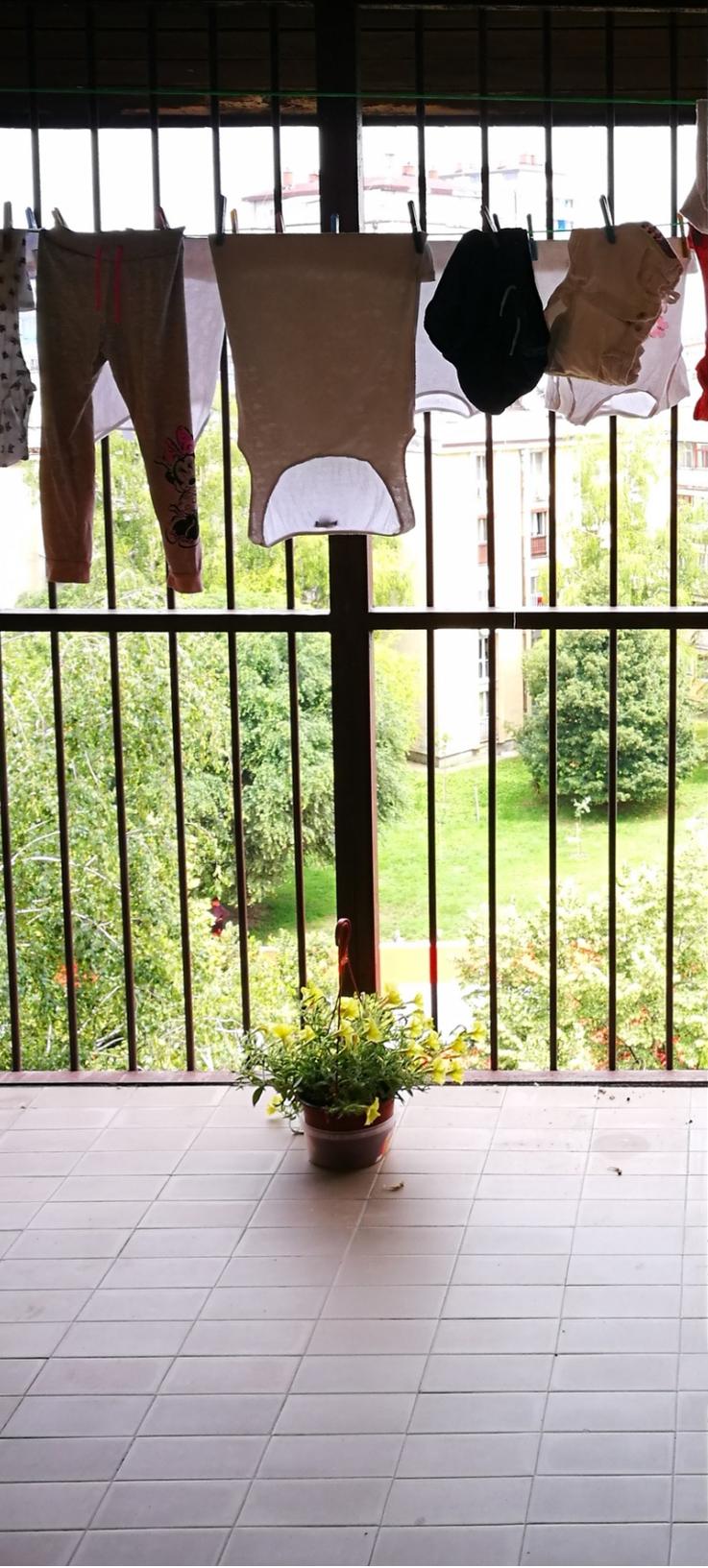


# Interface

A journal for and about social movements

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**Interface volume 12 issue 1**  
**Organizing amidst Covid-19**

**Interface: a journal for and about social movements**  
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## **Cover art**

Cover and photo by Ana Vilenica.

## **About *Interface***

*Interface: a journal for and about social movements* is a peer-reviewed journal of practitioner research produced by movement participants and engaged academics. *Interface* is globally organised in a series of different regional collectives, and is produced as a multilingual journal. Peer-reviewed articles have been subject to double-blind review by one researcher and one movement practitioner.

The views expressed in any contributions to *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* are those of the authors and contributors, and do not necessarily represent those of *Interface*, the editors, the editorial collective, or the organizations to which the authors are affiliated. *Interface* is committed to the free exchange of ideas in the best tradition of intellectual and activist inquiry.

The *Interface* website is hosted by the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland Maynooth.

## **Organizing amidst Covid-19**

**Sutapa Chattopadhyay, Lesley Wood, Laurence Cox**

The world is on fire, with both fever and flame. After a few months of lockdown, things are erupting in new ways. The movement for Black Lives is demanding an end to anti-Black racism and conversations about abolishing the police are on late night television. In North America, a new world appears to be dawning, one that didn't seem possible even a month ago. Meanwhile, in the new centre of global capitalism, the long-standing Hong Kong movement seems to be on the point of succumbing to a new wave of repression.

Around the world, movements are strategizing about how to ensure that no one is left behind. In April we put out a call for short pieces on this theme. We could see that the imminent arrival of the virus had generated many different struggles - initially pressure to force some states to take action in the first place, resistance to cuts and demanding benefits. Then came struggles characterized by mutual aid, efforts to protect essential workers, and the most vulnerable, such as the homeless, prisoners, the elderly and the undocumented.

We were overwhelmed with contributions that reflected the gradual mobilization of the organized left, feminists and LGBTQ+ activists, the self-organisation of migrants and precarious workers, resistance to curfews and the expansion of the surveillance state, the reorganisation of ecological and food sovereignty movements, artistic and online struggles. These movements achieved significant successes, in many different contexts. In the end we published thirty-eight pieces, from every continent except Antarctica.

And right as we stopped at the end of May, US police killed George Floyd and a new chapter of movements during Covid began. This new wave of protest, with protests in over 2000 cities (as of June 13th) is particularly visible in North America and in parts of Europe and Africa and builds on the experiences of organizing under Covid-19 as well as on longer Black Lives Matter struggles, practices of mutual aid and dialogues between movements. It is one that is expanding the range of the possible, with powerful demands for the defunding of police departments, charges laid against violent officers and promises of new Black hires in a range of institutions, new programs and resources for Black communities.

In Hong Kong, “the other superpower” also experienced a new upsurge in resistance as the Chinese state, too, sought to use the pandemic to wrap the flag around state leadership and assert its power in a very different context. As we go to press, the new security legislation has just come into effect and many activists and organisations are going at least partly below the radar. It is too early to tell whether Goliath will win, or if Hong Kong will prove indigestible together with China's many other struggles – of Tibetans and Uyghurs, migrant workers and peasants, women and LGBTQ+ people.

Movements in both countries escape the facile violence vs non-violence description: both states have the physical capacity to destroy their opponents, but struggle to construct the political capacity to do so. In this context, activists - staying far below the level of violence deployed against them - resist physically as well as in many other ways.

This is also a moment of internationalism. Many have noted that the past dozen years (since the global crash of 2007-8) have seen a rise of nationalism, after a period of globalization. Borders are tightening and xenophobic formations are accelerating. But now, during a period of parallel closures - which have worked very differently in different countries - activists around the world are experiencing something that both unites and divides.

In this spirit, we want to state our solidarity *both* with Black Lives Matter protesters *and* with the Hong Kong movement, and to reject the claim that all that matters is which superpower you support. *Interface* stands, ultimately, for the development of popular power from below – for social movements as substantive democracy – and rejects the cynicism that sees ordinary people’s struggles as pawns on some imaginary chessboard.

### **In this issue**

This issue has 55 pieces, covering movements in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Haiti, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, the UK, the US and globally and written in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

The special section of this issue contains almost all of the short pieces originally written for our rolling coverage of movements in the virus, as well as a few pieces written especially for this special issue. We’ve included dates in these articles because of how quickly the situation has evolved in different countries: these pieces represent reflective activists and engaged researchers trying to grasp what their movements were doing, and what they should do, in an unprecedented situation.

Together they show just how thoughtful, creative, brave and radical our movements actually are - in the teeth of hostile or trivialising media, attempts at commodification and conspiracy theories. If there is hope for the future, it is to be found *here*, and not in state or corporate leaderships who have been found as desperately wanting as have the dominant social groups they represent. A world we can live in will be a world built “from below and on the left”, in many forms.

In a period when many conventional academic journals have reported a falling-off in submissions from women due to increased care responsibilities in the crisis, and when commercially-oriented activist media have often gone to their usual white male commentators, it is striking what a difference it makes to just

*do things differently.* We did not commission these pieces; and we deliberately *lowered the bar* in seeking short, non-peer review pieces. As a result, the gender, geographical and ethnic distribution is considerably broader - while much remains to be done, particularly on redressing the balance between majority world voices and experiences and those of the global North.

We had called for contributions that reflected on: a) movements already going on prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus; b) collective actions that informed the involvements of activists, who at various capacities responded to the crisis; c) struggles of the civil society that made their states take action; d) specific needs campaign, solidarity economy and mutual aid initiatives that have catered to very specific to general needs of people from particular social backgrounds, and lastly e) longer-term perspectives of what might the crisis mean for movements and what are the possibilities of a better world in post-pandemic times.

These contributions have all grappled with at least one of these themes. We attempted to thematise them further so as to bring out not only the differences but also the similarities in the depth, types and creativity of autonomous initiatives during the ongoing global crisis. This new wave is not a return to normal. What this issue – and today’s movements – illustrate is an expansion of movements that place the most vulnerable at the centre, and demand systemic solutions to systemic problems – perhaps providing possibilities for a better world.

### **Overviews of movement struggles in specific places**

We begin with a series of articles that attempt to grasp the complexity and diversity of movements within a single space: Spain (Martinez), Ireland (Cox), Toronto / Canada (Wood), Kenya (Chukunizira), Udine / Italy (Venturini) and Delhi / India (Mohanty).

Wearing the lens of an activist researcher, Miguel Martinez explores the enhanced meanings of solidarity that emerged during the corona virus crisis. Laurence Cox’s intervention explores current and post-pandemic struggles with a particular focus on how movements contest and force state action as well as exploring movement pressures for systemic transformation.

Lesley Wood shows how extra-legal procedures and actions have created a wall between care givers and civic society actors with the homeless, disabled, incarcerated, migrants, elderly, sexualised and marginalised. Her analysis is intersectional, connecting to social justice. Angela Chukunzira presents an array of movements that emerged to tackle the war on the poor.

Federico Venturini’s personal experiences organizing during the pandemic inform his reflections around time lapse, digital bottlenecks, and the rise of alternative platforms for protests. Lastly, Sobhi Mohanty narrates communal violence and Muslim apartheid in times of Covid-19.

Our blog also included a link to John Krinsky and Hillary Caldwell's [overview of movement networks](#) in New York City during the virus.

### **Feminist and LGBTQ+ activism**

Hongwei Bao writes about the Wuhan-based feminist movement “Anti-domestic violence little vaccine”. Bao sees the pandemic as a window to experiment new/flexible modes of activism. Ayaz Ahmed Siddiqui details the *Aurat march* in Karachi, Pakistan – that ingeniously connects the pandemic with on-going/historic movements against misogyny, domestic/sexual violence, honor killings and homophobia.

Similarly Lynn Ng Yu Ling shows the exponential growth of the *PinkDot* Movement in Singapore and how the pandemic has created a virtual space that paints the city state pink progressing non-discriminatory and non-identitarian aspirations. María José Ventura Alfaro details autonomous Feminist collectives that cater to local food and medicine shortages besides raising awareness to multi-level violence/s in Mexico.

Finally, Ben Trott explores the politics of distance and the ethics of care in the struggle to preserve the movement infrastructure of Queer Berlin.

### **Reproductive struggles**

For over half a decade, *Non Una di Meno Roma*, a trans-feminist and feminist Italian movement has countered violence against classed, sexualized, racialized people while challenging traditional understanding of (re)productivity and body politics. Their fantastic piece, translated into English here for the first time, seeks to grasp the complexity of the current moment in a perspective grounded in materialist and feminist struggles around work both paid and unpaid.

### **Labour organising**

Ben Duke observes how the pandemic provides a platform of collective change in the employment/welfare landscape for the precarious. Another brilliant study on precarity and il/legality around the migrant laborforce in Brazil is forwarded by Louisa Acciari.

Moving on, Arianna Tassinari, Riccardo Emilia Chesta and Lorenzo Cini report on the re-politicisation of precarious work, occupational security and health safety of workers in Italy. Tass Sharkawi and N. Ali's piece discusses how Egyptian health care workers used whistleblowing as a form of contentious mobilisation under authoritarianism.

Mallige Sirimane and Nisha Thapliyal takes us to India giving a close perspective on statist policies that toppled the lives of day laborers during Covid-19 lockdown in Karnataka, India.

Finally, our blog included a link to [Jeremy Brecher's piece](#) about precarious strikes across the United States.

### **Migrant and refugee struggles**

Johanna May Black, Sutapa Chattopadhyay and Riley Chisholm explore migrant-specific mutual-aid alliances across the globe. Anitta Kynsilehto focusses on the specific challenges of migrant solidarity in Morocco, where solidarity groups were already under fire.

Susan Thieme and Eda Elif Tibet discuss how Swiss women and unions organised together before and during lockdown around issues including the situation of migrant women and care workers. Chiara Milan runs an analysis on refugee comradeship along the highly porous Western Balkans frontier zone.

Marco Perolini complements these entries as he writes on the struggles of refugees and others in Germany against housing refugees in camps, subjected to curfew and forced quarantine under the virus.

Amidst a sea of stories about inhumane procedures and interventions against stateless and paperless migrants, it was a joy to read about these progressive strategies of resistance during the most difficult global crisis.

### **Ecological activism**

Clara Thompson discusses how Fridays for Future were already on the back foot before lockdown, while challenging media myths in social media has its limits: what can activists do now? Susan Paulson carries out a twofold analysis of the relationship between degrowth, crisis and finding a politics to move through and beyond the pandemic.

Peterson Derolus' French-language piece explores the Haitian mining resistance during the pandemic. While Silpa Satheesh discusses Earth day protests by masked activists in Kerala, India challenging toxic wastes in the Periyar river.

Lastly, Ashish Kothari discusses indigenous and Dalit "territories of life" and the possibility of radical ecological democracy grounded in popular struggles.

Our blog also included a link to Jeremy Brecher's fascinating piece about how the struggles of workers and communities around the virus hold the germs of an [emergency Green New Deal](#).

### **Food sovereignty organising**

Dagmar Diesner holds a unique example of *CampiAperti* which is a food producing collective providing food sufficiency during the pandemic in Bologna, Italy. Similarly *URGENCEI* is a community supported agriculture collective that

provides a safe and resilient alternative to -chemical-induced/industrial food production.

Jenny Gkougki takes us to small-scale Greek farmers who led a nationwide social media campaign to merge producers and consumers. John Foran writes about a student-based organization *Eco Vista* that makes unique efforts to create sustainable living. All these entries show how such movements – necessarily grounded in the longer-term - connect the pre-crisis world with the virus-dominated situation and possible futures.

### **Solidarity and mutual aid**

Michael Zeller explores the strain on homeless and impoverished people due to protective measures and institutionalisation of social service, during the pandemic, in Karlsruhe, Germany. Some of our contributions fit in more than one theme, like Sergio Ruiz Cayuela's article on solidarity soup kitchen in Birmingham, which could equally fit in the previous section.

Clinton Nichols delves into the prospects of post-secondary education for the incarcerated during the pandemic. Finally, Micha Fiedlschuster and Leon Rosa Reichle use the case of Leipzig, Germany to explore the variety of practical and analytical approaches mutual aid.

### **Artistic and digital resistance**

Kerman Calvo and Ester Bejarano write on the social spaces of protest and extraordinary relevance of music promoting bonds to cope with the nostalgia and crisis of the virus. Neto Holanda and Valesca Lima's Portuguese-language piece discusses the struggles and challenges faced by artists and cultural actors in Brazil during the crisis, particularly in the state of Ceará.

Margherita Massarenti informs us about the practical realities of the online organizing around a #Rentstrike that developed out during the pandemic. A fascinating entry was forwarded by Dounya on virtual forms of everyday resistance and grassroots broadcasting in Iran – in a new wave of global authoritarianism, it is important to see that even in states which have experienced decades of authoritarian rule there is resistance.

### **Imagining a new world**

Donatella della Porta details how crucially new and change in strategies of social movements can create spaces for reflection about a post-pandemic world. Jackie Smith similarly connects systemic capitalism and human rights movements. Yariv Mohar expands the discussion of human right and social justice issues amid Covid-19.

The piece by Julien Landry, Ann Marie Smith, Patience Agwenjang, Patricia Blankson Akakpo, Jagat Basnet, Bhumiraj Chapagain, Aklilu Gebremichael,

Barbara Maigari and Namadi Saka follows on from governance theme to civic society participation. Roger Spear, Gulcin Erdi, Marla A. Parker and Maria Anastasia write how Covid-19 has created a range of responses to alleviate direct and indirect impacts on people, institutions, systems, cultures.

Breno Bringel brilliantly ties this special issue with a note on moving on from cataclysmic capitalism to a pluriverse one through new forms of protests, new articulation of change, and new modes of connection across people and places. We started the issue with similar calls for change (see Cox, Khothari and della Porta)

### **Non-themed articles**

As in every issue of *Interface*, we also present general (non-themed) pieces.

Luke Beesley's article explores the birth of the "social model of disability" in Britain. Using newly-available material, he explores the activist debates within the Disabled People's Movement and shows the centrality of democratic self-organisation in the dynamics that surrounded the emergence of a social definition of disability. Doris Murphy's piece draws on oral history interviews with participants in Ireland's successful campaign for abortion rights. She shows that despite widespread awareness of the need for activist self-care, the pressures of the situation and lack of resources often undercut participants' ability to put this into practice, and calls for a move from individual self-care to collective care.

Poyraz Kolluoglu's ethnography of the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul highlights how – despite scholarly assimilation to the "Arab Spring" or "Occupy" - participants were more likely to frame the events in relation to the 1871 Paris Commune, "conjuring up the spirits of the past to their service" as Marx observed of another uprising. Dimitris Papanikolopoulos' article explores the reorganisation of Greek movements and politics in the 2010s around resistance or opposition to the Troika. He looks at the intense cognitive work done by movement participants in deconstructing traditional political boundaries and constructing new ones: what outside accounts understand as populism turns out to be an active construction from below.

Noah Krigel's article attempts to understand the current shift to the right in global politics through an ethnography of a college Republican club in the US. He identifies the narratives of victimhood, exclusionary mechanisms and gender politics involved among these students, who are increasingly being supported by elites as the future of hard-right politics. Rohan Davis' short piece, on the pro Palestinian movement in Australia, notes the marginalisation of Palestine solidarity in Australian politics, notes the impact of the Bernie Sanders candidature on the expansion of pro-Palestine views in the US and calls for charismatic leadership of this kind in Australia. Michael Zeller's article argues for a more systematic approach to theorising the demobilisation of social movements, presenting a complex logic of causal factors. It uses the case of

Russia's 2011-12 For Fair Elections movement to show how this analysis works in practice.

Two articles look at the relationship between movement activists and researchers around nonviolence. Charla Burnett and Karen Ross' article carries out a meta-analysis of movement training manuals and scholarly research, contrasting how they discuss scaling up. The authors note how research on campaigns diverges substantially from what activists prioritise when trying to increase the size and impact of non-violent action. Kyle Matthews' article on how movements use research discusses Extinction Rebellion's use of Chenoweth and Stephan's research to argue that if 3.5% of a population engages in civil disobedience success is inevitable. He shows that this is based on misunderstanding the context of the research. Both papers argue for better dialogue between researchers and movements – a key concern for *Interface*.

We are delighted to finish with a paper that does just that. A team of academic researchers and Indigenous youth - Levi Gahman, Filiberto Penados, Adaeze Greenidge, Seferina Miss, Roberto Kus, Donna Makin, Florenio Xuc, Rosita Kan and Elodio Rash – co-authored this article about dignity-anchored, dream-driven and desire-based research coming out of Maya youth organising that is redefining development in southern Belize, from the perspective of an Indigenous movement which has won historic gains on land rights.

### **Book reviews**

Finally, we have a bumper crop of book reviews. Isaac K. Oommen reviews Yasser Munif's *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. Masao Sugiura's *Against the Storm: How Japanese Print workers Resisted the Military Regime, 1935-1945* is reviewed by Alexander James Brown.

Rogelio Regalado Mujica offers a Spanish-language review of Samir Gandesha (ed.), *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*. Daniel Ozarow's *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-Class Revolt: Comparative Insights from Argentina* is reviewed by Agnes Gagyí.

Cameron Shingleton reviews Andy Blunden's *Hegel for Social Movements*. Cas Mudde's *The Far Right Today* is reviewed by Patrick Sawyer. Lastly, Dawn Marie Paley reviews Alyshia Gálvez' *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies and the Destruction of Mexico*.

### **Writing for *Interface***

A call for papers for future issues of *Interface* follows. *Interface* seeks to share learning between different social movement struggles and movements in different places and to develop dialogue between activist and academic understandings and between different political and intellectual traditions. That

means we publish pieces by activist thinkers as well as academic researchers (and many people who are both), and in many different formats.

Because of this, *Interface* doesn't have a "line" - or rather, the line is that we want to hear from movement participants who are thinking about strategy, tactics, movement theory, history etc. and from researchers on movements who are committed to working with activists rather than for purely academic goals. It is movements "from below" - movements of the poor, the powerless and those at the bottom of cultural hierarchies - who most need this reflection. Conversely we are opposed to racism, fascism, casteism, and religious fundamentalism. This dialogue and audience should also shape writing for *Interface*.

Please, please don't write us pieces aimed at convincing a general public to support your cause! Most of our readers are already very heavily engaged in their own movements: if you have a good piece for a general public, why not publish it somewhere that public will actually see it? Similarly, please don't send us pieces which are all about the theoretical analysis of social structures, economics, culture, biopolitics or whatever. Again, *Interface* readers get it: but what they are interested in is what people actually do to resist and / or change these structures, what happens when they resist and how they can struggle better. Lastly, some academic and political styles of writing are all about showing that you're part of the in-group: using a vocabulary that people in other movements /traditions/disciplines can't make sense of is fine if you're writing for that kind of journal, but it isn't *Interface*.

What do we want? Clearly-written pieces that don't assume your readers know your country / movement / academic discipline / theoretical tradition but focus on what readers can learn from the movement you're writing about, including from its mistakes, dilemmas, challenges and conflicts. Something you would find interesting and useful if you were reading it about a different movement, in a different country! Have a look at our past issues to get a better sense of who our readers and writers are – and try writing for them. Our guidelines for contributors and "About *Interface*" pages have more details.

### ***Interface* editors – leaving, arriving, needed!**

With this issue we welcome Ana Vilenica as a new East and Central European editor. Ana also did the covers for this issue and the last one, and is inaugurating a visuals working team. We also say farewell to Ana Margarida Esteves, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Helge Hiram Jensen, David Landy and Anna Szolucha. Our thanks go out to them for all the work they've done over the years in developing the journal, keeping it going in hard times and making connections with new generations of activists and movements.

We're also looking for a new editor with IT skills to join the IT / website working group. We publish on Wordpress.org, using files created in Word and social media outlets on Twitter and Facebook. Like all our editorial work, this is voluntary and collective. If you're interested in activist media, please contact Laurence Cox at [laurence.cox@mu.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@mu.ie).

## **Call for papers volume 13 issue 1 (May-June 2021)**

### **Rising up against institutional racism in the Americas and beyond**

**Elisabet Rasch, Heike Schaumberg and Sara C. Motta**

The May-June 2021 issue of the open-access, online, copy left academic/activist journal *Interface: a Journal for and about Social Movements* (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/>) will focus on themes relevant to understanding and registering the popular responses and uprisings to racism. The geographical scope will be focused on the Americas, but we also encourage relevant submissions from other geographical regions with significant ant-racist movements. We also welcome contributions that critically analyse the deeper social constructions of racism and the absence of, or barriers to the development of, protest movements. Contributions on other themes, as always, are also welcome.

The Volume 12, issue 2 (November-December 2020) issue will be a general issue, open to all contributions relevant to the journal.

### **Rising up against institutional racism in the Americas and beyond**

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on racism as a structural and institutional ill of capitalism. The vicious police killing of George Floyd on 25 May ignited uprisings and protests against the institutional racism not only in the US but across much of the 'Global North'. This happened just at a time when most of the world was in lockdown and activists wondered how the Covid-19 pandemic and, in particular, the quarantine would affect our ability to organise collectively against injustice and discrimination and fight for a better world.

The past decades, the Americas have witnessed growing radicalisation and movements of indigenous peoples that has raised awareness of structural racism across these continents. Yet, with Latin America as the new pandemic's hotspot at the time of writing, energies in this region are still focused on Covid-19 itself and the social and economic consequences; we are yet to see whether the ant-racist movements in the north will reverberate more strongly in the south.

There is a plethora of structural, political and historical reasons for anti-racism to crystallize countless issues of contention and articulate as a movement. For instance, there have been allegations and reports of racially motivated police abuses in several countries in the region, where poverty is also racialized (see for example: Grimson and Grimson 2017; Mondon and Winter 2019; Sears 2014; Hale 2005; Guano 2003; Gordillo 2016). Indeed, the rage underpinning the rising against racism is fuelled also by the connected economic injustices. The pandemic also highlights this: poorer sectors pay with disproportionately more lives for a pandemic that they have not helped to spread across the globe, but for

which they have fewer means for protective measures and treatment. Institutional racism, police brutality and racial profiling are well-known and documented issues right across the Americas, in many countries steeped in a history of state terror and/ or exploitative, and frequently violent, Latifundista social relations.

Today, political conditions are both combined and, characteristically of a general crisis, jarringly uneven across the Americas. With Trump only being trumped by Bolsonaro in Brazil, Chile's popular uprising halted by the pandemic was countered by Bolivia's right-wing coup, which now faces uncertainty due to elections and popular pressure, to name just a handful of examples. In a historical move, the recently elected Argentine government has taken legal action against the superpowers of the police in Salta province for recurrent abuses of powers, including unlawful detentions (El Portal de Salta 2020). It is the first time for the national government to recognize the institutional nature of police violence targeted at the poor, indigenous peoples, and political adversaries such as Human Rights, social movements and trade union actors.

The Black Lives Matter uprising in the 'North' has put the struggle against institutional racism onto the global agendas, which prompts a variety of questions. Will the Black Lives Matter Movement inspire forms of collective action against institutional racism in Latin America? In what ways would such movements re-shape the region's political landscape and could they re-invigorate the leftist social movements' agendas? Indeed, does the 'Black Lives Matter' movement offer an opportunity to unearth the institutional racism from the various origin myths and its historical legacies of slavery (Shilliam 2009)? In what ways have these legacies shaped national and ethnic identities across the Americas? How does the imaginary of a 'white' European colonial past still obscure and/or marginalise non-white collective identities? How has this been resisted? Have the nature and content of anti-racist resistance, or the conditions for such resistance changed? How does the racialisation of working-class poor articulate during the Covid-19 pandemic? What does this tell us about social, cultural and political conditions for confronting the ills of capitalism today?

This issue aims to explore the diversity of historical and political articulations of institutional racism and their antagonists in the Americas, and why it is now, under the difficult circumstances of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, the anti-racism movements have erupted into the public sphere in the North. How does the Covid 19 pandemic shape anti-racist and indigenous rights struggles? We invite in-depth empirical, historical and theoretical analyses, case studies and regional explorations, reports, opinion pieces, relevant interviews and other significant material, short contributions centred on 'events' of collective action against racism primarily in the Americas. Reflections on racism and anti-racism from other parts of the world that do not relate to the Americas will be covered by the 'open section' of this issue.

Some general questions seem to be particularly important, but this is not an exhaustive list:

1. What are particular and general constructions of racism in the Americas?
2. How is contemporary racism, and resistance towards it, rooted in the colonial history of the continent and how is it confronted or challenged?
3. How did anti-racist protests emerge during the pandemic and what is its meaning?
4. How does the COVID19 pandemic shape the work of anti-racist and indigenous movements?
5. What is the composition of the anti-racist and indigenous movements and why?
6. What are the (local) historical legacies of racism in ideological constructs and identity and cultural politics?
7. How do anti-racist movements in the North articulate with non-white and indigenous groups in Latin America?
8. How do indigenous movements (and their indigenous rights' agenda) articulate with other anti-racist agenda's in the Americas?
9. What are racism's 'hidden transcripts' and how do they shape collective subjectivities?
10. How do social (indigenous) movements, trade unions and left-wing parties construct and frame anti-racism?
11. How is the operational space of anti-racist and indigenous movements limited by governments, the private sector, armed actors, and others?
12. How are poverty, violence and class racialised and how does this shape resistance and protest?
13. How is racism gendered within the home, the family, in public spaces and at work?

In this issue, we would particularly encourage in-depth ethnographic, historical and political analyses, comparative approaches, activist accounts as well as event and practice analyses.

### **Principles for contributions**

*Interface* is a journal of practitioner research, meaning that we welcome work by movement activists as well as activist scholars, and work in a variety of formats which suit these different kinds of writing as well as our very varied readership – which includes activists and researchers across the world, connected to many different movements and working within very different intellectual, theoretical and political traditions.

We are interested in pieces in many formats – peer-reviewed articles and interviews with movement activists, research and teaching notes, book reviews and key documents and other formats that work well for their purposes – that tackle some of the questions raised above.

All contributions (including those for the special issue and the special section) should go to the appropriate regional editors by the deadline of May 1, 2018. Please see the editorial contacts page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/editorial-contact/>) – and use the appropriate template. Please see the guidelines for contributors (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) for more indications on content and style.

### **General contributions**

As always, this issue will also include non-theme related pieces. We are happy to consider submissions on any aspect of social movement research and practice that fit within the journal's mission statement (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/who-we-are/mission-statement/>). Pieces for *Interface* should contribute to the journal's mission as a tool to help our movements learn from each other's struggles, by developing analyses from specific movement processes and experiences that can be translated into a form useful for other movements.

In this context, we welcome contributions by movement participants and academics who are developing movement-relevant theory and research. In addition to studies of contemporary experiences and practices, we encourage analysis of historical social movements as a means of learning from the past and better understanding contemporary struggles.

Our goal is to include material that can be used in a range of ways by movements – in terms of its content, its language, its purpose and its form. We thus seek work in a range of different formats, such as conventional (refereed) articles, review essays, facilitated discussions and interviews, action notes, teaching notes, key documents and analysis, book reviews – and beyond. Both activist and academic peers review research contributions, and other material is sympathetically edited by peers. The editorial process generally is geared towards assisting authors to find ways of expressing their understanding, so that we all can be heard across geographical, social and political distances.

We can accept material in Bengali, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak, Spanish and Swedish. Please see our editorial contacts page (<https://www.interfacejournal.net/contact-us/>) for details of who to send submissions to.

## Deadline and contact details

The deadline for initial submissions to this issue, to be published in May-June 2021, is 15 October 2020. For details of how to submit pieces to *Interface*, please see the “Guidelines for contributors” on our website. All manuscripts should be sent to the appropriate regional editor, listed on our contacts page.

Submission templates are available online via the guidelines page (<http://www.interfacejournal.net/submissions/guidelines-for-contributors/>) and should be used to ensure correct formatting. *Interface* is a completely voluntary effort, without the resources of commercial journals, so we have to do all the layout and typesetting ourselves. The only way we can manage this is to ask authors to use these templates when preparing submissions. Thanks!

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## **Mutating mobilisations during the pandemic crisis in Spain**

**Miguel A. Martínez (April 27<sup>th</sup>)**

For a social movement and urban scholar, these are not the best days for conducting fieldwork on the streets. Off-line demonstrations, protests with gathering bodies and banners, deliberative assemblies and the like have been on hold for a long period in countries such as Spain. The coronavirus pandemic and the stringent measures taken by the government have set an unprecedented situation in terms of social life and politics, especially for the generations who did not live under the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1978), where surveillance and repression determined daily routines and anti-regime mobilisations. The current ruling coalition between the social democratic party, PSOE, and the more leftist Unidas Podemos, had opened up a promising term for, at least, some progressive policies since they took office in January 2020. However, the sudden economic crisis that the pandemic is unfolding has abruptly undermined even the least optimistic prospects.

As a regular online observer of bottom-up organisations, campaigns, and collective actions, as well as a follower of the debates that stir and flood the political sphere in Spain, I was surprised by some of the innovative ways of continuing to protest during these difficult times of home confinement, starting March 15, 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency. Obviously, online protests are not new at all but, in this short period of time, activists explored appealing forms of articulating discourse and campaigns. Grassroots mobilisations for social justice have included practices and challenges to the authorities previously unforeseen. In particular, the following selection of experiences resembles the context of the 2008 global financial crisis, although some dimensions have changed too. Hence, this preliminary analysis aims at understanding what seems like the first stage of an emerging cycle of mutating mobilisations.

### **Solidarity and mutual aid**

From the first days of the lockdown, most grassroots politics focused on discussing how the most vulnerable people, those without a home, could be sheltered, how those with casual jobs would face their contracts being terminated immediately, and how those in overcrowded prisons and migrant detention centres would cope with the new risks and rules. This was the beginning of a powerful campaign of solidarity that was increasingly widening its range in order to include concerns for the elderly, disabled, and people otherwise at risk; concerns over domestic gender violence, and the situation of workers on various fronts, as well as children. An enhanced meaning of the term solidarity has thus entered the mainstream public discourse: “mutual aid”. In addition, “support and care networks” organised by many grassroots

organisations and neighbours who were not involved in politics before, added practices of reconstructing urban communities in a very different way from charities and NGOs, although many of these have also been involved (sometimes also in alliance with local governments, as showcased by the platform “*Frena la Curva*” [Halt the Curve]). Furthermore, long-term campaigns of solidarity towards migrants and refugees continue to focus on the extreme vulnerability, racism, and criminalisation that these groups experience, aggravated by their irregular administrative situation.

Examples of the above are:

- Networks for care and mutual aid in order to help with daily errands and shopping, to call an ambulance, company for hospital visits, doing homework with children, providing basic supplies, taking care of pets, etc. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Food banks, especially for those without formal jobs. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Psychological assistance over the phone or via radio programmes. [\[link\]](#)
- Hand-clapping every day at 8pm from windows and balconies to express support and gratitude towards key workers, especially those in the public health system, subject to increased risks and pressures during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Racialised street vendors and women (such as the *Sindicatos de Manteros* and the *Xarxa de Dones Cosidores*) produced masks and other textile equipment to be donated to health workers. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Hackers and makers from autonomous and squatted social centres produced medical equipment. [\[link\]](#)
- A campaign asking for an extraordinary regularisation of all undocumented migrants and asylum seekers (estimated to be around 600,000 people) was widely supported with more than 1,000 Civil Society Organisations co-signing the campaign. [\[link\]](#)
- Demands to shut down all the migrant detention centres (CIEs), successful in many cases with the release of most inmates. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)

## **A “white” tide 2.0**

Very early on too, this solidarity was translated into a renewed focus on the public health system. Due to the privatisations and the severe cuts to this system in many regions of Spain (a policy that was mainly but not only led by Madrid and Catalonia), the pandemic revealed the shortcomings of the available resources and triggered a widespread cry to recover this essential pillar of the welfare state, if there is still time. Even right-wing politicians, who accelerated and benefitted from the privatisations of hospitals, changed their public discourse to pretend they were the first supporters of the public health system.

Like a reminder of the so-called “white tide” that took to the streets around the uprisings of 2011 (the 15M movement), calling for a defence of public health services and infrastructures, the pandemic has once more united large sectors of the population under the same banner. This time, its main manifestation is the regular applause heard every night at 8pm from the balconies of most cities across the country. This repertoire of protests is new, and the scope of the supporters is even broader than during “the white tide” one decade ago, but the anti-neoliberal content of the mobilisation is not that different. The massive staging or ritual performance of hand-clapping addresses all the workers of the health system trying to save lives and handle the serious medical consequences of the pandemic.

### **Rent strikes**

A third strand of mobilisations, symbolising an important shift from previous militant trajectories, covers all the ongoing rent strikes. An estimated 16,000 tenants have joined the strike that began on April 1 [\[link\]](#), although it is expected to widen on May 1 in line with similar international calls. To date, around 80 “strike committees” have been established in different neighbourhoods and municipalities across Spain. Rent strikes by tenants are not historically new, but the last one that took place in Spain was in 1931. The present ones are a consequence of the previously strong housing movement led by the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) as a response to the 2008 global financial crisis and the wave of housing dispossessions that led to the eviction of more than half a million households. Tenants unions were also set up some years later in a number of major cities, especially following the recovery of the speculative housing bubble around 2015, when many international investment funds and short-term platforms such as Airbnb led to unbearable rises in rents and massive displacements from gentrified urban areas. Tenants unions and other housing organisations had been pressing for the central government to change the rental laws and implement rent controls measures.

However, the coronavirus crisis deepened and worsened an already strenuous housing situation. During the pandemic, the government has ruled that home evictions are forbidden and the payment of rents and mortgage can be postponed, but not cancelled. Moreover, energy and water supplies cannot be cut if the bills are not paid during the same period (six months after the state of emergency). Unauthorised occupations (squats) are not covered by the decree though. These measures are considered insufficient by activists and not help alleviate the hardship of those who have become unemployed and impoverished over the last weeks. If they pay rents later or apply for loans now, they may even increase their levels of debt and their financial default in the aftermath of the pandemic.

## Who will pay for this crisis?

Many predictions estimate that unemployment will escalate to 30%. A similar proportion is expected in terms of the average decrease of household income. This adds to the already 12 million people living under the poverty threshold, including the International Labour Organization's accounts of 15% "poor workers", as well as the 3.2 million unemployed people [\[link\]](#). Another recession is going to devastate the living conditions of the working class even more. This economic shock indicates that labour mobilisations will rise at higher rates than the ones observed over the last six weeks, once the appeasing policies are no longer viable (in the absence of any unconditional rescue by European powerholders, which is unlikely to occur). Although the following list hints towards the nascent labour protests:

- Workers' strike in the Nissan factory because the company is using the crisis as an opportunity to fire workers. [\[link\]](#)
- Workers' strike in the Airbus factory due to the controversial decision made by the government regarding the license for non-essential productive activities to reopen operations. [\[link\]](#)
- A similar motivation behind another strike at the Aernnova factory. [\[link\]](#)
- Workers forced the Mercedes company to halt production due to the lack of safety measures during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#)
- Threat of workers' strike in Glovo, Deliveroo, and UberEats due to the worsening conditions and payments during the pandemic. [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#)
- Also, as a reaction to highly precarious labour conditions, waged and self-employed workers in the culture and arts sector called to various strikes because of the lack of support from the government, and the cancellation of events *sine die*. [\[link\]](#)

The reaction of the government has consisted in subsidies to the temporary regulations of unemployment (ERTEs) that have the immediate effect of a 30% income loss for workers affected in the short-term, but there is no certainty around how long these subsidies will last. Domestic and care workers, especially those with no formal contract (around 200,000 people, mostly racialised and migrant women), will experience higher losses, ending up with wages of no more than 500 Euros per month.

In this context, campaigns for a universal and unconditional basic income have resurged [\[link\]](#) [\[link\]](#). They have been alive for many decades, but hardly reached the ears of the authorities. Once a key promise of political party Podemos, at its birth in 2014, universal basic income programmes became later replaced by less ambitious plans. However, the pandemic crisis has brought it back to the table, despite the initial reluctance of the PSOE. The negotiations between both parties concluded with an agreement of a conditional "minimum income" that will alleviate only the poorest households with no less than a 500 Euros subsidy, although yet to be rolled out.

In fact, a universal basic income was one of the starring demands of the *Plan de Choque Social* [Social Emergency Plan] [[link](#)] [[link](#)], a comprehensive list of demands called for by more than 200 civic organisations (many trade unions included) in order to press the government. Among them, activists demanded a state takeover of private hospitals without compensation, special resources to protect workers who are “sustaining life” (in elderly homes, social services, transport, cleaning, food supply chain, pharmacies, and so on), and the promotion of medical supply production. They also suggested higher taxes to capital and the funds of bailed-out banks during the 2008 crisis should be used to pay for the new expenses [[link](#)]. The alternative is to fall into the same nightmare of austerity and financialisation that the troika (EC, ECB, and IMF) imposed ten years ago.

### **No time to lose**

To conclude, a few preliminary lessons may be learned.

First of all, the above-mentioned mutating mobilisations show the often long-term effects of social movements. A range of movements – 15M, housing, feminist, antiracist, and migrant movements, to name a few – created the social connections, the practical knowledge, and the discursive frames that made many of the present mobilisations possible. Many of the previous activist networks, despite their weakness and fragmentation since 2014, are now linked to new ones. There is an ongoing and renewed wave of activist recruitment. Different grassroots platforms are converging with one another, and sometimes also with more institutional organisations and public authorities. On the other hand, the current urgency and political momentum might be temporarily relegating other areas of concern, such as the environmental movement. The success of some grassroots organisations and protests may be seen as poor at the short-run. Arrested migrants and impoverished tenants, however, would think otherwise. Anyhow, the persistence of so many initiatives from below, striving for social justice, continues to show their ability to mobilise large parts of society and, albeit perhaps too slowly, erode the pillars of the main hegemonic powers.

Secondly, another round of anti-neoliberal movements and campaigns are a sign that it is not just about asking for “more state”. This would be an overly simplistic conclusion, in my view. On the contrary, I read these expressions as a direct opposition to the key operations of the neoliberal alliance between global corporations and political elites. This is the case with the privatisation of health systems, with devastating and tremendous consequences to life and societies, as this pandemic is showing. On the one hand, the for-profit health industry had neither the interest nor the means to assist the high number of people affected by the pandemic. This realisation paved the ground for more positive views of financially-strong, state-owned health systems of a universal and non-profit nature. Hence, this second “wide tide” is an emergent movement that questions, above all, the commodification of health and the segregated benefits it offers

those who can afford it. On the other hand, the emerging defence of the public health system is claiming state accountability for previous privatisations, cuts offs, plans, and mismanagement. In my view, it goes beyond the replacement of the market by the state, although it stems from a general cry to defend and improve essential state services. Capitalism and public health have proven to be quite conflicting during the past weeks.

A third observation is that radical actions like rent strikes are possible in exceptional situations, such as the prohibition of off-line demonstrations, pickets, boycotts, and other forms of contentious and embodied actions. Compared to workers' strikes, the right to rent strike is not legally acknowledged in Spain. If tenants do not pay their rents, they may be swiftly evicted, and it is difficult to find affordable housing in a market that has been so overheated due to the intervention of global investors such as Blackstone and other vulture firms such as Airbnb. The timid moves of the government, however, opened up the opportunity for the housing organisations to take the risk of calling for a strike. In particular, the fact that home evictions are officially forbidden during six months after the state of emergency leaves enough time for the strike committees to organise and negotiate favourable agreements. All of this is done online, which is significantly novel compared to other virtual campaigns not so performative in terms of producing true radical practice.

Furthermore, more mobilisations are expected because a deeper economic recession is in fact taking place, with higher unemployment rates to come. New alliances between labour and social (and urban/housing) syndicalism are being forged, as the *Plan de Choque Social* [Social Emergency Plan] suggests. The notion of solidarity, usually an exclusive label for established NGOs, has been broadened and replaced by the vibrant, self-organised and fully bottom-up “networks of care and mutual aid”.

Finally, right-wing agitators are investing more and more in online mobilising. This has not been in the scope of this account, although there are many indicators that the extreme right is also on the rise. Their fake news campaigns, their rampant stigmatisation and dehumanisation of vulnerable people and leftist organisations, and their vicious attacks on any progressive measure taken by the government, are above all, very robust financially speaking. Less clear is how their legitimacy can last and how they can effectively counter their opponents without winning elections. Once they achieve this, however, as we recently saw in Poland and Hungary, for example, their dismissal of parliamentary control is the first step towards implementing their authoritarian and exclusionary political agenda. In this regard, it is worth noting that the social support that the far-right was not able to garner during the 2008 crisis in Spain has shifted towards a different scenario during the time of the pandemic, because one of such parties (Vox) won 15% of the parliamentary seats in the last general elections and is actively poisoning the political debates in many social and mass media networks.

### **About the author**

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## **Forms of social movement in the crisis: a view from Ireland**

**Laurence Cox (13<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

Media coverage and public discussion of the coronavirus crisis has focussed primarily on what states and governments do and what they should do about it: about the relationship between epidemiology and policies. Within the global North at least, public health is seen as being ultimately the responsibility of the state, despite neoliberal strategies aiming to dodge this responsibility and a legacy of hollowing out and privatising public health.

This arises from a history of state responsibility for public health going back (in Europe) a century and a half, itself in part the product of the appalling results of poverty and pollution in the new industrial towns, incarnated in the provision of sewers and drinking water. If public drinking fountains are now mostly shut to facilitate the selling of bottled water, the wider legacy is not easily shifted, despite decades of attempts to place the responsibility onto individuals as “consumers” (most commonly, of privatised health care that benefits from various forms of public subsidy).

Writing this on the Easter weekend, traditionally a period for family holidays in much of Europe, the latest iteration of European neoliberalism is the attempt to weaponise finger-wagging about individual behaviour, to convert handling the crisis into a matter of policing one another; but even here the finger-wagging is mostly shaped in terms of pressurising your neighbours to do what the government has told them to do. The first and easiest form of social movement action, then, has been to pressure the state to take on its own responsibilities.

### **Forcing states to act**

In many countries, civil society has been crucial in forcing states to actually bite the bullet and do something – challenging deep-seated tendencies of drawing a veil over embarrassing failures, of fear of “panic”, of concern for the national image, of boosting investor and consumer confidence of keeping the economy going at all costs, of not wanting to spend money... All the instinctual reactions of PR-oriented managers came into play at governmental level, and needed to be overcome.

While liberals like the easy and reassuring story of “science speaks and governments (should) listen”, a more accurate account of the last few months would be “civil society shouts, states decide they have to do something and *then* turn to scientists of their choosing”. In China, medics had to become whistleblowers for the state to admit there was a problem. States like Iran and Myanmar similarly denied the facts until it was impossible to continue doing so.

In Britain (according to a Nov 2019 WEF report the world’s second-best prepared country for a pandemic, after the USA), it took a public outcry for the

government to admit that its “scientific advice” was wrong – while court reporters now deny that “herd immunity” was ever part of its thinking. In this bizarre model, 60% (in fact herd immunity can require 70 or 80% of a population to be infected, and relies on immunity being acquired – which was not certain at the time) of the population of the UK (perhaps 42 million people) would catch the virus. On the death rates then reported from China or Italy, this could have meant half a million deaths in a matter of months – something which the official scientists failed to notice because they used mortality rates for viral pneumonia instead. It took a lot of pressure for the government and its scientists to take on board what the rest of the world was telling them.

In Ireland – which remains at the mercy of the control experiment being conducted next door – the state took a fortnight to catch up with civil society in terms of [public demands for action](#). A weak caretaker government, badly defeated in an election, eventually put itself at the head of the parade. Unable to act without popular consensus, it nevertheless benefitted strongly from this feeling of a national community of feeling – while making exceptions for the building industry (construction sites were only closed very belatedly) and their rich and well-connected friends who returned from the Cheltenham races in the middle of the crisis.

As states now move to restore “normality” – with varying mixes of actual success in tackling the virus as against pressure from economic interests – movements can be expected to do what they can to contest unsafe processes of capitalist restoration where the health response has been thoroughly inadequate.

### **Contesting *how* the state acts**

A second way that movements act on this crisis – having helped to push the state into action – is around the specifics of what it does. The state naturally takes a “bird’s eye” perspective that misses the local rationalities that people actually live by and in – even before we talk about the state *in capitalism*, the interests it routinely takes into account (those of the wealthy, the powerful and the culturally privileged) and the needs it routinely ignores.

Renters are a classic example here. But this is also true for people in precarious work (often overlooked by state rescue packages), prisoners, refugees, homeless people, students in campus accommodation - and groups like people with disabilities, health workers, people in care homes and others who a top-down medical view really *should* see but often ... doesn't.

As has become clear, care homes have been in effect treated as waiting rooms for death by governments in several countries – and in some not even included in national statistics of coronavirus deaths. People with disabilities have particularly complex and constrained lives which are often ignored in general rules for what people are allowed to do in a crisis, and fall foul of the arbitrary policing that has been widespread in “lockdowns”.

This policing more generally has exposed those who are normally shielded from it to the banal stupidity of everyday policing, and led to a certain degree of backlash, in some cases successful, against police forces rewriting the law – or at times even government recommendations – into forms that make sense to local police culture.

In many countries, we have seen increasing agitation and whistleblowing by health workers who are offered national cheerleading support but often deprived of PPE (personal protective equipment) and in extreme cases even disciplined for using their own. In Italy, the closure of workplaces was forced by workers in non-essential factories repeatedly going on strike; in Dublin, bus drivers refused to accept fares after management disciplined a driver for allowing passengers on through the side doors.

In Ireland, a particular battle has been around asylum seekers in “direct provision” (at the mercy of private landlords paid by the state) who have been left in over-crowded accommodation, sharing rooms with strangers and notionally “self-isolating” in rows of beds. Despite massive numbers of empty hotel rooms and the collapse of Airbnb, the government has refused to do more than move a cosmetic number from one shared accommodation to another. Led by MASI, the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland, activists have been pushing the government hard on this issue.

Social movements, then, have often been central in pushing the state to take action at all – and have then had to push again to get it to act in ways that take social realities other than those of the wealthy, powerful and culturally privileged into account. This experience has been shaped differently in different countries, with social media, unions, NGOs, left politicians and individual activists all involved.

Of course they are not the only actors involved: they find allies among academic and media voices, people aware of the situation in other countries, sections of the public that have become increasingly worried by governments unwilling to act, acting ineptly or acting cruelly are all part of the picture, and some fractions of capital that are thinking beyond the short term.

### **Solidarity economy and mutual aid**

And then ... we have countries where the state is doing its very best not to act, for whatever reason: ideological blinkers, debts owed to very short-term capital interests for buying elections, sheer incompetence and so on, where the general strategy can be summed up as “bail out the banks and call out the army”. The incapacity of the American federal government to respond coherently to the crisis speaks volumes about its declining hegemony within its own borders as well as internationally; Sweden is a more surprising case.

In majority world countries, the state lacks this capacity for other reasons, while the scale of the informal economy, the nature of the shanty-town environment, the weakness of health systems etc. mean that the kinds of responses to the

virus explored in most of the global North are either not feasible or not effective. In both kinds of context, we are seeing a huge upsurge in various forms of solidarity economy and mutual aid, people coming together to look after each other directly, beyond what the state can or will do.

On the fringes of popular self-organising we also see acts of responsibility by some employers, some universities, a handful of landlords etc. going above and beyond what the state mandates in different countries; but it is above all those who are on the edge, who are more used to giving and asking for help as part of their daily survival, who are helping to keep everyone afloat.

This is only partly a response to “objective circumstances” or the needs of “bare life”, which do not automatically translate into collective solidarity but can be shaped in other and much more damaging ways (clientelism, communalism, gang structures etc.) The contrast between the disaster that is the Indian situation and the level of popular self-organising visible in South Africa is one obvious indicator of this: self-organising traditions do not always survive over time to be re-activated in times of crisis.

South African poors (and US communities in struggle) have a long and recent history of acting collectively around basic needs which is not universal: people can of course rediscover what is after all an ordinary way of being human, but it is not always easy to do so at short notice. Many majority world and southern European countries have effective traditions of solidarity economy constructed in the long recession from 2007-8 as the welfare or developmentalist state has withdrawn even further from people’s lives.

In a sense the growth of solidarity economy reverses [the historical development of welfare states](#) in the global North, where the new urban proletariat initially looked for ways of supporting each other - unions, mutual insurance against injury or sickness etc., credit unions, self-organised education etc. - and states often took over these tasks.

In Ireland, although the state is far more effective (doing significantly better than the UK, for example), there are powerful cultures of active communities that range from the recent experiences of struggle around abortion, gay marriage and water commodification to less contentious forms of a nonetheless powerful imagined community. Long popular traditions of self-organising on a charity model have developed in the crisis, ranging from “checking in on neighbours” to ensuring supplies are available for marginalised groups (e.g. masks for asylum-seekers in “direct provision”). The net effect is that mutual aid groups of many different kinds – overtly politicised and “normalised” alike – have flourished as an unremarkable response to immediate suffering.

These processes develop new kinds of “local rationality” – ways of coping that people come to rely on – or extend existing ones. These local rationalities can readily come into conflict with state interventions, landlords’ or employers’ demands, etc., or indeed be perceived as challenges. They also create new bases for organising around longer-term needs and broader demands.

## **New forms of struggle**

As always, new situations give rise to new forms of struggle. Italy like other countries has seen prisoner revolts against overcrowded prisons in times of virus, and there have been some innovative forms of outside support (involving driving around the prisons in cars, hence physically distancing) in the US. Italy (again) saw the [first \(contested\) public funeral](#), of lifelong activist Salvatore Ricciardi, followed by a memorial wall slogan being painted – in the teeth of the police.

Amazon and other logistics workers suddenly find themselves working in very unsafe situations, which were already extremely oppressive and poorly paid, but now are life-threatening and simultaneously absolutely necessary for everyone else, meaning that workers have more power. Union organising and strikes will tend to develop in these key industries, initially around virus-related issues but no doubt over time around pay, conditions and managerial power.

Calls for rent strikes have been spreading, particularly but not only in the US where moratoria on evictions have been patchy, unemployed workers are even less likely to find adequate support than in other Northern countries – and the lack of state intervention means that the crisis is particularly severe in other ways.

In Ireland, the older struggle – before the virus – was around soaring rental prices in particular, brought on by a failure of social housing provision, vulture fund investment in short-term (e.g. student) housing, Airbnb, and more generally the financialisation of housing markets. While this had failed to produce a mass movement (in part because of the huge range of people's housing relationships) it nonetheless produced mass anger which expressed itself in historically high votes for left parties in the last general election and difficulties in government formation. However there are good chances that the virus in itself will burst the housing bubble and defuse at least some of this pressure; and that the “next big movement” in Ireland will be something currently unexpected.

We will see many, many more struggles before this is through.

## **The possibility of a better world?**

Putting all this in the terms Alf and I outlined in *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, social movements start from human needs and our everyday praxis, which already exists but is massively variable. People find themselves in specific situations shaped by inequality, power and cultural hierarchies, and (collectively, culturally) develop ways of trying to cope - "local rationalities".

When (as with the virus) these are disrupted, threatened or undermined, people mobilise through and to defend them in quite specific ways - what Raymond Williams called "militant particularisms". These are different for renters, prisoners, refugees, precarious workers, healthcare workers and so on – and

different in different countries. However if multiple such particularisms come together (for example, in demands on the state from similar groups across a country, or from multiple groups around related issues like housing or pay) you can get a campaign.

Of course people were already in many cases mobilised *before* the virus - and those groups will be among those most active in developing new forms of mutual aid, new kinds of struggle, making links, pushing the state etc. Bring enough "campaigns" around specific issues together - and we start to see the embryo of a "social movement project", the vision of an alternative *kind of society* which is shaped around the needs of the powerless, the poor and the culturally despised.

And sometimes, when the dominant strategy for accumulating capital was already struggling to keep the show on the road, this kind of "movement of movements" can create an organic crisis. After all, we have been in the "twilight of neoliberalism" for some time...

### **Against magical thinking**

There is a big "but" here, though. A lot of writing currently popular on the left seeks to move from the virus to a better world without going through the messy business of popular struggles and collective debates: to resolve on paper (in the form of a saleable intellectual commodity) what actually needs to be resolved in contentious human practice.

Thus, for example, it is patently not true that things getting worse *in itself* creates a crisis that is likely to have a better outcome, however "objective" the need might seem. Anyone who paid attention in 2007-8 will have noticed this. Similarly, just because the utopia conjured up on paper seems compelling to its author (or well-grounded in "the literature", or whatever else), this is no guarantee that it will actually happen.

Reality perpetually refuses to allow individuals, or small self-selected publics, to inscribe their own self-image or wished-for future on the map of the world: between the idea and the outcome falls the shadow of power, underpinned by organised interests and buttressed by ideology (or, put another way, consent armoured by coercion). Unless these social relationships change, they can be relied on to reassert "normality" with incredible force at the end of any given crisis, just as the beautiful visions of the European anti-fascist resistance were largely squeezed out under [the pressures of Cold War](#) and the restoration of capitalism in the west and Soviet power in the East.

"We need", "we must", "we are finally realising" and all these rhetorical phrases are good for selling text by the yard to people who want to consume sermons; unless they are effective *agitation* – speaking directly to the needs, struggles and questions of large numbers of people – they are condemned to act as substitutes for the actual process of change.

So what is the relationship between crisis and transformation?

## **Rethinking the war metaphor**

One particularly powerful form of magical thinking is the belief that there is some hidden historical logic that will automatically and necessarily produce good effects. Gramsci felt that this kind of fatalism – “I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term” – was suited to giving movements strength in periods of defeat when they did not have the initiative, but became a real danger in moments of crisis when subaltern groups develop an active subjectivity and become leading actors.

The contemporary form of this fatalism lies in a lazy reading of history which sees wars as somehow automatically producing positive effects – British examples are the granting of votes for women after WWI and the development of the welfare state after WWII. Akin to theories of wars as engines of technical progress, this account erases the agency of first-wave feminists and inter-war socialist and trade union organising – in part because those who repeat it have known far more elite agency than they have effective, organised popular struggle.

The metaphor of war for societies’ responses to the coronavirus has been widespread, and justly criticised for its inappropriateness to the actual measures involved and its centring of (male) leader figures in a story which (following not actual wars but recent war movies) the performance of masculinity is somehow what brings victory against all the odds – a theory which was mown down by machine guns on the Western Front over a hundred years ago but is oddly appealing to certain people.

However (as with the “war brings good things” theory) there is a half-truth partly obscured by the verbiage. Like wars, the virus has combined non-routine forms of state action with significant degrees of popular mobilisation: while most attention has gone (as always) to the state, historical experience suggests that it is the popular mobilisation that is most important. Lenin – who knew what he was talking about in this respect – had some interesting things to say on the subject, in 1915:

To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the “upper classes”, a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for “the lower classes not to want” to live in the old way; it is also necessary that “the upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to

be robbed in “peace time”, but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the “upper classes” themselves* into independent historical action.

## **Failures of rule**

Taken on its own terms, this describes the conditions for a revolutionary *situation*, which is no guarantee of a revolutionary *outcome*. The late Colin Barker, as a leading scholar of revolutions, was fond of this analysis. Its first element, in Colin’s gloss, is the rulers no longer being able to carry on ruling as they had done.

Lenin was thinking ahead in the context of WWI, but also of the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, which helped lead to the 1905 revolution, and probably above all of the Paris Commune. In 1870 the French empire had manifestly failed at the basic business of empyring, by starting and badly losing a war with the Prussians. Paris had suffered a siege and the Versailles added insult to injury by seeking to remove cannons paid for by popular subscription.

So one element of this is the ruling classes failing in something that is core to the business of “ruling” – as we have seen, public health is historically this, and doubly so once the state takes on the role of leading the “war” on the virus. The central issue will be how far people actually feel that states (and employers, landlords, private health care systems etc.) are looking after them or not in this crisis.

Any fool can make a sonorous speech; but can they actually carry out the tasks that follow from the pontificating? Johnson and Trump have clearly failed (to our eyes); but will this be clear to their voters?

Centrists, by contrast, are oddly happy to have this kind of crisis, because they like managing things. In Ireland, as noted, Varadkar has found himself – and his party – a new lease of life in the face of the crisis.

The difficulty for centrists is that tackling the virus involves large-scale investment, and health care systems which have been often systematically run down for decades. Will they be up to the task?

So far, the indications are that despite their very different systems, the states in China, South Korea and Italy are largely receiving popular support, well into the crisis. Iran, perhaps not. How England / Wales and the US fare may be a different question again.

## **A crisis of local rationalities**

Clearly states that fail in their front-line response to the virus, in whatever way, will be made to pay for it. But I suspect greater weaknesses will show everywhere else, as the (necessary) response disrupts everyday life massively and people's needs aren't seen or met. The social dimension of life under extended curfew, rationing, isolation etc. with loss of jobs, housing, family

connections etc.... not all states will see this, or deal with it well. And what's the betting that the reconstruction will pay far more attention to the needs of business and banking than to the "heroes" and "heroines" who have been praised by official rhetoric and made the real sacrifices?

Lenin's second dimension is that the local rationalities of the "oppressed classes" are under even more pressure than usual – or, as Colin put it, people are no longer willing to go on being governed as they have been.

Resistance to WWI started (with India's Ghadar and Ireland's Easter Rising) in 1915 and 1916 in an effective way, but by the end of the war armies and navies were mutinying across Europe, strikes were building and peasants were occupying the land. The Russian Revolution comes at the midpoint of this process.

The end of the war - with bitter winters, Spanish flu, food shortages, unemployment etc. - saw revolutionary waves develop even further. Four empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, Russia) fell in these years, and the British Empire lost much of Ireland. This was the period in which the nation-state became the wave of the future; but there is nothing automatic about the process. Starting in Italy, fascism rolled back most of those revolutions.

### **"Independent historical action"**

A key part of all this is Lenin's third point, about "independent historical action". States mobilised people into war - not just into militaries, but in the fields and factories, through rationing and a thousand other transformations of daily life. People had been told "we are in this together against the common enemy", "you must make these sacrifices for the common goal", and "you are an actor on the stage of history". Many people took this rhetoric seriously at first (as today's liberal pundits still do).

But the most important thing is that people had learned to become public actors, initially mobilised and transforming daily life behind someone else's leadership. The more the war went on, the more their own and their families' needs went unmet, the more critical people were of the leadership – and the more they started to mobilise on their own behalf.

This is the critical moment: in 1916-23 as in 1870-1, top-down mobilisation for the state's goals gave way to bottom-up mobilisation for ordinary people's own needs. Workers seized factories. Peasants seized the land. Soldiers and sailors mutinied for an end to the war and to go back home. Oppressed nationalities sought independence.

Of course we aren't in 1914, or 1870, and right now the crisis is immediate. Unlike 1914, no sane person would want to stop states responding to the crisis - mostly we have wanted them firstly to step in and secondly to do it well. But that doesn't mean all those other issues are gone - they can't be avoided. States are choosing who to support and how - as landlords or renters, as businesses or

workers, and in a million other ways. They will take our needs more or less on board in different countries.

And there are already so many pieces of unfinished business.

Now that people have seen how much can be done - how many things we were told were impossible but are actually entirely doable with the political will - they may not be happy to wait for ever. They may see some other things as also being important enough to act on even if it doesn't fit the economists' theologies.

However it takes *time* to get to this point, because the crisis is largely constituted by what millions, and today tens of millions, of people do and think.

Lenin continued (and remember, this is only 1915):

It was generally known, seen and admitted that a European war would be more severe than any war in the past. This is being borne out in ever greater measure by the experience of the war. The conflagration is spreading; the political foundations of Europe are being shaken more and more; the sufferings of the masses are appalling, the efforts of governments, the bourgeoisie and the opportunists to hush up these sufferings proving ever more futile. The war profits being obtained by certain groups of capitalists are monstrously high, and contradictions are growing extremely acute. The smouldering indignation of the masses, the vague yearning of society's downtrodden and ignorant strata for a kindly ("democratic") peace, the beginning of discontent among the "lower classes"—all these are facts. The longer the war drags on and the more acute it becomes, the more the governments themselves foster—and must foster—the activity of the masses, whom they call upon to make extraordinary effort and self-sacrifice. The experience of the war, like the experience of any crisis in history, of any great calamity and any sudden turn in human life, stuns and breaks some people, *but enlighten and tempers others*. Taken by and large, and considering the history of the world as a whole, the number and strength of the second kind of people have—with the exception of individual cases of the decline and fall of one state or another—proved greater than those of the former kind.

Far from "immediately" ending all these sufferings and all this enhancement of contradictions, the conclusion of peace will, in many respects, make those sufferings more keenly and immediately felt by the most backward masses of the population.

When I posted the first version of this, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, I wrote:

"For now, many ppl are still in shock, esp those who haven't had to face these kinds of threats and uncertainties before - but also some who are being retraumatised.

Most are struggling to reorganise their 'local rationalities' to cope with how their specific situation is changing, and to try and meet everyone's needs in that situation.

And watching what their ‘leaders’ are doing in their name, measuring it in different ways.”

And they may decide that having all pulled together, they want to carry on pulling together on their own behalf. Meanwhile states and corporations will come to make themselves at home in the new normal, and try to use the crisis for their own interests, in a thousand different ways.

However, as people adjust and have time to think - or find themselves in new and unresolvable crises - their reactions will change too. Already many, many people are going from "object" to "subject", taking action in all sorts of creative and unexpected ways for themselves and others.

It’s also worth remembering that for many, their contribution is driven not by fear for themselves, or even for elderly / sick / disabled relatives, but for unknown others. That's ... a different and powerful kind of mobilisation.

## **Finally**

If we used this formula to predict possible outcomes, we would expect to see the greatest movement surges come in those countries where (1) the government has initially refused to act, and then acted in ways that are widely seen to be ineffective and that privilege the interests of capital, of the security state and of culturally dominant groups against those of the vast majority; (2) where the local rationalities of the majority – as renters and shanty-town dwellers, employees and workers in the informal economy, welfare recipients and incarcerated people, and a thousand other situations – have been pushed to breaking point by the virus and the lockdown; and (3) where “independent historical action” – bottom-up self-organisation, social movements – have been strongest, before and during the crisis.

Many societies were shot through with collective struggle before the virus. In the current crisis, people have been pushing states to act, and to act better; they have been developing new forms of solidarity and trying to change impossible situations.

They won't stop there. Because people don't.

This future is yet to be written - if the wars of 1870 and 1914 ended in revolutions, not every war does. But that history is worth remembering, and today's movements are worth supporting, participating in, developing.

Do we want to go back to the old world just as it was?

### **About the author**

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## **We're not all in this together**

**Lesley Wood (14<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

As CoVid19 cases in shelters and Long Term Care facilities soar, the police in Ontario are ramping up their enforcement of physical distancing bylaws. They ticket those gathering in groups, people standing closer than 2 metres apart, and those using closed park facilities. They can be fined \$1000. In addition, police have the right now to ask anyone to show identification with their name, address and date of birth. Those who don't comply can be fined up to \$750.

The goal is to limit the spread of CoVid19, but the choice to provide the resources for police enforcement (not to say bailing out the oil and gas sector), while neglecting the most vulnerable reveals the ways that state strategies reflect longstanding inequalities. Our identities and networks offer different pandemic experiences. The virus hits institutionalized, immigrant, poorer, indigenous and racialized communities harder. Neighbourhoods where there are more longstanding health problems, more crowded housing and transportation spread the virus. Shutting things down, or forcing people to separate when some people lack access to clean water or medical help or harm reduction services, means some are sacrificed for the greater good.<sup>1</sup> In this way, decisions like that of Toronto Public Health's CoVid closure of the city's largest supervised injection service, led to a massive spike in overdoses.<sup>2</sup>

In her new blog post, Alexis Shotwell cites Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her discussion of these effects of state logics. Wilson Gilmore defines the operation as racism as "The state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group- differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death." Such operations shape the distribution of sickness and death from COVID-19."<sup>3 4</sup> As Shiri Pasternak and Robert Houle note, such inequities compound disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> Shiri Pasternak and Robert Houle. 2020. "No Such Thing As Natural Disasters: Infrastructure And The First Nation Fight Against COVID-19," *Yellowhead Institute* 9/4/2020 <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/04/09/no-such-thing-as-natural-disasters-infrastructure-and-the-first-nation-fight-against-covid-19/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Altenberg. 2020. "CITY "Since Covid began, we've seen the highest number of overdoses since 2017": What happens when the opioid epidemic meets a global pandemic?" *Toronto Life* <https://torontolife.com/city/since-covid-began-weve-seen-the-highest-number-of-overdoses-since-2017-what-happens-when-the-opioid-epidemic-meets-a-global-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR3MVGpGFOqWHoQH3zmWrDEFBfyFEObLorW2UGlViXesdTeQxrTeG3QcSdc>

<sup>3</sup> Alexis Shotwell. 2020. "Survival will always be insufficient but it's a good place to start," March 25, 2020 [https://alexisshotwell.com/2020/03/25/survival-will-always-be-insufficient-but-its-a-good-place-to-start/?fbclid=IwAR1wKibb77LHOsuUzoteDxEge\\_lXAMuvMMaz-oAKIT7KakYywp2rOShsvfc](https://alexisshotwell.com/2020/03/25/survival-will-always-be-insufficient-but-its-a-good-place-to-start/?fbclid=IwAR1wKibb77LHOsuUzoteDxEge_lXAMuvMMaz-oAKIT7KakYywp2rOShsvfc)

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore. 2007. *Golden Gulag* (University of California Press), p. 28

Dr. Nanky Rai, a Toronto based family physician working closely with people experiencing homelessness and people who use drugs explains how prioritizing enforcement over care is hitting her clients. She says, "The clients I work with are already disproportionately impacted by policing and are already starting to experience heightened racial profiling by police under COVID19... Increasing police and punitive enforcement will not protect public health but it will threaten the health and safety of people, especially Indigenous, Black and other racialized people, those with precarious immigration status, sex workers, drug users and those experiencing homelessness. If these measures go through, it will be made very clear who the government does and doesn't consider as part of the "public" in public health."

Governments vary in their definition of the 'relevant public, as well as their capacity to take coordinated action. Wealthy, powerful countries have more ability to protect their populations. But they choose to protect only parts of the whole, and then unequally.<sup>5</sup> Most authorities develop policies that favour those like them, the wealthiest and most powerful. Prisoners, the homeless, disabled people, non-status folks or indigenous communities are simply left out of the conversation, unless there is a ruckus. When powerholders pass laws, and policies that don't recognize the vulnerability of these excluded populations, they are likely to harm them, they are likely to distort our understanding of social life, and push us towards police enforcement; transformations that will, if unchecked, harm prospects for a more just society.

So what do we do? Most of us want to do the right thing. And we want others to do the right thing. There is a real sense of a shared challenge right now. However, our individualist moral framework can make our belief in distancing and enforcement tactics evangelical and fundamentalist. Like the Protestant Ethic that infuses capitalism, we evaluate our moral worth on our commitment to physical distancing. Our fervour is justified by stories of Frisbee players and picnickers, just hanging out. Now, feel free to give me the emails of these scofflaws and I'll shame them. But they aren't the only ones still outside. And they definitely aren't going to be the ones most affected by new police powers. That burden will be borne by those who law enforcement traditionally see as risky – people of colour, particularly Black and indigenous folks and youth. Those without identification and options will be hit hardest, such as undocumented and homeless people.

The virus version of our social lives makes it harder for many of us to see the larger social implications of these policies. Physical distancing limits our connection to those we do not know. In the lockdown, most people rely most on their more homogenous strong ties of close family, friends and co-workers. Middle class people connect with other middle class people. Often, the media reflects those stories. Even more so than in 'regular time', people become siloed by class and race. This fortification amplifies those who are more resourced. Other voices are not heard. This social distortion is buttressed by journalists,

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Tilly. 2007. *Democracy*. Cambridge University Press

who are using fewer sources, as many work from home. They reprint wire services, government updates and police information. We tune in to the news from the front lines – but the voices we hear are fewer. Hunkering down at home isn't enough. We must address this imbalance, in ways that tip the scales.

### **Creating a Ruckus with the Excluded**

Social movements challenge the status quo, but they too, often reflect larger inequalities. Those with the most resources or relations to those in power may be most likely to gain traction. As Piven and Cloward noted in their classic book *Poor Peoples Movements*, those outside of that circle gain their power through disruption, most often through visible disruptions of physical space.<sup>6</sup> We march and rally, we send delegations and occupy roads, offices and squares. This is all a smidge difficult right now. We must use the all the creativity we can muster, to ensure that no one is left behind.

Prisoners and detainees are often excluded from political and social life. They are easily ignored by those in power. Nonetheless, it was these same folks who engaged in some of the first CoVid-era protests. Around the world, prisoners have used hunger strikes, engaged in civil disobedience or rioted. They demand release or at minimum, safety.<sup>7</sup> Many have succeeded, but some, like those in Iran, have been killed.<sup>8</sup> Supporters of those locked inside have used email campaigns, phone campaigns and creative car and bike protests to amplify the struggle. In Australia, detainee advocates drove honking and bedecked cars and bikes through the streets in protest. Although they posed no viral threat to each other or to the broader public, the main organizer was arrested and taken into custody, while 26 individuals were fined \$1,652 each for breaching physical-distancing orders, with a total of \$42,952. Such absurd charges will likely be challenged.

Homeless folks are, almost by definition neglected by the government. Shelters are crowded and don't have the needed protective equipment. As a result, in this CoVid-risky moment, many refuse to go inside. Allies have tried to get the word out and are pressing governments for hotel beds, more space, and better facilities. In Surrey BC, 50 homeless people and advocates occupied a community recreation centre.<sup>9</sup> In Toronto, anti-poverty activists risked tickets to hold a carefully spaced out rally at City Hall, using Facebook live to amplify

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. 1977. *Poor People's Movements*.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/prisoners-riot-as-coronavirus-tensions-rise-11586469284>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/iran-prisoners-killed-by-security-forces-during-covid19-pandemic-protests/>

<sup>9</sup> CBC 2020. Activists occupy Surrey rec centre, demand safe places for homeless to live during COVID-19 crisis. CBC 2 April 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/homeless-activists-surrey-bc-covid-19-coronavirus-1.5518500>

their message to journalists and the wider public. San Francisco activists used a car protest to demand that the city move more quickly to protect the homeless.<sup>10</sup>

Non-status people have been excluded from the state benefits provided to other workers. In a context of economic shutdown, non-status people haven't been able to access the supports they need. So migrant justice advocates have organized press conferences, sign on letters, and days for intense phone campaigns. The Caregiver Action Centre and groups like Butterfly, the Toronto-based Asian and migrant sex worker support network worked with legal allies to organize Know Your Rights in the CoVid era webinars. In places where state lockdowns are more intense, migrant workers are taking to the streets in order to draw attention – in India they rallied at train stations, demanding a way to return home, after trains and busses were cancelled.<sup>11</sup>

Institutions for older people or people with disabilities are often forgotten about – but with nearly half of the Canadian CoVid19 deaths are people inside such facilities, they hold the attention of many.<sup>12</sup> Care workers demanding Personal Protective Equipment and increased wages, and are walking off the job in Canada, and Mexico.<sup>13</sup> They are wearing buttons of protest, and their unions are lobbying and petitioning. Groups like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance are petitioning against a leaked draft of a government document that rationalized denying medical care to people with particular disabilities.<sup>14</sup>

This is not yet a new normal. It is both a crisis and an opportunity. It is time to remake the relationship between the powerful and the people. Places and peoples long neglected now pose a threat. This brings attention and possibility.

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Kerman. Kron4.com 13 April 2020. "Protesters call on San Francisco to move quicker to protect the homeless from COVID-19" <https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/protesters-call-on-san-francisco-to-move-quicker-to-protect-the-homeless-from-covid-19/>

<sup>11</sup> Sanjeev Miglani, Rupam Jain. 2020. "India extends world's biggest lockdown, ignites protest by migrant workers," Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southasia/india-extends-worlds-biggest-lockdown-ignites-protest-by-migrant-workers-idUSKCN21WoHI>

<sup>12</sup> Emerald Bensadoun 2020. "Nearly half of Canada's COVID-19 deaths linked to long-term care facilities: Tam," *Global News* 13 April 2020 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6811726/coronavirus-long-term-care-deaths-canada/>

<sup>13</sup> Global News. Coronavirus outbreak at Markham home for adults with disabilities causes staff to walk off job. *Newmarket Today*. 10 April 2020 <https://www.newmarkettoday.ca/coronavirus-covid-19-local-news/coronavirus-outbreak-at-markham-home-for-adults-with-disabilities-causes-staff-to-walk-off-job-2245434>

<sup>14</sup> AODA Alliance "Major Disability Organizations Unite to Voice Serious Fears About Supposedly "Draft" Ontario Protocol for Rationing Critical Medical Care – A Patient's Disability Should Never Be Used as a Reason to Deny Medical Care," 6 April 2020. <https://www.aodaalliance.org/whats-new/major-disability-organizations-unite-to-voice-serious-fears-about-supposedly-draft-ontario-protocol-for-rationing-critical-medical-care-a-patients-disability-should-never-be-used-as-a-reason-t/>

It should remind us that an injury to one is an injury to all. The most vulnerable must be at the centre of our solidarity moving forward.

### **About the author**

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## **Organising under curfew: perspectives from Kenya**

**Angela Chukunzira (9<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

The Covid-19 pandemic has at best exposed the sham of neoliberal capitalism. All the inequalities that existed before the pandemic have actually been exacerbated. The Kenyan state, as is, has inherited the colonial legacies of marginalization and exclusion and this has been highlighted in several ways in the midst of the pandemic. Governments across the globe have restricted movements in forms of curfews and lockdowns and this has had varying effects. In Kenya, there is a curfew that was imposed on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020 from dusk to dawn to contain the spread of the virus. In practice, it means that from 7pm to 5 am all public spaces are off limits. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, the curfew hours were shifted from 9pm to 4am.

Social movements have then emerged as an essential service. The hunger and the devastation that is experienced more so by the poor has called for mutual solidarity and aid amongst communities. Social movements have then in turn broadened their communicative practices and new and old ways of organising have merged. And although this brings in new challenges such as the immediacy of the issues being faced versus the importance of ideological change that is required for systemic transformation, the new social movements that are emerging and the relevance of the existing ones is being reinforced by the pandemic.

### **The intensified war on the poor**

The curfew was unfortunately accompanied by atrocities in its reinforcement. The brutality of the state once again reared its ugly head. Mostly the poor working class were the ones caught up while trying to rush home to beat the hours. In the counties of Nairobi and Mombasa specifically the violence meted out on the people saw crowds being teargassed, and beatings for being outside during curfew hours. For most, it was unrealistic to leave work and walk home without being outside the bounds of the curfew. Furthermore, there were even deaths reported such as the 13-year-old boy, Yassin Moyo, who was standing outside the balcony of their home in Kiamaiiko, Nairobi when a stray bullet ended his life. This underpinned the call for justice of social movements that advocate against police brutality.

In at least two other incidents, residents of Nairobi have been left homeless the midst of the pandemic. On the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2020, at least 5000 people were rendered homeless in Kariobangi. There were demolitions which were justified on the basis that the land on which the houses were built is public land and went ahead despite there being a court order on the contrary. In a similarly devastating incident, on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2020, at least 200 people were left homeless in Ruai, yet again and these demolitions took place in the dead of night leaving the victims with no place to shelter. The victims of the tragedy were mostly

Internally Displaced Persons from the post-election violence that took place in 2007/8, a double tragedy for the victims. They were allocated that land on which they had settled after the violence and that have been there for the past 12 years. All these demolitions are taking place not only in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also in the middle of the rainy season in Kenya when the infrastructure and hygiene in informal settlements become even more deplorable.

### **Communication practices of social movements**

Movements have been at the core in ensuring that social justice prevails despite the novelty of Covid-19. Old and newer innovative methods have (e)merged in organising practices and communication repertoires and this has allowed movements to be producers of information that is consumed and take a more pro-active role in the narration of their own narratives. The bigger question of digital inequality has obviously emerged. While this has seen hierarchies being replicated in the online space in terms of which types of movements are visible and arguably what type of activists are on the online public sphere, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a unique situation. This is because of the physical distancing that is required, movements and activists have been compelled at least in ways that are possible to them, to engage in the online public sphere. This has of course been extremely unequal but in some ways has broadened the communicative practices of some social movements. In the case of the extreme brutality by the police, a lot of the discussions that were led by social movements were on social media. Hashtags, along with photographs and videos that were taken on smart phones were being used for information. This was also an opportunity for public education and more importantly, give a deeper understanding on the systemic issue over the immediacy of the problem at hand. What was remarkably outstanding was a picture that was shared on social media that compared the brutality of the colonial state to the current police brutality and how the two were parallel to each other.

On the other hand, there was a vigil held in Kiamako, Nairobi for the young boy who fell victim to the stray bullet while maintaining physical distancing. In Kariobangi where the demolitions had taken place, a protest followed. The protest did not necessarily adhere to physical distancing and neither were the protesters in protective gear. The protest was characterized by a blocked road and burning of barricades. Police used teargas and water cannons on the protesters and disrupted the protests. Protestors used the only means at their disposal to express their discontent at the brutality of the state. The reasons given for the disruption of the protests were allegedly being disruptive and they should use the correct channels to air their grievances. This tactic is often used to delegitimize community struggles. However, even within the protest, some video footage taken on smartphones that was shared on social media platforms showing the hybridity of communication repertoires.

In terms of public education around Covid-19 one of the more creative ways in which movements are engaging the public has been the use of graffiti on the walls and the spoken word artistes have also been using poetry. Musicians have also composed songs.

### **Gradual progressive change**

It has been remarkable the solidarity that has been experienced by activists coming together. The neoliberal crisis has further pushed the poor and the vulnerable communities to the brink of mere survival. The pre-occupation of social movements with overcoming daily challenges because of the immediacy of the issues at hand such as distributing food and mutual aid and solidarity for the evicted families may, in some ways obscure the vision for radical transformation in the process. This is to say, the crisis within the crisis is a hinderance for a vision of radical transformation. It remains difficult for social movements to answer because they must practically deal with the immediate problems of communities.

More optimistically however, is how the crisis has also shown that all the crises that are being faced today are intersecting: Patriarchy, climate change, racism among others have been highlighted more deeply with the spread of the virus. This makes the voices of social movements to be even more amplified and giving them more relevance. Although the pandemic may not see the death of capitalism, more people will be convinced of more human-centric models of production furthering the call for change.

### **Hope for the future**

Crises always allow room for new social movements to emerge. In the pandemic era, new ideas are already being formulated. What makes me hopeful is that most of the people calling for transformation are young. This is in part because they are more affected by the neoliberal order, having experienced the deceit of meritocracy and aspiration that they have been taught to believe over the years as a way of escaping the pangs of poverty, rather than eliminating it.

The immediate hunger that is experienced by many, exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic has then made budding movements in Kenya be able to link it directly to the climate catastrophe in which we find ourselves. A movement that is budding around issues of ecological justice has made a radical approach to plant their own food. Using indigenous seeds that are banked by other small peasant farmers as a way to escape the modern agricultural model that is built on multinational corporations destroying the planet and biodiversity. They draw their inspiration from the Arusha Declaration, as articulated by Nyerere. Self-reliance then is seen as an alternative to capitalism. Food directly informs our consciousness and if people can produce and consume their own food, and the social movements that are emerging globally as a direct result of the pandemic can be a source of hope, then not all is bleak. We shall rebuild. We shall restore.

### **About the author**

Angela Chukunzira is a scholar-activist from Nairobi. She is currently based at the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg. Her research examines the link between technology and communication practices of social movements.

## **Social movements' powerlessness at the time of covid-19: a personal account**

**Federico Venturini (24<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

This is a story about my experience as activist-researcher during the Covid-19 crisis in Udine, a small city in the North-East of Italy<sup>1</sup>. This is not a happy story of actions and results but a narration of frustration and feelings of impotence .

At the end of February, Italy had the first red zones in lockdown in some Northern regions . The period coincided with the Carnival holidays so schools and universities were closed for an extra week. They did not open again afterwards as the number of Covid-19 cases spiked, and the Friuli Venezia Giulia regional and national governments took a series of draconian (but necessary) decisions to restrict movement and work. On the 24th of February, the regional government decided to prohibit all gatherings of people in public places. The same decision was adopted on a national level on the 11th of March. The only commercial activities left open were food shops, pharmacies and newspaper/tobacco shops alongside a strategic selection of factories. On the 22nd of March a new national ordinance was adopted which prohibited all personal movements in a municipality except those for proven work needs, or of absolutely urgent health reasons. Moreover, a further tightening of activities, dividing them between unnecessary and necessary/strategic. In the beginning, these measures were intended until the 3rd of April but then they were extended several times until the 3rd of May.

On the top of that, the local regional government prohibited any physical or sports activities, as well as going for walks or entertaining oneself in areas frequented by several people. Moreover, they made disposable gloves and masks (or in any case a protection to cover the nose and mouth) mandatory in food shops. It seems impossible to believe that on the night of the 24th of February I had participated in a panel on the Kurdish revolution in a public event with one hundred participants. I still remember that night as if it was yesterday, with the freedom to stay out with friends and comrades and to debate and to propose new ideas. After that, a blanket of silence befell on the communications with the outside world. As a teacher and researcher, I had to switch to smart working and I started spending all my days in front of the computer (even more than before). In my family, we are three, I, Margherita and Francesco, our four-month old baby, who is super happy to have both parents at home all the time. We had to change our routine and adapt to isolation at home.

I started to feel miserable, only concentrating on teaching or tedious online research work. I even had some health issues, maybe somatizing the difficulties of being isolated. Despite the severity of the crisis, I could not organise anything

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Giovanni Lupieri and Margherita Ciani for their comments and advice relating to earlier versions of this piece.

effective to help people, a very disempowering feeling. The only action that I was able to perform (with other comrades) was to challenge the fake news on social media regarding the pandemic, often spread by right-wing or populist websites.

Then a comrade abroad asked me to join an online conversation to share the experience in Italy. From then I understood the necessity of internal communication, eased by the flexibility of online communication. That call refreshed me and I started to coordinate various efforts with groups where I was previously involved.

At this point, I would like to clarify the maybe unique situation of social movements in Italy during the pandemic. Any movement or action is forbidden, and there is almost zero possibility of doing anything. There are few relevant exceptions, for example in big cities like Milan, Rome, Turin, Naples and Bologna, social movements based in social centers managed to organise a response, developing various forms of support, especially for the delivery of basic necessities (Merli 2020). In Milano local social movements organised the Brigade 'Volontarie per l'Emergenza' - 'Crisis Volunteer Brigades'<sup>2</sup> (Redazione Milano 2020). Crucially these had the recognition and support of *Emergency*, a humanitarian NGO that provides free medical treatment in conflict areas. Having the support of legal entity, activists were able to organise different nine neighbourhood based brigades that delivered food and medicine to people in need.

However the situation in few big cities is very unusual. In most of Italy very little has been organised because of the strict lockdown laws. Breaking them is a penal offence and you receive a fine, something very unique worldwide where forms of different solidarity were effectively organised. Compared to mutual aid efforts, social movements in this phase managed more easily to concentrate their efforts for generating content for alternative media, especially for online publications and radios. Unlike other crises where social movements have quickly managed to organize themselves, and generate empathy and mobilisation in society, this time they find themselves in a cul-de-sac: on one side respecting the health requirements to end the pandemic and therefore, the impossibility of taking any actions.

National and local police renewed their efforts to enforce the new regulations, using many checkpoints and patrols, using multiple modes of surveillance, using boats and helicopters, even drones are allowed to monitor, bypassing the strict regulations that were in place before the crisis.

The control is not limited to the police surveillance of the territory but it has expanded to electronic surveillance. An application to monitor mobiles called 'Immuni' - 'Immune people' has been developed by a private company and licensed to the Italian government without cost (Redazione ANSA 2020). The aim of this application is to track the people in order to trace the possible contacts of infected people. At the moment it is under test in some regions and

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<sup>2</sup> More info at: [https://www.facebook.com/brigatevolontarieMilano/](https://www.facebook.com/brigatovolontarieMilano/)

the use is voluntary although the government is expecting a massive use of it.

Furthermore, when we started to organise online communication between activists, two critical issues emerged: questions of technological literacy and the flaws of alternative online platforms. On one side, activists from all age groups often are not familiar with effective online communications or platforms and they need training. On the other, alternative online platforms showed many limits, like not being user friendly or poor performance intimes of internet overload. On the top of this, many activists and groups started to useThe current pandemic highlighted both a fundamental weakness, the lack of solid infrastructures for social change that can be activated for a medical emergency, and the State power that can effectively shut down any possible form of dissent. and understand the importance of alternative online services only during the crisis. In a time of dire need, the demand for these services has suddenly skyrocketed , putting even more pressure on autonomous resources and highlighting critical issues of learning. However, the advantages of these platforms in terms of communication self-management and digital security are enormous, both in the short and long term.

Since the beginning of the crisis, unions denounced the way that the General Confederation of Italian Industry (the Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce) put pressure on the government to delay the establishment of containment zones, and to weaken health guidelines in order to keep production going. From the 4 of May onwards the government is planning the Phase 2, the phase after the lockdown, with openings various health measures. However the employers are eager to open their businesses, even at the risk of the health of their employees.

Social movements were caught by surprise by this pandemic, like everyone else, and they have been very slow in organising a response, because of the gravity of the crisis and the structural issues previously highlighted. Building lasting and effective infrastructures for social change have for long been a problem that needs to be seriously addressed, now more than ever. What we are trying to do now is to discuss online what will happen next. We are all too aware that a phase of lockdown with an acute number of infections will be followed by many months of uncertainty before a vaccine or a cure will definitively solve this pandemic. What will happen during this period and the magnitude of the economic breakdown that is ahead of us remain question marks. What is certain is that with this crisis the capitalist system has demonstrated for the umpteenth time its inability to live on the planet in harmony with nature (Bookchin 2005).

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## About the author

Federico Venturini is an Research Associate at the University of Udine (Italy). His current research focuses on Zero Waste and sustainable tourism. In 2016, he earned his PhD at the University of Leeds. Focusing on the experiences in Rio de Janeiro between 2013-2014, in his research he explored the relations between contemporary cities and urban social movements, utilizing participatory/militant research approaches and through the lens of social ecology. He is been a member of the Advisory Board of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology, and the International İmralı Peace Delegation, organized by the EU Turkey Civic Commission. He co-edited with Thomas Jeffrey Miley the book *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan's Turkey* and with Emet Degirmenci and Inés Morales the volume *Social Ecology and the Right to the City: Towards Ecological and Democratic Cities*. He can be contacted at federico.venturini AT uniud.it

## **From communal violence to lockdown hunger – Emergency responses by civil society networks, Delhi, India**

**Sobhi Mohanty (22 May 2020)**

The Covid-19 story in India has rapidly become one about the equivalence of a public health crisis caused by the pandemic on the one hand, and a near humanitarian crisis precipitated by government measures to control the pandemic on the other. Within less than a month of lockdown, extensive loss of livelihoods combined with inaction by central and state governments around provision of food, emergency welfare, and economic reassurances, had resulted in the prolonged starvation of millions of urban and rural poor families, a nationwide crisis around mass attempts by rural-urban migrant workers to walk back home under physically precarious conditions, and devastating economic consequences for the one-fifth of Indians who live below the official poverty line and for the millions who work in the informal sector. Each of these consequences has grown in severity over the course of the two month lockdown, with extensive media reports and policy analysis around these issues also having emerged.

Within the media and policy discussion of these multiple crises however, two points have remained relatively less discussed. First, the critical role played by India's civil society in ensuring that the human cost of managing the pandemic has not been even higher and second, ways in which social movements prior to the coronavirus crisis have been intersecting with the current scenario. In this article I highlight one such intersection, by using the case of civil society response to the event of extreme communal violence in Delhi that immediately preceded the events of the coronavirus pandemic. The case illustrates how the networks, knowledge and tools developed by civil society actors in one crisis scenario allowed them to act with immediacy in the next. The discussion is informed by media reports and public discourse on social media, but also by direct involvement with civil society actors and their efforts.

Delhi and its surrounding areas are the hub of one of the densest industrial regions in India. Announcement of the lockdown without advance notice, and shutdown of transportation and of inter-state borders quickly resulted in NGOs and social workers being faced with an overwhelming scale of distress. From migrant workers who lived in temporary makeshift shelters and lacked domicile documents, to the tens of thousands of families living in Delhi's slum settlements who typically get by on marginal daily or weekly wages, a large section of the region's population started running out of food, running out of savings to purchase supplies from private or even government stores, and frequently lacking the paperwork needed to access food from public distribution systems.

Civil society actors, themselves in physical lockdown, responded along two lines. First, they focused on creating a system of local network/s for relief provision - to ensure coordination with public officials – district and municipal authorities, police officials, and elected state representatives – to make relief work more efficient and in line with social distancing rules. The work on ground comprised drawing up lists of individuals and families who were in critical need of food or any form of emergency support on the basis of incoming messages for help, verifying these messages through an extensive volunteer network, roughly mapping areas that needed help, and then working on either fundraising, procurement and distribution of food supplies, or setting up of community kitchens at strategic locations. Indeed, it was not only in Delhi that civil society organisations (henceforth CSOs) organised so effectively despite severe logistic constraints: a news report suggest that in at least thirteen states of India, it was CSOs and not government authorities, who ensured that people had food.<sup>1</sup>

A second line of work done by CSOs was to meticulously document ground realities and gather information. The Delhi Relief Collective for example – a loose association of NGOs and individual volunteers that had come together to respond to a prior crisis, as will be discussed subsequently – used WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media platforms to collate and communicate information about relief work, and continuously worked to build a database of target beneficiaries on the one hand, and policy responses, changes in government rules around lockdown, and the broader on-ground context of the growing food (and migrant) crisis. Unlike the Facebook group ‘Caremongers India’ for example – a nationwide network that by now includes at least 40,000 members – which predominantly comprises middle and upper class volunteers privately helping with individual requests for food and emergency assistance across the country, those working with low income groups used this knowledge to build a rights-based discourse around the fallouts of the lockdown for informal and migrant worker, focus media and political attention on the situation, and advocate for targeted governance and emergency welfare measures.

Against this context, it is significant that in the case of Delhi, a large section of the civil society network leading current relief and advocacy efforts actually mobilised in response to a very different sort of crisis – communal violence. This violence followed an intense nationwide political movement that was in process at the time that the coronavirus pandemic hit. The movement itself had started as a protest against the CAA/NRC<sup>2</sup> legislations that were widely

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Coronavirus in India: In 13 states, NGOs fed more people than govt did during lockdown’. By Mukesh Rawat. In *India Today*, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020. Article can be accessed online at:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/in-13-states-ngos-fed-more-people-than-govt-during-coronavirus-lockdown-1665111-2020-04-09>

<sup>2</sup> Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). The former is an Act by the Indian national government from 2019 purportedly to provide citizenship status to non-Muslim victims of religious persecution in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan,

perceived as a strategic intervention by the right-wing government to undermine the legal and social citizenship of Muslims within the country<sup>3</sup>. Its focus soon broadened from a display of solidarity with the Muslim community, to dialogues around the secular principles underlying India's constitution, and broad opposition to the national ruling party's authoritarian and communal politics. It took the form of both online activism, and a continuous series of physical demonstrations across the country. The most iconic of these was a sit-in organised by Muslim women in the east Delhi neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh. The sit-in started around 11<sup>th</sup> December 2019 and continued unbroken over the next many weeks. By the end of February 2020, it was being extensively covered by international media as the longest running peaceful protest in India. Despite incidents of police-aided violence on university campuses in Delhi and at protest sites in other parts of the country, protestors at Shaheen Bagh and at these other sites remained non-violent. On the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020 however, there was a sudden eruption of extreme violence across multiple east Delhi residential neighbourhoods, a predominantly Muslim part of the city. The government declared a curfew in these parts of Delhi on the next day, but the curfew primarily served to intensify the violence in these areas. Over the next week, at least fifty people were reported brutally killed in these riots, many more dead bodies started emerging in sewers, and the extensive arson in these areas left thousands homeless, including both Hindus and Muslims, and the many families that lived in the numerous slum communities nearby.

On the night of 24<sup>th</sup> February, a well-known national human rights activist – Harsh Mander – started organising emergency rescue operations in the curfew neighbourhoods in response to emerging reports of violence. Meanwhile, both private residents of these areas and a few independent news media reporters started using Twitter to disseminate live coverage of mobs carrying out lynching, setting mosques, shops, and homes on fire, and police complicity in these ongoing events. Soon, multiple leading activists joined in these efforts to coordinate emergency rescue and relief operations by setting up private WhatsApp groups comprising NGOs, researchers, lawyers, journalists, and other private citizens across Delhi; the Delhi Relief Collective was one of them. As civil society came together however, police and government authorities began a crackdown by tightly cordoning off these neighbourhoods, preventing entry of ambulances, doctors, aid workers, and journalists into the affected areas, and speeding up legal action against activists who had criticised government actions during the CAA/NRC protests. Even as riots continued, the solicitor general of India filed a complaint in the Supreme Court against Harsh Mander, claiming that hate speech by him and other activists had incited the

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and Bangladesh. The latter is a legislation to carry out a countrywide census and taking count of legal and illegal migrants.

<sup>3</sup> These legislations have had a significantly different meaning and public reaction in the north eastern state of Assam, where agitation against these Acts was extensive and violent, but ran contrary to the Muslim-solidarity focused public response in other parts of the country. This is not discussed here.

violence. As a result, Mander and his group had to curtail their operations. Given these repressive measures by the government, volunteer operations had to be rapidly configured so as to circumvent government authorities and yet effectively reach emergency medical assistance and funds to those in urgent need.

The complete lack of cooperation by formal government institutions, from the police to elected representatives, necessitated enormous online coordination using WhatsApp groups, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in order to track and verify distress messages, connect with residents within the affected neighbourhoods in order to collect detailed information about the violence as it happened in real time, start campaigns to raise public awareness, and put pressure on political representatives once reports had been verified. As the curfew eased, the information compiled over these few days became the basis of further investigations by civil society actors and the media, and also helped ensure that victims of this violence could seek legal redress and rehabilitation support from the government. It was only under public pressure that the government started judicial inquiries and set up relief camps for the thousands of people in these areas who were rendered homeless. The work did not stop here however. There were large gaps in provision of food, medical supplies, and legal assistance to these camps, which continued to be filled by civil society volunteers and their network of doctors, lawyers, journalists, and private donors. The coordination of supplies, fundraising, and on-ground assistance in these camps and neighbourhoods continued well after the violence itself had occurred.

It was under these circumstances that news broke of the WHO declaring the coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic. As with the migrant crisis, there was little pre-emptive planning regarding the many hundreds of homeless families in east Delhi who had just been the victims of horrific communal violence, lost their homes, and were now living in crowded relief camps. When the Delhi government discussed shutting down these camps, volunteers who had been involved with rescue efforts made urgent attempts to help these families find a temporary home with relatives or volunteers. The pandemic also provided the perfect opportunity for many government supported news outlets to extensively brand public protestors, such as those at Shaheen Bagh, as irresponsible for endangering public health. On 25<sup>th</sup> March – while hundreds of migrant workers were crowding the streets of Delhi, and hundreds of poor and homeless families were gathering en masse at community kitchens and shelters as a consequence of government lockdown measures – the Shaheen Bagh site was cleared by the Delhi police in the interest of social isolation.

The communal violence events described here, and the pandemic lockdown measures, have provided a similar context for civil society actors to navigate. Both violence related curfew and social isolation related curfew restricted physical entry into areas, prevented access to information about ground realities, made delivery of emergency support difficult, and required personal risks to civil society volunteers. Both necessitated helping those on the margins

of citizenship in urban India. Some of the areas in Delhi that have been worst affected by the lockdown for example, are those same east Delhi areas that were affected by the communal violence. This is not surprising given that they are largely poor Muslim neighbourhoods, are located at the outskirts of the city, and have numerous migrant worker settlements, all factors contributing to their being relatively sidelined when it comes to government welfare provision. Finally, extensive documentation and creation of a knowledge base of on-ground realities in each case not only allowed relief work in both cases to be efficient despite minimal resources, but also allowed CSOs to publicly demonstrate how already marginalised groups were being systematically targeted with physical and economic violence through the complicity of formal government institutions. Thus long term strategies of advocacy and civil society support for these groups could (and continue to) be built atop the layer of emergency relief provision.

Yet it is not only identity politics and civil society strategy that links these events of resistance, violence, and pandemic. Acts of government repression also link them. Thus, even as the food and migrant worker crises grew during lockdown, the central government issued orders to the police to continue arresting those involved in anti-CAA/NRC protests in Delhi during lockdown. Prominent Muslim activists and a number of university students who had been the target of police violence during the protests in Delhi were served legal notice under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), and arrests of many of these individuals began midway into the lockdown. At a time when access to legal support was limited because of the lockdown, this put further pressure particularly on Muslim civil society volunteers, who feared being arrested under a variety of pretexts as occurred during the time of the protests earlier this year while out conducting their relief activities.

Discussions about a post-lockdown and post-Covid world have been ongoing in many circles across the world throughout this pandemic crisis. There are questions about whether countries will see this as an opportunity to invest in governance and public health infrastructure, whether political elites will see this as an opportunity to seize greater control of government institutions, and so on. It is too early to conclusively answer questions such as these for India – although the recent labour and economic reforms announced by the national government suggest that privatization will (be made to) play a prominent role – since the country continues to grapple with the public health aspects of the crisis as case numbers rise. It is undeniable however, that it has been Indian civil society that has allowed for a humanitarian crisis in the making to be swiftly identified and at least partially addressed. Using the lockdown as an opportunity to target this same civil society with repressive measures has perhaps been one of the worst uses of the Indian government's resources at this time, providing a not unclear indication of the democratic struggles that lie ahead.

### **About the author**

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## **‘Anti-domestic violence little vaccine’: A Wuhan-based feminist activist campaign during COVID-19**

**Hongwei Bao (28<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

First reported in Wuhan in late 2019, COVID-19 has now spread around the world and become a global pandemic. In this historical moment when many governments are doing their best to tackle the public health emergency, many social issues are neglected, and the negligence can lead to great social costs. One of the issues that have surfaced in the quarantine is a rise in domestic violence against women. Life under lockdown has been difficult for many women who live in abusive relationships or who suffer from domestic violence (Taub 2020). These victims often have nowhere to go because of the strict quarantine measures imposed on them. Necessary police intervention as well as legal and social help may not be readily available during this period, either. It is therefore crucial to raise public awareness of domestic violence, offer support to victims, and issue warnings and even mete out punishments to perpetrators.

From January to April, many Chinese cities including Wuhan were locked down in a state of emergency. The lockdowns triggered and exacerbated some social problems including domestic violence against women. Under the Blue Sky, an anti-domestic-violence NGO (non-governmental organisation) based in Hubei’s Lijian County, received 175 reports of domestic violence in February, three times the number of such complaints during the same month in 2019 (Feng 2020). To address the issue of the rising domestic violence, some feminist activists in China connected with each other and formed support groups for women online. One such group was led by Guo Jing, a feminist activist and social worker based in Wuhan.<sup>1</sup> They launched an activist campaign called ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ to raise public awareness of the issue of domestic violence and women’s rights.

In this short essay, I introduce the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ campaign in China during the COVID-19. After a brief introduction of the campaign by using first-person accounts from the organiser Guo Jing, I will then sum up some of the activist strategies used in the campaign.<sup>2</sup> I will also

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<sup>1</sup> I use the *hanyu pinyin* type of romanisation and the Chinese convention to present Chinese-language names: family names usually appear before given names. For example, in the case of the name Guo Jing, Guo is the surname and Jing is the given name.

<sup>2</sup> Guo’s accounts have been taken from her published diary. The diary was first published online on Guo’s social media and on the Chinese-language news media Matters. It was later published in print, titled *Wuhan Lockdown Diary* (Guo 2020), by Taipei-based Linking Publishing. Although nominally a diary, Guo’s writing can be more appropriately understood as a blog, publicly shared with friends and followers and widely circulated online and offline. Guo uses public circulation of her writing as a form to engage with feminism and connect with other

discuss how the campaign engages with the quarantined public space. I hope that these strategies can inspire activists around the world to find strength and solidarity, and also to seek solutions to tackle the global pandemic. I also suggest that rather than seeing the pandemic as an obstacle to social movements, we can use the pandemic as a good opportunity to experiment with flexible and creative modes of social and political activism.

### **‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’**

Guo Jing, a resident of Wuhan, is a 29-year-old feminist activist and social worker. In 2014, she was involved in China’s first lawsuit regarding gender discrimination in employment and subsequently won the lawsuit against the employer (Legal Information Institute 2014). Inspired by the success, Guo set up a legal aid helpline for women facing gender discrimination in the workplace. On her social media sites, she frequently advertises the helpline (Figure 1). During the Wuhan lockdown, Guo was in quarantine in a small flat for seventy-seven days from 23 January to 8 April 2020, when she communicated regularly with her feminist friends online. At the same time, she kept a diary on her social media and shared her diary with friends and social media followers; she also ran the legal aid helpline and answered questions from callers every evening during the Wuhan lockdown.

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people. The public nature and the realist and activist style of the diary makes it an important document for the pandemic and the social movements during the pandemic.



Figure 1. Guo Jing’s business card, on which the helpline information is displayed.

At the beginning, Guo and her feminist friends all felt vulnerable and helpless, as the infection rate and death toll rose dramatically, and as the situation in Wuhan got out of control. However, after a while, they decided to act together to overcome the sense of helplessness. They set up a feminist activist WeChat (a Chinese-language social media) support group and talked to each other through voice and video chat for a couple of hours every evening, encouraging and supporting each other along the way. In these chats, the group examined the lockdown from feminist perspectives, discussed ways of engaging with social issues, and explored possible strategies to ‘help individuals overcome a sense of vulnerability’, especially for young women like themselves (Guo 26 January 2020).<sup>3</sup>

In their discussion, they realised that the epidemic was having a gendered effect. Indeed, in comparing fighting the coronavirus to fighting a war, public health

<sup>3</sup> All the dated quotes are taken from Guo’s diary (Guo 2020). The dates refer to the time when these entries were first published online.

intervention often prioritises a masculinist perspective by valorising men’s role in combatting the virus. It neglects women’s lives and their needs by relegating women to the domestic and private sphere. In doing so, it reinforces the traditionally men/women and the public/private dichotomies characterising a patriarchal and heteronormative society. At the same time, the epidemic condition has exacerbated sexual discrimination and domestic violence against women. Trapped in a confined physical space for an extended period of time, many men use their family members to vent out their pent-up frustrations. Women who live in abusive relationships are particularly vulnerable. When domestic violence occurs, women usually have no escape because of the quarantine situation. Guo reports in her diary: ‘The lockdown increased the difficulty for victims to get help and support; it also increased the practical difficulty for us in being able to offer our own intervention.’ (Guo 28 February 2020)

To raise public awareness of the issue, Guo organised an online workshop. In the workshop, feminist activist Feng Yuan shared her experience of and gave the audience advice on how to deal with domestic violence. The live broadcast and its recording attracted 1,200 viewings on that day, with positive feedback from participants and viewers (Guo 29 February 2020).



Figure 2. ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ social media account



*Figure 3. An activist posted a hand-written ‘anti-domestic violence open letter’ on the door of a lift.*

Building on the success of the workshop and in collaboration with the Rural Women Development Foundation Guangdong, the anti-domestic violence workgroup led by Guo launched an ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign (Figure 2). The campaign called on women to act up and raise public awareness of domestic violence. The group published an open letter online, calling to the public for an end to domestic violence. It then encouraged people to copy or print out the open letter and post them in public spaces (Figure 3). The response was overwhelmingly positive: ‘In just a few hours, several thousand people volunteered to become “little vaccines” [meaning volunteers].’ (Guo 2 March 2020) Many people also came up with creative ways for public advocacy:

Since the start of the campaign, many people have posted the open letter in their own neighbourhoods. Some have even redesigned the open letter and made it into a beautiful poster. Some dialled the telephone number of the Women’s Rights Hotline run by the All-China Women’s Federation to make sure that the hotline is in operation. Others shared their own experience of falling victim to domestic violence.

The aim of the campaign is to make domestic violence visible and make its victims feel supported. Now thousands of people have volunteered to become

‘anti-domestic violence little vaccines. I hope that many people can get involved in this and the number can reach ten thousand, so that ‘anti-domestic violence little vaccines’ can be spread in more neighbourhoods. (Guo 4 March 2020)

## **Designing campaign strategies**

The strategies used in the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign are well worth noting. The first question that the group encountered is how to ensure the safety of a campaign and its participants. Feminist activism is a politically sensitive issue in the PRC (People’s Republic of China) since the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ – five young feminist activists who planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment leaflets on public transport on the International Women’s Day in 2015 (Fincher 2018). Despite this, the language of ‘anti-domestic violence’ has its own legitimacy in the PRC’s public discourse. China’s legislative body passed its own anti-domestic violence law in 2015 (Mak 2020). China’s national organisation representing women, the All-China Women’s Federation, also runs a helpline for women, advising callers on how to deal with domestic violence. It is, therefore, possible to address the issue of domestic violence without explicitly talking about ‘feminist activism’. In other words, a campaign should be carried out in a non-explicitly political, non-aggressive, and non-confrontational way. This would require some rethinking of activist strategies based on the social context of the quarantine and the cultural specificity of the PRC. Although China’s feminist activism constitutes an integral part of the international #metoo movement, copying activist experiences directly from their Western counterparts without localising activist strategies is not an option for Chinese feminists.



