# SYMBOLIC OBJECTS IN CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

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EDITORS

*Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*

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# in Contentious Politics

**Edited by Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner**

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# Introducing Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

Peter Gardner and Benjamin Abrams

Physical things can play all sorts of roles in collective action. Rarely do protesters and picketers, insurgent fighters, and revolutionaries act in the absence of objects imbued with symbolic content. Protesters parade banners above their processions; striking workers hold placards declaring their grievances; some revolutionaries have used tulips, carnations, or roses as signifiers of their cause. Objects come in all shapes and sizes, from the "Lennon walls" of communist Prague and present-day Hong Kong or the symbolic democracy of postrevolutionary streets in Portugal to squares of red felt pinned to the clothing of the 2012 student fees protests in Canada. In the 1980s in Poland, metal badges declaring the name of the outlawed Solidarność (Solidarity) trade union were so small that they were almost imperceptible. In recent years, statues have become focal points for antiracist and decolonizing movements, and for reactionary backlash to "protect" them. In all these cases and many more, symbolic objects act as powerful signifiers and potent motifs in contentious politics.

Yet all too often the role of such symbolic objects has been undertheorized, or even overlooked entirely, absorbed into the totality of the act. Often, their meaning is assumed or passed over, their symbolic or written content interpreted with little further consideration. While there have been many important studies of some specific objects in contention, a survey of the academic literature on the topic shows that the field remains

underdeveloped. This edited volume aims to act as a starting point for addressing this neglect. We do not claim that this book conclusively "fills the gap" or solves all the problems of the literature; rather, in bringing together authors and researchers from a variety of disciplines who focus their attention on a plethora of symbolic objects and case studies, we hope to inspire a more joined-up approach for further research in the area.

In what follows, we introduce the reader to the content of this volume. To begin, we describe what is meant by "symbolic objects," discussing their meaning in the context of contention, along with proximate research on the topic. We then move on to outline the chapters and thematic sections.

## Meaningful Stuff

One may be tempted to consider symbolic objects as a subset of material culture. Indeed, many of the contributors to this volume are interested in the study of material culture and materiality more broadly. Alternatively, one may wish to interpret symbolic objects through the lens of "symbolic politics" (Kertzer 1988; Kaufman 2001; Ross 2007; Elgenius 2011a, 2011b), pointing to their role as signifiers. Both interpretations are attractive, and we conceptualize the study of symbolic objects as running the gamut from the study of objects' production, materiality, and physical uses, all the way to their place in the semiotics of protest. However, we are particularly interested in the *intersection* of these two perspectives: where the cultural or semiotic qualities of symbolic objects become intertwined with their material properties in important and often transformative ways. Most specifically, we are interested in how this happens in the context of contentious politics: interactions or series of interactions "in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims or third parties" (Tilly 2008, 5; Abrams et al. 2022).

We are of course not the first to invoke the notion of "symbolic objects," even where reference to contentious politics is concerned. The term has been used by several scholars, but only very rarely has it been theorized or fully described. Speaking of social movements, John Lofland (1996, 130) referred to "symbolic objects" as one of the most basic components of the culture of social movement organizations, alongside expressions of general values, everyday stories, occasions or gatherings, roles, and personae. Here, Lofland describes symbolic objects as

all those material items that participants view as physically express-
ing their enterprise, including remembrances of its successes, trau-
matic challenges, and hopes for its future. Such objects are of several
kinds, three of which are: (i) key artifacts, (ii) symbolic places and
(iii) iconic persons. (1996, 130)

Although Lofland is speaking here of social movement organizations spe-
cifically, and we in this volume discuss contentious politics more broadly,
this is nonetheless a productive starting point. We similarly consider sym-
bolic objects to be material things that hold the potential to physically
express something. However, Lofland limits the interpreters of meaning
to movement participants. We take a broader view of who can and should
be considered a stakeholder in meaning and interpretation of symbolic
objects, stretching from opponents, through bystanders, observers and
authority figures, all the way to the protagonists at the heart of a conten-
tious episode. Symbolic objects do not only exist for those "in the know"
about in-group meanings associated with them; they also act on and make
representations to those who have deviating or lesser knowledge of them.
Fascist foot soldiers assaulted by counterprotesters in black bloc need not,
for example, recognize the intricacies of antifascist uniformity and tactics
to attach symbolic meaning to the sights before them. Likewise, the ter-
rifying specter of the Jacobin guillotine did not reserve its meaning for
those in the innermost circles of the Committee of Public Safety. To give
a more contemporary example, almost nobody attending the Extinction
Rebellion protests in 2019 could grasp the meaning of a solitary painted
boat at Oxford Circus until its symbolic meaning became apparent in the
heat of contention.

In terms of the scope of symbolic objects, Lofland's description includes,
but is not limited to, artifacts, places, and persons. Artifacts are "the trans-
portable and literal objects that are 'part' of it," the material "stuff" of
social movements (Lofland 1996, 130). Although such artifacts need not
necessarily be transportable, this accurately describes the nature of sym-
bolic objects. In reference to both symbolic places and iconic persons, this
volume develops these points further. While places and spaces can cer-
tainly be semiotically important in contention, it seems to us that further
theorization is needed to operationalize this point. While many things that
we regard as "places" are indeed objects, in practice this category quickly
becomes blurry. Places appear to form more of a continuum, ranging from

those that exist plainly as objects (such as buildings, streets, and plazas), through liminal cases where objects may be present but do not wholly form the place in question (perhaps ancestral trails, national waters, and historic battlegrounds), to those that lack substantial materiality (for example, airspace). It is also evident that a geographical area in and of itself doesn't constitute an object, and is better described as a kind of "space": a unit of analysis that has already attained substantial and fruitful attention in its own right as a separate subject of contentious political analysis and political geography (see Sewell 2001). Similarly, while iconic persons certainly do play important symbolic roles in contention, we need to be clear about what renders them symbolic *objects*. One way to conceptualize this further is through the application of theories relating to body politics and body-work (see chapters 8 and 9, this volume). Another is to analyze the artifacts that speak of or represent emblematic individuals (see chapters 3 and 10).

More recently, Hank Johnston's (2009) work on protest cultures has attempted to grapple with questions similar to those that Lofland explored in 1996, and that we have invited contributors to consider herein. Johnston's analysis is not of symbolic objects per se, but of a larger category of cultural "artifacts," which he defines as "objects produced either individually or collectively, such as music, art and literature which stand alone in their materiality and are available to others after the initial (cultural) behavior that produced them," and that give rise to "artifact-based performances" by contentious protagonists (2009, 7). While Johnston, drawing on the Latourian category of "technical artifacts," extends his analysis to poetry, prose, and music (cultural artifacts we do not explore or analyze herein), he also briefly addresses "artifacts in the concrete, material sense" (2009, 19), which correspond more or less exactly to what we call symbolic objects.

Much like the broader set of "artifacts" Johnston analyses, what we call symbolic objects have a distinctive relationship with contentious performances (see, for example, chapters 1 and 7). They are, to extend the metaphor, the props and stage dressings that "shape action" and carry with them "a prescribed range of appropriate responses" (Johnston 2009, 17). Some are capable of metonymy and representation. Others may "require the active complicity of other social actors." Contentious performers thus draw on a "strategic toolbox" of these objects (chapter 2) in processes of claims-making. At other times, such objects provide a means of psychological transformation that enables participation in contentious politics (chapter 3). Throughout these processes symbolic objects, like Johnston's

artifacts, are "appropriated, discussed, modified . . . amplified and expro-priated for further actions, giving them a life beyond their relatively short-lived material existence" (2009, 16).

Johnston's work on the role of cultural artifacts in protest is valuable, and the broader category of "artifact" is in many ways useful in its own right. Nonetheless, there is, we think, something valuable about studying the intersection of materiality and semiosis that makes the specific concep-tual category of "symbolic object" particularly useful as a unit of analysis. Our own theorization of symbolic objects and their role in contentious politics, derived both from the analyses in this book and a litany of empiri-cal examples and theoretical sources beyond it, is explained in full force in chapter 1.

Thus far, we have described the contours of symbolic objects with an emphasis on their quality as physical "things in the world." Another impor-tant feature of these objects is that they are symbolic. The academic litera-ture on symbols is much too vast to be effectively summarized here, but we do wish to briefly point out the power of the symbolic dimension of symbolic objects. In the context of a comparative ethnography of religious symbolism, Geertz (1957, 422) writes:

> [M]eanings can . . . be "stored" in symbols: a cross, a crescent, or a feathered serpent. Such religious symbols, dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up, for those for whom they are resonant, what is known about the way the world is, the quality of the emotional life it supports, and the way one ought to behave while in it. Sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and a cos-mology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a com-prehensive normative import.

This conceptualization of symbols can also be productively applied to symbolic objects and their place in contentious politics. These objects are containers for multiple meanings, myths, declarations, and stories. Their presence at contentious performances is often ritualized and dramaturgi-cal, and speaks of—and to—notions of "the way the world is." Ontological realities are expressed in and through symbolic objects. They are often imbued with power through their ability to reify abstract ideas, affording collectively held truths an "objective" reality in the world. Crucially, to

reiterate a point made prior, we do not consider symbols alone to be within the purview of the approach taken in this volume: it is the combination of their symbolic quality with their physicality that makes them "symbolic objects."

## The Structure of the Book

The chapters in this book trace the profound scope of symbolic objects in contentious politics from a variety of academic perspectives, running from in-depth sociological inquiries to ethnographic and historical research, and from single-case microanalyses to broad theoretical reflections. The book is organized into three overarching thematic sections, on the creation, potency, and legacy of symbolic objects. Each section reflects the general focus of its constituent chapters on different points in the life cycle of symbolic objects: how they come to play a role in contentious politics (creation), how they operate when deployed (potency), and the invocations, reinventions, and memories they give rise to over time (legacy).

In the first chapter, we set out some of the core parameters for the study of symbolic objects in contentious politics. There, we provide a detailed outline of the scope of the area of study, and connect it to the broader literature on both material culture and contention. Following chapter 1, the book moves into its three thematic sections.

### The Creation of Symbolic Objects

It may sometimes seem that symbolic objects come from nowhere, emerging in the heat of contention, sometimes even by accident; but the process by which objects come to adopt symbolic properties is not always so random and sudden. In some cases, these objects are consciously manufactured, conceived of as part of a toolbox for contentious political action; their symbolic and material properties can be the consequence of careful consideration, as often seen in the props and banners constructed for street-protest displays. At other times, symbolic objects are produced after the fact, designed to reinvoke associations with a contentious episode that they represent but were not in fact present for, as seen in their use in political martyrdom.

Even when a symbolic object arises without conscious manufacture, the process by which those objects take on their full symbolic thrust is often quite gradual. Objects that may have been temporarily repurposed

or borrowed for the purposes of contention often undergo processes of reframing or symbolic renegotiation as they endure, or they may even be set aside when their symbolic properties are insufficiently malleable. Such dilemmas are, for instance, reflected in the case of the Lebanese LGBTQ+ movement. Sometimes, through a continuous process of symbolic contention, objects with preexisting symbolic potency can be reframed and indeed recreated in a fashion almost antithetical to the meaning they originally held—as in the case of the feathered headdress in the contemporary United States.

Chapter 2, "A Strategic Toolbox of Symbolic Objects: Material Artifacts, Visuality, and Strategic Action in European Street-Protest Arenas," by Bartosz Ślosarski, contends that the symbolic objects available to a movement constitute a toolbox from which contentious performers can draw to fulfil their goals. Examining the role of banner making in Polish and German social movements' efforts to gain greater visibility, the chapter shows how symbolic objects' character as both material tools and symbolic, active mediators of human interaction prompt an array of strategic dilemmas for the protesters who develop or acquire them for use in contentious political action.

In chapter 3, "The Nation That (Mis)took Death for Life: The Materiality of Martyrdom, Shia Religiosity, and Contentious Politics in Iran," Younes Saramifar discusses the objects of martyrdom culture, grounded in ethnographic research on Shia resistance in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Drawing from anthropological observations and visual records since 2015, Saramifar's chapter provides a thick description of the meanings and uses of symbolic objects in the production and reproduction of martyrdom. The chapter traces the operation of martyrdom culture through the circulation of symbolic objects and the ideas associated with them across West Asia, with a focus on Iran.

In chapter 4, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow: The Symbolic Politics of In/visibility in Lebanese Queer Activism," John Nagle examines the symbolic politics of the rainbow flag through a study of queer activists in Lebanon. This chapter outlines how the rainbow flag plays an ambiguous role for the Lebanese LGBTQ+ community, simultaneously representing global solidarity and Western sexual imperialism. In light of this, Nagle analyzes the flag's use and deliberate non-use arising in relation to its equivocal visibility. Nagle traces how strategic concerns shaped the rainbow flag's utilization or repudiation in favor of alternative meaning-making materiality, such as graffiti, banners, and murals.

In chapter 5, "The Feathered Headdress: Settler Semiotics, US National Myth, and the Legacy of Colonized Artifacts," Sonja Dobroski shows how "the" Native North American feathered headdress was—through its frequent use in contentious performances—imbued with an array of distinctive symbolic properties that alienated it from the indigenous Americans to whom the object belongs, simultaneously allowing the erasure and appropriation of indigeneity. Dobroski traces how the reinvention of the headdress as a settler symbolic object "allows the settler project to work in the *longue durée*," through its ubiquitous deployment in (hot or banal) nationalist political gatherings. These contentious episodes were used to advance a settler-colonial cause and diminish indigenous claim-making. In this context, even something as seemingly banal as a football game can serve as a contentious political moment in which claims about settler-colonial power are reasserted or maintained.

## The Potency of Symbolic Objects

This section of the book focuses squarely on the invocation of symbolic objects as potent aspects of contentious episodes. The history of contentious politics is replete with such instances, such as the dramatic spectacle of occupied streets in postrevolutionary Portugal, and the flaming body of "the burning monk" Thích Quảng Đức in 1960s Vietnam. At other times, symbolic objects feature in less iconic but still highly influential forms, such as the recurrent use of signatures and signed objects in contentious processes such as the anticommunist Red Scare and the recent Hong Kong protests. Likewise, symbolic objects affixed to protesters' bodies in the 2010 Toronto G20 Summit—though not considered to be particularly meaningful by protesters—became potent symbolic enablers of police violence, unbeknown to those who carried them. Sometimes, it is not merely objects on bodies that have symbolic potency, but the body itself—shown in sharp relief by the enduring contentious purposes of self-immolation protests throughout history.

In chapter 6, "The Symbolism of the Street in Portuguese Contention," Guya Accornero, Tiago Carvalho, and Pedro Ramos Pinto trace the symbolic development and shifting meanings of the street in Portugal's contentious history. Beginning with the nation's anti-authoritarian struggles, the trio trace the emergence of a notion that the nation's streets themselves connoted a legitimate space for democratic power. This arose, they argue, due to the role played by street protest in the revolutionary

and postrevolutionary struggles following the 1974 Carnation Revolution, when there was no established mode of democratic expression. To fill the streets, in this context, was understood to be an expression of the popular will. The authors then trace the further development of the street as a symbolic object in two more-recent contentious episodes: Portugal's anti-austerity struggles, in which the notion of the street as an emancipatory space was developed, and the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, where these positive connotations were temporarily supplanted.

In chapter 7, "Signature, Performance, Contention," Hunter Dukes investigates the act of signing an object as a form of contentious performance that—in affixing one object to another—alters its symbolic properties. Drawing on a wide variety of instances from across the contentious political spectrum, he advances the idea that when objects are signed, they adopt symbolic properties that transmit unto them the agency and character of the signator. "Signing" an object in some form or other is—as Dukes shows—an illocutionary act that can be re-invoked where the object itself is again presented with the signature affixed. Drawing from examples ranging from Hong Kong prodemocracy protests to the anticommunist Red Scare and even international trade disputes, Dukes exposes the complex symbolic consequences of a signature, and its manifestations in contentious political action.

In chapter 8, "Policing Bodies: The Role of Bodywork and Symbolic Objects in Police Violence during the Toronto G20," Valerie Zawilski examines how forces in contentious political action respond to symbolic objects possessed by their opponents. Examining police-protester relations during the 2010 Toronto G20 Summit by drawing on a wide range of historical data and participant testimonies, Zawilski shows how police officers attributed certain meanings to symbolic objects adorning protesters' bodies, and used those attributions to justify violent repression of the Summit protests.

In chapter 9, "Bodies on Fire: Self-Immolation as Spectacle in Contentious Politics," Dennis Zuev explores the politics of self-immolation in contention. The chapter argues that through this dramaturgical and theatrical act of protest, the ritual of self-immolation, the "body-on-fire" itself becomes a symbolic object. Zuev contends that the intensity and poignance of this act renders it a spectacular contentious performance, granting hypervisibility to contentious claims. As a result of this aspect of the flaming body as symbolic object, the act frequently sparks further contentious action.

### The Legacy of Symbolic Objects

Even after having played a role in a contentious episode, symbolic objects can develop longer-running trajectories of invocations and reinvention that last far beyond the initial episode. From the intense symbolism and multi-objectedness of Che Guevara—whose seemingly eternal recurrence haunts contentious political action more than a half-century after his death—to the enduring role of war relics in contentious memorialization, some legacies play out over the exceptional *longue durée*. At other times, the meaning of intensely contested symbolic objects—such as the Mekap shoe in West Asia—is reshaped relatively quickly after their initial invocation in contention. This section of the book delves into the diverse legacies of symbolic objects, and their transformation over time.

Eric Selbin wrote the tenth chapter, "El Che: The (Im)possibilities of a Political Symbol," and investigates the legacy of El Che *as* and *through* symbolic objects. El Che himself, Selbin finds, "is a symbolic object invoked around the world against the state, institutions, and structures that dominate and oppress people, and in favor of equality, for justice, for human rights." After Che's death, contentious political actors have cast novel individuals or personages to re-present his symbolic power in physical form, allowing the revolutionary energy with which he has been associated to be "embodied by an actually existing person who can be present, can show up, can represent the struggle or matter at hand." Selin finds that symbolic objects bearing El Che's visage or associated imagery are also used to call Che to the field of contentious conflict. They are "forceful tool[s]" that—even where they are commodified and supposedly emptied of political content—carry and communicate a hidden potency for contentious political action. These objects, Selbin argues, can become at crucial moments a "source of strength, a demand for justice, a clarion call that says, for so many people in so many places at so many times, we are here, we matter, and we demand better."

In chapter 11, Dilar Dirik describes the symbolic role of yellow Mekap shoes in Kurdish insurgencies and revolutionary activities. These shoes have been worn by Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) members, revolutionaries, and members of both the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Kurdish areas of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. In this short chapter, Dirik outlines how, though the shoe has also been demonized and criminalized as a "terrorists' shoe" by the Turkish state, the struggle against Daesh gave way to a renewed understanding of the Mekap as an important symbol of unity, solidarity, and liberation.

In chapter 12, Scholastica Atata and Ayokunle Omobowale discuss how the physicality of Biafran objects from the Nigerian Civil War replicate the memory of insurgency and provide impetus for collective action in the present. They describe three elements of material culture that have been important in this regard: the Biafran flag, relics of insurgents' war technology (weaponry, armored tanks, and other machinery), and the statue of Biafran insurgency leader Colonel Ojukwu at Niger Bridge, a bridge across the Niger River that connects the rest of Nigeria to the part of the country that seceded in 1967 to form the Biafra Republic. Drawing on primary ethnographic and interview data with Biafran activists, the authors contend that these objects help perpetuate a sense of Biafran nationhood and insurgent mentality in present-day pro-Biafran protest.

Chapter 13 is "The Mask as Political Symbol: On the Ritualization of Political Protest through Mask Wearing," by Bjørn Thomassen and Lone Riisgaard. The authors argue that mask-wearing allows those engaged in contentious politics to make distinctive kinds of social representations about political power. Through the use of masks, protesters can construe relationships to power that differ from the mask-wearers' own, and in so doing simultaneously express contradictory attitudes toward power holders. They can not only erase individual differences and provide anonymity, they can superimpose new identities or theatrical representations on the wearers. Thus, in the authors' analysis, the mask as a symbolic object allows its wearers to deconstruct or indeed reconstruct "implicit images of and ideas about the society in which a group lives and the makeup of their social environment."

In the concluding chapter, we outline some of the most important, overarching themes raised in this volume. In light of one of the central rationales behind the creation of this book—the need for further research in the area—we end by outlining what we consider to be the five most pressing areas in need of further empirical and theoretical development.

*Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics* illustrates the sheer breadth and promise of studying symbolic objects in the context of contention. Its manifold contributions offer insights into a range of cases across continents, cultures, and time, drawing on the expertise of an international and interdisciplinary community of contributors. We hope this book will serve as the initial foray into a fruitful field of inquiry, and help cultivate enduring contributions in the years to come.

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# Contentious Politics and Symbolic Objects

Peter Gardner and Benjamin Abrams

In the Olde Towne of Portsmouth, Virginia, on the site of an old slave whipping post, four figures, cast in dramatic white bronze, flank a thirty-five-foot obelisk dedicated to those who served the Confederate States of America. Or at least, they did. On June 10, 2020, under the watchful eye of police and media alike, silhouetted against a pan-African flag, protesters decapitated each of the four statues before finally tearing them down. In other cities, similar statues were symbolically lynched, set on fire, covered in fake blood, and even drowned as part of a nationwide rising against white supremacy. Where they had once been objects that lent everyday legitimacy to the Confederate cause (quite literally placing it on a pedestal), during the 2020 American rising these statues became canvases for the symbolic castigation, punishment, and annihilation of white supremacy. In a struggle so distinctively about people, structures, and ideologies, these symbolic objects nonetheless took center stage.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the prominent role played by statues in contemporary American protest is something of an academic curio: a relatively unique case in which some particularly symbolic objects played a highly influential role in contentious politics. After all, when we observe protest marches, insurgent movements, and unruly masses in the world today, our gaze is instinctively drawn to two things: the people, and the problem. All too often, we fail to see what is right in front of us. Amid the crowds, regiments, and mobs of contentious politics, litanies of objects routinely fill our field of vision. Some such objects are ubiquitous

the world over, including flags, banners, placards, and other classic pro-
test tools. Others are situationally unique; who could have anticipated
the historical importance of a flower placed in the barrel of a gun, a flam-
ing torch, a sea of umbrellas, a motorist's yellow vest, a feather headdress,
or a knitted pink hat?

These are what we call symbolic objects: powerful and potent signifiers
in political contention. They range from flags to protest placards, from
controversial statues to symbolic bodies and personages, from masks and
uniforms to the machete and the AK-47. Importantly, these are not simply
objects, or only symbols: they are at once physical objects *and* symbolically
potent. Symbolic objects can denote resistance, collective action, and peo-
plehood, on the part of groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, political
party, class, and gender and sexuality, among others. They can present nar-
ratives, articulate symbolic arguments, and make proclamations, and they
can be used as tools in protest and other contentious actions. Such objects
can divide and unite social groups, tell stories, make declarations, spark
controversies, and even trigger violent upheavals. Despite the prominent
and often profound role these symbolic objects play, in the academic litera-
ture on contentious politics they are almost nowhere to be seen. Objects
and materiality have been chronically underrepresented and undertheo-
rized in the study of social movements, war and conflict, revolutions, and
other contentious political phenomena.

When we speak of "contentious politics," we refer to any form of dis-
ruptive action that aims to effect change upon the social order.[1] Impor-
tantly, contentious politics includes but is not limited to social movements.
As Tarrow (2015, 3) explains, the term "does include movements, but it
also includes contention between striking workers and their employers,
insurgent armed forces and their governments, the contestants in civil
wars, and revolutionary coalitions and the states they strive to overthrow."
We find contentious politics across the totality of situations in which there
is something at stake that cannot be resolved without transgressing or
superseding existing power structures, whether those situations intensely
involve governing authorities, or include them only as passive bystanders.

This volume brings together a geographically and disciplinarily diverse
group of researchers to explore the roles and effects of objects in conten-
tion. In bringing these two phenomena together, our aim is to develop a

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1. We are here paraphrasing Tilly's definition of the term: "interactions in which actors
make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as tar-
gets, initiators of claims or third parties" (2008, 5).

serious, distinctive, and cohesive theoretical contribution that provides the foundations for future inquiry in this important yet largely untapped field.

In this chapter, we develop what we see as the promise of studying symbolic objects in contentious politics. Our aim is not to put forward a particular argument about how objects in contention must be interpreted, but to offer what we understand to be some of the most promising parameters for interpreting these fascinating empirical phenomena, inspired by the diverse inquiries to which this book plays host. The chapter is organized into three sections. First, we develop and discuss the scope of symbolic objects in contentious politics as an area of study. Second, we outline key lessons from work on symbolism and materiality that inform our understanding of symbolic objects. Third, we examine more precisely how studying symbolic objects can enrich our understanding of key areas in the study of contentious politics.

## The Scope of Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

Throughout the history of human culture, objects have played crucial and far-reaching social roles. Historians have deemed this to be so much the case that some of the earliest phases of human history are named after the materials from which objects were formed. When we speak of the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages, we refer specifically to the materials people drew on to constitute their societies and give meaning to their lives. Archaeologists have long understood that objects simultaneously functionally intervene in the natural world, and contain or reveal "cultural information": revelations about, undercurrents to, and contention within a given culture (Wisseman and Williams 1994, 3). Geographers similarly know that "objects are an irreducible part of all stories . . . of the human, both individually and collectively, and that this could not be otherwise" (Braun, Whatmore, and Stengers 2010, xix). It is because of the vitalizing role of objects in human history that some philosophers have even argued that we should see them as "quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett 2010, viii). Our claim is not so bold. We argue merely that objects play a central role in shaping, maintaining, and shifting the social world and the material conditions that underpin it. From this standpoint we thus allege that objects *also* play a central role in contentious politics, and that this is particularly so for those that are symbolic in character.

This section outlines several key dimensions of symbolic objects in contentious politics to further clarify the agenda put forward in this volume. In

what follows, we outline these objects' qualitative variation; their various roles as target, component, and stimulus in contention; and their capacity to be banal, charged, or anything between. In the final subsection, we outline some of the limits of this area of study.

### Qualitative Variation

Symbolic objects in contentious politics can come in a range of sizes; they can be easily transportable or relatively static, long-lasting or ephemeral, and animate or inanimate. In terms of size, these range from buttons bearing political messages (Tucker 2006) and safety pins worn by anarchist punks (Goldthorpe 1992) to seafaring vessels (Farrell et al. 2019) and towering walls in urban anticolonial struggle (Legg 2008). Many objects, such as flags, placards, and weapons, are portable; others, such as walls, monuments, and buildings, are more or less immobile. However, as illustrated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, and the Sons of Liberty's systematic deconstruction of the home of the administrator charged with enforcing the 1765 Stamp Act in Massachusetts, no such object is truly permanent. Objects in contention have a range of life spans: they can be ephemeral and momentary (a milkshake thrown at a politician), makeshift and transient (tents on Wall Street during the Occupy movement), and longer-lasting (protest art that becomes a more or less permanent feature of the urban landscape). In this regard, we can also consider how certain objects are produced for specific social actions only (for example, banners or effigies), while others have alternative uses in their "lives" outside of contention (for example, coat hangers before and after their use in pro-choice protests in Poland). Importantly, symbolic objects are not simply inanimate. Fruitful lines of inquiry have emerged from scholars who consider the human body itself to be a symbolic object in contention (Bernstein 2013; Cornish and Saunders 2013; Eileraas 2014; Purnell 2014, 2019; chapters 8, 9, and 10, this volume; see also Baer 2016). In the context of contention, it is clear that objects have at least the capacity to play roles beyond the aims or intentions of the individuals who produce them, bring them, or perform with them.

### Target, Component, Stimulus

Symbolic objects in their many forms routinely figure as targets of, components in, or stimuli for contentious political struggles. First, objects can be

a target—or, indeed, *the* target—of collective action, wherein taking action that has some bearing on a symbolic object becomes an aim of the particular contentious activity. Most commonly, this involves pursuing the alteration, appropriation, or destruction of a symbolic object. This is seen in the recent attempts by antiracist protesters to take down Confederate flags in many US states, in the replacement of colonial street signs for indigenous place names from Uganda and India to Ireland and Canada, and in the toppling of controversial statues in societies throughout the world. Similarly, during the Sri Lankan Civil War, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, where the relic of the tooth of the Buddha is housed, was bombed, allegedly by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This attack aimed not only to damage the iconic temple itself, but to destroy the tooth relic, a potent symbol of both Buddhist primacy and Sinhalese sovereignty in Sri Lanka (Coningham and Lewer 1999). Conversely, there are cases in which the *restoration* of a symbolic object becomes the focus of contentious action. When Belfast City Council voted in 2012 to reduce the number of days the Union Flag (the national flag of the UK) was flown above Belfast City Hall from 365 to 18 designated days per year, the empty flagpole at City Hall became the site of intense protest by Northern Ireland's unionist/loyalist communities (Hayward et al. 2014). The removal of the flag was interpreted as a direct attack on their sense of collective identification; but furthermore, it was perceived as validating the narrative of Protestant victimhood and exclusion in post–Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland (Hearty 2015). In this instance, the absence of the symbolic object was the target of protest action, with the reinstating of the flag as its central aim. Causes have also *added* symbolic objects to public spaces to accompany others in order to further a political argument. After Republican politicians donated statues of the Ten Commandments to be placed outside the Oklahoma and Arkansas capitol buildings, the Satanic Temple of the USA responded by donating their own statue for the same purpose: an 8-foot bronze of Baphomet, a half-man, half-goat deity of the occult (Laycock 2020). To Baphomet's left and right stood a young boy and girl, gazing up in admiration. The Satanic Temple did not, in fact, aim for both statues to be removed, but rather for both to stand side by side as a visual representation of the First Amendment requirement to treat all religious beliefs equally, and to challenge Christian hegemony in the US.

Second, and perhaps most commonly, symbolic objects feature as components in contentious politics. Physical things are held or held up, gesticulated with, worn, stood upon, sheltered underneath, revealed, produced,

and utilized in a plethora of other ways as part of contentious performances. From protest placards to revolutionary armbands, from the colored shirt in Thai riots to the machete in African insurgencies, and across the ubiquity of flags of all kinds in actions as disparate as LGBTQ+ pride parades, socialist revolutions, terrorist compounds, environmentalist protests, nationalist insurgencies, and workers' strikes, contention is profuse with physical objects. The presence of these symbolic objects can be potent, acting as a form of declaration, a speech act, a tool, and a representation of unity and solidarity. Striking workers commonly hold a small range of homogeneous banners and flags, often produced by their union. Nationalist insurgents often create uniforms, iconic weaponry, unauthorized memorials, and the flags of their preferred nation-state. Scholastica Atata and Ayokunle Omobowale illustrate this in relation to the Biafra nationalist insurgency in Nigeria (see chapter 12). The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia reached its apogee when the revolution's leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, led an assemblage of demonstrators to disrupt the national parliament in Tbilisi carrying red roses in his hands, a symbol of the Georgian people's "shared belief in nonviolence" (Fairbanks 2004, 114). Extinction Rebellion's large-scale protest actions in 2019 saw a plethora of art utilized in their contentious performances, including a giant octopus sculpture, a five-foot human skull cast in white resin, and the movement's iconic pink boat.

As symbols come to be aligned to specific movements, they are often appropriated for use outside of their original context. As Eric Selbin masterfully demonstrates in chapter 10, Che Guevara has become a global presence through his pervasive reproduction: a symbolic body duplicated and reprinted on paraphernalia of all kinds. This is also visible in the decontextualized adoption of Soviet socialist symbolism by the chain of high-street bar-restaurants called Revolution. In the 2016 and 2020 US elections, Donald Trump's campaign involved the wearing of "MAGA" hats by his supporters. The red cap sporting the phrase "Make America Great Again" in white has since begun to semiotically diffuse, with the wearing of any red cap taking on the potential to (mistakenly or not) identify its wearers as, variously, a supporter of Trump, a white nationalist, or a far-right sympathizer. As these examples demonstrate, multiplicitous and fluid meanings can stick to objects in ways that permit them to transgress the boundaries of their earlier contentious performances and be utilized in other social and political contexts.

Third, objects can act as stimuli for (further) contentious action. Speaking of words rather than objects, Tarrow (2013, 116) argues that "conten-

tious language not only expresses mobilization but also stimulates emotions and drives episodes of contention." By the same measure, symbolic objects can communicate the politics of affect and hence stimulate forms of collective response. Bodies—especially those of the deceased—often play these roles. In 1955, the lynched corpse of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was made visible to all who attended his open-casket funeral. His mother's decision to move his body "from a muddy river bottom in the Mississippi Delta to a public exhibition in urban Chicago" had the effect of transforming Till "from a victim of white racism to an unforgettable symbol that mobilized a generation of activists" (Harold and DeLuca 2005, 271). Similarly, when the South African state responded to the 1976 Soweto school protests with brutal force, the limp body of Hecker Pieterson being carried away from the scene came to embody the inhumanity of apartheid regime. This poignant and emotive image provoked not only a further round of black resistance in South Africa itself, but a rise in international solidarity movements worldwide (Skinner 2017). In a similar vein, the act of self-immolation has also produced highly emotive societal responses and incited new forms of contentious politics (see chapter 9). Thích Quảng Đức setting himself alight in protest against the Western-backed government of South Vietnam was a critical juncture, inciting further protest in opposition to President Ngô Đình Diệm's government in the 1960s, and it inspired subsequent anti-imperial and anticapitalist insurgency. By the same token, arguably the initial act of the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, the spark which set the entire region ablaze.

Of course, objects as stimuli for contention need not be limited to the viscerality of dead and dying bodies. In Myanmar, the government decision to construct a golden statue of General Aung San, the revolutionary leader and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, gave rise to widespread protest by ethnic minority groups across the state (Milko 2019). In Queensland, Australia, workers on a building site went on strike after their employers removed the flag of their union (Hannan 2016). In the United Kingdom, the 2019 European Parliament elections saw the rise of the practice of "milkshaking" right-wing candidates. A milkshake was thrown at far-right activist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson) in May 2019, and this act inspired others to "milkshake" a variety of politically reactionary elites, including UKIP and Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage. Here, the milkshake became a symbolic expression of disgust being poured on the political outlook of the milkshaked individual. As each of these three examples illus-

trate, the presence—or indeed removal—of symbolically important objects can trigger contention.

Importantly, these three roles of symbolic objects in contention—target, component, and stimulus—are not mutually exclusive. An object may begin as a target of contentious action but then become a component. After the women of Revolutionary Paris captured the royal cannons stationed at the Hôtel de Ville, they incorporated the captured objects as a component in their subsequent demands, pushing them the many miles to the Palace of Versailles, and riding astride them triumphantly. An object may initially be a component, but then be transformed into a stimulus. For example, when the *gilets jaunes* protests first emerged on the French political scene, the yellow vest was employed to signify the unity and ordinariness of the protesters. Because all motor vehicle drivers were required to keep a luminous jacket in their vehicles, the object thus became a *stimulus* for further contention, its everyday presence serving as a prompt to encourage motorists to participate in future actions if they encountered them while driving. As the yellow vest itself came to signify collective action in opposition to the state, it became a catalyst for further similar actions, to the extent that as the repertoire spread from France to other countries, protesters in other parts of the world went out to buy them, and other contentious causes—inspired by the vest's symbolic potency—initiated new protest efforts that used the yellow vest to indicate a kind of grassroots populist character. We also see cases where an object is both a target of and a stimulus for contentious action. In the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the "Twin Towers" were targeted by the Al Qaeda terrorist movement. As many around the world looked on in horror, for those who identified with the jihadist cause it offered inspiration for a further escalation of contention. Finally, objects can play all three of the roles we have discussed. When antigovernment protesters stormed the Kuwaiti Parliament and stole the Speaker's gavel (used to rule over parliamentary procedure) during the 2011 Arab Spring, they appropriated the implement as a kind of symbolic trophy, reproducing oversized copies of their own for use in protests. "The hammer was reproduced in several larger copies and displayed during rallies, sit-ins, house gatherings, public and private gardens, and posted on the social media, reiterating the intention to [resume] street protests in case of unaccomplished reforms" (Buscemi 2017, 263–64). The protesters declared that the gavel would only be returned in 2020 "when things in the country had turned to their liking" (Darwish 2011, 1).

*Banal or Charged*

Symbolic objects in contention range from the banal to the highly charged. The former are objects that are more or less unremarkable in the context of a given form of contention, so much so that their presence is commonly overlooked. The placard represents an exemplary case of a banal symbolic object. Placards are pervasive. They can be highly adorned or relatively plain, professionally produced or home-made. They may contain written or visual content, and they can be comical or serious. Regarding their "transferability across different contentious contexts" (Wada 2012, 544), placards represent one of most successful cases in the history of contentious politics. They appear at Pride parades, far-right rallies, the street marches of communist revolutionaries, pro-democracy protests and marches in support of absolute monarchy, at antiwar demonstrations and workers strikes at munitions factories, and are held by both protesters and their counter-protesters. Placards are so ubiquitous in the repertoires of such actions that holding one, or being near someone who is doing so, has become a way to identify an individual—or to identify oneself—as a demonstrator or picketer. Irrespective of what appears on the placard itself, this object has become synonymous with the expression of collective grievance. The nonvisibility of the placard as a symbolic object in contention is reflected in the literature; thus far, they have received little to no attention. A small number of productive studies have involved content analyses of protest placards (Martsenyuk 2005; Alekseevsky 2011; Bowcher 2012; Mayer et al. 2015), but to our knowledge there has been no attempt to conceptualize the placard as an object in and of itself. As Miller (2010) contends, the banality of certain objects in particular contexts can render them socially powerful: "The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behavior, without being open to challenge."

At the other end of the spectrum, objects can be highly charged, their very appearance in an episode of contention being impactful, remarkable, or even shocking. We see this in the use of bodily fluids in US protests against the encroaching regulation of bodies (Bivens and Cole 2018), of traditional dugout canoes by Malawian protesters opposing oil drilling at Lake Malawi (Lemu and Ngwira 2018), and the monstrous sculpture of a pig held aloft by demonstrators in Nairobi in 2013 to represent the greed of Kenyan politicians (Halliday 2019). In June 2017, farmers from

Tamil Nadu staged a protest in the Indian capital. The local impacts of the global climate crisis in this southern state of India have included droughts, late monsoons, higher temperatures, and unpredictable rainfall (Varadan and Kumar 2014). For farmers, this has meant reduced yields, repeated crop failures, and a range of other ecological challenges, which, alongside broader national and global geographies of inequality, have pushed many into debt, instability, and poverty (Mehta and Kumar 2017). Protesters assembled in New Delhi, and began to engage in highly emotive performances through which they aimed to represent their plight. Many shaved half their heads and moustaches, removed their clothes, and drank urine. A particularly potent feature of the protest aesthetic was wearing oversized necklaces made from human skulls, described as the skulls of farmers whose plight had resulted in death by suicide. These grim objects presented an irrefutable visual assertion of the crisis faced by the agricultural workers of Tamil Nadu.

Of course, symbolic objects do not simply fall into a single category, but rather form a continuum from the banal to the highly charged. Their place on this continuum is not fixed over time or homogenous across participants and observers. Over the course of a contentious performance, objects can gain intensity of impact or fade into the totality of the act. At times, symbolic objects are employed to gain visibility or shock value. At other times, they play less combative or more prosaic roles.

### The Limits of Symbolic Objects

Though symbolic objects play important roles in contentious politics, we do not wish to claim that such objects are the single most decisive or significant element to consider when conceptualizing contention. It is not the case that symbolic objects represent overarching causal variables, holding the potential to explain all aspects of social action. Indeed, it is necessary to place these phenomena in their historical context, and to consider the role symbolic objects perform in conjunction with a variety of other social forces. For example, conceptualizing Northern Ireland's Union Flag protests outside Belfast City Hall in 2012 requires more than an understanding of the symbolism of the flag itself. The history of the Troubles, the rise of power-sharing and ethnically framed peace, the ideology of unionism, the political economy of Northern Ireland, the failure of the much-promised "peace dividend" to actualize in working-class areas, and the organizational structure of loyalist contention are all crucially important in this regard

(Nagle 2009; Hayward et al. 2014; Hearty 2015). Rather than presenting symbolic objects as a nostrum for conceptualizing contention, our aim is to call attention to the frequent inadequacy of the attention paid to them, and to the need to decompartmentalize the field to produce a more unified conceptualization of how they function in these contexts.

Of course, not everything that is physical or material is of equal symbolic importance in contentious politics. Objects are everywhere, but they do not always rise to the level of being distinctly symbolically important. While the umbrellas used as pepper-spray shields by Hong Kong protesters became symbolic of the entire pro-democracy movement, the ones contemporaneously carried by Scottish Independence protesters on one of the country's wetter days were nothing more than shields against the rain. Furthermore, much that is material may be important in conceptualizing social change and social action in some regard, but not primarily for its symbolic qualities. Silver may be relevant for reading the rise of revolutions in South America, and understanding the discovery of gold around Johannesburg helps us properly assess the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism prior to the Boer Wars, but this is more for its economic than its symbolic power. To be sure, alongside their symbolic properties, the objects we discuss in this volume do intersect with economic, political, and ideological forms of power; however, our aim is to draw specific attention to symbolically important objects in contention. What we call a symbolic object is neither a symbol nor an object alone. It is both at once. The interaction of symbolic objects' material and symbolic qualities is what lends them the many distinctive roles that they play in processes of contention around the world and across history.

Thus far in this chapter, we have outlined some of the key parameters for the study of symbolic objects in contentious politics. In the following two sections, we develop this agenda further by engaging with key lessons from the literature on (1) symbolism and materiality, and (2) contentious politics.

## Material Culture and Contention

Material culture studies calls our attention to the intricacies of "the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space" (Miller and Tilley 1996, 5), and to "the multilayered ways in which persons and things might be drawn into relations with one another" (Geismar, Küchler, and Carroll 2016, 4). Since the "material turn" of the 1980s, research in

the area has rapidly expanded. This has produced an extensive array of productive work, much of which could be fruitfully applied to researching the roles and realities of objects in contentious politics. A full material cultural analysis of these forms of collective action would go substantially beyond the scope of this book, considering everything from the capacity of a jacket worn at a picket line to "hold" memories of strike action to the material composition of the objects involved (Ingold 2007). It could encompass the wood, paper, cardboard, ink, and paint of the placards, and the vinyl, metal, and wood of the banner. While doing so may be interesting and potentially productive, our aim in this book is, rather, to consider specifically the effects of objects in and on contention itself.

Objects do things, and do things to us; there is a mutually constitutive relationship between things and people (Gell 1998; Miller 2005, 2010; Miller et al. 2005). As Miller and Tilley (1996, 8) put it in regard to material culture studies broadly, the "fact that objects tend to be meaningful rather than merely communicate meaning has helped move our concerns from narrow questions of semantics to larger issues of identity." While this is clearly the case when it comes to the material culture of strikes, protests, revolutionary movements, terror, and insurgency, our focus is on what objects do in these contexts. To exemplify the point, several impactful studies have demonstrated that the things people keep in their homes influence their identities, their sense of who they are "as moral beings with histories and beliefs, who are both socialized and individuated" (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Hurdley 2006, 729; Latimer and Munro 2009). Similarly, a flag flown by a demonstrator at a protest march may be subsequently displayed in their home such that it has various impacts their sense of self. While certainly worthy of attention, our approach in this volume would draw attention primarily to whether such practices affect involvement in subsequent protests and other forms of contention.

For another example, consider the following description from Tobias Carroll's (2020, 45–50) book *Political Sign*:

> When I was a small child, my mother took me to a demonstration in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment. . . . I still have a souvenir from the rally . . . : a green button, about two inches in diameter, with the phrase "ERA YES" emblazoned on it in white, angular letters. The button was an omnipresent element of my childhood, something to sit on the shelves of my bedroom beside Matchbox cars, pictures of dinosaurs, and snow globes. For the first few years

I had it, I don't even think I knew what it meant. . . . By the time I
was old enough to start caring about politics . . . it still took me too
long to look back at that green button and parse out what that actu-
ally meant. . . . [In] learning about what the ERA stood for—and the
fact that it had been blocked for decades by elements of movement
conservatism—helped me clarify my own politics.

Importantly, Carroll's politics ended up including a significant amount of
involvement in contention, including attending protest marches, rallies,
and demonstrations. In this way, the protest button itself acted as a com-
ponent in the author's political socialization, influencing his engagement
in collective action many years down the line. A similar trajectory is found
in Saramifar's (chapter 3, this volume) account of consumers of martyrdom
trinkets being set on the pathway to becoming martyrs themselves.

The meanings, interpretations, and effects of objects are not static or
stable, but change over time and according to context. Following Kopy-
toff (1986), the use of the metaphor of object "biographies" has become
commonplace across the material-culture literature. This approach calls
for attention to be paid to the lives of objects, from their conception and
construction to their movement, exchange, usage(s), and destruction or
museumification. Over their life course, the meanings attached to objects
often change, with new meanings added, prior connotations supplanted or
translated, and emotions "stuck" to them (Ahmed 2014). At the same time,
the field has demonstrated a tendency to overemphasize semiotic dyna-
mism, as Fontijn (2013, 183) points out:

> Transformations can take place when objects change ownership and
> travel, though shifts in meaning are just as likely to happen when
> objects stay where they are. Reviewing the broad field of material
> culture studies in anthropology, archaeology or art history, one
> sometimes has the impression that it is not particularly the mean-
> ing of things that is studied, but rather changes in meaning. One
> could easily get the idea that the most essential point to be made
> in interpretations of material culture is that its interpretation is in a
> constant state of flux.

Rather, attention needs to also be paid to the "stability or subtle changes"
of such meanings, where "there may be long periods of inertness and sta-
sis" (Fontijn 2013, 183).

A lot can be gained from applying these theoretical contributions to the analysis of objects in contentious politics—the various meanings that come to be attached to things prior to, during, and as a consequence of their appearance in these contexts. Some objects are made specifically—or only—for use in the contentious performance (such as a protester's placard), while others were produced for other purposes but took on new meanings upon their appearance during collective action (such as the carrying of wooden spoons by Slovak protesters opposing the implementation of more restrictive laws on abortion). Some objects have layers of meaning that give shock value to their presence in contentious performances, such as the aforementioned necklaces made from human skulls worn by protesting farmers in New Delhi. Other more banal objects can gain symbolic potency through their use in contention. As Dilar Dirik points out in chapter 11, the "yellow Mekap" shoe was initially used by Kurdish insurgents for pragmatic reasons during the Kurdish-Turkish conflict (1978–present), but it only became symbolically important when it was identified by the Turkish state as subversive.

Although Fontijn (2013) is right to point out that the meanings of objects are not always and everywhere in constant flux, we contend that the processes, spaces, transitions, and activities that come under the umbrella of contentious politics are particularly conducive to semiotic instability. These are "hot" moments, wherein the meanings of aesthetics are contested, interpretations of things are often brought under sudden and intensified scrutiny by stakeholders of all kinds, and cultural wars over the terrain of narrative telling are being fought.

A crucial element of Kopytoff's biographical approach to objects was his emphasis on "idealized biographies," the normative societal expectations assigned to the life course of objects (1986, 66). Objects in society are expected to have the "right sort" of beginning, use, and end—a fact brought into sharp focus when these expectations are transgressed (Fontijn 2013). This observation is particularly relevant to contentious performances. In such contexts, it is often through the transgression of normative object biographies that such objects acquire increased potency, from tents erected in inner-city roads and squares during Occupy and associated movements to the use of giant inflatable ducks in Thailand's 2020 protests (Ratcliffe 2020). Such transgressions can trigger acute consternation:

> We are shocked by pictures of the looting and destruction of the Iraqi Museum of Antiquities in 2003 because they forcefully remind

us that such treatment is completely at odds with what we see as the appropriate life-path of such antiquities, namely to be on display in a museum as inalienable possessions marking the progress of civilization. (Fontijn 2013, 185)

Similarly, the Islamic State's destruction of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 2015, often understood as a simple exercise in premodern "barbarism," might more productively be read as acts of violence against idealized object biographies, with the purpose of shaking Western sensibilities to their core. More generally, a Kopytoffian approach to objects in contentious politics offers a productive framework for analysis, illuminating the fact that while some objects were "made" only for protest (for example, placards and banners), others accomplish contentious goals precisely because of their deviation from their idealized biographies (such as Extinction Rebellion's decision to place a boat at a busy London intersection).

## Contentious Politics through the Lens of Symbolic Objects

Symbolic objects are everywhere in contentious politics, and we believe that their study has much to contribute to our understanding of contention. They may take the form of resources to be mobilized, or emerge as vital components in movements' strategies. They can serve as structuring elements of movement cultures or as the props in actors' repertoires of contention, carrying the language of contention and the emotions of protest. When we see contentious politics through the lens of symbolic objects, opportunities to expand the scope of our analyses are legion. We necessarily detail only a select few of these opportunities here, to illustrate what we believe to be the promise of such an analytical approach.

Jasper (1997), in *The Art of Moral Protest*, sought to clarify four irreducible dimensions of contentious political action: resources, strategies, culture, and biography. Each of Jasper's proposed dimensions may be further enriched by the inclusion of symbolic objects. First, "resources" are "the tools through which humans instrumentally change the objective physical world," the various material, technological, and financial capabilities available to those involved in collective action (see also McCarthy and Zald 1977, 43). When it comes to symbolic objects, resources are clearly an important factor, given that the physical "stuff" of contention needs to be acquired, professionally produced or built by actors in the movement, and made available for use.

Second, "strategies" are the decisions and tactics contrived by organizations and individuals aiming to achieve specific ends. Symbolic objects are often a part of strategy: individuals, groups, and organizations need to decide what objects to use or discourage the use of; how objects should be used, adorned, worn, or presented; when and where they are to be hidden or made visible; and even, at times, how objects should be interpreted. However, objects can—and often do—emerge as symbolically important in contention without strategic decision-making on the part of the contentious actors.

Third, Jasper describes "culture" as sets of mutually held understandings relating to "beliefs, feeling, rituals, symbols, practices, moral visions" and similar cognitive, moral, and emotional features (1997, 48). This dimension is often captured in and represented by the aesthetics of contention, in the cultural politics of objects and their usage. Jasper's fourth category, "biography," essentially corresponds to the psychology and lived experiences of the individuals involved in collective action. Of course, this factor would certainly lead to different outcomes when it comes to the use of symbolic objects in contention. However, in each of these four dimensions, objects should be considered not simply as passive components, but as active elements of contention. As discussed in prior paragraphs, scholars of material culture (at least since Kopytoff) have suggested that objects themselves have biographies; they coproduce culture through human-object interactions, and their availability as a resource for contention can make them influential factors in strategy-making.

All this is to say that symbolic objects play central roles in many causes' repertoires of contention, "the array of collective actions which people employ" in a given time and place (Tilly 1977, 131). Some of these roles take the form of provocative performances or displays with objects designed to instigate or encourage further contention. Flaming objects quite often serve such a purpose. The Ku Klux Klan used cross-burning as a symbolic ritual designed to initiate waves of violence and intimidation, while Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation served as the starting-pistol for a wave of revolutionary protest in Tunisia. The brandishing and reading of the Declaration of Independence served a similar role in American revolutionary engagements, where public performances with the document were used to whip crowds into a revolutionary frenzy. Symbolic objects are also used to enhance ordinary protest activity. Marches, rallies, and occupations almost always incorporate a range of performances with symbolic objects. These include activities as diverse as flag-waving, placard-holding, the

hanging of banners, and even the use of floats, effigies, and puppets. Contention targeting an object also features in repertoires of contention across history. Attacks on offensive or unpopular statues can be found in war, revolution, riot, and radical activism throughout history, while marches to a given symbolic location such as a memorial or a city square routinely feature in the history of organized protest.

Much that can be gleaned from studies of contentious language also applies to how objects work in contention. Tarrow, in *The Language of Contention*, explores how certain words and phrases have real-world effects in the context of contentious politics, and how "new words . . . diffuse across social and territorial boundaries to new actors" (2013, 5). Tracing the trajectories of language, such as "chauvinist pig," "boycott," and "taxpayer," he contends that repertoires of language are configured "as a result of the intersection of symbolic resonance and strategic modularity" (2013, 18). By "symbolic resonance," Tarrow means the extent to which particular words and phrases are able to be(come) culturally and politically relevant in a given context. "Strategic modularity" refers to the capacity for language to be transferred from the context in which it emerged into other circumstances "without losing the strategic advantages [it] originally possessed" (2013, 18).

Both symbolic resonance and strategic modularity are clearly applicable in tracing the transferability and durability of symbolic objects across time and space. Important symbiotic relationships also exist between object-based performances that become symbolically loaded and later language adopted to describe contentious politics, as seen in the origins of the word "strike"—"eighteenth-century sailors in the port of London 'struck' (i.e., lowered) the sails of their ships as a sign of their unwillingness to work, in a 1768 dispute with shipworkers" (Tarrow 2013, 61). However, the material nature of objects renders them distinct from language, because their transferability across contexts also depends on their transportability and/ or reproducibility, and hence the (economic and other) resources available to the contentious actors in question. In this way, we would propose that, to extend Tarrow's schema to symbolic objects, "physical replicability" should be added to symbolic resonance and strategic modularity. Indeed, in *Power in Movement*, Tarrow (1998, 203–4) highlights how items invoked or invented during a given period of protest become "symbols of their respective cycles of contention," helping "to keep the flame of mobilization alive, often after its initial fuel was consumed," and sometimes even subsequently reappearing "in more diffuse and less militant form, where they can serve as sources for the symbols of future movements."

Symbolic objects can come to play a crucial role—we argue—not only in the kinds of stories that come to prominence in contentious politics, but as a way to reify narratives about causes or episodes of contention. Francesca Polletta's (1998, 2006) work on the role of narratives in social movements has shown the often-profound importance of narratives in shaping contentious political action, but nowhere does Polletta constrain to the spoken or written word how such narratives are constructed. This has been further explored in the work of Eric Selbin, who emphasizes the representation of objects as one of the three central means by which "resistance, rebellion and revolution are made to seem possible" (2010, 75–76). For Selbin (2003, 83–84), objects in contentious politics have the capacity to "become symbols redolent with meaning(s) and freighted with significance and import, consequential in their invocation and deployment, their story—and the part they are made to play in other stories—contested by people from all sides in the struggle to articulate the case(s) for or against revolution."

The diffusion of symbolic objects in contentious politics can also occur within movements rather than only between them. Soule's (1997) landmark analysis of the diffusion of mock "shantytown" student accommodation structures such as "Biko Hall" and "Karl Marx House" on US student campuses shows how institutional character and student identity were decisive in the adoption and restaging of shantytown structures. At other times, the diffusion of symbolic objects within cycles of contention is a distinctly strategic choice. Activist framing efforts often involve creating or drawing on existing symbols (and by extension, symbolic objects) that bring together "the groups they wish to appeal to, their own beliefs and aspirations, and their situations of struggle to create solidarity and animate collective action" (Tarrow 1998, 156; see also Gamson and Meyer 1996). Ślosarski's (chapter 2) analysis of the use of banners in contemporary European street protests furthers this line of inquiry, examining how activists' desire to use symbolic objects to make their demands visible and attractive is tempered by distinctive dilemmas arising from their materiality. At other times, objects themselves are the targets of these framing efforts (Snow and Byrd 2007; Dobroski, chapter 5, this volume), and have their meanings contested, recategorized, or transformed through processes of contention.

Sometimes, the contentious political role of symbolic objects can be found not in large-scale processes, but in the context of small-scale actions. Drawing on Randall Collins' (2014) work on emotional energy, Jasper (2018) argues in *The Emotions of Protest* that individuals taking part in col-

lective action can have various effects on each other's emotions, influencing the "mood" of the group. He explains:

> Face-to-face interactions—ritualized to varying degrees and in various ways—generate emotional energy that gives participants confidence and a sense of energy. They carry this energy to their next encounters, along chains of interactions, with each interaction raising or (if unsuccessful) lowering emotional energy. . . . Successful ritual interactions generate both positive moods and affective commitments. Physical copresence is important, as the sights, sounds, smells, and physical contact combine for an overwhelming sense of connection with one another. Speakers and audiences unconsciously fall into rhythm with each other. People feel "an energy" or "an electricity" in the room. (Jasper 2018, 82–83)

Our elaboration on Jasper's observation here is quite simple: if the transmission of emotional energy is possible through human interaction, it is likewise possible as a result of human-object interaction. Anecdotally, at least, it seems to us fairly uncontroversial to suggest that banners, flags, placards, and other such objects all have the potential to influence collective moods. By way of example, sources from Extinction Rebellion speak of the euphoria that spread through the crowd on the arrival of the pink boat in Oxford Circus (XR, 2020). Similarly, Jen Reid, an activist in the UK Black Lives Matter protests, described how "seeing the statue of Edward Colston being thrown into the river felt like a truly historical moment" (Quinn and Reid 2020).

There are, of course, many more instances beyond the context of protest where thinking about contentious politics through the lens of symbolic objects yields considerable benefits. Indeed, we contend that much is to be gained from analyzing the roles played by symbolic objects within the nexus of war-making, state-building, and contention. Flags have often moved from use by revolutionaries to postrevolutionary state-building and national armies, and subsequently back into forms of antiwar and civil rights–based movements (Casquete 2003; Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Girard 2009; Bertaud 2019). As Atata and Omobowale demonstrate in chapter 12 of this volume, Biafran war technologies built during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) have become an inspiration for Igbo protests over ethnonational rights in contemporary Nigeria. In the US, statues of Confederate generals of the Civil War were co-opted into postbellum

state-building narratives (Cook 2017), but have also been symbolic targets in antiracist protest (Dickinson 2020). The way the various constellations of warfare, state-building, and contention have come to shape the parameters of states, memory, and rights (Tarrow 2015) is a story that can be more completely told with reference to the roles played by symbolic objects.

An appreciation of symbolic objects helps to complete the study of contentious politics, which has so far profitably delved into processual, structural, intergroup, and individual factors. Symbolic objects can be found playing purposeful roles in contentious politics, whether we choose to examine the scenes of street protests, picket lines, and occupations, or to turn our gaze to bloody battlefields, radical militias, and smoldering ruins in the wake of terrorist attacks. We already have many tools at our disposal that can be readily applied to their analysis, and doing so is only a matter of applying the right lens.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined what we consider to be the key parameters for the study of symbolic objects in contentious politics. At its core, there are three central properties of this area of focus: that the "stuff" to be considered be symbolically important, physically manifest, and appear in the context of contention. The objects themselves can be large or small, static or transportable, long-lasting or ephemeral, and animate or inanimate; they can be the target of, a component of, or a stimulus to contentious action; and they range from the banal to the charged. Overall, we contend that much is to be gained for both material culture studies and scholarship on contentious politics by contemplating their intersection.

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# The Creation of Symbolic Objects

# A Strategic Toolbox of Symbolic Objects

## *Material Artifacts, Visuality, and Strategic Action in European Street-Protest Arenas*

### Bartosz Ślosarski

On seeing images of street protests in cities around the world, we tend to focus mainly on the number of demonstrators, dramatic clashes with the police, or protesters' demands. What we see is the effects of the organizers' work, the hard-won fruit of activists' involvement and the mobilization of specific resources, as well as the product of a set of relationships between individuals and groups involved in a given protest event. Where attention is given to the role of symbolic objects in these events, it tends to come through the lens of spectacular material and visual culture (Mattoni and Treré 2014; Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2015; Garrett 2015). In this understanding, activists' goal is to attract the potential viewer's attention and, consequently, to draw attention to a social problem in a public sphere. Cultural analyses of social movements and other forms of contentious politics are likewise often primarily concerned with structures of symbolic meaning. But by paying careful attention to the scope of movement culture, we can broaden our analytical field somewhat. Take, for example, the definition of culture given by Jasper (2010, 60) in the *Handbook of Social Movements Across Disciplines*: "shared mental worlds and their perceived embodiments. The latter may include words, artifacts, artworks, rituals, events, individuals, and any other action or creation that carries symbolic meanings." Jasper's definition emphasizes the fact that for those involved

in contentious politics, culture is built not only on meanings attributed to different human activities, but also on certain objects that meanings are thrust onto or delegated to.

Thinking critically about the various symbolic objects that take part in protest events, we can also note that there are movement activities that are not themselves visible but are nonetheless crucial for sustaining the visibility of such objects and hence effectively expressing symbolic meanings. As stated by Charles Tilly (1999, 260), "activists often spend their energies planning joint actions, building alliances, struggling with competitors, mobilizing supporters, building collective identities, searching for resources, lobbying, *and pursuing other activities to sustain collective challenges*" (emphasis mine). While most of the aforementioned sentence boils down to classic notes in the social movement research agenda—all of which might be explored in the context of symbolic objects—it is the relation of the agnostically phrased "other activities" to the topic of this volume that my chapter concerns itself with.

