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Awad, Sarah H. ; Wagoner, Brady

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Protest Symbols

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Corresponding Author:	Sarah H. Awad Aalborg Universitet Aalborg, DENMARK
Corresponding Author's Institution:	Aalborg Universitet
Corresponding Author E-Mail:	awads@hum.aau.dk
First Author:	Sarah H. Awad
Order of Authors:	Sarah H. Awad Brady Wagoner
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Protest Symbols

Sarah H. Awad, Aalborg University, awads@hum.aau.dk
Brady Wagoner, Aalborg University

Introduction

Throughout history people have mobilized for different causes, forming mass movements and driving social change (Moscovici, 1976). The circumstances leading to protests and revolutions are complex and have been reflected upon using different political, economic, social, and psychological theories. For example, we can identify 'relative economic deprivation' of a society (Davies, 1962; Power, 2018; Royall, 2020) as well as the growth of trade unions and labor movements (Feltrin, 2019; El-Shazli, 2019) as key conditions for the eruption of mass protests. Yet, these *conditions* only become protests when they are ignited by specific *triggers*-- the 'last straw that breaks the camels back'--which we argue in this article can best be theorised as symbols constructed by a group. It is through the motivating force and identity marking provided by symbols that protest crowds emerge, are sustained and adapt through time. Thus, this article focuses on how symbols function to fuel mass protests, bringing together the cumulative effect of the many grievances into an objectified image. To this end we borrow from cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2014) and social representations theory (Moscovici, 2000) to analyze meaning making processes within larger groups. The article has three main parts: First, we review crowd theories focused on submersion within a group through its symbols; second, we consider more closely the processes by which symbols motivate people towards similar ends; and finally, we explore how symbols are ways in which a group creates a representation of itself for its members and others.

Theorizing Protest Crowds: From Pathology to Creativity

When crowd/mass psychology emerged it tended to group behaviour as a pathological social occurrence, driven by unconscious factors (Freud, 1940), with distinctive spontaneity, excitability and discontinuousness (Tarde, 1962; Le Bon, 1977). However, the behavior that seems to be out of control is a response to the 'quasi-irresistible pressures of principles, symbols, traditions, and institutions' within a society (Moscovici, 1986, p. 22). One only has to think of the images of coordinated mass behavior seen in Nazi rallies through ritual and symbols. Furthermore, it can be understood as a response to a conscious identification with an elaborated group identity (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Stott et al., 2017, 2018; Della Porta & Diani, 2020). This latter explanation however does not deny that suggestibility and contagion are relevant forces shaping crowds as earlier theorist have suggested, but rather sees those features as driven by the belonging to a bigger group which shares similar beliefs and motives.

The group seeks coherence, solidarity and identity through the communication of images, rituals, and symbols that direct the behavior and principles of the crowd. The key idea to understand is that crowds are composed of 'normal' people that feel, think, and behave differently by being part of these social formations. This requires moving beyond the prejudice in psychology and contemporary society that only individuals are real, not collectives (Greenwood, 2003). Taking this critical idea forward, we need to explore how it is that individuals mobilize together in collective action through symbols. Furthermore, how can those symbols endure beyond the disintegration of the crowd. For example, the Guy Fawkes mask (Figure 1), the bra as part of female liberation (Figure 2), or simply red as a representation of the communist struggle for a classless society, are still widely recognized as having the potential to channel protests in many countries today.



Figure 1. Photo credit: Sarah Awad. Captured in Brick Lane, London, 2014.

From the collective level, symbol creation and rituals are inherent to group formation and maintenance. Durkheim (1912) famously theorized religious rituals in this way, borrowing concepts from earlier crowd psychologies but with a difference. While Le Bon, for example, saw crowds as inherently conservative, Durkheim saw in them creative forces that generate symbols (e.g., gods, totems and spirits). Moreover, it is only through this mutual innervation of many people acting together that people become re-vitalised and re-animated. By contrast, the individual that stands alone loses energy and motivation in their alienation from others. The power of rituals and symbols in his account is to bind people in a group together and provide a motivating force and direction for their behavior. To give a familiar example national flags and religious icons (e.g., crosses and crescents) have been potent symbols for identification and common cause in history, leading their members to serve the group in war.

Moscovici (2000) has extended Durkheim's analysis of these 'collective representations' of the group into a wider theory of 'social representations' that captures the multiplicity and dynamic exchange between groups in contemporary societies. Social representations are the systems of ideas, values, and practices constructed by a social group with a two-fold function: to provide a common code of communication and social exchange, and second, to establish an order through which members of the group can orient themselves in their material and social world (Moscovici, 1973). Symbols, in the above sense, can be easily seen in the process of 'objectification', whereby abstract ideas are transformed into concrete images, such that what was in the mind is projected into the world, naturalising our ideas. This corresponds closely with the image-based, affective consciousness that characterises individuals in crowds, versus the dominance of discursive thought outside of it (see esp. Moscovici, 1985).

Mobilizing Social Movements through Symbols

The Arab Spring was set in motion by a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who immolated himself after being humiliated by the police when he refused to pay a bribe. His story and image (found even on stamps today) became a powerful symbol of structural injustices, police corruption and political neglect, such that the event quickly became the rallying cry of a whole nation (Lacroix & Filu, 2018; Sofi, 2019). It is powerful because it is able to condense multiple meanings and feelings, which creates a point for solidarity among members of a group that might otherwise lack the cohesion to be moved in a common direction. Similarly, in Egypt a young activist, who was brutally beaten to death in broad light by police officers, led to the creation of a Facebook page called 'We are all Khalid Said,' on which the 2011 Egyptian Revolution was organized. Images of both figures were powerful symbols throughout the revolutions, and were disseminated widely by the aid of internet and social media (Rieder et al., 2015). They crystalized an image of the respective regimes and the duty to protest against them (Awad & Wagoner, 2018). While in the bigger scheme of things a single person's death may seem insignificant given the scale of injustices, the incident functions as a symbol that creates a concrete focus. Those incidents of repression can paradoxically become transformative points as they serve as emotional and cognitive trigger for collective action (Shultziner, 2018).