*Figure 4. ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ campaign logo*

The design of the campaign logo and slogan has effectively considered the social context of the epidemic and the geographical location of China in East Asia. It therefore speaks effectively to a target audience – primarily young people in urban China – without making the campaign sound explicitly political. At the centre of the campaign logo is the standing cartoon figure of a green-coloured cat dressed in a short skirt, wearing a surgical mask, holding a huge syringe with one hand/paw, and pushing the top of the syringe with the other (Figure 4). A gentle shot of green liquid, resembling a green grass shoot in shape, appears on the tip of the needle. The image manifests an aesthetics of *kawaii* (‘cuteness’ in Japanese) and *xiaoqingxin* (‘little freshness’ in Mandarin Chinese) popular among urban youths in East Asia. The cat image is characterised by a fresh, pleasant and dynamic visual style and at the same time appears non-militant and non-threatening. The words on the left-hand side of the picture read: ‘anti-domestic violence little vaccine’; and on the right hand-side, ‘caring for each other in the lockdown’. This slogan taps into a culture of solidarity and mutual care in the epidemic. The term ‘little vaccine’ also speaks to the epidemic condition in which ‘vaccines’ are welcome and needed. Also, by calling the volunteers who participated in this campaign ‘little vaccines’, the campaign also bypasses politically sensitive terms such as feminist activists and reduces potential risks for participants.

Being veteran feminist activists, Guo and her friends are aware of the importance of participation; they also recognise ordinary people’s agency in making decisions and taking actions to change their own lives and society. The campaign strategies are designed in such a way that people are encouraged to ‘act up’, because one’s confidence and agency can be effectively boosted in the process of ‘acting up’. But this ‘acting up’ should not be prescriptive, that is, following strict guidelines and rules. Instead, they should be open and flexible enough so that individuals can decide their own ways of participation and devise their own activist strategies. Different individuals may have their own perceived places in the movement; a movement should be able to help these individuals negotiate the grey zone between finding and challenging their own comfort zones. Flexibility in ‘acting up’ also helps to protect new participants and give them time and space to try out new things and gain confidence at their own pace.

An activist strategy should recognise participants’ agency and help them exercise their own agency. How to mobilise the participants’ agency is therefore crucial to a movement, and this process usually involves embodied participation, which is obviously under constraint in a quarantine environment but is not impossible. A well-designed activist strategy can mobilise participants physically, psychologically and emotionally. For example, the major action point of this campaign is for participants to make an ‘anti-domestic violence open letter’ public. This is a good task because it is easy, doable, and flexible; it also leaves ample space for individual creativity. Participants can post the open letter online and on social media. If they are brave enough, they can post the letter in

the public spaces of their neighbourhoods. Most people disseminate an e-version or a print version of this pre-drafted open letter. Those who are determined enough or those who do not have a printer at home can choose to hand copy the letter. Those who are artistically gifted can even redesign the poster. In other words, the task of ‘posting an open letter’ can activate people’s agency and creativity; in doing so, it boosts participants’ confidence and gives them a sense of accomplishment. After sharing their experiences online with others, participants develop a sense of belonging in an activist community – although their relationship to and position within the community may differ – and feel that they are contributing to an ongoing social movement, or a social cause they feel that they can support. The constant shifts of a campaign from online to offline and then back online, aided by the active involvement of one’s embodied and affective participation, are therefore crucial for the success and sustainability of a social movement.

Most importantly, the campaign organisers have not called themselves and the participants ‘feminists’ or ‘activists’. This is an example of a type of politics based on specific social issues (i.e. anti-domestic violence) instead of political identities. The campaign has therefore attracted some male participants and even garnered support from some participants’ parents. By focusing on specific issues, activist campaigns become more inclusive and therefore have a greater social impact.

### **Engagement with the public space**

The lockdown condition offers ample opportunities for activist campaigns because many people – mostly the ‘non-essential’ workers in the public policy discourse – now have more time and enthusiasm for social participation. Also, the pent-up energy and emotional intensity during the lockdown can be released through social participation. During a pandemic, most people are eager to do something useful to help others and to contribute to society, but many cannot find a suitable way. The public health discourse during the pandemic often centres on the notion of an individual who stays at home and takes care of themselves and their families. This highly individualised and home-centred narrative neglects people’s need for social interaction and their social responsibilities. Forging a collective subjectivity and shaping a form of publicness is therefore crucial for a social movement.

The quarantine condition poses unprecedented challenges to bring out a sense of publicness – both in terms of people’s concern for political and social issues and in terms of bringing issues from the private sphere to the public sphere. Offline gatherings become difficult, although this experience can to a certain extent be remedied by using digital media and technologies. In order to bring a movement from the private and domestic sphere to a public space – understood in both physical and virtual terms, a movement needs to adjust its conventional activist strategies by taking into account the cultural specificity of the public space in China.

The notion of ‘public space’ has a vexed history in China, because of the conflation of the public and the private in the Mao era and its aftermath. Public spaces in a city are often controlled with surveillance by authorities, and the use of these spaces are often politicised and even commercialised. A bulletin board in a residential compound is often occupied by political posters and commercial advertisements, and the residents’ use of these spaces is often forbidden or strictly scrutinised. The act of posting an open letter in these public spaces therefore marks an act of transgression and the reclaiming of the ordinary people’s entitlement to these spaces. Guo reflected in her diary, aware that many participants of the campaign were among her readers:

Many people said they were very nervous when they posted the open letter in public spaces, as if they were doing something wrong. In contrast, many perpetrators of domestic violence did not feel any unease at all when they committed physical violence in public. They would not tone down their voice. The victims were usually more worried about being seen and humiliated by others. Such a public space tolerates and encourages violence against women.

To whom do public spaces belong? Today, our urban spaces are overwhelmingly occupied by homogenous propaganda slogans and commercial advertisements. [...]

It is thus easy to understand people’s nervousness. We seldom use public spaces, and do not claim ownership to these public spaces. The campaign of posting anti-domestic violence open letters in fact has two objectives: firstly, to raise public awareness of domestic violence and to offer support to victims; secondly, to exercise our right to use public spaces, and to improve the social environment where such practices exist, and to send a warning message to the perpetrators. (Guo 6 March 2020)

Guo believes in the power of individual and collective action in empowering marginalised people in society; she also sees the potential of ordinary people’s agency once they feel that they can do something to change their lives and to change society. She wrote on 8 March, the International Women’s Day, also the fifth anniversary of the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ (Fincher 2018; Wu, Yuan and Lansdowne 2018): ‘Many people have been looking for light and connections in darkness and lockdown. They have never given up their desire for social change. This can release tremendous strength and power.’ (Guo 8 March 2020)

## **Conclusion**

The ‘Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine’ activist campaign offers a good example for social movements in a time of crisis and a ‘state of emergency’. COVID-19 brings unprecedented opportunities and challenges to contemporary social movements across the world. The pandemic has exposed and magnified existing problems such as structural equality, government inefficiency and weak

social welfare systems. Many people are suffering from illness, death and poverty as a result of these problems. But this situation has also raised the public's awareness of these problems and issued an urgent call for these problems to be addressed. Social movements addressing these problems are therefore more likely to garner support from people and invite wide participation in society. Although the quarantine measures have made public gatherings and physical contacts between people difficult, the Internet and social media have facilitated social mobilisation and political activism in significant ways. For example, a large part of the 'Anti-Domestic Violence Little Vaccine' activist campaign took place online and on social media. Physical isolation, therefore, does not bring an end to social movements. The collective spirit and emotional intensity generated in a time of crisis can be mobilised for activist purposes, and their impacts are likely to be greater now than in ordinary times.

This case study has also helped us to imagine social movements in non-Western contexts. Social movements studies have for a long time primarily drawn on and theorised Western experiences. People sometimes assume that activists from all over the world actively learn from their Western counterparts. The practice of how Chinese feminists have devised innovative activist strategies to engage with the issues of domestic violence and women's rights during the pandemic preceded many similar pandemic activist practices in the West. This, on the one hand, can be attributed to the fact that China was the first country that had to cope with the epidemic, and this pushed Chinese activists to the forefront of the pandemic activism. On the other, it is yet another example which shows that activists in non-Western parts of the world have always been experimenting with innovative activist strategies, perhaps more than what they have been given credit for. There is no denying that Chinese feminist activists also draw on experiences from other countries, and all of this contribute to transnational feminist movements. There is, however, an urgent need for activist experiences in non-Western parts of the world to be documented, reflected upon, and theorised. In this sense, we are contributing to the de-Westernisation of activist knowledge and social movement studies by taking the experiences from the Global South seriously.

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## About the author

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## **Aurat March, a threat to mainstream tribalism in Pakistan**

**Ayaz Ahmed Siddiqui (25<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

Since 2018, civil society across the class spectrum has mobilized in major cities of Pakistan on International Women's day under the banner of Aurat March. Aurat, means 'woman' in Urdu. A radical appropriation of the global #metoo movement these demonstrations were first organized by a group of feminists in my hometown Karachi, one of the largest metropolises of the world. Much controversy is generated on local mainstream and social media by posters displayed at these demonstrations.

Pakistan's fledgling public sphere appears divided on women empowerment.

One side believes that the artistic expression on these posters raises the specter of immorality and all the 'degeneracy of the West' that entails in a movement organized by foreign funded women. In the words of New York Times columnist Muhammad Hanif, the prospect that women might get together in large numbers in public spaces with stencils and placards and not invite a man as their chief guest has got grown (Pakistani) men asking, frothing at their mouth, what do these women want?<sup>1</sup>

The organizers of the March say that their campaign highlights grave injustices that are an everyday reality of historically vulnerable social groups in a society struggling to cope with modernity.

Thus, while participants appear to be mostly women, the substantive message of basic human dignity resonates equally with students, rural citizens, non-binary genders like *Khawaja Siras* and yes, even many angry men who are often victim of the same tribal values of toxic masculinity.

But the artistic expression generated around Aurat March is remarkable in bringing the conversation on women empowerment from an abstract public domain of a developing state to 'the kitchen and bedroom' of its citizens.

This success doesn't just lie in the way they irk mainstream sensibilities on the place of women in a traditional Muslim society. It also lies in effectively translating universal values of social justice, equality and human rights in Pakistan's unique cultural lexicon.

This year's demonstrations occurred amidst a heated national debate over Government of Pakistan's COVID-19 response. This was reflected in the vibrancy of contentious performances. In this essay I describe the logic behind some of these posters, what they mean for Pakistan's changing political context and ultimately hopefully what such activist repertoires can reveal about Muslim women contention elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/opinion/international-womens-day-pakistan.html>

## Anatomy of political slogans



*Figure 1.0*

As of writing, reported COVID19 deaths in Pakistan are 265 and the state is implementing a comprehensive response. However:

- Each year more than 1000 women are reportedly murdered in the name of 'honour'.
- 90% of women have faced some form of domestic violence at the hands of their husbands or families. 47% of married women have experienced sexual abuse, particularly domestic rape.
- The government has done little to address cultural norms at the root of domestic violence.



*Figure 2.0*

Through clever wordplay a link between misogynist behavior and a deadly pandemic is made in this poster. In English it reads *Khalil Ur Rehman, Shut Your Nonsense Already*. It calls out a local celebrity writer of a popular television soap for his misogynist views. The controversy was generated due to a popular Aurat March slogan *My Body My Consent*. Mr Rehman verbally abused a female human rights activist during a live TV program few days before the demonstrations for repeatedly uttering

the slogan. Video clips of the altercation went viral on social media and created a national outrage.

Slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*, which roughly translates as *My Body My Consent* in English, are protest tactics that leverage the power of media to create a cultural resonance between the activist demands for justice and the constituency whose interest they claim to represent.

Cultural resonance means reframing campaign messages so the public in a particular socio-political and cultural milieu can relate with the activist demands. *Kitabi batien* (English for, seemingly abstract concepts) like feminism, marital rape, consent, dignity, decency, get a life of their own when expressed in popular language.

This entails more than just their lexical usage. Norms, world view, rituals, practices and ways of thinking provide a tool chest for the activist to create preferred frames beyond simple English to Urdu translation.

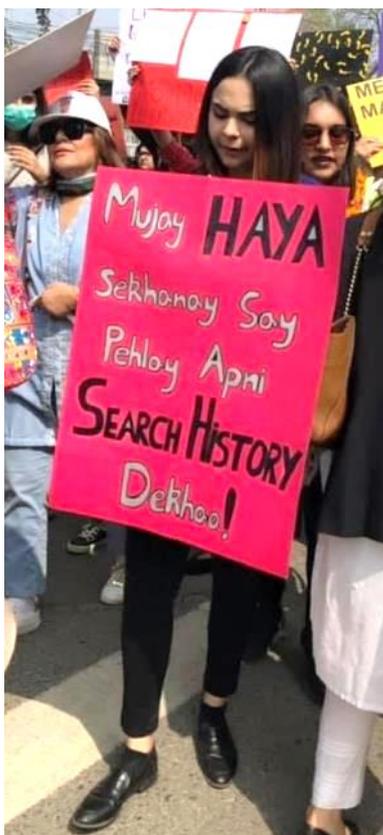


Figure 3.0

*Check Your Internet Search History Before Preaching Modesty*, is a loose English translation of this poster. Sex education is a difficult subject in some advanced democracies. But it is a special challenge in Muslim Pakistan where it is considered a taboo and the state prefers to ban porn websites. Of course, many still find ways to access exotic content.

Meanwhile, Slut Shaming is a pervasive practice. It starts with the girl's male relatives and ends with her husband. Public life is no different. This poster expresses the double standards for Muslim men and women in the popular language of morality. It does that in a way perhaps no presentation of statistic on 'honour' killing and sexual harassment could.

Through media the impact of these frames is magnified for outgroups mobilizing grassroots support in a system that violently resists class politics.

Such witty sloganeering should also resonate with Muslim communities elsewhere. It may allow them to go beyond petty squabbles over what feminism means to why Muslim women are so angry and against whom.



Figure 4.0

Trans folks in Pakistan endure allegations of inauthenticity and fraud, as well as invasive tests and procedures to determine their gender.

This activist has appropriated the surgical mask for protection against COVID19 but also as an added layer of anonymity.

The Aurat March advocates that every trans and non-binary person is included in educational institutes, workplaces, voting and healthcare facilities. So Pakistanis wouldn't need masks to express their thoughts in public life.

This binary, that binary, no binary!

The choice for a particular frame also depends on a handful of previously tried and tested material the activist knows works.

Observers of issue advocacy can describe how Aurat March slogans of today are a modification on those used in earlier feminist waves. Such as during the dictatorship of General Zia Ul Haq when women protested against discriminatory laws.

For this reason, some frames are more powerful than others because they resonate with even larger segments of society. Any social cause in Pakistan framed as *Ghadar (Traitor)*, *Corrupt*, *Bay Haya (Immodest)*, *Ghair Islami (Against Islam)*, for instance has the time-tested impact of threatening its very survival.

Historically, a weak state has used these tactics to govern and suppress dissent. They are handy for any political actor with national aspirations.

Although, I would argue that progressive movements elsewhere are engaged in similar discursive battles with far-right populist groups.



Figure 5.0 Aurat March 2020 participants in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital city.

### **A sign of changing political context**

But Aurat March may be a sign of changing times in Pakistan.

Through their posters Marchers are creating a vocabulary to describe the world beyond a 'good Muslim Right Wing' and 'bad Muslim Western Liberal' dichotomy.

That is why these demonstrations resonate beyond the perceived feminist stereotype and even transcend counter-frames of *Ghadar* and *Bay Haya* lodged by opportunistic politicians. The state tolerance of the Aurat March is a testament to this.

In a recent paper, Katherine Adeney, a scholar of democratization in South Asia, shows that the biggest challenge to Pakistani democracy comes from a lack of civil liberties i.e. freedom of the press and assembly and rule of law, rather than reserved domains of power i.e. defence, security, public policy, and competitiveness of elections that are usually the focus of analysts<sup>2</sup>.

The large illiterate population and a budding middle-class that is as illiberal as the elites it despises adds weight to her findings. They suggest that civic causes such as accountability for all, community education, women empowerment and information literacy must be prioritized to build governance capacity. Substantive issues as opposed to inane discussions among political elites on

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<sup>2</sup> Adeney, K. (2017). How to understand Pakistan's hybrid regime: the importance of a multidimensional continuum. *Democratization*, 24(1), 119–137.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1110574>

many mainstream TV talk shows. Or, even more pointless discussion on Sharia Law, an issue Pakistanis always reject at the ballot.

The steady increase in number of cities that participate in Aurat March demonstrations each year indicates a rise in civic consciousness. Activists such as Ammar Ali Jan, who also teaches at Forman Christian College in Lahore, see these demonstrations, together with the recent student solidarity and climate change rallies in Pakistan, as a new opposition in the making. One where the electorate will not spread red carpet for the elected. Instead it will mobilize to demand rights as citizens of Pakistan<sup>3</sup>.

The current progressive wave in *Naya* Pakistan<sup>4</sup> may have more to do with international pressure. But the discerning activist pounces on any political advantage that presents itself. While the millennial among them multiplies the advantage through technology. Let's not forget that a massive social media campaign of *Tabdeeli* helped push the PTI from the fringes to the mainstream.

### **Muslim women challenging the status quo**

Since women make up nearly half of Pakistani population, many believe that women empowerment is a sorely needed development program. One that will have profound ripple effects in other sectors. This is almost certain because at present the country ranks 151<sup>st</sup> out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's global gender parity index. Faring only better than war torn Iraq and Yemen<sup>5</sup>.

As in activism world over those who feel threatened are often beneficiaries of status quo. Their level of offence at mere words on a placard is proportional to their position of privilege. This partly explain why there are supporters who are women and men on both sides of Aurat March.

Many in Pakistan are not prepared to lose their privilege. Participants in Islamabad were pelted with stones by hardline religious groups who happened to be hosting their own *Modesty March*. In the event, riot police stepped in to contain the frenzied mob but not before several women sustained injuries<sup>6</sup>.

The new generation of Pakistani activists, unlike the traditional 'leftists', are not necessarily preoccupied with the security establishment. They are concerned with civic rights. Indeed, civic rights for citizens are difficult to provide by states lacking the capacity to enforce rule of law.

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<sup>3</sup> Najam Sethi Official. January 4, 2020. Muqaddimah | Episode 5| New decade new opposition? [Video]. Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4Do4g8kGBU>.

<sup>4</sup> *Naya* Pakistan or New Pakistan, and *Tabdeeli* or Change, are campaign slogan of Imran Khan the current prime minister of Pakistan. Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was an underdog that is well regarded for mobilizing a previously apolitical young vote bank.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1522778>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539954>

A similar line of reasoning was made recently by the political scientists Francis Fukuyama in *The Atlantic*<sup>7</sup>. He observes that effective response to global challenges, such as the Coronavirus Pandemic, will be determined less by the binary between democracy and autocracy, and more by the trust between citizens and the state, as well as the state's capacity to govern.

Those questioning Aurat March poster's morality are forced to reckon with the deafening silence every time 'Islamic slogans' are used in the name of free speech to coerce Muslim women. More broadly, what pragmatic solutions these critics have for Pakistan's chronic social problems, and by extension, the Arab world.

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Source: author.

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### Figure 3.0

Source: public.

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### Figure 4.0

Source: author.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>

Facts: see Figure 1.0 facts 2 and 3.

### **Figure 5.0**

Source: public.

<https://www.facebook.com/Hoodbhoyist/photos/a.910930622352458/2589839964461507/?type=3&theater> .

**For a detailed list of Aurat March demands kindly visit only verified social media accounts:**

Facebook handle: @AuratMarchKarachi

Twitter handles: @AuratMarchKHI, @AuratMarch, @AuratAzadiMarch

### **About the author**

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## **What does the COVID-19 pandemic mean for PinkDot Singapore?**

**Lynn Ng Yu Ling (June 23)**

As one of Singapore's most prominent LGBTQ social movements, PinkDot Singapore has grown exponentially over the years. At the inaugural 2009 event, 2500 participants showed up. In 2011 this had multiplied to cross by 10,000 people. By 2014 a turnout of 26,000 people had overflowed the confines of Hong Lim Park, also the state-sanctioned Speakers' Corner. Since 2015 turnouts have increased to 28,000 people. In 2019 [PinkDot 11](#) released a video to mark the movement's tenth anniversary. The video charted PinkDot's humble beginnings and the persistent efforts of local activists in garnering wider support from community members, making international headlines and inspiring secondary movements in other cities worldwide. As COVID-19 takes away the sheer power of a steady crowd. The movement has drawn public attention to inter-relational work at the community level.



*PinkDot SG 2009*



*PinkDot SG 2011*

### **A sense of solidarity beyond nationalized identitarian politics**

In recent years PinkDot has faced obstacles in expanding movement inclusivity with the 2016 amendments to the Public Order Act.

“It is with profound regret for us, the organisers of PinkDot 2017, to announce that as per recent changes to the Public Order Act rules on general assembly, only Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents are permitted to assemble at the Speakers’ Corner.” (PinkDot SG, 2017).

The revised legislations implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) were under the premise that foreign entities should not interfere with domestic issues, especially socio-politically controversial and sensitive ones (Tan, 2016). Until 2016 PinkDot supporters without citizenship or Permanent Residency (PR) were allowed in the assembly square to observe the PinkDot formation, but could not be involved in holding up placards which would count as active participation. The latest modifications meant that the law no longer distinguished between observers and participants, instead considered all supporters present to be part of a cause-related assembly. The presence of any foreigners was deemed as unlawful participation, and could result in the legal prosecution of both event organizers and participants (Ng, 2018).



### *PinkDot SG 2014*

Being blackmailed into choosing between complying with the rules or not having the movement at all, for the first time ever PinkDot organizers made the painful decision to barricade the Speakers' Corner and conduct identity checks at the entrance, which quadrupled the event's operation costs. Furthermore, as per the revisions foreign entities whose shareholder board did not comprise Singaporean citizens as a majority were required to apply for sponsor permits (Han, 2018). Out of the thirteen multinational conglomerate sponsors, the ten applicants were rejected. Thankfully, organizers scrambled to put together well over 100 local sponsors whose combined contributions of more than \$250 000 skyrocketed past the initial fundraising target (Jerusalem, 2018). The impromptu responses to alleviate the ban on non-citizen presence went further than the event itself. In a harrowing span of time, informal networks were mobilized that drew numerous fringe events to include supporters who could not physically be in the rally. These developments led to the PinkFest, a series of twenty casual gatherings held over the prior two weekends. Events were hosted not by Speakers' Corner organizers but by individual volunteers in venues outside Hong Lim Park, so they did not fall under the same regulations (Aw, 2018). These get-togethers enabled many migrant laborers and Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) to be involved in carnival-style hangouts and picnic gatherings among others. Organizers themed the event of that year as "Against All Odds" (PinkDot SG, 2017).



### *PinkDot SG 2017*

PinkDot has been carving significant inroads in collaborating with migrant worker collectives as a way to articulate its broader conceptualization of queerness. The movement proclaims in loudly subtle ways that heteronormativity is not simply an identitarian issue but a developmental one. Crucially, the state makes strange both co-national LGBTQs and non-national migrant workers who are denied a position in the vision of reproductive futurism, which must be upheld by the ‘basic building block’ of a “proper family nucleus”: one man, one woman, and their offspring or dependents (Oswin, 2014: 421). This recognition is also an attempt to move PinkDot beyond simply advocating for LGBTQ equality in a nationalized sense, which in Singapore usually means acknowledging non-normative sexualities for their economic contributions, i.e. ‘pink dollars’. The almost one million work permit holders who form the backbone of social reproductive labor for this highly successful developmental state must be put at the centre – is argued by the PinkDot activists. The growing number of grassroots initiatives in support of PinkDot testify to an increasing awareness that LGBTQ and migrant worker equality cannot be reduced to judgements of economic disposability at the expense of the humanitarian side of the equation. PinkDot and broader queer activism cannot reduce rights campaigns to issues of domestic economic contributions, for these are about looking at those beside us as *rightful claimants* to the privileges citizens enjoy, i.e. as equal human beings with full status.

COVID-19 has more starkly brought to the fore the unfortunate reality of “two Singapores” - one for citizens, one for the transient labor force who perform the back-breaking labor shunned by locals (Han, 2020). PinkDot has been making incremental efforts to disrupt the citizen-noncitizen dichotomy at the centre of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), which is proving hard to sustain in the face of rising anti-immigrant backlash amidst this pandemic. Among numerous other smaller groups, the more prominent ones include conservative Christian factions like the Anglican Pentecostals headed by Dr Thio Su Mien, former Dean of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Members make it a point to show up to every year’s PinkDot with a counter ‘[Wear White](#)’ campaign to announce their explicitly condemnatory stance on non-heteronormative family models (Luger, 2018). They are also known patrollers of the Speakers’ Corner who loiter around its premises, observe PinkDot’s activities and look out for the presence of non-

citizen/PR participants, basically salvaging for any sign of violation of public assembly rules that can be reported to state authorities. Other opposing groups include ‘LoveSingapore’ and the ‘Singapore for Singaporeans’ campaign against increasing immigration. Their most notable presence was in the 2013 occupation of Hong Lim Park following the White Paper on loosening immigration policies. As the number of COVID-19 cases in Singapore spikes unprecedentedly, public discourse on the part of citizen netizens on official forums and social media channels reveal that xenophobic prejudices are not uncommon, and indeed have obtained a certain degree of social legitimacy for many.

PinkDot is non-discriminatory and non-identitarian aspirations of solidarity have spread slowly, yet these types of relationship-building remain largely confined at the intra-network level of activists, allies and supporters. A broad swathe of ‘Not In My Backyard’ (NIMBY) advocates persist in airing racially motivated justifications. A Chinese forum letter received by Lianhe Zaobao, which has since been translated into English and put [online](#), endorses a ‘civilized citizen’ versus ‘uncivilized foreigner’ dichotomy. This author urged readers not to ascribe unnecessary blame on the Singapore government for the outbreaks in migrant worker dormitories. The author argues that local authorities have achieved satisfactory standards in providing decent living conditions. But migrant workers from “backward countries” who grew up in living environments rife with “bad personal hygiene habits” bring these with them wherever they go (Lee, 2020). Lianhe Zaobao’s Facebook page has garnered floods of supportive comments and voices echoing agreement. If PinkDot has in mind a politics of care that goes beyond identity debates, it is not enough if citizen supporters advocate LGBTQ equality yet endorse a ‘co-national only’ agenda. The nation-state’s developmental history of economic nationalism (Oswin, 2014), as an offshoot of the colonial *fait accompli* of modern state institutions bequeathed by the British at formal independence, is not interrogated for its *legal but unjust* employment relationships with the transient labor force.

“So when we look at the situation in Singapore, I think it is important to realise and recognise that we are dealing with two separate infections - there is one happening in the foreign worker dormitories, where the numbers are rising sharply, and there is another one in the general population where the numbers are more stable for now”.

(Lawrence Wong, Minister of National Development, 2020)

As media coverage of COVID-19 begins to envelop local news channels, traditional mainstream media blames migrant workers residing in dormitories account for an [overwhelming](#) proportion of new cases (Han, 2020). PinkDot 2020 sees this indefinite period of physical silence as a time to quietly endorse its broader agenda of migrant worker inclusivity. Ironically, being forced to migrate online presents some opportunities as activist pathways are altered. The Public Order Act is preoccupied with the use of public spaces, but does not refer to digital spaces and non-traditional media sources, which includes social media platforms (Chua, 2014). While PinkDot has long been aware of social media as indispensable to its emergence, given the impossibility of uttering explicit denunciations of the state regime in open spaces, the pertinence of this loophole has never been so poignant. Indeed, for its inaugural event eleven years ago, PinkDot planners found that “going on social media was our

only option” at promoting the event, for censorship regulations would never approve it on public media platforms (Wang, 2016: 9).

## **Silver linings in the clouds of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this loophole to the forefront yet again, as social media extends to activists a virtual space with far less iron-clad rules that dress the material world. PinkDot’s social media channels at the moment are advertising [fundraising campaigns](#) for LGBTQ members of the migrant worker community and calling out structural inequities of the nation-state. Most recently PinkDot promotes [Migrant Matters](#), a ground-up initiative which organizes COVID-19 collection drives to deliver care packages to twenty locations. The online promotion materials consistently hint at the unfair treatment levied onto “our migrant brothers”. PinkDot and its grassroots allies, regardless of the categories of human rights mobilization each organization uses, hope that these campaigns will [ignite conversations](#) that challenge the status-quo affairs regarding migrant justice as “we collectively contemplate and work towards the post-pandemic Singapore we want to see”. These are hardly calls that can be announced in the Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park.

Despite the alarming surge of COVID-19 infections among dormitories, the number of discharged and recovered cases have outnumbered new cases consistently as the effectiveness of the dormitory taskforce has begun to show. As of [29 May 2020](#), Singapore has reported 33 622 cases out of which 18 294 have recovered. More than 15 000 are currently housed in isolation facilities. The death toll stands at 23 and consists of mainly elderly patients above the age of 65 who had succumbed to complications of the virus. At the current time of writing, Singapore’s healthcare and treatment facilities continue to operate with [spare capacity](#). Testing regimes in both the dormitory and non-dormitory population have continuously demonstrated a capacity well above [OECD averages](#), while hospitals still have [vacant](#) Intensive Care Unit (ICU) places reserved for the most critical cases. These are feats of exceptionality that point to the Singapore government’s extraordinary capacity for enforcing the rule of law, to the extent that there is the will to do so.

International observers including [WHO officers](#) have rightly pointed out that Singapore possesses the medical capacity to handle exponential surges. Yet the surge among migrant workers reminds us that we have a long way to go when it comes to recognizing them as not machines or robots but human beings with the same basic needs that we do. That Singapore displays a remarkably low death rate despite being the most infected Asian nation outside of China and India does not exempt us from the humanistic side of the equation. When asked by a nominated member of parliament whether the government would [apologise](#) to migrant workers, the minister of Manpower answered that she had come across “not one single migrant worker himself that has demanded an apology”.

Local sociologists like Daniel Goh (2019) have pointed out long ago that the asymmetrical power relationship between employers of work permit holders and employees means that often the latter does not find it in their interests to voice out concerns about working rights violations, that is if they were even made aware of them in the first place. The Employment Sponsorship system that governs the inflow of ‘unskilled’ workers effectively ties the residential conditions in the host destination to the generosity of the employer, who is able to repatriate workers anytime during

the duration of the contract. Given that most workers are indebted to placement agencies who charge hefty fees, while some have taken numerous loans from family and friends, demanding an apology from the state and the employers it protects is surely not in their favor as they risk unemployment which only exacerbates the situation of financial precarity for their own families.

PinkDot Singapore has had in mind for a long time the inequities in the work permit regime that have suddenly received attention from the Singaporean public, even if for mainly economic reasons. Some immigrant-heavy industries have asked the government to [reconsider](#) its plan of reducing imported labor flows, because Singapore's employment composition has taken on a certain irreversible degree of reliance on foreign labor to perform the manual aspects of value creation. Employers acknowledge the need for industrial restructuring by making "[3D](#)" ([dirty, dangerous, degrading](#)) sectors employable and attractive for local graduates, however this shift cannot happen overnight. Indeed, local taskforces are devoting an unprecedented amount of resources, time and effort into the migrant worker population which have until now been on the peripheries, out of sight and out of mind. The demand for safe social distancing has resulted in the crowding out of purpose-built dormitories, and the rehousing of workers into the heartlands of the city including hotel rooms, public housing blocks, empty carparks, [cruise ships](#) and Expo Halls with more to come. The suggestion of [offshore dormitories](#), as some online commentators have proposed, not only assumes that the interests of migrant workers and the general community can be separated, but also do not reflect well on the spirit of national treatment.

To a certain degree, PinkDot and its allies might be grateful that COVID-19 has forced these adjustments to migrant worker accommodation and brought them into the spotlight of heated debate. The challenge for community solidarity then is learning how to decouple the actions we take for migrant workers from questions of economic disposability, such that we learn to see these long-term adjustments not as a question of "For how long will this inconvenience us?"



*PinkDot SG 2019*

This year on 27 June, PinkDot 12 invites members of the community to light up in pink their homes and workplaces, as well as share pictures of small gatherings with close ones (PinkDot SG, 2020). Livestreams of performances and interactive discussions will be held in absence of the human PinkDot. For an indefinite period of time PinkDot and other social movements worldwide will not be able to enjoy the comfort of close physical proximity with familiar allies. But on an individual level, PinkDot and its allies will soldier on with the much needed community work behind the scenes that the preoccupation with organizing massive assemblies has not left much energy for. This includes starting difficult conversations with close acquaintances, community members and even within our households. In the words of one ambassador: “We are ready to start difficult conversations even with people who don’t agree with the values that we stand for. We need to keep sharing our stories and keep the conversation going!”

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### **About the author**

Lynn Ng Yu Ling is an international graduate student from Singapore doing a PhD in Political Science at the University of Victoria (UVic). Her main interests are around Migrant Domestic Worker (MDW) rights advocacy, but also how these cannot be separated from other movements that use different words for their activism.

## **Feminist solidarity networks have multiplied since the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico**

**María José Ventura Alfaro (18<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

### **Abstract**

*Prior to COVID-19, the feminist movement in Mexico was at its strongest. On the 8th of March for international women's day, tens of thousands of women in the capital alone went out onto the streets to protest against the daily violence, harassment, and abuse that they have suffered for decades on end. Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. This essay explores how women's collectives have not only continued their struggles by use of the virtual world but they have expanded their reach within the community. Independent feminist collectives have created solidarity networks across the country to attempt to tackle the gravest socioeconomic consequences of the virus at the local level: food, medicine, and other essential product shortages, amidst the rise in domestic and family violence.*

### **Keywords:**

COVID-19; Mexico; Feminism; Social Movement; Violence Against Women

### **Introduction**

“Women, welcome to your revolution” read one of the thousands of signs on the International Women’s Day protest in the Mexican capital. There, the women’s movement like those in Chile, Argentina, and many other Latin American countries, has been building up momentum during this past year leading up to mass demonstrations on the 8th March 2020. Tens of thousands of women went out onto the streets not only to celebrate International Women’s Day but to protest against the violence, harassment, and abuse that have become part of their reality<sup>1</sup>. Mexican women took back the streets, reclaiming public space as their own and feeling safe for once in each other’s company. They organised workshops, seminars, reading groups, and often simply gatherings to build community amongst women. Women’s collectives grew exponentially in the last year, with the capital alone hosting over 100 feminist organisations. And just when the movement was at its strongest, the coronavirus outbreak hit. Already on International Women’s Day, the government warned against massive public gatherings, and yet this did not dissuade the activists to cancel or postpone the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan, "Tens of thousands of Mexican women protest 'femicide,' gender-based violence", *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2020.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/mexico-international-womens-day-march-femicide-strike/2020/03/08/1ca6167c-6153-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-international-womens-day-march-femicide-strike/2020/03/08/1ca6167c-6153-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html)

march. Only two weeks later, the pandemic could no longer be ignored. Businesses closed down. Restaurants emptied out. Companies commenced implementing home office strategies. People avoided going out onto the streets. Marches and protests eventually died out. The health crisis was rampant. Coronavirus took precedent on the national agenda, and social issues were put aside. Some would assume this translated into the breakage or dissipation of the feminist movement. This was not the case. The fight continues, indoors.

In this short essay I explore both the increasing domestic and feminicide violence Mexican women face as a result of the global pandemic contingency strategies, as well as the everyday resistance embodied by feminist collectives in the shape of solidarity networks across the country. I suggest that not only women's movements have continued mobilising 'virtually' but they have in fact expanded, capitalising on the new emergencies brought about by the outbreak of Covid-19.

### **Coronavirus in Mexico: A quick overview**

As of mid-May 2020, Mexico has almost 50,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with over 5,000 deaths. The figures are relatively low in comparison with other countries. Testing, however, continues to be scarce and there is wide contestation to the accuracy of official statistics. The government response to the coronavirus pandemic has been highly criticised as the MORENA party president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (popularly known as AMLO), continued to underestimate the fast approaching health crisis in the early days of the outbreak, dissuading people from adhering to social distancing rules suggested by health officials and, in the subsequent weeks, offering slow and disparate government action. Coronavirus lockdown measures commenced on the 23rd of March known as "Phase 2" which was originally meant to be in place until April 30th. These have now been extended until at least the end of May with schools and businesses aiming to reopen shortly before June 1.

### **The other growing pandemic: Femicide and domestic violence**

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, gender and domestic violence as well as feminicide rates were already on the rise in Mexico. 63 percent of Mexican women over the age of 15 report having experienced violence (physical, psychological, sexual or economic) during their lifetime<sup>2</sup>. Official statistics show how, in the past decade, female murder rates have almost doubled<sup>3</sup> with 3,142

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<sup>2</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). 2013. "Panorama de violencia contra las mujeres en México". Aguascalientes: INEGI. [http://internet.contenidos.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/estudios/sociodemografico/mujeresrural/2011/702825048327.pdf](http://internet.contenidos.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/estudios/sociodemografico/mujeresrural/2011/702825048327.pdf)

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women and girls killed in 2019 alone. As it is the case in much of the world, contingency and self-isolating measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus have resulted in a rise of domestic violence reports and femicide rates.

On a press release, feminist civil society Equis Justicia as well as Amnesty International and the National Shelter Network highlight the increasing violence Mexican women are facing as a result of the imposed quarantine and call on the government to put in place preventative and protective strategies to aid this parallel human rights crisis<sup>4</sup>. Since the start of quarantine, there have been a total of 163 feminicides reported<sup>5</sup>. The National Shelter Network reports that, from the 23rd March, when 'Phase 2' officially commenced, domestic violence helpline calls grew by 60% (40,910 calls) with their 69 shelters being between 80-110% of their capacity nationwide<sup>6</sup>. Femicide and domestic violence rates grow exponentially as the quarantine prevails. Contingency measures reveal to the public eye how some women are at their most vulnerable in their own houses, unable to escape their abuser. For victims of domestic violence, having to adhere to social distancing measures translates into a lack of access to their usual support network. Domestic violence has never been seen more clearly as a public health issue, calling out for a strong policy response and action from the government. However, government action to combat this growing crisis has been lacking and almost non-existent, with many Public Ministries refusing to record reports of domestic violence as services and employees stop working due to the quarantine. No clear policy guidelines has yet been published on how this rise in domestic violence will be addressed by the government, with officials merely urging women to call 911 if an incident occurs. This refusal to acknowledge the aggravating consequences lockdown measures have on gender violence makes evident a much larger problem of patriarchal violence within the very establishment. The coronavirus outbreak becomes in this instance a reflector and aggravator of the pre-existing social, economic and political gendered violence. In a country where violence against women is systemic and institutionalised, activist groups become the main safety network for many women.

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<sup>4</sup> Monserrat Aguirre. "Ni la pandemia detiene los feminicidios en Mexico". Reporte Indigo, 11 April 2020. <https://www.reporteindigo.com/reportes/ni-la-pandemia-detiene-los-feminicidios-en-mexico/>

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<sup>6</sup> Oscar Lopez and Christine Murray. "Murders of women in Mexico rise amid fears of lockdown violence". Reuters, 27 April 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-women-violence-trfn/murders-of-women-in-mexico-rise-amid-fears-of-lockdown-violence-idUSKCN22930V>

## **The resilience of the feminist movement**

In the face of the COVID-19 self-isolation restrictions and embodying one of the most characteristic elements of the 4th feminist wave, women's collectives and civil societies have adapted their fight to the virtual world. Online workshops, reading groups, and seminars are hosted weekly by different organisations to continue the ongoing discussions around violence, sexual harassment, job conditions, gender stereotypes, reproductive rights, and many other issues that affect women in their everyday lives. Feminist collectives, such as the hacktivist group *Luchadoras*, coordinate discussions and debates on how the measures implemented to control the pandemic simultaneously reflect and aggravate socio-economic, political, geographic and gender inequalities. Notwithstanding the social distancing experience, emotional bonds are re-created by sharing life stories, testimonies of violence, emotions, and feelings about the quarantine, building community in the shape of new collective digital memory. The collectives' work, however, does not limit itself to the virtual, academic or modern world, it also utilises the net as an organisational tool. Feminist collectives have made use of social media platforms during the pandemic to help provide basic rights to vulnerable women by tackling two main aspects of the social crisis: domestic violence and economic insecurity.

## **Domestic violence networks**

Mexican feminist collectives have focussed on holding the government accountable for their refusal to acknowledge the deepening issue of domestic and femicide violence during quarantine<sup>7</sup>. This is crucial in a setting where the country's president denies and refutes the accuracy of reports and statistics brought forward by civic societies and is endemic of a much larger issue: a violent patriarchal state. As a response to the last president's assertion that domestic violence rates have not gone up during quarantine, the hashtags #nosotrastenemosotrosdatos (In spanish, "we have other data") became viral. Feminist collectives called out for a recognition of the issue and the need for action. As a way to denounce this violence and hold the government accountable, the feminist collective CrucesxRojas created a video to visibilise the violence experienced by Mexican women as a result of the quarantine<sup>8</sup>.

The government's inactivity has shown how violence against women is reproduced by the very State responsible for protecting them. Mexican women have resolved to become their own protectors. Feminist organisations have created support networks for victims of domestic violence whose situation worsens by contingency restrictions. "From the very start of the pandemic

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<sup>7</sup> Infobae. "Organizaciones, activistas y legisladoras refutaron comentario de AMLO sobre "llamadas falsas" por violencia de género". 16 May 2020.

<https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/05/16/organizaciones-activistas-y-legisladoras-refutaron-comentario-de-amlo-sobre-llamadas-falsas-por-violencia-de-genero/>

<sup>8</sup> Crucesxrosas. <https://www.crucesxrosas.com/>

women started creating solidarity networks. From day one" comments Monserrat Ibarra, a feminist activist who volunteers as part of the informal domestic violence helpline network. These networks are not organised by governmental bodies or NGOs, but by small feminist collectives who come together through social media. They keep close contact with victims of domestic violence, often calling them on a daily basis. For example, *Las del aquelarre feminista*, a Mexico City-based feminist collective have opened their own emotional support phone line for victims of domestic violence. Professional therapists have volunteered to be part of this network pro bono<sup>9</sup>. Many feminist collective have put forward "secret codes" that can be used by victims of domestic violence were they unable to contact 911 directly. In which case, one of the volunteers will make the call instead.

### **Food security networks**

Much of Mexico's informal labour force is made out of female domestic workers, home carers, and street food vendors. In a country where most people produce just enough to feed their family on a day-to-day basis, quarantine and contingency measures have disastrous socio-economic consequences. The Government has suggested some form of economic relief may take place in the near future for banks and corporations, but the informal worker is forgotten in this scheme. As a response to growing economic insecurity, feminist collectives commenced organising soup kitchens as well as food and basic products supply networks for those most affected by the crisis. These activities are organised via social media where feminist colectives advertise the need for donating food, medicine and other basic products for vulnerable citizens in precarious work conditions. The activists are often community members who offer their own private house to operate and distribute these goods. Therefore, although these operations occur country wide, they are often at a local, small scale.

In Toluca, for example, already with the 2009 H1N1, the feminist collective *Mujeres Trans Famosas* began providing meals to trans sex workers whose income and livelihoods became most affected by contingency measures such as the closure of hotels<sup>10</sup>. The collective have now expanded their reach and, during the COVID-19 outbreak, supply over 70 meals on a daily basis to those citizens who are often forgotten and invisibilised but most affected by the pandemic: sex workers, illegal or informal workers, homeless people, drug addicts. *Crianza feminista*, another collective based in Mexico City, has also been providing over 40 daily meals to female workers either unemployed or in precarious

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<sup>9</sup> Las del Aquelarre. "Apoyo telefónico para mujeres en crisis" 11 April 2020.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-1VVFODt2F/?igshid=166er7u0ipzal&fbclid=IwAR3qCE4j12IeZ6U7bgl6exmELvYXfbsFO4TUz4JD25DfpSz3fRlbpOlCoI>

<sup>10</sup> Rodrigo Estrada. "Las Famosas y su comedor sin discriminación". 23 April 2020.  
<https://www.am.com.mx/hidalgo/opinion/Las-Famosas-y-su-comedor-sin-discriminacion-20200423-0044.html>

conditions, and have stocked up food cupboards for 22 families that should last them a full month. Their operation has now stopped as the government imposed quarantine is to end. Another popular activity that is taking place as a way to supply within the community was suggested by the feminist collective *Brujas Feministas* who encourage barter-trading, or as they call it “feminist trading”<sup>11</sup>, in social media platforms. Through the platform, women can exchange services and products they wish to supply. For instance, therapists can provide a consult and in return receive some clothes, food or artisanal goods. The focus of this trade is on building community and sorority, helping those most vulnerable in the face of the pandemic, as opposed to making profit. The collective is based in Mexico City but the operation is taking place country-wide.

## **Conclusion**

The feminist movement in Mexico appears not only to be resilient to the Covid-19 outbreak but also thrives through solidarity. The movement presents the two most iconic characteristics of the 4th Feminist wave: it is underlied by an inclusive, intersectional feminist epistemology and it utilises social media platforms and the web as their main organisational tool, now accentuated by the quarantine. Despite having to deal with ongoing health, economic, emotional and social adversities, the Mexican feminist collectives are continuing expanding their work. Their means have changed, but their message continues to be the same: *we are stronger together*.

## **About the author**

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<sup>11</sup> Mercedes Matz. "Trueque Feminista: Mujeres se organizan para generar red de apoyo ante Covid-19". 30 April 2020. <https://www.somoselmedio.com/2020/04/30/trueque-feminista-mujeres-se-organizan-para-generar-red-de-apoyo-ante-covid-19/>

## **Queer Berlin and the Covid-19 crisis: a politics of contact and ethics of care**

**Ben Trott (16<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

In his 1989 essay “Mourning and Militancy”, the critic and curator Douglas Crimp (1989, 11) wrote about how, with the onset of the AIDS crisis, gay men not only came to mourn the loss of friends and lovers but also the loss of pleasures, specifically of “uninhibited and unprotected sex”. He noted that to state this openly would “hardly solicit solidarity, even tolerance”; with tolerance itself, he argued, just another albeit more refined form of condemnation, and “[o]ur pleasures were never tolerated anyway; we took them. And now we must mourn them” (Crimp 1989, 11). The current Covid-19 pandemic is not an equivalent to HIV/AIDS, not least, as João Florêncio (2020) reminds us, in terms of the social stigma attached nor the time it has taken governments and scientific bodies to respond. But for many queer and LGBT people, mixed up with a mourning of lives lost to Covid-19 – and a fearful anticipation of those that may still yet be lost to the virus – there is once more a kind of sadness at the loss of certain queer forms of sociality; and a growing anxiety about when, perhaps even whether, they might return. This is not necessarily related to the loss of queer sexual pleasures (at least, not exclusively), but rather to the looming threat of losing ways of encountering others that emerged out of how intolerable their absence was.

Contemporary queer socialities – including the friendship networks and the alternative modes of community and kin-making that can form in and around bars, clubs and other spaces – are partly the product of histories of banishment from the family (and from the social and political institution of the family), shared experiences of sexual stigma, a need to escape from the policing of gender, and a desire for sanctuary from threats of homo- and trans-phobic violence.<sup>1</sup> (These are the “safe spaces” that it is so fashionable to mock today, particularly among those who have never needed them.) For those who have never *needed* a gay bar, a queer club, a community of drag and other artists, it is – I imagine – easy to underestimate what it means to lose these things (temporarily, hopefully); and to lose them in a moment of real crisis. My focus in this paper is on queer Berlin, but the fear of permanently losing queer institutions and infrastructure feels well-founded, given the closure already of San Francisco’s oldest gay bar, The Stud (founded in 1966), as a result of revenues lost in the current pandemic (CBS News 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> I am drawing here on Donna J. Haraway’s (2016, 102-103) discussion of “making-kin” which attempts “to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy.” She writes: “I was moved in college by Shakespeare’s punning between *kin* and *kind* – the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral ties, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story” (Haraway 2016: 103).

To be sure, just as it is not only gay men who have suffered, mourned, and died in the ongoing AIDS epidemic – and it is very much ongoing: 770,000 lives were lost to AIDS-related illnesses worldwide in 2018 (UN AIDS 2019) – it is clearly not queer and LGBT people alone whose lives are currently missing important forms of community and conviviality. Moreover, degrees of isolation from networks of mutual care and kin-making, not to mention levels of exposure to risk of infection, illness and death, are very unevenly distributed; both within and beyond these milieus. Yet there are aspects of the Covid-19 crisis that pose particular challenges and threats to queer and LGBT people.

I will address some of these challenges and threats here, and particularly those posed to *queer infrastructures* and the forms of encounter and unforeseen *contact* that they can facilitate (among a number of other important material, political and aesthetic functions). I will then turn to some of the forms of *care* that have been developed by queer and LGBT (sub-)cultures, institutions and communities in Berlin amidst the current pandemic, before making a case for embedding the urgently needed defence of queer spaces and socialities within broader social movements and struggles for *the right to the (queer) city*.

## Gay stigma

Despite important differences, the effects and consequences of the coronavirus cannot be entirely separated from those of earlier (and ongoing) epidemics. If it had not been the Trompete nightclub in Berlin's Mitte district, for instance, but rather one of the many dark rooms and cruising spaces found in the city's gay clubs that had become one of the early infection "hotspots", it is very easy to imagine how queer people could quickly have been again cast as particularly dangerous vectors of transmission – and in ways that did not happen with, say, the police after the *Berliner Zeitung* reported several officers had been infected while on a night out at the club (Schütze 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Berlin has a deserved reputation for sexual tolerance but, as in the country as a whole, forms of stigma are easy to find, particularly where health is concerned. Germany's comparatively soft lockdown, imposed incrementally throughout the course of mid- to late-March, saw the shutting of schools and other public buildings often used for blood donation, followed by social distancing measures and an encouragement to stay at home. Hospitals quickly expressed concern about blood shortages and by mid-May reserves in Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg had fallen to less than that required for the average day (Kögel 2020 and DPA 2020a). And yet the country's ruling coalition of Social and Christian Democrats (the SPD and the CDU/CSU) have reaffirmed their commitment to regulations preventing men who have sex with men (MSM)

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<sup>2</sup> A spokesperson for the Ministry of Health in South Korea has described the "criticism and hatred" that was directed toward some of those who became infected at gay clubs in Seoul's Itaewon neighborhood after the easing of social distancing regulations in the city in early-May, and following attention to the cluster of infections by conservative and religious media (Ryall 2020).

from donating blood (unless they have abstained from sex for at least 12 months) (Warnecke 2020). Gay sex continues to be defined as risky, then; even when it takes place within monogamous state-sanctioned marriage, and despite the ability to effectively test for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

## **Paradoxes of queer liberalism**

Recent years have seen a significant growth in LGBT cultural visibility and representation in Germany, with 2019 seeing the launch of television shows from *Queens of Drag* (inspired by *RuPaul's Drag Race*), *Prince Charming* (a gay version of *The Bachelor*), and *Queer 4 You* (based on *Queer Eye*). Greater legal equality has also been achieved, with both adoption and marriage rights granted to same-sex couples in 2017. And yet, as has been the case elsewhere in world, increased visibility and more formal equality have coincided with a rise in homo- and trans-phobic violence (or at least in their reporting), including in Berlin (DPA 2020b). It has also coincided with an international rise of far-right groups and parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).<sup>3</sup>

The shutting down of much public and commercial life in response to Covid-19 had the desired (and in many ways desirable) effect of drastically reducing the number of people out and about in the city, particularly in late-March and April. However, even before the streets temporarily emptied of many of those who *might* be able to help deter or prevent homo- and trans-phobic violence and harassment, a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2020, 50) had found that in Germany, 24% of respondents “often” or “always” “avoid certain places or locations for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed due to being LGBTI”. 36% reported having been harassed in the previous 12-months (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 44). The streets and public life can be more dangerous for queer and trans people, then. But not everyone has the “luxury” of being able to stay safe at home either. This is most obviously the case, first, for those working in essential jobs (namely, those professions suddenly recognized as “*systemrelevant*”, even if they are often highly precarious and poorly paid) and second, the homeless, of whom there were at least 1,976 in Berlin as of January 2020 (ZEIT ONLINE 2020a). Official statistics about queer and trans homelessness are not gathered in Germany, but it seems safe to assume that, as in those places like the UK where data is collected, they are over-represented among this group.<sup>4</sup> The safety of staying at home is also contingent for queer and trans people living in shared accommodation, as well as those too young or without the financial means to leave their family homes. There are accounts of LGBTI refugees in shared accommodation being subjected to homo- and trans-

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of forms of “queer liberalism” which merge increased legal protections for gay and lesbian domesticity with (mediatic celebrations of) depoliticised queer consumer lifestyles, and of the related phenomenon of “homo-normativity” in a context of ascendant nationalism, see David Eng with Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz (2005, 10-15).

<sup>4</sup> On LGBT homelessness in the UK, see the Albert Kennedy Trust: [www.akt.org.uk](http://www.akt.org.uk)

phobic violence, including by those employed there; as well as suggestions that, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become more difficult to access non-Covid related medication and medical treatment (LSVD 2020). While schools and other environments can often be inhospitable to young queer and trans people, so can the family home. Across the EU, among those who understand themselves as LGBTI, only 5% of 15- to 17-year-olds describe themselves as being “very open” (and only 12% of 18- to 24-year-olds) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 23).

Even many of those living in stable and secure housing, and free from immediate threats of violence and harassment, have found themselves more cut off from important forms of support, solidarity and sociality. While many organisations have made very impressive efforts to continue providing counselling, advice and other services amidst the pandemic, some of these have had to be restricted.<sup>5</sup> And accessing some in-person support has become more difficult, particularly for those especially at risk from Covid-19, including older people, the immunocompromised, and the chronically ill. In Berlin, a number of queer and LGBT initiatives have formed to support those unable to easily leave their homes. By 19 March, only 17 days after the first known coronavirus case in Berlin, 800 people had already signed up to support “an ad hoc relief line for queers, womxn and otherwise marginalized people in Berlin” established by Karada House, a queer art space.<sup>6</sup> Its aim has been to run errands and shopping trips, pre-cook and deliver meals, offer financial support, and match people with others to talk with. A neighbourhood support project for older lesbians, lesbians with disabilities, those living alone, and others in need of support has also been set up by Rad und Tat (RuT), an organisation based in the city’s Neukölln district.<sup>7</sup>

The home itself is also in the process of undergoing a series of transformations amidst the pandemic, as Paul B. Preciado (2020) has recently argued. Isolation, alienation, and processes of de-collectivization are all at stake when the home is not just turned into a space of confinement, as Michel Foucault showed was the case with the plague of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also when it becomes – as is increasingly the case for many – a site of “tele-consumption and tele-

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<sup>5</sup> To cite just two examples of projects that have continued to deliver important services: Checkpoint BLN (<https://checkpoint-bln.de/>) has been providing sexual health support for gay and bisexual men as well as for trans and intersex people and GLADT ([www.gladt.de](http://www.gladt.de)), an LGBTIQ black, indigenous and person of color organisation, has been providing counselling and other services via telephone, online chat and video.

<sup>6</sup> See the Karada House website: <https://karada-house.de/2020/03/28/queer-relief-for-corvid-19/>

<sup>7</sup> The 16 April, 2020, the Queerspiegel e-newsletter published by the daily *Tagesspiegel* newspaper included an interview by Nadine Lange interview with Gabriele Michalak of RuT. For more, see: <https://rut-berlin.de/nachbarschaftshilfe/>

production” as well as a “surveillance pod” (Preciado 2020).<sup>8</sup> Just as Preciado (2020) suggests, some social and political forces will no doubt attempt to instrumentalise Covid-19 as a means of intensifying individualization, refining techniques for the distance management of immaterial forms of labour, and continuing to distribute vulnerability to premature death along racialized, gendered and class lines. As such, he is surely right to argue that our times of (relative) confinement could be well-spent learning “to de-alienate ourselves”, not least by studying “the tradition of struggle and resistance among racial and sexual minority cultures that have helped us survive until now” (Preciado 2020). It is also crucial, of course, to study and invest ourselves in those forms of collectivity and de-individualisation that persist, or which are emerging from within the current crisis.

### **Caring about queer infrastructure**

The sadness and anxiety around the threatened loss of queer socialities relates in large part to the danger currently posed to queer infrastructure. Berlin is famous for its nightlife; a nightlife that can famously spill over into daylight, or sprawl out across a whole weekend. But for years now – and despite the significant, well-documented contribution it makes to the city’s economy – it has been placed at risk by gentrification, a housing boom, and property development.<sup>9</sup> In a 2019 report, the city’s Club Commission (2019, 26), which brings together club, party and event organisers and their supporters, showed that what their members most wanted from politicians – even more than greater financial support and fewer regulations – was protection from the very real threat of being forced to move. Around 100 clubs have had to close in the last 10 years, with 25 more currently under threat (Connolly 2020); many of them hosts to LGBT and queer events. In January of this year, hundreds joined a demonstration after the electronic music club Griessmühle, home to the cult queer CockTail d’Amore party, lost its tenancy in a venue next to the Neukölln Ship Canal (it will be replaced by an office block). Several bars have recently faced the threat of eviction too: from Hafen, an almost 30-year-old institution in the city’s traditional gay neighbourhood of Schöneberg, through to the much newer queer café and beer garden, Südblock at Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg (Siegeßsäule 2019 and Joswig 2020). What was thus already a very precarious situation has been significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In an international survey carried out by the Gay Romeo dating website, it was users

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<sup>8</sup> In describing the shifts in biopolitical techniques addressed to the domestic sphere in the Covid-19 crisis, Preciado (2020) writes: “The domestic space henceforth exists as a point in a zone of cybersurveillance, an identifiable place on a Google map, an image that is recognized by a drone.”

<sup>9</sup> According to research carried out by the Berlin Club Commission, in 2017 the estimated gross turnover of the city’s club and event scene was €168 million, with an additional €48 million estimated to be generated indirectly, through advertising, gastronomy, the music industry, etc. (Club Commission 2019, 28).

in Germany who expressed most concern (46% of respondents) about the economic impact of Covid-19 on the gay scene.<sup>10</sup> In Berlin, bars are currently reopening, but with – albeit understandable – restrictions that will not only challenge their economic viability but also their capacity to function as spaces of encounter and unforeseen connection and contact.<sup>11</sup> Clubs look likely to remain largely closed, at least for much of the rest of the year.

Queer and LGBT bars, clubs and other social spaces serve numerous functions, including but not limited to the facilitation of queer socialities and forms of “contact” (my primary focus here). First, they provide income for queer and LGBT people in a world where many still experience homo- and trans-phobic discrimination at work.<sup>12</sup> The Neukölln-based club SchwuZ (short for *Schwulenzentrum*, or Gay Centre) employs around 100 people as well as 300 freelancers: DJs, technicians, and others.<sup>13</sup> //about blank, a club located in Friedrichshain, and which hosts various queer, feminist, anti-racist and anti-fascist events, also employs around 100 people; with event organisers, artists, performers and others also reliant on the venue for an income. It is a collectively organised co-operative with what it describes as a “solidary economic and feminist self-conception”.<sup>14</sup> SchwuZ is a registered association (*eingetragener Verein*), rather than a profit-making company owned by a private individual. In total, around 9,000 people are employed by clubs in Berlin (not all of them queer or LGBT of course) (Club Commission 2019, 30).

Second, established queer and LGBT institutions – SchwuZ was set up in 1977 – serve as sites for political debate and for practical solidarity with contemporary social movements, but they can also provide a connection to histories of social and political struggle. The club is Germany’s oldest existing queer cultural institution, set up by those surrounding Homosexuellen Aktion West Berlin (HAW), a gay liberation group. It was created not just as a nightlife space, but as a community and activist centre: it established a “pink telephone” support service, provided space for a gay choir and a youth organisation, and a meeting space for campaigning groups – including, later, those organizing a response to the AIDS crisis (Kraushaar 2017). For several years, it shared a building with the

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<sup>10</sup> For details of the survey, see: <https://www.planetromeo.com/en/blog/romeos-in-lockdown-survey-results/>

<sup>11</sup> Bars will only be permitted to serve customers seated at tables, rather than standing or sat at the bar.

<sup>12</sup> 23% of survey respondents in Germany reported having felt discriminated against at work in the previous 12 months (2% above the EU average), and 11% felt discriminated against during this period while looking for work (1% above the EU average) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 32-33).

<sup>13</sup> This information is taken from the SchwuZ website. See: [www.schwuz.de](http://www.schwuz.de)

<sup>14</sup> This information is taken from the page raising funds for //about blank. See: [https://www.startnext.com/whatever-you-take?fbclid=IwAR3Lhrm\\_mQy1Wwmltv2-Z7hNYH2fBaUcdv3NIdC4zLz2UDDliRFRm4x8HGQ](https://www.startnext.com/whatever-you-take?fbclid=IwAR3Lhrm_mQy1Wwmltv2-Z7hNYH2fBaUcdv3NIdC4zLz2UDDliRFRm4x8HGQ) For more about //about blank, see: <http://aboutparty.net>

city's Schwules Museum\* (Gay Museum) and it was the place where in 1984 the city's free gay (now explicitly queer) magazine *Siegessäule* was born.<sup>15</sup> Like other such publications, *Siegessäule* includes an event listing, featuring everything from support group meetings, theatre, dance and opera programming, over political discussions and demonstrations, through to club nights, drag shows and sex parties. The quality and scope of its queer cultural and political commentary and debate marks it out from many other free LGBT city magazines, however. For instance, the April 2020 issue not only included coverage of Covid-19 but also: the "LGBT free zones" being created in Poland; restrictions on blood donation by MSM in Germany; the attitude of gay and lesbian members of the CDU toward the party's current leadership candidates; the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and a project remembering and commemorating the lesbian women imprisoned and murdered there; the Queer Asia network providing a platform for artistic, intellectual and political work in Berlin; debates around the ownership of the history and symbols of lesbian activism; the history and meaning of leather sub-cultures in the gay scene; transphobia within the queer community; and the Georgian-Swedish film, *And Then We Danced*, about love between two male dancers in Tbilisi's National Georgian Ensemble. Just like many of the venues whose events it lists, the magazine was plunged into crisis by the Covid-19 pandemic, temporarily losing access to many of its distribution points and much of its advertising revenue amidst the lockdown. (A campaign saw over 1,700 people donate almost €150,000, with further funds raised by the 2020 Solidarity campaign, launched by the artist Wolfgang Tillmans and his Between Bridges Foundation. Tillmans and other artists donated limited edition works for sale.)<sup>16</sup>

Cultural institutions like the regular Gayhane party (the name is partly a play on the Turkish and Arabic word for "house", "*hane*") can also serve as a connection to decades of struggle, not only by but also *within* queer and LGBT movements. Gayhane has been held at SO36 for over 20 years, a club and concert hall named after the former postcode of the area of Kreuzberg it is based. The neighbourhood has long been home to multiple generations of migrants from Turkey and elsewhere, to punks, squatters (and now former squatters), queers, and those who, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, had moved to the demilitarised West Berlin as a way of avoiding national service. In an interview marking Gayhane's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the organisers explained its origins in the regular Salon Oriental event – a broadly Turkish LGBTQI cabaret that took up questions of racism and migration, sexism, homo- and trans-phobia.<sup>17</sup> In her book, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Fatima El-

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<sup>15</sup> See: [www.siegessaule.de](http://www.siegessaule.de)

<sup>16</sup> On the fundraising campaign, see: <https://www.startnext.com/your-siegessaule-needs-you>  
On the 2020 Solidarity campaign, see: <https://www.siegessaule.de/magazin/2020solidarity-kuenstlerinnen-fuer-siegessaule/>

<sup>17</sup> See Andreas Hartmann's (2019) interview with three of the Gayhane organisers, Frieda, Sabuha, and DJ Ipek.

Tayeb (2011, 143) argues that Salon Oriental introduced “a minoritarian voice, disrespectful of dominant hierarchies of representation with regard to nationality and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality” and thus “did not only center the experience of queer minorities but allowed other segments of the audience to relate to and identify with this usually discarded perspective, letting the performances work as a kind of testimonial through interpellation”.

The Gayhane organisers remain invested in addressing questions of queerness, nation, migration and racism, including through donations to social and political projects included in the entrance fee. This is the third key function of many queer and LGBT bars and clubs, then: as fundraising spaces supporting political and other initiatives. For instance, on the first Monday of every month, a different social, political and community group takes over Möbel Olfe, a queer bar located around the corner from SO36, for an event called Solidarität vom Fass (or Solidarity on Tap). Regular “solidarity parties” and fundraising events are held at SchwuZ, Südblock, and ://about blank too, as well as at many other queer venues. In Neukölln, the Silver Future bar plays host to the regular Queerberg party, featuring and raising money to support refugee queer performance artists.

This is the fourth function of LGBT and queer venues and events: showcasing queer and trans performers, artists and musicians. For years now, every Tuesday night at Monster Ronson’s karaoke bar on Warschauerbrücke between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, Pansy’s House of Presents has provided a stage for drag, queer and trans performance artists from around the world.<sup>18</sup> The show is immediately preceded by Gieza’s Pokehouse, with Gieza Poke – a drag queen who describes herself as “Berlin’s only power-top pan-sexual former-Scottish-daytime-TV-fitness-sensation” – hosting a show that features “new and upcoming drag and drag-adjacent performers.”<sup>19</sup> At its best, queer performance art, including and perhaps especially drag, can serve as a form of cultural critique, a means of interrogating racism and misogyny (including within LGBT milieus), and a mode of producing community and collectivity. This can have effects that ripple out into the world at large. José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, published in 1999, remains one of the most compelling scholarly works in this field. And much of the book would no doubt be of use in any analysis of many of the performances at events like Queerberg at Silver Future – which describes itself as a place for “kings, queens and criminal queers” – at the House of Presents and Gieza’s Pokehouse, as well as at events like Queer\*Syria (a series featuring performers from Iraq as well as Syria), Queens Against Borders (which often takes place at SO36 and describes itself as aiming “to build a bridge between drag, trans and queer performance artists who are refugees and those performers who have already established spaces in the city”), and in

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<sup>18</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/pansypresents/>

<sup>19</sup> See: <https://www.giezapoke.com/bio>

performances and events hosted by the House of Living Colors (a queer and trans of colour drag house).<sup>20</sup>

Part of what Muñoz (1999, 147) explores is how what he calls “performances of counterpublicity” can challenge the discourses of a majoritarian public sphere, as well as the reproduction of these discourses. The construction of “counterpublics”, he points out, can be particularly important for subordinate and subaltern groups – including women, queers, people of colour, and others – and they can serve as a means of contesting the purported universality of the public sphere, its exclusionary and discriminatory norms (Muñoz 1999, 147-149). Counterpublic performances by drag and other queer (and particularly queer of colour) performers can articulate forms of cultural critique which allow new models of social relations to be imagined – those, for instance, that might escape the “interpellating call of heteronormativity” (Muñoz 1999, 33). The performers that he engages with, like (the now Berlin-based) Vaginal Davis, make use of humour and parody while waging cultural battles to “transform the popular ‘mentality’” and “unsettle the hegemonic order” (Muñoz 1999, 110-111).<sup>21</sup> And it is in this sense that, for Muñoz, performers like Davis can be understood as organic intellectuals and philosophers in the Gramscian sense of these terms. Moreover, queer and minoritarian performance is shown to contain a capacity for “worldmaking”, or the making of “worlds of transformative politics and possibilities.” (Muñoz 1999, 195). He writes:

“Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, ‘worldviews,’ that reshape as they deconstruct reality. Such counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.” (Muñoz 1999, 196)

## **A politics of contact**

And here we arrive at the final function served by queer and LGBT bars, clubs and other spaces, namely, the facilitation of forms of sociality that can be generative of community and kin-making. It is crucial to point out, however,

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<sup>20</sup> On Queer\*Syria, see Eva Tempest’s (2018) interview with one member, Katy. On the House of Living Colors, see (Wiedemann 2019) and: <https://www.facebook.com/houseoflivingcolors/>. On Queens Against Borders, see: [www.facebook.com/queensagainstborders](http://www.facebook.com/queensagainstborders)

<sup>21</sup> El-Tayeb (2011, 141) argues that the “mixture of classic drag show, physical comedy, and agitprop” that characterised Salon Oriental’s shows resembled Muñoz’s description of Vaginal Davis’ “queer drag”, “at odds with conventions of academic queer theory as well as those of an increasingly commercialized gay scene.”

that at times such spaces can and do themselves reproduce and reinforce hegemonic norms, existing social hierarchies, and modes of exclusion – including those of race, nation, class, disability, and gender (performance). Many queer and LGBT spaces in Berlin, including some of those discussed here, have long been subject to criticism for doing just that. At the same time, these spaces can – albeit often imperfectly – also serve as sites that enable the kinds of “contact” that Samuel R. Delany (1999) distinguishes from “networking” in his work on the social relations, institutions and functions displaced by the development of New York City’s Times Square. Here, “networking” can be understood as relatively instrumental and as rarely facilitating, say, cross-class interactions. “Contact”, in contrast, “tends to be more broadly social and appears random”, often involving the kind of “interclass encounters” that tend to take place only outside of the domestic sphere (Delany 1999, 129).<sup>22</sup> In his book, *One-Dimensional Queer*, Roderick A. Ferguson (2019) draws on Delany’s account of “contact” to describe a multi-dimensional vision of the urban that queer spaces have often facilitated. This is where the city comes to involve “much more than the fulfillment of jobs and wealth”, providing “the possibility to satisfy desires for self-invention and for the invention of new types of community” (Ferguson 2019, 84).

In other words, where the city provides such a function, this is often facilitated by queer spaces that have historically enabled “encounters between communities typically kept apart” (Ferguson 2019, 83). Delany and a number of others, such as Tim Dean (2009), have shown how cruising spaces in particular, and queer spaces of public sex, can facilitate this sort of contact between otherwise relatively separate communities.<sup>23</sup> Although there have also long been those within Queer Studies, like Leo Bersani (1987, 206), who have cautioned against any naïve understanding of these sites as entailing a kind of “Whitmanesque democracy”, emphasizing instead how they tend to be marked by hierarchy, status, and competition.

Contra some sexual liberation discourses, however, sex itself is not *necessarily* particularly central to the production of queer socialities. Nor in fact to queer contestations of social norms or queer efforts towards the reinvention of the self. (Although this is certainly not to say that sex cannot or does not have a role to play here.) Queer and LGBT bars and clubs do indeed facilitate the (often unforeseen) forms of contact that Delany (1999, 111) argues can be generative of some of the most “rewarding, productive, pleasant” aspects of life, and they do frequently provide sanctuary (“safe spaces”, if you like) from forms of anti-gay prohibition. (This is just one reason why the defence of these spaces must be a

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<sup>22</sup> Delany (1999, 111) opens the second of the two essays in his book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* by explaining: “The primary thesis underlying my several arguments here is that, given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will.”

<sup>23</sup> Delany (1999, 124-125) also describes non-sexual forms of “contact”, such as those established in queues at supermarkets or in copy shops.

cornerstone of anti-gentrification struggles; as Ferguson (2019, 108) points out, “[t]he story of neoliberal redevelopment is one in which city planners have attempted to gain power over the city’s inhabitants to shape the ‘character’ of urban space.”) But, just as Foucault argued in the 1970s, such forms of prohibition are not necessarily targeted primarily at sexual acts themselves (although again: sex *can* become a target). Rather, they generally tend to be directed towards broader “economies of pleasures”, including those of simply “being together” and the affective and relational development of specifically gay (or queer) modes of life (Foucault, cited in Eribon 2004, 307). In *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, Didier Eribon (2004, 308), addresses at some length the development of Foucault’s thoughts on the “gay mode of life” and “gay culture”, including his repeated insistence that it was the different ways of relating to one another, the forms of public affection among gay men – including the simple holding of hands – that appeared more intolerable for many than the *fact* of sex among men. For instance, despite its continued stigmatisation and association with risk (described above), there certainly seems to be little appetite in liberal societies today for a recriminalization of gay sex. And yet precisely the kinds of affection that Foucault described do still appear to be intolerable for many; with 45% of same-sex couples in Germany “always” or “often” avoiding holding hands in public “for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 26). A crucial function of queer and LGBT spaces, then, is facilitating affection, not just among same-sex couples but also as a means of developing new ways of relating, alternative queer modes of life rooted, as Foucault (1997 [1981], 136) put it, in “tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship”. Indeed, for Foucault, it was the cultivation of these new relational systems (rather than sex itself) that best allowed for the reinvention of oneself and for escape from subjugating social norms.<sup>24</sup>

### **An ethics of care**

Part of what has emerged in response to the Covid-19 crisis is what the moral and feminist philosopher Joan C. Tronto describes as an ethic of care. Care, understood by Tronto (2009, 104) as “a practice” as well as “a disposition”, is made up of several elements: “caring about” (requiring *attentiveness*; recognizing the need for a particular kind of care, and understanding and that this should be met), “taking care of” (implying the assumption of a degree of *responsibility* for this care), “care-giving” (the meeting of a care need, and the capacity and *competence* to do so), and “care-receiving” (or *responsiveness* on the part of those who, or that which, is cared for) (Tronto 2009, 106-117 and 127). The response to the Covid-19 pandemic by much – although certainly not all – of Berlin’s queer and LGBT (sub-)cultures, institutions, and activist communities could be well understood through this framework: from attention

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<sup>24</sup> I am drawing here on Eribon’s (2004, 303-309) discussion of Foucault’s reflections on questions of homosexuality, sexual liberation and friendship from around 1976 onwards.

to the needs of those particularly at risk from the virus and the assumption of responsibility for addressing (“taking care of”) these needs, through to the development and deployment of skills and capacities that can help both sustain queer and LGBT infrastructure as well as the affective connections and forms of sociality and “contact” that they can (re-)produce.

In addition to the crowd-funding in support of *Siegessäule* magazine, funds have also been collected by and for SchwuZ. First to help secure the jobs of those who work there, then to contribute to the income of precarious artists; with a pledge to donate surplus funds to a solidarity campaign in support of LGBTIQ+ refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos.<sup>25</sup> A similar online fundraising drive was launched by ://about blank and has received considerable support.<sup>26</sup> A Berlin Collective Action Nightlife Emergency Fund has been set up, supported by a number of clubs, party collectives and artists – including Cocktail d’Amore, House of Living Colors, and Lecken (a queer rave collective whose parties are “womxn-to-the-front space[s]” that are open to all)<sup>27</sup> – working together with various projects and organisations including GladT e.V. (an LGBTIQ Black and PoC organization working on questions of intersectionality and multiple discrimination), the Berlin Strippers Collective, and Olga (a project providing support for women who use drugs). The Fund raises money for “those most impacted by risk and violence in Berlin during Covid-19”, and particularly “[w]here state support fails”.<sup>28</sup> “The fund aims to prioritise those most impacted by COVID-19. Due to the realities of systemic oppression, this generally means womxn, queer, trans and non-binary people, low-income gig workers, people with migratory backgrounds, BIPOC, sex workers, the immunocompromised, the disabled and those who are unsafe in quarantine.”<sup>29</sup> The campaign has established “a diverse rotating committee” that distributes the funds it raises to applicants.<sup>30</sup> Many of the clubs and venues discussed here have also participated in the United We Stream project that, since the closure of Berlin’s nightlife on 13 March, has livestreamed dozens of live music events, performances, and DJ sets from clubs in the city, with income generated going to support venues and event organisers (8% of funds raised are donated to the Foundation Fund for Civilian Sea Rescue).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> SchwuZ explain how they will use funds raised here: <https://www.schwuz.de/?lang=en>

<sup>26</sup> See: <https://www.startnext.com/whatever-you-take>

<sup>27</sup> On Lecken, see: <https://lecken.berlin/about>

<sup>28</sup> On the Berlin Collective Action Nightlife Emergency Fund and for a fuller list of supporters, see: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>  
Donations to the Fund can also be made via this link.

<sup>29</sup> See: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>

<sup>30</sup> See: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>

<sup>31</sup> On United We Stream, see: <https://en.unitedwestream.berlin/info/>

Some of the most politically, aesthetically, and affectively innovative approaches to digital queer performance in the pandemic have been developed by Berlin's drag world. As nightlife was shut down, regular drag events – including Gieza's Pokehouse and Pansy's House of Presents – almost immediately took to streaming drag shows via Twitch.tv, a platform otherwise primarily used for video game streaming.<sup>32</sup> Performers and hosts quickly adapted, incorporating elements that would not necessarily have worked in a live stage show, such as animation. In one show, Gieza Poke used greenscreen technology to transform herself into a puppet, with her own head atop a cardboard body made by the visual artist Rory Midhani. The hosts cut to mostly live but occasionally pre-recorded shows (at times featuring music videos that again incorporate effects that would be difficult to simulate live or in-person) by drag and “drag-adjacent” artists, most of them performing in their homes. In early-April, queer performance artists Prens Emrah, The Darvish, Wizzy, and Pansy presented Queerantina, a show featuring drag, belly dancing, song and other performances by the Queer\*Syria, Queens Against Borders, and Queerberg collectives. In late-May, the Venus Boys, who describe themselves as “a collective of Berlin based drag performers who paint from the palette of performative masculinity”, put on a König: Digital Girls night, with drag kings performing as queens for one night only.<sup>33</sup> In all these shows, tips and donations are collected to support queer and trans performers, many of whom have lost income amidst the lockdown. Many performances, and many of the hosts of these shows, have explicitly addressed the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic is posing to queer and LGBT individuals and subcultures, as well as many of the ways in which the coronavirus crisis intersects with questions of movement and migration, economic precarity and racism (including in terms of the ways that this is being contested by the Black Lives Matter movement). With a surprising degree of success, many of the shows' hosts have encouraged audiences to use Twitch's chat function to cheer on and support performers, simulating something similar to the feeling of being in a crowd at a live show.

Of course, watching a show streamed online is *not* the same as attending a live show. The possibilities for the production of “counterpublicity”, and particularly for the kinds of “worldmaking”, that Muñoz theorises are, I think it is safe to say, more limited. And there are certainly few opportunities for the forms of encounter and unforeseen “contact” that Delany describes. Notwithstanding Preciado's critique of digital surveillance technologies and the new technologies of (bio-)power that they are caught up with, digital cultures have now long played a role in the development of new relational systems and in sustaining gay and queer cultures and modes of life. But these are also heavily dependent on the physical spaces provided by queer infrastructure. Queer care-giving will, then, need to continue developing a capacity not only (as Tronto might put it) to *care about*, but also to *take care of* and *give care to*, the spaces that sustain

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<sup>32</sup> See: <https://www.twitch.tv/giezapoke> and: <https://www.twitch.tv/pansypresents>

<sup>33</sup> On Venus Boys, see: <https://www.facebook.com/Venus-Boys-433107937467307/> and: <https://www.twitch.tv/venusboys/>

these modes of life. The forms of solidarity economy that have been developed by queer and LGBT subcultures and communities will certainly have an important role to play. But it will also be crucial that the defence of queer socialities and infrastructures both inform, and become one focus of, broader social movements and struggles to shape the city and urban social life within and beyond the pandemic.

### **The right to the queer city**

Berlin is a city animated by creative industries including its sizable club scene (and the numerous services that support and sustain its nightlife), a fashion industry characterized by “vibrant networks of independent designers” (McRobbie, Strutt and Bandineii 2019: 134), and a rapidly growing start-up tech sector.<sup>34</sup> Of the €4.6 billion invested in start-ups in Germany in 2018, €2.6 billion were invested in Berlin (Stokel-Walker 2019). Even before the development of “the full-blown creative economy”, however, Berlin had long attracted a young workforce interested in “the arts, and in culture in the broadest sense”, with many employed in “the not-for-profit sector” and in forms of project work that rarely pay high salaries, as Angela McRobbie, Dan Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli (2019, 135) have shown in their recent work on Berlin’s fashion “microenterprises”. Many creative and cultural industries rely on the kinds of labour and the forms of production that increasingly characterize post-Fordism as a whole: with flexible, largely horizontal networks involved in temporary, often small-scale projects requiring specialist skills. In their account of what they call “post-Fordist placemaking” – in relation to city beaches in Berlin and a number of other European cities – Quentin Stevens and Mhairi Ambler (2010, 534) describe how such spaces, like many of the nightlife spaces described here, blur production and consumption; events, parties and venues rely on the contributions and participation of those who attend, so that they co-produce the experiences they consume. (The ways in which many drag performers rely on interactions with their audiences is just one particularly clear example of this.)

There have of course long been efforts – like those famously advanced by Richard Florida (2012 [2002], e.g. 237-239) in his work on “the creative class” – to transform queerness into “a mode of difference that can promote capital’s well-being” while displacing “the forms of queer creativity that [have] exceeded and critiqued market capitalism”, as Roderick A. Ferguson (2019, 101) persuasively puts it.<sup>35</sup> In many ways, the increased need, amidst the current

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<sup>34</sup> The city’s economy is described as follows on the state of Berlin’s official website: “The city has long developed from an industrial location to a modern service centre and international motor of innovation” (my translation). See: <https://www.berlin.de/berlin-im-ueberblick/wirtschaft/>

<sup>35</sup> In Florida’s (2012 [2002], 238) work on the creative class, the very presence of gay people in a neighbourhood is in some ways taken as an indication that it would also be welcoming of others

pandemic, to defend the infrastructures that facilitate queer socialities (many of which have long been at threat of displacement, as I have argued) is perhaps best understood as caught up with long-standing demands and discourses around *the right to the city*; a city oriented around the needs of those who (under post-Fordist conditions) produce, shape and live within it.<sup>36</sup> I will close this paper, then, by pointing towards three sets of political demands and initiatives that have already been widely discussed, debated and at times advanced by social and political movements – including those well beyond Berlin – which could be of particular use in establishing the right to a city capable of sustaining the sorts of infrastructure required for queer socialities and queer forms of life (broadly conceived).

The first is the demand for a *guaranteed basic income*, an enduring proposal that has gained substantial support amidst the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>37</sup> 400,000 people in Germany recently signed a petition demanding it be instated amidst the pandemic and Spain has already seen its accelerated introduction in response to the coronavirus (ZEIT ONLINE 2020b).<sup>38</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009, 309-310) have been among those to have long made the case for a basic income, in part “on the basis of economic justice (wealth is produced across a widely dispersed social network, and therefore the wage that compensates it should be equally social) and social welfare (since nothing close to full employment can be achieved in the current economy, income must be provided for those without work).”<sup>39</sup> The global Covid-19 pandemic has of

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that are often “the source of new ideas”: “egg heads, eccentrics”, “immigrants and ethnic minorities”. (As Ferguson (2019, 104) points out, in Florida’s account, these “migrants and ethnic minorities” represent a separate category to “gays”. In other words, the two do not overlap.)

<sup>36</sup> Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre’s influential 1967 essay, *The Right to the City*, the formulation has been taken up by social movements and initiatives around the world (including in Germany). In his own engagement with the notion of the right to the city, the geographer David Harvey (2012, x) describes Lefebvre’s original formulation as “both a cry and a demand. The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty.”

<sup>37</sup> In April 2020, the German network for a basic income, Netzwerk Grundeinkommen, was made up of 134 organisations and 5,391 individuals. See: <https://www.grundeinkommen.de/netzwerk/mitglieder> On the ethics as well as the economics of the basic income, see Widerquist et al. (2005).

<sup>38</sup> A basic income had been one of the key pledges in the electoral campaign fought by Unidas Podemos in the autumn of 2019, a party with its roots in the ‘15M’ movement that, a few years after the global economic crisis began in 2008, saw millions occupy squares across the country. Unidas Podemos formed a coalition government with the centre-left Socialist Workers’ party (PSOE) in January 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Hardt and Negri (2009, 310) also point out that “we need to recognize how ensuring that the entire population has a basic minimum for life is in the interests of capital. Granting the

course only increased unemployment. The demand for a guaranteed basic income, or for a “social wage”, would certainly help support those cultural workers and artistic forms of production that sustain and help animate queer and LGBT subcultures. It also represents a means of contesting the precarity that post-Fordism imposes, but without recourse to nostalgia for the Fordist “family wage”, “that fundamental weapon of the sexual division of labor” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 403) and institution of heteronormativity, or of “compulsory heterosexuality”. The basic income demand can also serve as “a provocation”, pointing “toward the future” as Kathi Weeks (2011, 145) argues in *The Problem with Work*. “As a mode of provocation, the collective practice of demanding should be understood also as a constitutive event, the performative force of which inevitably exceeds the scope of the specific reform” (Weeks 2011, 145). This particular demand can function, she argues, as “a provocation to freedom” understood “as the time and space for invention”; creating room for lives less dependent on work (Weeks 2011, 145). The primary goal of any defence of queer forms of sociality, and of the infrastructures that support them, should not be a return to “normal” when the pandemic passes. Instead, the rupture with “normality”, and the forms of care and solidarity that have been developed in the pandemic, can serve as an opportunity to imagine, demand and build different, better, queerer futures.

Many of the queer projects and collectives discussed here – from Salon Oriental and Gayhane through to events like Queerantina (in April of this year) – have been among those to articulate, in various ways, a second key set of demands, namely, for *freedom of movement*, *the right to remain*, and *the right to citizenship*. For many queer and LGBT people, the need and desire to move (to new neighbourhoods, to cities, or across borders) is a familiar experience; even while these experiences vary widely. And those who make up queer socialities in Berlin arrive from many places. The right to the queer city will, then, always need to be the right to a city that is open, where one can remain, and without hierarchies of citizenship. Campaigns like the Seebrücke ‘Cities of Safe Harbours’ initiative play an important role in this regard, demanding that cities and municipalities declare their willingness to welcome greater numbers of refugees. As does the #LeaveNoOneBehind campaign which, amidst the Covid-19 crisis, is demanding the urgent evacuation and granting of asylum to refugees being held at Moria camp on Lesbos.<sup>40</sup> In recent years, queer and LGBT organisations, projects and networks have also played a role in anti-racist protests and in protests against the far-right. *Siegessäule* and its sister publication *L-Mag* organized a sizable queer block on the 240,000-strong Unteilbar (or, Indivisible) demonstration in October 2019, along with SchwuZ,

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multitude autonomy and control over time is essential to foster productivity in the biopolitical economy.”

<sup>40</sup> On the Seebrücke Cities of Safe Harbour campaign, see: <https://seebruecke.org/en/startpage-2/safe-harbours/> On the #LeaveNoOneBehind campaign, see: <https://leavenoonebehind2020.org>

Adefra e.V. – Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland (or, Adefra – Black Women in German), RuT, the Berlin Leather and Fetish Society (BLF), Lesben gegen Rechts (or, Lesbians Against the Right) and others (Woopen 2018).<sup>41</sup> In May 2018, queer clubs, bars and party collectives including ://about blank, CockTail d'Amore, SO36, Südblock, and Möbel Olfe were among those to take part in a mass Reclaim Club Culture mobilization against a far-right demonstration through the centre of Berlin.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, defences of (already highly precarious) queer infrastructure amidst the current crisis should be understood as caught up with broader demands in Berlin and beyond for *affordable housing*, for *accommodation that is under public or common ownership* and for *protection from displacement* (particularly through gentrification and urban development projects). One of the most innovative and dynamic efforts to make visible, accessible and concrete the “needs of the many, of the Other, of the marginalized” (Tajeri 2019) in relation to social housing, rents and urban development in particular is the Kotti & Co initiative and their “Gecekondu” protest hut which has been located right next to Südblock at Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg since May 2012. Writing for the *The Funambulist*, Niloufar Tajeri (2019) has explained that, “Kotti & Co understood that change has to be systematic, large-scale and needs to intervene in the legal structures of tenancy and social housing laws.”<sup>43</sup> And recent years have seen various attempts to do just that; with urgency added by rents in the city beginning to increase faster than anywhere else in the world (by 21% from 2017 to 2018) and apartments becoming increasingly unaffordable for those with an average income in the city (Knight 2019). Following a campaign that successfully collected the required number of signatures to initiate a city-wide referendum, the Berlin senate administration are currently evaluating the legality of a potential poll that, if successful, would result in a form of expropriation: legally transferring the ownership of properties belonging to companies that rent more than 3,000 apartments in the city to a new public body (Schönball 2020). Demands for rent control and affordable living also led to the 2019 introduction of a five-year rent freeze; a move greeted by many campaigners as a step in the right direction, but as insufficient nevertheless (Tagesspiegel 2019). To demand the right to the queer city is certainly to demand it be affordable for all those who live there, and for all those who have yet to arrive. But it could also be made to imply the right to develop and to experiment with new models of common ownership, including those that can

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<sup>41</sup> For a full list of participating organisations, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/unteilbarqueer-queer-block-auf-der-unteilbar-demo/682490362127753/>

<sup>42</sup> For the full list of participating clubs, bars and collectives, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/187723188713308/>

<sup>43</sup> On Kotti & Co, see: [www.kottiundco.net](http://www.kottiundco.net) and the film *Miete Essen Seele Auf. Der Kampf um das Recht auf Stadt* (or, *Rent Eats the Soul: The Fight for the Right to the City*), available with English subtitles here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=101&v=qS6KrhBcvVU&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=101&v=qS6KrhBcvVU&feature=emb_title)

accommodate various forms of kin-making. However, no matter how affordable, accommodating and secure, the domestic sphere and the space of the home can never be sufficient in terms of the production of queer socialities. Queer futures are unthinkable without the infrastructures – including but not limited to bars and clubs – that facilitate unforeseeable encounters and those forms of contact that can help produce new types of community.

## Note

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## **About the author**

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## **Life Beyond the Pandemic**

**Non Una di Meno – Roma (29<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

**(Translated by Emma Gainsforth and Miriam Tola)**

*This collective text, by the feminist and transfeminist assembly Non Una di Meno Roma, part of the larger Italian movement Non Una di Meno, was circulated in late April, during the phase-1 of the Covid-19 lockdown imposed nationwide by the Italian government. Over the past four years, Non Una di Meno has been campaigning to end male violence against women and connecting it to the violence of heteronormativity, precarious labour, racism and the European regimes of border control. A key tool of struggle has been the feminist strike from reproductive and productive labour, organised at the transnational level on March 8th since 2017.*

Something is moving in the ruins of the pandemic. We are still physically distanced and yet, now more than ever, the desire to transform everything is bringing us together. An event as devastating as Covid-19 calls for powerful responses and unbridled ambition. The pandemic has made clear that the reproduction of life is incompatible with the neoliberal project to apply the market rationale to every aspect of our existence. In order to orient ourselves, we turn to feminist and transfeminist knowledge and practices that have focused on social reproduction as the key battle field. We build on a collective, situated self, one that shifts through transversal alliances, always taking on new shapes. In fact, if the present is catastrophic, the future is unwritten and our struggles have the potential to create new modes of living together after the pandemic.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we turn to the “arcane of reproduction”,** that is, all those activities that regenerate human life in a given historical and social formation. These include not only the reproduction of generations, the affective and bodily care of everyone, including adults, children and the elderly, but also the care of spaces and the household, education, access to culture, services, leisure and social relations. Feminist movements have unveiled the centrality of reproductive labour and defined it as the condition of existence of the whole of society, its persistence in time.

In the 1970s, the campaign Wages for Housework demonstrated that the transition to capitalism, starting from the dawn of modernity, was made possible by the invisibilisation, naturalisation and devaluation of reproductive labour. Without the domestic and care work that allowed the subsistence of (male) workers, there would have been no labour force. Without labour force there would have been neither factories nor profit. And yet, reproduction has never been acknowledged as work. On the contrary, it has been ascribed to the

sphere of natural resources available to appropriation. This has served the purpose to legitimise an immense extortion of wealth. This is the thread linking women's unpaid work in the household to the expropriation of the planet's resources.

As Black and anti-racist feminists have emphasised, domestic labour, reproductive labour and resource expropriation have always been divided along the colour line. Today, migrant and racialised women continue to bear the brunt of exhausting care work inside and outside the family. Indigenous land and populations continue to be plundered by capitalist predatory violence. These are the afterlives of slavery and coloniality.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we look at the reorganisation of reproduction in neoliberal societies before and after Covid-19.** The neoliberal model is rooted in the celebration of the market and social competition, in individual responsibilities in adapting to risk. It has demanded the privatisation and erosion of the public institutions and programs that contributed to partially redistribute reproductive and care work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, over the last fifty years, the dismantling of the welfare state has gone hand in hand with a radical reconfiguration of labour, known as “feminisation of work.” By this we mean flexibility, total availability and the exploitation and valorisation of relational, linguistic and care capacities. If, on the one hand, reproduction has become immediately productive, on the other hand, value chains feed on the exploitation of gendered, racialised and queer subjectivities, thus rendering the lives of entire generations precarious.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the fragility of the reproductive and care structures, starting from the healthcare system, has become evident. In Italy, the last decade of austerity and neoliberal policies have meant the disappearance of 70,000 hospital beds, 359 wards and entire hospitals. The most brutal, ruinous effects of these measures is now visible to all. The pandemic has highlighted the centrality of social reproduction but also its profound crisis. As some say, the virus does not discriminate between social classes. But class, race, ability and age discriminations manifest themselves in the impossibility of accessing healthcare. Some lives enjoy the right to assistance and care, others do not. There is no such a thing as “bare life” – there are lives marked and stigmatised by class, gender, sexuality, geographical positioning, disability and age. There are bodies suffering from isolation, and others that have made the quarantine possible, because they have never stopped working, inside and outside the household. These are health workers, janitors, domestic and care workers, mothers who care for their children and daughters who care for elderly parents.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we start from the home,** the main place of exploitation of women, but also the first space of feminist conflict. We have stayed in for weeks, but not all in the same way.

There are those who don't even have a home. Homes reflect a series of inequalities. For some, the home is no refuge from a pandemic, but a place of oppression, threat, violence, even femicide. For many domestic and care workers, (the) homes (of others) are still the place of exploited and unrecognised work. This was confirmed, once again, by the institutions: the "Cura Italia" decree left out care workers who were not able to benefit from mechanism of income guarantee and measures for health protection. 80% of the care workers in Italy are migrant – they amount to more than one million. For these people losing their job has also meant losing a place to live, and being held hostage by an exploitation system that links the possibility to accept or refuse a job to one's residence permit.

We start from homes as a battleground, as a place to shape new (but also old) alliances, seditious and intersectional coalitions. Time dedicated to care is a time of conflict and imagination. We take advantage of the difficulties we are experiencing: homes, which are now also offices, school and university classrooms, an area where production and reproduction can no longer be distinguished, will have to change radically.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we look to education and knowledge networks.** For years neoliberalism has starved schools and universities. Since the beginning of the pandemic, teaching has been carried out online, which has, on the one hand, provided "platform capitalism" with new opportunities to appropriate knowledge – always produced in a cooperative way –, on the other, it has accentuated social differences and discrimination based on ability. Decision-makers, both experts and politicians, have no regard for education as relationship and care, they celebrate agile and smart working. But as teachers have been denouncing, smart working is yet another form of exploitation, as well as a profound discrimination against those who carry the burden of caring for children, the elderly, the disabled.

Children, teenagers and kids are paying a very high price. The transmission of knowledge cannot be separated from proximity to peers and teachers, which plays a fundamental role in building autonomous relationships, away from the family. The impossibility of proximity will have serious consequences, from an emotional and social point of view, but also from a political one: schools and universities are places where the young discover and nourish both erotic and political passions.

Right from the start the issue of schools led to the organisation of many territorial solidarity networks, from those working to bridge the digital divide, to those helping to meet primary needs. Practises of mutualism cannot replace institutional interventions, but they indicate the way towards the construction of a new common space, beyond the State, but also beyond the family, which can no longer be viewed as reference point for the distribution of income and resources.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we claim that freedom of movement must be at the centre of the reflection on social reproduction.** During the very first days of the emergency it became clear that the food supply chain depends on migrant workers, who are employed in agriculture, logistics, distribution, services. Many refused to work due to a lack of safety conditions, while others were blocked by the restrictions on movement between states imposed to contain the pandemic. That same border system, which causes daily deaths among migrant women and men, forces us to consider the link between freedom of movement and the conditions that make the reproduction of life possible.

In migrant detention centres, from Ponte Galeria to Gradisca d’Isonzo, in the reception created for the containment of asylum seekers, in the slums and informal occupations, which compensate for the absence of reception and housing, the restrictions on movement imposed during the social and political emergency Covid-19, are not measures that block the pandemic, rather, they multiply the obstacles to freedom to save oneself. The same can be said of the shameful decree that declared Italy is an “unsafe port”, or of agreements that block migrants in Libya or on Greek islands. In addition to numerous non-essential factories, it was precisely the detention centres as well as the prisons, that remained in full operation, places whose function it is to reproduce bodies intended for exploitation.

The massacres taking place in the Mediterranean, for which the pandemic has provided a new excuse, show us that policies against freedom of movement are policies of death. To stir up a powerful response it is necessary to put freedom of movement at the centre of our battles and around this claim work for a new and universal access to rights, welfare and income.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events, we look at the socio-ecological dimensions of reproduction.** The nexus between social and ecological reproduction is not new. Together with women’s work, industrial capitalism has appropriated the biosphere as a source of matter and energy. Reproductive activities and the biosphere have been reduced to free resources to fuel a mode of production driven by the imperatives of profit and growth. Today, the collapse of healthcare systems follows that of ecosystems. These processes have created the conditions for the pandemic and its devastating consequences. The out-of-control expansion of deforestation, intensive agriculture, industrial farming and urbanisation have created opportunities for zoonotic spillovers. After finding a new host species, the Sars-Covid-2 virus has travelled across the circuits of the globalised economy. The coronavirus, as some studies suggest, drifts through particles of air pollution and is more easily transmitted in highly polluted, densely populated areas such as Wuhan and the flat plain of the Po Valley. In Italy, the infection spread in workplaces that were shut down too late or reopened too early. Contagion worsened in a healthcare system weakened by budget cuts and privatisations. The pandemic has confirmed what feminist and socio-ecological conflicts have been saying for a

while: the connections between social and ecological reproduction can no longer be ignored or dismissed as secondary. Our wager is to extend care from singular bodies to that which allows them to persist: relations, ecosystems, the biosphere, the planet itself. This is the ground of encounter, and possible convergence, between feminist, transfeminist and ecological movements.

**To stir up a powerful response to devastating events a radical redistribution of wealth is needed.** While in Europe and at a global level decision-makers clash over the tools needed to manage a massive economic and health crisis, what is starting to emerge is that States and economic-financial institutions will inevitably have to start re-investing in social spending. The point is how. How consistent will public funding be, and who will benefit from it? Will this investment continue to be based on the mechanism of debt?

Emergency measures are not enough. Many are now arguing in favour of a basic income, a care or a quarantine income. Similarly, we are convinced that a structural and redistributive measure is needed. For years, in fact, we have been claiming an income of self-determination: universal and unconditional, addressed to individuals and not to the family, not connected to work, citizenship and conditions of residence, which must guarantee economic autonomy, an instrument to escape from gender violence, from exploitation, of labour and of the ecosystem. We claim a self-determination income together with the European minimum wage, to prevent the former from becoming a tool in the hands of companies and employers aiming at reducing wages, to combat ridiculously low wages, and wage disparities between women and men, natives and migrants.

We want welfare institutions to be structurally refinanced and rendered universal, we want free and supportive institutions to which everyone may have access: a public and laic healthcare system, more territorial clinics, continuous hiring and permanent contracts for staff; investment in school, training and research; childcare services; support and care for the most vulnerable; guarantee of the right to housing; social security.

It is important to stress that struggles for welfare, other than being struggles for the redistribution of wealth, are struggles for democracy, for the democratic reappropriation of social infrastructures. To defend the public means to imagine common institutions and freedom beyond the State.

**To stir up a potent response to devastating events, it is crucial to create new alliances of care in common.** “Flatten the curve, increase the care” is the slogan of the art and activist collective Pirate Care. In our view, it conveys the meaning of the feminist wager: containing the contagion is not enough, we need struggles for reconfiguring the infrastructures of care, taking control away from market forces. This is how the bodies that today are more exposed to the pandemic’s deadly effects will enjoy the protection that has been a privilege for few.

The mutual-aid networks operating in many Italian cities point in that directions: they have developed modes of caring from below that draw attention beyond individuals and towards communities. Consider, for example, the solidarity networks among and for sex workers that have been able to overcome the barriers of stigmatisation and criminalisation, standing with those who are more exposed to contagion and exploitation. Or think about how, in Rome as well as other urban centres, domestic violence shelters have continued to operate remotely to support women who are quarantined with abusive partners. In the same vein, radical unions and other organisations have provided legal support and facilitated access to social programs to precarious, migrant and informal workers and the unemployed. Solidarity brigades linked to squats and neighbourhood initiatives have mobilised for home delivery and distribution of groceries to those in need.

Care has thus become an experimental field. Moving beyond the enclosed space of the hospital, which, to be sure, is essential at the time of such a sanitary emergency, care has become a matter of diffuse and promiscuous relations, nurtured by networks of intimacy that do not coincide with biological kinship. We need to rethink the forms and the institutions of care beyond heteronormative and patriarchal models that view the individual and the family as the basic units of society. We need to rethink our life in common, bringing down once and for all the violence of the neoliberal model.

The rising struggles demand strength, determination and creativity. In the past few years we opened new paths with the resignification of the strike as a tool of struggle. This process is still ongoing and points in a direction that needs further exploration. Workers' strikes, as well as the riots that broke out in prison at the peak of the Covid-19 emergency, have shown just that.

Now more than ever it is time to struggle for the redistribution of that same wealth that for centuries has been expropriated from women. Inspired by the Argentinean feminists who marched before the pandemic hit the country, this is the time to collectively shout "The debt is owed to us!" and "We want to be alive, free, debt free!".

### **About the authors:**

Non Una di Meno Roma is a feminist assembly based in Rome. Part of the larger network Non Una di Meno, the assembly has been meeting since 2016. It brings together a large, shifting group of feminist and transfeminist activists and collectives, including domestic violence shelters, students, researchers, feminist attorneys, precarious workers, cultural agitators, radical union activists and indomitable spirits. You can contact us on Facebook ([facebook.com/nonunadimenoroma](https://facebook.com/nonunadimenoroma)) or write to [nonunadimenoroma AT gmail.com](mailto:nonunadimenoroma AT gmail.com).

## **The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the gig economy and zero hour contracts**

**Benjamin Duke (13<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

### **Abstract**

*In most Western liberal democracies, state economic responses to COVID-19 have done little to protect the incomes of self-employed individuals. The COVID-19 global pandemic has helped provide renewed focus upon the social need, for a minimum income guarantee indemnified by the state. The UK Government's response highlights how large corporations and the financial institutions were prioritised first, followed by established profitable businesses with three years accounts. Self-employed people working in the gig economy, alongside others managing zero hour contracts, finding themselves at the back of the queue. Such people have been largely abandoned by the state, being left to their own devices, having to fend for themselves. Employed people who qualified for 'furlough' schemes found they had little bargaining power, having to take what they were given. Employment Tribunals were largely unable to sit. COVID-19 has provided an impetus for changing solidarity and collective action, providing a foothold for multidisciplinary worker cooperatives movements. COVID-19 will herald fundamental changes in the employment and welfare landscape of many countries globally. Large employers will no longer accept responsibility to provide for as many salaried workers as present. The state's pivotal role of being the guarantor of last resort has become ever more critical.*

### **Keywords:**

**COVID-19; gig economy; collective action; zero hour contracts; social movements;**

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a profound effect upon the social and economic wellbeing of millions of people the world over (International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020, p8; OECD, 2020). The paper discusses the United Kingdom's (UK) government's response to the COVID-19 crisis, through a critical lens of UK social movement and collective action. The paper focusses upon various responses by social movements, to protect employment and welfare rights in the UK (Unison, 2019, p28). The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the societal danger of zero hour contracts, highlighting why a minimum income guarantee is required (HRW, 2020; IMF, 2020). The paper also discusses the rebirth of the mutual aid social movement, delivered by local volunteers at the micro level (Blagburn, Change Incorporated, 26 March 2020). It is clear that COVID-19 will present overhanging societal challenges after the

crisis has receded. The effects of COVID-19 on the UK's social welfare and economic landscape can be described as a contemporary form of interregnum. The societal challenges are manifest as '...morbid phenomena of the most varied kind coming to pass' (Gramsci, 'Prison Notebook 3', 2011, [orig. 1930], p33).

### **COVID-19: mutual aid social movement reborn**

Draconian measures have been introduced by the UK government's lockdown response to the COVID-19 pandemic, closing many work opportunities. As a result people who were working in the gig economy and/or on zero hour contracts, have seen their incomes dramatically reduced (ILO(a), 2020, p14). People in such insecure precarious work, often didn't qualify for any of the state's choice of economic tools, e.g. the 'furlough' scheme<sup>1</sup> (Bogg and Ford, UK Labour Law, 23 March 2020). Many of these people fell through the social protection cracks, finding themselves unable to pay for essentials e.g. accommodation, heating and food (National Code, 6 April 2020; Citizens Advice, June 2018). Bogg and Ford (March 2020) alert us to another concern which may affect furloughed workers. They argue that recent changes in employment legislation in response to the COVID-19 crisis, may enable employers to reduce the rights of salaried workers. The strain on people's social welfare and economic wellbeing has been reinforced by the UK Judiciary. By Presidential Direction we have been informed that in-person Employment Tribunals were suspended from 23 March 2020 (Brodies Law Practice, 7 April 2020). In addition Employment Appeal Tribunal Hearings were not scheduled to recommence until 16 April 2020 (The Honorary Mr Justice Choudhury, 9 April 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis lengthened from a few weeks to several in the UK, providing a hotbed from where the mutual aid social movement was reborn (Ashford, *The Week*, 24 March 2020). There were many vulnerable people under the age of 70 not living in a care or nursing home, who found themselves really struggling to live. The state COVID-19 lockdown, necessitated the need for local community support groups at the micro level, to perform basic tasks for people (Volunteer Edinburgh, 10 April 2020). Mutual aid groups were vital in collecting people's medical prescriptions, their shopping and keeping claimant's welfare benefit entitlements in payment. The hitherto small incidence of period poverty became more prolific, when advice was given leading to an increase in welfare claims for this purpose (Macartney, *The Combination*, 17 March 2020). COVID-19 saw an escalation in telephone befriending by mutual aid volunteer groups, required as more people became socially isolated due to the lockdown. Here collective action delivered a sense of wellbeing in pragmatic terms, providing a social glue acting to cement community bonds. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) was a decentralising community activist, with a vision of a social

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<sup>1</sup> This UK Labour Law article is a blog which critically analyses various benefits and limitations of the UK Government's 'furlough' scheme announced 20 March 2020.

landscape of worker cooperatives and self-governing voluntary associations. Kropotkin's (1902) work *Mutual Aid – A Factor of Evolution*, describes how mutual aid can metamorphose into a social movement taking collective action to protect communities. The COVID-19 crisis can be described as an exogenous shock requiring a societal response at the macro and micro community level. The quote from *Mutual Aid* below encapsulates the social movement, which embodies collective action in the face of adversity when responding to a crisis. The presence of social glue, is indicated by the implied reference to the necessity of bonds being reconnected. The emphasis on collective action, in shaping both the purpose and direction of mutual aid in building for the future, is perhaps more nuanced. Kropotkin (1902) clearly indicates there must be mutual aid for communities afterwards, from the state's response to an exogenous shock. For our purposes, shock is contemporised as the COVID-19 crisis.

...these bonds are at once reconstituted notwithstanding the difficulties, political, economic and social, which are many, and in such forms as to best answer to the requirements of production. They indicate in which direction and in which form further progress must be expected (Kropotkin, 1902, p135).

### **COVID-19: societal rejection of zero hour contracts**

COVID-19 has delivered a new normal. Previously united workers found themselves on opposite sides of the food supply divide. On the one hand, people who worked in pub, clubs and restaurants, were unable to work. Whilst on the other hand, agricultural workers fruit and vegetable pickers, or piece workers in food production factories remained in situ.

It is clearly essential for workers in the health and social care sector to keep working. (The sporadic availability of PPE (personal protective equipment) clothing in some regions, providing an ongoing acute concern) (Hugh Pym, BBC News, 11 April 2020). There has been widespread political recognition that all such staff are underpaid. Zero hour contracts in areas of societal importance e.g. the health and social care sector are seen to be unsafe. The COVID-19 crisis helped increase recognition that support workers and cleaners, are equally as valuable in our society as other workers.

There have been changing solidarities as new stakeholders have developed. Unusual alliances have formed e.g. food suppliers for conferences and one off events, found themselves in the same boat as make-up artists and hairdressers. Piece workers in the textile industry or wedding sector were similarly aligned, being self-employed individuals working in the gig economy. COVID-19 reignited the formation of multidisciplinary worker alliances and cooperatives<sup>2</sup> (ILO(b), 30 March 2020, p2).

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<sup>2</sup> This is an ILO template for Employer and Business Membership Organisations (EBMO). EBMOs fill this template in to demonstrate support of the ILO's statement and response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Self-employed people in media and marketing sector, formed action groups with piece workers from the carpentry and metalworker sectors. These multidisciplinary action groups have been able to lobby governments for unemployment support, manifest as disbursement of non-returnable grants and cheap loans during COVID-19. Worker action groups, cooperatives and alliances which pre-COVID-19 didn't exist, have coordinated collective action digitally on social network platforms, promoting campaign messages.