The aim of the game in the street-protest arena is to achieve visibility: on the street, in the media, in the eyes of political decision-makers and the general public. To achieve this, activists undertake a variety of strategic actions relating to the design and practical management of a protest's symbolic content. During this process, activists not only mobilize resources—both human and material, but they consider translations and delegations of certain duties to objects (Latour 2005). The design process and practical plans for a protest involve a combination of manual, mechanical, and creative work, which in principle remains invisible.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that, in addition to drawing on certain repertoires of contention, movements draw on a "toolbox" of objects. Such a toolbox helps protesters gain visibility and communicate meanings to observers.[1] However, the various symbolic objects available to activists also pose an array of strategic dilemmas that interfere with attempts to make protests visible. The term "strategic dilemmas" is derived from the work of Jasper (2006) and is variably used to connote the trade-offs and choices faced by organizers, rather than necessarily relating to

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1. Visibility, of course, is far from the only goal of contentious actors. Nonetheless, in the context of street-protest arenas, visibility is a goal *through* which the social and political recognition of a movement is made possible (and thus the potential for further, more advanced contentious action). While visibility is not an end in itself, it constitutes the means through which activists can draw attention to their goals so that they can become the subject of public debate and thus further contention.

a strictly delineated, mutually exclusive choice between two options. To explore and identify these dilemmas, I examine the material cultures of Polish and German protest events with chief reference to one very common type of symbolic object: banners.

In the rest of this chapter, I detail the strategic dilemmas that the use of symbolic objects such as banners can pose for activists in street-protest arenas. The chapter draws on direct observations of street protests in Warsaw and Berlin, and a series of fifteen in-depth semistructured interviews with a range of key actors in the street-protest arenas I observed.[2] The main aim of these interviews was to garner insight into the strategic decisions and dilemmas regarding activists' choices of artifacts for the purposes of protest. Interviews took the form of a directed conversation (Lofland and Lofland 1992), based on a series of semistructured interview guides prepared in advance on an individual basis. Initial analysis took place using ATLAS.ti, with a codebook developed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), rather than prepared in advance of the interviews.

## A Strategic Toolbox of Symbolic Objects

A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of material culture in the study of social movements and contentious politics (Rucht 2016). These theoretical threads have historically been located in the field of the cultural sociology of social movements (Johnston and Klandermans 1995). More recent research strands have been situated in visual studies and visual communication research, and in work on protest event atmospheres. Where materiality per se is concerned, studies have tended to explore the topic in relation to visual cultures of protest (Khatib 2013; Garrett 2015), and to the "sensory-emotional impact" of certain key artifacts (Kim 2017). Cultural studies of social movements have also explored materiality as an element of contentious communication (Mattoni and Treré 2014) and mediatization (Fahlenbrach 2016), as well as in relation to fashion, cloth-

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2. I interviewed nine organizers responsible for the material infrastructure of street protests in Berlin and Warsaw. Five of these interviews were conducted with professional, employed organizers or campaigners, in nongovernmental organizations (2), unions (1), or organizations associated with major political parties (2). Four were conducted with activists from informal initiatives associated with environmental (1), tenant (1), and feminist (2) movements. Three further interviews were conducted with artists and designers who devised material objects for use by activists. Finally, two interviews were conducted with media journalists covering the protests. Interviews were conducted in Polish (seven interviews) and English (eight interviews) and transcribed in their original language.

ing, and lifestyle movements (Yangzom 2016; see also chapters 3, 5, 8, and 10, this volume).

To understand how movements' strategic toolboxes play out in street-protest arenas, I draw on the strategic perspective predominantly developed by Jasper (2006, 2012, 2015). Jasper's strategic perspective invites social scientists to focus on specific arenas, defined as bundles of rules and resources "that allow or encourage certain kinds of interactions to proceed, with something at stake" (Jasper 2015, 14). The perspective features particularly prominently in two monographs relating to the study of social movements in state, market, and media arenas (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015) and within various continental contexts (Goodwin and Jasper 2012).

According to the strategic approach, "arenas" embody past decisions, invested resources, and cultural meanings—but they vary in their degree of institutionalization, the ratio of players to audience (some arenas are composed only of players, whereas others include audiences), and in the usefulness of a given tool (e.g., money is very important in a market context, but not in a street-protest arena) (Jasper 2015, 14–19). Within such arenas, we can find individual or compound players (social groups or institutions) who engage in certain strategic actions to achieve their goals. Compound players such as social movements are constantly shifting, merging, and splitting as a result of differences and similarities in the goals and means of action (Jasper 2012, 22). The modus operandi of a given arena is based on the strategic actions of players trying to influence and convince others in that arena of their claims. "Strategic" should be understood here as meaning "efforts to get others to do what you want them to" (Jasper 2015, 19). Strategic actions are associated with multiple dilemmas, which have to be addressed to sustain such actions within the rules of the arena (either by applying them or by breaking them) (Jasper 2006, 171–80).

I draw on Jasper's strategic perspective to delineate the street-protest arena not only spatially, as a place or space of contentious event (e.g., a square, march route, or the courtyard of a public institution), but in terms of the litany of strategic actions and interactions of and between the actors involved in contentious performances (Tilly 2008). Each actor or compound player has their own goals within this arena. Most notably for the purposes of this chapter, activists organizing the protest event seek to make their actions visible and in so doing make visible the social problems they are concerned with. But they do not do so alone: they are equipped with an

array of material artifacts or "symbolic objects,"[3] which serve as strategic tools. These artifacts are

> the results of performances, the products that . . . become available as the foci and/or the raw materials for subsequent performances. Although embodied in concrete form, artifacts are no less social than the original performances that created them and which they often represent. [In this sense artifacts] 1. [are] created by social actors, 2. constitute sources of meaning, which allow them to stand in for human actors in specific situations, 3. shape action themselves by carrying with them a prescribed range of appropriate responses, 4. often require the active complicity of other social actors to engage their oppositional meaning. (Johnston 2009, 15–16)

As material artifacts, each of the strategic tools a movement has at its disposal possesses certain "affordances" (Norman 2013): the relations between an object and a person, or between the properties of an object and the capabilities of a subject. In this case, the capabilities in question concern strategic actions. The intentionality of these strategic actions is thus materially mediated—the material artifact helps to organize relations between specific groups of actors and the arenas in which they are conducting their strategic actions. Strategic tools are thus not merely representations of political ideology or identity, but are part of social mobilization processes (Johnston 2014). The symbolic objects in an individual or compound player's strategic toolbox help to shape the strategic actions and dilemmas that arise, and so activists' choices about which to acquire or manufacture must be carefully weighed.

### Visibility and Strategic Dilemmas in Action: Evidence from Warsaw and Berlin

By asking questions about the materials used in protest events and the processes through which they are produced, we can gain insight into the strategic decisions, dilemmas, and interactions of actors involved in such

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3. While the terms "material artifacts" and "symbolic objects" may differ in their conceptual boundaries, the artifacts with which I concern myself happen to also fall under the banner of symbolic objects (Krajewski 2013; Kubik 1994), and so in this chapter I use the phrase "material artifact" and "symbolic object" interchangeably.

events. Activists must consider the opportunities and threats associated not only with the material qualities of an object, but with the process of its design and its eventual use in contentious political action. The artifacts causes use are thus important components of protest events, not only in their capacity as provocative, highly visible props, but in the ways that their social lives intertwine with those of their creators. They are a reservoir of memory, a reflection on past experiences and existing ways of thinking and acting. In selecting or creating a given artifact for use as a strategic tool, actors are prompted to adapt their strategic activities in the arena to better achieve their goals, generating a series of strategic dilemmas. I dissect this process, devoting special emphasis to three topics: the character of visibility as a strategic aim, the strategic dilemmas associated with the use of specific material artifacts (in this case, protest banners), and the visual and symbolic threats and opportunities arising from the use of various different artifacts in street protests.

### Visibility as a Strategic Aim

In my discussions with activists in the Berlin and Warsaw street-protest arenas, they said the most immediate aim of their public actions was achieving visibility. Visibility provides the groundwork for articulating demands in the public sphere. Furthermore, it serves as the groundwork for attracting new community members and ultimately helps implement other movement activities, such as creating online campaigns, increasing recruitment opportunities, or building sympathy for an organization.

Visibility had two major aspects for the activists I talked to. On the one hand, they sought public visibility for their demands and the people making them. On the other, they also sought visibility to establish internal recognition of a cause's own strength and popularity. Thus, activists seeking visibility were concerned not only with building political power in the public sphere, but with fostering community and networked solidarity. The dualism of visibility was emphasized by the organizer of a protest campaign in Berlin against the presidency of Donald Trump:

> There is something particularly powerful about the . . . , I mean this is the word that is thrown a lot in activists' circles as well as media circles, it's "the optics." Seeing thousands of people on the street, where you don't typically on a daily basis, having a collective space to vocalize a common feeling, is surprisingly powerful. [ . . . ]

whether it's effective or not, I think there is a psychological effect it has, for the people that participate as well as the people that don't participate. It's something, I think it gives people who do participate an opportunity to feel that they are not alone in the feelings that they have about the particular subject. (Interview 2)

The organizer's response suggests that the special strength of her demonstration lay in the sheer spectacle of seeing people overwhelm public space. Those already participating have an opportunity to express their beliefs in a secure setting, while the protest's visibility gives nonparticipants an opportunity to engage with the social problem that the protest communicates or visualizes. The decisive factor here is that we see the involvement of other people.

As shown in an interview with an organizer of environmental protests, the pursuit of visibility also has more calculated dimensions. Here they discuss "probably the two most important roles" of visibility in environmental protest:

[We seek] to produce a picture that is an illustration of something, to be somewhere more noticeable and to draw people with it, because it is also important. This "picture" is also important by the way. [ . . . ] We often think or try to think in such a way that it is not only that we come and [ . . . ] . break something or produce this picture, but also that this picture somehow interacts with [ . . . ] the audience. [ . . . ] in public space, or on the Internet. Somehow we try to create such opportunities and such reactions. (Interview 4)

The main goal of this action was to produce images, not only in a fleeting, temporary capacity, but also in a form that could be captured: the production of photos of events on the street that can be used by organizations for further activities, creating a visual setting for digital media communications. Pictures from public events in this sense have the power to engage potential supporters of the movement in their aftermath, and image production is a conscious strategy for movements seeking to build or sustain a community around an issue currently at stake.

Considered as a strategic aim, visibility was the principal goal of movements involved in Warsaw and Berlin street-protest arenas. Visibility in the eyes of public opinion *and* protest participants serves as an important precursor for stepped-up contentious activity, such as influencing policy

decisions by authorities or gaining recognition from opponents. However, seeking visibility is not always straightforward. As the next section shows, movements often recruit strategic tools in the form of material artifacts, and these tools come with their own strategic dilemmas.

### The Strategic Dilemmas of Protest Banners

Organizing a street protest includes confronting a variety of dilemmas that must be resolved before, during, or after the event if such a protest is to be successful. Many dilemmas faced by social movements have been summarized in detail in past research (Jasper 2006). However, I am specifically interested in the set of organizational dilemmas that arise in relation to the material culture of protests that involve symbolic objects. In particular, my conversations with activists in Berlin and Warsaw drew attention to four major dilemmas causes face in using symbolic objects in their protests. These are related to efficiency, storage, reuse, and aesthetics.

What we could call the *efficiency dilemma* concerns the effectiveness of actions, especially in the context of preparing material artifacts for use in protest. The dilemma is derived from three concerns that organizers took into account in determining the trajectories of their strategic actions: the available preparation time, budgetary constraints, and networks of cooperation. Budgetary constraints restrict the amount of professional labor that can be invested in preparing for a protest event, making it more difficult to delegate activities to professional contractors such as graphic artists, designers, printing companies, and photocopiers. Where groups such as informal protest collectives lack these budgets, they instead draw on their supporting networks, but are nonetheless constrained by the available preparation time prior to a protest, which might often be more productively employed elsewhere.

The preparation of an object such as a banner is only one of the hurdles a group must overcome if they are to use it in a protest. To use such an object, activists must address the *storage dilemma*, which relates to the management of a given object before and after the protest. For organizations that do not have their own office (and, often crucially, an empty basement beneath it), it becomes important to assign responsibility for storing individual items to individual organizers, or to seek out common spaces shared by many activists, such as squats and social centers. From my discussions with organizers in Berlin and Warsaw, I found that rather often, key banners found their way behind wardrobes or under beds in the

TABLE 2.1. Strategic Dilemmas of Protest Banners

| | |
|---|---|
| *Efficiency* | Which resources to draw on, and in what amounts, when making a banner |
| *Storage* | What to do with a banner after its creation |
| *Re-use* | Whether to use the same banner multiple times |
| *Aesthetic* | Whether to evoke professionalism or authenticity |

organizers' homes before being dug out for use in another demonstration or public action. In many other instances, storage dilemmas simply remain unresolved, and the symbolic objects created for a given protest are simply given up or thrown away in the event's aftermath. One of the organizers I spoke to recalled how it became necessary to establish a record of exactly where items were stored when putting banners in shared places, such as squat spaces or the cellars of friendly pubs. Where they failed to do this, the object's improvised storage spaces simply became a stop on the way to the trash, because the objects were never able to be effectively retrieved. Almost all of the groups I talked to experienced storage dilemmas, with the sole exception of representatives from established trade unions, who had the luxury of entire buildings, expansive basements, and even archives.

Even should an object be effectively stored, activists face another dilemma when seeking to reuse it. The *re-use dilemma* occurs in the context of the prior two dilemmas, and thus of the various constraints resulting from a cause's capacity to store objects, the time available to them, and the financial resources on which they can draw. The dilemma is principally a question of organizational practicality: reusing an object saves money, but it requires the use of storage capacity and potentially maintenance time (such as touching up the paint on a banner, or repainting it entirely). Moreover, if a cause is to use an object such as a banner for a longer period, the quality of the material must be better, which in turn requires investing more resources (usually monetary) in its creation. Often, the same organizations that have the spatial and monetary resources to produce highly reusable objects also have the capacity to rapidly produce lower-cost objects, and thus might only entertain their reuse on the basis of other organizational concerns, such as environmental principles.

The final key hurdle faced by activists is the *aesthetic dilemma*, between communicative clarity and movement authenticity. As my interviewees stressed, objects made by one's own strength are not always pleasing to the public eye. In the case of banners, some hand-made instances were so unattractive that the message of the banner and its symbolism were lost on their

intended audience. This was often exacerbated when banners had been painted over or transformed as a way to overcome efficiency issues. By contrast, professionally produced banners offered the advantage of generating standardized artifacts that could be distributed to event participants and used to sustain a consistent message. This communicative clarity was certainly advantageous in many cases, but opting for professional production aesthetics also had its weaknesses. The produced artifacts lost a sense of authenticity, making it easier for activist groups to be discredited. In the Polish and German cases I investigated, the targets of protest were sometimes able to call into question the subjectivity of contentious actors by accusing them of external control or "astroturfing."

Creating and using symbolic objects—even those as straightforward as banners—prompts strategic dilemmas that need to be solved. Efficiency-related dilemmas take into account financial resources, time, and the potential number of hands available (both within an activist group and among those outside it but potentially recruitable for the task). These factors determine the scale and number of objects a cause can create. Where movements can efficiently create symbolic objects, they are less dependent on their capacity to surmount dilemmas relating to storage. Correspondingly, movements that struggle in addressing this dilemma are more likely to be vulnerable to storage issues, and must improvise solutions when such issues arise. Failing to address the storage dilemma can have pernicious effects for movements, in terms of both the monetary or time expense involved in creating new objects, and in their capacity to surmount the further dilemma of reuse. Being able to reuse an object has considerable benefits, most notably continuity of symbolic meaning: a cause can reuse a banner or other object that has already accrued symbolic importance in a contentious setting. Finally, movements face an aesthetic question: whether to prioritize professionalism and clarity, often at a considerable financial cost, or to seek authenticity, often at the cost of considerable time. I have discussed these dilemmas in relation to the production of banners in particular, to draw attention to the sociological fact that such object-related dilemmas exist and influence movement strategies. Where other objects are concerned, the type, scope, and scale of strategic dilemmas relating to their materiality are likely to be quite different. Button badges, for example, are so materially different from banners that issues of storage are unlikely to pose many difficulties, but issues relating to matters such as distribution might instead arise.

### Object-Related Opportunities and Threats

In our conversations about the objects in their strategic toolbox, the activists I spoke with pointed to a set of opportunities and threats that movements faced in the sphere of visuality and visual perception. They noted that certain objects already had strong symbolic associations, such as the connotations of culturally coded political colors and motifs, or certain symbols' capacity to give rise to supportive indignation or counteractive moral panic in specific social groups among the general public. Moreover, the opportunities and threats associated with the use of a given object were not limited to its symbolic meanings, but also to haptic possibilities and practical applications in the street.

In a contentious performance, protesters can use symbolic objects to convey meanings that attract public attention or scrutiny. Organizers pay careful attention to the potential objects they can craft or acquire and consider the potential threats and opportunities connected with their use in attempts to align a given contentious performance with dominant frames (Benford and Snow 2000). One of the organizers of the protests against Donald Trump's child-detention policy at the US Embassy in Berlin recalled how

> [w]e bought a number of those emergency blankets, the kind of aluminum blankets that if you are having hypothermia, you wear, because that's essentially what they are giving to [the] children. And so we bought a bunch of those and made that one of the visuals during the rally at the US embassy, was to just have the children that were there, basically wrapped themselves in it, just to try to make that [visual] connection. (Interview 2)

In this action, organizers acquired disposable thermal blankets and used them to cover the bodies of children and other young people involved in their movement to evoke the immediate danger faced by children in Trump's detention facilities, using the spectacle to craft a coherent, moving, and engaging message.

The objects that organizers seek to add to a movement's strategic toolbox vary depending on the sociopolitical context of the event (the meanings of symbolic objects are variable and shift according to different contexts—see in particular chapters 5 and 8, this volume), and the structure of politi-

cal opportunities at a given time (Kriesi 2004; Meyer 2004). Of course, such factors are often highly complex and not always easily accounted for. Thus, objects may sometimes turn out to be controversial, disrupting a given protest movement's attempt to communicate effectively. The organizer of the tenant movement in Berlin discussed exactly this phenomenon, describing how in one action activists dressed up as sharks:

> In German the speculator is called "the shark," the investor, "the rent shark." So, a lot of people use it and there are some groups who say that it's not right to identify, [ . . . ] to animalize or to personalize some sort of structure that you fight against. Some people would connect this to the type of language that anti-Semitic campaigns use . . . the question of let's say the anti-Semitism, Israeli Palestine and these sort of things might make more serious conflicts. (Interview 1)

Differences in opinion relating to symbolic objects can cause major issues for movements. Using animal motifs for opponents in the rental industry, while intended to evoke the idea of "rent sharks," may have struck participants, allies, or observers as playing into anti-Semitic narratives about the Jewish community (a concern with understandably heightened salience in Germany). In another instance, a Berlin feminist protest that flew the Palestinian flag (among others) to show international solidarity among women of all countries gave rise to controversy in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and some participants instead interpreted the flag as evoking support for rocket attacks on Israel.

The above examples could suggest that the use of artifacts in a movement's strategic toolbox should be more subtle or nuanced. However, other examples show how an overly subtle message can generate potential communication problems, such as the case recounted by a feminist activist from Warsaw:

> Two years ago we made a banner with a Starbucks mug [on it]. It was supposed to refer to a strike by Starbucks' employees. . . . Starbucks fashioned itself as a corporation that supports equality . . . [yet] people work on temporary contracts, [and] after hours. We made such a beautiful banner from the Starbucks latte, with caramel and everything, and wrote something like: "Maybe if lattes had employee rights, you would be more worried [about them]" . . . People

didn't get it. . . . People asked: What do you mean with Starbucks?
(Interview 8)

For the protest's organizers, Starbucks coffee was synonymous with a
petite bourgeois decadence that pursued cultural liberation while ignoring
economic struggles. They sought to shame observers into realizing that
their passion for Starbucks coffee should extend to the business's employ-
ees. However, for many who saw the banner at the demonstration, Star-
bucks coffee was simply Starbucks coffee, without bringing to mind the
complexities its designers had in mind. From these people's perspective, it
appeared as if the organizers were promoting the brand.

In the case of the tenant protests, feminist rally, and Starbucks pro-
test, a lack of symbolic alignment between activists and their audience dis-
rupted communication efforts both within and outside of the movements.
Where organizers are most effective, they draw not only on frames com-
mon within activist communities, but maximize their appeal by conceiving
of the objects in their strategic toolbox from multiple perspectives within
and beyond movement communities.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, I have endeavored to offer an analysis of symbolic objects
in terms of their material dimensions. I have shown how such objects form
part of a toolbox from which street protesters draw, and highlighted four
key strategic dilemmas that arise in relation to banners across the Polish
and German cases. The material qualities of objects are weighted or fash-
ioned in relation to these dilemmas, and the toolbox of objects a movement
tries to maintain influences the dynamics of these dilemmas in the future.
In both of the cases I examined (and doubtless many others), visibility was
the primary strategic aim of the activists with whom I conversed, serving as
a steppingstone necessary to achieve their goals. It is perhaps unsurprising,
then, that the principal aim in the conscious creation and use of symbolic
objects was to gain visibility. Even when dilemmas related to the material
dynamics of objects have been overcome, the pursuit of visibility can often
pose strategic problems for social movements, and symbolic objects need
to be carefully employed if they are to have their desired effect. Organiz-
ers in street-protest arenas may consider not only the extent to which a
given object will amplify the visibility of a given action, but also the extent
to which its symbolic properties will resonate with its intended audiences

and how its negative connotations might problematize or undermine its purpose.

The objects that make up a movement's strategic toolbox are in principle virtually limitless, but in practice their use is constrained by strategic dilemmas encountered by organized causes. When employed in protest, such objects co-create the visuality of a given social movement, and provide a material setting for the whole event. Thus, though they are part of a strategic toolbox, such objects also operate as symbolic mediators for protest actions, which convey intended and unintended meanings to fellow participants, allies, observers, and opponents. As the cases I discuss show, the process of thinking about artifacts, and of creating, acquiring, and using them, presents a whole network of materially mediated interactions, with specific points in which this materiality actually affects the activities of social movements, and changes the strategic actions taken by activists. In other words, the contents of a movement's strategic toolbox give shape not only to the contentious performance organizers are able to orchestrate, but to the movement's strategic capacity over the longer term.

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# The Nation That (Mis)took Death for Life

## *The Materiality of Martyrdom, Shia Religiosity, and Contentious Politics in Iran*

### Younes Saramifar

I was inspired by Oliver Sacks's famous essay, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat" (1970), and reworked his title for this chapter. In his essay, Sacks recounts the challenges faced by a patient of his who suffered from visual agnosia, an illness that impairs one's ability to recognize presented objects and people's faces. Sacks challenges the conventional assumption that visual agnosia, through damage to the brain, renders the sufferer unable to form abstract attitudes about the world and reduces them to merely a pile of emotions. Instead, he suggests that there are those who experience visual agnosia the other way around—that is, they have an abstract attitude only toward objects and people. Sacks refers to his patient Mr. P, "who lost the concrete, the personal, the 'real' [and reduced it] to the abstract and the categorical" (1970, 8). In a similar manner, I contend in this chapter that Iranian national narratives of martyrs and martyrdom display a collective agnosia of sorts, that takes death for life.

In Iran, any bearded man shown in an image in a khaki uniform toting an AK-47 in front of a blue background (preferably a cloudy paradise with white doves, as in the murals, posters, and other propaganda materials distributed by the Iranian state) is seen as a martyr. No history, biography, or face need be recognized; an abstract existence called "martyr" is nonetheless evoked. "Martyr" becomes a general category of man, a species

that stands by itself. I have encountered this mode of recognizing martyr-
dom among Shias who hail from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.
Although there are similarities among Shias as a translocal community of
faith, they experience martyrdom and celebrate their martyrs according to
local sociocultural settings. For Iranians, the saturation of images, imagi-
naries, fabulations, and ideologies related to martyrdom is especially dense
because Iran is governed by a Shia state, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The
social complexities of the culture of martyrdom in Iran provoke questions
of exactly how Iranians perceive martyrdom and how that perception is
formed.

In this chapter, I explore the world of objects and images to highlight
how Iranians' perceptions of martyrdom are formed and configured. The
material semiotics (Law 2008) of martyrdom in Iran in turn describe how
martyrdom is lived and perceived. By way of objects[1] and images, I argue
that martyrdom is not a predefined notion that shapes worldviews, but is
instead a perceived and emergent dialogic concept that inspires different
definitions of life. My approach is an anthropology of access[2] that discusses
the modes through which social actors access life and make it livable, access
God and make him/them believable, and access religion and craft practices
for it.

My anthropology of access, exploration materials, and visual expres-
sions of martyrdom are the results of long-term ethnographic engage-
ment in West and Central Asia. I have conducted close-contact partici-
pant observation among translocal Shia resistance groups, armed Shia
nonstate combatants, and revolutionary Iranians who strongly support
the Iranian government and comply with its ideology and regime. Here, I
focus mostly on Iran as the epicenter of West and Central Asian Shia resis-
tance movements and paramilitary action. Iran supplies worldviews, ways
of seeing, and modes of martyr recognition through synchronized propa-
ganda machinery operating across a transnational network that runs from
Pakistan to Lebanon. I share here encounters and stories from those who
trusted me with their ideas and emotions; therefore, I have anonymized,

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1. There are still debates as to the best terminology for abiotic entities; some scholars
prefer "object," some say "things," some say "stuff (of life)." I do not seek to intervene in that
debate here and I use the terms "things," "objects," and "stuff of life" interchangeably and
loosely.

2. An anthropology of access explains how the infrastructures of social life are accessed. It
does so by moving beyond the means that provide access to those infrastructures, and instead
questioning the modes of access and tracing conditions that emerge from entangled asym-
metric networks through bodies, objects, and performative subjectivities.

changed names, and sometimes modestly altered locations, as per accepted anthropological mores. My fieldwork, storytelling, and anthropological analysis deviate from the growing body of literature on Iranian combatants in that I avoid analytical speculation based on discourses, media broadcast contents, press releases, open-source materials, or informal data (see, for example, Golkar 2015; Ostovar 2018). Instead, I contribute alongside several emerging young Iranian scholars, who seek to offer nuanced, theoretically insightful, and politically balanced views on Iran (see Moosavi 2015; Behrouzan 2016; Saeidi 2020; Sefat 2020; Tamjidi 2020). These stand in contrast to the large body of work on Iran that tends toward either Iran-bashing or "singing along the Empire."

I organize my argument in four sections. I begin by situating the material semiotics of martyrdom in its uniquely Iranian historical, sociocultural, and political setting. The second section engages with recent academic conversations on martyrdom, the visual culture of martyrdom, and material expressions of conflicts. I end this section by proposing my own anthropology of martyrdom. In the third section, I substantiate my argument with recourse to my field notes and observations on war and visual memorabilia. I devote the fourth section to the AK-47 and to the other weapons that are infused into, or symbolic of, the culture of martyrdom. The culmination of these sections comes in the form of a grounded and bottom-up approach to contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) that traces how object-subject relationships shape personal and political views. I focus on martyrdom and sacrifice not as happenings and events in themselves, but rather as phenomena endemic to political Islam, constituted of objects and the stuff of life. I step into the mundane affairs and lesser-noticed things in everyday life to argue how politically and emotionally charged objects operate as "modes of access" for individuals to craft political perceptions about their communities and surroundings. Studying meanings and symbolic representations alone is insufficient to understand what mobilizes social actors to pursue a common cause. Hence, I argue for a "modes of access" approach, applying anthropologies of access and material culture to contentious politics in order to unpack the trajectory of how nations, communities, and social movements imagine together through objects, regardless of their meanings. In short, I study the contentious politics of martyrdom by focusing on the symbolic objects that become dear and intimate, and evoke the imaginations of social actors to show how political commitments are expressed, imagined, and perpetuated.

### Martyrdom and Religious Trinkets in Iran

The consolidation of martyrdom culture in contemporary Iran is largely rooted in the geopolitical and military miscalculations of the US and its European allies. Iran and Iraq experienced eight years of conflict (1980–1988) almost immediately after the revolution (1979) and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Iranian monarch, was deposed at the culmination of the revolution, and a republic under the religious leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was instituted. The Islamic Republic reconfigured democratic governance and established a learned jurist-theologian as the highest authority of the state. The office and authority of this learned jurist was based on the principle of *Vilayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), put forward by an Islamic school of thought that advocated political Islam. According to the principle of *Vilayat-e faqih*, a learned jurist who is recognized as the most knowledgeable theologian (as well as being socially and politically acceptable) can take up this position of highest religious authority. This role authorizes him as the guardian of the nation, the armed forces' commander-in-chief, and the custodian of national wealth. He is allowed to wage war; call a nation to arms; or accept the termination of conflict due to victory, stalemate, or ceasefire. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called Iranians to arms when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran's southern and western borders. Iranian defense forces were in disarray after the revolution, and the country had not yet been able to structure its armed forces properly; as such, Iranian leadership depended mostly on the limited capacities of the Revolutionary Guard, bolstered by volunteers who joined the front lines as a paramilitary force known as the Basij. The Basij was instituted according to the earlier pronouncement by Khomeini on 25 November 1979: "The country that has twenty million young men must have twenty million *tofangdar* [gun-holders]."[3]

Basij, which literally means "mobilization," opened branches in all institutions of Iranian government and enlisted new recruits from all strata of society. Basij recruited in universities, factories, government offices, tradesmen's associations, and wherever able-bodied men congregated. The fundamental discourse that propagated the mobilization was that of martyrdom and religious commitment to one's self and the Islamic nation. All men were supposed to seek higher grace by way of blood and martyrdom

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3. See http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n25082 (accessed 07/08/2020).

in the name of God in the "holy defense" of Iran against the evil forces
led by Saddam and supported by the US and Israel. Thus, the eight-year
war strengthened the concept of martyrdom in Iran; it henceforth became
an integral component of warring and conflict. Figures prominent in Shia
scripture, such as Ali (the son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad) and Hus-
sain (the grandson of the prophet Muhammad), have long inspired a spirit
of resistance to tyranny among Iranians, and in war the state called on
the people to follow Hussain's example. Hussain and his fellowship were
beheaded in Karbala (situated in modern-day Iraq) during a battle on 10
October 680 AD. His story inspired passion, sorrow, and the desire for
sacrifice among Iranian combatants, because Hussain was abandoned on
the eve of battle by many of those who traveled with him. The proverb
that "we shall not leave him alone" was adopted by the state to refer to
Khomeini, the metaphoric Hussain of the Islamic revolution. Shia men, it
was declared, would never accept such a disgrace as the abandonment of
the proxy Hussain. Of course, not all of the proverbs and discourse sur-
rounding martyrdom are organic or forged by people; in fact, much of the
martyrdom-related language and terminology popularized in the Iran-Iraq
war was carefully considered and chosen by officials working in the Sitad e
Tabligate Jang (Coordinating Centre for War Information Dissemination,
hereafter Sitad).

The Sitad played an important role in provoking popular religious
sentiments and emotions. It was established to coordinate news agencies'
access to war zones, but propaganda and advertising quickly became a
secondary responsibility. The Sitad coined the phrase "*defa-e moqaddas*"
("the holy/sacred defense") and commanded all press releases and print
and media news outlets to refer to the war using this term. The Sitad also
maintained and boosted religious morale on the front lines in cooperation
with Sazman-e Tabliqat-e Islami (the Organization of Islamic Dissemina-
tion, hereafter Sazman). Sazman assigned religious missionaries and cler-
gymen to live alongside combatants as religious advisers, performing
rituals and preaching sermons. Additionally, the collaboration between
the two governmental institutions resulted in the publication and circula-
tion of memoirs of fallen combatants, the organizing of tours of liberated
areas for martyrs' families, and the commemorating of successful military
operations. The task of commemorating the war; archiving, collecting, and
publishing war memorials; and keeping the passion of martyrdom alive
remained the responsibility of the Sitad at the end of the war. However,
the name of the Sitad changed to Sazmane Hifz e Asar and Arzeshhaye

Defa' Moqadas (the Organization for the Preservation of the Heritage and Values of the Holy Defense), which continues its activities today.

Sazmane Hifz Asar is the heart of the Iranian memory machine (Varzi 2006; see Saramifar 2019), which itself encourages a culture of martyrdom. The organization posits everyday life as the arena for martyrdom-habituation and nation-building around Shia notions of sacrifice and salvation. Sazmane Hifz Asar paints murals on city walls, maintains the burial grounds of martyrs, circulates memorial posters for installation in educational institutes, advises the Ministry of Education on the inclusion of martyrdom-focused curricula, and finally manages associated organizations dedicated to keeping the culture of martyrdom alive. However, the unsystematic growth of Sazmane Hifz Asar has made it inefficient, ineffective, and out of touch with how Iranian society has developed since the end of the war. The Shoray e Tarvij va Tosa'ye Farhang e Fadakari va Shahadat (Council for Popularization and Development of the Culture of Sacrifice and Martyrdom, hereafter Shora) was established to prepare guidelines and oversee all things related to martyrdom. The Shora indirectly shaped the market economy by stressing the value of religious trinkets and objects that symbolized martyrdom.

Iran's local market economy and its constituent entrepreneurs have found the culture of martyrdom to be a fertile space for business. The publication of war memoirs and documentaries has remained the exclusive domain of the state, but other war memorabilia and religious trinkets (such as CDs of elegies and ballads for martyrs, calendars, notebooks stickers, T-shirts emblazoned with martyrs' faces, pinup buttons, and keychains with pictures of martyrs) are extensively produced by private companies and sold across the country. Auwkerd commercial center in Qum and Mahestan commercial center in Tehran were among the earliest locations where booksellers and entrepreneurs began printing and circulating items associated with martyrs and martyrdom. The sale of martyrdom merchandise and religious trinkets was not prevalent across Iran beyond Qum, Tehran, Mashhad, and to some extent Isfahan until the end of the presidency of Muhammad Khatami (2005), who was slightly more liberal and left-leaning (relative to other Iranian presidents). The entry of Ahmadinejad, a right-wing conservative president, to the office changed the martyrdom merchandise market completely.

Ahmadinejad revived the abandoned and forgotten Shora. He poured money into it and subsidized "pilgrimages" to memorials of martyrs and former combat zones in southern regions. The Sazman Hifz Asar and

Fig. 3.1. Martyrdom pinup buttons, Tehran, Iran
(*Credit:* Photograph © Younes Saramifar.)

the Shora received an enormous budget to convert all former combat zones into memorial sites and to build roads for visitors to access them (see Saramifar 2019). These new developments, alongside the new focus on martyrdom, were examples of the indirect promotion of the version of political Islam accepted by the right-wing president's ideologies. The Iranian right conceives of martyrdom and armed resistance against "the other" as keeping the political scales tipped in their favor (Elling 2009). Accordingly, the business of martyrdom merchandise and religious trinkets was boosted because it supplied a means of religiopolitical expression for the Iranians interested in political Islam and martyrdom. Martyr-themed pinup buttons attached to backpacks and keychains displaying the smiles of martyrs dangling from briefcases became fashionable, and revolutionary piety became "cool" (Herding 2013).

The entrepreneurs of the martyrdom market economy picked up on the trends in sartorial fashion, accessories, and concept items in the "secular" market and replicated them to cater to politically committed and pious Iranians who desired these items but preferred them with signs and symbols they could identify with (a phenomenon not entirely dissimilar to the reproduction of Che Guevara paraphernalia—see Selbin, chapter 10).

For instance, coffee mugs, pinup buttons, and key chains with soft toys became popular in Iran in 2010, when the equipment for their production was imported from China at a low cost. Opportunistic entrepreneurs were quick to plaster mugs with quotes from martyrs, add tiny grenades or land mines to key chains, and print scarves with revolutionary slogans written in beautiful calligraphy.

Secular items—bunny-rabbit keychains, Farsi poetry calendars, traditional miniature painting bookmarks, and Harry Potter buttons—are not sold alongside items conveying political/Islamic significations. The bookshops and concept shops that serve pious customers have always been separate and isolated from "secular" shops; for instance, the ground and second floors of the Mahestan commercial center are dedicated to martyrdom-themed shops, while the first floor is filled with companies and offices that offer printing services for banners, posters, and other advertisements. The first floor is occupied by technicians and print experts, and is one of the few spaces where secular and religious markets intersect. Printing technology is the neutral ground where these two different markets, with two very different worldviews, are forced to encounter each other. Such profit-driven encounters bring about an exchange of ideas focused mainly on how to attract customers and push products. For instance, I was amazed to see how Mehrdad, a graphic designer based in Mahestan, was inspired by another graphic designer, who he met in the print office on the first floor. Mehrdad, a part-time student at the military academy of the Revolutionary Guard, designed and sold martyrdom-themed posters. One of his more recent items was a life-sized cardboard cutout of famous martyrs. He met a female graphic designer in a printing shop on the first floor and noticed that she'd ordered life-sized cardboard cutouts of characters from Marvel comics (yes, Hulk and Spider-man are popular in Iran too). He told me, "I would not talk to someone like her in a million years because of her unsavory appearance, makeup, and bad hijab, but I needed to learn the technique. She had a good idea and I thought that I can use it for martyrs as well." A grim twist to his trade is that sometimes he ends up memorializing his own customers; volunteer combatants sometimes visit and take selfies with the life-sized cardboard martyrs, have a good laugh, post it on Instagram, and then afterward are deployed to Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria. Mehrdad finds out later that the customer has been killed in action and has thus become a martyr. He adds a new life-sized cutout to his production line and the martyrdom market continues.

Iran's ideologically saturated martyrdom-market economy is not an

Fig. 3.2. Mohsen
Hojaji's selfie
alongside a
life-sized cutout in
Mahestan, Iran
(*Credit:* Photograph
© Younes Saramifar.)

orchestration of the state-infused ideology, religiosity, and consumption. The state controls the walls of the city, the names of streets, the contents of skyline banners, media broadcasts, and publications, but the martyrdom economy is populated and maintained by nonstate entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs are usually pious business-oriented individuals who craft and sell objects that represent their worldviews. Some are employees of the Revolutionary Guard, armed forces, other martyrdom-oriented state institutions, or even the clergy. They engage with the market economy as private individuals to increase their income amid precarious financial conditions. While it is understandable that financial interest is their primary motive, the relevant question is why the martyrdom market is such a fertile business opportunity. Is it the convergence between state ideology and vendors' strategic use of symbolically loaded items that attracts pious

Fig. 3.3. Religious trinkets and posters in Takiye, where Shias mourn Hussain
(the grandson of the prophet Muhammad) and Iranian martyrs
(*Credit:* Photograph © Younes Saramifar.)

consumers? Is it the world of significations embedded in these objects that
turns them into valuable commodities?

I propose that pious consumers' interests in martyrdom-themed com-
modities should be linked to the larger Shia material culture, which shows
how pious Shia individuals are habituated to material expressions of faith
via objects. Shia Islam in Iran is built on long-established rituals and reli-
gious practices that are intensively linked to objects—hence, a sophisti-
cated and intricate material culture has developed and spread among
the global community of Shias. A variety of objects shape the premises
of Muharram ceremonies, memorials for the martyrdom of Hussain, and
commemorations of the Battle of Karbala (Gruber 2016), which in turn
help make the purchase and consumption of martyrdom-themed objects
an accepted practice among Iranians. I do not suggest that consumers of
martyrdom-themed merchandise and religious trinkets purchase them
because they believe in religious ceremonies; rather, I suggest that the Shia
material culture that is already at work in Iran facilitates object consump-
tion and the continuation of habituated material expression. Therefore, it
is not the draw of specific meanings, symbolic interactions, or significa-

tions that encourages the economy (read: circulation) of objects, but rather an already-established material culture that renders such circulation possible through a material semiosis that exceeds any single object's meaning (see also chapter 5, this vol.).

## Tactile Martyrdom and Chasing Meanings

In what follows, I elaborate briefly on the notion of martyrdom and explain how my approach differs from current writings on the topic. Martyrdom is all too often understood as only a form of death that manifests as a religious or national happening, and it is frequently reduced to its discourses and histories; little attention is paid to the experiences of social actors. For example, Litvak (2017, 121) draws from Khomeini's speeches and writings to show how, for Iranian combatants, martyrdom is a package of ideas produced by religious leaders and accordingly taken up by Iranians. Exclusive recourse to such a perspective is liable to present Iranians and Iranian combatants as blind followers with little agency or perception of martyrdom beyond what they are permitted to perceive by their leaders. Likewise, Cook (2017, 76–96), situates martyrdom solely in its produced and state-circulated contexts. Such an analysis leaves out the nuances of reception and the appropriation of martyrdom by social actors. Martyrdom, for Cook, is supposed to be an assumed form of death that extends its shadow over the communities of Muslims which they embrace *as it is*. Contrastingly, Farzaneh (2007) shows how religious orientation and notions of nationhood are entangled in Iran. He explores the last wills and testaments of volunteer combatants and members of the Revolutionary Guard to show how martyrdom operates in the domains of both religiosity and citizenship.

Recent scholarly attention to radicalization and political turmoil in West Asia has resulted in the publication of numerous pieces on martyrdom (Biancalana 2009; Hatina and Litvak 2017; Abedin 2020). Moreover, locally or religiously situated scholars (Varzi 2006; Farzaneh 2007; Hyder 2008) have elaborated on the social complexities that shape martyrdom. They highlight that martyrdom is a lived experience entangled with notions of citizenship and with traditions that fall outside the Islamic canon. Such attempts to broaden understandings of martyrdom are certainly welcome, but still tend to primarily explain martyrdom by focusing on death rather than life. In other words, the current scholarship sets out to explain martyrdom by focusing on death rather than life. I do not intend

to focus here on how Muslims may believe or deny the Qur'anic verse (3:169: "And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision") that declares that martyrs are alive and receive sustenance from their Lord; instead, I adopt and encourage an anthropology of access that explores how martyrdom is accessed *in* and *via* life by asking how death—that is, the interruption of biotic life and, tellingly, *not* social life—is integrated into biotic life. Chasing death in and via life will reveal martyrdom to be an emergent notion that is not dependent on death, but is rather an expansion of life to a different plane of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari 1991). I have taken objects, things, images, and the stuff of life as the methodological guidelines for my brand of anthropology of access, which itself asks how martyrdom emerges in the everyday lives of Iranians and how they access it.

To clarify: all things, objects, trinkets, images, and abiotic entities that I write about here may display some symbolic value to the eyes of beholders. Nonetheless, in the sociocultural settings I examine in this section, their most important features must not be reduced to passive symbolism. To avoid reducing objects (and other abiotic entities) to mere signifiers or reflectors of socially constructed meanings, I deliberately refrain from claiming that the objects or images in my examples ultimately symbolize or signify martyrdom. I step outside of debates that seek to mediate between the frameworks of Nobert Elias's symbol theory (1991) and Charles Peirce's theory of sign (1931). Rather, I trace how objects in contentious politics can exert agency in co-constituting meanings by mediating thoughts and persuading senses (Meyer 2009; Harman 2011).

My approach can be differentiated from other analyses of symbolism and materiality in the Iranian context. For example, Rolston (2017) suggests that the martyrs' murals painted on city walls across Iran signify the power of the Iranian state as it attempts to control the masses and suppress opposition. He stresses that the Iranian state claims legitimacy and seeks to monopolize religious symbolism via murals (Rauh 2013; Rolston 2017). In contrast, Flaskerud (2012, 44), in her ethnographic investigation of the material culture of religious ceremonies in Iran, proposes that religious images that evoke martyrdom show the interplay between metahistorical truths and historical representations of those truths. My critique of such scholarship relates to the either/or approach that shapes their methodological and theoretical frameworks. Such analyses posit either the material culture of martyrdom as the symbolic orchestration of things by the state

*or* the material culture of martyrdom becomes the result of individuals appropriating the circulating representations. Instead, I stress that martyrdom is co-created by multitudes of partners beyond either/or designations. Martyrdom emerges from the social assemblage of human and nonhuman and state and nonstate actors who co-constitute the question of life and death. I exemplify my argument through the letter by Jawad Allah Karam, who volunteered to be deployed in Syria and was killed by ISIS forces. He wrote to his weapon:

> I salute you my weapon who has become a partner in serving justice, salutation at the weapon's barrel that suffered the heat of gun powder [. . . .] Salutation to my weapon's fixed stock that its hardness taught me how to step into the righteous path and don't see my goals hazy and opaque [. . . .] Salutation to the weapon that I learned from it the gravity of being human whenever I held the weapon's grip with my left hand and aligned it 30 degrees to my body. (Field notes 2017)

Allah Karam crafted ways of seeing the world by way of his weapon. He explains how the methods and ways of weapon-handling taught him how to see the world. Every corner and curve of his weapon instructed him in the worldviews and sensations of martyrdom. To put it differently, the martyr in this example crafted his cosmology alongside his nonhuman partner, and his assumption of martyrdom emerged from their collaboration. His weapon did not operate as a mere symbol that signified a set of meanings; rather, the weapon and its user found meaning in the warring ecology that extended beyond the combat zone and beyond a single individual's consciousness. Allah Karam ends, "but, it is the *ayneeye vujoud* [the reflections of existence] that is the *true* instructor who bestows kindness and vibrance to this *mohit* [ecology]" (Field notes 2017). He completes his letter to the weapon by hinting at the larger vibrance and shimmering presence that shapes the ecology of life. The lethal object is not merely a signifier that empowers the combatant, but a material collaborator that helps them make sense of a life lived amid blood and mayhem (see also Warnier 2001).

The ecology I speak of here is the ecosystem and assemblage of life that falls beyond biotic versus abiotic, reality versus fantasy, or factual versus imaginary. The assemblage of life is the culmination of corresponding ontologies that allow angels, fairies, hidden Imams, messiahs, electoral politics, financial debt, the rise and fall of currencies, the scent of blood and

corpses, and pleasure and pain to co-constitute one another without apparent conflict. This assemblage is the mess of everyday life that allows us to investigate the contradictory desires that shape Iran's culture of martyrdom. Before moving further into the stories of martyrdom trinkets, I share an anecdote that highlights the challenge of grasping the contradictory desires in Iran's culture of martyrdom. Recently, I submitted a manuscript about Mohsen Hojaji, a celebrated Iranian combatant who was beheaded by ISIS in Syria. I quoted the last voice message he left for his three-year-old son: he cried, and told his son that he needed to leave and find martyrdom to become a better person. An academic colleague, a white male from Western Europe, kindly read the paper and shared his comments, but he also added a personal remark: "Hojaji left his son to seek his own wishes so he was not a good father. How could he become a better person by leaving his son and prioritizing martyrdom? [*sic*]" This anecdote points to the contradiction that lies at the heart of the desire for martyrdom, which transcends the cultural differences between my colleague and Hojaji.

The challenge of grasping this contradiction lies in the fact that death and life are seen as dualities that are defined against each other. This apparent contradiction becomes comprehensible, however, if one sees how social actors such as Hojaji integrate death into life and refuse to define life against death. I allow Hojaji's words to explain:

> My son . . . be careful what kind of future you select for yourself. Really take care of yourself—I shall watch over you and stand beside you if I become a martyr. *Inshallah*, I will come step by step along with you and I will not let you feel my absence. I will be myself with you till you grow up if I don't become a martyr.

### The Tensile Life of All-Things-Martyrdom

The ecology of things, the stuff of life, and images that recur in Iran's culture of martyrdom vibrate with the tensions and frictions of politics and meanings. Sefat (2020, 192) explores the links between materiality, language, and politics during the war era to argue that "appearance is generated by objects visible to us." He investigates the discourses produced and published by the Islamic Republic of Iran and locates materiality in their evolution, contending that "The vocabulary of martyrdom in fact metamorphosed into a discourse by way of material things" (2020, 192), which led him to ask further about the relationship between words and objects.

Fig. 3.4. Mourners pay homage at Hojaji's cenotaph in his hometown, Najaf Abad (Isfahan Province, Iran)
(*Credit:* Photograph © Younes Saramifar.)

This invites further questions about how objects gain materiality and why objects are subordinated to social actors' perceptions. Hence, I seek to broaden Sefat's conclusions by looking *among* objects and explaining how Iranians come to know martyrdom in partnership with such objects. And, like a good anthropologist, I will tell another story to make my point.

### Appearances and All-Things-Martyrdom

She walked toward me—shy, coy, and calm. She pulled her black sleeves over her hands so that none would see her fair skin and golden bangles, but she did not see me looking at her. I sat, feeling the midnight breeze in the martyrs' burial ground, and remained observant of all those around me. It was Thursday night, and the most pious revolutionaries had gathered to pay homage to their fallen heroes or utter prayers beside them. There was a sense of tranquility despite the lament-singer's voice, which permeated the silence, and the screaming children running amid the graves. She handed me a small sachet filled with candy, a prayer card, and a martyr sticker. She said, "Please keep martyrs—and us—in your prayers."

I looked behind her and saw her friends, who were handing sachets to others. Unintentionally, I smiled and said, "Okay."

She did not appear to like my unintentionally English utterance—perhaps she felt mocked. She looked at me, said, "I wish you martyrdom," and rushed away. I was amused by her displeasure, and as my inner ethnographer kicked in, I followed, asking, "Do I look like the kind who can become a martyr?"

My question—and the risk I'd taken by following a woman in full hijab in a place full of revolutionaries—worked. She agreed to an interview, so long as we met at the university. Na'eemeh, twenty-nine years old and a student of dentistry at a reputed medical university in Tehran, was from a small province around Mashhad. She sourced prayer sachets and gifted them to visitors whenever she came home for the holidays. There was an idea behind every item in the sachet:

1. Candy—this was locally produced by a women's association that sells candy to raise money for Iraqi families displaced by ISIS insurgency.
2. A prayer card for the Al-yasin prayer, which implied a covenant and fellowship of militancy between a believer and the Messiah at the time of his return to spread justice globally.
3. A sticker depicting the face of a lesser-known martyred brigadier named Abdullah Iskandari, one of the earliest Iranian commanders beheaded by ISIS in Syria.
4. The sachet—a thin biodegradable textile colored in green, the color associated with the family of the prophet Muhammad.

Na'eemeh explained excitedly how she thought this package could take anyone interested to "the gates of martyrdom." The sweetness of the candy along with the sacred prayers placed in a sachet in the green color associated with the prophet Muhammad did not lead to the gate of martyrdom unless the sachet included a picture of a martyr who could be the role model for the journey. The candy was hand-made by the wives and daughters of martyrs, so the recipient would be able to commune with martyrs via the hands that served them when they were alive. Those willing to recite the prayers would resurrect after their deaths and support the messiah's war against injustice—and, if they missed their opportunity the first time round, they would become martyrs. The stickers were printed especially for her sachets; because Abdullah Iskandari was not famous,

his face would provoke the curiosity of recipients, and, it was hoped, they would try to find out more. She was sure anyone, even unbelievers, would be touched by his story. Lastly, the environmentally friendly sachet would dissolve away, just like martyrs who had been consumed by the love and grace of God. Na'eemeh had clearly thought about how each element could *perform* martyrdom and push toward it the one who had been gifted the sachet. However, it was not the sachet that produced martyrdom; the recipient of the objects had to be worthy as well. I asked Na'eemeh how she could judge that worthiness, and she stressed that she usually made only twelve sachets and gifted them based on instinct. To ground the question and prevent her getting away with abstract descriptions, I asked why I was deemed worthy of martyrdom. She simply told me I'd "appeared" like a worthy one. Her shy tone made it difficult to decipher whether this was intended to be complimentary or whether she was simply keen to evade explaining herself further to such an inquisitive stranger. She recounted how I resembled someone who'd fought for the resistance.

She did not know that I had arrived just a few hours ago from Iraq, where I'd been conducting fieldwork among Shia combatants fighting against ISIS in Mosul. She did, however, notice my olive-green Fjällräven hiking jacket, Chinese collar shirt, straight cotton cargo pants, Timberland ankle boots, and unstyled beard. Back in the Netherlands, I'd be called a punk or someone from an alternative scene, but Na'eemeh saw a reflection of Shia combatants. She looked at the similarities between my attire and the military uniforms of her comrades, paying no attention to the telling, more minute deviations. This seemed to me like visual agnosia—someone recognizing the world and others through abstractions rather than precisely ascertaining the reality of the situation. The ecology of images was at work, and it introduced me, via my appearance, as a possible combatant or as a friend—someone worthy of martyrdom. My sartorial choices—born of practicality—had made me worthy of martyrdom. The objects that spoke my worthiness to Na'eemeh by way of color, shape, and sensation, as well as all the items inside the sachet, configured martyrdom. Na'eemeh wished the grace of martyrdom for me, but she also anticipated its impossibility; this is why she ensured my martyrdom by placing the prayer card and indirectly inviting me to read it. When Na'meemeh became more at ease, she asked me whether I was married and whether I enjoyed life abroad. I told her succinctly while collecting my notebook that I was not married, and inquired as to why she'd asked.

She said, "Those who don't pollute themselves with lust and die virtuous are considered martyrs too."

It seemed there was no way out of this martyrdom deal for me; according to her, I was destined to become a martyr. Her punchlines reconfirmed the fact that, in Iran, martyrdom emerges from the web of life if one remains open to it; it emerges from the collaboration of actions, objects, and historical trajectories that shape notions of death. Death/martyrdom become integral to life by way of objects that collaborate, categorize, and signify, as well as through concepts such as virtue and lust.

### Transitional Objects and All-Things-Martyrdom

The capacities of an object to circulate, exist, emanate meanings, and collaborate with the user/owner to make sense of the world are not reducible to mere symbols. Things operate as "transitional objects" (Bollas 1987) in the everyday lives of social actors. Such objects are "enviro-somatic transformers" that enable individuals to redefine themselves in relation to the network of meanings around them and accordingly shift the relationship between a subject and their environment (just as a comfort blanket or teddy bear helps a child achieve independence). I draw from Bollas's psychoanalytical approach to explain that consuming the stuff of martyrdom is not simply a symbolic interaction with an object of desire; instead, pious consumers pursue these objects to surrender to them, positing them as a medium that facilities transition and enables access to new modes of subjectivity.

One such example of transitional objects in action concerns two young girls who I came across sporting white shrouds of the type usually wrapped around corpses before they are interred in the grave. These *Kafan-poushan*, "death cloth" wearers, were not more than fourteen years old, and they had taken the white shrouds to march for the Jerusalem Day demonstration. They were not part of the groups usually organized by schools obliged to bring students to demonstrations; they were by themselves, and seemed indifferent to my camera and evident interest in them. Their *Kafans* were of white fabric, with round holes cut from the top. They fell over their black attire like badly stitched shirts. They had inscribed slogans over their white shrouds, and I asked them about their *Kafans* and intentions. Asiyeh, who studied biology with the intention of becoming a doctor like her martyred uncle, pointed at a group of students a few hundred meters away:

> They are my stupid classmates. Our fancy school brings us every year, as if demonstration is the day for an outing, hanging out and ditching classes. They don't give us flags, posters, signs, and certainly not a *Kafan*. The revolutionary promise—to be available when we are called on—seems like a chore to them. I hate it.

Then her friend, who was busy with an ice cream, chimed in: "We like having fun, but this is a serious business[. . . .] We wore *Kafans* to show we are not scared to die."

It was difficult to take her seriously while she licked an ice cream. She pulled an old newspaper article from her school bag. The piece was laminated—she obviously wanted to preserve it. "This is my prized possession in the world," she said. "Look at these men and women wearing *Kafans*, marching against the Pahlavi king and deciding their own destiny. I always knew that [that] is what I want to do when I grow up: express my courage, wear a *Kafan*, and stand against injustice in the occupied Palestine." Asiyeh was nodding in confirmation while her friend spoke, and I got a sense of the underlying motivation for *Kafan-pushy* (wearing a *Kafan*).

*Kafan* was more than a signifying material expression of ideology. It was a transitional object that marked passage into adulthood, which is itself linked to revolutionary subjectivities in Iran. Fashioning themselves to resemble corpses demonstrated that the two girls were able-bodied women who could take their lives into their own hands and offer them to anyone and anything that they found appropriate. Asiyeh and her friend saw the possibility of becoming "sovereign subjects" by way of readiness to sacrifice and through ownership and exhibition of the specific materials associated with revolutionary adults. Martyrdom-themed objects and images often emanate something undefinable and unlocatable for consumers (Saramifar 2018), who believe the object "makes someone who they appreciate out of them": a young girl becomes a woman, a boy turns into a man, and a pious man becomes a martyr via transitional objects.

### Weapons, Sticky Objects, and All-Things-Martyrdom

The larger portion of my ethnographic journey among pro-regime Iranians took place in combat zones and involved interactions with Shia militias. As such, weaponry is a part of my exploration of the material expressions of religion among Shia militias. That said, the weapon as a material expression of Islam extends beyond combat zones. For example, Islamic jurisprudence

(*fiqh*) strongly recommends that clergymen lead Friday prayers by holding a weapon during sermons. This tradition is built on a broad interpretation of Muhammad's habits—while offering sermons, he often leaned on a sword, a walking cane, or a bow. It was Núman Maqhrebi, the high jurist of the Fatimid dynasty (909–1171 AD), who suggested that Muhammad's habit should inspire Muslim clergymen. He emphasized that the combination of words (sermon) and the sword (the performative object) during rituals conveyed to enemies that the sword would come if the words were not accepted (Poonawala 2001). The weapon or lethal object as part of the clergyman's ensemble thus supplies meanings to his spoken metaphors and indirect hints.

Muslim jurists appreciated the interventions of Núman Maqhrebi, and his words were especially disseminated and propagated by such branches of Islam as the Ismaili and Twelver Shias, who emphasize armed resistance. His interpretation of Muhammad's habit is an example of how weapons have long carried a vibrant symbolic potency in Friday prayers, to the extent that nowadays those attending a Friday prayer pay careful attention to the weapon carried by Ali Khamenei, the current highest Iranian religious authority. After prayers, those in attendance discuss the weapon's type and country of manufacture via social media or in the political forums of mosques, circulating theories about why the weapon was chosen. These conversations should not be understood as the idle chatter of devoted followers; they in fact indicate how certain social imaginaries of the community of believers are tied to weapons as contentious political objects and lethal crafts.

Ali Khamenei often holds the Heckler & Koch G3 during his Friday sermons, setting himself apart from other clergymen across Iran, who typically carry an AK-47 or decommissioned BRNO. The AK-47 is the weapon of resistance, and was used widely during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). It is also the official weapon issued to the personnel of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is under Khamenei's command. However, it seems that Khamenei prefers the G3, the official weapon issued by Iran's national defense forces. Khamenei, as the leader of the nation, takes on the weapon carried by the national defense forces while addressing the nation, and he thereby attends to the national dimension of his leadership instead of projecting a wholly religious persona.

Recently, Ali Khamenei has begun to hold a Dragunov sniper rifle during Friday prayers sermons. This has been the case since the Dragunov marksman rifle became the weapon issued to Iranian fighting units

deployed abroad to fight ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Consequently, this weapon is recognized by many Iranians as the weapon used against ISIS. The weapon gained notoriety as marksmen's pictures circulated across various social media platforms. When some marksmen were killed in action, the public's retrospective perception of the Dragunov changed; it was not a lethal rifle anymore, but a symbolic object imbued with the attributes of the martyrs who died in the war against ISIS.

The symbolic potency of weaponry is taken very seriously by some clergymen, who pray fully armed rather than just holding a weapon. Gholam Reza Hasani, the late representative of Ali Khamenei in one of the northern provinces of Iran, always carried a weapon during prayers, going so far as to keep a handgun in his hand at all times. He would famously hold the handgun in his palms, and during a specific part of his prayers, would offer the handgun toward God. The allure of weaponry as symbolically potent and lethal objects can enchant to the extent that carrying a weapon supersedes the words (prayers and sermons) that should, according to Núman Maqhrebi, come before any display of power. Weaponry exceeds its instrumental use and it becomes entangled in the everyday affairs of pious revolutionary Iranians. An account of this entanglement explains why certain objects "stick" to users.

The everydayness of religious practices and piety highlight the complexities of taking a gendered role in Shia communities. Here, I point to the process of "becoming a man," which involves presenting one's own gender *alongside weaponry*. For instance, in the province of Najrāb, less than 100 km from Kabul, Afghanistan, most young men and teenagers ride their motorcycles to school while sporting well-maintained AK-47s. They are not militants or members of any subversive group fighting against the Afghan state; they don't belong to the Taliban or any other Islamist organization. Weapons, especially the AK-47, are simply part of the everyday attire of those who are *becoming* men in the eyes of the Iranian community. Motorcycles and weapons are the marks of a coming-of-age personality who has acquired enough masculine credibility and male sociability to possess a mode of transportation and to be trusted with a lethal object.