A symbol sparking protest could be an incident or a new government policy, such as a tax. In Lebanon protests recently began after the government tried to impose taxes on online messaging services (Fjeld & Abdunnur, 2020); in France the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vests) movement began after a gas tax (Royall, 2020; Jetten et al., 2020); in Iceland protests began after information was revealed about scandalous financial policies (Bernburg, 2019); and in Ireland, anti-austerity protests were ignited by a tax on water (Power, 2018). These incidents came after longer and wider repressions and inequalities, but the movements were mobilized when those injustices were objectified into one symbolic form, be it a person or a new law. Online media has also facilitated new ways of symbol creation and mobilization through, for example, viral images and memes and hashtags such as #metoo (Andersen & Lybæk, 2020) and #BlackLivesMatter (Leach & Allen, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2016; Thomas & Zuckerman, 2018). These online hashtags were not only the initial triggers of these movements, but also became identity symbols for representing the group and building solidarity.

Representing and Extending the Group through Symbols

In Durkheim's (1912) analysis of religion, he describes how Australian clans worshiped animals and plants as a sacred power, the symbol of a totem or god. For him god was an externalization of society, a means for society to come to know itself. Such processes can also be observed in the secular context of protests. The symbols produced are not only a reminder of what is being fought for but a representation of the group itself, which continues to unite people in action and inform decisions. Furthermore, such symbols can spread to other groups for different causes under the same affective umbrella. For example, the bra as a symbol of female liberation, appropriated different meanings after an incident in the Egyptian protests in 2011 where a protester's blue bra was exposed while she was being attacked by military forces; it then became a symbol of women protestors and the violence they face, and was used widely in protest graffiti. Moreover, it spread beyond Egypt to other Arab countries in solidarity with the cause. For example, in the 2013 Lebanese protests it was used as a symbol for the wider cause of removing the governing regime (Figure 2) (Jarbou, 2017; Awad, 2017; Hafez, 2014). As described above in relation to social media, protest groups become networks in which symbols are connecting nodes.



Figure 2. Photo credit: Rana Jarbou. Captured in Jisr El-Cola, Beirut, 2013. Text reads: *against the regime*.

The visual production and street art produced during the Arab uprisings shaped the movements (Mehrez, 2017; Abaza, 2016; Doerr et al., 2013) and created an image through which the movement could see itself (Khatib, 2013; Buckner & Khatib, 2014). Like the symbol of the blue bra, many of the images produced during protest became the symbolic representation of the movement and travelled beyond national borders and grievances - See example of 22-year-old Sudanese woman who became the symbol of the protest movement in Sudan after her iconic image leading a crowd of protestors in a chant went viral (Sidani, 2019), also the Nefertiti with a gas mask graffiti image from the Egyptian revolution and how it travelled and appropriated different causes (Awad, 2020). Mitchell (2012) also reflects on how symbols of the Arab uprisings travelled and were diffused to the Occupy movement. He argues that it is the figure

of the square occupation that formed the verbal-visual image that united both movements: *space* being proclaimed and occupied by the masses.

This brings us to what happens to symbols after a revolution. Mitchell (2012) looks at how the empty space of the square becomes the new symbol of defeat, of a suppressed or a betrayed revolution, and of individual and collective memory. Furthermore the space could be taken over by a new monument that represents the new regime/movement, in an intentional effort to shape collective memory and identity (Wagoner, 2015, 2017; Wagoner et al., 2019). This can be seen in the Egyptian government's efforts to erase traces of the revolution from Tahrir Square (see Awad, 2017). Also, from the 1789 French Revolution to the 1917 Russian Revolution and beyond those that come to power and want to effect change overlay symbols of the old system (Connerton, 1989) in an attempt to alter the consciousness and behavior of the 'new' citizens shaping them into a new organization of society in its associated values (Campbell & Moghaddam, 2018). Another example is the symbol of hijab (women head cover) in the post-Revolution era in Iran, where it has become a tangible objectification of the Islamic Revolution and the ideals it stands for (Jaspal et al., 2016). This transmission, destruction, and overlaying new meanings of symbols shows how their power changes through time.

Symbols and the Psychology of Proests

A focus on protest symbols and the cultural production of social movements can inform the psychological analysis of protest on different levels. The social life of symbols and how they become anchor points for new issues, shows how the history of protest is layered in a way that symbols form part of the collective memory and can be activated or triggered for new causes across time. Also the diffusion and transformation of symbols across place and time shows how culture is continuously (re)constructed and how social change manifests itself through symbols that endure after the protest is over. Sometimes they are destroyed and replaced by other symbols in an attempt to overlay memory. And sometimes they endure and travel across national borders and become diffused in other cultures. These processes show the power dynamic and the contestation over the representation of society and who has the power to do it. Thus analyzing the symbols of different movements provides a bridge between the micro, meso, and macro processes in social psychology (Jaspal et al., 2016); the micro individual level of identifying with certain symbols and deciding to join certain causes; the meso level of group formation and solidarity through symbols; and the macro level of the representation of the society and its ideologies through symbols.

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