## **Conclusions**

An unintended consequence of COVID-19 crisis, is that it paved the way to help forge various multidisciplinary worker cooperatives in the UK. Collective action from social movement alliances, which would have been considered virtually unthinkable during the pre-COVID-19 crisis period took place. Another possible outcome of COVID-19, is that a national unity government, agreeing to work together collaboratively on some key issues could be formed. Given how the vast majority of UK population pulled together during the COVID-19 crisis; another outcome could be, UK Brexit proceeds as intended, but with the same employment and welfare rights which apply at present, being retained by people after the UK leaves the EU.

These realistic possibilities demonstrate; social movements, people coming together for a common cause then taking agreed collective action will continue apace, after the COVID-19 global pandemic has faded.

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## **Care for those who care for you! Domestic workers' struggles in times of pandemic crisis**

**Louisa Acciari (24<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

“Cleonice Gonçalves, present!” became the new slogan on the WhatsApp groups of domestic workers in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Not by coincidence, one of the first deaths confirmed by COVID-19 in the country (March 17<sup>th</sup>) was that of a domestic worker: Cleonice Gonçalves, a black woman, aged 63, diabetic, leaving in the city of Miguel Pereira in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Her employer, a resident of the upper-class area of Leblon, had just returned from a trip to Italy and did not inform her employee that she had been contaminated. One survived, the other did not.

The new coronavirus was initially seen as a disease affecting more the cosmopolitan middle and upper classes, with the financial conditions to travel abroad and organise fancy parties. However, the virus soon started to reach the popular classes, having a more critical effect on them. Since Cleonice Gonçalves died, Brazil has registered more than 50,000 deaths, but many specialists alert that the actual number could be 10 times higher, since the government has a policy of not testing and not reporting adequately the causes of death. While the middle and upper classes can easily protect themselves in spacious houses, with the option of home office, social isolation is much more complex for the popular classes who are forced to stay in work, and face precarious living and housing conditions.

Domestic workers are the typical example of this precarious working class, exposed to high risks of contamination and without adequate social protection: they are black women, poor, with an average income below the minimum wage, often heads of their households, and located in the informal sector. Of the 6.3 million domestic workers in Brazil, only 41% contribute to social security, 70% do not have a formal contract and 47% are day labourers (IPEA, 2019). This means that although there is a law that guarantees labour rights to them (Complementary Law n. 150 of 2015), the majority of domestic workers fall outside of the scope of the legislation. If this sector of activity has always been marked by high rates of informality, precariousness is felt more violently in times of pandemic crisis. The leaders of the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) conducted a partial assessment of the situation of their affiliates over the phone, and found three types of cases: day labourers (with no

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<sup>1</sup> There is a tradition to say out loud the name of activists who passed away to show that their memory is still alive; for instance, in women's movements, it became common to scream “Marielle Franco, presente!” in honour of the council officer of Rio de Janeiro, murdered on 15 March 2018. Cleonice Gonçalves was not an activist, but her death became a symbol of the precarious situation of domestic workers.

formal contracts), full-time domestic workers with a formal contract, and caregivers.

## Day labourers

According to union leaders, 90% to 95% of the day labourers (*diaristas*) with whom they spoke over the phone are being fired without pay. A study published by the Institute Locomotiva, made with employers, suggests that this number would be closer to 40%, and that 23% of the day labourers would still be working normally.<sup>2</sup> The actual proportion is probably in between, as we can expect that employers would under-report dismissals because of the Covid-19, while the union leaders are quite likely to have been contacted only by those who were fired. This mass dismissal is not illegal; day labourers are considered “self-employed” by law, which means that they do not have access to the unemployment benefit, and the employer owes them no notice period or financial compensation. They are totally unprotected. There are about 2.5 million day labourers in Brazil. If they all get dismissed, there will be millions of families without income or with a significant drop of income during the pandemic crisis. Although the government has announced an emergency financial support (\$115 per month) for informal and unemployed workers, which includes the day labourers, workers are facing difficulties in claiming this benefit and the process is rather slow.

As explained by Valdelice de Jesus Almeida, President of the union of Maranhão, and elected officer of the FENATRAD:

“Those who have a contract can stay home, and the day labourers, like myself, get fired. Staying at home means not getting paid. As most of the domestic workers are the breadwinners for their households, how will they pay for their bills? My family, for example, depends on my salary, since my husband cannot afford to pay for everything on his own. I don’t know how I am going to pay for the share of the expenses I am usually responsible for. I haven’t been receiving money for weeks. Most of the daily workers, *diaristas*, will go through this same situation.”

The FENATRAD has been contesting the unfair condition of the *diaristas* since the approval of the law 150/2015. Although day labourers already existed before, this legislation institutionalizes the distinction between full-time formalised workers (who work for at least 3 days a week for the same employer), and day labourers (who work up to 2 days a week for the same employer). A difference that contradicts ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic

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<sup>2</sup> See study published on 23 April: <https://www.ilocomotiva.com.br/single-post/2020/04/23/G1-39-dos-patr%C3%B5es-dispensaram-diaristas-sem-pagamento-durante-pandemia-aponta-pesquisa>

workers, ratified by Brazil in 2018, which does not recognize any criteria of days worked for the good application of equal labour rights.

### **Domestic workers with a formal contract**

There is a minority of domestic workers with a formal contract. Some are managing to negotiate a paid quarantine or anticipated vacations to maintain their salary. The union of the city of São Paulo, where there have been collective agreements with employers since 2017, estimates that about 70% of domestic workers with a formal contract are in paid quarantine. But that only takes into account the workers and employers with whom the union has been able to speak in recent weeks, and it probably does not reflect the reality of the rest of the country where such agreements do not exist. According to the Institute Locomotiva (cited above), only 48% of the full-time formalised domestic workers would benefit from a paid quarantine. Put in other words, more than half of the domestic workers who hold a contract are being either dismissed or kept in work.

In fact, many domestic workers reported to their unions that they have no choice but work to survive. Some are being picked-up at home by their employers, others have to face crowded public transports. One even shared that her employer had raised her pay so that she keeps cleaning and cooking for the household and their two student daughters (all working from home). These kind of cases cause a certain discomfort; first, why is having someone else doing your cleaning so vital during a pandemic crisis, and second, why not pay more the employee under normal circumstances, if the employers can afford it? On the bright side, when domestic workers have a formal contract, cases of abuse or unfair dismissal are likely to be brought to a labour court by their unions.

### **Caregivers**

The third case is that of the caregivers, who have been declared an essential sector by the government. According to the unions, the absolute majority of caregivers are, in fact, working. In many cases, patients could not stay without this service, and their own families are often not trained to do the work of the caregiver. However, there have been many reports of abuse, showing that the rights of this category are not respected. Many caregivers continue to use public transport on a daily basis, the employers do not always provide the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and unions have exposed several instances of what they call “private imprisonment”. Some employing families forced their caregiver to remain in quarantine with them, while others demand double or triple shifts without offering the worker any financial compensation or sufficient resting time.

Several feminist authors have discussed the precarious conditions of domestic workers and caregivers, revealing the tension between the need for social reproduction and the devaluation of the women who perform those tasks

(Duffy, 2007; Hirata, Guimarães, 2012; Parreñas, 2001; Sorj, 2014). In the context of the current crisis, this tension becomes particularly visible, and even shocking. The cases of abuse reported by the domestic workers' unions are disconcerting: families aware of having a contaminated person who do not inform the worker, threats of dismissal or just dismissal without pay, forced quarantines, non-remunerated extra shifts. Domestic work is rooted in the colonial legacy that has established a gender and race division of labour in Brazil, and in fact, in most countries. The Covid-19 crisis shows only a new expression of these persistent social inequalities, within which the labour and the life of domestic workers are considered to worth less than that of the other workers. In the collective imagination, certain tasks cannot be performed by the “qualified”, white, middle-class, even in a situation of pandemic crisis.

### **Care for those who care for you!**

But domestic workers are resisting. They are simultaneously fighting against the Covid-19 and the exploitation from their employers. The FENATRAD launched a national campaign, with the same slogan as their sister organisations in Latin America affiliated to the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), called “Care for those who care for you” (in Portuguese: “*cuida de quem te cuida*”).<sup>3</sup> They require that employers provide the adequate level of protection to those who have to work, such as the caregivers, while demanding the right to a paid quarantine for the professional category. Their allied Congresswoman, Benedita Silva, from the Workers' Party, proposed a bill relaying domestic workers' demands. As argued by Creuza Maria de Oliveira, General Secretary of FENATRAD: “the domestic worker is also a human being, she has a family and needs to preserve her health”,<sup>4</sup> while Luiza Batista, President of the Federation, emphasizes: “We have to end this idea that quarantine in Brazil has become a class privilege.”<sup>5</sup>

The FENATRAD also published guidelines for domestic workers, offering advice on how to protect themselves and suggesting ways of negotiating the best possible working conditions with their employers. Furthermore, local unions are informing and representing their members via phone and WhatsApp even though their doors are closed. As the crisis progressed, the Brazilian government took some measures that impact the sector: the announcement of an emergency financial support, and the possibility for employers to suspend

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<sup>3</sup> See FENATRAD's website : <https://fenatrad.org.br/2020/03/18/cuida-de-quem-te-cuida-proteja-sua-trabalhadora-domestica/>

<sup>4</sup> Video published on 25 March: <https://fenatrad.org.br/2020/03/25/veja-video-creuza-oliveira-faz-apelo-aos-empregadores-para-a-liberacao-das-trabalhadoras-domesticas-durante-a-pandemia/>

<sup>5</sup> Interview published on 29 March : <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/03/29/domicas-defendem-direito-a-quarentena-remunerada-e-dividem-patroes.htm?cmpid=copiaecola&cmpid=copiaecola>

contracts or reduce wages and working hours for a period of 3 months. The unions are helping domestic workers to claim their benefit, as many struggle with the website, and they offer mediation with employers to those who have a contract that is being revised.

Last but not least, union leaders are indeed taking care of domestic workers. In most cities, they have been asking for donations and distributing food baskets to those who lost their job. For most leaders, this is the first experience of fundraising, and they have had to learn quickly how to handle new online technologies. With homemade face masks, a bit of alcohol in gel 70% in their bag, and an infinite amount of compassion, union leaders are facing the virus to support the most vulnerable workers. Valdelice, President of the union of Maranhão in Brazil, explains that taking care of domestic workers has become one of her most important tasks:

“I also spend part of the day calling my affiliates and comrades to check in on them, to know how they are coping. I speak to at least 20 domestic workers every day, by WhatsApp, and I call another 5 who don’t have the application, every Saturday, on their landlines. I ask them how they are doing, if they are taking care of themselves, and offer my support. I let them know that I am here if they need me. I know the situation is difficult for all of them and it can be nice to have someone to talk to, we all want someone to tell us everything is going to be fine.”



*Luiza Batista (with the red mask), President of the FENATRAD and of the union of Pernambuco, distributing food baskets to domestic workers.*

All over Latin America, the unions affiliated to IDWF are adopting very similar strategies: legal mobilisations, information, and humanitarian aid. In Chile, for instance, the National Federation of Unions of Home Workers (FESINTRACAP), sent a bill to the Congress demanding the right to a paid quarantine. In Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, the unions are providing information to their members via WhatsApp, Facebook, online conferences, and they produced guidelines on how to avoid contamination. In El Salvador, Guatemala and Paraguay, the leaders are distributing food and hygiene baskets to domestic workers who lost their jobs.<sup>6</sup> At the global level, IDWF is raising an emergency fund to support its affiliates, if you can, please donate!<sup>7</sup> With very limited resources, and under an incredibly adverse context, domestic workers' organisations are showing us the way forward: more rights, more collective action, more solidarity.

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<sup>6</sup> See more actions on IDWF website: <https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/rapid-responses-by-the-idwf-affiliates/every-action-counts>

<sup>7</sup> Link for donations: <https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/solidarity-fund/idwf-solidarity-fund>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.reflexpandemia.org/texto-5>

## **Labour conflicts over health and safety in the Italian Covid19 crisis**

**Arianna Tassinari, Riccardo Emilio Chesta, Lorenzo Cini  
(21st May)**

### **Introduction**

The current Covid19 crisis has raised new issues regarding health and work in Italy. Far from being new, the pandemics rehabilitate a debate dating back to the 1970s, which brought to the establishment of the national healthcare system. Italy has a longstanding problem with health & safety at work. In 2019 alone, according to the estimates of workplace safety agency INAIL, more than 600,000 workplace accidents were reported, of which 1,089 deadly - roughly three per day; to which many more unreported ones must be added. This problem, particularly stark in Italy when compared to other European countries, has many roots: widespread labour informality, unregulated outsourcing practices, inadequate resources for workplace inspections and upholding of legislation, and the quantitative predominance of micro- and small workplaces in the Italian productive system where unions presence is low and the flouting of regulations commonplace. For long, the issue of workplace accidents and insecurity remained an invisible hemorrhage, which did not attract neither headlines nor public attention. However, the Covid19 pandemic has contributed to a sudden re-politicisation of this issue, putting it at the very centre of public debate and labour conflict in Italy. In this contribution, we outline the major points of contention on this issue which have emerged during the Italian Covid19 pandemic, and the responses and strategies enacted by labour movement actors.

In Maussian terms, pandemics have the characteristics of a «total social fact», with generally no borders, involving the totality of a population. Consequently, the response of worker organizations and unions needed to overcome the fragmentation of localized disputes, usually limited to specific plants or working sectors. The problem of health and safety emerged in all its sharpness as an issue of general interest when, due to the risk of biological contagion from Coronavirus, the simple act of *physically going to work* suddenly became a potentially deadly source of risk for the whole workforce, and not just for those usually unseen minorities working in particularly dangerous occupations. However, the potential universality of contagion from Covid19 was not matched by an effective universality of protections against it. The management of the Covid19 pandemic in Italy has rather been characterised by a persisting tension between two contending imperatives: the protection of public health on the one hand, and the push – especially from business organisations and political forces mainly from the centre-right of the political spectrum -- to safeguard economic growth. Or, to put it differently from the workers' side, the tension between the right to work and the right to health. This tension has manifested in various

forms of more or less overt class conflict which have unfolded around the issue of the safeguarding of health and safety since the onset of the Coronavirus crisis.

In the first phase of the Italian Covid19 emergency, between late February and late March, the main issue of contention regarded the *timings* and *extensiveness* of limitations on productive activities, and the granting of adequate protections to essential workers who continued operating.

Since February 21, the Italian government has issued a series of decrees to manage the worsening of the outbreak; some have confirmed that the protection of workers in Italy is rather fragile. Indeed, it is now well-established that in the first weeks of the Italian Covid19 crisis, delays in implementing widespread closures of productive and commercial activities in the areas worst affected by the outbreak in Northern Italy were decisively shaped by the lobbying of the employers' organisations (Confindustria) – both in industry and in the service sector. When this stance became untenable from a public health perspective, the government decided to tow a middle ground and shut down most commercial outlets whilst recommending that all employers that could do so should introduce working from home. But in line with the requests of the manufacturing employers' confederation Confindustria and its powerful regional chapters in Lombardy, Assolombarda, most industrial activities and factories remained initially operational – alongside supermarkets & local food and drink shops, logistics and delivery services, construction sites, many call centres, and many public services.

So, for these weeks Italy was in a situation in which, whilst the population as a whole was being asked to stay home, at least 6 million people were still going to work every day. Whilst some of these productive activities were, arguably, 'essential', many were not. This policy of selective and partial closures made evident a sharp inequality, in terms of exposure to health risks, between workers who were able to work from home (around 30% of the workforce, two thirds of whom in highly qualified, well paid occupations), or stay home with some form of income replacement, and those who could not and still had to work in presence, often to carry out activities far from 'essential' in a crisis juncture, and frequently without appropriate protections such as basic personal protective equipment.

### **Concertation under the contagion: labour conflict by other means**

Different actors in the Italian labour movement responded differently to this emerging tension, highlighting long-standing differences in their strategic orientation. On the one hand, the major trade union confederations – CGIL, CISL and UIL – initially moved slowly and cautiously on this issue, fearful of not appearing too confrontational at a time of national crisis and seemingly sharing into the narrative that production could not stop altogether, otherwise the country would risk economic collapse. Same for the main centre-left party, the PD (Democratic Party). On the other hand, some smaller rank-and-file

unions like USB and S.I. COBAS opted for a more contentious approach, and issued calls for the immediate closure of non-essential activities and also for a general strike on 26 March. The relatively small membership of the rank-and-file unions meant that these initiatives remained circumscribed in their reach. At the same time, restrictions to public demonstrations and assemblies brought indeed the Italian Commission of Guarantee of Law 146/90 to severely control strikes and particularly those regarding essential productions and services.

However, workers in many sectors that stayed operational took the initiative in their own hands to exercise their right to safeguarding their health at work. In the second and third week of March, wildcat strikes broke out in many factories and logistics warehouses around the country, with workers walking out to demand the immediate implementation of health and safety measures that could guarantee safe working conditions. In some factories with high unionisation and strong trade union presence, these mobilisations resulted in the temporary suspension of production, or at least prompted management to re-organise production process drastically to guarantee safe working conditions. But in most workplaces, especially small ones without any trade union presence, this did not happen.

In mid-March, the government chose to respond to these emerging tensions from below by choosing the avenue of social concertation and negotiating with the main trade unions and employers' confederation a 'protocol' outlining the necessary measures that employers could and should implement to prevent contagion in workplaces. This was a small step forward, celebrated by the government and the 'social partners' alike as an exemplary instance of negotiated crisis management<sup>1</sup>. The implementation of these measures remained however voluntaristic, up only to the employers' will. In workplaces without trade union presence, this essentially made them toothless. In the meanwhile, the numbers of infected people continued spiralling up, especially in the most industrialised regions of Northern Italy, and the silence and lack of strong intervention on part of the major unions persisted.

In face of emerging mobilisations from below and threats of a general strike leveraged by the rank-and-file union movement, the major unions also came round to calling for the closure of all non-essential productive activities. In the late hours of March 21st, as the numbers of infections and deaths still did not give a sign of slowing down, the government finally announced the closure of all 'non-essential' production activities. Heated negotiations with the main employer confederations and the confederal unions ensued over the definition of the list of the sectors and sub-sectors that should be designated as 'essential', with the unions even threatening a general strike if the list remained too ample. Again, the confederal unions claimed their intervention, which resulted in a more restrictive list of essential activities, as an important victory.

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<sup>1</sup>

[http://www.filctemcgil.it/images/stories/flexicontent/news/panorama\\_sindacale/Protocollo\\_c\\_ondiviso\\_SSL\\_emergenza\\_Covid-19.pdf](http://www.filctemcgil.it/images/stories/flexicontent/news/panorama_sindacale/Protocollo_c_ondiviso_SSL_emergenza_Covid-19.pdf)

## **Class struggles or classification struggles?**

The tripartite negotiations over the operational management of the economic lockdown did not fully succeed in achieving the social pacification that the government clearly hoped concertation would deliver. Rather, they inaugurated a second and more dispersed phase of conflict, where the focus of contention on the terrain of health and safety moved on to two other issues: i.e. the effective extent of the closure of ‘non-essential’ activities, and the *actual* implementation in workplaces of the health and safety norms for the prevention of contagion outlined in the tripartite protocol. Borrowing Pierre Bourdieu’s famous expression (1978), classification struggle became the terrain of a class struggle under contagion.

Following the pressures of employer confederation Confindustria, the formulation of the norms on compulsory closures left indeed ample space for manufacturing firms to continue operating, even if they did not fall in the original list of ‘essential’ sectors. All that firms had to do was to send a self-declaration to the local governmental authorities (“*Prefetto*”), outlining the reasons why they had to continue producing. The lack of any local administrative capacity to check on the veracity of these declarations meant that virtually all firms that declared themselves essential were able to stay open. Meanwhile, in many ‘essential’ services - from food delivery to logistics and even in healthcare - the implementation of even the most basic health and safety norms - such as the provision of adequate protective devices and the adjustment of working times and work organisation to prevent overcrowding - remained often very loose.

Since May 4th, Italy has then entered the so-called ‘phase 2’, with staged reopenings and progressive easing of the lockdown. This has come earlier than many would have expected, largely due to the pressures leveraged on the government by business groups and regional authorities in the northern manufacturing regions. Contention has continued to emerge in several sectors and workplaces over the application of health and safety norms during the return to work. Whilst in some unionised and well-organised workplaces unions have been in a position to negotiate at firm level local agreements on the re-organisation of working time and operational procedures, in many other contexts - especially in micro- and small workplaces with no union presence - employer unilateralism has affirmed itself forcefully. Many episodes have been reported of managerial counter-action and acts of retribution by employers against workers who publicly denounced unsafe working conditions on social media or demanded more stringent rules or the provision of PPE. Employers organisations have also been launching a national offensive through political lobbying channels, again supported by political forces on the centre and centre-right, aimed at loosening the stringency of the guidelines originally issued by the national institute for workplace safety INAIL governing the return to work, and to eschew any potential penal responsibility in cases of workers becoming infected.

The unfolding of the Covid19 pandemic has therefore put the issue of health and safety at the coalface of labour-capital conflict, and shown some of the limits of the ‘concerted’ approach privileged thus far by the confederal unions. Indeed, the national agreements on health & safety norms have shown all their limits when it came to concrete implementation on the ground. This has remained highly uneven across sectors and types of firms, strongly dependent on the local relationships of power between labour and management, and on the extant levels of organisation in workplaces. This fragmentation and disconnection between peak-level agreements and practices on the ground reflects many of the long-standing weaknesses of Italian industrial relations, and makes evident the importance of workers’ agency and organising practices in effectively putting into practice the rights and norms set on paper and move beyond employer voluntarism - which often equates with widespread laxism. The Italian government is tackling the crisis by building a labor regime based on the exploitation of weaker workers, such as those employed in logistics or agriculture where the migrant workforce is dominant.

So, considering these flashpoints of tension, how have “essential” workers responded on the ground? We now discuss some of the most relevant examples across different sectors.

### **The mobilizations in the food delivery and the logistics**

The main contentious issue in the “essential” sectors of food delivery and logistics throughout the most dramatic period of the Italian pandemic (“the phase 1”) has been the implementation in workplaces of the health and safety norms for the prevention of contagion outlined in the tripartite protocol. Since the start of the lockdown, this issue has been the main target of protests and of an increasing process of politicization, especially in sectors such as the gig economy where the lack of adequate legal protections has exposed workers to undergo an actual blackmail, forcing them to choose between the safeguarding of their own health, on the one hand, and the access to an income and, therefore, the possibility of survival, on the other.

Reporting the dynamics of work conflict in these sectors seems particularly interesting, as none of these conflicts has been organized or fostered by the presence of trade union confederations, namely, those actors signing the protocol on the workers' behalf. In both sectors, the initiative has been spontaneously triggered by the workers themselves and, only at a later time, various kinds of grassroots organizations have played a role.

For what concerns delivery platforms, unlike other “essential” workers, because of their legal status as self-employed, ‘riders’ have neither access to social safety nets designed for dependent work, nor the possibility to temporarily abstain from work, nor, in the majority of cases, access to sick leave in case of contagion or compulsory quarantine. The decision whether to continue working or not during the pandemic, carrying out a high risky activity that entails constant physical contact with the client, is therefore seen by the workers as a forced

choice between to keep the only source of income and the safeguarding of their own health.

Since the beginning of the Covid19 emergency, riders have encountered great difficulties in obtaining adequate forms of prevention against contagion from delivery platforms during the execution of their working activities. Several platforms have initially sought to escape from the obligation to provide them with proper devices of individual protections, such as gloves, masks, and sanitizing gel, adducing the reason that riders were not their employees but only partners with whom they occasionally collaborated. The responsibility for adopting behaviors to prevent contagion during deliveries was also initially left to the initiative of individual workers. And given the lack of implementation in the safety procedures by the platforms and restaurants, riders often found themselves having to face risky gathering situations when picking up food deliveries from restaurants, unable to maintain the right safety distances.

Since mid-March, riders from all over Italy have thus begun a protest campaign aimed at safeguarding their own health and their physical integrity during their working time. The campaign consisted in sending video testimonies and taking photos of themselves holding signs with a batch of hashtags:

#PeopleBeforeProfits, #NotForUsButForAll, #StopDelivering. The initiative was launched by an alliance of different grassroots riders' organizations such as Deliverance Milano, Riders Union Bologna, Riders Union Roma, Riders per Napoli – Pirate Union, and the Turin-based network Deliverance Project. Addressing the government, the riders demanded the interruption of the food delivery service, access to a social security cushion, actual distribution of personal protective equipment by companies, and the suspension of tax obligations for the whole of 2020.

In Milan and Turin, Deliveroo has been forced to guarantee two weeks of sick pay for workers who were sick or subject to quarantine. In Bologna, faced with delays on the part of many platforms in providing protections, it was the riders themselves who took directly into their own hands, through the organizational network of their union Riders Union, the responsibility to promote and implement the anti - contagion, first by obtaining 500 masks from the Municipality and then distributing them among the workers in a self-organized way. Although the riders were not able to shut down the delivery service, they have managed to get some intermediate objectives: creating more awareness among people, extending the contact network among riders, and also communicating to other workers that protection devices must be provided by companies.

Logistics workers faced similar challenges and risky situations during the pandemic. The hyper-diffusion of the virus in the areas with the highest production intensity (Bergamo-Brescia) and logistics (Piacenza) is clearly linked to the non-adoption of measures suspending the productive activities or forcing the employers to provide workers with individual protection equipment. In this sense, the perception of being "slaughter meat" was very strong among workers, who since early March have spontaneously staged wildcat strikes in Northern

Italy to demand the closure of their companies or the access to the individual protection devices.

Facing the inertia of many companies, the first protest events have been spread in a scattered way, initially self-organized by workers, especially in the logistics hub of Piacenza. Since the second week of March, the grassroots union, S.I. Cobas, which has in the logistics sector the main site of political intervention since the first mobilizations of 2011, took the lead of the strikes. The wave of mobilizations that has taken place in the logistics sector across Italy since mid-March has been addressing frontally the issue of safety in the workplace. The main concern that workers have raised in their protests concerned the issue of those who were supposed to monitor the implementation of the security measures in the workplace. As reported by Carlo Pallavicini, S.I. Cobas spokesperson in Piacenza, in his account of the strikes in the logistics sector in March: *“There was an initial phase in which we supported the strikes that were organized more or less spontaneously, whose culmination was around March 12-13 for the issue of safety in the workplace, with almost 100% of workers participation in some warehouses where we are present.”*

In the second half of March, several other mobilizations have continued occurring in the Piacenza logistics interport, where, on March 17, also the Amazon workers in the warehouse of Castel SanGiovanni (placed in the Piacenza area) staged a strike, with the support of the union confederations of CGIL, CISL and UIL, to force the company to take the necessary safety precautions for its 1,600 employees. The strike ended the following week, with an agreement between the unions and the company for the establishment of an internal committee, composed of management and union delegates and aimed at monitoring the application of the safety measures in the workplace. At the moment, however, the workers report, the company would be hindering the control activities by the delegates.

### **The epicenter of conflict: worker mobilizations in the healthcare sector**

“Before, we were invisible. Now we are heroes. Stop hypocrisy, we are just workers”. This slogan appeared on 1st May 2020 over a banner out of the hospital in Vercelli, in the Piedmont region in Italy. Workers and confederal unions contested the rethorics emerged during the Covid19 crisis and which emphasized the heroic status of workers while at the same time ignoring their social and economic conditions.

The Covid19 crisis stressed the importance of the public health system as well as the rights of health workers, from doctors to nurses. Visible in the dramatic state of hospitals, the most direct effects of the Covid19 was indeed the extraordinary need for doctors, nurses, assistants which brought the State to

urgently open a new call for workforce<sup>2</sup>. On 9 March 2020, the Italian government ratified an extraordinary decree which extended the recruitment of health professionals and workers to young doctors and nurses which were close to the completion of routinary qualifications - e.g. young doctors completing their «specializzazione», similar to a specific PhD. degree. Moreover, part of the personnel was recruited among retired doctors and specialists.

These measures were clearly extending to a broader public opinion the negatives of decades of neoliberal reforms which progressively transferred public resources to private clinics. If the marketization of health was previously an aspect restrained to individual grievances or to specific movement organizations, the Covid19 crisis triggered a phase of symbolic and real protests which tried to establish new links among doctors, health workers, a variety of workers claiming for a safe working environment as well as citizens, which were directly and indirectly concerned as potential patients. In this sense, the slogan “health is not a commodity”<sup>3</sup> used during the online demonstration called “White Sheets” launched on the World Health Day on 7 April 2020, reactivated frames that characterized the worker struggles for health on the workplace during the 1970s and that brought Italy to approve the Statuto dei Lavoratori in 1974 and the National Healthcare System (SSN) in 1978. The online demonstration was indeed organized by «Medicina Democratica», an historical expert movement organization which, born in the Northern factories, contributed to create the first groups of occupational medicine which later on became institutionalized. In this sense, the scientific activism of Medicina Democratica has been a resource that at different phases contributed to mobilizations on the right to health, be it in terms of health in the workplace, environmental health or universal access to public healthcare.

In terms of claims of protests, the pandemics have opened new windows of opportunities for health movement organizations, which became therefore one of the central actors in a variety of issues regarding the link between politics of health, prevention and anti-contagion measures, and particularly the link between expertise and democracy. But at the same time, traditional forms of activism were severely constrained by the lockdown and the rigid protocols regarding public gatherings.

For these reasons, workers and activists elaborate new forms of demonstration. As an example, the so called “White Sheets” mobilization mostly happened through “clickactivism”, with citizens and activists posting online photos of banners and messages exposed out of their balcony. Participants politicized their domestic space and especially their balconies which were previously used for other forms of expressive solidarity, like the diffusion of the national anthem

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<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioNotizieNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=4188>

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[https://www.medicinademocratica.org/wp/?p=9914&fbclid=IwAR1SOmVpWCMGwYg6xz6Bnr4\\_tl2QEyM6KGhPCYuMl5oR\\_siaBgg\\_NGTHZaw](https://www.medicinademocratica.org/wp/?p=9914&fbclid=IwAR1SOmVpWCMGwYg6xz6Bnr4_tl2QEyM6KGhPCYuMl5oR_siaBgg_NGTHZaw)

in solidarity with health workers and as a sign of national cohesion. In this case, health movements used the same setting to raise a critical voice which emphasized the importance of the public health system and the health worker rights.

Another change in the movement repertoire was visible in the general strike launched by the USB Cobas<sup>4</sup> which the Commission for Guarantee 146/90 obliged to convert into a symbolic “one-minute strike” at the end of daily shifts of health workers, policemen involved in security controls, care workers, fire brigades, workers in sectors of the environmental hygiene, gas and energy distribution. Opportunities to mobilize increased with the transition to the so-called “phase 2” which brought many other workers to strikes, from taxi drivers, artisans, to dealers and street vendors and restaurateurs. Overcoming the peak in deaths and contagions, the war rhetoric against the virus which called for a national unity ceased and trust in Governmental decreased. Opportunities to organize safe and distanced rallies increased as well, so that traditional repertoire of action like street demonstrations became more popular among various categories of workers affected by the economic consequences of the lockdown.

If media narratives regarding the responsibility of the spread of contagion still targeted runners and sport activities, health movements reframed new critical claims like “Spread solidarity not the contagion”. The slogan emphasized the need to consider the social and economic aspects characterizing Covid19 crisis, where the availability of a domestic comfort zone equipped with large spaces and ICT were privileged elements limited to specific social classes. Moreover, the health crisis put on the table the condition of farm workers and especially the need for a regularization of their status. Several strikes were organized in the south of Italy - where most of the migrant workers are concentrated - and out of the Parliament to claim for an extension of a recognition as worker and citizen. Mostly, grassroots unions led the protests which contributed to a governmental decree that approved the regularization of previously invisible workers employed through black and informal work especially in the care sector and in agriculture. In this sense a mobilization called “the strike of the invisibles” took place on 21 May 2020<sup>5</sup>, adding an important voice to the social and political changes triggered by the pandemics. In this regard, the mobilizations of migrant farm workers and health workers used a similar slogan to describe the removal of work and worker rights that can be defined as one of the key aspects of neoliberalism, which contradictions were clearly manifested during the pandemics.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usb.it/leggi-notizia/usb-conferma-lo-sciopero-generale-di-mercoledi-25-quantimorti-ancora-perche-il-governo-capisca-che-occorre-chiudere-tutto-diventi-lo-sciopero-di-tutti-1014.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.radiopopolare.it/sciopero-degli-invisibili-21-maggio-intervista-a-aboubakar-soumahoro/>

## **Conclusions: on the link between labour and health mobilizations**

The Covid-19 crisis has contributed to putting the issue of health and safety at work back at the centre of labour conflict in Italy. The selectivity of lockdown measures has shown in naked light the tension between narrowly-defined business interests for the preservation of economic activity, and the broader public interest for the safeguarding of health. Furthermore, the evident mismatch between the content of tripartite agreements concluded by peak-level actors and their actual implementation on the ground have made evident the long-standing blindspots in the application and exercise of the legal rights to the safeguarding of health at work on the ground. The dynamics of worker mobilisation in ‘essential’ sectors, such as food delivery, logistics, and healthcare, have made clear that those rights which exist on paper have to be enacted and reclaimed by workers through their active agency, overcoming the limits of employer voluntarism which, in most cases, translates in passivity if not blatant disregard for workers’ interests. These issues have deep roots, but have now received renewed attention. The Covid19 pandemic is thus reigniting and giving new urgency to an old debate among unions, worker organizations and social movements regarding the centrality of health as a public good. This could bring to new alliances among unions, grassroots worker groups, health activists, and expert organizations for new mobilizations claiming the universal right to public healthcare and health at work, and highlighting the necessary connections between the two.

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## **Acts of whistleblowing: the case of collective claim making by healthcare workers in Egypt**

**T. Sharkawi & N. Ali (28<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

### **Abstract**

After a brief interlude of democratization ushered in by the Arab uprisings in 2011, Egypt has taken a sharp turn towards authoritarianism. While political repression has disintegrated social movements and demobilized seasoned activists, the outbreak of the coronavirus has afforded an opening for new voices, such as those of healthcare workers who took to social media to expose mismanagement and malpractice within the healthcare sector. The article examines acts of whistleblowing performed by Egypt's healthcare workers during a public health crisis, drawing on qualitative research materials collected from social media, trade union press releases, and interviews conducted with a small group of doctors and pharmacists. The article contends that individual acts of whistleblowing can produce unconventional practices towards collective claim-making prompting multiple forms of contentious mobilization. The findings highlight main features that facilitate diffusing and sustaining mobilization under prohibitive authoritarian settings.

**Keywords:** acts of whistleblowing, social movements, authoritarianism, COVID-19, Egypt.

### **Introduction**

Since the removal of the democratically-elected President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, Egypt has taken a sharp turn towards authoritarianism. The new leadership has taken great pains to consolidate its rule, curbing in the process dissent and curtailing freedom of speech. Various political and legislative measures have been introduced to clamp down on unions, civil society and any form of grassroots organizing. Nevertheless, the outbreak of the coronavirus has encouraged many healthcare workers to speak out, taking to social media to expose mismanagement and malpractice within the healthcare sector. Participants in this series of whistleblowing videos and posts publicly express grievances about adverse working conditions and make claims using their real identities. Whilst there is no dearth of anonymous leaks or incidents of extraterritorial whistleblowing by members of the Egyptian diaspora, acts similar to those undertaken by healthcare workers have been extremely rare in post-2013 Egypt.

This article engages with social movement scholarship to argue that the coronavirus pandemic has provided an opportunity for the emergence of novel acts of dissent and mobilization among members of the healthcare community operating under highly prohibitive authoritarian conditions in Egypt. While

political repression in Egypt has disintegrated social movements and demobilized seasoned activists, forcing many into exile, the pandemic has afforded an opening for new voices, such as those of healthcare workers, who have deployed different implicit and explicit forms of renegotiating their social contract. The article further contends that individual acts of whistleblowing, which take a public and interactive nature, can produce unconventional practices towards collective claim-making prompting contentious mobilization. The main questions the article attempts to address are how and why this wave of contention has started and is sustained in a ruthlessly repressive authoritarian setting. The article is organized into three sections. It begins with a review of Egypt's militarized authoritarianism under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to contextualize the repercussions of the prohibitive conditions created by this brand of authoritarianism on social mobilization and dissent. This section then turns to surveying the state of the healthcare sector in Egypt and its connections with the military institution. Drawing on analytic categories developed within social movement theory, the article then moves to examine empirical research materials collected from social media, trade unions press releases and statements, and interviews conducted with a small group of doctors and clinical pharmacists in Egypt. More specifically, it analyzes acts of whistleblowing performed by Egypt's healthcare workers during a public health crisis, focusing on how collective claim making escalated into instances of direct action. This section looks closely at the relevant changing opportunity structures and threat levels, the social networks involved and the framing of the collective claims of healthcare workers. The analysis concludes that deviation from conventional forms of collective claim making under repressive rule and in times of crisis was crucial in diffusing and sustaining mobilization within the healthcare sector. Building on these findings, the article calls for reconsidering predominant modes of collective claim-making under repressive authoritarianism. Finally, the article considers the impact of the swelling of collective claim making by healthcare workers on future popular mobilization, sustaining political and social dissent, and engendering the formation of new social and political grassroots networks that can escape authoritarian state surveillance.

### **Legislating authoritarianism**

The history of authoritarianism in Egypt dates back to the popularly-backed military coup of 1952 placing the country into the hands of successive military rulers who stifled political life. The Arab uprisings in 2011 ushered in a brief interlude of democratization, popular mobilization and civic participation. However, following the popularly-backed putsch in 2013, Egypt has reverted to a harsher authoritarianism which expanded the role of the military in politics and civil domains in ways unseen before (Sayigh, 2012; 2019; Rutherford, 2018). The new leadership has taken great pains to consolidate its rule, curbing in the process dissent and curtailing freedom of speech (Abrams, 2015; Cook, 2017; Hawthorne & Miller, 2019). A body of legislation introduced in the past

few years helped “legalizing authoritarianism” (Hamzawy, 2016) in Egypt, namely, the Protest Law (107/2013) – and its 2017 amendment – which restricted demonstrations and gatherings (Hamzawy, 2016). This law has effectively put an end to all forms of public manifestation and organizing. This was followed by the Cybercrime Law (175/2018) which legalized internet censorship (Hassan, 2018; Mada Masr, 2018; RSF, 2018), and “provide(d) authorities with further leeway to conduct comprehensive surveillance of communications...forcing broad collection of data...not provided for in the law” through five major surveillance actors including the General Intelligence, Military Intelligence and the National Security Agency (Privacy International, 2019). Egypt’s early adoption<sup>1</sup> of a ‘networked authoritarianism’ (MacKinnon, 2011)<sup>2</sup> facilitated the enforcement of the Cybercrime Law with the aim of targeting political dissidents and non-dissidents who could be seen as a threat to the monopoly of the state over communication and information. Through its significant investment in technologically advanced methods of social control and networked repression such as communication surveillance (FIDH, 2018; Privacy International, 2019), the Egyptian regime demonstrated its evolving dynamics of ‘tactical adaptation against dissidents’ (Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Lynch, 2011). The latest measure in this run towards ‘legalizing authoritarianism’ is the amendment of the Emergency Law (162/1958) in May 2020 which exploited the COVID-19 public health crisis to further undermine judicial independence by “permanently introduc(ing) military personnel to the panel of the Emergency High State Security Court and expanding the jurisdiction of the military judicial system over civilians” (EFHR, 2020).

The introduction of this series of laws cemented the legal enforcement of authoritarianism and legitimized the militarization of civil life in Egypt. This stands in sharp juxtaposition to a legislative vacuum in relation to whistleblowing as seen in the absence of any laws that can protect whistleblowers in Egypt (Birch et al., 2015). This has had catastrophic consequences for Hesham Genena, the former head of the Accountability State Authority, Egypt’s central auditing agency. Genena was fired and then arrested in 2016 after releasing a report that reveals the involvement of the state in corruption transactions that cost Egypt’s budget around \$68 billion over four years (Aboughabal, 2018). To further suppress political life, the government also declared the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s most influential opposition party, a terrorist group, in addition to arresting at least 60,000 people on political grounds from 2013 to 2019 (HRW, 2019). Meanwhile, the crackdown on civil society organizations has escalated, leaving most inoperative or

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<sup>1</sup> The President’s Men? Inside the Technical Research Department, the secret player in Egypt’s intelligence infrastructure. (2016) Medium <https://medium.com/privacy-international/the-president-s-men-9a1d0e0e1e62> Accessed 29 May 2020

<sup>2</sup> In her research on how China uses the internet to suppress dissent, Mackinnon (2001) argues that the internet has globalized the reach of state security apparatuses and their agents and informers, placing dissidents and critics inside and outside on the radar of authoritarian regimes which has created a ‘networked’ form of authoritarianism.

ineffective (Amnesty International, 2016; Austin Holmes, 2017, HRW, 2016). In tandem, privately-owned satellite channels, which have played a crucial role in the run-up to the uprising in 2011, have toed the line of the state, whether by means of intimidation or direct acquisition (AFTE, 2018). This unprecedented clampdown on political life has coincided with the military leveraging its influence to advance its economic expansion (Abul-Magd, 2016; Noll, 2017).

## **The healthcare sector in Egypt**

Decades of systemic mismanagement and underfunding have left Egypt's public healthcare system in shambles, disproportionately ill-equipped to cope with a lethal pandemic. Egypt has 1.6 bed hospitals for every 1,000 people, significantly lower than the WHO recommendation of 5 beds per 1,000 population (World Bank, 2014). In the past few decades, economic migration attracted scores of doctors and nurses fleeing low pay and poor working conditions<sup>3</sup> in Egypt. The Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS) estimates that more than 50% of its membership of 220,000 registered doctors work outside Egypt (Abd El-Galil, 2019). Public hospitals are also understaffed by around 55,000 nurses (Abdo, 2020). An EMS board member estimated that around 1,800 Egyptian villages do not have doctors (Debes, 2015). This grim picture of the healthcare sector in Egypt is the background against which systemic efforts have been directed towards militarizing the Ministry of Health (MoH). Several plans were adopted in 2018 to ensure that the Egyptian Armed Forces are involved in: 1) the procurement and importing of medical equipment and baby formulas; 2) the construction of new hospitals; and 3) the militarization of the organizational structure of the MoH through appointing members of the Armed Forces to fill managerial positions in the ministry and at public hospitals (Hamdy, 2019). The military seems to be also keen on discursively and visually asserting their involvement in the MoH. This is evident in the countless pictures and footage of the Minister of Health, Hala Zayed, in Egyptian media where she is seen accompanied by army generals in field trips, press conferences, and official visits to other countries. A picture from a pro-government newspaper of Zayed on a podium closely surrounded by army generals was turned into a meme trending on Egyptian social media.<sup>4</sup> The text accompanying the picture added by the author of the meme read: "I would like to reveal the actual figures of coronavirus infections but I can't."

Against this backdrop, and bearing the brunt of the fight against a deadly virus, many healthcare workers have made noise in order to highlight shortcomings,

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<sup>3</sup> Doctors' infection allowance is 19 Egyptian pounds (slightly over \$1) a month, while judges, a mainstay of the regime, receive 3,000 pounds (about \$187) per month.  
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200402-proposed-covid-19-pay-rise-insufficient-say-egypts-doctors/> (accessed 22 May 2020)

<sup>4</sup> The picture of the minister of health: Elbalad (2020) 'The minister of health welcomes families and children repatriated from China', 17 February. Available at:  
<https://www.elbalad.news/4177956>.

assert rights and put forth demands. The current authoritarian environment of Egypt which brought back political fear to public life (Khalifa, 2017) makes it difficult to dismiss these acts of whistleblowing as merely workplace grievances. The return of large-scale state surveillance after 2013, which Egyptians experienced under Mubarak (Asad, 2012), forced many to self-censor and eventually withdraw from engaging with politics (Matthies-Boon, 2017). In a prevailing culture of a “silencing fear planted from above” (Pearlman, 2016, p. 30)<sup>5</sup>, speaking out becomes an act of dissent, and individual discursive acts of opposition (on social media) become public expressions of disagreement and non-compliance through which collective political agency is exercised. In Egypt’s muted public sphere, and amidst the quiet of an eerie lockdown, the voices of healthcare workers broke the silence and fear, turning their individual grievances into collective claims.

### **Social movements and acts of whistleblowing**

Social movement scholarship posits that opportunities for contentious mobilization are oftentimes met with the threat of suppression (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). Mobilization can often begin in response to changing political opportunities (Meyer, 2004), when actors involved in “contentious politics combine response to threat with seizing opportunities” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007, p. 58). These opportunities are often engendered in connection to shifting regime characteristics (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007, pp. 58-59). Accordingly, changes in political opportunity structures are of particular relevance to understanding the conditions under which actors can mobilize (Tarrow, 1994) in spite of the threat of repression from a consolidated authoritarian regime like that of Egypt. A combination of opportunity and threat can, therefore, explain why and how healthcare workers in Egypt have recently engaged in defiant acts of whistleblowing which they then escalated, at a great risk, into collective claim making against a repressive and authoritarian regime.

A number of factors have arguably opened a window of opportunity for healthcare workers in Egypt to engage in contentious mobilization under harsh authoritarianism. While no substantial changes in the Egyptian regime can be tangibly identified, and forms of militarized policing of dissenters and non-dissenters are still widely employed, the pandemic and the ensuing public health crisis have unquestionably overwhelmed the state’s struggling economy and public health services at a staggering scale. Consequently, opportunity structures during the peak of a global pandemic have been more favorable to

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<sup>5</sup> Pearlman’s work describes Syria’s legacy of political fear and repression. Her perspective can also be extended to Egypt as the two countries entered a political union from 1958 to 1961 led by the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser’s reign is said to have paved the way for a legacy of state violence, political suppression and fear, transforming Egypt from a constitutional monarchy to an authoritarian police state. See Cook (2011), Joesten (1974), Kandil (2012), and Podesh (2004).

mobilization by healthcare workers in Egypt precisely because, paradoxically, it was not anticipated.

Despite vast scale unionization and the prominent role played by the Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS)<sup>6</sup> in modern Egyptian politics (Abou Omar, 2013), the majority of doctors and other middle-class healthcare workers<sup>7</sup> in Egypt are generally perceived not to be as politically engaged as other groups in Egyptian society. Because of the arduous admission requirements to schools of medicine and pharmaceutical sciences in Egypt and the difficulty of graduating from these schools, doctors and pharmacists are largely viewed by many Egyptians as hardworking and career-focused albeit somewhat socially isolated.<sup>8</sup> This social perception may have made many doctors less heavily monitored<sup>9</sup> by Egyptian security agencies. Fighting the pandemic under excruciatingly difficult conditions, Egyptian healthcare workers, like their peers around the world, have been working very hard, showing resilience and resourcefulness despite substantial government mismanagement. This prompted state officials and the main stream media<sup>10</sup> to hail healthcare workers as ‘Egypt’s white army’<sup>11</sup> commanding their ‘courage, heroism and sacrifice’. Songs have been composed in praise of doctors and many Egyptians have used the phrase ‘Egypt’s White Army’ on social media in appreciation of doctors and nurses on the frontline. This newly found national appreciation for underpaid and overworked

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<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian Medical Syndicate is an independent organization that was established in 1920 under the name of the Egyptian Medical Society which was later changed to syndicate in 1926. The leadership and the administrative organizational structure of the Syndicate run like a trade union and some of the objectives of the EMS stated on their website are those typical of a union. The wider mission statement of the Syndicate ranges from providing medical education and training, medical ethics, primary and preventive medical care, to engaging with national causes and building bridges with regional medical unions and syndicates. For more background on the recent struggles of members of the Syndicate, see (Hodaib, 2016) and (El-Mahdawy, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> See Kandil (2012) for an analysis of how the middle class was perceived to be an ally of the Mubarak regime, yet was first to take to the streets in 2011 demanding the fall of the regime.

<sup>8</sup> This remark draws on findings from telephone interviews conducted (in Arabic) by T. Sharkawi with doctors and pharmacists at the National Cancer Institute in Cairo, Egypt during the first week of June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> State surveillance in Egypt has (historically) targeted those who are affiliated to or have connections with the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>10</sup> The private main stream media in Egypt are informally controlled by the state security apparatus.

<sup>11</sup> The subtext of this description is comparing the “courage, heroism and sacrifice” of Egyptian healthcare workers to that of the Egyptian armed forces who have been engaged in a ‘war on terror’ in Sinai in the north east of Egypt for the past seven years. In these years, the incumbent regime used the media and educational institutions to engender a neonationalist discourse which glorifies the armed forces as an organization, and individuals who belong to the military. This is exemplified in songs valorizing the army sung by public school pupils during their morning assembly, films and TV drama shows produced by the Ministry of Defense and similar prescriptive displays of national solidarity with the army.

professionals of the public healthcare sector<sup>12</sup> coalesced with staunch support from the EMS for doctors.

As the registered trade union and professional association for doctors in Egypt and one of the oldest unions in the region, EMS played an actively prominent role during this public health crisis, holding online press conferences and publishing regular press releases; criticizing and demanding revisions of protocols adopted by the Ministry of Health (MoH); issuing statements of support for doctors on the frontline underlining the conditions they are facing; and successfully negotiating on behalf of the families of doctors who die from Covid-19 infections to receive the same pension and compensation provided to families of soldiers who are killed in combat. Following several acts of whistleblowing, which exposed cases of infected doctors who have died due to the unavailability of beds in the hospitals specializing in treating the coronavirus, the EMS demanded that the MoH designate hospitals exclusively for the treatment of infected healthcare workers across the country. With the spike in infections and deaths among healthcare workers, the EMS adopted a more vocal stance in advancing the rights of doctors. Its elected general-secretary, who is also the head of the Egyptian Medical Syndicates Union, coordinated with other medical syndicates to release a strongly worded statement<sup>13</sup> addressed to the Egyptian President General Abdelfattah El-Sisi. The statement published on May 24 accused the MoH of negligence and failure to protect medical doctors, stressing that the MoH “has an obligation towards doctors and all medics,” and emphasizing the “imperative to provide them with the necessary protection and rapid medical intervention for those who contract the disease.” The statement goes on to stress that the Syndicate “holds the health ministry responsible for the mounting deaths and infections among doctors due to its negligence ... that is tantamount to death through a dereliction of duty” (AFP, 2020).

These dynamics combined have carved an opportunity for contentious mobilization among healthcare workers in Egypt – an opening that is less available to other groups in the country at present. This shifting in opportunity structure becomes more evident when contrasted to the fate of the social media campaign ‘Egypt’s Scholars are Angry,’ which was launched in August 2019 to demand the reform of salaries and pensions at public universities. The campaign managed to mobilize thousands of faculty members to engage in collective claim making but stressed that this was not a call for strike action.<sup>14</sup> Despite the growing number of supporters, the campaign failed to gain wider traction among Egyptians inside and outside academia. On August 31, the

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<sup>12</sup> Egypt has an extremely underserviced and impoverished public health sector, and a growing private sector for health services that are deemed beyond affordability for many Egyptians. See Youngman (2015).

<sup>13</sup> The text of the statement published on the website of the Egyptian Union of Medical Syndicates: <https://emu-eg.org/?p=1245>

<sup>14</sup> Technically, it would have been complicated to organize a strike given that universities in Egypt are banned by law from unionizing.

National Security Agency (NSA) arrested law professor and co-founder of the campaign, Tarek El Sheikh (AFTE, 2020A). Further arrests of several prominent political science professors and junior faculty members took place in the following week; some of whom still remain in custody without trial (AFTE, 2020B).<sup>15</sup> Juxtaposing these two instances of collective claim making reveals the conditions under which mobilization interacts with the dynamics of a pandemic, national solidarity and a strong union, to mediate changes in opportunity structures. Thus, “the ‘when’ of social movement mobilization – when political opportunities are opening up – goes a long way towards explaining its ‘why’” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 17). To further explore the changing opportunity structure and the dynamics involved, the article focuses on two of the early cases of whistleblowing that took place at two university hospitals in Cairo: the National Cancer Institute and Al-Zahraa Hospital.

As is the case with most forms of dissent, it is not a simple task to account for the onset of contention. It is, however, believed<sup>16</sup> that the National Cancer Institute (NCI)<sup>17</sup> in Cairo is the site where the first acts of whistleblowing were performed by healthcare workers. The earliest documented incident started when a nurse exhibited symptoms of COVID-19 on March 21, motivating staff to ask the dean of the NCI to adopt strict preventive measures in order to ensure the safety of vulnerable patients and medical staff.<sup>18</sup> The dean’s response was sending instructions to resume business as usual, and warning against disclosing any work-related information on social media (Abdelwahab, 2020). When the NCI head of anesthesia revealed on Facebook that two staff members had tested positive, she was forced to delete the post, and was later suspended by the dean.<sup>19</sup> By early April, 17 doctors and nurses working in the hospital had contracted the virus (Alaa El-Din, 2020). This coincided with recurring statements by the EMS calling on the government and the MoH to provide

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<sup>15</sup> Egypt arrests prominent critics of Sisi with 1,400 detained since Friday protests

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-arrests-prominent-political-scientists-critical-sisi> (accessed 29 May 2020)

<sup>16</sup> This conclusion is based on research materials collected from 1) social media, 2) independent digital news media platforms during the period from the second half of March to end of May 2020, in addition to 3) interviews conducted with doctors and pharmacists at the NCI during the first week of June 2020.

<sup>17</sup> The National Cancer Institute is Egypt’s largest oncology hospital and research institute operating several pediatric and adult departments, outpatient units and pharmacies serviced by thousands of doctors, pharmacists, nurses and medical technicians. The NCI is affiliated to and funded by Cairo University and its medical staff are academic faculty members. Medical services at NCI are offered to patients free of charge.

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of a clinical pharmacist at the NCI on the breakout of the virus at the Institute and the response of the dean. These details were verified by two of the research participants interviewed in June 2020. <https://www.cairo24.com/2020/04/04/-/هددوها-بالفصل-صيدلانية-حذرت-من-تحول-مع/>

<sup>19</sup> Testimonies of two colleagues of the NCI head of anesthesia <https://www.facebook.com/611353599/posts/10157516780293600/?d=n>; and <https://www.facebook.com/100000228084062/posts/4263075767043317/?d=n>.

testing and personal protective equipment (PPE) to medical staff country wide, and expressing strong support for doctors across Egypt.<sup>20</sup>

As the NCI dean continued to deny confirmed cases of Covid-19 among staff or patients, several staff members claimed that they were threatened to be terminated if they speak out about any Covid-19 cases (Abdelwahab, 2020).<sup>21</sup> It could be argued that this escalation by the NCI dean together with the attention the situation has received from independent news media impacted opportunity structures perceived by healthcare workers in Cairo and elsewhere in the country. Enraged by the inaction of the NCI senior management, several doctors, pharmacists and nurses resorted to social media to expose the situation. One pharmacist revealed the details of a closed meeting the medical staff had with the dean. She claimed in a Facebook post that the dean said: “If you are afraid of the Coronavirus, then submit your resignation and don’t come again” in response to her pointing out that failure to act swiftly could cause harm to doctors and patients alike. She also accused him of outright lying in his public statements to the media (Ahmed, 2020).

If the National Cancer Institute was the first hit by the virus, then Al-Zahraa Hospital in Cairo, affiliated to Al-Azhar University, has probably been one of the hardest-hit hospitals in Egypt, with at least 135 reported infections among staff (EG24 News, 2020). Following in the footsteps of their NCI colleagues, several doctors took to social media to criticize the hospital management and expose the gravity of the situation. In a Facebook post dated May 13, an intern doctor called out “the injustice” she and her colleagues had faced. She explained that she was assigned to work five 12-hour shifts in one week during which the senior management of the hospital “was covering-up on the real number of infections” and refusing to perform Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests on workers who had come in direct contact with suspected Coronavirus patients.<sup>22</sup> Another doctor posted on Facebook demanding the provision of isolation beds and treatment for medical staff saying: “our most basic right is to offer us and our families a place for isolation and treatment,” and urging his followers to help in exposing the situation by sharing his post.<sup>23</sup> The story was picked up by the media after similar whistleblowing posts started circulating (EG24, 2020). An incomprehensive number of PCR tests were performed only after the media

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<sup>20</sup> The EMS has published daily statements since the outbreak of the virus on its website: [www.ems.or.eg](http://www.ems.or.eg)

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of a pharmacist on the response of the NCI senior management and the intimidation of staff. The alleged intimidation was also reported by several of the doctors and pharmacists interviewed in June:

<https://www.facebook.com/HagarAshmawy/posts/10219645233774823>; and <https://www.cairo24.com/2020/04/04/هددوها-بالفصل-صيدلانية-حذرت-من-تحول-مع/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100002897158832/posts/2669106193195926/?d=n>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100026009796852/posts/536160857260903/?d=n>.

had reported the outbreak, yet the MoH failed to provide isolation beds for medical doctors who tested positive.<sup>24</sup>

The recurring acts of whistleblowing by NCI and Al-Zahraa staff garnered support from many Egyptians on social media who shared and retweeted whistleblowing posts using the Arabic hashtag ‘solidarity with Egypt’s doctors.’ These acts of whistleblowing interacted with national and EMS solidarity which were critical for animating and sustaining further mobilization and drawing recruitment from other groups in the healthcare sector. Similar acts of whistleblowing soon started to swell across Egypt. This was reflected in the larger numbers of nurses, pharmacists, medical technicians and paramedics posting on Facebook to expose wrongdoing at their workplace, as well as sending complaints to the EMS to report malpractice. In a whistleblowing post, a doctor at Al-Matareya Hospital warned that the situation was “catastrophic” and had “gotten out of control.” Whistleblowing escalated into harsh criticism from healthcare workers levelled at the health minister, her senior advisors, and the state at large for the inefficient and unmethodical handling of the crisis. The same doctor laments the terrible working conditions endured by staff saying: “The state and the ministry (of health) have sold us out.”<sup>25</sup> Another doctor responded to the ministry’s decision to modify the testing protocol for COVID-19 in ways that could ultimately increase the risk of infection by saying: “They are killing the medical teams.”<sup>26</sup> Objecting to the same infamous protocol, an intensive care physician stated: “Enough with the monkey business, health ministry.”<sup>27</sup> A third doctor exposed in detail the grave conditions of public hospitals leading to her decision to quit working for the MoH explaining that she is “not ready to bear the guilt for all those who will perish due to poor capabilities and mismanagement.” Then, hinting at her intention to move overseas, she said: “You are not safe in Egypt. It is impossible for me to raise my children in a country where I might not be able to save their lives if they fell ill.”<sup>28</sup>

Growing acts of whistleblowing on social media continued to focus on collective claim making through discursively framing demands to reflect a unified voice of the healthcare community at large. For instance, a doctor at Al-Hussein University Hospital stated: “We want the same social protection and financial rights that the army and officials have. Believe me, doctors do not want songs or titles<sup>29</sup> – we just want to be able to do our job safely” (Michaelson, 2020).<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100002897158832/posts/2669106193195926/?d=n>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/815525496/posts/10163983410605497/?d=n>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/815525496/posts/10163980298145497/?d=n>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/815525496/posts/10163798416020497/?d=n>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100003927702950/posts/1668382463302661/?d=n>.

<sup>29</sup> This is an allusion to the description ‘Egypt’s white army’

<sup>30</sup> “Egyptian authorities have forced (Michaelson, the Cairo-based Guardian journalist) to leave the country after she reported on a scientific study that said Egypt was likely to have many more coronavirus cases than have been officially confirmed. Ruth Michaelson, who...reported from

rise in acts of whistleblowing<sup>31</sup> on social media alongside the increasing solidarity statements and press releases by the EMS seem to have prompted contentious mobilization on a wider scale. This is evident in how whistleblowing escalated into growing calls for collective disobedience in the form of refusal to work until testing and PPE are provided. Following the disclosure of the full extent of the virus outbreak at NCI, a number of nurses assembled in front of the main entrance<sup>32</sup> of the hospital. Addressing senior management, one of the nurses said rebukingly: “If you are not concerned about our safety, then (at least) be concerned about the patients” (Basha, 2020). In the same vein, individual acts of whistleblowing at Al-Zahraa Hospital took on a collective character. Frustrated at being deprived of their basic rights, the hospital doctors issued a public statement on May 20 outlining their struggle with senior managers to ensure that health and safety procedures are put in place. The statement lists the various demands they made since early April to protect the hospital staff from contracting the virus, adding that the hospital’s managers flouted their demands and even failed to provide them with basic PPE.<sup>33</sup> In response to mounting pressure, the director of the hospital was forced to submit his resignation.

By extension, mobilization among doctors and clinical pharmacists in Cairo affected opportunity structures perceived by healthcare workers elsewhere in the country. This is apparent in the rise of whistleblowing acts taking place in rural cities and the recurrence of incidents of small-scale contention, such as short strike action and assembly. This shift in scale (McAdam et al., 2001) also made diffusion of further contention and collective claim making possible among less visible groups within the healthcare sector such as nurses, first responders, and medical technicians. In the small town of Al-Bagour, located in the northern governorate of Al-Minufiyah, nurses went on strike in protest of insufficient testing and shortages of PPE and medical supplies in an isolation hospital designated for COVID-19 patients. One nurse is seen in a video documenting the incident saying emphatically: “We will not work ... We are only asking for our rights, just our rights.” Another healthcare worker protested their mistreatment by MoH senior officials explaining: “The two representatives of

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Egypt since 2014, was advised last week by western diplomats that the country’s security services wanted her to leave immediately after her press accreditation was revoked and she was asked to attend a meeting with authorities about her visa status.” See Safi (2020).

<sup>31</sup> The increase in acts of whistleblowing was met with a campaign by some pro-government supporters on social media and MSM to delegitimize the demands and calls for disobedience by doctors. The campaign claims that healthcare workers who make these demands belong to the banned Muslim brotherhood, and “deserve to be killed like traitors who abandon the battlefield.” This campaign, however, did not find much support among the majority of Egyptians on social media who continued to express their solidarity with doctors.

<sup>32</sup> NCI main entrance is centrally located in the heart of Egypt’s capital city, very close to Tahrir Square and in close proximity to a number of government offices. The main entrance is also at the crossroads of the motorway connecting the north and the south of Cairo.

<sup>33</sup> Text of the doctors’ statement and demands:  
<https://twitter.com/Mohammeo3693409/status/1263200320081010689>.

the ministry's undersecretary talked to us as if we were chess pieces. They did not give any of us the chance to talk. When our doctors attempted to discuss matters, they said: 'We know how the protocol works, but you don't.' Aren't we human beings (like them)? ... The two representatives talked to us with arrogance and snobbishness" (Protests of Nurses, 2020). The same kind of collective claim making that defies the government and the state, and the recurring use of a language of rights is seen in the footage of a similar strike by nurses in the socioeconomically disenfranchised Karmus district in Alexandria. The video shows a female nurse shouting assertively in the face of the hospital's manager: "We want CPR tests to be performed on all nurses. This is our right. The state is leaving us high and dry ... We are no less than other people; we should be treated equally and granted our rights." The manager promised to take care of it, asking her to resume work, but she went on: "None of us - doctors, nurses and workers - will resume working before all our needs are met ... Detain us, throw us in police stations (if you want); at least, we will not die then" (Karmus Nurses, 2020).

Despite the considerable risks associated with collective direct action in an authoritarian context, digital acts of whistleblowing have coalesced into traditional forms of dissent involving collective claim making on the ground. Contentious activities that require some level of organizing, such as strikes and sit-ins, took place in at least three hospitals in the period from April 28 to May 9 alone. Remarkably, many of these public displays of dissent occurred outside Cairo, traditionally Egypt's historic hub of social and political dissent, as well as the epicenter of surveillance and policing of dissenters. Noticeably, some healthcare workers in some of these strikes played the game with caution, insisting that they were not striking even when explicitly stating they are not going to work until their demands are addressed. Most videos of strikes were shot from a distance and in some cases only showed the torsos of the people assembled. The reporter who covered the nurses' protest at the main entrance of the NCI mentioned that they refused to reveal their names (Basha, 2020). Caution also extended to the framing of claim making. In most of the social media posts and videos by healthcare workers, whistleblowers and instigators of collective disobedience framed their claims explicitly in professional terms, evoking notions of ethical responsibility towards patients and society to explain their rage about negligence and malpractice. Footage of some of the small-scale demonstrations that surfaced on social media were in many cases staged as staff meetings or gatherings.

These strategies can be understood in light of the intensification of political repression and the ruthless crackdown on dissent in Egypt since 2013. Individual whistleblowers are not any safer in the absence of whistleblowing protection laws in Egypt (Birch et al., 2015), and like all social media users around the country, they are, too, subject to the Cybercrime Law. This already repressive environment is further compounded by the fact that doctors and clinical pharmacists at university hospitals in Egypt are academic faculty who

answer to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHE).<sup>34</sup> This is additionally problematized by the direct intervention of state security in matters of higher education in Egypt (Ashour<sup>35</sup>, 2013; Geer, 2013; Scholars at Risk, 2015). The encroachment on the academe is reflected in the processes of appointing university presidents and faculty deans which are sanctioned by the National Security Agency (NSA) (AFTE, 2016; Scholars at Risk, 2016). Similarly, academic staff, including doctors and clinical pharmacists at university hospitals, is required to obtain clearance from the NSA before they are hired<sup>36</sup> (AFTE, 2016). Staff is also required to apply for NSA approval before travelling to academic conferences, or receiving international research grants, scholarships or funding (AFTE, 2019). This political environment heightened the awareness among doctors of the risks associated with their acts of whistleblowing.<sup>37</sup> A case in point is a Facebook post of an anesthetist at NCI: “I write this and I know all the consequences ... I was threatened in various ways, directly and indirectly, that I would be fired because I talk a lot and object to mistakes. I know all this, but I still write these words because what’s going on jeopardizes my life and those of my colleagues and patients. This situation should not be tolerated.” He goes on to describe at length the malpractice and intimidation committed by the senior management, and highlights how the lack of protective gear for frontline workers could have disastrous consequences (Egypt Fans Club, 2020). Shortly before this post, his supervisor was suspended by the dean for disclosing that colleagues have contracted COVID-19.<sup>38</sup> Other doctors and clinical pharmacists experienced more serious consequences for their whistleblowing acts as they ended up getting arrested, or worse, were forcibly disappeared (Amnesty International, 2020; Reuters, 2020). A 26-year-old junior doctor in Al-Shatby University Hospital in Alexandria contacted the MoH hotline to report a patient who had visible symptoms of COVID-19 and needs immediate care. Allegedly, the head of the department then informed the dean of the school of medicine at Alexandria University, about what she had done. According to human rights organizations, the dean then requested that she go to his office. Once at his office, she was arrested by the NSA. She is currently held in pre-trial detention on charges of “membership in a terrorist

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<sup>34</sup> This issue was raised by doctors and clinical pharmacists interviewed in June, as well as on earlier field research on academic freedom in higher education in Egypt conducted by T. Sharkawi in 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Radwa Ashour was a professor of comparative literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo. She was one of the co-founders of the ‘9 March movement for the Autonomy of the University’. In her autobiographical book, she documented the daily experiences of the intervention of the police in university and academic matters, as well as incidents of police violence against protesting professors and students on campus.

<sup>36</sup> We draw here on findings from earlier field research on academic freedom in higher education in Egypt in 2015. This was also confirmed by NCI doctors in June 2020.

<sup>37</sup> The issue of fear and awareness of risk was raised in the interviews conducted with doctors and pharmacists at the National Cancer Institute in Cairo during the first week of June 2020.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/611353599/posts/10157516780293600/?d=n>; and <https://www.facebook.com/100000228084062/posts/4263075767043317/?d=n>.

group,” “spreading false news,” and “mis-using social media” (Amnesty International, 2020; EFHR, 2020B). Over the past two months, a number of journalists and a researcher, who published and posted about the pandemic situation in Egypt, were arrested (EFHR, 2020B; Safi, 2020).

Despite the threats and arrests, acts of whistleblowing continued and spread. Confronted by a situation where the cost of inaction came to outweigh the jeopardies of speaking out, many doctors and other healthcare workers continued to engage in various forms of defiant collective claim making. This reveals how changes in perceived opportunity structures and threat levels can have significant explanatory value for understanding why mobilization by healthcare workers started and swelled across Egypt.

### **Social networks of the healthcare community in Egypt**

As changing opportunity structures and threat levels might not fully address questions of how mobilization can transform into collective action (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999), we draw on the work of a number of social movement scholars who underline the analytic value of social networks in understanding mobilization (Diani, 2003; McAdam et al., 2001) despite practical impediments to collective action as in the case of highly authoritarian contexts (Shock, 2005; Gamson, 1990; Denooux, 1993; Pfaff, 1996). We examine the role of networks between individuals and groups among the healthcare community to explain movement recruitment and swelling within established social settings (Diani, 2003). The healthcare community in Egypt is characterized by dense and interconnected social networks which seem to have informed perceptions of opportunities, facilitated recruitment, and enabled mobilization to start in Cairo, and then diffuse to other cities. Our findings from several interviews with a small group of doctors and clinical pharmacists at the NCI reveal how these dense and interlaced social ties extend beyond common professional interests and identities as they appear to impact the socio-economic, academic and political life of healthcare workers. The economic interdependency in these formal social networks is most apparent in individual and group professional ties between the medical and the pharmaceutical sectors in Egypt. These links typically include incentivizing large-scale prescriptions both in public hospitals and private practice – particularly in the field of oncology, sponsoring academic conferences and opportunities for career development, kitting out new private-practice clinics, sponsoring lavish social gatherings for star academics in the medical profession, doctors and pharmacists, and similar reciprocities. Similar interdependent ties also exist among doctors, and testing and imaging laboratories and physiotherapy clinics, to name a few examples. Dense informal socio-economic links between and among doctors, pharmacists and nurses exist in parallel through social gatherings and parties, group holidays, informal networks of chain lending<sup>39</sup>, and organizing group community gifting during

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<sup>39</sup> This is a fairly common practice among the working and lower middle classes in Egypt whereby a group of people agree to pay an equal share each month. Then each participant

religious festivals. Interviewed doctors and pharmacists note that these informal networks have provided a safe space for members of the healthcare community to share problems, brainstorm solutions and discuss the politics of healthcare in Egypt. “It was only natural to resort to these networks as a platform for a more candid discussion around the coronavirus crisis away from the constraints of the workplace and censorship by senior management.”<sup>40</sup> Worth noting is that the characteristically leaderless and dispersed nature of this type of informal social networks contributes to their opacity<sup>41</sup> to authorities and are hence in some way shielded from state surveillance.

A key figure who animated both formal and informal social networks of the healthcare community in Egypt over the past decades is Dr. Mona Mina, the former EMS secretary-general.<sup>42</sup> Mina, who was elected in 2013, is widely respected among Egypt’s healthcare community for her staunch advocacy for the rights of doctors, universal healthcare, and an autonomous role of the EMS in healthcare policy making.<sup>43</sup> She resigned her role as assistant secretary-general in 2018 “in protest of low ceiling for union freedoms” in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> She is one of the co-founders of the group ‘Doctors without Rights’, formed during the Mubarak era, which grew into the biggest independent healthcare activist movement in Egypt (El-Mahdawy, 2018; Hodaib, 2016). The group fought for EMS reform and succeeded in ending the hegemony of members of the Muslim Brotherhood over EMS elections (Dyer, 2016; Hodaib, 2016). She has also supported the 2011 uprising and took part in the 18-day sit-in in Tahrir Square which culminated into the ousting of President Mubarak. She repeatedly expressed her disagreement with controversial policies introduced by successive governments since Mubarak. Through her Facebook page, Mina played a crucial role during the pandemic crisis by exposing negligence and mismanagement,

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receives the cumulative total amount paid at a pre-agreed time. This practice is called ‘gamiya’ in Egyptian Arabic which roughly translates to organization.

<sup>40</sup>This was iterated by one of the doctors in an interview conducted in June 2020. Words to this effect were echoed by other healthcare workers interviewed.

<sup>41</sup> See Scott (1990) for more on network opacity.

<sup>42</sup> Profile: Mona Mina, new sec-gen of the Doctors Syndicate <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/89596/Egypt/Politics-/PROFILE-Mona-Mina,-new-secgen-of-the-Doctors-Syndi.aspx> (accessed 1 June 2020); and <https://egyptindependent.com/profile-mona-mina-revolutionary-sage-who-subdued-ministry/> (accessed 1 June 2020)

<sup>43</sup> Egypt’s Doctors Take on Mubarak [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing\\_continents/7301476.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/7301476.stm)

(accessed 1 June 2020); and Doctors Without Rights Protest Against New Accreditation Body <https://www.dailynewssegypt.com/2010/08/01/doctors-without-rights-protest-against-new-accreditation-body/> (accessed 1 June 2020)

<sup>44</sup> Doctors’ Syndicate General Secretary and Assistant Resign in Protest of Low Ceiling for Union Freedoms <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/05/22/news/u/doctors-syndicate-general-secretary-and-assistant-resign-in-protest-of-low-ceiling-for-union-freedoms/> (accessed 1 June 2020)

offering support and solidarity with doctors, and advocating for the rights of protection and treatment for healthcare workers. The doctors and pharmacists we interviewed referenced Mina's past of healthcare activism as the reason behind many doctors around the country trusting her with first-hand accounts of the malpractice and negligence they witnessed in managing the outbreak of COVID-19. Mina has been remarkably active on social media, sharing stories of negligence and mismanagement sent by doctors, sharing whistleblowing posts, and publishing op-ed pieces in newspapers. Her videos, posts and published articles criticize the way the government and the MoH handled the crisis and make suggestions to address the issues raised by healthcare workers, demanding that the MoH act swiftly. Her ceaseless activity turned her Facebook page into a site of collective claim making which seems to have brokered mobilization as apparent in the level of engagement with her live videos and posts. Many of the public comments left by doctors and other healthcare workers reveal their deep appreciation for her solidarity and advocacy.

A third intensely dense and overlapping network involves the Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS) which has arguably been the primary hub of closely interlinked formal and informal social networks among the healthcare community nationally and regionally.<sup>45</sup> As a trade union and a professional association, the EMS sponsors numerous projects that look after the professional, economic and social interests of members.<sup>46</sup> These projects continue to provide countless opportunities for growing informal social networks among doctors across the country.<sup>47</sup> Under Mubarak, the Syndicate played a significant role in opposing the application of neoliberal policies to healthcare provision and medical education (Abou Omar, 2013), largely through networks of leftist groups among its membership and the 'Doctors without Rights' movement.<sup>48</sup> The Syndicate took on a more prominent role in the political struggles after the 2011 uprising, especially after the election of Mona Mina and her mostly leftist successors (Abou Omar, 2013; Hodaib, 2016; Kiley, 2016). These struggles produced resources, skills, social relations, and a social space engendered in its networks. In many ways, these informal social networks acted as social and political sites where activist learning took place, and resistance and grievances took shape and were articulated in an environment that was fairly guarded from state surveillance. Over the years, the social networks that were involved in (and emerged from) these struggles provided a key source of solidarity, a strong sense of identity and camaraderie, and a much-needed resource for socio-

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<sup>45</sup> Based on findings from interviews conducted with doctors and pharmacists at the National Cancer during the first week of June 2020.

<sup>46</sup> EMS website [http://www.ems.org.eg/menu/index/خدمات النقابة](http://www.ems.org.eg/menu/index/خدمات%20النقابة) (accessed 2 June 2020)

<sup>47</sup> Based on findings from interviews conducted with doctors and pharmacists at the National Cancer Institute in Cairo, Egypt during the first week of June 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Doctors' Syndicate General Secretary and Assistant Resign in Protest of Low Ceiling for Union Freedoms <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/05/22/news/u/doctors-syndicate-general-secretary-and-assistant-resign-in-protest-of-low-ceiling-for-union-freedoms/> (accessed 1 June 2020)

economic coping. More importantly, these networks generated a wealth of contentious repertoires for successful collective claim making and sustainable mobilization under prohibitive conditions.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic crisis in Egypt, the EMS and its formal networks have continued to provide unwavering solidarity for doctors, exhibited in a series of powerful statements, relentless criticism of the government, and collective claim making addressed directly to the president.<sup>49</sup> This solidarity seems to have provided the backdrop against which acts of whistleblowing and associated collective claim making, and recruitment took place. Drawing on an established legacy of social and political organizing, the EMS informal networks adapted some of the inherited repertoires for claim making and mobilization during the pandemic crisis. This is manifested in the framing of claims made on the government both by individual whistleblowers and in the formal statements and open letters published by the EMS. Grievances articulated and demands made stressed the professional rather than political nature of claim making and avoided direct criticism of the president, hiding behind phrases like ‘the state’ and ‘leadership’. Another salient tactic in framing claims is the discursive deployment of the carrot and stick metaphor by offering some limited praise of the government or head of state while alluding subtly to the indispensability or the social and economic weight of the healthcare community and its networks. The EMS has further capitalized on its dense and overlapping social networks to rally national and transnational support for the healthcare community. This stance was more vocal in response to claims made by government officials and the state-run media that doctors who call for strike or resignation due to lack of protection or testing are conspirators who belong to the banned Muslim Brotherhood group<sup>50</sup>, as well as claims by the prime minister that the spike in infections is due to doctors’ absence from work.<sup>51</sup> The same social networks also mobilized support for Mina when a complaint was submitted to the Attorney General accusing her of “communicating with Brotherhood channels to question the health system and the measures taken by the state to confront the coronavirus, and intentionally publishing false news.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The EMS website is updated several times each day, publishing statements, open letters, demands, op-ed pieces by its members, and reporting cases of malpractice. It also includes a new section which commemorates doctors who died from COVID-19 while treating infected patients. These updates have also been widely circulated by doctors on social media and by Mona Mina.

<sup>50</sup> Resignations of Doctors: A Muslim Brotherhood Conspiracy or Legitimate Demands? Available in Arabic at: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-52811178> (accessed 2 July)

<sup>51</sup> Rage among Egyptian Doctors as the Government levels Accusations of Causing a Spike in Infections. Available in Arabic at: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-53169582> (accessed 24 June 2020)

<sup>52</sup> A Notice Accuses Mona Mina of Doubting the Health System

<https://nwafez.com/en/a-notice-accuses-dr-mona-mina-of-doubting-the-health-system/> (accessed 3 July)

## Conclusion

By exploring the various acts of whistleblowing performed by Egypt's healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article has attempted to highlight three main features of dissent in authoritarian settings. First, unusual times impose risks, but they also open opportunities for novel acts of mobilization and claim-making. Second, sporadic and individual incidents of whistleblowing have the capacity to translate over a brief time into more direct forms of contentious mobilization even under the reign of the most repressive political regimes. Third, the role of informal, and hence, more opaque social networks in the diffusion and sustainability of mobilization carry the potential of engendering new social and political grassroots networks that can mobilize at short notice in the future. The article therefore calls for revisiting predominant forms and modes of collective claim-making in the literature on social movements in relation to highly authoritarian settings, wherein public organizing is suppressed and an open public sphere has been eradicated.

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## **Migrant labourers, Covid-19 and working-class struggle in the time of pandemic: a report from Karnataka, India**

**Mallige Sirimane and Nisha Thapliyal (11<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

### **Abstract**

Since the imposition of the unplanned lockdown in India, Karnataka Jan Shakti has worked with stranded migrant labourers to respond to a range of issues including starvation, transportation to return home, sexual violence, Islamophobia and labour rights. Karnataka Jan Shakti (KJS, Karnataka People's Power) is a coalition of Left-leaning activist groups and individuals. For the last decade, it has mobilised historically oppressed groups on issues of economic and cultural justice including Dalit sanitation workers, Dalit university students, slumdweller, peasants, nomadic tribes, and survivors of sexual violence. Our approach to collective struggle is shaped by the social analysis tools of Karl Marx, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Shankar Guha Niyogi. In this article, we document and analyse our struggle against situated forms of precarity in migrant lives shaped by class, caste, gender, age, and rural/urban geography which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. We also reflect on lessons for movement-building in a political milieu dominated by a hyper-surveillant fascist state, communal media apparatus and accelerated, unregulated privatisation under the latest national slogan of Self-Reliant India (*AtmaNirbhar Bharat*).

**Keywords:** Migrant labourers, Covid-19 pandemic, India, learning in the struggle

### **Introduction**

On March 24 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP, *Bharatiya Janata Party*) announced a three-week national lockdown to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Drawing on his usual blend of Hindu mythology, advertising jingo speak, and martial rhetoric, Modi announced a war against corona. He said, "The Mahabharata war was won in 18 days... Our aim is to win this [corona] war in 21 days" (Times of India, 2020). He gave the country a total of four hours' notice to prepare for the cessation of life as we knew it.

At the time of the unplanned lockdown, the state of Karnataka hosted an estimated 10.9 million migrant labourers<sup>1</sup> (Government of India 2011) out of

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<sup>1</sup> Data on internal migration remains scarce. The most reliable data available is the 2011 Census which was only released for public consumption in 2019 (Ahamed 2020). According to this Census, there were 455 million internal migrants in 2011. However, Ahamad (2020) reminds us that this data does not include child and female migrant workers or district-level data. The state

which an estimated 4 million work in the construction industry alone (Deepika 2020). These women, men and children provide the labour that fuels construction, factories and small units, coffee plantations, food service industry, domestic work, waste collection, the taxi industry, the restaurant industry, care industry and other informal and organised economic sectors. Many migrants circulate annually for seasonal work while others have become more or less permanent residents in their adopted state/s. A minority are fortunate to have fixed work while the majority are compelled to look for temporary work and migrate from place to place in search of short-term employment (Mazumdar, Neetha and Agnihotri 2013). Most importantly, these labourers are predominantly from impoverished Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities from the most economically backward regions in the country and across the border in Nepal and Bangladesh (Samaddar 2020). They are the muscle, blood and bones that power the prosperity of Karnataka, and indeed the entire nation. Yet within India, they represent the invisible 99% whose exploitation is intrinsic to the enrichment of the 1%, Indian Dollar Billionaires (Oxfam, 2019).

When lockdown was imposed, the vast majority of them became unemployed overnight.<sup>2</sup> Shortly thereafter, they ran out of food and money to pay rent. Local authorities declared the high-density slums which most of them called home 'containment zones' and placed severe and overnight restrictions on movement. Migrants living on construction sites were abandoned by their employers and forced to venture outside for food and water when they often encountered anti-Muslim, anti-Chinese<sup>3</sup> and anti-outsider abuse (Dalasanoor 2020). In solidarity with Prime Minister Modi, upper class Indians rang bells, banged thalis, and lit *diyas* (oil lamps) from the safety and comfort of their socially distanced, well-supplied homes at regular intervals through the lockdown. However, migrant workers remained invisible to the official gaze until they decided to walk thousands of kilometres home. They had neither money nor food but they refused to allow their precarious lives to descend further into indignity and abuse. This powerful act of resistance led to a steady stream of news reports which documented callous and inhumane treatment by police, officials, and countless others seeking to exploit their desperation.

The death toll from these long marches during the height of the Indian summer got the attention of media and social workers. However, this was a problematic

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of Kerala (again) leads the way in terms of keep records, implemented welfare programs and changing the deficit discourse – guests of the state – which enabled the state to take relatively better care of its migrant workers during the lockdown.

<sup>2</sup> A recent survey by Azim Premji University found that 8 out of 10 urban workers and 6 out of 10 rural workers have experienced job loss since the imposition of lockdown (Center for Sustainable Employment, 2020). Available at <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/>

<sup>3</sup> Residents of north-east India and Nepal have long been subject to racialised, gendered and sexualised forms of discrimination. During the lockdown and even before the flare up of the conflict on the Indo-Chinese border in Ladakh, rightwing social media was hard at work circulating fake news about China's role in the pandemic and advocating boycott of Chinese goods.

form of visibility. Official and media discourse became dominated by problematic, gendered representations of migrants as carriers of disease, objects of charity and even superheroes capable of superhuman feats of endurance (Thapliyal 2020). It would take the Modi administration another four weeks to come up with a national plan to transport these workers home by rail and bus. The plan to arrange special trains and buses were given another catchy name, *Shramik (Worker) Specials*, but incommensurate resources to respond to the magnitude of need.<sup>4</sup>

### **The situation in Karnataka**

Karnataka, home to India's Silicon Valley and approximately 53 million people, has historically been one of the better performing Indian states based on the economic and social development indicators. However, the Karnataka Human Development Report reveals that the benefits of the hi-tech development boom are yet to reach poor women, Scheduled Castes (16% of the state population), and Scheduled Tribes (7%). The gap between these three groups and the rest of the population only continues to grow in relation to education and income attainment (Government of Karnataka 2006:312-313).

The ruling nexus in Karnataka today consists of entrenched elites consisting of Hindu upper-caste and class, urban, English-speakers and the relatively new elites from landed peasants - the *Vokkaligas* and the *Lingayats* who are officially classified as Backward Classes.<sup>5</sup> These two lower caste groups successfully mobilised against the Brahminical caste system which dominated the British colonial state apparatus. However, their social reformist critique and victories never extended to include Dalits. This historical reality provides a partial explanation for why Dalit and Adivasi populations continue to live in extreme poverty and exclusion in a state with 200 years of reservation policies and state subsidies that have benefitted other historically marginalised groups (Manasa, 2000).

Since the late nineties, state-led development has been overtly oriented towards the rhetoric of economic globalisation through a discourse of IT-led growth, privatisation, efficiency, and competitiveness (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003). Karnataka was one of the first states to secure large loans from the World Bank in return for structural adjustment reforms; and, one of the first states to pilot the World-Bank funded District Primary Education Program (DPEP) in 1994. Since then successive state governments, rightwing and centrist, have promoted

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<sup>4</sup> Senior Counsel Prashant Bhushan filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court demanding proper food and shelter arrangements for all stranded workers and poor across the country. While the Supreme Court initially declined to intervene on behalf of migrants, similar PILS filed at the state level were treated with more compassion by judges of the High Courts including Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka.

<sup>5</sup> Readers should note that Caste groups classified as 'backward' are distinct from those classified as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe but they also benefit from affirmative action policies - also known as reservations - some of which were introduced in colonial India.

the neoliberal development model by slashing public sector spending and borrowing money to meet their social obligations (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003:3406).

Karnataka is currently governed by the BJP under the Chief Ministership of B.S Yediyurappa who came to power after the ruling Congress-JDS coalition collapsed following the defection of 15 elected politicians to the BJP.<sup>6</sup> Since the Ayodhya movement in the nineties, Karnataka has provided fertile ground for the mobilisation of rightwing Hindu nationalist forces in southern India. This movement has systematically fueled existing divides around language, religion, caste, regional identity in a region historically characterised by every form of cultural diversity.<sup>7</sup> They were aided in these efforts by Kannada language media which has a long history of casteism and communalism (Haligeri 2020).

At the same time, Karnataka has a long history of grassroots social reform movements dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century anti-caste and anti-patriarchy *Vacchana* movement. The region has been a site for mobilisations for cultural recognition, economic redistribution and environmental conservation including: anticolonial struggle, promotion of Kannada language and cultural identity, recognition of Backward Classes, land rights (of farmers, Adivasis, slum dwellers and squatters), workers' rights, Dalit rights, LGBTQI rights and violence against women.

However, migrant labour largely remain unorganised and unmobilised in the state not in small part due to differences of language, regional identity. These forms of difference continue to divide Dalit and Adivasi groups along with cumulative effects of three decades of rightwing outreach to these communities (Sundar 2002). In Karnataka, key current sites of mobilisation include urban slum evictions in Bengaluru<sup>8</sup> and the coffee plantations in Kodagu, Chikmagalur and Hasan districts which account for 70% of the coffee production in the country.

### **Karnataka Jan Shakti (Karnataka People Power)**

Karnataka Jan Shakti (KJS, Karnataka People's Power) is an umbrella organisation of Left-leaning activist groups and individuals. For the last decade, it has mobilised communities on issues of economic and cultural justice

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<sup>6</sup> The entire process was engineered by BJP master strategist and Home Minister Amit Shah from his headquarters in New Delhi which then proceeded to repeat the process to bring down elected governments in other non-BJP states (Moudgal 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The erasure of Muslim histories in this region has been a key strategy. For example, in 2019, Hindutva activists campaigned to remove 18<sup>th</sup> century Muslim ruler of Mysuru Tipu Sultan from history textbooks. Sultan died fighting the British and subsequently became an almost mythical figure in British colonial discourse as well as postcolonial official and popular histories.

<sup>8</sup> In 2019, the forcible evictions were attempted in Turubarahalli near Kunadallahalli gate which is home to more than 2000 migrants from West Bengal, northeastern states and Bangladesh. The Alternative Law Forum has filed a court case for the land rights of slumdwellers.

including Dalit sanitation workers and university students, urban slum dwellers, rural landless people, nomadic tribes, and survivors of sexual violence (Thapliyal 2014).

The KJS approach to mobilisation is shaped by anti-caste thinkers and activists including Jyotiba and Savitri Bai Phule (1855) and Dalit leader Dr B.R Ambedkar (1936) for whom caste and untouchability were and remain deep rooted problems in Indian society. We also draw on the teachings of Marxist thinkers including socialist trade union leader Shankar Guha Niyogi who organised the *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* (Chhattisgarh Liberation Front, or CMM), a movement of miners, industrial workers, and farmers and gatherers from local Adivasi communities. From the CMM and Niyogi<sup>9</sup>, we have learned that movements of poor people cannot sustain the struggle if their lives are not stable. Hence along with rights, economic stability or rather livelihood and life are important. We have also learned the importance of knowledge produced through indigenous culture, history and the experience of collective struggle (Sadgopal and Namra 1993).

At the time of the lockdown, KJS was part of the nation-wide civil society collective called 'We The People' that had formed to resist a series of anti-Constitutional law and policy reforms introduced by the Modi administration in December 2019, namely the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Registration of Citizens (NRC), and National Population Register.<sup>10</sup> It was a key member of the Karnataka organising committee, *Naavu Bharateeyaru* (which means We The People in Kannada) along with Muslim community activists, student activists, and other pro-Constitution civil society groups. Our organising efforts received a significant boost after thousands of citizens spontaneously gathered outside the Townhall on December 19, 2019, to prevent the police from arresting anti-CAA activists. Since then, the coalition has worked to support the occupation of Bilal Bagh by women from the Muslim community as well as other forms of collective protest in Bengaluru and across the state. Over two months, we had formed district-level Save the Constitution Committees in preparation for the next phase of mobilisation against the 2020 Census data collection. The imposition of the unplanned lockdown conveniently ended this growing movement even though activists were willing to comply with physical distancing and other rules.

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<sup>9</sup> Niyogi was able to organize these groups into a Green-Red coalition by linking questions about development, growth, technology and labour rights to issues of environment and cultural identity (see also Krishnan 2016). Its achievements and imagination for a different world continue to inspire workers struggles in India (see e.g. Scandrett 2019; See also <http://sanhati.com/shankar-guha-niyogi-archives/>)

<sup>10</sup> The cumulative effects of these reforms would be to downgrade Muslims from their status of second class citizens to deprive them of citizenship all together (see e.g. Mishra and Waheed 2020). These exclusionary reforms did not apply to any other religious or cultural minority in the nation. These protests are considered historical in part because of the large numbers of Muslim women who participated in non-violent occupations of public spaces such as Shaheen Bagh in Delhi and Bilal Bagh in Bengaluru (see also Mohanty 2020 in this journal).

## **Activism during pandemic**

In the early weeks of the lockdown, Karnataka was lauded for its Covid-19 response. In keeping with its image of being home to India's Silicon Valley, the state government deployed technology-based surveillance to trace contacts and ensure strict quarantine akin to the Kerala model (Belagere 2020). Unlike Kerala, it turned a blind eye towards the vast population of migrant labourers stranded by the lockdown. For instance, the Public Distribution System (PDS) which provides free rations to the poor excluded people without ration cards, who were disproportionately interstate migrant labourers. This was one of the first issues highlighted by KJS activists which received favourable media coverage and resulted in a change in government policy.<sup>11</sup> Since then KJS has worked with migrant labourers to respond to a range of issues including starvation, homelessness, and transportation to return home, sexual violence, labour rights and Islamophobia.

*Hunger and Starvation:* The joint action committee which was formed during the anti-CAA movement became a spontaneous common platform for corona relief work in Bangalore city. The network grew around community kitchens established by Muslim youth and enabled civil society groups to distribute cooked food to thousands of people on a daily basis under the name of Mercy Mission. In addition, approximately one hundred KJS cadre located across the state<sup>12</sup> identified gaps in the public food distribution system and delivered dry ration kits to communities living in precarity in rural areas including slum dwellers, nomadic tribes and migrant labourers for four weeks. (The ration kits contained rice, dal, edible oil, sugar, onions, cereal, flour, spices, detergent and soap.)

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, even existing food subsidization programs like the Indira Canteens (modelled on similar programmes in Tamil Nadu) were underutilized. The provision of free food packets to the poor and homeless through the canteens was reversed on the grounds that people were not observing physical distancing and misusing the programme.

<sup>12</sup> KJS covered eleven districts including North Canara, Coorg, Mandya, Bangalore, Thumkur, Davanagere, Bellary, Koppal, Raichur, Bijapur, and Shivamogga.



Figure 1: Poster created for online Workers Rights Campaign<sup>13</sup>. Designed by Pavitra, KJS affiliated student activist.

### Migrant worker helpline and survey

After the central government required states to provide transportation for migrants to return home, we began additional strands of work. We formed coordination teams to liaise and support migrant travelers as part of the nationwide Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)<sup>14</sup>. One of the earliest issues we raised was the fact that domestic migrants (residents of Karnataka) were being charged more than twice as much they would normally pay for a bus ticket home. We carried out agitations with our allies including trade unions and other people's organisations. Again, these protests received support from Kannada and English media as well as opposition political parties led by the Congress. Within days, the Karnataka government announced fully free travel for all migrant workers on May 5, 2020. However, the true priorities of the state were revealed when the state government suspended all train and bus travel

<sup>13</sup> On the occasion of May 1 (2020) Labour Day, KJS started an online campaign through Facebook and Whatsapp called 'Shramika Hakku Abhiyana' (Workers Rights campaign as part of a national campaign for labour rights. The poster shows Ms. Savitramma, a resident of Davanagere district, a pensioner who works as a street vegetable vendor since government rations are not sufficient for an entire month. Lockdown put an end to her only means of livelihood. The poster text states, 'if you are hungry, if your family is affected by the lockdown and the apathy of the government, please join the campaign. Take the photo of you and the family with empty vessels and send it across the Chief Minister of Karnataka through Watsapp to this number.'

<sup>14</sup> On 1 May 2020, the group released a report — *32 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India* based on a national survey of approximately 17000 workers on issues of food supply, wage payment, and post-lockdown decisions. The report can be downloaded at [https://covid19socialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/32-days-and-counting\\_swan.pdf](https://covid19socialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/32-days-and-counting_swan.pdf)

three short days later. This decision was made to appease powerful lobbies of real estate developers and builders who did not want migrant construction workers to leave Bengaluru. The All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) described the decision as a violation of the fundamental right of the freedom of movement and one that promoted forced labour.<sup>15</sup> This decision was also reversed within a couple of days due to a national public outcry.

As part of this liaison work, KJS established a migrant worker telephone helpline for 24 hours and 7 days a week. The helpline was managed by nine volunteers who variously spoke Kannada, Telugu, Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and English. Unlike government helplines which limited themselves to dissemination of information, our helpline responded to all requests for aid. These included funds for travel and transportation to the nearest railway station, provision of funds and medicine to family members of workers stuck outside Karnataka, and emotional support. What we learned from callers in the early days of the helpline prompted us to carry out a systematic survey of conditions in working communities living in precarity.

KJS activists in all 30 districts of the state carried out phone or household surveys with migrant labourers<sup>16</sup>, small farmers, and sex workers. A total of 1500 individuals answered questions on issues including access to food and contract wages, government officials and facilities, Covid19 testing, and the state government's decision to lift the prohibition on the sale of alcohol (See Figure 2 below) (KJS 2020). In the survey, we also asked farmers about the sale of their harvested crops, government support for planting new crops in the approaching rainy season; and whether the national rural employment scheme needed to be expanded (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, MGNREGS).

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<sup>15</sup> The Wire India. May 7, 2020. <https://thewire.in/labour/karnataka-migrants-builders-trains>

<sup>16</sup> The Kannada language version of the study was released on 4 June 2020 in the company of migrant labourers who live in Channahalli Hakkipikki Colony. The Hakkipikki are members of a historically nomadic tribe which remains one of the most economically and socially oppressed communities in the state. Despite sustained government neglect, they have not faltered in their struggle for land and housing rights.

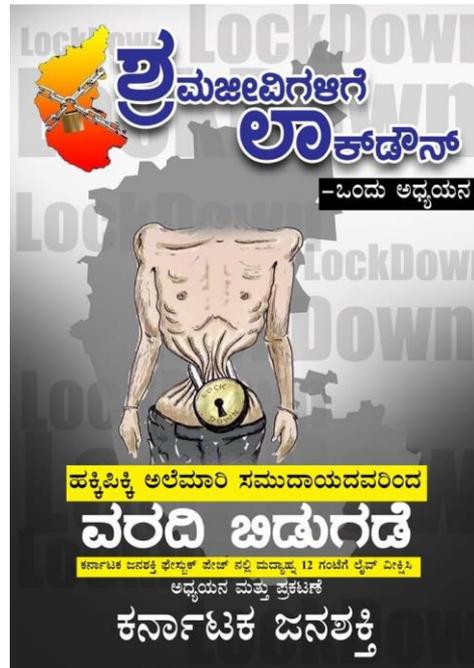


Figure 2: Cover page of Migrant Worker Survey Report (KJS 2020). Designed by Chandrashekhar (KJS activist).

In particular, our survey provided gendered insights into people's lives under lockdown. Our respondents included a total of 284 women labourers, sex workers, transgendered peoples and *devadasis* (female servants of God).<sup>17</sup> Women shared their concerns about domestic violence during the lockdown which increased when the alcohol prohibition was lifted. More than 60% of this group reported that they were unable to access any treatment for the routine ailments including those that accompany sex work (Karnataka Jan Shakti 2020: 47). They shared their worries about not being able to get adequate quantities of food. The lack of income for the last two months also jeopardised the education of their children since this is time for school admissions, payment of fees and purchase of textbooks and uniforms.

### Gendered violence

Through the helpline, we learned about the trafficking of two Adivasi women from Jharkhand who were forced into bonded labour in an incense factory near Bengaluru. For more than a year they were illegally confined and raped when they attempted to escape. The women only spoke Santhali and had two young

<sup>17</sup> An estimated 50-100,00 girls and women across continue to be sexually exploited by upper- and dominant caste men through the devadasi system which was legally abolished in 1982.

children with them. KJS arranged for the women to be placed in a shelter and pressured the police to take action against the rapists and factory owner.<sup>18</sup>

These gendered encounters align with what we know about the gendered forms of oppression and precarity experienced by women migrant labourers from historically oppressed groups.<sup>19</sup> According to Mazumdar, Neetha et al (2013), women comprise at least 15% of the migrant labour force. They are more concentrated in short-term and circular migration and perform dangerous and exploitative work alongside men on farms, construction sites, brick kilns, textile and other small factory units and so forth. However, they are typically paid far less and rarely on time (Dutta 2019). They are more likely to be subject to sexual harassment and violence from contractors, supervisors and employers (Mazumdar, Neetha et al. 2013). However, official data on the numbers and experiences of female migrant labourers, particularly from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds, continues to be highly limited by gender- and caste-insensitive concepts (Krishnan 2020; Mazumdar, Neetha et al. 2013).

## Islamophobia

On March 28, India learned that a Muslim community known as Tablighi Jamaat had convened a meeting of thousands of followers in Nizammudin Markaz in New Delhi in early March to commemorate the founding of their religious sect. Despite the fact that religious communities of all denominations had held similar meetings up till and even during the early days of lockdown, rightwing media embarked on a furious nationwide campaign about the 'Tablighi Virus' and 'Markaz disease'. Anti-Muslim rhetoric dominated Kannada news media coverage as well accompanied by calls to boycott Muslim businesses and traders (Nagaraj 2020). A halfhearted warning from the BJP Chief Minister did little to stem the deluge of new reports and talk shows which recycled conspiracy theories about corona jihadis in India and Pakistan, sometimes in league with Chinese communists.

At the national level, this mediatized campaign of hate was countered by online media outlets such as The Wire and The Quint. In Karnataka, *Varthabharathi* (Kannada, print and online), *Naanu Gauri* (Kannada, online) and *Gauri Media* (English, online) worked systematically to counter hateful and fake news. KJS has a close working relationship with the latter two media outlets which were established in memory of progressive Kannada journalist Gauri Lankesh who was assassinated by a Hindutva activist on September 5, 2017. Through these Internet media outlets and related social media, our activists actively countered the Islamophobic and fake news discourse circulating in mainstream news media (see e.g. Mutturaju 2020).

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<sup>18</sup> See also <https://gaurilankeshnews.com/bangalore-shocking-tale-of-human-trafficking-sexual-assault-and-bonded-labour-of-migrant-ativasi-woman/>

<sup>19</sup> See also the Special Issue on Gender, Violence and the Neoliberal State in India edited by Kalpana Wilson, Jennifer Ung Loh and Navtej Purewal (2018).

## **Activism during pandemic: lessons learned**

In this report, we have documented recent struggles against situated forms of precarity in the lives of migrant labour shaped by class, caste, gender, age, and rural/urban geography. In the previous section, we discussed how our current areas of work are oriented to both forcing the state to act as well as contesting how the state acts (Cox 2020).

Our experience over the last ten weeks has reconfirmed the lack of respect for the dignity of the working poor and instead the sheer disposability of their bodies. We say reconfirmed because this knowledge should come as no surprise. Overwhelmingly, these are the people whose lives have been systemically impoverished, whose communities have been historically destroyed by colonial extraction and capitalist dispossession by accumulation (Kapoor 2013). These are the same bodies unceasingly subject to state-sanctioned, gendered forms of coercion and violence, increasingly directly at the hands of the state, as evinced by Kashmir, Chattisgarh, and the northeast of India (Sundar 2018).<sup>20</sup> In his seminal book, 'Everyone Loves a Good Drought', journalist P. Sainath<sup>21</sup> (1996) refers to these communities as development refugees. This term is inappropriate because these migrants are not homeless. Rather, they appear to have been permanently designated collateral damage, a metaphor that fits with current dominant masculinist discourse about the war against the pandemic.

In our endeavors to help migrant workers reach home safely with dignity, we have had multiple opportunities to rethink the relationship between crisis and transformation (Cox 2020). We have learned that Covid-19 pandemic is not the great equalizer in stratified societies. The protections of the neoliberal, neocolonial, and now fascist Indian state are only available to those with historical privileges of caste, gender, race/ethnicity, class and purchasing power. Perhaps this is why the corporations that are laying ruin to India have donated so generously to the PMCare Fund.<sup>22</sup>

The BJP administration is using the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate privatisation in India. This objective has been made unapologetically clear in the so-called *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan* (Self Reliant India) relief package recently announced by the Central government. The package contains no

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<sup>20</sup> In her blog piece, Sundar (2018) argues that democracy functions in three ways in relation to precarity and violence: "it is a casualty of violence; it is an enabler of violence and precarity (including the slow violence of starvation); and it is a resource for oppressed groups."

<sup>21</sup> Sainath is a Magsaysay Award winning journalist and founder-editor of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) news network. He also reported on India's agrarian crisis in the 2010 documentary film 'Nero's Guests'.

<sup>22</sup> India's largest construction and engineering company Larsen & Toubro donated Rs 150 crores to the Fund while its predominantly migrant construction workers were kept unpaid and virtually captive on locked down construction sites. Protests by thousands of workers on sites in Hyderabad and Kattupili were met by police violence and cessation of water and food supplies (<https://www.newsclick.in/Tamil-Nadu-COVID-19-Lockdown-Migrant-Workers-Denied-Wages-Forced-to-Work>).

provisions to support the working class and poor recover from the economic ravages of the unplanned lockdown (Jha 2020). In evoking *atmanirbharta* or self reliance, Modi<sup>23</sup> is drawing on a concept which resonates with his faith-based audience who can trace it back to a distant but divine Vedic and Brahminical past (Srinivasaraju 2020). The same concept of self reliance underpinned anticolonial struggles but with very different meanings. For liberation thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar and Gandhi, the meaning of self reliance was intrinsically connected to the struggle for freedom and dignity for historically exploited and enslaved groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, bonded labourers and other workers.

Instead, the Modi administration has pushed states to undermine hard won labour rights secured through 135 years of struggle by urban and rural workers (Oomen 2009). Six states tried to increase the working hours for all workers and employees from 8 to 12 hours per day. The Karnataka government also tried to bring an ordinance connected to working hours, Provident Fund and other worker protections without presenting it before the Cabinet. Our mobilisations along with trade unions and civil society allies were able to put a stop to these proceedings. However, the government succeeded in passing an amendment to the Farmers Cooperatives Act which would allow farmers to sell their produce to anyone to the benefit of agrobusiness and multinational corporations (Deccan Herald 2020<sup>24</sup>). In addition to privatisation, the Indian state has sought out more opportunities to expand surveillance and silence dissent. It is no longer mandatory to install the corona tracking app, *Aarogya Setu*, which has been found lacking on grounds of both security and privacy. However, employers, housing societies, airlines and railways have expanded the reach of the surveillance state by making this track compulsory on behalf of the Modi administration. Furthermore, as lockdown restrictions have eased, the surveillance state has banned all protests, even those which followed physical distancing, group size and other rules. After abdicating responsibility for the wellbeing of migrant labourers to civil society, the state apparatus has continued its persecution of anti-CAA student activists (most recently Safoora Zargar, Devangana Kalita, and Natasha Narwal) and lifelong civil rights activists like Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Navlakha, and Dr. Varavara Rao. These activists have been dragged into the prison industrial complex even as the state is freeing thousands of prisoners in admission of the fact that the virus is spreading rapidly within overcrowded inmate populations.

So where to from here? P. Sainath (1996) reminds us that states welcome crises like droughts and pandemics because they can do anything, they want during

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<sup>23</sup> For that matter, not once in two months did Prime Minister Modi mention migrant workers in his weekly televised and radio addresses to the nation. In Week 10 of lockdown he wrote a Letter to the Nation to celebrate completion of one year in office in his second term as Prime Minister where he acknowledged the suffering of migrants (NDTV 2020).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.deccanherald.com/state/karnataka-politics/kumaraswamy-warns-karnataka-govt-against-ordinance-to-amend-labour-laws-and-apmc-836853.html>

these crises<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, activists (and anyone with a shred of humanity) can be completely overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of human suffering and need amongst the poor and working classes. We have to honestly say that there was a palpable sense of panic and fear in movement spaces in Karnataka at the onset of the pandemic. Activists are no exception in this respect. In addition, there have been too many moments during the last three months when we have felt ineffective in all areas of our work. The systematic silencing of rationalist, scientific, 'sane' voices about responses to the pandemic have compounded these feelings. For example, instead of using the lockdown to broadcast scientific education about the coronavirus, the Modi administration chose to rebroadcast Ramayana<sup>26</sup> television drama from the 1980s.

Yet even in this time of extreme oppression, we draw inspiration from the resistance and self-respect of migrant workers who have resisted the authoritarian state with unrestricted powers. Migrant workers have resisted in myriad ways: by choosing to walk home; by demanding that they be released from construction sites where they have been kept all but captive; by protesting in large numbers at train stations and so forth.<sup>27</sup> These voices of resistance also emerged in our survey (KJS 2020):

*“Jaan hai tho kuch dhang ka apne gaon mein kar lenge, yahan nahi ayenge”*  
(If we survive, we shall do something respectable in our place, but we won't return to this place) (Chotu Sahani who travelled from Coorg to Bengaluru in order to return to his village in Bihar) .

“Am I a terrorist? Why am I being treated like one?” (Arabindo from Assam who was denied travel on Shramik train because of lack of *Aadhar* identification card).

While we cannot be certain as to what the future will bring, we are clear that the issue of informal labour sits at the heart of a structural and logistical reorientation of the economy (Samaddar 2020). Our current demands for immediate relief are the doorway to politicise claims for the rights and dignity of migrant labourers (Della Porta 2020). Looking to the future we see this as an opportunity to revitalize campaigns for sustainable jobs, stability in rural economy, and respect and protection of human rights.

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<sup>25</sup> Sainath attributes the title to a peasant activist from Jharkhand who noted that drought reliefs are a like a *teesri fasal* (third crop) for people in power who stand to make even more money in the name of relief work.

<sup>26</sup> Readers may also recall the 2011 rightwing campaigns to erase 'Many Ramayanas' from University curriculum.

<sup>27</sup> The Migrant Workers Solidarity Network has documented migrant workers' resistance across India in an interactive map which can be experienced at <https://www.mwsn.in/resistancemap/>

But we have to start from where we are today. As Laurence Cox (2020: 5) writes, social movements “start from human needs and everyday praxis”. All though collective struggle is not new to us, we find ourselves in a place where we are taking stock and trying to cope with these extreme forms of oppression and injustice shaped by our deeply unequal society.