A weapon, as a transitional object, is the mark of becoming a wise "man" who recognizes the value and the worth of life; he is trusted to respect life at large, although he is equipped enough to take a life. The AK-47 becomes the mark of transitioning and transforming from boyhood to manhood because, in Najrāb, those who achieve manhood and the respect

that comes with it are not expected to carry weapons. Middle-aged and elderly men in Najrāb are already the measures of masculinity in that community; the weapon and its physical presence are no longer required. That said, the perpetual conflicts plaguing Afghanistan do not allow the weapon to completely vanish from these men's lives and social imaginaries.

Najrāb is an example of how becoming a man is expressed via the lethal object and how a certain gender expression operates according to one's ability to take life. Women become those who offer life by virtue of giving birth. Men, in their masculine "wisdom," determine the worth and value of life by virtue of their privilege to tote weapons and terminate life. These ideas and social demarcations, which tightly control gender expression, are condensed into subject-object relationships, such as that between a man and his weapon.

I return to Iran and its religious authority to elaborate on how weaponry/objects, masculinity, and the socialization of violence are linked together within the Islamic framework. The saying by the prophet Muhammad, "the weapon is the jewel of men," has encouraged most Shia jurists to approve the open carrying of weaponry for Muslim men. Indeed, numerous fatwas (Islamic ordinances) deem carrying a weapon openly in public permissible by Islam. However, these fatwas are overridden by whoever assumes the role of *Valiye Faqih*, or by any jurist recognized locally as the highest religious authority and politically accepted jurist for Shia Muslims. Basically, a certain learned man can seize and deny the religiously given rights of other Muslim men. He can administer all relationships that his followers would establish with lethal objects by virtue of God, his office, law, and structures of social acceptance. *Valiye Faqih* is the man enabled by law, society, and God to precede all men and their desires. He is the most masculine man, and can permit the rise of arms or prohibit their usage. The *Valiye Faqih* and his relationship with weaponry turn him into the highest model of masculinity inspired by Islam. He dictates the shape, ideas, domains, and objects of violence. The *Valiye Faqih* is able to administer, permit, prohibit, and facilitate the socialization of violence via his authority over lethal objects. Additionally, Muslim militias accept the authority of *Valiye Faqih* because their belief in him legitimizes the act of killing and the use of weaponry.

I have shown here how gender and religiosity are infused into the weapon, such that it becomes an integral part of the process of Muslim masculinity. Accordingly, new sociocultural practices have developed

around the lethal object. The treatment of weaponry and modes of accepting it as the "manly" thing are not due to some culturally or religiously fixed script; there are other dynamics at work in the ecology of martyrdom.

## Contentious Politics, Objects, and the Meaning of Life

I started this chapter by taking visual agnosia as a metaphor to explain political attitudes of pious revolutionary Iranians toward objects of contentious politics. The Iranians of my stories see a particular "concrete" object, but treat it as something abstract that can homogenize everything and everyone into socially accepted categories. I followed martyrdom-themed objects to elaborate and explain how martyrdom, God, and life are accessed by adherents of martyrdom. My anthropology of access contributes to the study of symbolic objects in contentious politics by inviting readers to see how death is integrated into life by way of objects that contribute to radical and religious cosmologies. I acknowledge the symbolic potency of these objects, but suggest that they additionally express a material allure to consumers capable of turning the personal into the political (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7). Asiyeh and her friend yearned for "adulthood" because they found their peers to be aimless children; political Islam became the arena of expression for them. The *Kafan* was a collaborator that allowed them to perform "being grown-ups," and the Iranian regime embraced their choice of objects and approved their chosen lifestyles. The stories that I shared fall into the framework that Tilly put forward in *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978). Tilly stressed that one side of the contentions and frictions that traverse the personal to the political must be a state in order for the contention to become political. However, Tilly's notion of state is purely located in approaches to governance and administration, whereas anthropologists such as Sharma and Gupta (2006) and Benedict Anderson (1991) locate the state in social imaginaries. My fieldwork experiences don't fully confirm Tilly's framework, but they do push contentious politics into non-representational ground, where contentious frictions exist for their own sake and allow individuals to define themselves against the other, regardless of states or regimes.

Overall, my stories and ethnographic explorations of objects highlight their role as nonhuman partners of social movements, regimes of ideology, and worldviews. They are entangled into contentious politics, they acquire symbolic potency from their contexts, but they resist universality. The acquired symbolic potency may display some phenomenological similari-

ties with other violent conditions, but they are context-dependent. Following the contentious trajectory of objects of martyrdom, their transitions and the gradual loading of meanings into them shows how contentious politics is truly neither the domain of collective actions nor fully the arena of individual social actors. Instead, contentious politics can emerge from interactional dynamics between collectives and individuals in partnership with nonhuman elements at the intersection of other social forces.

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# Somewhere Over the Rainbow

### *The Symbolic Politics of In/visibility in Lebanese Queer Activism*

John Nagle

In 2003 thousands of protesters gathered in Beirut, Lebanon's capital city, to demonstrate against the invasion of Iraq. A small group in the crowd—described the next day in a local newspaper as including one member with dyed green hair and another with "a piercing in his ears"—stood on the steps of the national museum and unfurled the rainbow flag, the symbol of LGBTQ pride and activism (Mandour 2019). The rainbow flag represented the first visible sign of a nascent activist network that had hitherto been submerged in private networks in Beirut. A year later, this subterranean movement announced its existence to the world with the formation of Helem, the first above-ground LGBTQ movement in the Arab world (Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk 2008).

The rainbow flag has become the most internationally recognizable and ubiquitous symbol of LGBTQ activism, visibility, and pride. Similar to the symbol of Che Guevara (see chapter 10), the rainbow flag has become an almost postmodern global signifier, representing anything to anyone and everything to everyone. The flying of the rainbow flag has become a radical declaration of resistance against the marginality and precarity of queer lives under neoliberalism, and simultaneously an empty marker of depoliticized diversity and consumer capitalism. It is a symbol than can equally be appropriated by states as part of "pinkwashing" declarations of

liberal tolerance, and be proscribed by regimes seeking to securitize and repress activist groups. The flag has been redesigned and adapted by a variety of activist groups to fit their own narratives, identities, and struggles, a consequence of the multicolored design of the flag allowing for polysemic potentials. Yet at the same time, the rainbow flag is a product of Stonewall activism, an expression of rights-based politics that emerged in North America and Western Europe from the late 1960s onward (Weeks 2015; Ayoub 2016). This sexual politics is predicated on emphasizing the visibility of queer communities and the affirmation of sexual difference. The Western origins of the rainbow flag—and the forms of sexual politics that it enshrines—mean that it is a symbol that many activist groups in the Global South are deeply ambivalent about, especially in societies where same-sex relations and nonnormative forms of gender are criminalized. While flying the rainbow flag in such contexts is a political imaginary that allows activists to announce their existence to the world, it is also a symbol that risks positioning a movement as an agent of Western sexual imperialism (see Nuñez-Mietz 2019).

In this chapter I examine the rainbow flag as a symbolic object. In particular, I draw attention to the antinomous use and nonuse of the rainbow flag by LGBTQ activists in Lebanon. I pose this as a queering of symbolic politics, an attempt to disrupt, spoil, and problematize sexuality so that it does not cohere into fixity and essentialist categories that sustain inequality (Moussawi 2020). This queering of symbolic politics stems from activists strategically playing with and negotiating public visibility. Such "ambiguous visibility," as it has been called by some activists (see Meem 2010), is a product of activists operating in an environment where they are harassed by various arms of the security forces, but it is also indicative of the sexual politics of the Lebanese LGBTQ movement that seeks to foment mobilizing strategies that resonate with local understandings of sexuality. I also illuminate the role of symbolic objects in LGBTQ activism as an intersectional movement, which uses alliances and coalition-building with a range of groups that are marginalized in Lebanon. Finally, to illuminate some of these issues, I turn to the October 2019 protests known as the Thawra (uprising), a series of citizen demonstrations against corruption and declining living standards in Lebanon. LGBTQ activists were able to find room in the spaces of the Thawra to advance queer politics by blurring the boundaries between visibility and invisibility.

The research in this article is based on eight fieldwork trips to Lebanon since 2011. I draw on more than forty interviews with LGBTQ activists,

human rights advocates, representatives of political parties, and international actors. As same-sex relations and nonnormative gender are criminalized in Lebanon, resulting in state harassment of activists, all interviews are anonymized. This data is triangulated with reports and policy documents by activists, human rights groups, and media outlets, including Helem, Meem, the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality, and Human Rights Watch.

This chapter proceeds by first tracing the development of the rainbow flag as a symbolic object inextricably linked with the rise of gay rights activism in the Global North. I highlight the rainbow flag as a universalizing symbolic object that is imagined as articulating LGBTQ visibility and pride, a unifying political project and a sense of a global identity that binds together sexual minorities across borders. I note that the rainbow flag also risks being an exclusionary symbolic object and an ill-fitting one for some contexts in the Global South. Second, the chapter looks at queer activism in Lebanon, particularly the ambivalent use/nonuse of the rainbow flag as a symbolic object. The final section of the chapter looks at Lebanese activism as an intersectional project that involves the queering of symbolic objects, including the use of murals and graffiti.

## Visibility, Global LGBTQ Activism, and the Rainbow Flag

At the nucleus of Stonewall LGBTQ activism is the politics of visibility: that sexuality itself must be visible—a matter of public, not just private, concern—for rights to be secured. In the words of the renowned US activist Harvey Milk (2013): "Come out, stand up and let that world know. . . . Only that way will we start to achieve our rights."

The personal public declaration of one's marginalized sexual identity acts as a catalyst for a positive transformation of the attitudes of homophobic society while attracting others to emulate such declarations. Visibility sends a signal to closeted and isolated people that they are not alone, and that there is a community out there willing to endow them with a sense of pride and support in their sexual orientation. Visibility, as an "open avowal of one's sexual identity," thus symbolizes "the shedding of the self-hatred that gay men and women internalized" (D'Emilio 1983, 103). As a strategy for LGBTQ activism, especially in the US and Western Europe, the power of public visibility fueled the organizational capacity of the LGBTQ movement by encouraging "the active involvement of large numbers of homosexuals and lesbians in their own emancipation effort" (D'Emilio, 1983,

238). While visibility is central to the process of movement-building, it is also important in making LGBTQ identities and politics visible in the public arena, which in itself is a challenge to the notion of a uniformly heteronormative social order. Visibility, as such, encourages society to accept and tolerate the reality of sexual diversity.

Thus, as Michelson claims (2019, e1), "visibility matters": when LGBTQ people are seen, "they are more able to influence public attitudes and public officials and . . . to advance LGBT rights." While such visibility can be expressed via a wide variety of media and formats, when it assumes a symbolic form, it is most famously expressed in the rainbow flag. The flag itself is a product of Stonewall activism. Designed by the US activist Gilbert Baker, at the request of Harvey Milk, the different colors of the rainbow spectrum represent distinct but complementary aspects of an individual gay person's identity. For Baker, the rainbow flag most importantly represents the power of visibility in contentious politics:

> Our job as gay people was to come out, to be visible, to live in the truth, as I say, to get out of the lie. A flag really fit that mission, because that's a way of proclaiming your visibility or saying "This is who I am!" (Inside/Out, 2015)

Baker's declaration that to be visible is "to live in the truth" echoes Michel Foucault's (1982, 1998) claim that sexuality has become "the truth of our being." Here, Foucault argues that in the *dispostif* formed through the intertwining of science, politics, and religion in the nineteenth century, sexuality was no longer to be understood as merely an act; it had instead become an essence and signifier of one's identity. For Foucault, the construction of sexuality—both hetero and homosexuality—as a social category was a product of what he termed "biopower," the forms of governance concerned with the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, and the increase of its wealth, longevity, and health. Biopower embraces two complementary forms of disciplinary power, one that works on the individual and the other on society (Foucault 1982, 1998). While the former is a power that exercises itself on the body, creating docile bodies that are economically useful, the latter is concerned with the reproductive capacity of the population. It is within these configurations of biopower that sexuality is a matter of a healthy functioning state, and that health means normality and deviance means pathology. In the new medical discourses, "homosexuality" was a descriptor of a deviation from a developmental norm, and thus

had to be "corrected" through interventionist forms of disciplinary power that served the good of the body politic (Foucault 1998).

The rise of Stonewall activism accepted the truth of sexuality but turned what was a societal vice into a virtue. In other words, the "gay rights" movement reimagined homosexuality as an identity that one should be proud of, and such pride was affirmed through the politics of visibility, including "coming out" and flying the rainbow flag. Indeed, it should be noted that the rainbow flag was designed to replace the then-existing symbol of the gay rights movement—the pink triangle. Rather than a symbol of pride, the pink triangle was a badge of shame sewn onto the clothing of gay people in Nazi concentration camps. In the 1970s, the burgeoning gay rights movement in the West reclaimed the badge, not as a symbol of pride, but as a means to expose the necropolitics of queer lives, especially the institutional homophobia, inequality, and violence that LGBTQ people faced daily. The replacement of the pink triangle with the rainbow flag thus represented a symbol of pride in sexual orientation and a demand for respect for diversity (Waxman 2015).

No symbol, of course, can ever be said to wholly represent any political community, because no group is homogenous in the way that its leaders often fantasize. The power of symbols is that they generate what Anthony Cohen (2013) called the "symbolic construction of community," multivalent forms that allow for different readings depending on a member's social position while simultaneously providing a sense of shared belonging to a particular group or political project. The strength of the rainbow flag, as a symbolic object, derives from its multicolored series of horizontal stripes, each colored stripe symbolizing a specific but complementary essence of a gay person's identity. It is a flag that is inextricably associated with LGBTQ rights, yet it allows space for different forms of sexual identity.

In this sense, the rainbow flag risks being an obscuring symbol, one in which in the appearance of unity conceals the unequal power relations that have often existed within LGBTQ communities. On this, Duggan (2012) uses the term "homonormativity" to capture what she considers "the construction of an acceptable homosexuality. . . . specifically, gender conformity" (Rosenfeld 2009, 621), since these are the values and identities our society rewards as meriting rights. Homonormativity secures privilege for affluent and gender-normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender, while marginalizing the needs of working-class sexual minorities, lesbians, and transgender individuals,

who are seen as deviant and a threat to the moral order of society (Stryker 2008, 146–47).

Despite the power differentials that exist within the LGBTQ movement and the wider population, the power of the rainbow flag is that it is indeed a flag conceived as representing a political community. In describing his process of conceptualizing the rainbow flag, Gilbert Baker was inspired by flags that had developed in the context of revolutionary action to become symbols of a new nation:

> I thought of the vertical red, white, and blue tricolor from the French Revolution and how both flags owed their beginnings to a riot, a rebellion, or revolution. I thought a gay nation should have a flag too, to proclaim its own idea of power. (Baker 2020)

For Baker, the flag was not meant to be a symbol restricted to gay people in the West, but for an emerging global gay nation and transnational activist network mobilizing for LGBTQ rights:

> As a community, both local and international, gay people were in the midst of an upheaval, a battle for equal rights, a shift in status where we were now demanding power, taking it. This was our new revolution[. . . .] It deserved a new symbol [. . . ,] a global collective that was expressing itself in art and politics. We needed a flag to fly everywhere. (Baker 2020)

Baker's planetary vision for the rainbow flag resonates with the concept of the global gay nation or community. This is a "globalizing . . . gay community," a "political identity struggling for equality" (Nardi 1998, 571), "where members of particular groups have more in common across national and continental boundaries" (Altman 2002, 86–87) than with those from within their own countries. The movement has supposedly "helped create an international gay/lesbian identity . . . by no means confined to the western world" (Altman 2002, 86–87), and they generate activism by a process of transnational diffusion.

Yet this assumption of a unified global LGBTQ movement is highly problematic. The false allure of unity and homogeneity among LGBTQ activists and the LGBTQ population conceals highly concentrated power differences among activists in the Global North and South. Activists in

the Global South have often perceived international LGBTQ organizations, such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, to be dominated by the movement in the Global North (see Nagle 2018). More than this, the premise of a global LGBTQ movement assumes that trajectories of activist knowledge travel in a linear way from the Global North to the South. In other words, the modes of activism that developed from Stonewall, centered on the politics of visibility and recognition of sexual difference, provide a template for activists in the Global South to replicate. A Lebanese LGBTQ activist wrote about how Western policymakers tended to promote "Western" forms of activism and sexual development as a model for Lebanon and other countries to follow: "The idea that LGBT liberation was a linear timeline, of which various nations and peoples were lagging behind a triumphant West, was deeply offensive" (Zeidan 2019). In an examination of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's use of a traffic-light system to determine a state's status in the spectrum of tolerance for LGBTQ rights, Rao (2014, 170) notes how this "ranking impulse" reproduces a "temporal narrative of sexual modernization." International funders and development agencies support activists in the Global South on the basis that these advocacy groups are agents of modernization and Western human rights. As Klapeer (2018) notes, LGBTQ populations in homophobic states are interpreted as sexual subjects who already "embody (some) elements of modernity." For this reason, international actors are required to "activate these populations so that they can begin a process of queer identity formation that will transform them . . . into important agents of modernization and development" (Klapeer 2018, 110).

The evocation of the global LGBTQ community thus risks doing service for forms of sexual imperialism, in which Global South movements are supposed to import Western modes of sexual identity as part of liberatory politics. Such sexual imperialism not only overrides local understandings and practices in relation to sexuality and gender, it positions local activists and populations as agents of Westernization. This perception of LGBTQ movements in the Global South, particularly in places where same-sex relations are criminalized, provides a pretext for the state to delegitimize activists by accusing them of being agents of Western sexual imperialism, importing foreign vices that will destroy society through a process of moral decay (Human Rights Watch 2016). In so doing, the state can securitize LGBTQ activists on the basis that they represent an existential threat to national security. Indeed, several homophobic states have in recent

years engaged in "norm immunization," a strategy to resist the advance of LGBTQ rights in their states using special and extrajudicial methods. Russia's infamous "gay propaganda law" criminalizes any activity deemed as promoting homosexuality, including outlawing pride parades and even proscribing the rainbow flag (Nuñez-Mietz 2019). In Poland, the governing Law and Justice party, while not explicitly banning the rainbow flag in public, frames it as "a symbol of all the things that they say pose a threat to Roman Catholic values and the nation's identity" (Santora 2020).

The rainbow flag is thus a deeply ambivalent symbol for activists beyond the Global North, simultaneously offering potential for transnational solidarity while supporting a narrow Western neoliberal expression of sexual identity. Of course, it should be noted that it is erroneous to think that local and global sexual epistemologies are disconnected from each other. There are no "uncontaminated," "local" sexual and gender identities, whether in the so-called West or in postcolonial states. I now examine LGBTQ activism in Lebanon to illuminate these issues of visibility/invisibility and the global/local in symbolic politics.

## "Sex against the Order of Nature"

Article 534 of Lebanon's Penal Code, which criminalizes "sex against the order of nature," is directed at the LGBTQ population, and offenses carry up to a one-year jail sentence (Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk 2008). Expressions of nonconforming gender identity are further prosecuted under several other articles regulating public morality and decency (Human Rights Watch 2019). Lebanese LGBTQ people confront "discrimination in employment and arbitrary dismissal . . . limited access to housing, health, and social services . . . [even] political and financial extortion" (Makarem 2011, 100). A report commissioned by activists noted that members of the LGBTQ population are "periodically arrested, detained, and tortured by Lebanese security forces" (Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre, 2015, 7).

In this environment, Lebanese LGBTQ activism began in virtual spaces: gay people began to connect via Internet Relay Chat in the late 1990s and then in private spaces (Nagle 2016). From this, an activist rights-based movement was formed. The first and most notable of these is Helem, which is the first "above-ground LGBT organization in the MENA region" (Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk 2008). Helem publicly announced itself as a group in 2004, and then gained support from sympathetic lawyers, media figures, international human rights organizations,

and several diplomatic missions in Lebanon. Since then further LGBTQ activist groups and NGOs have been formed. It is important to note that activist groups do not form a coherent and homogenous bloc, but include more radical activist networks as well as professionalized advocacy NGOs. This often-fractured landscape means that activists' political programs differ, although intense expressions of solidarity are common in response to incidents of human rights abuse experienced by activists and members of the LGBTQ population.

The Lebanese LGBTQ movement cleaved over several issues, including whether it should broadly follow the model of Stonewall activism or if it needed to craft mobilizing strategies that reflected the specific context of Lebanon. A senior Helem activist explained:

> If we're going to make things better for LGBT people we have two choices: either we start to create a society similar to the West so that we can follow the trajectory of Western LGBT activists in making things better (so, our own Stonewall somewhere down the line) or we can actually sit and observe the way things are done here and ask ourselves: "can something be done within this sort of reality that is here?" If the system here, and the way it works—the relationships and the mechanisms that make it operate—are really inefficient, there may be a way whereby we can make things better in the short term, because you have a responsibility to save people who are being killed and hurt.[1]

From its beginnings, Helem associated itself with transnational movement politics. The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission presented the prestigious Felipa de Souza Award to Helem for their human rights work. Lebanese activists also participated in the meetings of the International Lesbian and Gay Organization (Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk 2008).

Beyond positioning itself within the global LGBTQ movement, a section of the activist movement used some of the key tactics developed by Stonewall activism, particularly the politics of visibility, as means to achieve rights. For example, just months after becoming a public movement, Lebanese LGBTQ activists joined groups around the world in the first International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) in 2005. The theme chosen

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1. Interview, Beirut, June 2015.

by activists in Lebanon was "I Exist," a simple declaration, one wrote, that "LGBT people exist in Lebanon and we are breaking the wall of silence" (Azzi 2011). Visibility has been further expressed via a variety of forms. Helem's online magazine, called *Barra*, meaning "Out" in Arabic, provided a regular source of information about the movement, covering issues ranging from sexual health to legal advice. Activists have also claimed space in Lebanese television and media to challenge how they represent LGBTQ people. In addition to these activities, a Beirut Pride celebration was inaugurated in 2017 with a weeklong series of indoor events and "coming out" storytelling. Beirut Pride is noteworthy in that explicit political activism guiding its mission is absent. The aim of Pride, according to the organizers, is to "banalize" LGBTQ people, to make them seem ordinary and less of a threat to society (Beirut Pride 2020). The politics of visibility was further buttressed by sections of the movement organizing into professional advocacy NGOs. Helem, for example, has described itself as a "rights-based organization that focuses on advocating and lobbying for the legal and social rights of people with alternative sexuality" (Dabaghi, Mack, and Jaalouk 2008, 4). Funding from international actors, including a range of governments (e.g., US, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, and Norway) gave LGBTQ NGOs capacity to focus on service delivery, such as HIV testing, medical support, legal casework, clinical management of rape cases, and psychosocial help.

Yet the politics of visibility for Lebanese activists was always expressed in an ambivalent form. LGBTQ activism has taken the form of street politics, such as protests against human rights abuses by the state. Public parades celebrating sexual difference are unheard of. Thus, for Lebanese activists, unlike contentious politics in Portugal (see chapter 6), the street has rarely been assigned as a symbolic object through which rights are legitimized or contested. Given that same-sex relations are criminalized in Lebanon, visibility is severely constricted by the various arms of the state. Rashida, a human rights worker and activist, identified a dialectical relationship, in which "the more visible LGBT rights become . . . in the political discourse the more backlash we are receiving."[2] In recent years, several incidents have highlighted the extent to which state oppression, as one reporter notes, forms "part of a bigger campaign and strategy to limit the spaces of the LGBT community" (Hall 2019). The categorization of sexuality as a security issue is evident in the fact that General Security, the

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2. Interview, Beirut, September 2019.

intelligence branch of the Lebanese security forces, has raided LGBTQ events and arrested participants on the basis of "protecting society from imported vices" that "disrupt the security and stability of society" (Human Rights Watch 2018). In 2018 alone, activists monitored thirty-five arrests and trials, a significant rise over a five-year period (Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality 2018). Indeed, as illuminated in chapter 8, the policing of queer bodies in protest entails attending to various symbolic signs and corporal indicators associated with the LGBTQ+ community, including tattooing, body piercings, and hair dying.

It is in periods of visibility in which the various arms of the state have sought to repress the LGBTQ movement, restricting its visibility in public space, that activists have countered by increasing their visibility. Flying the rainbow flag is particularly salient at these moments of counterprotest. In reaction to the closing down of Beirut Pride in 2018 by after the main organizer was arrested and detained in a police cell by the "Vice Squad" (Human Rights Watch 2018), a group of activists hired two speedboats to sail around Pigeons' Rock, an iconic Beirut landmark, and wave rainbow flags for onlookers. In a show of solidarity, several bars in Mar Mikhael, a hip district in Beirut, flew the rainbow flag for one night. Graffiti then appeared across the city stating, "The Closet Can't Contain Us Anymore." Lebanese activists also drove to several embassies in the city to hand out rainbow flags for them to fly as a declaration of solidarity with Lebanon's LGBTQ population. In a joint statement posted on social media, the UK, Australian, and Danish embassies declared "we raise the rainbow flag at our embassies to support the full enjoyment of human rights for all" (UK Lebanon 2019). For an activist who had distributed their flags, the flying of the rainbow flag was a "big statement" by the embassies to the Lebanese authorities. "It was a statement to say that 'we have eyes on you.'"[3]

The rainbow flag has thus become particularly visible at moments when the Lebanese LGBTQ population and activists are under attack. The flag is used to signal the movement's resistance to homophobic violence perpetuated by the state and to demonstrate that the LGBTQ community cannot simply be erased from the public sphere. At the same time, however, the flag is an ambivalent symbol, since for many activists, it is a symbolic object that promotes Western forms of sexual politics—predicated on LGBTQ rights and visibility—that are not only ill-fitting for non-Western contexts but further threaten to depoliticize the radical character of queer

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3. Interview, Beirut, September 2019.

activism in Lebanon. Thus, activists have often distanced themselves from the Stonewall mode of activism mentioned earlier, which is based on the idea of the truth of sexuality as a fixed identity.

For one critical Arab writer, Joseph Massad (2007), the West has essentially exported fixed categories of sexuality—especially the binary of the straight-gay paradigm—to the Middle East. Massad (2007) notes that the construction of the category of "homosexual" as a clearly defined subject and identity that requires recognition and rights is relatively modern, and a "product of specific Euro-American histories and social formations." The exportation of "gay rights" is enabled by what Massad terms the "Gay International"—the network of global and local activists that promotes LGBTQ rights. Massad accuses LGBTQ activists—such as those in Lebanon—of being "native informants . . . complicit with imperialism." This complicity is not located in the politics of LGBTQ activists—Massad recognizes that these activists often position themselves as radical and anticolonial; complicity instead resides at "the level of epistemology and ontology." By this, he means that LGBTQ activists are "complicit with an imperial sexual regime that rearranges the world along the hetero-homo binary, which they . . . insist on reproducing and disseminating across the Arab world as the road to liberation."

Massad's arguments about LGBTQ rights outside of the West are not only provocative, but reductive in some parts. Certainly, Massad's portrayal of LGBTQ activists as "native informants" renders them as mere props in Western forms of sexual colonialism, thus stripping them of any agency and voice outside of the parameters of Global North sexual politics. Yet while Massad's critiques of LGBTQ movements in the Middle East, and particularly Lebanon, are extreme (and—I would argue—problematic), they nonetheless reflect an anxious imperative for many activists in Lebanon to develop modes of activism that do not simply reproduce Western modes of Stonewall activism, predicated on visibility and the recognition of sexual identities.

Such modes of activism can thus be vehemently opposed to the importation of what is perceived to be Western neocolonialism. Krystal, an independent activist, bluntly put forward one perspective:

> In Lebanon ironically the more that we get funding the more we realise "fuck your Western funding." On international things, such as international gay pride, some LGBT groups spoke to all of the embassies and put the rainbow flag on many buildings. I am here

on the radical left and for me these are the governments that oc-
cupy, that are funding weapons. Is it good that the Finland embassy
raised the rainbow flag? How did it help? Some LGBT activists go
to the US, the UN, conferences in Washington, and they cooperate
with senators and politicians. We are on the radical left, we are anti-
imperialist and anti-colonial; I don't go to the US to get fed ideas
on how it should be, I know how it should be, I have agency, I am
an LGBT activist in Lebanon, I have exactly what I need. Why do I
need to go to Washington?[4]

Rather than simply express opposition to Western forms of activism and
funding, other activists articulate more nuanced sexual politics. Meem, a
queer movement formed in 2008, presented an outline of a more radi-
cal vision of queer politics. In a speech to the International Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual and Trans and Intersex Organization at a meeting in Sao Paolo, an
activist from Meem (2010) issued a challenge to the "shared international
understanding of 'visibility' and 'coming out' as signs of progress in LGBT
movements across the world." In other words, visibility—"a standard vali-
dation of one's identity"—is a largely Western form of identity politics that
does not necessarily resonate with the conditions that confront LGBTQ
people in Lebanon. In response, Meem developed what they described as
being "ambiguously visible," a position that "rejects the binary between
the closet and coming out." In practical terms "ambiguously visible" meant
that activists creatively and spontaneously combine different approaches to
being seen and concealed (Meem 2010).

The strategy of being ambiguously visible resonates with queerness as
a mode of political subjectivity. Queerness is an invitation for all marginal-
ized individuals and groups to come together and form alliances. Queer,
as such, works toward imagining the intersections that exist among mul-
tiple struggles in societies not only divided by sect, but by a much wider
and deeper set of inequalities. This use of Queerness echoes what Muñoz
(2019) calls "Queer futurity." Queer futurity, as a utopian project, is the
construction of political imaginaries designed to dismantle systemic injus-
tices while also constructing alternative visions of community based on
interdependency, vulnerability, and solidarity. It entails a recognition that
dominant structures of power are not only profoundly complex, but repro-
duce multiple forms of inequality, which require intersecting struggles

4. Interview, Beirut, October 2017.

based on including the most vulnerable members of present communities.

The pursuit of ambiguous in/visibility in relation to queerness represents a concrete political project. It reflects the need to be strategic in a dangerous environment for LGBTQ activists. Yet it is also a political subjectivity that refuses to take on a clearly defined symbolic form expressible in a single object such as the rainbow flag. Instead, this politics involves playing with images to communicate both presence and nonpresence in public space, and thus involves visual forms that express this ambiguity. I now turn to the 2019/2020 protests in Lebanon to illuminate these forms of political agency.

## "Queering the Revolution"

In October 2019 protests erupted in Beirut and quickly spread across Lebanon. The protests—known as the Thawra ("uprising")—were notable for drawing in hundreds of thousands of citizens, regardless of sectarian identity. Although the protests were generated by a number of issues, a galvanizing theme concerned corruption and economic mismanagement by Lebanon's political elite, the so-called *zu'uma*, called "insolent thieves" by the demonstrators. Queer activists quickly became key actors within the spaces of the Thawra, successfully joining the question of overthrowing the political regime with the call to stop the violent marginalization of queer people in the state. Queer activists were able to do this by encouraging intersectional politics, which foreground linkages between a range of marginalized groups and issues in Lebanon. Such intersectional activism corresponds to what Mouffe (2000) calls "a chain of equivalence": discreet political platforms aiming for a transformation of society come together, often momentarily, as actors who are equivalently disadvantaged by existing power relations. These movements, made up of allied groups seeking broad transformation of existing power relations, retain their different claims while coordinating around an agenda of equivalence. As Purcell (2009) argues, "equivalent" in this case does not mean identical; actors are not disadvantaged in precisely the same way. The groups in the chain each have their own distinct relation to the existing hegemony, and each group's interests are irreducible to the others.

An activist noted how the Thawra forged a site for a "political project" in which queer feminists chanted slogans and organized events that encouraged linkages among a variety of issues.

Fig. 4.1. "LGBTQ Rights," graffitied wall in Beirut, Lebanon, November 2019 (*Credit:* Photograph © John Nagle.)

> We pushed for a discourse that's intersectional: Let's talk about sexuality as much as we talk about migration. We curated intersectional chants that brought together non-normative sexualities, refugees and domestic workers' rights. We also organized public discussions about the economy and the banks.[5]

5. Interview, Beirut, February 2020.

Fig. 4.2. "Queers for Marx," graffitied wall in Beirut, Lebanon, November 2019 (*Credit:* Photograph © John Nagle.)

It is in forming these intersectional alliances that queer activists have played with the symbolic politics of "ambiguous visibility": being both present and absent. Indeed, at the heart of LGBTQ activism in the 2019 uprising lies a continuum of shades varying between direct and more concealed exposure. LGBTQ activists were emboldened enough to leave lasting "physical marks'" on the city walls, reminding people that the uprising had a strong focus on their rights. At the same time, activists remained semisecret: they constructed tents in the downtown area that was a focus for the Thawra, but did not make these identifiably LGBTQ structures. On the protest tents erected in Beirut city center, activists juxtaposed manifold slogans written in various colors, such as blue, red, and yellow: "No To Homophobia," "This Is A Feminist Revolution," and "Domestic Migrants' Rights." In the Thawra, LGBTQ activists claimed intersectionality as a frame that could consolidate rather than weaken their cause. Within days of the start of the protests, pro-LGBTQ slogans reflecting the intersectionality of demands were sprayed onto the protest tents and the city walls: "No To Homophobia," "Domestic Migrant Rights," "Queers For Marx,"

Fig. 4.3. "I wish my uterus shot bullets so the government wouldn't regulate it," graffitied wall in Beirut, Lebanon, November 2019 (*Credit:* Photograph © John Nagle.)

"Lesbians Against Homophobia," "Strike Like A Dyke," and "Black Poor Gay Trans."

Some activists chose to be more visible in the public spaces opened up by the Thawra. Helem, notably, set up a tent in Martyrs' Square, which became a venue for providing services, assistance, and legal protection to members from the LGBTQ community and vulnerable groups. Helem's rainbow-colored banner "*Kilna Yaani Kilna*" ("All of Us Means All of Us") was occasionally present. After one protest in the downtown district of Beirut, a rainbow flag was strategically positioned underneath a fresh piece of graffiti demanding "LGBTQ Rights."

By becoming momentarily visible in the downtown district, activists attempted to multiply the readings of the city: different stories that contradict hegemonic narratives (Lefebvre 1991). Rather than recruiting a familiar symbolic object whose meaning they could not reinscribe, they instead fashioned new objects and refashioned old ones.

## Conclusion

The rainbow flag is the internationally recognizable emblem of LGBTQ symbolic politics. The multicolored rainbow design evokes the precept of "unity in diversity"—a sense of collectivity and adherence to shared political objectives across a spectrum of individuals and groups holding nonnormative sexual identities. The power of the rainbow flag as a symbolic object is its articulation of Stonewall activism, grounded in the power of the politics of visibility and rights. Visibility—as noted earlier—means to be "out," and accepting the truth of one's sexual identity, and that such sexual difference should be recognized and celebrated. While the rainbow flag is imagined as representing a global "gay nation" and a transnational LGBTQ social movement, it is an object with symbolic properties deeply rooted in the sexual politics of Western activism. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the rainbow flag is not a wholly transferrable tool for transnational contentious LGBTQ struggles. The politics of visibility, sexual identity, and rights, embodied in the rainbow flag, does not necessarily fit with how sexuality is understood and practiced outside of the Global North. In such places, especially where same-sex relations are criminalized, the state often frames LGBTQ rights as Western forms of sexual neoimperialism designed to weaken the fabric of the nation. The rainbow flag can be securitized and banned by homophobic states seeking to close down the spaces of LGBTQ activism.

In this chapter I have examined the use and deliberate nonuse of the rainbow flag by activists in Lebanon, especially as expressed in terms of ambiguous visibility, which blurs and questions the binary of being seen and being unseen. The rainbow flag can be used to articulate sporadic and strategic moments of visibility, yet it can also be eschewed for even more temporary modes of symbolic politics, such as murals and graffiti, which embrace intersectional rather than identitarian politics. Such symbolic politics in Lebanon was evident in the spaces created during the 2019 Thawra uprising against the country's corrupt government and sectarian system, which also reproduced homophobia and gender inequality. It was in this moment that the symbolic politics of Lebanese queer futurity offered new political possibilities beyond the Stonewall model, and with it the rainbow flag.

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# The Feathered Headdress

*Settler Semiotics, US National Myth,*
*and the Legacy of Colonized Artifacts*

Sonja Dobroski

On February 2, 2020, the Kansas City Chiefs played the San Francisco 49ers in the 54th Super Bowl, the annual apex event of American football. Thousands of fans entered the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, Florida, in support of their respective teams. America's devoted football aficionados wear a wide variety of adornments to identify themselves as fans of their chosen team. For instance, the Green Bay Packers wear giant foam cheese heads, while Minnesota Vikings fans don horned helmets. In the 54th Super Bowl, as fans screamed, cried, and clutched one another, waves of feathers could be seen in the stadium. Fans of the Kansas City Chiefs wore these feathers on their heads. The logo of the Kansas City Chiefs is an arrowhead, and their mascot since 1989 has been a gray wolf with bulging eyes, draped in "KC" garb. Prior to the wolf the mascot was a horse named "War Paint," ridden by a person in a feathered headdress. This tradition of wearing a feathered headdress has continued into the twenty-first century; fans signify their allegiance to the team by wearing this symbolic object. By 1990 the team had adopted the infamous "tomahawk chop," a movement considered to represent the swinging of the tomahawk. Stereotypical imagery of Native North American people (arrowhead, war paint, headdress, tomahawk) has saturated the team's aesthetic.

On December 16, 1773, well over 200 years earlier, a group of American colonists frustrated with British taxation and seeking liberation from

Fig. 5.1. The destruction of tea at Boston Harbor, 1773 (Lithograph, 1846. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)
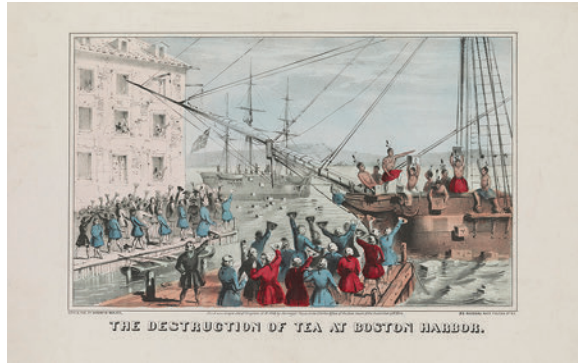
the crown's control boarded a ship in Boston Harbor that was carrying imported British tea. Dressed as Mohawk Indians, they dumped the tea overboard in protest. These colonists too were wearing stereotypical Indigenous clothing, what Yankton Dakota scholar and historian Deloria has famously characterized as "Playing Indian."

Indeed, American Indian semiotics—and people—have figured widely in the construction of settlers' national identity (see also Berkhofer 1978; Deloria 1998). There is a consistent element of adornment in these constructs that merits further exploration through the lens of object semiosis. In early artistic depictions of the famous "Boston Tea Party," the colonists, like the Kansas City Chiefs fans, can be seen wearing feathers on their heads to indicate Indigeneity. In this chapter, I argue that what connects these two events is their invocation and (re)affirmation of a set of particular narratives around US settler nationalism through the use of the feathered headdress. I contend that a semiotic cluster has been discursively built around the feathered headdress, a cluster that connects US settler nationalisms and "their" claim-making over Indigenous territories. Returning to the Boston Tea Party and the Kansas City Chiefs, in both we observe the long lineage of settler-nationalist usurpation, invention, and erasure in the US. Through a close reading of settler-semiotic perceptions and uses of Indigenous material culture, I argue that the feathered headdress has become a symbolic object onto which multiple complex narratives of settler identity have been superimposed, which speaks of colonial erasure and cultural appropriation.

Whereas the Boston Tea Party may be unambiguously considered a contentious political act, we may be initially tempted to view the Super

Bowl as something rather different—a benign sporting event, lacking the traditional forms of claim-making associated with contention. However, scholars of American football have recognized the sport's connections to US nationalism (Langman 2003; Sorek and White 2016), identifying football as a "key trope of American identity," a space in which Americans gather "to celebrate a general conception of allegiance to an American conception of self" (Langman 2003, 69, 72). Indeed, American sporting traditions more broadly are deeply entangled in American collective identity. Butterworth (2005) has contended that baseball in the post-9/11 era has become a site of ritual performance, with the game becoming politically and ideologically mobilized as an arena for the reaffirmation of national unity and commitment to the nation, highlighting the game's tremendous affective scope and capacity to erode dissenting opinions and even democratic discourse. Hence, both participants in the Boston Tea Party *and* the Kansas City Chiefs fans engage in acts of national performance, contending for the nation, and adopting feathered headdresses as signifiers of identity in the process.

As headdresses have been utilized and manipulated by US settlers since the beginning of colonial contact in the Americas, we must consider the adoption of the headdress into the Kansas City Chiefs costume and the disgruntled taxation-protesting settler-colonists as part of the same lineage. In this chapter, I draw on Tarrow's insights on contentious performances and their capacity to "[spread] across an entire society" (1998, 16). However, in this study, I follow the symbolic object itself—the headdress—as the connecting performative feature binding together the Boston Tea Party, KC Chiefs fans, and a host of other phenomena. These phenomena, I argue, exist in relation to a type of political contention that lays claim to Indigenous territories through semiotic nationalism. A central aspect of contentious politics is "claim-making"—a concept that brings together "contention, collective action, and politics" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7). There may be no grander example of claim-making than settlers' inhabiting and owning indigenous territories. Indeed, the settler-colonial condition rests on the active, working structural arrangement that consistently maintains settlers' right to settle the land. Wolfe (2006, 388) wrote, "territoriality is settler-colonialism's specific, irreducible element," and that "invasion is a structure not an event." This structural aspect of land-based claim-making is the quintessential character of settler societies. The subject—the settler—makes claim to the land (and its semiotic associations) as the object. Claim-making of this nature informs the larger "headdress telos"

that permeates national discourses, allowing its wearers to subvert and obscure the very historicity of the symbolic object itself.

For US settler society to exercise its claim on indigenous territories, the population must maintain its rights of ownership. This maintenance manifests in a variety of actions, from US federal Indian policies to mis-representations in popular culture; there are a myriad of assaults on indig-enous sovereignty. Maintaining this claim also entails mobilizing national symbols and objects to produce a particular settler heuristic that both elides and supports the project of settler-colonization. In this chapter, I show how the headdress has been crafted into a symbolic object in service of settler claim-making and claim maintenance, emerging and reemerging across multifarious US national(ist) contentious performances.

## The Headdress as a Symbolic Object

To establish how these disparate events are connected through objects, it is necessary to explore the relationships between "object" and "symbol." A wide variety of feathered headdresses exist in Native North America, made from diverse materials and with different histories and varying socio-cultural situatedness. Adornment in general among indigenous peoples of the Americas varies in myriad distinctive ways. The homogenization of a wide range of indigenous peoples and tribal identities is a symptom of settler-colonial thinking. This homogenization, I argue, exists in a particu-lar semiosis surrounding sociohistorical settler nationalism and its asso-ciated concept of "liberty." Smithsonian curator Cecile Ganteaume has written about one of the earliest depictions of Indigenous people(s) of the Americas, Johann Froschauer's *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil*, published in Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* in 1505 (see Ganteaume 2017, 7). In this woodcut, several figures can be seen wearing flared feathered headdresses, and participating in cannibalistic activity. Ganteaume asserts that "cloth-ing was one of the most important ways of illustrating cultural diversity in sixteenth century Europe" (2017, 27). This, she purports, explains why feathered headdresses became a standard means of representing American Indian people; it was a process of "othering" via material culture. American Indians wearing a "stand-up feather headdress had become a wide-spread visual convention for depicting any 'New World' American Indian" (2017, 40). Feathered headdresses were consistently used in non-Native depic-tions of American Indian people, from the beginning of European colonial contact in the Americas to the settler narratives in the twenty-first century.

The headdress acted as signification not only of the Indigenous, but of the "New World" and the people one might expect to find there.

Froschauer's *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil* (1505), alongside other early depictions of feathered headdresses, began with an erasure of materiality in the creation of an icon.[1] The feathered headdress in these images is largely detached from Indigenous life-worlds. Colonial iconicity,[2] in its nature, tends to rely on the erasure of diverse Indigenous material traditions. A comparison of an actual headdress from the Tupinamba people with its depicted image in Froschauer's painting shows very few similarities between the two. In fact, one could hardly identify what is depicted in Froschauer's painting as a distinctly Tupi headdress. There are two important starting points for understanding settler semiology here. The first, foundational point is that these headdress depictions or "ethnographic objects" have been extracted from indigenous life worlds, constituting the first disruption in material relations and a distancing from indigenous materiality. As Fabian (2004, 25) has argued, the collection of the ethnographic object was a process of decontextualization, which often served the national and Western scientific imaginary. An image from Ferdinando Gorge's *America Painted to Life* (1659) resembles Froschauer's painting; the partially nude female figure wears a feathered headdress and is holding a severed leg. Again, the image portrays cannibalism and savagery. If we took away the female figure's adornment (headdress, bow and arrow, feathered skirt), would this image communicate "America"? I argue that it would not. We would see a woman with European features participating in cannibalistic activity. It was these adornments, this iconic status of the headdress, that allowed both political and geographic communication to be successful among colonial populations.

In contrast to their homogenization and acontextuality when depicted and used by settlers and colonists, in their usage by Native American people, feathered headdresses are community- and person-specific, each with its own unique identity and relationship within the Indigenous worlds of its crafting and maintenance. In a colonial context wrought with systems of hierarchy and power, this disparity is far from benign. The significance of settler iconicity lies in its need to cut through the roots of Indigenous

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1. An icon is a sign in which the signifier resembles the signified, (i.e., a painting or a picture).

2. Iconicity refers to the similarity between the symbol and what it stands for. The depiction of several identical headdresses (feathers on a band) homogenizes diverse material traditions to produce a particular kind of icon.

Fig. 5.2. An
allegorical image of
America (Ferdinando
Gorges, 1659).
(Courtesy of the John
Carter Brown Library,
Brown University,
Providence, RI.)

material traditions. It is not an individual headdress understood through Indigenous life worlds, but a headdress that stands, in part, for all headdresses. Keane (2003, 415) writes,

> To determine what features count towards resemblance require some criteria. These involve the articulation of the iconic with other semiotic dimensions—and thus, I would argue, become thoroughly enmeshed with the dynamics of social value and authority.

The headdress is transformed from an individual and tribally specific cultural belonging to a generic icon through specific representational and material interventions, wherein we can observe hegemonic social values and forms of authority. To settler society, it is not the type or number of feathers that matters, and there is no indication of the Indigenous worldviews in which the headdress was created, the making and knowing about the object. Instead, the headdress in these images (or other semiotic dimen-

Fig. 5.3. "The Female Combatants" (1776).
(Lithograph, unknown artist. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.)

sions) is surrounded by a variety of indexical[3] signs. Protesters at the Boston Tea Party and football fans at the 54th Superbowl were engaging in a type of distinctly US American activity. The choice to utilize the headdress in these acts is connected to the headdress's ability to convey and represent each of these disparate subjects as engaging in an act of Americanness. To understand how this symbolic object became connected with America, it is important to also examine other objects and symbols that have been displayed alongside the headdress.

Three consistent indexes are created in these images, and indeed many other images throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries share these semiotic features. The first is the headdress to Indigeneity as a broad category, the second is the headdress to "America," and the third is to a type of savage barbarism depicted via cannibalistic activity. In Joan Blaeu's atlas, an engraving titled *Allegory of America* (1662) depicts three headdresses (see Ganteaume 2017, 30). One is worn by an Indian maiden, the other two are depicted in the top lefthand corner on two figures participating in cannibalism. Here, we begin to see the sense of the "noble savage" emerge. The headdress is associated with barbarism through cannibalistic activity, which may only be circumvented through the Christian figure depicted looming over the figures, speaking of the "hope of salvation" but also of the dangers that the New World might represent for Europeans. The headdress on the Indian maiden, the central figure in the engraving, is indistinguishable from the headdress on the cannibal figures, cementing the iconic register through the erasure of potential individual materiality. Deloria (1998, 6) has commented on the cognitive dissonance that emerges in US settler populations through the desire to "savor both civilized order and savage freedom," what he has described as America's "fatal dilemma." The homogenization of headdresses resolves this dissonance by making a comfortable connection between nobility and savagery in these two figures. Above the maiden's head, the angels hold the banner "America." A variety of other semiotic communicative references are imbued in this image, namely, the inclusion of the naked Native woman connoting the "virgin continent." An image of the maiden was commonly used, and scholars have supported the notion that this communicated rape-able and take-able land (Deloria 1998; Smith 2015). Indexicality and icon inform and rely on each another here; I focus primarily on the indexes of "America" and "indigenous." As I show, these two indexes are foundational and have

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3. Indexicality occurs where the signifier is attached to the signified (i.e., smoke = fire).

survived to the present day, allowing other semiotic dimensions to derive from them like tendrils. The indexing of the headdress as "indigenous" and as "America" was only possible through an easily recognizable icon, such that any type of feathered-looking item adorning the heads of any subject was placed alongside notions of America and indigenousness (both diverse, complex, and nuanced categories).[4] The reverse also holds true— the homogenization of headdresses (icon) is only possible when they are attached to notions of "America" (index) or "indigenous" as broad categories, effectively shifting the objects out of individual tribal realities and into the socio-semiotic associations of colonial exploration. The interpreter is able to receive communication about the headdress through "America" and "Indian," and "America" and "Indian" through the headdress. To articulate its potency in social life, we need to extend the headdress beyond its iconic character and, as Keane (2003) noted, into other semiotic dimensions.

Prior to the American Revolution, North America was subject to competition among European colonial powers. Yet the headdress as semiotic representor of "Indian" and "America" suited all of these powers, not least because, at times, the colonizers found working relationships with American Indian people to be politically advantageous. Competing powers made alliances and negotiated with Native people in order to "win" the land and wrest control of it from competing interests. The interconnected notions of the headdress as "America" and as "Indigenous" follows this particular relational logic. As a communicative device, this semiotic cluster (headdress, Indian, America) allowed colonial powers to root political and land-based notions in visual imagery. Crafting diverse Indigenous cultures' headdresses into a homogenous icon became a necessary condition for colonial discourses about territory, land, and nation. In the 1740 drawing *European Race for a Distance*, a satirical commentary on the War of Jenkins' Ear between Spain and Britain over the control of commerce in the West Indies, America is represented by a maiden wearing a feathered headdress and seated on a crocodile. Beneath her pedestal, "America" is inscribed. This eighteenth-century depiction draws on the same semiotic cluster as Froschauer's *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil* (1505) and Blaeu's *Allegory of America* (1662). It is important to note the longevity and durability of these semiotic clusters: it is not a brief legacy, but one that stretches across five centuries, from the earliest European depictions of Americas through the exploration and conquest of the "New World" to the present day.

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4. I draw on a particular reading of Peircean semiotics in developing this argument.

Semiosis of this nature allows the headdress to become malleable. In the colonial context, the capacity for colonists to render Indigenous material culture semiotically malleable was a crucial step. Whether worn in public and in contentious performances or depicted in art, the decision to utilize the feathered headdress can be seen as a relational "aesthetic act." Adornment "doesn't grow out of a vacuum, but it is learned through other people" (Roach and Eicher 1973, 7). The violence and dispossession that characterize conquest on the scale of the colonization of the Americas required a material register that was digestible and palatable. When colonists encountered the land that they wanted to take, they encountered Indigenous people established on the continent from time immemorial. They encountered cultural complexity, contradistinctive traditions, and unfamiliar practices. To make sense of what they perceived, and to communicate this in such a way that would allow the colonial project(s) to work in and on the land, this complexity had to be piecemealed and abstracted into a semiotic cluster. The homogenized "headdress" as a settler semiotic aesthetic played this critical role.

The Indian maiden with a feathered headdress figured predominantly in these representations. The headdress was often depicted on a body with a face that drew on European features. In images from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries she was often portrayed with other species such as the alligator or parrot, to indicate her rootedness in the Caribbean, as seen in *European Race for a Distance* (1740) and *Allegory of America* (1662). However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the meanings and uses of the headdress began to shift with the changing tides of colonial power. Leading up to the American Revolution, settlers in the colonies of the Eastern Seaboard adopted the colonial symbol of the maiden-with-headdress and repurposed her to suit their particular political struggles against foreign rule (Ganteaume 2017, 46).

I argue, however, that it was not the female figure that grounded the semiotic referent, but the headdress that acted as continuous in imagining America. The maiden in these reckonings was second to the significatory weight that the headdress had cultivated throughout the long history of its iconic and indexical status. In other words, there is no maiden without the signification of "headdress"; she would cease to exist without the relationality that this representational adornment provided. As long as *the* headdress was present, various actors and groups (politicians, protesters, musicians, football fans, artists, and others) across hundreds of years of settler-colonial history could mobilize the headdress in art and adornment

to maintain and perpetuate the semiotic aesthetic constructed in prior years. As such they could continue to participate in, and communicate to, generations of U.S. settlers' political renderings of *America*: of the land and the settlers' right to it. The headdress's malleability is critical, then, to both a historic and contemporary exploration of how the headdress figures into notions of settler national identity.

Thus far, I have contended that the homogenization of Indigenous headdresses into *the* headdress involves—and indeed necessitates—the erasure of Indigenous materialities. The fact that this erasing semiotic practice could be attached to this symbolic object permitted a conquest mentality to be distilled and attached to a physical artifact, hence communicating a settler narrative to its observers. A headdress could be moved from context to context and image to image, to suit a particular relationality between colonizer and "the Americas" with little regard for Indigenous peoples and their lifeways or actual material traditions. Indexicality afforded another move: the removal of the representative Indigenous body from the object entirely. If the headdress now signified America, it needed no Indigenous person or representative Indigenous body to index itself as "American." The maiden, the female body, only served as a vessel for a material potency that blanketed depictions throughout the sixteenth century, and indeed to the present day. To illustrate, we can examine the 1766 print *The Wheel of Fortune or England in Tears*, a commentary on the Pitt administration (1766–77). During Pitt's time in office, the colonies were a battleground between the English and the French, both wrestling for control of Canada and the West Indies. Pitt is seen atop the wheel wearing a three-plumed feathered headdress. No other sign is present to signify "America" other than the headdress, invoking the land that Pitt invested much time, many resources, and indeed his political career to gain control of. In the British Museum's records relating to this image, Pitt is described as "wearing an American feathered headdress." Examining the headdress itself, we see a band with three plumes sticking out from the front. Here again we see the dynamics of settler iconicity, with *the* feathered headdress standing in for all headdresses found on the North American continent, from Canada to the West Indies: a vast continent with nuanced and complex material traditions homogenized to serve iconic registers and colonial communication. Whether on a European-featured woman as in Gorge's *America Painted to Life*, on a male figure in *Argus* (1780), or on the heads of European figures such as William Pitt, it is the *headdress* that is the active and potent semiotic agent. It binds diverse narratives of colonial communication to each other.

The simplicity of this symbolic object—at times little more than a few feathers attached to a band—only adds to its malleability and transferability. Cultural appropriation is, hence, not a phenomenon of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but one with a deep historical lineage and affect over multitudes of generations of US settler engagement with American Indian people.

In this section, I have proposed that the history of colonization and settler appropriation of both land and culture in North America gave rise to the creation of a semiotic cluster around the headdress. This semiotic cluster required an erasure and superimposition of the headdress's materiality and Indigenous symbolic content for settler semiotics, in order to serve a variety of important settler-colonial purposes. Most notably, the semiotic homogenization of the object helps create and maintain a monolithic image of the Indigenous people(s) of the Americas. This monolithic representation of "the Indian" has had significant implications that continue to the present day, functioning as a key trope in anti-Indigenous racism, denying tribal identities and cultural difference. This trope is temporally weighted and, I argue, materially constructed through settler semiological intervention. With its roots at the start of the sixteenth century, this practice of crafting the feathered headdress as an icon and shifting its indexical associations to meet settler desires has been a feature of North American colonization for at least half a millennium (Ganteaume 2017, 43).

## Liberty as Qualisign

Charles Sanders Peirce defined a qualisign as "a quality which is a sign. It cannot actually be a sign until it is embodied, but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign" (1998, 291). Anthropologists who have applied the analysis of qualisigns to social life have stressed the entanglement of meanings with objects, people, and places. For instance, through her anthropological study of island cultures off the coast of Papua New Guinea, Nancy Munn (1986) has identified the qualisigns of lightness and heaviness seen and felt in/on the body. These "qualia" she characterizes as having the potential to engage in a "symbolic nexus" where heaviness and lightness (as qualisigns) become inculcated in a spatiotemporal language surrounding the production and consumption of the garden. Observing the relationship between the body and the garden in the Gawanese community, Munn wrote:

When food flows swiftly into the body (insatiable eating that makes the body heavy), it flows swiftly out of the garden. When stones or food leave the garden producing a state of *moru* and making the garden lightweight (empty), the body becomes heavy with hunger, the body and the garden are coordinately produced with reverse qualisigns of heaviness and lightweightness. (1986, 87)

Hence, the body and the garden become entangled in a semiotic cluster of what Munn (1986, 80, 121) terms "logico-causal relations": a set of connections inferred among objects, events, and outcomes (Makovicky 2020). The body can be understood through the garden and vice versa through the categories of lightness and heaviness.

Julie Chu (2010) applied the concept of the qualisign to consider the concept of mobility. Mobility, she wrote, "can do little on its own" (2010, 15). Like Munn, Chu argues for a type of semiotic bundling that occurs when mobility necessarily becomes attached to people, places, and objects. For instance, she uses the example of air travel; mobility becomes embodied in the person engaging in movement via plane. However, she notes that it also becomes "entangled with the other features of whatever material form it takes . . . with other qualities such as speed, lightness, or cosmopolitan privilege" (Chu 2010, 15).

In this section, I wish to further develop our analysis of the headdress and its sociocultural weight in US settler communities by considering how the notion of "liberty" can act as a qualisign that gets bundled into the headdress's semiotic cluster. Here, I explore how liberty has been variously bundled and embodied. Like Chu's mobility (airplane), and Munn's lightness and heaviness (garden and the body), liberty is a quality that becomes a sign only when embodied (the featured headdress).

Unlike Munn's logico-causal relations, however, I argue that liberty is produced as an act of national necessity that builds on the headdress as icon and index. The relations of settler society are largely predicated on both indigenous absence *and* indigenous presence, and as such, liberty as qualisign can't be considered within a logical or causal relationship. Indeed, settler-colonialism presents an illogical and dissonant relationality where indigenous people are simultaneously desired and expelled. Causation and logic, if we are to find them, are only partially illuminated, and are often bifurcated as we trace a grand temporal semiotic nexus that is shifting, often unpredictable, and always incomplete. As Veracini reminds us, "settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production" (2010, 14).

Whereas Munn's semiotic analysis fits into an orderly schema, US settler semiotics (like the settler-colonial project in general) present an ongoing, obscured chaos. I thus trace liberty's attachment to the headdress in light of—and as indicative of—the settler-colonial project's obscuration of its own production.

During and immediately following the American Revolution, the Thirteen Colonies that formed the United States began to grapple with notions of becoming a nation, a settler nation. This process entailed developing a deep sense of importance around notions of "liberty" and "freedom" from foreign (British) rule. Up to this period, headdresses had been associated with the American continent and with indigeneity as a broad category, an entanglement between signs at a metasemiotic level. It is important to note that connections between an object and semiotic systems are not unchanging but processual: complex and dynamic processes of signification change and adapt. In the case of the feathered headdress, we see a variety of new semiotic potentials emerge that served settler nation-building purposes leading up to the American Revolution and directly after. For as much as American settlers needed indigenous peoples to realize the nation, they also needed, equally, to dispossess and erase them.

Building on its already iconic status, from the latter half of the eighteenth century images of the headdress began to emerge alongside various notions of liberation. As Deloria (1998) has demonstrated, settlers have long imbued notions of American liberation with the concept of indigeneity. Two additional important icons emerged in this period leading up to the American Revolution and shortly thereafter: Lady Liberty and the liberty hat. These two additional signs were consistently depicted in semiotic clusters alongside, or in conjunction with, the feathered headdress. In the revolutionary war cartoon, *Female Combatants of 1776*, a bare-chested maiden wearing a plumed headdress fights an aristocratically dressed Mother Britannia. On a shield to her right is the conical liberty hat; below the shield, a banner reads "for liberty." The satirical drawing *Proclamation of Peace* (1783) depicts five male figures, each representing a different aspect of commentary on the success of the American Revolution. One figure, the only one not fully clothed, and wearing a three-plumed feathered headdress, holds a tomahawk in one hand and in the other a pole with the liberty hat attached. A speech bubble from his mouth states, "I have got my liberty and the devil scalp you all!" The "I" in this figure's speech does not represent the indigenous peoples of the continent, but "America" itself.

