---

20 ‘Headquartered in Belgrade, CANVAS is run by Slobodan Djinovic and Srdja Popovic. It operates a network of international trainers and consultants with experience of successful democratic movements. CANVAS is a non-profit institution which relies solely on private funding; there is no charge for workshops and revolutionary know-how can be downloaded for free on the Internet. CANVAS was founded in 2003 by Srdja Popovic and Slobodan Dinovic as an organization that advocates for the use of non-violent resistance to promote human rights and democracy. Since then, CANVAS has worked with pro-democracy activists from more than 50 countries, including Iran, Zimbabwe, Burma, Venezuela, Ukraine, Georgia, Palestine, Western Sahara, West Papua, Eritrea, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Tonga, Tunisia and Egypt. CANVAS works only in response to requests for assistance and offers free trainings to activists’ (CANVAS 2019).

21 They claim to have worked in more than 50 countries (Henley 2015).
how to proceed to a rallying point, for example. From an organizational point of view these were extremely effective assets for protest on a local level, however, once state security services had acquired effective electronic monitoring skills and equipment, mobile and smartphones had to be used in less direct ways. Protestors kept their phones turned off to avoid surveillance and to prevent arrest and effective mobilization by the police and state security agencies. Alex Comninos in his report ‘Twitter Revolutions and Cyber Crackdowns’ (2011) and Evgeny Morozov in his book *The Net Delusion* (2011) claimed that social media and the Internet are as much the ‘tools of oppressors’ as the ‘tools of liberators’ because the authorities can use new media for spying, propaganda, and censorship (Morozov 2011: 311). Content generated on social media platforms is certainly a powerful aid to protest, although some research indicates its influence is not as pervasive as I might be suggesting (Theocharis et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the landscape is treacherous and the state can use new media to spread fear, disinformation and fake news.

Opposition movements, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, for all the richness of their cultural manifestations, their satirical overidentifications with dominant ideologies, their creativity, instantaneity, performativity and youthfulness in large part facilitated through these same new media platforms, essentially lacked a thorough programme of political emancipation in the traditional modernist sense. New media are short and fast in their generation and reception: operating in real time, speed is of their essence. Potentially global in reach, everything is just a click away and one might argue that new media fails to provide the opportunity for reflection and in-depth debate. Print media more often requires commitment, physical presence and conscious acts to purchase and read the pamphlet, look at the poster on the wall, to take the handbill, to experience the speeches and the violence, potential or otherwise. In the shift from print, new media have contributed to the apparatus of protest to signal a different political environment, where technological advance has generated an ideological change that undermines the authentic desire to guarantee political emancipation. The form of the mass protest as a performative choreography has remained largely the same but circumscribed within the ‘cuts’ of inclusion and exclusion, there has been something of a transformation in the apparatuses of protest, their mediation and their ethics of responsibility. The analogy of the apparatus is drawn from Karen Barad’s philosophy of quantum physics. In physics the apparatus is consciously designed and the ‘cuts’ can be repeated and the results tested. If we regard protest as a phenomenon generated by an apparatus
which includes its media technologies and the corporate ambitions of their owners alongside the overall mediation in imagination and appearance, then things are altogether less controllable and open to influences and objectives unknown to the protestors. The global capitalist imperatives of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, for example, for all of their benefits, have arguably subverted the demos and laid the ground for surveillance capitalism, partly defined as: ‘A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales’, and ‘An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty’ (Zuboff 2019, The Definition).

There is a kind of aching romanticism to the profoundly ethical philosophical thinking of Barad, Butler and Rancière, with which I strongly identify, even though it could be said that their speculations on the demos, the will of the people, responsibility and ethics lays a screen of theoretical distraction that elides over the fact that arrests are made, skulls are cracked, bones are broken, tear gas is inhaled, and protestors, even unarmed ones, do get shot. People suffer traumatic physical and psychological injury, some die in the cause of democratic freedoms. While non-violent protest can be extremely effective in expressing discontent and in creating new realities and new futures in the world, since the turn of the century protest has unconsciously been subverted by the support received from neoliberal organizations which would wish to promote their own interests above those of the protestors. A state of affairs now made infinitely more complex through the well-documented uses and abuses of social media. Protests are born of a sense of injustice and are filled with hopes for democratic freedoms and equality in an unstable environment which opens the gates for the forces of reaction, such as nationalism and forms of meaning easily exploited by imperatives which lie beyond the demos. The vital and political question is where do the boundaries fall, what does the particular apparatus include or exclude and why? The apparatus and the realities it creates consist of people and things, picture and image, subject and object, discourse and material, culture and nature: they are all radically interdependent and co-constitute phenomena in ways that are contested in the profoundest of ways. Unpredictable and overdetermined, protest is ultimately unknowable, yet it remains deeply implicated in what we do and how we perceive ourselves in the world.
References


Leigh, Mike, dir. 2018. *Peterloo* [film], Thin Man Films, Film 4, BFI Film Fund.


Ramdani, Nabila. 2019b. ‘The UK Yellow Vests Have Nothing to Do with Their French Counterparts – but They Could Be Just as Influential’, *The Independent*, 10 January.


Sylvestrová, Marta, and Dana Bartelt. 1992. *Art as Activist: Revolutionary Posters from Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Thames & Hudson with the Smithsonian Institution.

Theocharis, Yannis, Will Lowe, Jan W. van Deth, and Gema M. García Albacete. 2013. ‘Using Twitter to Mobilise Protest Action: Transnational Online Mobilisation Patterns and Action Repertoires in the Occupy Wall Street, Indignados and


About the Author

Jim Aulich is Professor of Visual Culture in the Department of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University. Since 1985 his research has engaged with how conflicts are pictured and meanings are produced in propaganda, publicity, advertising, and reportage in the graphic arts. The research has involved partnerships with galleries and museums in this country and internationally, such as the Imperial War Museums (IWM), in London; the Moravian Gallery in Brno, in the Czech Republic; and Manchester art galleries. He is editing a special issue on the theme ‘Pictures and Conflicts since 1945’ for the open-access online journal Humanities.