Shankar Guha Niyogi taught us that working people are the ones to bring change in this world. At the same time many workers filled with the hierarchical and discriminatory ideas and beliefs which shape how the ruling classes view social relations e.g. hierarchies of class, caste, gender and so forth. In Kannada, we say “*Dudiyuva janaru eshtu dina thamma samajika samskrutika moulyagalalli aaluvavara baala hididirutharo, alliyavarege aarthika abhivrudhdhige arthavilla*” (As long as the working people are holding the tail of the ruling class (in their social and cultural values and relationships), economic upliftment and stability means nothing). Therefore, the challenge for us in order to move forward is to facilitate the kinds of learning that enable workers to see that they are the people who generates the wealth for the nation. Many of the migrants that we have had direct interaction with appear broken and their suffering is not yet at an end.<sup>28</sup>

What is more workable are the familiar tensions and contradictions that accompany movement-building amongst the Left. There are always potential divides based on ideology and practice that cannot be bridged overnight. During the anti-CAA organising, we were able to overcome challenges of sectarianism which threatened to splinter the movement. For example, some Left groups wanted their individual flags and banners to be displayed prominently but we were all eventually able to agree to demonstrate a common Indian identity. The rightwing media had us under tight surveillance and did not miss any opportunities to accuse us of unpatriotic, anti-national behaviour.

All this is to say that movement-building is undoubtedly messy work. Building collective identities and networks of dissent is an incremental and situated process in a political context characterized by the scale of socio-cultural diversity that is India. What we have learned over time is that to act collectively, there has to be a centre which can hold all other forces in mutual faith and cooperation. In this we are reminded the Marxist feminist August Bebel (1904) who urged activists to march separately but strike a united blow. The last six months have taught us that relationships which have been strained and broken can be reconstituted and redeployed in struggles for justice (Della Porta 2020). We have found a new sense of solidarity and a belief that we can rely on each other rather than leave marginalised people to fend for themselves.

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<sup>28</sup> As readers may know, those who have reached home are being placed in unsanitary and unsafe quarantine centres. In the last week alone, news media have regularly reported the deaths of men, women and children due to food poisoning, snake bites, untreated health conditions and alleged suicide.

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## **Solidarity in times of social distancing: migrants, mutual aid, and COVID-19**

**Johannah May Black, Sutapa Chattopadhyay, Riley Chisholm  
(20<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

Stories on communing prompted us to write this manuscript. As we ventured into emerging reports, articles, and other readings about organizations and grassroots community groups on the forefront of the ‘fight’<sup>1</sup> against the pandemic, bringing support to people in need, we felt provoked to explore the strategies and networks that are working with, for, and amongst migrants.

### **The necessity of solidarity in addressing the COVID-19 crisis:**

“Mutual aid” has become a mantra across the globe. Despite pressures to adopt a neoliberal, individualistic and protectionist worldview, with the rapid spread of the virus, ordinary people all over the world have begun to recognise the practical necessity of mutual assistance and cooperation. Government and industry pressure to re-establish the flow and exchange of goods and capital has reified the figure of the autonomous ‘worker’ as fundamental to the global recovery project—one oriented principally toward the health of the ‘economy’ Particularly for those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, the irony here is profound: as we are writing this today, the novel-Coronavirus has affected 4.66 million people, with hundreds of millions of job losses and layoffs in formal sectors, as well as devastating impacts on the informal economy. COVID-19 has produced the rapid aggravation of inequities, trapping untold millions in many layers of marginalization and exploitation<sup>2</sup>. These desperate circumstances have not gone without a progressive response. Around the world, activists and grassroots community members are demonstrating that COVID-19 has not prevented them from forming alliances and reaching out to those in need, crossing the boundaries of quarantine, lockdown, administrative bottlenecks, and, in some cases, rigid exceptionalism (see pp.2).

Informal, local, community initiatives and alliances often emerge at times of crisis, emergency and natural calamity. As we have seen both historically and in the present moment, ordinary people—those without activist or clearly articulated cooperative political backgrounds and experiences—have shown an empathic response to the suffering of others during the crisis. In such cases, people are motivated to act without having connection to a formal institutional or organisational body. In many cases, involvement begins as simply responding

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<sup>14</sup> The discursive frame through which ‘war’ is invoked as the dominant orientation to COVID, simultaneously reinforces patriarchy and the power of the state. As we shall discuss, radical and feminist alternatives are available through a language of mutuality and cooperation.

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_743036/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang-en/index.htm) Last Accessed May 17, 2020

to expressions of need by running errands, empathic listening over the phone or via online connections, or helping to shovel a driveway<sup>3</sup>. In the case of migrants, the homeless, those struggling with mental illness, disability and/or domestic violence, the range and extent of daily needs is compounded by their relative dispossession before the virus emerged. For these populations, needs can include having access to appliances, clothing, or critical infrastructure including a reliable internet connection, making connections with supportive people who can offer words of care and encouragement from a distance, or help organising resources such as transportation or access to medical help when pre-existing challenges become acutely magnified. Where clinically trained NGOs, such as *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)* have obeyed border restrictions implemented during COVID-19, there has been a withdrawal of the organizational support systems that were in place before the arrival of the virus. For migrants, this has proved disastrous in terms of cutting off critical medical care to those crossing borders by land and sea. Instead, mutual aid support for migrants has been provided to those managing such things as chronic heart or pulmonary disease, cancer, heart disease, diabetes or immune disorders, through social media, phones, and other online supports.

The tragedy of Flint Michigan and Hurricane Katrina are readily pointed to as evidence of the ways that disaster capitalism seeks opportunity in catastrophe, both in terms of profiteering and fortifying the mechanisms of state repression and capitalist exploitation. But, at the same time, the resistance notable across time and space to such aggravations of structural violence, oppression, economic exploitation and bureaucratic disciplining, testifies to the strength of ordinary people, to engage deeply and collectively in moments of deep crisis. Especially for these reasons, both MSF and *SOS Méditerranée* have partnered in the past, to address the vital needs of migrants crossing the dangerous Mediterranean Sea. In the face of COVID-19, these groups are no longer in cooperation as they have taken on different approaches to the crisis. Where SOS Méditerranée has lobbied for more solidified legal and political assurances by receiving countries that they would, for instance, commit to having fully-equipped search and rescue ships in ports to assist - these efforts have been slow-moving in a context where the political apparatus for making such decisions is presently difficult to access. Contrarily for MSF, the humanitarian imperative to act was immediate. MSF has taken the position that its work is vital as people continue to flee severe dangers in countries such as Libya and face the risk of drowning. Since European states have placed extreme restrictions on NGOs doing work with migrant populations, the search and rescue operations have been severely hampered. Accordingly, these organizations are demanding that individual governments take full responsibility for the humanitarian catastrophe at sea that they are enabling through their closed border policies. Specifically, pro-migrant organizations are

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<sup>3</sup> As we write from Nova Scotia, Canada, the issue of accessibility in the snow which continued well into the month of May, was of a challenge to accessibility for persons with disabilities and older people.

insisting that the EU take immediate measures to stop the further loss of life and suffering of so many by reinstating search and rescue capacities, and by ending the flow of state-sanctioned resources to the Libyan coastguard which actively terrorizes border-crossers through forcible interdiction and return of refugees.

Times of prolonged and profound crisis, like the current pandemic, engender the discovery of a variety of alternative arrangements of protest, mutual aid, solidarity, self-management, self-mobilization and self-organization. The pandemic has introduced a plethora of new technologies for online mobilizations by ordinary people, workers, unions, alliances, and NGOs. Strategies have included but are not limited to e-petitions and other forms of mass-appeals that have forced governments and institutions to, for instance, suspend rents for students and low-income wage-earners, as well as to push for emergency student benefits and grants. To highlight a specific example, in mid-April the Malawi high court backed a petition by the Malawi Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) seeking to block a 21-day lockdown by the government. With no clear protocols or clarity on how the social and economic impacts would be mitigated for the most vulnerable, the HRDC were successful in convincing Justice Kenyatta Nyirenda that more consultation was needed to prevent disproportionate harm to the poor. Strikingly, the success of the HRDC was followed by satellite protests in other cities, led largely by small-scale traders and young people concerned about access to employment and relatedly, food resources should a lockdown be implemented<sup>4</sup>.

While the Kenyan government adopted draconian measures to enforce the quarantine measures of coronavirus patients<sup>5</sup>, in Nigeria, patients suffering from the virus forced their way out of isolation to object improper care and their worsening health conditions<sup>6</sup>. In Rwanda, relocated refugees from Libya living in overcrowded camps also rose in dissent,<sup>7</sup> while in Israel, hundreds of cars raising black flags headed to Jerusalem in opposition of the government's restrictions on movement and its authorization of the cyber-tracking of civilians. Such protests are not the expression of entitlement but rather expose the possibilities<sup>8</sup> in terms of collective interference in state-sanctioned, anti-democratic measures and the authoritarian suppression of resistance. Around one hundred parents disputed in Karachi, Pakistan demanding that the government assist in the return of their children who had been studying in the

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<sup>4</sup> [Malawi high court blocks coronavirus lockdown](#) Last Accessed May 15, 2020

<sup>5</sup> [Kenyans held for weeks in quarantine were then told to pay to get out](#) Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> [Nigeria: COVID-19 patients protest over 'ill treatment](#) Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/refugees-protest-under-coronavirus-lockdown-rwanda> Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Bauder, Harald. 2016. *Migration Borders Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Chinese province of Hubei, and due to the lockdown, were now stranded there<sup>9</sup> Grassroots feminist organizers have set up support funds for sex worker and survivors of the sex trade in Hawaii<sup>10</sup>. In countries like Finland, public transportation drivers declined to monitor tickets. And right across Europe and Asia, collective messages of contestation and solidarity have been swapped from balconies, windows, and rooftops. In Iraq, activists voiced their resistance to gender relations of power in terms of state led violence towards women<sup>11</sup>. Here in Canada, at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary resistance has emerged around newly implemented practices in which inmates have been placed in cells for more than 20 hours a day. In India, protests were provoked by Prime Minister Modi when he officially extended the lockdown in a live television address, this extension was understood by many to be a threat to the lives of temporary, migrant, gig workers<sup>12</sup> and small and local entrepreneurs. These examples offer just a small window into the various issues, strategies and techniques through which collective action has brought pressure to bear on governments around the world.

All of this said, in the face of the glaring necessity for radical and complex social transformation, movements often include protests without being limited by them. First, social movements create and reinforce alliances, while building upon existing social and community networks. But also, in practice, movements are about making connections, reinforcing pre-existing associations and solidarities, and reproducing what has already been established as a community's strength in the face of adversity/ies. Confronted and challenged by the manufactured inequalities of nationalized state systems and, even more, the capitalist market, social movements often find their legitimacy in justice-based values that flourish and multiply in contexts that support political innovation and creativity. We can see how this is so in terms of contemporary mutual-aid responses to the pandemic where the organic emergence of devoted support groups have begun to promote direct social action to assist those left behind by government. Moreover, movements produce resilience by resisting in imaginative and inspired ways that flow from the 'bottom-up', rather than the typical imposition of 'top-down' policies familiar to state and business organizational settings. This 'movement' from the bottom is in fact a metaphor

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-pakistan-idUSKBN20A0J9> Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://ca.gofundme.com/f/supportsurvival> Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> [The Iraq Report: Protest movement revives as coronavirus lockdown eased](#) Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> [India's migrant workers protest against lockdown extension | India News](#) Last Accessed May 15, 2020.

for the structural prerequisite for the emergence of broad coalitions of collective solidarity (Della Porta 2020)<sup>13</sup>.

Crisis also opens windows of opportunity for social change by intensifying the critical need for a truly public responsibility and civic sense, and for clear opportunities for broad civic engagement and acts of solidarity. If crises have an immediate effect on concentrations of power, up to and including militarization, they also validate the ineffectiveness of sovereign states acting merely through force (Della Porta 2020). As argued by Wendy Brown in her recent book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*<sup>14</sup>, the building of walls at the perimeter of nationalized territories is indicative of the decline of a state's sovereignty rather than its aggrandizement under conditions of globalization. And so here we can recognise the various failures of state-sanctioned power to halt the movement of people through establishing circuits of curtailment including, orchestrated administrative dead-ends, border walls, surveillance systems and other means by which the desperate and the poor become entangled. So, while walls have been the focus of most resistance, we may also recognise that symbolically, they stand as a crude depiction of psycho-political ambiguity and a defensive acknowledgement by the state itself to its own profound vulnerability. Fortifications emerge only when sovereignty dissipates; even walled states cannot completely interdict those who are determined enough or desperate enough to cross (consider Calais in Northern France, the Mexican and United States Border zone, the Mediterranean, the Schengen territory, and the list continues).

Here, the need for the redistribution of resources and widespread support in order to address the pandemic might bring forth an acknowledgement of the productivity of mobilizations from within civil society. Such collective solidarity movements might thus provide a necessary contrast to the measures taken by authoritarian states in their repressive response to the crisis of the pandemic. What is more significant is that the COVID crisis has shown the value of a fundamental public goodness of citizens to mobilise not only on behalf of their own, but in the interests of non-citizens as well. The crisis has illuminated how solidary work requires creativity, cooperative input on aims and goals and participatory action, from-below. In any of the mobilizations that have occurred during the pandemic, the value of a universally accessible system of public health has been made readily apparent as a matter of justice. We know that trade unions have traditionally argued for health care for workers, and those on the political Left have long fought for even broader universal health protections as a public good. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly demonstrated the need to reaffirm these demands and to expand them to include protections for the most vulnerable including migrants. Indeed, this is not simply a state-based issue as the pandemic triggers reflection on the need for a globally-established

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<sup>13</sup> Della Porta, Donatella. 2020. Social Movements in times of Pandemic: Another world is needed. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/social-movements-times-pandemic-another-world-needed/> Last Accessed May 10, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, Wendy, 2010. *Walled States and Waning Sovereignty*, NY: Zone Books.

set of health protections—a view espoused by civil society organizations such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Global), Food Not Bombs (North America), No One is Illegal (Canada), Black Lives Matter (North America), Emergency (Global), South Sudanese United Refugees Association (Africa), *Médicos Unidos* (Venezuela), Seva (India), to list a few.

### **The specific struggles of migrants and organizations from below**

With this snapshot of the intersection between the COVID-19 crisis and solidarity initiatives around the world, we have thus far, offered a brief exploration of both the challenges and innovative initiatives that have sought to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable during this crisis. Although in a limited fashion, we have tried to hone in on some of the creative and spirited ways in which mutual aid, and other forms of popular resistance have formed a counter-hegemonic orientation to the COVID-19 crisis. We have touched upon various expressions of autonomy and the agency of ordinary people engaged in mutual aid, as well as migrant justice organizations and NGOs—each in their own way advocating for human rights during a time in which such rights are being placed at increasing risk, particularly for those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Hannah Arendt's (1976)<sup>15</sup> most quoted phrase, often interpreted as the “right to have rights”, sums up her skepticism towards the concept of human rights where in theory, those rights are afforded every person by virtue of being human, while in practice are denied to those who do not have citizenship or legal status to stay. The migrants, we have talked about in this manuscript are but a handful of the 65.6 million people forcibly displaced by war, conflict, and political persecution. They join the ranks of 22.5 million refugees and ten million stateless people currently denied basic human rights to shelter, benefits, education, and freedom of movement.<sup>16</sup> From Western Europe to Australia, the United States to East Asia, undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers spend their days simply existing, waiting to be granted the legal acknowledgement that they are human.

The blatant hardening of borders through regulatory measures designed specifically to keep migratory labor cheap, disposable, and controllable, is not new or particular to COVID-19. It has long served the interests of the ruling class both in the feudal period and became aggravated with the advent of capitalism. In recent decades, the exploitation of global migrant populations has been fortified with increasing technological sophistication, the spread of globalization, and the hegemony of neoliberalism. Borders establish the political boundaries of various exclusionary state policies that internally, legitimize both

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt, Hannah. 1976. *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Orlando: A Harvest Book.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations. 'Refugees'. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees/> Accessed May 21, 2019.

domestic police repression of vulnerable populations and the super-exploitation of migrant labour, while externally, surveil and criminalize refugees seeking to escape poverty, hunger, and violence. Such practices are not unique to the circumstances presented by COVID-19 but are rather exacerbated by the current crisis. Viewed in this way, we can see that calls for compassion by state-bodies or multi-national corporations for migrants at this time—to enable access to food, sanitary accommodations, safe housing, health-care facilities, and information—is highly unlikely.

That Black American communities have disproportionately contracted and died of the novel-coronavirus, or that around the globe, indigenous communities have contracted the virus, or that migrants, refugees and other marginalized folk are being stigmatized and unjustly discriminated against for supposedly spreading the virus, that these populations are also, disproportionately underserved or outright neglected by medical services—all is related to the systemic oppression, racism and colonial biopolitical practices that pre-figured the arrival of COVID-19. Moreover, increasing neoliberal cuts to healthcare systems as well as the constant drive towards privatization have meant that even basic healthcare is increasingly out of reach for the poor. Xenophobic responses to COVID-19 from both governments and the public rings familiar: consider the response to other health crises like SARS, swine flu, Ebola. What is not well known is that such responses—those that underpin racist, classist, and sexist orientations—are not uni-directional. They also convey negative health outcomes to the wider public<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, these claims are not only based in hate, they are also divorced from facts: estimates show that transmission of the disease from refugee and migrant populations is low. Considering these data, we fail to see how increased border closures, including to asylum seekers here in Canada, as well as forced returns and refoulement of migrants globally are justifiable. In what follows, we briefly expand on the relevant work of some pro-migrant organizations.

On one side of the Atlantic Ocean is Florida and on the other is the inhospitable Hamada region of the vast Sahara Desert where lies the former Spanish colony of the Sahrawi country, now annexed by Morocco after Spain. The Sahrawi refugee camp is only a few kilometers from Tindouf in Algeria, between the Mediterranean Sea and Sub Saharan Africa. The lives of colonized Sahrawians who were already isolated by the so called “Wall of Shame”<sup>18</sup> are now lives of hyper-isolation with reduced access to humanitarian aid, sanitary supplies, health care, and food. Worse still, those confined in the overcrowded and squalid conditions, sleeping in tents, have no options for “social distancing” aside from full isolation making detainees particularly vulnerable to the spread of the disease. Since March 19, the Algerian government has suspended the

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/coronavirus-not-great-equalizer-race-matters-u-t-expert> Last Accessed May 10, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> An approximately 2,700 km long structure running through Western Sahara separating Moroccan-occupied areas (the Southern Provinces) on the west from the Polisario-controlled areas (Free Zone, nominally Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) on the east.

collective expulsion of irregular migrants<sup>19</sup> yet continues to remove migrants from Africa, while reducing the possibility of refugees crossing the border. No new asylum policies or practices have been adopted in response to the virus. On April 2020, 5,037 prisoners were released by the Algerian president. Migrant detainees are now being confined in facilities with inadequate sanitary provisions and limited health care and are being forced to share rooms with countless others. As in many refugee camps around the world, restrictions around COVID-19 have meant that these liminal spaces have become places of long-term settlement with complex economic systems and alliances. In Saharawi, capital inflows have been produced by remittances and informal economic activities. The Sahrawians in exile and in refugee camps have converted parts of the bleak desert into planned vegetable gardens through initiatives of young Sahrawi agronomists as well as technicians versed with irrigation. By their own resourcefulness, Sahrawians have also drawn on the generational knowledge of elderly Sahrawis in order to incorporate traditional soil and plant protection techniques. They have established self-supporting health care facilities honing the technical and medical skills of exiled traditional healers, doctors, and nurses. The stories of hope amidst dismay, precarity and extreme vulnerability long-predicate the spread of the virus, but we can recognize how, with the establishment of these practices and skills, resilience continues to manifest even in the bleakest situations. As Eric Werker has noted, the main economic actors in any refugee camps are “the refugees themselves, many of whom possess skills and access to networks and commercial capital acquired either before or during their residence in a camp” challenging the normal description of refugees as “passive, paralyzed victims who are totally dependent on international aid” and refugee camps as “places of stasis, and of refugees as passive, paralyzed”<sup>20</sup>

Over the past few years, Venezuela remains mired in economic, political, and social turmoil as well as the threat of imperialist intervention, has meant the rapid depopulation of roughly 4.5 million people including much needed medical professionals, by foot into Columbia and Brazil. Hyperinflation and economic sanctions have caused shortages of basic food and medical supplies. According to local Venezuelan NGO *Médicos Unidos*<sup>21</sup> hospitals are regularly faced with repeated power outages, shortages of staff, gloves, antibiotics, protective gear and other medical supplies or potable water. While the borders remain closed due to the virus, informal crossings continue.

In Uganda, home of 1.4 million refugees, lockdown has been in place since March 30th. Many in the country are faced with challenges posed not only by

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<sup>19</sup> Defined generally as a person who, owing to what is considered a breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of their legal basis for entering and residing, has no legal status in a host country.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/rethinking-concept-durable-solution-sahrawi-refugee-camps/> Last Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30718-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30718-2/fulltext) Last Accessed May 9, 2020.

the virus, but by its secondary consequences including a lack of food, medicine, and basic services. Arua, a bustling town located on the West Nile, is now surrounded with refugee camps facing severe shortages of food due to restrictions on mobility. Although bound by policies that prevent them from feeding refugees, a refugee-led organization called *South Sudanese United Refugees Association (SSURA)* has been drawing upon the help of refugee families who pick food on behalf of those stuck in Arua. Another community-based organization known as *Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID)* has “distributed baskets of flour, soap, beans, sugar, and cooking oil to vulnerable refugees in Kampala, identifying recipients through community networks and reaching over 200 households”<sup>22</sup>. Similar organizations are making efforts to dispel the myths of COVID-19 via social media and cellphones. It has been noted that, “The current crisis may lead to lasting models of participatory and inclusive refugee assistance – and in turn more sustainable and localized humanitarian governance.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Milan (2020, 2-3)<sup>24</sup> writes that in the Balkans which is in a State of Emergency like many other places, contact with or access to refugee centers, camps, squats or housing is restricted except for a few international organizations like the *Red Cross*. Yet informal solidarity groups have sprung up to provide such things as cooked hot meals, online vouchers that migrants can use to buy food locally, first aid support and much-needed information on the virus. One independent organization that is relentlessly working with refugees and illegalized border crossers in the Western Balkans migratory passage is *ŠID – Velika Kladuša or No Name Kitchen (NNK)*. Having established a “solidarity market”, the NGO manages to provide food for approximately 500 people on a weekly basis. This sort of an activity also supports the local economy, which is emulated by other grassroots collectives, such as the Italian Bozen Solidarity. This group uses social networks to provide resources and aid to people on the move along the migratory path.

Another organization like NNK is *Food Not Bombs (FNB)*. This organization works around the clock and 365 days in some cities in the United States. They usually cook and serve weekly public meals and are now cooking and canning food and dropping it off to those in need. As many in the group are in isolation in their homes, they quickly set up a fundraising app to raise money in order that their membership could participate in making masks and bottles of bleach cleaner/disinfectant in their confinement. The bags of food put together for distribution by FNB, contain a mask and a spray bottle of disinfectant. With the help of another organization called *ON A MOVE*, FNB includes a printout of information on the virus in the food bags. FNB also partners with other

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<sup>22</sup> Why Refugees are an asset in the fight of coronavirus. <https://theconversation.com/why-refugees-are-an-asset-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus-136099> Last Accessed May 10, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/04/29/coronavirus-response-refugee-camps-humanitarian-aid> Last Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Chiara-Milan.pdf> Last accessed May 19, 2020

organizations like Philly IWW [Industrial Workers of the World], *Philly Trans March*, *Socialist Rifle Association*, *SHARE Food Program*, *Philly REAL [Racial, Economic and Legal] Justice*, *For the People* and the *Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement*, each of which are pushing for social justice for the marginalized during the pandemic.

In late January 2020, France confirmed a positive case of the COVID-19 respiratory disease. In France, roughly 3000 migrants live in temporary makeshift camps, communal housing, on the street, or in public parks and face poor sanitary conditions and a lack of access to basic medical care. The same people have also been confronting harassment from police, exploitative working conditions, and repeated evictions by the authorities. The northern city of Calais nicknamed “the jungle,” houses more than 10,000 migrants, living in sordid conditions. Véga Levailant, Communications and Advocacy Officer for the migrant aid organization [Utopia 56](#), has said that migrants in Calais “live in such poor conditions that the virus is not such a fear. Because they are afraid of dying in so many other ways, like lack of food, or lack of water, or just any disease they could have by living in the street. But yes, a lot of them are also very scared.”<sup>25</sup> [Care4Calais](#) is one of the only organizations still providing emergency services to migrants and refugees in [Calais](#). Local authorities started to move migrants from makeshift camps to accommodation centers, but the process has been slow, and the centers are already over-crowded. Grassroots aid groups have reported that the camps are faced with limited water and food supplies. Migrants are under strict quarantine, without access to the proper paperwork, and cannot access the supermarkets to buy food for themselves. “Refugees living in northern France already have weakened immunity from chronic stress and the deplorable conditions they are forced to live in,” said Sarah Story, co-founder and director of [Refugee Info Bus](#).

Undocumented workers make up an often invisible part of the Canadian workforce. From construction labourers, to seasonal farm workers, to house cleaners, they are often paid in cash and can face discrimination from employers or other workers over their undocumented status. Even more concerning, thousands of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers have been working on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis in Quebec’s understaffed long-term care homes<sup>26</sup>. In southwestern Ontario, approximately 14,000 temporary migrants work in the agricultural sector each season. The towns of Leamington and Kingsville alone see an annual intake of 5,000 to 6,000 workers a year, the vast majority of whom are from Mexico, Jamaica, Indonesia, or the Philippines. The growth in the migrant worker population in this area has been triggered by the rapidly growing \$1-billion greenhouse industry. With 2,000 acres under glass or plastic, this region represents the largest concentration of greenhouses in North America. There have already been problems reported in terms of

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<sup>25</sup> <https://qz.com/1834508/what-dealing-with-covid-19-is-like-for-homeless-migrants/> Last Accessed May 9, 2020

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-asylum-seekers-on-front-line-of-quebecs-covid-19-battle-in-care-homes-2/> Last accessed May 19, 2020

discrimination by employers and locals toward the migrants, yet with COVID-19, there is great concern that these negative attitudes towards migrant workers by the wider community will deepen, particularly for those from Asian countries like Indonesia or the Philippines. For example, one video shared over social media by the activist group Justice4MigrantWorkers<sup>27</sup> shows migrant farmworkers at one Ontario farm, housed in a warehouse, sleeping on wooden pallets with cardboard boxes for storage<sup>28</sup>. Cast as temporary labourers and not citizens, migrant workers already experience mental health struggles that are, according to health care workers, “situational”—that is, produced in the context of their conditions in the Canadian migrant labour force. This is reinforced by a study in British Columbia<sup>29</sup> that found feelings of unworthiness, loneliness, and social isolation are common among migrant workers, predisposing them to increased rates of depression and anxiety. Certainly, depression and anxiety are likely to intensify given the restrictions associated with the pandemic.

In all, the situation is both bleak and promising. We cannot ignore the profound hardships and struggles forced upon the most marginal at this time. Yet, innovative and creative responses and resistance to Coronavirus have emerged as effective interventions in critical situations facing the most vulnerable. These grassroots, collectively based efforts have had important impacts, the most apparent being those which have coordinated and distributed critical resources to people most in need. In addition, local mutual aid groups, pop-up food banks, community sourced medical gear, and free online medical-consultation<sup>30</sup> clinics have all been used as methods that people developed in the past several months to address what more formal organisations and institutions have been structurally unable, or politically unwilling to do. What is certain is that the actions of social movements and communities around the world have already saved countless lives. Where migrants stand out as a particularly vulnerable group, we note that they are not in any regard, helpless. Broad reaching commitments across all of civil society, including from the migrant community, promises to be a source of resilience and support for us all. It also is the basis for the development of unified resistance to state sanctioned tyranny and dispossession, through which local groups and communities cohere around not just local interests but establish global political demands such as health care and human rights for all.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.justicia4migrantworkers.org/?source=post\\_page-----](http://www.justicia4migrantworkers.org/?source=post_page-----) Last Accessed May 19, 2020

<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/martinezdefence/status/1262026764643164160> Last Accessed May 19, 2020

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0188-70172016000100085](http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0188-70172016000100085)

Mendliburo, Aaron Diaz and Janet McLaughlin. 2016. “Structural Vulnerability and Health among Seasonal Health Care Workers in Canada”, *Alteridades* 6, (51).

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1099363> Last Accessed May 18, 2020.

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## **Doing migrant solidarity at the time of Covid-19**

**Anitta Kynsilehto (30<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

This paper discusses migrant solidarity in Morocco, drawing on long-term work with migrants of different nationalities from Western and Central African countries residing in Morocco as well as on migrant solidarity activism in the country. Many of these people on the move have arrived in Morocco with a plan on continuing their journeys to the European continent and ended up staying in Morocco because of enhanced border control measures and outsourcing of the European Union's borders to the African continent (e.g. Andersson 2014; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias & Pickles 2015). Along these 'fragmented journeys' (Colley 2007), people on the move have organised in different ways developing practices of 'circumstantial solidarities' (Bredeloup 2013) based on the shared condition of precarity mounting to daily struggles for survival, including shared places of residence in makeshift campsites and crowded apartments. Since the beginning of visible migrant protest from 2005 onwards, they have also formed more established associations and organisations (e.g. Üstübici 2016). These latter have been able to influence the new migration policy in Morocco, in the making since 2013, as active and indispensable contributors in public debate and different specialized commissions as well as through their direct contacts with broader migrant community. However, since August 2018 there has been a severe backlash against migrants' rights activism in the country (e.g. Kynsilehto 2019). It is this evolving context where the global pandemic has posed additional challenges, both immediately and potentially in the long-term: highlighted some of the persistent structural issues related to migrants' access to rights such as healthcare, food and accommodation that have become all the more precarious during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also as regards to the migrant solidarity movement's possibility to testify and denounce violations by the authorities in a societal climate where these forms of solidarity are increasingly criminalized.

### **Global health crisis contributing to broader social crisis**

With the outbreak of Covid-19 in Morocco, all country was locked down. The sudden closing of the whole country created uncertainty as regards to what could happen, how to best survive in the midst of global health crisis now affecting also the immediate proximity and, very simply, where and how to find relevant information as regards to measures in place. Migrant communities were particularly affected by this uncertainty as at first relevant information was distributed in Arabic, such as in the government web page devoted to the pandemic (<http://covid19.interieur.gov.ma/>). This was where migrant organisations stepped in by seeking to map those in need of specific support, such as lone mothers, families with small children and pregnant women. At the same time, information on the pandemic and the measures in place to contain it was quickly translated into different languages in order to inform everyone, and

Serge Aimé Guemou, the president of the French-speaking umbrella organisation Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc (CMSM), distributed a video and written message on the measures everyone needs to remember during the pandemic (Guemou 2020). An important one of these was the permission needed to justify any outdoors activity such as grocery shopping or visit to a health centre. Earlier Mr. Guemou had also reminded migrant community leaders of this possibility when seeking to reach out to the most vulnerable individuals (personal communication, 21 March 2020). Hence, the first obstacle to be mounted was the overall restriction on mobility and understanding what reasons for moving about could still be permitted under these restrictive measures.

Despite different projects and measures put in place over the years in order to enable migrants' access to health care, this remains problematic not only in terms of the present pandemic but also during times of the 'old normal'. Regular check-ups on permanent diseases or follow-up of pregnancies have been halted. Registered migrants have, in paper, access to universal healthcare RAMEL reserved for all those with low income (see, e.g., Akhnif, Macq & Meessen 2019). This system has, however, been unevenly accessible for migrants even in normal times, prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic: for example, health care centres may have asked for a valid residence permit in the original version and refused entry for prospective patients whose residence permits were undergoing renewal, which is a notoriously lengthy process. Moreover, according to Moroccan sociologist and migrants' rights activist Mehdi Alioua, the specific support measure of some 800 to 1200 dirhams for low income families during the Covid-19 lockdown and resulting practical unemployment concerns only those migrants who had been able to have a valid RAMEL card at the end of 2019 (El Ouardighi 2020).

Access to work has become impossible for many daily laborers during the lockdown resulting in de facto unemployment and complete lack of revenue. It has thus impacted in many ways migrants and the communities they form. The direct consequence of lack of income is that it has become difficult, even impossible to pay rent for the shared apartments and rooms, and created shortages of food, leading to hunger crisis (El Ouardighi 2020) that migrant solidarity groups try to alleviate the best they can. Moroccan associations mobilized swiftly to come in support of migrants (Yabiladi 2020). Soup kitchens and other forms of collectively organised solidarity put in place in times of crisis prior to the present pandemic, for example in Greece under the austerity measures and the so-called refugee crisis in Europe (e.g. Rozakou 2016), have needed to adapt to the changed context of social distancing.

For migrant groups, some of which organised according to nationality, lack of income has created an additional problem. The activities of these community groups rely largely on small contributions (cotisations) of all members, and alongside other shortages, it has become extremely difficult for the members to contribute. For this reason, independent allies and funders stepping in from outside would be warmly welcome.

## **Health emergency enabling further criminalisation of solidarity**

The context of Morocco also provides unfortunate examples of how emergency measures undertaken because of the global pandemic can serve as an excuse for restricting individual freedoms beyond the necessary precautions due to the need to contain and stop the global health crisis. In the context of migrant solidarity, the case of human rights activist Omar Naji provides an important example. Resident of Nador, the emblematic border town shouldering the Spanish city of Melilla, Naji has been involved in migrants' rights activism for many years, reminding Moroccan authorities for their duties vis-à-vis foreigners and denouncing publicly their excessive use of force during frequent raids and mass arrests and subsequent forced removals, for example. This time he was arrested and accused for posting this kind of information in social media, under the pretext of recent regulation forbidding such activity. This regulation was passed in haste and in secrecy under the state of emergency due to Covid-19. It has remained unclear what possible connection this interdiction would have for doing anything to the health crisis; however, it has been immediately implemented. What is clear, however, is that this example of Moroccan authorities' attack on a well-known migrants' rights activist attests to the need for solidarity activists and critical civil society to remain alert to states' attempts to use the health emergency to implement control measures that go beyond health concerns in order to silence critical voices.

## **Concluding remarks**

As the above suggests, the present pandemic highlights the inequality among different populations and persisting structural problems people on the move face in their country of settlement. As a first step forward, there is a collective call from migrant activists across North Africa and beyond: being able to access a regular residence status is a primordial requirement for accessing other fundamental rights. This became clear, for example, in the webinar organised by Maghreb Social Forum on the 30 May, 2020, addressing the additional challenges Covid-19 poses to migrants without regular migration status in the country they reside. This event was one amongst many recent collective online meetings that offer possibilities for exchange across countries and regions to collective mobilisations in times of crisis that impedes international mobility also of those who usually have access to regular and orderly travel channels. At the same time of being a necessity for this period of global health emergency, they may also offer further learning opportunities for movements that rely on in person meetings but, in so doing, render it difficult for those with limited access to (international) mobility to take part.

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## **New political upheavals and women alliances in solidarity beyond “lock down” in Switzerland at times of a global pandemic**

**Susan Thieme and Eda Elif Tibet (3 June 2020)**

“Because people have to stay home and will be working less they won’t be able to afford their pension in the future. There will be payment gaps. Now the debate is on the interest rates, they are arguing whether people should retire at a later age, why because we are under a crisis and we are all in the same ship, says the authorities. But this is not true we might be at the same sea but not in the same ship. Some of us are journeying in a dingy boat, some in their ships, sailing boats, vessels and luxurious yachts, laborers are already drowning.”  
(May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, Emine Sariaslan)

Quoting Emine Sariaslan<sup>1</sup> a social worker at public health services, refers to the recent most heard metaphor “*we are all in the same ship*” and draws our attention to how people are not affected equally by the governmental measures taken against the increasing spread of the global pandemic COVID-19. She speaks of the common human experience to be not taking place in the same ship but in the same sea, which for some is of comfort and for some is a matter of life and death. Those who are drowning she mentions later in our conversation; to be the health care, retail, service and logistics workers, among them who do not often have Swiss citizenship, lacking full political participation with limited possibilities to claim their rights. “These are the people working on the frontline who make the system function amidst the devastating pandemic” also writes Sariaslan in her recent article at Horizonte<sup>2</sup>. A fact even more striking in a country where formal citizens can shape political decisions in a participatory way, where many referendums have been about migrants without having them present in the discussions. At our interview taking place on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, Sariaslan further claims; “not having migrants to participate in the decision making processes diminish migrant backgrounds into apolitical beings whom are seen as either a surplus or a burden by nationalist parties, ripping them off from their very human rights”.

By addressing the ongoing inequalities in our society, in this paper we aim to show how women alliances in Switzerland could mobilize their forces and influence in shaping state policy, as they have been able to react urgently and took actions immediately during the lock down. Following studies made by

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<sup>1</sup> Emine Sariaslan is a voluntary board member at UNIA , a commissioned writer at the Horizonte, originally from Turkey and a Swiss Citizen. See her profile at <https://public-health-services.ch/portfolio/emine-sariaslan/>

<sup>2</sup> Horizonte is the additional newsletter magazine published as part of the “Work” newspaper ,published by UNIA in five different languages: [https://www.unia.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Horizonte\\_Polnisch\\_1\\_2020.pdf](https://www.unia.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Horizonte_Polnisch_1_2020.pdf)

scholars on how intersectional interests can be used to build coalitions within and across social movements increasing the number and diversity of activists (Fisher et al 2017:1; Carasthatis 2013; Cole 2008; ) we look at new political upheavals led by a women coalition between the already active Frauen\*streik movement<sup>3</sup>, Frauen Alliance<sup>4</sup> and Swiss Unions in Switzerland. We interviewed two members of the coalition; Muhterem Hülya Genis and Emine Sariaslan<sup>5</sup>, in learning their activities that correspond to the needs of those hit by COVID-19, that shaped the premises of new political upheavals.

Our analysis based on our conversations with the activists, informed on how current activism around the pandemic is built on the existing social movement Frauen\*streik that helped mobilizing a wide range of women with different backgrounds within the streets and the parliament and in areas in between, in responding to those hit by the pandemic. The movement hence became mobilized in meeting the urgency of the COVID-19 impact particularly on labor rights and in extending one of the criteria “willingness to participate within the economic life” from the Swiss Integration law (passed on 2019). The coalition have been able to shift the discourse on how “work” has not become a matter of “will” but are determined by “restrictions” and “inabilities to access” along with many other complex processes affecting peoples’ participation into the economic life during the pandemic.

## **For those on the frontline but in the backyard of Swiss politics**

“The oppressed are always the working class and laborers that also include migrants within these categories and these categories are also differentiated according to their residence permits from B, C to N. Last year according to the new migrants law the number one criteria for integration has become to have a job, second is to know the language, and permits are prolonged as such, if this person is not a burden to the state... however since people are losing their jobs as of now, they will not be allowed to stay in Switzerland and won’t be able to apply to RAV (unemployment fund) either. As the UNION we have made a concentrated meeting on this issue and have intervened starting with the case of

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<sup>3</sup> Women across Switzerland took to the streets by about 500,000 on June 14 2019 in a historic strike called as Frauen\*streik, demanding equal treatment and conditions compared with their male counterparts, See :

[https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment\\_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950) and official web page: <https://frauenstreik2019.ch>

<sup>4</sup> Frauen Alliance is an umbrella organization for over 100 women's organizations, established 120 years ago in Switzerland. Defines itself to be the voice of women in Swiss politics and does advocacy to achieve equality between women and men - in society, in business and in politics. Alliance F is non-partisan and its’ members include women (and men) from all major political parties, including active and former national, state and federal councilors. See their web site: <https://de.alliancef.ch>

<sup>5</sup> Both participants did not see a need to anonymize their voices and gave consent to publish their points of view.

the Portuguese service providers in Zermatt whose rich employers wanted to fire them that would have resulted in their deportation, we did not let that happen.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17th 2020)

According to unions there has never been a time where a majority of Swiss society (of working-age people) has faced the risk of unemployment<sup>6</sup> with applications to RAV (Regional Employment Centre) for claims to the ALK (Unemployment insurance fund) are of record numbers. Many of the employers have been reported to try cutting the unforeseen loss of their revenues by ending peoples jobs in these peculiar times. For those with temporary residence permits losing a job equally means to lose residence permit, without residence they are not allowed to benefit from their unemployment insurance. Those self-employed (including citizens too), and those with daily contracts are also not given the chance to apply for the unemployment funds.

“Migrants are losing their jobs but not only, they are also blamed for not being integrated as they cannot meet the number one criteria of integration; which is to have a job. So at our meeting we asked and proposed the Federal state (Swiss Union Confederation met the Federal Congress) that this should not be the case for the time being, especially those who were on the verge of applying to citizenship should still be able to do so. The implementation needs to be at the cantonal level, if needed they should also be able to get funds from the state, so we as well proposed a bridging fund. We also started a petition for those families who have lost 10-20 % of their income (particularly for those families with one sole bread winner) to be able to apply to the social and to receive the entire salary, called Kurzarbeit<sup>7</sup>. This process has shown us how important it is to be a UNION member, and how important it is to act together... those who did not want to pay 10-20 francs subscription are now lined up at the door. We also give 15 mins free consultancy for those who are not members yet. We also published political responses and this created pressure for the employers.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17th 2020)

The coalition demanded the extension of the integration rule and made their proposition be accepted in the federal level. UNIA<sup>8</sup> continues to consult non-

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<sup>6</sup> According to the number given by SECO as of April 2020, there are 153.413 unemployed people: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/289105/umfrage/arbeitslosenzahl-in-der-schweiz-nach-monaten/>

<sup>7</sup> See the petition at: [https://www.solidarisch-aus-der-krise.ch/?fbclid=IwAR2EapVBRVuRvSeuiAPU4nt1Fz\\_PwJaSnnNP0o1T\\_VFoSoO-vbX5c\\_zEs6M#aufwurf](https://www.solidarisch-aus-der-krise.ch/?fbclid=IwAR2EapVBRVuRvSeuiAPU4nt1Fz_PwJaSnnNP0o1T_VFoSoO-vbX5c_zEs6M#aufwurf)

<sup>8</sup> UNIA, is a trade union in Switzerland that operates as the largest unemployment fund in Switzerland and a member of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions. It has around 190,000 members from all sectors of the private economy, offers individual advice, legal protection and further services to its members. With more than 50 % of UNIA members not having a Swiss

union members for 15 minutes a day, and raises awareness through public discussions, newsletters, forums and webinars.

## **Our power is our movement**

Another dimension of care, supported by political decisions where citizens without Swiss passports are often affected but have not been part of the political decision making, is child care. Child care, especially for young children is little supported and institutionalized by the state. A fact particularly hard, for people working in 24/7 health care and retail jobs lacking parents and grandparents for care support close by. Muhterem Hülya Genis, originally from Turkey, today a Swiss citizen, organizing committee member of Bern Frauen\*streik and a kindergarten care worker (*kita worker*) highlights;

“Women’s burden was quite heavy already now it is even more with having to work from home and take care of the child at the same time under such hostility...The System should see that it cannot produce anything without us, the women, the world is experiencing the invaluableity of currency and that one needs to respect labor. Those who have a contract can stay home but among my friends who are day laborers as child care takers got fired. You can apply to RAV but with a reduction of 20 % of your usual salary, that is nearly thousand francs difference, enough to destroy your entire livelihood. The weight of the virus is on the top of the poor. At least our taxes can be given back, there should be a difference in the way rich and poor are being treated in terms of taxes. We need concrete steps into securing work contracts and making sure working conditions are safe.”  
(Muhterem Hülya Genis, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

Touching on the inequalities between higher incomes and lower, Hülya stresses the need for a different treatment by the state for those of limited income and precarious working conditions. Emine supports Hülya’s concerns about how “staying at home” for women can have fatal consequences for their mental wellbeing and socio-economic welfare:

“Whenever there is a crisis, women are immediately given the task to stay home anyway. They should be taking care of domestic work, and as they withdraw from their jobs their economic independence is shaken, this also has to do with their pension frames, since they can work less they can pay less for their pension and when they retire they will be getting less in return and will perhaps struggle to meet the ends in the future. Since this crisis seems to go in the long run, the situation is going to affect their economic independence on the long run too. Women’s dependence for men will affect women’s psychology and that will have

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passport UNIA is the largest organization for workers without Swiss citizenship. See the official web site: <https://www.unia.swiss>, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

an impact on their children's education and homeschooling if necessary...this is the Domino effect." (Emine Sariaslan, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

According to the activist duo, street presence is very important as Emine affirms the need to be able to continue gathering in streets as she speaks of the way to overcome the Domino effect is to unite and move together in the most physical stance. Furthermore, "togetherness is our insurance", adds Hülya;

"We managed to collect 500.000 women all across Switzerland for the strike, with 70.000 of them in Bern. With one year of intensive labour we managed as the coordination group, 20-30 of us. Our movement had a novel impact on the politics, we have increased women participation into the parliament by 40%<sup>9</sup>. This is a huge success, our power is our movement. We have a power of 500.000 women. Our togetherness is our insurance, if we do not have that then we are deemed to creep and suffer." (*Muhterem Hülya Genis*, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

Talking of those without an insurance, "insurance" is to be provided by "togetherness", and are among the core motivations behind the active solidarity beyond the lockdown. Building on one of the largest political demonstration<sup>10</sup> in the recent history of Switzerland that took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2019, Frauen\*streik will possibly go digital on 2020 and take creative forms of online protests, talks, artistic performances and webinars, says Hülya that is still yet to be decided and implemented. Continuing to address and redefine what the pandemic has yet to bring and transform, the Frauen Alliance came up with a new agenda to four different target groups to be collectively supported; 1) Underrepresented and under paid women, 2) Women facing domestic violence, 3) Migrant women and asylum seekers and 4) Women in politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Starting with a number of only 20 to 30 organization members made Frauen\*streik come into life and made thousands of women to participate across Switzerland (70.000 women gathered only in Bern). A further claim by the activists is that the strike ended up increasing women's political participation into the parliament by 40 % on 2019. As of now there remains no official data or research to verify the very connection between the strike and the increase ratio of women in the parliament, but we suggest to keep an eye on the recent studies to follow up the claim.

<sup>10</sup> June 14, 2019 goes down as the largest political demonstration in the recent history of Switzerland, bigger than the women's first strike in Switzerland on 1991 according to "the Swiss Trade Union Federation" : [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment\\_women-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment_women-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950)



*Protestors fill in through the narrow streets to the center facing the parliament in Bern, Switzerland. Image taken by Eda Elif Tibet , Frauen\*streik, 14 June 2019.*



*Emine Sariaslan addresses the protesting crowd as she speaks of liberty, freedom and justice for migrant women, behind her stands Muhterem Hülya Genis who also addresses the crowd for an un-discriminating world and a more participatory democracy inclusive for all. Image taken by Eda Elif Tibet , Frauen\*streik, 14 June 2019.*

Lastly, Emine Sariaslan speaks of the importance of science, the need for it to be independent from state politics and the role it plays in contributing to national and international solutions to the benefit of people underrepresented in political debates and decisions.

“Science is very important particularly now, they were making fun with professors before, now everyone looks into what science has to say. Politics and science is in a conflict, politics look into economy but the independence of scientists are so important, for whom am I making science? All scientists should be questioning that, they should be doing this for humanity. The problem being more then global it is international, so the solution should also be international. All this requires drastic and integrated action and makes it critical to start planning for a post- COVID-19 world as soon as possible.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

In the most urgent sense, the coalition calls on Switzerland to treat all people living in Switzerland independent from having a Swiss passport or not when confronting the COVID-19 pandemic through the co-creation of an evidence-based policymaking structure that urges decision makers to take into account the research of not just one but many disciplines, including social sciences such as mobility and migration scholars. As academic scholars, we are convinced that this policy vision will lead to more sustainable, equal and diverse societies based on national and international solidarity, and to ones that can better prevent and deal with shocks and pandemics to come.

What we perceive is a contradiction ; on how the so called global pandemic requires a globally concerted action but at the same time is converted into a national security problem. We do not only close borders (within and beyond the lockdown) to feel protected but also measure and value workforce, intellectual capacity and contributions to our society not on an equal basis but measure through formal citizenship that becomes the decisive category to be “in” or “out” of the society. Most of the research being done on the pandemic in Switzerland are done in collaboration with researchers without Swiss passports, and the underrepresentation of the majority of the academics in this field is even more striking. It is here where sadly and gratefully social movements and alliances remind us the importance of international solidarity in the fight of recognition. This is not only true for the most precarious workers but also for scholars facing precarity with short term contracts and no Swiss passports who are working and contributing to the high international standards of Swiss universities, and are put on hold at the moment due to their citizenships. Acknowledging those hardest hit by this peculiar crisis, we urge politicians, policy-makers and the general public to respond to the need of redefining formal citizenship, representation and further visibility , so to be able to govern a much inclusive , participating and healthy society.

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## **Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route: new challenges and a change of strategy in times of COVID-19**

**Chiara Milan (11<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

### **Lockdown and restrictions to people's movement in the Western Balkans**

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has presented several opportunities for strongmen in the Western Balkans region to grab extra powers, it has also made solidarity initiatives with people in transit along the Western Balkans route more difficult. The route has been declared officially closed in March 2016 by virtue of the (controversial) agreement between the EU and Turkey.

Nevertheless, the migratory flow has never stopped. People escaping war and poverty continued in their attempts to cross the region to reach Northern Europe, although their journey became increasingly dangerous and risky. With the progressive closure of borders and the recent restrictions to people's movement, also the living conditions of those stranded in the refugee centers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have dramatically worsened.

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, Serbia declared the state of emergency to prevent the spread of coronavirus. After almost two months, on May 7<sup>th</sup> the state of emergency has been lifted for everyone but the 9,000 individuals living in the state-run refugee centers throughout the country. The Serbian lockdown, one of the stricter in Europe, imposed the closing of the doors of 19 asylum and reception centres across the country. The people held inside cannot longer leave or enter them except for exceptional circumstances, such as medical reasons. Meanwhile, the army and security forces caught all those found sleeping rough or in improvised shelters in cities and rural areas of Serbia and forcibly transferred them inside the official centres. These centres are now overcrowded, making it impossible to comply with the necessary social distancing rules. Prevented to leave the centres, migrants are put in a state of "permanent quarantine". They cannot go out to buy goods, clothes, or the food necessary to integrate the small portions distributed daily. This situation makes also almost impossible to withdraw the money sent from their families via Western Union, needed for the daily survival and to pay smugglers.

The migrants stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina face a similar destiny. Since the beginning of 2018, the country has turned into the bottleneck of the Western Balkans migratory route. Nowadays about 5,500 persons find themselves inside the nine reception centers of the country, while an estimated figure of 2,000 found shelter in makeshift camps in the middle of woods, abandoned warehouses or buildings in ruin close to the Croatian border. Unlike Serbia, where the camps are managed by domestic authorities, the majority of centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The IOM entrusted the surveillance of the centers to private

companies, and repeatedly cases of violence of private surveillance guards against migrants have been reported ever since.

After the proclamation of the state of emergency on March 28<sup>th</sup>, Bosnian and Herzegovinian authorities have progressively curb the movement of their citizens, extending these restrictions to migrants. Foreigners are prohibited from entering BiH as part of the measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. On April 17, the Council of Ministers of BiH announced that any foreigner found without a valid document and a residence address, registered at the foreign office, will be automatically deported to the reception centres, where (s)he will must stay with no possibility of getting out. As in Serbia, also in BiH migrants and asylum seekers have been forcibly transferred to refugee centres, which are overcrowded, often with no access to hot water and laundry services. Not even soap is provided to wash clothes and hands. In a situation in which even stricter hygienic sanitary standards are to be followed, in the centres not even basic hygienic conditions can be respected. Amongst deprivation, movement bans, and closed borders, people on the move appear even more isolated and vulnerable than before the pandemic. Inside the centres cases of fights amongst individuals are repeatedly reported, while depression is dramatically increasing.

### **Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route does not stop**

However, this situation has not stopped international and local volunteers from acting in solidarity with people in transit along the Western Balkans route. Notwithstanding the enforcement of lockdowns and movement bans forced the majority of international volunteers to leave the region, the attempts to provide some relief to migrants have continued, just the strategy had to be changed. If in normal times support to asylum seekers proved to be a difficult task, in times of pandemic it is even more so for different reasons. First of all, the prohibition to be physically present. With the outbreak of the COVID-19, the access to official refugee centres has been restricted to few authorized organizations, usually large international associations such as the Red Cross. Informal, independent grassroots groups are banned from accessing them, and also can no longer provide assistance to those living outside the centres. The physical presence is of utmost importance for the volunteers of No Name Kitchen (NNK), an independent organization that gathers international volunteers providing hot meals and first-aid support to undocumented migrants along the Western Balkans route. In Serbia since 2017, they have been kicked out of the country following the state's emergency declaration.

Unable to provide hot meals and human support by visiting migrants in squats and makeshift camps, the volunteers of NKK had to suspend their activities on the ground. However, they have decided to remain by changing strategy. "If we cannot reach out to people to provide them with food, we can still bring people to food", claimed a volunteer. NKK has thus opted for distributing online vouchers that migrants can exchange in edible goods at local shops and

bakeries, with which NNK has previously been in contact. By means of this “solidarity market”, NKK manages both to provide food for around 500 people weekly and to support the local economy. A practice followed also by other grassroots collectives, such as the Italian Bozen Solidarity, which uses social networks to provide people on the move in BiH with coupons that they can spend in markets of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, two important nodes of the migratory path.

Yet the Western Balkans route does not cross only the former Yugoslav region. The city of Trieste, in Italy, has turned into the landing place of the route. Here relentless women and men of the Linea d’ombra association (literally “Shadow line”) have never stopped providing firsthand support the migrants who manage to reach the Italian territory after having been beaten up by the Croatian police at the border. The 30-50 migrants reaching Trieste daily come with broken arms, infected wounds, and often barefoot. “At times around 100 people showed up in a day”, explained the founder of the association, “we kept healing their wounds even when local authorities revoked the authorization to provide assistance to migrants on the open space, and we were asked to hide in a less visible spot”. Volunteer doctors of the association La Strada Si.Cura (The safe road/The road must be cured) provide migrants with healthcare, while continuing to operate also along the Slovenian border.

Illegal pushbacks continue even during the pandemic, although the changed situation makes it more difficult to report them. The group Border Violence Monitoring, which gathers several individuals and associations active along the route, has been constantly monitoring pushbacks, collecting and reporting episodes of police violence committed against migrants at the borders. With the borders closed and people locked inside their houses, those experiencing violence at the border and discriminatory treatment, mostly committed by the Croatian police, are given the possibility to send their testimonies in a safe manner by means of social networks.

The pandemic intensified also the efforts to join hands amongst the several independent solidarity groups active along the route. To denounce the unhealthy and unsafe conditions of the official reception centres for migrants and refugees, especially those managed by the IOM across BiH, the recently founded Transbalkan Solidarity Network launched the campaign “A soap for IOM”. The 48-hour campaign, called “Soap bombing”, denounced the mismanagement of the centres IOM run in BiH. Here, most often migrants lack the most basic hygienic supplies, even more necessary in time of pandemic. The network also wrote the open letter “CoVID-19: No one is safe until All are protected!” to raise awareness on the worsening conditions of people in transit along the route, calling for the end of discriminatory and dehumanizing practices against migrants, demanding to stop the violence at the borders, and advocating for the provision of basic sanitary conditions and healthcare to people on the move. Formed in March 2020, the network gathers hundreds of activists from all over the region (North Macedonia, Serbia, BiH, Croatia,

Slovenia, Italy), striving to respond to the immobility of institutions as regards the situation of the most vulnerable under the pandemic, the migrants.

### **The militarization of borders and criminalization of solidarity**

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the conditions of people on the move, stigmatized, segregated and discriminated even more than before. In the pandemic, local governments have found a justification to further restrict freedom of movement and enact the militarization of borders. In the same line of EU leaders, also Western Balkans officials have changed the narrative towards people on the move. While the first waves arrived in summer 2015, local politicians showed a welcoming attitude towards them, motivated with a discourse portraying the Western Balkans as “merely transit countries”. Following the closure of the route, and the EU process of externalization of the borders, local politicians changed their public discourse to depict migrants as dangerous individuals, criminals and terrorists willing to stay in the country. With the arrival of the pandemic, migrants are also accused of spreading the virus. Although the data prove that the region remains a place of transit, since a very little number of individuals files asylum claims, the attitude towards people on the move has changed. Along similar lines, police violence at the borders, as well as attacks of right-wing and nationalist groups refugees and volunteers are on the rise. The change of narrative criminalizes not only migrants, but also those acting in solidarity with them. Lately, the animosity against migrants and international volunteers increased in particular in Šid, at the northern border with Hungary, to the extent that at the end of February some volunteers have been physically attacked by right-wing extremists, acting in cahoots with the local police. As volunteers provide free support mainly to people who have not access to, or refuse to enter, official refugee centres, they have been accused of being a pull factor attracting migrants to the country. This narrative has been widely used previously against NGOs rescuing migrants on the Mediterranean sea, and mirrors the negative attitude towards migrants endorsed by local politicians. Government and often the local population alike accuse pro-refugee solidarity groups to be a pull factor attracting people in transit, while they are just (and consciously) filling a void left by local institutions and large international organizations. This results in people in transit being increasingly invisibilized, pushed at the outskirts of cities and deported in refugee centres that they cannot live anymore. Besides the militarization of borders, nowadays we are assisting at the militarization of refugee centers, which have converted from transit to detention centres, some of them being fenced overnight. In the meantime, the possibility to file an asylum claim is de facto denied.

In times of pandemic, the declaration of the state of emergency has been used to reinforce the negative attitude towards migrants and marginalize them even further. By contrast, pro-refugee solidarity groups are striving to counter this process of dehumanization and marginalization finding innovative ways to alleviate the hardship migrants are facing, like for instance by means of the

above-mentioned “solidarity markets”. In the meantime, their appeals to grant migrants rights and healthcare have intensified.

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## **Abolish all camps in times of corona: the struggle against shared accommodation for refugees\* in Berlin**

**Marco Perolini (1<sup>st</sup> July 2020)**

On 8 May 2020, a group of activists who mobilize with Women in Exile and Friends<sup>1</sup>, a self-organized group of refugee\* women, visited a refugee\* camp in Hennigsdorf, in the outskirts of Berlin.<sup>2</sup> The activists did not travel to Hennigsdorf to deliver an empowering workshop for refugee\* women living in the camp, which is the type of mobilization in which the activists of Women in Exile often engage. Instead, the activists distributed food and personal care products to some of the over 400 refugees\* who lived in the camp.

At the time of the visit, the refugees\* in Hennigsdorf were subject to a forced quarantine. The authorities imposed the measure at the beginning of April, when 68 refugees\* tested positive to COVID-19. Deprived of liberty and surrounded by police who enforced the quarantine, refugees\* had to order groceries by ticking a pre-printed list of items that the management of the camp made available to them. That list did not include diapers, sanitary towels or soap.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare some of the most endemic flaws of the shared accommodation system for refugees\* in Germany. Lack of privacy, overcrowded spaces and more generally the exercise of biopower (Foucault, 1976) on racialized non-citizens are some among the most egregious shortcomings. Self-organized groups of refugees\* and other social movement organizations (SMOs) have contested shared accommodation for refugees\* in Germany, which they refer to as camps or Lager (in German), since the 1990s. They have been promoting the awareness of refugees\* of their right to have rights (Arendt, 1951) and organizing protests, marches, occupations and many other types of collective actions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the mobilization of self-organized groups of refugees\* against border regimes. On 9 May 2020, Women

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<sup>1</sup> Women in Exile and Friends is a self-organized group of refugees\* founded in 2002. Their offices are in Potsdam (Brandenburg, the federated State surrounding Berlin). Self-organized groups of refugees\* are social movement organizations founded by refugees\*, characterized by a horizontal decision-making structure and with the primary objective of empowering refugees\*.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to all non-citizens who have applied for asylum in Germany as refugees\* irrespective of their legal status. In the context of the ethnography that I conducted between January and November 2018 in Berlin, I talked to dozens of activists and participated in the mobilization of several social movement organizations. Non-citizen activists define themselves as refugees irrespective of whether they had obtained the legal status of refugees. They contest the hierarchies among different legal status categories embedded in the German asylum law. Refugee\* and refugees\* are notions that I use in this article as they embed the non-legal understanding of the idea of refugee shared among activists in Berlin. In view of protecting the privacy of activists, all the names that I use in this article are pseudonyms.

in Exile and friends staged for the first time an online protest on Youtube. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the activists of Women in Exile settled for a virtual gathering to raise awareness of the daily ordeal that women and children face in camps, including in Hennigsdorf. The activists reiterated their slogan, which they encapsulated into a social media hashtag: “Social distance is a privilege”. The slogan decries the impossibility for refugees\* to follow guidance on social distance in camps.

The online protest was not infused with the same powerful energy as the protests that the activists of Women in Exile usually stage on the street. However, the easing of lockdown measures at the end of May has enabled Women in Exile and other social movement organizations that contest border regimes to take it to the street again. For example, on 1 June Women in Exile and other SMOS protested in Potsdam to demand the abolishment of camps. On 6 June, many SMOs that oppose border regimes participated in the Black Lives Matter protest in Berlin in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in the United States.

Self-organized groups of refugees\* in Germany have mobilized for the abolition of camps since the 1990s. In this short piece, I examine the multiple modalities through which self-organized groups of refugees\* resist camps. Apart from organizing protests, activists engage in submerged forms of mobilization that have the potential of transforming the isolation in which refugees\* live. Moreover, I explain why the COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for the struggle against camps to acquire more resonance and visibility.

### **Hennigsdorf: a refugee\* camp under forced quarantine for over 5 weeks**

The shared accommodation for refugees\* in Hennigsdorf is composed of several buildings that used to be military barracks during the time of the German Democratic Republic. Similarly to many other camps that I visited, the complex is fenced-off and managed by a private company. Security guards patrol the entrance of the complex, scrutinize the movements of refugees\* and monitor the presence of external visitors.

German asylum law requires non-citizens who apply for asylum to live in a designated reception centre for up to 18 months. During this period, they do not have the right to work and they cannot leave the district (Landkreis) where the reception centre is located (this restriction is commonly known as *Residenzpflicht*). After 18 months, non-citizens who are still waiting for their asylum claim to be processed are sheltered in shared accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

On 16 April 2020, a cleaner working in the shared accommodation in Hennigsdorf tested positive to COVID-19. Following further tests, 68 out of the more than 400 refugees\* who lived in the accommodation tested positive. The

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<sup>3</sup> Articles 47, 53 and 59a of the Asylum Act.

authorities swiftly quarantined the whole complex. While some refugees\* could leave the complex after two weeks, provided that they wore a green wristband which many considered to be stigmatizing,<sup>4</sup> the authorities quarantined some of the buildings within the complex for over 5 weeks.

In a video that a refugee\* who lives in the complex shot from his window, several police cars appeared to patrol the entrance of the shared accommodation.<sup>5</sup> In an open letter that Women in Exile published on Twitter on 1 May, the refugees\* who lived in the camp emphasized the inadequate measures that authorities had taken to counter COVID-19. While a forced quarantine was in place, refugees\* raised the lack of face masks and sanitizers and the failure to promptly separate refugees\* who had tested positive from those who tested negative.<sup>6</sup> Authorities scored better on the enforcement of coercive measures to control refugees\*: CCTV cameras in the hallways, private security and police patrolling the entrance of the accommodation.

On 8 May, a few activists of Women in Exile decided to travel to Hennigsdorf. During the online protest that the Women in Exile organized on 9 May, one activist explained the purpose of the visit. She emphasized:

“The reason why we went there is because the women reached out to us and said that in the shopping list [pre-printed by the managing company] there was not like... I call it like...women basic needs like sanitary pads,

baby diapers...the women said: ‘we need this please can you come and bring us these things as they are not in the shopping list’. They can't go out for shopping and it was very sad and so we decided to go... and when we went there we met the security, they said of course you cannot get in and they said they would deliver the shopping themselves...we said no we want to see the women whom we brought this for [...]. The security went and say the women can come down but they can't get out and we said yeah of course we know and we don't want them to come out...the women came but they didn't have masks only one who had a mask... I was really shocked like they don't have masks and this is where they report everyday cases of people testing positive [for COVID-19]”.<sup>7</sup>

After delivering the shopping bags to the women on the other side of the fences, the activists displayed a few small banners that read “social distance is a privilege” and “abolish all lager” and took some photos for social media. The police who were patrolling the entrance of the shared accommodation stopped

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[https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2020/coronavirus/beitraege\\_neu/2020/05/brandenburg-fluechlingsheime-ketten-quarantaenen.html](https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2020/coronavirus/beitraege_neu/2020/05/brandenburg-fluechlingsheime-ketten-quarantaenen.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/953605994710745/videos/1387659564757967>

<sup>6</sup> [https://twitter.com/women\\_in\\_exile/status/1256108211394031616](https://twitter.com/women_in_exile/status/1256108211394031616)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvlt2\\_O7iM4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvlt2_O7iM4)

the activists and argued that they were staging a demonstration. An activist explained during the online protest:

“We had to talk to them for over two hours, meanwhile refugees inside became more and more upset and started demonstrating [to oppose the police intervention]. They told us that we should know the law of this country, when police came they ask if anybody among us was under quarantine and infected, we said no... some of them had masks but others they didn't, they did not keep the distance with us [...]. They accused us of breaching the law on public assemblies and said that this was an unregistered demo and we were forbidden to go to other Lager for 24 hours. We were shocked as we didn't do anything, it was not a demo, we just took some photos with messages of solidarity. If the authorities gave women what they needed, we wouldn't have had to go there in the first place”.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Women in Exile joined many other social movement organizations in calling for the abolishment of shared accommodation for refugees\*. They frame shared accommodation as camps or Lager, a term that refers to the bare lives, the disposable lives, of non-citizens who live in there (Agamben, 1998). They decry the flaws on camps as they put the health of refugees\* at risk.

Self-organized groups of refugees\* have indeed documented the situation of refugees\* in camps during the COVID-19. Apart from Hennigsdorf, in several other camps across Germany, the number of COVID-19 infections among refugees\* was very high. Self-organized groups of refugees\* collected and made public information that pointed to the ineffectiveness of the forced quarantine that the authorities put in place. For example, more than 400 out of the 600 refugees\* who lived in a camp in Ellwangen (Baden-Württemberg) tested positive to COVID-19. Despite the forced quarantine that the authorities had imposed at the beginning of April, refugees\* continued to shared toilets and communal areas. One month after, the 200 people who had tested negative were still under forced quarantine. The self-organized group refugees4refugees who mobilize in Baden-Württemberg emphasized:

“All inhabitants of the reception centre in Ellwangen were put into quarantine on 5 April. This protected the people outside the camp, but not the people inside the camp. Inside the camp, a huge group of several hundred people were quarantined together. In this large group, as was to be expected, the virus spread rapidly. After the first mass test at the beginning of April, 250 people were infected, the next test was 313 and finally 406 people in the camp tested positive. This means that there are still almost 200 people in the quarantine group. If even one of them tests positive again, the quarantine for all 200 must be extended again by two

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 7

weeks according to the rules of the German government. And this can go on for a long time.”<sup>9</sup>

International Women Space, an organization of refugee\* women who emerged during the protest camp in Oranienplatz between 2012 and 2014 (Azozomox and IWS refugee women, 2013), collected and published audio testimonies of refugees\* about their lives in the camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we met in 2018, Jennifer, one of the activists who founded International Women Space, told me that documenting the struggle of self-organized groups of refugees\* was crucial for mobilizing against border regimes. She explained that the activists who mobilized in the protest camp on Oranienplatz and the refugee\* women who lunched IWS did not have access to any information regarding the resistance of refugees\* who had contested camps and other aspects of border regimes before as there was little written documentation.<sup>10</sup>

The “Corona Lager reports” of International Women Space include, for example, a case of arbitrary use of force by the police against a refugee\* woman in a camp in Brandenburg. According to the information collected by IWS, another refugee\* called the police to complain about the noise coming from a neighbour’s room who was having a small party with a few other refugees\*. Seven police came to the camp with two dogs, they knocked on the door from where the noise was coming from. They asked the woman who opened the door to produce an ID and, when she refused, they tackled her to the floor and pinned her down. Someone started recording the scene and when someone else shouted: “Look what they are doing to us here. They want to kill us like the other man that was killed in America [George Floyd]”, the police released the woman.<sup>11</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the control, oppression and biopower that refugees\* experience in camps in Germany. In particular, police and private security enforced quarantines of hundreds of refugees\*. However, the pandemic also galvanized the struggle against camps as many organizations, including large NGOs such as Pro-Asyl, which is the biggest refugee rights organization in Germany, demanded the closure of shared accommodation for refugees\*. On 11 May, Pro-Asyl, refugee councils and the Seebrücke movement called for the closure of all camps in Germany and in Greece emphasizing that no one could be left behind and that shared accommodation made non-citizens more vulnerable to COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, several courts across Germany

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<sup>9</sup> <https://refugees4refugees.wordpress.com/2020/05/04/corona-chaos-in-ellwangen-04-05-2020/>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jennifer, 20 September 2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://iwspace.de/2020/06/in-the-shadow-of-corona-police-violence-lager-brandenburg/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://fluechtlingsrat-berlin.de/presseerklaerung/11-05-2020-niemand-darf-zurueckgelassen-werden/>

requested the transfer of refugees\* who lived in camps to apartments as their health could not be protected in shared accommodation.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, self-organized groups of refugees\* continued to organize protests with other organizations to call for the closure of camps in Germany as well as at the European borders. For example, On 1 June, Women in Exile and other organizations staged a protest in Potsdam to ask for the closure of camps in Brandenburg as well as in Greece.<sup>14</sup>

Self-organized groups of refugees\* have framed camps as grievances against border regimes since the 1990s. They have engaged in multiple and diverse forms of collective actions to call for the abolishment of all camps and for adequate housing for all refugees\*. COVID-19 has made the long-term demands of self-organized groups of refugees\* and other grassroots groups against camps acquire wider resonance.

### **The long-term opposition to camps**

In the 1990s, groups of non-citizens organized themselves in shared accommodation, in particular in Eastern Germany. For example, the Voice Refugee Forum was founded in 1994 in a camp in Thuringia (Odugbesan & Schwiertz, 2018). In the 2000s, the occupation of Oranienplatz (O-platz), a square in Berlin, which non-citizens activists transformed into a protest camp, provided visibility for their struggles against border regimes (Landry, 2015; Langa, 2015; Bhimji, 2016).

One of the main grievances that self-organized groups of refugees\* have formulated since the 1990s is the opposition to the isolation in which they live in shared accommodation. For example, Brice, an activist from Benin who had mobilized with the Voice Refugee Forum and with the protest camp on Oranienplatz, told me about his experiences of isolation and fear when he lived in camps in Mecklenburg-Pomerania (Eastern Germany). Brice arrived in Germany in 1997, only 5 years after the racist riots that had shattered Rostock, the main city in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, in 1992.<sup>15</sup> Brice told me:

“We could not even leave the camp because police stopped and searched us all the time. If you went from the camp to the train station, you were

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-netherlands-asylum/asylum-seeker-wins-right-to-leave-german-centre-over-coronavirus-rules-idUSKCN2252VO>;  
<https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-covid-19-protection-inadequate-at-refugee-home/a-53395710>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fluechtlingsrat-brandenburg.de/pressemitteilung-demonstrationen-am-1-juni-in-potsdam/?cn-reloaded=1>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/revisiting-germany-xenophobic-rostock-riots-1992-170517123148797.html>

stopped. One of the camps in which I lived was very isolated and in the middle of the forest. If you were sick you had to walk 8 km to the nearby town and then 8 km back”.<sup>16</sup>

Brice explained that the demand to abolish all camps was grounded in the experiences of non-citizens, whose segregation in camps contributed to their racialization (Omi & Winart, 2015). Many of the refugee\* activists whom I met in 2018 framed camps as prisons, in which their freedom of movement and their private life were scrutinized and restricted. In 2018 refugee\* activists were particularly concerned with the establishment of new types of shared accommodation, the Anker centres, in which non-citizens who claimed asylum could spend up to 24 months.<sup>17</sup> Paul, an activist from Cameroon who mobilized with Corasol, a self-organized group of refugees\*, framed his opposition to camps by referring to isolation and lack of privacy. He told me:

“We have to put the emphasis on humanitarian law. A human is a human. Policy makers have to take that into account. In the shelters, you are like in a prison. Today, those who claim asylum will have to stay in Eisenhüttenstadt [a reception centre in Brandenburg that functioned as an Anker centre] until the end of the procedure. At least when I was there people were still transferred to other shelters. In the shelters, there is no privacy, you have to leave a copy of your ID to go in and out, there is security and you share a room with many people. It’s absurd not to be able to leave your home and to come back when you want”.<sup>18</sup>

Women in Exile and friends have repeatedly emphasized that camps are not adequate for women and children. In the context of their bus tour across Germany “Women Breaking Borders” in 2018, refugee\* women spoke out against the lack of privacy for women in camps. In the aftermath of the activists’ visit to an Anker centre in Bamberg (Bavaria), Jule, a woman from Nigeria who lived in the Anker centre, joined the bus tour. She made a public speech in the context of a protest in front of Federal Office for Migration and Refugees\* (BAMF) in Nuremberg in which she decried the living conditions for women in the camp. She emphasized:

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Brice, 29 August 2018.

<sup>17</sup> For more information about the Anker-centre, see “Was ist ein Anker/what is an Anker” published by Lager Mobilization Network Berlin on 15 May 2018 and available here: <https://oplatz.net/was-ist-ein-anker-what-is-an-anker/>

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Paul, 9 September 2018.

“We are living as prisoners or we are prisoners already... we are suffering in that camp, honestly we are suffering, look at our kids, our families...the women have no privacy...16 people...one toilet one bedroom...we are going nowhere...we’re here to stay!”<sup>19</sup>

Self-organized groups of refugees\* and other grassroots organizations framed camps as a system that racialized and control non-citizens.<sup>20</sup> Many of the non-citizen activists whom I met felt unsafe in camps as the authorities could identify them and target them with deportation. For example, Bastian, a young Cameroonian man whom I met during my fieldwork, left the shared accommodation where he lived in Brandenburg for fear of deportation. Some of the activists whom he met in the context of his mobilization against border regimes sheltered him to avoid his transfer to Spain, the first country from where he had entered the European Union<sup>21</sup>. In the context of a public workshop in September 2010, Bastian told the participants:

“One night the police came to the heim [shared accommodation] to look for me. I was at a birthday party and a refugee called me and informed me that police were looking for me. So, I left the heim. In the jungle, the strongest and the most intelligent survives. When you are about to be deported, you really need to do whatever you can to survive. It’s like when you are a child and you fall in the water, in order to save yourself from drowning, you need to find any available hold. The network of activists and friends in Berlin has been really important as they provided me with a shelter and supported me.”<sup>22</sup>

Self-organized groups of refugees\* and other grassroots groups often call for the abolishment of camps in the context of their visible repertoires of contention. They document the lives of refugees\* in camps and ground their demands in the racialization processes through which non-citizens who live in camps are excluded, isolated and othered. Activists also engage in more submerged, invisible initiatives, for example to counter deportation. Despite the difficulties to put in place these collective mechanisms of resistance, activists often collectively identify and make use of cracks and opportunities to resist the alienating reality of camps.

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<sup>19</sup> Ethnographic notes taken on 27 July 2018.

<sup>20</sup> See “Was ist ein Anker/what is an Anker” published by Lager Mobilization Network Berlin on 15 May 2018 and available here: <https://oplatz.net/was-ist-ein-anker-what-is-an-anker/>

<sup>21</sup> Bastian’s transfer to Spain was based on the Dublin III Regulation (Regulation 604/2013) which establishes the responsibility for assessing asylum applications among EU countries.

<sup>22</sup> Ethnographic notes taken on 8 September 2018.

## **Submerged resistance against camps**

Activists often engage in submerged and less visible forms of mobilizations than protests to resist and transform the isolation that refugees\* experience in camps. For example, self-organized groups of refugees\* often organize outreach initiatives in camps in view of raising the awareness of refugees\* of their rights and promoting their political mobilization.

Refugee\* activists who participate in collective actions often emphasize that their activism is grounded in a process of political activation that other activists have facilitated. For example, when I spoke to Julia, a woman from Kenya who mobilized with Women in Exile and friends, about the outreach activities in camps, she stressed the impact that the first workshop that she attended had on her determination to collectively resist border regimes. Julia told me:

“Women in Exile visited us in the camp and told us more about the politics here [in Germany] and that we had rights, I didn’t know that refugees\* had rights. Women in Exile ran an empowerment workshop and taught us that we could fight for our rights, that’s how I became an activist in Deutschland [Germany]. I felt there is a need to fight, especially because of the conditions we are living in”.<sup>23</sup>

Julia explained that many refugee\* women came from national contexts in which they were discriminated against, they were invisible in the political space and were not used to claim their rights. Moreover, she stressed that refugees\* in Germany were often afraid of the negative consequences that their mobilization may have on their asylum claims. Julia reiterated that it was crucial for refugees\* living in camps to realize the opportunities that they had to collectively mobilize.<sup>24</sup>

Guillaume, an activist who mobilized with Corasol, spoke with me about the importance of reaching out to refugees\* in camps and stressed that these initiatives alleviated the distress and isolation in which refugees\* lived. In the context of a workshop about the new Anker-centre that Guillaume delivered and which I attended, he emphasized:

“I got to know my rights because of my involvement in activism and all the people whom I’ve met in this context. Despite that, I am still very stressed, I have been seeing a counsellor for 6 months. Imagine what would have happened if I lived even more isolated [i.e. in an Anker

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Julia, 19 September 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Julia, 19 September 2018.

centre], if I couldn't even get in touch with activists and the outside world...".<sup>25</sup>

Guillaume indeed often appeared sullen and absent-minded. When we got to know each other better, he often shared with me the anxiety that his precarious legal status prompted. In June 2018, I agreed to support Guillaume in reaching out to refugees\* living in a few camps in Brandenburg. The activists of Corasol planned to reach out to refugees\* to involve them to a workshop and a protest scheduled on 20 June to contest the new asylum policies that the government had recently proposed. The activists were adamant on informing refugees\* living in camps about the new policies, explaining their consequences and stimulating their mobilization against them.

In the early afternoon of a sunny Sunday afternoon I met Guillaume in the shared accommodation where he lived in Brandenburg. Guillaume was very energetic on that day. He was very keen on reaching out to refugees\*. After lunch we started knocking on the doors of the rooms where other refugees\* lived. When they peered out at us, Guillaume hastily explained to join us downstairs in a meeting room where we would provide them with more information about a protest against the new asylum policies. Most of the refugees\* whom we talked to did not show much interest and I felt that they would not attend the protest.

In contrast, a dozen of refugees\* who lived in another camp that we visited afterwards were keen on participating in both the workshop and the protest. While we were knocking on the doors a bit randomly, we realized that several refugees\* came from Chechnya and did not speak any other language than Russian or Chechen. I showed to a couple of them the Russian version of the flyer that we had designed to advertise the protest. After 20 minutes in which we talked to as many refugees\* as possible, Guillaume suggested moving to the meeting room where many of the refugees\* whom we had talked to were waiting for us.

The meeting room was indeed very full as more than 30 people from countries including Pakistan, Iran, Kenya joined us. One Chechen woman, a young blue-eyed woman wearing a small head-cover, came too. Guillaume made a short presentation in German and I translated it into English. A refugee from Iran who spoke good English translated simultaneously into Farsi. Guillaume asked me a couple of times the German translation for "government" and "law", which surprised me because his German was better than mine. I thought he must have felt under pressure to speak German in public and to a large group.

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<sup>25</sup> Ethnographic notes of the summer camp organized by Welcome United between 5 and 7 July in Falkenberg (Brandenburg).

Guillaume repeatedly reiterated in his speech: “We have to fight all together against these new laws”.

Several of the refugees\* whom we met in the second camp that we had visited attended the protest. One man also started to regularly participate in the meetings and the collective actions of Corasol. Other self-organized groups of refugees\* regularly organize outreach visits and workshops for refugees\* living in camps. The political mobilization that these activities promote is also conducive to weave new social ties which break the isolation that refugees\* experience in camps.

Apart from outreach initiatives in camps, activists also engage in campaigns and acts of political disobedience. Some of them aim to provide alternative shelters to refugees\* who do not feel safe in camps because they are at risk of deportation. Police often enforce deportations during the night by conducting raids in shared accommodation and without informing the person subject to a deportation order.

In the last two years, activists in Berlin have launched the campaign Burger\*innen Asyl (Citizen Asylum), which aims to establish a network of citizens willing to shelter non-citizens who are at risk of deportation and who want to move out from camps.<sup>26</sup> In October 2018, the organizers of the campaign announced that they had successfully facilitated the first case of citizen asylum by providing a shelter to a family who were threatened with deportation and who subsequently obtained residence rights in Germany. In April 2020 the initiative announced that it would stop to function as a platform that facilitated citizen asylum as it was logistically burdensome. They produced a handbook providing tips to anyone who could offer citizen asylum to a non-citizen who felt unsafe to live in camps because of their deportation looming.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the long-term demands of self-organized groups of refugees\* against camps acquire a wider resonance. Forced quarantines have become exemplary of the biopower that authorities exercise on racialized non-citizens in camps. Authorities have rushed in to enforce measures that, in many instances, proved ineffective to protect refugees\* from COVID-19. The pandemic has laid bare the flaws of camps in Germany. In an unprecedented move, large NGOs, in particular Pro-Asyl, have demanded the closure of camps and the transfer of refugees\* to private accommodation. In some individual

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<sup>26</sup> <https://buerger-innen-asyl-berlin.org/>

<sup>27</sup> [https://buerger-innen-asyl-berlin.org/static/blog/SolidarityAsyl\\_handbook\\_ENG.pdf](https://buerger-innen-asyl-berlin.org/static/blog/SolidarityAsyl_handbook_ENG.pdf)

cases, Courts have ruled that camps were not an adequate solution to protect refugees\* from COVID-19.

Self-organized groups of refugees\* rallied with other social movement organizations to call for the abolishment of camps. During the lockdown, they continued to document the lives of refugees\* in camps and assisted refugees\* who were under forced quarantine. As soon as the lockdown measures were eased, they resumed their plans to engage in submerged forms of mobilization through which, by promoting collective struggles, they daily resist and transform the isolation that refugees\* experience in camps.

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### **About the author**

Marco Perolini is finishing his PhD in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His research focuses on how the social movement opposing border regimes in Berlin constructs human rights. He also works as a human rights researcher with Amnesty International focusing on discrimination, policing and the criminalization of protests and human rights defenders in Europe.

## **#FightEveryCrisis: Re-framing the climate movement in times of a pandemic**

**Clara Thompson (28<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

Just as 2019 seemed like the beginning of a new era of climate protests, early 2020 appeared to mark its abrupt end with the outbreak of novel corona virus. Starting in Sweden in August 2018, 'Fridays for Future' (FFF), a group of committed students organizing school strikes seemed to materialize out of nowhere, grabbing media attention and creating a global sensation that peaked in the following year. The protest tactic of choice, the school strike, was particularly controversial, sparking discussions about the political participation of young people, the urgency of the climate crisis and responsibility across generations. Similarly, starting in London in November 2018, Extinction Rebellion drew attention to the looming environmental disaster by engaging in high profile non-violent civil disobedience in cities across Europe, leading to debates about the legitimacy of stopping "business as usual" in order to draw attention to the climate crisis. Especially for groups like FFF, XR or the German climate group *Ende Gelaende* (which is also a German saying for "here and no further"), that developed out of the occupation of the Hambacher Forest and has brought thousands of people to occupy open pit mines, large scale physical protests have been the decisive form of mobilization. In April 2019 approximately 40.000 people joined in civil disobedience actions in London. In June 2019, over 2000 people entered a coal mine in the Rhenish lignite mining area, blocking it for an entire day. Around 10 million people worldwide joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Climate strike organised by FFF on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2019. In Germany alone there were 1.3 million people on the streets that day for climate change protests in Berlin and several other major cities.

### **Disappointing results of the year 2019**

Putting aside the outbreak of COVID-19 for a moment, activists already realized by the end of 2019 that their protests were not successful enough in terms of leading to radical change. While the European Union as well as some European governments including Austria, Belgium and the UK declared a climate emergency, they had not started cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions drastically. In addition, activists started suspecting climate protection policies such as the *European Green Deal* to be more a tactical distraction than an ambitious plan to start tackling emissions. Activists and others have accused it of green washing and using the slogans of climate activism but none of its substance. Furthermore, many scientists and activists criticize the year 2050 as the set date for the EU to reach carbon-neutrality as being too late. In Germany, the *Datteln 4* coal-fired power plant is to be opened at the end of May 2020 despite Germany's announcement to phase out coal by 2038 (which is already much later than most European countries). Finnish state-owned utility Fortum owns

approximately 70 percent of German power plant operator Uniper, tying *Datteln 4* to the Finnish state and making it partially responsible for the controversial opening the power plant. This means that also Finland will likely fail to reach its target of becoming climate neutral by 2035.

In addition to this disappointing outcome, the media attention for the climate movement had decreased by the end of 2019, as the actions of FFF, XR and other groups started losing the news values of novelty, unpredictability and surprise. Media attention is crucial for protest movements placing their messages, shaping the discourse and mobilizing followers. At the same time many climate activists were experiencing burnout after the seemingly endless series of protest actions in 2019. Some started rethinking their strategies, exploring new possibilities of regaining interest of the media. There seemed to be a consensus that protests must continue until real political changes were made that would help avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change.

2020 has of course been much different than anyone could have anticipated. With the outbreak of a pandemic and physical distancing measures in place most of the actions and stories that climate activists had planned for 2020 had to be shelved for the time being. In addition, the novel virus traumatized people not just in terms of worrying about loved ones becoming sick or dying, but also in terms of causing financial meltdown, worsening domestic violence, feeling isolated, and other consequences. Thus, the issues that the climate movement had been addressing thus far with its actions and stories were no longer the focus of events. The outbreak of COVID-19 brought about a change in the media, social and political resonance space. The long-lasting impact this pandemic will have on society, politics and the economy is still uncertain, but it is likely to be bigger than anticipated.

### **Media reporting in the time of a pandemic: climate crisis vs. novel corona crisis**

What does this imply for climate activists? As long as case numbers remain high, the news will be dominated by case numbers, mortality rates, the fragility of our health system, and the geographical spread of the virus. This will last for an unpredictable but likely extended period of time. Climate-damaging investment packages to rescue economies during the crisis, on the other hand, have been subject to less critical mainstream media attention. However, media attention for the pandemic are also likely to be in waves, as case numbers are sinking in Europe in mid-year (although rising elsewhere) with concerns about a second wave later in the year. Furthermore, although attention to the climate and the environment decreased noticeably in the first couple of months of the spread of COVID-19, it was not completely off the table. Climate activists have still occasionally been interviewed to talk about their responses to the crisis. In these times, climate groups with well-known activists tended to have better chances of being heard, as the media mostly sought out “celebrity” spokespersons.

The media has also explored the question how the climate crisis and the virus outbreak related. Unfortunately however, many articles mostly compared the effects of the two crises with each other, which is not a particularly helpful narrative, instead of searching for links between them. When journalists ask about the ways the crises supposedly “compete” with each other it often remained unclear which particular aspects of the crises the comparison is referring to (the “health” crisis? The “economic” crisis?), thus making the issue unnecessarily abstract and vague. Second of all, measuring which crisis is “worse” holds the danger of belittling the traumatizing effects each of them can potentially have on people’s lives. As Fridays for Future activists point out with their Hashtag #fighteverycrisis, instead of trying to figure out which crisis is worse, we should recognize the severity of each crisis and act accordingly to prevent them in the future.

### **Taking back social media**

To balance out their dependency on mass media and the minimal news reporting on climate change at the moment, activists have increasingly turned to social media. However, they have also struggled to keep control of more problematic narratives circulating online being connected to the climate movement. Misleading statements like “mother nature is cleansing itself”, “humanity is the virus” or posts expressing support for the short-term stop of CO<sub>2</sub> emission due to the economic shut down were widely found on Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms in the first couple of weeks after the COVID-19 breakout. Many climate activist groups responded immediately, joining efforts to debunk these newly circulating narratives. In March, XR Scotland stated on Twitter that “any claim that a global pandemic and loss of thousands of human lives is a \*good\* thing for the climate is far more dangerous than the virus itself” and further: “Misleading narratives about ‘overpopulation’ can lead to the promotion of eugenics or a one-race state achieved by oppressive anti-immigration policies”. XR Germany followed later in the month with a Twitter Post encouraging solidarity with the thousands of refugees being locked in at the camp Moria on Lesbos:

“it is not humans who are the problem, but certain ways of living together, economic activity and bad political decisions [...]. Such narratives celebrate the death of mostly structurally disadvantaged people and imply that the earth can be ‘saved’ in this way. They aim to create an irrational image of the enemy and open the door to repressive and racist anti-immigration policies.”

In May, Greta Thunberg published a Facebook post stating that CO<sub>2</sub> temporarily falling might be good in showing how much emissions decreased in the last decade, but is generally “not good news”.

Demystifying such narratives has kept activists busy since the outbreak of the virus. In addition, especially in the first months of the coronavirus crisis many climate groups made efforts to support local communities and show solidarity with overburdened health care workers. Some groups joined forces with their local food banks and supermarkets, cycling supplies to elderly costumers so they would not have to come pick them up themselves. Other groups created solidarity funds. Since the outbreak of the virus efforts have been made to show intersecting links between struggles, making solidarity between different (climate) activist groups more visible. In Germany, one of the first big successes and blueprint for showing solidarity within the wider movement and running campaigns in times of corona was an action by the collective ‘Seebrücke’ (‘Seabridge’), a Germany based group calling for the establishment of safe routes for refugees. The hashtag #LeaveNoOneBehind was widely adopted by climate groups across Europe with many climate activists joining in small physical protests against the catastrophic hygiene situation in the refugee camp Moria and demanding it to be evacuated immediately.

Since the outbreak of the virus, the conservative media in particular have criticized activists’ call for more climate protection measures following an economic framing à la "The pandemic is more important than the climate crisis, which is why the economy must now be rescued without regard to the climate". This narrative sets the stage for a climate policy "rollback". Activists know that economic and financial systems do not operate in a vacuum, but are highly dependent on the political environment. In order to respond to and prevent this roll back climate groups all over Europe have been getting involved with political decisions about how to reboot the economy after the pandemic is over. In Germany, the discussion about the so called “Abwrackprämie” - a supposed stimulus measure providing every new car buyer with a bonus and thereby encouraging cars purchases (including cars that run on fuels such as diesel!) - has been intense. Including during the (now digital) weekly climate strikes, German activists protested against the financial bailout of the car industry which in their eyes contradicts promises of the government to pursue the “Energiewende” – the planned transition by Germany to a low carbon, environmentally sound, reliable, and affordable energy supply. Similarly, in France, a 22 billion dollar investment package to support industries, largely the aviation and automobile sectors, with no strings attached, did not slip past French climate activists unnoticed. XR Germany started a campaign around the theme “Klimarettungsschirm”, a “financial parachute for the climate”, demanding governments tie financial aid for companies to climate neutrality obligations and stop funding the fossil fuel industry. On April Fools Day a fake *Google* website made by XR activists appeared, announcing that the tech giant has reevaluated their responsibility regarding climate change in times of crisis and has decided to immediately stop funding organizations that are associated with climate denialism. A day later, the group *Google Workers for Action on Climate Change* stated its support for the action. (The real) Google then announced that it will desist from building AI tools for oil and gas drillers. This communication guerrilla action by XR New York as well as the other examples

show that activists have not lost their voices, and have instead found new and creative ways to pressure governments, even from their desks at home.

However, COVID-19 has also shown the limits of digital campaigns. Although activists' concerns and narratives can also be brought to the public through social media, they do not generally have the same reach as mass media. Since the mass media are active co-creators of the narrative about the climate crisis, the climate movement depends on the media to talk about it. While it is possible to reach many through social media, it is difficult to reach people beyond the "filter bubbles". Furthermore, unfortunately spreading out to the digital realm has excluded many former more senior activists who were not able to catch up with the ever changing fast pace of digital activism. While activists have made it into mainstream media since the outbreak of corona, and recently there has been a rising interest in what has become of the climate movement, media attention for the climate movement has not yet become consistent again.

### **So what can we do?**

Even without a pandemic capturing media attention it is a great challenge for social movements to bring their messages into the media. Not only do they lack "real means of power", scholars have found that they are usually forced to adapt to the "media's desire for 'simple' messages or 'imaginative' images" in order to receive coverage.<sup>1</sup> Protest movements typically attempt to undertake actions that include an element of surprise, involve socially influential actors and attempt to personalize the events to increase the interest of the news media.

But how to find new ways of exciting and provocative actions, when all that people worry about is how to go back to normality as quickly as possible? Activists know that the post-virus phase will be a decisive one. Politicians are seeking a narrative that will determine how the economy will be stabilized and further crises prevented. They will choose among competing narratives, with some prevailing others. Activists know they must engage in this "competition" – if they do not, climate unfriendly narratives may become dominant and the climate crisis will intensify further.

### **Finding a new narrative**

Since the outbreak of corona, climate activists and scientists have wearily observed politicians and people's growing eagerness to return to "normality". They know that normality and stability is only possible if all crises are tackled at their *origins* instead of only their *symptoms*. Measures like physical distancing, financial bail-out for key industries and vaccinations may be effective short team measures to deal with the novel corona crisis, but they are not enough to

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<sup>1</sup>Brunnengräber, Achim, Ansgar Klein, und Heike Walk, Hrsg. 2005. *NGOs im Prozess der Globalisierung: mächtige Zwerge, umstrittene Riesen*. 1. Aufl. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. P. 353.

prevent the next virus from breaking out. As long as our economic system encourages people to destroy our ecosystems and cut down entire rainforests for profit, the outbreak of the next virus might just be waiting behind the corner: Destroying natural habitats forces animals to flee, making it more likely for them and humans to get in contact with other species. In the case of COVID-19 the virus was much likely transmitted by bats that migrated to Malaysia after they were forced to leave the rain forest in Sumatra. There they probably transmitted the disease to other animals, that later were sold at an animal market in Wuhan.

The story of the climate, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and greenhouse gases is the one that has brought the climate movement to the forefront of public attention over the past year. However, it has one big problem: Many people, who are lucky enough to not have their livelihood threatened by the effects of climate change yet, still do not understand how it affects their daily lives. This narrative refers to the climate as if it can be isolated from our economic system, from our health and from the outbreak of new diseases. Furthermore, at the moment, with many people having very acute worries such as the health of loved ones and how to pay next month's rent, the narrative of the lurching climate crisis might overwhelm people more than mobilize them. Framing climate and ecological protection as the surest way to achieving true stability can directly address such concerns.

For the period after the Corona crisis ends or at least recedes activists will need to develop a new narrative that is concrete and immediate. In that sense, similar to the one that has dominated during the pandemic. It must be a narrative that answers how people's health can be best protected and that promises economic stability. It must be a narrative that shows the direct connection between everyday human concerns and the protection of nature from exploitative practices such as extractivism. It must be a narrative that shows that crises such as COVID-19 and climate change do not affect all people equally and one that builds solidarity beyond borders. This narrative must demonstrate that climate and ecological protection is not a "luxury" but the basic building block of a resilient society. In short, it must be made clear that climate and nature conversation are the most basic form of health protection and economic stability.

Tearing down rain forests does not just increase the probability of transmittable diseases, it directly and indirectly contributes to raising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which results in flooding, sea-level rise and catastrophic wild fires such as in Australia in 2019. As long as governments exclude the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems in their plans, stability will remain an illusion. As long as people deny themselves as part of the ecosystem and that their livelihood, health and well-being depends on their care for it, a state of crisis awaits us and future generations.

All activist groups need to come together to find a common narrative of climate protection which shows that this is the world's best hope for a stable economy and open, healthy, resilient societies. That the corona virus crisis will change

everything is a key narrative that activists need to communicate, so that people can expect substantive changes and build their acceptance of this. Over time, mass media space will become more readily available for climate activists' actions and narratives. This chance should not be missed, as it may be the best one the climate movement gets in the foreseeable future.

**About the author:**

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## **Degrowth and feminisms ally to forge care-full paths beyond pandemic**

**Susan Paulson (30<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

### **Abstract**

This article describes four initiatives in which degrowth and feminist activists mobilize collaborative analysis and communication in efforts to influence paths through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The efforts work together to identify and advance actions that help our societies to address and emerge from this global disaster in more humane, just, and sustainable ways. We join other social movements in asking: How can we seize opportunities to build healthier values, social arrangements, and policies? To slow down the rush toward future disasters? Highlight is on caring and commoning as features of desired worlds ahead, and as means and methods in our own organization and activism.

### **Key Words**

Degrowth, feminism, COVID-19, care, mobilization

### **Moves toward radical redirection**

Degrowth advocates seek to reduce ongoing harm to humans and earth systems by reorienting values, practices, and institutions away from economic expansion and toward equitable and sustainable wellbeing. Different actors work toward these goals via everyday practices, communal initiatives, scholarly theory, and policy recommendations (e.g., Gezon and Paulson 2017; Kallis 2018; Kallis *et al.* 2020; Treu and Schmelzer 2020). This article shares processes and outcomes of four overlapping initiatives that mobilize for change via collaborative analysis and writing, and by communicating shared understandings among diverse audiences. All coincide in foregrounding caring and commoning as engines for getting through the pandemic, in policies and actions toward healthier futures, and as characteristics of our own practices.

First is Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), an inclusive network of activists and scholars launched in 2016 at the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest. A 2017 survey carried out by Jolanda Iserlohn revealed that members are located in wide-ranging contexts around the world, and bring to the network an immense variety of activist, academic, household, and professional experiences.

During March and April 2020, around 40 participants of this network, quarantined in locations ranging from Chile to Finland, joined in a series of virtual conversations that mixed strategizing for political change with mutual encouragement for facing immediate challenges. After circulating ideas and drafts, the group produced two messages communicated to the public on April 20, 2020: [“Feminist degrowth reflections on COVID-19 and the Politics of Social](#)

[Reproduction](#)” and “[Collaborative Feminist Degrowth: Pandemic as an Opening for a Care-Full Radical Transformation](#).” To reach beyond English language speakers, the messages were translated into [Finnish](#) (Suomi), [German](#) (Deutsch), [Greek](#) (Ελληνικό), [Italian](#) (Italiano), [Spanish](#) (Español), [Turkish](#) (Türkçe). The call for a “Care-full radical transformation” begins:

The crisis we face as a global community must be understood not only as a public health crisis, or as an economic crisis of the capitalist mode of production, but also, fundamentally, as a crisis of the reproduction of life. In this sense, it is a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere. The pandemic is a historical rupture . . . we take this opportunity to reflect on how we can, from our diverse positions, face this moment, organize, and collectively imagine radical alternative modes of living: those with more time for community, relationship building, and care for each other as well as the non-human world.

A second, parallel, processes of collaborative thinking and writing led to the dissemination, three weeks later, of [Degrowth: New Roots for the Economy. Re-imagining the Future After the Corona Crisis](#). This open letter, signed by more than 1,100 individuals and 70 organizations from 60 countries, calls for various sectors of global populations to embrace five principles to guide responses to COVID-19 crises and economic recovery: (1) Put life at the center of our economic systems, not economic growth; (2) Radically re-evaluate how much and what work is necessary for a good life for all, emphasizing care work; (3) Organize society around the provision of essential goods and services, minimizing wasteful practices; (4) Democratize societies, struggling against authoritarian and technocratic tendencies; and (5) Base political and economic systems on the principle of solidarity, rather than competition and greed.

Like FaDA’s messages, this letter was mobilized to bring diverse audiences into conversation. It was translated into 19 languages, and published in Open Democracy (UK), Mediapart (France), The Wire (India), HGV (Hungary), Pagina 12 (Argentina), Yeşil Gazete (Turkey), ctxt (Spain), Italia Che Cambia (Italy), UDRŽITELNÝ NERŮST (Czech Republic), Ricochet (Quebec), Sin Embargo (Mexico) and Information (Denmark), among other [media outlets](#).

Rapid actions like these global communications are nurtured by slower processes of collaborative learning demonstrated by a third initiative, a team of four activist scholars whose collaborations in teaching, conferences, and writing led to the 2020 book [The Case for Degrowth](#). Joining many others in arguing that perpetual growth is harmful and doomed, this publication also provides encouraging examples and reachable proposals for healthier ways forward in daily practices and values, communal organizing, government policies, and political mobilization. In the recent article [The case for degrowth in a time of pandemic](#), the authors show how their proposals address current challenges.

Promoting dialogue and debate among these and other intellectual projects, while building convivial solidarity and trust among diverse actors and organizers, are

goals of the fourth initiative discussed here: the world conference “[Degrowth Vienna 2020 – Strategies for social-ecological transformation](#)” held May 29 - June 1. The call for participation foregrounded the conference’s strategy for learning across differences:

By bringing together practitioners, artists, activists, civil society actors and scientists, we want to integrate different kinds of existing expertise and elaborate promising approaches to transforming the economy in a socially just and ecologically viable way. The conference will have a participatory design, including a thorough documentation process that will generate concrete outcomes for the degrowth movement and research society.

Observing that expert factual knowledge has not been sufficient to move societies toward healthier paths, degrowth and feminist activists seek more holistic approaches that connect with bodily and emotional feelings. In workshops, summer camps, and other gatherings, we have been experimenting with learning and communication strategies that go beyond scientific lectures to include theater, makers spaces, graphic facilitation, artwork, and more. Participants at previous world degrowth conferences were charged with energy by parading through the streets of Budapest, and by sharing locally-grown vegetarian meals at Descrecimiento México. Below, we learn how organizers responded to the daunting challenges of hosting a participatory world gathering in 2020, amid quarantines that limit corporeal conviviality.

With the goal of fostering dialogue among social movements and communities, the following discussion shares ideas and approaches from each of these initiatives. The text draws from and complements the short article [From pandemic toward care-full degrowth](#) published in the *Interface* series [Social movements in and beyond the COVID-19 crisis: sharing stories of struggles](#).

### **What does growth have to do with pandemic?**

Social movements have long attacked the pursuit of profit as a root of ecological and social degradation, and degrowth focuses explicitly on halting the drive for relentlessly expanding production and consumption. The open letter “New Roots for the Economy” observes,

The crisis triggered by the Coronavirus has already exposed many weaknesses of our growth-obsessed capitalist economy – insecurity for many, healthcare systems crippled by years of austerity and the undervaluation of some of the most essential professions. This system, rooted in exploitation of people and nature, which is severely prone to crises, was nevertheless considered normal.

Today, it is tempting to portray the COVID-19 pandemic as tangible proof of limits to growth, a messianic reckoning for our profligate ways. But such a claim would be naïve; epidemics have spread in the past and will in the future. What is clear is that the speed and scope of this contagion have been accelerated by global economic dynamics, while the growing ease with which viruses like HIV, SARS, MERS and COVID jump from animals to humans is enabled by the expansion of industrial agriculture, ranching, and other human encroachment on habitats, as well as the commodification of wildlife, all motivated by drive for profit.

Slow and ineffectual responses of leaders like Bolsonaro, Johnson, and Trump, as well as impulses to restart economies before the pandemic has waned, can also be understood in the context of ongoing pushes to sustain growth. Government capacities to respond have been eroded by budget cuts to public health and social infrastructures, enacted as public funds were redirected to subsidize expansion of private ventures. Ongoing struggles to fund and mobilize responses to public health emergencies contrasts with the agility with which national guard and other military forces were mobilized to protect property during recent protests in the US.

A dangerous dimension of pushes for growth is the rejection of scientific evidence and advice. In order to defend fossil fuel, climate change deniers have undermined faith in science, opening the way for politicians to shun a range of findings that threaten economic expansion; some had cut funding for pandemic research units and epidemic control teams, as well as studies on mitigation and adaptation to climate change. Even as COVID-19 spread, a number of leaders refused to respond to scientific findings and protocols (such as distancing, testing, and protective equipment) until pushed to do so by courageous protests of health workers, civil society, and other actors.

### **Paths toward more equitable and sustainable societies**

Contrary to claims of [some critics](#), the ravages of COVID-19 do not represent degrowth worlds strived for by social movements. Yes, the health crisis has provoked declines in natural resources used and waste generated, giving welcome respite to ecosystems. And yes, the lives of *some* people have slowed down, as ambitious schedules give way to more time for reflection and relationships. But no, unevenly-suffered trauma, impoverishment, and death are not features of degrowth; on the contrary, these are precisely the kind of phenomena that planned degrowth aims to avoid.

We would like to see societies slow down by design, not disaster. However, it looks like transitions away from growth may be largely unplanned and messy, in conditions not of our own choosing. Conditions like the ones we are living through now. So, finding ourselves amid global disaster, we join other social movements in asking: How can we seize opportunities to advance values, social arrangements, and policies that help us move toward more livable and just worlds? That slow down the rush toward future disasters?

Like those in other social movements, activists discussed here insist on connecting immediate responses to deeper structural transformations. The problems we

address did not appear with the coronavirus. They are produced and reproduced by hierarchical and exploitative social systems that took form several centuries ago with colonial capitalism, then continued to evolve in varied contexts. Key here are historically-specific systems of race and gender adapted to engineer and to justify forms of appropriation that support economic growth. Shared critique of these historical forces nourish alliances among degrowth and decolonial feminisms, even as they mark distance from liberal feminisms and green growth.

Transformative responses will require synergy among diverse perspectives and movements. Our most immediate case for including degrowth in this allied front is that its fundamental practices—modest living based in cooperation, conviviality, sharing, and caring—are desirable in and of themselves. Even when there seems little hope of establishing societies characterized by dignified work, equitable and solidary communities, respect for natural environments, we can already exercise and begin to embody these practices, enjoying their intrinsic rewards as we take steps toward feminist degrowth worlds to come.

In spite of the beautiful simplicity of these core principles, putting them into practice requires struggle and negotiation. In addition to battling forces aggressively defending various aspects of the status quo, we face quotidian conflicts around our own common senses and expectations, inherited ideas about aesthetics, propriety, respect that are internalized in our bodies and relationships, including our professional and academic practices. In an [essay on challenges faced in organizing the Vienna 2020 Conference](#), Nathan Barlow reflects on debates about how and to what extent conference processes and logistics should coincide with degrowth visions, and who establishes degrowth standards for conference organizing.

Should we use social media to promote the event? All vegan or just vegetarian catering? Paid organizers or all volunteers? Are organizations x, y, and z really degrowth-y enough? Can we plead against flying to the conference or is this exclusionary towards those travelling longer distances, such as would-be attendees from the Global South? Thus, organizing a degrowth conference is not just a practical exercise. Importantly – and we should have realized this sooner – it is also a manifestation of ideas.

Vital ideas have also been manifest through a rainbow of actions and alliances mobilized to deliver groceries and medicines, help others to manage welfare benefits, telephone isolated community members. Actors deciding whether and how to carry out these beautiful acts face their own questions, including risks of contagion. For Benjamin Duke (2020), the confluence of these initiatives creates fertile ground for the emergence of alliances unthinkable before the pandemic. When the difficult journey of reconstruction begins, this resurgent dynamism will be vital for establishing more enduring commons for care and provisioning.

## **Feminisms draw attention to diversely positioned contributions and vulnerabilities**

The coronavirus pandemic provokes us to think about our worlds in new ways. We hope it becomes clearer that, without essential workers, none of us can thrive. That, unless vulnerable community members are protected, even the most privileged are not safe from contagion.

Contributions to essential care and provisioning, as well as vulnerabilities to harm, are organized through economic systems, kinship systems, and other social institutions that foster greater hierarchy, or greater equity, in different historical periods and contexts. Amid experiences of COVID-19 and ensuing economic troubles, degrowth feminisms call for heightened attention to differentiated distribution of burdens and vulnerabilities, particularly those associated with gender.

Data from countries around the world show that [COVID infections tend to be much more severe and deadly in men than in women](#), with death tolls as much as [2.2 times greater for men](#). This intersects with [disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups](#). In many contexts, then, it is non-white men who are most vulnerable to suffer critical illness and death from coronavirus, while differently positioned women are facing different challenges and vulnerabilities.

Growing gaps by which women, on average, [outlive men in every country](#) by as many as 14 years are driven by structural forces, including the gendered organization of military, occupational, and incarceration systems, as well as lifestyle expectations connected to certain masculine identities, including meat-heavy diets, alcohol and tobacco consumption, disdain for healthcare, limited social connections, and risk-taking. Amid COVID-19, research has found that men in some contexts are as twice as likely as women to go [without masks](#) and to [break quarantine](#).