This Revolutionary rendering of notions of American liberation

Fig. 5.4. *Statue of Freedom*, Washington, DC (Thomas Crawford, bronze sculpture, 1860).
(Photograph by Jack Boucher for the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1993; courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, HABS DC-38-C-11.)

embodied in the headdress-as-America did not end with independence, but continued into the nineteenth century. Francisco Burmudi's first fresco, painted in the nation's capital circa 1855, depicts the Indian maiden wearing an eagle-feathered headdress. She is located leaning on the left side of a frame that contains the profile of George Washington. Leaning on the right of the same frame is the figure of Lady Liberty. In *The Triumph* (1861), a similar visual semiotic cluster emerges in response to the success of a sovereign settler nation. The central figure wears an eight-plumed feathered headdress holding the liberty hat in one hand and the US flag in another. *The Statue of Freedom* (1860), which was once mounted on the Capitol building in Washington, DC, displays a figure with European features dressed in robes similar to those found on depictions of Lady Liberty. Thomas Crawford, the creator of the statue, originally designed the piece as wearing the conical liberty hat. After some critique from the secretary of war, Crawford settled on a Roman-style helmet, its crest featuring "an eagle's head and a bold arrangement of feathers, suggested by the costume of our Indian tribes" (Gale 1964, 56). Underneath the statue is an inscription, "*E Pluribus Unum*" (Out of Many, One). It is here that we might engage with the full weight of a settler-national material semiosis. Iconicity in terms of the feathered headdress indeed fulfilled this creed: out of many distinct Indigenous material traditions, one and only one emerges consistently in settler semiosis, *the headdress*. Crawford's words indicate this reliance on tribal homogenization as the headdress is suggestive of "our Indian tribes," a totalizing statement that erases both tribal identities and material traditions to serve national unity, and thus liberation. Creating this material semiotic cluster follows the very ethos of the settler state: out of many, one. In each of these temporally vast depictions, liberty consistently presents in semiosis with the feathered headdress. Each of the headdresses depicted relied on the iconic and indexical weight produced in prior centuries to communicate hegemonic social value over Indigenous objects, land, and peoples. I argue that it was objects (the headdress in particular) in semiosis that lends the qualisign of liberty to the concepts of "America" and "Indigenous." Images from this period, from both settlers and various European colonial powers, consistently portrayed the feathered-headdress-wearing figure next to objects and figures that also ground liberty as a qualisign.

I began this chapter by discussing the long lineage of the feathered headdress in the US, considering its use in the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and the 54th Super Bowl in 2020. Symbolic objects make effective con-

tributions to nation-building processes. As Anderson (1991) suggests in *Imagined Communities*, even in the smallest of nations citizens are not all personally acquainted, but rather rely on "imagined" connections. For Billig (1995), to maintain this connection, citizens are inundated with everyday representations of nationhood, and these often come in widely recognized symbolic forms. Similarly, Zubrzycki (2017, 5) contends that "individuals experience historical narratives and national myths through their visual depictions and material embodiments." When we identify how objects work (or are produced) as symbols, objects in contentious political contexts can be more deeply interrogated in terms of their processual and affective scope within nationalist thinking. As Zubrzycki notes, "tracking the making and unmaking of visual and material cultures affords insight into conflicts about, and changes in[,] political visions of the nation" (2017, 4). In settler societies, it is common for visual and material cultures to maintain the settler-colonial project of Indigenous erasure through acts of political contention.

Settler actors at the Boston Tea Party and at the 54th Super Bowl were engaging in a practice of national maintenance and construction through a symbolic object. The object-cum-symbol is critical to connecting these two acts, both of which, I argue, are wrought with contention. Peirce's theoretical approach to semiotics lends itself to thinking about how objects become symbols, and this gives researchers a road map to think through complex symbolic systems (Peirce 1998). Taking a Peircean approach to settler interpretations of feathered headdresses, these artifacts can be considered a "legisign." Peirce (1998, 291) defines a "legisign" as, "not a single object, but a general type which it has been agreed shall be significant. Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *replica* of it." The agreement of significance is manmade, socially constructed through a complex process of semiosis. In the context of the feathered headdress, this process of semiosis follows the erasure of Indigenous material traditions. Any feathered object adorning any head signifies "the headdress" as a general type, which indices into notions of America. Thus, the homogenization of the headdress allows actors at the Boston Tea Party and the 54th Super Bowl to identify one another. Indeed, it is the wearing of a homogenous headdress that distinguishes them as a community of protesters and football fans, but also as part of an imagined *national* community.

In all representations of the headdress in colonial and settler-colonial

images, feathers on a band suffice to bring it into the corpus of alike objects. This settler-crafted icon of "the headdress" (feathers on a band, denoting America, Liberty, Indigenous) governs *all* other depictions and representations of individual headdresses. It serves the particular settler-colonial purpose of object erasure. We are dealing, then, with a powerful, temporally weighted hegemonic semiosis that relies on the engagement and manipulation of material culture. "Replica" becomes a key word when we consider any non-Native feathered headdress. Indeed, the market is now saturated with headdress replicas from sources ranging from transnational companies to small businesses. The Kansas City Chiefs fans are wearing a multitude of these replicas in their performative fandom. This legacy of material culture–based semiosis roots contemporary uses of replica feathered headdresses in contentious historical and political contexts. It is the dissonant and obfuscated character of settler semiology that generates an heuristic for US settlers as they come to define a highly sacred and localized piece of Indigenous material culture as "freedom."

Veracini's (2010) model of the "settler self" gets at the tension between the settler desire to hold an Indigenous relationship to the land and also one that strives to establish European norms. He writes,

> Indigenization is driven by the crucial need to transform an historical tie ("we came here") into a natural one ("the land made us"). Europeanisation consists in the attempt to sustain and reproduce European standards and way of life. (2010, 21–22)

It is this process where liberty as qualisign becomes important for settler national identity, to transition from "we came here" into "the land made us" while still upholding and sustaining European ways of being. It is this unresolved tension between "sameness and difference" that becomes concealed and obfuscated in semiotic reckonings of the headdress. Any headdress used in this manner by settler society is inculcated in notions of settler nation-building, of the emotive and embodied qualities of US liberation and freedom. The headdress lives in the same semiotic sphere as the eagle, of freedom and liberty. This becomes all the more potent when we consider Patrick Wolfe's claim that "settlers destroy to replace" (2006, 388). The use of the headdress as iconic legisign solves two problems—it acts as a symbol of liberty, creating and maintaining imagined settler kin, while simultaneously working to erase the material traditions of the Indigenous population.

## The Headdress, Contention, and Settler Claim-Making

Symbolic objects, then, may prove to expand the scope of what we might consider a contentious political act or moment. Objects that have semiotic potency are rarely spatiotemporally static. Symbolic objects are reproduced as icons, and, as I have shown in this chapter, can be indexed into other semiotic spheres. Semiosis, in the context of feathered headdresses moving into colonial consciousness, required a type of homogenization and a practice of erasure surrounding diverse Indigenous material traditions and their respective materialities. A settler society, in its basic structural nature, must maintain its claim to Indigenous territory. Settler-colonialism then may be seen as an act of hegemonic maintenance saturated with moments of contentious political action, cycling moments of national memory. Returning to the Boston Tea Party, a curious act of burgeoning settler claim-making emerged here. American settlers sought independence and resisted taxation from a "foreign" entity, what Tilly characterized as a "contentious gathering" (1993, 270). Contentious gatherings, as Tilly has demonstrated, can be methodologically cataloged into a repertoire that may help us understand contentious political episodes (Tilly 1977, 2008). The headdress in semiosis acts as empirical evidence to suggest that settler collective identity emerges in response to symbolic objects imbued with notions of America and liberation that are mobilized in the service of claims to Indigenous territories. In the case of the Boston Tea Party, this liberation and independence from the colonial metropole is a land-based claim. Settler bodies were—and are—consistently grafting themselves onto Indigenous land. We can return to Veracini's tension here, where settlers desired an Indigeneity in relation to the land base, such that they too were original inhabitants being born and developing a distinct cultural character in relation to that land, separate from the metropole that sought to control and tax them. "Liberty, Liberty forever, Mother while I exist," written in the speech bubble coming out of the headdress-wearing figure in *The Female Combatants*, articulates this heuristic quality. Two claims exist here. One is the claim to Indigenous territories inherent in the additional assertion that the metropole (third party) no longer had the right to control settler commerce. One must follow the other—claim-making by American revolutionaries participating in the Boston Tea Party was predicated on Indigenous erasure and was mobilized in a political act of contentious gathering signified through the use of symbolic objects. This dual quality of claim through the erasure

of Indigenous material traditions cements and encourages the settler-colonial obfuscation of its creation and maintenance.

A settler-colonial analysis of US sport could extend these notions of contentious gathering to a geographical performance in that teams operate in a state- and territory-based classificatory system. This settler geographic taxonomy reinforces what Indigenous studies scholar Mishuana Goeman (2008, 28) calls "geographical truisms," where US states' boundaries cut through Indigenous territories and attempt to supersede Indigenous geographic realities and relations, "producing abstractions of difference." It is not just blanket nationalism or patriotism that football presents in the US context: it is a type of *settler* imagination of the self that rests on land-based erasure of an Indigenous past and present. Before Kansas became a bounded state, the region was the home of the Pawnee, Wichita, and numerous other tribes entering and leaving Indigenous-reckoned land. The boundedness of settler statehood in the form of "Kansas" or "Kansas City" is a performance of settler land-based re-grafting through the medium of American football fandom that reaffirms settler *claims* to territory. It is the claim to Indigenous territory that acts as the glue in this vast, imagined settler community.

Settler claims to territory come to be expressed in a variety of contentious political acts, being digested and obscured in manifold settler performances of national maintenance. The obfuscation exists in moments when claims to Indigenous territory are reformatted and glossed over under the language of liberation *and* the symbols of freedom. If the claim to territory becomes the emergent quality of a settler politic, when the headdress emerges at the 54th Super Bowl, for example, it represents a contentious political act *semiotically* connected to the Boston Tea Party, to notions of settler claims to territory, and to associated concepts of "liberty." The symbolic object (the headdress) signifies and cements the comfortable engagement with settler Americana through collective national identity. To articulate this point further, we might think of Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2017) discussion of settler aesthetics and symbolic violence here. She asserts that "colonial and authoritarian regimes alike publicly project state aesthetics to display their power" (2017, 1282). These aesthetics act as a mechanism by which settler systems reify hegemony and "shape national memory" (2017, 1282). Indeed, the headdress as icon plays an important part in both preserving national memory and preserving settler claims to Indigenous land and material traditions.

Both the object as an iconic symbol and US football's geocartographic

team model make the event one of spectacular settler political contention wrought with aesthetic and symbolic violence: a political moment in which to reassert or maintain claim-making, liberation, and conquest discourse into a national(ist) performance. The headdress in these disparate historical moments acts as the threaded continuum that signifies ideas of domestic liberation, boundedness, and the national imagination critical to the construction of US settler identity. As Tilly reminds us, performances, "including social movement performances, vary and change" (2008, 7). Similarly, objects in semiosis are malleable and temporally dynamic. A contentious political structure can be lengthened and repurposed time and time again via a symbolic object through its use in saturated contentious gatherings. Contentious performances can be seen as a "class of communications that evolve in something like the same way as language evolves: through incremental transformation in use" (Tilly 2008, 13). As nations change they transform "demonstration and social movement repertoire[s]" (Tilly 2008, 87). In the context of the US and the headdress, this symbolic object allows claim-making to evolve and to carry on through their continued use in seemingly disparate social phenomena. The Boston Tea Party, as a contentious performance, can be recommunicated and reproduced in national memory in the 21st century at the 54th Super Bowl.

It is no coincidence, then, that Kansas City Chiefs fans have fought back against Indigenous peoples who view their use of the headdress as insulting and protest their right to use it in this way. There is a sense of ownership that runs through the settler use of the object as symbol, with all of the semiotic baggage previously discussed. To be clear, US settlers who wear feathered headdresses are always engaging in semiosis. Replicas are part of a history of semiosis that is deeply entangled in the formations of the settler state. When wearing the headdress, Chiefs fans are engaging in the long history of laying claim to Indigenous land. Concomitantly, the iconicity involved in replica-wearing also lays claim to Indigenous material traditions. This type of adornment becomes especially potent and evidential of its semiotic weight in moments when fans defend their right to wear the headdress in response to protests by Indigenous peoples. Note that in settler semiosis, America is headdress, America is land, and hence it follows that headdress is *also* land. The headdress mobilizes to exercise these claims. It is this broader material heuristic for the settler that makes the symbolic object critical to a long-lasting hegemonic imaginary. What are fans communicating through semiotic signification when wearing or displaying an object that is seen in many parts of Indian country as sacred?

At its most basic, it is a claim to Indigenous territory. The lack of recognition of this particular intention behind the act only furthers the argument that settler-colonialism tends to hide itself, even to its own actors. There is no territory of recognition here; semiosis allows the settler project to work in the *longue durée*. It is only through a deep semiotic reading of the headdress into settler consciousness that we can begin to untangle the current politics surrounding non-Native people wearing headdresses. The 54th Super Bowl and the Boston Tea Party can be seen as connected contentious political acts through the adornment of a feathered headdress. The headdress as a symbolic object serves to maintain the settler state through its cycled use in imagined settler communities. When symbolic objects come into the fold in settler societies, we may indeed expand our scope to include a detailed semiotic reading of materiality grounded in rich historical and political interrogation. Unsettling contemporary settler-colonial thinking may well entail engaging with symbolic objects within their long contentious political histories.

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# The Potency of Symbolic Objects

# The Symbolism of the Street
# in Portuguese Contention

Guya Accornero, Tiago Carvalho, and Pedro Ramos Pinto

*Só tu podes chegar a sentir*
*Qual a boa solução*
*Mas uma coisa é mais que certa*
*Tens de tomar posição.*[1]
   —Xutos e Pontapés, "Sai para a Rua" ("Go Out to the Street")

The street has long been a disputed symbol in the Portuguese history of contention. Usually understood as endowing political legitimacy, sometimes as an inherently emancipatory space, and latterly as an unsafe, risky, and unsheltered space, the street has long featured at the center of Portuguese democracy and political discourse.[2] But the street is not just a space used or occupied by contentious players, or only a symbol mobilized in their discourses. In the Portuguese cultural context, the materiality and physicality of street occupations offer a distinct potential for conflicts to invoke notions of legitimacy and emancipation. In relational terms, the street is mobilized by social movements, trade unions, and political parties

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1. "Only you can feel / what's the good solution / but one thing is certain / you have to take a position."

2. This work was in part developed in the context of the project Housing Perspectives and Struggles (HOPES). Futures of Housing Movements, Policies and Dynamics in Lisbon and Beyond (PTDC/GES-URB/28826/2017).

to narrate their struggles in a democratic space. The importance of the street extends to Portuguese pop culture, as seen in the lyrics quoted at our chapter's beginning. In the mid-1980s, Xutos e Pontapés, one of the most emblematic bands in the Portuguese rock scene, made it the main topic of one their songs. Their 1987 release, "Go Out to the Street," captures the spirit of what we focus on in this chapter: the importance of the street as the site of political action in Portuguese contention.

In this chapter, we explore the role of streets as a particular kind of symbolic object in Portuguese contentious politics, tracing their recon-figuration by contentious players from the 1970s transition to democracy to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. Like others before us (della Porta et al. 2018; Carvalho and Ramos Pinto 2019; Fishman 2019), we claim that the Portuguese revolutionary period was a critical juncture that shaped the country's contentious imagination and associated symbols throughout the subsequent democratic period. If the authoritarian dicta-torship sought to downplay street politics, mobilizations throughout the transition to democracy brought it back as a privileged arena of politics. In this sense, the street became not merely a space where protests may hap-pen, but in its essence an ever-present symbol, whose physicality matters, where and through which democracy is legitimized or disputed.

While the role of framing process in contentious politics has been quite comprehensively investigated by social movement scholars (Jasper 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001), the role of symbols has not attracted proportionate attention. Yet some important contribu-tions to the latter, smaller literature have informed our analysis. In her pioneering work on the construction of meaning and symbolic structures in social movements, Anne Kane (1998) identified important analytical, theoretical, and methodological distinctions between frames and symbols and corresponding lessons as to their relevance for mobilization processes. For Kane, frames, though important in contentious politics, are depen-dent on symbols that are "semi-coherent," "autonomous," and "volatile" in nature. As the wellspring of frames, cultural structures and symbols thus shape their construction and interpretation. Interpretation is consequently crucial, and it is seen as "a volatile process that occurs on two analytical levels, the individual analytic and the collective" (Kane 1998, 256). Accord-ing to Kane,

> [o]n both levels, people engage in a double interpretation: they in-terpret cultural experience using models, but in so doing they also

interpret the symbolic elements in the model itself[. . . .] But in the often emotional effort to make sense of novel or difficult situations, this analogically creative process is set in motion within the individual, generating new ideas, thoughts, and emotional sentiments. (1998, 257)

Building on this trajectory of scholarly work, we understand symbolic objects, like symbols, to be in a state of constant change, and their meaning to result from a continuous process of negotiation, conflict, and interaction among cultural players. But the meaning of a given symbolic object at one time or another does not simply constitute a "compromise" among all the objectives held by players in a contentious process; rather, it is the result of a creative process in which new meanings are constantly introduced whenever such symbolic objects are invoked.

In this chapter, we trace the evolution of the meanings associated with the street as a symbolic object disputed by various contentious players in Portugal. We trace its development during three principal periods: the 1974 Carnation Revolution, the anti-austerity cycle of protest from 2010 to 2014, and lastly, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As will be seen, the street is not merely an object atop or within which contention takes place, but rather a distinctly symbolic object that has played and continues to play a sizeable role in Portuguese contentious political action.

Throughout the three periods analyzed, the meaning of the street has been contested along two axes. First, it has been the site of contestation between non-institutional and institutional players to define the locus of power: do the forces that fill the streets represent the people, or is it those in government buildings? Second, its meaning has been contested by non-institutional players in relation to the question of how street politics should happen: does the street emancipate us from political hierarchies, or is it merely another space to be filled? Various episodes attest to these contestations. With regard to legitimacy, the symbolic construction of the street is exemplified most strongly by struggles over the legitimacy of the government and protesters during the revolutionary period, and then subsequently in the Portuguese anti-austerity protests. As for the street's emancipatory properties, these were most distinctly constructed and challenged during the anti-austerity protest wave, as groups disputed how the street should or could be used to display their claims. Moreover, we see how these longer-running contests over the street's symbolic properties were temporarily superseded during the coronavirus pandemic, during which

connotations of vulnerability temporarily suspended their use in contentious politics.

## A Space of Legitimacy: The Portuguese Revolutionary Street

Throughout the early years of Portugal's authoritarian regime, street mobilization was almost absent. Over time, there were periods of conflict, but the street first appears as a relatively banal object without any substantial meaning associated with it, and it gained significance only slowly. It was with the 1974 military coup and revolutionary period that followed that the street truly obtained its potency as a symbol of democratic legitimacy that would shape the country's contentious politics thereafter.

Like other European nations struggling with the challenges of modernization, mass politics, and the global convulsions of the interwar period, Portugal experienced street protests that often spiraled into violence. In reaction, the dictatorship that ruled Portugal between 1926 and 1974 positioned itself as what we might call an anti-mobilization state. António de Oliveira Salazar, who in effect controlled the regime between 1928 and 1968, began his rule by emulating aspects of Italian "corporatist" fascism, but deliberately sought to quench its more animated tendencies for street-fighting and public battles. While public displays of support for the regime were encouraged and often orchestrated, Salazar's single party, the União Nacional, always aimed more at being a party of notables than a mass political organization (Costa Pinto 1995). Salazar's regime thus emphasized order and acquiescence over fervor and devotion.

Public displays of dissent were repressed, and even when the regime staged periodic simulacra of free elections, the few tolerated opposition groups were extremely constrained in their ability to use public space to reach out to voters. Nevertheless, the regime faced certain moments when popular dissent was able to break through its repressive apparatus. Such moments were among the regime's weakest. One of the earliest prominent instances was the spontaneous street celebrations following the Allied victory in World War II. Such celebrations amounted to direct criticism of Salazar's regime, which had remained neutral and even kept up supportive mutual relations with the Axis countries prior to the outbreak of war.

Thereafter, instances when opposition to the regime found expression in large public displays became increasingly common. Sham presidential elections in 1958 saw unexpectedly large crowds turn out in support of Humberto Delgado, a "fig-leaf" democratic candidate positioned by the

regime as controlled opposition, whose candidacy nevertheless quickly became a rallying point for discontent (Raby 1988). Four years later, in 1962, strikes and protests by university students were brutally repressed, initiating a cycle of protest, clampdowns, and politicization that would feed a growing opposition to the regime (Accornero 2016). As the 1960s heralded widespread conscription in intensified wars against liberation movements in Portugal's remaining African colonies, antiwar and pro-peace protests also escalated. Among the most notable, and damaging for the regime, was the police action against a pro-peace street-prayer vigil by young Catholics at a Lisbon Church in 1967 (Almeida 2008).

During the Salazar regime, street protests gradually emerged as the key means of opposition to the regime (alongside workers' strikes), and they were a central part of the political education of a generation that would soon have the opportunity to take center stage in the country's Carnation Revolution. When on April 25, 1974, a coup led by antiwar military officers thrust the dictatorial regime from power, unsanctioned street protests played a central role in the proceedings that followed. As a small number of army units descended on Lisbon, coup officers used radio to request that the people stay out of the streets. The Portuguese people's refusal to do so arguably transformed the events of the day from an audacious but risky coup to a popular uprising. In Lisbon, thousands rushed to the street to surround and support the insurgent units. Soldiers loyal to the dictatorship hesitated to use force that would inevitably shed civilian blood. By the end of the day, Salazar's successor, Marcello Caetano, handed over power to a provisional government so that, as he put it, "power would not fall to the street" (Palacios Cerezales 2003).

While the notion of "the street" owes its symbolic importance to the events and narrative of the 25th of April, its enduring characteristics as a symbolic object were cemented by the political dynamics of the eighteen months that followed. The ousting of the Caetano regime opened up the major question of which direction the country would subsequently take. Multiple political actors, ranging from parties to the now highly politicized armed forces, advanced competing visions of the country's future, ranging from a Western European–style parliamentary democracy to a revolutionary regime based on Third World examples (Cruzeiro 1994). With no direct legislative plebiscite on the popular will until 1976, the ability of a postrevolutionary faction to mobilize supporters on the street in public demonstrations of visibility became a vital political tool (Tilly 2004). Conversely, many sectors of the population outside organized political move-

ments saw in street demonstrations the most effective way to communicate demands to institutions in a state of flux.

In the days following the coup, thousands of ordinary citizens continued to take to the streets, demanding better salaries, working conditions, housing, and other services. Others came together to demand the arrest of those closely linked to the felled dictatorship. Shantytown dwellers in large cities occupied hundreds of vacant or under-construction public housing units, claiming urgent need. Despite calls for moderation from the nation's provisional government, the country was rocked by a titanic wave of street mobilization and demonstrations throughout the summer of 1974 (Ramos Pinto 2013).

Despite the participation of new political parties in the Portuguese political process, it was nonetheless the insurgent military—now institutionalized as the Movement of the Armed Forces (or Movimento das Forças Armadas, henceforth MFA)—that ultimately controlled the provisional government. Thus, parties came to rely on mass street rallies to assert their level of support and so claim a seat at the table. If the celebrations of May 1, 1974, a week after the coup, were a display of unity between left-wing parties (especially the center-left Socialist Party and the Communist Party) who held a joint mass demonstration on the day, as competition intensified in later months, each would rally its own supporters in competitive shows of force.

Conservative actors, rallying behind the interim president, General António Spínola, also sought to fill the street to demonstrate their support. Spínola's conservative politics and desire to transform the Portuguese Empire into an international federation were out of step with the feeling of the times. Seeking to cement his grip on power, Spínola emulated his hero, Charles de Gaulle, by appealing for Portugal's "Silent Majority" to show its support for his project in a September mass street rally in the capital. Political parties on the Portuguese Left read this as a threat to postrevolutionary progress and so called their supporters to take to the street and erect barricades to prevent an "invasion" of Lisbon by Spínola's "reactionary" forces.

The response to Spínola's rally culminated in his resignation, and thereafter the September events reinforced an already palpable sense that street mobilizations could forcibly determine political outcomes. Thereafter, political parties increasingly sent their supporters into the streets to pressure other actors—even those who had previously been hesitant to involve themselves in street protest. Those who had taken over the institu-

tions of the state (principally the MFA) rewarded such street mobilization by disproportionately responding to street mobilizations rather than other forms of contentious political action. The interaction between this new political order seeking to legitimate itself and a population with years of pent-up demands and unfulfilled basic needs generated a scale of popular political activism with few precedents in postwar Western Europe. It was a moment of widespread and genuine enthusiasm for experimentation with direct democracy and popular participation. Throughout 1974 and 1975, Portuguese politics lived on the street.

The central symbolic role of the Portuguese street was once more evident on March 11, 1975, when military units close to Spínola attempted to regain power through a right-wing coup. As in the previous year, crowds rushed to the streets to protect the revolution, building barricades and acting as human shields for left-wing army units. As the attempted coup collapsed, voices rose from the street demanding the arrest of leading right-wing figures. Rapidly, the day was cast as the moment when the people "saved" the revolution by filling the streets, and the pace of revolutionary change was correspondingly increased, leading to what came to be known as the "Hot Summer" of '75.

The anniversary of the revolution in April 1975 heralded new challenges for the legitimizing symbolism of street action. On April 25, one full year after the revolution, the first elections for the Portuguese Constituent Assembly were held. The vote had given a majority to the Left, but the most radical revolutionary faction, Portugal's Communist Party, placed behind not only the main opposition party, but also behind both the moderate-left Socialist Party, and the liberal Popular Democratic Party (*Partido Popular Democratico*). This led to both the Communist Party and ascendant left-wing factions of the MFA to increasingly seek to juxtapose the "revolutionary legitimacy" of the street against the "bourgeois legitimacy" of the Constituent Assembly (Noronha 2019).

Throughout the Hot Summer of 1975, these two legitimacies confronted each other in Portugal—at times threatening to spiral into a violent conflict. In some senses, this can be seen as contest between the "street" and the "ballot box" (Ramos Pinto 2008), but in reality the more moderate camp never truly gave up on attempts to win over the street and still tried to match the ultrarevolutionary camp in attempts to mobilize supporters in public demonstrations of strength.

In July 1975 the resignation of Socialist Party members from the provisional government prompted what Diego Palacios called a "duel of demon-

strations" (Palacios Cerezales 2003). On July 10, as the Socialist Party left the cabinet, a large demonstration expressed support for the MFA-led government and its program for a revolutionary constitution based on workers, farmers, soldiers, and neighborhood councils. A week later the Socialist Party resoundingly responded with mass rallies in the streets of Lisbon and Oporto, calling for the resignation of the provisional government and the creation of a new cabinet that reflected the results of the Constituent Assembly elections. From that point, increasingly strident demonstrations backing one side or another became an almost daily occurrence. In the north of the country, anticommunist street protests went as far as violent attacks on the Portuguese Communist Party offices. In mid-November, in a last show of strength, demonstrators close to the Portuguese Communist Party and supportive of the by-then-sidelined radical wing of the MFA occupied the streets and besieged the Constituent Assembly for almost two days. This was one of the most tense and emblematic episodes of the revolutionary period. Civil construction workers demanding better pay and working conditions—supported by farm workers from southern Portugal—surrounded the Parliament building, singing "long live the working class." The streets adjacent to Parliament became an encampment of an estimated 100,000 protesters, warmed by bonfires and decorated with many flags and banners. Members of the Constituent Assembly, who were prevented from entering or leaving the building, had to camp out in their offices, while attempts by several political leaders to speak to the crowd from the balcony of the building were met with wall of noise. As the government refused to negotiate, rumors of an imminent storming of the Parliament or an attack on the crowds by right-wing forces spread inside and out.[3] While the siege was lifted through eventual concessions by the government, the event hardened the moderates' determination to seize the initiative and bring politics back to the institutional arena.

Throughout this period, the symbolic significance of the street in Portuguese contentious politics must not be underestimated. Indeed, recourse to the street was one of the key ways in which ordinary citizens could express their voices (Ramos Pinto 2013). Aside from the last show of force in the siege of Parliament, the diminishing ability of the revolutionary camp to draw supporters to the street over the course of the Hot Summer is an important reason for the retreat of the Left in its latter weeks, and the

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3. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFZ5on3HEiI; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtmCleIL2CE&t=2s

eventual victory of the parliamentary democracy model. The inability of the revolutionary camp to sustain street mobilizations called into question the legitimacy of their power over the direction of the country. This period came to an end on November 25, 1975, when military units close to the revolutionary Left were disarmed in a series of swift confrontations with forces loyal to the moderate-led government. Unlike in September 1974 or March 1975, however, the streets were quiet. No crowds rushed to the street to defend the more ambitious revolutionary hopes.

In the wake of the Hot Summer, a parliamentary system was fully institutionalized, including representation for parties on the far Left, and then a moderate-dominated MFA retained a tutelary role until 1982. Politics were "normalized" in the sense that organized political parties were given an almost complete monopoly on political representation, to the comparative exclusion of the mechanisms of the direct popular voice experimented with during the revolutionary period, such as street protest and local popular assemblies.

By this point, the street, its materiality and use, had become enshrined as a central symbol of Portuguese democracy, aided by a wave of cultural production—song, film, poetry, and visual arts—that framed it as the essential aspect of the Portuguese revolution. The victorious moderates of November ascribed their legitimacy not to the anxious and conflictual days of the Hot Summer, when the country seemed on the verge of civil war, but to the moments of unity and joyful release of April 1974. The result was a somewhat paradoxical construct. As Robert Fishman (2011) has argued, the manner of Portugal's transition to democracy is memorialized through the lens of April as a popular revolution, enacted on the streets by the people, which serves to give street protests a fundamental legitimacy in Portuguese political culture. However, many other perspectives on the Portuguese political system since the transition to democracy have highlighted how its institutions have been relatively insulated and hermetic to social movements and civil society. In this alternative analysis, the tolerance and legitimation afforded causes holding space in the street is more of an "escape valve" that does not necessarily translate into corresponding political influence (Cabral 2006).

As a result, in the three decades following the transition to democracy, Portuguese street politics acquired a somewhat ritualistic feel. Although the incidence of demonstrations declined from the very high levels of the revolutionary period (Francisco 2000), the street nonetheless remained an important symbolic object invoked in contentious performances. Despite

being structurally equipped to engage in strike actions, trade unions none-theless exhibited a marked preference for organizing street demonstrations around regular collective bargaining events. Rural villages regularly use street blockades at election times to make demands for local services (Mendes and Seixas 2005). There were also important waves of street protest in the 1990s, particularly among university and high school students (Seixas 2005). In 1999 a series of vast street mobilizations—arguably some of the largest and most socially encompassing since the revolution—emerged in support of independence for East Timor, a former Portuguese colony under brutal Indonesian occupation (de Almeida 1999).

The revolution constituted a foundational moment of Portuguese democracy that shaped not only institutions, but also the collective memories and the inventory of symbolic objects that would be subsequently invoked. The pervasiveness of symbols related to this historical period throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protests was not a foregone conclusion; rather, it arose through subsequent processes of reappropriation, resignification, and dispute among the various contentious players. Indeed, Fishman (2019) argues that the revolutionary nature of the Portuguese transition, and the inversion of hierarchies present in Portuguese street politics, not only informed the nation's horizontal political culture but also created an enduring increased openness of institutions to protests in the nation's streets. Baumgarten likewise emphasizes the importance of the revolution for later contentious mobilizations (2017), highlighting that throughout the anti-austerity period, activists constructed collective memories referring to revolutionary identities, aims, and repertoires. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this period would also be one in which the symbolic properties of the street were once again open to contestation and reconstruction.

### From Legitimacy to Emancipation: The Street in a Time of Austerity

In the wake of the 2008 financial earthquake and the economic and political crises that followed, Portugal was subject to an intense wave of protests, which lasted from 2010 to 2014 and involved grassroots organizations, political parties, and trade unions. This protest cycle was important not only because of the new configurations of street politics that ensued, but because it gave rise to radical new forms of political participation and engagement (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015, 2020; Carvalho 2022).

Portugal's anti-austerity protest cycle constituted one of the most contentious periods in the country's democratic history. It was a period during which protest arenas were reopened and reconfigured after decades of relatively inactive contentiousness in a country of "mild manners" (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; Portos and Carvalho 2022). While the country had experienced some important episodes of contention in the 1980s and 1990s,[4] the anti-austerity protests heralded an unprecedentedly enduring and consistent wave of protests, distinguished by wholesale mobilization of the different sectors of Portuguese society (Carvalho 2022).

Despite the existence and prominence of social movements in Portugal, institutional players such as trade unions and political parties often determined the path protests took during the country's anti-austerity wave. After an initially promising mobilization by the group named Geração à Rasca (Desperate Generation) in March 2011 that attracted wide participation, grassroots movements found that they lacked the intrinsic capacity to mobilize further, and instead arranged a strategic alliance between parties, trade unions, and movement groups connected to institutional actors. By 2012, these institutional players dominated protest in Portugal: trade unions disputed austerity in the streets, and political parties, particularly the "Left Bloc," had substantial influence over popular mobilizations.

It is in this context that the street emerges once again not only as a contiguous object on or within which protest occurs, but also as a disputed symbolic object. Throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protest, the symbolic dispute over the street revolved around two poles: legitimacy and emancipation. The conflict over the association of the street with legitimacy was principally staged between anti-austerity players and the Portuguese government. Anti-austerity players cultivated a notion of the street as an avenue for the democratic process, the only arena left to combat the imposition of the neoliberal austerity measures designed by the country's creditors—the so-called Troika of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank—and implemented by the country's center-right government after 2011. By contrast, the government saw itself as the legitimate holder of power, refusing to be ruled by the street and its claims, and thus seeking to rid the streets of their association with democratic legitimacy.

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4. Including strong labor mobilization through general strikes (Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015) or student fees protests in the mid-1990s (Drago 2003).

*Re-invoking the Legitimacy of the Street*

The importance of the street during Portugal's anti-austerity protests came to the fore in September 2012 when Prime Minister Passos Coelho announced a new measure to reform corporate payroll taxes (a measure the Troika had long insisted be implemented). After more than a year of austerity, the announcement of these new measures inflamed public passions and popular protest, unleashing contestation from virtually every sector of society. This spanned social movements, workers and employers, and even the junior coalition partner in the government, the Centro Democrático e Social—Partido Popular. This coalition criticized the new payroll reforms as iniquitous, because this tax would increase workers' tax contributions and decrease those made by employers. This context sparked and framed mobilizations throughout this period, and in particular the emergence of *Que se Lixe a Troika* (Screw the Troika—QSLT).

Together with the announcement of new austerity measures, the QSLT's demonstrations created a wave of discontent that translated into the mobilization of one million people all over the country (according to the organizers' estimate) (Carvalho 2022). The aim was not only to establish an ideological and political line of demarcation, but to resurrect a social one: street protest as the foremost democratic expression of legitimate judgment on the ongoing austerity program. To reinforce its resurrection of the revolutionary legitimacy of the street, the QSLT also recruited other symbolic objects from the 1974 revolution, such as the rising's titular carnations. The group sustained its activity from September 2012 to March 2013 under the slogan of "*O Povo é quem mais ordena*" ("the people rule"), drawn from the lyrics of the song broadcast in 1974 that set in motion the overthrow of the dictatorship (a clearly legible reference to the revolutionary period). By carefully deploying revolutionary framing and symbolic objects, with their positive and polysemic meanings of the April 1974 coup (Costa Lobo, Costa Pinto, and Magalhães 2016), the QSLT achieved not only resonance (Benford and Snow 2000) but strategic modularity (Tarrow 2013).

During the battle over the payroll tax, one instance that draws particular attention to the symbolic properties of the Portuguese street occurred when 10,000 people occupied the area in front of the official presidential residence, where the State Council was meeting to discuss the proposed measures. Filling the streets outside, they chanted "Cavaco Escuta, O povo esta em luta" ("Cavaco, listen—the people are fighting") (Fishman 2019,

148–49). While the occupation achieved its aims and the law was withdrawn, the governing regime nonetheless used their concession to dispute the symbolic legitimacy of protest in the streets. Though he announced the measure's withdrawal, months later the prime minister publicly declared in Parliament that despite recognizing the legitimacy of street demonstrations, he did not govern at their pleasure, remarking instead that the measures had political legitimacy due to the government's parliamentary majority.

## The Street as Emancipatory

In addition to the symbolic dispute over the democratic legitimacy of movements filling Portugal's streets, a secondary, more minor area of symbolic contestation arose in relation to the street as an emancipatory space. The dispute here concerned whether protests in the streets should obey conventional leadership. Such symbolic disputes began early in the anti-austerity wave. When the first austerity measures were put forward by a soon-doomed center-left government in 2010, a general strike in November became the starting point for the then-upcoming cycle of protest. Traditionally organized by the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, a trade union with strong links to the Communist Party, the first general strike was instead jointly called by the two trade union confederations in the country. Usually, general strikes in Portugal solely involve workplace stoppages without any type of demonstration. However, as emerging social movement groups came to support this action against ongoing cuts in the public sector, they decided to defy the structure set forth by the unions and instead organize street demonstrations to supplement strike action, leaving them free to protest without obeying union leadership. From then onward, and given the pressure of social movement groups, in the following general strikes trade unions started to incorporate similar street demonstrations into their array of contentious performances and thereby exert discipline over this otherwise emancipated space.

In the aftermath of the 2010 strike, autonomist groups that rejected any link to institutional players also paid more attention to cultivating the emancipatory symbolism of the street. One clear example of this trend is the Acampada that occupied one of the central squares in Lisbon (Rossio) in May 2011. The Acampada started with activists gathering in front of the Spanish consulate in Lisbon in solidarity with the ongoing *15M/Indignados* mobilizations in Spain. After the initial assembly, the group decided to

move to Rossio, a large, open square in downtown Lisbon. The protesters remained camped in this square for three weeks, with more people joining over time, especially when the assemblies were held. Emerging almost spontaneously, the Acampada brought together anarchists, libertarians, autonomists, antiparty groups, and members of several groups within the Left Bloc. By occupying a central square of historical importance, the activists wanted to not only give public visibility to their demands, but make a statement that the street, as a public space, was fundamental to democratic practice. Their main point was one of replicating and living democracy as an everyday practice: the encampment became an autonomous space with daily assemblies. The participants would spend their day in the square, not only discussing with each other the way forward in their activities, but bonding and creating structures for future events (Carvalho 2022). Many of those who participated—despite an awareness that these assemblies lacked concrete outcomes—described it as an enriching experience where they got to practice democracy outside of an institutional frame in a city that lacked, at the time, more autonomist and libertarian experiences.

Some years down the line, the spirit of the Acampada returned. One particularly evocative instance was a street demonstration organized to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the 1974 revolution (Carvalho and Ramos Pinto 2019). Its organizers' central claim was that the anniversary had become too institutionalized and domesticated by mainstream, parliamentary parties. In their minds, the ideal of the revolution was lost, becoming merely a ritualized ceremony. To counteract this, some groups decided to organize an open demonstration called Rios ao Carmo (Rivers into Carmo). Participating groups converged at the Largo do Carmo, the square where the dictatorship had officially capitulated to the insurgent army and people. The street was portrayed as a river where the masses of people would spontaneously flow to the square. Their main objective was to bring back the "spirit" of the revolutionary period, while defying the more formal official commemorations and ritualization of this historical event. Rather than a well-defined and coherent group, this event was planned as an open-ended structure whereby each group would organize its own converging march to the Carmo Square, evoking similarly emancipated organizing seen in 1974. The street was thus a space for celebratory resistance to and emancipation from the ritualized forms of political engagement: emancipation lay in the street, and not in the Parliament and hierarchical institutions. In the various videos available online of this

event, the spirit of defiance is clear, with public space (either in the street or in public transportations) occupied by participants singing and playing music and some groups even playing music through speakers (it is possible to hear the British punk band The Clash being played in one of the videos). Once the groups arrive at Carmo Square, one can see children playing and people taking over a square, which over the last two decades has been commodified to become a tourist destination filled with restaurant terraces.[5] Throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protest, the street was not only a symbolic object within or on which protests were situated, it was also the center of disputes between elites and contentious players over its association with ideas of legitimacy and emancipation. Emerging social movements criticized the ritualized uses of the street and made use of contentious innovations to simultaneously exploit and contest its symbolic potential. For protesters in Portugal during this period, the street was a stage where they could not only voice their concerns, but also perform their alternatives and "present narratives, articulate symbolic arguments, and make proclamations" (see chapter 1). It is important to stress that when they are in the street, these protesters are in fact performing and enacting the ideals that they believe in and putting them into practice. The street is thus a prop through which players can achieve an emancipatory lived experience with emotional results. But as Portugal moved from the throes of austerity to the tumult of pandemic, the street's symbolic qualities would undergo further invocation and reorientation.

## The Street in Pandemic Portugal: A Place of Vulnerability

Given the continuous and uncertain process through which symbolic objects (and symbols more generally) take on meaning, it is understandable that at certain specific critical junctures, these oscillations of meaning become more evident. Such has been the case during the current pandemic, which changed the meaning of the street as a space of democratic legitimacy or emancipation to something quite different: the street as an unsheltered place of extreme vulnerability. This reconfiguration occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when, having declared a state of emergency, the Portuguese government introduced various limitations to citizens' mobility and rights on March 22, 2020. Many of these directly prohibited public use of the street, such as the "interdiction of

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5. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4HGb5vxAVw

unjustified displacement or stay in public streets" and the "limitation or prohibition of meetings and demonstrations."[6]

The novel restrictions placed on protest had marked effects on the Portuguese contentious arena, seriously constraining the capacity of groups to engage in classic contentious performances such as street demonstrations and occupations, many of which had to be canceled or postponed. These constraints proved particularly harsh in a period when threats to labor rights and increasing vulnerability made protest particularly urgent.

Health measures implemented during the pandemic instructed citizens to "stay home" to protect public health, and many social and public uses of the street remained forbidden by law. The importance of such restrictions was recognized as undeniable, and among Portuguese contentious players it was initially difficult to find critical voices to the contrary. Indeed, the only group protesting in support of freedom of demonstration at the time was the Climáximo (2020), an anticapitalist climate-justice collective. However, the pandemic was seriously aggravating the risk of homelessness, and many in the Portuguese contentious political arena soon came to highlight how the nation's strict public-health measures aggravated these and other inequalities. Above all, housing came to be at the forefront of contentious political action against the government's new rules. One of the first issues raised by contentious players came to be: How could people be expected to stay home when they were homeless? How could people pay their rent—and thereby secure their homes—when many had suddenly lost their incomes because they had been fired or because they were not earning enough money?

From the first days of the pandemic, tourists abandoned cities, leaving luxury hotels empty. Simultaneously, struggling people continued to be evicted from the houses they were alleged to be "illegally" occupying, and were left with no alternatives but to live in the nation's streets. As conditions grew worse, references to the street as a kind of inhospitable, extreme environment intensified among Lisbon housing activists' discourses, as well as those of policymakers. The discourse of political and public health authorities was likewise one of "danger," "unsureness," and "prohibition," framed in opposition to the safeness of being at home.

During this period, the symbolic meaning of the street as a place of

6. In marked difference to other countries that adopted similar rules (even if elaborated under different legal frameworks), such as Italy and Spain, Portugal also suspended the right to strike until the end of the state of emergency, on May 3, 2020.

vulnerability strengthened, in opposition to appeals or even imperatives to "stay home." On the other hand, the street still retained its longer-standing connotations from revolutionary and anti-austerity struggles. The ambivalence was evident between the street as a public and collective emancipatory but also unprotected space, and the "home," a space of security and safeness but also of private and inward-looking values.

The construction of meaning cannot be understood only as a voluntary rational process, but also as an interactive dynamic resulting from the negotiation between different players and arenas. Nonetheless, there are times when the conscious strategic intentions of these players must be accounted for. Social movements can seek to create or strengthen "frames" to make certain situations and problems more salient, mobilizing people, attracting media attention, and influencing public debates and, finally, politics and policies. It was thanks to these conscious efforts that the street came to assume a new, powerful, seemingly "common-sense" contentious relevance in pandemic times, arising due to the increasing danger that extended time in the streets posed to their remaining, unsanctioned occupants.

Despite the notable rise of the street's new symbolic connotations, its longer-running emancipatory properties were in no way abandoned. On April 25, an article appeared on the news page of the Portuguese news service, RTP online, associating the experience of lockdown, or *confinamento*, to Salazarism and the freedom to leave (*desconfinamento*) with the revolution (RTP 2020). This was more of a semantic, symbolic discussion than a polemical one: the article did not use this argument to criticize the rules and restrictions introduced to protect citizens throughout the pandemic, but rather it drew on the symbols, and thus the feelings and emotions associated with the street in the Portuguese contentious repertoire. As discussed in past pages, conquering the street gave rise to Portugal's most powerful political revolutionary symbol. The impossibility of celebrating the revolution's anniversary in the streets motivated the symbolic association of the pandemic (not of the rules to manage it) with the dictatorship, and the desired and imminent *desconfinamento* with Portugal's emancipation.

Even without the traditional march marking the fall of the dictatorship, the celebration of the 25th of April, 2020, was nonetheless performed on and around the nation's streets, but only at a safe distance. Citizens were invited to appear at their balconies and windows and sing the revolutionary anthem, "Grandola Vila Morena," while cars with loudspeakers

roamed the streets of Lisbon playing the song. A compilation of pictures and video of various citizens singing into the street from their homes was then uploaded online and organized in a "digital" celebration.

Another revolutionary anniversary, May 1st, which was generally celebrated with a highly contested authorized in-person demonstration organized by the Portuguese Communist Party and the Trade Union General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, provides another case of the use and importance of the street—in both its immediate physical form, and digitally reconstituted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As opposed to the 25th of April, its organizers called for full-on street demonstrations, with the aim of demonstrating that it was possible to simultaneously respect the rules of public health and defend workers' rights.

Though the event did not have the same dimension as in previous years, Portugal's contentious forces nonetheless returned to the streets on May 1. For them, it was in these physical streets that protests and practices should happen. Even when meeting face-to-face has proven impossible, Portugal's activists have continued to project the street and references to it into their digital organizing. Even when the copresence with the street as a symbolic object became impossible, it did not lose its potency as a referent for mobilization.

The pandemic period may come to constitute a critical juncture for the Portuguese street. In such extreme moments, symbols and meanings are frequently reshaped and new interpretations emerge. At times this is the result of what we could call a "cognitive shock,"[7] in which the scope of popular symbolic and ideological reorientation and reinterpretation is radically increased (Accornero 2019). With the cognitive shock of the pandemic in mind, the question now is: which kind of "street" can we expect at the end of the pandemic? With regard to contentious symbolism, there has been renewed interest in contesting the political character of the street. In the 2019 general elections a new far-right political party called *Chega* (*Enough*) elected one MP, the first manifestation of the resurgence of this political sector in Portugal since the transition to democracy. Throughout 2020, despite the restrictions of the pandemic, the new party mobilized demonstrators in the streets, and in recent interviews its leader stated that its party's objective was to contest the Left's hegemony over the street (TVI 2020).[8] In the 2022 general elections Chega became the third most voted

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7. Complementary to the notion of "moral shock" identified by James Jasper as one of the main processes at the basis of individual mobilization (Jasper 1997).

8. Interview to Andre Ventura, leader of Chega at TVI (2020): https://tvi24.iol.pt/videos /especial-24/continuacao-da-entrevista-a-andre-ventura/5fb2fe4d0cf2ec6e47137f72

party, electing 12 MPs—but also became a more visible target for counter-mobilizations. Perhaps this will spark a renewed struggle over the street's symbolic properties and their consequences for contentious politics.

Beyond the realm of protest, but certainly still within the realm of contentious politics, a debate has started in Portugal precisely on the question of which kind of street we want to inhabit in our postpandemic future. This debate has drawn in a broad spectrum of participants, ranging from activists and planners involved in the "right to the city" struggle to public authorities, academics, and media figures. New meanings associated with the street are already emerging from this collective process, and they stretch far beyond its use in protest. Many such figures have called for a street of inclusion and not exclusion, a street for energetic socializing and demonstrating and not for sleeping in, a street for walking and biking and not for cars. If this debate is to continue fruitfully, one of the main consequences of pandemic times may be that the street's currently salient symbolic association with vulnerability is productively banished, while its long-standing status as symbol of emancipation and legitimacy is enhanced with new, positive symbolic connotations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced the trajectory of the street as a symbolic object in Portuguese contentious politics all the way from the 1970s to the present day. More than just a coincidental space or place in which contention happens, the street exists in Portuguese contentious politics as a distinctive symbolic object used and disputed by players ranging from protest groups to governmental authorities. Even though new meanings of the street emerge in contentious discourses and public-health narratives, it has been through its occupation that the character of the street as a symbolic object has been most commonly produced and narratives about democracy continue to be articulated.

Above all, legacies of the revolution are still visible today in the way the street functions in Portuguese contentious politics. It is, in a way, where the roots of Portuguese democracy lie. As the Portuguese protest maxim, often heard at demonstrations, states, "Democracy is in the street." As our section describing the events of the revolutionary period shows, the street emerged as the defining element and arena of politics that came to shape contentious politics over the following decades. As a place of contestation, the street had the potency not only to reverse the social and political hierarchies of the dictatorship but to make subsequent institutional players

open to the demands of protest by imbuing with legitimacy demonstrations that took place in it. Even if the meaning of the street was fundamentally structured by contentious activity during the revolution of 1974 and the subsequent transition to democracy, we have stressed that one cannot overlook the emergent variations in its meaning related to legitimacy, emancipation, and vulnerability that arose from interactions and conflicts between subsequent contentious players. The street remains a symbol of contentious politics par excellence in Portugal: it is not just a place or space where protest happens, but a symbolic object to be mobilized in and filled with popular energy.

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# Signature, Performance, Contention

## Hunter Dukes

August 2019. For nearly six months, residents of Hong Kong have been protesting the introduction of a government bill that would allow for the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China. The concerns center on the bill, but go beyond it too; this is but the latest assault on the autonomy and democratic desires of many Hongkongers by a censorious Beijing administration. The tendrilled collective moves through the streets of Kowloon's Mong Kok, bodies mobilizing against bureaucratic restrictions, the way they had five years earlier during the sit-in protests dubbed the "Umbrella Revolution" by observers. In the coming weeks and months, police will continue to pepper and gas these participants, mark them with dye fired through water cannons, blind some with rubber and beanbag ammunition, shoot others with live rounds, and disappear so many people that "no-suicide declarations" become a common practice, as protesters succumb to ambiguous, "accidental" deaths. Alongside these intense events, a curious ritual is sometimes seen:

> On the fringes of the demonstrations in Hong Kong, one could sometimes observe a bizarre scene over the past few days: an autograph session in which demonstrators dressed in black hold out their goggles or mobile phones to be signed by a tall woman, also dressed in black. They're reaching out to Denise Ho, one of the best-known pop singers in town. (Bölinger 2019)

How do we interpret this symbolic transaction against the background of political contention? Well, to begin: Ho herself serves as a case study for the risks of speaking out against the People's Republic. In 2014, she held a concert in solidarity with the "Umbrella" revolutionaries. Her Cantopop ballads were quickly blacklisted by the Chinese mainland (Anderson 2021). Remember, this is a climate where simply "liking" a photograph of the demonstrations could lead to economic and social consequences for an artist.

But signatures are not reducible to "likes" on social media: they have material and agential aspects that function across a variety of platforms toward differing, imaginary ends. At first, the "bizarre scene" resembles a typical autograph event: a distillation of celebrity into an indexical sign of proximity. Ever since autograph-collecting took on its modern guise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least in Britain and the United States, these transactions have involved a fraught economic paradox (Dukes 2021). To sign your autograph dilutes its market value. The gift of a name (and these events are often framed as gifting ceremonies, with the tacit understanding that fandom always accompanies economic investment) creates autographic inflation, weakening the exchange rate of all one's previous signatures. But there is a form of contextually situated (deictic) investment that offsets this loss. When a celebrity signs an autograph in your presence, they are signing it *for you*, *here*, *in their presence*—transubstantiating an object into memorabilia resistant to complete liquidation.[1]

The signature's capacity for different endowments of value, its ability to function simultaneously across a range of contexts (as both an icon of assent and a petitionary protest) perhaps explains why Donald Trump's actions on August 29, 2020, were so darkly comic. Nearly a year to the day after Denise Ho's autograph ceremony, the president of the United States visited Lake Charles, Louisiana, in the devastated wake of Hurricane Laura. After a press conference, unprompted, he began signing autographs for first responders and emergency personnel. "Sell this on eBay tonight, you'll get $10,000," he told one man. "Who's going to get this one?" Trump asked no one in particular, before handing another signed piece of paper in the direction of the audience he had summoned toward him. The third autograph came with a curious gloss: "If I put your name on it, it loses a lot of value, so just sell it tonight on eBay" (Jankowicz 2020). It is difficult to parse why the incident provoked particular outrage in the press

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1. Media archeologists may one day find this quality of the personalized autograph to be a forerunner for the nonfungible tokenization of artworks.

and on social media. The consensus seems to be that federal repertoires of aid-giving do not include recourse to a personal autograph's exchange value. The president should be a figurehead for the government's executive branch, not a celebrity equating his name with its actions.

But there is also an unsettling display of market cynicism: "If I put your name on it, it loses a lot of value." Here the personal gets put aside without a second thought. Or rather, it seems impossible for Trump, in this moment and others, to imagine forms of desire that do not involve enrichment. Interpersonal sentiment inhibits fungibility: the name must remain in circulation for it to be valuable. (There is no sense, for example, that a customized autograph, recognizing the deeds and bravery of Trump's addressee, could be *more valuable* to someone than an IOU for fiat currency.) While it is unclear if the president knows the name of the person to whom he speaks, he knows that their name would depreciate his own. Capital trumps kinship; the phantom of tender makes tenderness impossible. Finally, the imaginary economics of this exchange rely upon infinite demand. Trump denies the principles of oversupply: if every autograph he pens is worth $10,000, the president could personally prop up the US economy with a Sharpie and legal pad. Instead, his speech act recruits the potential buyer to be a political actor: by paying thousands of dollars for a signature on eBay, you are legitimizing a contentious performance of value creation ex nihilo.

Now observe how the same symbolic object, a signature, takes on an entirely different set of associations in the example involving Denise Ho. In that case, by autographing protective equipment, Ho seems to imbue it with an additional, shielding dimension—as if her name might strengthen the goggles' polymers, intervene between the special administrative region and its discontented populace. The act also implicates the artist in political contention: here the gift of the name becomes a shorthand for culpability. If a person carrying Denise Ho's autograph is arrested, the signed equipment may direct the state's disciplinary authorities away from the protester's family and toward the artist, who cosigned the action. Revising a popular saying by Jacques Lacan, we could say that the letter does not always arrive at its destination, but the postman does.

## Signs of the Self

Both of the examples that begin this chapter sit at a disconcerting intersection between material and semiotic considerations of the signature

as a "symbolic object." They reflect how, to quote Gardner and Abrams (introduction, this volume), "the cultural or semiotic qualities of symbolic objects become intertwined with their material properties in important and often transformative ways." The signature is not reducible to writing, for its value resides in a *parasemantic* register: a name's graphological texture—the loops, stems, and tails, which cannot be easily transferred into typography. The signature's affective intensity, and in some cases financial appraisal, does not trade on legibility. An autograph need not even consist of letters, as in the case of former US Treasurer Jacob J. Lew's curlicue scrawl: it only must be recognizable, verifiable, and vaguely repeatable.

And yet, if signatures are not completely reducible to the vocabulary of semiotics, they are also anything but purely material entities. There is a parasitism to the signature, for its meaning intermingles with the qualities of its medium. As Jacques Derrida wrote, while setting out the principles for cultural graphology, we must consider objects like signatures "not from the point of view of signification or of denotation, but of style and connotation; problems of the articulation of graphic form and of diverse substances, of the diverse forms of graphic substances (materials: wood, wax, skin, stone, ink, metal, vegetable) or instruments (point, brush, etc., etc.)" (Derrida 2016, 95). Ho's signature on Hongkongers' protective equipment would symbolize something utterly different were it scribbled on an album cover (see also Selbin's discussion of El Che's various reproductions, this volume). And, moving from the material back to the semiotic, the presidential eBay signature can traverse an entire continuum "from the banal to the highly charged," as Gardner and Abrams describe, depending on a context that has little to do with its material origins.

It makes sense, then, that signatures show up in contentious political contexts, because in many ways, the uptake of this technology parallels the rise of a more individualist politics. Putting a pin in familiar arguments that track back to Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* (1550), about the transition away from craft guild production toward emergence of the singular, visionary artist, we might consider how the same processes that led to constitutional republicanism and the rhetoric of inalienable rights and liberties helped create the conditions necessary for selfhood to be indexed by a repeatable, yet never identical, signature. While property marks seem to predate the invention of systematized writing (Diringer 1948; Schmandt-Besserat 1992), the signature in its modern form—pegged to a proper name; legally binding, or, at least, interpersonally obligatory— did not appear until thousands of years after the invention of writing. "It

was not until the thirteenth century in England that the signature began to gain acceptance as a valid form of authentication," chronicles J. Lauer, "but even then it remained subordinate to the seal" (Lauer 2007, 147)—a biproduct of literacy rates, naming conventions, and a yet-to-come formalization of handwriting pedagogy.

Of course, seals, signets, and other technologies of authorization and verification have been used for millennia. And while Roman law recognized *subscriptio*—a handwritten epistolary subscript indicative of authority—it was not linked to graphology in the way we have come to expect: the enslaved and scribal classes could write *subscriptio* for their masters without contradiction (and these "signatures" often took the form of sentences, rather than proper names, due, in part, to a lack of onomastic diversity (Bond 2016)). In her study of Roman legal practices, Elizabeth Meyer describes how the autograph served as a supplement for the seal: "a way of putting yourself in or on a document that grew naturally out of the practice of sealing itself" (2004, 180). This practice continued, with various modifications, for centuries. When Edward III signed his name in a missive sent to the king of Castile, "the autograph confirmed but did not replace the king's seal" (Harvey and McGuinness 1996, 2). That is, as in Roman times, it remained supplemental. Legal scholars point to the Statute of Frauds Act of 1677 as the moment when handwritten signatures became an officially recognized element of contract law in England, though other experts note that autographs had already gained significant legal power by this era.

This early-modern transition—away from a stamped sign of presence toward a handwritten, indexical scribble as the shorthand for personal assent—marks a seismic, medial shift in the history of bodily techniques. As Béatrice Fraenkel writes, "The use of seals allowed the production of impressions similar in every detail to their common matrix. In order to forge a seal, a false matrix must be made. The signatory is deemed to produce a signature as if he himself were a matrix capable of replicating a form" (quoted in Harris 2000, 183). Consider, for a moment, just how strange this *becoming-matrix* is, when read against colloquial narratives for technological advancement in communication systems. The development of our modern signature is one of the most widely accepted forms of an *internalized* cognitive prosthesis. Whereas most other communication formats *extend* the mind and self beyond the body, offering preservation, visibility, and increased reach, the handwritten signature virtualizes, remediates, and internalizes the seal—a technology that originally had no bodily index, aside, perhaps, from the rough portrait on a signet ring. Writing

externalizes memory; visual representation makes perspectival sight communicable; gramophonic inscription entombs the evaporating voice; and typewriters remove bodily noise from the writing hand. On the other "hand," the autographic signature makes a seal of the writing hand—a replicable matrix of selfhood. Rather than moving sense perception and memory into a nonbiological device, the lettered signature, as a cultural technique, replaced the hardware of seals, stamps, and maker's marks, with the looping, confirmational movements of an individualizing script. In doing so, it helped stabilize the self as an unchanging quantity.

## Constitutive Petitions

How did the self arise in its modern guise? A colossal question too unruly for a monograph, let alone a book chapter, but lurking in even the most microscopic present-day signature. Well-known allegories offered by intellectual history involve communication or prohibition of communication between the inner and outer worlds, a barrier crossed when graphologists attribute moral character to handwritten characters. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche (2012, 83) chalked it up to a process of *internalization*: the soul, like an abscess, was engorged into existence by pent-up drives that could no longer be drained at will due to the imposition of monotheistic morality. Michel Foucault turned Nietzsche's subject inside-out in *Discipline and Punish*—where the soul, like a blister, formed through a "'microphysics' of the punitive power" exercised across the body's exterior (Foucault 1995, 29). And Judith Butler (2006, 172), while developing a notion of performativity that will be important for what follows, took Foucault's lashings and made their scars cohere into signifying texts webbed across the skin's surface: "the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such." If all three philosophers connect the self's origin to a process that lineates the body's encasing membrane, the signatories on declarations and petitions, who helped birth republicanism in France and the United States, recruited parallel imagery for thinking about the autonomy of citizenship in relation to state power via the collectivizing and individuating mechanisms of the signature, circulating across the surface a body politic in the form of declaratory articles and documents of resistance.