Is it useful to blame men victims for getting sick? Feminists have struggled to motivate compassion for women whose conditions constrain the development of self-confidence, initiative, and financial skills necessary to make dignified lives for themselves. Transition to care-full worlds will also require compassion for boys and men whose conditions push them to demonstrate their virility by performing dangerous labor in hazardous conditions, by exercising and enduring violence, and by taking risks with their health and their lives.

While some people shelter at home, others must choose between jobs that expose them to the coronavirus and unemployment without adequate safety nets. Much attention has been drawn to vulnerabilities of nurses, health aids, and caretakers, in majority women. More gender awareness is needed for millions of men performing essential jobs as sanitation workers, meat packers, food harvesters, truck and bus drivers. While absolutely vital for public health, these occupations were already among the most dangerous and deadly before adding exposure to coronavirus. Around the world they are performed overwhelmingly by men, in patterns of workplace violence so highly gendered that, in countries like USA, ten

men die of occupational accidents for each woman ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019](#)). The added exposure to virus can be the spark needed for degrowth and feminist mobilization against gendered traditions of workplace violence that are harming men.

While some people find comfort at home, others face conflict and crowding, or lack homes altogether. Reports from diverse countries indicate that domestic violence has intensified during lock-downs, impacting women disproportionately ([Taub 2020](#)). People who don't even live in homes face different kinds of vulnerabilities. In most countries, women outnumber men among residents in long-term care centers, while men make up majorities as high as 90% in prisons, jails, migrant labor camps, homeless shelters, immigrant detention centers, and military barracks, all of which have become hotspots for the virus. In these residential patterns too, the forms of violence and discrimination borne by those who embody subordinate masculinities manifest intersections of gender, racial, and class inequalities.

Other relevant intersections involve sexuality. Many public health messages reinforce the widespread—and incorrect—assumption that contemporary populations live mostly in heteronormative nuclear households. “Stay home with your family,” “balance extra domestic responsibilities between husband and wife” are relevant for a portion of the population, for example, the 20% of US households that consists of nuclear families ([US Census Bureau 2013](#)). However, equating residential units with normative kinship units limits support for the actual residential and kin arrangements through which provisioning and care are organized in today's societies. Inaccurate assumptions that all people live like the Flintstones, the Simpsons, or the Jetsons seriously limit public health efforts by obscuring empirical realities, which are plural. Those public messages also operate to demean other ways of living and to stifle pluriversal creativity.

Across wealthy countries, the most common household category is a single person living alone ([27% US and Canadian households](#), [40% of Swedish households](#)). Amid isolating conditions, one creative response to needs for care and conviviality is found in [queer dance parties](#) organized online with scopes ranging from local communities to celebrity-filled global gatherings. Dancing together—even virtually—not only provides care and acknowledgement needed in quarantine (and other forms of isolation), it can also build values and pleasures outside the realm of economic competition and gain. Alliances with LGBTQ and related social movements help us to honor the diverse identity, household, and kin arrangements that people are already living, and to support innovations provoked by the pandemic, as well as those motivated by desires for positive transformation.

Equitable and sustainable transitions depend on collaborative abilities to develop gender systems that honor diverse contributions and sacrifices, and that minimize vulnerabilities for all. FaDA has raised awareness of this challenge by hosting participatory workshops at the Budapest, Malmö, and Mexico City world degrowth conferences, and by organizing sessions to share

research findings on feminisms, masculinities, and degrowth. In their article “[Feminism\(s\) and Degrowth: A Midsummer Night’s Dream](#)” Corinna Dengler, Camila Rolando Mazzuca and Renda Belmalle summarize conference conversations:

FaDA members were eager to emphasize that FaDA must not become one of the many streams within degrowth. It is of the uttermost importance to understand gender relations as cross-cutting theme that fundamentally has a say in how we conceptualize the transformation towards a socially just and ecologically sound degrowth society. The pervasiveness of unequal gender relations in the capitalist system is so historically grounded that it requires a constant and in-depth attention for its deconstruction in all degrowth-related topics.

Although it is equally true that the anti-black racism and exploitation pervasive in capitalist systems requires constant and in-depth attention in all degrowth-related topics, that struggle has been less visible and less organized in degrowth activism overall. In initiatives like those discussed here, we face important work of developing stronger understandings and more explicit actions against racism. Building needed alliances with actors and movements working against racism will be essential for futures of degrowth feminisms.

In mainstream environmentalism, white men have dominated organizational leadership, science, and media. Even within climate action movements, students and grassroots members experience currents of racialization, patriarchy, and coloniality that make it difficult to work together equitably ([Chan and Curnow 2017](#)). In contrast, grassroots environmental and social justice movements in low-income and wealthy countries alike have frequently been inspired, led, and publicly represented by actors who are not men, not white, or not wealthy. Not incidentally, they have advanced more radical proposals, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1967 call for a guaranteed basic income to abolish poverty and decrease inequality, or the Zapatista’s demand for autonomous spaces to create a future outside of Mexico’s national development. In order to learn from and build alliances with diversely positioned social-environmental justice movements, degrowth advocates must prioritize mutual and respectful dialogue among diverse ways of knowing and being.

In one study designed to highlight diverse experiences and adaptations in Georgia, USA, FaDA member Lisa Gezon and Deirdre Haywood-Rouse are collaborating with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), League of Women Voters, and Latinos United of Carroll County to document a variety of experiences and cultural interpretations of COVID-19. Via online surveys and phone interviews, they have gathered testimonies from people from diverse social status, gender, and ethnoracial positions, and plan to reconnect with many of these six months later to document adaptations to the pandemic and its consequences.

## **Politics of care**

It is good to hear scientific, political, and moral authorities praise people who stay home to protect community health and those who sacrifice to perform essential work. Some have even suggested that caring for people's health and wellbeing should come before profit. But we must not be seduced into believing that such sentiments will automatically lead to structural change. Rebuilding societies around care will require constant material struggles.

While respect for planetary boundaries demands degrowth of the global economy as a whole, some critical features need to be nurtured and developed, namely infrastructures of care. Feminists call for policies that support the regeneration of healthy humans and environments, revaluing home and neighborhood as sites of production and reproduction, and provisioning economies grounded in solidarity across different strengths and vulnerabilities.

In one example of social movement advocacy, the [Global Women's Strike \(GWS\) and Women of Color GWS](#), urge governments to implement Care Incomes to recognize the indispensable role of (re)productive work for life and survival. Care Incomes build on and differ from other basic income proposals by foregrounding social recognition of unpaid and gendered care work that we all perform to sustain the life and wellbeing of households and communities. As advocates develop and debate various ways of operationalizing care income, all seek to foster equity and solidarity by investment of common wealth in people's capacities to take care of ourselves, our kin, and others, as well as our environments ([D'Alisa 2020](#)).

Like the FaDA network, the co-authors of *The Case for Degrowth* not only encourage readers to prioritize care and common effort in community organization and government policies, but practice it themselves, as communicated in the book's acknowledgements:

Writing this book is an act of care. Care for family, friends, and fellow citizens striving to contribute and find meaning in the face of historic challenges. Care for people and places around the world struggling to survive the burdens and damages of growth. And care for each other, as collaborators and co-authors. As in any act of care, our efforts to produce this book ran up against the limits and vulnerabilities of our individual positions – class, gender, disciplinary, cultural, and other.

Nathan Barlow writes poignantly about care and common effort in moments when teams organizing the Vienna 2020 conference were disheartened by challenges of COVID-19.

[W]e face the dual challenge of the practical necessities of organizing an online conference, which is totally new to most of us, and the important care work of looking after each other in this challenging time. Already a few members of the organizing team have stepped back. Some aren't motivated to organize an online conference in the same way that an in-person conference excited them. Others in

the team have voiced the challenges of organizing online, which often leave little space for emotional sharing or the chance to have informal discussions over coffee.

We are doing our best to proactively create the spaces for emotional sharing and caring amongst the organizing team. To highlight the work done by everyone in the team (especially that which may be forgotten in an online conference), and show appreciation for each other's work, which is especially important in a time of crisis when people are going through additional stress or challenges (health, financial, etc.). The ComCare (communications & care) team deserves a special shout-out for their ongoing work in this regard.

Grief over lost dreams needs to be honored. And disappointment acknowledged when hard work invested seems no longer relevant. At the same time, the successful and well-attended virtual conference suggests that, debating about degrowth conference-planning and figuring out how to work in common had provided marvelous training for unexpected scenarios. In Nathan Barlow's words, "it is precisely *because* we have had two long years of organizing together that we were resilient enough to make such a transition."

### **Policies through and beyond pandemic**

The letter "New Roots for the Economy" raises hope that positive impulses among individuals and social movements can be transformed into sustained structural change.

We now have an opportunity to build on the experiences of the Corona crisis: from new forms of cooperation and solidarity that are flourishing, to the widespread appreciation of basic societal services like health and care work, food provisioning and waste removal. The pandemic has also led to government actions unprecedented in modern peacetime, demonstrating what is possible when there is a will to act: the unquestioned reshuffling of budgets, mobilization and redistribution of money, rapid expansion of social security systems and housing for the homeless.

*The Case for Degrowth* shows how principles of caring and inclusive solidarity can guide the establishment of policies and institutions that prioritize human and environmental health: Green New Deals, work-sharing and reduced working hours, universal public services, support of community economies, and care incomes. In response to COVID, and to pressure from activists and movements, governments across the political spectrum have begun to consider and selectively adopt versions of the radical proposals advanced in this book. In Europe and North America, public and private employers have reduced working hours and implemented work-sharing; different forms of basic income are being debated; financial measures have been instituted to subsidize workers during quarantine and after businesses close; an international campaign for care

income has been launched; governments have engaged the productive apparatus to secure vital supplies and services; and moratoriums are being considered or imposed on rent, mortgage, and debt payments.

On April 14, 2020, the Hawaii Department of Human Services' State Commission on the Status of Women delivered to Hawaii legislators a *Feminist Plan for COVID-Era Economic Recovery*, conveying concrete policy recommendations for a new kind of economy ([Dolan 2020](#)). Rather than reinstate a status quo riddled with inequality, the document recognizes the current crisis as the “moment to build a system that is capable of delivering gender equality.” It calls for a universal basic income; free, publicly provided child-care for essential workers; the creation of public emergency funds available for high-risk groups; enhanced health care for women and LGBTQIA+ people; and reinvestment in midwifery services to improve maternal health care. The plan also insists that 20 percent of the state's COVID-19-response funds go directly to Native Hawaiian communities.

Most states and countries have more than enough resources to cover public health and basic needs during crises, and can certainly weather declines in non-essential parts of the economy by reallocating work and resources to essential ones. Yet, because current economic systems are organized around constant circulation, any decline in market activity threatens systemic collapse, provoking generalized unemployment and impoverishment. It doesn't have to be this way. To be more resilient to future crises—pandemic, climatic, financial, or political—we must (re)build systems in which interruptions in market activity do not sacrifice livelihoods and lives.

Crises in basic provisioning have raised the pitch of mobilization around the establishment of basic incomes, ranging from feminist care income discussed above to [Pope Francis' proposal for global universal basic wage](#). Degrowth aligns with those basic income proposals that seek to enhance resilience to crises, and simultaneously establish material conditions that liberate individuals from exploitative employment, support transformation away from environmentally-damaging regimes, and move beyond “jobs versus environment” antagonism ([Lawhon and McCreary 2020](#)).

Degrowth seeks to curb ecologically-damaging aspects of current economies. Societies in pandemic struggle to demobilize activities not immediately essential for sustaining life. And feminists fight to reorient societies around the sustenance of human and other life. Today, all coincide in facing the fundamental challenge of managing public health and provisioning without growth during and after COVID-19.

## **Conflict and mobilization**

Bitter struggles have already arisen over which paths to pursue through and after this crisis. Powerful actors will continue pushing to reconstitute the status quo and to shift costs to others. There is real danger that abilities to ally in resistance will be

undermined by politics of fear, xenophobia, and blame; intensified surveillance and control; and isolation that constrains common efforts and political organizing.

Movement toward more equitable and resilient societies that have gentler impacts will require alliances across social movements. Differently positioned actors will need to raise voices, organize, vote, strike, protest non-violently, and mobilize in other ways. We are encouraged by instances in which common senses, practices, and politics of degrowth and feminisms are already being mobilized as people collaborate to provision and live differently. And by the recuperation of old and generation of new modes of (re)production and social organization. We also recognize that journeys through and beyond COVID-19 will involve setbacks, counter-reforms, repressions, readjustments, and unexpected turns.

Collaborators in the four initiatives described here coincide with fundamental messages of the open letter “New Roots for the Economy”: “As long as we have an economic system that is dependent on growth, a recession will be devastating. What the world needs instead is Degrowth – a planned yet adaptive, sustainable, and equitable downscaling of the economy, leading to a future where we can live better with less.” Yet leaders around the world are now focusing on saving growth economies; many have already moved to bail out and re-launch profit-making industries, while media reinforce false antagonisms between economy and public health, between jobs and environment.

Shifting priorities toward human and ecological health and justice will require interconnections among culturally and geographically dispersed movements, such as that proposed by the May 11, 2020 call by Progressive International [To Form a Common Front in Global Struggle for Justice and a Better World](#). The messages generated and circulated in initiatives described here interact with many other necessary contributions. Scholarly analyses have certainly contributed to social change; yet much intellectual work has been limited by historically narrow gender, racial, and class positioning. Seeking different paths, the collaborative initiatives described here emerged and developed via dialogue across differences, and explicitly seek to broaden epistemological and social horizons. They also strive to transcend divide between theory and action. These social movement journeys of thinking, debating, and organizing together, while caring for each other, are outcomes in themselves. As degrowth and feminist participants, practices, and relationships are changed in the process, they produce tangible changes in the world.

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## **About the author**

Susan Paulson, based at the University of Florida, studies and teaches about gender, class, and ethnoracial systems interacting with bodies and environments. She has researched and taught in Latin America for 30 years, 15 of those living in South America among low-income, low-impact communities. Recent writing includes [Degrowth: culture, power and change](#), and [Pluriversal learning: Pathways toward a world of many worlds](#).

## **Coronavirus, mouvements sociaux populaires anti-exploitation minier en Haïti**

**Peterson Derolus (18 avril 2020)**

La pandémie du nouveau coronavirus ou COVID-19 a sapé la base de l'économie de tous les pays, car les industries, les échanges commerciaux ne se font presque plus. La pandémie va déboucher sur une véritable crise économique mondiale et que les pays appauvris, dépendants, exportateurs ou fournisseurs de matières premières vont être les premiers sacrifiés. Toujours, dans ce pareil cas, les investisseurs, les capitalistes cherchent toujours une monnaie de refuge pour absorber la crise. C'est ce qui justifie la tendance de l'augmentation du prix de l'or dans les temps de crise économique, et même dans la crise de COVID-19, car il est toujours utilisé comme monnaie de refuge et sert pour la thésaurisation en temps de crise. Les territoires qui ont été sources d'approvisionnement de ces ressources vont être soumis à une rude ruée vers l'or et d'autres ressources naturelles qui pourraient aider aux investisseurs, aux capitalistes d'absorber la crise. Donc, les périodes de crise et d'effolement sociale généralisée sont généralement exploitées par les institutions et compagnies multinationales pour faire main mise sur les ressources naturelles dans les pays qui ont des gouvernements corrompus et des structures juridico-administratives faibles notamment en Amérique Latine, en Afrique, et dans les Caraïbes. Tout compte fait, la résistance populaire a toujours été le seul moyen d'empêcher le pillage des ressources naturelles dans les moments de crise, or dans ce contexte de pandémie, le confinement, la « distance sociale », l'interdiction de rassemblement de plus de 10 personnes, le couvre-feu sont recommandés. En ce sens, nous pourrions dire que la conjoncture actuelle n'offre pas beaucoup de possibilité de résistance contre les gouvernements et les multinationaux, pendant que la situation actuelle exige une plus grande surveillance et de résistance populaire. Dans cet article article, nous poursuivons comme objectif de démontrer comment la crise du COVID-19 est défavorable à la relance du projet d'exploitation minière en Haïti, vu l'importance de certains produits naturels dans ce contexte et de démontrer comment les mouvements sociaux populaires anti-mine ont exploités ce contexte pour faire avancer leur lutte.

### **Double jeu contradictoire : Promoteurs d'exploitation minière, sensibilisateurs contre le COVID-19 en Haïti**

Dans le contexte actuel, tous les gouvernements, même les plus criminels, prétendent vouloir protéger la vie des citoyens contre la pandémie du coronavirus. Ainsi, ils mettent en place un ensemble de dispositifs juridico-administratifs et émettent des consignes sanitaires pour lutter contre la propagation du virus. Les mouvements sociaux populaires anti-miniers en Haïti participent aussi dans des activités de sensibilisation contre la propagation du

COVID-19, en invitant la population haïtienne, les communautés ciblées par l'exploitation minière à se laver les mains, à ne pas toucher la bouche ni le nez car avec les mains sales, etc. Ces mouvements croient que pour résister, il faut d'abord être en vie et en santé. Car, il est fondamental pour eux de rester en vie et en santé pour faire face à d'autres événements aussi destructeurs que le coronavirus. Ainsi, démystifier la métamorphose, le double jeu des acteurs qui portaient de discours et de projets de développement suicidaires dans ce contexte est une des tâches nobles que jouent les mouvements sociaux populaires anti-miniers en Haïti dans ce moment particulier. En effet, beaucoup d'acteurs, de projets, de discours qui ont participé à la destruction de tous les cadres de la vie humaine se convertissent en humanistes-bienfaiteurs. Ils n'ont jamais tenu compte de la sauvegarde de la vie, de la santé de la population, de la protection de l'eau et l'environnement comme cadre de la vie, mais d'un coup, ils sont devenus leurs protecteurs. Le coronavirus et l'exploitation minière, spécialement les mines métalliques ont les mêmes effets sur la vie, la santé et l'environnement. Donc, la métamorphose des promoteurs de l'exploitation minière en grands sensibilisateurs contre le COVID-19 serait une stratégie qui vise à se légitimer, à gagner et à exploiter la conscience de la population pour mieux la manipuler après. En ce sens, renforcer la sensibilisation contre la propagation du coronavirus c'est aussi une lutte contre les acteurs et les projets destructeurs. « *Nou pap lave men pou siye l atè!*

### **Le mouvement contre l'exploitation minière dans le contexte du COVID-19**

La résistance populaire ne s'éteint pas en Haïti avec l'annonce officielle du COVID-19 et les mesures prises par le gouvernement tant décrié, mais plutôt prend d'autres formes. Si la résistance contre la mise en place du gouvernement de facto et la lutte contre la corruption connaît un grand ralentissement, mais pour les mouvements sociaux populaires contre l'exploitation minière, le contexte est favorable à la conscientisation de la population haïtienne non seulement sur l'importante et la protection de l'eau, de l'agriculture familiale et d'autres ressources naturelles, mais aussi sur les dangers que représentent l'industrie minière sur ces derniers.

Depuis plus de cinq (5) ans, des organisations populaires, paysannes, des droits humains, des organisations internationales se mobilisent pour défendre l'eau, l'agriculture et l'environnement contre l'exploitation minière, plus particulièrement les mines métalliques, n'ont pas trouvé un contexte aussi favorable pour étendre leurs résistances. En effet, dans le contexte de lutte contre la propagation du coronavirus, l'eau est devenue une ressource incontournable, car le lavage régulier des mains est fortement recommandé par le Ministère de la Santé. Aussi, comme grand pays consommateur des produits étrangers, le ralentissement du marché import-export montre encore une fois de plus la nécessité d'investir et de protéger le secteur agricole haïtien. Enfin, aucun vaccin n'est encore trouvé contre le coronavirus, la population ne compte non sur l'exploitation minière pour se protéger, mais sur certains produits

naturels comme le gingembre, l'ail, le citron, sirop de miel, l'oignon pour renforcer le système défensif de leurs corps. Tout compte fait, les mouvements sociaux populaires anti-miniers en Haïti trouvent un horizon favorable pour mener, amplifier, généraliser leur lutte sur tout le territoire haïtien en s'appuyant sur l'importance de l'eau, de l'agriculture et des produits naturels utiles dans le contexte de la pandémie du coronavirus.

### **En guise de conclusion**

Contrairement aux périodes post-séisme, post cyclone Mathieu, la stratégie du choc ne va pas être facile à appliquer dans le contexte de coronavirus en Haïti tenant compte de la place de certains produits naturels et de l'eau dans la lutte contre le virus et la vigilance des mouvements sociaux populaires anti-miniers. Ainsi donc, le COVID-19, ne crée pas seulement les conditions et l'opportunité pour la mise en branle du projet d'exploitation minière tant dénoncé par les communautés ciblées, il donne aussi la possibilité et les moyens pour renforcer, généraliser la lutte contre ce projet sur tout le territoire d'Haïti. Pour protéger l'agriculture et les produits naturels, il faut d'abord lutter contre les politiques d'accaparement des terres agricoles haïtiennes et lutter contre des projets comme l'exploitation minière, plus particulièrement l'exploitation des mines métalliques qui peuvent détruire la terre et empoisonner l'eau. De part de l'impact irréparable que l'industrie minière peut avoir sur l'agriculture et l'eau, l'enjeu de la lutte contre l'exploitation minière est de taille. Penser que le COVID-19 donne la possibilité pour l'exploitation minière est un faux calcul. Les mouvements sociaux ont profité de cette situation de crise sanitaire et économique pour renforcer le processus de conscientisation de la population haïtienne à travers des outils d'éducatons populaires et mettent en place des structures de surveillances communautaires, d'amplifier le réseautage et la solidarité internationale.

### **A propos de l'auteur**

Peterson Derolus est un militant anti-extractiviste haïtien.

## **The pandemic does not stop the pollution in River Periyar**

**Silpa Satheesh (1<sup>st</sup> June 2020)**

### **Abstract**

When the entire world has been witnessing improvements in environmental quality, a river in Kerala flows in many colors due to pollution. River Periyar has been flowing in black and white through the Eloor-Edayar industrial region ever since the lockdown started in the state. On Earth Day, members of the grassroots environmental movement, *Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samithi* (PMVS, Periyar Anti-Pollution Campaign), staged a protest, wearing masks and without violating social distancing etiquette, to call out the continued release of toxins into the river even during the pandemic. This essay is written building on a conversational interview with Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of PMVS, and by analyzing the video recording of the protest organized on Earth Day.

### **Pollution in Periyar continues unabated**

Periyar, the longest river in Kerala, has been flowing in black and white colors carrying industrial effluents, amidst the pandemic. This is ironic considering the significant improvements in environmental quality reported from across the world during the spread of the pandemic. Reflecting on the unique predicament of the river, Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of PMVS (Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samithi or Periyar Anti-Pollution Campaign), remarks, “We have been paying attention to the stories from around the world about rivers flowing clear and the slow revival of aquatic life. And we really hoped that the River Periyar would flow clear during the lockdown. However, it has become clear that our expectations were misplaced!”

Explaining the visible and discernible effects of pollution in the river and aquatic life, Purushan Eloor continues:

Pollution issues have accentuated to dangerously high levels since the lockdown came into effect on March 22, 2020. The river was seen flowing in black color for more than 20 times, and at times the river flowed in white color with thick layers of pollutants floating on the surface. Fish-kills were reported in the river for about four times. We must understand that a river flowing in black also implies that the entire river ecosystem is dismantled. Earthworms that live on riverbeds were spotted dead and floating in a stretch of river starting from Pathalam bridge to almost 5 km down the stream. The dead fish and earthworms clearly indicate the toxicity of the chemicals released to the river.

As the excerpt points out, the visible effects of pollution in the form of discoloration of river water and fish kills signify the negative environmental burdens borne by the local ecology and community as part of industrial development in the region. Despite continued efforts and struggles by local environmentalists to put an end to the release of untreated industrial effluents into the river, pollution in the river continues unabated even during the lockdown. The problem is compounded, given the possibility of the toxic pollutants entering the drinking water pumping station located in the river.



*Purushan Eloor, the frontline leader of the Periyar Anti-pollution Campaign.*  
*Source: Facebook*

### **“There is no alternative to drinking water”: Earth Day protest**

On April 22, 2020, *Periyar Malineekarana Virudha Samyukatha Samara Samithi* (Periyar Anti-Pollution Joint Protest Committee) [staged a protest](#) in the Eloor-Edayar industrial belt in Kerala to call out the continued pollution of River Periyar even during the lockdown. A few members<sup>1</sup> of the environmental groups lined up on the Pathalam regulator cum-bridge, built across the river. Protestors holding placards wore masks and maintained a safe distance from each other in compliance with social distancing norms prevailing during the pandemic.

Talking about the rationale for organizing the Earth Day protest, Purushan said, “Our mission here is to revamp River Periyar. This protest is only the last and most recent one in a very long history of struggles to save this river.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from Purushan Eloor, the members who participated in the Earth Day protests include Anwar, Azeez Elamana, Iqbal, Mahesh Kumar, Sakeer Hussain, Shabeer, and Shamsudheen Edayar.

continued to detail the conditions that led to the protest and described the event as follows:

In a context where the river kept flowing in black, on Earth Day, we decided to organize a protest, more like a symbolic resistance to the ongoing pollution. We planned to organize this event without violating any lockdown regulations imposed by the Central and State governments, and by maintaining social distance...in other words, we planned this as an act of protest that does not violate the law, and that's exactly how we managed to stage the protest. Since there was a curfew, only five of us staged the protest holding placards. All five of us were immediately arrested. However, later when a local politician came to take us out on bail, he was informed that there are orders from above requiring the police to hold us in custody until the Pollution Control Board (PCB hereafter) officials complete the collection of samples. This evidently shows how our presence and intervention is perceived as undesirable by local industries and unions who have access to the higher echelons of power.

The protestors were released by the end of the day only after the sampling process was completed. However, there have been no institutional initiatives to curb the release of pollutants into the river even when this essay is being written. People continued to record and document the river flowing in black in the succeeding days and share that on Facebook.

As highlighted in the mission of the movement, the protest staged over the river reaffirmed the centrality of the river in the lives and livelihoods of the people in the region. This focus on the river was further reflected in the placards and slogans used during the Earth Day protest. One of the collective action frames used during the protest said, "There is no alternative to drinking water." Such slogans succinctly capture how the local environmentalists establish the severity of the problem by highlighting the implications of continued pollution on the availability of clean and safe drinking water. More so, the strong presence of the river in the protest vocabularies such as "Will we thrive if the river dies? Save Periyar," marks the long legacy of the movement organized to save the river from pollution. Most importantly, the protest and frames used such as this one, "April 22, Earth Day. Stop the Pollution in Periyar," expose the irony of celebrating Earth Day when a river, which is also the primary source of drinking water, flows in many colors carrying industrial effluents.



*Earth Day Protest against Industrial Pollution in Kerala.*  
*Source: Mohanan M.N*

Another important aspect surrounding the most recent protest event has been the use of technology to spread awareness and garner wider support for the fight against pollution. The live streaming of the protest via Facebook Live also enabled people across the world to observe the protest virtually. This helped in receiving media coverage and public attention on the issue and the act of defiance. Besides, Facebook has been used as a platform for documenting evidence in addition to spreading information about the plight of the river. Live streaming the videos of the river flowing in black and white colors helped in documenting the release of effluents into the river. Many of such videos gathered more than 81.8K views and more than 7K shares on Facebook. One such video posted on Facebook clearly shows a cloud of black effluents slowly spreading across the river underwater. This helped in countering the usual denial from the Kerala State Pollution Control Board (PCB hereafter), the local authority responsible for monitoring and containing pollution.

### **“Stop the unholy nexus between industries and the PCB”: Fighting the nexus between industries and PCB**

The Earth Day protest also called out how the nexus between industries and the PCB, a state agency, is preventing the implementation of any sustainable solutions for curbing the release of untreated effluents into the river. The problem of industrial pollution in Periyar has a very long history and trajectory dating back to the 70s. The region housing more than 280 chemical industries were declared a toxic hotspot in 2003. At least 50 industries have pipes that release industrial effluents directly into the river.

The story of industrial pollution in the region is compounded by the story of institutional apathy and negligence by PCB. More so, local environmentalists allege that the PCB has been facilitating pollution by producing reports that link river discoloration to factors other than industrial effluents. One of the slogans used during the protest exposes this compliance as follows, “When Periyar flows

black, that's caused by the rotten grass. And when it flows in red, that's due to disturbances at the riverbed—le PCB.”

The Earth Day protests and the subsequent intervention from the Kerala High Court directed the PCB to collect water samples from the river for testing. According to Adv. Ashkar Khader, who leads the legal fight against pollution, the scientific reports released by two government agencies came up with two competing inferences. When the Irrigation report confirmed the presence of heavy metals and extremely low DO (dissolved oxygen) levels in the stretch of the river next to the industries, the PCB report only makes cursory reference to this.

According to Purushan, some of the important demands outlined by the protestors include:

One of the important demands we proposed was to find the reasons behind the discoloration of the river. PCB knows the reasons very well, but they continue to say that they don't. We all know that water is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. However, the water in this river flows in many colors, has a pungent smell, and tastes terrible. This implies that the water in River Periyar is a chemical compound. The reason for discoloration can be pinned down to the toxic and untreated effluents released from the industries on the banks of the river. The continuous release of such chemical effluents would bring down the level of dissolved oxygen (DO) in the river. It is disappointing that even when we exposed the sources of such pollution, the negligence from PCB cares to take no action. This stand taken by PCB stands testimony to the institutional negligence and apathy displayed by an institution entrusted with the responsibility to monitor and control pollution. We were fighting against this injustice. And by saying that, I would like to reiterate that this protest has been just one event in the long history of struggles against pollution here.... We demand PCB to break free from corruption and take action to remediate the issue of industrial pollution in the river.

Other major demands raised by the local community include implementing mechanisms to prevent the release of industrial effluents into the river and maintaining a material-balance record for all operating industries. The local environmentalist illustrates how the current situation is conducive to the unfettered release of effluents into the river and for that reason the local environmentalists demand the construction of a dike along the banks of the river throughout the industrial belt to monitor and control the release of industrial wastes into the river through underground and hidden pipes. This has been an important recommendation made by several scientific committees appointed by the state.

Furthermore, Purushan elaborates on how a community-based pollution monitoring committee can help break the nexus between private industries and the PCB as follows:

We have been demanding a Local Committee modeled after the Local Area Environmental Committee formed by the Supreme Court of India in 2004. We envision this as a monitoring committee constituted by local stakeholders, including inland fish workers, local environmentalists as well as PCB. Such a community built on the principle of social accountability alone can monitor, regulate, and contain the issue of industrial pollution in this region. This can put an end to this nexus between private industries and the PCB. In doing all of this, I am sure the condition of River Periyar would improve if we do this. In fact, our struggle for the last 25 years or so has been to save this river. To bring back the old River Periyar, a river in which we all used to bath, we are trying to revamp the river we all once had.

The excerpt reiterates the centrality of the river in the protest vocabularies and motives of the local environmental movement. The primary mission of the movement emerges loud and clear from the excerpts, and it is a commitment to “Save Periyar.” The clarity of diagnoses and prognoses done by the local movement is further evidenced by the careful distancing of the movement from any groups that call for the complete shutdown of all industries in the region. Frames such as “We are against pollution and not against the industries,” used by the movement uncovers how the movement recognizes how industries form an integral part of the livelihoods of the factory workers in the region.

## **Left and environment in Kerala**

The Earth Day protest highlights the unending issue of industrial pollution that has forced the people in the region to deal with the double pandemic: Covid-19 and toxic industrial effluents. “We could tame Nipah, we are taming Corona, but we couldn’t yet tame the people who pollute River Periyar? Why would that be?” said a member of the grassroots environmental group in a Facebook post. The lingering issue of pollution in the Eloor-Edayar region raises questions about the Kerala model of industrial development.

Kerala recently garnered international attention for its remarkable initiatives to contain the spread of the pandemic<sup>2</sup>. The response spearheaded by [Minister K.K. Shailaja](#) reaffirms the continued relevance of socialized health care and the provision of necessities to tackle public health crises. Furthermore, the model of pandemic response emulated by the communist government in Kerala grounded in the idioms of social solidarity, stand in stark opposition to the crumbling health system in capitalist countries such as the U.S. However, the protests in Eloor-Edayar raises pertinent questions about the environmental sustainability of the development model and how the nexus between state authorities and

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/aggressive-testing-contact-tracing-cooked-meals-how-the-indian-state-of-kerala-flattened-its-coronavirus-curve/2020/04/10/3352e470-783e-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/aggressive-testing-contact-tracing-cooked-meals-how-the-indian-state-of-kerala-flattened-its-coronavirus-curve/2020/04/10/3352e470-783e-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/21/kerala-indian-state-flattened-coronavirus-curve>

industrial capitalists amplify the issues at the ecological front. Further exemplifying the role of environment in Kerala's development, Purushan remarked:

When the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government came to power, they made a promise to conserve the environment. In fact, environmental conservation was an important agenda in their election manifesto. Once the government assumed power, they stated that conserving the water bodies of our state is of prime importance. So far as the revamping of rivers is concerned, I think, the government perceives this only in terms of river widening and deepening. It completely ignores the preservation of river catchment areas. More importantly, the state has overlooked the issue of river pollution. There has been no systematic effort to curtail the dumping of wastes and pollutants into the river...In other words, the promise to preserve the rivers does not translate into action. It's been four years ever since the new government took office, and I am disappointed to say that I won't even give "pass marks" for its performance at the environmental front. A state like Kerala that receives international accolades for its performance on many other fronts is stalling at the environmental front. And I am forced to assume that this is due to other priorities. We continue to believe that a state that truly is a model state on so many other fronts would, at some point, take adequate action to alleviate the issue of pollution.

As narrated in the excerpt above, despite the stride made in social and public health sectors, the proliferation of grassroots environmental struggles highlights the environmental issues associated with the development and infrastructure projects launched in the state. PMVS emerged as a working-class environmental movement and continues to hold strong affiliations to left politics. Most of the members are continued members/erstwhile members of the Communist Party (CPIM). This complicates the dominant narratives pitting progressive politics against environmentalism. Grounded in principles of equality and social justice, most environmental struggles in Kerala seek to expose how the environmental burdens of development are unequally borne by people at the margins.

In sum, the working-class and Marxist ideological orientations of many of these local environmental struggles ([Vayalkili struggle in Kannur](#), [Save Alappad](#) campaign against mineral sand mining, [Kandankali Samaram](#), etc.) poses important questions about the interface between left and environmental politics in the state. By exposing the impasse between environment and development, the grassroots environmental movements in Kerala uncover the need to perceive the environment as a class issue that needs to be brought to the center of the idioms and practices surrounding development. More so, the heightened vulnerability to climate change disruptions make such questions urgent and makes it imperative for the states to reimagine development in the post-pandemic world by making it ecologically just and sustainable.

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## About the author

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## **Corona can't save the planet, but we can, if we learn from ordinary people**

**Ashish Kothari (16 April 2020)**

It is fascinating that the only people who know nothing of the COVID-19 pandemic are also those completely unaffected by it: uncontacted or isolated forest peoples in the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, a couple of adivasi communities in the Nicobar Islands, perhaps some groups in the Arctic circle. How I wish I was amongst them, as much to escape the virus as to be mercifully far from the incessant chatter about it!

But then there are so many silver linings to this astonishing knockout punch humanity has been delivered, that I'm going to add to the chatter. Note that I say 'silver lining', for at the centre of this is a massive humanitarian crisis, not only of the suffering of the sick and the loved ones of those who are dying, but also of the working classes who cannot switch to 'online' work, whose daily wage labour is imperiled, whose vegetables and fruits are not selling, whose industries are shut and who unlike their capitalist or government bosses do not have wealth to fall back on. One cannot talk positively about a crisis in which 100,000 people have already died, and, according to the International Labour Office, 195 million people may lose their jobs <sup>1</sup>.

The corona pandemic has grabbed global attention like no previous disease, generating historically unprecedented actions by nations, partly because it has hit the rich and brought the global economy to its knees. But we must not forget that like always, the 'poor' are paying a higher price. This is true of other ongoing global crises, including of climate, biodiversity loss, and conflict. Everything else I write, in this article, has to be tempered by this very sobering reality.

We have been handed an incredible opportunity to right many historic wrongs. One is with regard to how we have treated our earthly home. And the other is regarding how our economies and politics have marginalized vast sections of humanity, the ones disproportionately suffering the consequences of multiple global crises - and these factors are connected.

### **What is the crisis telling us?**

Images of how clean the air of cities like Beijing and New Delhi has been since the virus took over and halted vehicular traffic, industries and other sources of pollution, have been flashed worldwide<sup>2</sup> must have significantly reduced carbon

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/11/positively-alpine-disbelief-air-pollution-falls-lockdown-coronavirus>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-51944780>). The cessation of much of the world's air traffic

emissions. Likewise many populations of fish and other aquatic life, and of terrestrial wildlife, must be breathing a bit easier as industrial scale fishing and hunting, and pollution, would have significantly declined.

In *The Swarm* by Frank Schätzing (2004)<sup>3</sup>, deep sea micro-organisms form a collective intelligence, and wreak mass scale revenge on a rampaging humanity for its complete disregard of planetary ecological limits. I am not superstitious, but who knows if viruses are not doing precisely the same thing? Why should we think only human beings have agency, and the rest of nature is only a mute bystander?

But even if the message of the viruses is not consciously generated, we should be heeding it. Industrial forms of natural resource use (including hunting for the global market rather than only for local subsistence use and markets, and monocultural commercial agriculture) have disrupted natural systems irreversibly, with fatal consequences for millions of species and for ourselves<sup>4</sup>. Amongst many consequences, we are frequently unleashing micro-organisms that were not earlier affecting human beings but now are latching on to us as new hosts. And this is only one kind of impact; others include the rapid and widespread collapse of ecosystems that sustain the livelihoods of or provide security to billions of people ... and eventually of the planet's ability to sustain life as we know it.

All this is a consequence of the triple forces of capitalism, statism (domination of the state in our lives), and patriarchy running amok. It is not only with the earth, but vast sections of humanity that are suffering. The growing chasm between the have-lots and the have-nots has grown so much that even those benefiting from it are worried, if nothing else because of the backlash they fear. The lack of accessible healthcare for millions in so-called 'developed' countries like USA, where the pharmaceutical and medical industry has been profiting shamelessly, has also been horribly exposed. The central role of the fossil fuel and military-industrial complex in the earth's destruction and the exacerbation of inequalities, is clearer than ever before.

### **What is the opportunity?**

With the whole world listening, we have possibly history's biggest chance of changing course. We can refashion the economy and polity, local to global, to be respectful and sensitive to ecological limits, and to work for all of humanity. But

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<https://www.economist.com/business/2020/03/15/coronavirus-is-grounding-the-worlds-airlines>

<sup>3</sup> Schätzing, F. 2004. *The Swarm*. NY: Regan Books.

<sup>4</sup> <https://theecologist.org/2020/feb/04/eating-animals-will-be-death-us>;  
[https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Gmail](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail);  
<https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/03/11/capitalist-agriculture-and-covid-19-a-deadly-combination/>

this requires not simply some cosmetic managerial fixes of the kind that governments hastily applied after the 2008 economic collapse. Such fixes (such as bank bailouts) in fact made things worse by privileging the elite; even now, bailouts of the airline industry are being considered, rather than using such resources for rebuilding the livelihoods of the poor<sup>5</sup>. Nor is the solution the kind of technological fixes that those destroying the earth's climate and biodiversity are promoting, such as giant screens ('geoengineering') that will supposedly reduce global warming.

We need transformations that are systemic, replacing the currently dominant structures of injustice and unsustainability with more equal political, economic, and social relations. We need a dramatic transformation towards genuine democracy, a *swaraj* ('self-rule' in Sanskrit) that encompasses not only all humans, but the planet as a whole, based on an ethics of life.

### **What course changes are required?**

What does this mean? It means reversing economic globalization, a process that was supposed to bring prosperity to all peoples but has actually brought enormous distress, growing inequality and ecological devastation. This process has entailed the integration of production, consumption and trade into complex global structures and relations in such a way that no community or country is able to strive for self-reliance, or to protect livelihoods and environment from damage by multinational corporations and unfair trade. A system whose fragile economic interdependencies have been rudely exposed by the virus crisis; for instance, when the components of a single consumer product are made in a dozen countries, mostly by informal labour with little economic or legal security, the collapse of even one of these links in the chain can cause a domino effect across the entire production chain. This is one main reason why this crisis may result in the loss of millions of jobs.

It is also a system that has also meant the domination of one way of being and knowing ('western') over all others. Entire libraries of knowledge, embedded in thousands of languages and worldviews and ways of knowing around the world, have been wiped out or are in the process of being erased due to epistemological colonization.

To be clear, in pointing to globalization as one major factor in the current crisis, I am not talking of global social relations that help exchange ideas, principles, cultures, and knowledges on an equal plane, which has been a valuable component of human existence for millennia.

But what will economic globalization be replaced with? Open localization, a process of striving for self-reliance in meeting basic needs (food, water, shelter, learning, health, governance, dignity, livelihoods) from within a certain human-

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/14/us-government-coronavirus-bailout-airlines-industry>; <https://stay-grounded.org/savepeoplenotplanes/>

scale local region. In such a system, each of us in our local communities has a level of control over decision-making, and localized feedback loops mean that we can't easily overlook ecological and social damage, unlike in a globalized economy in which the damage of my over-consumption is borne by someone a thousand kilometres away. Most important, such a system will significantly reduce (not eliminate) the necessity of global movement of products and people, with much less chances of pathogens spreading quickly across the world. It will also reduce, in many cases even reverse, the mass migration of people from rural areas into cities, which has resulted in densely packed populations where disease can spread so easily. The need to reduce global trade and travel, and densities of human habitation, must surely be amongst the biggest lessons from the corona virus disaster.

### **Communities show the way**

Thousands of initiatives at food, energy, water, and other forms of community sovereignty across the world show that localized but interconnected solutions can work (such as India<sup>6</sup>, and from other parts of the world<sup>7</sup>). And many of them are showing how resilient they can be during a global pandemic.

In India, several thousand Dalit women farmers (severely marginalized in India's patriarchal, casteist society, and facing hunger and malnutrition, three decades back), organised themselves as *sanghas* (associations) of the Deccan Development Society in a few dozen villages of Telangana state<sup>8</sup>. Using their own traditional seeds, organic methods, local knowledge, and cooperation, they have achieved food sovereignty, completely eradicating hunger and malnutrition. They are currently donating about 20,000 kilograms of foodgrains for COVID-19 related relief work, and feeding thousand bowls of millet porridge every day to municipality and health workers and police personnel who have to be on duty despite India's ongoing lockdown.

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Sapara nation have fought hard to gain collective territorial rights over their rainforest home. They are now defending it against oil and mining interests, and trying to demonstrate a localized economic well-being model that blends their traditional cosmo-vision and new activities like community-led ecotourism<sup>9</sup>. In COVID times, their income from the latter would have dropped, but their forests and community spirit give them all the food, water, energy, housing, medicines, enjoyment, health, and learning that they need. Across vast areas of Abya Yala and Turtle Island (native indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org](http://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org)

<https://www.localfutures.org>

<https://solutions.thischangeseverything.org>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ddsindia.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://theecologist.org/2019/sep/17/resistance-and-rebuilding-amazon>

names for the Americas), Australia, and South-east Asia, indigenous peoples have fought for and in many cases obtained collective title for self-determination.

In central India, *adivasi* (indigenous) people over 90 villages have formed a Mahagrame Sabha (federation of village assemblies) to move towards self-rule, resist mining, conserve and sustainably use forests by getting community rights recognized, and empower women and youth in decision-making<sup>10</sup>. Some of their members who had migrated out to work have returned during the COVID lockdown, and have no income; the village assemblies are using funds collected by sustainable harvest and sale of forest produce, to help them tide over the crisis period.

Across the world, 'territories of life' conserved by indigenous peoples and other local communities have proven to harbor some of the most important areas of biodiversity and ecosystem functions, providing millions of people with basic needs and with critical back-up sources of food, water, energy, during times of disasters and crisis (<https://www.iccaconsortium.org>). On a recent webinar organised by the ICCA Consortium, a global network of over 100 indigenous, community, and civil society organisations, Giovanni Reyes of the Kankanaey tribe of northern Philippines described how indigenous peoples there have traditional systems of grain storages specifically for disease outbreaks and other such disasters.

Also globally, the movement for the commons is reclaiming privatised or state-owned spaces for the public good, such as parking lots and disused governmental lands into collectively governed urban agricultural plots, unused private buildings into housing for the poor and for refugees, and so on<sup>11</sup>. As David Bollier, who with Silke Helfrich has compiled several books of commoning examples and the principles that underlie them, notes: "Throughout history commoning has always been an essential survival strategy, and so it is in this crisis. When the state, market, or monarchy fail to provide for basic needs, commoners themselves usually step up to devise their own mutual-aid systems<sup>12</sup>."

Most such examples have had to struggle against adverse macro-economic and political contexts, so imagine how much more they could spread if there were positive policy environments. For instance in India, if the billions of rupees of subsidy for chemical fertilisers was to be given to small farmers to generate organic inputs, there would be a rapid transition to ecologically sustainable farming. But they have also had to confront entrenched socio-cultural inequities and discrimination, especially related to gender, ethnicity, caste, ability and age.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/transformative-alternatives-at-korchi/#.XpdWty2B2V4>

<sup>11</sup> <https://commonstransition.org>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.freefairandalive.org/commoning-as-a-pandemic-survival-strategy/>

## **Towards Eco-swaraj: a radical ecological democracy**

Crucially, such a transformation would mean a shift back to the *real economy*, focused on actual products and services, and not the crazy roller-coaster virtual economy of shares and bonds and derivatives on which a tiny minority of people have become immensely rich. It will bring back the importance of biocultural regions, defined by close, tangible social and ecological relationships. It will emphasize once again that instead of the privatization of nature and natural resources (including land, water, forests, and even knowledge and ideas), we need to place these in the public domain, with democratic custodianship. It will also have to press for a significant reduction in overall material and energy use, and especially that of the world's elite, as argued convincingly by Europe's degrowth movement<sup>13</sup>.

It is important that all this is accompanied by radical democracy, i.e. where people take political control in collectives where they are (rather than putting all their faith in elected parties); and by the struggles for social justice and equity (on gender, caste, ethnicity and other fronts). This means also that the xenophobic 'shut the borders' call of racist and religiously bigoted right-wing elements is not what I am supporting. Civil society initiatives in Greece and many other European countries have shown the possibility of open localization, in which attempts at self-determination and self-reliance are combined with the welcoming of refugees from war-torn areas<sup>14</sup>. And it works both ways, as migrants show how they can give back; as part of the Barikama cooperative, African migrants who were once exploited as labour in Italy's plantations, are working extra hard to produce and deliver food to the country's locked down population<sup>15</sup>.

In the long run, of course, conflict zones from where people have to flee, need to themselves become areas of peaceful localization, as for instance has been attempted in the incredibly brave autonomy movement of Kurdish people (especially its women) in Syria-Iran-Iraq-Turkey border area. Both this and the Zapatista autonomy movement in Mexico show how communities can address multiple issues through local radical democracy, informed by principles of ecofeminism. The worker-led 'one million climate jobs' campaign in South Africa<sup>16</sup>, and the Green New Deal of Bernie Sanders in USA<sup>17</sup> and the Labour

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2020/03/a-degrowth-perspective-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Alternatives-in-a-world-of-crisis-2019-2nd-ed1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/a-beautiful-thing-the-african-migrants-getting-healthy-food-to-italians>

<sup>16</sup> <http://aidc.org.za/programmes/million-climate-jobs-campaign/about/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://berniesanders.com/issues/green-new-deal/>

Party in UK<sup>18</sup>, despite some serious flaws<sup>19</sup>, demonstrate in earthy details how society can move towards justice and ecological sustainability.

The transformation also needs to encompass a spiritual or ethical reconnection with the earth, and each other. Indigenous peoples have long warned of the consequences of our alienation from the rest of nature, the penchant of modernity to think of human beings as outside of nature, somehow not bound by the limits and norms of the planet around us. In their movements they have brought back a diversity of ways of being and knowing ... buen vivir, ubuntu, sumac kawsay, kyosei, country, minobimaatasiiwin, swaraj, and many others ... that speak of living with the earth and each other in harmony<sup>20</sup>. 'Ordinary' people have shown extraordinary innovation in forging eminently practical socially and ecologically sensitive solutions to everyday needs, across the world. Now its up to the rest of us to heed the warnings, resist injustice, undermine the systems of oppression, and learn from the pluriverse of alternatives already available.

Am I hopeful we will take this opportunity? We did not when the 2008 financial collapse shone a blazing torch on the ills of economic globalization and the capitalist-statist-patriarchal forces underlying it. But this crisis is much bigger, it is different, it is showing much more vividly the dangers of economic hyperconnectivity even as it highlights the crucial ecological connections our lives are dependent on. It is bringing out humanitarian and community spirit in wonderfully diverse ways, including singing along with neighbours, distributing leaflets offering help to the elderly, volunteering for health care, learning to live slower, less consumerist lifestyles. It is pushing or encouraging young people to go back to their communities, learn from their elders how to live off the land, such as amongst indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, Canada<sup>21</sup>. It is showing how communities that have regained governance over the natural ecosystems around them (such as some in India using the Forest Rights Act), have built up economic reserves that can be used to support members who no longer have a job because of the COVID-related economic collapse.

Movements of the youth and women and indigenous people and other marginalized populations, already vocal for many years on many issues, must use these opportunities to push for radical transformation, personal to global. There lies the hope.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.labourgnd.uk/gnd-explained>

<sup>19</sup> <https://wsimag.com/economy-and-politics/61905-the-green-new-deal>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/pluriverse/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/indigenous-canada-turn-land-survive-coronavirus-200401073446077.html>

### **About the author**

Ashish is with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Global Tapestry of Alternatives. A shorter and earlier version of this article was published in *The Wire*, 31.3.2020: <https://thewire.in/environment/we-will-survive-the-coronavirus-we-need-to-make-sure-we-survive-ourselves>

## **Self-governance food system before and during the Covid-crisis on the example of CampiAperti, Bologna, Italy**

**Dagmar Diesner (28<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

At the end of the 1990's agro-industries together with the European Commission cut through meta and mesa spacial and ecological geographies dislocating farming activities from the regional level, and tied producers and farmers to the 'open' competitive market. The abolition of the stable price-mechanism for European farmers and producers in conjunction with the diversion of caring for nature in production, had exposed producers and farmers to a fall in their wages, and land, water, animals were subject to sheer expropriation for the relentless linear production and distribution systems of agro-industries. Emilia-Romagna is a province in Northern Italy and is the second highest agricultural producer in Italy with its vast agricultural outputs of cheese, wine, vinegar, ham, fruits and pasta, of which its products is only 5% certified as organic, whilst 75 percent of intensive farming in the plain area and of animal husbandry employ high and medium agricultural intensive methods causing so-called environmental externalities, such as high concentration of nitrates and phosphorus in freshwater and groundwater and soil erosion. This skewed situation led to the formation of CampiAperti, an Association, composed of about 80 producers and farmers in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy, who decided to take the economy, production and nature back through self-governing the markets and their production.

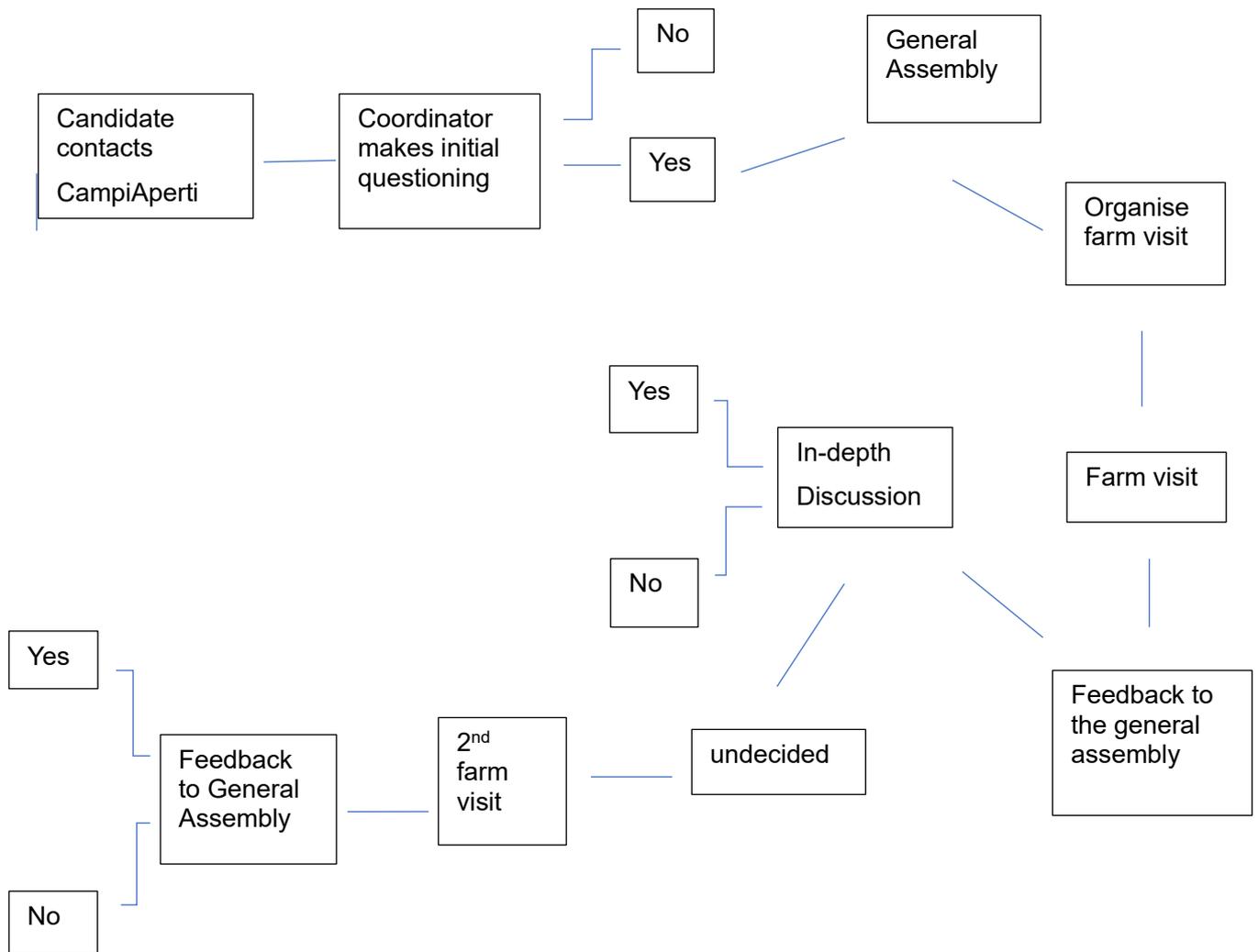
The producers and farmers of CampiAperti decided on exerting complete autonomy over their production and the distribution systems, which would allow them to employ farming practices that can be aligned to sustainable agroecological methods and thus avoiding complying with the regulations for producing goods to the capital- and state-controlled markets. By doing so, they have challenged the regulatory body of the state, which administered the organic certification procedures, on its strong alliances with agribusiness. In Italy, sanitary regulations were composed toward the agro-industries and their production of scales undermining small- and medium-scale farmers and producers in the process, and as a result of this legislation over a third of them had closed down in the early 2000s.

On the merit of commoning, CampiAperti had issued their own certification label for striving toward food sovereignty, and by doing so implementing a de-centralised agricultural system whose production systems is experimenting with and practising agroecological farming methods. Their pursuit is the multiplication of small and medium-scaled farms with each of them producing products from the seed to the farm gate. Material and immaterial inputs for the production of particular foodstuff is coming from close-by circuits or are produced on the farm building up their resource stock over time. Because labour takes place outside of the capital circuits, the valorisation of labour is radically

different than to the commodity cycle. In this context, CampiAperti's foodstuff produced on virtuous farms are certified with their label called Genuino Clandestino, genuine, referring to the production of food products in an artisan or virtuous fashion, and Clandestino, mirroring the hostile socio-political environment.

### **The participatory-guarantee-system**

The PGS is defined by the International Federation of Agricultural Movements (IFOAM: 2020) like this: “Participatory-Guarantee System (PGS) are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.” The self-governed mechanisms main aims include: the removal of local trade barriers, to safeguard specific crafts in farming, to protect local biodiversity and diversity of foodstuff and ensure animal welfare standard. CampiAperti uses this system in a modified form adapted to their socio-political and ecological circumstances, and included further no worker's exploitation, ensure quality organic local and affordable foodstuff to the local community and to instigate a decentralisation of food production. Over the years their self-certification process had become complex because of the growing number of farmers, and also, farmers are scattered into all four cardinal directions with a distance of about 80km from Bologna. The self-organized participatory guarantee system by CampiAperti as it is in its current form:



The coordinator of Campi Aperti gets in contact with the new potential farmer and asks a set of standard questions on ecological values and farm structure, and also on their commitment to participate in the self-governance structure of CA. If, at that point, the candidate does not match with the basic principles with CampiAperti, the ‘inspection’ process closes. If, on the other hand, the coordinator decides that the new potential farmer fits into the CA structure, then the coordinator puts forward a request for a visit to the next general assembly. At the general assembly the farm visit is coordinated, usually one person has to share the same craft with the candidate in order to interrogate in detail the how and with what the product is produced and who else is involved in making this product. In case there are third parties involved in making the product, for example an external pasta-making site or a close-by farmer produces barley for the animals, then also these sites are scrutinized for its

sustainable and organic standard.

The other accompanying persons support the interview process with general questions on sustainable productions and on the arising responsibilities and long-term commitment to self-governance organization when taking part at Campi Aperti. The impression and gathered information of the farm visit is reported back at the next general assembly, to which the whole group responds by discussing the sustainable aspect in production in great detail. If a decision was not made, another farm visit is coordinated. At the next assembly another discussion is held with the additional information, before the general assembly finally decides.

The main advantage of this mechanism is its flexibility in the application procedure. By doing so, it is underlining the diversification of agroecological methods and techniques of each specific craft. The merit for qualifying with the PGS is to develop virtuous labour skills and abilities, for example in making cheese, or brewing beer, producing wine or vegetables, etc. in such a way that integrates the intrinsic nature-human-animal relationship. It is in this light that the principles of agroecological methods and practice extends the organic labelling system of the EU's regulatory body, such as caring for soil fertility (no use of petrochemicals), regenerating resource material, respecting the rhythm of the animal's natural production cycle of milk and gestation period, the effective use of natural resources (water collection system; grey water systems), and lastly, producing an output within the limits of one's own manual labour capacity.

For the actualisation of virtuous farm, which is the autonomous production of the seed to the product, farmers and producers have to go through a long struggle with the varied local regulatory bodies, which involves in challenging the structural guidelines for workshops on a smaller scale, for example, a toilet can be reached via a staircase from the laboratory rather than it has to directly be attached to the workshop, or the ceiling can be 2,80m high instead of 3m. During the phase of setting up the farm individual farmers are consistently engaging with the authorities, forming a somewhat relationship with individual bureaucrat. As a result of it, laws and regulations can be interpreted to local circumstances. The bearing of the authorities is in those moments an individual struggle, however, since everybody at CampiAperti has to deal with the authorities, this experience is a shared one. Because of this collective experience, farmers support each other and show solidarity amongst each other.

For changing the dire structural conditions for small- and medium farmers in Emilia-Romagna, only recently, after years of engaging with the local and regional authorities, amendments for local small- and medium-scale farmers were made by the region. Finally, new regulations were introduced that are apt for small- and medium-scale farmers and producers. Despite of this thrust from the authorities recognising self-governance institutions, CampiAperti remains persistently alert to the political and socio-economic situation.

## **The self-governance markets**

The PGS-system distinguishes from other foodstuff on farmer's markets in Bologna in so far that only self-certified products can be sold on the markets of CampiAperti. Farmer's markets in Bologna purchase 100 percent of their foodstuff from wholesale markets, and thus bypassing the regional legislation, which says, that at least half of the foodstuff sold on farmer's markets should come from the producer's production. Because of this shortcoming, CampiAperti only sells foodstuff that went through their self-certification process recognised on their label. They had coalesced with the social centre movement and neighbourhoods Associations in Bologna and together with them or through them were able to set up their own self-governance markets. For each market CampiAperti uses their Association status for applying for a market licence from the Council of Bologna. With the licence they offer a market stall for all producers even for those producers that are not officially registered as producers with the state yet. These markets are vital for the producers as many of them are at the beginning or in the middle of setting up their farms. It gives them from early on an opportunity to earn an income, create a body of clients, and lends them an empowerment to develop their skills and abilities through the constant communication exchange on the market. I must emphasise here that CampiAperti does not have the authority to regularise new or irregular producers, but what is capable of doing is offering an economic opportunity through their Association.

The most important feature of their markets is the annual convergence for establishing a common price list for their products. By doing commoning, they reach out to clients, and thus make them part of the food system. Each year farmers and producers of each of their craft come together and decide on the price of the product. The collaborative price-mechanism subverts the price volatility of the market by fixing a price for their products together. As one farmer puts it: *"It would make no sense to offer the same products for different prices. Otherwise the consumer goes to the stall with the lowest price and the other farmers do not sell anything. And if we set-up the price too high consumers would not come and buy our stuff"*.

Each market is self-organised by the producers who attend the markets. This means when a producer attends three markets, the producer participates in three monthly market assemblies where details of the management of the markets and distribution of responsibilities are discussed. Each market liaises directly with the Council, and in case problems with the Council exceeds the market boundaries and affects all members of CampiAperti, then the issue is put forward for discussion at the bi-monthly general assembly of CampiAperti.

One of the constant issues with the Council is the threat of closures of their currently eight markets, and any methods and tactics is used by the Bologna Council to chase them away. Only recently, another social centre was closed down after more than twenty years in existence. The producers and farmers are resilient and continuing to set up their stalls anywhere, where they think they can create a market. The involvement of city consumers is crucial, who have the

mobility to quickly turn up and support them during negotiations with the Council, battling for new market spaces and licenses, or just lend them support in many other ways.

### **The Covid-crisis, struggle, and strategies**

Now during the Covid-crisis, the Council of Bologna had closed down all markets immediately even though supermarkets and food shops should remain open. With the Covid-crisis, supermarkets had increased their market share by thirty percent. Paradoxically, Rumanian migrant workers were flown into Italy to work in the fields, though are not subject to receive any health checks from their governments and neither from the Italian government. The lockdown in Emilia-Romagna, which had the second highest Covid-rate after Lombardy, was controlled heavily by the police with every ten kilometres a control, tele cameras taking photos from licence-plates, helicopters in the air controlling public spaces and roads from above. This trajectory had given hardly any space for building up a solidarity structure with the producers of CampiAperti. For example, the set-up of a vegetable box scheme is only feasible within the extreme restricted mobility limitations ringfencing the numbers of consumers to a very limited area. Though CampiAperti had opened up their farms for consumers to buy directly from them, but CampiAperti is not located in one place and thus the challenge for CampiAperti was to somehow surpass these restrictions in order to remain together.

The producers geared toward a direct confrontation with the Council of Bologna. They organised a virtual protest with the slogan “Defend solidarity, and not the virus!” asking people to join from balconies, corridors, gardens, wherever people are, and share the individual protest on a collective platform. This protest was part of the petition they have launched successfully to re-open the markets, of which only three were given the permission to open within two weeks after the petition but under social distancing conditions. CampiAperti was not able to sell directly to any customers, but only to members of the Association, which in turn increased the pressure to build-up their membership quickly. This was also coupled with only permitting customers onto the market, who have pre-booked their food items online. In a very short time, CampiAperti had moved from the direct market to putting their products online. The market was turned into a collection point for picking up the vegetables only in order to handle the social distancing between people. They have received an enormous amount of solidarity with membership rising by the day.

At the time of writing there is still a lot of uncertainty around for whom the lockdown is going to be lifted on 4<sup>th</sup> May, and on what conditions will be increased mobility permitted. However, one thing is certain, the producers of CampiAperti are resilient to the market conditions, because of their autonomy. As the founder of CampiAperti said on autonomy: “We will never give-up our autonomy”.

## Conclusion

The acceleration of the local food economy through the commoning institutional framework of CampiAperti had found roots in all regions throughout Italy, which ultimately, had evolved to becoming the Genuino Clandestino movement. The Associations or networks of the social movement adapted to the horizontal self-governance system of CampiAperti in a modified version that is to the socio-economic and political conditions within their trajectory. Though the Covid-crisis is for producers, such as at CampiAperti, just another crisis within the food system to deal with, the Covid-crisis highlights many shortcomings within the agri-industrial system that might have an effect in the long-run in terms of guaranteeing our food security. It is these autonomous networks like CampiAperti, who need our solidarity through purchasing their products not only during the crisis but also thereafter. For CampiAperti it had always been clear that only together with the consumer they can work and walk together toward a de-centralised and real economic and ecological sustainable food system.

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### **About the author:**

Dagmar is currently a Phd-Candidate at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, UK writing her thesis on "*Transformation to Food Sovereignty: Opportunities, barriers and resilience strategies from the commoning perspective on the case study of CampiAperti, Bologna, Italy*". Previously, she had co-founded an ecological-cultural Association in the Apennines in Emilia-Romagna where with others had set up a community permaculture garden, organised events around local herbal medicine, climate change and local agriculture, as well as intercultural events convening African migrants with the local community.

## **Community Supported Agriculture is a safe and resilient alternative to industrial agriculture in the time of Covid-19**

**International Network URGENCI (7<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**



The international campaign we are all engaged in to reduce our tragic losses to the Covid-19 crisis is just a rehearsal for the big campaign that lies ahead – to preserve and build sustainable local and territorial food systems that connect producers and consumers and provide healthy, nutritious food for all. We are learning a lot about the weaknesses and gaps in the global food distribution system. Communities are discovering that they cannot rely only on food that requires transportation across borders or even from distant regions within a single country. Nor can producers on large-scale industrial farms rely on migrant labour as they have done in the past. In some countries food is beginning to rot in the fields. Many local markets have been shut down. Supplies of critical items in supermarkets disappear quickly through panic buying and profiteering. In countries like India, where farmers are on lock down along with everyone else, middlemen are taking advantage of the crisis to buy at cut-price rates from the farmers and sell at high prices to those who can afford to pay.

**Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)<sup>1</sup>, however, is quick to respond and is successfully facing the crisis.** Isa Álvarez, a food activist from Spain, and the Vice-President of URGENCI, the International network for Community Supported Agriculture, describes the situation in the Spanish Basque country *“The government recommendation has been to close the open air markets but the CSA networks are working more than ever. The only problem is that because of the restrictions to mobility, only the farmers are allowed to do the deliveries and they have to do it house by house.”*

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<sup>1</sup>Community Supported Agriculture has been defined by the European CSA Declaration adopted in Ostrava, in 2016, as *“a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement”*. (<http://urgenci.net/the-european-csa-declaration-adopted-in-ostrava/> )



We are on the brink of a global food crisis, not because of lack of available food, but rather because it cannot be harvested or transported to consumers through the industrial long chain food system. **The future genuinely lies in building stronger short food supply chains that allow local food sovereignty and traceability.** As Bregje Hamelynck, a CSA vegetable grower from the Netherlands says, *“The nearer the source, the stronger the relation between farmer and citizen, the more secure the food supply.”*

We are also seeing a rapid rise in food prices making it difficult for vulnerable families to afford essential food items. And unlike 2008, when the food crisis was due to a lack of food, there is no such lack. Just a total breakdown in the supply and demand industrial system.

By contrast, local CSA farmers are adapting quickly to provide food to their communities in safe ways. As Ruby van der Wekken, from the Finnish CSA network, quoted *“CSAs are not only the safest way to get food during this time, they are also part of the solution to have a healthier future.”*

Farms can and do sell direct to the public. Open air CSA distributions of pre-ordered and pre-paid produce from farms are one of the safest ways of providing food, safer than indoor supermarkets! There are also many new, creative local platforms springing up to connect producers and eaters at local level. **“In China, at the peak of the Covid crisis in January, demand increased by 300%”** said Shi Yan, the pioneer of CSA in China and the co-President of URGENCI. *“Our producers came under extreme pressure to meet*

*the demand.”*



Many new vegetable boxes are extensions of existing ethical platforms such as CSAs and local food co-ops, others are more opportunistic, as up to double the cost of CSA shares. Such high prices clearly exclude access for low-income groups. This violates one of the core values of Community Supported Agriculture, solidarity economy, and thus affordability that still ensures producers a decent livelihood.

In the current pandemic, **Community Supported Agriculture weekly share distribution has been widely maintained, thanks to the safe nature of how it is done, and the hugely responsive reaction of both producers and consumers in ensuring that it is done in accordance with new, highly rigorous health and safety regulations.** CSA shares are prepared upfront. This drastically reduces human contact with the food and between people. CSA is planned in advance. There is no need to gather, queue or stand in line at a check-out like in a supermarket. Each group can organize things so that the pick-up is staggered and there are never more than a small handful of people present at any one time. There are no cash transactions: everything is ordered and paid for in advance and paid for on-line or by cheque. As cash (both notes and coins) are a vector for virus transmission, this is an important aspect. Distribution is short and immediate. This reduces

interactions and potential contamination. Correct social distancing is always observed. All necessary sanitary recommendations – washing hands frequently, wearing masks and gloves when touching food, and staying home when feeling at all sick are systematically observed. And finally where needed to protect the vulnerable, food can be delivered to your door. Just check with your local CSA to see. There are also many new initiatives to set up additional CSAs to provide greater supplies.

In many cases, the national and regional CSA networks, gathered in the international network URGENCI, have worked closely with their local authorities. According to Gaelle Bigler, president of a Swiss CSA network, the *“CSA members have had to change their practices, from changing their delivery system to managing volunteers. It is super complicated but at the same time very exciting, because everybody seems to realize that we play a big part in providing healthy food to the city population. With the closed borders, huge vegetable growers have had employment problems as they usually hire temporary, foreign, low cost workers and we, as CSA groups, don't. As the network coordinator, I have been contacted by several public servants trying to list all the short supply chains possible, and they all knew us and thanked us for our work!”*

A critical and as yet overlooked aspect of the current pandemic is that of social and mental well-being. In times of generalized lock-down, people are becoming more isolated and there will certainly be many knock-on effects linked to the social and economic crises that will result from this pandemic. According to Fatima Zohra Hocimi in Algeria *“CSA allows people to connect with each other, to break social boundaries and serve a cause that lies beyond themselves. CSA with multidimensional health building is the future of communities' well-being”*.



Many of the CSA networks around the world are putting together resources to support their members, such as in the UK (<https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/covid-19/>) and in France (<http://miramap.org/-COVID19-et-AMAP-toutes-les-infomations-.html>). These are precious resources to ensure that local supply chains remain open.

At this frightening moment when we need solidarity and compassion so badly, but must remain separated, Community Supported Agriculture has a critical role to play in feeding local communities safely. And as we face the even greater crisis of climate change, family-scale farms using agroecological practices provide the surest solution to world hunger and malnutrition and to harnessing the power of photosynthesis to reduce the carbon in the atmosphere by building healthier, more productive soils to feed us all.

We must continue to take the long view of the crisis. What will happen once the pandemic comes under control? How will it affect the industrial supply chain and alternative food systems? Will this be the moment when public awareness reaches a new level and allows peasant agriculture and family farming to become the mainstay of our food systems? And will the current gains in reductions of greenhouse gas be converted into a lasting victory in the battle to overcome climate change? We all know that the relocalisation of our sustainable food systems and many other forms of production can play a key role in ensuring that solidarity economy and food sovereignty, two of the key levers in

this essential struggle for the collective survival of humanity, become recognized and normalized around the world.

CSAs in many countries are also reaching out beyond their traditional role to create new on-line platforms helping local producers to sell direct to consumers. Our role is to contribute to a human rights-based approach that looks to preserve the livelihood of producers and ensure consumers have on-going access to the healthy, local nutritious food they need for their families. This is the most effective way we can counter the increasingly repressive measures in favour of industrial agriculture that are being pushed through various legislative processes, from the UN to the EU. Our role is to call for more institutional support for the CSA networks in this time of crisis, and to make sure they are able to meet the enormous surge of demand for safe, nutritious and resilient food. It is our responsibility to continue working with our allies in other social movements to ensure that our food systems do not fail us all. It is our role to promote agroecology and food sovereignty as the way forward to the realisation of food systems by the people and for the people.

*For more information about CSAs and solidarity economics, please visit the URGENCI Hub: [hub.urgenci.net](http://hub.urgenci.net), where materials, videos and booklets can be found on "how to set up your CSA."*

### **About the authors**

URGENCI is the international network of Local and Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology. Its mission is to coordinate the movement of local food systems around the world, in particular Community Supported Agriculture.

## **Corona-crisis affects small Greek farmers who counterstrike with a nationwide social media campaign to unite producers & consumers on local level!**

**Jenny Gkiougki (May 7<sup>th</sup>)**



*Greece is experiencing low corona-related mortality rates, but the measures imposed came early and were as harsh as in other, more stricken countries, posing severe strain to a society and an economy in shambles due to the ongoing economic crisis. In an understandable move to protect an already depleted National Health System, on Feb. 27, a day after the country's first Covid-19 case was diagnosed in Thessaloniki, all Carnival celebrations got cancelled everywhere. On March 11, schools closed down, and two days later, Greece limited non essential travel and closed down cafes, restaurants, libraries, museums, etc. From 23/3 till 4/5 (a proper 40 days of 'quarantine') the country has been on strict lock-down where citizens are only allowed out for limited time and for a set of specific reasons, and need to notify via SMS of their moves.*

Small agroecological farmers were hit very hard by COVID-19. Strict restrictions in movement and the provisional closing of many businesses meant that places like small restaurants, hotels and farmers' markets suddenly became inaccessible for most of them -who do not receive subsidies or compensations and rely on short supply chain for their survival. This is critical, not just for their livelihoods, but for the continued existence of family farming in Greece. CSA farmers, who usually operate in more local scale, also faced difficulties as in many cases they were not allowed to travel and had to use the services of already overwhelmed delivery companies instead, adding cost and subtracting quality from their produce. Furthermore, most CSA schemes in the country, until now, are informal, there is no 'contract' signed between the two parties, and there is no formal national association to promote, or advocate for their interests.

The movement restrictions served to highlight many underlying pathogenicities pertaining to the agricultural sector and food production in Greece, but also to bring forth how the globalised food systems we rely on can collapse, and how the most effective solutions for food security, let alone food sovereignty, have got to be based on the foundations of agroecology and localisation. The consumers were suddenly faced with a new reality: that the place where the majority of them procure their food (the supermarkets) is not safe any more,

and that foods purchased there will have to be washed with soap in order to eliminate the possibility of getting infected. The problematic of a food system fraught with intermediaries is showing its face again, not in terms of profit accumulation, but in terms of endangering public health.

*Agroecopolis - The Hellenic Network for Agroecology, Food Sovereignty and Access To Land* (AEP) instigated an e-meet with small producers from all over the country in mid-March; with representatives of organic growers' associations, members of EcoFest networks and individual farmers, in order to assess the situation and decide on collective action, as assembly. **As an urgent and immediate response, it was decided to run a nationwide digital and social media campaign promoting local direct links between producers & consumers all over the country.**

Within a few days, a collection of food activists with no direct personal gain, under the coordination of Agroecopolis, started developing the campaign and were even able to create a short promotional video while being unable to shoot new footage! We all came together because we realise the importance of standing by our farmers; now more than ever! Out of the blue, without any access to resources or prior organisation, at a time of extreme uncertainty, we were able to organise four different groups, working on aspects of the campaign, including content creation, dissemination, liaising with producers and organising the final 'match-making'.

The main message of the campaign is: *#Support local small food production# #We are staying in our fields and cater for your household needs#* We aim to reach a much larger audience than the 'usual receptors' of similar actions organised by eco-activists and bio-farmers in the past. We are addressing the average coronavirus 'quarantines': consumers living in urban setting (from big cities to small towns), who are now, concerned about the safety in big crowded stores; are interested in eating healthy; and wish to protect and cater for their families in times of uncertainty. The campaign will run till July, each week focusing on a different aspect -why it is important to eat locally; why agroecology is the solution; showcasing producer profiles from different areas, etc.

As this is an urgent matter, and not a planned campaign, it is quite tricky to organise resources and create a model that works, immediately! Our first goal is to make sure '*not one more leaf rots unpicked in a field*'. Drawing from the principles of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Reko (The Finnish alternative), the interested consumers in one locality and the chosen producers (experienced volunteers have created a 'vetting system' to make sure they comply to the same principles as us) are brought together using Facebook groups, where our volunteers set up each group, instigate interaction and monitor first steps until members take over and self-organise. The idea is to promote self-management of needs and citizens' mobilisation on local level - thus creating conditions for higher levels of autonomy and food sovereignty in local terms. We have teams of volunteers working on the creation of content and the dissemination of the campaign so it generates responses from consumers all

over Greece, and we aim to have groups in each major city, in each prefecture, by the end of June, to make sure all these small farmers are supported by networks of consumers.

In the first four days of going ‘live’ we’ve had more than 400 responses from consumers and the goal now is to make sure we can match demand with supply.



*This project started as an immediate and urgent response to the fact that small bio producers everywhere in Greece are facing difficulties accessing markets due to corona restrictions. It aims at connecting, on a local and direct level, producers and consumers in all prefectures of the country, so their sustainability is assured. But, it will also serve as fertile ground for the creation of PGS (Participatory Guarantee Systems) and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) networks that will further solidify*

*the Food Sovereignty movement on a national level -a necessity in the uncertain times that are coming, in a country that has already been exhausted by the ongoing, ten year economic crisis. For more info, or to join the campaign visit <https://www.agroecopolis.org/covid-19/> (only in Greek)*

### **About the author**

Jenny Gkiougki is a food sov activist from Greece, founder and president of Agroecopolis - The Hellenic Network for Agroecology, Food Sovereignty & Access To Land.

**While we remained inside....**

Pension at 72 years instead of current 68 - 800,000 fines to politicians waived - 'Lagarde list': 500 rich Greeks finally get away with not paying 330 ml euro in taxes - *Philopapou Hill* and *Athens National Garden* become private property - 11 ml euro given away to private highway/toll operator as compensation for reduced traffic(!) -11 ml euro to private media to play the *StayHome* messages - 30 ml euro to private hospitals for using their facilities for testing - waive 21 ml euro that private TV stations should pay for licences - authorities cut off the power to the (only) self-managed **Vio.Me.** factory in Thessaloniki, that is producing cleaning products and soaps -needed items during this time.

But, perhaps **worst of it all** is the huge attack on our environment with this new **(anti-)environmental omnibus-bill** that **1.** essentially eliminates the protection of Natura 2000 sites and promotes mining and hydrocarbon mining in nature conservation areas **2.** abolishes the autonomy of the Protected Areas Management Bodies (PAMB) **3.** allows for the destruction of the environment in the name of investment projects at will, by consigning control of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) to private entities and by imposing tight deadlines for the required opinions/recommendations of the relevant public service departments **4.** promotes the reckless expansion of industrial Renewable Energy Sources (RES), especially wind, which have already caused environmental degradation and a financial burden on consumers to ensure excessive profits for investors **5.** legalises illegal construction in forestlands and in some cases, within wetlands and streams **6.** simplifies solid waste management procedures and does not take measures against the degradation/deterioration of streams from the uncontrolled disposal of urban and industrial waste within them **7.** violates Constitutional Provisions, European Directives and International Conventions

*To support our opposition please sign the petition!*

## Eco Vista in the Quintuple Crisis<sup>1</sup>

John Foran (19<sup>th</sup> May 2020)



The interlocked triple crisis of capitalist globalization-driven inequality, bought-and paid-for democracies, pervasive cultures of violence – from our most intimate relationships to the militarism of the United States – has for a long time been bound up with the truly wicked fourth of climate chaos. And now we have the wake-up moment of the coronavirus breaking upon these structural, systemic burdens.

Suddenly, it seems like we might have a quintuple crisis on our hands!

So, how do we connect *this many* dots?

Does less global trade and use of cars to commute mean less greenhouse gas emissions?

Will there be less (or more) militarism and violence as the dangers of the virus reduce the health and maneuverability of armies?

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<sup>1</sup> An [earlier version of this essay](#) was published at [Resilience.org](#) on April 21, 2020.

Might this economic crisis of unprecedented scope lead to universal health care and sky-rocketing unemployment lead to a guaranteed basic income for all, even in a place like the United States?

And how can we adapt our movements and systemic alternatives in the time of the Corona crisis?

Every movement, organization, systemic alternative, and countless activists, theorists, and intellectuals are asking questions like these (and better) as the crisis unfolds.

Everywhere, there is evidence that people are rethinking and imagining things like alternatives to our outmoded educational systems, an economy that works for all to meet real, basic needs, a new and better kind of politics for the purpose of radical social transformation, the shifts in culture and affect to design the whole ways of life we desire, the fair, ambitious, and binding global approach that the unfolding climate change will force on states and other elite institutions...

\* \* \*

This is the story of a systemic alternative that is new and young, emergent and hopeful, and rooted solidly on the ground, yet informed at the same time by the [pluriverse](#) of such alternatives.

“[Eco Vista](#)” was the name chosen in 2017 by a group of students at the University of California, Santa Barbara acting together with long-time community members to describe their vision of turning their rather unusual community of Isla Vista into an ecovillage in the next ten years. Unique because 23,000 people live together in an area of .54 square miles, with eighty percent of them between the ages of 18 and 24. In March 2020, the Eco Vista Transition Initiative became the 169<sup>th</sup> member and the newest link in the Transition US network.

We aim to encourage and inspire the foundation of an eco-village with renewable energy, a flourishing and regenerative agro-ecology of public urban gardens, cooperative, affordable eco-housing, a circular eco-economy based on solidarity and capable of meeting the real needs of the inhabitants, and radical self-governance and community priorities determined by all who reside here, all within a vibrant web of imagination and cultural creativity.

We know that to achieve this aspirational aim will require significant political organization, social movement building, and visionary policy proposals, including the design of strategies for achieving a systemic alternative and perhaps even the invention of [a new kind of party!](#)

## **Isla Vista, a 50-year experiment in community built on five centuries of indigenous dispossession in the Americas**

The land on which Isla Vista and the adjacent university and city of Santa Barbara sit is Chumash land, and the crime of their dispossession by white settlers is a history we are acutely aware of, as seen in this [video](#) on Eco Vista's real foundations made by Sierra Emrick. There will be no climate justice in California or anywhere in the Americas until this monumental injustice is overturned by making common cause under the leadership of indigenous and other frontline and fence-line communities everywhere.

Built on this tragedy and sold again by the Regents of the University of California to unscrupulous private landlords in the mid-1950's and early 60's with the inception of the UCSB campus, for the past half-century the unincorporated college town of Isla Vista has been a site for radical experiments in alternative ways of living, civil disobedience to authority, community governance, and environmental stewardship. As an epicenter for both youth culture and intergenerational solidarity, Eco Vista consciously draws on these histories of struggle, which are well narrated in the book [Isla Vista: A Citizen's History](#), written by Carmen Lodise and a number of other community members who lived there from the 1970s onward.

Today, the community presents many opportunities for active engagement that touches upon some of the most critical issues facing U.S. society – food insecurity and injustice, landlord rip-offs, houselessness, and tenant struggles, mental health, sexual violence, free speech, and police-community interactions.

After a forty-year battle against landlords, college administrators, and the county of Santa Barbara, in late 2017 Isla Vista elected its first local government – the [Isla Vista Community Services District](#); two years later another referendum empowered the new government to tax utilities, drawing revenue to a \$1 million annual budget by 2019. This would soon be followed by an even more surprising development as community interest in carbon-neutrality, just transition, critical ecological post-sustainability, and systems change from below has grown deep roots.



## **The Eco Vista Project**

In 2017, two UCSB undergraduates, Jessica Alvarez Parfrey (now a member of the permanent community) and Valentina Cabrera (who graduated and moved on to do this work elsewhere) conceived a project whose goal was to lay the groundwork for an ongoing effort to turn their community, Isla Vista, into a model “eco-village” through a thoughtful bottom-up process of engagement with others.

Over the summer and fall of 2017, the project was named Eco Vista, and activity began. Since then, students and community members, both inside and outside classes on topics such [The World in 2050: Systemic Alternatives](#), [What’s Wrong with the World? How Do We Fix It?](#), and a regular group studies called, simply, Eco Vista – have worked in the community on projects around food issues, housing, energy, transportation, local cooperative start-ups, a [newsletter/zine](#) and a [website](#), community outreach, and a burst of cultural creation. In the fall of 2019 my Environmental Studies/Sociology 134EC class “Earth in Crisis” engaged in a two-week exercise that produced the beginnings of a [Green New Deal for Eco Vista](#) and resulted in a 27-page list of projects for aligning Isla Vista’s next community development planning process with the most progressive versions of the concept, such as the [Red Deal](#), the U.S. Green Party’s [plans](#), [feminist](#) and [labor](#) GNDs, Bernie Sander’s detailed [platform](#), and [ecosocialist ideas](#).

There are now more than 250 people on the Eco Vista e-list, with bi-monthly General Assemblies that have continued to meet on-line during the corona crisis. There are on-going working groups involved in projects including a food forest, community gardens, tenants’ rights (including UCSB-owned housing), and more. As we imagine the future, we also have the precious legacy and ideas of the late resident scholar and activist Michael Bean, who just before his

untimely death in February created an [Eco Vista Sourcebook](#) of imaginative ideas and detailed proposals for bringing about Eco Vista on which to draw. Our collective grief at the passing of this shining spirit could only be borne because he had helped us discover each other and our collective strength.

Conceptually our efforts draw on the latest thinking about Transition Towns, degrowth, *buen vivir*, just transition, radical climate justice, and the many worlds to be found in the path-breaking [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#), edited by Alberto Acosta, Federico Demaria, Arturo Escobar, Ashish Kothari, and Ariel Salleh. Another approach that guides our thinking and practice is adrienne maree brown's [Emergent Strategy](#), which counsels working from the bottom up in an inclusive and un-predetermined way to generate a collective analysis enabling members to articulate their desires and dreams for what could be.

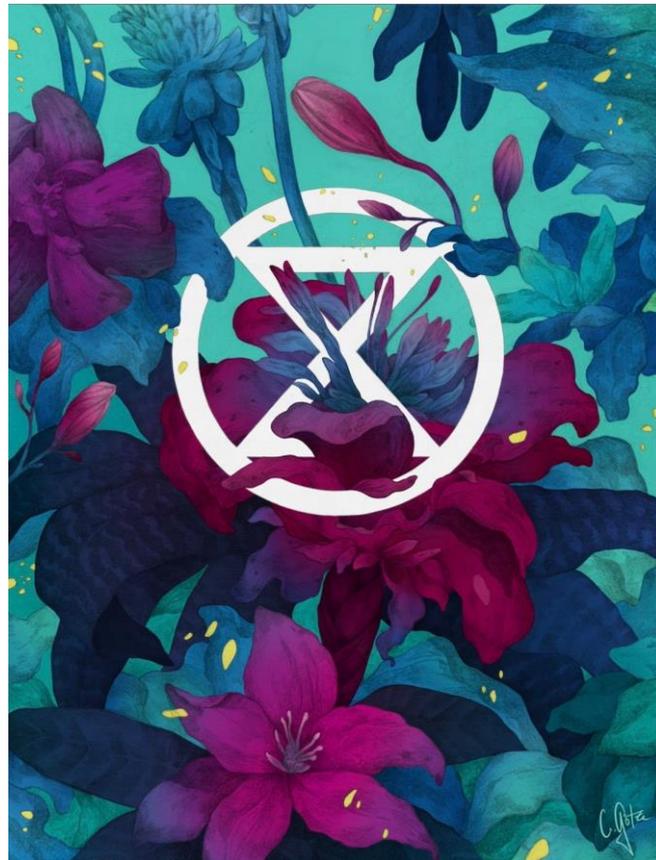


Image by Charlotte Götze, [www.charlottegoetze.de](http://www.charlottegoetze.de)

This image from the work of Extinction Rebellion is so vivid and beautiful that I have stolen it openly for it resonates deeply and expressively with the feel of what we are doing with our own project. Some of this comes through in the

community values we have embraced and our invitation for participation, open to all who agree with them:

*Community values and principles*

We are inclusive.  
We are democratic.  
We are non-violent.

We work collectively whenever possible, and all are free to organize their own activities and projects.

We are open to all points of view that are aligned with these values and supportive of the Eco Vista Mission.

We act and live out of love for the dignity of all living beings, and base this love on social and climate justice, and on radical hope.

## **Corona crisis**

And now our worlds have been shaken by the coronavirus. How has this crisis impacted our efforts in the past three months? We last met face to face on March 13, 2020, just before the two-week spring break at the university.

When we returned to start a new ten-week quarter on March 30, we found ourselves beset by the challenges of continuing the work of system change as did all of the world's peoples in movement.

And like many of these organizations, we moved our work to the Zoom space. We have used a regular Friday meeting starting at noon and often continuing till 3 in the afternoon to keep our projects moving forward, to rebuild community and support each other's struggles in the new environment, in a community that was reduced to half its size as many students elected to live at their non-university homes all over the state of California.

We have probably fared better than most organizations in these changed circumstances, and the students among us have probably coped better than most of their peers around the U.S., both of these outcomes effects of the community we had already built and the possibilities we have found of working in the remote on-line environment.

We hosted an Eco Vista community event on Earth Day, April 22, and [a webinar](#) on our work for Transition U.S. We launched an ambitious new project, the [Eco Vista Climate Justice Press](#) this month and published the first in what we hope will be a long line of inspiring and cutting-edge free offerings to the world, a work of climate fiction by local novelist Maía with the beautiful title [See You in Our Dreams](#).

We have continued to pursue a project for the food forest, to help feed the community with Food Not Bombs, to bring out a weekly [newsletter/zine](#) for the first time, to deepen our knowledge of our own history with the help of Carmen

Lodise's book and a conversation it has started between the activists of the 1970s through 1990s and ourselves, to prepare a synergizing proposal for consideration by the local government that would create a position for an Eco Vista organizer to draw our projects more tightly together with the many other popular initiatives and institutions of Isla Vista, and to seek the funds to pursue them.

There are ongoing collaborative research projects this spring involving over 200 students engaged in conducting interviews, designing surveys, and unearthing the archival record of the past to further the transformation of the community. There is [a household carbon-reduction program](#) underway, and plans for continuing to meet over the summer, which would be a first for this student community!

We are seeding the future of our community and the network of communities with whom we hope to be in alliance as this “decade of decision” unfolds, in all its uncertainty.

### **Conclusion: a far-reaching significance?**

We are aiming high: to assist in and lay the foundations for the establishment of an ongoing, multigenerational, student-community project for an equitable and just transition in Isla Vista, California, and to put the result, Eco Vista, forward as an experiential model that other small towns with college students might want to try in their own communities. We consider what we are trying to do as experiments in sustainable, resilient, participatory development, in a space we call Eco Vista, a very real place and also a timeless, cosmic community of radical visionaries and seekers.

I close with this passage from our mission statement:

In the end, Eco Vista is ... a promise, a pledge, a dream, a future.

The promise of Eco Vista is that together we might create a place that is life-affirming for all its inhabitants and that might inspire others elsewhere – particularly young people in their own communities – to use their imaginations to create the innovative future communities we all want to live in, right now!

Our pledge to each other is to co-create, imagine, dream, and transform our community into a place that matches the name of Eco Vista. We want to dream and make manifest this vision together with you!

The Eco Vista dream is a communal, shared, joyful adventure – may it transport us to a place worthy of the love we feel for it.

The future of Eco Vista is ... well, that's what we hope and aim to find out!



### **About the author**

By day John Foran teaches sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Most of the time, he lives the life of a scholar-activist in the global climate justice movement, at the center of the struggle for achieving social justice and radical social change in the 21st century. He also feels that far too much activism falls short of its potential for liberation because groups and individuals fail to acknowledge and work on the inner transition and nurturing of relationships that the best spiritual practices enable in us. Some of his work along these lines is available at [www.resilience.org](http://www.resilience.org). He can be contacted at [jforan5 AT gmail.com](mailto:jforan5@gmail.com).



## **Karlsruhe's 'giving fences': mobilisation for the needy in times of COVID-19**

**Michael C. Zeller (20 April 2020)**

### **Abstract**

*Protective measures against the spread of COVID-19 have placed strains on many segments of society, but perhaps homeless and impoverished people most of all. In Karlsruhe (Germany), a form of collective action has emerged to help provide for needy individuals while their normal support structures are unavailable: 'giving fences.' This article reviews this practice and considers its qualities and defects. The giving fences are a promising example of solidary collective action, providing considerable advantages to participants and beneficiaries. Its shortcomings, however, emphasise the importance of resuming institutionalised social service provision as soon as emergency conditions are relaxed.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; homelessness; collective action; expectancy-value theory; digital mobilisation; solidarity

The outbreak of COVID-19 and activation of protective measures in Germany has introduced unique restrictions on public life. For many, these restrictions are fairly minor inconveniences or annoyances; for others, for those living at mere subsistence levels in normal circumstances, the consequences of COVID-19 are a serious threat to survival. In many instances, essential service providers to homeless and needy individuals have been forced to suspend operations.

In the German city of Karlsruhe, these unprecedented circumstances have indeed caused many charitable organisations to close temporarily or to reduce operations. Yet several residents in Karlsruhe have responded to this emergency by organising food and supply drop-offs. These 'giving fences'—a term derived from the location (fences) and legal context (which makes an important distinction between 'gifts' and 'donations') surrounding the practices—are a form of solidary collective action that provide sustenance to Karlsruhe's homeless and needy.

This article reviews this practice. The following section presents the context in which the 'giving fences' emerged, including the typical support available to needy individuals and the challenges presented by COVID-19. Then, it presents the practice and its qualities and defects. The article concludes by discussing the prospects of the practice and outlook for service provision to the needy after the COVID-19 emergency conditions abate.

## **Social welfare in Karlsruhe and the onset of COVID-19**

Karlsruhe is a medium-sized city located on the western edge of Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany. Baden-Württemberg is economically prosperous and, vis-à-vis other German states, has low levels of poverty, welfare scheme enrolment, and homelessness. Nevertheless, these issues do manifest, particularly in the region's largest cities, Stuttgart and Karlsruhe.

Germany's welfare system has ample provisions for people who are homeless or struggling economically. Unemployment benefit (*Arbeitslosengeld*), basic security benefit (*Grundsicherung*), social benefit (*Sozialgeld*), and housing benefit (*Wohngeld*) are the most common sources of financial support from the state. There are, moreover, dense and stable networks of philanthropic institutions in Karlsruhe that support people in need: the 'Worker's Welfare' (*Arbeiterwohlfahrt*, AWO) charity, Catholic Caritas missions, and Evangelical diaconal ('*Diakonie Deutschland*') missions operate or supply short- and long-term housing facilities throughout the city. Donations from restaurants, grocery stores, and private individuals sustain numerous food distribution centres. Clothing depots at a handful of central locations give individuals a place to get garments suitable to the weather, especially during winter months. Taken together, the support and services provided to the needy in Karlsruhe<sup>1</sup> are considerable and do much to alleviate the extremities of homelessness and poverty.

Crucially, however, there are not many redundancies within these support networks. They often work to capacity, and without them people in need may have no alternative source of help. The onset of COVID-19 in Karlsruhe has compelled some parts of this network to shutdown.

## **COVID-19 in Karlsruhe**

The southern states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria—as well as North-Rhine Westphalia—have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 outbreak in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Proximity to particularly stricken regions like northern Italy, Tirol in Austria, and Alsace in France presumably influenced the high number of infections. By the middle of March the total number of confirmed cases in Germany numbered several thousands, which prompted the German government to move from 'containment' to the 'protection' stage of its strategy (Robert Koch Institut 2020a, 13). This entailed, first, the closure of schools and daycare centres (13 March), and subsequently several restrictions on public spaces, including prohibitions against gatherings of more than two people, the closure of restaurants and businesses, and general guidance to avoid leaving one's residence (21 March) (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2020b). In a nationally televised address on 18 March, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that 'since

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<sup>1</sup> Catalogued online in several online resources (e.g., Ruf (2020)).

<sup>2</sup> The first case recorded in Germany was in Munich in late January (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2020a).

the Second World War, no challenge in our country has demanded more of our collective solidary action' (Merkel 2020).

The first recorded cases of COVID-19 infections in Karlsruhe appeared on 6 March. Insofar as testing reveals it, the spread of COVID-19 has not taken on the sort of geometric growth witnessed in more severely affected places; as of mid-April there were just over 300 cases and only four confirmed fatalities.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the containment and protection measures enacted nationally and regionally apply in Karlsruhe like everywhere else: restaurants and businesses are closed or operating at reduced capacity, social services are restricted to operations deemed 'essential,' and individuals are encouraged to remain at home as much as possible.

These restrictions to public life have diminished the resources upon which many homeless and impoverished people rely. A food bank in West Karlsruhe, for example, closed their ordinary distribution service on 16 March. Though the service later made arrangements for a fixed number of pre-prepared meals that could be collected, this provision (72 meals) is smaller than usual and available for shorter periods on fewer days of the week. Yet the fact that this service has continued in any form is exceptional. Other providers, often reliant on supply chains that have gone into abeyance or volunteers that feel compelled to stay home,<sup>4</sup> have had to suspend operations. Perhaps most disturbing of all: the short- and medium-term economic impact of COVID-19 may result in a contraction in funding for welfare and social services, whether through reduced state expenditure or fewer private donations. Apart from the direct health risks, COVID-19's secondary and tertiary effects pose a serious threat to economically struggling people in Karlsruhe and around the world.

### **'Giving fences': digital mobilisation for Karlsruhe's needy**

On 24 March, a group page called '100% Karlsruhe helps the homeless and needy' (*100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen*) appeared on Facebook. The creator, a 36-year old Karlsruhe resident using 'Loco Dias' ('crazy days') as a nom de guerre, announced his intention to improvise a food and supply station for the needy near a local railway station. Crates of food and hygiene supplies were arrayed along a low fence beneath an overpass—free to any who came to collect and superintended by 'Loco Dias' himself. Within the space of a couple of days the group page had upwards of 100 members and had attracted a handful of participants to act as administrators (i.e., taking on core organising duties). In less than three weeks, the group had well over 1000 members and the practice had developed from a *random* collection of spare food, hygiene products, and clothes for a dozen needy persons to more regular

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<sup>3</sup> For up-to-date figures, see the Robert Koch Institute's COVID-19-Dashboard (Robert Koch Institut 2020b).

<sup>4</sup> Many soup kitchens are staffed by elderly volunteers, who are particularly at-risk from COVID-19. Soup kitchens, moreover, have not been allowed to take on new volunteers during the crisis.

provision of meals, distribution of vouchers for use at local groceries, and even delivery of supplies to more than 80 people per day.

This emergent practice unfolded in a thick legal structure. In German law, the term 'donations' (*Spende*) has specific legal usages, which generally imply liability. Since the '100% Karlsruhe' group page scarcely constitutes a legally-recognised entity—let alone one capable of assuming liability—the activists clarified on signs posted on the fence that only 'gifts' (*Gaben*, a less legally restricting term) are accepted, and referred to their project as the 'giving fence' (*Gabenzaun*).<sup>5</sup> This terminological choice, however, is not the end of legal issues for this practice: '100% Karlsruhe' did not have a permit for their activity.<sup>6</sup> German law has longstanding and all-encompassing permitting requirements for activity in public spaces; yet the protection measures against COVID-19 caused municipal registrar offices to close, leaving no possibility for legally permitted public activity. Police inquired with Loco Dias, but were content to allow the giving fence to continue as long as social distancing measures were observed (Rastätter 2020). This signaled an open opportunity for this and other giving practices—but it is a legally tenuous opportunity which leaves much to police discretion (Betsch 2020).

Members of the group page came from various areas of Karlsruhe; that fact and recognition of the limited mobility of homeless and needy persons led the '100% Karlsruhe' group to establish other giving fences: in less than a week the group had initiated three other sites, and four more in the week after that. The group also spurred on others: in West Karlsruhe a group ('Karlsruhe West helps the needy', *Karlsruhe West Hilft Bedürftigen*) set up a 'giving wall' (*Gabenwand*) in an underpass; in the nearby city of Pforzheim, too, a group started a giving fence (Scharfe 2020). These practices and the not inconsiderable mobilisation of activists and resources that they require have continued and grown for several weeks.

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<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, this distinction is not observed in several comments and exchanges on the '100% Karlsruhe' group page, where commenters often refer to 'donations'—but it is present in all the practice site's signage.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when interviewed 'Loco Dias' declined to give his real name to ensure that the action, the giving fence, remains the focal point, but also because the activity was, strictly speaking, not legal (Rastätter 2020).



*'Giving wall' in West Karlsruhe. The text reads, 'Giving-wall for homeless and needy. Together instead of alone.'*

### **Practice benefits**

The mobilisation of participants in this practice seems commonly motivated by both a sense of potential efficacy—that this practice can achieve a desired effect (i.e., it can provide food and supplies for the needy)—and a value-based sympathy for a disadvantaged, marginalised group (Saab et al. 2014). It is, in other words, a case of solidary collective action. This motivational pairing supports the expectancy-value theory of collective action articulated by Klandermans (1997), Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013), and others—though not necessarily to the exclusion of other socio-psychological theories of collective action participation.

On the 'expectancy' side, wherein participants engage because of an expectation of efficacy, giving fences achieve a visible and emotively powerful effect. On many of the group pages there are pictures and videos of organisers distributing or delivering food and supplies to beneficiaries. While it is difficult to determine the proportion of local needy persons who have benefitted from the giving fences—both because statistics on homelessness and the socio-economically disadvantaged are scarce and because the COVID-19 crisis has likely enlarged

this group—recurrently witnessing several dozens of individuals collecting from a single giving fence over days and weeks bears out the practice's effect.

On the 'value' side, wherein participants derive benefits (moral self-esteem, a heartening sense of community, or even just useful preoccupation in circumstances where typical activities of work and leisure are not available) from their engagement, there are numerous daily posts on the organising group pages that express joy at the solidarity evinced in the giving fences and gratitude for the various contributors.

'[I] just hung something [on the fence]. People are super grateful and happy. I'm supposed to send along greetings and a big thank you' ('gabENZaun Pforzheim' page, 31 March 2020).<sup>7</sup>

'[I] was at the fence around 7 this morning to bring some things by - there were already several bags. Really great, I'm totally happy!' ('gabENZaun Pforzheim' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>8</sup>

'... Thanks to the many donors who provide us with supplies every day. Thanks go not only to the many companies, but especially to the many members of this group, who provide us with urgently needed food, fruits and vegetables, as well as hygiene products and other supplies. ... Even with the smallest donations, you are all guarantors that we can help many homeless and needy people through this difficult time' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 8 April 2020).<sup>9</sup>

'Good morning everyone! Just thank you to everyone who brings something, who has a kind word for us and who helps make life a little easier for those in need' ('100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen' page, 19 April 2020).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In original: "Habe gerade was angehängt. Die Leute sind super dankbar und freuen sich. Ich soll liebe Grüße und ein herzliches Danke ausrichten"

<sup>8</sup> In original: "war heute morgen gegen 7 am zaun um ein paar sachen vorbeizubringen - da hingen schon mehrere beutel. echt super, freut mich total!"

<sup>9</sup> In original: "... Danke an die vielen Spender, die uns Tag für Tag mit Nachschub versorgen. Der Dank geht nicht nur an die vielen Firmen, sondern ganz speziell an die vielen Mitglieder dieser Gruppe, die uns täglich mit dringend benötigten Lebensmitteln, Obst und Gemüse, sowie Hygieneartikeln u.s.w. versorgen. ... Ihr alle seid auch mit noch so kleinen Spenden Garanten dafür, daß wir vielen Obdachlosen und Hilfebedürftigen über diese schwere Zeit hinweghelfen konnten."

<sup>10</sup> In original: "Guten Morgen an alle! Einfach mal lieben Dank an alle, die etwas vorbeibringen, die ein liebes Wort für uns haben und die helfen, den Bedürftigen das Leben ein wenig zu erleichtern."

An unmistakable impression emerges from such comments and informal conversations with participants of a clear constellation of psychological benefits from engagement with the giving fences. First, during crisis circumstances that are likely to impart feelings of helplessness and paralysis, there is a sense of purpose and of contribution expressed; to be sure, some of this benefit is attributable just to empowering participants to get out of the house (no mean feat given the pressures to remain at home). Then, witnessing the engagement of others and the response of beneficiaries can engender faith in community, which also mitigates the deleterious impact of social isolation.

In sum, the giving fences are a practice that, so to say, keep on giving. Beneficiaries and participants alike derive clearly recognisable rewards. However, it should be noted that the advantages of this practice are not unalloyed. In fact, the struggles and shortcomings of the giving fences are largely by-products of the stopgap motivations that gave rise to them, thereby underscoring the importance of resuming institutionalised social service provision as soon as emergency conditions are relaxed.

### **Practice problems**

Though no problems have arisen from their legal status, giving fences in and around Karlsruhe have nevertheless encountered several challenges. The most serious of these stem from the use, or rather 'misuse,' of the service. In every group page there are reports or speculation of people who are not really needy taking from the giving fences. With remarkable regularity, participants on group pages use the metaphor of 'black sheep' (*schwarze Schaf*) to refer to such individuals. The black sheep problem is essentially an issue of verification: the normally operating institutions for homeless and needy persons in Karlsruhe have established procedures to ensure that services go to those truly in need. For example, Karlsruher Tafel e.V. (that is, 'Karlsruhe Table registered Association')—which has reduced operations due to COVID-19 prevention measures—provides free and low-cost groceries, but to access the service individuals must obtain an 'authorisation card' (*Berechtigungsausweis*) by showing a personal ID and confirmation that they receive some form of state welfare (Karlsruhe Tafel e.V. 2020); Karlsruhe's Caritas branches employ a similar verification procedure (Caritasverband Karlsruhe e.V. 2020). But the giving fences do not have sufficient resources to institute these procedures. Besides, many group members flatly dismiss the idea of using such a procedure, at least partially because the notion of eyeballing someone's state benefit confirmation at the side of a road or in an underpass is a grim prospect. Yet posts about people with new smartphones or nice bikes and backpacks taking from the fences evince a suspicion about the efficacy, or at least efficiency, of the practice.

In several instances, the black sheep problem has a pointedly ethnic facet: at the giving wall in West Karlsruhe a participant posted that he had asked a beneficiary who was taking a large amount of food and supplies whether that

was necessary and found that the beneficiary could hardly speak German. The participant's emphasis on this detail triggered a tense exchange about 'latent racism,' which eventually prompted one of the group administrators to disable comments on that post. A participant in Pforzheim, conferring with beneficiaries, was informed that Russian individuals were collecting all the food and supplies, and even threatening others—though the participant noted that this did not necessarily mean they were not in need. It could be that some people who do not need help are misusing the giving fences; it could be that some needy persons are over-using it, which evidently disappoints participants who feel that some beneficiaries' behaviour does not reflect the solidarity (and other values) they are acting upon. This, in turn, can trigger demobilising pressures of 'lost commitment' and 'membership loss' (Davenport 2015, 35–36), depriving the collective action of essential resources.

Core participants initiated conversations about how to deal with the black sheep problem. At the giving wall in West Karlsruhe, for instance, one of the group administrators wrote,

'It had already bothered me and annoyed me. Skin colour doesn't matter for me. I don't want to read that here anymore! How can we control the whole thing better? Post guards? Also stupid, camera? Stupid ... or just hope that some who badly need [help] get enough. Or should we abandon [the giving wall] entirely so that nobody gets anything anymore since there will always be people who take advantage of things? Think about it please' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>11</sup>

With such interventions, participants combat the internal demobilising pressures caused by doubts about the efficacy of their action. They engage in what Davenport (2015, 43–47) terms 'reappraisal' and 'trust-building.'<sup>12</sup> In the cases of the giving fences, reappraisal denotes reconsideration and alterations arising from efficacy concerns, while trust-building refers not only to exchanges and interactions between activists—strengthening intra-group bonds—but also repeated endorsement of the notion that the practice is worthwhile so long as some of the food and supplies are getting to people who genuinely need it.

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<sup>11</sup> In original: "Es war mir auch schon aufgestoßen und hat mich geärgert. Die Hautfarbe spielt da für mich keine Rolle. Das möchte ich hier nicht mehr lesen! Wie können wir aber nun das ganze vielleicht besser kontrollieren? Wachen abstellen? Auch doof, kamera? Doof...oder hoffen das einige die es dringend brauchen genug bekommen. Oder sollen wir es ganz lassen damit niemand mehr was bekommt, da es nun Mal immer Menschen geben wird, die Dinge ausnutzen? Denkt Mal drüber nach bitte."

<sup>12</sup> Davenport theorises about the demobilisation of social movement organisations (SMOs) based on induction from a case study of antagonistic dyadic interaction between a SMO and the state. However, his theorisation of demobilisation is generalisable to many other forms of SMOs and collective action.