What keeps selfhood stable? Not the body—we change our minds; grow, regress, mature, decay; all the while, our cells refresh. What keeps a

political subject stable before the law? In many cases, a name signed on the dotted line, which points back, faithfully, to an ever-changing and evolving individual. As Peggy Kamuf (1988, ix) discusses,

> If every time you sign your name, you deliberately make a significantly different mark, if no two of your signature acts resemble each other, then there is no telling after you have signed whether it was indeed you who signed. After a while, even you may forget having made some particular mark. Here the grounding assumption is that "the subject named" is not only self-identical with itself in the moment of signing but as well remains recognizably the same over time.

Before the law, the signature shores up the discontinuities of selfhood, concatenates every past iteration into an indexical sign. And thus, the signature became a metonym par excellence for a liberal political subject: protected in its particularity, beholden to constitutional universals, ever differing, and always equitable.

Unlike the seal, which carries no "character" aside from the forms etched in negative on its matrix, the signature becomes both the sign of an individual and a reflection of its wider social-political context. "What the semiology of the signature tells us is something about the society responsible for its evolution as a graphic practice," writes Roy Harris. "It is evidently a society with great respect for the individual, and the gradual extension of the signature as a formal procedure goes hand in hand with the development of the rights of the individual, in both political and economic matters" (Harris 2000, 183). During John Locke's (1988) section "Of Conquest" in *Two Treatises on Government*, he compares the thievery performed by an unchecked sovereign power to signatory coercion. "Should a Robber break into my House, and with a Dagger at my Throat make me seal Deeds to convey my Estate to him, would this give him any Title?" (Locke 1988, 176). Here the threat of bodily laceration invalidates the quality of a seal's impression, and marks a burgeoning awareness that the seal's matrix cannot communicate character—the hand can be forced, but, paradoxically, an authentic signature cannot flow out of duress in an unjust seizure, an image Locke links to "the Consent of the people" when erecting a "new Frame of a Common-wealth" (Locke 1988, 176).

It remains unclear, argues Lauer, why the Declaration of Independence that initiated the American Revolutionary War was signed at all—given the conventions of British Parliament at the time (2007, 151–52). As Pauline

Maier (2012) notes, examining colonial petitions to the King in 1774 and 1775, the individual signatures on the document did not personalize it, but on the contrary universalized the document's message. "By affixing their signatures, the delegates signaled that each of the colonies mentioned supported the petition" (2012). Here the unique autograph of *one* bundles in the assent of *all*. "That was," Maier continues, "they seemed to say, not the work of an inconsequential faction of colonists, as their critics in England so often alleged, but the voice of the American people" (2012). Yet unlike these petitions, which acknowledged royal sovereignty and maintained loyalist rhetoric, signing the Declaration of Independence was a treasonous confession. Here again the semiotics of signature shifted, given a different form of contention: "the signers, by affixing their names to the text, and so making their signatures part of that most hazardous of Congressional papers, mutually pledged to each other . . . their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" (Maier 2012). If the signed petitions afford representatives the symbolic power to speak for their constituents before the King, the US Declaration of Independence used the indexical autograph to both underwrite this pronouncement and communicate the interpersonal commitments of its founders to each other. Even graphology gets recruited into political action. In one account, after signing the document with "exaggerated bravado," John Hancock—whose name has become synonymous with every American signature—was said to have boomed, "There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles and double his reward of £500 for my head" (quoted in Lauer 2007, 152). This story of John Hancock and John Bull may be, as the names imply, merely cock and bull, but once again we find acts of contention encoded in value-generating graphology. Even before the Declaration of Independence was used "to whip up crowds into a revolutionary frenzy," as Gardner and Abrams recount, its letter forms became containers for similarly stirring sentiment, semantic sense aside.

Signatures were used for analogously flexible political ends during the episodes of contention that arose between the foundation of the National Assembly and the Establishment of the First Republic during the French Revolution. After the National Assembly passed the Le Chapelier Law restricting strikes and organizations by workers in the summer of 1791, the Cordeliers circulated a petition on July 14, protesting the "abjuring chief on the throne" and calling for Louis XVI to recognize the constitution. "Signed first 'Le Peuple' above individual signatures, the protestors declared that, on an issue concerning the entire nation, the Assembly had the duty to consult its opinion" (Alpaugh 2015, 95). This congruency between personal

ascription and collective action had not always been so frictionless. During deliberations of the Third Estate, almost two years to the day earlier, a presiding member cautioned the assembly against signing as individuals. "Instead of strengthening our resolution, signing could weaken it; for once a resolution is taken by the assembly, it is considered to have been adopted unanimously; whereas signing, if not universal shows that the resolution has been adopted only partially" (quoted in Baker 1987, 199). Two years later, the Jacobin Club used the divisive, exposing nature of the signature to argue for royal abdication. If the individual signatures on the Cordelier petition allowed individuals to amass as "Le Peuple" on paper, during a period where physical gatherings were banned, the Jacobin petition inverted Locke's metaphor, elevating the signature's constitutional authority over monarchical absolutism: "it is important to decide promptly the matter of this individual's fate . . . that Louis XVI, after having accepted the duties of kingship and to defend the constitution . . . has protested against this constitution by a declaration written and signed by his own hand" (quoted in Baker, 274). Here the King as a figurehead for the body politic becomes a mortal hand: individual and disenchanted through the singularity of his own signature, dissolved into the masses of "Le Peuple." As students of French history know and Micah Alpaugh tracks, what may be one of the most widely implemented techniques of peaceful protest—petition signing—led to the Champ de Mars massacre on July 17, after an estimated 50,000 people gathered and 6,000 signed in support of abdication (150).

Without needing to consider the revolutionary claims made by handwriting interpreters with their oracular, divinatory games—such as the graphologist who believed that Jean-Paul Marat's autograph contained "a rope and dagger," apropos for "the blood-stained hangman of the French Revolution" (quoted in Harris, 179)—we can consider that signatures are well poised to take on an outsized force during processes such as revolutions, state repression, and interstate conflict, as well as isolated contentious performances such as the inscription of animal bodies to sustain a fantasy of partisan ecology. I will turn to further illustrative cases in time, but first we must consider the "performative" dimension of the signature and how it squares with sociological discussions related to contentious politics.

## Contentious Performatives

During their discussion in *Contentious Politics*, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define a *social movement* as "a sustained campaign of claim-making,

using repeated performances that advertise the claim," which, through said repetition, "cluster into repertoires of contention" (2015, 13). "Repertoire" and "performance" are carefully chosen terms, cementing a theatrical conceit foundational to the theorization of contentious politics. Agents are so commonly referred to as *actors*, for example, that we have lost the figurative thrust of this term. Here loss is two-pronged. On one hand, we are working with what Nietzsche, Richard Rorty, and subsequent linguistic pragmatists might call a *dead metaphor*; Tilly, *per contra*, worries about the potential incongruities between map and territory: that is, the cases of contention where figurative language fails to accurately approximate the political scene.

> Unlike the imagined situation of actors on a stage before a darkened house, all participants in contention learn continuously as they interact. . . . [C]ontention affects what happens next because each shared effort to press claims lays down a settlement among parties to the transaction, a memory of the interaction . . . and a changed network of relations with and among the participants. (2008, 15–16)

All the world's a stage after all, but there is no fourth wall in Tilly's political theater. Actors and their audience are embroiled in feedback loops of various kinds; all participants *learn continuously* through contention. The traction of theatricality for sociology transcends the figurative. Theories of drama and cultural analysis have been entwined at least since Aristotle connected the cathartic effects of tragedy to representations of power in his *Poetics*. It makes sense, then, to look once again toward developments in dramaturgy and performance studies when trying to sculpt a theory of contentious politics that accounts for the vibrant, agential dimensions of the nonhuman or inorganic world—a boundary typified by signatures and autographs: where the symbolic endurance of human presence relies on the material conditions of writing.

During the same year that Tilly's *Contentious Performances* was published, Erika Fisher-Lichte's (2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance* appeared in English translation. Like Tilly, Fisher-Lichte describes a type of performance that refuses to demarcate between spectacle and spectator, thereby troubling conventional semiotic approaches where "a clear distinction between subject and object is fundamental" (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 17). Performances such as Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975), which implicates the audience in the artist's self-inflicted harm and allows for

the possibility of intervention (spectators can become actors by terminating the performance), dissolve the clear boundaries between "subject and object, observer and observed, spectator and actor" (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 17). We might here note how Fisher-Litche's variations on Judith Butler's *performativity* parallel Tilly's ideas concerning contentious performances:

> Consequently, the repetition of an act comprises a "reenactment" and a "reexperiencing" based on a repertoire of meanings already socially instituted. Cultural codes neither inscribe themselves onto a passive body nor do the embodied selves precede cultural conventions that give meaning to the body. In a theatrical performance, a text can be staged in various ways, and the actors may interpret and realize their roles within its textual framework. (Fisher-Lichte 2008, 28)

> Performances clump into repertoires of claim-making routines that apply to the same claimant-object pairs: bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions, and many more. The theatrical metaphor calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people's interactions as they make and receive each other's claims. (Tilly 2008, 35)

In Tilly's formulation, figurative actors (and sometimes literal ones too, in the case of street theater) perform what the philosopher of language J. L. Austin called *locutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts. The former term indicates the intended content of communication: "the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain 'meaning' in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and with a certain reference" (Austin 1962, 94). The latter evokes "what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something" (Austin 1962, 108). *Locution* is allied to intention and aspiration; *perlocution* to persuasion and consequence. While linguistic treatments of communication rarely make reference to the embodied qualities of textuality (the body noise, as it were, that accompanies the meaning-making of verbal and gestural performances), Fischer-Lichte reminds Tilly that contention often obeys a version of Newton's third law of motion. To make and receive claims is to act and be acted upon, to alter and be altered in turn. Signatures further complicate this already reflexive process. They are the *bruit* in any academic fantasy of pure transmission. If performances clump into claim-making routines

along the axis of claimant-object pairs, signatures triangulate Tilly's dyad. Though indexical of the self, written signatures also remain by definition *separate* from it, invested as they are with the legal and affective power to act on their referent's behalf, even if that referent is absent or deceased.

## Naming's Symbolic Necessities

To "learn continuously"—as Tilly suggests contentious performers do—involves extracting the locutionary content of a performance, its intended meaning. We can say that the *perlocutionary* aspect of a performance equates to what Tilly calls the *changed network of relations*: the locution's actual, rather than intended, effects, the shifting settlements among those party to a communicative transaction. In Austin's language, locution and perlocution are frequently yoked through causal logic: by saying *x* [a locutionary act] I was doing *y* [the perlocutionary result], intentionally or not. During an elaboration of *perlocutionary acts*, Austin might as well be talking about contentious performances: "convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading" (1962, 108). Here is Tilly offering a similar list:

> Contention involves making claims. . . . People make claims with such words as condemn, oppose, resist, demand, beseech, support, and reward. They also make claims with actions such as attacking, expelling, defacing, cursing, cheering, throwing flowers, singing songs, and carrying heroes on their shoulders. (Tilly 2008, 5)

While the notion of "performance" has become deeply embedded in discussions of contentious politics, it is important to note that the term "performative"—despite its continual deployment across cultural studies—is nowhere to be found in core texts such as *Contentious Politics* or *Contentious Performances*. Jeffrey C. Alexander fills this gap in *Performance and Power* through his attempt to craft a sociology more attentive to the cultural dimensions of power politics, those typically neglected in Weberian accounts of force and authority (Alexander 2011). For Alexander (and his collaborator Jason Mast), Austin privileged communication's interactions, *the stage*, and "failed to account for the cultural context out of which particular signs are drawn forth by a speaker," *the script* (2011, 9). In this argument Austin's failings are shared by Erving Goffman, whose sociological dramaturgy cut off "the practice of language from its texts"; by Victor

Turner (1998), who categorized modernity as marking the transition from ritual to theater; and by Clifford Geertz's (1980) theater state (Alexander 2011, 10). Recuperating *parole* from *langue*, speech from text—to borrow the semiotic distinction that Alexander and Mast employ in their engagement with Derrida's well-known critique of Austin—gives rise to a sociological pragmatics that both emerge and diverge from dramaturgy:

> Dramaturgy emerges from the confluence of hermeneutic, post-structural, and pragmatic theories of meaning's relation to social action. Cultural pragmatics grows out of this confluence, maintaining that cultural practice must be theorized independently of cultural symbolics, even as it remains fundamentally interrelated with it. (Alexander 2011, 11)

Pragmatics and dramaturgy lay the foundation for questions of contentious politics when focalized through performativity, how a specific kind of utterance navigates power's vertical hierarchy with horizontal acts of affinity, real or imagined. For Alexander, performance is not theatrical because "felicitous performances fuse speaker and audiences . . . and audiences do not, in fact, see actions as if they are performed" (2011, 103). Nowhere is this *fusing* more apparent than in Austin's third class of speech act: the illocutionary utterance.

If for Austin and his successors locution concerns the act *of saying something*, illocution involves the act *in saying something*. This class of utterance changes the social reality of an interpretive community through its pronouncement, bypassing the need for perlocutionary persuasion. Seduction this is not. Common examples here include acts of naming, christening, warning, promising, and gifting. Notably, one of first examples given by Austin (1962, 102) to highlight the differences between *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution* involves protest:

Act (A) or Locution
  He said to me, 'You can't do that.'

Act (B) or Illocution
  He protested against my doing it.

Act (C. *a*) or Perlocution
  He pulled me up, checked me.

Of course, as Austin quickly admits, illocution often requires locution: to protest something requires saying certain words in many cases. But the *force* of illocution is not solely contingent upon an utterance's content, but something like social context, what Austin obliquely calls "the appropriate circumstances." An illocutionary act involves "the securing of *uptake*" (Austin 1962, 116): it commits both the speaker and her audience, if successful, to a certain course of action. Once a ship has been named and that naming acknowledged, for example, one cannot call said vessel by a different name without *renaming* or *misnaming* it.

But who has the right to name a ship? Here Austin's concept dodges an important political question. To take the most frequently quoted example: Austin describes some low type, who, in the very moment you are about to shatter a bottle across the bow of a ship and slap a name on it, "snatches the bottle out of your hand, breaks it on the stem, shouts out 'I name this ship the *Generalissimo Stalin*,' and then for good measure kicks away the chocks" (Austin 1979, 239). What a revealing example! For Austin, this performative becomes infelicitous because it is uttered by the wrong person, "this low type instead of the person appointed to do it"—"you should first of all get yourself appointed as the person to do the naming and that's what this fellow did not do" (1979, 240). The legitimacy (and legitimizing powers) of nominal regimes remain veiled. What happens if it was not the "low type," but the *appointed namer* who called the ship *Generalissimo Stalin*, to the chagrin of those who appointed her? And what if she is stripped of her appointment after the performative utterance has taken place? Will *Generalissimo* float?

Two recent examples highlight the contentious attributes of naming ceremonies in which objects are forcibly imbued with symbolic qualities. In 2012, the regional assembly of Bratislava held a two-month campaign to crowdsource the name for a pedestrian bridge across the Morava river. A clear favorite emerged: "Chuck Norris," with 12,599 votes. Slovak officials rejected the result and named the bridge "Freedom Cycling Bridge" to honor those who died fleeing Czechoslovakia for nearby Austria under the communist regime. On the other hand, when the British Natural Environment Research Council opened a vote to name a new polar research ship, they initially decided to honor the public's choice of *Boaty McBoatface* as the name for its $287 million vessel. Despite the Council's subsequent reversal of this decision, opting to name the ship RRS *Sir David Attenborough*, they nonetheless maintained *Boaty McBoatface* for its principle submersible

vehicle. One might choose to quibble over whether or not these government bodies "appointed" the public or merely crowdsourced suggestions. But to get hung up on these designations would be to miss the larger, political takeaway. These "infelicities" (as Austin would have put it) are not abnormal failures in an otherwise functional nominal system. Rather, they also manifest in the case of suspended elections or the invalidation of electoral results through accusations of ballot rigging. Every illocutive act of naming, whether the referents be boats or democratic leaders, involves an inquiry into and a performance of authority, individual or collective.

How do ceremonies of naming, in this argument, differ from the practice of signing autographs? Or, to put the question another way, do illocutive speech acts need a speaker? Austin offers a ludic answer. If a performative utterance is "something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*" (Austin 1962, 60), signatures do not fit the criterion. Shortly after this definition, however, Austin distinguishes between *verbal* utterances and *written* utterances:

(a) In verbal utterances, by his being the person who does the uttering—what we may call the *utterance*-origin which is used generally in any system of verbal reference-co-ordinates.
(b) In written utterances (or 'inscriptions), by his appending signature (this has to be done because, of course, written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the way spoken ones are). (Austin 1962, 60–61)

Austin's "of course" in the second example might catch the critical eye as an example of what Derrida described as Austin's revealing offhandedness. For Derrida, a written signature "implies the . . . *nonpresence* of the signer" (1977, 20). By this he means—playing with the partial homophone between *maintenant* (present) and maintenance—that signatures do not merely refer to an absent presence, they offer an illusory presence that need not be *maintained* by the individual in question. As objects widely accepted as legal proxies for an absent, corporal subject, signatures may thus be employed to imply or evoke an individual or group's participation (with or without their signer's consent) in contentious politics. This may be wielded by contentious protagonists or—as we shall soon see—by repressive forces.

Forged Signatures and Political Repression

If the late eighteenth century saw the signature recruited by networks of revolutionaries to serve as symbolic objects for discrediting feudalism and instantiating republicanism, the nineteenth-century witnessed a retaliation of sorts on behalf of the powerful. During this period, state actors, newspapers, and even forensic scientists recruited novel techniques of interpretation to weaponize signatures against contentious individuals and populations, discrediting their political efficacy and imputing a pretext for victimization. These cases serve as a telling reminder that repertoires of contentious politics involving symbolic objects are as vulnerable to state seizure as the objects themselves.

What we now refer to as handwriting forensics—analytic techniques for matching a signature or autographic text to its issuing body—had its foundations in graphology, a science that promised not just to illuminate denotation, but to extract information from the connotation of script: locating moral character, predicting future criminal behavior, and attributing guilt, all by means of examining the unique patterns of a person's handwriting. This graphological frame shifted the handwritten signature's symbolic potency by declaring the existence of certain empirical techniques that could uncover someone's essence through careful and "proper" analysis of their written words.

During the struggle for Irish Home Rule in the late nineteenth century, one of the Irish nationalist movement's leaders, Charles Stewart Parnell, was accused of the double murder of two of the movement's opponents, Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke, thanks to a series of forged letters. *The Times* (1887), which bought the letter after it was described as "an infernal machine guaranteed to blow the whole Irish party into space," functioned as a key part of the anti-independence counter-movement, and as an organ of Prime Minister Salisbury's government, which, as the saying went, sought to kill Home Rule with kindness (Stead 1890, 185). On April 18, 1887, the newspaper reproduced, as part of its "Parnellism and Crime" series, a letter purportedly written by Parnell in the spring of 1882. The signed document (which was followed by several other letters in subsequent editions) appeared to condone the murders, while cultivating a tone of conspiracy (Bew 1980, 100). Even though the handwriting was clearly not Parnell's own, *The Times* declared that the sig-

nature nonetheless matched the politician's. "It is requisite to point out that the body of the manuscript is apparently not in Mr. Parnell's handwriting, but the signature and the 'Yours very truly' unquestionably are so."

For Parnell to clear his name it was not enough to disavow the text of the letter. Rather, Parnell had to carefully dissect the authenticity of his supposed signature, placing "his finger on the S of the signature," and declaring "I did not make an S like that since 1878'" (Timothy Harrington, quoted in Bew 1980, 101). Here signatory difference tracks the flux of penmanship, stressed by the focus on the serpentine S, allowing Parnell not only to spot the forgery, but to date it to a version of his graphic self that dissipated before the Phoenix Park murders took place.

In a similar vein to the Parnell Commission, the contentious episode wrought by the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) also centered upon finding the author of an unsigned treasonous *bordereau*. The document, written by French officer Ferdinand Esterhazy, was attributed by biased and inaccurate handwriting analysis to the Jewish artillery officer Alfred Dreyfus, sparking a frenzy of anti-Semitic protests and riots. Propelling and underpinning the frenzy whipped up during the Affair, state powers employed the Kafkaesque argument that Dreyfus—though not immediately obvious as the writer of the document—performed a "self-forgery" by purposefully obscuring the identifiable signatures in his own handwriting.[2] The notion was justified by a flawed system of mathematical reasoning that verged on the magical. The French state alleged that a person's handwriting corresponded to the scripts of their parents (Kurland 2009, 61), linking Dreyfus's bloodline to his allegedly seditious inkwell. This framing not only served to justify anti-Semitic movements of the time, but undermined former revolutionary strategies. Where once one might gather thousands of individual signatures and present them under the banner of "Le Peuple," this new framing of the signature balkanized it along imaginary ethnic and racial divisions, potentially detectable through the science of graphology. When state investigators inadvertently *exonerated* Dreyfus by matching Esterhazy's handwriting samples to the *bordereau*, they backtracked, claiming "that the bordereau had been written by someone the Jews had trained to imitate Dreyfus's handwriting" (Begley 2009, 99).[3]

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2. The French state utilized Alphonse Bertillon, chief of the Identification Department of the Judicial Police, as handwriting analyst. Bertillon was famous for developing anthropometry—a forensic system used to recognize criminals based upon a complex system of bodily measurements.

3. In painful irony, any similarity between Dreyfus's handwriting and Esterhazy's may have

## Signing Ceremonies

As symbolic objects used by contentious political actors ranging from dissidents to diplomats, signatures offer particularly rich case studies for contentious politics because they signify across a spectrum of interests, tracking how "the various meanings, identities and narratives that objects come to be entangled with are not always consciously named or recognized but may nonetheless be strongly evoked," as Gardner and Abrams (conclusion, this volume) put it. Signatures are simultaneously ledger, stylo, and signer. Autography becomes a paradigmatic example of the symbolic protocols, like those theorized by Alfred Gell, whereby objects can act *on behalf of* an absent body. Borrowing C. S. Peirce's tripartite division of signs, we could say that the signature lends itself equally to iconic, indexical, and symbolic investments. Or, following Sonja Dobroski's elaboration of Peirce's "qualisign" in this volume, we might highlight her gloss of Julie Chu and say that the signature too always involves "a semiotic bundling that occurs when mobility necessarily becomes attached to people, places and objects."

To return to the near past, consider the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), Donald Trump's renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trump's signature made international news, due to a suspicion that, on one of the agreement's three copies, he signed on the wrong dotted line. The story was perhaps unwarranted, because each copy might have had the North American leaders' names in differing orders. In photographs documenting the signing ceremony, Trump's signature looms large, written with his custom Sharpie. Here the controversy and media sensation involve multiple registers of signification.

We do not even need to know the terms of the USMCA to locate the critical discontent: Trump's signature was the culprit, not the bill to which it was affixed. First there is the critique of deixis: *to what the signature points*. If Trump did, in fact, sign on the wrong line, this mistake could be quickly remedied and would carry no legal authority. The outrage, then, has nothing to do with the validity of an illocutionary act, but its implied subtext: if the president of the United States signs on behalf of a country not his own, intentionally or unintentionally, what stops him from advocating for, or falling prey to, another foreign power?

Second, we find a critique of graphology. Trump's outsized autograph,

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been a result of standardized state education: "at that time the slanted, highly cursive script was taught at every school" (Begley, 6).

composed of around a dozen distinct lines and often written with a Magic Marker instead of the expected presidential pen, carries a connotation in excess of the signature's performative function. Assessments of exactly *what kind of connotation* will differ wildly among audiences, depending on their personal and political affinities or repulsions, but it remains nevertheless iconic. The symbolic attributes of Trump's signature are by no means arbitrary: the signature *looks* like what it *means* (whatever it means). The audience's interpretation, here, is not separate from the event: it helps form the "feedback" loop identified in Tilly and Fisher-Lichte's work by means of a symbolic inscription linked to the signer's body. For a supporter, Trump's graphology might be the shortest possible paraphrase of his "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan, while the opposition could connect the name's girth and its signatory's bloated, executive power. Symbolic objects' ambiguity does not hinder their role in contentious politics; rather, it is an engine of their potency.

Symbolic objects such as signatures are not *merely* metonymic advocates for human subjects. Trump's signature on the USCMA bill fascinates because of its implied political infidelity. Through its interaction with onlookers, who subject its character (locutive and graphological) to speculative interpretation, the signature both advocates on behalf of Trump, *and* may be used to reveal weakness and uncertainty. A signature can thus turn against its maker's hand in a very real way. As signs of surrogacy, prosthetic symbols of intent, signatures may inherit any controversy surrounding their signatory, but can exceed it too.[4] The signature functions as a symbol of presence and proximity, while its material shape and graphology serve as a storehouse of character and interpretable content.

Both contentious and consolatory, signing ceremonies—held in locked rooms or behind secured barriers, sometimes televised, always reported upon—initially appear to be nothing but diplomatic pomp. If the rhetoric of a signing ceremony champions republicanism, their iconography verges on the feudal: a court filled with statesmen and stateswomen, convening around a document, with each person's handwriting imbued with the symbolic efficacy for national assent. Tilly, Tarrow, Alexander, and others predominantly recruit theatrical vocabulary to describe the performative dimension of contentious politics; the signing ceremony is the epitome of scripted political performance's fixed repertoire. The terms have been

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4. In more formal terms, we could say that signatures are objects that denote and connote controversy simultaneously, modifying Derrida's earlier question regarding the materiality of style.

agreed upon beforehand. All that is left is to sign them into existence. Why, then, the fuss?

In journalistic accounts of signing ceremonies, politics always has the potential to slip into mass entertainment. This remains true even in the context of some of the grandest contentious political phenomena—war and interstate conflict. While these ceremonies have a binary outcome—either the parties sign or they do not—the duration, setting, and performance of the events are often remarked upon. Reporting on the signing of the World Security Charter on June 26, 1945, *The Times*, for example, seized upon the ceremonial duration. "The ceremony began at 6 o'clock, and was not completed until mid-afternoon," with the "San Francisco printers work[ing] overtime during the week-end" to deliver "the royal blue morocco-bound volumes containing the documents which represent the hopes of 50 nations for a prolonged period of peace and security." The duration of a signatory event seems to symbolize the prolonged negotiations (months of debate and drafting). The setting also overshadows the legal agreement. *The Times* remarked how the scene "was almost like a Hollywood setting," a simile that reveals the congruency of contentious politics' theatrical lexis.

> Against a back-drop of pale blue stood the flags of the 50 nations, and the documents lay upon a huge round table on which powerful lights played. In the galleries many news-reel cameras recorded in picture form the signing by every delegate. Most of the delegates spoke a few words into the microphone. ("Ceremony of the Signature," *The Times* 1945, 4)

The words are not recounted—they do not need to be. We can contrast the United Nations charter ceremony to the peace deal signed five years earlier between France's General Charles Huntziger of the Supreme War Council and General Wilhelm Keitel, Adolf Hitler's chief of staff. As the *Sunday Mirror* reported, the ceremony took place in the same railway dining car where Ferdinand Foch, the Supreme Allied Commander during World War I, dictated his Armistice terms on November 11, 1918. There the duration was also remarked upon. Unlike the United Nations signatory event, this ceremony "took only two minutes" ("French Sign!," *Sunday Mirror* 1940, 2). The length of the event has no bearing on its outcome. as Gertrude Stein might have been tempted to say at the time. But a hasty autograph comes to symbolize the scale of attrition, the depth of defeat. It

retains connotations of the dining car's pervading history: we are reminded that something like this happened before, in the very same place. While diplomatic signing ceremonies attempt to exclude dissent through repertoires of compromise, the signature, as we have seen, offers a symbolic vehicle for the return of repressed, political content. When leveraged as a tool of protest, the signature's duration, graphology, and proximity form the building blocks of veiled social dissent.

If the World Security Charter signing resembled a Hollywood movie, during the subsequent decade, Hollywood signatures became repositories of political resistance. During the struggles between members of the American Left and state authorities during the US Red Scare, signed letters became an important means of rebuffing repression attempts. One such case can be found in Katharine Hepburn's signature on a 1950 letter addressed to Dr. G. G. Killinger, chairman of the U.S. Board of Parole. Hepburn wrote as a character witness for Ring Lardner Jr., an American satirist and one of the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters, producers, and directors who refused to answer questions posed by Congress about their possible communist sympathies. Lardner was a man with a colorful character (A 1963 obituary in the *Chapel Hill Weekly* described him as "an alcoholic, suffering from heart disease and incipient tuberculosis, alternating between cocaine and caffeine, sick, weak, sad, sometimes crying over his typewriter, sometimes falling asleep over it."). His political views had made him a scapegoat for the California Un-American Activities Committee (1941–1971) headed by Jack Tenney, a Republican senator from Los Angeles, whose playbook Joseph McCarthy borrowed from for his reign of paranoia and terror. Charged with contempt, Lardner was imprisoned and then professionally blacklisted.

While Hepburn had also been suspected by the committee, it was Lardner's visit to the Soviet Union, which he thought represented "the only true attempt to rebuild a new world," and his outspoken support for the US Communist Party that landed him in hot, authoritarian water (Horne 2006, 135). "All the most beautiful girls in Hollywood belong to the Communist Party," he once proposed with tongue in cheek, for the Party's recruitment slogan (Starr 2002, 289).

Hepburn's signature serves as a nuanced political object because it is affixed to a letter that performs nonpartisanship. "This letter is written in behalf of an old friend [of] whose political views I know nothing, but whatever they are I believe they are sincere, although they may differ radically from my own," it concludes (US National Archives 2014, 9). It takes

some cognitive contortion to decipher how Hepburn can simultaneously claim ignorance of Lardner's politics while maintaining that his beliefs are sincere. How many old friends remain unaware of their acquaintances' beliefs? How can one separate *sincerity as affect* from *sincerity as coherence between belief and action*? And how can Hepburn intimate that Lardner's politics differ from her own without knowing what they, in fact, are? Here the signature functions again like a protective proxy. It performs its illocutive duty—Hepburn's fame and reputation vouch for Lardner—while maintaining a certain locutionary ambivalence with regard to the actress's knowledge. The signature, in some sense, knows more than Hepburn by design. Just like Denise Ho's autographs on Hongkongers' goggles, Hepburn's signature does not avow Lardner's innocence or promise reform. Rather, the signature speaks for itself, on behalf and in place of Hepburn. Such a case foregrounds the power of signatory acts of support beyond the confines of their denoted referent's professed agenda.

## Conclusion: Trumping Nature

By drawing on a range of case studies abreast of historical moments of dissent, memorialization, and consolidation, I have argued that the signature represents a particularly tricky class of symbolic object, requiring a chimeric theoretical apparatus derived from sociological theories of contention, dramatological treatments of performance, and forking paths in the philosophy of language. If, in the wake of structuralist accounts of signification, symbols are often dissolved into signs—arbitrary relationships between the word-image and its signified content—autographic signatures reintroduce the body into contentious, symbolic contexts, recoupling the hand, as it were, to its imprints. While Tilly and Fischer-Lichte both invoke the figure of a feedback loop to describe how repertoires of action structure and make porous distinctions between political subjects and objects, an actor and her audience, signatures and signed objects exploit these blurred borders by serving as a triangulating agent. Ultimately, I have tried to demonstrate how the same protocols of substitution both shield political actors and become graphological sites for finding and deriving dissent.

Perhaps, bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's imperative to always historicize, I might step outside of the formal register of academic writing and comment on the conditions in which I am composing this chapter. It is timely, tragically so, that an edited collection on symbolic objects and contentious politics would appear in the wake of the greatest display

of sedition in recent American memory. During the period of collective mourning following January 6, 2021, a strange headline caught my eye—perhaps you saw it too. It describes the discovery of a West Indian manatee in Florida, whose back bore an inscription scraped in the algae on the animal's skin: TRUMP. There has been some debate about whether the creature was harmed in the process—luckily, little physical damage seems to have been done. But the symbolic import of this signatory event touched an already raw nerve in the public psyche. Having faced near extinction several decades earlier, the manatee is now vulnerable not only to climatological precarity, but also, apparently, to symbolic appropriation. And while (as far as we know) the president of the United States did not sign the animal himself, his signature has been weaponized against the more-than-human world. Of course, here the sign is closer to a hotel placard than an authentic, graphological autograph. Yet the very real violence of inscription demonstrates the necessity of taking such things as the signature seriously in contentious politics, even when they might initially seem the stuff of orderly administration.

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# Policing Bodies

## *The Role of Bodywork and Symbolic Objects in Police Violence during the Toronto G20*

### Valerie Zawilski

During the Toronto G20 Summit of June 2010, police repression surged. People who wore bandannas or had body piercings, tattoos, dyed hair, or other corporeal indicators associated with the LGBTQ+ community were more likely to be threatened, attacked, and detained by security forces. Drawing on a content analysis of testimonies given by detainees, legal observers, and expert witnesses, I argue in this chapter that these data indicate how individuals who engaged in these "bodywork" practices came to be considered suitable targets for state violence. That such biases occur is not a new observation, but considering how they are produced allows us to think abstractly and practically about the link between body- or object-related creativity, anarchy, and resistance, as socially and politically defined by those who control the means of violence. This chapter examines how the body is contested terrain, and how its creative enhancement with symbolic objects, and indeed the "body" itself, may be symbolically and physically politicized through various forms of bodywork.

The term "bodywork" is derived from Bryan S. Turner's concept of "embodiment" (Turner 1992)[1]: a form of reflexive experiential understanding of the social body and the body politic. Bodywork, in this chapter, per-

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1. Turner offers a critique of the positivistic medical model of health and illness, suggesting that embodiment is the process through which we understand the social and material world in which we live, and that it is fundamental to our understanding of both health and illness.

tains on the one hand to symbolic bodily practices and behavior that were outwardly manifested in performative compliance to the neoliberal values of society by Canadian security forces during the G20 Summit. On the other hand, bodywork also possesses an agentic character; political activists use "the body" as an expressive object to engage in acts of symbolic, cultural, social, political, and material resistance.

In this chapter, I deconstruct the bodywork practices of both security forces and political activists during the Toronto G20 by (1) examining data derived from a systematic, thematic content analysis of thirty-five testimonies given by people detained by the protest police, or who acted as legal observers during the weekend of the G20; (2) discussing how the "body" is a contested terrain in which creative enhancement and bodywork may be politicized by both civilians and the security forces who were policing "bodies" using strategic incapacitation tactics that relied on intelligence reports and cultural cues; and (3) analyzing observations about security forces' behavior during the Summit. I unpack these observations by drawing on Foucault's theories about governmental power and the body, and Goffman's work on performativity and stigma, as well as critical work on cultural essentialism, especially as it relates to concerns about cultural stereotyping, racism, misogyny, and homophobic attitudes, all of which were overtly expressed by G20 security forces.

## Strategic Incapacitation

The G20 Summit and World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings are international forums for world leaders to gather and discuss issues such as the global economy and climate change. These mega-events have attracted global networks of trade unionists, NGO workers, and social activists, who organize demonstrations in the cities where these world forums take place, raising social awareness about issues such as global poverty, workers rights, environmental justice, Indigenous groups' claims, and LGBTQ+ issues. The first (then G6) Summit was held in 1975 in the Paris exurb of Rambouillet, and there were few protesters in attendance. Later G7[2] meetings were held in Canada, in Ottawa in 1981, Toronto in 1988, and Halifax in 1995. While the number of protesters increased over time, protest policing generally consisted of the use of escalated force against unruly protesters and negotiated management with nonaggressive activists.

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2. Russia was admitted in 1998 into the G7, which then became the G8.

During the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle, USA, protesters blockaded areas of the city, preventing thousands of delegates from attending. In response, police used teargas, pepper spray, and other tactics to disperse the protesters. This event—along with the emergence of post-9/11 security culture—has been considered as a global "tipping point," after which protest policing during these mega-events changed. By 2003, during the Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiations in Miami, a form of selective enforcement had emerged that distinguished between "good" protesters and "bad" protesters. Many activists refer to this form of protest policing as the "Miami Model," a method of enforcement that includes

> the mass acquisition and deployment of surveillance and anti-protest gear, having plainclothes police confront protest organizers weeks ahead to suss out their plans, playing up some kind of pre-event scare such as a discovery of [a] weapons cache or nefarious plot, the promulgation [of] emergency regulations and severe restrictions on where and how the public can demonstrate. (Dubinsky 2010)

Kitchen and Rygiel (2014) propose that this newly integrated model of policing and security has militarized urban space and created new markets for the security sector. Monaghan and Walby (2012, 653) use the term "strategic incapacitation" to describe the hybrid model of intelligence practices and police training that has emerged in protest policing strategies in the post-Seattle era. The model has been used by police forces to target activist leaders at global summits such as in Genoa (July 2001), Edinburgh (July 2005), and London (April 2009). Didier Bigo points out that a process of fear amplification endorsed by the mainstream media has resulted in "internal policing and external defense [. . . being] no longer separable but instead merge[d] into one another as part of a Mobius Ribbon of security networks" (Kitchen and Rygiel 2014, 201). The militarization of mega-event policing has been justified as a means to quell fears of terrorist attacks, protests by immigrant groups, and random acts of violence, and to thwart the activities of protesters dubbed the "Black Bloc."

Black Bloc protesters at summits tend to be anticapitalists who tactically choose to wear indistinguishable black clothing and masks to conceal their individual identities. Images of these masks—as Thomassen and Riisgaard note (chapter 13)—are often used by powerholders to "evoke the fear of an unidentifiable but organized threat to society." Those who wear Black Bloc garb often do so as they engage in performative acts of symbolic

violence such as attacking corporate buildings and police cars during summit meetings. Dupuis-Deri (2017) reports that "The Battle of Seattle . . . which received wide media coverage, was a turning point in the dissemination of Black Bloc tactics. Since then, they have been widely taken up by anti-austerity protesters and by some segments of student movements in countries as diverse as France, Italy, and Canada." The use of these tactics led security institutions to expand their definition of urban violence and thus to expand the scope of protective security and surveillance measures considered acceptable to protect urban populations.

During the Toronto G20, more than 1,100 people briefly "disappeared" from the city streets, and re-emerged following dehumanizing experiences in police custody. This was the largest mass arrest of civilians in Canadian history. Individuals who engaged in bodywork practices such as tattooing, body piercing, hair dying, wearing bandanas, or displaying outward signs of being from the LGBTQ+ and racialized minority communities were more likely to be criminalized by the security forces during the summit. During this time, mainstream media became increasingly likely to use a "lawlessness and violence" framework to describe activists (Douai 2014), while protest police were given unprecedented powers through the revival of a piece of legislation referred to as the Public Works Protection Act (PWP Act), originally intended to defend a city under siege. The PWP Act was created to protect Ontarian public works during World War II (Leclerc 2010).[3] Following an independent civilian review of the Summit, it was found this "regulation came into force on June 3, 2010 and was revoked on June 28, 2010" (Morden 2012, 28). Its temporary resurrection was used by protest police to control and to pre-emptively detain Canadian citizens without democratic approval.

Due to the PWP Act, the Toronto police forces and their associates had unprecedented policing powers during the G20 (Morden 2012). During the summit, the general public was widely notified about an apparent "five-meter rule" that forbade civilians from coming within five meters of the winding web of summit security fences erected in downtown Toronto (they were later discovered to have never existed). Meanwhile, a large section of

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3. "A little-known Ontario law called the Public Works Protection Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. P.55 received much publicity . . . due to the decision to designate a large swath of downtown Toronto as a 'public work.' It was said this was due to G20 security concerns, giving police wide powers to search people who even dared to venture near the G20 security zone. It is a short, six-section Act (http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90 p55_e.htm)."

downtown Toronto was designated as a "Public Work Zone" placed under a form of martial law. The PWP Act gave police and security officers the right to search and arrest, without a warrant, anyone in the "Public Work Zone" whom they deemed to be of suspicious appearance or behavior. During the weekend of June 26 to 27, 2010, police not only arrested many nonviolent social activists, but according to one testimonial, the majority of those detained were found to have been bystanders or observers living in, working in, or visiting the area.[4]

The testimonies gathered from participants and observers who took part in the Toronto G20 protests (simply referred to as "G20 testimonies" herein) describe the police strategies of kettling or trapping groups of protesters in confined spaces and using "snatch squads," a practice in which security officers single out activists known to the police, who are identified by bodily and cultural cues and then apprehended, dragged behind police lines, and detained. These individuals were "othered" and deemed to be "dangerous" representatives of alternative lifestyles and cultures. They were accused of engaging in or planning conspiratorial behavior that challenged the mainstream hegemonic masculinities of the nation state. The G20 public narratives bear witness to this public event.

### Narratives of Resistance as Data

My findings in this chapter draw on public testimonial statements recorded on November 10 and 11, 2010, in Toronto and published on the internet by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.[5] In the G20 testimonies we hear the voices of LGBTQ+ people who question the heteronormative discourse of the state and aligned actors. The G20 testimonies are adversarial in nature, and they ask that we bear witness to painful narratives in an effort to acknowledge unjust actions carried out by the Toronto Police Forces and their associates.[6] The goal of recording oral histories is to create a form of reconciliatory action that will confront a difficult history (Winter 2014), to raise public awareness about policing systems during

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4. Testimony P.

5. According to the website of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the CCLA "actively stands up to power by fighting against rights violations, abuse of police powers, inequality, and discrimination" (CCLA, no date).

6. Even though the testimonies were published on the internet by the CCLA, I have chosen to protect the identities of narrators by assigning each testimony a letter from the alphabet. The only demographic information I have included is whether the narrator identified as male or female and whether they identified as transgender.

global mega-events such as summits, and to move beyond governmental breaches of trust and help ensure that similar mass arrests of citizens will not take place in the future (Zawilski 2021).

Each G20 testimony in the data analysis was thematically coded twice, after a pilot test identified key thematic areas of concern that were mentioned in more than 50 percent of the testimonies. Of the thirty-five testimonies analyzed, eighteen were women and seventeen were men.[7] Two people within this data set also self-defined as transgender. In the first overview of the testimonies, the coder focused on information the narrators gave about security forces' behavior.[8] The coding categories include bullying, rushing/targeting leaders, illegal searches, false detention, obstructing freedom of assembly, criminalization of dissent, escalation of violence, no warning by police, and physical assault. During the second coding of the testimonies, the coder examined the behavior and observations of the individuals themselves. Categories include peaceful protest, democratic rights, global justice, passive behavior, violation of personal rights, feelings during the protest, observations of the crowd, observations of the detention center, and feelings in detention. Through the thematic coding of the testimonies, a sociopolitical consensus emerges among the various legal observers, social activists, and other witnesses: that the Toronto police forces and their associates orchestrated systematic and methodical attacks on targeted civilians during the summit. This finding is especially significant in the reports given by females who, in seven of the nine categories, were more likely than males to express deep concern about police brutality and the militarization of protest policing and crowd control (see table 8.1).

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7. Transgender individuals were stigmatized, marginalized, and isolated while they were in detention. Social identities of the narrators: The 35 testimonies include members from various sectors of society: 5 students, 1 graduate student, 2 professors, 1 educator, 5 lawyers, 1 legal advisor, 4 union organizers, 1 mechanic, 1 security officer, 2 photographers, 2 journalists, 1 gardener, 1 army veteran, 1 mechanic, 1 grandmother, 1 artist, and 5 with unknown occupations. The ages of the 35 testifiers, who self-identified as 18 females and 17 males, are:

| 20–29 years old | females 50% (9) | males 47% (8) |
| 30–39 years old | females 16.6% (3) | males 11.7% (2) |
| 40–49 years old | females 11.1% (2) | males 11.7% (2) |
| 50–59 years old | females 5.5% (1) | males 5.8% (1) |
| 60–69 years old | females 11.1% (2) | males 5.8% (1) |
| Ages unknown | females 5.5% (1) | males 17.6% (3) |

8. On average the oral testimonies are 13.7 minutes in length. The mean number of words in each testimony is 1,976. The page length of the transcriptions: 8.5% (3) are 1 to 2 pages long, 34% (12) are 3 pages long, 43% (15) are 4 pages long, and 14% (5) are 5 or more pages long.

TABLE 8.1. Behavior of the G20 Police (Toronto, Canada)

|  | Observations by Females (%) | Observations by Males (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Bullying | 79 | 50 |
| Rushing, or targeting leaders | 47 | 55 |
| Illegal searches | 79 | 50 |
| False detention | 89 | 61 |
| Obstructing freedom of assembly | 58 | 72 |
| Criminalization of dissent | 63 | 61 |
| Escalation of violence | 53 | 44 |
| Failure to give warnings | 58 | 50 |
| Physical assault | 100 | 72 |

### Reflexive Embodiment, Hegemonic Masculinities, and Biopower

Durkheim observed that in preindustrial eras bodywork practices such as displaying tattoos and bodily adornments were cultural cues that signaled that an individual "belonged" to a specific social group (Turner 1999; Durkheim 2001). Rubin and DeMello (2000) trace the modern history of Western body inscription or tattoos from their social origins among aristocratic groups, working-class society, convict and biker communities, and middle-class communities in the 1980s. By the 1990s, they contend, tattoos had evolved into an expression of fine art, especially among Celtic and Japanese communities (Rubin and DeMello 2000). In a postmodern world, "the body" has continued to be a central vehicle for self-identification, and it is the key to identity formation (Elliott 2015). The term "embodiment" is used to describe "all those actions performed by the body or on the body which are inextricably oriented towards the social" (Gilleard and Higgs 2015, 17). Identities are created or performed when we take on personal and social meanings through the ways we present, adorn, shape, and use our bodies with and as symbolic objects. Individuals as members of a social group use the process of reflexive embodiment to reflect on and shape their bodies and their external material world. Crossley (2006, 1) defines reflexive embodiment as the "the capacity and tendency to perceive, emote about, reflect and act upon one's own body": this encompasses self-directed practices such as body grooming, maintenance, and modification.

Reflexive embodiment or bodily planning is, according to Giddens (1991), an important form of impression management, and in industrialized societies, tattoos and other forms of creative, social, and/or political bodywork have been detraditionalized; they are just one way that one can

express the many narratives that comprise one's cultural identity. Cultural theorists such as Wikan (2002, 12) note that

> The problem of how to reconcile human rights and cultural rights is still with us, as with all plural and multicultural societies of a liberal or democratic nature. The question of how free the exercise of culture should be continues to trouble us if not in principle then certainly in practice.

One may ask how free cultural expressions of identity such as body inscriptions, piercings, and tattoos as an act of culture in our postmodern world really are. One might also wonder: at what point does a creative form of material culture become representative of an accepted collective (alternative) culture? In a study that examined the bodywork of 304 members of subcultural communities, Atkinson (2004) found that 14.1% of the women and 4.2% of the men had body piercings (other than in the ears), 32% of the women and 5.8% of the men had dyed hair, 71% of the women and 7.5% of the men had one or two earrings, and zero women and 2.5% of the men had three or more tattoos. The data collected from the G20 Summit indicate that "countercultural" women were identified more frequently by their body piercings and hair color, while men were more likely to be singled out and attacked by security forces if they had multiple tattoos and/or were wearing scarfs or bandanas.

Historically, cisgender men and women have supported a heteronormative masculinized collective identity. The term "hegemonic masculinity(ies)" is used to refer to the multiple forms of masculinity whose social constructions are "influenced by hierarchical power relations among men and between men and women" (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; in Norman, Ricciardelli, and Gillett 2021). Though the term is broadly defined, Connell and Messerschmidt propose that it is "an idealized set of embodied practices and traits that, in a specific cultural context, legitimize a social hierarchy that privileges a small number of men while subordinating women and men who cannot meet this ideal" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; in Norman, Ricciardelli, and Gillett, 2021). Fuchs (2001, 1–2) argues that "observers are positioned in a culture—they are 'cultured' observers, and what they see and do not see, depends on where they are located in the networks of a society and culture." Thus, both the body as a symbolic object and the symbolic objects adorning protesters' bodies at the Toronto G20 had distinct meanings for social activists, who saw their actions as an

expression of their democratic right to free assembly and an expression of their alternative cultures. Conversely, I argue that the G20 security forces' perceptions of the protesters' appearance and behavior were understood as a threat to their "imagined community" of the hegemonic masculinized version of nation state, thereby legitimating actions against them.

Donaher (2015, 65) succinctly points out that in cases such as the one I consider, when one culture clashes with one another, "culture as an excuse may be used as a disguise and a pretext for infringing upon the inalienable human rights of particular groups" (see also Dobroski, chapter 5, this volume). Conflicting or alternative narratives expressed by vulnerable minority groups are often rejected, systematically silenced, and dismissed as irrelevant, problematic, and less worthy of recognition, through what Habermas (1984) might describe as a systematic distortion of communication or propaganda. Subsequently it is these alternative communities—routinely ridiculed, harassed, and dismissed from the public realm of civil society—who then challenge and disrupt the hegemonic flow of the grand narrative of the nation state.

Foucault (1998) proposes that governments historically ruled through authoritarian or sovereign power structures, which he describes as a prohibitive form of government. By contrast, in modern democratic states such as Canada, institutions of power operate in tandem with an active civil society to normalize and reward mainstream identities through dominant social discourses. Foucault refers to this form of power as "governmentality" (Foucault 1998). Governmentality, he argues, does not usually require the use of physical coercion or force against its citizens, but instead uses a form of regulatory control that is disseminated throughout civil society and allows only limited opportunities for alternative identities to be processed on a daily level. This form of control proactively seeks to produce compliant citizens. Through a process of internalization and self-regulation of the body, social identities are socially constructed and reinforced by every tenet of civil society, and if citizens question the hegemonic social order, they are then, by definition, dissenters.

Goffman uses the term "stigma" to describe "a process through which the reaction of others spoils normal identity" (1990). He argues that people who are members of social communities may "conceal" their normal identities while they are in the public realm, by using performative front-stage impression-management techniques such as conforming to standard dress codes, using mainstream language, and engaging in compliant behavior. Goffman describes this form of impression management as "discreditable

stigma" where the audience, or other people, do not know if someone belongs to an alternative cultural group or not. However, when a person chooses to not conceal their "secret self," they may be ostracized or punished by mainstream authorities as they are performing what Goffman describes as a "discredited stigma" (1990).

## Dangerous People and Contentious Objects

During the G20 Summit Meeting weekend, people who were in the "Public Works Zone" in Toronto and exhibited signs of discredited stigma were stopped, questioned, searched, and in many cases detained by security forces. One narrator spoke about how a young French exchange student who was speaking his native tongue and wearing a black jacket was treated by security forces:

> I watched as a young man was grabbed by a large number of police, at least six, they threw him against the van, they tore his knapsack off of him, they opened it and then demanded that he show his identification. He was asking them in French what they were doing. . . . he showed his passport, he showed his visa, he was a French language student. I think that his offence was speaking with a French accent and wearing a black jacket, clearly two things that were signaling protest police that this was clearly not acceptable in Toronto that particular weekend. (Testimony E: Female)

The media attention given to the specter of the Black Bloc and its association with the student movement in France and Quebec, and the signs that (according to Monaghan and Walby 2012) protest-police training sessions instructed officers to look for (younger males wearing black, carrying bulging knapsacks and water bottles, having "radical" haircuts and other distinguishing bodywork such as tattoos and piercings), identified these symbolic bodies and adornments as characteristic of "bad" protesters and meant they were fit to be harassed and detained. Another witness said that she was detained for helping a friend erect an Indigenous Unity flag (Testimony P), which was regarded as a cultural marker of dissent by the protest police. In another case, a deaf black man was assaulted for disobeying a police command that he didn't hear, after which several racialized minority men were subsequently assaulted and detained for trying to help their friend (Testimony P).

These three examples of singling people out based on scripted body-work demonstrate that certain bodies fell outside of the "good" protester identity spectrum owing to the signifying properties of their bodies and the other symbolic objects they carried. Likewise, the social categorization of these individuals—being primarily French-speaking, collaborating with an Indigenous person, or belonging to a racialized minority contingent of the crowd—were designated by the police as forms of discredited stigma. During the G20, many people were "othered" based on their bodies or their possessions.

Perhaps one of the most notorious examples of civilian assault and detention by the Toronto protest police involved environmental activist Natalie Gray, who was known by police intelligence and identified during the meeting by the Summit security apparatus. Having been identified, Natalie was shot with rubber bullets in both the sternum and the arm while retreating from a police charge. Interviewed by *CBS News*'s Bill Gillespie, Natalie said:

> And my friend hears a cop order coming from the back shouting: "The girl with the blue hair, the girl with the blue hair." And that was when I got shot. (Gillespie 2010)

In her G20 testimony Natalie describes her observations during her detention[9] and her treatment by police officers while she was in the Detention Centre.

> I was soon brought to the makeshift prison office and interrogated by three male officers. One of them referred to me as sir, immediately after I told them my name and I preferred to be called Natalie, implying that my physical appearance didn't represent my sex. Every prisoner I spoke to experienced some sort of verbal abuse at the hands of the officers. It appears that the officers categorized and harass[ed] people according to race, gender, sexual orientation, physical capability, gender identity, presumed income and whatever else came to their minds. A person in the cell next to me was told— "you stop crying faggot." A racialized person was told ". . . we let

9. Ms. Gray has released the photo of herself to the media, so I did not conceal her identity as I did with the other G20 narrators.

you into this country and this is what you do?" A woman was told she was going to be ". . . repeatedly raped while she was in jail." After being interrogated I was led away to be strip searched. When I repeated several times that I want to speak to a lawyer before being strip searched, I was surrounded by approximately eight officers. A male officer referred to me in third person and said "I know she'll behave, because if she doesn't she knows we'll be coming in," referring to himself and several other male officers. I was strip searched by four female officers. While I was strip searched one officer threatened to cut my piercings out of my face. (Natalie Gray)

Natalie Gray's testimony describes homophobic and sexualized violence that was apparently based on her deviation from a prescribed heteronormative identity script. Her experiences are mirrored by another LGBTQ+ person, a volunteer paramedic during the G20 meetings. The paramedic's medical bag featured both a Red Cross and a rainbow symbol on it, and once in the Detention Centre he experienced homophobic comments and other forms of sexual harassment from officers.[10] A third example of masculinized violence against female-bodied protesters took place in the Detention Centre when a French Canadian female union leader was singled out as a social activist and publicly threatened with sexual assault (Testimony D).

## Weapons of Oppression

While forms of bodywork emblematic of subcultural resistance were used by Summit security forces to identity dissenters, police forces deftly used various forms of oppression to generate fear and panic among civilians. Using strategies identified with the Miami Model of protest policing, officers rushed into peaceful crowds without warning, targeting and grabbing activists identified by surveillance cameras and covert officers. The snatch squad's targets appeared to be random, something which subsequently generated panic, fear, and confusion among those in the streets that day. However, further analysis shows that target selection was among the carefully orchestrated components of strategic incapacitation used by the Toronto protest police. This was borne out in several testimonies, during which

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10. Testimony Q.

witnesses commented on how they initially believed that the targets of the snatch squads were random, but on reflection, concurred that each individual was identified by their appearance (Testimonies A, B, M, R, and Q).

As people were being preemptively detained by protest police, two legal observers during the G20 Summit Meeting reported that they did not observe a single act of violence by social activists against the police forces themselves.[11] By contrast, a particularly disturbing aspect of the protests was the police's routine use of full riot gear, and their relentless rhythmical baton banging on their riot shields, lending them an air of anonymous invincibility. This shield-drumming, reminiscent of medieval warfare, provoked fear, panic, and even some retaliation among citizens protesting the summit. One university professor recalled, "The purpose of this was to intimidate . . . to provoke a fight-or-flight instinct in people" (Testimony M).

## Conclusions

During the week running up to the Toronto G20, thousands of people peacefully protested to raise awareness of human rights issues throughout the world, especially in the Global South. Not one incident of civilian-generated violence was recorded during that week, but police nonetheless transformed the city of Toronto from a democratic open space into a tightly policed "city under siege." A hybrid model of protest policing which relied on intelligence and pre-emptive detention of activists led to protesters being punished, not for criminal activity, but for their appearance, demographic traits, and the symbolic objects that adorned their bodies. The government spent close to one billion dollars training and paying for the services of regular and privatized security officers; the outcome was that over 1,100 civilians were detained and held against their will, without any criminal charges being laid against them. While many citizens were said to have been "accidentally" picked up in the scoops that the protest police carried out, eyewitness reports suggest that they were assaulted and detained owing to symbolic assessments made by security forces.

The G20 testimonies show how social activists were systematically stereotyped, assaulted, and deterred, and that those on the receiving end of this treatment were more likely to come from certain targeted communities of social "others" classified in advance by the security forces. Constel-

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11. Testimony F.

lations of symbolic objects and performances were methodically used by police snatch squads to determine the scope for intimidation, assault, and detention of many compliant and nonviolent civilians.

Photographic evidence of what actually took place that weekend is limited: civilians, photographers, and journalists had their cameras confiscated by security forces, and the film, cameras, or both were systematically destroyed or not returned to the owners. This is why the available evidence—public testimonies, several highly publicized lawsuits, a public inquiry into the policing practices during the G20 Summit Meeting, and a class action suit against the Toronto Police Forces—has been instrumental in underpinning scholarly understanding and public awareness about how security forces operated during the events.

Racialized minorities and self-identifying LGBTQ+ people were targeted due to the physical properties and symbolic objects that rendered them identifiable, leading to their disproportionate assault, detention, and "special treatment" on the streets of Toronto, and in the Detention Centre, where they were isolated from other detainees and placed in separate cages. Natalie Gray's testimony about her assault and detention is only one among hundreds of unheard narratives of civilians, who were harassed and oppressed by G20 security forces for symbolic bodywork—such as Gray's blue hair. In symbolically deviating from the identity script expected of her, Gray was considered fit for securitization by police forces.

Though it took a decade for the truth about the Toronto G20 to be told, on August 8, 2020, the Toronto Police Forces agreed to pay $16.5 million to social activists detained during the 2010 Toronto G20 Summit Meeting in an out-of-court financial settlement. This settlement is in response to the $45 million class action suit launched by detained social activists in 2010. Murray Klippenstein, one of the lawyers who represent the social activists in the suit, said "We think that most Canadians will recognize that there really have to be limits on police actions and this is an example of how *not* to do things." In the future, the Toronto police have agreed "to do things" better—to use less coercive crowd-control techniques and to give people warnings and a chance to disperse during mega-events in the city. They have also agreed to not kettle peaceful protesters, to allow people recourse to legal counsel, to improve the conditions of detention centers, and to release people within in a few hours who have not been charged with a criminal offence (Fine 2020). This outcome means that the continuum of integrated security forces that relies on intelligence-gathering and militarized protest-policing in urban spaces, and contributed to a decade of

policing bodies using a hybrid model of strategic incapacitation at mega-event meetings, has been to some degree pushed out of Toronto. However, the disproportionate policing of minority groups and other vulnerable identities using symbolic registers much like those found at the Toronto Summit continues in Canada and around the world.

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# Bodies on Fire

## *Self-Immolation as Spectacle in Contentious Politics*

Dennis Zuev

Contention is often described as driven by mechanisms and processes, many of which involve theatrical, dramaturgical, and visually intense performances (Tilly 2008). Such acts not only include the full gamut of what is traditionally described as "collective action," but involve single-act and monological performances. Self-immolation is one such contentious performance, perhaps one of the oldest forms of contentious politics, even as old as the act of self-sacrifice ("martyrdom") itself. The flaming, self-immolating body is a symbolic object that appears to traverse borders of religious affiliation and geographic relation, gaining different symbolic meanings as it does so.

Self-immolations have been performed by people around the world, regardless of religious background, political affiliation, or ideological outlook. Many self-immolators subsequently became national icons of resistance, such as "the burning monk" Thích Quảng Đức in Vietnam and Romas Kalanta in Lithuania. In 2011, a significant wave of self-immolations was observed in Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt. Mohammed Bouazizi, who self-immolated in Tunisia, consequently became a symbol of the Jasmine Revolution(s) and antigovernment protests that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2012. While it has been recently argued that self-immolation is an act performed by the socially desperate and otherwise voiceless (Żuk and Żuk 2018), the

1960s and '70s saw it take on a novel form in contentious politics as an act performed "not out of despair but out of hope" (Cheyney 1994). By following the sociohistorical evolution of self-immolation as a contentious performance, we can observe the transformation of its meanings over time. We can thus trace the value of such individual sacrifice as a radical form of protest for collective causes, and the value, significance, and potency of the body on fire as a symbolic object in such contentious performances.

Although it is often considered an act of violence without murder (Biggs 2005), and sometimes even a mindful, meditative, or passive form of protest (Whalen-Bridge 2015), the act of self-immolation can ignite waves of riot, protest, or even revolution. Hence, understanding its performative potential and symbolic value in contentious politics is highly useful. While it is equally important to grasp the causes and outcomes of this radical performance, the elemental symbolism of fire as a pyrotechnic medium is often missing in the analysis of self-immolation. The symbolic object that is central to this performance—the "body-on-fire"—constitutes a radical transformation of the body that can, in turn, herald a call to radically transform society, or give rise to radical transformations in the broader culture of protest in its wake (Żuk and Żuk 2018). Self-immolation as a form of protest is seen differently in various sociopolitical contexts, in line with cultural and political differences in relation to (necro)politics (Makley 2015) and the moral value of the body. In some cases, the destruction of the body might represent one of the only available means through which grievances may be individually communicated on a grand scale.

Over the last 60 years, self-immolation has been a worldwide phenomenon, being seen and performed from Vietnam and South Korea to Lithuania and Tunisia. This phenomenon does not seem to be bounded by membership of any particular religious or gender category. No studies suggest that one's religion is a predictor of self-immolation: self-immolators have come from all religious backgrounds. Neither is gender understood as a causal factor, despite the higher visibility and thus greater value often afforded to male self-immolators (Cheyney 1994).

Unpicking the symbolic meanings associated with self-immolation involves understanding the body as a site[1] and indeed sight of protest, as well as a potent and radical tool for increasing the visibility of protesters' claims. Self-immolation can be used as a lens for grasping the material transformation that occurs in other pyrotechnical forms of contentious

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1. See also Zawilski, chapter 8, this volume.

performance. Indeed, fire is used in a wide variety of protest performances, such as burning of flags, draft cards, political leader effigies, books, newspapers,[2] and even Christmas trees.[3]

In this chapter, I show how self-immolation may be seen through the lens of contentious performances and symbolic objects. Self-immolating constitutes a transformative protest ritual, with the potential to spark waves of further protests and even deep social change, via the symbolic act of "dissipating the dark" and, hence, "awakening" others. The self-immolating "body on fire" created by this high-octane, "spectacular" contentious performance takes on an important role as a symbolic object in episodes and processes of contention, alongside other objects associated with the immolator in question (such as their personal accessories or instruments of immolation). This improved understanding of self-immolation and "the body on fire" contributes to our understanding of contention by focusing specifically on self-immolating bodies as both a class of symbolic objects and a contentious performance that may lend visibility to a diverse set of sociopolitical issues in tightly controlled regimes and domains.

## Theorizing the Body-on-Fire

The topic of self-immolation has seen its fair share of scholarly attention, especially among sociologists (Robbins 1986; Park 2004; Biggs 2005) and anthropologists (Andriolo 2006; Makley 2015). It has been addressed in discussions as diverse as photographic protest (Yang 2011) and the role of women in peace movements (Cheyney 1994). However, the visual aspects of self-immolation as a distinctly material kind of contentious performance—in particular, its spectacularity, visuality,[4] and physicality—remain largely unaddressed.

The notion of "spectacle," borrowed from the philosophical work of Guy Debord (1994), presents us with a way to explore self-immolation's emotional dimension and role as a means of unification. Debord suggested speaking of the "spectacle" in its own terms: "signs and the dominant system of production—signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-

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2. During the antigovernment protest in Lisbon in 2011, the simple act of burning a newspaper ignited the protesters to move up to the Parliament building and occupy the stairs (author's fieldwork observations).

3. Such as in the Greek protests of 2008 (Jepps 2008) and, more recently, the burning of Fox News's self-proclaimed "All American" Christmas tree in Manhattan, 2021.

4. A notable exception in this regard is the highly emblematic and much-discussed photograph of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in Saigon, 1963, taken by Malcolm Browne.

products of that system" (1994, 2). The notion of the "spectacle" allows us to conceptualize the act of self-immolation not simply as a monological act but as an *interactive* phenomenon (Best and Douglas 1999) in which a charismatic situation of resistance is created. Unlike when Debord was writing *Society of the Spectacle* and its follow-ups (1960s–1980s), today if a self-immolation is not publicized (or media coverage is avoided due to existing media taboos), it can still be circulated in the visual sphere of the internet. In this way, self-immolation as a communicative act can gain powerful visual potential and accumulate iconic prominence in and through waves of global protest. In this vein, this chapter contends that, as a contentious performance, self-immolation's key property is its visual potency, achieved with recourse to *both* certain performative scripts, and the symbolic objects involved in the performance—most centrally, the body on fire.

As Tilly (1986, 2008) and others have emphasized, historically speaking, participants in collective action often have limited performative options in their expressive repertoire, a "paradoxical combination of ritual and flexibility" (see also Traugott 1993). The same can be said of modern rituals of contention that have visibility as their primary goal, and that employ symbolic logic designed to convince rather than to win (Della Porta, Peterson, and Reiter 2006; Zuev 2013; see also chapter 2, this volume). Latterly, contemporary work on the visual analysis of radical politics and protest movements has focused increasingly on the spectacle of "performative violence" (Juris 2005), with intensifying clashes between protesters and police giving activists valuable symbolic resources to raise their political voices (Askanius 2013). And, as several recent works in social movement studies demonstrate, these political voices are increasingly visually articulated (McGarry et al. 2020) and draw on "visual thinking" (Mirzoeff 2020, 20).

Contentious performances such as self-immolation generate emotions. Following Jasper (2012, 25), I understand emotions as "forms of thinking, and as such [they] are a part of culture mixed together with cognitive propositions and moral principles and institutions" (Jasper 2012, 25). Our morality and cognition are saturated with emotion, and rational claims-making is thus commingled with passionate and emotional interactions such as contentious performances. In turn, while performances as methods of political expression do not necessarily carry specific demands in themselves, they may nonetheless carry some degree of individual agency (McGarry et al. 2020). Namely, contentious performances can be both outpourings and elicitations of emotion. Self-immolation performances, with their radical aesthetics of pyrotechnical spectacle, are especially potent examples.

Several scholars have suggested that self-immolation ought to be "read" as a form of suicide in terms of its agency and performance. Yang (2011), in her close visual analysis of Malcolm Browne's photograph of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức (see figure 9.1), examined how appropriations of the burning monk's image demonstrate the resonance of "about to die" moments and their potential to promote agency and civic engagement. At the same time, Jaworski (2010) offers a feminist critique of this perspective, suggesting that the suicidal act is relational, and as such never outside of discourse and power relations. Drawing on Foucault, Jaworski contends that the act of taking one's life can be seen as an act of resistance to death that performs the limits of power. Developing this approach further, Uzzell (2012) explored the biopolitical (and necropolitical) dimensions of self-immolation, suggesting that the destruction of the body during this act is a particularly powerful political act, as the death of the body undermines biopower's core conduit: the life and health of the body.

Drawing on the work outlined herein, this chapter demonstrates that self-immolation is best understood as a visual "speech-act" that is not reducible to simplistic interpretations as a suicidal act of self-negation, desperation, or even as a political call for an altruistic self-sacrifice. However, adopting a "symbolic objects in contentious politics" lens, this chapter extends these arguments by conceptualizing "the body-on-fire" as a symbolic object. In this sense, self-immolation has the capacity to speak many messages to multiple audiences, and can be conceptualized in terms of relational visibility.

This chapter proposes a set of overarching scripts of self-immolation in relation to the visual potency of the self-immolating body. While all self-immolators make some kind of symbolic statement or message, I suggest that three overarching scripts can be read from the visual and performative symbolism of the body-on-fire:

1. The most extreme form is the *suicidal script*, where the ultimate direction is unconditional, nonnegotiable self-annihilation, staged to elicit a strong emotive response from audiences. The form of visibility involved here is, in a Foucauldian sense, deeply empowering, and hence a highly symbolically loaded act. It is aimed at relations of power, as the death of the self-immolating subject is the ultimate and terminal aim.

2. The *sovereign script* aims at attaining visibility for the social grievance rather than simply the termination of life. I define "sovereign" here in similarly Foucauldian terms, as relating to the

capacity for an individual to performatively attain the power over life and death. In this case, death need not necessarily be the ultimate end of the act; rather, the transformation of the individual into the performative artifact of the flaming body symbolically represents sovereign power through the performance of their own death. In other words, sovereignty is attained through the symbolic transformation of the performer's body into a body-on-fire.

3. In *the scenographic script*, the spectacle of the self-immolating body is *invoked* through a contentious performance performed, but is *achieved* through a depiction of the act only. The spectacle of death or self-destruction is simply staged. This can be serious or playful, and staged by a variety of different actors ranging from protesters themselves to the very authorities being protested.

Needless to say, categorizing specific acts of self-immolation into these three scripts poses numerous challenges, especially in light of the divergent stories and cultural meanings associated with each such performance. Nevertheless, doing so is conceptually productive for the visual sociology of self-immolation specifically and spectacular forms of protest more generally. On an ontological level, acts of spectacular suicide and violence against the self reveal a range of insights into relationship between the body and the self, and expose the problematic agency of the body in political protest.

In the following section, I outline a range of episodes of self-immolation with respect to the three scripts listed above: suicidal, sovereign, and scenographic. Having done so, the final substantive section focuses on the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010, which, despite the lack of an immediate visual record, was nevertheless captured, reproduced, and memorialized in the form of cartoons, caricatures, stamps, and other materials. This analysis demonstrates how certain "ordinary" bodies can become symbols of heroism in contentious politics through performative sacrifice and their transformation into "bodies on fire."

## Gaining Visibility: Scripts of Self-Immolation

### The Suicidal Script

Suicidal self-immolation is often associated with East Asia, in part due to the hypervisibility and reportage of self-immolations by Buddhist monks in mid-twentieth-century Vietnam. The association is also a product of

its place in Buddhist and Hindu theology and practice, in which it is considered the highest form of religious devotion. One of the most notable references to self-immolation we can find is in the Hindu tradition of *Sati*, the practice of self-immolation by a widow on the death of her husband, meant to signify spiritual salvation for the deceased spouse. The act of self-immolation by the widow thus leads to a sacralization of the woman, and the act itself stands for the extreme expression of marital valor. Although *sati* is not an act of protest per se, but rather a religious ritual, it has a deep symbolic meaning as it allows the widow to reach a higher status and signifies an equalization of wife and husband after death.

Similarly, some Buddhist texts openly glorify self-immolation. In the twelfth chapter of the *Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra*, we find perhaps the clearest description of the sacrificial burning of the human body as a means of worship:

> Sacrificing one's own body, young man of good family, is the most distinguished, the chiefest, the best, the very best, the most sublime worship of the law. (*Saddharma Pundarika*, Kern 2012)

The act of burning the body is understood to result in supreme and perfect enlightenment, the production of a "pious merit" that, unlike the human body itself, cannot be burned by fire or swept away by water. The person who destines their body to be burned is characterized by the achievement of the highest stage of enlightenment.

However, historically it is not only Hinduism and Buddhism that valorized self-immolation as an act of worship. In sixteenth-century Russia, Russian Orthodox Raskolniks (or "Old Believers") immolated themselves on a mass scale, earning them a reputation as overzealous religious dissenters. Tens of thousands of people burned themselves, at times even whole families in their homes, or whole villages. Raskolniks' acts of suicide can be considered an expression of violent struggle aimed at defending and preserving traditional Orthodox values (such as the ritual structure of the liturgy). The dissenters' belief at the time involved the imminent coming of the "antichrist" and the end of the world, in light of which self-immolation—understood to be a purifying act—was considered the only means of salvation (Robbins 1986). In some cases, attacks on the Old Believers were deliberately provoked by the clergy to hasten confrontation and, hence, wider involvement in martyrdom. As Robbins (1986, 8) explains, the great wave of mass suicide among Raskolniks resulted from

interactions among escalating persecution, intensifying alienation, and deviant protest. Despite their spectacular acts of mass suicide and violent confrontations, the sect survived and lived on as a religious movement (Robbins 1986, 9). However, the act of protest has also lived on: Raskolnik immolations also made claims against the tsar, and so may be considered simultaneously religious and political. These bodies on fire found visual representation and memorialization in an 1882 painting by Grigoriy Myasoyedov entitled *Samoszhigately* ("self-immolators"), which is understood to be one of the first visualizations of self-immolation as a political act.

Similar to Hindu or Buddhist traditions, the mass suicide among Raskolniks was also viewed as a way to reach a higher status through the ecstatic act of collective self-immolation. Priests often led the procession, but would allegedly exit through a secret door in the church or house, and thus demonstrate the magic of rebirth through their ability to lead another batch of dissenters in the performance of self-immolation. The notions of community salvation through individual sacrifice and purification through fire are key to understanding the deep symbolism of self-immolation. Alongside the Abrahamic and South Asian faiths already mentioned, the symbolism of fire as a purifying force is also found in Zoroastrianism, an association that is important for understanding self-immolation and protest culture (and its gendered associations) in the Middle East and Central Asia (Rasool and Payton 2014). From the analysis of its roots across multifarious religious traditions, we can conclude that many of the core ideas found in modern contentious self-immolation have precursors in these form of theological ideas, symbols, and iconography.

If the preeminent representation of self-immolation in fine art is found in Grigoriy Myasoyedov's 1882 depiction of the Raskolniks, its photographic history begins with the iconic image of Thích Quảng Đức, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk photographed by Malcolm Browne in June 1963. This was the first recorded photographic image of self-immolation as an expression of protest, where the human body became a visceral contentious, political, symbolic object. Self-immolations are prepared rituals, and hence include an element of staging: at the least, a place has to be chosen, and that can have a symbolic meaning as well; often, preliminary notes or manifestos are written and disseminated, and photographers invited. The example of Thích Quảng Đức was copied during US protests against the Vietnam war by Quakers (see Cheyney 1994) and by radical youth in 1960s and '70s Eastern Europe during protests against the Soviet military (e.g., Jan Palach in 1968).

Fig. 9.1. Self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức, South Vietnam, 1963.
(Photograph by Malcolm Browne.)

In 1972, Lithuanian student Romas Kalanta left a note in his diary stating "No one is to blame for my death but political system" before self-immolating in the small town of Kaunas, a municipality that had experienced two days of the largest riots experienced in postwar Lithuania. The news of his self-immolation did not spread across the borders of the USSR, but it became an important symbol of the anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania. Nevertheless, Kalanta remained a key figure in the national "culture of protest," with annual commemorations occurring since Lithuanian independence in 1990 and a monument in his memory erected in Kaunas in 2002 (LRT 2019).

For Thích Quảng Đức, however, commemoration and memorialization have spread considerably further. Across the world, Malcom Browne's photograph of Duc's burning body has been reprinted on posters, postcards, and placards; it has been recreated as artworks, and symbolically cross-referenced in modern acts of protest. A memorial statue to Thích Quảng Đức enveloped in flames now stands in Ho Chi Minh City. The extent of its reach is demonstrated by the appropriation of Browne´s image on the cover of the eponymous album of the band Rage Against the Machine,

which sold over a million copies. The band's cropped version of the photo is used to convey the ideology of the album, inspiring a new generation of rebellious youth. The rhetorical power of the original image that documented the act was amplified through this mechanical reproduction and repackaging of its impact.

The band's modified, cropped image of the burning monk carries a slightly different message, enhanced by the dramatic font used for "rage against the machine," which mimics a ransom note by using individual letters cut from newspapers to allow the author to evade identification. The image is lifted out of its immediate sociohistorical context: in place of the meditative and mindful public-spirited self-sacrifice of the immolating monk, the album cover connotes the anarchistic rage of youth rebellion, the fire of Molotov cocktails and arson. Nevertheless, the dissemination of the image on the album cover and the associated Facebook page evoked a public memory of Thích Quảng Đức's act and reactivated its potency in a new spatial, temporal, and political context (Yang 2011).

In the history of self-immolation, relatively few performances have been captured by visual media. Staged and photographically captured performances such as the one documented by Browne in Vietnam have been rare. However, with the rising ubiquity of video and photo recording devices since the latter half of the twentieth century, documenting self-immolation is easier than ever before. For example, many of the numerous self-immolations by Tibetans over the last decade have been captured on cellphones and disseminated to members of Tibetan diaspora abroad, and subsequently circulated further.

Another publicly available image of self-immolation that follows the *suicidal script* is that of Tibetan student Jamphel Yeshi, who self-immolated in New Delhi in 2012. The act was photographed by Manish Swarup and subsequently published in *National Geographic* on November 30, 2012 (see Bartholet 2012). One of the most striking features Yeshi's immolation was the significant number of onlookers who were taking photos rather than interfering and helping to extinguish the fire.

As the replications and memorializations of bodies on fire described above illustrate, self-immolation is a potent act. Browne's photograph depicts the monk seated in a meditative posture, his body engulfed in flames. The picture of the Jamphel Yeshi depicts him running down the street, leaving a trail of fire in his wake, his face half-smiling, half trans-figured in an agony of pain. Both images hold the rhetorical power of the "about to die moment" (Zelizer 2010), yet their dissemination has been

carefully curated by the media to not disturb the public eye. The relative absence of such images in state media illustrates the tendency for the latter to limit depictions of charismatic political acts of self-destruction or death in the public visual sphere (Malkowski 2017). We may occasionally encounter images of burned bodies (such as miners or car-accident victims) and, through this observation, be able to imagine the pain of immolation (Boltanski 2005; Chouliaraki 2008).

However, contentious self-immolation achieves something even more potent. When we encounter not a burned body, but a body *on fire*, viewers are much more readily invited to transition from passive audience into active observers, able to symbolically interact with the body of a live, suffering person. Browne's image of Thích Quảng Đức, where the monk's performance is preserved by the audience and carefully guarded in order to be watched, documented, and absorbed by the foreign eye, captures the transformation of the body into a symbolic object, a visual message destined for a global audience. The self-immolator's body is not confronted or opposed, nor is anybody attempting to extinguish the fire; he is found in a serene sitting position, conveying power, belief, and detachment. In terms of the actions of the observers in the photograph, the picture of Jamphel Yeshi, the Tibetan self-immolator printed in a 2012 copy of *National Geographic*, achieves a similar effect. As Yeshi runs down the street, numerous bystanders are seen holding cameras pointed at his burning body. In terms of the depiction of political self-immolation, neither the about-to-burn nor the disfigured and burned immolated body have become the key visual representation of the act; rather, it is the body-on-fire—the "about to die" moment—that has taken center stage (Zelizer 2010). In this sense, the photographic capture of the self-immolating body has come to (re)present the suicidal script to its audience as a potent and emotive artifact of protest.

So far, I have demonstrated that political self-immolation, from its earliest meanings, has its roots in extreme forms of religious devotion, grounded in notions of public ritual and the sacrality of fire as a purifying medium. As a result of this lineage, when applied to political protest the act came already charged with radical and poignant meaning. This suicidal script renders self-immolation all the more powerful.

In the following two sections, self-immolation is viewed from the perspective of the *sovereign* and *scenographic scripts*, both of which elucidate the complexity of cultural understanding of the individual body as an agent in performance. The *sovereign script* is enacted out of desperation by Afghan and Kurdish women, and the *scenographic* self-destruction is produced by

the feminist activist group Femen. Both scripts deal specifically with women's self-immolations in which the body-on-fire can be conceived of as a pyrotechnical manifesto. In the cases discussed through these sections, it is not always true that the act of self-immolation aims for the terminal cessation of life; in some cases, it is the body-on-fire—or a scarred body—rather than immanent death that becomes the medium of contentious political symbolism.

### The Sovereign Script

The sovereign script of self-immolation involves the theatrical representation and aesthetic of self-annihilation. It may involve the death of the performer, but this is not a necessity; it can complement or replace the suicidal script. At its core, this script involves conferring sovereign power on the immolating protester. Sovereign power, according to Foucault (2003, 241), relates to the "right to take life or let live." By symbolically transforming the body into a body-on-fire, this form of contentious performance exhibits, and hence fleetingly claims, this form of power.

As Rasool and Payton (2014) have noted, self-immolation signifies different things depending on cultural context. In Afghanistan, self-immolation became a frequent "last resort" in women's nonviolent resistance against domestic violence and abusive marriage[5] (Aziz 2011). According to Lebni et al. (2019), self-immolation is a very frequent mode of suicide among women in societies such as Iran, Iraq, India, and Sri Lanka, in some cases constituting more than a quarter of all female suicides. While the authors cite a variety of motives for women's self-immolation, protest was found to be a common rationale, a method of manifesting ongoing injustices and a form of defiance—a method of breaking the silence.

Thus, oppressed women in certain societies have used self-immolation as a radical communication strategy to convey contentious political messages beyond the walls of the house, breaking a silence enforced by cultural taboos, thereby gaining greater valence for their voices. In the Afghan context the use of fire in suicide symbolizes eternal destruction or the elimination of one's legacy; hence this form of public struggle is perhaps all the more radical (Aziz 2011). Among Kurdish women, self-immolation has been similarly used to protest against diverse forms of injustice and marital

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5. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has documented a total of 103 women who set themselves on fire between March 2009 and March 2010 (Hauslohner 2010).

conflicts. In both contexts, the symbolic destruction of the body becomes a last resort for exercising sovereign subjectivity in the context of patriarchal subordination; it is a final means of attaining power and agency (Rasool and Payton 2014; Lebni et al. 2019).

As we have seen, the sovereign script involves treating the body as a tool of last resort, a means of gaining fleeting individual agency where other avenues appear to no longer be available. In the context of biopolitical domination, self-immolation gives the protester sovereign power, with the ultimate right to take life. For women living in highly repressive gender regimes, the transformation of their bodies—subjected to severe control up to the point of self-immolation—into bodies-on-fire represents a means of empowerment and agency. Moreover, these bodies-on-fire become symbolic objects in opposition to domineering patriarchal policies, practices, and figures in the family or community. The sovereign script is thus used to protest the monopoly of male authority and structural violence, as a means of moral claim-making and a symbolic and embodied form of dramatizing (dis)empowerment (Makley 2015).

### The Scenographic Script

As illustrated in the prior section, through the conceptualization of the body-on-fire as a symbolic object, its substance (a flaming body) can be extracted from its end-point (death). Hence, the performative potential of self-immolation can be "played with" on a scenographic or theatrical level. Here, the notion of the body-on-fire is invoked, often without injury to the body at all. An example of this can be seen in the protest performances of the Ukrainian feminist social movement Femen, whose aims are to fight "patriarchy in its three manifestations—sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship and religion" (BBC 2013). Femen activists use the female body as a canvas in their contentious performances through topless protest, bearing words and phrases on their torsos, and through symbolic burning. In 2011, however, Femen staged a faux-self-immolation protest against prostitution in Ukraine. Surrounded by fellow bare-skinned protesters holding placards, one demonstrator held aloft a black jerry-can with a "flammable" symbol on its side, and emptied a clear liquid over her head. Self-immolation was then further invoked, with the same protester wielding a makeshift flamethrower. In this context, the partial nudity and the act of imaginary self-immolation aim at a radical reverting of corporeal

biopolitics in which the scenographic, symbolic destruction of the body functions as an effective expressive contentious performance.

The extremeness of self-immolation is only reinforced by Femen's other form of bodily protest: the public display of topless female bodies (O'Keefe 2014). The group's mock self-immolation conveys a sense of the protesters' own strength of feeling, but also calls forth notions of the voicelessness and desperation of a broader constituency of abused women on whose behalf they are protesting. The symbolic self-immolation of a bareskinned female body invokes both the suicidal and sovereign scripts, with control of the body allegorically performed. Drawing on radical feminist repertoires of using the gendered body in contention (O'Keefe 2014), this scenographic script of self-immolation mobilizes the body as a symbolic object in order to convey multilayered narratives.

A rather different instance of the scenographic script can be observed in China, where state powers utilized the spectacular theatrics of self-immolation to denigrate and undermine Falun Gong protesters. On January 23, 2001, five Falun Gong practitioners were filmed by the Xinhua agency allegedly undertaking this radical act in Tiananmen Square; the event was subsequently narrativized in state reportage to demonstrate the violence, inhumanity, and fanaticism of the movement. Falun Gong activists gave their own response, entitled "False Fire," offering an alternative reading of what happened on that day. According to this version of events, the authorities staged the self-immolation in an attempt to taint the movement in popular opinion. In this case, the flaming bodies in Tiananmen Square became the object of meta-contention, contention over an alleged contentious performance. This case demonstrates how existing repertoires can be reversed and used against the (alleged) claim-maker to advance the political agenda of the (alleged) target of the claim, irrespective of who it was performed by or for. Either way, the government was able to utilize the scenographic script of bodies on fire to depict Falun Gong as an extremist, fanatical movement and hence depress its public support.

Beijing's Tiananmen Square is a symbolic cornerstone in China, and since 1989 has been considered its most politically sensitive area. Several notable cases of self-immolation have been attempted and performed there, the most recent being in October 2011 (BBC 2011). Since the early 2000s, fire-extinguishers have become an essential instrument of Tiananmen Square guards, who keep them close by and visible as a precautionary measure. In this way, any attempt at self-immolating protest can be quickly

Fig. 9.2. Fire extinguishers on Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China (*Credit:* Photograph © Dennis Zuev, 2008.)

dealt with, decreasing the chance of such performances being enacted in this particularly symbolically important space (see figure 9.2).

## Interactive Effects: The Case of Mohammad Bouazizi

The act of self-immolation can have unpredictable interactive effects. Nevertheless, its sheer intensity has the potential to instigate powerful societal responses, from emulative performances to waves of protest (see Biggs 2012 for a productive outline of waves of self-immolation). To exemplify the former, in 1990, Rajiv Goswami, a student at Delhi University, self-immolated in opposition to the government's enactment of the Mandal Commission recommendations. The commission had "advocated statutory provisions of reservations for people belonging to 'other backward classes—OBC' in the civil service and educational institutions run by the central and state governments in the country" (Singh et al. 1998, 71). However, many students and new graduates at the time viewed this new legislation as disproportionately disadvantaging them as a subset of the population. In the wake of Goswami's self-immolation, a swathe of students replicated the act. Bodies on fire can set countries and even regions alight with protest and revolution. In this section, I consider this potential further by focusing on the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, at the beginning of the Arab Spring.

On December 17, 2010, Mohammad Bouazizi doused himself with gasoline and set himself alight. No photographer had been organized to capture the moment, and he was not surrounded by like-minded activists

carrying placards, nor was he a leading member of a social movement. Nevertheless, the actions of the Tunisian street vendor became a crucial spark that lit the flames first of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and subsequently ignited a host of contentious activities in countries across the region.

Up to this point, self-immolation had been notably rare for men in the Muslim-majority societies of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Khosrokhavar 2012). Outside of the Kurdish community, such ritualistic suicides were essentially practiced only by women, and even then, doing so was particularly uncommon in Tunisia. Hence, in this context, Bouazizi's actions were all the more impactful. Not only did he become a popular hero and fighter for social justice (Michelsen 2015), but his flaming body became a symbolic object that represented people power, resistance to death, and even revolution itself. In the absence of photographic evidence, alternative forms of iconography stepped in to portray Bouazizi's body-on-fire, in the form of art and popular media, specifically via cartoons and drawings.

The suicide script involved in Bouazizi self-immolation represented a significant rupture with orthodox Islamic rhetoric relating to self-sacrifice and martyrdom, in which individual sacrifice was to be realized through an investment of corporeality in the collective political cause (Khosrokhavar 2012). While suicide is an act that is formally prohibited in Islam, and the flames of self-immolation has been portrayed as having negative associations with hell, this is not the case for self-sacrifice per se. On the contrary, the sacrifice of the body for the collective has been valorized to varying degrees in modern Islam[6] (Khalili 2007). However, Bouazizi's self-immolation managed to transform social perceptions of the act. Indeed, copycat self-immolations spread to Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, while "at least 107 Tunisians attempted self-immolation" in the "six months following Bouazizi's self-immolation" (Khosrokhavar 2012, 175).

Bouazizi was reportedly driven by despair arising from economic inequality and feelings of powerlessness. He was not the figurehead of a particular cause, he did not call for regime change, and his act was not staged for a particular audience, yet his public act became emblematic of secular heroism and martyrdom. In many ways, his flaming body functioned as an empty signifier, the spark of the revolutions, an artifact of the scenography of radical dissent. Significantly, in the artistic representations

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6. Naturally, Christianity also valorizes suffering and martyrdom, as do many other faiths.

of Bouazizi, it is not just his body or face that tends to be reproduced, but more his occupation and means of production: the fruit-seller's scales and the wheeled market cart. In many ways, this constellation of objects—the scales, the cart, and the body-on-fire—became props in a powerful visual display of revolutionary immolation.

Peace activist and artist Effer Lécébe created an installation at the Center of Contemporary Art in Paris paying tribute to Bouazizi. Open since January 22, 2011, the installation consisted of a simple wooden stall containing fresh fruit and vegetables, beside which lies a pile of ashes. Every day, the stall's stocks were renewed at 19.15, the time of Bouazizi's death. In the installation, there is no image of Bouazizi, just the cart, the produce, and the ashes. Together, these objects represent a symbolic complex inextricably bound up with the Tunisian Revolution. As discussed in the prior paragraphs, the iconography associated with self-immolation usually features the body-on-fire. In this piece, however, the body on fire is represented in its terminal form: a pile of ashes, which are not disposed of but stand in place of Bouazizi's immolating body, serving to activate memories and consciences in a more somber manner. There is some artistic license being taken here: in reality, Bouazizi was not incinerated in the street, but died from his burn wounds in a hospital bed. In Lécébe's installation, the ashes come to connote the transfiguration of the body, a transformation that is hoped to bring forth societal transfiguration. They speak of the symbolism of fire as an "ontological operator" (Peters 2015) and a relational medium: the ash that results from fire is in itself a potent symbol of repentance and renewal, of both destructive and constructive forces. The mythology of the Phoenix, which dies in flames but resurrects from ashes, is an archetypal motif in the installation. Unlike the image of Thích Quảng Đức, no image of Bouazizi's self-immolation has been made available in the global media. Indeed, the only post-immolation photograph available for reference is one taken when then–Tunisian president Ben Ali visited him in the hospital (Lageman 2020). In this sense, the ashes in Lécébe's installation speak of a flaming body that once stood by the grocery stall, but not of Bouazizi's true fate.

A comprehensive search for visual representations of Bouazizi's act found around two dozen images in the form of drawings, caricatures, and cartoons. These images show that the portrayals have been mixed, variously depicting Bouazizi as a hero, as self-sacrificial, or as a martyr for the cause of justice, but also as the subject of satire, dark comedy, or even deri-

sion. The wave of self-immolations that followed in the Middle East and North Africa have been subjected to similar treatment. From 2011, several political cartoonists used the motif.

In quite condemnatory tones, the Algerian newspaper *Al Watan* downplayed the associations between Bouazizi's self-immolation and any prospective self-sacrifice, choosing rather to portray the self-immolator as a ridiculous, doubtful, and infantile character. The headline of the article was "*Je brule, donc je suis*" (I burn, therefore I am), a play on Descartes's epigrammatic expression "cogito ergo sum." The cartoonist here adopted a paternalist ideological code, again infantilizing the act. Although the fire itself is intentionally left out of the cartoon, it was signified through the presence of two associated objects: a nearby jerry-can and matches. The jerry-can itself is a particularly recurrent symbolic object in performances and depictions of self-immolation, not only as a signifier of imminent death but as a container for destructive or purifying power, to be doused on the old order. Indeed, the jerry-can features as an important substitute for immolation in numerous representations of the act: in the Al-Watan caricature and in the scenographic performance by Femen activists; it even features prominently in the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức (fig. 9.1).

In contrast with al-Watan's depiction, other cartoonists opted to amplify the contentious political character of Bouazizi's immolation. Emad Hajjaj's[7] depiction portrays Bouazizi as a moving body-on-fire, ramming the throne of the despot with his proverbial fruit cart, carrying his fruit scales—now scales of justice—in his hand (see fig. 9.3). The act of self-burning by a powerless street vendor is depicted as a conscious act of contestation and a symbolic clash with the authorities. In another cartoon by Hajjaj, a candle burning on a wooden cart is placed beside the torch of the Statue of Liberty, with the figure of a man burning at its core. Here, notions of liberty and liberation are connected to self-sacrifice, Bouazizi, and the mediating role of the "human torch."

## Conclusion

Tightly linked to self-immolation performances, the body-on-fire has the capacity to be an exceptionally powerful and potent object in contention. I have outlined three "scripts" for self-immolation performances that impute

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7. Emad Hajjaj is a Ramallah-born political cartoonist (see Hajjaj 2022).
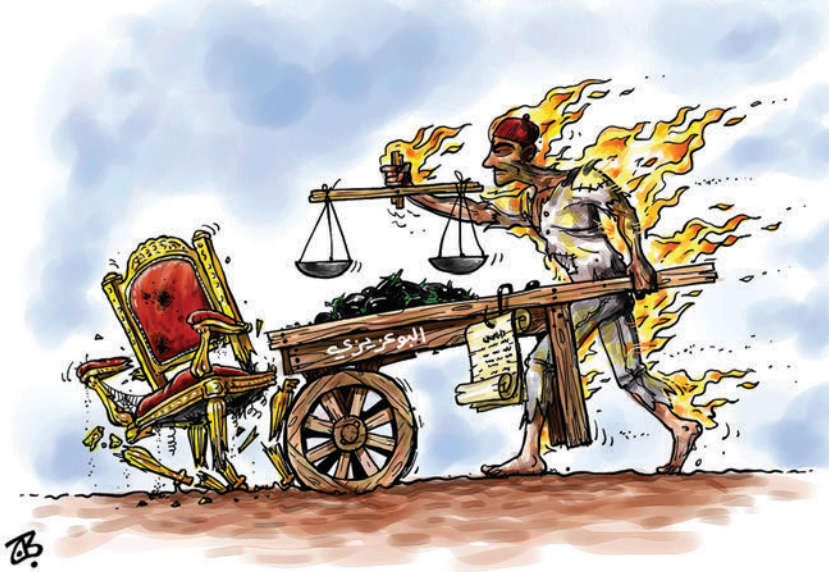
Fig. 9.3. Cartoon depiction of Mohamed Bouazizi
(*Credit:* © Emad Hajjaj, 2011.)

meaning to the body-on-fire and its representations: a suicidal script, a sovereign script, and a scenographic script. These are by their nature not discrete categories, but overlapping, layered aspects of self-immolation performances. Self-immolation is a spectacular form of protest ritual that can be utilized with almost no limit to the range of protest agendas, from personal grievance to the sacrifice for a nationalist or ethnic cause.

Overall, the appearance of the self-immolating body—both physically at the point of immolation and subsequently in its representation and memorialization—has the potential to draw stark attention to an issue or set of issues. It is powerfully affective, evoking a sense of horror, terror, and alarm, and generating strong reactions among its viewers. The body-on-fire is thus a powerful contentious object that can reshape public discourses, detonate waves of contention, and even communicate messages across generations and cultures. Wherever bodies-on-fire appear, their potency is immediate and lasting.

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# The Legacy of Symbolic Objects

# El Che

## *The (Im)possibilities of a Political Symbol*[1]

### Eric Selbin

At some point it became impossible to write about Che Guevara; that this is trite does not make it less true. We can quibble about the date, but that is a small matter; what matters is that at some point, perhaps as early as his 1967 death and almost certainly by the early 1970s, "El Che" was more a legend than a person—mythic, maybe a parable. If he said to his killers "You're only killing a man," a statement and phrasing that seem unlikely on an array of levels,[2] it captures something (if far from everything) about who he had become and what he was becoming, the symbol par excellence, the archetype, of the modern revolutionary. Sartre's (in)famous remark soon after Guevara's death, that he was "the most complete human being of our age" (Sinclair 2006), seemed faintly ridiculous then and more so now, but it foreshadowed the hagiography and inevitable reactive demonization (see, e.g., Humberto 2007) to come.

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1. My thanks to Helen Cordes and Robert Snyder for their advice and counsel. For Daniel Castro, *¡presente!*

2. It is worth noting how many things about Guevara are difficult to pin down with anything approaching academic accuracy or certainty. Does it matter? I am guided here by Steffens's quip about an exchange between British PM Lloyd George and Italy's Duce, Benito Mussolini: "Authentic? I don't know . . . Like so many rumors, it was truer than the records . . . but somebody said it, somebody who understood what it was all about" (Steffens 1931, 809). The White Queen's riposte to Alice's caution that "one can't believe impossible things" seems apt: "sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast" (Carroll 1946, 76).

To paraphrase a clever riff, writing about Che "is like dancing about architecture," a nearly senseless, even absurd exercise.[3] As a remarkably universal symbol, he—or his spirit or incarnation—is pervasive, "the inescapable symbol of everything that dreamers think a revolutionary should be" (Donovan 2020). The bibliography on Che rivals the photographic compilations; if you add in fiction, film, plays, art, fashion, and more, it is daunting. Perhaps this is apt for a self-imagined contemporary Quixote (his final letter to his parents notes that he feels "beneath my heels the ribs of Rocinante"; Guevara 2002a, 176),[4] whose most famous quote declaims "at the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality" (Guevara 2002b, 169), and who is said to have said, "be realistic, demand the impossible!"[5] While still alive, the improbability of Che's presence in the many places he was said to have been prefigures what followed his murder—freed from earthly constraints, he became omnipresent.

The symbols of revolution and related matters are global, regional, and local, even microlocal, freighted with meaning and significance, their employment and deployment consequential. For over fifty years there has been no symbol more associated with revolution than Ernesto "Che" Guevara, most commonly in Korda's famous picture (or others), sometimes his beret, often simply his name. Rarely has a single symbol been so universal and imbued with so much meaning in so many places at so many times. Revolution's most ubiquitous figure, Che, long past his "death," has been invoked everywhere people struggle, and "spotted" in various parts of Africa, Latin America, around the Mediterranean, and in Southeast Asia, Nepal, Palestine, and Quebec. In Casey's formulation he became "the quintessential postmodern icon signifying anything to anyone and everything to everyone" (Casey 2009, 133).[6] His presence is pervasive—on

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3. The phrase "writing about music is like dancing about architecture" has been credited to some half-dozen people, but it seems to originate with Martin Mull (O'Toole 2010); see also Portman (2018), who makes a similar point: "The message is that writing about music is a pointless exercise, an absurd thing to try to do. . . . That would be as stupid as . . . dancing about architecture."

4. Perhaps the most famous song associated with the musical version of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, "The Man of La Mancha," is "The Impossible Dream" (1965). The focus of the lyrics, on a quest to right wrongs against impossible odds no matter what, resonates almost painfully with Guevara's pursuit, though it is impossible to know if Guevara ever heard them.

5. Another somewhat unlikely phrase and another difficult-to-locate quotation.

6. Vargas Llosa (2005) argues that Che's actual quintessence is as a "capitalist brand. His

T-shirts, selling beer and bikinis, sodas and socks. He is imitated in commercials by humans and animals. The 2012 Mercedes-Benz advertisement at a Las Vegas, USA, car show that replaced the star on Che's beret with their logo seems a moment. If this risks rendering him an empty signifier (mostly in the Global North), his global presence remains profound, a specter, as it were, that haunts us still.

Che's global presence, the (im)possibility he is meant to embody, is not really about an actually existing human being who lived and died. As a result, what follows is not a biography, of which there are many (Anderson 1997; Castañeda 1997; Taibo II 1997 are particularly notable), nor is it either an appreciation or an excoriation, both of which abound. Rather, it is a mediation on Che Guevara as an object, a symbol, perhaps most intriguingly but complexly, a palimpsest. We can disavow Che's putative claim to be "only . . . a man," which he most assuredly was—an object in space and time—and construe and consider Che as a demand, a claim, a symbol. This is not a petition for some sort of gnostic or mystic Che,[7] whose intricacies and understanding elude us as mere mortals. It is, rather, an effort to think through what the symbol of El Che became and becomes for so many in so many places, so widely, seemingly universally recognized.

For some two decades,[8] contentious politics has helped theorize and explore claims for change made on, of, and from the sociopolitical and economic order; the resultant literature is legion. Symbolic politics encompasses a perhaps even more expansive range beyond the scope of this essay,[9] but symbolic objects, as defined by the editors, are those that may hold symbolic value in contentious political action. Importantly, they are not "simply" (there is nothing "simple" about them) symbols, but neither are they "merely" objects; there must be a symbolic value attached to them. As such an object, El Che represents, reflects, at times refracts, resistance, col-

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likeness adorns mugs, hoodies, lighters, key chains, wallets, baseball caps, toques, bandannas, tank tops, club shirts, couture bags, denim jeans, herbal tea, and of course those omnipresent T-shirts." There is, he continues, "even a soap powder with the slogan 'Che washes whiter.'"

7. Some cast him as a saint; see, in particular Passariello (2005). Some scholars frame him as a "popular saint," including Kruijt (2017), who elsewhere casts him as a "civil saint" (2008, 89; Kruijt, Tristán, and Álvarez, 2019, 4). Interestingly, Kruijt (2017) notes in another place that it is "a term coined by García Marquez and used by Taibo to portray Che's status as a revolutionary hero."

8. I am dating this from McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (1996), though it might be reasonably dated from McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001). The literature of contentious politics is vast.

9. As I have argued elsewhere (Selbin 1997, 118), symbolic politics, collective memory, and the social context of politics are critical to understanding and exploring revolutionary processes.

lective action driven by the individuals within such a collectivity, and a people (primarily the dispossessed and disenfranchised, but all who struggle against the systems and institutions and the odds). El Che has become—and is always becoming—a narrative, even more a story (a distinction returned to below), and for some who do not even "know" or "understand" why, a proclamation, a declaration, an assertion: We.Are.Here. In this sense perhaps more than any other, El Che is a tool, a weapon, for collective action and contentious politics.

Neither as a person nor as an object has Che been static in meanings or associations. Rather, particularly as an object, Che has been continuously reincarnated as people around the world produce and reproduce El Che as a social and public symbol, imbuing El Che with new meanings even as they may reanimate the old. El Che thus represents a space and a place the very fluidity of which (on the sinuosity of Che, see Selbin 1997, 87), meaning so much to so many in such numerous ways, makes it hard to isolate and locate. This is in part because El Che has come to exist to a large extent outside of any explicitly political institutions or even systems,[10] residing, as it were, in the places and spaces of not just popular politics but popular culture and society, i.e., the sphere of cultural contention. Indeed, it is in these surprisingly tangible, actually existing (albeit simultaneously ephemeral and even ethereal) worlds that El Che survives, informs, even acts on us (as we in turn act on El Che).

This is not to posit some small, international cohort of radicals sharing whatever remains of Guevaraism, if there ever was such a thing. Rather, it is to suggest that we can identify (to the extent possible; it is not possible to be aware of it all) the overlapping commitments, passions, interests, and actions that facilitate the creation of spaces and places of exchange and collaboration (which seems to suggest an intentionality and consciousness I am not sure exists). To borrow and twist a bit from Tsing (2004, xi), these are zones of awkward engagement, awkward here in the sense of not always and maybe even rarely fitting neatly together even as they share a touchstone, El Che. The ceaseless recuperation, reformulation, and reformation of El Che can almost serve as a link not only between and among radical organizations and groups (and, being almost exclusively on the left, inevitable splinters), but for scholars seeking to trace and map connections, particularly within one's own or related legible historical framework(s). El Che as a symbol can work not just backward and forward in time, but

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10. El Che remains highly visible in Cuba; his import is less clear.

alongside (that is, in the moment) and from underneath and inside (animating people's feelings) in ways that sometimes seem outside of academic or Global North "logical" understanding.

Suspicious of models predicated on trees—roots, a trunk, branches—and engaging with a case that contains multiplicities, as noted, so many things to so many people across many different places through such different times—how best to proceed? To the extent that there is a framework through which we might unpack El Che here, it is one wherein contentious politics and symbolic objects undergird or perhaps pull through this chapter (inevitably conditioned by what we bring to it) that is populated by a snapshot of people's use of and engagement with a symbol, El Che. The goal here is the creation of an entangled, figurative zone of awkward engagements in an effort to open a moment, relationships where we exchange thoughts and ideas as they multiply; this then is also Tsing's "friction," "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (2004, 4). The space we create here together is mobile, permeable, operable by anyone with a passing command of English (a serious, very nearly irredeemable limitation), and fraught; this space is not immutable, not invulnerable to the depredations and degradations inherent in the world extant, and it is easily dismissed. But this should be a place to meet and to continue, with no beginning or end, a multilogue. This matters because we live in our small worlds that constitute our daily lives; we respond to what is around us, read the room and ourselves, and exist in a world that is often inimical to our interests and desires, and that as a result we often seek to change or at least think about seeking to change. And to seek change we need inspiration, we need sustenance, we need aspirations, and we seek symbols to carry us along. Symbolic objects stir sentiments within us that feed, even fire, our imaginations; thus inspired, this can lead to the creation and initiation of situations—discussions, meetings, and organizing—and from such situations resistance, protests, rebellion, and even revolution may flow.

### What Becomes a Legend Most: A Brief Biographical Interlude

A throwaway line at the end of the 1962 US Western film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* has since become a trope: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Separating the "fact" and "fiction"—the content of which is far more closely related than most care to consider—about Ernesto "Che" Guevara is nearly impossible at this point. Still, it seems

important to say something about Che the human being before turning to Che the symbolic object. Few of our lives are simple; our actual lived experiences are complicated and chaotic, all held together by the stories we tell. People are storytellers, and our stories define us, albeit inevitably cleaned up by our narration and perhaps inescapably made more compelling. Few have a more compelling story, certainly as it is most commonly narrated, than the actual existing Che Guevara. The necessarily brief profile here will please no one; consider it a nod to a human being who lived and died.[11]

Che was complex and complicated, as most of us are, and a far from perfect person. An "obstinate and prodigal" son (Guevara, 2002a, 177), a sibling, a friend, a husband, a father, a doctor, a revolutionary, an author, a (less-than-stellar) military strategist, a (mediocre) government minister—all were marked by a vocation and passion for social justice that was not always generous, could be dogmatic, and at times led to mistakes and injustices. In his relentless pursuit of social justice, while still alive, he became the modern avatar of a radical, updating Lenin's example of a disciplined, self-denying, self-sacrificing revolutionary, not least with the added and perhaps telling inclusion of emotion, famously proclaiming, as noted above, "that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love" (Guevara 2002b, 169).[12] For billions around the world, he came to literally and figuratively embody revolution.

Modern revolution's most mythic character was an asthmatic Argentine doctor in search of adventure who found himself in the inspiring and dramatic last six months of Guatemala's 1944–54 democratic experiment, having been radicalized by its US-stage-managed overthrow. He fled to Mexico, where he encountered and worked with radicals of various stripes and auspiciously connected with some exiled Cubans and, somewhat inexplicably, became one of the leaders of the Cuban Revolution. A dutiful if unfulfilling stint in government prompted a journey to the Congo with visions of aiding revolutionary forces battling imperialism there. With the failure of that ill-fated mission, Che decamped to Bolivia with visions of fomenting continental revolution, and there he died at the hands of those

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11. There is a surfeit, perhaps even a glut, of readily available biographies covering most every conceivable angle. The thirtieth anniversary of Guevara's murder brought forth a wealth of such books and articles; see, in particular, Anderson (1997), Castañeda (1997), and Taibo II (1997).

12. See also his relating to his children that a revolutionary's most "beautiful quality" is the ability "[to feel] any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world" (Guevara 1987, 31)

who believed his efforts to sow revolution local and global must end. As previously noted, before he left Cuba, this peripatetic figure wrote his parents, perhaps oddly (in several senses) invoking Don Quixote's noble quest for places to right wrongs. He could not have imagined how, after his death, he seems to have visited and been part of the struggle in many more places, an omnipresence that renders him almost commonplace.

And yet it is the case that no one embodies the romantic revolutionary figure like Che; Löwy's nearly fifty-year-old prescient conceit is no less accurate: "romantic adventurer, Red Robin Hood, the Don Quixote of communism, the new Garibaldi, the Marxist Saint-Just, the Cid Campeador of the wretched of the earth, the Sir Galahad of the Beggars, the secular Christ, the San Ernesto de la Higuera revered by the Bolivian peasants" (1973, 7). It would be a tall order for any mere mortal, but by then Guevara's transition was transcending mere mortality. As Richard Gott, the British journalist asked to identify Che's body, wrote the next day, "he is now dead, but it is difficult to feel that his ideas will die with him" (1967). Could he have imagined?

## El Che: A Not-So-Obscure Object of Desire

If El Che as an object is hardly obscure (unless we mean obscurity in the sense of being difficult to understand), El Che clearly seems to function as an object of desire, perhaps even desire armed, at least in a figurative if not literal sense,[13] though the world of Che wannabes has often featured plenty of weapons. Certainly, El Che as a *consigna*,[14] an artifact, or a multiplicity infused, suffused with meaning as an object as well as a subject of desire. In that object, whatever its form, resides much promise and potential, myriad (im)possibilities.

Exactly when Che emerged in the global consciousness is relatively easy to box in, with his death in 1967 as a sort of pivot point; pinning it down exactly seems fruitless and unhelpful. But El Che as a symbolic object is more challenging. Symbolic objects are imbued with meaning. Woven together in often daring and defiant acts of bricolage, the very existence of such symbolic objects offers the opportunity to understand how and

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13. While Che obviously used weapons, he is not particularly associated with them. That said, he clearly believed that theory and belief were a weapon, a tool with which to arm oneself.

14. *Consigna* does not translate neatly into to English, but might be usefully thought of as a guiding principle or motto.

why people act in concert to seek to challenge and change the material and ideological conditions of their everyday lives. The symbolic object reflects a concatenation of significance, ritual, and everyday informal aspects. This presents a formidable array of problems for those interested in explicating and exploring. This is exacerbated by our propensity for pulling matters onto one's own turf and relying on one's own tools and terms to "make sense of," to in some sense translate, the matter(s) at hand.

There are few more obvious examples of such a conundrum then the surfeit of cross-cultural/multicultural renderings of Che Guevara, whose iconic, pop-star status remains resilient, albeit farther removed from the actual person. El Che the symbolic object, on the other hand, seems to not only continue to grow, but to grow and spread rhizomatically, an image Caspari (2013) describes as largely "torn out of its historical, social and political context . . . a symbol of rebellion against mainstream society . . . the original connotations . . . forgotten." If an exact meaning is elusive and arguably irrelevant, it seems possible to trace out a set of "meanings," with all the problems inherent in that word, these words, and this formulation.

For the purposes of this chapter, the assumption is that El Che is a symbolic object invoked around the world against the state, institutions, and structures that dominate and oppress people, and in favor of equality, for justice, for human rights, for the people, whose struggle, in this construction, Che made his own. You need look no further than to El Che's global ubiquity, as recent appearances in protests for democracy in Bolivia and Hong Kong, Black Lives Matter (#BLM), and Defund the Police protests in the United States, and anticorruption protests in Israel and Lebanon serve to remind us. Moreover, El Che serves as a kind of shorthand for some kind of signifier of commitment, of authenticity, of a legitimacy and thus a kind of authority that summoning (a word not used lightly) El Che connotes. Betwixt and between all of this is a notion that people make their own history,[15] and are the agents of their lives. The location and invocation of El Che offers an array of people the illusion of categorization and hence control; only those of us invoking El Che know what that represents and why it matters.

El Che is thus a supersignifier. The "super" prefix is not meant to imply the exaggerated, hyperbolic aspects of the symbolic object, but to reflect El Che's place as, to borrow a trope, a symbolic object for all seasons. Indeed,

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15. If not, in Marx's salutary reminder, under the conditions of their own choosing (1978, 594)

his image on a T-shirt, flag, or other objects suffices. El Che remains "true" to a certain sentiment or imagining and is adaptable to the extant conditions and exigencies—to draw on the examples just discussed, a democracy supporter, a Black Lives Matter advocate, an anticorruption activist. None of these connections are necessarily intuitive, and they may even be far-flung from the issues that Guevara actually dealt with. Rather, they speak of El Che as mutable, malleable, even porous, a symbol to be claimed and hence contested. Unavoidably—and consequently—this requires cultural re-editing[16]—that is, one culture's incorporation of another's symbol as its own. While one often encounters, as here, claims of El Che's universality, it is also true that his story and even his narrative are deeply rooted in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Global South. This offers scholars an opportunity in terms of comparison and finding a familiar (and, hence, "useful") story, but it also presents a formidable array of problems.

For a symbolic object that is, at least in this case, multiplicitous, any notion of a single-entry point for study is illusory. But as with a star chart, the constellation of explanations is a place to begin. Tsing's concepts of "zones of awkward engagement" and "friction" have been mentioned; another possible tool is the traditional Celtic concept of "thin places," where distance between what we might construe as the "physical" world and a more "spiritual" world is more permeable.[17] Words may fail, matters may become simultaneously clearer and more confused, seemingly impossible to articulate but no less "real," and even (deeply) meaningful. All of these might be subsumed under the notion of entanglement, derived from entangled histories that recognize what Gould (2007, 766) describes as the "'mutual influencing,' 'reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions,' and the intertwined 'processes of constituting one another.'"[18] Indeed, Bauck and Meier (2015) suggest that Werner and Zimmer's (2002) concept of *histoire croisée*, which Gould draws on, "reflects the entanglement between observer, angle and object" (Bauck and Maier, 2015). As suggested earlier, this is the sort of approach that allows for the exploration of symbolic

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16. A term borrowed with a bit of a twist from Geertz (2000, 23).

17. The concept of "thin places" seems to be an ancient one; in more recent times it is most commonly associated with Celtic spirituality. I am guided by Healy-Musson's formulation of thin places as "stand[ing] for points at which different belief systems, creative traditions, philosophies, narratives, experiences, scientific world views and historical perspectives overlap," thereby creating "an expanded sense of place and new modes of environmental knowing" (2020, 93).

18. Gould (2007, 766n10) notes that "entangled history is an inexact translation of (and slight variation on) *histoire croisée*" and lays out in detail what she is drawing on.

objects and resonates with Younes Saramifar's allusions in this volume to "stickiness" (90–94) as well as John Nagle's notion of a "social life" marked by objects, people, and places (131).

Another approach is to consider a symbolic object such as El Che as part of a global radical imaginary. Drawing on Anderson (1991), Castoriadis (1998), and Taylor (2004), imaginaries capture the real ways in which real people imagine, that is, create the worlds they live in. "Imaginaries" of various types—social, cultural, technological, psychological, and more—prioritize human agency, collective action, ideology, cultural matters, and what might be called the "narrative turn."[19] Reflecting people's creation of an understanding, a sense, of their lives and the meaning of their existence (Castoriadis 1998), imaginaries generate a narrative that defines "reality" and binds them together. Imaginaries are socially and collectively constructed by people in the acts of bricolage referred to earlier, wherein symbols, songs, tales, rituals, dates, places, memories, and more are woven together into a sort of legible, working narrative (Selbin, 2010, 75–76), a story of who and what they are, how they came to be, and what they do and will.[20] As a symbolic object that can be employed and deployed in pursuit of changing the material and ideological conditions of their everyday lives, making claims on the state and elites, El Che serves as rhizome of respect, radicalism, and on occasion, revolution; it also provides capacity.

Taken together, the (overly) broad notions of entanglement and imaginaries give us entrée to where El Che becomes part of repertoires of contention. Entanglement—reflecting mutuality, reciprocity, and common composition—gives us access to a place and space where people share the imaginaries that reflect the lived realities they draw on to construct their worlds. Thus it is that the material and ideological conditions of their everyday lives become one for them, deeper, richer, and more full of meaning that they themselves manufacture.

In the face of often hostile circumstances, El Che symbolizes a clear and

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19. If these imaginaries are imagined (Anderson 1991), they are not imaginary. People use their creativity, verve, and élan to generate, create, maintain, and extend their world. These worlds are problematic for interlopers to access, and it is imperative that we not overwrite them with *our* images in our narrative(s).

20. Similarly, Prestholdt (2012, 508–9) explores Che's symbolic appeal to 1960s–1970s leftists via the notion of a "transnational imagination," "a mode of perception that frames local circumstances in a world historical trajectory and thereby affects collective aspirations and actions." In Prestholdt's (2012, 526) analysis, Che's most important legacy is not "as a guerrilla tactician or a popular T-shirt design, but as a perennial symbol for alternative social and political possibilities."

bold claim that "better must come" (Wilson 1971; see Selbin 2009n2). In whatever form(s) he takes—pictures, graffiti, singing or chanting, bestowing his spirit on another—El Che symbolizes a popular contentious politics, one in which people are, or may become, more deeply entangled.

### ¡Hasta La Victoria Siempre!

While the human Che was known for few accoutrements, he shares with mythic El Che certain markers: the beret, the hair, the stoic, resolute, hopeful look into the future. The most common versions of this symbolic object are the pictures, the name, and the reference, as in when someone or something is referred to as "the Che Guevara of _____." The pictures and name are so common as to be stipulated, but merit mention here. Che was spotted long past his death in nearly every corner of the world; the stories go on and on. Martin Guevara once remarked that his brother was "like the white horse of Zapata. He is everywhere" (quoted in Ryan 1998, 36). The "Che Guevara of" formulation is simultaneously more problematic and more prophetic and powerful and worthy of more reflection; it is here that the symbolic object is, as it were, returned to the flesh. While Che is not present, El Che is, embodied by an actually existing person who can be present, can show up, can represent the struggle or matter at hand.

### Pictures of Che

From his earliest days as he fashioned himself into what would become El Che, Che proved photogenic; the camera, as they say, loved him, and if he did not love the camera, they certainly were very close. What is most important for our purposes is less the stories of the photos than their role as a symbolic object. Often referred to as the most famous photograph in the world, Alberto Korda's *Guerrillero Heroico* (Heroic Guerrilla Warrior) was published in *Paris Match* in August 1967, two months before his murder. It is certainly one of the most iconic; art historian Jonathan Green argues that "Korda's image has worked its way into languages around the world. It has become a hieroglyph, an instant symbol. It mysteriously reappears whenever there's a conflict. There isn't anything else in history that serves in this way" (Lotz 2006). If the timing meant that the picture was initially associated with martyrdom, it quickly became associated with more: hopes, dreams, desires for a better future, and struggles for a better world. Pic-

tures of El Che on all manner of things became talismans, positions, and perspectives, a universal icon and also a statement and a claim.

The pictures can appear on bandanas, keychains, bathing suits, skis, album covers, mugs and glasses, posters, clocks, berets, cigarette packs, advertisements, wristwatches, lighters and ashtrays, tattoos on the renowned (Angelina Jolie, Diego Maradonna, Mike Tyson) and not-so-renowned, and most famously the T-shirts. Sometimes these are used consciously and intentionally, as with Mexican students identifying each other with Che lighters in 1968 or the Che T-shirts appearing in revolutionary Tehran 1979.[21] More often, the message to be conveyed seems to be some vague brand of radicalism, commitment, and, inevitably, cool. As Cambre (2012, 84) points out, the "media vary as do the times, places, and contexts where everyday people occupy and find themselves interpellated by some rendering of Che Guevara's face that recalls the Korda photo." Her concern is whether "these disparate figurations of Che's image be brought into conversation with each other without arbitrarily reducing them" (Cambre 2012, 84). They can. Indeed, failing to appreciate that these are, intentional or not, forms of activism, misses what matters: this is a symbol with meaning. Cambre invokes Gell to cleverly capture what is key: it "is a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated" (Gell 1998, 68; cited in Cambre 2012, 102). While it is set, it has also proved timeless; as Charlton (2006, 7) points out, "possibly more than the Mona Lisa, more than images of Christ, more than comparable icons such as The Beatles or Monroe, Che's image has continued to hold the imagination of generation after generation." This image, the picture, the myriad pictures of El Che, speak and act, are read and heard, and are widely understood.[22]

## Say His Name

While pictures of El Che proliferate (and mutate) they are in some sense mirrored by scrawls, scribbles, graffiti ("Viva Che," "Che," and "El Che"),

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21. Conversely, the Colombian government relied at one point on Che T-shirts to help them fool a group of the country's long-running FARC revolutionary guerrilla insurgency holding hostages (see CNN 2008).

22. Besides Cambre's intriguing semiotic analyses (2012, 2015), Casey (2009) provides a one-stop shop with regard to the famous photo and "afterlife" of Che's image; see also Ziff (2006). Ziff (2006, 104) quotes Villarreal's reminder that "the famous image is not venerated by all. It has also been aged, laughed about, parodied, insulted, and distorted around the world. . . . It has literally been transformed into one of the worst symbols . . ."

and the shout of his name. In Carte's (2008) compelling analysis of Che as a classic "trickster" figure as well as "cultural hero," she like others frames Che as a "cultural object." Carte (2008, 182n15) specifically draws on Griswold (1994, 11) who describes them as "a socially mindful expression that is audible, or visible, or tangible, or can be articulated"; such objects, Griswold continues, "may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body." I would add to this list "said" or "shouted"; *¡Viva Che!* has literally been heard almost everywhere.[23] In Mattern's (1998) felicitous formulation, people "acting in concert" use sound and song to demonstrate their concerns, cares, grievances, and vision(s) of the world they live in and the dreams and desires of the world they wish for; as Cordes and I have argued elsewhere, such actions empower people physically and mentally (Cordes and Selbin 2019, 20).