In all cases, some of the most active participants put forward optimistic perspectives on the black sheep problem, attempting to dispel efficacy concerns. One ruminated on the 'gift' terminology that the legal opportunity structure imposed on the practice:

'I think if you give a gift it is given away. I hope and then trust that it provides a benefit, but there are always black sheep, no matter where. That is annoying, of course, but as soon as I have given something away, passed it out of my hands, it is beyond my authority. Strange if someone then comes and takes it away, but that's the way it is. And I think—that is where I start from—it is not easy to take something from a fence if there is no good reason. So maybe respond [to someone behaving suspiciously]. But don't let it annoy me or mess up my day when I cannot change it' ('KA West hilft Bedürftigen, Lebensmittel Ausgabe Haltestelle Kühler Krug' page, 3 April 2020).<sup>13</sup>

Others downplayed the black sheep problem:

'We don't want to judge [who is *really* needy] and hope that those who really need it will take it. Black sheep are everywhere - but if, of the 100%, 25% are black sheep, then we are happy about the other 75%' ('gabENZaun Pforzheim' page, 4 April 2020).<sup>14</sup>

Some are even more forceful about imposing this sort of perspective as the basis for participation:

'Hello to all helpers. This group is all about love and humanity. Something like [the misuse] described above can happen. If someone is convinced that he or she needs blankets and food, please help yourself. You don't have to be homeless and have signs of decomposition to be in need. We want to reach everyone. And in the event that it was unjust, their karma should take care of it. However, please continue with your good deeds. Don't scold anyone. You are great people, so we

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<sup>13</sup> In original: "ich finde wenn man eine Gabe abgibt ist es verschenkt. Ich hoffe und vertraue dann darauf das es beim richtigen ankommt, aber schwarze Schaf gibt es immer, egal wo. Das ist natürlich ärgerlich, aber sobald ich etwas verschenkt habe, in dem Fall abgelegt, entzieht es sich meinem befehlen darüber. Doof wenn man dann sowas mit bekommt, aber ist halt so. Und ich denke- da gehe ich von mir aus- es fällt nicht leicht an einem Gabenzaun was mit zu nehmen wenn es keinen triftigen Grund hat. Ansprechen ja eventuell. Mich ärgern nein, versaut mir den Tag und ändern kann man es nicht."

<sup>14</sup> In original: "Wir wollen das nicht beurteilen und hoffen darauf, dass es sich diejenigen nehmen, welche es auch wirklich brauchen. Schwarze Schafe gibt es überall - aber wenn von den 100%, 25% schwarze Schafe sind, dann freuen wir uns doch über die anderen 75%."

will continue with that. The comment function is hereby switched off ('100% Karlsruhe hilft den Obdachlosen und Armen' page, 29 March 2020).<sup>15</sup>

In their conversations, participants (particularly core organisers) in the giving fences ultimately affirm the view that the food and supplies will at least reach some who need it; they adopt an approach of trust—but the desire to 'verify' is plainly there.

One other challenge deserves mention: the giving fences can be absorbing, demanding considerable commitment and active involvement—especially from core organisers and especially after black sheep problems prompt participants to adopt more demanding procedures (Witke 2020). As ever, when collective action demands such intense engagement there is a danger of 'burnout' or 'exhaustion' (Davenport 2015, 32–33; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising 2018). Demands on participants have been dealt with by a habitual readiness to ask for help and to share around administrative responsibilities, but the longer the collective action continues, the more likely are the exertions of participation to induce burnout.

## Outlook

The giving fences are a promising practice and well suited to the exigencies of the COVID-19 emergency measures in Germany. Its benefits are modest in scope, but certainly meaningful among direct beneficiaries and participants: cumulatively over the whole municipal area, probably a few hundred homeless and needy individuals take succour from the giving fences; and participants clearly derive distinct psycho-social benefits from engagement, which can alleviate strains arising from the public health response to COVID-19.

All the giving fence group pages reveal struggles with inefficiency and efficacy concerns, and difficulties in establishing optimal arrangements for supply and distribution. This underscores a distinctive feature of collective action focused on service provision. Unlike other areas of collective action, in which institutionalisation (Tarrow 2011, 207–13) is sometimes viewed as the death knell of a movement, mobilisation that centres around service provision overwhelmingly benefits from the establishment of fixed institutions and regularised procedures. Institutionalisation facilitates more efficient provision of services and more constancy for beneficiaries. Some participants expressed a desire to continue the giving fences after the COVID-19 crisis abates—but this

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<sup>15</sup> In original: "Hallo an alle Helferinnen und Helfer. In dieser Gruppe geht es ausschließlich um Liebe und Menschlichkeit. Sowas wie oben beschrieben, kann passieren. Wenn jemand davon überzeugt ist, dass er oder sie decken und Lebensmittel notwendig hat, dann bitte bedient euch. Man muss nicht obdachlos und Verwesungs Anzeichen haben um bedürftig zu sein. Wir wollen alle erreichen. Und für den Fall das es doch ungerecht war soll sich deren karma darum kümmern. Ihr allerdings macht bitte mit euren guten taten weiter. Schimpft niemanden. Ihr seid tolle Menschen, also machen wir genau damit weiter. Kommentarfunktion wird hiermit abgeschaltet."

can almost certainly be attributed to the 'initial euphoria' (*Anfangseuphorie*) of engagement. The daily demands on participants, especially those most involved, are intense, which more than anything else suggests that the practice cannot be maintained in the long-term.

The giving fences are an encouraging manifestation of solidary collective action. Their inherent shortcomings underscore the importance of re-starting social work and service provision institutions as soon as COVID-19 protective measures are relaxed. The resumption of these normal operations may draw some individuals mobilised in the giving fence practices into established institutions. Understandably, the merged senses of ownership and accomplishment that some participants have for the giving fences are not lightly relinquished, but the extensive network of welfare institutions in Karlsruhe and other German cities offer channels for participants to continue acting upon their values—and with greater efficacy.

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## **Organising a solidarity kitchen: reflections from Cooperation Birmingham**

**Sergio Ruiz Cayuela (28<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

### **Covid-19, a “not-so-natural” disaster**

The global Covid-19 pandemic is being faced by governments and covered by the media as a natural disaster. And in a way they are right: as scientists predicted, the rapid change in climatic conditions has created a favourable environment for the virus to spread. However, practices related to the agribusiness model can also be related with the increasingly recurrent outbreak of global pandemics<sup>1</sup>. Other factors have also contributed to the transmission and mortality of the disease. Global capitalism and the frenetic movement of people and goods that it entails; an endemic lack of funding (or plain privatisation) of public healthcare systems all over; cultural inclination to frequent socialising; and most importantly, widespread lack of access to basic goods such as healthy food or clean water and air. Critical geographers already discovered decades ago that natural disasters are not purely *natural*, but to a great extent they are socially constructed. Or as Neil Smith, in his account of hurricane Katrina, puts it – natural disasters don’t just create indiscriminate destruction, “[r]ather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter”<sup>2</sup>.

### **From disasters to solidarity**

But there’s a more hopeful side to natural disasters which seems to be reproduced across temporal and geographical scales: the outstanding popular responses based on solidarity and cooperation. In this extreme situations in which the social order is temporarily broken, people tend to organise together in order to fulfil each other’s basic needs and ensure their collective survival<sup>3</sup>. Whilst there’s goodwill in all the help being offered, the current pandemic is proving that it’s not enough. A clear lack of experience in political involvement and community organising by most of the population is undermining mutual aid efforts in the UK.

Take as an example WhatsApp groups created to connect residents of the same street or area in several cities, which have become the locus of popular self-organisation in times of Covid-19. Whereas they might be useful to help some people in self-isolation access basic goods, their reach is very limited. They embody a type of solidarity which, even if necessary, is insufficient because it is

1 Rob Wallace (2016). *Big farms make big flu: dispatches on influenza, agribusiness, and the nature of science*. NYU Press.

2 <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/>

3 Rebeca Solnit (2010). *A Paradise Built In Hell. The Extraordinary Communities That Arise In Disaster*. Penguin Books.

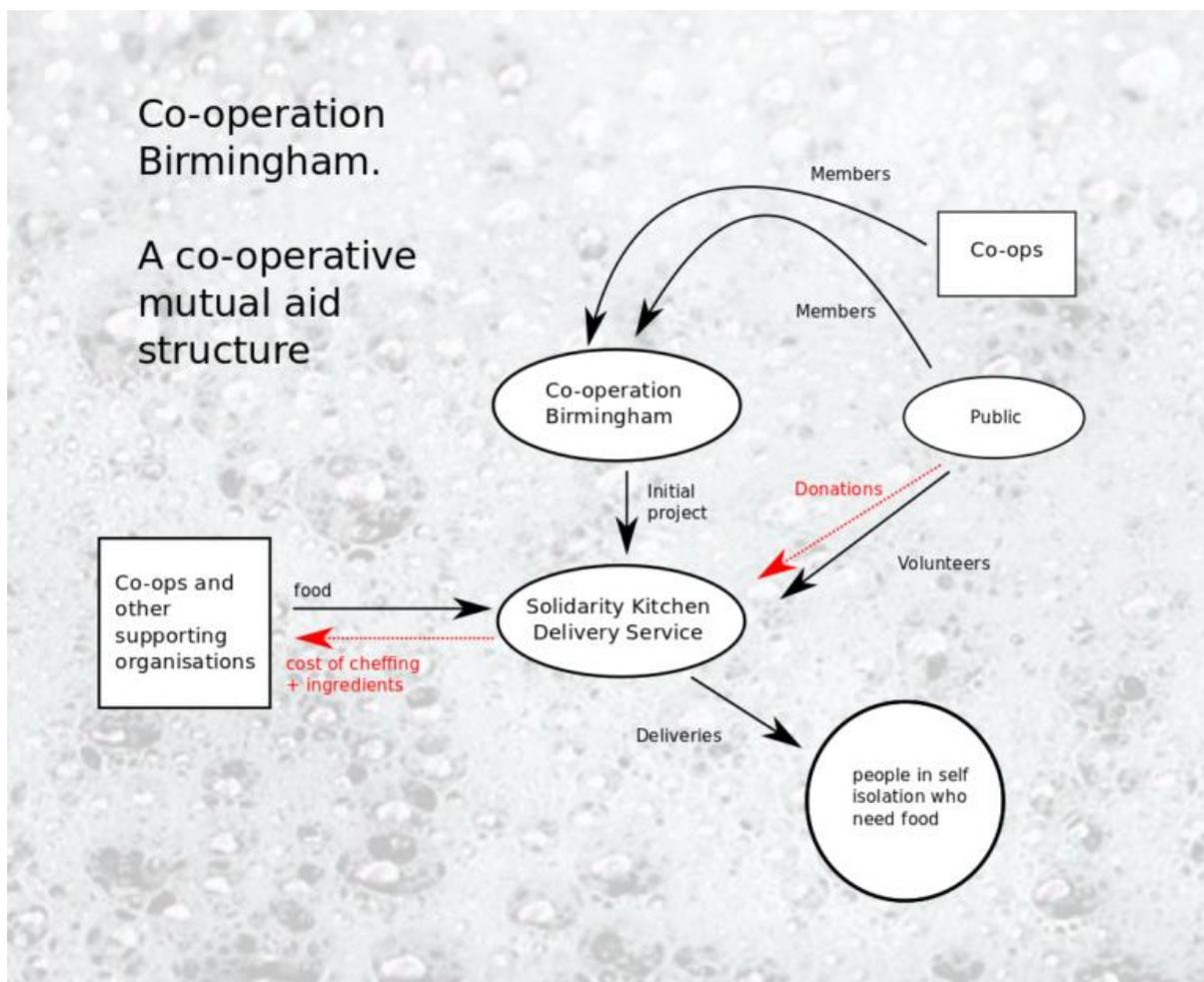
exclusively based in locality, which is translated in a lack of coordination among networks. Moreover, unequal access and ability to use technology or lack of time to follow conversations are factors that, when not taken seriously, prevent many members of the community from being actively involved. In the end, these groups tend to become taken over by a few residents who dominate the interactions and/or modify the scope of the group – and with it its potential effectiveness.

## **How to organise a solidarity kitchen**

Aware of these dynamics, and of the fact that structure and purpose are key factors in mutual aid efforts, Cooperation Birmingham<sup>4</sup> has recently brought together several grassroots organisations and workers' cooperatives to create a solidarity kitchen. Funded with donations collected through an online platform<sup>5</sup>, we offer warm meals to people in self-isolation in Birmingham. We ask no questions and we take no money, we practice solidarity without conditions.

4 <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

5 <https://www.gofundme.com/f/cooperation-birmingham-mutual-aid-kitchen>



Source: Sean Farmelo

### **Securing access to a professional kitchen**

Two infrastructural dimensions are basic in the organisation of the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen: physical and political infrastructures. As obvious as it may sound, in order to provide cooked meals you need a kitchen, the bigger and better suited, the more meals you will be able to provide. Key to the success of the project, thus, is the participation of the Warehouse Cafe, a centrally located cafe, organised as a workers' cooperative and home base to several leftist and environmental organisations. The temporary closure of the business when the pandemic started has given us access to a professional kitchen.

### **Social measures encourage solidarity**

Besides providing a kitchen, many of the workers of the cafe (including the chefs) are contributing with their labour to the project. They are currently furloughed, and that allows them to concentrate efforts on the project. But not

only cafe workers, over 100 people contribute regularly to the project by cooking food, cleaning the kitchen, delivering meals and doing backroom work. This constantly expanding group is mostly composed of people who are not able to engage in waged labour in the current situation. This fact shows the real importance of adopting social measures directed to covering the basic needs of workers, as they encourage solidarity and mutual aid and have an impact that surpasses economic calculations.

### **Organising – horizontal, practical and open**

As for political infrastructures, the experience in organising of most of our members is key for the success of the project. We work on an ideally horizontal but practically layered structure of decision-making in which decisions are made by a mix of consensus and pressing-need. The main decisions are made in open online meetings that take place usually weekly. For smaller issues related to the daily operations we have created working groups that have a certain degree of autonomy and specific tasks assigned. We also hold regular feedback meetings with participants, where important operational issues are raised but also bring humanity and care to the tasks of the people involved. The assessment of the operations in the open meetings allows all members to reflect on the general direction of the project, but also on specific practical matters.

Thus, the fluid interaction between open meetings, working groups and participants avoids the accumulation of power and ensures that the political orientation of the project remains in the correct path. It is important to acknowledge that all political infrastructures are open, and we encourage both participants and users of the kitchen to join a working group and attend to the organising meetings.

### **Communication**

Crucial for the smooth functioning of our political infrastructures is technology. We have an open online forum<sup>6</sup> where whoever is interested in joining the solidarity kitchen, or just curious about it, is able to see at a glimpse the form of our political structure, join a working group and read the minutes of the meetings. We also make use of social media, which is key for reaching new users and recruiting participants. And of course, instant messaging apps provide a much needed bridge between political and physical infrastructures. We are aware of different degrees of confidence when using technology, so we offer personalised training to everyone interested and make sure that important information is available in different formats. A financial update is published weekly, and there is a section on the forum where all decisions are compiled, including how and by whom they were taken in order to ensure accountability. Transparency is one of our core values, and we take it very seriously.

6 <https://forum.cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

## **Councils externalising social services onto the commons**

However, our solidarity kitchen is far from perfect. We understand the project as a process in which we try to learn from our mistakes and adjust to the needs and abilities of the people involved. It has been difficult to deal with a huge workload and different levels of involvement that have led some organisers to the edge of burnout very soon. However, we have been put in a very difficult situation by the Birmingham city council, which is denying responsibility and relying on the commons to respond to the crisis. Instead of setting a relief operation of sufficient scale that would reach most of the vulnerable population in Birmingham, the city council has been systemically directing people to community efforts like ours. After our second day of operation, the council started referring calls to us, which meant a surge of over 500% in food requests from one day to next. At the same time we received a call from a council worker vaguely offering support to our solidarity kitchen. However, we are aware of the history of cooptation and institutional intrusion within social movements in the city, so we decided to decline their offer. The early spike on the number of requests caused a great disruption to the solidarity kitchen. We felt overburdened with a responsibility that should not fall on us and was disproportionate with our capacity at the moment, and that paid a toll on our physical and emotional well-being. After capping our daily deliveries to around 150 meals, we are currently involving new members, recruiting participants and looking for infrastructures that ensure the sustainability of the project and allow a controlled expansion while ensuring a certain degree of autonomy.

## **A perspective beyond the current crisis**

Even if the cost comes high, this systemic externalisation of social services onto the commons makes the existence of politicised mutual aid projects like ours more important than ever. Because our purpose is not just to respond to the current crisis, we need to look beyond. What awaits after the immediate public health emergency is an economic crisis of unprecedented magnitude that will change the capitalist system as we know it. Socio-economical reconfigurations that follow disasters and crises traditionally offer “an opportunity for elites to recapture and even intensify their power”<sup>7</sup>. However, critical events such as the current pandemic can also pave the ground for the emergence of ‘moments of excess’ in which existing patterns of oppression and resistance crystallise to expand the realm of possibility and produce new subjectivities<sup>8</sup>. We need to seize the window of opportunity that is now opening. We need popular mutual aid efforts such as Cooperation Birmingham to become strong alternative institutions that take power from political elites and redistribute it among the working class. We need to have a major role in writing the new rules of the

7 Ashley Dawson (2017: 257). *Extreme cities: The peril and promise of urban life in the age of climate change*. Verso Books.

8 Free Association (2011). *Moments of Excess: movements, protest and everyday life*. PM Press.

world to come. A world defined by the worst economic crisis of our times and by climate change, an uncertain world in which the elaborate system of social ordering will start to crack<sup>9</sup>. A world of hope.

## **Update**

This article was written during the first week of April 2020. By the end of May of the same year, Cooperation Birmingham has already delivered over 8,000 meals to people in self-isolation in the city. The project has also expanded with the inclusion of a mask-making operation and the production of a weekly newsletter open to participants and food recipients.

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9 John Holloway (2010). *Crack Capitalism*. Pluto Press.

## **On lockdown and locked out of the prison classroom: the prospects of post-secondary education for incarcerated persons during pandemic**

**Clinton Nichols (18<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

Covid-19 has prompted advocates for post-secondary education in American prisons to focus their activism on the wellbeing of their students as prisons and jails have become vectors for infection. Incarcerated persons lack access to adequate healthcare and the ability to practice preventative measures like social distancing and basic hygiene. In the United States, prisons and jails account for nearly 75% of the top fifty congregate sites of known infections (New York Times 2020). Incarcerated persons, their families, activists and medical professionals have raised alarm about the spread of the virus. Since mid-March 2020, incarcerated persons and supporters working through grassroots organizations have conducted more than 120 actions to demand improved sanitary conditions, immediate release, and increased coronavirus testing in the United States (UCLA Law Project 2020). Activists have also raised funds to donate soap, hand sanitizer, and face coverings for persons caged in jails and prisons in states like Illinois as one example.<sup>1</sup> Among these supporters are teachers who volunteer their time and expertise to offer classes inside prisons and jails. Prison education programs adjusted quickly by stopping the term or transitioning to a correspondence pedagogy. The ability to sustain educational opportunities during this pandemic may prove in jeopardy. This reflection outlines the status of prison education in the United States before identifying the challenges that lay ahead and suggesting that innovations may result in closing rather than expanding classroom doors to incarcerated persons. Activists will need to develop new strategies to sustain and amplify arguments for the expansion of educational opportunities for persons caged in American prisons and jails.

The American federal system of government delegates responsibility for education and crime control to states and local governmental units. This system has resulted in more than 50 different state-level prison systems for felony convictions and more than 3,100 county-level jails for persons awaiting trial or serving misdemeanor convictions. With almost 85% of incarcerated persons caged in state prisons and local jails (Sawyer and Wagner 2020), access to the classroom as a way to promote rehabilitation, societal re-entry, and ending mass incarceration requires activism at the level of state and local governments. Studies have consistently shown that prison education reduces significantly the likelihood of recidivism, but educational programs in American prisons and jails only reached 12% of incarcerated persons at its highest point in the late 1970s (Wright 2001). Ironically by 1982, when the greatest number of post-secondary programs inside prisons and jails peaked at 350, only 27,000 persons representing 9% of the total population of incarcerated adults and juveniles were enrolled in classes (Robinson and English 2017). Consequently, twelve

programs that offered degree granting programs to incarcerated persons expanded by the year 1982 to 350 programs operating in every state. In that year approximately 27,000 persons, representing almost 9% of the total population of incarcerated adults and juveniles in the country, were receiving some form of post-secondary education. American lawmakers decimated post-secondary and vocational programs with Congressional passage of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This law made incarcerated persons ineligible for federal financial aid to cover tuition which college and universities had come to rely on after decades of declining support from state governments. By 1997 only eight colleges and universities had continued their programs; over the next eighteen years this number grew to forty-one largely due to the generosity of private donors and volunteers (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). Under a presidential executive order by the Obama administration, federal financial aid started in 2015 as a pilot program enabling 4,000 incarcerated persons to take undergraduate or vocational classes (Robinson and English 2017). The current administration has expanded this initiative but without Congressional repeal of the 1994 law federal support remains tenuous.

The emergence of the novel coronavirus in American prisons and jails earlier this year resulted in quick and ongoing changes to the delivery of educational programs. Structural factors such as a state's dominant ideology about incarceration, the degree of demographic similarity between incarcerated and non-incarcerated populations, and the nature of the working relationship between education program leaders and prison or jail authorities also shape this response. The classes run by the University of Maine at Augusta exemplifies a situation where instructors found supportive partners in that state's prison authorities. When prisons in Maine entered lockdown, prison staff at different facilities agreed to extend ethernet cables into classrooms, even at the maximum security facility, so that instructors could meet smaller groups of students via online meeting platforms (Weissman 2020). This cooperation is not simply a matter of a cooperative relationship between university faculty and prison authorities. This situation also stems in part from the Maine's status as one of two states where incarcerated persons retain the right to vote regardless of the conviction (Lewis 2019) and the demographic racial similarity between its imprisoned population and the state's general population living outside sites of incarceration.

Another structural reality for sustaining educational programs during the pandemic centers on the material commitment prisons are willing to make. Southside Virginia Community College operates College Within Walls (CWW) program at Lunenburg Correctional Center. CWW had developed a residential learning model before the pandemic. The prison authorities dedicated a single housing unit for 90 men to live together while they are enrolled in classes. This dormitory-like setting includes seven teaching assistants who have graduated from this program. CWW students enjoy access to laptops, a quiet study environment, and support from fellow students and the teaching assistants (SVCC 2020). Committing physical infrastructure to has enabled this program

to mitigate the abrupt end to in-person learning that most programs had to adopt across the United States.

The response to Covid-19 by educational programs and prisons and jails in Maine and by Southside Virginia Community College suggest exceptional innovations. Most programs and prisons very quickly shutdown classroom learning and switched to correspondence learning. Lyle May's experience (2020, 2019) as correspondence student on North Carolina's death row highlights the challenges that come with this learning model. Contending with the noise, lack of space, and the lack of technology to study and complete assignments are obstacles inherent to confinement (May 2020). May also identifies how correspondence courses elevate the role and power of prison staff in ways that are instructive of the challenges outside educational programs will encounter as the pandemic continues. Prison staff had to communicate with instructors on his behalf, sign registration forms, receive his course materials, send assignments, designate an exam proctor, and maintain his academic records for case manager, the court, and parole board (May 2019).

In-person classroom interaction as a pedagogy draws its strength from the dialogic interaction between students and instructors. Unexpected learning emerges for all participants. Instructors also gained insights about incarceration by momentarily experiencing humiliations such as the procedure correctional officers use to check visitors are not carrying anything unauthorized into or out of a prison or jail, seeing the physical condition of the facilities, and by hearing the accounts of daily life from their incarcerated students (Walker 2004). Ositelu (2020) notes that face-to-face learning reconnects students to their humanity as instructors see the potential for intellectual and personal development. The abrupt turn to correspondence learning ended these multi-faceted forms of witnessing that instructors bring back to the outside world and that students share with the outside through their writing, artwork, and performances.

The short-term impact of the novel coronavirus has involved restricted visitor access and a shift to a correspondence model of education for many incarcerated students. While the long-term impact of this infectious disease is not fully known, supporters for prison education must be prepared that a therapeutic regimen or even a vaccine will not return everything to the status quo ante. Innovative solutions such as extending greater access to technology to students, segregating students into a separate housing unit, and cooperative partnerships with prison authorities will remain exceptional. Three issues loom large for educational programs and their proponents: constrained prison budgets, privatization of medical concern, and vaccine prioritization.

Prisons will face constrained budgets in the next few years as the economy suffers from outbreaks that disrupt the sources of revenue state and local governments rely on. Prison authorities will not have funds to modify classrooms and other spaces for face to face instruction that meet health guidelines. Prisons have already failed to provide adequate amounts of cleansing supplies to incarcerated persons (IL-CHEP 2020; PNAP 2020). It is

unrealistic that these institutions will install infrastructure to adequately expand access to monitored internet for students to use through tables, laptops, or modified computer labs. Non-profit educational organizations will have to take the lead in funding these efforts. Forms of online instruction also create new and more robust opportunities for prison authorities to surveil students, which has already happened through email systems available to incarcerated persons (see Raheer 2016).

Pushing medical concerns onto volunteer instructors and teaching organizations will be one way that prison authorities respond to Covid-19. Once prisons have lifted lockdowns there will still be restrictions on visitors and increased efforts to conduct basic health screening such as a temperature check. Classroom learning inside prisons and jails will not resume until prison authorities have developed more protocols. Volunteer instructors will face heightened scrutiny since a course running for a 14-week semester necessitates recurring visits to a prison or jail. One possibility involves voluntary educational programs to maintain and provide up to date documentation about instructors' test results. Only instructors who test negative, have Covid antibodies would have permission to enter the prison to teach a class. While there is no cost for testing now, it is likely that private insurance companies will raise costs over time for Covid testing. In this way non-profit organizations and their volunteer teachers will need to consider how to bear these costs for regular testing.

Where prison staff and incarcerated persons fall in the order of importance to receive a vaccine once one (or more) is available will influence any return to face-to-face teaching. If frontline prison officers are not included among doctors and other first responders, correctional officers through their labor unions will oppose efforts to expand the number of outsiders who can enter prisons beyond lawyers who have a constitutional right to see clients. The availability of a vaccine will also become the gold standard that prison authorities will rely on to permit outside educators to resume teaching inside jails and prisons. Outside educational programs can expect limited availability of instructors until vaccination of the general population has started. Prison authorities will likely demand instructors show proof of vaccination just as it is a common requirement for volunteers to provide test results that they are free of tuberculosis. Satisfying universal demand for a vaccine will take more than a year especially if more than one dose is necessary to achieve immunity. Unless the federal government coordinates the efforts of manufacturers to produce the vaccine and necessary related supplies, and the distribution of these items to medical facilities. The haphazard response to the first wave of Covid-19, in which state governors competed against each other for the procurement of supplies and equipment, suggests that vaccination will be as troubled as it was for the polio cure (Conis et al 2020).

Relying almost entirely on voluntary efforts to offer post-secondary classes inside prisons and jails, prison education in the United States had begun to expand under tentative federal support. The advent of Covid-19 presents major challenges with the abrupt transition from classroom instruction to

correspondence learning for students housed in jails and prisons. Effective advocacy for post-secondary education in prisons and jails will require pursuing closer, and in some cases unusual, collaborations. Prison authorities are viable partners only in situations where maximizing the learning opportunities does not result in strengthening the punitive or surveillance power of these institutions. Improving ties with other organizations that run programs inside prisons and jails presents another opportunity. In many prisons and jails a chaplain's office coordinates programming for multiple faith communities. Advocates for prison education can seek to strengthen ties to these religious groups by drawing on their university's historic religious affiliation if applicable. The urgent health concern Covid-19 presents to incarcerated persons invites working with congregations to donate items like soap and face coverings while also informing faith communities about the importance of and ways to support secular educational opportunities inside prisons and jails.

Responding to Covid-19 also presents opportunities for coalition building among universities operating educational programs within the same facility and across a state. The presence of multiple post-secondary educational programs within a prison or jail is less frequent but this situation raises the prospect for coalition building among universities. Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum-security prison near Chicago, hosts five different academic programs. Lockdown at this facility has compelled greater logistical cooperation. Administrators from the five different programs are in greater communication with each other so that one person travels to collect or return student assignments for multiple programs. These university programs can deepen this cooperation by issuing joint media statements and reports, and co-organizing local public events. At the statewide level, university programs can work together to amplify their concerns about incarceration and about the need for increased educational opportunities to state lawmakers and gubernatorial leadership. Nonetheless proponents for prison education will need to be mindful that the current heightened attention to the failures in the American criminal justice system will not lead to immediate reforms. Student access to classrooms in prisons and jails will likely remain limited and or even decline during this pandemic and its immediate aftermath. At its zenith educational programs for incarcerated persons reached only 12% of the American prison population (Wright 2001). This statistic speaks to the ongoing challenge of seeing persons in prisons and jails as inherently worthy to learn and of the need to fundamentally change, if not abolish imprisonment.

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<sup>1</sup> IL-CHEP (Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison) reported on its website that the Illinois Department of Corrections requested in-kind donations that could assist incarcerated persons to have better access to soap and hand sanitizer (URL: <https://ilchep.org/> and <https://ilchep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sanitizer-One-Pager-IL-CHEP-1.pdf>, 15 June 2020). Chicago-based Prison & Neighborhood Art Project reported that more than \$4,000 in contributions enabled donation of 4,000 units of soap and six gallons of hand sanitizer to incarcerated men at Stateville Correctional Center at the end of March 2020 (Covid-19 Emergency Response Efforts, <https://p-nap.org/donate.html>, 15 June 2020).

## **Solidarity forever?** **Performing mutual aid in Leipzig, Germany** **Micha Fiedlschuster and Leon Rosa Reichle** **(4<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Solidarity; Germany; Mutual Aid

### **Introduction**

The global pandemic COVID-19 not only started a discussion on the crisis of health systems around the world, it also brought a discourse on solidarity to the fore. The World Health Organization (WHO) called on global solidarity. Asking for donations for a Solidarity Response Fund, the WHO has named its clinical trial “solidarity”. European solidarity meant treating some French and Italian patients in German hospitals (also in Leipzig) but economic aid is still debated controversially. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that “since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge for our country in which action in a spirit of solidarity on our part was so important” (Address to the nation, March 18, 2020).

The political discourse on solidarity remained poor in content, mainly restricted to issues of charity; more significantly, this discourse continued to be largely detached from existing discussions and practices of social movements and the Left.

As a scholar on social movement democracy and an activist scholar working on neighbourhood relations, we are curious about the political and transformative potential of solidarity in action during this crisis. Hence, we analyse different initiatives of mutual aid during the pandemic in our city. In Leipzig, a city of 600,000 in Eastern Germany, the number of infections are relatively low (about 600 cases in May 2020) but the social consequences are enormous. On March 17 all public events were banned and a week later an almost complete lockdown came into effect. It was partially lifted on April 20 and public life re-opened with restrictions on May 4. The right to protest and assemble was banned for most of the time.

We first give a short overview of concepts of solidarity, providing a lens to analyse the mutual-aid groups. Second, we discuss six cases with differing political backgrounds and organizational set ups. We wanted to capture their experience during the crisis and their analytical and practical conceptualizations of solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Our research is based on six interviews that we conducted May 11 - 15, 2020. We would like to thank our interview partners for their time and their effort to help other people during COVID-19. We would also like to thank Alia Somani and Helena Flam for comments on the draft.

### Three types of solidarity

In this section, we present three types of solidarity to guide our empirical findings. Even if we cannot review the rich discourse on solidarity here, we outline some important variations.<sup>2</sup>

**Solidarity as (or based on) shared identity** has been recently criticized as exclusive, explicitly in the context of COVID-19 (August, 2020). The critique relies on perspectives of Richard Sennett, who since his early writing condemned community solidarity as a purification tool neglecting differences in a shared 'we' (Sennett, 1973). Yet others interpret shared identities as less fixed, highlighting merely a necessity of shared experience for collective identification and solidarity (Mühe, 2019), or, even more radically pluralist, use feminist theories to define solidarity as an attachment possible despite or even *because* of difference (Bargetz, et al. 2019).

August (2020) is equally critical on **solidarity as compassion and a moral duty**, its disregard leading to sanctions. This evokes a kind of Durkheimian notion of pre-modern solidarity. Nuss' (2020) take on solidarity as compassion is less judgemental, framing it as taking responsibility for one another.

Finally, **solidarity as political practice** is the perspective, we, as critical scholars and activists have worked most with so far. It is defined as a relation of a shared struggle against oppression (Featherstone, 2012), a struggle for the same goals, positioned against something or someone specific (Nuss, 2020) or, on more universalist terms, based on an analysis of a concrete universalism implying that all are concerned differently by the same oppressive society (Adamczak, 2018; Meißner, 2016; Mühe, 2019; Struwe, 2019).

As we show below, these different variations help to analyse the differences of the mutual-aid groups in Leipzig.

### Please, let me help you: six cases of solidarity

Witnessing the popping up of solidarity initiatives, both by existent and newly forming groups in Leipzig, and following their trajectories, the first impression is that all are doing the same thing: they are encouraging mutual help with practical daily life tasks complicated either through the virus itself (for those with highest risk) or the respective measures. Another commonality is that relatively few people use their services. The differences lie in the ideological framework, the organizational philosophy, the target groups, and the time horizon of action. We discuss these differences alongside the aforementioned conceptualizations of solidarity.

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<sup>2</sup>On the non-fixity of the concept, its contested nature and permanent need for reconstruction see Wallaschek, 2019; Bargetz, et al. 2019 or Mühe, 2019. For a recent discussion of exclusive and inclusive/transversal forms of solidarity in the context of migration see Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020.

### **Solidarity based on shared identity**

One initiative in particular has grown out of a shared identity: the legal-help collective of the local soccer club *BSG Chemie*, which was formed in 2014 as a response to harsh police brutality towards fans and ultras. When their work slowed down in the face of COVID-19, they thought “what can we do, we are quite an organized group, have a network, how can we use it?”<sup>3</sup> Their aim was “to come out of the crisis strengthened, initially the idea was for the Chemie fans.” Asked what solidarity means, the interview person laughs and says “of course it means that we are there for one another within the fan-scene [...] and support one another.”

Providing their infrastructure for a helpline, setting up chat groups and drafting flyers for neighbourhood mutual help, they were quickly discovered by the local public health department. It was the pragmatic cooperation with this department that provided them with their only help requests. Adapting to the situation, their focus shifted, “it got a bit more global, throughout the whole city and outside of the scene.” Their highlight was supporting a financially precarious family in quarantine and organizing Easter presents for the kids: their large network gathered such a massive lot of presents, that they redistributed it to several refugee shelters and the local food bank.

They were not discouraged by the low demand (“we are happy if a majority stays healthy”), but have adapted their work through, for example, encouraging blood donations which went down in the pandemic and asking people to donate the remuneration to food banks or the local women’s shelter “because through our big network we just reach many folks.”

Therefore, even if grown out of and based on a strong shared identity as soccer fans, their solidarity quickly became more universal and supportive of all those in need they could identify. Their solidarity is shaped by compassion: “in the fan-support we simply like to support people and [...] have an inner drive to do so”, but also a political critique. Besides their pragmatic mutual help, they continued critical evaluation of state measures “we also wrote texts on how to deal with constraints of freedom and observe many policing measures critically.”

### **Solidarity as compassion**

The group *Nachbarn für Nachbarn* (Neighbours for Neighbours) operates in the quarters Schleußig and Plagwitz, the former being of Leipzig few central middle-class neighbourhoods and the latter becoming one too. The group did not exist before the Corona crisis and was initiated through an individual’s appeal in an online social network. Its members set up a Telegram chat group for coordinating help and a phone line as an access point. The service was made public mainly through flyers. The main target group are the elderly who they identified in accordance with the public authorities as those who need help most. The group

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<sup>3</sup>The interviews were conducted in German. All quotes were translated by the authors.

responded to an estimated eight requests so far and at least in one case the help for grocery shopping lasts until today. Despite low numbers of requests they will continue their work because they want to be ready for further expected waves of mass infections.

The intention of the group can be characterized as offering help without political attachments.

Friedrich, one of the two interview partners, stressed that they do not want to create a formalized organizational structure or engage in political activities. They decided against social media activity, arguing that it is too time-consuming. Similarly, the group sees internal discussions as detrimental to the organization of help. As Friedrich explains, the group has about 30 members and they practice a form of direct democracy where decisions are taken by majority vote in a Telegram chat group.

Their solidarity can be characterized as a form of compassion or felt responsibility for people in need. The two interview partners pointed out that their Christian world-view is a source of motivation but this is not generalizable for the group which they characterized as being diverse. They want to avoid labels in order to be as open and approachable as possible and to avoid in-group conflicts. When asked about the term solidarity, Friedrich said that the core idea of solidarity is to help the needy, which he sees as their source of motivation. However, they do not use the term because it is used by other groups in Leipzig and because of its socialist legacy. Charity, altruism and a moral duty to help are more accurate to describe the group's ideational framework than solidarity.

The non-political setup of the group did not save them from a significant conflict. The initiator of the group, who saw himself as a leading figure, started posting political messages and became involved in the organization of protests against the government restrictions. These protests are associated with the new right and conspiracy theory. At first, the group tried to discipline his activity within the group, without excluding him. But when he did not follow their request to abstain from political postings in the group, tried to obtain a leadership role, and when the group became associated with his political activities by the public, the members decided to create a new group under a new name and thus excluded the initiator from its ranks. The conflict within this group can be understood as reflecting the growing polarization within the broader population itself around the issue of restrictions and their appropriateness. Interestingly, this conflict, both within the group and within the broader society, is not between the left and the right but rather between the political mainstream and the new right.

Whereas this group does not want to be a vehicle for social change and its temporal horizon is the pandemic, the following groups aim in different ways at transforming society.

### **Solidarity as political struggle for transforming society**

The foundation *Ecken wecken* (Awaking Corners, <https://stiftung-ecken-wecken.de/>) is located in the Western part of Leipzig but offers help city-wide. Similar to other initiatives, they set up a help platform and a phone line. Specific here is that they use professional software (constituent-relationship management, as it is called in the non-profit sector) to coordinate help efficiently. On May 20, 2020 they counted 1,115 supporters and had answered 225 calls for help since they started on March 15, 2020.

The foundation pursues a collaborative approach towards local politicians and bureaucracy to implement projects for community development. They can be located in the tradition of a reformist way of community organizing which has roots in the US civil rights movements and has been introduced to Germany more than 10 years ago (see e.g. Penta, 2007). At the same time, they also market their solution for mutual aid to other organizations and cities in Germany. This situates them closer to the field of NGOs in development aid which often provide model solutions that are marketable.

The foundation's work during COVID-19 can be classified as charity (just like that of many other, also more radical left groups) and solidarity is not an explicit concept that they use. Yet their long-term goal has a transformative dimension. Similarly to many other initiatives in the world, they seek to democratize representative democracy by strengthening political agency through increased citizen participation in the existing political system (Fiedlschuster, 2018, p. 245; see also Fung and Wright, 2003; Santos, 2005).

Whereas *Ecken wecken* seeks moderate social change and aims at becoming recognized by the local authorities and politicians, the next group set up a state-independent redistributive system.

*Direct.support Leipzig* (<https://leipzig.directsupport.care/en/>), which is modelled after groups in Berlin and Halle, connects people with money with people in a financial crisis. They set up a simple way of redistributing money: someone, who self-identifies as needing money urgently (they do not restrict help to but explicitly encourage people who are exposed to structural discrimination), contacts the group. The group organizes what they call 'bidding rounds' among the supporters in a Telegram group to collect the money, which is then directly transferred from the supporters to the person in need. They started at the beginning of April, 2020, have around 100 supporters and helped about 17 people. The process is as anonymous as possible to protect the people in need, which raises the question of how to establish long-term exchanges and how to go beyond a mere monetary redistribution. Nevertheless, they try to fill a gap in the allocation of state-run emergency funds, which are inaccessible for some.

The group has not had the time (yet) to discuss a common understanding of solidarity. Whereas for the one interview partner the charity aspect and their involvement in other initiatives of solidarity economy seemed to be the motivation to take action, the other interview partner stressed that being solidaristic involves being against social injustices and questioning own privileges. *Direct.support Leipzig* sees solidarity as a political practice connected

with an anti-capitalist critique and their long term goal is to promote the idea of redistribution in general and not only during crises.

A similarly radical transformative approach characterizes the work of two initiatives in Leipzig's East. One of them is a Telegram chat group *Leipzig Ost Solidarisch* (Leipzig East Solidary) with 860 members, set up by three friends, self-identifying as "politically engaged people" who adapted their activism to COVID-19 and the restrictions which accompanied it. Initially they wanted to coordinate neighbourhood mutual help especially for people in high risk of COVID-19, but being confronted with the difficulty to reach those in need, the group served mainly as a platform for sharing information material. This ranged from inspirational leaflets from groups in other cities to comics for explaining COVID-19 to kids, and flyers with hotlines about domestic violence. Once the group shared a call for volunteers from the food bank and "shortly after we posted it, the food banks contacted us and told us to immediately stop sending people, they were being flooded by help-offers". Also, an initiative for Gabenzäune (gift-fences) grew out of the group. Its volunteers arrange different material donations for homeless people in a given public space.

The problem of reach did not discourage them but "made us question how political work can better reach those people it refers to." For the organizers, solidarity is "unconditional mutual support based on a perceived form of injustice, and it is not limited to any group membership, except maybe certain political attitudes." This probably refers to far right or racist attitudes.

They quickly established a cooperation with friends from another initiative we interviewed, the Poliklinik. With a core group of 15-20 people from different medical and social professions, this "solidary medical centre" was supposed to open right when COVID-19 started to spread in Germany. Their idea is "that you can only change health via social conditions - we think that social determinants make you sick, like housing conditions, working conditions, racism." Therefore, they explicitly chose the neighbourhood Schönefeld as their area of activity a location because people here are maybe more marginalized than for example in Schleußig."

First being resigned about the interruption of their work through COVID-19, they quickly established a specific COVID-19 task force preparing neighbourhood action through a phone line, the organization and distribution of self-made masks and the distribution of information material about the governmental restrictions, translated to many different languages. Our interview partner explains: "We want to support solidary neighbourhood help, so people get empowered, especially in times of such intense isolation, also people without internet or who don't speak German fluently, [...] so they don't suffer even more, [...] we want to build structures and simultaneously utter our criticism, because we are now doing the work, that should actually be done by the state."

Whilst receiving many support offers, their assessment was that "like in all other groups" they were in touch with, demand for help was quite low. They distributed flyers extensively in the neighbourhood, yet "especially elderly people sometimes

eye us critically, this new left wing project, and maybe, I'm not sure, people in need sometimes find it even harder to accept help [...] or it's simply distrust. Or maybe people already have good support structures." Yet, they were happy to have done so much publicity work and astonished at the positive feedback they received, especially by employees of refugee shelters for the translation of information.

Similarly as in the other groups, "what remains is the question of how you reach people." Replying to the question about solidarity, the interviewee says: "generally we work against an unjust system, where the responsibility is dumped off onto the individual. But of course we're changing that on a small scale, we won't manage to change the whole system - unfortunately (laughs)."

To sum up, whereas *Ecken wecken* hopes for reforms in the established political system of representative democracy, the remaining three groups (*direct.support Leipzig*, *Leipzig Ost Solidarisch*, *Poliklinik*) have a radically transformative perspective on solidarity, interpreting their mutual-aid work as a tool within a wider struggle against oppression and social injustice.

## Outlook

The population reached by all groups that we interviewed remains low. However, their work may be very important to cater to specific people in need, be this the affluent elderly in Schleußig or the manifold precarious workers who cannot momentarily pay their bills (direct support). Beyond this commonality, our preliminary analysis of a selection of mutual aid in Leipzig<sup>4</sup> revealed important differences in the political dimensions of their work.

Mapping the groups along different types of solidarity reveals their temporal and political horizons, but also allows to capture the shifting nature of solidarity in action. Whereas the base of a shared identity for solidarity in action seems obvious coming from a specific soccer club, their support work became more inclusive and reached a plurality of people. Meanwhile, a shared identity is not an outspoken base for any of the other group's work, yet their very different political characters stand in an interesting relation to their location in the city. The non-transformative form of solidarity based on compassion arose in one of Leipzig's wealthiest neighbourhoods, the reformist-transformative one in a quite gentrified area and the explicitly radically-transformist ones in the poorer East of the city where living costs are (still) lower. It is especially these neighbourhoods, where often financially precarious (yet mostly middle class) left wing activists have moved in the last years. The city's South, in contrast, while quite expensive, holds the longest left-wing tradition and is the base of many of the explicitly left-wing soccer fans. These observations raise the question, to what extent there is an undiscussed shared (class) identity, or at least a common experience of one's

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<sup>4</sup>Of course there are more than these six initiatives, which were not covered due to time and reach constraints.

location in the city, and therewith society (Joseph, 2002) at the base of some of the groups' work and horizon of social change.

To what extent any of their work is not just immediately charitable and efficient, but also sustainable or maybe even transformative for the city's social and political life remains to be seen and will depend crucially on the reach and therewith the relationships these groups manage to build within the local population.

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## **Music, solidarities and balconies in Spain**

**Kerman Calvo and Ester Bejarano (28<sup>th</sup> May)**

Balconies are not just beautiful architectural features; they also work as a social space for communication (Morant and Martín, 2013). Balconies are political and cultural artefacts and they often become ‘sites of contention’ between residents and authorities (Aronis, 2009). So it comes as no surprise that balconies (and windows) have acquired an extraordinary relevance during confinement in Spain, particularly between March 14<sup>th</sup> (beginning of lockdown) and April 26<sup>th</sup> (when relief measures started to be implemented). Through balconies and windows Spaniards have clung to the life they wanted to recuperate. In their *balcones*, Spaniards are organizing dance and theatre competitions, but also in prompt religious parades. Children-made banners with positive messages have been displayed while neighbours organize collective readings of poetry. The call on March 18<sup>th</sup> to bang pots and pans from balconies (*cacerolada*) against the monarchy was considered to be a great success. Pots and pans are also being banged against the Government, or even against Podemos. Of course Spaniards are not unique in their inclination to use their balconies for expressive purposes; pro-democracy activists in Serbia, for instance, are using them to organize different forms of contentious mobilization during confinement<sup>1</sup>. And music has been played; a lot of music<sup>2</sup>. Right during the first weekend of confinement, a growing number of individuals started to play their music after the minutes of collective applause to express gratitude towards health workers and doctors. This involved professional musicians<sup>3</sup>, but also many anonymous individuals who struggle to see themselves as ‘musicians’. More often than not performances have been posted in social media, by performers themselves, by relatives, friends or by neighbours.

### **Musicking in balconies**

In this short piece we share some intuitions drawn from an ongoing research project of ‘musicking’ in balconies in Spain during the pandemic. As Eyerman and Jamison (1998) anticipated, musicking can connect people with their neighbours and communities, promoting bonds that will last because funds of

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<sup>1</sup> [https://wagingnonviolence.org/2020/05/serbian-activists-nationwide-anti-authoritarian-protest-covid-19-lockdown/?fbclid=IwARoPXqzMMFeoU9Oc5tdm3pYhvTS94sb2v\\_7orzUo5Vfj5Q7kbfqH6v815Ew](https://wagingnonviolence.org/2020/05/serbian-activists-nationwide-anti-authoritarian-protest-covid-19-lockdown/?fbclid=IwARoPXqzMMFeoU9Oc5tdm3pYhvTS94sb2v_7orzUo5Vfj5Q7kbfqH6v815Ew)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.elmundo.es/comunidad-valenciana/2020/03/19/5e735f2bfc6c83c3188b4657.html>;  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/life-in-lockdown-spain-curtailed-by-coronavirus-but-still-rocking>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.operaactual.com/noticia/opera-solidaria-desde-los-balcones/>

shared memories have been created. This departing point explains our conceptual background. The socio-cultural approach to music (see, above all, Small, 1999) defines music as a form of social interaction shaped by the particular physical setting where that interactions takes place. Music, as a substantive, turns into ‘musicking’, a verb. Such an approach shifts the emphasis from the listenable to the contextually-contingent dynamics of collaboration and interaction that are fabricated around music. Singalongs, balcony to balcony classical music duos or serenading with traditional instruments express a social message that transcends the quality of the music performed. The focus should be on those social factors, and also on the powerful narrative that balconies help create, when the privacy of home can become the center of public social action. In this view, it does not matter how proficient a performer you are: as a respondent (cheerfully) confessed: “you do this in any other day and everybody would have yelled at you!” We have built a database of 150 individuals who had played or sang in their balconies at least twice. We went the extra mile to identify informers in places with strong regional identities, such as Galicia or the Basque Country, and also with strong traditions of band music, such as Valencia. We have run 51 interviews over the phone. Questions addressed several aspects of confinement, the reasons to play music, and also specific questions regarding the selection of repertoire, staging or the way neighbours reacted to their music.

### **Community resilience**

Political and music movements have often linked. Particular songs have firmly established as parts of the symbolic narratives of various forms of mobilization. Practicing congregational music has been found to strengthen solidarities and senses of collective identity, as in the case of the civil rights movement (Ward, 1998). Youth subcultures, very often glued around musical taste, develop mechanisms that contribute to new structures of mobilization, as in the case of Punk (Moore and Roberts, 2009). Music has been linked to framing and the emotional arsenal of mobilization, and has been found to be a connecting element for people engaged in contentious mobilization (see, for instance, Collin’s 2001 work in relation to opposition to authoritarianism in Serbia).

Despite these solid theoretical grounds, however, it is still unclear if musicking in balconies is an expression of mobilization-in-the-making. Many of our informers wanted to remain clear of ideological and party disputes. That is relevant the more the handling of the pandemic by the current left-wing Government has unleashed a ferocious reaction by conservative and extreme-rightist political parties, a reaction that also involves politics from the balconies. What is clear, however, is that musicking is linked to a search for networking and solidarity<sup>4</sup>. For these reasons, we find it safer to address musicking in

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<sup>4</sup> This was a point made in relation to the Italian experience of balcony to balcony singalongs, which in many ways was the model for interpreters in Spain.  
<https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/covid-19/trisnasari->

balconies as an example of community resilience, which has been defined as “the collective ability of a neighbourhood or a geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks” (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015: 2). The concept has been applied in the context of natural disasters, but also to explain endurance and resistance against forms of cultural and political exclusion.

### **Music, connectivity and solidarity**

A relationship can be established between musicking, solidarity and interconnectedness, one that goes both ways: musicking is likely to be stronger where social capital abounds. But musicking, as a relational practice, can contribute to the development of social capital, a process that can have strong healing properties. We summarize now some data on the motivations for playing music in balconies. Musicking in balconies expresses the search of communities to find collective ways of handling disaster. Performers played motivated by the idea to build a sense of collective strength. Individuals played while neighbours listened, one day after another. They kept playing because neighbours (and later on followers in social media) asked them to do so, sometimes explicitly in the form of balcony to balcony requests of specific music, sometimes by social media or other means. Very often performers and audiences were not acquainted. But they had connected visually thanks to their balconies and the musical experience. We organize our findings following a popular typology that distinguishes between three types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking (Aldrich and Meyer, 2014). This allows us to highlight those elements of musicking that reflect a ‘solidarity agenda’. ‘Bonding’ social capital represents interaction with people with whom you are already connected. This is the least interesting aspect of musicking for our present purposes. On the other hand, ‘bridging’ social capital builds on solitary and networks with people that might be more or less similar to you, but with whom you do not have prior strong connections. In time, perhaps, these bonds might lead to permanent forms of exchange, solidarity and, if activated, contentious mobilization. In ‘linking’ social capital you reach out beyond close groups, making claims with a universalistic appeal.

### **Bonding: Breaking the tedium of confinement**

Not all musicking in balconies relates to a larger purpose. In many cases, performers reacted to informal or formal petitions to sing or play, by close relatives, door to door neighbours or even by brass bands and orquestras. ‘Viral challenges’ have played a part. A professional association of music teachers

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[fraser/music-across-the-balconies-social-cohesion-and-community-resilience-in-action-260050](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=Q734VNoN7hw&feature=emb_logo); see also [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=3&v=Q734VNoN7hw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=Q734VNoN7hw&feature=emb_logo)

launched #musicaviral<sup>5</sup>, an online challenge which invited music teachers to simultaneously play a different score each day. Music teachers spoke about these challenges as a very ‘persuasive’ reason to keep on playing, perhaps in fear of breaking relationships of trust and respect with peers in their profession. Despite differences in professional background, respondents quoted personal reasons to play from balconies. They talked about the need to provide a break to the tedious life of confinement. Musicking helped with children: “I keep the kid busy with this, we look for a song, we arrange this, he helps out”. Performers with children at home, DJs and also music teachers (who in most cases do not seem themselves as ‘musicians’) emphasize the entertainment element of musicking. Some music students and teachers made the most of the obligation to keep on practicing. As a young musician explained to us, “it is a fine moment, neighbours can listen to some live music and I make a case for the value of music, they have a good time and I carry on practicing”. The local media in Bilbao, for instance, reported the experience of a music teacher who organized balcony to balcony study sessions of *txistu* (a traditional instrument popular in the Basque Country that resembles a flute) with students who happened to live nearby<sup>6</sup>. This, however, also connects with the ‘linking’ dimension of musicking, as these practices were also intended to raise the profile of traditional music and Basque culture.

### **Bridging: Community making**

The dominant theme emerging from our data is the need to create bonds with neighbours, and also to help others. This powerful idea came in very many different formats, often intersecting with personal, individualistic arguments (bonding social capital), but also with universalistic, very general appeals (linking social capital). The following quotation exemplifies this:

I like playing, it is a natural thing, I enjoy it. Then I saw colleagues playing on Instagram, and also my parents and neighbours were asking me to play. It is a good thing, it shows that we are united, that we stand together. We get together at 20:00, I play a couple of tunes and then we chat for a while, and we feel ok; they like it, so I keep on playing

Whether to commemorate nurses or doctors dead in the fight against the virus, to live up to a challenge, to entertain kids leaving nearby or even to increase the number of followers, respondents acknowledge the powerful effect of music to create new bonds among strangers, and also to help circulate a sense of interconnectedness. Professional musicians saw this as their ‘duty’ as ‘artists’ (*titiriteros*, in Spanish); in other cases, performers simply wanted to do

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<sup>5</sup> <https://musicaviral.weebly.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.deia.eus/bizkaia/eskuinaldea/2020/03/21/txistu-rompe-monotonia-durante-tardes/1025977.html>

something for other people. Community making is embedded in emphatic appeals to help. A running theme has been the presentation of music as a stress reliever, a way to cope with anxiety, loneliness of the pain associated to not being able to meet your loved ones. A good number of musicians started playing on March 19th (fathers' day in Spain), as a way to express love and affection. Musicking helped with the celebration of birthdays, in an interesting process where private rituals became a vehicle to connect with neighbours. Helping others has been the most common expression found in our data, a goal that, however, adopts different expressions: performers have wanted to cheer up people hospitalized in nearby mental health centers, to remind senior neighbours that there is someone 'out there', to cheer kids up, and so on. The realisation that music had a potential to do good transformed what was meant as a single-off act into a daily routine.

Community is a fuzzy word in Spanish, not always taking the meaning that is more common in countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom. Respondents referred to communities sometimes in a very general way. In other cases, however, they adopted a narrower definition that relates either to very close neighbours (possible those living in the same block) or to those with whom they had established visual and 'sonic' ties. Underlying this was a sense of similarity with those people living nearby, a commonality that needed to be reinforced in times of distress. The discussion about community-making intersected with the impact of musicking on social media. Respondents shared a call for altruism. They acknowledged the positive consequences of posting their videos, often in terms of a huge raise in the number of followers. This, however, was presented as a by-product of an action that was not meant to give a boost to their popularity. Respondents very often linked their impact on social media with an expanding sense of togetherness that might last well beyond this crisis. A performer living in a rural community explained this idea to us:

new people are now in the WhatsApp group that we have in the village, they do not live here but they want to watch the live streaming when I play; I do not want to get anything out of this, but it is true that a lot of people are interested. I think I entertain them

Are these networks going to last? That is of course a crucial question here. The majority of our respondents were optimistic about the positive social consequences of musicking. Social relations would become stronger, more 'resilient', empowering people to deal with future problems. The crisis creates a window of opportunity to put a limit to individualization, recuperating the value of close ties and collective action.

### **Linking: A better world after all this?**

A strong final theme brings together a great number of respondents, one that frames music-making (and other social responses during confinement) as a

factor engineering changes in the fabric of society. In the case of professional musicians, but also with performers living in rural areas, they addressed a wider audience: “music is a breath of fresh air to all of us”, “if only we could cheer everyone up”, “life music helps a lot to cheer everybody up”, “so very many people are living this on their own, and perhaps my music can help”. We particularly like one quotation about this:

something within me reacted, I was like this is a battle that we must win together, that is what I felt, that we had to go deeper; since I was a little girl I have always found easier to express myself playing the bagpipe, my heart told me I had to play (...) it broke my heart that people were applauding on their own, alone, but we all had the same goal; so I started playing

This effort to link with society connects with intriguing dynamics that cannot be addressed here in full. For instance, musicking appeals to the intersection between culture, values and national identities. Musicians in places with strong national identities, which often involves playing folk song and traditional instruments, see their balconies as platforms to vindicate national identities. A young musician from Galicia, for instance, explained that his serenades with the *gaita* (bagpipe), which were posted on facebook, worked to disseminate “our culture”, and to make people outside Galicia “more familiar with it”. Professional musicians also saw their music during confinement as an opportunity to generate a societal conversation about the role of culture.

## **Conclusion**

Pandemics are not necessarily the cause of social disintegration; as a matter of fact, in most pandemics most people manage to carry on with the lives in more or less normal ways (Jacobsen, 2018), looking for ways to cope and resist. Musicking from balconies is not perhaps the most obvious form of collective mobilization; participants do not have obvious political agendas, and were not explicit about any connections between their own actions and political goals. Musicking, however, is all about solidarity and networks. Music can provide the means for ‘exemplary’ forms of social solidarity (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998) which are so necessary in times of acute crisis. In sociological parlance, musicking contributes to the creation of social capital, a fantastic resource that helps communities to deal with the kind of crises that are likely to become common in the years to come.

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## **Movimentos e ações político-culturais do Brasil em tempos de pandemia do Covid-19**

**Neto Holanda e Valesca Lima (30 de abril de 2020)**

Em seu livro “Manual e Guia do Palhaço de Rua”, o palhaço Fernando Chacovachi comenta sobre a ausência de políticas públicas para a cultura, mas é interessante notar que o teor de seu discurso não perpassa pela lamentação por tal descaso; por outro lado, ressalta a importância dos movimentos independentes de artistas pela implantação de ações e programas que contemplem seu ofício. No Brasil, o setor cultural emprega mais de 5.2 milhões de pessoas em 2018 (IBGE, 2019), e gerou o equivalente a 2.6% do PIB brasileiro em 2017 (Firjan, 2018). Apesar da riqueza cultural e da grandeza do setor cultural no Brasil, o setor sofre com ciclo de descomprometimento do Estado com a cultura. O desafio maior para os artistas brasileiros ao longo dos anos é transformar a cultura em política de Estado, desatrelada de políticas de governo (Cerqueira, 2018). Durante período de isolamento causado pelo coronavírus, a falta de estratégias para desenvolver a cultura fica mais evidente.

Com o advento da pandemia do coronavírus, o setor artístico-cultural foi um dos mais socialmente afetados, tendo suas atividades canceladas e/ou adiadas em decorrência dos decretos de isolamento, necessários ao controle da curva de contaminação da doença. Sendo o Brasil um país federativo, cabe ao governo federal determinar as diretrizes gerais da política de combate ao vírus, e aos governadores estaduais determinar as medidas específicas. No estado do Ceará, no Nordeste do Brasil, foco deste texto, o Decreto nº 33.510 de 16 de março de 2020 determinou o fechamento de equipamentos culturais públicos e privados, interferindo diretamente na vida e nos calendários dos trabalhadores da cultura. O impacto foi imenso, e logo no começo da crise, muitos artistas começaram a relatar os impactos da paralisação de suas atividades: contas atrasadas, cancelamentos de contratos de serviço e até desoladores relatos de falta de alimentos. Algo importante a frisar é que o trabalho do artista geralmente envolve o contato direto com o público e a formação de aglomerações de pessoas para a participação de seus espetáculos, concertos, exposições etc., o que torna a situação ainda mais delicada, haja vista que se instala um “acréscimo” de incertezas no que se refere ao futuro da classe. Isto é, se exercer a profissão artística, no Brasil, já se configurava como um desafio árduo; com o novo contexto trazido com a pandemia, exercê-la se tornou um verdadeiro feito de sobrevivência.

A história das políticas culturais no Brasil está marcada por autoritarismo, caráter tardio, descontinuidades e fragilidade institucional (Rubim and Bayard, 2008). No período da administração do Partido dos Trabalhadores, houve uma relativa retomada do papel ativo do Estado brasileiro nas políticas públicas culturais no sentido de revisar, formular, estruturar e executar das políticas culturais (Cerqueira, 2018). Nesse período, foram criados de espaços sustentação e operacionalização da cultura, como o Sistema Nacional de Cultura

(SNC), e espaços de participação democrática, como o Conselho Nacional de Política Cultural (CNPIC).

Apesar de existirem órgãos e ações específicos para a cultura (como os citados acima), com editais de financiamento de espetáculos e cursos promovidos pela FUNARTE (Fundação Nacional das Artes) e as Secretarias Regionais de Cultura de cada estado, existe ainda grande quantidade de artistas mobilizados politicamente pelo seu direito que continuar exercendo dignamente sua profissão, haja vista que as ações empreendidas por tais órgãos e programas ainda não são suficientes para abranger todas as demandas pertinentes à classe dos trabalhadores e trabalhadoras da cultura.

### **Experiência dos Artistas Cearenses**

As manifestações artísticas do Ceará, advindas de todas as partes do estado e de qualquer classe social, detêm um árduo histórico de luta a fim de preservar sua legitimidade. Desde os primórdios de sua história, da instalação de sua primeira vila de colonização na cidade de Aquiraz em 1713 (mais tarde transferida para Fortaleza em 1726), com o despontar do chamado coco do Iguape e da confecção de arte sacra, os artistas cearenses vêm resistindo de maneira popular e independente. Em todas suas expressões, sejam nas artes cênicas, na música ou no artesanato, etc., urge o reconhecimento do poder de mobilização da categoria para se preservar legítima cível e juridicamente. Vale lembrar, possivelmente como reflexo dessa trajetória de luta e resistência, que a Secretaria Estadual da Cultura (Secult) é a pasta estadual de cultura mais antiga do Brasil (Lei nº 8.541, de 9 de agosto de 1966), criada antes mesmo que as pastas de regiões mais desenvolvidas do País, como o Sudeste e o Sul. A criação da secretaria adveio outrossim de uma mobilização organizada da categoria em prol da produção artística local (Leitão & Guilherme, 2014).

Hoje, com reuniões frequentes, conselhos, fóruns e entidades socioculturais mobilizam sua classe e linguagens artísticas a fim de melhorar suas condições de trabalho no setor cultural. Essas linguagens – quais sejam: teatro, dança, circo, música, literatura, cinema, artesanato, humor, artes visuais, cultura popular e tradicional, entre outras – se organizam em nichos específicos de suas áreas e também em nível mais abrangente. Como exemplo de nicho específico, podemos citar o Fórum Cearense de Teatro e, como exemplo de nicho mais abrangente, podemos citar o Conselho Municipal de Cultura (Fortaleza/CE), que aborda as demandas e necessidades das várias linguagens existentes no estado.

### **Redes de colaboração entre artistas**

Nesse sentido, logo no início da crise, na segunda quinzena do mês de março de 2020, formou-se uma rede de colaboração independente dos artistas da região de Fortaleza (capital do Ceará). A rede iniciou uma campanha de arrecadação de fundos e alimentos destinados aos colegas em situação de maior de

vulnerabilidade. O uso das redes sociais e de plataformas de financiamento coletivo (como a Vakinha, Catarse, etc.) foi essencial na propagação dessa primeira “ação de resistência”, que teve como foco inicial o provimento básico e rápido de insumos para os indivíduos mais necessitados de seu movimento. Fortalecendo-se a rede, algumas outras ações foram implementadas, como a realização também independente de um festival virtual multilinguagem para financiar e manter a produção criativa e intelectual dos artistas atingidos. O Festival Quarentena, como foi chamado – em referência ao período de reclusão vivenciado –, foi uma produção coletiva de várias lideranças da cultura em parceria com jornalistas e publicitários que com duração de quinze dias, com a participação de artistas cearenses de várias linguagens, em formato virtual através de lives no Instagram. A forma de arrecadação também era virtual, por meio de transferências, boletos e plataformas de pagamento como o PicPay. O festival teve um grande impacto na categoria, com o fortalecimento da referida rede de apoio e a expansão da ideia da rede até para outras cidades, como Maracanaú e Caucaia/CE (Região Metropolitana de Fortaleza), contemplando artistas de outras regiões.

### **Artistas virtuais – um novo nicho para a categoria**

Nesse rumo, sobreveio ao período de adaptação a necessidade de criação de novos nichos de trabalho no setor artístico. Sem poderem estar em contato direto com seu público, em decorrência do período de isolamento, muitos artistas da região começaram um movimento de ações virtuais estratégicas para se manterem em criação e também para incrementarem outros meios de autossustento. Seguindo uma tendência de proporções nacionais, em que muitos grandes artistas promoveram *lives* dentro de suas próprias casas, os artistas de menor envergadura de público começaram a reativar suas contas no YouTube e a produzir vídeos nessa plataforma, buscando, de preferência, ampliar o número de inscritos nos seus canais, haja vista que tal plataforma monetiza (em dólares) o canal que atingir no mínimo 1000 pessoas inscritas. Ademais, muito grupos de teatro, dança, música e também equipamentos culturais públicos e privados começam a produzir e a publicar as filmagens de seus espetáculos, aulas e palestras, tornando o material acessível para o público em geral.

No Instagram, as *lives* se tornaram frequentes na categoria, sendo um meio de divulgar esse novo nicho de trabalho, colaborando na venda desses novos produtos culturais e na criação de um novo público espectador. Arte-educadores que promoviam cursos e oficinas culturais em tempos pré-crise também se viram forçados a adaptar suas estratégias de trabalho, oferecendo cursos on-line em plataformas de aulas/reuniões, como o Zoom, o Google Meet e o Microsoft Teams.

## **Intervenção do Estado na cultura durante a crise**

Com o isolamento social exigido pela pandemia, artistas viram seu percurso profissional ser inteiramente transformado. Assim cresceu entre os artistas a necessidade de pressionar o estado e governos locais para realização de editais simplificados para apoiar financeiramente os artistas e fortalecer a economia criativa.

Em relação às intervenções de governo a nível nacional a fim de mitigar os impactos econômicos e sociais da pandemia, inicialmente, podemos citar o Projeto de Lei nº 873/2020 de 2 de abril de 2020, que expande o alcance do auxílio emergencial de R\$ 600,00 aos profissionais da cultura, até então não incluídos no benefício. A medida, de fato, gerou um “respiro” na situação financeira da categoria, que foi atingida diretamente em sua forma de trabalho. Ademais, não é exagero esclarecer que tal medida não foi uma iniciativa do próprio governo federal, através da Secretaria Especial da Cultura (remanescente do antigo Ministério da Cultura), mas uma ação incitada por deputados federais.

Em nível estadual, a partir da mobilização do Conselho Municipal de Cultura de Fortaleza e apoiadores, com o apoio do governador do estado do Ceará, Camilo Santana, e o secretário de Cultura do governo, Fabiano Piúba, foi lançado o edital emergencial Cultura “Dendicasa”, com a liberação de recurso no valor de um milhão de reais para a seleção de 400 projetos artísticos de todas as linguagens. Assim como o Festival Quarentena, toda a programação do edital será virtual, através das redes sociais e dos canais virtuais dos proponentes selecionados. O edital recebeu um total de 1.700 inscrições e, à altura da escrita deste texto, encontra-se em fase de homologação dos resultados para processo de pagamento. Importante frisar uma mobilização de cuidado na classe, que incentivou a inscrição restrita dos membros mais vulneráveis de seu movimento, muito apesar de tal recomendação ter sido seguida fielmente.

Outros editais semelhantes também foram lançados noutros estados além do Ceará, como o “MS Cultura Presente”, contemplando 700 artistas do estado do Mato Grosso do Sul; O Edital do Fundo de Apoio à Cultura (Brasília) para apresentações on-line de até 107 projetos, com investimento de dois milhões de reais; e o edital “Fica na Rede, Maninho”, da Secretaria de Estado de Cultura e Economia Criativa do Amazonas, contemplando até 300 propostas.

Entre as iniciativas privadas de nível nacional, podemos citar o protagonismo do Itaú Cultural, ao lançar o edital “Arte Como Respiro: Múltiplos Editais de Emergência”, recebendo inscrições de todo o Brasil e abrangendo as áreas de artes cênicas, música, artes visuais, além de trabalhos com acessibilidade para deficientes auditivos. Além desse, mencionamos também o Edital “Pipa em Casa”, promovido pelo Instituto Pipa (Brasília), destinando 50 mil reais para 10 artistas plásticos locais;

Em nível municipal, especificamente na cidade de Maracanaú, cidade na região metropolitana de Fortaleza, Ceará, podemos elencar o Edital “Maracanaú Live

Festival Cultural” (Lei nº 2.926), destinando 100 mil reais para a seleção de 100 projetos culturais da cidade. Um fato interessante a ser lembrado com nessa iniciativa é que o edital foi divulgado e lançado sem a consulta da classe, o que gerou uma série de limitações em seu plano de ação, como a inserções de critérios de seleção que privilegiam os artistas mais experientes e uma burocracia de pagamentos que não contempla a urgência que o período implica. Partindo desse contexto, os artistas locais, através de reunião virtual do Fórum de Arte e Cultura de Maracanaú, organizaram uma carta pública direcionada ao prefeito e às autoridades da Cultura, a fim de alinhar as ações do governo e as necessidades da categoria. Tal movimento (o fórum) é recente, e tem como interesse restaurar o Conselho Municipal de Cultura, com respaldo legal, mas inativo por razões turvas aos profissionais da cultura da cidade.

Neste ínterim, artistas do Brasil e do mundo seguem criando de maneira autônoma, seja individualmente ou seus grupos/coletivos, preservando a consciência de todas as medidas apresentadas até então são paliativas no que se refere à atual crise. Contudo, tal contexto mais escancarou as fragilidades do sistema político brasileiro, deixando ainda mais vulneráveis aqueles setores historicamente relegados, tendo a Cultura como um deles. Por outro lado, os movimentos político-culturais seguem resistindo e lutando pelo direito dos de exercerem criativa e politicamente a sua profissão.

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## **How Covid-19 led to a #Rentstrike and what it can teach us about online organizing**

**Margherita Massarenti (19 June 2020)**

### **Abstract**

*What are the impacts of the sudden online shift of social life forced by the global pandemic, on the organizing capacity of worse-off, socioeconomically marginal communities? This article analyses the 2020 Rent Strike movement in response to the Covid-19 crisis, to investigate how online and offline protest practices can be combined to support local struggles and transnational networks.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Rent Strike, Social Media Activism, Online Social Movements, Class, US, Transnational Networks, Leftist Politics.

### **Class struggle and collective action in the midst of a pandemic**

As Covid-19 spread across the world, society and communities have been forced to re-adapt individual and collective life, and to move a big part of it online. This includes organizing and protest practices, in a time in which worsened socioeconomic conditions urge solidarity and action to protect livelihoods. Bringing about more than a health crisis, the pandemic has been opening cracks in the existing inequalities, it has further exposed marginalized groups and inflated the number of people in precarious situation. Housing conditions are no exception, rather, they play quite a key role in a crisis characterized by the imperative to “stay at home”.

Breaking out in the first weeks of the American wave of contagion, the movement for rent strike pooled such widespread struggles and gained international visibility, with the diffusion of top hashtags such as #RentStrike, #CancelRent, #CancelMortgages and #NoIncomeNoRent. Reference websites were set up, like Rentstrike2020 and WeStrikeTogether, to share action trackings, resources and tools that would help activists worldwide build their own strategies, giving the campaign a transnational reach.

Just as for any other example of digital campaign, activists and researchers will have seen these calls to action and rightfully wondered what’s beyond the surface of social media advocacy. This is a particularly relevant interrogative when it comes to a movement that requires timely, specifically localized solutions, and a deep and tight coordination between strikers to actually have them protected from evictions and other legal consequences. A reflection on such challenges of online activism places itself within the wider debate around the reconceptualization of collective action in the Internet era (Bimber, Flanagin, Stohl, 2005; Schradie 2018 a, b). Against claims of the internet being a democratizing space that would have facilitated access and participation to all,

researchers have pointed out that lower costs of engagement often lead to a lack of real impact, while also not really being low for everyone. Speaking of practices such as rent strikes, which stem from socioeconomic inequalities, higher costs of engagement and lower resources are found to characterize the digital experience of marginalized or disadvantaged communities, just as they do offline (Schradié, 2018, a,b). In this perspective, the rent strike movement constitutes a great example to understand the ways in which class struggle plays out online when forced to.

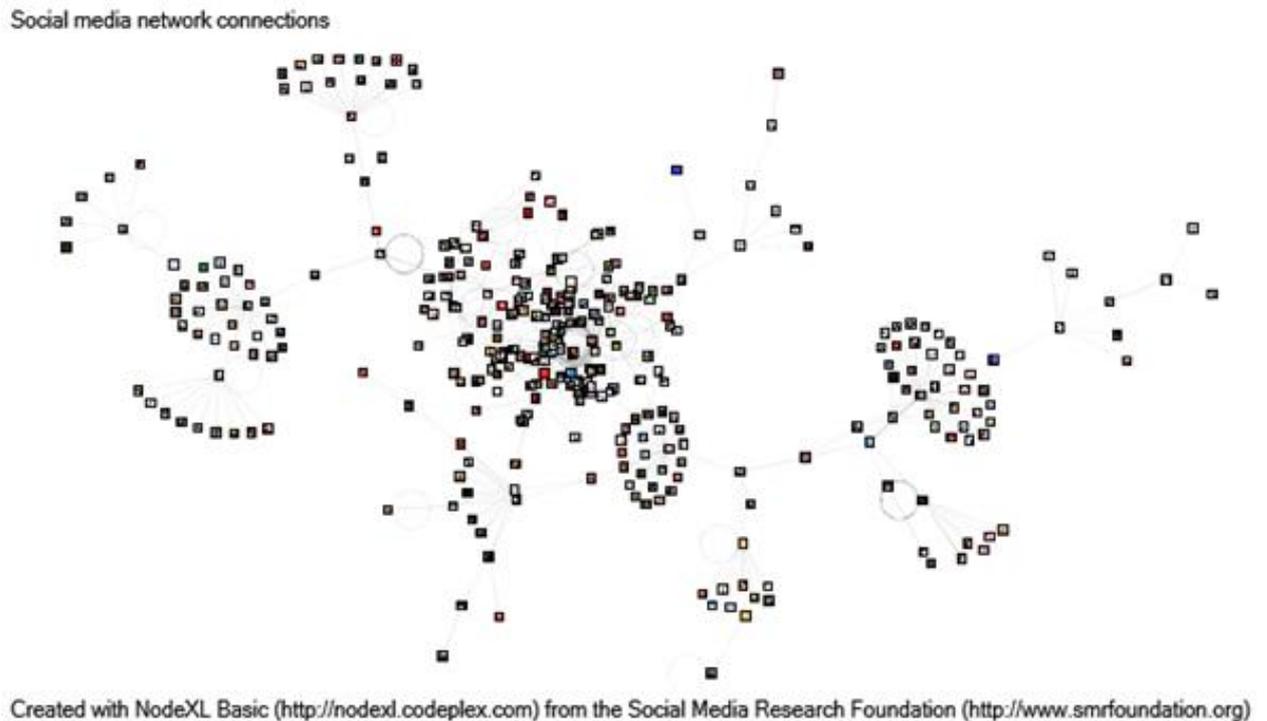
So how does the mobilizing capacity of worse-off groups change in an historical phase that allows little if none physical collective action to happen? Here is a summary of how I went about researching the issue through a sample of tweets.

### **Mapping social media mobilization**

My research combined institutional data, social network analysis and content analysis of users' profiles, with the goal of understanding the structure and main actors of the rent strike movement on Twitter.

Social network analysis (through NodeXL) allowed me to map the use of the hashtag #Rentstrike in 436 tweets, posted between April 25, 8.12 PM and April 26, 2.39 PM Paris Time. The resulting graph outlines the main groups and subgroups in the network, shows the relationships within and between them, and highlights the users that play key roles as vectors of information, organizing or both (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Social Network Analysis graph, hashtag #RentStrike



I identify as central figures the ones placed at the core of subnetworks, arguably their referents. Gatekeepers instead are the isolated figures that are responsible for bridging those segregated subnetworks, and without which the overall structure would be fragmented. Highly visible tweeters are those that present more than 800.000 followers and thus are able to raise visibility around the issue. Once these actors have been identified, an analysis of their Twitter accounts provides information relevant to understand the movement - particularly whether they are organizations or individuals, if they state an ideological affiliation (through symbols, colors, groups names or political values) and their eventual connection to specific territorial contexts and communities organizing the rent strike.

Finally, evidence from both my sample of tweets and the dedicated websites can give us an idea of the reach of the movement beyond the American context.

In the next sections, the main findings of this combined research will be outlined and analyzed to elaborate the takeouts of the rent strike 2020 experience.

### **Individualized core, structured peripheries: a layered network of political actors**

The graph resulting from the social network analysis layout highlighted a sharp opposition between what happens at the core and what happens at the margins of the network (Figure 1).

On one hand, a tight web of interactions between mainly individual users, forms a chaotic mass at the center of the map. Leader-less and structure-less, this cluster in a way accounts for a the fast rhythm at which the hashtag has been retweeted and reshared. These, in fact, are likely to be the main social media activities in which highly visible tweeters and other users in this position are engaged: while they are active supporters and participants in the wider online political conversation, they seem to have a less direct contact with the actual planning of the rent strike.

On the other hand, several subgroups occupy segregated, peripheral positions and are connected to the core with only few links. Despite being marginal, these smaller clusters present clearly identifiable central figures, dominant elements of strong hierarchical structures. These are not only important to their own audience but, for the indicators they present, they qualify among the key elements of the entire network. Moreover, an observation of their profiles shows most of them are 'institutional' accounts of either associations, organizations, mutual aid or activism groups. The majority of them presents a strong ideological background recalling typical leftist narratives - the black and red colors, the fist symbol, statements on values of equality, class struggle, anti-capitalism and anti-fascism. Finally, most of these accounts show affiliations to offline local groups whose purposes they serve through online activities of coordination and resource sharing. Such coordination seems to happen most often at the state and city-level, and to involve working class, black and overall vulnerable communities. Not surprisingly, this matches with data from the American context showing that the harshest health and socioeconomic consequences are falling on young people, precarious and low-paid workers, and on those coming from the service sector - features that characterize a large proportion of the American renter population (Adamczyk, 2020).

To summarize the main findings, a prevalence of institutional accounts over individual ones, and a clear cultural and political background emerge from the analysis of our sample, as the distinctive features of its leading speakers. Online collective action thus seems to be based on the work of leftist organizations rather than individuals. Despite often being marginal, these organizations prove strong offline ties and ideology, as well as experienced background in social activism.

## **Local fights, global narratives: tenants unions going transnational**

What was particularly fascinating about mapping and combining Twitter data on the #RentStrike hashtag is that it allowed me to unfold the multiple, interwoven venues through which the movement developed and grew. By looking at one actor, a whole new set of information would uncover in front of me, often providing links to other actors that eventually happened to figure in the network themselves.

This was the case with @igd\_news, the Twitter account of a well-established platform for mutual aid and anarchist organizing across the US. The website, called 'It's Going Down' (Igd, 2020), gave me access to a map of the rent strike actions that were being taken worldwide. Such map had been designed by 5DemandsGlobal, another reference platform for anti-system politics in response to the Covid crisis. In addition to this, among the striking groups reported in the map, I found the New Zealand activist community of RentStrike Aotearoa, whose Twitter account figured among the central users of my dataset.

Examples like this suggest that a deep interconnection exists across groups and regions involved in the initiative. Despite the challenges posed by the global situation and beyond the actual success of the strikes, this tells us that activists were able to create networks of solidarity and support across worse-off communities, and to build online tools that made them visible to the other struggling populations.

Another map, published by the San Francisco Tenants Union and Anti-eviction Mapping Project, provides records of the level of Covid-19 Housing Protection Legislation and presence of Housing Justice Action all over the world. It reports a high density of offline engagement on the two sides of the US (especially New York and California), in the UK and in Italy. Although the question of where this is all happening is really different from the one about the online reach of the hashtag, users themselves and the content they rely on for coordination overall suggest agreement on the part of the movement on a major dissemination starting from the US and echoing in the anglophone world and across Southern Europe. In addition to this, the transnational character of the movement can also be assessed by looking at its discursive framing in online advocacy: in fact, the rent strike was often integrated within a global, holistic and anti-system political narrative, that places it among other intertwined goals (formulated, for example, on the 5DemandsGlobal website) for the achievement of social justice against the damages brought up by Covid.

## **Digital class struggle: teachings from a pandemic**

To conclude, how can these findings inform our understanding and practice of online organizing?

As mentioned, literature suggests that low-SES and marginalized groups face similar challenges online as offline, making their claims harder to articulate in

the digital space, which is understood as largely individualized and often not paired with on-site engagement. Researchers also argue that class entails more risks with participation, especially if in political debates and activities in general (Shaw and Hargittai, 2018; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015; Seong-Jae 2010; Shradie, 2018a).

These arguments allow to assume that the prevalence of institutional over individual tweeters in our network might find a reason in the lower classes' higher costs of engagement. They highlight the importance for such groups to pool claims into organizations and strategies able to protect individuals from risks. They point out that individualization might not always be the case, as class opportunities and constraints require shaping networks of social media activism differently (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012).

Following what Bimber (1998) has called accelerated pluralism, the structureless core of our network can be considered responsible for the visibility and spillover effect of the hashtag. However, this type of digital activism proves to be not enough and not the most relevant one in the context of a rent strike, as little would have been put in place or achieved without the effort of the marginal political groups actually connected to specific local contexts. This reminds activists to not overestimate the ability of digital tools to mobilize individuals, but rather focus their efforts on building offline strong ties within and between communities first, without which an impactful use of ICTs wouldn't be possible.

In light of these elements, the rent strike 2020 experience tells us that, contrary to what is thought of social media activism - that weaker ties and a less defined political color allow for a larger spreading of the cause -, a clearer framing is necessary when anti-system politics, timely solutions and socio-economic justice are advocated for. In this sense, the intertwined challenges, sharper class conflict and higher urgency created by the pandemic is likely to continue to offer us insights on how a combination of online and offline tight linkages, and an acknowledgement of the political dimension of such struggles, is increasingly fundamental for social movements to navigate their costs of action and achieve their goals.

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## **Knowledge is power: virtual forms of everyday resistance and grassroots broadcasting in Iran**

**Dounya (8<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

Resistance in a totalitarian state takes on unique forms - manifesting in mass protest, underground activities, everyday forms of resistance and more. In 1985 James C. Scott first introduced the concept of everyday resistance. In his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, he explained “These techniques [of everyday resistance], for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle. They are the techniques of “first resort” in those common historical circumstances in which open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger.”<sup>1</sup> For over two years, I have been researching, documenting and analyzing everyday forms of resistance in contemporary Iran. Such forms can appear through casual conversations, defiant and ‘illegal’ gestures, grassroots initiatives, and many other methods devised by the oppressed to bypass rules and regulations set by oppressing forces. As an example, communications apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber as well as social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are frequently used in Iran in both organized forms of activism or what Saeid Golkar in the book *The Whole World is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age*, recognizes as “non-movements”<sup>2</sup> which are “shaped under authoritarian regimes where there is no freedom of organization and expression.”<sup>3</sup>

In Iran, apps and communication channels are a means through which people organize protests, share news and report information that remains otherwise unreported or is manipulated by the state media. Such grassroots broadcasting has undermined the oppressive Iranian regime to such an extent that the government constantly attempts to limit, hack, censor and ban these communication and social media platforms. Beginning with an analysis of online resistance and grassroots broadcasting during the current Covid-19 Crisis and moving backwards with other examples from the events of the last year, 1396 AD (Spring 2019-Spring 2020) in Iran, I will unpack the importance of such forms of virtual resistance in shaping Iran’s contemporary social and political climate.

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<sup>1</sup> James C Scott, “Everyday Form of Resistance,” *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4, (1989): 34, <https://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/cjas/article/view/1765>.

<sup>2</sup> “ [...] the term ‘social non-movements’ refers to the collective actions of dispersed and fragmented actors; ‘non-movements embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented, but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations’ (2010, p. 14).” Saeid Golkar, “Student Activism, Social Media and Authoritarian Rule in Iran,” in *The Whole World is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age*, 2015, ed. Irving Epstein (The Netherlands: Rotterdam, 2015), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Golkar, *The Whole World is Texting*, 62.

Iran has a complicated relationship with social media, communication apps, and Internet as a whole. Since the 1990s when Internet grew more popular in Iran and with it access to information became easier, the use of Internet in and of itself became an act of everyday resistance as people were able to obtain less censored information, blog and communicate without following many of the rules and regulations set by the state. It took some time for the Iranian regime to realize and act on the threat that Internet posed to their existence and control but since then, their techniques of controlling people's Internet activities have become increasingly more advanced. The Iranian government has been utilizing censorship and surveillance technologies made in China and has created a Cyber police branch, The Supreme Council of Virtual Space, to combat the anti-state activities and target political activists and dissidents in Iran. However, this has not deterred Iranians from using Internet as a new public space in which to organize and resist their totalitarian government. For example, many in Iran are using proxy servers and VPNs to access the censored and banned websites and social media channels. The techniques devised and employed by the people in Iran have also improved to better sidestep the restrictions.

### **Covid-19 pandemic**

Becoming one of the epicentres of the new Corona pandemic back in March of 2020, Iranians have been dealing with the devastating impacts of the virus ever since. The first official confirmation of a Covid-19 death in Iran was reported in mid February. Attempting to downplay the scale of this pandemic, the Iranian government was refraining from releasing more accurate information and statistics about the number of cases. Nonetheless, in the days following the first reports people were already questioning the official statistics. To retaliate and discredit such speculations however, as reported by the National Review; "An Iranian parliament spokesman on Wednesday announced that anyone found to be 'spreading rumors' about the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak will be sentenced to one-to-three years in prison and flogging."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, anonymous reports were being circulated online. People are still sharing information about the disease and warning each other despite government orders. voice and video recordings as well as photos taken by doctors and nurses in Iran's hospitals were demonstrating, first hand, the scale of the pandemic.

Another example of grassroots broadcasting during the pandemic was the early reporting of the detection of the Covid-19 virus in the infamous Evin Prison. The news was quickly broadcasted through social media channels, despite the relentless attempts by the government to hide this information which endangered the mostly political detainees of this prison. Though other forms of pressure also contributed to the government temporarily releasing over eighty

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<sup>4</sup> Zachary Evans, "Iran to Sentence Citizens Who "Spreads Rumors" about Coronavirus to Flogging, Three Years in Prison," National Review, February 26, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/iran-to-sentence-citizens-who-spreads-rumors-about-coronavirus-to-flogging-three-years-in-prison/>.

five thousand prisoners, the public knowledge of the virus leading to pressure from the people was a significant factor. Reports from those inside the prison and those temporarily released about the conditions and lack of proper preventative measures and supplies have also exposed the dangers for those who still remain incarcerated in prisons across Iran.

Iranians have also been taking matters into their own hands when it comes to public safety. Some companies with the ability to produce disinfectants have been halting their regular work to provide the necessary disinfecting agents to hospitals and medical centres. Videos of people teaching how to sew masks and scrubs to donate to their near medical centres have also been circulating on social media. Fundraising initiatives have been organized by Iranian expatriates and citizens to support the fight against Corona. As an example “Help Iranians Fight Coronavirus” Go Fund Me page is set up by Negar Mortazavi, an American-Iranian Journalist, to provide supplies to healthcare facilities and families in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Exposing government shortcomings is one part of such forms of activism, but demonstrating the lack of control of the government in handling the pandemic is far more important and devastating to the Iranian regime. BBC Persian, a news station based in the UK, recently released a discovery on the role of Mahan Air, a popular Iranian airline, in spreading the Corona Virus in Iran. According to the article, Mahan Air had defied the orders of the Iranian government to halt direct flights from China to Iran due to the pandemic. The spread of this report on social media brings to question the freedom and autonomy such companies have in Iran and by proxy questions the power of the Iranian government over its own internal affairs.

In another case, an Iranian citizen journalist revealed the impact of the US sanctions during this pandemic through a cellphone video. The video showed a series of trucks which were carrying medical supplies to Iran being held for three days in Romania at the Bulgarian border. In the video one of the truck drivers was asked about the situation. He explained that the drivers had been stranded there for three days without being provided food or water as the Bulgarian government was refusing entry, stating the US sanctions as their reason. He then remarked that the Iranian consulate was also not responding.<sup>6</sup> This video, as an example, was widely shared on twitter.

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<sup>5</sup> Negar Mortazavi, “Help Iranians Fight Coronavirus,” Gofundme, March 24, 2020, [https://www.gofundme.com/f/negar039s-campaign-for-relief-international?sharetype=teams&member=4039340&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=p\\_na+share-sheet&rcid=ae7854d31775458da6docoe895d61a5e](https://www.gofundme.com/f/negar039s-campaign-for-relief-international?sharetype=teams&member=4039340&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=p_na+share-sheet&rcid=ae7854d31775458da6docoe895d61a5e).

<sup>6</sup> Sami Ramadani (@samiramadani1), “Lorries packed with medical supplies destined for Iran, to fight Coronavirus, are being stopped by #Romania & #Bulgaria obeying US sanctions & economic warfare on Iran.” Twitter, March 23, 2019, <https://twitter.com/OlsiJ/status/1241870466282856451>.

Amidst crippling sanctions which have limited medical supplies to Iran in the best of times and worsened the economic situation of the average Iranians, a pandemic is a near impossible task to handle. This, the corruption, mismanagement and plain stupidity apparent the Iranian government's actions has worsened the already devastating effects of the pandemic in a country that is densely populated. A simple example of such negligence was the deputy health minister of Iran, Iraj Harirchi, downplaying the scale of the pandemic in a press conference only to test positive for the virus a day after his speech.<sup>7</sup> The news and video of this incident circulated quickly on social media as people mocked the government's actions. Iranians mistrust in their government however, has a long history and such incidences only work to reaffirm this feeling. Such forms of virtual resistance have been present in the everyday life of people in Iran for over two decades and in the following sections, I will draw from some of the other major events of the last year in Iran to further demonstrate the trend.

### **March 2019 floods**

The year 1396 begun with major floods across several regions in Iran caused by heavy and persistent rainfall for over two weeks. The hardest hit regions were faced with high casualties, destruction of their houses, their farms and cities' infrastructures. The government response to this disaster lacked both urgency and did not reflect the gravity of the disaster. The official reporting of the devastation was insufficient and distorted. During this time Instagram accounts of both Iranian residents and expatriates were swarming with videos of houses being washed away by the flood. People were using these channels to report more accurate statistics of casualties and to amplify the voices of the outraged victims who had not received the support they needed from their government. One can gauge the threat that such grassroots forms of broadcasting pose to the Iranian regime by looking at its response. According to an article in Iran News Wire for example, Iran's Attorney General, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, had stated that publishing 'fake' news—which means any negative reports— about the 2019 flood in Iran on the Internet is a security violation and those found guilty will be prosecuted.<sup>8</sup>

### **November protests**

On November 15th, 2019, after the sudden rise in oil prices and the subsequent rise in the price of all goods in Iran, people took to the streets. Protests irrupted

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<sup>7</sup> "Iran's deputy health minister: I have coronavirus," The Guardian, February 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/irans-deputy-health-minister-i-have-coronavirus>.

<sup>8</sup> Adena Nima, "Iran Attorney General says posting flood news on social media 'disrupts security'," Iran News Wire, March 27, 2019, <https://irannewswire.org/iran-attorney-general-says-posting-flood-news-on-social-media-disrupts-security/>.

in several cities and location in Iran including Ahvaz, Mashahd and Tehran. Protestors parked their cars in the middle of the roads, blocking highways and streets. In some locations, demonstrators set fire to gas stations and cars. The scale of the protests reflected people's built-up frustration at their financial and political situation since the collapse of the nuclear deal.<sup>9</sup> To silence the protestors and undermine the protests the government induced an Internet shutdown beginning in a few cities and quickly advancing to the whole country. By November 16, Iran had entered a near complete Internet blackout. The Iranian expatriates however, joined in these protests through virtual means by drawing attention to the human rights violations inherent in an Internet blackout. Because the Internet shutdown was gradual, some images and video documentations of the protests were still leaked on the Internet and circulated quickly by those outside of Iran.

The Iranian government had learnt its lessons from the 2009 Green Movement and the role that social media platforms and communication apps played in the uprising. As Golkar explains, during the Green Movement "Social media also helped activists circulate information and news among people in a country where the majority of the media had been under severe state control."<sup>10</sup> This time, the total Internet shutdown was implemented quickly and worked effectively to disrupt any potential for a more organized movement. It as well blocked any further videos and images from circulating on the Internet at the time of the protests and, from any statistics about the number of casualties and arrests to be made public. The protests were crushed by the government through extreme violent force, thousands of arrests and hundreds of deaths. At this time, as Internet was gradually restored, people took to social media to report on the violence they had just witnessed and to circulate the images and names of those who were arrested, some without a trace, demanding for their safe release.

### **Boeing 737 crash**

As tensions between Iran and the US escalated, due to the recent US assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, on January 8th, a Ukrainian plane carrying 176 passengers and personnel crashed only minutes after take off from the Imam Khomeini International airport in Tehran. Reports of the crash stormed the news and social media channels and with the cause of the crash and the death toll still unknown many were already publicly speculating. For three days following the crash, the Iranian government attempted to pass off a mechanical malfunction as the cause of the incident to the public. For most Iranians and especially the friends and family of the

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<sup>9</sup> "The Guardian view on Iran's protests: unrest is crushed, unhappiness endures," The Guardian, November 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/26/the-guardian-view-on-irans-protests-unrest-is-crushed-unhappiness-endures>.

<sup>10</sup> Golkar, *The Whole World is Texting*, 71.

causalities, the prospect of a mechanical malfunction was the least devastating. Shortly following the crash however, a video footage of the incident taken by a civilian was surfacing online. When the online community, including journalists, further inspected the footage, they noticed an object hitting the plane prior to the explosion. This finding, as well as other inconsistencies, forced the Iranian government to reveal the truth. The plane was shot down by Iranian missiles through what the state called a ‘tragic accident’. Iranians were devastated by the news and shocked by the ease in which their government lied for three days while knowing the cause of the crash. A translated section from an Instagram post of Hamed Esmailion, a father who lost his wife and daughter in the crash, reads; “if you wanted to kill these 176 people, wouldn't it have been easier if you had lined them up in front of the international airport and shot them? [...] so that at least they would not have been tormented in the sky for six minutes. At least we would have a body that we could feel. Maybe we could caress the hands of our children one last time. [...] come out and say why you did this? why did you do this?.”<sup>11</sup> This feeling of betrayal was widespread and easily detectable both online and in the resulting protests.

After the government’s public announcement, Iranians, yet again, took to the streets and social media to verbalize and publicize their anger and disbelief at the level state corruption. The government was again desperate to muffle the voices of the public and instil fear in those who tried to report the truth. As an example, the state tried to find and arrest the man who had shot the video of the plane crash.<sup>12</sup> The protests were yet again met with extreme police force. Families of the victims were threatened by the state and sometimes forced to hold private funerals. Hence, much of the grieving was moved to social media channels. Hashtags such as Boeing #737 or #176 were used to circulate news and information about the crash and mourn the deaths. Family and friends of the victims created online groups in which they demanded justice for the victims. Many also formed initiatives to raise funds for the victims’ burials.

## Conclusion

It can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint the extent to which each of these instances of virtual resistance and activism have direct effect on government policies and people’s social reality but they are undoubtedly part of the path to change. With Iran’s population median age being around 30 years old, Internet is a tool used by the masses. As an example, an estimated 50 million people are

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<sup>11</sup> Hamed Esmailion (Hamedesmaeilion), “ همه اگر نبود تر آسان آیا بکشید را نفر ۱۷۶ این خواستید می که شما “، “؟ زنید می هم را تان کثافت هی؟ دهید می بیانیه هی حالا؟ بستید می رگیار به و کردید می صف به تان الملی بین فرودگاه جلوی Instagram, February 5, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8KkaZGpuj3/?igshid=n5a88xh3v6jg>.

<sup>12</sup> Yaron Steinbuch, “Iran arrests person for sharing video of missile striking Ukrainian airliner,” New York Post, January 15, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/01/15/iran-arrests-person-for-sharing-video-of-missile-striking-ukrainian-airliner/>.

currently using Telegram in Iran.<sup>13</sup> Hence, such grassroots broadcasting methods can potentially reach a large number of people. Though it is important not to depict a false utopian idea of virtual resistance in Iran, as much of the dangers of physical protests and resistance also exists in the online sphere, it is important to acknowledge its effectiveness and credit its often anonymous activists. As seen in the examples above, Iranians have embarked in both a virtual and a physical battle against their oppressive government and they are proving unstoppable. As Iran has been on the road to recovery in the fight against Covid-19, there are talks of returning the temporarily released prisoners back to prison and yet again, people have taken to social media to call attention to this and to demand the permanent release of the many political prisoners and those unjustly incarcerated. Furthermore, social media is still being used to bring attention to and demand answers regarding the victims of the events of last year as the Corona crisis has overtaken the news. We can see, this fight continues with full force.

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## **How progressive social movements can save democracy in pandemic times**

**Donatella della Porta (19<sup>th</sup> May 2020)**

Against all odds, the first stages in the Covid19 pandemic have been met by what media and activists can see is a new wave of protest. While the fear of contagion and the lockdown measures, heavily constrained physical movements, and seemed to jeopardize collective actions; activists invented new forms of expressing their increasing grievances, but also spread new tactics Car caravans, pot banging, collective performance of protest songs from balconies, live-streamed actions, digital rallies, virtual marches, walk outs, boycotts, and rent-strikes have multiplied as forms of denouncing what the pandemic made all the more evident and all the less tolerable: the depth of inequalities and their dramatic consequences in terms of human lives.

In most of the countries that have been harder hit by the pandemic, the workers of the health care sector called for immediate provision of live-saving devices as well as resources to be invested in the public health system. In Italy, 100,000 doctors signed a petition calling for territorially decentralized organization of healthcare provision. In Milan, the health care personnel of private hospitals staged stay-ins (keeping social distance) to protest the deterioration of their working conditions. In the US, nurses staged peaceful rallies, and were attacked by radical right activists calling for the end of the lockdown. In Spain, as in many other countries, citizens express support for the health workers by collectively clapping their hands on their balconies.

All over the world, workers of the so-called gig economy, including bike delivery people, Amazon drivers, and call center workers; mobilized in wildcat strikes, walking out of workplaces, calling in sick and staging flashmobs asking for protection against the contagion as well as for broader labour rights. They also often denounced their companies' attempts to discourage collective action by firing those who stood up to denounce the poor conditions. Inequalities have also been challenged by students calling for reductions of fees and grants, and by those who are suffering from unemployment and drastic drops in income, promoting rent strikes.

Protests also address the increasing deterioration of environmental conditions. A main example of a digital strike is the fifth Global Strike Against Climate Change carried out on 24 April 2020 by *Fridays for Future* with activists geolocalizing themselves in front of highly symbolic places (such as the Italian Parliament). Digital assemblies allowed activists to discuss perspectives and to build proposals. This happened with the Back to the Future program, which focused on building a socially equitable and environmentally just response to the pandemic. Posters have been left in squares and on buildings to call for changes in environmental policies.

As with contentious politics in non-pandemic times, disruptive street politics by other means mixed a logic of numbers showing support for their proposals (as in digital strikes or petitions); a logic of damage, creating costs for their targets (as in the workers' strike but also on the citizens' rent strikes), as well as a logic of testimony, by proving the extent of their commitment displaying the sacrifice, risks and costs of collective action (as in the vigil of the nurses standing in front of abusive rightwing militants).

The activities of progressive social movements in the pandemic are not limited to the visible protests. Activists called for political and economic power to be accountable through a careful work of collection, elaboration and transmission of information on the effects of the pandemic on the poorest and more disadvantaged groups of citizens—such as prisoners, migrant workers, homeless—but also on the unequal distribution of activities of care within the family and the violence against women. In fact, activists have produced a lay knowledge that is at least as much needed as the specialized knowledge of the expert. Using digital resources for information sharing as well as online teach-ins, they contributed to connect the different fields of knowledge that the hyperspecialization of science tends to fragment. Intertwining theoretical knowledge with practical, experimenting with different ideas, building on past experiences, they also prefigure a different future.

Besides protesting and constructing alternative knowledge, progressive movements have also contributed to a much needed task in a tragic moment: the production and distribution of services of a different type. Faced by the limited capacity of public institutions (weakened by long lasting neoliberal policies) to intervene and to bring support to those in need, activists have built upon experiences of new mutualism, that had already been nurtured to address the social crisis triggered by the financial crisis and especially the austerity responses to it at the beginning of the years 2010. So progressive civil society organizations and grass-roots neighborhood groups distributed food and medicines, produced masks and medical instruments, given shelter to the homeless and protected women from domestic violence. The principle of food sovereignty and the solidarity economy spreads through these practical examples.

In doing this, activists are challenging a top down conception of charity or humanitarianism, by spreading norms of solidarity that contrast with the extreme individualism of neoliberal capitalism. Through social interventions, they reconstitute social relations that have been broken well before the pandemic but they also politicize claims, shifting them from immediate relief to proposals for radical social change. In performing these activities, progressive social movements constitute public spheres in which participation is praised in a vision of solidarity as born out of a recreated sense of shared destiny.

In action, different (pre-existing and emerging) groups are building ties and bridging frames. In fact, these energies are connecting around a series of central challenges for the construction of post pandemic alternatives. First and

foremost, progressive movements are elaborating innovative ideas about how to contrast ever-growing inequalities, in labour conditions and income, but also among generations, genders, racialized groups, and different territories. Here the struggles are for not only a return of the labour rights that neoliberal capitalism had already taken away, with consequences that become all the more dramatic during the pandemic, developing claims for a basic incomes for those who are expelled or never entered the labour market, as well as rights to education, housing, public health. The pandemic demonstrates the killing consequences of differential access to public health care in countries that (like the US) have historically had a weak welfare state, or countries where neoliberal policies by right-wing governments have been more widespread (as the UK). In other countries (including European ones) the consequences of commodification of health services, cuts of resources to public institutions, the savings on the number and the salary of the public workers have been visible in the spread and lethality of the virus. Besides the immediate challenges, the pandemic has made evident the dramatic long term effects of inequalities by hitting ethnic minorities, old people in overcrowded shelters, and poor neighborhoods especially hard. Highlighting the importance addressing climate change, the contagion was particularly intense and the mortality higher in the most polluted areas. Besides the increase in the episodes of violence against women, the pandemic also made blatantly clear both the importance of care activities and their unequal gender distribution with heavy burdens on women.

Besides claiming social and environmental justice, progressive social movements mobilized in the pandemic are also suggesting that the path to achieve it is not through the centralization of political decision making and even less through technocratic moves but rather by increasing the participation of the citizens. Pandemic times have been times of scapegoating on the others, the poor, the migrants, accused by right wing politicians of spreading the virus. These have been times of a lack of transparency and of low accountability, with the proclamations of state of emergencies used, in different forms and degrees, to curb dissent. Xenophobic governments have increased forced repatriation and closed the borders even to refugees. Through car caravans (as in Israel) or bike marches (as in Slovenia), progressive groups have protested government attempts to exploit the crisis to limit political participation and citizens' rights. In this direction, they can build upon the democratic innovations that were developed as responses to the financial crisis in the last decade. Through deliberative experiments, direct democracy, crowd-sourced constitutional processes as well as the building of movement parties, the ideas of the commons develop, pointing at public goods that need to be managed through the active participation of the citizens, the users and the workers.

Times of deep crisis can therefore (admittedly not automatically) trigger the invention of alternative but possible futures. As the pandemic changes everyday life, progressive social movements create needed spaces for reflections about a post-pandemic world, one that cannot be conceived as if it were in continuity with the pre-pandemic one.

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## **Responding to coronavirus pandemic: human rights movement-building to transform global capitalism**

**Jackie Smith (15<sup>th</sup> May)**

### **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic makes patently clear the limitations and vulnerabilities of the global capitalist system, portending significant changes in the world economy. Given the long history of divisions in the global Left, is there hope that we might forge the unity needed to transform the global economic order? In this essay I argue that global social movement practices and history reveal human rights as a unifying and transformative framework for organizing across issues and across local-global scales. More localized human rights movements are now well situated to help unite and guide transformative global activism in this moment of crisis, and I provide examples from current Pittsburgh and U.S. national human rights cities organizing.*

The COVID-19 pandemic makes patently clear the systemic crisis of global capitalism, portending significant changes in the world economy. Now in focus are the fundamental contradictions between a system organized to prioritize wealth accumulation and one oriented to promote life and well-being. Should we accept an even more ruthless version of what Naomi Klein calls “[coronavirus capitalism](#)”? Or can we overcome our many divisions to transform global capitalism?

Neoliberal capitalism’s worldwide erosion of social and ecological foundations for health and well-being fuel this unfolding tragedy. The chaotic and slow response of the U.S. Government, the denial of health care for victims, and limited social supports for the most impacted residents will intensify the global suffering both within and outside the country’s borders. Rescue packages laden with corporate giveaways and thin on help for struggling people expose the dangerous incompatibilities between corporate power and human well-being, leaving unambiguous the question of which side political leaders are on. The disruption of prevailing, market-oriented “common sense” makes this crisis moment a unique opportunity to popularize a long-emergent vision of a world organized around human needs.

### **Globalizing struggles for well-being**

In a recent essay, Valentine Moghadam has called on progressive forces to “[Planetize the Movement.](#)” calling for work to overcome a long history of fragmentation and lack of unity around a shared analysis and vision. She points out that the World Social Forum (WSF) process has, since 2001, enabled various elements of progressive/Left movements to develop thinking about global

problems, alternative visions, and strategies for social transformation. But she sees it as failing to generate a unified structure—like a [new socialist international](#)—to coordinate action and strategy in response to new threats or openings, such as those we see today. She points to local, municipalist movements as one source of hope.

I believe the WSF process has indeed provided a foundation for global and local action today, although its significance is in its decentralized and emergent nature, keeping it under the radar of most political analysts and public discourse. By creating spaces for global movement-building and anti-systemic learning, inspiring countless inter-linked regional and local social forums around the world, and supporting network connections across struggles, the WSFs have helped extend global analyses and organizing to diverse local contexts (See [Smith 2020](#)). Significantly, the forums have helped amplify voices of indigenous peoples, peasants, and feminists in the broader, global conversation. Because of the WSFs, local activists have new tools for confronting globalized capitalism and the global and local hierarchies upon which it relies. By disrupting old ways of thinking and inspiring new forms of agency as well as multi-scalar and cross-sectoral networks and organizing, the WSF process has been a catalyst for system-transformation.

While the networks generated by the WSFs remain highly decentralized, they are more interconnected as a result of the WSF process and the practices and platforms it helped generate. They also integrate local- and global-scale activism better than ever before. Global activist networks are now more unified around shared language and analyses—and this largely reflects the wisdom brought into global movement spaces by feminist and indigenous movements. Thus, they provide critical structural and ideological foundations for global justice movements going forward ([Smith 2014](#)).

The [intentionality of the WSF process](#) (Santos 2008), privileges voices of the global South and other marginalized and excluded groups, creating potential for new challenges to the Western development paradigm's global scale, anthropocentrism, and extractivism in Left politics (see, e.g., [Conway 2017](#)). In contrast, labor internationalism has reproduced extractive, capitalist logics and obscured this long history of humanity's struggles for life and well-being, confounding efforts at Left unity.

Thus, what we learn from the WSF and related movement processes is that feminist and indigenous praxis can unite progressive movements, especially at this moment when health and life are most visibly at stake. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups (however imperfectly), the WSF process helped make more visible for the global Left the social reproductive work made invisible in the racialized, anthropocentric, patriarchal capitalist paradigm. This recognition is evolving through ongoing interactions and movement-building processes, shaping what [Goodman and Salleh](#) (2013) call another “class” of labor—one whose identity is grounded in the shared foundational needs and experiences of life and community, rather than in processes of work and capitalist production:

the global majority of meta-industrial workers—urban women carers, rural subsistence dwellers, and indigenes...share the experience of exclusion and diminishment by social stratification and cultural bias. That said, ...[they] are victims only to hegemonic eyes. In a time of multiple crises, there is an urgent need for political decisions informed by ecologically embedded modes of existence. Women and men with “holding skills” have a head start in constructing the parameters of a “bio-civilisation.” *This positive concept of labour and creative knowledge making at the humanity-nature interface challenges conventional sociological categories.* By the Eurocentric model, class is defined by “lack” in relation to the mode of production and reproductive labour is deemed non-productive. *As the focus of counter-hegemonic politics shifts from production to reproduction, “another labour class” comes forward with unique capacities for regenerative knowledge.* ...The next question is: under what conditions will this socially diverse labour grouping “in itself” become a class “for itself?”