Our contention is that it is critical to understand vocalization, primarily song and singing—how, where, and when people use their voices to organize, heal, express their aspirations and emotions, and more (Cordes and Selbin 2019). The invocation of El Che—as a chant, as graffiti, as spoken words—empowers people, connects them, enables them to unify and both inspire and be inspired. If in the Global North in particular the vernacular of El Che has often been one of "things," the sorts of consumer goods adumbrated above, all around the world El Che has existed as a phrase, a *consigna* (slogan) meant to convey much; it is the word. For the Bemba people, "the organ of truth is the ear. The criteria of truth the words of others" (Maxwell 1983, 11). While this raises a number of matters beyond our scope here, it reminds us that it is not just that we imbue words with significance, but it is also significant how they are heard, and hence who says them, and how. Across a wide range of circumstances in a remarkable array of places and among a surprising number of people, saying or scribbling "Che" resonates and reverberates. If the message behind these declamations varies—from water-tariff protesters on St. Helena to Algerians or Nepalese demanding democracy to antigovernment protesters in Yemen—the underlying meaning and substance do not: we speak to be seen and counted, in our voices we make claims both on you and for us: we are here and we are not alone.

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23. There are innumerable examples of people marching and chanting (among other slogans) "¡Che Vive, Viva Che!" throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and in other languages all around the world. On the global reach, see Sommier, Hayes, and Ollitrault (2019, 66–67).

The Che Guevara of . . .

If these first two examples, of images and the name, are so common-place that cynics and critics may argue they are nearly meaningless, this last instance reminds us that it is not: the consistency and frequency with which people, politicians, academics, and others refer to a person (or, less commonly, a thing) as "the Che Guevara of . . ." with a meaning that is both widely transparent and meant to convey import and (by and large) *gravitas*. Literally hundreds of examples are readily found, ranging from the microlocal to the most global. What virtually all occurrences share is an instant flash of recognition, an immediate sense of what the comparison is meant to imply: this person (or thing) is to be taken seriously, is someone of substance, commitment, and passion, a voice to be reckoned with.

Hundreds of examples are easy to find in media of every stripe, and no doubt thousands more are not formally recorded.[24] "The Che Guevara of . . ." has been cast back at least as far as Spartacus, who led a several-year slave revolt in 71–73 BCE Rome (almost 2000 years later, Haiti's Toussaint Louverture would be referred to as the "Black Spartacus"). Recently Edward Leung has been called "the Che Guevara of Hong Kong," and "the Muslim Che Guevara" is Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard leader Qasem Soleimani, assassinated by the US in January 2020. Although I recognize the problems inherent in reading history backward, a common antecedent is Giuseppe Garibaldi, one of the first international (and great romantic) revolutionaries, the Che Guevara of the nineteenth century, who fought for Brazilian and Uruguayan independence, and participated in several of the 1848 revolutions in regions that would eventually unite as Italy, a struggle he participated in for the rest of his life. Other precursors include the Brazilian Antônio Conselheiro; various leaders during the era of the Mexican Revolution, but in particular Emiliano Zapata; Nicaragua's Augusto Sandino; Luis Prestes, another Brazilian; and Che's contemporary, the Costa Rican José "Pepe" Figueres. More contemporaneous are figures such as Brazil's Carlos Marighela, Niger's Mamani Abdoulaye, and East Timor's Xanana Gusmãoin. The Cape Verdean Amilcar Cabral was dubbed "the Che Guevara of Black Africa," as were the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Pierre Mulele, Mozambique's Samora Machel, and Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso. Across India the Naxalite Arikkad

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24. To offer but two examples I have encountered, in Barrio Sutiava in León, Nicaragua, a woman described the Leónese Comandante Omar Cabezas as "*nuestro Che*," and in Gouyave, Grenada, a woman I was interviewing told me about the country's "Rasta Che," Ras Nang.

Varghese (Kerala), fellow Naxal Sabyasachi Panda (Odisha), Thirumava-lavan ("of the Dalits"), George Reddy ("Andhra Pradesh"), and K Chandrasekhar Rao (Telangana) have all been described thus. Various 1970s- and 1980s-era Central American revolutionaries were anointed as well. During the so-called "Arab Spring," some suggested that the internet was the Che Guevara of the twenty-first century.[25]

   This is not to suggest that such invocations are always serious—there are Che references to tech entrepreneurs, athletes, financiers, bicyclists, musicians, cars (the Toyota Prius), and "the Che Guevara of the Hollywood subelite, Tony Randall" (Fish 2011, 222)—or to ignore efforts to besmirch (Osama Bin Laden) or belittle (Vladimir Putin as "the Che Guevara of the Right"). Yet the assumption is that people will recognize the reference and interpolate the meaning(s). All of these allusions testify to the symbolism and meaning of El Che. Rather than becoming an empty signifier, El Che has become some sort of supersignifier, legible to billions, mostly an inspiration and aspiration (if on occasion the devil's handyman) that people wish to be associated with, whether or not they know much about him. What is clear is that the symbolic object matters. Borrowing and broadening it from Larson and Lizardo, whose focus is primarily on current radical movements associated with global economic justice, El Che "appears to function as a powerful mnemonic symbol and powerful galvanizing force" (2007, 426). When people want to lend significance, meaning, and get people's attention, they say "the Che Guevara of . . ."

## Como El Che

As soon as we write something down or tell a story, we organize our thoughts and feelings into lines of words, we begin to betray the truth, whatever it is. In the stories we tell ourselves, as we make meaning, we seek symbolic objects that enable and ennoble us to make our way(s) through the world(s) we inhabit, with their spaces and places and times that are often hostile to our hopes and dreams and desires. Billions of people around the world have become, per Berlant (2011), "too expensive"; they are told they must shrink their expectations for themselves and (for those who have them) their children and grandchildren, sacrificed on the altar of state austerity and wealth aggregation to benefit the austerity-security state's elite and their global partners, the state managers who serve them, and their min-

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25. This phrasing is most commonly attributed to Alec Ross (Gerbaudo 2012, 6)

ions. In the face of depredations and degradations at the hands of those ill-disposed to their interests, people collectively seek to realize broad human rights, labor rights, and collective and engaged governance with representation and resources available to all, all premised on radical inclusivity. People harbor dreams and passions for justice, equality, and freedom and seek to be the makers of their own lives, of history.

The notion of a "condensing symbol" (Jasper 1997, 159–62) is a powerful one, one that Larson and Lizardo (2007, 428) astutely invoke with regard to Che. El Che, as I have tried to lay out here, means more than any one of the aspects or elements discussed; all of them and more are used by people to (re)create and (re)construct a symbolic object that powerfully, if at times unintentionally and perhaps even unconsciously, fuses together. This symbolic object thus becomes a forceful tool, one that can never be fully commodified or depoliticized, one that forever carries with it a whiff (or more) of rebellion, of demand, of independence.

And here is where we find Che Guevara and El Che. Castañeda (1997, 410) argues that "Che can be found . . . in the niches reserved for cultural icons, for symbols of social uprisings that filter down deep into the soil of society." While he's not wrong, it seems clear that Che's legacy, El Che, is greater than this. It is relatively easy, if time consuming, to catalog the cultural presence of Che; he, it, El Che, is a thing. Che Guevara, to steal and paraphrase a line, is like radioactivity, rarely remarked on, yet one detects traces of him almost everywhere, and he has lasted a long time.[26] A long time, I might add, with a clear and consistent meaning. Che is part of our consciences, our consciousness, woven into the very fabric our lives, our world(s), and for those who are inspired by and aspire to him, our conscientiousness too, a source of strength, a demand for justice, a clarion call that says, for so many people in so many places at so many times, we are here, we matter, and we demand better.

There are as many ways that symbols can be deployed as people can imagine, and people's imaginations are vast. Guided by concepts of entanglement, imaginaries, and "zones of awkward engagement" produced by

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26. The same year Che was murdered, French philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle*, which presciently prophesied the emerging fixation on celebrity, of which Che could be Exhibit A. Debord also cofounded the Situationist International, a group of political thinkers, activists, and artists that existed only briefly in Europe but proved influential. In 1979 Debord wrote in a letter that "one can say that the SI is like radioactivity: one speaks little of it, but one detects traces of it almost everywhere, and it lasts a long time" (2006).

the predictable friction, the focus here has been on the fairly obvious: visual representation, invocation (verbal or visual), and the attribution of qualities. For students of contentious politics, exploring and explicating symbolic objects and, to the extent it is possible for interlopers such as ourselves, their meaning for people in this manner provides another, deeper place for agency as well as recognizing the reality of everyday politics.

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# Mekap—A Social History of the "Terrorist Shoe" That Fought ISIS

## Dilar Dirik

The Mekap is the most stigmatized shoe brand in Turkey. Over a period of four decades, a particular ochre-toned model of the sneaker with pumpkin-colored laces, often called the "yellow Mekap" (*mekapê zer* in Kurdish or *sarı mekap* in Turkish), has gained a reputation as the "terrorist's shoe." The brand was first established in the 1970s in Turkey, with the stated mission to provide workers with safe footwear. Soon associated with the working class, it became a popular shoe among the revolutionary Left (Ozturan 2016). Members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which has been leading a guerrilla war against the Turkish state since 1984, began wearing the affordable and solid shoe, which was suitable for the difficult mountain conditions in which they lived. The Mekap became increasingly identified with the PKK when Turgut Özal, during his time as Turkish prime minister, dismissed the guerrillas as a "handful of youth hiking in the mountains, wearing their Mekaps" (Ozturan 2016). With time, the association between the shoe and the terror-labeled[1] PKK went so far that Kurds who possessed them could face investigation.[2] In some Kurdish regions of Turkey, where the brand was unsurprisingly rather popular, the yellow "terrorist" model was banned from sale. The association proved so impactful that

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1. The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization in Turkey, the US, the European Union, and several European countries.

2. See Ozturan 2016 for more detail. This claim is also reported in various Turkish media outlets.

Fig. 11.1. A pair of used Mekap shoes in the Qandil Mountains, Kurdistan (2015) (*Credit:* Photograph © Dilar Dirik, 2021.)

the shoes' manufacturer eventually wrote a plea to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, asking authorities to stop publicly linking his innocent brand to the proscribed group (Oğhan 2013).

Until the pro-PKK mass uprisings (*serhildan*) in rural Kurdistan that began during Özal's presidency in the early 1990s, the Turkish state repeatedly downplayed any popular following that the group might have. With the *serhildan*, the PKK's popularity—at least among some sections in Kurdish society—was no longer deniable, and so Özal became the first president to agree to talks with the organization that he had previously portrayed as a bunch of mountain-dwelling, confused youth.[3] His words about the Mekap are mirrored in many theories developed in academic and journalistic accounts that subscribe to the Turkish state's security concerns and argue that the main factors that drive people to the mountains are not actual political grievances, but a lack of opportunities in the most disadvantaged

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3. Özal's words reflect a continuous tendency of Turkish state officials to patronize particularly youth-led oppositions. During the 2013 Gezi Park protests, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan famously used the term *çapulcu* (looter or marauder) to insult the young people in the square.

corners of the country. To explain the constant influx of young people to the guerrilla ranks, Turkish nationalist discourses often claim that while young Kurdish men are driven to the guerrillas by poverty, women join to escape forced marriage and honor killings.[4] Framed as a shoe of the poor, the Mekap becomes a symbolic object through which this narrative can be reinforced: a device the state can use to reduce the demands of the Kurdish cause and its sympathizers to the experience of economic deprivation, and thereby strictly delimit their political agency. In line with this interpretation, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party initiated large-scale development projects in Kurdistan, encouraging the perception that they had addressed the root concerns of PKK supporters. While the development projects certainly encouraged many Kurdish voters to support Erdoğan, this could not eradicate the symbolic meaning attributed to objects such as the Mekap. For supporters of the Kurdish struggle, many of whom are indeed young women and men from the lower class, the Mekap signified not the mere fact of economic deprivation, but the guerrillas' abdication of life under the capitalist system, as well as a selfless dedication to the cause of an oppressed people's liberation, pursued while living in the hardship of the mountains.

Scholarship from the Global South has criticized a Western-centric bias that informs much of social movement theory, arguing that the specific material, historical, cultural, and political conditions of different parts of the world need to be further taken into account when studying the ways in which people engage in contentious political action. Asef Bayat (2005), who argues for a fragmented and fluid understanding of contentious politics, contends that methodologically, scholars must "go beyond mere discourse, language and symbols, especially those of the leadership, taking both multiple discourses and meanings as tools for writing histories of such activities." In so doing, we can avoid the common tendency to "study movements in static form, in a frozen structure and discourse, rather than in practice, in constant shift and motion." Making sense of the symbolic objects—the bridges between the material and immaterial—that feature in the Kurdish freedom movement is crucial to understand the social relations and emotive arsenal that sus-

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4. Shahrzad Mojab (2001) argues in relation to the Turkish state discourses on Kurdish woman guerrillas: "From a male chauvinist perspective, women could hardly qualify as brigands or terrorists; their sedition, revolt against the 'indivisibility of the Turkish nation' and its 'territorial integrity,' had to be vilified in sexist terms."

tain contention and mobilization. The scope for such inquiry, however, is greatly limited in an environment of surveillance and criminalization such as that seen in Turkey.[5] In her discussion of the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, Gay Seidman (2001) critically engages with social movement researchers' reluctance to discuss the role of clandestine networks and armed struggle. Seidman argues that while both the apartheid state and Black South Africans knew that different aspects of the anticolonial struggle were intertwined, many sympathetic researchers chose to remain silent about the underground elements that constituted an important part of the movement. Seidman asks: "As researchers, do we perhaps fear tarnishing the moral righteousness of the anti-apartheid struggle if we admit that some of the heroic popular struggles of the townships might have been linked directly to clandestine networks involved in armed attacks?" (2001, 116). Her retrospective reflections in an issue published on September 1, 2001—shortly before the attacks on the World Trade Center—provide valuable insight into issues related to knowledge production on the Kurdish movement in the present day. Labeling the PKK as an international terror group pushes its support base toward politically motivated self-censorship (Dirik 2021). For researchers, this raises all sorts of intellectual, ethical, and political difficulties.

In what follows, I analyze the role of the Mekap as a symbolic object in the Kurdish freedom movement. I argue that this shoe has become a symbolic shorthand for the anticolonial liberation struggle in Kurdistan in a context of political violence and criminalization. In this chapter, I attempt to braid fragmented social histories from below, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to offer insights into the shoe's symbolic continuities and transformations that, due to political, security-related, or ethical concerns, are frequently rendered obscure.

**In the summer of 2015**, I spent two weeks of conducting fieldwork on Mount Şengal (Sinjar) in northwestern Iraq. It was the first anniversary of the genocide on the Êzîdî community,[6] committed by the so-called Islamic State or ISIS (hereafter: Daesh). From some areas of the mountain range,

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5. See also Dirik (2021).
6. The community is usually referred to as "Yazidi" in the English-speaking world. The term, however, has negative connotations, as it is associated with a false accusation that the community is related to Yazid I., a caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty often blamed for the death of Imam Hussein. The community refers to itself as "Êzîdî."

one could see Şengal city with the naked eye. A year after the genocide, the city was still occupied by the group that had slaughtered thousands of men on the spot and kidnapped thousands of women into sexual slavery. At the time of my stay, approximately 2,000 families who had survived the genocide were living in makeshift tents on the mountain. In their midst were guerrilla units of the PKK.

Outside of her tent, I spoke to Xensê, an Êzîdî woman in her forties. She began narrating how she had experienced this latest massacre in the history of her community with the following words:

> PKK, YPJ, YJA Star, YPG, HPG—all these names, I confuse them. When we tell the story of who rescued us, we just say: *heval hatin* (the comrades arrived).

To briefly unpack the acronyms: the People's Defense Forces (HPG) and the autonomous Free Women's Units (YJA Star) are the names of the PKK's guerrilla armies. These were the first forces to repel Daesh attacks in Şengal, and they lost several fighters doing so. They coordinated with the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) that sent reinforcements from majority-Kurdish regions of Syria. Together, a small group of women and men in arms rescued tens of thousands of Êzîdîs trapped on the mountain by taking them across the border from Iraq to Syria (Tharoor 2014). The rescue operation took place in a particular context: the Iraqi army had collapsed during the Daesh offensive on Mosul in June 2014, and fighters from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which controls much of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq and was in charge of securing the area, withdrew its forces from Şengal without a fight when Daesh attacked. Adequate humanitarian assistance to the genocide's survivors arrived only after the self-declared autonomous administration of "Rojavayê Kurdistanê" (western Kurdistan), more commonly known as "Rojava," set up a refugee camp for the Êzîdîs.

Xensê's remarks about the practical irrelevance of the many confusing acronyms make perfect sense to anyone who followed that catastrophic summer in Şengal. Although the Kurdish fighters involved in the battle against Daesh in Şengal belonged to different organizations and officially operated within different nation-state borders, they shared a common political history, ideology, and culture. Hence, they wore different uniforms but had stitched on the same patches: the face of the imprisoned

Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan (nicknamed Apo), who is known for his political project of "Democratic Confederalism," a system based on "radical democracy, women's liberation, and ecology" (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012).[7] The system that constitutes Rojava's "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," a development since 2012, draws largely on Öcalan's thought after all (Knapp et al. 2016; Üstündağ 2016). Alongside the many slogans, songs, and symbols that fighters in the Şengal rescue mission had in common, members of each army shared memories, relatives, and noms de guerre with people from the other group. So too were many of them united in wearing the amber-colored Mekap shoes with their differently patterned uniforms.

One month after the genocide in Şengal, Ain al-Arab, a small, majority-Kurdish Syrian town by the border to Turkey, began receiving wide international media coverage (Şimşek and Jongerden 2021). After major cities in Iraq and Syria had fallen to Daesh within weeks, the small town was holding up resistance against the brutal Islamist group. Soon, news reports began calling the town by its now-famous Kurdish name: Kobanê. A month into the fighting, the Obama administration began conducting airstrikes to assist the Kurdish forces on the ground. With this move, the United States took the first step toward what would later become military cooperation with a group that its fellow NATO member Turkey considered to be an enemy.

During the battle, which ended in Daesh's first defeat (Salih 2015), several newspapers reported on a family that appeared to have named their newborn baby "Obama" as a sign of gratitude for the US airstrikes. The less-reported reality was seen on numerous videos making the rounds on social media: the fighters, residents, and supporters of Kobanê were collectively chanting, not Obama's name but that of their imprisoned leader, "Apo." At the same time as baby Obama, hundreds of new-born Kurdish children were named after the "martyrs" of Kobanê. Many of the Kobanê martyrs, in turn, had previously taken up noms de guerre in honor of fallen PKK guerrillas. What many newcomers to the Kurdish question did not know was that Öcalan and his cadres had spent several decades mobilizing Kurds inside Syria. Kobanê was Öcalan's first destination on crossing the

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7. Öcalan outlines his paradigm in a five-volume series titled "Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization," written as his court defense. The first three volumes are available in English. A summary of his thought is available from Pluto Press under the title "The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan" (2017).

Syrian-Turkish border in 1979. As early as the 1980s, young people from Kobanê and other parts of Rojava had flocked across the border to join the PKK's guerrilla war against the Turkish state.

In 2015, I interviewed Meysa Abdo, one of the commanders in the battle for Kobanê. Similar to other women I spoke to in Rojava, she explicitly stated that her involvement in the war against Daesh was a continuation of a four-decade revolutionary struggle against the Turkish state:

> During the battle of Kobanê, journalists often asked me where my experience as a commander is from. Well, I was not sitting at home when Daesh rose. How can I deny that my foundations, my philosophy, my consciousness are a product of decades of women organizing in the PKK? For decades, Kurdish women have been in the mountains, but there was an information embargo on them. This embargo broke with the YPJ.

In the period that followed Kurdish victory in Kobanê, units of the autonomous women's army "YPJ" became the most popular global symbol of the battle against Daesh. While the media fascination with the YPJ has been criticized as Orientalist and detached from women's radical politics (Dirik 2022), this was nonetheless the first time that the decades-old legacy of Kurdish women's revolutionary militancy was rendered visible on a larger scale. The YPJ's newfound prominence in newspapers, TV programs, documentaries, and feature films legitimized the public expression of a hitherto secretly held pride among Kurdish families, many of whom have photos of guerrillas—often their own deceased family members—in their homes, in their wallets, and on their phones.

Amid the renewed fixation on Kurdish women fighters, and global attention to the Kurdish struggle, social media users and political commentators began openly recycling long-criminalized slogans and symbols of the Kurdish guerrilla movement in their commentary about the war on Daesh. The Mekap, once the terrorist shoe, received particular renewed attention—one of the most circulated phrases during this period was "Daesh will be defeated by those with the yellow Mekaps."[8] The visual artist Rewhat Arslan even drew a caricature of a Daesh fighter receiving a painful hit in the face with a Mekap-labeled orange shoe.

Even if many people remained cautious about openly expressing their

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8. See for example Alp (2014).

thoughts under Turkey's draconian antiterror regime, people familiar with the Kurdish movement's political culture knew very well what the Mekap was supposed to symbolize: not random Kurds, but the guerrilla "Apoists" (supporters of Öcalan) leading the war against Daesh.

Within the guerrilla movement, the Mekap has taken on further symbolic dimensions. The shoe, which is worn by women and men alike, has come to stand for the movement's central commitment to women's liberation (one of its main pillars alongside radical democracy and ecology). Today, a several-meters-high statue of a woman fighter with wings stands in a square in Kobanê. If one looks to her feet one sees shoes that are the spitting image of the movement's iconic Mekaps.

With the Mekap receiving its public rehabilitation on the global stage, a different way to frame the battle against Daesh was developing parallel to this revival of Kurdish revolutionary socialist imagery. Politicians, think tank–based experts, and other pundits began making the case for supporting the Kurds against Daesh based on the idea that the former shared "Western values." Seemingly at odds with the Turkish state's position that the "YPG/PKK" was one organization, and morally equivalent to Daesh, the US contrastingly engaged in efforts to dissociate their Kurdish military allies in Syria from any political project, first by refraining from any sort of political support for the self-administration, and second by driving wedges between the Kurds of Syria and Öcalan's ideas.[9] At the same time as they praised their tactical military allies' role in defeating Daesh on the ground, the US issued a bounty on the heads of three PKK leaders—Cemil Bayık, Murat Karayılan, and Duran Kalkan (Spencer 2018). The resistance against Daesh, which had been sparked by the ideologically driven Apoists in Şengal and Kobanê, was increasingly framed as a Western military success story. Contrastingly, US officials issued statements of condemnation when the autonomous women's YPJ held a big press conference to declare the liberation of Raqqa—in front of a gigantic photo of Öcalan (Reuters 2017).

In this period, Turkish media outlets hostile to the Americans' military alliance with the Syrian Kurds frequently reported on the combat gear of the different groups perceived to be linked to the PKK. Referring especially to the Êzîdî fighting forces that the PKK helped establish in the aftermath of the genocide, media reports particularly picked up on the dis-

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9. For instance, Army Gen. Raymond Thomas told a security gathering in 2017 that the US military suggested to the YPG that it should change its name to gain more legitimacy by dissociating from the PKK label.

appearance of the Mekap and the baggy *shalwar* trousers (long adapted by the guerrillas from traditional Kurdish clothing). One representative CNN Turk report used the following words (my translation): "In the latest photos that emerged, the PKK terrorists are now depicted using camouflaged, military models instead of their usual dress with poşu[10] and Mekap shoes" (Güncelleme 2017). Similar reports hinted that the US was pushing this uniform change by the PKK to disguise American cooperation with a terror-labeled group—as if ditching the Mekap and other signature clothing might render PKK fighters into covert forces.

In the late spring of 2018, I visited the now-legendary town of Kobanê. The trip took place shortly after the Turkish army had launched its so-called "Olive Branch Operation" on the majority Kurdish region of Afrin in northwestern Syria. Turkey claimed to be protecting its national security against the PKK. In the absence of international action against Turkey's invasion and occupation, the women's movement in Rojava launched the "Women Defend Afrin" campaign and invited feminist delegations from different countries on fact-finding missions.

One day, I was interpreting for two female civilians from Kobanê, who were recounting their experiences of the Daesh war to a group of European women I had been traveling with. Together with a handful of other civilians, these women had stayed behind mainly to cook and clean for fighters of all genders, who were suffering heavy casualties. In the most desperate moments of the conflict, they washed the uniforms taken off from dead bodies to give to newly arriving fighters (who were consequently quite literally filling the shoes—Mekaps–of their martyred predecessors). At some point, the women were speaking about how the *heval*—the comrades— were sending the dead bodies of Daesh fighters to Turkey at the request of their families. One of the women, deeply immersed in her memory of this traumatic period, contrasted this conduct with what she described as Daesh's "senseless torture and brutality against even dead bodies":

> Our *heval* gathered their IDs, money and other belongings, wrapped the bodies in blankets and handed them over at the border. This is because we have ethics in war, a culture. We don't do the brutal things they do, no matter what they do to us. This is the ethics, the culture of *the PKK!*

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10. Commonly known as "keffiyeh," a checkered scarf worn throughout the Middle East.

She repeated "PKK" several times in the sentences that followed. The woman next to her tried to hide a slightly embarrassed smile and gently pushed her friend's thigh, saying "Say YPG, say YPJ," after which the first woman quickly reformulated her original words. I, too, smiled with discomfort and translated her second, official version only. Although the delegation did not speak any Kurdish, I did briefly contextualize the suspicious switch, and I have no doubt that they understood the politically charged, clumsy acronym-swapping in that moment.

From the other parts of the conversation, it was clear that the woman did not mean to imply that not the US-backed YPG/YPJ, but the terror-labeled NATO enemy PKK, was leading the fight, although PKK members undoubtedly did participate. What the woman meant when referring to "PKK culture" was not that the PKK were the sole or even primary protagonists in the fight against Daesh, but instead that Rojava's social history and ongoing revolution were inseparable from the Apoist theory and practice developed by the PKK, who began mobilizing the local community forty years before the current moment. At the same time, publicly acknowledging this would render her community more vulnerable to attack by Turkish forces. After all, the occasion of our trip was the Afrin invasion, which had killed hundreds and displaced 300,000 civilians. While in that moment, this particular knowledgeable and sympathetic group of European feminists would perhaps not have minded either acronym, we were all implicated, through silence or tragicomically obvious self-censorship, in playing along with the rules set by the game of "antiterrorism"—for the sake of protecting Rojava's declared women's revolution.

The Mekap can be read as metonymic for the Kurdish movement, reflecting its evolution over time, resilience during the movement's long period of criminalization, and even its revolutionary fervor. Despite different actors' attempts to downplay the movement's relevance on the ground—with motivations ranging from self-preservation to criminalization—the shoe is an object that establishes legacy and continuity. In addition to its association with working-class and Kurdish identity, over time, the shoe's appearance on women and men in different but connected territorial settings has come to further symbolize qualities such as the movement's transborder mobilization or commitment to equality. The Mekap therefore merges Kurdish culture and revolutionary politics and is recognized as doing so. This dual nature is vital to the object's mobilizing power.

Depending on the context, the shoe, like the movement itself, is either praised for its qualities or made into an occasion for repression. Just as the

Mekap shoe company has recently embarked on a journey to change its image by producing new models in different colors (Internethaber 2010), so too (for a different purpose) has the confederal project of the Kurdish freedom movement engaged in efforts to form assemblies and congress structures in different regions and with different communities, generating new acronyms that do not reflect its "terror-labeled" segment. While this primarily derives from the wider movement's local autonomy-building project, in a limited way it can simultaneously help temporarily shield political activities from repression. In any case, even while, like the Kurdish movement's structures, the Mekap comes in different shapes, sizes, and styles, the object retains an intimate meaning that makes supporters of the movement recognize it—and its wearers in combat zones—as belonging to the *heval*.

In the years following the war against Daesh, as several other Turkish military invasions and occupations were launched in majority Kurdish regions inside Syria and Iraq, amid threats for more operations, the Mekap received renewed invigoration especially in protest actions. In April 2022, a protester named Berîtan brought a Mekap shoe with her to a protest against the official UK visit of Kurdistan Regional Government's Prime Minister Masrour Barzanî, whose party, the previously mentioned KDP that had abandoned the Êzîdîs in 2014, was now openly aiding the Turkish state in its military campaigns against the guerrilla. Footage of Berîtan, herself from Southern Kurdistan (within Iraqi borders), wielding a Mekap shoe and exclaiming her support for the guerrillas and condemning the KDP's latest "betrayal" while being held back by the Metropolitan Police soon went viral. Not long after, people across Kurdistan and Europe began to bring Mekap shoes to protests to express their respect for the guerrillas' resistance, with the shoe signifying an attachment to materially immeasurable values like freedom.

In May 2022, Hunergeha Welat, a revolutionary culture and art institution in Rojava, released a song with the title "Hey Zapê" in response to the Turkish state's military operations in the guerrilla-held mountain region of Zap within Iraqi borders. In the music clip, which reached half a million views on YouTube within the first two months after release and quickly joined the list of Kurdish protest classics, the artists are seen animating a crowd of hundreds of what seem to be ordinary, visibly working-class civilian residents of Rojava pumping Mekaps to the beat of the drums. As customary in the movement's protests, women strategically stand at the front

Fig. 11.2. YJA Star guerrillas at the front line against Daesh, 2015, Kirkuk, Iraq (*Credit:* Photograph © Dilar Dirik, 2021.)

of the protests. Seen among them is the mother of Kurdish women's activist and political leader Hevrin Khalaf, who was assassinated by Turkish-backed Islamist terror-listed group Ahrar al-Sharqiya during Turkey's 'Peace Spring' operation on Rojava in 2019. The song was soon adapted in protests across Europe. In a protest attended by tens of thousands in Germany in July 2022, activists showed up carrying a nearly human-sized Mekap replica on their shoulders. This and similar examples raised the significance of the Mekap once more across contexts; they show that even as sympathizers, supporters, and members of the movement are unable to openly carry certain symbols or chant certain slogans to express their political position, in this case their loyalty to the PKK-led movement—even in liberal democratic European countries—they use the Mekap as a unifying signifier for their ideology, political culture, and fight for decolonization. In this way, they creatively demonstrate the PKK's popularity, and with that, their own allegiance to the resistance, while evading criminalization.

Thinking through the difficulties and limitations of archiving the social history of the Palestinian Left in particular and popular movements

more generally, while recognizing that knowledge materials "might need to remain disaggregated, their scattered conditions protecting them from captivity by authorities and regimes seeking to further expunge and destroy, redact and repress," historian Mezna Qato argues in favor of compiling social histories, "against a methodological eclecticism seemingly unable to read political life outside of pre-set notions and epistemologies that prioritize and often only see already legible practices, collectivities, and imaginaries" (Qato 2019). Similarly, in the Kurdish context, security concerns and draconian antiterror policies assert pressure on ordinary people to disguise their politics, which often makes it difficult, even undesirable, to speak openly and honestly about the social relations that characterize the movement. In this environment, strategic silences, the conscious withdrawal of the "everything-I-know," is a device of intellectual solidarity that researchers can employ in the face of state violence and repression. In the current historical moment, it may be risky to write more openly and critically about the organizational structures of the Kurdish movement. However, social histories from below—making sense of symbolically important objects such as the much-maligned Mekap—can clear at least some of the smoke of deliberate distortion caused by state-centric ways of making sense of political life, of which regressive governments' manifold wars "on terror" form an important part.

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# Biafran Objects and Contention in Nigeria

Scholastica Ngozi Atata and Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale

Narratives of nationality often come to be projected onto physical objects. Stories of shared pasts, common present realities, and even destined futures can be attached to artifacts as diverse as a coat of arms, a medieval ceramic bowl, a banknote, or a woven cane basket. As such, symbolic objects can speak of values, ideas, worldviews, intentions, and actions. Both nations and states—whether established or contested—tend to proliferate such symbolic objects, projecting onto them notions of social cohesion, sameness (and otherness), and "shared values" (Cerulo 1993). In spaces where nationhood and statehood are contested, such as the Biafra region of Nigeria, national objects can be sources of—and resources for—confrontation, conflict, and political contention. Through this chapter, we consider the role played by Biafran symbolic objects in present-day Nigeria, looking in particular at the flag of Biafra, the insurgent region's memorialized war technology, and the statue of Colonel Ojukwu (the leader of the short-lived Republic of Biafra). We contend that the resurgence of Biafran nationalist protest in the twenty-first century utilizes these objects as symbolic shorthand, drawing together and standing in for conceptions of shared Biafran values, national idiosyncrasies, memories of the war, anti-Igbo injustices, and teleological narratives of the future of Biafra.

## Biafran Contention Past and Present

In 1967, Nigeria erupted into civil war when its Eastern Region seceded to form the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian Civil War resulted from

a range of causal factors, including political instabilities (in particular, the 1966 military coup and subsequent military government), economic inequalities spread geographically across the country, unresolved colonial tensions, and decades of interethnic strife (Plotnicov 1971; Ikpeze 2000; Uwalaka 2003; Adekson 2004; Achebe 2012; Onuoha 2014; Aremu and Buhari 2017). Although ideas of Biafra nationalism predated the 1960s, the massacre of Igbo people in the north of the country in 1966 gave rise to both a large-scale return-migration of Igbo people from other parts of the country to Eastern Nigeria and a rise in Biafra national consciousness (Hawley 2008; Omobowale 2009; Achebe 2012; Heerten and Moses 2014). These dynamics and sentiments came to fruition in the pronouncement of the Republic of Biafra[1] on 30 May 1967 by the then-governor of Eastern Nigeria, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Chukwuemeka Ojukwu (Gluck 2007; Duruji 2009). Later that year, Colonel Ojukwu met with the head of Nigeria's military government, Colonel Yakubu Gowon, in Aburi, Ghana, in an attempt to negotiate a peaceful resolution to brewing conflicts in Nigeria. However, when the Aburi conference failed, Nigeria descended into full-scale civil war (Ademoyega 1981; Effiong 2000; Achebe 2012).

During the war, the fledgling Biafran state began to manufacture the symbolic material culture of nationhood, producing a national flag, a coat of arms, army uniforms, and even a currency (the Biafran pound, in use from 1968 to 1970). These objects aided in the social production and proliferation of the idea that Biafra was an entity separate from Nigeria, that Biafrans were distinct from Nigerians, that the people of Biafra were themselves united, and that Biafra's soldiers were fighting for a real, burgeoning nation-state. In the three years of civil war, the material culture of Biafran nationhood came to be intensely filled with meaning. However, with the military defeat of the secessionist state in 1970 and its reabsorption back into Nigeria, Biafra's artifacts of statehood were rendered defunct. Although these objects continued to play important roles in the region in the decades immediately following the war, the recent resurgence of Biafran nationalist contention has seen them revitalized and repackaged for a new generation of activists.

The twenty-first century has witnessed something of a return to Biafran nationalist agitation (Obe 2013; Ezemenaka and Prouza 2017). In 2000, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra

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1. The Republic of Biafra was comprised of the then-–Eastern Region of Nigeria, an Igbo-majority area east of the Niger River.

(MASSOB) was formed. A second group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), was created in 2012. By the fiftieth anniversary of the cessation of the civil war, Biafran national consciousness and activism had once again gained pace. In this context, the symbolic objects once used for Biafran nation- and state-building during the war have been repurposed in street protests and other forms of political contention; they have been drawn on to make claims about the current place of Igbo/Biafran people in Nigerian society, and used in calls for a variety of reforms. These objects have also been drawn on to revitalize the very sense of Biafran national consciousness that these claims are often based on.

The symbolic objects used by twenty-first-century Biafran activists are a mixture of old and new, including the flag of the Republic of Biafra, relics of Biafran war technology, Biafra-themed clothing (such as caps, T-shirts, and bangles), and Colonel Ojukwu's statue at the entrance to the Biafra region of Nigeria. These objects are used to express a plethora of narratives and claims in contemporary Biafra activism, to construct a sense of Igbo/Biafran social cohesion, and to draw unresolved grievances from the past into the present. They act as methods of social identification that can trigger unrest, appeal to the social and political consciences of fellow Biafra activists, and attempt to revive the sentiments of late-60s opposition to the Nigerian state.

In what follows, we discuss the use of Biafran symbolic objects in present-day protest, paying particular attention to the use of the Biafran flag, war technology relics, and the statue of Colonel Ojukwu. Before turning to these objects, we first outline the methodology employed in this study.

## Methods

The findings presented in this chapter were drawn from an ethnographic study of Biafran contentious politics in two cities in southeastern Nigeria. Onitsha in Anambra State and Aba in Abia State were chosen because these cities have seen repeated Biafran protest activity in recent years. While the Biafra solidarity movement and associated rallies, protest performances, and riots can be found in cities across southeastern Nigeria, Onitsha and Aba have witnessed the brunt of these agitations. Ethnographic observations were made, with particular attention being paid to the use of symbols and objects in street protests.

Alongside ethnographic observations and archival research at the National War Museum in Umuahia, Abia State, twenty interviews were

conducted. These interviews were split into In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the participants for which were identified through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling of Igbo people from the two selected cities. IDIs were conducted with Biafra activists and supporters, while KIIs were conducted with leaders of the Biafra movement. The interviews were conducted in Igbo and English languages, and aimed to elucidate the meanings attached to the symbolic objects used and invoked in Biafra activism.

## Biafran Objects in Protest

Protest, as a bringing together of various people and groups in pursuit of a definite shared goal or set of goals, has considerable potential to create new senses of shared identity. In fact, the power of protest lies as much in its production of new forms of solidarity and cohesion as it does in achieving social change. As several scholars in the field have noted (Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon 2010; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013), most social movements utilize some form of public demonstration as a potent social tool, because it not only vocalizes the movement's aims and helps produce a sense of shared purpose and identification with the movement. At demonstrations, symbolic objects, imbued as they are with interpretive significance, tend to work toward both of these ends. Given that protests involve making claims on the basis of particular political demands and aspirations (Opp and Kittel 2010), the objects that come to be used tend in some way to describe—or attempt to describe—the intent of the protesters. Simultaneously, however, the very act of holding, being near, or referring to similar objects that tell a shared story about the nature of reality and how it might be changed has significant identity-making properties—as well as collectively producing a protest aesthetic that expresses shared worldviews (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Symbolic objects have the capacity to embody multiple, even conflicting or multilayered, messages. In Nigeria in recent years, MASSOB and IPOB groups have staged protests opposing discrimination against Igbo people and their marginalization, sometimes simultaneously calling for greater civil rights in the Nigerian state and for self-determination for Biafra. Symbolic objects are open to multiple interpretations and significations, and so can sustain complex discourses, speaking to—and connecting with—the outlook of the observer. As such, they are highly potent communicative devices for building a sense of community and solidarity. In this

way, Biafra protest objects have been able to act as a uniting force among Igbo people across southeast Nigeria, as well as in the Biafran diaspora (Chiluwa 2018).

Biafra protest in the twenty-first century has drawn on symbolic objects from the civil war era to stoke collective memories of resistance against the Nigerian state, instigate reminiscences of Biafran statehood, and draw parallels between the Biafran soldiers of the late 1960s and present-day protesters. Indeed, as Omeje (2005) has argued, Biafran activists since 2000 appear to have directly replaced war with protest in their quest to advance Biafra. Over this period, we have witnessed growing contention around Biafran nationalism, with increasingly intense calls for a return to independence (Agbambu and Oruya 2015; Ibekwe 2016; Ugwuanyi 2016). In our ethnographic study of Biafran activism, we found symbolic objects to be a prominent feature in contentious performances and social outlooks. In this context, three elements featured prominently: the Biafran flag, relics of Biafran war technology, and the statue of Colonel Ojukwu that stands after the bridge that was once an entrance to the Republic of Biafra. We consider each of these in turn.

### The Flag of Biafra

The creation of a national flag is an important milestone in nation-building processes (Elgenius 2011). In their symbolic content, flags are purported to represent the allegedly unique values, identity, history, future, and general narrative of the nation (Rasmusen 1998; Stets and Burke 2000). As Thoits and Virshup (1997) have cogently argued, the national flag also serves as a means of maintaining social order at and within the nation's borders. Nationhood is (re)presented in the form of the flag, and hence flags include in their semiotic content various notions of belonging, participation, and membership (Fennell 2003). This is a relational process, projecting notions of sameness and otherness (Clarke 2011). In multinational societies, flags often function as important symbolic markers of difference within the state (Cerulo 1993; Waterman and Arnold 2010). However, in deeply divided societies that have experienced ethnonational civil war, the politics of flags can become particularly fraught (Joyner 1989; Roy 2006; Bryan 2007; see Deets 2007). In Nigeria, from the late 1960s onward, the national flag of the former Republic of Biafra (see figure 12.1) has been a potent and controversial symbolic object, as well as an item in the "strategic toolbox" for Biafra activists.

Flags do not merely express singular or static meanings; they can communicate complex messages. One of the most direct messages that flying a substate national flag can express is a call for greater autonomy, independence, or statehood (Wood 1989; Douglas 2001; Boldbaatar and Humphrey 2007). This is certainly the case when the flag of the Republic of Biafra is flown at recent Biafran protests. However, the flag communicates more a call for secession; in many ways, flying the Biafra flag is itself an act of protest, a symbolic representation of the aims of Biafra protest. The flag also reflects a narrative of past independence as an antecedent for a Biafra renaissance, calling back into the present the nation that once was.

With its creation and use centered around Biafran independence and the civil war, the Biafran flag calls forth collective memories of war and peace, safety and danger, fear and fervor. For many Igbo people, the flag has connotations of security (in more ways than one). During the Nigerian Civil War, the flag communicated to Igbo who were fleeing other parts of Nigeria to the Republic of Biafra that they would be safe, their livelihoods and even lives secure, in the new secessionist state (Achebe 2012). These ideas were wrapped up in the flag. In contemporary Biafra activism, the presence of this flag continues to call forth similar notions of safety and belonging (as well as insecurity and danger for Igbos at the whim of the Nigerian state).

Thirty years after Biafra's defeat in the civil war, the Biafran flag was again hoisted in Aba, Abia State, on 30 May 2000, by Ralph Uwazurike, the leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (Effiong 2000; Uwalaka 2003; Omeje 2005; Duruji 2009; Okonta 2012). The revitalization of the flag offered a renewed sense of legitimacy to Biafran identification, and for many, it symbolically represented a Biafra renaissance to come. In many ways, the Biafran flag is a symbol that influences and encourages Biafra agitation. However, the flag also speaks of ethnonational difference, past (and future) achievement, hope for a new Biafra, freedom from marginalization, and fraternity. It calls forth notions of secessionism, revolutionary spirit, and shared trials. In our ethnographic work, we found that the presence of the flag at demonstrations has a powerful effect on its observers. For those taking part in Biafran protests, seeing the flag being held, worn, or flown by fellow activists is experienced as an energizing force, propelling the march (see figure 12.2). For nonparticipating Igbos, witnessing the flag in a march can also motivate future participation.

The design of the flag, with the red, black, and green of the pan-African

Fig. 12.1. The flag of Biafra.
(*Credit:* Photograph © Scholastica Atata, 2021.)

flag and the rising-sun emblem of a "glorious future," remains symbolically important. In many cases the meaning and history of the visual elements in national or state flags eventually falls out of public consciousness and into the more or less exclusive preserve of vexillologists. Not so for the Biafran flag. The flag's visual elements continue to incite and sustain Biafran contention today. This is in large part due to the mapping of Biafra-specific meanings onto the original meanings of the pan-African flag. In the latter, the red panel represents "the blood that unites all people of Black African ancestry, and shed for liberation," the black panel speaks of "black people whose existence as a nation, though not a nation-state, is affirmed by the existence of the flag," and the green connotes the "abundant natural wealth of Africa" (Okonkwo 2019). Accordingly, the red color on the Biafran flag represents the heroic strength and sacrifices of the Igbo during the Nigeria Civil War as well as vibrant notions of revolution that appeal to Biafra activists today (Ebeogu 1992; Effiong 2000; Achebe 2012). For present-day activists, it encourages persistence, valor, and willingness to stake their

Fig. 12.2. Biafra protesters with the Biafran flag during a street protest in southeast Nigeria, 2016
(*Credit:* Photograph © Scholastica Atata, 2021.)

lives in defense of the Biafran cause. It is not simply a mark of heroism, but a descriptor of peoplehood, of ethnic character. The red panel also calls to mind the idea that this part of the flag has sustained bravery in the past, a symbolic feature that has supported Biafran people through past crises.

The black panel of the Biafran flag has connections to decolonization, to overthrowing imperialism, and to African self-determination. It represents a determination to actualize the independent Biafran state, and recalls memories of the Biafran struggle. Emblazon on the black panel is the an eleven-pointed rising sun. The eleven points represent the eleven provinces of Biafra, while the rising sun is a symbol of the future hope and greatness that await the Biafran nation on independence from Nigeria, the new dawn that awaits them.

As with the pan-African flag, the green panel speaks of abundance from the land. Connecting also to notions of safety and security for those in Biafra, the green signifies a particular narrative about Igbo territory and identity: a land of vegetation and resources, and an enterprising and industrious people. In its totality, the symbolic content of the flag of Biafra tells a particular story of Biafran nationhood, as well as the values and ideologies of the movement. It depicts the very notion of shared identity that its holders also aim to instill and reignite.

For many of our interviewees, the presence of the Biafran flag at protest events evoked the various meanings and connotations outlined above. As one interviewee put it,

Whenever I see the Biafran flag, it spurs me up to action, especially during protest. It brings us Igbo people together and calls on my consciousness on the need and attachment Biafra has brought for

us Igbo people. It motivates me to join others during protests and it shows that *Igbo wu otu* (Igbo people are the same, and united). (IDI 1)

Another interviewee said,

I have my own Biafra flag, I use it mostly during protest and it acts as a symbol of motivation and anywhere I see the Biafran flag it gives me a sense of brotherhood. Anytime there is Biafra protest, I must fly the flag, it acts as a sign of unity, and it brings every Biafra supporter together and inspires us during protest. We cannot protest without the Biafra flag. (IDI 2)

As the two quotations above illustrate, the flag deftly relays many of the core ideas and ideals underpinning participation in Biafra activism among the Igbo. The flag bifurcates, giving material form to feelings of in-group identification (Igbo/Biafra) and out-group otherness (other ethnic groups of Nigeria).

Although it was common to find the flag displayed in Biafran protests, some demonstrators chose not to use it for fear of confrontation with the Nigerian military and police force. This dynamic in itself has only intensified feelings of Igbo marginalization in the state of Nigeria. Where agencies of the Nigerian law enforcement have restrained the use of Biafran symbols, including the flag of the Republic of Biafra, Igbo national consciousness has only been intensified (Agbambu and Oruya 2015; Nzeagwu et al. 2015), feeding back into a cycle of victimhood, resistance, and repression. As a result, at Biafran protests, the very absence of the flag can act as a symbolic marker of shared cultural repression under the Nigerian state.

Overall, the Biafran flag has become an important visual signifier for present-day activism. Its very presence—its continued existence—is a physical manifestation of the past state in the present, a claim that the Biafra that once was, remains, and is here to stay. An Igbo adage states, "*Ihe Biafra wu nke anyi*" (Anything about Biafra is our own), a sentiment that is woven into the fabric of the flag.

### War Technology

If civil war comes, and I do think it is imminent . . . Our people here have for a long time been prepared for this eventuality, and I am

confident of their readiness. I think that when it does come, that the people on the other side would be surprised as to what they're going to get. And I'm confident that it will not last long. (New Africa 2020)

These were the words of Colonel Ojukwu in a press conference in 1967, prior to the start of the war. The Nigerian government at the time was a military junta, who doubted the capacity of the fledgling Biafran state to pose a serious military threat. However, Biafra proved able to quickly produce a range of high-capacity military equipment and hence mount an impressive armed resistance. This has become an important narrative in Biafra nationalism, and is connected to broader notions of Igbo ingenuity, resourcefulness, and courage.

The relics of the civil war, now largely housed in the National War Museum in Umuahia, Abia State, have come to be highly symbolically important for Biafra activists and protesters (Oyewole 1975; Opara 2014; Onuora 2015). These artifacts are read among Biafra nationalists as indigenous Igbo innovations, evidence of what an independent Biafran nation achieved (and, hence, could achieve in the future). This sense of ethnic power and exceptionalism exists in stark contrast to current feelings of Igbo marginalization in Nigeria. According to Smith (2005, 30),

> For Igbos, memories of Biafra can be poignant and powerful. Igbos commonly explain their perceived marginalization in contemporary Nigeria as a legacy of Biafra. The political dynamics popularly believed to explain their defeat are widely seen as being replayed in the current context. Yet legacies and recollections of Biafra also reverberate in more subtle ways. Some of the most powerful aspects of Igbo culture and demography are reinforced through the production and circulation of collective memories of Biafra.

The relics of Biafran war technology—weapons, armored cars, tanks—stand in physical refutation of feelings of social exclusion and defeat (see figures 12.3 and 12.4).[2] To Biafran activists, these relics imply power, perseverance, and aptitude; they are symbols of achievement for the Igbo and the Biafran nation. They are a source of pride and of inspiration for further

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2. For more work by Chijioke Onuora on the National War Museum in Umuahia, see Onuora's (2015) article, "The National War Museum, Umuahia: Preservation of Civil War Memorials and Nigerian Military History."

Fig. 12.3. Biafran Red Devil, National War Museum, Umuahia, Nigeria
(*Credit:* Photograph © Chijioke Onuora, 2021; used by permission.)

political agitation, an energizing force. Hence, as Smith (2005) cogently argues, collective memories of Biafra serve as important counternarratives to postwar defeatism.

To contemporary protesters, these weapons are about more than simply firepower or aggression. At its core, the fact that the Republic of Biafra was able to construct these technologies of war suggests that, as an independent state, it could stand alone as a technologically advanced black nation (Nwankwo 1972; McDonald 1990). The technological relics memorialized in the National War Museum include the Biafran war tank, war ship, and armored cars, as well as machine guns, war ammunition, bombs, and the *ogbunigwe* (a Biafran innovation, meaning the "weapon that destroys a multitude"). Furthermore, the museum hosts an underground site known as the "Ojukwu bunker" and the Biafra national radio station. Many activists see embedded in these relics and structures various Igbo ethnic characteristics, including notions of *nke anyi* (our property) and *oru aka anyi* (our

Fig. 12.4. Biafran armored car, National War Museum, Umuahia, Nigeria (*Credit:* Photograph © Chijioke Onuora, 2021; used by permission.)

product, and ability). In this way, many activists we encountered saw in these war technologies signs of hope for the future of Biafra.

The Biafran state housed an organization known as "Research and Production" (RAP), a group of "scientists, engineers, and technicians [who] managed to perform socially relevant science, sustain their efforts through the three-year Nigerian-Biafran war, and [would have] put Biafra on the path to technological development, had the young nation survived" (Ukaegbu 2005, 1396). During the bombing operations during the civil war, RAP managed to design and produce a variety of types of rocket, including both ground-to-ground and ground-to-air. They innovated a range of different *Ogbunigwe*, including the *Ojukwu bucket*, one of the most deadly weapons used during the war (Oyewole 1975; Opara 2014). For many Biafran protesters today, these relics in particular contribute to a narrative of Biafran nationhood that is retained in twenty-first-century protest.

As both Ukaegbu (2005) and Achebe (2010) have argued, the achievements of the RAP propelled advancement not only in weaponry, but in education, science, and engineering more broadly. The relics of those

technologies create a "social mindset" of achievement for the Igbo. These dynamics were evident in our research. As one interviewee put it,

> *Nke anyi wu nke anyi* [Our property is our property]. The technologies Biafra developed during the war are symbols of ability to rule ourselves. The fact that we (Biafra-Igbo) have such skill shows that we can be on our own. These technologies are signs of strength and hard work, you see, those technologies give me hope and drive me to continue to protest for Biafra. Biafra we hail thee! (KII 1)

Similarly, speaking of war relics, another interviewee stated,

> Biafra protest will continue, because I know that we (Biafra-Igbo) can do it ourselves. We have proofs those Biafra technologies are Igbo-made, as long [as] the relics of those technologies continue to exist, the protest will continue, our strength is my motivation, let the protest continue! (IDI 3)

For many Igbo activists, the ethnic excellence indicated by these war technologies was evidence that, failing full secession from Nigeria and the return of the Biafran nation-state, the Igbo at least deserve greater rights and recognition in Nigeria than they currently experience (Onuoha 2014). However, as the two quotes indicate, these relics of war continue to be a source of hope for those desiring a return to Biafran independence.

### Statue of Colonel Ojukwu

If one drives from Lagos State in southwest Nigeria to Onitsha in Anambra State, the area that was, from 1967 to 1970, the Republic of Biafra, the route is likely to pass over Niger Bridge. At this bridge—once an entrance into the Biafran state—stands a statue of Colonel Ojukwu, the leader who declared Biafra independent in 1967 and led the Biafran side through the Civil War. This statue holds considerable symbolic importance to many Igbo, and to Biafra activists in particular. The Colonel Ojukwu statue (see figure 12.5) stands as a symbol of *Ikemba* (strength of the nation), and often serves as a converging point for staging Biafra protests, especially in Onitsha, Anambra State.

The very existence of this statue is a source of inspiration and a stimulus for demonstrators. Its positioning at the "entrance" to Biafra is suggestive

Fig. 12.5. Statue of Colonel Ojukwu at Niger Bridge, Anambra State, Nigeria (*Credit:* Photograph © Scholastica Atata.)

of protection, connecting the notion of the Biafran state to ideas of safety and security. The "father of the nation," standing to protect his people, is a source of inspiration in the current Biafran struggle. As one of our interviewees put it:

> We [Biafra activists] converge at the Ojukwu statue to draw inspiration from him, as you know he [Ojukwu] is the father of Biafraland. Anything we want to do must come from him, as his statue is here, we see him as being here to lead us through this protest. On Biafra we stand! (KII 2)

Another interviewee buttresses this point:

> The Ojukwu statue is our main source of inspiration. He was (because he is dead) and will continue to be our *Ikemba* (because he lives on). His statue motivates and shows us that he is in support of our Biafra agitation. (KII 3)

Behind the Colonel Ojukwu statue an inscription reads "gateway," marking the entrance to Biafra from Nigeria. Positioning the statue in this symbolic space is not simply a reminder to the rest of Nigeria of the Biafran struggle, but it plays an important internal function, acting as a constant reminder to the Igbo people of the need for Biafra.

The role played by Colonel Ojukwu during the Nigerian Civil War has received the attention of several scholars (Ademoyega 1981; Achuzia 1986; Diamond 2007; see Achebe 2012; Alabi-Isama 2013). It is difficult to overstate his centrality in the Biafran struggle. Acting as premiere of the state and leader of its armed forces, Ojukwu was the undisputed leader of the movement and the "father of the nation." It was Ojukwu who announced the secession of Biafra from Nigeria on May 30, 1967, after he and General Yakubu Gowon failed to reach a political compromise. Further, it was Ojukwu who officially named the new nation-state "Biafra" (Nkpa 1977). Hence, it is unsurprising that, since its unveiling in 2012, the Ojukwu statue at Niger Bridge has become a rallying point in present-day Biafra political contention.

In the years since the statue was erected, its location has been the site of numerous protests. For example, in December 2015, more than 20,000 pro-Biafra protesters descended on Niger Bridge, blocking traffic to the southeastern region from the rest of Nigeria (Iaccino 2015). After several hours of the blockade, the Nigerian Joint Military Task Force fired on the protesters, killing nine of them. Such events only reinforce and reinvigorate the statue's significance as a memorial to the Biafra struggle. As with the flag and the relics of war, the Colonel Ojukwu statue functions as a potent symbolic resource for Biafran activists. Just as the narratives of Biafran nationhood get written onto these objects, so too do these objects contribute ideas, values, and themes to the (re)production of these very narratives. As a result of this cyclical process, these objects act as highly operative resources for pro-Biafra activism in Nigeria today.

## Conclusion

As the various symbolic objects discussed in this chapter demonstrate, a range of artifacts that refer to the Nigerian Civil War play crucial roles in present-day Biafran activism. The Biafran flag, relics of war technology, and the statue of Colonel Ojukwu help produce Biafran/Igbo solidarity, social cohesion, and unity in opposition to the Nigerian state. In Biafran street protest events, these objects fan the flames of rebellion, evoke memories of the armed struggle and past glories of the Biafran state, and create a sense of pride in Biafran/Igbo identity. They tell stories about, and to, the Biafran nation. A core feature of this narrative, at least in its interpretation by pro-Biafra activists and protesters, is one of collective resistance. In this way, these symbolic objects of Biafran nationhood serve as semiotic ammunition for contemporary Biafra agitation.

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# The Mask as Political Symbol

## *On the Ritualization of Political Protest through Mask-Wearing*

Bjørn Thomassen and Lone Riisgaard

The "hot" fall of 2019 saw a series of popular political protests around the globe.[1] The range (strikes, marches, sit-downs, outright street riots) and global spread of the protests led several commentators to talk about a new "wave of protests." This "wave" included people taking to the streets in Chile, Hong Kong, Paris, India, Cameroon, Spain, Ecuador, Iran, the Philippines, and Sudan, to mention a few salient hotspots. Many of these protests continued into 2020. Not without reason, commentators started to perceive a global replay of the Arab Spring. A major topic of journalistic and academic debate became the simple yet important question: What do these protests have in common? Can we identify "root causes"?

On November 16, 2019, *Welt am Sonntag* cleared its front page with the title: "Where Does the Anger Come From?" followed by a four-page article by Sascha Lehnartz, who wrote, "It is tempting to look for a global theory that can explain why citizens in so many countries take to the streets in protest against their government. But the causes are as diverse as the involved citizen groups" (Lehnartz 2019). Most certainly, in terms of what the protesters wanted to achieve, one could (and still can) witness a bewil-

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1. Parts of this chapter draw on an article published in *Theory, Culture & Society*; see Riisgaard and Thomassen (2016), "Powers of the Mask: Political Subjectivation and Rites of Participation in Local-Global Protest," https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416651685

dering diversity. In Hong Kong people wanted democracy, in Catalonia they claimed independence, in Lebanon people took to the streets because of a new tax on WhatsApp, in Chile people protested against rising prices on public transport, in India there were strong elements of gender and religion behind the protests, in Egypt and Iran the issues were seemingly of a completely different kind. But was (is) there no system to the madness?

In an article in the *Washington Post* titled, "Why Are There So Many Protests across the Globe Right Now?" Fareed Zakaria launched the hypothesis that even if the protests on the surface looked different, they were all rooted in the economy—and more specifically, the collapse of economic growth: "When growth collapses, anxieties rise, especially among the middle class who feel squeezed, get enraged by corruption and inequality, and have the capacity to voice their anger" (Zakaria 2019).

Still, in *Welt am Sonntag*, Lehnartz expressed her skepticism about that explanation, citing the fact that the 2008 financial crisis spurred fewer protests. Lehnartz instead pointed toward the demographic factor as explanatory: "41% of the world's population is less than 24 years old. It is not new that protest movements are carried by young people, who fear for their future" (Lehnartz 2019).

From a left-leaning (post-Marxist) perspective, writers such as Paul Mason sustained the "economic explanation," identifying the wave of protests as evidence of the structural weaknesses of global capitalism, a system of exploitation whose true nature was becoming increasingly visible to the broader disenfranchised masses. Finally, the cruel nature of capitalism had dawned on the people!

On October 25, Amnesty International posted an article, "Protests Around the World Explained." From their viewpoint, what was at stake was fundamentally a question of political rights:

> Sadly, a common thread throughout these protests has been an extremely harsh response from the state, which in many instances [has] amounted to gross violations of human rights. [ . . . ] Protesters are exercising their human rights and should be allowed to do so. But what is just as important is that the reasons why people are taking to the streets are also often linked to human rights concerns.

In this chapter we wish to provide a different answer to the same question: what—if anything—ties together protesters around the world today? While recognizing some solid truths in all of the above accounts (yes,

inequality matters; yes, political freedoms matter; yes, accusations of corruption are a common theme), we wish to point to a commonality of a completely different kind, not related to the substance of grievances, but to a crucial performative aspect in the art of political protest: the fact that in the protests that unfolded during the fall of 2019, protesters made use of masks. Mask-wearing was not a complete novelty within the art of protest. Indeed, the use of masks in political protest has slowly established itself as a "repertoire of contention" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) since the antiglobal movement(s) emerged during the late 1990s. What one could witness in late 2019 was in a sense nothing but a particularly visible confirmation of a trend that started about two decades ago. But it opens up a bigger discussion and more general question that we would like to address in this chapter: *why* do political protesters today use masks?