Thus, through [intense struggle and debate](#) (Sen and Waterman 2007), the WSF process helped bring forward a new set of global protagonists—that is, progressive activists who have recast a shared, decolonized history to confront the violence of capitalism towards both people and the planet. It has helped authorize Goodman and Salleh’s “meta-industrial logic,” or an “[epistemology of the South](#)” (Santos 2004) obscured by prevailing Right- and Left-political narratives.

The coronavirus pandemic is a tragic reminder that the global economic system depletes our capacities for social reproduction and thus, survival ([Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance](#) 2020). Much labor internationalism has neglected the fact that a global economy focused on *economic growth* and *jobs* versus one that is designed to support and protect *livelihoods* undermines our [foundational economy](#). Thus, the COVID-19 crisis opens opportunities not only for transcending traditional Left-Right divisions but also for addressing long-standing contradictions in global Left organizing.

### **Localizing human rights in a pandemic**

Global movement processes like the WSFs have supported the localization of global movements and nurtured global formations like the “right to the city” movement, which are now advancing different visions of Zapatismo’s “one world where many worlds fit.” As national governments have deprived localities of needed revenues, and as economic globalization and climate change intensifies local governance challenges, new unlikely alliances are forming to implement “[people-centered](#)” [human rights](#) “from below.” The political project of “human rights globalization” advances an emancipatory, biocentric, decolonized understanding of human rights (Baraka n.d.), or what Fregoso (2014) refers to as “alternative human rights imaginaries: a pluriversality of human rights not dependent on legalism or the state.”

COVID-19 is now drawing more attention to the fact that those left furthest behind by this system are now on the front lines doing essential work that sustains livelihoods. Their health and well-being is critical to the global effort to contain this pandemic. Yet, substantial lapses in governance have undermined, for these groups especially, the rights to health, housing, food, workplace protections, and environmental justice. All of these are human rights claims, and the enjoyment of each right requires all the others. Such interdependence supports movement-building, and inter-networked human rights city activists are connecting trans-local policy conversations to global human rights discourses, drawing legitimacy and leverage via global movement alliances.

While many see existing international human rights law as “toothless” due to weak enforcement, human rights activists have been working behind the scenes to build, slowly but steadily, an increasingly potent global framework for monitoring human rights practices and holding human rights offenders accountable (See [Sikkink 2018](#)). Most notable are the establishment of the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) in 1994, the [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#) in 2000, and the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) process in 2006.

In the midst of the unfolding pandemic, this global human rights infrastructure can be a resource for people and communities worldwide. Global human rights bodies are speaking out to remind governments of their legal obligations to respect and protect rights, reinforcing “from above” the demands activists are making “from below.” For instance, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, global human rights officials have issued the following reminders to national and local governments of the continued salience of international human rights obligations, including:

- [Draft Human Rights Council resolution](#) on the human rights implications of the COVID-19 crisis calls on national officials to center human rights in their responses to the pandemic.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights [warned](#) of the devastating effects of many states’ responses to COVID-19 on people living in poverty.
- [Chairpersons of ten U.N. Treaty Bodies called on states “to adopt measures to protect the rights to life and health](#), and to ensure access to health care to all who need it, “without discrimination.”
- [UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing](#), Leilani Farha has been especially vocal, issuing *COVID-19 Guidance Notes* with specific policy recommendations on evictions, homelessness, and financialization of housing markets. Farha states, “*Now is the time to address structural inequalities in our financial and housing systems and ensure that they are guided by, and responsive to, international human rights.*”

Thus, despite limited tools for enforcement, international laws and norms provide legitimacy that can, especially in times of crisis, help tip the scales in favor of those advocating for people’s rights and dignity against politicians and

business leaders favoring status quo policies. The growing human rights architecture provides more resources for local residents and activists to advance human rights, but its effectiveness requires active efforts of grassroots movements. As more people find themselves vulnerable, and as the pandemic forces people to see that the denial of rights to any vulnerable group undermines health everywhere, there is greater resonance for human rights demands in the wider public, and greater possibility for “human rights globalization from below.”

Drawing from my experience working with local human rights movements, I have seen in recent years greater potential for appeals to global human rights laws and institutions to impact local policies and practices. The public in the United States especially has limited knowledge of international human rights, and few local officials are aware of their human rights obligations. So when local activists reference UN human rights reports and related documentation, such reminders that local officials even have international legal obligations can elicit new attention and responsiveness. We found this in Pittsburgh when we shared documents from the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing with the local City Council and Planning Commissions,<sup>1</sup> and when we referenced our submission of a report on local human rights conditions to the United Nations at a City Council hearing.

Nationally, human rights organizers are uniting in response to COVID-19 to make human rights more a priority in public policy, and this work is aided by global human rights bodies. For instance, [a network of U.S. human rights activists](#) sent this [letter to the State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Rights](#) on his office’s obligations to “ensure that *all levels of government—from Executive branch through state and local levels* are informed of their human rights obligations under international law.” And they have [appealed to the President of the UN Human Rights Council](#) for the chance to provide supplemental documentation for the UPR Review of the United States, which was initially scheduled to take place in May 2020.

Recently, U.S. human rights city advocates have been using the UN’s UPR process to build human rights movements in the United States. They launched the “[UPR Cities](#)” initiative in 2019, as part of work to generate local human rights documentation for the formal UN review of the U.S. government. Webinars and online organizing toolkits provided guidance for local activists on the UN process and models for local actions. UPR City organizers are explicitly advancing a two-pronged, or “sandwich” strategy that brings evidence about local conditions to other national leaders while supporting movements bringing pressure on local, state and national governments “from below” ([Tsutsui and Smith 2019](#)). Other national leaders are now more likely to confront the U.S. for its human rights failures, since they are now so directly threatening to their own national interests.

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<sup>1</sup> [UN to US Government: Do Better on Housing](#) Shelterforce June 3, 2019, Jackie Smith and Emily Cummins.

In Pittsburgh, I've been part of our UPR Cities work, helping coordinate a [local coalition](#) that submitted a report to the UN's UPR working group entitled [Racial Inequity at the Core of Human Rights Challenges in Pittsburgh](#). Pittsburghers' mobilization against the city's bid to host Amazon's second headquarters, and concerns over developers' impacts on affordable housing helped shape conversations that produced the national Human Rights Cities Alliance UPR submission, "[The growth of corporate influence in sub-national political & legal institutions undermines U.S. compliance with international human rights obligations.](#)"

Our local UPR Cities coalition had planned to work during the spring of 2020 to prepare a local version of its UPR report which would identify specific municipal and county policy recommendations deriving from international human rights commitments. We planned to formally present our UPR report to local officials in conjunction with the timing of the UN's review of the U.S. government.

The pandemic has given local and national organizers additional time to build local activist knowledge about human rights and opportunities in the UN. The pandemic highlights that the United States is indeed exceptional for its failure to recognize the right to health, and this failure is behind its disastrous and dangerous inability to address the COVID-19 crisis. This failure has deadly global repercussions, and the UPR process provides one avenue for other world leaders to address the connections between the human rights of U.S. residents and the health and safety of their own populations. Human rights movements are needed to fortify their political will.

As an example of how community leaders have responded to this crisis moment, Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and an array of coalition partners have organized a virtual community forum series, [Learning from COVID-19: Shaping a Health and Human Rights Agenda for our Region](#). The series convenes panels of organizers helping spread awareness of local conditions and responses to the pandemic, and deliberate attention is made to generating ideas for alternative policy landscapes and strategies for transforming the status quo. Since participants in these forums are the same ones who have been working around the UPR initiative, there are synergies across these efforts, and local organizers are increasingly using human rights to frame their demands.

It is important for our movements to be conscious of the long traditions of human rights activism and its relationship to supporting the social foundations for life and health. Through this lens we can see a long-emergent human rights globalization that provides today's movements with institutional support and movement strategies that can challenge the power structures of globalized capitalism and confront its violence against nature, indigenous peoples, women and other vulnerable groups.

The right to the city movement has helped movements from below in localities around the world to "bring human rights home" by holding local governments accountable to globally recognized norms. They have helped build unity [against corporate power](#) and the health and food industrial-complexes and offer a

compelling justification for the de commodification of basic needs. These ideas, the emerging global institutional framework they are shaping, and the models of global- and local-level organizing they have generated reflect a powerful *project of human rights globalization* that supports life, community, and the human and ecological care work upon which all depends. In this moment of global pandemic, we should look to this movement knowledge and organizing infrastructures for guidance to build a planetary movement for transformative change.

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## **Human rights amid covid-19: from struggle to orchestration of trade-offs**

**Yariv Mohar (19<sup>th</sup> April 2020)**

### **Abstract**

*If pre-covid-19 human rights organizations dealt mainly with violations of rights, amid the novel pandemic's challenges they ought to center on conflicts of rights - i.e. trade-offs and dilemmas - and reorient themselves toward that task*

**Keywords:** human rights organizations, covid-19, conflicts of rights, re-tooling, mobilization

### **Human rights amid covid-19**

#### **Human rights work should transcend the struggle framework to include orchestration of trade-offs amid the novel pandemic**

As the covid-19 pandemic endures it obliges governments to deal with related trade-offs between health and other aspects of life and with conflicting rights which unfold rapidly. At best governments handle this by using a balancing strategy - i.e. trying to weigh the damage of each path and look for a middle way. But alas governments' balancing strategy is often a flawed one; it is frequently tailored based on the masses' interests and lived experience, which leads to glossing over "special cases" and marginalized groups. Hence in such a context human rights and social justice organizations' activism needs a reorientation toward the task of ameliorate governments' balancing strategy. This task may take new forms or just involve ramping-up already established repertoires. For example amplifying the voices, and mapping the cases, of those who are left behind and find no real relief by the state and its policies is important nowadays not only in and of itself but also as a way to fine tune the balancing strategy. Without such activism governments will keep turning a blind eye to what is really at stake in regard to the moral dilemmas stemming from the novel pandemic and will keep using the average citizen as their point of reference for social trade-offs management.

Before diving into the model for such activism the context should be explicated: Dealing with human rights and social justice was never a black and white task; it has always involved moral dilemmas and conflicting rights. Yet the field of human rights was mainly guided by what can be termed the struggle metaphor - a framework juxtaposing human rights supporters with their adversaries, and which takes human rights violations as the key problem to be addressed. The coronavirus pandemic, and the unprecedented intensity of trade-offs it

introduces, are fundamentally subverting against the struggle metaphor and therefore call for new forms of activism.

Indeed the covid-19 pandemic brings about a set of pressing trade-offs; most notably the right for health (and ultimately for life) clashes with principles like freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, the right to privacy and with economic, social and cultural rights. Lock-downs and cellular phones monitoring are the most obvious examples of policies embodying such trade-offs.

How should human rights organizations deal with such challenges? Traditionally “proportionality” is the key term to be utilized amid conflicts of rights. Yet even in more settled time human rights organizations struggled to define proportionality; now it becomes totally vague - nothing is proportional about imposing a lock-down on 60 million Italines, still nothing is proportional in the threat posed by coronavirus. Hence the struggle metaphor collapses and may give way to, say, the orchestration metaphor - that is, a framework for balancing and orchestrating conflicting rights (according to well-defined proportionality) and for mitigating the trade-off between rights. Rather than dealing with violations, the focal point here is balancing and mitigation.

But it would be wrong to impose an “either-or” choice between the two frameworks - the struggle and the orchestration - since both are vital for promoting human rights, albeit in different doses depending on circumstances. Indeed struggling against human rights violations is still a critical task even as the coronavirus spreads but orchestration seems much more inline with the challenges introduced by the novel pandemic. Having said that, broadening our framework and moving the focal point to orchestration is not just doing more of the same - dealing with proportionality or balancing as the locus of activity, amid a new and complex situation, requires re-tooling of our NGOs.

On the surface human rights organizations are ill-equipped for orchestration. Furthermore, the current situation mainly emphasizes an enduring flaw in the field of human rights - it's limited capacity for dealing with trade-offs which are nothing but new. Indeed human rights organizations are not political philosophers nor experts in the various fields of knowledge at stake; they can say little about the hierarchy of rights in principle and little about empiric questions pertaining to the anticipated damage of compromising certain rights for the sake of others. In a different vein activism and mobilization is heavily leaning toward the struggle schema to the extent that it is hard to imagine collective action in the absence of a salient villain. In contrast the task of orchestration entails careful judgment rather than gut-level enthusiasm and sense of injustice which are so crucial for mobilization (e.g. Gamson 1992; Benford and Snow 2000). Currently human rights organizations can, therefore, contribute little to ameliorating policies amid conflicting rights. Yet I would like to suggest some initial thoughts on modalities of orchestration - and related activism - that human rights organizations can successfully govern. Most of these modalities are not new, but they should become much more central and developed:

### **Mediating and amplifying the lived experience of various constituencies**

Conflicting rights are somewhat connected to diversity in societal characters - i.e. young and healthy people and older and wealthy people may fear from different aspects of the current situation. Hearing all voices is the first step for intelligible and fair orchestration of trade-offs, especially when it comes to marginalized groups whose voice is habitually disenfranchised. In the course of such grassroots work the enthusiasm and sense of injustice so crucial for mobilization may be maintained even within the framework of orchestration.

### **Mapping policy lacunae**

Gaining familiarity with the lived experience is also pivotal for mapping lacunae in governmental policies and taking them into account - that is, monitoring cases of people or groups who are left behind and find no real relief by the state. If we want to balance rights properly we need to know to weigh the actual damage of certain policies including their “blind spots” - i.e. the people who are damaged more than the average or more than what was intended. Yet even as governments aspire to formulate balanced policies they are often biased toward the macro-level, hence glossing over “extraordinary” cases and the marginalized. Here human rights organizations have a unique utility; they can start off where governments’ capacity ends.

One current example is an ongoing project by the Israeli section of Amnesty International, which aims to monitor and map cases of people or communities whose income and livelihood was hurt by the pandemic situation yet they can find very little, if any, support by the government of Israel. Beside obvious marginalized communities - such as Palestinians and African asylum seekers - some types of individuals whose circumstances rendered them ineligible were found in this framework. The overall picture enables Amnesty to demonstrate the many lacunae in Israel’s social policy amid the pandemic and may facilitate a more nuanced balance between conflicting rights as the hidden impact of policies is brought to light.

### **Constructing shadow government of experts**

While often lacking professional knowledge human rights organizations can construct forums for external experts and experienced ex-seniors in the civil service, relevant to the various issues at stake, that can mirror the forums governments form in order to debate policies toward the crisis. Working like a shadow government or cabinet, such a parallel forum is actually a mechanism for scrutiny, for double checking the validity and merit of balancing and mitigation strategy in the face of conflicting rights. If we suspect a government not to have done the most to mitigate and balance trade-offs, we have to replicate the kind of debates and reasoning done in the corridors of power. Such forums need not be ed-hoc ones but can be an ongoing oversight mechanism.

### **Nurturing the wisdom of the crowd for mitigation**

Mitigating trade-offs between rights is always better than properly balancing them - it means that we can find a way to outsmart the dilemma by going “out of the box.” Achieving this best case scenario requires not just a good will but creativity which governments often lack. Hence human rights organizations may mobilize masses via digital platforms as a hive mind for thinking trade-offs’ mitigation thoroughly. The shadow government of experts may be involved here too so that the output of the masses is processed by professionals and professionals may also brainstorm among themselves and come up with creative mitigation. Even if the vast majority of suggestions by the hive mind may be considered as “noise,” we need just one brilliant idea for a breakthrough. It may be worth the bother.

The 4 modalities presented above are just a preliminary reflection on what should be done in order to facilitate orchestration and compatible activism. Formulating and refining the orchestration framework is still mostly ahead of us. It requires first and foremost a conceptual expansion of frameworks - human rights work should be thought of not only as a struggle but also as an orchestration - which could impact the field of human rights to the extent that governments of good will may find it to be not only a critic but also a partner with great utility to fine tune the orchestration of ever pressing social trade-offs. To accomplish that a crucial strategic process will have to be launched in the field coupled with massive capacity building. The time to start this is now.

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## **Social justice snapshots: governance adaptations, innovations and practitioner learning in a time of COVID-19**

**Julien Landry, Ann Marie Smith, Patience Agwenjang, Patricia  
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(29<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

In early 2020, COVID-19 swept across the globe, prompting widespread government responses with far-reaching implications for civic space and actors working to strengthen transparency, accountability, participation and inclusion in governance at all levels. For many graduates of the [Coady International Institute](#) — over 7,000 development leaders and practitioners working with social movements, advocacy groups, networks and alliances, civil society organizations, community and civic associations in over 130 countries — the pandemic and the measures put in place in response have led to adaptive and innovative ways to continue their work in solidarity with citizens and communities.

Since 2015, the Institute has worked to support over 22 graduates in 14 countries to document [case studies](#) based on their advocacy, governance, and citizen participation work as part of the [Participedia](#) project, a global knowledge mobilization effort aimed at cataloging and better understanding participatory political processes.

In April 2020, a small group among these graduates came together virtually to share their experiences as practitioners, advocates, and activists working for inclusive and accountable governance through the pandemic. What follows is a snapshot of what their organizations, networks, and communities have been doing in the first few months to sustain or adapt their work aimed at building transparency, participation, accountability and/or inclusion in decisions affecting communities.

This virtual dialogue and writing exercise provided these authors with an opportunity to reflect on their own practice and learning as they navigate the realities and opportunities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article summarizes how each author's organisation/work has adapted to new realities, including emergent themes, lessons, and reflections from the authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article were published elsewhere.

## **Adaptation and innovation: a few snapshots of governance practice**

### **Advocacy through Nepal's land rights movement**

In Nepal, the [Community Self-Reliance Centre](#) (CSRC) has been supporting the national land rights movement and advocating on land and agrarian issues alongside landless and smallholder peasants since 1994. [Jagat Basnet describes](#) how Land Rights Forums (LRFs) have played a key role in making the government more accountable for the COVID-19 response. [Land Rights Forums](#) are people's organizations that generate grassroots participation for policy influence, just governance, and accountability. During the pandemic, CSRC and LRFs have leveraged their relationships with communities to provide the government with real-time data and accurate information from the field on COVID-19. They have supported a more adequate local response by coordinating advocacy from civil society groups to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development in support of landless and smallholder peasants, while facilitating connections between local governments and communities.

### **Citizen feedback data in Nepal**

In the same country, as mentioned above, a new media organization called [Sharecast Initiative Nepal is formed to](#) promote [citizen participation through media and local radio](#) launched a nationwide survey to understand citizens' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding COVID-19. As Bhumiraj Chapagain [writes](#), one week after the lockdown measures were imposed, Sharecast trained enumerators to remotely survey 1,110 respondents across Nepal. Sharecast then provided the government with key data on people's awareness and attitudes regarding the virus, as well as opinions and feedback on their responses. The research was acknowledged by the Prime Minister and helped multiple stakeholders understand the baseline regarding the COVID-19 response, allowing them to better address needs.

### **New channels for children's and youth's voice in Kenya**

In Kenya, the [Mombasa County Child Rights Network](#) (MCCRN), a network of child rights advocates, are focusing their efforts on child protection as a major governance issue in the advent of COVID-19. Peggy Saka from the [Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children outlines](#) the disproportionate impacts the pandemic is having on children, and how the network is adapting to enable children to participate and speak out on COVID-19. Through online meetings and live media broadcasts with elected officials and leaders of community and national organizations, children and youth are able to express themselves and share their fears and anxieties about the pandemic

### **Engagement and mutual aid among Ethiopia's marginalized communities**

Aklilu Gebremicheal [explains](#) how [Love in Action Ethiopia](#) (LIAE) is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging community structures and systems in regions of the country where predominantly underserved and marginalized communities were already facing economic hardships and poor service delivery prior to the spread of the coronavirus. LIAE has balanced a shift to home-based operations with ongoing community engagement aimed at raising awareness, supporting mutual aid, providing emergency supplies and addressing the immediate needs of communities most at risk. As in much of LIAE's [work](#), citizen participation has been key to this effort. Through newly established community-based COVID-19 task forces, LIAE is mobilizing 1,200 volunteers as community resource persons to collaborate with local and regional government offices.

### **Alternate pandemic responses in Cameroon**

In Cameroon, youth and democracy advocate Patience Agwenjang [observes](#) how the COVID-19 pandemic represents one of a number of crises, particularly in English-speaking regions. Response to the pandemic has been marred by pre-existing political tensions and questions around the relationship between the President and citizens, and a lack of transparency around the management of the COVID-19 Fund. The public's distrust of government has meant that citizens have been participating in alternate pandemic response programs set up by civil society groups, rather than engaging in the government scheme. Meanwhile, the crisis has created opportunities for skills development, technological advancement, and for businesses and civil society organizations to produce, distribute, and sell emergency supplies.

### **Rights awareness through virtual and media engagement in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, Barbara Maigari of [Partners West Africa – Nigeria](#) (PWAN) [describes](#) how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their advocacy visits and awareness campaigns related to human rights and sexual and gender-based violence. Lockdown measures have resulted in exclusive reliance on remote engagement through the PWAN website, social media, and call-in radio and television programs. Not only has this adaptation altered the interactions between PWAN and citizen groups, it has also brought certain rights issues and violations to the fore. For instance, PWAN is addressing increased community concern over the right to freedom of movement (especially for journalists), freedom of expression. Awareness-raising efforts now include COVID-19 safeguards for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and other pandemic-related rights and responsibilities.

### **Leveraging advocacy networks for women's rights in Ghana**

In Ghana, a largely informal economy, the predominance of self-employment, communal living conditions, and the nature of its markets have resulted in the government's COVID-19 related measures having disproportionate effects on women. Patricia Blankson Akakpo [explains](#) how, NETRIGHT, a national women's rights network, has adapted its [usual work](#) to ensure women's voices and interests are taken into account during the pandemic response. NETRIGHT has mobilized funds among women's groups to support the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in its outreach efforts to vulnerable and homeless women and children. As part of their COVID-19 response, NETRIGHT'S members have distributed relief supplies to communities while also encouraging women and girls to report cases of sexual and gender-based violence.

### **Bridging diverse experiences: common grounds on shifting sands?**

Based on the small yet diverse set of responses to the COVID-19 crisis described above, a few observations and lessons emerge. Some actions focus on the basic, immediate needs that an emergency response requires. LIAE's public sensitization and citizen engagement for proper handwashing in Ethiopia, CSRC's food provision in Nepal, PWAN's quick response to provide communities with accurate information on COVID-19, and NETRIGHT members' fundraising and resource mobilization for women and vulnerable groups, all contribute to immediate, far-reaching, and lifesaving impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, these immediate responses foster more informed grassroots participation and support community mobilization, solidarity, and mutual aid among groups and stakeholders who may not have previously worked together towards common solutions.

Parallel to these shifting dynamics at grassroots, many responses hint at gradual shifts in the complex systems that affect people's lives, livelihoods, quality essential services, and effective public decision-making and governance. Below, we outline these trends and discuss related lessons based on the authors' accounts and reflections on their own experience as social justice practitioners and advocates working both in solidarity with citizens and communities, and in the civic space and political processes shaping how the pandemic response is governed.

### **Information, transparency and trust: national challenges and local solutions**

The pandemic has had far-reaching implications for national-level institutions, governance, and politics such as disruptions to the Ethiopia's electoral processes and the post-electoral politics playing out in Cameroon's response. On top of political systems struggling with cultures of opacity and corruption, this crisis highlights the importance of transparency as a bedrock of trust and

accountability between citizens and governments. This lack of trust has manifested through alternate and parallel governance and service delivery in Cameroon's response (despite increased transparency through social media) and through questions around the use of COVID-19 funds in Kenya.

In Nepal, Sharecast's work reminds us that understanding the nature of citizen [trust](#) and satisfaction (or discontent), through accurate information and timely data, is key to an effective response. Where trust and transparency are lacking, advocates often contend with challenges around misinformation and misconceptions related to the virus, as is the case in Nepal and Kenya where people turn to alternate sources of information and to traditional and religious practices for guidance.

In the midst of these national challenges, much of the immediate response has been at local government level. Through community-based COVID-19 Task Forces and by mobilizing volunteers, LIAE has facilitated community-driven responses that are not only building the capacity of local governments, but also strengthening collaboration across civil society and government at the local level.

### **Collaboration, relationship-building and shifting social contracts**

Collaboration has been and will continue to be indispensable through this moment. None of the stories shared speak to the success of any individual or organization acting unilaterally in responding to this pandemic. On the contrary, the strategies that work are based on collaborative efforts — often across sectors and linked to parallel mutual aid processes in communities. Whether these are new relationships or built upon existing ones, networks, alliances and partnerships have extended the reach of solidarity around the pandemic response, and have served as a key asset as advocates adapt to new realities. In Nigeria, for instance, PWAN's prior advocacy among law enforcement agencies and community leaders was critical in forging new relationships, allowing them to pivot their advocacy to a focus on COVID-19.

Previously ineffective relationships are now working to address this collective challenge. In the Ethiopian case “government leadership, faith-based organizations and community actors are working hand in hand unlike previous times.” The collaborations being forged by NETRIGHT in Ghana and the children's organizations in Kenya are other cases in point. In the Nigerian case, “effective leadership needs collaborative engagement with the people and listening to the greater demand of the populace.”

The shifting nature of collaboration and relationship building are connected to the roles, rights and responsibilities of states and citizens. The crisis impacts how social contracts are evolving. For instance, the work in Nepal illustrates the key intermediary role that civil society organizations, member-based organizations, and national movements play in facilitating relationships – and claiming rights – during emergencies. This kind of collaboration was recognized for its positive results, following unilateral attempts by the state that were much less effective.

Also in Nepal, Sharecast's work shows that citizens are willing to cede some rights and freedoms (at least temporarily) to curtail the spread of the virus. There are, of course, [longer-term risks](#) related to these [emergency measures](#). In Ghana, the measures and legal instruments put in place have had the effect of closing civic space and further marginalizing some citizen groups and community organizations' efforts to engage them. In Cameroon, the pandemic has on the one hand revealed that the executive is willing to take steps (even if they are perhaps merely symbolic) towards improving governance and safeguarding the rights of citizens. On the other hand, the pandemic compounds existing crises facing the country, where "the COVID-19 curfews do not represent a new phenomenon for [...] residents," who for the last three years spend about a hundred days in lockdown annually.

### **Digital technology, governance, and advocacy**

The global crisis has accelerated an ongoing trend towards [digital governance](#), with an increasing reliance on online communication and engagement, and an enhanced role for traditional and social media. Even though some pandemic-related directives hinder effective social mobilization and participation in governance processes, some strategies adopted through media and digital channels are supporting innovative forms of virtual engagement.

The stories shared here demonstrate adaptability, creativity and innovation in the use of technology to improve access, provide information, support mutual aid and grassroots responses, make and maintain connections, deliver services, enable participation and feedback, foster transparency and accountability, and spur further innovation. The telephone has been leveraged in Nepal and Nigeria, enabling Sharecast to conduct a nationwide survey in a novel way, and PWAN to connect with communities through home-based rights awareness campaigns.

Sharecast's work also shows how technology-enabled data generation and accurate community-level perceptions and public opinion serve as a foundation to design appropriate, targeted messages for public awareness and safety, as well as for advocacy. PWAN's work reminds us that a shift to technology-mediated engagement, while perhaps expanding the breadth of participation, comes with less depth in engagement. In Mombasa County, where technology provides a virtual space for children's voices at decision-making tables, the media becomes an intermediary in governance and accountability relationships, bringing with it implications around power, responsibility, and the ability to limit or enable participation.

A shift to mediated engagement has also meant that many authors' advocacy and activism has also adapted to a new reality. On the one hand, public awareness raising and mobilization now relies much more heavily on local and mass media to ensure citizens know both their rights and their responsibilities as they face the pandemic. Similarly, the kinds of advocacy tactics commonly used to apply pressure on policymakers are also being adapted, as CSRC's collective lobbying

efforts in Nepal and NETRIGHT's public advocacy statements in Ghana demonstrate.

On a smaller and more personal scale, individual practitioners and organizations have embraced digital channels and technologies such as Zoom and Facebook Live, and have developed increased resourcefulness and confidence in using the digital environment to pursue their accountability and engagement work. Sharecast's efforts in Nepal have led to a commitment to do a follow-up digital/telephone survey. This said, there are ongoing challenges as virtual (and home-based) work comes with the increased potential for [digital surveillance](#), a [digital divide](#), other family obligations and gender-related risks.

### **Gender dimensions and intersectional vulnerabilities**

These stories have all explicitly or implicitly revealed that — as is [widely acknowledged](#) — the pandemic has a [gendered impact](#) that amplifies existing gender disparities. This is in line with suggestions that the economic and social toll will be largely borne by women and girls, and further compounded by other intersecting dimensions of disparity and vulnerability.

There is a clear gender dimension to care. In [Ghana](#), “women constitute the majority of primary caregivers for family members, as well as in professional capacities as health and social workers. At the same time, they face [the] increased burden to provide for their [families], particularly if family members fall ill or lose jobs due to the economic hardship linked to the pandemic.” In [Kenya](#), the scaling down of some child protection services and the school closures has left many parents unable to carry out their roles as duty bearers — in providing “proper nutrition, safety, healthcare and education for their children.” This hits women particularly hard because much of the responsibility for childcare continues to fall on them.

Meanwhile, groups with multiple vulnerabilities are not being given the requisite support. In [Ethiopia](#), high-risk groups “have been disproportionately affected by the virus” including “street children, commercial sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, children and girls living in high risk areas.” The Kenyan case also references an increase in teenage pregnancies and “the sexual abuse of both boys and girls.”

The need for physical distancing has curtailed one of [PWAN's advocacy roles in Nigeria](#) for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, as the organization is unable to “conduct confidential interviews and represent them in courts” during this period. This has effectively silenced the voices and delayed justice for these survivors, who are largely women and girls. In Nepal, people in remote villages have suffered from delayed communication and misinformation, which “affects illiterate people from remote areas in particular and [has] increased health-related tensions in the country.” Generally, as information from remote villages is also slow in reaching those who govern, the responsiveness, effectiveness, and quality of services provided to communities suffers.

[NETRIGHT reminds us](#) that while the Ghanaian government has been proactive in engaging different groups in its pandemic response, “this engagement has not been sufficiently broad or inclusive to ensure the voice and concerns of a majority of people — such as women and other vulnerable populations.” Further, stay-at-home orders exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities of domestic abuse survivors — largely women and girls — who are stuck at home with perpetrators and have little recourse, support, or access to provisions to hold abusers accountable.

The [virus is not gender-blind](#) and governance around this issue cannot be either. Any strategy to address the impact of the pandemic must take into account its intersectional and gender dimensions. Alongside the impacts on women and girls, some of the authors also raise the adverse consequences the crisis has had on boys and men. The Kenyan and Ethiopian cases mention the sexual exploitation of boys. In Ethiopia, young men have been deprived of their livelihoods, with some turning to crime for survival. It thus behooves policymakers, community organizers, civil society groups, and social movements to be alert to these realities while determining entry points and designing strategies for more inclusive, accountable, and equitable remedies.

### **The many faces of effective and adaptive leadership**

Collectively, these reflections confirm what we know: the complex, multi-layered, multi-pronged and intangible nature of COVID-19 impacts every part of society, every nation, and every sector. In terms of leadership, such a complex problem has and will continue to require a dynamic and adaptive approach.

One particular approach — [situational leadership](#)— seems to resonate with the authors’ emerging reflections on effective leadership through the crisis: it is anticipatory, anchored at both the macro and micro levels, and responsive to the specific nature of the situation at hand. Key to situational leadership is adaptability. Leaders navigate among leadership styles to meet the changing or varying needs of communities and citizens, and have the insight and flexibility to understand when to adapt their leadership strategy to fit emerging and competing circumstances.

In the [case of Nepal](#), we have learnt that in responding to the crisis “local and volunteer leadership” had been more imperative than the leadership and presence of “paid and government staff.” The call is made for the deliberate development of local leadership in each community to support change. Beyond this, endogenous leadership capability would certainly enhance governance and local development beyond the immediate COVID-19 crisis, and in anticipation of future ones.

In the [experience of the MCCRN](#), “true leaders have to offer direction and be firm in the implementation of the same,” and further, the value of communities and other stakeholders “rallying behind” such leaders and implementing solutions in the best interest of citizens is necessary for good governance. In

contrast, shared leadership was also seen as an effective approach in responding to the pandemic, as well as being an avenue to advancing citizen participation in democratic governance.

What is clear is that no one form of leadership works everywhere and in all situations. In emergency situations, leaders often need to be directive, as there is little or no time for engagement and dialogue. Yet in response to COVID-19, alongside this kind of directive leadership leaders have also had to be collaborative, inclusive, compassionate, and participatory. As one practitioner puts it “success comes from thinking for and with the people,” both being critical steps in the process and practice of advocacy and movement building.

### **The value of reflection in social justice work**

Reflection is one of the most powerful tools that leaders have at their disposal. Often it is through reflection that transformative learning happens, leading to deep and sustainable change in perspectives, behaviors, and outcomes.

Through this reflective writing exercise that some of the authors reported enhanced their understanding of themselves in the unfolding crisis, leading to changes in their behavior. This included learning to be measured in their communication style and recognizing personal biases, preferences, and tendencies.

As social justice practitioners, it is important - to become aware of oneself, to divest oneself of unproductive biases, preferences and tendencies, and to one’s creativity. As advocates we often invite the communities we serve and work with to shift their perspectives and change their behaviors. Authentic leadership requires that practitioners model the behaviors that they are inviting others to embrace and practice. Understanding how this works can be key to supporting and enabling others to experience their own change. In a time of crisis and uncertainty it may be more difficult, yet no less important, for social justice practitioners to model this type of behavior and leadership.

In a similar vein, the exercise of collaborative writing and reflection (among a group of social justice scholars, educators, and practitioners from Nepal, Ethiopia, Kenya, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica and Canada) has not only been a platform for collaborative learning, mutual support, and solidarity, but has also modeled the kind of collaboration and reflective practice sought in this moment of crisis.

### **Learning is happening at the individual, organizational, and national levels**

In sharing their own stories and learning, this group of practitioners has also shared the learning that is taking place around them at organizational, collective or community, and societal levels:

“As a practitioner, I am learning that I can be more creative and adaptive if I want to. It is important to be flexible when engaging with people. [...] As an organization, we are learning to adapt to suit the community.” (Nigeria)

“Issues such as flexible working hours, workplace childcare facilities, our capacity to respond to emergency situations and meeting the needs of the communities we work with, while adhering to protocols to curb the pandemic are concerns that we are still thinking through as a leading network advancing the rights of women.” (Ghana)

“Cameroonians are keen on reading, responding and spreading the Minister of Public Health’s daily updates using various social media platforms. This increases public consciousness and engagement in hygienic practices and protection from health-related problems.” (Cameroon)

This learning is not only essential to enabling redress for the pandemic, but is being applied to other areas of governance, enabling participation and citizen engagement and thereby ownership of responses now and for the future. By sharing their stories, the authors are also influencing learning outside of their national jurisdictions.

### **Balancing acts and new possibilities**

The pandemic has left governments, civil society organisations, movement actors and communities with multiple points of tension. A form of polemic paralysis can set in as they try to balance competing socio-political imperatives and the complexity of satisfying the needs and demands of constituents while [upholding the rights of the people](#).

These tensions are apparent in various authors’ accounts and efforts, expressed in this reflective piece. At the fore is a difficult balancing act of governance: saving lives, keeping people healthy, and keeping the economy buoyant while providing transparent, evidence-based and timely information, ensuring meaningful participation and inclusion of diverse communities, and remaining accountable throughout the response.

As is the case [globally](#), the authors’ experiences show that this process has had both intended and unintended consequences. Many of these are positive and dynamic developments, offering new and adapted channels for governance and mobilization: innovations in remote working and virtual engagement; expansion in the use of new and existing technologies to generate data; greater attention to health-related public awareness and practice; enhanced collaboration between the state, the private sector, communities, and civil society actors; virtual governance and nimble advocacy tactics.

Yet these stories also show that the disease itself and the need for an urgent response have had negative impacts on individuals and communities

everywhere. Shielding children from contracting the virus by closing schools has, for example, exposed many of them to increased levels of violence and neglect, setbacks in development due to lack of necessary play, as well as a withdrawal of social protection services and nutrition support received through institutions such as the school system. Similarly, lockdown measures requiring families to stay home has exposed many to loss of employment, hunger, and violence, among other ills.

These measures and the expansion of executive power in general have also [accelerated](#) a closing space for civil society in many countries, as citizens (willingly or unwillingly) cede their rights in favor of health protection, and as some state actors overstep their authority. States of emergency and quarantine orders have negatively impacted youth unemployment and led to increases in crime. Already marginalized segments of the population, such as migrants, have become more impoverished. Many women and girls are increasingly subject to violence behind closed doors.

The need for new forms of social action, advocacy, and governance arrangements continues to evolve, increasingly requiring meaningful connection to the solidarity efforts and mutual aid initiatives emerging in many communities, greater trust across sectors, adaptations to existing accountability mechanisms, and the creation of new ones. Central to this is the ability of civil society actors to build on their (often novel) concerted efforts with state and private actors, to work more collaboratively together, and to continue expanding their networks and alliances as the pandemic waves ebb and flow into a ‘new normal.’ Communities in their diverse forms will need to build on these emerging strategies and novel methods to foster greater self-reliance and resilience. The extent to which this is possible will depend on the kinds of efforts documented in these stories, contributing to transparency, citizen voice, critical collaboration, and accountable governance throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

As social justice advocates, as development leaders, and as citizens, we must continue to remain curious, interrogating our own motives, our work and our next steps. And in our curiosity, we are invited to sit with the question of what is possible today that was not possible prior to this pandemic.

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## **Innovations in citizen response to crises: volunteerism and social mobilization during COVID-19**

**Roger Spear, Gulcin Erdi, Marla A. Parker, Maria Anastasiadis  
(April 30<sup>th</sup>)**

### **Introduction**

The global pandemic of Covid19 is having severe social and economic impact on people and communities in nearly every country on the planet and we have seen differential impacts exacerbating pre-existing social and health inequalities particularly in poor and minority ethnic communities. Inevitably the responses of governments and institutions have been found wanting, partly because of the scale and rapidity of the infections, but also due to failures in preparedness, as well as mistakes and delays in responses. Subsequently there have also been clear market failures in the way government procurement and business supply chains have functioned.

Civil society particularly through different forms of social-economic-political action has played an important role in helping to address these response weaknesses, and implicitly or explicitly revealed a critical dimension to established governments and institutions. The characteristics of typical government responses (lockdown, tracking, tracing, modelling) has pushed digital technologies to prominence for citizen digital/virtual responses. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework (with associated examples from the U.S and Europe) for understanding and subsequently empirically examining and evaluating COVID19 responses that can be used for further improvements both in application and theory. The framework has four key dimensions: *digital continuum*, *institutional-constituent continuum*, *tool innovation*, *response targets*. To conclude the paper, several lessons are offered, which may initiate and inform discourses and empirical observations about evolutions in social innovations related to crisis responses.

### **Framework: digitization, institutions and constituents, tool innovation, response targets**

The following framework reflects extant literature on factors related to crisis responses; but coupled with the COVID19 examples presented, new insights may emerge. In addition to providing descriptions of each framework element, political and policy dimensions inherent in each of them are highlighted.

#### **Digital continuum**

The role of information communication technologies (ICTs) and other tech based innovations have changed the boundaries, roles, resources and dynamics

of political and policy stakeholders in the context of responsiveness during crises. More specifically, these innovations have in many cases increased response capabilities, enhanced collaboration, provided agency to communities, increased demands for accountability, altered institutional arrangements, enlarged the scale of responses and contributed to the various narratives present during responses (Bennet, 2019; Pipek et al., 2014; Gonzalez, 2010; Palen & Liu, 2007). At one end of the continuum, innovations have not completely eroded the value and need of low-tech or no-tech approaches. While at the other, Jarvis (2005) identified “hashtag revolts” as key ways social media networks support internet activism, like occupy-type movements; although in successful global campaigns and mobilisations combine both the [internet and public space](#). For this particular framework, the digital continuum considers how COVID19 responses exist as purely digital, purely non-digital or some combination of both.

The novelty of COVID19 is that it requires social distancing in the face of meeting physical and non-physical human needs, thus highlighting the simultaneous necessity of effective tech and non-tech solutions. Moreover, these varied responses play multiple roles by providing needed community information, soliciting for and providing help, and providing socio-emotional support. For example, in Austria there are numerous self-organized purchasing initiatives for risk groups initiated by young people. Users on Twitter and Co. are calling for help for these people in their neighbourhoods. With the [#NeighbourhoodChallenge](#)<sup>1</sup>, people want to help those quarantined with their daily errands. To this end, users posted photos of notes that they hang up in the neighborhood, leading to young people offering their neighbours support - a movement which inspired imitators in Germany. Another example is the use of Instagram by actors and influencers in various parts of the world who read to children at home due to quarantining or create public service announcements encouraging social distancing<sup>2</sup>. A network of women in France named “Over the Blues”<sup>3</sup> who sew masks and hospital gowns for hospital staff established a Facebook and internet page to organise their distribution, allow entry into the network and provide a map showing similar activities throughout the country. In the French banlieue of Sartrouville, at the Cité des Indes, known as a marginal and problematic area, a group of young people use Facebook<sup>4</sup> to organise and solicit participation to bring food and meals to both hospital staff and to elderly people in their neighbourhood. Even in the absence of ICT tools, essential needs such as direct health care, health support, food, clothing and

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000115636108/nachbarschaftschallenge-wiener-rufen-dazu-auf-aelteren-mit-besorgungen-zu-helfen>

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. <https://www.instagram.com/carolinepetersliet/>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://over-the-blues.com/>, they have now 2500 voluntary with 156 local solidarity branch

<sup>4</sup> See “les Grands Frères et Soeurs de Sartrouville”, <https://www.facebook.com/LesGrandsFreresEtSoeursDeSartrouville/>; for a media coverage of this network, see : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A6w3wVXuUc>

shelter have increased demands for in-person volunteerism that may require physical, non-digital actions such as packaging and distributing goods. As an example, the gifts fences (previously used in the freezing winter of 2017) in Austria are dedicated fences where the citizens hang bags of food, hygiene products and anything else that helps, and where homeless people can help themselves freely<sup>5</sup>. Overall, these examples demonstrate the value of technology to scale responses and minimize risk of illness, but also reveal their limitations that still need to be filled with non-tech approaches. In other words, these online organisation tools are used for needs in offline life. Finally we can advance the idea that social media and the internet by shaping coalitions, creates space for online social networks to facilitate activists to strengthen connections and build social capital (Mundt et.al, 2018).

### **Institutional-constituent continuum**

Public, nonprofit and private institutions have varying capacities and motivations for addressing crises centered on the public values, institutional structures and formal policies (Wetter & Torn, 2020; Brugh et al., 2019; Culebro et al., 2019). Yet, insufficiencies and even unfairness of institutions have largely driven more community, grassroots based approaches (Anderson, 2008; Palen et al., 2007). Literature about the role of emotions in social movements in community-solidarity responses also informs constituent driven crisis responses where emotions trigger, shape strategies, and target objects of movements (Goodwin et.al 2009; Jasper 2011; Traïni 2009 ). However, collaborative governance has led to more hybrid approaches (Moynihan 2008, 2009). The literature on volunteer responses in crises (Whittaker et al, 2015) indicates two types: 1) emergent, where volunteers respond in the immediate aftermath, often innovatively as they are closely connected to the crisis impact; and 2) extending, where those who are already part of existing groups and NPOs and draw on those networks and resources. In this paper, our cases reveal the full range, but various forms of hybridity are most typical. In the platform "Covid-19 Civil Society Initiatives"<sup>6</sup> established by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs (an extension of the already existing platform "Freiwilligenweb" - a volunteer recruiting platform), self-organised groups as well as NPOs and social entrepreneurs but also commercial businesses can publicise their support offers. This list of helpers refers to a multitude of different initiatives that offer support to citizens of all ages and in different problem and life situations (elderly people, children, families, people with health and psychological problems etc.) but also to small entrepreneurs, self-employed and artists affected by the crisis. They range from neighbourhood initiatives, delivery services, fundraising platforms, appeals for donations, lists of regional online shops to support the regional

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. <https://www.1000things.at/blog/wie-du-obdachlose-menschen-momentan-unterstuetzen-kannst/>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.freiwilligenweb.at/de/freiwilliges-engagement/österreich/covid-19-zivilgesellschaftliche-initiativen>

economy to online courses and consultations of all kinds (e.g. how small businesses can apply for the announced state financial support or telephone discussion groups for caring relatives of people suffering from dementia).

From a policy, political and even administrative perspective, the extent to which responses reside in the domain of institutions or constituents has implications for efficiency, effectiveness, support, usage, and raises issues of civil rights and liberties violations.

The scale of the crisis has demanded huge levels of resources for institutional based responses by national, state and local governments to provide direct financial support to residents and the economy. In addition to the huge sums of money for the economy damaged by the lockdown similar support structures can be found in Austria and in France (e.g. support for short-time work to keep unemployment low, funds for small businesses and artists, discussions on additional welfare support for marginalized groups). Corporations have also been drawn into lend support, but the extreme needs has also required hybrid approaches such as the UK's Enabling Social Action programme which supports local authorities to collaborate on services with local people, service users, and civil society organisations in routine work; these have been extended to link with different volunteer recruitment platforms.

Governments in multiple countries had weaknesses in their preparation phase, due to poor planning, and years of austerity, plus difficulties with global supply chains, thus motivating communities to engage in social entrepreneurship to address failures such as lack of PPE (personal protective equipment). For example, the Hackney Wick Scrubs Hub was formed when four women talked to a doctor friend who was worried about scrub supplies. As a result, their friends from the fashion industry began designing and creating scrubs for healthcare workers out of their homes. They now coordinate a team of over 50 volunteers. Their Mutual Aid Group also established a fundraising online platform. Similarly in France, the government was not able to provide all necessary equipment, especially gowns. News on the TV showing hospital staff wearing trash bags<sup>7</sup> instead of real hospital gowns and the loss of several hospital staff from Covid19 due to insufficient personal protective equipment pushed many citizens to take initiatives and constitute help and solidarity groups to support hospitals. In all these initiatives, indignation and compassion were major factors in the emergence of collective action. In the Covid19 pandemic, from our cases we can see the impact of two kind of emotions motivating people to mobilise: reflexive, and moral emotions motivate people to organise themselves and create solidarity networks in order to do something, to participate in the collective effort against Covid, but also against stereotypical stigmatisation (e.g. of marginal neighbourhoods). These two kinds of emotions transform into an emotional energy as it finds rapid recognition, compassion and gratitude from society and state institutions (hospitals, municipalities, etc.).

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<sup>7</sup> See about this : <https://fr.theepochtimes.com/des-sacs-poubelles-utilises-comme-blouses-par-le-personnel-hospitalier-pour-pallier-a-la-penurie-1323519.html>

## **Tool innovation**

Examining innovation cycles reveals common outcomes when disruption and problems (i.e crises) arise: 1) adaptation of existing tools, 2) repurposing of existing tools, 3) removal of obsolete tools and 4) creation of new tools (Dekkers et al., 2014; Pumain et al, 2009; Schumpeter, 1991). This section of the paper provides examples illustrating some of these outcomes during the pandemic. One indicator is The Coronavirus Tech Handbook a crowd sourced continually evolving library of tools, services and resources relating to COVID19 responses, with an impressive range of over 20 categories of tools (from developers, to health workers, to consumers). For ordinary citizens and community groups its category of tools support Mutual Aid Groups, skills and time matching, fund-raising, and volunteering. And from the examples provided in this paper this involves extending the use of social media and communications platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp; Google Duo, Zoom, Facetime, Skype, Slack for communications; for e.g. WhatsApp Groups to connect volunteers). For supporting skill-time matching and volunteering, there's also more sophisticated local connectors and apps, like Nextdoor, a neighbourhood social networking app for connections and exchanging of information, goods, and services locally; established in California, 10 yrs ago, and now operating internationally in 11 countries, and volunteer platforms have also been extended for Covid initiatives, like: do-it.org with UK government support and the already mentioned Austrian "Covid-19 Civil Society Initiatives".

Extending the use of existing technologies has shifted *Digital Technologies Frontiers*: knocking on a neighbour's door is taking place, with more regularity, in fact some people say they've met their neighbours for the first time. But the digital technologies have moved substantially into more of our lives, our work, and our families. Almost every social innovation we've encountered was made possible through these new digital technologies, particularly the global companies founded in the last 20-25 years. As noted above, Nextdoor, the neighbourhood social networking app (which purchased the UK's Streetlife in 2017), gets its income from ads, and was valued at more than \$1bn two years ago. But at the next level citizen expertise has indicated considerable levels of innovation. Many Hackathons have been initiated to support social innovation - #HackForce virtual hackathon organized by TechChill Foundation is hosting a fully virtual hackathon for the online environment. Organized by volunteers from the startup community, HackForce gathered more than 650 hackers from 18 countries, working on many of the 71 originally submitted ideas. While some highly skilled citizen researchers have used open source data to inform the public, for example a Singaporean coder created a website using open data from the Singaporean government to map the daily status of every coronavirus patient, to provide detailed geographic and demographic detail. (Ref: <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovation-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>). John Hopkins University in the U.S. has created a similar tracking mechanism open to the public that illustrates the rate of virus (new cases, recovery and death) across the globe.

While not exhaustive, the examples have revealed a few insights into outcomes related to tool innovation. First, there are winners and losers. Digital tech companies have been the big winners, together with online delivery companies, and essential goods and services; poor people, the precariat, unemployed, vulnerable people have been the losers, who have been the focus for community responders and social innovation. There's been a scandalous neglect of care homes which have been the biggest losers. Second, bricolage and use of social networks seems to have been most prominent in community responses, mainly using or extending existing tools. Some quite low tech have nonetheless been very inventive, as the mentioned gifts fences.

### **Responsiveness targets**

Crises are rarely confined to one domain. They have equally devastating impacts beyond their direct targets. In case of COVID19, it has not just been healthcare systems experiencing a toll, but also economic, financial, political and educational systems. As such, the responses have focused not only on directly saving lives and treating the illness, but helping to mitigate the damaging indirect effects such job loss, business downturns, partial school shutdowns, and overwhelmed public resources.

Additionally, the pandemic has exposed existing disparities in socio-economic and health systems disproportionately impacting marginalized communities and thus compounding the negative impact of the virus. Thus some responses have specifically aimed to address unique needs of specific communities, fill gaps in institutionalized services and counter entrenched narratives of marginalized communities that can also prevent adequate care. The pandemic response becomes usurped or part of existing social movements aimed at eliminating marginalization. For example as noted above, the group of young people, “Les Grands Frères et Soeurs de Sartrouville”, in the French banlieue Cité des Indes, in Sartrouville, are highly stigmatized and known as “badlands of the republic” (Dikeç 2007). Despite negative media attention on the inhabitants of this kind of banlieue (especially the young ones) who are, according to the media, not able to respect the curfew or the law, solidarity networks have been organised in order to better organise the needs of health workers and elderly people in the neighbourhood. Another example comes from the U.S. where public sessions and media pieces have aimed to expose and explain the connection between inequitable systems and COVID19 death rates that are disproportionately high among communities of color and low income populations. They are accompanied by calls to action that galvanize targeted support for those communities (e.g. demand for more transparent data that provides more information about minority COVID19 cases). Anti-Asian sentiment and anti-African sentiment in China have also revealed the cultural norms and values associated with xenophobia where the virus has enabled negative narratives about belonging and “citizenship”, which has led to responses from institutions and individuals that either fan the flames of racism and “othering”, or seek to dismantle it.

## **Conclusions: Lessons learned for moving forward**

This paper highlights how the unique COVID19 pandemic has motivated and even required a range of responses to alleviate its direct and indirect impact on individuals, communities, institutions, systems, culture and policies. While responses reflect the insights from extant literature on the intersection of technology, social innovation, volunteerism, the cases presented in the paper also provide an opportunity to consider possibilities for new frameworks. The presented cases reflect variation in responses based on a digital continuum; institutional versus constituent driven action; use, evolution and creation of new technology tools; and targeted responsiveness based on direct and indirect needs as well as marginalized status.

There are inevitable limitations to this study, being based on case studies from Western countries, it can only indicate emerging patterns and types of responses. And it has not been able to map global responses, nor able to touch on the secondary socio-economic impacts in exacerbating or restricting responses to the risks of famine to 130m people. However, although this presented framework remains to be applied in an empirical context that can yield more rigorous insights into the evolution of social innovation vis a vis responses during crises, lessons can still be gleaned that address a critical question posed on the webpage <https://covid-entraide.fr/>:

*“The Covid-19 and its hideous face leave us the choice: do we want to find the world before or change course? The after covid is now: Act, reflect, organize, oppose, claim, think about tomorrow”.*

- Technology combined with constituent action and emotions are powerful tools with the potential to erode, circumvent or even replace entrenched institutionalized approaches to crises that can be insufficient.
- Market and state failure in vulnerable economic based systems reveal the necessity and resourcefulness of civil society, thus motivating considerations for new systems centered on sustainability and inclusivity.
- Common experiences and needs at the global and local levels underscore interconnected dependency on goods, services and data that may inform new norms and values related to solidarity, community and globalism.

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## **Covid-19 and the new global chaos**

**Breno Bringel (25<sup>th</sup> June 2020)**

### **Introduction**

We are living in a moment of global chaos. Chaos does not mean the complete absence of some kind of order, but suggests a level of turbulence, fragility and contemporary geopolitical uncertainty in the face of multiple "global risks" and possible destinations. Unpredictability and instability become the norm. This refers not only to greater volatility in the face of threats, but also to the very dynamics of political forces and contemporary capitalism. The world order that emerged with the fall of the Berlin Wall and sought to expand formal democracy in the world (despite how often the major powers destabilized and interrupted it whenever they thought it was necessary) hand in hand with neoliberal globalization, in a kind of "[global social-liberalism](#)". A narrative of global "prosperity" and "stability" was created that confined democracy to capitalism. This strategy is now being challenged in light of the prospect that the international market can hold up well, even with authoritarian drifts, neo-fascism and constant violations of individual rights. If the pandemic ends up producing a geopolitical shift, it would then be necessary to discuss some of the main emerging geopolitical trends and patterns, as well as the contentious scenarios in dispute at the global level. That is the focus of this article.

### **Neither de-globalization nor the end of capitalist globalization**

We are not facing the end of globalization and the emergence of "de-globalization", although we are possibly facing the end of capitalist globalization as we know it. The degree of radicalization of the territorial and financial expansion of capital during the last decades has been made possible by the creation of an agreement championed by the West – with the United States at the helm (even as its hegemony is on the decline) – which has allowed for the creation of dominant narrative of growth. This was attuned to the unlimited expansion of transnational companies and to the approval of diverse groups that hold power and national and international organizations. Its unfolding took place, as is well known, by removing all barriers in accordance with a grammar of deregulation, flexibilization and liberalization that secured neoliberalism's place around the world, while destroying the environment and the social life. With it came a process of cultural struggle to entrench neoliberal globalization as a model that was not only economic but also societal. Despite intense criticism of the alter-globalization movement and a host of resistance movements – and how much the 2008 crisis uncovered the most tragic and lethal dimension of financial capitalism and globalization – the response was not an alternative to it, but a radicalization of the model. The losses were shared with the entire population and states applied policies of adjustment and austerity while bailing out the banks, which in turn privatized the benefits.

Capitalist globalization was thus able to follow its course of accumulation and plunder, deepening the extractive model. The recent scenario, amplified in times of pandemic, seems to be a little different: among the different sectors of the right and extreme-right, "anti-globalists" and nationalist positions emerge everywhere, whether in the core of the system, in the "emerging powers", or in peripheral countries, seeking to reorganize capitalism in a more closed and authoritarian way. There is no single strategy or course. In fact, [Luis González Reyes and Lucía Bárcena](#) show how the three main hubs of capitalist globalization are following different strategies. The United States promotes protectionist policies while, at the same time, strengthening the trade war with China, which, like the European Union, seeks to strengthen global economic chains, although in different ways. In the first case, by pushing an ambitious plan of economic expansion, in which the new Silk Road initiative stands out. In the second, with trade negotiations and bilateral investments. Meanwhile, international trade, privatizations and capital flows may stumble over more public regulations proposed by different actors; dependence on inputs and products from other countries (visible in the pandemic with masks or respirators, but in reality extends, in many cases, to essential products), is prompting many countries to revise their policies, thinking about self-sufficiency or, at least, about reducing dependence. Strategies for specialization and internationalization of production, on the other hand, are being reworked and central states and transnational companies are reorganizing and increasing investments in technologies such as robotization or artificial intelligence. The world, therefore, seems to be moving, at least in the short term, not towards deglobalization, but towards a *more decentralized, reticular and ultra-technological capitalist globalization*.

Global value chains will change directions in the face of the post-pandemic recession, although they will certainly continue to carry a lot of weight. The supranational institutional framework designed to facilitate the logic of accumulation may lose weight in the face of a more complex economic and political plot of accumulation in cities and in hierarchical networks. Not everything is new, but the pandemic may accelerate and consolidate geopolitical changes and trends that have been triggering over the past decade. This is the case with the relative strengthening of China, which, even if it does not become a new *hegemon* in the short term, it will play a more decisive role in the world system. Conversely, the gap between the center and the periphery – or North and South – tends to increase even more, due to both the centrality of technological development and the economic recession, which is always accompanied by a known macroeconomic prescription that is harmful to the countries of the Global South. These scenarios and trends reinforce the fact that the current geopolitical order is predictably marked by greater rivalry in the interstate system, distrust between political and economic actors, but also by the deepening, on the part of dominant actors, of global militarization, which could strengthen systemic chaos.

It seems unlikely that a new global governance of health can emerge, both because of the faltering role of the World Health Organization and because of

the lack of commitment from the states themselves. International and multilateral organizations of all kinds have also failed to cope with the tragedy of the pandemic, either through silence, inability or incongruity. That is precisely why they need to reinvent themselves. Most of the regional blocs have been weakened and, in some cases, dismantled and without moral authority in the face of the pandemic. This is the case with the European Union, which, during the global health crisis, missed the opportunity to establish itself as an alternative to the failure of the US' response to the pandemic, but also in the face of the centralized and authoritarian Chinese model. Cracks and asymmetries within the block appeared again, making internal coordination and external projection difficult. On the other hand, those regional projects that some years ago tried to project themselves in Latin America as counter-hegemonic regionalisms – such as UNASUR, CELAC and ALBA-TCP – went almost silent in the pandemic and were not large enough to build any relatively well articulated supranational political response. In the case where they minimally functioned, as with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), this occurred mainly through the objective of exchanging information and coordinating policies to stimulate trade and business. Thus, in some cases the pandemic may lead to the definitive burial of some regional projects. In others, regionalism will be reorganized as a result of broader geopolitical and geo-economic changes.

### **Between the virus contention and social protests: national shock and local alternatives**

During the pandemic, national sentiments were mobilized, and the intervening state was vindicated even by neo-liberals. A kind of "transitional health Leviathan" emerged, as proposed by Argentine intellectual Maristella Svampa. With it came, in most cases, policies of social and health protection, but also the military in the streets, states of emergency where everything was suspended and the establishment of a dangerous warlike narrative. It turns out that permanent surveillance from the most classic forms to digital tracking and drones, control and management of [big data](#), new facial recognition devices, and other sophisticated forms of social control are deepening and not just to fight the virus. Power concentration adopted to combat Covid-19 may even be necessary to enable public health care and "protection" of the population. However, there is a very thin line between this and authoritarian practices. The state responses were diverse, also varying according to the profiles of their political regimes. In some cases, authoritarian state capitalism prevailed, while in others the more socially conscious face of the state appeared. However, much of the analysis of the state management of the crisis sought to highlight cases of "success" and "failure". The main variable for this was the lockdown of infected people and of the dead. There are certainly more successful strategies than others, and cases in which denial, coupled with incompetence (in this sense it is difficult to beat Bolsonaro and Trump), offers the worst side of the responses seen. But we must not forget that in the case of dependent states on the periphery and the global

semi-periphery, the difficulties in confronting the pandemic are even greater: public health systems are practically non-existent, the right to water is compromised, housing is precarious and overcrowded in the urban peripheries, and the state's capacities are limited. Nevertheless, the importance of the State and the national sphere coexisted with a strong appreciation of places and the local scale. All over the world, local initiatives have appeared, seeking to generate dynamics of mutual support and to build neighborhoods and communities to provide collective responses from below, based on people's daily needs. Given the difficulty of protesting in the streets, much of the analysis of resistance in times of coronavirus tended to emphasize the crucial role of digital activism, but also the creativity of social movements to generate spaces and [innovative proposals](#).

The press, as usual, tends to pay attention only to the most visible aspects of citizen action and social movements, such as flash mobs, *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests) or online petitions. Although this has been an important part of the collective actions during the pandemic, it is essential to also note what happens under the surface, such as the self-organization and protection of workers who have had to continue working, either because they cannot survive without their income or because their jobs fall within what are considered "essential services". Despite the restrictions and difficulties inherent to protests, uprisings can always occur through some catalytic event, even at unlikely times like a pandemic. This was the case with the brutal death of an African American man, George Floyd, by a white policeman in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, which unleashed a wave of anti-racist protests not seen in the United States since the fight for civil rights in the 1960s, impacting the entire world.

Although it is common to hear that the elderly population is the most vulnerable to the coronavirus, recent events have made it clear that being African-American in the United States or Black in Brazil, and in so many other countries with strong structural racism, also means that you belong to a *high risk social group*. In other words, the chances of dying from racism are greater than from the coronavirus, which leads to a relative reduction in the costs of protest in times of pandemic. Beyond the material and immediate needs, the commitment of many groups and collectives to the community and the reconstruction of the social bond in times of deep individualization of society has been significant. It has also sought to bring to light care work inequality, solidarity and food and energy sovereignty. The lockdown of a third of the world's population has also served to spread a message that feminists have long insisted on: the body must also be considered as a scale. But the local scale was not only important in a transformational, non-institutional and, in some cases, anti-institutional sense. In those countries that failed to push forceful measures throughout the national territory, there was fierce dispute with local and regional leaders who, along with unofficial initiatives, took on the institutional lead in the fight against the pandemic. In other cases, progressive and leftist municipalities have also sought to promote collaborative care platforms or have directly taken over the reins of crisis management.

This "new return" of places and their importance to social resistance and social movements in times of coronavirus cannot lead us to fall back into had seemed to be overcome, but which are once again widely circulating today, as if the global scale is the place of capitalism and the local scale the locus of resistance. As I have insisted [on several occasions](#), in the past two decades, the most *globalized* social struggles were the more *localized* ones. In other words, territorialized movements are the ones that have managed to internationalize more successfully. This has been the case, for example, with the peasant and indigenous movements in Latin America since the 1990s, but also with the several experiences gathered around the alterglobalization movement and global and environmental justice struggles. However, the emergence of what I have defined as a new [geopolitics of global indignation](#) during the last decade seems to have led to a lower intensity of organizational density among social struggles around the world. That protests expand globally, or rather, through different countries, does not mean necessarily that it is globalized in a strong sense – that it articulates with solid ties and builds a truly global response to the capitalist world system. On the one hand, it is important to distinguish between global actions and global movements. On the other, faced with the hypothesis that we would be facing new political cultures without such an internationalist effort, it would be necessary to deepen the debate on the changes in the "social movement form" and in the types of activism today. Although they continue to coexist with more traditional formats, they force us to question previous lenses to grasp cognitive, generational and identity dislocations, with important repercussions on practices of resistance, political articulations and conceptions and horizons of social transformation.

### **Three geopolitical scenarios: recovery, adaptation or transition**

In Classical geopolitics, there was a strong "geodeterminism", which links the provision of political actions to environmental conditions or places. Moreover, the predominant anthropocentrism allowed for unlimited territorial expansion and capital accumulation, in an effort to "domesticate" nature and natural resources. Although the ecosystem boundaries have long been crossed, the pandemic seems to have opened an inflection with regard to the importance that the environmental issues and the possible geopolitical scenarios acquire vis-à-vis social and economic models. In the contemporary political debate, three different projects dispute the directions of the post-pandemic world:

- Business as usual, focused on GDP growth, predatory developmentalism and the search for new market niches to lift economies out of the crisis, from adjustment policies that require, once again, the sacrifice of the majority to maximize profits for the few;
- The "Green New Deal", which initially emerged a decade ago in the United Kingdom, has gained more prominence in recent years from the

proposal of Democratic representatives in the United States to generate social and economic reforms to transform the energy sector. It has also spread very quickly in the last year (and especially during the pandemic), with diverse appropriations from companies, international organizations and the European Union, which is creating its own "[European Green Deal](#)";

- The paradigm shift towards a new economic and ecological social matrix, proposed by more combative environmental movements and various anti-capitalist sectors that see degrowth, *buen vivir* ("good living) and more disruptive measures as the only possible alternative.

[These projects](#) seem to open up three possible scenarios, which do not occur in a "pure" mode and can interwoven in multiple ways, although all have their own logic: the *recovery* of the most aggressive logic of economic growth; the *adaptation* of capitalism to a "cleaner" model, although socially unequal; or the *transition* to a new model, which implies a radical change in the ecological, social and economic matrix. In view of these projects and scenarios, it is important to ask ourselves the implications of each of them.

The implementation of "business as usual" implies an even greater strengthening of militarized globalization, of the biopolitics of authoritarian neoliberalism, and of a model of destructive despoliation that would lead, predictably, to even more catastrophic scenarios, including wars and the deepening of the eco-social crisis. Terms such as "return to normality" or even "the new normal" justifies and ensures this type of scenario, based on the anxiety of a large part of the population to recover their social lives and/or employment. In the case of adapting to a green capitalism, deep geopolitical and geo-economic adjustments seem likely. According to this vision, a green makeup is no longer enough, a process that began with the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the "adjectivation" of development as "sustainable". The situation now requires going a step further. And we know that, if capitalism accepts it, it does so not necessarily for the protection of the environment, but because this may be a way to maximize profits. The new strategies of coexistence between the accumulation of capital and the environmentalist imaginary may give more room for autonomy to local politics, but also deepen North/South inequalities and environmental racism.

However, it is necessary to be fair: this predominantly "adaptive" scenario is still strongly disputed. On the one hand, an important part of the dominant collectivities, especially in the North, understands that it is a path to follow. On the other hand, political forces that defend social justice and sustainability seek to stress it in various ways, towards a rupture and an integral reconfiguration. This is the case of proposals that claims for the "decolonization" of the rationale of the Green New Deal from the South; or that critically discuss their assumptions, but ground them in other realities such as Latin America, Africa or Asia, giving more importance to the State and to the contributions of popular

movements, with the objective of promoting, as Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale suggest in the context of Argentina, a great [ecosocial and economic pact](#) that can address some national realities and serve as a basis for essential North/South democratic dialogues.

Finally, the third scenario is the most difficult, but also the most necessary so that the environment is not only, once again, a banner to save capitalism, but to save humanity and the planet. It is the social movements themselves, the territorial experiences and a diversity of popular and political-intellectual struggles that drive this scenario, stretching the limits of the narratives of green capitalism. The transition towards a radical change in the eco-social matrix is a goal of several social movements today in both Global North and Global South.

At a time of systemic inflection point, when attempts at a capitalist exit from the crisis join a growing political authoritarianism, it is essential to create broad democratic and transformative platforms that bring together activists, committed citizens and social organizations that seek to prevent the destruction of ecosystems and that the multiple inequalities brought to light by the Covid-19 crisis be swept under the rug. There is not one recipe, but a multiplicity of routes to escape from capitalist globalization and to articulate a new globalization of trans-local movements. Many are already underway and seek to reinvent transnational solidarity and militant internationalism, expanding future horizons. It is in this spirit that the proposal for a [Latin American Ecosocial Pact](#) was born on June 2, 2020, with the support of more than 2,300 people and 450 organizations until the [first public presentation](#) of the initiative on 24 June. One of the key points of the platform is the *articulation of redistributive justice with environmental, ethnic and gender justice*.

To this end, concrete proposals, that also spread in other forums – such as solidary tax reform, cancellation of states' foreign debts and a universal basic income –, are combined with broader horizons associated with building post-extractivist societies and economies, strengthening community spaces, care and information/communication from society. Moving in this direction will require sacrifices and drastic changes ranging from the personal sphere (changing habits, reducing consumption or reducing travel) to the more macro (policies that make it possible to relocate food and a change in the food system or a radical decline in sectors such as oil, gas and mining), as well as labor relations and social life as a whole. It also implies territorial resistances that seek new forms of articulation, connection and intelligibility within the global map of emerging struggles. Or, in other words, to develop, from the struggles of our time, a *global movement* that can challenge the directions of this *new alter-globalization moment*. Only then we will move from a destructive globalization to a "[pluriverse](#)" one. Only then other possible worlds will emerge.

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## **The social and the subjective: defining disablement at the birth of the Disabled People’s Movement in Britain**

**Luke Beesley**

### **Abstract**

*Recent activist memoirs and archival work has begun to challenge our understanding of the historical Disabled People’s Movement in Britain; recentring the voices of self organised groups of activists in its strategic and analytic development. This article takes advantage of the results of this work to explore the emergence of a social definition of disability during the formation of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS); the first national organisation of disabled people to form in post-war Britain.*

*Utilising a previously private, internal UPIAS communique from before its first conference, I show that the adoption of the social definition followed a period of extensive debate amongst activists on the nature of subjective responses to disablement and the social position of disabled people. I situate this debate in the history of UPIAS’ emergence from a critique of the existing Disability Movement, and outline both the objections raised to the social analysis of disability, alongside the counter-arguments deployed to defend it. I conclude by evaluating the success of this defence against UPIAS’ final agreed policy document.*

**Key words:** Disability Politics, UPIAS, Disabled People’s Movement, Disability History, Finkelstein, Radical Theory.

### **Introduction: between the theory of the movement and the movement of theory**

The last eighteen months have seen a significant upsurge in resources on the history of the Disabled People’s Movement (DPM) in Britain, albeit with little indication that Disability or Social Movement scholars have recognised the significance of newly available accounts. The summer of 2019 alone included the publication of Judy Hunt’s *No Limits* - a comprehensive history of the DPM by one of its most longstanding activists - alongside the public opening of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People’s archives - a vast collection of papers related to Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) held at Manchester Central Library. Alongside these developments, Tony Baldwinson’s *Radical Community Archives*<sup>1</sup> has continued to publish internal documents from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tonybaldwinson.com/archives/>

historic DPOs online, allowing us a fascinating insight into the development of policies, strategy, and political theory within the early period of the DPM.

This article seeks to complement these developments with a study of how political theory was collectively contested and formulated in the earliest days of the DPM. Using Vic Finkelstein's *Are We Oppressed?* (2018) [1974], a document which collects and responds to objections to the social understanding (or 'model') of disability during the movement's formation, I seek to show that the most emblematic and controversial tenet of theory generated by the movement has a more complicated democratic history than is often imagined; one which has direct implications for evaluating its rejection in later academic accounts of disability.

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The DPM in Britain exhibits a peculiar, deep seated, and extensive split on questions of theory. This division, which carries almost universally between the organisations of the movement and its academic wing in Disability Studies, is all the more stark in that it does not concern the interpretation or implications of certain pre-agreed theoretical premises or questions, but the foundational concepts and definitions used to explain the existence of disability and the position of disabled people in society. Consequent on these fundamental disagreements over the nature of disablement, there exists no vision of disability liberation, or emancipatory strategy, that is shared between the academy and activist community.

DPOs, from the most politically militant (such as Disabled People Against Cuts) to government funded service providers (such as the Kent Centre for Independent Living), hold a structuralist and materialist account of disability which emerged with the formation of the DPM in the mid 1970s. This account, somewhat misleadingly labelled as the Social "Model" of Disability, was first formulated by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS):

'(I)t is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. It follows from this analysis that having low incomes, for example, is only one aspect of our oppression. It is a consequence of our isolation and segregation, in every area of life, such as education, work, mobility, housing, etc.' (1976: 3-4)

By this definition, disability is the result of a social formation that separates impaired people from the core activities of modern civic life and the social leverage which comes with participation. While impairments - conditions of the

body or mind which can be identified by medical science - hold a material existence, their social implications rest entirely on how governments, employers, civil society, and civic institutions structure the rules of social participation. The strategy of DPOs has, therefore, been externally focussed: with the aim of identifying barriers to full integration and dismantling them through a mixture of direct action, lobbying, and the promotion of alternative forms of access to public life.

Much of contemporary Disability Studies, on the contrary, begins from the indissoluble link between impairment, disabling barriers, and prevailing attitudes in the experience of individual disabled people: a nexus within which the qualitative aspects of a physical or mental condition interact directly with the discursive practices of institutional and non-institutional sub groups (medical regimes, the family, ethnic or religious communities, the media) active in disabled people's lives. (Thomas: 1999; Shakespeare and Watson: 2002). This focus has generated a significant critique of the activist view which, at its mildest, seeks to radically revise the social definition to include explicit reference to the experience of impairment types (Levitt: 2017) or the emotional impact of disablist social practices on identity formation (Reeve: 2012). At its most stringent, it rejects the activist framework entirely, and seeks to build analytic models which collapse the categorical distinction between the body and the social through Critical Realist (cf, Shakespeare: 2006a) or Poststructuralist (cf. Tremain: 2006) methodologies.

The purpose of this piece is not to arbitrate these debates, but to explore one of their ironies. If we grant the claim that impairment and social phenomena are experienced simultaneously, then how do we explain the adherence of a democratic mass movement - numbering tens of thousands of activists at its height - to a theory that runs so contrary to their immediate lived experience? What arguments were successful in convincing people that their situation was the result of macrological social organisation and not, more obviously, a mixture of their own bodily limitations and the attitudes and intentions of those they came into contact with? Furthermore, how do we make such an explanation without diminishing the agency of lay activists by focussing exclusively on organisations' leadership or movement theoreticians?

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Thanks to archival work undertaken by the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, and its subsequent digitisation by Tony Baldwinson, we are beginning to get a picture of the internal life and debates of the DPM from which to launch such an enquiry. *Are We Oppressed?* is a key resource; collecting the earliest responses and critiques of disabled activists to the social definition of disability alongside a defence, from Finkelstein, of its validity and its uses for social and political action.

The objections in this document concern the role of subjective views and experience in identifying the social position of disabled people; and in particular how much primacy should be given to the feelings, attitudes, and self-conceptions of disabled and able-bodied people in an analysis of disability. Compiled with commentary on the eve of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation's (UPIAS) first conference in the winter of 1974 - at which this definition of disability was adopted by its membership - it stands as a rare insight into exactly what activists conceived as the role of their own experience within their project, and how wavering activists were convinced of the viability of the social approach<sup>2</sup>.

This article argues for two distinct but interrelated claims. Firstly, through an historical account of the formation of UPIAS in response to the professionally dominated 'Disability Movement', I argue that rigorous internal debate was integral to the UPIAS project and that, as such, any discussion of its collective policies or positions cannot be separated from their formation in internal discussion and the active assent of its membership. Secondly, I show through an exegesis of the arguments in *Are We Oppressed?* that the role accorded subjectivity within UPIAS's analysis was a matter of significant debate within its early cadre; which only subsided after both a counter-critique of proposed alternatives to the social definition, and the development of an account of subjective responses to disability that is distinct from (although compatible with) later attempts to explain divergent experiences of disablement in terms of racial and gendered oppression (Oliver: 1990 pp.73-7; Barnes & Mercer: 2003 pp.60-1).

I begin by outlining the critique of the democratic deficit in the Disability Movement developed by Finkelstein and Paul Hunt alongside their earliest theorisations of the nature of disability, and their attempt to counter such a tendency by creating channels for internal debate in the fledgling UPIAS. I subsequently outline three strains of counter-argument to the social interpretation found within internal literature and Finkelstein's responses to them. Finally, I discuss Finkelstein's own alternative account of the generation of subjective attitudinal response to disablement, before concluding with an indication of how successful these counter-arguments were by comparing the propositions raised in the internal literature with the final policy statement of UPIAS's first conference, and the proceedings of the conference itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Social understanding/definition/interpretation/approach' will be used instead of 'social model' to refer to the thesis that disability is imposed on the impaired person due to the rules of social organisation. This is to avoid anachronism (as no attempt was made to model this thesis until several years after the debates that I recount), and to avoid confusions that arise from blurring distinctions between a set of definitions and their operationalisation within specific contexts in the form of a model or models (Finkelstein 2007).

## **Finkelstein, the social understanding of disability, and the birth of UPIAS**

The impetus for the creation of UPIAS arose from a dual critique of the Disability Movement in Britain, and in particular its strategy of prioritising welfare issues over broader strategies of social integration, developed privately by Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt in the early 1970s. Finkelstein, a refugee and former political prisoner from Apartheid South Africa, and Hunt, a campaigner within residential homes in Britain, came to the conclusion that only a new organisation with a radically different mission to those already in existence could solve the problems they identified, and began to seek the support of other disabled people nationally for its creation.

Their first critique concerned the subject matter of disability itself, and stemmed initially from Finkelstein's period of imprisonment. Paradoxically, Finkelstein had found that South African prisons were much more accommodating to his access needs than wider South African society. In prison, he later revealed, he found the first bed he could comfortably get into (a mattress on the floor, as provided to all political prisoners) and that even the hard labour ordered on him by the court was facilitated through the assignment of 'helpers'. Conversely, the long list of prohibited activities contained in his banning order after his release 'didn't make much difference to (his) life', as the premises he was banned from (educational institutions, premises of publications, courts, etc) were places wholly in-accessible to him as a wheelchair user (2005a 1-2). From this perverse situation, and a re-engagement with Nelson Mandela's trial speech on the 'disabilities' imposed on black South Africans under Apartheid, Finkelstein began to conceive of the social exclusion of Disabled People as something rooted in the structures of the society they live in, rather than as caused by the fact of them having an impairment of the body or mind. By early 1972, Finkelstein had begun to say, in private, that disability was best understood as "a social relationship between a person with an impairment and the social environment in which they live, rather than just being a personal (medical) possession, condition, or attribute' (ibid: 2); a position bolstered by the support of Hunt.

The consequences of such a view were that the social relationships that created disability could be changed in order to eliminate the social exclusion of people with impairments; and that the contemporary focus on welfare benefits within the Disability Movement was far too limited to meet that aim. Finkelstein and Hunt attempted to convince professionals working with, and organisations for, disabled people of their position, and to alter their own practice accordingly. As Finkelstein later recalled, the results of these meetings were non-existent (2001: 5; 2005a: 2).

Secondly, Hunt and Finkelstein identified a failure of representation within the British Disability Movement. At the time of Finkelstein's emigration, the Disability Incomes Group (DIG) was the most influential Disability organisation in Britain, with significant support amongst disabled people (J.Hunt 2019: 69). As Finkelstein recounts, however:

‘Although it was started by two women, Megan Duboisson and Berit Moore (Thornberry / Stueland), who were concerned about broad social rights of disabled people and the way disabled ‘housewives’ were ineligible for any of the current disability benefits, policy became dominated by men, including some influential male academics, and they transformed the organisation into a rather narrow parliamentary lobbying group wholly focused on ‘benefits’. (...) Having started as a mass organisation, concentration on parliamentary lobbying meant that the grassroots membership soon had no clear role within the organisation and membership began to decline. In order to lobby parliament only a few experts are needed who know the issues and who can present and argue them effectively.’ (2001: 3)

To prevent the domination of the Disability Movement by a professional element, the pair decided to solicit support for building a group whose policy would be determined solely and democratically by disabled people. To this end, Paul Hunt wrote a letter to the national and disability presses in 1972 asking disabled people who shared their concerns to respond and indicate their willingness to create such an organisation (P.Hunt: 1972).

The critique of the democratic deficit within the Disability Movement had direct implications for the establishment of the social understanding as the guiding principle for an organisation. If the new organisation was not to repeat the mistakes of the DIG, it would be necessary for lay members to have real control over the organisation’s activities and strategy - including the political theory under which it laboured. It would not, then, be sufficient for Hunt and Finkelstein to attempt to get into positions of organisational leadership and then simply impose the social understanding by dictat; to be a dominant theoretical force, it would have to be accepted by the majority of the organisation’s members and be upheld by them in their campaigns. The attempts to convince prospective members began shortly after Hunt’s letter was published, and only concluded in the first conference of the organisation some two years later. As we shall see, the debate around this was rich and wide-ranging; provoking both clarifications and defenses of the initial argument from Finkelstein which are relevant to any ongoing debates of the validity of the social interpretation.

### **The internal circulars and the early membership: UPIAS before its first conference**

That Finkelstein and Hunt held the position that disability is a product of social relations (rather than the fact of having an impairment) before UPIAS was formed is a matter of historical record; it was not, however, the starting position for those who responded to Hunt’s appeal. In order to gain organisational consensus on what the policies, aims, and analysis of the new group should be, two years’ worth of private debate were conducted by way of confidential

circulars in which those who wished to join the fledgling UPIAS were free to express their views, share news from campaigns they were involved in, and propose or criticise any prospective policy. This process culminated in the first congress of UPIAS in Winter 1973<sup>4</sup>, in which the Union's *Aims and Policies* document (1975) was adopted by the membership.

Between the 1972 letter to the disability presses and the date of the first conference, eleven internal circulars were distributed amongst the UPIAS membership (Baldwinson 2019: 76). Paul Hunt composed the first circular as a questionnaire to find out what correspondents believed were the most pressing issues in their lives and how they'd like the new organisation to operate, and used the second circular to collate the initial thoughts of prospective members (ibid: 21-31). From the third circular onwards, independent pieces by activists and members began to be circulated to disabled people who had expressed an interest in the organisation (ibid. 8). Only the first two of these circulars, along with *Are We Oppressed?* are currently available in their entirety. The publication of the latter marks the first time where the content of these missing pre-conference circulars is quoted at length, and is thus a vital resource for understanding who the early cadre of UPIAS were, what they believed were the priorities for the Disabled People's Movement, and how these should be met.

The document also records an important turning point in Britain's Disabled People's Movement. The text was written during August of 1974, circulated to members shortly afterwards, and contains Finkelstein's responses to criticisms raised of his and Hunt's position in the period immediately before the first conference of UPIAS (where this position would either be approved by the membership or rejected in favour of a different formulation). It is one of the last opportunities that Finkelstein had to convince the membership of the desirability of his and Hunt's view as the guiding principle for their new organisation.

Later critiques of the social interpretation and models used to operationalise it imply that this membership was already predisposed to such a view in light of their racial and gender homogeneity, their shared spinal impairments, and the prevalent influence of Marxism on their worldview (cf, Shakespeare 2006: 197-8; Lloyd 1992: 209-12). While Finkelstein himself accepts that wheelchair users were over-represented in UPIAS for 'historical reasons' (2001: 4), the members quoted in *Are We Oppressed?* don't appear to fall neatly into any kind of demographic or ideological category. In the public edition, contributors are referred to anonymously, making it difficult to identify immediately the gender (or any other characteristic) of the writer. From some explicit statements within their contributions, however, it appears that there was a greater level of heterogeneity within the membership than is often imagined. For example, while most writers quoted do not explicitly state their impairment, one author mentions being blind (48), and it is clear that the level of institutionalisation

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<sup>3</sup> The conference was split into a physical session in October, followed by a period in which members not in attendance were able to vote on UPIAS' policy documents and committee positions by post. This process ended in December 1974 (Baldwinson 2019: 9)

which members experienced at the time or writing varied - with contributors writing to the circular from residential homes (16), community living arrangements (17), and in at least one case a university (41). Marxism is only positively appealed to once by any contributor quoted in *Are We Oppressed?*; interestingly, this writer also states their involvement with a local branch of Women's Liberation (47). Explicit rejections of antagonistic political projects (18, 40), and Marxism in particular (41), are more common.

Without the names of the contributors, the full set of circulars, or a list of members, we should be cautious about extrapolating from the information presented in *Are We Oppressed?* about the broader demographic makeup of UPIAS. As the lengthiest piece of public evidence of both the positions and concerns of the early membership<sup>4</sup>, however, it undermines the plausibility of attempts to explain the UPIAS analysis of disablement on the basis of shared impairments or political philosophy within the organisation at its inception. This insight, alongside the sharp political disagreements that are recorded in members' contributions, mean that the fact that the Union's analysis developed in the way that it did requires a more nuanced and less mechanical explanation than the one often offered.

## Alternative positions

While the first two circulars do not touch explicitly on the nature of disability itself; an extract of Finkelstein's contribution to the third circular late in 1972<sup>5</sup> (2005b) gives us an early statement of the position the organisation was to express in *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976). This appears to be the first time that the content of Finkelstein and Hunt's theoretical position was put forward to the UPIAS membership.

In this early piece, Finkelstein differentiates between impairment, handicap, and disability as three distinct phenomena whose treatment by a social organisation require different forms of intervention. Impairment is defined as the physical state of having 'an abnormality (or damage) in an individual's body which is then described and treated by medical science. Handicap is considered to be a context dependent, functional limitation which 'accrues from an impairment'. As the same functional limitations may arise from a variety of distinct impairments, Finkelstein argues that their reduction falls properly into the realm of physio- and occupational therapy, rather than the direct treatment of a medical condition.

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<sup>4</sup> Circular 2, by contrast, is less than seven pages in length - including Paul Hunt's editorial commentary, a discussion of the logistics of meeting in London, and two responses from people unwilling to join. The majority of members' contributions to it are rarely longer than two or three sentences (Baldwinson 2019: 24-31)

<sup>5</sup> I date the initial publication of this extract according to that placed on it by the archivists of the online Disability Archive (Finkelstein 2005b). Baldwinson, in his chronology of the UPIAS circulars, estimates the date of publication at 1973 (2019: 76). It is unclear why there is a discrepancy in dating.

Disability, by contrast:

‘results when an individual is unable to participate in social relations because these very social relations are organized in such a way that the physical handicap excludes its possessor.’

Regardless of the level of medical stabilisation of a given impairment, or the reduction of a functional limitation, available to a person at a given moment, Finkelstein argues, there remains a disjunct between the level of integration of people with impairments within that society, and the level of integration that would be technically possible if society were organised differently. This takes the form of exclusion - or segregation - of people with impairments within that social totality; with degrees of severity stretching from being unable to access certain environments, to exclusion from work and leisure activities, to its purest form in the completely segregated and dependent forms of life found in residential institutions. Finkelstein described this relationship of segregation as a variety of oppression and, unlike the medical and technical problems raised by impairment and handicap, sees it as purely as a socio-political imposition on impaired people to be resolved by collective struggle.

The critiques of this view collected in *Are We Oppressed?* fall into three categories: arguments prioritising the epistemological position of the disabled person<sup>6</sup>; arguments from the explicit intentions of those who produce exclusionary social relationships; and one alternative explanation for the social exclusion of disabled people which I will call the ‘Attitudinal Account’.

### **Epistemological priority**

A number of members quoted by Finkelstein object to his conclusion that the exclusion of physically impaired people amounts to a social oppression on the basis that physically impaired people do not, or can be imagined not to, recognise oppression as part of their experience of disability. If this is the case, it follows that measures to end what Finkelstein identifies as oppression aren’t guaranteed to reflect the aspirations of disabled people themselves, and are likely to be based on a falsification of their actual experience.

Part of the justification for this argument is phenomenological<sup>7</sup>; with members indicating that they don’t feel that the subjective threshold for feeling oppressed in their case has been met (‘Oppressed never. When I feel weighed down with impossible burdens, tyrannically severed and harshly dominated then I may agree’ (49), ‘As for me, as someone physically impaired, I don’t feel particularly oppressed, so why bother?’ (40)), with some indicating that different words would better describe their subjective state when dealing with service providers

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<sup>6</sup> I.e., the role of their individual experience in explaining the phenomenon of disability.

<sup>7</sup> i.e., relating to their subjective interpretation of the world.

and wider society ('dreadfully upset' (40), 'it's a nuisance' (49)). It is further speculated that this view is shared by a sizeable number, if not the majority, of physically impaired people in Britain: either through the psychological effects of institutionalisation (18), the relative benefits of institutional life (lack of housework, guaranteed company, etc) (41), or from analogy from the personal feelings of the writer (40). One member argues that, if the claim that physically impaired people are oppressed is to be considered valid, its proponents 'will require a large sample of the physically impaired population to provide those experiences' (49)

### **Arguments from intention**

These counter-arguments criticise the use of the term 'oppression' on the basis that, in common language uses of the term, there is an implication that oppression results from the conscious action of an individual, or groups of individuals, which is designed to cause harm or restrict freedom. Such an intention is difficult to prove in light of other, more plausible, explanations. As one writer has it:

'Oppression to me is something akin to malice aforethought. Something premeditated. To prove oppression we would need to prove premeditation. Our problems stem from disunity and lack of coherent voice. Our need is to put across our feelings, opinions. We know, others assume' (43)

Another contribution indicates the difficulty of proving any intentional oppression in large institutional bodies that physically impaired people interact with:

'I honestly don't think that this is the intention of the NHS or other official bodies. I don't think they intend to oppress or set out to oppress us. I think we are neglected, forgotten, and wrongly treated often enough, but I don't think it is deliberate oppression (...) I've felt they've fallen sadly short in their duty very often, and also in their understanding and the choice of persons they employ to carry out the wishes of the State and various organisations can be very poor indeed. Yet again, I have still never felt that they have set out to oppress me. (40-1)

If this critique holds, it would mean that the social interpretation, as laid out by Finkelstein, leads to an untenable conclusion, and that strategic decisions resulting from the hypothesis that physically impaired people are oppressed are unlikely to reflect the real cause and nature of their social position.

## **The attitudinal account**

Unlike the two counter-arguments above, this account provides an alternative description of the social position of disabled people and its cause within wider society. It was originally published in the third internal circular (the same issue in which Finkelstein expressed the position outlined above), and at over-six pages is the longest single contribution quoted in *Are We Oppressed?*

The account begins from the premise that, while an impairment does disqualify someone from taking part in certain exceptional activities (the example used is participating in an Everest expedition), there are many other spheres in which the physically impaired are excluded despite there being no causal basis for this in their impairment. The writer identifies education, housing, and employment as areas where physically impaired people experience ‘mistreatment (...) without their having done anything to merit it’ (9).

Such mistreatment is characterised as discrimination, and the author asserts that its existence is caused both by an existing prejudice within the minds of some members of society, and a ‘norm conforming’ set of behaviours in others caused by a lack of accurate information on what disability means or by the existence of stereotypes of the disabled (10). These active or passive beliefs about disabled people can be caused by a number of different factors, all of which imply varying scopes of influence: some applying only to one individual at a time (as the result of a personal bad experience (11)), while others may apply to large numbers of people (such as through scapegoating (12), or ignorance of the social cost of segregating disabled people (14)); some directly cause prejudice (such as taking the existing ‘equality gap’ between disabled and able bodied people as a permanent consequence of disability (12) and developing feelings of superiority on that basis (13)), while others merely imply a feeling of unease or confusion about disabled people (such as a general ‘dislike of difference (10)).

The author proposes that changing these attitudes should be the main focus of UPIAS policy, and that its strategy should reflect the three forms in which these attitudes can be expressed: as rational or rationalised beliefs, as affective or emotional responses to a situation, and as the activity of discriminating against a physically impaired people. The first two forms, the author argues, can be combated by ‘propagating accurate and relevant information about the situation of the physically impaired to as many people as possible’ (14), while in the case of discrimination UPIAS should

‘stand firmly behind all who are the victims of discriminatory practices. People so suffering should be encouraged to resist ... if penalisation occurs - this should be publicised’ (ibid).

### **Finkelstein’s response: structural and systemic exclusion and the problem of explanation.**

Finkelstein begins by pointing out a methodological distinction between the three arguments that contradict his claim that physically impaired people are oppressed, and the premise he and others in UPIAS use to reach the oppression claim. The former, Finkelstein argues, are predicated upon the assumption that the social position of physically impaired people can be identified and described from the first person experience of their social relationships - whether through that of the impaired person, or that of the able-bodied member of society. The latter is extrapolated from macro-economic phenomena, measurable inequality, and systematic policies of segregation within firms and institutions (6). Citing examples used by other contributors to the circular, Finkelstein points to high rates of unemployment and low pay amongst physically impaired people, lack of choice in terms of housing, limited access to education (21), and policies which charge impaired people more to travel (15) as examples which corroborate the claim of oppression.

Concluding oppression from these kind of examples does not, he argues, require any specific mental state to be held by any party, but is concluded from the nature of the aggregate relationship of the actors:

“Oppression” does not exist simply because it is in the “mind” of the doer as intention, nor to the “mind” of the done-to as a feeling. It is in the factual situation that exists between a “doer” and a “done-to.” If someone was being hit in the face, we would not have to ask him whether [they] “felt” hit before we could decide that this is what was happening to him. Nor would we have to ask the hitter whether this is what he “intended” doing. We look at the situation between the two, what is happening between them whether they admit this or not, whether they are fully aware of the facts or not, whether they are conscious of it or not. Then we decide on the reality of the situation. If physically impaired people are oppressed we have to decide whether we agree that this is a matter of fact, in spite of the “intentions” or “feelings” of anybody.’ (7-8) [gloss in original]

That there are various thoughts, feelings and attitudes which correspond to a social position, and which can be accurately described, is taken as *prime facie* true by Finkelstein (26). To be an adequate basis for analysing the social position of impaired people, and for being any kind of guide to action for an organisation, accounts based on these qualitative mental states would need to account for how and why systematic exclusion and inequality emerge within a social organisation, and how they are sustained. Conversely, an account which begins from the fact that the systematic exclusion exists, and wishes to provide guidance for social and political action, is required to account for why subjective responses to it differ and may be in tension with its analysis.

Finkelstein asserts that the existence of qualitative mental states does not imply their generalisability, and while I may be sure that I have an attitude, feeling, or

belief, it does not follow that other people share it (7). If these qualitative states are to provide a causal basis for the social position of disabled people as a whole, or an insight into its nature, they will require a grounding in phenomena that can be recognised as generalisable between subjects. Finkelstein identifies two difficulties with finding such a general or universal basis for attitudes: in its lack of support within the scientific study of mental states and behaviour; and in a modal or logical paradox which emerges from trying to explain individual mental states while maintaining their primacy over social phenomena.

As a practicing psychologist, Finkelstein is aware of the disunity within psychological research at the time of his writing, and the relative decline of its dominant schools, which rooted attitudes and behaviours within universal tendencies of the human subject:

‘Ideas such as, “norm-conforming behaviour may be based on stereotypes” and “attitudes may be ego-defensive, rooted in insecurity and inferiority” have long been suspect and we should be wary of being involved in the shop-worn concepts. Professional psychologists are at present involved in violent disagreements about the various theories of human behaviour and are divided into definite schools of thought. Each school produces arguments that prove the other schools wrong!’  
(28)

If there is going to be any explanation of attitudes wide enough to account for the social position of disabled people, it is unlikely to find backing from within science that isn’t already compromised by critique. Without taking sides in these debates within psychology, and thus advocating this or that form of counselling to overcome this situation (21), accounts based on mental states and attitudes cannot simply assume a shared basis for these mental states that transcends the individual.

The second problem arises when we ask what kind of phenomena explain mental states or attitudes. If these are explained through appeals to pre-existing mental states that the subject holds about themselves or the world (such as explaining scapegoating by reference to beliefs about one’s interest, or prejudiced ideas through imagination and fear (26-7)), then they are grounded in phenomena which are equally un-generalisable and cannot be used to explain broad social phenomena. As Finkelstein puts it, ‘we wander in the fog bumping into isolated attitudes and invent connections between them’ (27).

If, alternatively, we explain the belief or attitude on the basis of an experience that a number of subjects may share, such as accounting for a negative view of disabled people on the basis of bad personal experiences (26), then the question remains ‘exactly what is happening between the “doer” and “done-to”; and who says it is a bad experience?’ (27). As the situation which generated the mental state is prior to it, and thus independent of it, it is governed by the social relationship between the parties rather than the attitude that it generates, and would need to be explained and intervened in on those terms. That is to say,

explaining attitudes about physically impaired people on the basis of collective experience would require falling back on the method proposed by Finkelstein, rather than maintaining the one held by his interlocutors.

### **The social account of attitudes**

From the above paradox, Finkelstein concludes that an approach which holds the subjective attitudes of actors as responsible for the social position of Disabled People is not only untenable, but politically limiting and has more in common with a reactionary ideology than an emancipatory one.

“There is constant pressure on physically impaired people to talk about their feelings, their personal experiences, and their innermost thoughts. When we complain about the things that are wrong (that lead to feelings of frustration, depression, etc.), then we are said to have “chips on our shoulders”, to be “paranoid”, to have “the wrong attitude”, and so on. If we take this up, soon we are no longer talking about what is wrong, but whether our attitudes have been wrong. (...) When we argue about attitudes before real problems, then we are being “conned” (31).

This critique is repeated in Finkelstein’s later work - where its scope is extended to attack the right wing of the Disabled People’s Movement (2001: 13) -, and is not a simple determinist claim. Unlike one contributor to the circular, Finkelstein does not make the argument that the social position of disabled people is a result of society being ‘brainwashed by the media’ (2018: 17) or believing certain things because they are told to by those with vested interests. His account of attitudes and subjective responses rests, instead, on the interplay of three distinct but interrelated factors: the personal, the ‘social rules of participation’, and that which is possible within a society at a given moment.

Finkelstein identifies attitudes, feelings, and beliefs as a constituent ‘part’ of a situation - rather than its cause or simply being caused by it (29). In a discriminatory or oppressive social relationship, both oppressing and oppressed parties are capable of taking an attitude that challenges the basis of that relationship, finds reconciliation with it, or tries to find a way to turn it to their own personal advantage (32). The conditions under which the oppressive relationship arises, and the possible challenges and advantages that both parties could identify, are governed by the rules and institutions that determine how society functions. In the case of disability, Finkelstein identifies the rules of competition for profit, especially as they pertain to the labour market, as the most relevant determining factor:

‘In this situation people have to compete in the labour market for jobs in order to earn a living. When the person hires labour [they do] not want to buy labour that is physically impaired, or at least, [they are] not going to pay the same amount for

an imperfect purchase. This is a fact regardless of his “intentions” or “feelings”. When the rules of earning a living are fixed in this way then, in reality, physically impaired people are discriminated against. Consequently, we can’t get jobs, or are paid less for our work, or end up in the poorer paid, less desirable jobs. In all these cases we end up with less income and/or the quality of life is inferior. We are also deprived of choice in where we work, where we live, and so on.’ (ibid) [gloss in original]

The fact of a person’s unequal treatment or status is, Finkelstein believes, something that is bound to call forth some kind of resistance or challenge on their part. This resistance can be purely personal, taking the form of non-compliance or an attempt to find more freedom in the situation imposed on one than is initially given, or can be aimed at the structure of the inequality itself, and the set of rules and institutions which maintain it (33).

Both the scope and the intensity of this resistance is dependent on what possible avenues a person has to express it. If an individual can see no possibility of changing the situation they are in, they are more likely to try and find some accommodation with it or a purely individual solution to it. In the position of having minimal social power with little opportunity of changing one’s situation, claims that one’s unequal treatment are due to innate and permanent traits one has (an impairment for disabled people, a ‘feminine psychology’ for women, etc) can appear plausible (33-4). Conversely, if social and technological developments imply that the situation one is in could be structured differently, then the possibility exists of taking an antagonistic position to the whole of that relationship and wishing to reject it in favour of an alternative.

Citing elevators, hoists, iron lungs, and ‘housing with help schemes’ as examples (36); Finkelstein argued that such a possibility had already arisen:

‘When society has not yet achieved the technical ability to solve the practical problems (of integrating physically impaired people), so that we can compete, for example, for jobs, then prejudiced attitudes tend to remain unchanged over a period of time. However, in the 1970s we have already the “know-how” and technology to solve these problems. Consequently, a few physically impaired people have successfully integrated into society – they have got well paid jobs, adapted houses, their own families, cars, etc. (...) But, it is only rich people that get the full benefit of society’s technology. What is required is that these practical aids are provided by society to all that need them. In this respect our society denies us what is available and ignores what are perfectly reasonable requests’ (35-6)

From the perspective of what is socially possible, the segregation of disabled people is a mere ‘technical problem’ which could be solved by changing the way that a situation, or society more broadly, is structured (30). Doing so, however, would violate the existing ‘social rules of participation’ (ibid) as they are administered (knowingly or otherwise) by state, social, and market institutions.

Thus the struggle against these rules becomes, in the first instance, an antagonistic struggle against those who administer them (33) combined with an attempt to build support within the ranks of the oppressed for alternative social arrangements - or, as Finkelstein puts it, converting 'unconscious struggles' that exist on a purely individual level into 'conscious struggles' which recognise individual circumstances as part of a contested social reality (34).

## **Conclusion**

I hope that it is clear, from the above discussion, that Finkelstein proposes a response to attacks on the social definition made on the basis of its failure to encapsulate all of the lived experience of a disabled person, and those that presume a transparent and direct link between an attitude and the outcome of exclusion and oppression. In the first case, Finkelstein argues strongly that attempting to base a universal analysis on individual experience is unsustainable; due to its collapse into a fog of competing psychological explanations or a necessary appeal to outside factors. As Finkelstein's argument for his social explanation of disability oppression aims to avoid this outcome, and explicitly focuses on a methodology that does not rely on the heterogeneity of individual experience, the lack of reference to individual thoughts and feelings in his argument hardly invalidates it.

In the second case, Finkelstein problematises the relationship between attitudes and social outcomes by interjecting the problems of power and existing social formations; which not only determine the possibility of an attitude being adopted, but equally dictate the chance it has of successfully manifesting itself in behaviour which oppresses or liberates. On Finkelstein's model, even if I and those I deal with have a positive attitude to my impairment, my low social power and the governing rules of engagement are still such that I will experience oppression. Similarly, if I have an elevated leverage, and the rules of participating in society are changed in my favour, I will experience considerably more integration in society even if outright bigotry still exists.

I leave it to the reader to decide whether these arguments convince a modern audience. The extent to which Finkelstein's arguments were successful in convincing UPIAS members is, however, shown by the repetition of his premises and conclusions in the eventual policy of the organisation. While the first policy document had been drafted by Hunt prior to the writing of *Are We Oppressed* (2001: 3), and it is thus unsurprising that there is significant crossover between the position the two developed privately and the final policy document; the extent to which the Union's *Aims and Policies* (1975) reflect this position is notable in light of the support from the membership required for its adoption.

This document ratifies the distinction between a factual or material impairment and the social disablement of impaired people; albeit without the interim concept of Handicap<sup>8</sup> used by Finkelstein in his earliest writing:

‘What we are interested in, are ways of changing our conditions of life, and thus overcoming the disabilities which are imposed on top of our physical impairments by the way this society is organised to exclude us. In our view, it is only the actual impairment which we must accept; the additional and totally unnecessary problems caused by the way we are treated are essentially to be overcome and not accepted.’ (Clause 15)

Not only does this public statement of aims accept the claim that this relation of society to disabled people is ‘essentially oppressive’ and that this finds its purest expression in the segregation of impaired people in residential institutions (Clause 7), it also roots this oppression in the mechanisms of the labour market (Clause 4). It notes that this situation has no basis in material necessity, with the relevant technology and technical know-how already in existence to solve it, but in a social organisation which allocates resources to on the basis of profit rather than need (Clause 1). The existence of the capacity to solve the problem of segregation, alongside pre-existing political struggles by disabled people and their supporters, is accounted to explain both the increasing (although limited) integration of impaired people, and a partial change in the attitudes of wider society (Clauses 3 & 4). Strategically, the Union commits itself to providing political, secretarial, and advisory support to campaigns by individual disabled people, and informing other activists of their campaigns within its newsletter (Clause 18). The success or failure of strategies, it argues, are to be assessed by their efficacy and their ability to be replicated:

‘We need to learn from our failures and successes, and so develop arguments and a theory which have been proved to work - because they do actually bring about practical gains for disabled people. In this way the value of our practical experience will be multiplied many times over, as the essential lessons learned from it are made available to other disabled people now and in the future.’ (Clause 19).

Tony Baldwinson’s recent work (2019) reproduces, for the first time, the internal report of the first UPIAS conference as an appendix (47-59). Given the initial disagreement with Finkelstein’s claims that disability is an essentially social phenomenon, irreducible to subjective attitudes or interpersonal

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<sup>8</sup> As one UPIAS member recalls (Davis & Davis 2019), the earliest definitions discussed in the organisation were modelled on the tripartite definitions of disability, handicap, and impairment used by the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys and the World Health Organisation. As UPIAS’ analysis progressed, sharper distinctions between forms of social organisation and the disabled person’s body or mind made the second category superfluous (103-4)

prejudice, it is striking to note that these arguments were not replayed on the conference floor. The points of contention between members were in large part the consequences of this view, not the view itself. For example, the conference debated whether specialist holiday facilities should be opposed by the Union on the grounds of their segregative function, or whether they could be presumed to disappear by themselves if rights to inclusive housing and work had been won (53); and, more pressingly, whether disabled people as an oppressed group should be open to able-bodied people joining the organisation for their liberation (55). Only on three occasions were arguments akin to the objections outlined above raised: a proposal to include a reference to the ‘individual character’ of decision makers as a cause of greater integration (51), and two separate objections to the characterisation of residential homes as ‘life-destroying’ and ‘prisons’ (54-55). These interventions are recorded as being raised by one member on each occasion, and none of them gained enough support to be moved to a vote. The questions of the summer seem to have been answered for the delegates in the room, and the debate had already moved on.

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## **Repealed the 8th: Self care for reproductive rights activists in Ireland**

**Doris Murphy**

### **Abstract**

This article investigates the experiences of activists during Ireland's Repeal the 8th campaign, which secured abortion rights in Ireland through a 2018 referendum. The focus is on activists' experiences of self-care and collective care during their activism. Differences between attitudes and approaches to self-care are investigated, the emphasis on work versus care in movement culture is explored, and the need for a move from self-care to collective care for continued feminist activism is suggested.

**Keywords:** Repeal; reproductive rights; activism; abortion rights; care; aftermath; sustainability; motivation; campaigning.

### **Introduction**

I felt so deflated and lost after the campaign. After being part of such a monumentally important campaign, making positive changes for our country, having those conversations, meeting such incredible people... I questioned all aspects of my life. My work, hobbies... it all seemed vacuous and pointless in comparison. I also couldn't understand why I was so low when the result was better than I could ever have imagined. It took a while to shake off.

(Survey respondent, 2019).

Activists in the Republic of Ireland successfully achieved access to abortion services for the first time in a landmark Referendum campaign in 2018. This was a long-fought campaign, 35 years in the making, and should have resulted in complete euphoria in feminist circles. I was a member of the campaign, and despite our victory, I observed that many campaigners, including myself, experienced exhaustion and burnout in the aftermath of the campaign. This led me to conduct this research, with a view to investigating activists' experiences of caring for themselves and each other during the Repeal the 8th campaign.

Stories played a huge role in the success of the campaign. Many people told their personal stories of abortion and pregnancy loss, often at huge risk to themselves. While this was a successful strategy, I wondered what impact it might have on those people who laid themselves bare in the interest of political progress.

I was fortunate to be part of this wave of pro-choice activism. I was the co-founder of Pro-Choice Wexford. Wexford is a county in the South-East of the country, with a population of 150,000. Wexford town, where I was based, has a population of 20,000. It is a rural town, and would be considered a traditionally Catholic community, but it has a strong culture of arts and drama. As noted previously, I experienced burnout in the aftermath of the campaign. This prompted me to reflect on the impact that activism can have on the wellbeing of social justice campaigners, and how best activists can sustain themselves to continue their important work.

Flacks (2004) noted that attending to the self-understandings of activists is important when analysing social movements. Furthermore, Cooper (2007: 243) noted that ‘care has become a central frame for feminist scholarship, providing a primary term through which intimacy and labour are configured’. For this article, self-understandings of care during the Repeal the 8th campaign will be investigated. My central research question is thus: How did activists engage in self care during the Repeal the 8th campaign? Audre Lorde (1988) reflected on the political importance of self-care, noting ‘caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.’ I will consider how the Repeal activists understood care within the campaign.

I will first provide a brief history of abortion rights activism in the Republic of Ireland so as to situate the activists I interviewed within a broader context. I will then discuss my methodology and limitations. I will then look at differing practices of self care between groups within the campaign. Next I will look at attitudes to work versus self care in movement culture. I will then discuss the need for movements to shift focus from self care to collective or community care. I will conclude with a reflection on self-care within the movement. I will now begin with a discussion of pro-choice activism in the Republic of Ireland.