Engaging this question leads us right to the main theme of this book, because we need to ask the even more fundamental question: what kind of symbolic object is the mask, that it can perform a political function that is apparently globally applicable? The aim of this chapter is to provide some elements of a plausible answer, although not an exhaustive one. Toward this aim, we will not go into further detail with any specific protest movement, but rather explore the semantic complexity of mask-wearing rituals in a broader comparative vein, providing brief examples as we go along.

Let us stress from the outset that our focus on the mask as a distinct material object and powerful political symbol is anything but a mere interest in artistic forms. Our hypothesis is, rather, that engaging with the performative powers of the mask allows us to capture something quite crucial about contemporary representational politics, revealing a problematique that resides with the Habermasian communicative rationality (Habermas 1984) of the modern "public" and the "sphere" in which it operates. Our proposal is that comparison can be profitable exactly at the level of artistic forms and processes, rather than merely focusing on structural "causes" or "sufficient conditions." It seems to us that this volume invites a comparative engagement that works *through* ritual dynamics of political processes and hence moves beyond the dichotomies of structure/agency, materialism/idealism, or content/form.

Our argument is not an invitation to celebrate masked rituals as a happy consequence of new-gained creativity; something more is at stake. Nor is it a question of taking sides with masked protesters against a neoliberal "system," or belittling or disregarding altogether the historical achievements of the liberal democratic state that is now being called into ques-

tion. Our analysis starts from the in-between space created by masked performances, and our aim is to throw light on the nature of the political meaning-formation and the exact type of communication that take place in masked political protest. In short, we wish to discuss the symbolic language of the mask.

We thus start from the assumption that protest forms are highly ritualized, and as such generate symbolic resources that direct and inspire processes of transformation. Put briefly, the mask offers an opportunity for subjects to construe their relationship with power. To explore this further, we briefly revisit and revive key insights from historians, anthropologists, and philosophers in order to argue that the powers of the mask reside not mainly in hiding the identity of the mask-wearer, but rather in the "liminal" transformative ability of masks to unify and transcend key oppositional categories and thereby dissolve the binary oppositions that form the very foundation of how we make sense of the world—and thereby create possibilities of action within it. Indeed, our hypothesis is that mask-wearing facilitates and expresses a subjectivity that negates fixed identities and the very ideal of representation of relatively bounded interests that lies at the heart of the liberal democracy.

We consider these oppositional pairs in turn and via brief examples illustrate their continuing relevance and transformative potential. Based on these insights and building on earlier Bakhtin-inspired critiques of Habermas (see Gardiner 2004) and liberal democratic normativity, we then elaborate on the nature of the political meaning-formation that takes place in masked political protest.

We focus on what the mask enables, not what it hides. We acknowledge the juridical significance masks may carry in hiding the identity of the bearer from authorities, and the increasing importance of this with the advent of new surveillance technologies such as face-recognition software. Yet we are not interested in authority-evading strategic uses of masks, but in mask-wearing practices where "authorities" are openly addressed. In a similar vein we do *not* explore the use of masks in protests that are primarily aimed at violence or political terror. The focus in this chapter is on the cultural and dynamic properties of nonviolent mask-wearing in political protests.

## Powers of the Mask: Anthropological Foundations

The so-called "normal" may be more of a game, played in masks (personae), with a script, than certain ways of behaving "without a mask," that are

culturally defined as "abnormal," "aberrant," "eccentric," or "way-out" (Turner 1974, 78).

To understand the powers of the mask in contemporary politics, we start by taking a step back and open with some general considerations concerning masks and masked rituals. While masks and rituals of mask-wearing hardly figure as a key topic in political science or political sociology, the theme has indeed been touched on by historians, anthropologists, and philosophers—not to mention poets and writers, from Yeats to Blixen. Masked actors also took center stage in modernist artwork. Intriguingly, almost every single artist whose works sought to elaborate and penetrate the continuous eruption of (political) violence in modernity, would paint his subjects as masked creatures, from Tiepolo to Goya and Picasso. From the eighteenth century, artistic representations of revolutions or dramatic social and political change repeatedly depicted these key transitional moments as a carnivalesque setting-loose of uncontrollable forces, dominated by masked figures.

Moving further back in time, masks have been looked on with deep suspicion by Western religion. Before Christianity, Judaism, like all other religions of Semitic origin, had banned every use of the mask, together with the cult of images. This in and of itself raises a series of unresolved questions, for masked performances had played a huge role in the Hellenic and Roman cultural contexts. Such a prohibition cannot simply be interpreted in an evolutionist key, as a coming to maturity, establishing more rational forms of communication. A prohibition must amount to the recognition of something *problematic*, an identification of the powers at stake in mask-wearing rituals, and an experienced recognition of the possible *use and abuse* of such powers.

Interestingly, bans on the use of masks during public demonstrations flourish again today (antimask laws have been passed, for example, in Canada, Denmark, France, and Bahrain), often on the pretext of antiterror legislation—accentuating the criminal connotations of mask-wearing and clearly positioning the mask as an unacceptable political instrument. However, the fear of the mask runs deeper than the security threat involved in having unidentifiable protesters roaming in public. An essential part of the quasimystical power of mask-wearing is best understood as something immanent in the *object* of the mask in conjunction with the *act* of mask-wearing. Thus, although the specific connotations vary according to cultural context, mask-wearing is in and of itself an extremely powerful tool of expression. It has explicitly discussed as such only by very few social theorists.

Fig. 13.1. The Triumph of Pulcinella, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1754). "The Triumph of Pulcinella" is a series of paintings that deal with the carnival. In Tiepolo's works the pulcinella often appears in several "cloned" versions that take part in mirth-provoking or slapstick scenes. Directly inspired by the political upheavals of his time, Tiepolo sees the pulcinella figure as spreading, copying itself into the many, forming a crowd.

In 1952 the young Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno wrote an essay in Italian, "Saggio sulla Maschera," inspired by theater plays he saw in Paris, and visits to mask exhibitions in the Paris museums. The essay (translated into English as "An Essay on the Mask," Pizzorno 2010) offers a useful vantage point for reflecting on the relationships between material and artistic forms and on the social life of symbols and rituals. Without engaging Pizzorno's larger sociological project (see Della Porta, Greco, and Szakolczai, 2000), our argument takes a cue from the analytical openings present in Pizzorno's essay, which resonate with insights from process approaches in anthropology, as in Arnold van Gennep and Victur Turner. Pizzorno starts by confronting the standard approach to masks, this "purely psychological and negative notion of mask: something behind which the face of man hides" (2010, 6). In fact, linguists trace the use of the term meaning "to disguise" back to the middle of the nineteenth century, and not beyond. As noted by Marcel Mauss (1985) in his classical essay on personhood (which clearly inspired Pizzorno's essay), the very word for

*person* derives from the Latin word for mask used in Roman theater (possibly borrowed from the Etruscan *phersu*, also literally meaning a mask). Describing the notion of personhood among the Zuni, Mauss insisted that we should not consider the wearing of a mask as different from any "real" person behind the mask. The person *is* the mask, and in exactly this Maussian sense the mask can be considered a "technique of the body" (Mauss 1950). This understanding is only possible if we attempt to move outside a moderno-centric worldview (on moderno-centrism, see Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019). The person is a human being, but this designation is not based on a Kantian fiction of "autonomy"; quite the contrary—"persona" derives from the Latin verb, "per/sonare," that is, to "sound through." The mask is something *spoken through*. The mask does not conceal, it gives voice. The mask does not hide the subject, it constitutes subjecthood (this observation is also related to the literal and original sense of subjectivity as being "thrown under": sub/jectum). As Saramifar (chapter 3, this volume) notes, people may pursue objects such as these "to surrender to them, positing them as a medium that facilitates transition and enables access to new modes of subjectivity."

### The Mask as a Material Object and the Act of Mask-Wearing

The making of masks is an extremely old practice, probably going back to the early Neolithic (c. 8000 BC; see Pernet 2006, 31)—but almost certainly not much further. It can be considered an extremely important technological discovery, an instance of preparing something for the sole purpose of producing an effect (Szakolczai 2010, 173). Pizzorno immediately identifies the mask as a material object, *a thing:* "Before being placed on the face of a man, it has a reality of its own, and thus an autonomous function" (2010, 6).

To continue on the mask's materiality, masks are physical surfaces, most often two-dimensional. When placed on the face, they represent a boundary between the single person and the world outside. In this sense the mask is often considered as a threshold or a door (see again Szakolczai 2010). Put differently, and following here the process approach of Victor Turner (1988), masks are bearers and vehicles of liminality (Thomassen 2014; Van Gennep 2019, chapter 2). They essentially perform a mediating or in-between role (Lorrain 1900); it limits, by setting up a boundary—but as a threshold, it also brings into contact two distinct realities: subject/object, inside/outside, frame/message.

Therefore, Pizzorno stresses that a primary function of the mask is to create *participation*. *Wearing* a mask is no joking matter; it is intoxicating and liberating, as Roger Caillois put it (2001, 75). The full potential of this experiential effect, however, requires that there be someone to watch; the mask is put on for others, and in the ritual context its mystic power emanates via a powerful gaze of gazes. The masked individual can look at others, while not himself or herself being seen: it gives an enormous power, strikingly similar to Foucault's panopticon. No one knows what may not burst forth from behind the mask, and the tension created by the contrast between its appearance and the secret it hides can become almost unbearable. This is the *terror* (Pizzorno 2010, 15) the mask inspires. "I am exactly what you see," it proclaims, "and everything you fear is behind me" (Canetti 1984, 376).

These potentialities of the mask are not just of interest to ancient historians and comparative anthropologists; they somehow speak to central aspects of the modern public sphere. In his recent book, *Comedy and the Public Sphere* (2013), Arpad Szakolczai, much inspired by Pizzorno, proposes a path-breaking genealogy of the public sphere, moving completely outside established traditions in social theory. The general point is that we have overlooked a series of cultural practices that became foundational to the emergence of the modern public sphere, centuries before the Parisian coffee saloons. Szakolczai focuses for very good reasons on the role played by comedy in the late Renaissance and early modernity, as mimes, clowns, and comedians literally came to conquer public squares and spaces, starting from Venice and Italy. The mask returned to Europe right on the threshold of modernity, via carnival and theater. Building on this insight from Szakolczai, the more specific point we now wish to pursue is how the role of mask-wearing in current political contestation can also be analyzed against such an anthropological reading.

## Binary Opposites and Their Mediation

Following Pizzorno, it is possible to analyze the mask through a series of oppositional pairs that together animate its materiality: fixity/transformation, absence/presence, one/many, death/life, being/not being. The mask gains its social life via these binaries, exactly because it is situated in a liminal position that both divides and brings together (on the mask and liminality, see Szakolczai 2013, in particular part I). Let us consider these pairs, and exemplify them as we go along.

## *Absence/Presence, Hiding/Revealing—the Question of Authority*

The power of the mask further emanates through a delicate game between absence and presence. The mask "does not perform the simple function of an image, as a statue might do: the mask indicates absence, at the same time as it affirms a presence. It is an empty, two-dimensional face, its head, its body are all that is not there" (Pizzorno 2010, 7). The mask hides *and* reveals, says Pizzorno. The mask creates an absence by erasing the real human being; it is a disappearance and a void that resembles death, but out of this void something new is created.

The most widespread global symbol of theatrical protest in contentious politics today is the Guy Fawkes mask. This mask first appeared in the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd in 1981[2] and later became associated with hacktivist group Anonymous's Project Chanology protests against the Church of Scientology in 2008. Since then the mask has been widely used in protests across the world.[3] As Pizzorno noted, a mask changes the person. Or, as Martin puts it, the mask "causes the reveler to become another without reneging on his or her self, it engenders a combination of the self and of one or several other(s)" (Martin 2001, 16). Exactly because the mask negates unitary conceptions of the self, but rather opens the self to exploration, masked protest is a symbolic staging with a counterpart: the uniform (note the word, uni-form, *one* form, viz. the verb, to uniformize).

In fact, the striking fact about many masks used by current-day protesters is that the identification established involves the very symbols of power contested, with protesters variously masking as corporate businessmen, bankers, politicians, and policemen, as illustrated in this image from a demonstration against the global antipiracy treaty, ACTA in Frankfurt am main in 2012 (see figure 13.2). The image shows two masked protesters dressed in uniform business outfits—a combination that forges identification with corporate interests while at the same time mocking and exposing them.

In other protests (e.g., the Million Mask Marches or the political contestation in Hong Kong), we see masked protesters wearing police or military uniforms. By forging an identification with institutional authority, the uniformed mask wearer seems to expose and undermine state power from

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2. For a detailed analysis of the anarchist critique levied by the novel and later its film version from 2006, see Call (2008).

3. For a range of examples see https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/opinion/guy-fawkes -day-v-for-vendetta.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share; accessed June 2020.

Fig. 13.2. "Save the Internet" demonstration in Munich, Germany (2019)
(*Credit:* Photograph © Henning Schlottmann, 2019; CC BY-SA 4.0.)

within. As a participatory tool, the mask permits its wearers to engage in ironic and consciously defiant theatrics that essentially question state powers' very right to authority. It 'calls out' the source of this authority from behind its protective veil of black suits and ties wielding empty or abstract political principles.

This strategy is almost the opposite of that adopted by political protesters in the 1970s, who consciously tried to look as *different* as possible from authorities (naked, unshaved, long-haired). What we have now is Weber's rational legitimacy challenged by charismatic legitimacy, or, using Dumézil's terms (as discussed in Caillois 2001, 101–2), we have an order *legiste* versus an order *frénétique*—and the dichotomy could not be more openly displayed. Johnson (2001, 108), in his analysis of the role of clothes as signifiers after the French Revolution, notes how uniforms are "the ultimate visual expression of a politics of sincerity." Therefore, when a mask is superimposed on a uniform, this "politics of sincerity" is exposed as a deceit, and the general will and abstract equality that the uniform is supposed to represent is turned on its head.

### The One and the Many: The Question of the "Public"

The mask is a fixed representation, literally like a facial expression frozen in time. "The mask is distinguished from all the other end-states of transformation by its rigidity. In place of the varying and continuous movement of the face it presents the exact opposite: a perfect fixity and sameness" (Canetti 1984, 374). It is this sameness that allows for its copying. The mask can transform the person wearing it, even as it always stays the same.

But just as mask-wearing refutes fixed and uniform identities, the mask at the same time allows a new form of universalism or collectivity that all protesters can join by simply wearing the mask, regardless of the motives that animate their protest.

> Instead of embracing the first person singular "I" (the self-identical subject), masks and costumes also allow these movements to create a new form of third person subjectivity: "we." Instead of being isolated by their identity, the mask allows for a new form of universalism, since the mask can be worn by anyone. (Nail 2013)

The impersonality that the mask brings forth is therefore crucial: Personifying and enacting the idea of renewal, revelers demonstrate that collective life is indestructible, regardless of the demise of individuals (Martin 2001). In fact, mask-wearing does not negate identity but "instead it signifies the possibility of a multiplicity of identities" gathered in a collective movement (Ruiz 2013, 275). The spread of masks indicates a mimetic process and the mechanical reproduction of sameness, *mockingly* so. In this way, mask-wearing political rituals reject a modernist, rational, identity-based individuality. Instead of the modern autonomous individual—that problematic pillar of social and political thought—we have a decentered and slippery person, jokingly multiplying into the many.[4] Instead of the individual—*in-dividuum*, that which cannot be divided—we have the one and the many blurring into each other, and the very principle of division and re-aggregation is exposed.

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4. In, *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri (2004) included a section titled "Carnival and Movement," devoted to "protests that are carnivalesque, however, not only in their atmosphere [but] also in their organization." They credited Bakhtin for "help[ing] us understand . . . the logic of the multitude, a theory of organization based on the freedom of singularities that converge in the production of the common."

This is well illustrated by the message on the 9,000 masks distributed during the Carnival against Capitalism in the City of London in 1999:

> Dressing up and disguise, the blurring of identities and boundaries, transformation, transgression; all are brought together in the wearing of masks. Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together, to shout as one to those who rule and divide us "we are all fools, deviants, outcasts, clowns and criminals." Today we shall give this resistance a face; for by putting on our masks we reveal our unity; and by raising our voices in the street together, we speak our anger at the facelessness of power. (author unknown)[5]

While recognizing that other forms of costumed political protest, such as the wearing of red dresses or yellow vests, also facilitate a collectivity that transgresses identity-based individuality (see, for example, Lavender 2019), the powers of the mask, as we shall discuss below, run much deeper.

### Death/Life—the Opening of a Different World

As we learn from religious practices, masks and mask-wearing practices have enormous powers that need to be tightly controlled to avoid threatening to unravel the established structures of society as we know it. These immanent and arguably perennial features of mask-wearing are also described by Martin (2001). Masked performances are symbolic markers of renewal: they are placed in a ritual sequence with liminality in the center: a beginning, something about to emerge, liminality, an end. But the seeds of renewal are still hidden, not to be seen, and the order of the cosmos to come lies hidden and undeclared in its substance. Putting on a mask is a symbolic entry into a new calendar, a different marking of time, an entry into a new cosmic order where other rules prevail. It is not only a subversion, but something much more radical in terms of protest: it is the opening of a different world—or as phrased by the Occupy movement, "another world is possible."

Often political protesters use the language of binary opposites quite consciously, as illustrated by the Zapatista movement: "In order for them to see us," Subcomandante Marcos says, "we covered our faces; so that they would call us by name, we gave up our names; we bet the present to have

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5. Accessed October 2014 at http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/carnival.html

Fig. 13.3. Anti-ACTA demonstration in Frankfurt am Main, Germany (*Credit:* Photograph © Heiko S, 2019, CC BY 2.0.)

a future; and to live . . . we died" (from Marcos *Ya Basta!*, 115, quoted in Nail 2013).

Life and death, indeed; much like the Ndembu neophytes studied by Turner, who ritually paint their faces black and white to emulate death—a death that is not merely symbolic, as the person undergoing the ritual actually does cease to exist, only to transfigure into something or somebody else (Turner 1967).

What Turner recognized as the jointly destructive/creative energies of the liminal period are equally at play here, and the political protests playing out on our urban squares are prime examples of what he termed "public liminality." "The village greens or the squares of the city are not abandoned but rather ritually transformed" (Turner 1988, 102). This public liminality is also what Turner (1988, 102)(1988: 102) calls "public subjunctivity": "For a while, anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed, the low are exalted and the mighty abased" (see Thomassen 2012 for a general application of Turner's work to the study of political revolution).[6]

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6. Jeffrey Alexander (2004) equally sees a performance-based approach as the only meaningful way to move beyond the structure/agency divide, and refers to the work of Victor Turner when arguing that social performances can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones. However, Alexander ultimately grounds his performance approach in a Goffman-Durkheim tradition. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, Alexander argues, social performances must engage in a project of "re-fusion," bringing together the various symbolic elements into a whole and communicating meaning to an audience. It is only in this way that rituals become effective, and this "success" relies on the integrative powers of the performance. This is ultimately a problematic perspective in general (see Thomassen [2016] for further discussion), but it positively prevents an analysis of mask-wearing practices that

While contemporary contentious politics is not simply identical to theatrical performances (with their scripts, stages, actors, and audiences) or carnivals (with their temporary lifting of bans and taboos and their ritual inversion of hierarchies and power), many features are similar and are consciously used as such by the protesters. Indeed, political revolutions are quintessential examples of liminality at the macro level (Thomassen 2012), characterized by the recurring use of theatrical performances and carnivalesque techniques. By putting on masks, the protesters invoke a carnivalesque sense of exception.

Carnivals are not political facts first and foremost, but they can *become* political. They become political already by an essential analogy that under specific circumstances transforms into isomorphism: carnivals are plays on life and death, order and disorder, self and the other, hiding while becoming manifest. For Georges Balandier, "in carnival order and disorder are like the obverse and the reverse of a coin: inseparable . . ." (as quoted in Martin 2001, 16). Or, as Martin states it, with reference to Da Matta, carnivals reverse

> the surface of everyday life in playful fantasy. Carnival, however, plays not only with the surface but with what the surface hides[. . . .] Carnival's logic is totalizing, a both-and rather than either-or game[. . . .] Inversion theory is not false, but it is falsifying because it neglects the dynamics that connect what Bakhtin calls "debasement" [ . . . ] with incorporation, the dream of ever more inclusive, total ways of feeling, desiring and acting. (Martin 2001, 4)

Not only does the mask not hide: it manifests what is. If politics is power over life and death, then carnival is a ritual staging, unraveling, and renewal of life and death. Carnival, as political power, is therefore a technique of subjectivation, and it is this technique—ancient and novel—that the sheer putting on of the mask evokes and operates.

### Being/Nonbeing—and the Question of "Representation"

"Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloguing: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival

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are exactly not about a "whole," and that simply cannot be captured within a Durkheiman form of "collective representation."

needs masks, thousands of masks; and our masks are not to conceal our identity but to reveal it" (Author unknown; printed on the back of the 9,000 masks distributed at the 1999 London Carnival against Capital).[7]

In various local/global protest performances, the rejections of fixed and uniform identities are taken a step further to expose and reject the idea of representative democracy itself. In his short but insightful piece, "The Medes," Nail (2013) identifies "a practical and theoretical convergence of the mask" with what he calls the "anti-representational political movements" of the last 20 years, ranging from the black balaclavas worn by the Zapatistas to the Guy Fawkes masks worn in Occupy demonstrations around the world. He—correctly in our view—sees mask-wearing in contemporary political protest as a political and strategic critique of "the currently dominant form of political subjectivity based on identity" (Nail 2013). What is targeted here is the very idea of representative democracy. "Political parties and states . . . require some form of identity to represent" (Nail 2013). If you do not display an identity to be represented, you are not counted as a citizen. Escaping this trap therefore liberates a new potential.

By refusing to be identified, mask-wearing protesters reject the legitimacy of state representation in favor of principles of direct participatory democracy and a multiplicity of identities and positions. Masked protesters are not asking the state to represent them, nor are they seeking the recognition of yet another minority to be "included"—they are calling for a different order altogether.

This critique is related to another key feature of the liberal democratic model, namely that of interest representation—the expression of interest groups with more or less bounded strategic interests that can be represented. As noted by Thévenot and Lamont (2000), the principle of representing a wide range of interests, through political parties or stakeholders, is at the heart of a broader liberal political model of deliberation and of balancing group interests and power (Cheyns and Riisgaard 2014).

Indeed, theater is the ideal form for representational experimentation (Agnew 1986). It is from here that the political notion of representation derives, and it is from here that it can be questioned once again. By wearing masks and costumes, masked participants "reject the traditional presupposition that political minorities are seeking a party to represent them precisely by refusing to allow visible signs of participants' specific identities to be identified" (Nail 2013). According to Nail, the history of representation

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7. Accessed October 2014 at http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/carnival.html

has so far been one of misrepresentation. And thus in contrast to "different minority identities vying for representation, the use of masks disidentifies these movements and allows them to speak for themselves, in their own name" (Nail 2013).

Thus, mask-wearing facilitates and expresses an alternative subjectivity to the one prescribed by the liberal democracy model. This subjectivity is not based on fixed identity and representation of relatively bounded interests. The nature of those very interests is put into play: "By wearing a mask in protest, the protesters are unraveling the apparatus of representation itself" (Nail 2013).

A political subjectivity based on identity and interest representation and the very ideal of coherence and consensus-seeking is transcended. The World Social Forum and Occupy Wall Street are good examples here. They explicitly have no aim of reaching overall consensus, they make no collectively binding decisions, they have no general will or no common strategy, no central decision-making mechanisms. In other words, "consensus" as understood here simply means open participation, and thus does not aim to reduce the variety of viewpoints to a generalized social will (on this see Conway and Singh 2009; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Gerbaudo 2017).[8]

Thus, in the actions of various protest movements one can discern a deep critique of liberal democratic political imaginaries, an attempt to reimagine the political as more open-ended and without the imperative of uniformizing—a perspective that fits exceptionally well with the inherent qualities of mask-wearing, namely, to deny fixed identities and representations of bounded interests and instead to insist on open spaces, diversity, participation, and open ends. A good example of such positionality is the "Sardines movement" that emerged in Italy in November 2019 and for many months dominated the streets and squares of Italy. Representatives of the Sardines have up until today insisted that they do not seek any form of political representation. They have explicitly banned political party symbols during protests for the very same reason. Like the Occupy movement, the Sardines explicitly make a point out of not seeking consensus, leaving things open and creating spaces of heterogeneity or antihegemony in their widest sense. They are, in line with World Social Forum and the Zapatis-

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8. Based on their analysis of the World Social Forum, Conway and Singh (2009, 75) suggest that "the imperative to arrive at universally binding outcomes may in fact impede social solidarity and hinder collective action by raising the stakes of deliberation in a way that necessarily suppresses diversity, emphasizes division among interlocutors, and turns participants into competitors fighting to define the 'general' will and to determine the final outcomes that will be binding on all."

Fig. 13.4. Protests in Santiago, Chile, in 2019 (*Credit:* © Carlos Figueroa, courtesy of the artist, CC BY-SA 4.0.)

tas, opposed to "*pensamientos unicos*"—universal thinking—hegemony of any sort that denies the possibility of other ways of thinking. For these purposes, mask-wearing is a perfect fit.

This is not to say that that mask-wearing political protesters always reject representative democracy. Increasingly, during political protests we see the mask in combination with national or political identity markers such as flags, as illustrated in the photo (fig. 13.4) of a 2019 protest in Santiago, Chile (Gerbaudo 2016; Barret 2019). Gerbaudo (2016) described this combination as a merger of neo-anarchism (signified by the mask) with a kind of democratic populism (signified by the flag). Hence, in some cases, masked protests might be seen as opposing misrepresentation and abuse of power rather than rejecting representative political institutions altogether.

### Binary Opposites and Their Sublimation

Masks evoke danger, and this is still so when they are used in the context of protests and contentious politics today, although the powers called on may no longer refer to the same religious forces as in earlier periods. As argued by Johnson (2001) and further developed in Ruiz (2013), images of masked

humans evoke the fear of an unidentifiable but organized threat to society. However, mask-wearing associated with political contestation plays much less on "the organized threat to society," at least in the more traditional revolutionary sense of wanting to replace the current regime. So what is the real power of the mask?

No substantive answer can be given. Building on Pizzorno's insights, the game of unifying or sublimating key oppositional pairs—the very cognitive building blocks of how we make sense of the world—is extremely powerful. It nullifies established categories that are essential to our language, our understanding of the world, and our navigation in it—leaving it open, mutable, and undefined, in a liminal state where anything can happen, where "another world is possible." Thus, the conventional boundaries of the possible/impossible no longer restrict. Or rather, the mask serves to *identify* those categories, expose them, and open them up to interpretation, reversal, and nullification, as indeed anticipated by Bakhtin:

> The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (Bakhtin 1984, 40)

### Continuity and Change in Ritualized Protest: Beyond Transparency

We have so far seen the liminal transformative ability of masks to unify key oppositional categories and create possibilities of action with them. We have seen how mask-wearing facilitates and expresses a subjectivity that negates fixed identities and the very ideal of representation, and how masked protesters do not simply refuse to play the "communication game" of the modern public sphere, but by doing so paradoxically unmask and expose the very ideal of transparency. Now let us explicate more clearly the language that the mask speaks in protest and contentious politics and consider some theoretical implications.

As illustrated by Johnson's (2001, 91) account of the banishment of masks by the early French revolutionaries (after having played a central role in the 1789 revolution), revolutionary transparency based on the Enlightenment ideals of sincerity and participation depended on banish-

ment of the mask, since mask-wearing would impede or conceal the workings of democracy. During the French Revolution even puppet booths were eventually closed. The very first legislation that Napoleon's troops enacted as they conquered Venice in 1797 was to prohibit carnivals and masked performances.

Yet the mask never disappeared entirely. Carnivalesque techniques have been employed over and over, and what we see today is indeed another resurgence of something that runs deeper than what is most often assumed, and that we need to re-pose as a question. After all, it was French situationist Raoul Vaneigem, with his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1994 [1967]), who fueled the May 1968 student movement with what could be called Carnival liberation theory. Presciently, Vaneigem wrote that "a strike for higher wages or a rowdy demonstration can awaken the carnival spirit," and "revolutionary moments are carnivals in which the individual life celebrates its unification with a regenerated society" (as quoted in Tancons 2014, 297).

At the same time, the context within which masked performances occur today is different from the context of 1789 or 1968. Protest movements today draw on carnivalesque techniques, but they relate such techniques to political power more directly. They bespeak power and authority in a conscious and planned manner, and they do so as a reflexive exercise aimed toward earlier periods of social protest. Current-day protests are evidence of a reflexive stance not just toward dominant institutional forms of power, but also toward the emancipatory narratives that were supposed to counter that power.

Masked protests, in particular, can be read as hyperreflexive plays on the very ideal of transparency. In a Habermasian approach, the demand for transparency grounds the "purity" of the ideal-speech situation. The language that the mask speaks is different.

In his discussion of "wild publics," Gardiner draws on Bakhtin to stress how language itself is of an open-ended dialogical nature, where speakers are not in full control of the semantic resonance of the words they use:

> [I]ndividuals can impart their own "emotional-volitional tone" to the word through various techniques (the use of irony, selective paraphrase, parody, and so forth) but they cannot unilaterally determine its meaning, which is constituted through the struggle between the polyphonic voices and never subject to closure. (Gardiner 2004, 36–37)

It is such a Bakhtin-inspired perspective, we argue, that enables us to recognize the powers of the mask. The word, says Bakhtin, is better understood as a "mask" that obfuscates rather than a "face" that reveals (as in Gardiner 2004, 37). In place of a homology between the intentions and motives of speakers and the meanings of utterances or signs they generate, masked performances employ a symbolic language characterized by polyphony and multi-accentedness, a loophole left open. Multivalence and reversibility open up a universal field of application, enabling signs and words to flow in global space in a unified language open to local interpretation—as with the Guy Fawkes mask. As argued by Call (2008) in his analysis of the Guy Fawkes mask, precisely because of its slippery nature the mask as a "free floating symbol" has become a potent instrument for postmodern anarchism and destabilization of the representational order.

The theoretical lesson is therefore that our understanding of a democratic public sphere as a transparent and inclusive space in which power has supposedly been bracketed off is not only deceptive, but part of the problem. In line with Foucault and feminist poststructuralist positions, we recall that the rhetoric of consent and inclusiveness often conceals strategic engagement, power inequalities, and exclusion (Fraser 1990; Bickford 1999; Fraser 2007b). As Nancy Fraser points out, "declaring a zone neutral is not enough to make it so, and consequently deliberation can all to easily become 'a mask for domination'" (Fraser 1990; here as quoted in Ruiz 2013, 265).[9] In a sense, the use of masks in local-global protest serves as a mirror to already masked games; it is a perpetuation of power games, but also the opening of a hybrid space of multiple reversals. The mask provides an occasion to express, contest, or adjust social representations at the most basic level, thereby giving concreteness to that "moment of opening" that Fraser recognizes—but somehow fails to identify—in her discussion of "abnormal justice" (2007a, 74).

The deeper point is therefore also that the ideal of total transparency is itself a regulatory power, reminiscent of totalitarianism. Our "freedom to enter" an ideal-speech situation implies nakedness, also in the sense of defenselessness and vulnerability (Szakolczai 2013, 20). The ideal of "open discussion" easily transmogrifies into permanent hypercriticism that denudes personal life as well as the social life of meaningful dialogical

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9. For Fraser (1990), the liberal political model assumes that it is possible to organize a democratic form of political life even though it is based on socioeconomic structures that generate systemic inequalities. This model thus supposes that social equality is not a condition for participatory parity.

sociality. In situations of highly structured asymmetries of power, political subjects need a language of truth that emanates from the threshold that the mask represents.

Thus, the mask, by refusing to recognize communicative rationality as the norm, unsettles and uncovers the covert power structures that constitute the public sphere. The mask, by refusing to play by the communicative rules that are considered acceptable in liberal democratic models, at the same time exposes how the ideals of transparency, inclusion, participation, and balance of interests in reality often obscures power inequalities and forms of exclusion. Thus, the ritual masking we have identified paradoxically must be understood as an unmasking; or, as captured by Bakhtin's notion of grotesque realism: via the grotesque, the real becomes visible.

## No Final Act

> To unmask, that was our sacred task, the task of us moderns.
> (Latour 1993, 44)

Human beings have been aware of the powers of the mask throughout history and across cultures. That is why the use of masks has been extremely circumscribed, and occasionally even banned. This is no joking matter; in many cultural settings in the past, masks could under *no circumstance* be used outside a ritual context. To put it on in private, without a ceremony master, was considered such a transgressive act that in some cases it would be punished by death. That is also why masks were almost always fabricated secretly and often destroyed or hidden after use (Caillois 2001, 87).

In addressing our question, we have been facing a perplexing puzzle that somehow goes to the heart of political modernity. Self-understanding in Western modernity can easily be pinned down by the underlying notion that only "primitive" peoples took masks seriously, while we, as rational moderns, no longer need such devices: having rid the world of superstition, we could see the world for what it truly is. It is becoming increasingly clear that this was an illusion all along. We need to go beyond and behind the Enlightenment view of rational discourse as something that can only erupt once we take off our ritualistic masks and start to communicate "freely," in an "ideal speech situation," a situation where we, stripped naked, dispossess ourselves of all our human "attributes," in full transparency.

With a mask, ambivalent and contradictory attitudes toward power can be expressed at the same time. Social representations form a shared body

of implicit images of and ideas about the society in which a group lives and the makeup of their social environment. Depending on the cultural codes particular to each group (subject to the more detailed study of particular movements that we have not engaged in here), images and ideas symbolize elements of the environment in order to make sense of it and to make action on and in it thinkable and feasible. The mask, thus, must be understood as an effective vehicle for the symbolic expression of social representations of power. Mask-wearing ritualized protests potentially push to the foreground and expose the very notions that were supposed to form the background of modern, emancipatory politics: transparency, free speech, representative democracy.

Wearing a mask is about the act of seeing, it is about a gaze. It is not a closure, but an opening, and what it opens is not a predefined substance but the very realm of the sayable, made possible through an inner projection of the seeable, thrown onto the world stage of politics-in-the-making. And perhaps here we arrive at a conclusion long ago anticipated by a theatrical writer indeed: All the world's a stage. And the theater is still called "the globe"; ever-more so.

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# Conclusion

# Advancing the Study of Objects in Contention

Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner

Symbolic objects play a variety of crucial roles in contentious politics. Objects are important devices in the strategic toolbox available to contentious players (see chapter 2). On one level, they are the "stuff" of contentious repertoires. However, they are not simply performance paraphernalia; symbolic objects are collaborators in the execution of contentious action. They can make declarations, aid in formulating new narratives and challenging old ones, and puncture the texture of public discourse. Symbolic objects can instigate powerful emotional responses, influencing the targets of contentious performances, observers, and even the contentious actors themselves. In some instances, they not only speak of liberation and emancipation, but *bring forth* a sense of liberation and emancipation among the actors involved (see the Biafran flag in chapter 12, the street in chapter 6, the Mekap shoe in chapter 11, and the mask in chapter 13). Symbolic objects can create concrete points of visibility for movements beyond the human bodies associated with everyday protest (see chapters 2, 4, and 9), or conceal movement activity by referencing a more ambiguous or differently associated symbol (see chapters 3, 10, and 13). They can also create transformative spaces where ontological assumptions are broken down, thereby allowing for new "possibilities of action" (chapter 13). Contentious actors may also strategically utilize the interplay between symbolic objects visibilizing and invizibilizing qualities to craft effective and complex contentious performances that marry symbolic communication and direct action.

As the various chapters in this volume have outlined, the meanings attached to symbolic objects are mutable: new interpretations may be brought to the fore and alternative connotations subverted or evaded. In chapter 10, Selbin illuminates how the pervasive repetition of a symbol across objects and time may fundamentally affect its meaning, leading to a figure such as Che Guevara being commodified, commercialized, globalized, and symbolically emptied. Yet the chapter also speaks to the resilience of symbolism despite repeated objectification, showing how, despite this process, something of el Che's semiotic power has been nonetheless retained. By the same measure, in chapter 5, Dobroski describes how colonists' uses of indigenous American feathered headdresses have obscured indigenous meanings, leading to processes of colonial amnesia coming to be embodied by such objects. Symbolic objects can be modified to alter their potency and narrative properties, from changing an object through affixing a mark, inscription, or signature (see chapter 7), to modifying bodies by setting them aflame (see Zuev, chapter 9) or conducting bodywork practices (see Zawilski, chapter 8). This volume also includes considerations of who or what has the power to make or adapt the meanings attached to symbolic objects, as seen in the relatively limited ability of elites to reframe the body on fire (chapter 9), in stark contrast to the routine construction of state-sanctioned narratives around martyrdom (see Saramifar, chapter 3) or the reading of bodywork by the Canadian security forces at the 2010 G20 Summit protests (chapter 8).

One overarching purpose of this book has been to draw attention to the role of symbolic objects in contentious politics. Despite the consistent and often important role played by such objects in episodes and processes of contention, the subject has historically been understudied and undertheorized, leaving research in the area all too often disparate and disjointed. This book does not aim to "fill a gap" (it is at present impossible to ascertain the boundaries of such a gap), but rather to help develop a more unified field of study in relation to symbolic objects, and to encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplines.

In pursuit of our goal, we brought together scholars from several continents and disciplinary backgrounds to consider the roles and realities embodied and played out by symbolic objects in contentious politics. In this concluding chapter, we draw together some overarching themes that can be observed across the volume's various contributions, before highlighting what we see as some of the key areas for future research on the topic.

## Impact and Potency

A theme that reverberates throughout this volume is the question of how symbolic objects come to have an impact in contentious politics. Chapters in this book discussed situations in which objects become symbolically charged such that they may exert influence in the world, as well as those where symbolic objects' preexisting qualities are strategically employed by contentious political actors. In both situations, the prospective impact of a given symbolic object depends on its "potency" to impact actors, audiences, and power relations in a given conflict—in other words, how they operate when deployed.

As we have already established, symbolic objects fill quite a large number of roles in contentious politics: they make declarations, represent constituencies, attract attention, inspire responses, stigmatize or legitimize actions, and afford authority, vulnerability, or other reputational attributes. Accordingly, the potency of a given symbolic object can differ quite considerably depending on the item in question. Attempting to figure out *why* leads us to return to symbolic objects' dual nature. On the one hand, we must consider an object's "symbolic importance" (see chapter 1), in the social context in which it is being deployed. On the other, we cannot lose sight of objects' raw material utility or capacity as a physical tool (see chapters 1, 2, 7, 9, and 10).

We saw, for example, how the material capacity and symbolic importance of Portugal's city streets combined to create a legitimizing tool for protests, producing an arena in which political action could be imbued with "democratic" qualities (see chapter 6). Iranian political and religious figures enriched their political status by employing weaponry with "vibrant symbolic potency" derived from its "type and country of manufacture," but also from its material power as killing machinery (see chapter 3). Conversely, the material capacities of certain modified bodies and personal effects combined with a threatening sense of symbolic importance to stigmatize protesters at the Toronto G20 (see chapter 8).

Failing to properly consider how the material capacities and symbolic importance of objects contribute to their potency in contentious politics can lead to a sense of ambivalence, ignorance, or confusion among protesters and observers alike. This was a fate carefully avoided by LGBT activists in Lebanon, who shunned the use of the rainbow flag after considering this question, but one with entirely palpable consequences for tenant-rights protesters in Germany, whose failure to consider these factors under-

pinned a collapse of their objects' (expected) potency (chapter 2). As these cases demonstrate, the potency of a given symbolic object in contention is a result of the interplay between its symbolic importance and material capacity, mediated by its social context.

The availability of objects with various material capacities and the generation of their "symbolic importance" does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, as we have seen in the sections of this volume addressing the legacies and creation of symbolic objects, these dimensions are tightly conditioned by the social context in which contention occurs. Certain kinds of material capacity may be criminalized or restricted (chapters 3, 8, 11, and 12) by the state as well as other local or cultural authorities. They may also be delimited by the material conditions and cultures relating to production or acquisition of objects (chapters 1, 2, 5, 10, and 13). Meanwhile, the power to create, maintain, and alter narratives is asymmetric between the public and elite interests (Smith 2003), and these inequalities are similarly observable in relation to the potency of symbolic objects in the cases outlined on the prior page. Objects' symbolic importance is furthermore scaled and shaped by long-running histories (chapters 6, 10, and 12), contextual variations (chapters 2, 4, and 8), and active or ongoing transformations arising from contentious performances involving the objects in question (chapters 3, 5, 7, and 13). The combined consequence of these contextual factors is that the potency of symbolic objects is often circumscribed.

Yet these limitations are not insurmountable. It is not always possible for elites with conflicting interests to (fully) dispossess symbolic objects of the specific meanings, narratives, emotions, and metonymic attachments with which these objects have become entangled. An object's symbolic importance can also be fostered or developed by the careful use of framing and public performances. Material limitations, meanwhile, can be substantially overcome by the mobilization of resources across multiple sites. Large-scale contentious political projects such as global terrorist movements have a history of overcoming material limitations to utilize objects of maximal symbolic importance (such as—in the case of terrorism—public buildings, the bodies of living human beings, and sacred religious relics) and using them to stage elaborate, painfully emotive performances (Dingley and Kirk-Smith 2002).

Some objects "arrive" at contentious political episodes already imbued with considerable symbolic and/or material power, and hence already have considerable potential for impactful performances. There are numerous examples, from the theft of the US Speaker of the House's lectern in the

2021 storming of the Capitol to the destruction of world heritage sites and other symbolically important targets by terrorist groups. Perhaps one of the most impactful examples of the use of objects of immense symbolic and material worth in contention are the 9/11 attacks. The dramatic destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, carried out by members of the infamous "Hamburg cell," was ultimately world-changing in its impact. This attack prioritized staging a powerful performance over and above maximizing civilian or military casualties. As the US's National 9/11 Memorial and Museum recounts,

> The terrorists did not have the capacity to destroy the United States militarily, so they set their sights on symbolic targets instead. The Twin Towers, as the centerpieces of the World Trade Center, symbolized globalization and America's economic power and prosperity. The Pentagon, as the headquarters for the U.S. Department of Defense, serves as a symbol of American military power. . . . Al-Qaeda hoped that, by attacking these symbols of American power, they would promote widespread fear throughout the country and severely weaken the United States' standing in the world community, ultimately supporting their political and religious goals in the Middle East and Muslim world. (9/11 Memorial and Museum 2021)

The 9/11 attacks targeted objects of pivotal symbolic importance—ones linked to the United States at a domestic and international level. However, for most causes seeking to target the World Trade Center or Pentagon buildings, enacting their destruction would have been practically impossible. It was only by leveraging the Al-Qaeda network's considerable resources that the Hamburg cell could carry out this devastating symbolic act, one that prompted a reshaping of America's self-image and its relationship with the rest of the world, while heralding a surge in extremist Islamist terrorism worldwide.

However, many cases in this volume notably involve objects that in fact possess few special material attributes or particularly grandiose symbolic importance prior to their use in contention, such as masks used in protest, graffitied walls in Lebanon, Mekaps in Kurdistan, or even the body of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that contentious actors often come from outside the sphere of power, while access to objects of immense material or symbolic import is often controlled by the state and societal elites. It is for this reason that contentious actions

involving objects of these types often employ violence or illegal activity. When it comes to objects with less well-established symbolic importance, their interpretation is battled over in news media, in political discourse, among activists, on social media, and in society more broadly. It is through this process that the potency of the object is influenced, both in the immediate term and in the longer-running construction of its legacy. While this volume has dealt with a variety of highly potent objects, and provided examples in which potency has been heightened or limited, there is much scope for further research in this area.

Overall, we consider the potency of objects in contention to be established in the context of a broader ecology of power in a given society. There are thus many societal factors that influence their capacity to make meaningful impacts in the world. As many of our contributors have pointed out, the semiotic entanglement of objects with narratives, histories, meanings, and feelings is an important dimension of their potential effectiveness in contention. It is to this issue that we now turn.

## Semiotic Entanglements

One particularly interesting emergent theme arising across several chapters in this book is the capacity for objects to be or become semiotically entangled with certain meanings and narratives. Although all chapters of the volume refer in some sense to the attachment of ideas or stories to objects, some of our authors and readers have found the notion of "entanglement" to be particularly productive. The term evokes more than simply a process of meanings becoming attached to objects: it has connotations of messiness, of disorderly or chaotic intermeshing. "Entanglement" also raises the potential of serendipitous interlacing, connected as a result of having been jumbled together rather than conjoined through a linear, natural, or logical process. We see this, for example, in the entanglement of a demonstrator's hair color with notions of political subversion (chapter 8), decommissioned armored tanks with narratives of self-sufficiency (chapter 12), or yellow shoes with revolutionary insurgency (chapter 11).

Another useful property of the term "entanglement" is that it intimates a restriction of movement. Historical processes of meaning attachment and power asymmetries concerning the capacity to create or change stories limit actors' ability to alter a symbolic object's semiotic entanglements (Smith 2003, 32). Although this can mean that activists face restraints in what objects can signify (or avoid signifying), so do their audiences. As

Zawilski argues in chapter 8, the associations between the pierced body and anarchism were bound up in the police's interpretation of peaceful demonstrators at the G20 in Toronto. The various meanings, identities, and narratives that objects come to be entangled with are not always consciously named or recognized but may nonetheless be strongly evoked by the objects' situation in a contentious political struggle.

Perhaps the most established example of a symbolic object that becomes entangled with a given collective identity is the flag. Nonetheless, even here we see multilayered narratives and meta-conflicts over what—or whose—meaning comes to be attached to them. As Nagle finds in chapter 4, the "Western origins of the rainbow flag—the forms of sexual politics that it enshrines—mean that it is a deeply ambivalent symbol for many activist groups in the Global South, especially in societies where same sex relations and non-normative forms of gender are criminalized." Atata and Omobowale (chapter 12) also describe the entanglement of multiplex stories with flags. In their analysis of present-day Biafran contention in Nigeria, they argue that the flag of the Republic of Biafra speaks of a nation that once existed, and so it calls a past nationhood into the present. In this way, the flag of Biafra invokes not only ethnonational identification, but collective memories of the civil war, of heroic resistance, and of Biafra's short-lived existence as a state. In this way, the flag calls forth at the same time the former glory of the Biafran nation, the marginalization and victimhood expressed by many Igbo in the present, and notions of unity and solidarity in the continuation of the struggle.

Of course, semiotic entanglement is by no means irreversible, and sometimes contentious processes can disentangle an object from a given community, and even its re-entanglement with a new one. As Dobroski's chapter on the feather headdress notes, "headdresses have been utilized and manipulated by U.S. settlers since the beginning of colonial contact in the Americas," the ultimate effect being that the object ceased to connote the intricacies of individual indigenous cultures and instead served to not only lend indigeneity to colonizing parties, but finally to represent a kind of vague "Americanness" that actively erases the cultures from which it was originally appropriated.

## Differences of Interpretation

One further lesson from the chapters in this book is that precisely *what* a symbolic object connotes can sometimes vary substantially, depending on

the audience that beholds them. While there are indeed some objects that have largely consensual connotations within a certain context, when the bounds of that context are overstepped or transgressed, such objects' symbolic properties can differ distinctly. Nagle's contribution to our volume shows convincingly how the LGBT flag's very positive symbolic connotations within the Stonewall activist world did not have the same symbolic potency when the flag was used by activists in Lebanon. In fact, Nagle notes, it was precisely because the flag carried connotations of the context in which it was invented—Western activism that emerged from the Stonewall era—that it became such a problematic symbol for Lebanese activists, who instead opted to borrow more generic symbolic motifs (the rainbow) and craft symbolic objects more familiar to their own political community (such as graffitied walls).

Likewise, the understanding with which those who carry or interact with symbolic objects do so can differ wildly from the understanding adopted by allies, observers, or opponents. As Selbin observes in this volume, "for those who are inspired by and aspire to him," Che represents "a source of strength, a demand for justice, a clarion call." Yet in mainstream circles, Guevara's various manifestations are regarded as relatively banal cultural objects generated by a capitalist mode of production. The polysemy of Che's various objectified incarnations to which Selbin draws attention shows the breadth of impacts symbolic objects can have on their different beholders, though the meaning of such objects is not always so open-ended. Sometimes symbolic objects are subject to distinctly binary interpretations, as shown in Dirik's study of the Mekap shoe favored by Kurdish guerrillas. Dirik highlights how the Mekap was "either praised for its qualities or made into an occasion for repression," depending on observers' positionality relative to the Kurdish cause.

Sometimes, the dissonance between objects' symbolic interpretations can be so stark as to make objects that protagonists see as generative of solidarity function as a pretext for discrediting the movement. As Ślosarski's (chapter 2) study of banners and protest props in Germany and Poland shows, "a lack of symbolic alignment between activists and their audience" can lead to objects giving off manifestly the wrong impression. Such a case presents itself multiple times in Ślosarski's chapter. One such occasion concerns his discussion of how Palestinian flags and shark costumes (meant to draw attention to an international feminist coalition on the one hand and the problem of "rent sharks" on the other) drew criticism from observers, who alleged that the objects were tantamount

to anti-Semitic dog whistles. Another case Ślosarski notes concerned an anti-Starbucks protest banner that observers mistakenly believed was an advertisement for the very same brand.

Of course, the capacity of an object to connote multiple meanings need not be disadvantageous to a given contentious political cause. A symbolic object can also be subject to an array of differing but harmonious interpretations. As Atata and Omobowale note, Biafran war relics' multiple meanings help to galvanize a much broader political coalition than a narrow "nationalist" or "resistant" cause. As they note, the potential for these objects to recall the past into the present, in a way that permits multiple interpretations of both, can offer tailored meanings. This multiplicity allows for the pro-Biafra movement to be inclusive across political aspirations (ranging from a modest desire for greater Igbo rights within the state of Nigeria to a more extensive call for a return to a fully independent nation-state of Biafra) and across space (participants in street protests, nonparticipating sympathizers across southeastern Nigeria, and the Igbo diaspora).

## Transformation *of* Symbolic Objects

The chapters in this book offer rich and instructive accounts of how symbolic objects may transform during contentious processes. Performances with, actions on, or adornment of objects have the potential to *change* them materially, symbolically, or both. Quite often, these changes take place even while the object in question remains recognizable as "the same object" or type of object. These transformed objects can take on renewed symbolic potency, and even become the subject of contention themselves.

Perhaps the most clear-cut example of how profound the impact of small transformations of symbolic objects can be is the instance of signing them. As Dukes's chapter in this volume highlights, inscriptions or signatures on an object can change their meaning, or make the object or its inscriber complicit in a contentious performance. Dukes draws attention to the case of a West Indian manatee whose back was forcibly engraved with the word "TRUMP," making the creature an unwitting billboard for the former president's loyalist cause and perhaps a sign of its adherents' extreme dedication.

In contrast to Dukes's manatee, Accornero, Carvalho, and Ramos Pinto's account of the symbolic qualities of the street in Portuguese contentious politics shows how objects' symbolic transformations can take place gradually and gently, in the absence of physical transmogrification. In their

study of Portugal's city streets, they show how the symbolic qualities attributed to the Portuguese street were chiefly a product of the kinds of performances (contentious or otherwise) enacted on it, its central connotations of democratic legitimacy having been built up over an extensive period of postrevolutionary contention during which street protest constituted the only form of democratic expression.

At other times, objects undergo visceral, profoundly physical transformations, with potentially explosive effects. Self-immolation is one such instance, in which an ordinary, quite unremarkable body is transformed temporarily into a "body-on-fire," possessed of much greater symbolic importance. Zuev's chapter shows how, in these instances, despite the moment of self-immolation itself being relatively brief, the performance becomes petrified and immortalized in the form of a body-on-fire. Hence, self-immolation may be understood not simply as a contentious performance, but as a transmogrification of the ordinary body into a symbolic object.

Comparable to, but nonetheless somewhat distinct from, the transformation of symbolic objects is their reconstitution in another form. Such instances of reconstitution can free them from past connotations or attach them to new ones. A frequently reconstituted symbolic object is the personage of "el Che," who has found expression in an enormous array of objects in the wake of his internment in a Bolivian tomb in 1967. As Selbin notes, Che can be found on "bandanas, keychains, bathing suits, skis, album covers, mugs and glasses, posters, clocks, berets, cigarette packs, advertisements, wristwatches, lighters and ashtrays, tattoos . . . [and] T-shirts." Each of these reincarnations has lent a different quality to the reconstituted Guevara. Che Guevara berets, uniform patches, and other items of clothing have been used by revolutionary bands and political dissidents to signal a serious adherence to the brand of communism to which he was committed, yet in most cases the mass-produced T-shirts and consumer paraphernalia offer only—as Selbin puts it—"some vague brand of radicalism, commitment, and, inevitably, cool."

## Transformation *by* Symbolic Objects

While symbolic objects often undergo transformations within and beyond contentious political scenarios, the contributions to this volume also show how such objects can transform agents in some way. On some occasions,

these transformations occur only in the eyes of observers. Selbin's chapter, for instance, notes an instance where undercover agents of the Columbian government were able fool a FARC rebel unit into thinking they were not a threat by adorning themselves with Che Guevara paraphernalia. Zawilski, meanwhile, notes how by merely donning a black garment during the Toronto G20 Summit, protesters found themselves erroneously identified as "Black Bloc" insurgents by the police. Dukes similarly notes how a pop star's signature affixed to the protective gear of Hong Kong protesters "intervene[s] between the state and its discontented populace," diminishing their culpability in a way that instead "implicates the artist in political contention."

Transformation in the eyes of onlookers is one facet of the transformations symbolic objects can enact on those who wield them, but these can also occur on a personal level. Saramifar's chapter draws attention to precisely this phenomenon, noting how obtaining an object "enables access to new modes of subjectivity." In rural Afghanistan, he observes, "the AK-47 becomes the mark of transitioning and transforming from boyhood to manhood," in such a way that "gender and religiosity are infused into the weapon and it becomes an integral part of the processes of Muslim masculinity." Likewise, Saramifar draws on the writings of Iranian fighters in Syria to show how for them, the gun "is not merely a signifier that empowers the combatant but moreover a material collaborator that helps them make sense of a life lived amid blood and mayhem." One such fighter, Jawad Allah Karam, "crafted his cosmology alongside his nonhuman partner [i.e., his weapon], and his assumption of martyrdom emerged from their collaboration."

Transformed subjectivities are not only a facet of lethal objects such as those studied by Saramifar. Indeed, as Thomassen and Riisgaard observe in their chapter, "mask-wearing facilitates and expresses a subjectivity which negates fixed identities," allowing the emergence of truly collective behavior. But for Thomassen and Riisgaard the mask not only alters subjectivity, it marks an entry point "into a new cosmic order where other rules prevail: it is not only a subversion but something much more radical in terms of protest: it is the opening of a different world." Evoking the example of Zapatista mask-wearing, Thomassen and Riisgaard argue that in wearing a mask, it is not only the wearer who is transformed, but those its wearer beholds. In affixing such a symbolic object to one's face, a contentious actor is given the power to act as if the subjectivities of their opponents or observers held less sway in the social order.

## Future Directions

In light of the overarching aims of this book, it is fitting that we conclude by outlining some key areas for future research on the subject of symbolic objects in contentious politics. As we hope the chapters of this volume illustrate, this area of study has a great deal of potential. However, many pertinent questions remain open, there is much scope for further theoretical development, and there is a pressing need for more empirical data on how objects "work" in contention. Broadly speaking, we perceive five areas that would most particularly benefit from scholarly attention, and now move to detail them in turn. These areas are:

1. How contentious processes or episodes affect the symbolic qualities of objects.
2. The effect of objects on social actors during contentious political events.
3. The causal roles of symbolic objects in determining the political and social outcomes of contention.
4. How interpretations and framings of objects in contention play out.
5. The resource mobilization dynamics of symbolic objects.

First, there is a need for further research into the effects of contention on symbolic objects. Precisely how certain objects come to play roles in contention, and how and to what extent these roles gain prominence, remain pertinent questions. When it comes to "origins," it is wise to heed Foucault's (1972, 1977) warning that the search for starting points may itself be futile, as "there is no origin, only an endless series of displacements" (Fuggle 2009, 88). Nevertheless, tracing the lineage of objects can provide productive insights (see, for example, Atata and Omobowale's chapter in this volume regarding the utility of items from the Nigerian Civil War in present-day Biafran protests). Another productive method by which the effects of contention on objects may be studied is drawn from material culture studies: object biographies. Such approaches allow us to see on a fine-grain level how the life of an object may shift before, during, and after its involvement in a contentious episode or series of episodes.

Second, it is evident that symbolic objects can have various effects on the outlooks, actions, emotions, and even aims of social actors engaged in contentious politics. Indeed, this volume contains various examples of this

phenomenon, such as the impact of mask-wearing on demonstrators and their observers (Thomassen and Riisgaard, chapter 13), the emotive power emanating from self-immolating bodies (Zuev, chapter 9), and the capacity for wearing yellow Mekap shoes to invoke senses of revolutionary solidarity (Dirik, chapter 11). The theme of transformation was—as detailed earlier in this chapter—particularly salient. Nevertheless, this area of study remains very much in an exploratory phrase, and given the sheer variety of interactions that take place during contentious episodes, there is doubtless much more to be discovered.

The third area of note concerns causality: how might symbolic objects causally determine the political and social outcomes of contention? This is a topic on which various contributors to the book have touched (such as Ślosarski, Saramifar, Dobroski, Dukes, and Zawilski), but in a level of depth particular to their own cases, and often amid a variety of other observations. Broader questions, such as how and why a symbolic object attains causal relevance, or how individual-level causal entanglements are replicated at a structural level, remain ripe for examination across cases and contexts.

Attempting to definitively pinpoint causality in the analysis of contentious politics is notoriously thorny. As Meyer (2021) has effectively outlined, the field suffers from a broad variety of issues in this regard, including problematic case-study selection (with researchers prioritizing cases they know better or that provide a preferred conclusion), overly narrow focus (considering the effect of a small range of factors in isolation), limited temporal considerations (the failure to take into account the longer historical context of social movements, as well as cross-pollination across different movements), and the challenge of taking into consideration the scale of the audience who may affect the outcomes of contentious action (including the media, the public, other activists, politicians, judges, social media users, and others).

It is evident throughout this volume that symbolic objects play important causal roles in shaping the outcomes of contentious activities. We have seen how observing war relics such as armored tanks emboldened Biafran activists to take their cause to the Nigerian state with greater vigor (chapter 12), how carrying banners can render protests more visible (chapter 2), and how self-immolated bodies can transform the public mood and political discourses on a particular issue (chapter 9). While identifying this dimension of symbolic objects is a crucial step, we must also heed Meyer's warning to "at least acknowledge some uncertainty . . . in making assessments

or predictions about current matters" (2021, 151). To this end, scholars looking to further the field must pay close attention to the selection of cases and symbolic objects for analysis, consider the effect of such objects in a multifactorial and broader temporal context, and attempt to measure their impact on a broad and diverse audience.

Fourth, as discussed herein, objects in contention tend to be subject to different interpretations by different social actors. Alongside individual "readings" of the meanings and messages of these objects, there is the possibility of clusters of interpretation emerging around particular positions in relation to the contentious act, group, or claim, as occurs among protesters, the media, and the government. Social actors in contention tend to be far from oblivious of the fact that their performances are open to these varied interpretations and are often mindful of how they play out. Hence, attention should also be paid to the intersection of framing processes and symbolic objects. In general, while the fact of interpretive variation is not really a matter of dispute, exactly how this plays out in reality (and to what ends) is in need of further research. Our understanding of symbolic objects in contentious politics would greatly benefit from further empirical work on precisely how various social actors and stakeholders interpret—or present—the meaning(s) of these objects in contention.

Fifth, and returning to a concern that is very much at the core of many studies of contentious politics, are questions of resource mobilization. As we noted in the book's first chapter, in many cases symbolic objects operate as "resources to be mobilized." Such resources, we argue, "are clearly an important factor given that the physical 'stuff' of contention needs to be acquired, professionally produced or built by actors in the movement, and made available for use." The chapters in this volume that have focussed more squarely on materiality have offered some insight into the resource character of symbolic objects, but there is great scope for a thorough, sustained treatment of this topic.

Of course, there will doubtless be further areas of research that will catch the imagination of those who read this book, but have nonetheless eluded ours. Perhaps the greatest advantage of a field as uncharted as the one we have explored in this volume is that one need not feel bound to address only the "pressing" concerns ventured by those presenting themselves as authorities on the topic. While we have attempted herein to chart some useful paths through these unexplored waters, we have no doubt that exploration in any scholarly direction heralds the prospect of uncovering new ground.

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