### **A brief history of abortion activism in Ireland**

The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act in Britain rendered abortion services illegal in Ireland, and this remained the legal position in Ireland until 1983, when a referendum was announced. Ireland has traditionally been a majority Roman Catholic country, with conservative laws around women’s place in society, and their bodily autonomy. Conservative groups in Irish society worried that the successes of feminist groups in improving access to contraception, as well as the liberalising of abortion laws internationally, might lead to relaxation of Ireland’s abortion laws (Kennedy, 2018). These groups campaigned for the insertion of the eighth amendment to the constitution, Article 40.3.3, which said: ‘The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right’ (Wicks, 2011). This meant that there would be a constitutional ban on abortion in almost all circumstances.

Pro-choice activists formed the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC) in 1982, to oppose the insertion of the eighth amendment for a variety of reasons (Anti-Amendment Campaign, 1982). Muldowney (2015: 130) in her discussion of pro-choice activism in Ireland in the 1980s noted ‘the anti-Amendment campaigners were portrayed and for the most part saw themselves as the harbingers of a more open, liberal society’. The Catholic Church still held a lot of power at this time in Ireland, so these activists were brave in their opposition to the amendment. The referendum passed with a 2:1 majority, meaning that the 8th Amendment was added to the Irish Constitution. In her discussion of abortion rulings in Ireland, Ciara Staunton (2011: 208) noted:

Prior to the passing of the Bill to amend the Constitution, the Attorney General voiced his concern that the wording was ambiguous and would lead to confusion and uncertainty among the medical profession, lawyers and judiciary.

It took 35 years for this amendment to be repealed, despite concerted pressure from feminist activists in the intervening years. The Anti-Amendment Campaign was understandably dejected after the Referendum. The next wave of pro-choice activism was surrounding the X case in 1992, when the term “Repeal the 8th” was first used. A 14 year old girl who had been raped and became pregnant was forbidden to travel to England for an abortion by a court injunction. She became suicidal, and at appeal in the Supreme Court it was decided that she could be permitted to travel for an abortion because of the risk to her life.

There were mass protests from both pro- and anti-choice activists in 1992. A referendum in November 1992 enshrined the right to travel for an abortion, as well as the right to information about abortion. The Irish Government did not legislate for these situations despite sustained pressure from pro-choice activists. Ruth Fletcher (1995) noted that many pro-choice activists had suggested Irish women should tell their abortion stories, however ‘Irish society’s negative view of abortion, which has developed without listening to women’s words, now inhibits Irish women voicing their experience of abortion’ (1995: 63). Abortion was so stigmatised that people were reluctant to tell their stories in the 1990s.

The latest wave of pro-choice activism began in 2012, when the death of Savita Halappanavar resulted in renewed momentum. Savita Halappanavar was an Indian woman living in Galway, who in 2012 experienced a miscarriage. When it became clear that her foetus had no chance of survival, she and her husband Praveen requested a termination of pregnancy. This request was denied, as there was still a foetal heartbeat. Savita developed sepsis and died as a result of the inaction of her doctors. Inquiries into the death afterwards found that the 8th Amendment resulted in a chilling effect which meant that doctors were afraid to take action even when the life of the mother was at risk. Savita’s death angered the Irish public, and precipitated a new wave of pro-choice activism.

The Abortion Rights Campaign, and the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment, along with the National Women's Council of Ireland put pressure on the Irish Government to Repeal the 8th Amendment. Decisions from the European Court of Human Rights also supported this, noting that Ireland was contravening human rights protocols by not providing abortions when a woman's life was at risk. Enda Kenny, Taoiseach (Government leader) at the time, recommended that the Citizens' Assembly (a group of 99 citizens) look at suggested changes to the abortion legislation. The Citizens' Assembly considered the issue from November 2016 to June 2017 and recommended radical changes to the legislation. These recommendations were debated in both houses of the government, and a referendum was announced in February 2018, to take place in May 2018. This resulted in a frenzy of campaigning by pro-choice activists.

On May 25th 2018, 66.4% of the Irish public voted Yes in a referendum to "Repeal the 8th". Legislation was enacted on 1st of January 2019, and abortion services became available from then. There are still many issues with this legislation, including a 12 week gestational limit for most abortions, a mandatory three day waiting period, and barriers that migrant women face in accessing abortion. Service provision varies across regions, with many doctors and hospitals refusing to provide abortions. In the rest of the paper I will discuss the research that I conducted into activists' experiences of care within the Repeal the 8th campaign. This was mostly focused on the latest wave of activism (2012 onwards), but some activists had been involved for decades longer. I will begin by discussing my methodology and its limitations.

## **Methodology**

Hemmings (2005: 121) notes that 'nostalgia smoothes away the rough edges of this particular history; an innocent essentialism can be seamlessly integrated into a feminist progress narrative'. This is applicable to the Repeal campaign, as it would be easy to reflect on the campaign as a complete success. While this is one facet of the story, it does not preclude other more complicated factors. The personal cost of change can be high, and through surveys and interviews I hoped to document a variety of experiences that would contribute to the complex story of the Repeal campaign. I circulated an online survey to activist organisations, and received 221 responses. I completed nine oral history interviews, all with women who were active with different organisations during the Repeal campaign.

While reading the literature on activism and social movements research, I became aware of autoethnography, and of its use as a feminist research methodology. Autoethnography transforms 'personal stories into political realities' (Ettorre, 2017: 2). With this in mind, I endeavoured to intertwine my own personal story of the Repeal campaign with the stories of my interviewees and survey respondents, and with the objective outcomes of the campaign. The importance of storytelling as a feminist methodology exists here on several

levels: the stories that were told during the campaign, the stories that interviewees told me about their experiences, my story of the campaign, and how they all intermingle to provide a complex and often contradictory story of the Repeal campaign as it was experienced by the activists within it. In the next section I will consider limitations to my research methodology.

## **Limitations**

There were several limitations to my chosen methodology. Firstly, the survey contained only one qualitative question, and many of the respondents noted that they wanted to provide further information. Secondly, due to time constraints only nine activists were interviewed. While this covered a cross section of different activists, there were some groups who were not represented. Ideally, I would have liked to interview multiple members of various communities, as I do not think that one member of a community is representative of the whole group. One of my interviewees, who has a disability noted:

The experience of disability is so diverse, for me while I have experience of mental health difficulties, vision impairment and blindness, and physical impairment, there's so much disability experience I don't have, so it's very important that there isn't just one voice at the table.

She made that comment in relation to committees and working groups, but it is applicable to research projects also. Thus, while I tried to interview a variety of people with different life experiences and viewpoints, it was not possible to cover every group in society. I decided to interview only women due to my limited time, so further research into the experiences of men involved in the Repeal campaign would be enlightening. Throughout the surveys and interviews, themes around self-care emerged. In the following section I will discuss the first theme, which is differing practices of self-care.

## **Differing Practices of Self Care**

### **Gender and generation**

While analysing survey responses and interview transcripts it became apparent that self-care was viewed and practised differently by activists within the campaign. Gilligan (1995: 124) problematised the gendered association of women with care, when care is framed as 'an ethic of selflessness and self-sacrifice'.

Interestingly, this idea was echoed by one of the survey respondents, when she commented:

Because the organisations were mostly made up of women, there was an expectation that everyone would be “mothered” in some way ... I believe this to be an internalised sexist response where, as women, we are conditioned to feel entitled to unreasonable amounts of emotional labour from each other. I believe this is a recurring problem in women-led movements and should be critically analysed within movements so that unreasonable expectations of quasi-maternal care from comrades can be mitigated.

Another activist and organiser who provided an in-depth comment on the survey also raised this issue:

I think it's also interesting to consider the gendered element to this - because it was women led, we were possibly better at considering care, but also was the expectation of care higher because we were women led?

These comments raise interesting questions about the gendered lens through which we view women’s rights movements. It is possible that social movements made up primarily of men, or with a balance of men and women, would not be expected to provide care to their activists.

Another interesting comment which suggested a generational difference in attitudes to self care was the following, which was made by an older activist who has campaigned since 1983:

To be honest the focus on self-care amongst some of the younger activists involved was quite amusing and at times frustrating as they had to go to yoga or mindfulness sessions rather than campaign and canvas.

Another respondent noted that she hadn’t realised how much of an issue self-care was for younger activists, suggesting that generational differences might have presented in a variety of organisations. A comparative study of older versus younger activists’ experiences or expectations of care within social movements could be an area of further study. In the next section I will consider individual differences in approaches to self-care.

### **Individual differences**

It was clear when analysing survey responses and interview transcripts that people had varying ideas of what self-care looked like for them, for example one activist who is based in Northern Ireland noted:

A lot of sea-swimming went on during Repeal as well in Donegal, a lot of us just needed to get in the sea. So I do think that nature, and tapping into our inner Celtic goddesses and all ... it was earthy, for me anyway, really earthy and in

touch with something more primal, which is maybe where I drew a lot of strength from as well.

Thus, for this activist, self-care was a spiritual endeavour, which helped her feel connected to her past, and also energised her for the campaign. Another activist spoke of more hedonistic ways of practising self care:

Drugs and alcohol! [laughing]. My need to unwind was growing exponentially with the amount of work that I was doing... So if I'm carrying a lot of stress, I have to relax that much harder. So that for me is super indulgent, it's music and getting a buzz on, it's just really immersive, losing myself in music and dancing and stuff like that. At the end of every single night. That's what I found, I'd be going home and I would need like four hours at the end of every night to go somewhere else.

This quote really highlighted for me how personal self-care is, and how much it differs from person to person. Another activist, who now campaigns with a group of women with disabilities, noted that following the Repeal campaign, her group are cognisant of minding themselves and each other:

It's not just about your workload personally, it's about where your energy levels are at, we're very conscious of trying to mind ourselves and mind each other, I suppose because we were born out of the whole Repeal thing, and it was very traumatic for a lot of us, that self-preservation, minding each other, minding ourselves is at the heart of everything we do... Yeah, it's a serious focus because I think we all got burned. We learned in the trenches, and it's like ok, going forward this is something we really need to be conscious of.

Thus, this organisation learnt the importance of caring for each other, and how it should be a primary focus for activist groups. One area in which some groups succeeded more than others was in assisting members with practicalities such as childcare and transport. I will discuss this further in the next section.

## **Practicalities**

Motta et al. (2011) considered care as it applied to women's movements. They questioned whether movements consider the individual needs of activists, and also what organisational practicalities allow or prevent certain people from participating in organisations e.g. childcare, time of meetings etc. (Motta et al., 2011). In my research, many activists noted that practical support from their organisations allowed them to be active in the Repeal campaign. One activist, who is a single mother and a migrant noted:

Yeah, there's that solidarity within MERJ [Migrants and Ethnic minorities for Reproductive Justice], we know that we have other challenges, so we looked after each other. So say for example if there's a meeting in Dublin, most of the girls will make sure that I get a bus ticket, a place to stay over, they understand that I'm a single mother, you know? Just my struggles as a migrant woman, who has no family support.

The fact that her colleagues understood the challenges she faced, and tried to mitigate them by providing material support allowed her to be an active member of the group. Similarly, an activist in another group noted "I think as a parent for me, sometimes I needed to be able to bring my kids to meetings and stuff, and that was ok". The knowledge that her group was receptive to children made it easier for her to maintain her activism.

Another practical aspect of caring within activism was clear communication between organisation members. Good working relationships allowed activists to communicate clearly with each other, and to be mindful of each other's boundaries and limitations, as was expressed by one of the interviewees:

We worked really well together. And I think that was really important, there was no big egos or expectations, we constantly communicated, and we knew if someone had something on, or needed some time away, that was accepted, and that was the way it was. So I think that was the main thing, communicating well, and taking personal responsibility for not burning yourself out, and I think we all had to do that.

Thus, good group dynamics allowed activists to care for themselves and each other. This is a good example of the relationship between organisational and personal sustainability, as the structures put in place by the members of the organisation allowed the group to function at its optimum level, while ensuring that all members were cared for personally also.

Another practical area that a lot of activists mentioned was food, and the difficulty of cooking when activists were so busy in the campaign. One activist mother noted "I think we all gained a good few pounds, and had plenty of burning dinners while you're trying to work, and you're on your phone, yeah it was very intense." In a similar vein, another activist noted:

I don't think I cooked for myself once. If it wasn't for my best friend being like "Come eat", or just turning up with food, like I was eating a pack of biscuits in the car for dinner. Eighteen months ago I was two and a half stone lighter.

This shows how the practical and routine aspects of people's daily lives were disrupted by their involvement in the campaign, and how this affected their

health. It also speaks to the importance of social networks, which I will discuss further in the next section.

### **Social networks**

Many of the activists who I interviewed spoke about the importance of support from their social networks. This included husbands, partners, families, and friends. As one activist, who is a migrant said:

I was saying to someone, they were saying how do you get on with all those things that you're doing, I said I'm relying on my social networks, otherwise I would have long collapsed. What keeps me going is my social networks and the support that is there. And if I didn't have that, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing.

This quote encapsulates the importance of social networks, they provide support and encouragement when activists need it. Another activist noted that she relied on her social networks for practical childcare when it was not appropriate to bring her children with her:

When we started the canvassing I set up with my girls' dad that there was one night a week that he was always going to take them for the duration of the campaign, and then that was going to be my night to go canvassing, and obviously then towards the end of the campaign, when we were out maybe four nights a week, I just relied on friends to help out with childcare.

Another activist noted her husband had to take on more caring responsibilities than he would usually have, to allow her the time to be active in the campaign:

My husband was a really good support, like brilliant, so he was taking over minding the kids, I mean I was still breastfeeding around the clock but yeah, he just stepped in, and knew this was important, and let me off with it.

Thus all of these activists benefited from the strong social networks that they had built up outside of their activist circles. It is clear that there is an overlap between the efforts made at self care, the practical support offered both within organisations and outside them, and the support that activists received from their social networks. Unfortunately, many groups found that the urgency of the campaign pushed caring for oneself and one's colleagues into second place. I will discuss this further below.

## **Attitudes to work versus self-care in movement culture**

There were external constraints that set limits to the movement's capacity to balance productivity with care, especially the short time frame between the announcement of the referendum and the date of referendum. This meant activists had an enormous work to do in a short time frame not set by them. While this was one element of the overwork that activists experienced, there was also a sense that the movement culture expected overwork. Individual activists dealt with this differently, some thrived. Downton and Wehr investigated traits that allowed some activists to persist in social movements, and noted that "they got a 'second wind'... For a renewal of commitment of this kind, the new challenge had to be met with a sense of inner motivation" (1997: 108). Many of the activists I interviewed noted that their motivation was so strong, it sustained them throughout the campaign. One activist encapsulated this when she said:

I think what kept me going was that I'm making a difference, I'm making a difference to someone's life, it might not be seen immediately, but along the line. Yes, it was very stressful, very stressful, and also to be told "this is not your country, it's not your issue" was very stressful.

She went on to say that despite the racism and misogyny she faced, she had to continue, because "this is a fight that I have to fight for my people". Another interviewee, who is a doctor and long time advocate for reproductive choice noted:

It was never hard because there was loads happening, the sheer momentum of it, in that you'd be wrecked by it, but it won't go on forever, it is a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Thus her awareness of the importance and historic nature of the campaign allowed this activist to stay motivated, even when she was exhausted. I will investigate further how activists stayed involved in the campaign, and what contributed to their personal and collective sustainability.

Barry and Dordevic (2007) wrote a book about human rights activists and their ability to sustain themselves. They noted:

Quite simply, rest seems selfish. It's the context. How could anyone take a break, take time for themselves, when all around them others are suffering? When there is so much work to be done? When everyone around you expects you to work without stopping... (Barry and Dordevic, 2007: 26).

This quote resonated with me, as it encapsulated my own experience during the campaign, and echoed the attitudes of many of my survey respondents and interviewees. Do activists put pressure on themselves to keep working in the face of burnout? Or is there a collective pressure applied by other activists within the movement? An in-depth analysis of the contributing factors to burnout is outside the scope of this article, but I have discussed some of the barriers to care in the following paragraphs. The main barrier mentioned by interviewees and survey respondents was the lack of time for self-care. One interviewee noted:

So self-care is very paramount, but also it becomes the last thing on your mind as well, because you are so struggling just to have that time until something major happens and you think oh I have to look after myself.

This interviewee knew on an intellectual level how important self-care is, but highlighted the reality that when activists are in the midst of a frantic campaign, care is often relegated to the end of one's list of priorities. Another interviewee evoked the frantic nature of the campaign when she said:

There was zero self-care during it, none. And there were reminders, you know, be kind to yourself, remember to take time for yourself, but there is no time, there is no time, I can't.

This relates to the external factors noted at the start of this section, external time constraints made it difficult to prioritise self-care. One survey respondent noted that this was the case in her experience also:

Although organisations talked about the importance of balance and looking after your mental health there was very little time for practice but even short debriefs and cups of tea after canvasses helped.

Thus, while there was no time for organised activities, even short conversations and shared beverages were seen to positively impact on campaigners. However, one survey respondent also noted that they had a lack of personnel for organising self-care: "The entire organisation of our regional campaign fell to two individuals who were already stretched; should those two have organised self-care days too?"

Kennelly (2014) studied the interactions of global justice activists in Canada, who were engaged in anti-globalisation, antipoverty, anti-colonialism and anti-war organising. She found that young women put a lot of pressure on themselves to care for their fellow activists, as well as continuing all of their organising work. She noted that this pressure often led to burnout:

Amongst the women, I noted professions of an overwhelming – at times even crippling – sense of responsibility and culpability. They regularly commented on the powerful sway of negative emotions (feeling upset, outraged, angry) acting as both motivators and self-flagellation devices for their activism. In both field observations and interviews, I witnessed their tense negotiation between ‘caring for self’ and ‘caring for others’. (Kennelly, 2014: 243).

Laurence Cox (2011) noted that there can be ‘features of movement culture that directly contribute to burnout. Some of these have to do with the importation of productivist and / or patriarchal attitudes to work into movement contexts’ (2011: 14). One of the activists who responded to the survey noted this phenomenon during her work on the campaign, and especially during reflection after the campaign:

I also felt very much that in TFY [Together for Yes] (and in ARC [Abortion Rights Campaign], to a lesser extent), there was a culture of busy-ness and egoic burnout - as in, if you were tired and stressed and overworked, that meant you were an amazing activist and deserved praise for it. I think it is a dangerous territory to give someone praise for working themselves to the ground... It's a delicate subject matter because in one way, of course people deserve support and praise for all the hard work they've put in, but in another way, if we praise and value people working themselves to the bone, aren't we just continuing to propagate a patriarchal, capitalist culture, where "more work = better" and "taking time for reflection and care = weakness?".

This activist had reflected deeply on the culture within the main Repeal organisations. Her insight suggests that even within activist groups who aim for anarchist or socialist organisational structures, the neoliberal focus on overwork and achieving goals persists. As feminist organisers we must endeavour to operate in a way that rejects neoliberal and patriarchal organising, to create a more caring system. It is clear that this was not achieved for many activists during the Repeal campaign. One of the interviewees noted the level of overwork that she put herself through, and how it impacted on her health:

I was putting all of my energy, 24 hours, into this. So I wasn't sleeping, anxiety attacks, severe depression, but this was really important and I just knew that I had to do it. So it wasn't healthy, I wasn't coping, but I didn't feel like I had a choice.

It is clear that this activist was not operating at a sustainable level, and this had lasting consequences for her health. The absence of self-care was a significant contributing factor to this outcome.

### **Sharing personal stories versus protecting self**

Another area that impacted on a lot of the activists was the campaign strategy of sharing personal stories. Quesney (2015) wrote about the campaign for abortion rights in Ireland, and noted that ‘speaking out in a hostile environment is an act of bravery not many women are prepared to undertake, and nor should they be expected to’ (2015: 160). While nobody forced women to share their story, a lot of women chose to share the traumatic impact of the 8th Amendment. Sharing personal stories was a particular type of campaign work which led to people experiencing trauma. One campaigner eloquently noted:

The problem was that traumatised women were forced to rip open their old scars and bleed in public, to put their most private business on full display, to watch as other women did the same, in order to beg people to vote for them to be legally human. There's no amount of self-care that could make that OK.

This sentiment was echoed by a number of respondents. The strategy to tell personal stories was successful, it made clear the extent of the problems with the 8th Amendment, but it had a lasting impact on a lot of the activists who shared their stories. Another respondent noted that “you gave a bit of yourself away at each door, at each debate, at each stall. Endlessly telling your truth to them, giving your hurt to them”. This response highlighted the visceral impact that the campaign strategy of telling personal stories had on the women who shared their own stories. Future campaigns will need to consider whether the work of telling personal stories can be balanced with collective care, so as to avoid trauma for the story tellers. I will consider collective care further in the next section.

### **Shifting focus from self-care to collective care**

Sara Ahmed, following Audre Lorde, spoke about the political work of creating caring communities:

Self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We re-assemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. (Ahmed, 2014).

It became clear through the course of my surveys and interviews that emphasising self-care was not sufficient to maintain activists’ wellbeing during the Repeal campaign. There has to be a focus on collective care in social movements if activists are to be able to continue their feminist activism. Nina Nijsten (2011: 222) noted that ‘activism shouldn’t be self-sacrifice. Feminist activists have the responsibility to look after each other and make sure we don’t

get discouraged'. Similarly, Mountz et al. (2015: 1251) remarked that 'a feminist ethics of care is personal and political, individual and collective. We must take care of ourselves before we can take care of others. But we must take care of others'.

When analysing the results of the survey, it became clear to me that people's awareness of self or collective care was not always matched by the resources available for this care, and that this differed across organisations. To highlight this, 61.5% of respondents thought that there was sufficient emphasis on caring for oneself and others during the campaign. Only 44.3% of respondents said that their organisations arranged self-care activities for campaigners. One activist who worked in the national office noted:

Efforts were made to promote care - there was a dedicated helpline available from the IFPA [Irish Family Planning Association], we did our best to check in with each other, a wonderful human organised yoga and chair massage, I did my best to flag care with canvassing groups.

It is worth noting that many of the official care activities were scheduled in Dublin (capital city of the Republic of Ireland), making it difficult for regional activists to attend. Some organisations provided support within their own groups, one activist noted that they "had a wellness team of trained counsellors on hand to support our volunteers and organising team". Other activists took it upon themselves to support the activists in their group, like the activist who commented:

I feel like I stressed to other people the need for basic self care and made sure plenty of water and fruit was available. I did not pressure people to attend and reassured them if they had to cancel. I checked in with people who I knew had a hard time e.g. antis shouting at them.

Thus, it appears that the efforts made at collective care varied across groups. Feminist organisers should consider embedding collective care within their activism from the start of campaigns, so that burnout can be avoided, and activists can continue to fight for reproductive justice, and other social justice issues.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have investigated and documented the experiences of activists involved in the Repeal the 8th campaign. I utilised a combination of surveys, in-depth interviews, and autoethnography to collect data, and then I used thematic analysis to identify common themes among campaigners. I discussed these themes further with reference to the social movements literature, situating these

experiences within the global abortion rights movement, but also within social justice movements more widely.

Oral history and ethnographies are valuable, because “so many of the actors are still on the stage” (Muldowney, 2015: 142). By documenting the experiences of these women, I have given activists a chance to tell their stories. Ireland was a beacon of light in challenging times for reproductive rights globally. Ordinary people were the lifeblood of this campaign, and by working together, they made extraordinary things happen. One of the survey respondents summed up the enormity of what we achieved:

I think we should not lose sight of what we did - we carried a referendum by 66.4%, we were a beacon of hope in a world where reproductive rights are being rowed back. I know people have enduring pain from the campaign - damaged or broken relationships, health issues, financial issues and unresolved trauma. But we changed Ireland. We changed our constitution. We gave a generation of young women female role models, we gave thousands of people (mainly women) a taste of activism and of politics, we did what everyone was so busy telling us we could not do.

In this article I focused on care within the Repeal campaign. I looked at the differing practices of self-care among activists, the movement culture of work versus self-care, and the need to move from self-care to collective care. One of the implications of lack of self-care for social movements is that ‘instead of figuring out ways to take care of ourselves and each other, social justice groups lose brilliant and committed activists to burnout, disillusionment and poor health’ (Plyler, 2006: 123). Feminist research requires practical applications. Increased care towards one another is essential for continued feminist activism. One interviewee, who is a sex worker, noted that we need to create space for the messiness of real life. Feminist activists need to create space, and endeavour to care for each other within that space. As Mac and Smith (2018: 6) succinctly say “caring for each other is political work”. By committing to engage in care-full activism, we will be able to continue to work towards a more socially just world for all.

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### **About the author**

Doris Murphy completed her MA in Women's Studies in University College Cork, Ireland. Her thesis focused on the experiences of reproductive rights campaigners during the recent campaign to legalise abortion in Ireland, and underlying structures supporting feminist activism. Doris was the co-founder of Pro-Choice Wexford, a regional group which campaigned for abortion rights. Doris will complete her PhD research in University College Cork, exploring sex work and care through Participatory Action Research. She is an ardent supporter of the decriminalisation of sex work, and of full labour rights for sex workers. She also supports the abolition of Direct Provision, a system which segregates and incarcerates asylum seekers in Ireland. Doris advocates for full rights and appropriate healthcare for trans people. She provides space for marginalised people to tell their own stories, and is open to collaboration on projects in this area. She is an experienced group facilitator, presenter, and provides freelance transcription services. She is a qualified Speech and Language Therapist. She can be contacted at dormurf AT hotmail.com

## **A 21<sup>st</sup> century “repertoire”: affective and urban mobilization dynamics of the Gezi Commune**

**Poyraz Kolluoglu<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a deeper first-hand understanding of the post-2010 collective action forms by proposing “repertoire” as an analytical tool. In doing so, it primarily aims to bring a critical perspective on normative and culture-focused approaches to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century activism that tend to take various aspects of mobilization processes for granted. By questioning how participants “remember” their movements from a critical insider point of view and relying on an ethnographic analysis of Istanbul’s Gezi Park protests of 2013, this paper also sheds light on the ways in which the protest repertoires are adopted and performed in demonstration spaces wherein they are first applied as well.*

**Keywords:** #occupygezi, occupy movements, Gezi, repertoire, commune, Paris Commune, memory, affect, neoliberal metropolis, mobilization,

*“Could one speak of a statement if a voice had not articulated it, if a surface did not bear its signs, if it had not become embodied in a sense-perceptible element, and if it had not left some trace –if only for an instant—in someone’s memory or in some space?” (Foucault 1972).*

This paper presents a deeper first-hand understanding of the post-2010 collective action forms by proposing “repertoire” as an analytical tool. In doing so, it primarily aims to bring a critical perspective on normative and culture-focused approaches to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century activism that tend to take many aspects of mobilization processes for granted. By questioning how participants “remember” their movements from a critical insider point of view and relying on an ethnographic analysis of Istanbul’s Gezi Park protests of 2013, this paper also sheds light on the ways in which the popular protest repertoires are adopted and performed in demonstration spaces wherein they are first applied as well.

New forms of sustained mobilization patterns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century characteristically include heterogeneous crowds that are mobilized with

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<sup>1</sup> This research would not be possible without those who bravely agree to participate in it. I would additionally like to thank Richard Day for teaching me the activist research principles and showing the most necessary theoretical tools to analyze and understand the occupy movements. Without him, I could not learn humility and be a face in the photograph. To Susan Lord, Deniz Yukseker and Ugur Tekin, for all their supports during my most difficult times. I would also like to thank respectively Graham Ferguson, Lily Cuthbertson Amanda White for staying in touch with me during all this writing process.

affective sensoria, along with an inclination to occupy the symbolically strategic sites in the neoliberal metropolis. Segmented multitudes temporarily taking control of public spaces of global cities, I suggest, is a distinctive peculiarity of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century social protest “repertoire.” And I characterize this new modular form of social protest as the *commune repertoire* because, as will be shown below, the common grievances, emotions and particularly memories of the Turkish protesters frame the Gezi uprising of 2013 around the nostalgic imaginary of 1871 uprising in Paris rather than contemporary exemplary cases, which would be more comparable to the incident itself.

Since its debut scholars, as well as activists on the ground, have put forward different interpretations regarding the pros and cons of this protest form what is commonly known as the “occupy” strategy. While some critiques, which are more inclined to rely on mainstream sociological analysis, draw attention to its short lifespan and the apathy among “occupiers” regarding practical social and political gains, other discussions, especially those leaning toward more autonomous-activist based approaches, point out that the power of occupation comes from its peculiar anarchistic nature. The latter camp suggests that the action in and on itself provides the dissident multitudes with both a common physical site and shared opposition rhetoric by identifying the public with the common people instead of the state. They also add that the shared space and the common cause protestors embrace simultaneously enable the occupiers to forge new social relations alternative to state hegemony in these short-breathed resistance enclaves. What all these critiques have in common is their emphasis on the fact that the “occupation” of public spaces has become one of the most widespread protest tactics on a global scale following the 2008 financial crises and the Arab Spring (Aslanidis, 2016, p. 301,311; Calhoun, 2013, p. 5; Farro and Lustiger-Thaler, 2014; Gibson, 2013, pp. 342–343; Iranzo and Farné, 2013; Ross, 2015, p. 15; Tejerina et al., 2013, p. 378,382).

Without a doubt, the occupation practices, which were actually used pretty often in Italian factories and American university campuses in the 1960s and 1970s in micro contexts, did not arrive in the contemporary world protest stage out of the blue. It has been noted in several studies that the so-called Arab Spring actually wove the different threads of the anti-globalization struggles of the early 2000s and their daily occupy strategies into a new and distinct form, enduringly seen in Cairo (Kamrava, 2014, p. 66; Leveille, 2017, p. 100; Shihade et al., 2012, p. 5; Velut, 2015, p. 37) by staging a successful occupy performance in episodic forms that lasted about over a year. It can, therefore, be argued that Madrid, London, and Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan respectively attempted to take their anti-globalization struggle one step further with the excitement heightened by the fall of a Middle Eastern dictatorial regime against all the odds in the early 2010s. I would further argue that defiant demonstrators in Kyiv’s Independence Square (Euromaidan) and the streets of Hong-Kong in 2014 attempted to emulate the same collective performance despite the peculiar characteristics of their own political ecosystems. Last year, Hongkongers smartly shifted the site of action from streets and squares to strategic transportation hubs and commercial zones following the controversial

extradition bill of 2019 as if paying homage to the Seattle’s WTO protests. Thus, the occupy strategy and its derivations have reached a point wherein they can be observed at multiple sites of the global protest scene within a particular time frame regardless of the nature of local regime space, be it liberal-democratic, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian like Turkey, Ukraine Hong-Kong. In this regard, it would not be entirely wrong to suggest occupy has become a major component of a single “cycle of contention” (Tarrow, 1993). A global contention that takes place between the agents of neoliberal globalization, that is authoritarian or pseudo-liberal political state apparatuses, and multitudes mostly made by precariat classes that are reflexively jumping off from the bottom, in the way Hardt and Negri depicted in their meticulous historical analyses (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 2000). But is it literally accurate to characterize this mobilization strategy as occupy form both an empirical and normative perspective, as well as the collective action groups that perform it as multitudes, crowds, or as occupy movements as if they are entirely different from their antecedents?

## **Theory**

Without a doubt, the occupy movements display different features from the working-class movements of the past centuries, as well as they differentiate from the new social movements of the past decades in terms of class composition and site of action. While new social movements were more male, white-middle class-oriented and peculiar to Western Europe and North America, today’s occupiers are socially more diverse and their life-world is defined by the dynamics that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state (Day, 2005, p. 102). Nonetheless, most scholars also point out that the occupy movements share certain characteristics with new social movements in terms of addressing a wide range of social, political, and cultural issues that cannot be reduced to a single line of conflict. The diversification of motivational reasons has led scholars leaning to this position to emphasize the “intersectional” systems of political and social injustices in the immediate aftermath of occupiers’ retreat with a nuanced terminology accordingly. (Collins and Bilge, 2016, pp. 136–158; Özkırmılı, 2014, p. 3; Tejerina et al., 2013, pp. 384–385). Through the prism of intersectionality, the scholars of this canon suggest that each group involved in the “movement”, be it feminists, communists, anarchists, environmentalists or the LGBTQ community, come to the site of occupation with their own specific ideological agenda, as well as social and cultural grievances peculiar to their own subject positioning in the social cosmos. In search of common themes that can depict these different groups and identities in the same picture, the intersectionality approaches understandably direct the attention to sort of an empty signifier, a common denominator that takes the form of a dictatorial regime or global financial actors, as well as to the political, social and economic injustices that these power nodes cause. Collective identities which shape the mobilization agendas have, therefore, naturally been highlighted in a processual framework in these accounts from a culturalist

perspective, which comes along with a strong normative critique of global political economy (Aslanidis, 2016, p. 301; Bamyeh and Hanafi, 2015, p. 344; Gitlin, 2013, pp. 4–14; Smaldone, 2015).

I share a certain amount of sympathy with these culturalist and normative-based analyses, most of which are usually articulated from an exciting critical activist-academic perspective. I would nonetheless argue that since they have inclinations toward relying on participant-observation methodologies and negating meta-theories, these narrations which just seem to be celebrating the state of being together on a semantic ground are deprived of directing formulated, refined and precise answers to the question of why these previously disconnected actors and groups come together under a common protest scheme. More importantly, since researchers and participants share the same lifeworld to a certain extent, that is the lifeworld of activism, these culturalist-activist based approaches take many questionable and researchable dimensions of occupy movements for granted. First and foremost, they do not thoroughly investigate how protesters themselves give meaning to their own positionality within the cycle of global contention. Do occupiers really think and imagine the protest tactic they use on the ground as the occupy strategy? Are they truly emulating this protest form after seeing its successful performances in other parts of the world? What kind of associations and analogies they use to express their own occupy encampment? In this regard, I would argue that approaching the post-2010 protest scenery in and through repertoire will enable us to answer such questions, thereby providing the researcher with a narrative potential to generate analyses alternative to critical cultural accounts and normative critiques. The repertoire manages to accomplish such a theoretical feat because it forces the researcher to pinpoint the place of imaginations, perceptions, emotions, and particularly memories (Beinin and Vairel, 2013, p. 15) of protesters within a grand protest cycle.

The concept of repertoire is a fairly complex and open-ended analytical tool. Charles Tilly considered one of the leading scholars in the field and the creator of the concept, defines the repertoire as “learned” and “shared” “cultural creations” that express the recurrent patterns of socio-political mobilization within a limited set of alternatives (Tilly, 2015, pp. 42–43, 2008, p. 121, 2008, p. 390, 1993, pp. 264–265). This is not to say, nonetheless, that we may characterize all the repetitive protest forms as repertoires. Repertoires should be “contagious” elements and one way or another they have to be transmitted across the different nodes of a *politically* connected protest stage (usually a nation-state for Tilly). This transmission process usually becomes possible by various telecommunication means such as pamphlets, brochures as well as more contemporary mediums like media (Tilly, 2005, p. 13, 1978, p. 158; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 188).

Tilly suggests that generally a successful, “innovative” and “improvisational” performance made by a small group of protesters, as happened in the case of Black counter sit-ins the Southern United States before the rise of civil rights movements, motivates and inspires other dissidents who share more or less

similar grievances and political concerns to stage a similar resistance (Tilly, 2010, pp. 34–35, 2008, p. 68; Traugott, 1995, p. 44). Right after a successful innovation sets an example and “impress” others, Tilly points out that the protest performance becomes more open to adaptation and modulation through “word of mouth” (Tilly, 2010, p. 41) in addition to telecommunication means.

Despite highlighting the role of media channels and discourse in the diffusion processes of protest forms, Tilly acknowledges that “exactly how people draw on contentious repertoires remains a controversial variable” (Tilly, 2010, p. 34–35). As a scholar who likes looking at big temporal intervals with historical sociology lenses Tilly understandably refrains from clearly specifying the dialogical cultural mechanisms by which the protest repertoires diffuse in a political milieu he calls “regime space” (Tilly, 2010, p. 39), which for him is usually in a state of flux because of state-making processes and arising/demising opportunities<sup>2</sup>. To animate these cultural aspects of the protest action he makes use of metaphorical expressions such as “jazz” (Tilly, 2010, pp. 34–35, 1993, pp. 264–265; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 183) and metaphysical human practices like rituals (Tilly, 1978, p. 158; Tilly and Tilly, 2013, pp. 33–37). “Like their theatrical counterparts, repertoires of collective action...designate interaction among pair or larger sets of actors” he adds on such analogies to emphasize the intersubjectively performed elements of social mobilization (Tilly, 1993, p. 265).

As seen, Tilly’s regime-repertoire model is fairly complex since it navigates analytical terrain that lies between culture and structure. Perhaps it is through this multi-vectored conceptual framework that Tilly masterfully succeeds to conceptualize human acts amid protest action along with structural and political ingredients despite he never had the chance to make first-hand observations in an activist manner on the ground. Nonetheless, Tilly himself and the school of thought he represents, that is, the political process theories, have received a fair amount of criticisms for overlooking “emotions,” as well as micro-mobilizations dynamics because of the so-called “structural bias” (Goodwin and Jasper, James M., 2004) in their analyses. Against such critiques, Tilly responded by explaining that the main contours of his models “spanned the entire range from

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<sup>2</sup> Like many of his generations, Tilly utilized the epistemological and methodological understanding of historical sociology, which was the rising scholarly trend back in the late 1960s and 1970s (Smith, 1991), to observe the transition of social protest repertoires from more parochial forms to national ones (Tilly and Tilly, 2013, pp. 390–392). Within this longitudinal approach, for Tilly, it is generally through “improvisational performances” (Tilly, 2010, p. 34; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 188)<sup>2</sup> that a social protest repertoire diffuse to other relevant protest settings, and all the innovations and improvisational protest tactics at micro-level crystalize as a result of democratic openings in what he calls “regime space” (Tilly, 2010, p. 25, 2008, pp. 4–12) at the macro level. Tilly’s regime space is quite a Machiavellian and dynamic political arena that constantly oscillates under state-making and national market processes in temporality. Because of the dynamic nature of the political ecosystem, “opportunities” rise and demise in a constant fashion for dissident actors to make social and political gains (Tilly, 2010, p. 211, 1978, pp. 8,223–234; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 45). Therefore dissidents constantly modify the repertoires in an “unceasing” fashion with a formula, which blends rational aspirations for politics/social rights with spontaneously developed cultural modifications, in the course of action (Tilly, 1978, pp. 7–8; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 158; Tilly and Tilly, 2013, p. 390).

individual interactions to whole revolutions...no single unit of observation has priority” (Tilly, 2010, p. 46).

I think what causes problems in Tilly’s model is not the intense structural-political focal point he utilizes but his persistence in seeing and placing the repertoires within the nation-state context. Since he built his entire model on historical evidence extracted from the French revolutions and democratic demands made by the common people in industrializing Britain and its colonies across the Atlantic, he is understandably more inclined to cook the repertoire within the container of the emerging nation-state of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet with a little touch of discourse and media analyses, recent studies have salvaged the concept from the dark depths of the nation-state by shedding light on the cultural transmission mechanisms Tilly was hesitant to his finger on. In such more contemporary analyses, repertoires appear to be gas particulates not only oscillating within the nebula of the nation-state which is caught in the push-pull forces caused by structural and political processes, but they are more depicted as solid molecules that are capable of independently moving across a global spatiotemporally via dramatic live footages, images, and public discourses. Michael Biggs’ meticulous media analysis that demonstrates how the suicide protests spread across the world following the death of a Vietnamese monk who set himself on fire in front of cameras to protest the pro-Western government policies, for instance, show us the ways in which protest repertoires can be transmitted via press and communication means independent of national-political structures. And I would argue his study constitutes a perfect example for understanding the repertoire outside of national political milieu besides a few similar studies (Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Biggs, 2013; Braun, 2011; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Myers, 2000).

In his later studies, Tilly himself also acknowledged the power of telecommunication means in a visually wired world (W. Tennant 2013, 121) yet interestingly still in relation to national democratic demands and politics rather than the concept of repertoire itself. “Today, mass media have made the performances of social movement—especially their demonstrations—so visible through the world that dissidents in nondemocratic regimes often emulate their forms” he once noted (Tilly, 2010, p. 186; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 30)<sup>3</sup> with a euro-centric approach right before the aftershocks of the Arab Spring shook Continental Europe and North America.

Without a doubt, the rise of smartphone technologies and mobile computing have carried the interactive world Tilly acknowledged one step further. These new pocket-sized gadgets not only seem to have accelerated and amplified

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<sup>3</sup> Tilly exemplified the transitional connections of social mobilization by addressing how the Rose Revolution in Georgia was triggered by an American documentary followed by the dissidents who were in close touch with Serbian activists. What should be noted in this context is the fact that the documentaries showing the fall of a long-lasting dictatorship regime in Egypt by cross-class and cross-cultural alliance set the motion of a new form social protest form, but in a reverse way, that is, from the so-called Orient to the Occident, as I pointed out in the introductory section.

mobilization processes on the ground but also remarkably allow protesters on the far corners of the world to communicate with one another even outside the channels of mass media and transnational activist networks in a direct and instant way. Perhaps more than ever, I would argue, social protest repertoires have become more open to emulation, adaptation, and modulation on a global scale than Tilly could ever imagine. As a result, it is not surprising to see an exponential increase in studies that discuss the role of social media with respect to mobilization activities and changing nature of transnational activist connections especially following the reverberations of the Arab Spring (Cole, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012; Olorunnisola and Martin, 2013; Shaked, 2017; Trottier and Fuchs, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Given that each millisecond of eventful protests can be recorded and globally shared via new communication technologies, digital matrixes and global news sources, one can indeed assume that dramatic scenes displaying the successful performance of occupation in Tahrir Square offers, on a global platform, a model for protesters who took to the streets and gathered in public spaces of other global cities (Tejerina et al., 2013, p. 384).

## **Methodology**

With precisely this assumption and problematic in mind, in the late spring of 2014, I conducted ethnographic field research on one of the most recent examples of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century movements, that is the so-called #occupygezi, to throw light on the transmission mechanisms of what I first imagined as the occupy repertoire then. In other words, through an ethnographic exploration of this unique protest event in Turkey's history, I questioned whether demonstrators in Istanbul adopted today's most prevalent global protest strategy, which seemed to be diffusing from one corner of the world to another, to their own protest culture and political eco-system via new media technologies. More specifically, I investigated if the Turkish protestors truly draw inspiration from the visuals of Tahrir Square, the Occupy movement of New York, or other similar eventful protests before taking to the streets. If so, what was the source lying beneath this transmission mechanism? I would argue that such an inquiry was definitely necessary from a Tillean methodological point of view, given that his “repeated calls for empirical modification or falsification” with respect to the basic transmission mechanisms of the repertoire have not been sufficiently answered (Biggs, 2013, p. 407; Tilly, 2008, p. xiv). Besides this main area of inquiry while continuing my fieldwork another key question had preoccupied me as well: was the decision to participate in Gezi given in a more rational manner or emerged more in response to emotional motivational reasons that surfaced in the course of action? In a nutshell, I pitted emotions/culture against structures/politics in order to provide a few empirical evidence for the most contemporary decisions in social movements studies as well.

The ethnographic investigation, which approximately lasted over two years, mostly involved semi-structured one-on-one interviews carried out with the

participants who were drawn from different socio-cultural backgrounds and activist-political groups, which represent the complex multiplicity the occupy movements reflected on the world protest stage. Thus, the general profile of Gezi participants was spanning an entire cultural and political spectrum as well. The majority of the participants who accepted to speak to me under the conditions of Turkey’s volatile political climate during these times were from a precarious class background with no regular job or social insurance except one protester who was a laborer in the private construction sector. One participant declared himself to be a “conservative entrepreneur at heart” in the same sector.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that Gezi included not only subjectivities from the left-leaning groups such as environmentalists, Marxists, LGBTQ members, anarchists, feminists, progressive Islamists, but also socially conservative pro-government and government-allied ultranationalists. Nonetheless, studies that immediately came out following the afterglow of Gezi overlooked the presence of such right-wing subjectivities because of ideological as well as statistical reasons.<sup>5</sup>

In order not to pollute or taint the claim to objectivity and to channel all the voices of subjectivities in the repertoire, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 participants (approximately two members from each group and subjectivity) who were recruited via a two-stage snowballing technique. The first key group of interviews involved prominent public and well-known leader figures in their activist and political circles who acted as the gatekeeper for the second group interviewees. The second group involved relatively younger participants with independent roles in their groups, social settings, and organizations. Overall, interviewees came from a higher-education background except a few who seemed to be critical of the possibilities that education institutions could offer to people in the age of information. I commenced the

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<sup>4</sup> The interviewees were not specifically asked about their class orientation to avoid the unequal power relations that could surface between the researcher and participants. They were asked to introduce themselves and encouraged to talk about “their past before Gezi.” Since issues of social class are expressed in cultural and ideological means in Turkey, the interviewees preferred to define their identities according to the political ideology of the activist groups they were affiliated with. Some of them also mentioned their family background and ethnic ties while introducing themselves, even so, the social class was not specifically emphasized in the first place. This is not to say that that Gezi was a movement driven entirely middle or upper-middle groups or working-class segments did not involve in it at all. In a world where the number of citizens who are absent from the protection of social insurance systems is structurally increasing because of the general tendency in the labor market and economic transformations, it would be a futile attempt to map out the class composition of this incident. As I have noted before and debates in social movement literature indicate, new social movements and the Occupy movements differentiate from the working-class movements of early capitalism since their struggles cannot be reduced to a single line of conflict.

<sup>5</sup> In this article, I have particularly chosen to include analyses elicited from such conservative participants to paint a clearer picture of the protest scene in Istanbul because I would argue these protesters displaying liminal characteristics may be thought as better empirical channels to dig deeper into the core dynamics at play in micro mobilization processes. Participants with different ideological visions and cultural orientations also enable me to perform my role as critical insider.

ethnography with ideologically the most distant and challenging group for me, that is the nationalist youth organization called the Turkish Youth Unity (TGB).

I myself had also actively participated in the incident beginning from its embryonic occupation phase along with environmentalist groups. I attended many public forums and the meetings of Gezi (June) Unity Movement’s quorum series, which lasted almost over two years after Gezi till the winter of 2016. Nonetheless, as I suggested above, I strived to position myself as a “critical insider” (Graeber, 2009, p. 12)<sup>6</sup> throughout whole this process. To accomplish this ethical activist methodology, besides playing the role of devil’s advocate during the interviews the data I collected was filtered through epistemological matrices derived from memory studies (Bornat, 2013; Brown and Reavey, 2013; Fivush, 2013; Kansteiner, 2002; Keightley, 2010; Radstone, 2016; Roediger and Wertsch, 2008; Taylor, 2003) and critical approaches to narrative analysis techniques, which encourage the researcher to use his/her emotions as investigative tools during both transcription and data collection processes (Arditti et al., 2010; Hubbard et al., 2001; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). As a result of this methodological combination, I focused on consciously and/or unconsciously included and/or excluded metaphorical expressions, as well as common or clashing accounts that surfaced during the dialogical exchanges of the interviews (Keightley, 2010, pp. 57-58,64). I then made use of the expressions and accounts that compelled me to see the incident in a different light from the perspective of my own lifeworld in the panorama of Gezi. Thus, I must confess I went out in the field to disprove my own theoretical projections on the incident and set a common-knowledge production process in motion, which would eventually lead to a narrative reflecting the motivational factors of all the diverse subjectivities involved in Gezi.

The interview questions that would provide answers for the two main research questions I mentioned above were particularly structured in a very abstract and open-ended manner in order not to contaminate the remembering processes and means for the interviewees. With vague questions such as “what does Gezi remind you of?”, “what was the last protest event you remember before Gezi” or “what things came to your mind during the mobilization night” I tried to open enough space for the interviewees to shape their own narratives and memories, thereby contributing to the common knowledge production process as much as possible. On the other hand, the follow-up questions that were posed toward the end of the interviews purposefully brought up a couple of the tangible incidents such as the Tahrir Square, the occupy movements of the Global North, or more local-oriented protest events that took place before the Gezi Commune. Such questions also specifically reminded the interviewees of main mobilization factors such as class issues, increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey in the

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<sup>6</sup>David Graber defines critical insider as activist ethnographer "whose ultimate purpose is to further the goals" of the movement s/he is part of. For him, social movements are made up of participants with different social and ideological backgrounds, and maintaining solidarity in such diverse mobilization settings requires self-reflexive lenses directed at the ethnographer's own privileged subjectivity, as well as other participant's political views and subject positioning.

context of arising/closing political opportunities and emotional aspects of mobilization as well. Based on the answers given to all of these questions, the common denominator that brings all the interviewees together, I would argue, take shape around three important facts: first, the theatre protests as a matter of urban commons that occurred a couple of months before Gezi, second the red woman, one of the iconic images of the mobilization night, and lastly the Paris Commune and communal way of life as an example of utopic, nostalgic representation, which transcends the boundaries of contemporary temporality and consciousness as affect.

### **“Transformative events”**

At the outset, the Istanbul protests emerged in response to the latest installment of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) neo-Ottomanist urban renewal scheme, which proposed the restitution of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman artillery. This seemingly historical revitalization project reflexively created public outrage since it would have served as a façade for privatizing Taksim Square and constructing yet another new five-star hotel and shopping mall, which significantly threatened to destroy Gezi Park (Gürcan, 2014, pp. 73–80; Harmanşah, 2014, pp. 126–127; Özkırmı, 2014, p. 2; Tuğal, 2013, pp. 152–153). In conjunction with independent environmentalist activists, various groups from a local grassroots organization called the Taksim Solidarity (TD) set up a small encampment inside the park to halt the construction process.

By the night of May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013, the struggle for a sustainable urban life spread to other parts of Istanbul as well as to other major cities in the country, thereby evolving into nation-wide civil disobedience over a night. On the afternoon of June 1<sup>st</sup>, people from all walks of life amplified the intensity of the small environmentalist occupation, as a result causing it to expand in size and scope rapidly. The rapidly increasing crowd, both inside and outside of the park, carried out a nearly 24-hours of active struggle against security forces, who gradually withdrew from the square following the Istanbul governor's instructions. The state's decision to back down revealed the unpreparedness of its security apparatus to what I characterize as the commune repertoire, which was a performance unique to Istanbul's urban space as opposed to other metropolitan areas of Turkey. Thus, Gezi had reverberated across the whole country, yet it only managed to morph into a commune in Istanbul.

In the following two weeks, the demonstrators transformed the small encampment that was initially set up by the environmentalists into a self-sustaining and experimental protest enclave, as happened in the other previous episodes of the repertoire. With its library, collectively organized dinners and cleaning activities, mass yoga sessions, free food courts, botanic garden, solar ovens, infirmary, radio station, and daily press, the protest space conjured up a communal way of life within a metropolis, which was wrecked by three decades of neoliberal policies (Kolluoglu, 2018, p. 32). The park itself subsequently became an emotional point of reference that kept drawing other demonstrators

and by-standards in from a multitude of social and cultural backgrounds. Statistical projections estimated that almost 16 (3,5 million) percent of Istanbul's population (15 million) temporarily visited or participated in what is popularly known as the Gezi events (Yörük and Yüksel, 2014, p. 15). No one could have imagined that the small environmentalist encampment would form in Taksim's Gezi Park, much less it would ignite a cycle of protests throughout the country and lead to a commune in the city's ever whirling spatiality.

I first asked whether my participants were involved in any protest event prior to Gezi to analyze how the small picketing event culminated in a mass uprising. In this way, I aimed to explore how and why demonstrators from various socio-cultural backgrounds and political affiliations simultaneously took to the streets in solidarity unprecedented in Turkey's protest culture. Based on the answers provided, I then asked the interviewees to describe the demonstration, sit-in, picketing event, vigil, political campaign, or rally they participated in before the commune. My intention behind this inquiry was to examine whether any sort of “transformative event” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 183) built up to the rapid and instantaneous collective action of the 31 May night. In other words, I tested Tilly's model on an empirical ground.

Fourteen out of the seventeen interviewees told me they either actively participated in or closely monitored two protest events before the commune. The first protest incident the interviewees recalled was the International Labour Day gatherings, which was organized in the same square between the years of 2011 and 2013. The second case was the *Emek* Theater demonstrations. *Emek*, roughly translated as labor, was more of a micro-scale picketing event. In this incident, local dwellers confronted another privatization project targeting urban commons in the Taksim area. And I would argue that the theater protesters were particularly significant considering they erupted just a couple of weeks before Gezi.

Subsequently, I inquired had the participants “observed,” or “witnessed” anything “unusual” or “uncommon” in these both key turning points leading up to the commune. In other words, I looked at whether they came across any modulation, improvising performance, or innovation in the local protest repertoire pool from a Tillean perspective. Those who were actively present or followed the incidents via mainstream and social media channels told me they noticed a different “momentum,” “social texture,” and “crowd” in the course of events. Thus, contrary to my expectations, they told me that they observed a transformation in the social composition of performers, rather than a change or innovation in the forms or nature of collective action itself.

One LGBTQ individual who went out into Taksim Square for Labour Day celebrations in 2012 describes the scenes he witnessed as follows: “I could not see the thing that we may call the traditional left in 2012. That May 1 coincided with the student pact that was emerging against the AKP. There were many anarchists, black colors, rainbow flags, visible feminist organizations. That was a difference for me.” In a similar fashion, a young member of the ultra-nationalist youth organization verified his statement. “There were more

independent protesters than organizations” he recounted when he was asked to articulate his “feelings” and “thoughts” about his last demonstration before Gezi.

The last demonstration the TGB member participated in was the May Day gathering of 2013 in Taksim Square. That year the government authorities decided to cancel the celebrations that they let back in 2011. Up until then, the Turkish state had closed the site for all kinds of public gatherings following the May Day massacre of 1977, where right-wing contra-guerrilla organizations opened fire over a crowd gathered that year (“Turkish police, May Day protesters clash in Istanbul,” 2013, p. 1). In other words, the Taksim Square had remained a no man’s land over almost 30 years before the liberal vein of the AKP announced the site was open to gatherings in 2011. In the following two years, the site brought the cultural movements of Turkey together with unions in the new millennium. The statements that were given by the two diametrically opposed subjectivities (one LGBTQ individual one young proud nationalist) verify how cultural movements tried to articulate themselves upon the working-class movements under the conditions of the flexible labor market. Thus, unions, Marxist-Leninist party fractions, and syndicalist organizations were not only actors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century May Day gatherings as it used to be back in the 1970s. Interestingly, this heterogeneous, independent young activist profile mixing laborers with precarious classes showed up for *Emek* theater as well.

Similar to Gezi Park, in the early spring of 2013, the municipality announced a project that included the demolishment of the old historic theater hall, which was designed in the art deco style by a Levantine architecture in 1884. This urban renewal project was proposing to turn the non-profit theatre hall into a shopping venue, which generated considerable public disapproval in early April 2013 (Letsch, 2013). The spreading news captured the attention of young, left-leaning, and precariat middle-classes, including art curators, environmentalists, and the LGBTQ people who were living in the near vicinity. These young segments of the society were far more inclined to turn the area surrounding the theater (İstiklal Avenue) into an aestheticized space of resistance against global capitalism, rather than a profit-oriented venue. Interestingly, *Emek* also became a matter of concern for nationalist youths who are more sensitive about protecting “Turkey’s secular values” and sovereignty against the “imperialism” of the West. Another young member of the TGB surprisingly told me the *Emek* protests were among the last demonstration he attended. When I directed a volley of probing questions concerning his motivation, he pointed to the “operational logic of capitalism” and vehemently explained how this “mindset” could “devour national treasures like *Emek*.”

When asked about “memories” from her last “protest experience,” another protester, who introduced herself as a feminist socialist and film studies student, made the following comment: “Almost everyone was there. I noticed that there was more of a cosmopolitan crowd both in *Emek* and during the last May 1 celebration in 2013.” As if echoing this student’s sentiments, an environmentalist activist described the protester profile of the theater picketing

as follows: “Most of the people there were independent, they were just ordinary people, local dwellers and arts people living in the neighborhood, maybe a few from outside (other neighborhoods).”

The privatization of Emek theater hall epitomizes the three-decade neoliberal urban policies to which Istanbul has been left exposed. Today’s Istanbul can be thought as the product of what Çağlar Keyder refers to as the “new urban coalition,” which encompasses the city government, sub-state actors, and the conservative Islamic bourgeoisie, which crystallized in the aftermath of political Islam’s first victory in the municipal elections of 1994 (Keyder, 2010). This coalition took a more overt Islamic tone following the AKP’s rise in the national elections in the early 2000s especially in terms of reconfiguration processes of urban space. However, their ultimate goal, that is Islamising and globalizing the city, were diametrically opposed to the urban visions of new middle classes who were yearning for a cosmopolitan and sustainable city.

In this regard, I would suggest that the lifestyles of those deviating from orthodox Islamic norms, values, and the aesthetic and market understanding that the AKP represents, manifested themselves in both events, which is the theater and Labour Day celebrations. In a way, the Labour Day gatherings may also be viewed as an attempt to reclaim public spaces because there were many groups and movement members who will probably never grasp to chance to get unionized but cares more about the city they live in. Ultimately, in both incidents, I would argue that we are looking at a segmented crowd mostly made up of new urban, precariat middle classes that challenged what Ariel Salzman characterizes as “Islamopolis,” which she characterizes as a distorted, post-modern version of cosmopolitan Ottoman urban life (Salzman, 2012, pp. 68–71, 86).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the post-modern Islamic urbanity and the segmented crowds that took shape against it constitute the two main pillars on which the transformative events leading to the mobilization night were based on.

## **The mobilization night**

On several counts, the mobilization process of Gezi may be likened to the uprisings that occurred in both Tunisia and Egypt, behind which simmering in social media is counted among the most important triggering forces. The scenes showing the forceful evictions of the environmentalist protesters and the TD members from the park created outrage to a significant extent among Turkish demonstrators just as it happened after Mohammad Bouazizi’s self-immolation

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<sup>7</sup> Salzman, in fact, stretches the appearance of this multi-layered crowd back to the assassination of Armenian-Turkish in 2007. In this regard, she points to the funeral cortège that involved not only ethnically Armenian Turks, but also new urban middle classes as well as other minorities of the Ottoman past. She discusses the unexpected rise of this multi-ethnic and cross-class multitude in the context of the cosmopolitan historicity of Istanbul’s urban space nonetheless urges to “reflect on the varied motivations and emotions” of them from a more empirical point of view. My own field research findings, as suggested above, show us that this layer of the new urban middle-class composition is in a growing tendency.

incident spread throughout digital matrixes. On the night of May 31<sup>st</sup>, there was a similar surge of digital images and snapshots that went viral on social media. In particular, [an image of a young graduate student, also known as the red woman](#) (Benjamin Seel, 2013), became extremely popular online, which later on emerged as one of the iconographies of the commune.

The majority of my interviewees addressed this image throughout our discussions without me giving them any clue or reminder. The interviewees did not include political, social rights or class issues among factors the culminating to the uprising, even though I specifically asked whether they would view the AKP’s decision to lift the ban on Labour Day celebrations in the square as a “window of opportunity.” Rather than such political matters and constitutional rights, most of the interviewees lined up the “asymmetrical use of force” by police, “unjust violence,” and dramatic images they came across on social media as motivational reasons.

One of the interviewees, who introduced himself as an AKP supporter and an “Erdogan sympathizer,” pointed to the snapshot of the red woman and described it as the most “memorable moment left from Gezi.” He stated, “The red woman, she had a very strong stance in there. Images like that really made me thought there was a matter of injustice in the park, which is why my wife and I decided to go down there.” Another participant, who was affiliated with various anarchist organizations and also an employee in the construction sector, told me he first encountered the image of the red women on his cell phone while he was working. He stated, “After that, I made up my mind to go Taksim as soon as I finish off work.” As an anarchist Kurd, he used an interesting metaphor to express his “feelings” and “opinions” regarding the red woman. He shared, “I felt the whole country was under invasion. It was as if the public emerged as enemy...how could they do that to this girl I kept mumbling myself.”

The women of Gezi, who actively struggled on the frontlines throughout the mobilization night, inspired not only the dissident Kurdish laborer but also the young Islamist entrepreneur, revealing yet another pair of socially and ideologically contrasting subjectivities and intersecting motivating forces in the same picture. Another interviewee, who declared his allegiance to the Pan-Turkist ideology and its political actor the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), said to me: “I was impressed by ordinary people’s bravery during the insurrection night, especially that of women. They did not seem to possess extraordinary talents and skills, like heroic characters we see in the films...the courage they showed just impressed me. That is how I found myself amid the crowds trying to reach the park.”

Another interviewee, who was a socialist growing up in “a secular family environment”<sup>8</sup>, also underlined the significant role the female protesters took

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<sup>8</sup> In the Turkish political jargon such a statement corresponds to sympathy felt for the founding party of the Turkish Republic, the Republican People’s Party, which channels the voices of secular opposition in the political platform since the 1940s against parties representing liberal and vernacular/Islamic conservative values.

on during the mobilization night. She included the red woman among the most “unforgettable moments and scenes” of the uprising night without any reminder. She recounted, “The gas gun pointed at that girl’s face. That frame, its *memory* still haunts me.”

Of course, the red woman was neither the only social media heroine of the night nor was it the only morally shocking incident that reverberated across the affective domains of dissidents. When asked to recall memories, my other interviewees recounted many similar events and dramatic scenes they witnessed either first-hand or on saw social media<sup>9</sup>. The anecdotes they narrated, which forced the boundaries of my own theoretical projections, included the stories of elders and old-school protesters in about their “seventies,” “brave LGBTQ members” physically confronting security forces, and also environmentalists who locked themselves to the top of swaying trees following the night assault. Overall, most of the commentaries on such dramatic events, I suggest, highlighted the “heroic acts” of women in particular and explained how such brave initiatives encouraged and motivated male and personal involvement in the uprising.

In this regard, I would argue that the red woman can be considered the embodiment of many other morally shocking dramatic incidents, which slipped off the radar of social media that night. Expressed differently, I imagine its aestheticized effect, that is, the contrasting effect of her red dress disappearing into her pale white skin which evokes the spirit of the Turkish flag in a compositional sense, as the incarnation of a common denominator. And through this common affective circuit, the heterogeneous crowds that previously gathered around the urban commons and transformative events like the May Day celebrations horizontally managed to mobilize without a leadership figure and organizational structure in a true anarchistic sense.

Without a doubt, the affective sensoria the red women created cannot even be compared to Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation. Ultimately, the latter caused the life of a poor street vendor in a country where the wealth gap is much greater. Yet the exercise of violence on a young woman’s body, I would suggest, woke up the young Turks of the new millennium who were alleged to be apolitical. The red woman created a spillover effect in digital publicity because she morphed into a simulacrum, thereby emerging as an inter-subjective or interactively experienced truth in its own right. The fragility of the female body arose as an accentuated reality that warped and slowed down the accelerated spatiotemporally of postmodernity. As a result, it created incentives for an already atomized segment including even relatively obedient conservative and nationalist groups to connect to the moment from a politically decontextualized point of view. The aesthetics of the image depicted the violence as if it was almost stationary, like a frozen timeframe that was reaching beyond space and

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/gezinin-sapanli-teyzesi-tahliye-edildi,733829> and <https://t24.com.tr/haber/taksimde-tazyikli-suya-karsi-kipirdamadan-durdu,231113>

time configurations during which it was recorded.<sup>10</sup> It was as if the composition of the static body, the pale skin, and its stark contrast to the red dress, opened onto infinite possibilities. By creating “a powerful indetermination” in everyday routine and also simultaneously establishing an “affective intensity,” (Bartelson and Murphie, 2010), the image weaved the moment itself into previous contentious episodes, including Emek and the Labour Day protests. The affective intensity the red woman created, I would even argue, reached as far as many other “unjust”<sup>11</sup> events that had hitherto taken place in Asia Minor’s history.

A historical approach to social protest, in fact, shows us that iconography, motifs, and representations of woman body are associated with the abstract idealization of “liberty” during uprisings like Gezi, and it is very common to see this type of female images in times of revolutionary situations and socio-political turbulences. In the 1840s of France, images showing women fighting on barricades, for instance, circulated widely in pamphlets and brochures as reoccurring revolutionary symbols, which animated the dissident segments to rebel against the absolutist regime of Napoléon. Sexualized iconography of women motivated the Parisians, who gathered around common causes and the images depicting the notion of “liberating Paris.” Womanhood in a sense was associated with the image of “free motherland” (a very clichéd metaphoric imagination in official nationalist narrations, especially in the context of third world nationalisms) in these depictions, which usually portray the crowds gathering for the sake of the common cause they believe in. (D. Harvey 2004, 4,280-285).

Interestingly, memories of the second stage of the Gezi occupation did not appear to be very distant from the city of Paris en route to the Commune of 1871. The Pan-Turkish participant's observations on the late hours of the rebellion were as follows: "Unlike other demonstrations organized by the left, you know where you usually see people only raising left fists, this was without organization. This is a historical moment I told myself as I followed what other protesters were doing. Taksim was engulfed in flames." When asked to describe what those scenes reminded him of, interestingly, and immediately he said, "the French Revolution." He said this with a determined and self-assured tone in his voice as if there was no place for more contemporary exemplary cases like Tahrir and the Occupy movements in North America.

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<sup>10</sup> I would argue that the snapshot showing Alan Kurdi's on the Aegean coast of Turkey had a strikingly similar effect on the Western world, especially in Canada concerning the Syrian civil war and migration policies.

<sup>11</sup> I would suggest that the entrepreneur 's comments and his word choice about the red woman might serve to reinforce the argument I am presenting here. He suggested Gezi became a matter of justice for him after seeing the images of the red woman. In case I had directed probing questions to clarify what he meant by "injustice" he would probably have referred to the freedom for veiling protests organized in Taksim in the early 2000s. In this regard, it would not be entirely wrong to suggest that the red woman revitalized the memories of these repertoires organized by socially conservative feminists in his imagination.

As I noted above, I would not anticipate such a response given my own theoretical projections on the mobilization factors that draw the main contours of “occupy” repertoire. As a communitarian leaning toward the Pan-Turkist political tradition, which takes its inspiration from the mythical spatiotemporally of Central Asia, rather than the Western political culture. I would expect this proud young nationalist to associate the dramatic scenes he saw with a contentious episode recorded in the history of Turkey’s protest culture, or perhaps one that involves his own party organization, or at the very least with Egypt’s Tahrir revolution, which falls somewhere near the outer edge of Turkey’s political and cultural landscape. Nonetheless, as a subjectivity that is proud of his national history and Islamic heritage, the last hours of the mobilization night paradoxically revived the political imaginaries of the French Revolution in his lifeworld. And he was not the only interviewee framing the first days of the second occupation phase around similar distinct historically analogous events and metaphoric expressions, which were alluding to the revolutionary situations of the past century in world history.

### **The Paris Commune on the horizons of the park**

Following the affective intensity that brought the fragmented young Turks closer to one another, the encampment in Gezi Park was restored along with larger crowds following the police’s gradual retreat from the square on the afternoon of June 1<sup>st</sup>. This second occupation move continued into the second week of June 2013. Throughout the two-week commune experience, the protesters turned the park into a utopian space by forming small and large-scaled platforms where they put the direct-democracy principles into action, staged ritualistic art performances, organized counter-cultural activities. Above all, the tents and space per se allowed communards from all walks of life to get in touch with one another. Despite ongoing clashes with security forces in near vicinities, floor discussions, music gigs, political tirades, and soapboxes one by one blossomed around the tents of each collective and individual group pitched in the park. Formerly antagonized political and social identities such as the nationalist-secularists and Kurds, Islamists and feminists, LGBTQ people, and soccer fans shared the same space for almost two weeks. And furthermore, they slept in the camp mattresses as the police forces assaulted the borders of the commune.

By reminding such colorful and dramatic scenes Gezi engraved in Turkey’s social memory, I asked the interviewees to visualize the first day of “occupation” and then requested them to articulate their “opinions,” “thoughts,” and “feelings” over the very first scene” they themselves remember from a chronological point of view. I then asked them to associate the “the very first image they recall” with “anything” that flashes in their minds. Considering that memories regarding the mobilization night often verified the culturalist camp and produced a limited narration of the incident itself, my intention behind this memory exploration I suggest was to see to what extent the roots of the repertoire performed in the park could be viewed in the global protest climate

that the post-Arab spring brought with itself. In other words, I questioned whether the post-2010 global protest scenery inspired the Gezi protesters on the ground, be it via social media or mainstream media channels, or any sorts of means of new computing and media technologies. Did they really adapt the occupy strategy to their own protest environment?

Against my expectations, neither the contemporary cases of Egypt, Tunisia, nor the examples of Occupy movements in the global north came up in their recounts. Similar to the Pan-Turkist communard's commentaries, other participants primarily mentioned the Commune of 1871, or other similar historically analogous events like the Spanish Civil War, which lies in the distant past of revolutionary situations of Europe. Following my probing questions, they similarly weaved such historical cases, in which we also see fragmented crowds with diverse social and cultural backgrounds coming together, into Situationist expressions like “utopian space,” “a space of hope,” “liberated zone” and “commune.” Just like the Pan-Turkist protester, the Kurdish anarchist entered the park in the early hours of dawn Taksim Square appeared to be literally a battle zone. The anarchist communard described the scene he came across as follows: "I barely remember my first moment in the park. I was all drained out. All the area was covered up with a thick cloud and burnt smell. Flaming fires around the square were lighting up the far corners of the park. It was like the Spanish Civil War." When I asked him to elaborate on what he specifically meant by that "comparison," he responded in a determined manner: "You know sort of a liberated zone."

Another environmentalist protester remarked on her very first day in the park as follows: "I was wondering how such a huge crowd fit into the park. But there was something out there organizing everything. I do not know what that was or how to describe it. I cannot find the words...perhaps a commune, like the Paris Commune maybe." One of the members of the TBG, who was mesmerized by the same chaotic scenery, shared similar sentiments and thoughts regarding his first-day experience in the square without state authority. "There were overwhelmingly too many colors. But I felt something new at the same time. I felt hope. I could have never imagined the left resisting through art and humor before...It was like a utopian space."

The AKP voter was also among the dissidents who immediately visited the park on June 1<sup>st</sup>. He went to the site of action along with his wife to deliver the food they cooked together for the communards. He recounted, “the first thing that I noticed when we were handing food round was that people were lining up to carry plastic water bottles to the park in chains. At that moment, I came to understand that the Turkish left was not just about people raising left fists in times of demonstration. A sense of thrilling excitement covered (boiled) up inside me as we kept on watching them. I actually realized a *petit* anarchist was lying inside me at that moment. That scene enabled me to see what a commune life would actually be like. It showed me how it really looked like there.”

### **In lieu of conclusion: “mnemonic community”**

Methodologically and ontologically speaking, “memories are at their most collective when they transcend the time and space of the event’s original occurrence” (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 189). Remembering is a “mediated” process (Fivush, 2013, pp. 15–17) and memories often expand upon their own ontological existence through mediums such as images, written or oral metaphoric expressions, as well as grander collective memories or narratives. “Means of representation” that facilitate the act of remembering, the “physical and cultural proximity” to analogues events and their “subsequent rationalization and memorialization” do not have to entirely overlap with the actual event that occurred before people’s eyes. Hence, people may “embrace” memories of the medium events “that occurred in unfamiliar and historically distance cultural contexts” to “reconstruct” the real event after its happening (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 190). The more temporally distant the medium event is, the more the memory of the event being remembered becomes collective, thereby representing the lifeworld of a particular “mnemonic community” on common ground. (Keightley and Pickering, 2012).<sup>12</sup>

In light of this critical approach to oral history and the empirical findings I presented above, I argue that it was the political imaginary of the Paris Commune, its symbolic representation, as well as distant memories of other similar historical revolutionary situations in the past century that inspired the communards in Istanbul, rather than the contemporary post-2010 protest scenery. In other words, the Gezi participants collectively and retrospectively reconstructed the core meaning of their own performance by articulating a yearning for the Paris Commune and its symbolic derivations in a nostalgic way. Once again, I want to emphasize that I am neither arguing that the Istanbul communards consciously adopted the genesis of commune repertoire to their own protest eco-system nor the symbolic representations of the French revolutions were back in their mind before they decided to take on the Turkish state. They used the symbolic meaning of these events to reconstruct the past and their collective identity.

As narrated above, the Istanbul protests exactly crystalized in parallel to the transformative events of the International Labor Day celebrations and the theater demonstrations; the watershed moments that relayed and reflected the grievances mainly revolving around urban commons. These two key turning points then weaved themselves into morally shocking incidents and affective mimics (Gibbs, 2010), especially those triggered by female protesters in the course of action, all of which created the necessary emotional intensity that led to the mobilization night. Hence, I would shortly suggest that the fusion of urban commons with women’s affects were articulated through the nostalgic representation of the Paris Commune in the words of the Turkish communards.

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<sup>12</sup> Holocaust remembrance by different young generations of Jewish communities around the world and the reproduction of Jewish identity in contemporary societies through that mean perfectly exemplifies the ways in which mnemonic community come into existence.

One might argue that such a finding is not surprising at all given the overall Marxist-anarchist orientations of the interviewees and Gezi participants in general. But given the fact that even the conservative and ultranationalist communards used the Commune to shape their narratives I do not see any methodological and ontological reason not to characterize this protest form as the commune repertoire, at least in the Turkish context.

The term I coined at the end of this long common knowledge production process constitutes contrary evidence to the conceptual approaches that frame Gezi as another offshoot of the Occupy movement or as the ramification of the Arab Spring, as the expression of "Turkish summer" exemplifies. The commune repertoire also urges the scholars of social movements to check whether they use the expression of "occupy" in its place from a methodological and literal perspective. As a matter of fact, the responses I received for the probing questions at the end of interviews verified the accuracy of the commune repertoire for characterizing today's social movements.

Toward the end of the interviews, I reminded the participants of the various dramatic scenes of the Arab Spring, including the live footage of Mohammed Bouazizi whose self-immolation sparked waves of protest in a political geography reaching from the Maghreb to the Levant. Additionally, I directed their attention to various examples of occupy movements in the global north, such as the case of Zuccotti Park and Madrid. In particular, I pointed out how "similar types of people" in these separate “movements” communicated with one another outside the channels of diplomacy via social media despite distances (Shenker and Gabbatt, 2011). I specifically asked if they followed or monitored the performances by such similar crowds implementing “occupy strategy” via news sources or social media. Upon that, I also inquired whether they heard any comments about the Arab Spring or anti-globalization struggles in general during the two-week occupation experience.

The things communards articulated after the probing questions proved to me that Istanbul's commune repertoire was experienced, imagined, and performed in its own microcosm despite the support that came from global activists, intellectuals, and other protests that erupted more or less around the same times (Bevins, 2013).<sup>13</sup> In other words, the majority of the participants verified that other similar contemporary incidents did not spring to their mind neither before the mobilization night nor during the heydays of the commune. This was the situation for almost all the communards I interviewed except the Pan-Turkist communard who pointed out that as a young law student specializing in the field of human rights, he had an intellectual curiosity for “protest movements.” Upon my probing questions, he said that Gezi reminded him more

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<sup>13</sup> At its peak point, the Turkish commune repertoire became a source of inspiration for the newest social movements such that the protests in Brazil, which erupted as a reaction to the liberal government's increase in public transportation fees, culminated with a slogan shouting “the love is over here is Turkey.” Besides anti-globalization protesters that came from Europe, I also met two Brazilian activists who flew all the way from the southern hemisphere to give their support for Gezi.

of the 2005 suburban riots rather than “the Arab protests” in a determined manner.

The resonances of hyper-capitalism become far more dramatic in developing countries that go through authoritarian transformations like the whole Turkey is currently experiencing. In these countries, the accelerated time-space of configurations” of post-modernity that Harvey mentions (Harvey, 1992) would reach to such high levels that, I would argue, it could ultimately cause a severe social amnesia in the strictest sense. Under this type more vulnerable conditions, the political, and economic social crises that keep the publicity preoccupied melt into thin air before they ossify, as Marx once put it in regard to the dynamics of early capitalism. The volatility emerging from this unrestrained form of capitalism eventually cuts off the link between the reality of present and social memory. Understandably, this condition what I characterize as the neoliberal state of being peculiar to belated modern milieus in effect draws the attention away from the matters of global capitalism as well as anti-globalization struggles formed against it. In simple words, I would suggest that citizens in the global south have less time, resources as well as incentives to give meaning to their own struggles in a global context.

Perhaps Gezi protesters remained apathetic to the common trenches dug against global capitalism because of the neoliberal-Islamic vortex. They might have seen or heard about the Arab Spring before Gezi but that faded in memories because of the intensity of Turkey’s local economic and political landscape. Further research is required to fully understand and map the perception of Turkey’s new middle classes toward global activism and struggles. Yet, I would suggest that young Turks paid homage to another global struggle that occurred almost two centuries before while most of the other occupiers in the global north almost forgot about it (Lustiger-Thaler, 2014). They managed to re-invent a modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the global repertoire performed in 1871. Thus, Istanbul’s commune was global in its own nostalgic cocoon.

In fact, striking parallels can be drawn between the genesis of the commune and Istanbul’s encampment through the prism of critical human geography in addition to memories. Many scholars suggest that besides the political and structural dynamics and international politics leading to Napoleon's dictatorship, re-shuffling of city space, urban renewal initiatives, and the social segregation that came along with such penetrations into urban space can be counted among the main factors that led to the seventy-two days of the occupation of a significant portion of the *arrondissements* in Paris. Similarly to today's occupy movements, sort of heterogeneous crowd, a mix of crafts populations, and working-class segments took control of the city for a period of time as a result. (Gould, 1995, pp. 1-4,6; Harvey, 2012, pp. 7-10, 2004, pp. 1-20).

I also drew the attention to similar urban transformations in neoliberalizing and Islamizing urban space of Istanbul above. As if verifying the place of the city as the epicenter of the multi-layered alliances, twelve out of the seventeen communards chose the expression of “lifestyle” when they were asked to

summarize the “overall agenda of the protests in one word.” Nonetheless, when they were given more time to define what “Gezi was about” retrospectively, each participant responded according to their positioning in the political and social panorama of Turkey. Hence, for an environmentalist, the commune was more about protecting trees and ensuring the environmental sustainability of the park. Whereas secular-nationalists (TGB) framed it as the uprising and “awakening” of a secular society, as a resistance effort against a neoliberal Islamic government threatening the values of “enlightened” of the country. For an LGBTQ individual, the space inside the park carried a symbolic historical meaning since it is one of the first cruising ground, and still taking on that role for the community. Similarly, for the Turkish communists and socialists, Gezi signified the resurrection of a new class-consciousness in the age of neoliberalism. For transgender and feminist subjectivities, Gezi symbolized a resistance movement against the patriarchal state (*devlet baba*), which attempted to manipulate and abolish progressive abortion rights they won back in the 1980s. For ethnic and religious minorities like Kurds and Alevis, as my interviewees emphasized, the year of 2013 gave the secularist middle classes, who were living in the nostalgic legacy of Atatürk’s secularism and its safe institutional domains in the 1990s, the taste of their own medicine, that is the sense of being “the other.”

Without a doubt, the mobilization process of multi-layered protest crowds like Gezi involves a set of complex structural factors, forms of action, ideological derivations, and overlapping affective domains from an intersectional point of view. Nonetheless, as this article has pointed out, such heterogeneous protest crowds are more inclined to gather to protect urban commons and mobilize through affective intensities, particularly the affective resonances created by women in the course of action.<sup>14</sup> This article has also underlined that protesters in belated modern milieus retrospectively give meaning to their protest strategies in light of the political imaginaries of the past centuries’ revolutionary situations.

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<sup>14</sup> I closely followed the Lebanese protests of 2019 via different news sources, which channeled the voices of many participants from different ethnic, religious and ideological backgrounds. What was interesting is that, at least from my point of view, the Lebanese dissidents suggested that the civil unrest has escalated right after the privatization of a public space in Beirut’s coastline that restricted the access of city dwellers access to the sea in a significant way.

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## **Contentious politics or populism? Protest dynamics and new political boundaries in the case of Greek Indignados**

**Dimitris Papanikolopoulos**

### **Abstract**

*In Greece, an intense anti-austerity protest campaign (2010-2012) was followed by the reformation of Greek party system (2012-2015). This development is strongly related with the emergence of a new political boundary dividing Greek society on the basis of the acceptance, or not, of the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF) inspired austerity policy packages. In this article I examine how mass mobilization influenced the emergence of this new political boundary, focusing specifically on the Greek Indignados protests. Theorists of populism have argued that contemporary (movement) politics is dominated by a new political boundary separating the people and the elites, but, as I suggest, they fail to unpack the boundary activity, since they underplay the differences between parts of the people as well as the huge cognitive work that took place among protesting masses. Instead, drawing from both the framing perspective and contentious politics theory, I argue that the emergence of a new political boundary was a result of operating cognitive and relational causal mechanisms and processes such as frame alignment, deactivation of traditional political boundaries, and boundary change. Finally, I discuss why theories of populism do not constitute an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements.*

**Keywords:** Political boundaries, cleavages, framing processes, anti-austerity protests, Greek Indignados, movement of the squares, Greece, contentious politics, populism

### **Introduction**

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a new wave of contention swept western countries. European Indignados and American Occupiers very quickly sparked a wave of academic conferences and publications. Some scholars approach post-2010 movements through the prism of anti-austerity claims, while the imagination of others is captured by the innovative traits of “prefigurative politics”. Researchers also call attention to the interplay of economic and political crises (e.g. Hernandez and Kriesi 2016, Kriesi 2012) and the interactions between social movements, parties, and electoral dynamics (e.g. Almeida 2015, Kriesi 2015, della Porta et al 2017, McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 2013). Similarly, Greek scholars have highlighted the positive relation between anti-austerity protests (Indignados in particular) and a new political boundary (Papanikolopoulos et al 2014, Simiti 2014, Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016), a

new electoral regime (Serdedakis and Koufidi 2018) and the rise of SYRIZA (Simiti 2014, Karyotis and Rudig 2016, Vogiatzoglou 2017, Papanikolopoulos and Rongas 2019). Unlike relatively minor political changes that occurred in most countries hit by the economic crisis, the party system in Greece ended up totally reformed. Indeed, SYRIZA's rise was directly related to the emergence of a new political boundary: anti-memorandum vs pro-memorandum forces. Whoever was resisting austerity policies associated with the successive Memoranda of Understanding signed by the centre-Left and centre-Right Greek governments with Greece's lenders (EU, ECB, IMF) was dropped into the first category, while all those who considered the bailout agreements and subsequent austerity packages necessary were placed in the second.

Rather than focusing as suggested by Perugorria et al. (2016) on the cleavage structure of institutional politics to explain support for such extensive protests, in the Greek case it would be more appropriate to attempt the opposite as traditional boundaries had lost salience relative to the new boundary. Accordingly, in this article I examine the way protest dynamics contributed to the emergence of this new dividing line. Half a century after the emblematic work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), research on cleavages focuses on how social cleavages shape political boundaries and therefore party systems, attributing more or less weight to the agency of political elites, but ignoring the potential role of social movements when it comes to introducing/shaping/deepening political divisions.

In my analysis, I prefer to use the more empirical concept of political boundary rather than the notion of cleavage which is frequently referred to in the literature. Indeed, cleavage and political boundary are not identical concepts, although they are very often used as such. Cleavages constitute political expressions of historically embedded social divisions, like owners-labourers, centre-periphery, urban-rural, church-state (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In contrast, political boundaries are more plastic and ephemeral since they are more closely intertwined with the current political climate and economic developments. Cleavages feed political boundaries with raw material and ongoing political activity shapes the latter. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, old cleavages have either lost their salience or their clarity, while new ones revolving around employment status, identity and culture, age and gender have emerged. In this way, it is more fruitful to focus on political boundaries rather than cleavages when striving to explain the political earthquake of 2011.

In this context, we could assert that the formation of the anti-memorandum – pro-memorandum political boundary gave shape to the existing debate around neoliberal policies signifying what della Porta (2015) called “the re-emergence of a class cleavage” as well as to the cleavage between winners and losers of the globalisation or denationalisation process (Kriesi et al 2006). As we will see, an articulation of these two structural conflicts took place in the Greek squares. SYRIZA, a small party belonging to the Radical Left, positioned itself astutely on the side of anti-memorandum forces, and subsequently saw its popularity and support skyrocket from 2012 to 2015. After winning the elections in January

2015, it formed a coalition government which attempted to annul the Memoranda of Understanding and ensuing austerity policies, but was finally forced by Greece's lenders to accept another bail-out program. The signing (in July 2015) and implementation of the latter by a re-elected SYRIZA-led government (in September 2015), along with its more tolerant approach to the migration issue and the signature of the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia which ended the nationalist dispute over the name of the latter, led to SYRIZA's re-positioning with regard to these two axes of conflict. Part of the electorate no longer considered SYRIZA to be a fully anti-neoliberal and truly patriotic party. Protests against the Prespa Agreement were massive, unlike those against the implementation of the new memorandum. In this case, the articulation of the two conflicts (economic and identitarian) was incomplete. By that time, all major political parties had accepted austerity programs, the last adjustment program being completed by Greece in August 2018. Thus, the anti-memorandum – pro-memorandum political boundary lost most of its salience. SYRIZA came under mounting criticism for its heavy taxation policy and was accused of national treason by the right-wing New Democracy party which shifted its positioning (at least on a communication level) regarding the aforementioned cleavages and went on to win the national elections in July 2019.

In this way, it becomes clear that a) cleavages are multiple; and b) their content is unstable and open to debate (e.g. the enemy of national sovereignty might be the EU or migrants/neighbouring states; anti-austerity may refer to salaries/pensions/subsidies or taxes). Therefore, their very existence is as important as their articulation into political boundaries. Political forces struggle both to position themselves within the structure of conflicts and to pinpoint their content. Hence, political boundaries are the contingent by-products of political activity and not the direct expression of social cleavages. Consequently, my analysis focuses on mechanisms and processes through which collective action transformed the political space in Greece.

Political boundaries emerge as a result of a complex process which is cognitive and discursive as well as relational. People talk politics using broader social and political categories to define opponents and allies. Political boundaries change as people interact with one another in the social and political arena. In this context, I draw on both the framing perspective theory (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992, Benford and Snow 2000) and contentious politics theory (McAdam et al 2001, Tilly and Tarrow 2007) to establish an adequate theoretical framework to address the issue at stake. The identification of cognitive and relational causal mechanisms allows us to unpack the process of boundary change when every outcome is contingent. "Mechanisms are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" while processes are regular sequences of such mechanisms (McAdam et al 2001, 24). In the first half of the article my research focuses on the Greek Indignados protests as this cognitive work was publicly staged to a crucial degree in main city squares during the summer of 2011. In order to explore these mechanisms and processes, I

conducted extensive fieldwork in Syntagma Square in Athens between 25/5 and 31/6/2011, which included participant observation, attendance of dozens of popular assemblies, and participation in working group discussions as well as a range of political and artistic events. However, I do not present original data, since Greek Indignados protests were widely reported, while an already published series of academic researches offer a detailed picture of the Greek movement of the squares. Hence, my analysis of protesters' boundary activity neither rely exclusively upon a primary empirical research nor it is a meta-analysis based on reflection on the existent literature.

By contrast, I proceed to such a reflection in the second part of the article in respect with the well established theory of populism. Theorists of populism have argued that contemporary politics is dominated by a new cleavage separating the people and the elites, but, as I will demonstrate, the latter fail to unpack the boundary activity since they underplay the differences between parts of the "people" as well as the huge cognitive work that took place among protesting masses. Furthermore, I discuss why theories of populism do not constitute an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements, highlighting that the notion of populism has been so overstretched that seems to include almost every political aspect, while many definitions of populism contain normative considerations currently included in the elite's rhetoric. Finally, I reflect on the question if "square movements" can be classified under a "radical democratic populist" label as suggested by some scholars or contemporary populism has to be considered simply as a collective action frame as proposed by others.

### **Convergence between anti-austerity socio-political forces**

Throughout the (western) world 'pauperisation of the lower classes as well as proletarianization of the middle classes' marks a shift from a two-thirds society to a one-third society (della Porta 2014). In Greece, the vast majority of the population was opposed to austerity measures. Employees in the private and public sectors (77% and 78% respectively), the unemployed (73%) and students (75%) rejected austerity measures most categorically according to a first poll (Public Issue 2010). Researchers using actor attribution analysis (Kousis et al. 2016, Kanellopoulos et al. 2015) found that during the mass mobilisation of 2010-2014, Greek interest groups and other protest groups were placing the blame for economic hardship directly on the successive Memoranda of Understanding signed between successive Greek governments and Greece's lenders. The Memoranda were considered as a serious common threat, while an increasing majority realised that the cost of inaction could be higher than the cost of mobilisation. People felt frustrated and deeply discontent, while the highly educated and skilled youth who were worst hit by the neoliberal restructuration felt deeply frustrated due to the fact that the jobs they aspired to simply did not exist. However, unlike the Occupiers in New York (Milkman et al. 2013), Montreal (Ancelovici 2016) or Israel (Perugorria et al 2016) who were predominantly young, left-oriented and educated, young Greek people and in

particular those aged 25 to 35 acted, in accordance with the general assumption put forward by Tejerina et al, “as catalysts, igniting but not really ‘leading’ the protests” (2013, 18). As Rudig and Karyotis point out (2015, 508) “the main carriers’ of this protest movement were ‘those involved most closely in economic life, rather than people on the margins or outside of the labour force”.

Although Greek leftist parties were extensively involved in the street politics of the period, it is the trade unions that actually act as “internal governance units” within the anti-austerity campaign. Besides, Greece is not the only country where traditional labour organisations remained at the forefront of protest during the crisis period. Unions played a central role in staging demonstrations and strikes in Portugal (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015), Spain (Cristancho 2015), and Italy (della Porta, Mosca, Parks 2012). The backbone of the anti-austerity campaign consisted in a series of five well-articulated networks (trade unions, SYRIZA, KKE, ANTARSYA, anarchists) (Kanellopoulos et al. 2017) present in the vast majority of the Large Protest Events (Kousis 2016).

Figure 1 (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2014) depicts the boundaries between different movement actors that began to lose salience in favour of new political boundaries. Before the imposition of austerity policies by the Troika (EC, ECB, IMF) and their implementation by Greek governments, trade unions, parliamentary parties (KKE, SYRIZA) and extra parliamentary organisations (ANTARSYA) of the Left as well as anarchist groups formed different networks on the basis of conflicting political positions (Kanellopoulos et al. 2017). Leftist unionists and political forces accused PASOK’s (PASKE) and ND’s (DAKE) trade union fractions of “governmental unionism”. In their turn, anti-governmental forces were divided on the grounds of ideological issues. SYRIZA is a party of the Radical Left aiming for a peaceful transformation of the political institutions (national, local and European) in which it has a longstanding presence. In contrast, extra-parliamentary leftist organisations, KKE, and the anarchists uphold anti-capitalist solutions to political, economic and social problems. For that reason, the latter refuse to cooperate with those they consider to be “reformists”, with the exception of ANTARSYA which cooperated at that time with SYRIZA’s forces in many student, human rights, and labour protests. Use of violence constitutes another controversial issue among movement forces. While nobody on the left of the political spectrum rejects a priori defensive violence, almost only the anarchists engage in violent actions on a regular basis. All the aforementioned dividing lines lost salience relative to the boundary between pro- and anti-memorandum forces that emerged as a result of the economic crisis. In this context, the latter joined forces to reverse Troika-inspired austerity policies. Neo-fascist Golden Dawn opposed austerity too, yet found itself left out of this coalition structure made up of actors that traditionally stand against fascism. As a result of this ensuing political isolation, Golden Dawn found itself unable to participate in the anti-austerity protest campaign in a visible way, although its members did strive under the cover of anonymity to create a political space for their activities during the Indignados protests.

Figure 1. Dividing lines between organisations/groups involved in the movement



In general, participants in the Indignados protests were “a combination of experienced political activists and people participating in street politics for the first time” (Simiti 2014, 16), with 43% leaning to the left of the political spectrum, 38% to the right, and 38% declaring no ideology, the latter being people who had voted for PASOK or New Democracy in 2009 (26% and 17% respectively) or had abstained or cast a blank/invalid ballot (Public Issue 2011). Although popular participation increased to unprecedented levels during the Indignados protests (2011) in comparison with the labour-dominated protest events (2010) and the younger generations were more extensively involved, Karyotis and Rudig (2016, 7) found that “more than 70% of protesters had engaged in both types of protest”. Consequently, “the profile of 2011 demonstrators is relatively similar to that of those from the earlier wave, with the exception of younger age groups” (ibid, 6). Data from other countries (Italy, Spain, Belgium, UK) provides similar evidence, namely differences in protestor profiles between union-based mobilisations and Indignados/Occupy protests with respect to socio-demographic composition as well as organisational embeddedness and similarities as to their motives, ideology, and sense of efficacy (Peterson et al. 2013).

All that said, we can conclude that at least two interrelated causal mechanisms played a crucial role in the initial phase of the anti-austerity protest campaign: *attribution of threat* and *coordinated action*. McAdam et al (2001, 95) consider attribution of threat as “the diffusion of a shared definition concerning

alterations in the likely consequences of possible actions (or, for that matter, failures to act) undertaken by some political actor”. Threats can be related to state repression or economic or other harms currently experienced or anticipated (Goldstone and Tilly 2001, 184-5). On the other hand, coordinated action entails “two or more actors’ mutual signalling and parallel making of claims on the same object” (Tilly and Tarrow 2017, 216). These combined mechanisms produced an ongoing process of *convergence*, “where increasing contradictions at one or both extremes of a political continuum drive political actors between the extremes into closer alliances”. (McAdam et al 2001, 189)

### **Deactivation of traditional political boundaries**

Indignados protests, as I have already mentioned, were triggered by a combination of unprecedented economic distress and massive political dealignment. Calls for peaceful protests in Athens, Thessaloniki and Patras were addressed to every social group hit by the crisis, seeking to reinforce what Mc Adam et al. (2001, 334) identified as *attribution of similarity* mechanism, that is “the mutual identification of actors in different sites as being sufficiently similar to justify common action.”

Hundreds of thousands of people passed by or stayed for long periods of time in Syntagma Square, thus giving shape to Large Protest Events (Kousis 2016). What for? As Castells puts it, “these movements are rarely programmatic movements”, “they do have multiple demands”, which is both “their strength (wide open appeal), and their weakness (how can anything be achieved when the goals to be achieved are undefined?)” (2012, 227). However, it is worth attempting to define them in order to understand the real dynamics of such movements. Did Greek Indignados aim to overthrow the whole systemic order, or did they have more moderate goals like shrugging off neoliberal dominance and political corruption (Douzinas 2011), struggling to bring down the government and repeal the Memorandum (Simiti 2014)? Indignados refused to continue suffering what they perceived to be constant downgrading and called Greek people to join forces to overcome it. In fact, they engaged in all three core framing tasks outlined by Benford and Snow (1988): diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. “Diagnostic framing involves identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality”, prognostic framing suggests “solutions to the problem” and “identifying strategies, tactics, and targets”, while motivational framing consists in “the elaboration of a call to arms” (idid, 200-2).

As Papanikolopoulos et al. (2014) have indicated, social movement organisations participating in the anti-austerity campaign showed remarkable agreement on diagnostic framing, targeting economic and political structures and agents, on a national and international level. Among the Indignados however, marked division emerged between “upper” and “lower” square narratives (Simiti 2014, Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013) or political imaginaries (Kaika and Karaliotas 2014). Protestors in the upper square, mainly

leaning to the right of the political spectrum, tended to explain the crisis through the prism of politicians' widespread corruption and foreign lenders' hostility towards Greece. Meanwhile, mostly progressive and leftist protesters in the lower square focused on democracy, social and political rights, as well as the economic and political institutions. In other words, "accusations of 'national treason' prevailed in the upper square, while accusations of 'social justice' were predominant in the lower square" (Simiti 2014, 27). Nevertheless, people who filled city squares shared strong feelings of injustice. These "injustice frames" (Gamson et al. 1982) quickly dominated the public sphere.

Similar differences emerged with regard to prognostic framing. Some participants, and in particular the older generations, supported the idea that the Indignados should appoint delegates in order to negotiate their claims with the powerholders, or even form a new party and take part in the elections. Meanwhile, others and especially the younger generations rejected every form of "old politics" and insisted on non-institutional self-organised collective action seeking to block the parliamentary decision-making process while simultaneously transforming people's consciousness. However, there was overwhelming agreement throughout the square when it came to the idea of blocking parliamentary approval of the Mid-term austerity program and reversing austerity policies, even if a change of government was required to ascertain this. Similar convergence emerged among core activists with regard to motivational framing, since they all adopted a discourse focusing on severity of the threat, the urgency of addressing the problem and the most efficacious strategy to be adopted by each and every citizen. "Ohé, ohé, ohé, get off the couch" was chanted by thousands of participants almost every day in front of the Parliament.

The average discourse remained simple and calm, in contrast with the unappealing stereotyped political rhetoric. All attempts made by political activists from the Left or Right to impose a slogan reflecting their own exclusive rhetoric failed outright (Stavrou 2011). What made tens of thousands of people feel comfortable with the decision-making processes of the squares was the inclusiveness regarding both procedures (every person could speak independently of his/her rhetoric capacity, political status or affiliation) and language (exclusive concepts and symbols were precluded) (Giovanopoulos 2011). As Prentoulis and Thomassen (2014, 224) put it, "the signifiers through which the protesters are represented, and through which they represent themselves, are sufficiently abstract and vague to be able to include just about everybody". The strong causal relation between inclusiveness of framing and the massive scale of the Indignados protests was highlighted by other scholars too in relation to the Spanish and Israeli cases (Perugorria et al. 2016).

In the case of Greek Indignados, inclusiveness was provided via a *frame alignment process* (Benford and Snow 2000) between the two aforementioned distinct discourse repertoires, i.e. the leftist and the patriotic. Radical left activists performed a balancing act, trying to "gradually insert elements of their radical agenda, without scaring the public with maximalistic claims" and

“without coming forward as unduly antipatriotic, which would alienate the conservatives of the square” (Aslanidis 2016, 315). They actually performed what Tarrow (1998) considers being one of the key framing tasks undertaken by activists: avoiding very unfamiliar and scary slogans on the one hand and very familiar ones which are incapable of mobilising people on the other. At the same time, the upper-square conservatives were constantly heard shouting the well-known leftist slogan “Bread-education-freedom, junta did not end in '73”. Similarly, the leftist agenda focusing on economic hardship was combined very productively with the patriotic one highlighting the loss of national sovereignty. “We don't owe, we don't sell, we don't pay” was one of the favourite slogans on both sides of the square. While some Greek scholars still focus on the incompatibility between the two narratives (Simiti 2014, Kaika and Karaliotas 2014), others have recognised this very frame bridging process (Roussos 2014).

Anti-austerity and sovereignty claims were finally integrated into the “democracy” claim (Diani and Kousis 2014, 503). However, this does not mean that “democracy, rather than the economy, was clearly at the centre of popular reactions to the Greek crisis” (ibid, 504). Research into attributions of responsibility made by trade unions and other protest groups showed that blaming authorities on the grounds of austerity policies was at the core of protestors' discursive activity (Kousis et al. 2016, Kanellopoulos et al. 2015), although general assembly debates were dominated by both political demands: cancellation of the Memorandums and real democracy (Gaitanou 2016).

However, what did the “democracy” claim mean in the Indignados' context? “Democracy” was transformed into “real democracy” or “direct democracy” via “frame amplification”, “frame extension” and even “frame transformation” strategies (Benford and Snow 2000), depending on the scope of changes someone was seeking for. Democracy was considered to be malfunctioning and everybody tended to propose measures correcting democratic institutions, reinforcing people's participation (amplification) as well as expanding democracy on every level of social life (extension), or even going beyond parliamentary democracy (transformation). In this context, “real/direct democracy” functioned as a “master frame” (Snow and Benford 1992), a kind of collective action frame so broad in interpretive scope, inclusivity, flexibility, and cultural resonance that it could be used by almost every protester seeking to voice his/her claims.

Some participants declared it was the first time they had spoken with people with such different political affiliations (Papapavlou 2015). Individuals leaning to the left and right of the political spectrum were chanting slogans together or singing the same songs, and acting in unison to defend their ground during cases of police repression (Stavrou 2011), in solidarity with unknown people (Roussos 2014). Apart from the upper and lower square extremists, the majority of participants did not remain stationed exclusively at one end of the square (ibid).

A conscious effort was made, in particular among core activists, to avoid using concepts or adjectives that could exclude anyone (Giovanopoulos 2011). For this

very reason the organisers avoided playing music identified with the Left (Papapavlou 2015). Some protesters reacted positively to being able to take part without being obliged to identify with specific organisers, while others participated as “individuals” stressing the fact that “the presence of parties divides protesters and imposes differentiations” (Gaitanou 2016: 196, 200). Meanwhile, others blamed themselves for being aligned for decades with parties that ended up deceiving them (Stavrou 2011). It seemed that in Syntagma Square the post-civil war division between victorious Right and defeated Left, which fuelled the power relations for almost 60 years, came to an end (Douzinas 2011). Despite the fact that the Greek Left initially resisted this outcome, part of them gradually put aside the traditional rhetoric and symbols (Aslanidis 2016). This erosion of the differences between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions, which was facilitated by the *attribution of similarity* and *frame alignment* among protesters, denotes a *boundary deactivation* process (Tilly 2003, 21, 84).

The boundary deactivation process was marked by the extensive use of national symbols, especially by more conservative and elderly people. Participants were singing the national anthems as well as Cretan songs associated with the concept of Hellenism, while waving national flags of various sizes (Papapavlou 2015). As this was not a common feature of popular protests, it needs to be explained. Some social scientists tried to explain it through the catch-all concept of populism (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016). According to this perspective, nationalism is an unavoidable (if not constitutive) element of populist mobilisations.

Contrary to this argument, let us consider both the expressive and instrumental aspects of this choice. Successive austerity packages were imposed by external institutions (Troika), while people were contesting the ability of their representatives to lead the country (Sotiris 2011). It was easier for people with no prior experience of collective protest and unfamiliar with traditional symbols of labour movements and the Greek Left to appropriate national symbols (ibid). Let us now turn to the strategic aspects of this choice. First, it is difficult to imagine how people can involve themselves in politics without addressing the only legitimising authority of the nation-states era, the nation, or call into question the legitimacy of elected authorities without references to higher-level concepts. Second, use of national symbols helps people express massively what Charles Tilly (2004) considers the core tasks of (successful) social movements: the public presentation of Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, Commitment. Third, activating popular historical narratives and bridging them with the current situation, such as claiming the heritage of the Greek resistance against the Nazis, is a relatively typical *frame alignment* process (Benford and Snow 2000), and is simply an inherent part of the protesters' communication strategy.

Therefore, considering that protesters, some consciously and others not, undertake to bolster the political leverage of protests, we have to ask: did the use of national symbols increase “frame salience” by securing “frame centrality” and “narrative fidelity” (ibid)? Were beliefs, values and ideas associated with

protest frames essential to the lives of the wider public (frame centrality)? Were they culturally resonant (frame fidelity)? If we answer positively (as I do), then speaking of (national) populism prevents us from understanding how protesters try to defeat their opponents by unpacking their strategies and rationales. It would be at least paradoxical if protesters could not respond to a government claiming to serve the nation's interest while downgrading the overall standard of living, by conveying that this is not the nation's will or interest, especially in Greece where notions of massive popular mobilisation, uprising or even revolution are highly resonant and constitute an integral part of the national narrative (Kouvelakis 2011). "Nation" as well as "people" or "society" are but modern "master frames" that everybody can use at will. These are "empty signifiers" that anyone may fill with whatever transforms them into a winning discursive formula.

### **Boundary change and the formation of the anti-memorandum "us"**

After the signature of the 1<sup>st</sup> Memorandum, the political climate was polarised. *Polarisation* can be defined as the "widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode" that "vacates the moderate centre [and] impedes the recompositions of previous coalitions" and combines mechanisms of opportunity/threat spirals, competition, category formation, and the omnipresent brokerage" (McAdam et al 2001, 322). Every large protest event (general strike and demonstration in the centre of Athens) resulted in violent clashes with the police forces. Indignados' large scale protests in front of the Parliament during the two general strikes (on 15 and 28-29 June 2011) were met with harsh police repression too. Vociferous chants were aimed at politicians, the police, or broadcasters of the main private news programmes who were considered to be *threatening* popular interests. State repression triggered a "backlash effect", with some participants declaring they had changed their minds concerning the political system, the role of the state and their own social position (Gaitanou 2016), and others directly linking this shift to the fact that they had personally experienced repression for the first time (Papapavlou 2015, Roussos 2014). This process was reinforced by the widespread practice of "citizens' journalism" which brought social media and mass media into direct confrontation. *Competition* across the lines for uncommitted allies in society and the linking of previously unconnected sites and individuals (*brokerage*) brought about further convergence between different components of every single bloc. Everyday interactions between a converging "us" and a respective "them" overshadowed all other political boundaries resulting in the formation of almost exclusive categories. The *category formation* process was captured by slogans like "it is either us or them", "they decided without us, we move on without them".

However, as I have already mentioned, the boundary between organised democratic anti-memorandum forces and mainstream pro-memorandum ones was as deep as the respective boundary between the former and the Golden

Dawn, according to relevant research based on interviews and questionnaires (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2014). Despite this, “ideological convergence of the extremes” became the favourite motto of pro-bailout parties and media (Doxiadis 2016). Obviously, the aim of this political assumption was to defame protests by concealing that the convergence process between anti-austerity protesters took place not in favour of the extremes, but against the extremes of pro-bailout forces on the one hand and authoritarianism/fascism on the other. Besides, the formation of the anti-memorandum oppositional structure was triggered by the convergence between governmental parties of the Centre-left and Centre-right on the grounds of neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

Did the aforementioned processes (convergence, boundary deactivation, boundary change) result in the emergence of something more than an alliance structure? Scholars have suggested a series of such protest outcomes. The emergence of a social (Giovanopoulos 2011) or collective subject (Simiti 2014), a social coalition (Sotiris 2011), the social category of Multitude (Douzinas 2011), an inclusive identity (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016) are among them. The pluralism of concepts reveals the difficulty to deal with a movement process with contingent and uncertain outcomes as well as unclear, complex and possibly transitory forms of doing popular politics.

First and foremost, it would be a mistake to underestimate the “frame disputes” (Benford and Snow 2000) through which collective action frames were developed. Stavrou (2011) describes three such disputes, which I personally observed from up close. Left-wing activists migrated from the lower to the upper square and started shouting leftist slogans to balance the nationalistic ones that prevailed during the first few days. Similarly, in order to offset the impression created by the omnipresent national flag, they distributed flags of Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, they managed to persuade a crucial majority that trade-unions are not total sell-outs (as most of them were thinking) and the movement of the squares could cooperate with labour movements. In this context, we can acknowledge different identities feeding Indignados protests (Simiti 2014) or their activation, consolidation, amplification, and convergence (Roussos 2014), whereas *identity* or *actor constitution* (McAdam et al. 2001) could hardly be identified. Aslanidis and Marantzidis (2016) assert that an indignant citizen's identity was constructed, although Kioupkiolis (2019) considers such an identity as a practical one. On their part, Prentoulis and Thomassen stress that Indignados “never achieved a unified, full political identity” (2014, 231). Fieldwork provides evidence that “the Greek Square Movement was not a representative case of a social movement sharing a minimum collective identity”, since “even though protestors shared a common opposition to the memorandum, they did not always identify positively with each other because of their conflicting norms and values” (Simiti 2014, 8). Serious tensions appeared “between those who only want to restore their old privileges and those who think that ‘another world is possible’” (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013, 453). As an interviewed participant put it, “you could find among the five thousand in the square, at least two thousand perceptions of what was happening” (Gaitanou 2016, 256). Protestors did not abandon their

particular political identities in favour of a new one. In fact, out-group dynamics were more developed than in-group ones, so they did not create a coherent collectivity (and a respective internal life) which could continue acting as an entity. Instead, they voted for different anti-memorandum parties in the elections of 2012 and 2015 (SYRIZA, Democratic Left, Independent Greeks, Golden Dawn). Hence, the anti-memorandum socio-political category did not develop into something more than a coherent electoral pool.

## **Theories of populism and contentious politics**

Populism is a contested concept. As a matter of fact, there are four different approaches to the study of populism: populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004), populism as a strategy (Weyland 2001), populism as a discourse (Laclau 2005), and populism as a style (Ostiguy 2009). However, when it comes to qualifying a political actor as populist, all of them seem to include as minimum denominators what Stavrakakis (2017, 528) has called “people-centrism” and “anti-elitism” criteria. Thus, a common feature between populist parties, movements or leaders is that society is considered as being divided into two main blocks: the unprivileged people and the established elites. According to ongoing research, economic and political distress produced by the Great Recession and the way national governments dealt with it gave rise to populist phenomena, including populist social movements (Aslanidis 2016, 2017, Gerbaudo 2017, Kioupkiolis 2019). However, theories of populism do not seem, at least to me, an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements, for many reasons.

## **Is every social movement populist?**

Even if we put aside that the notion of people does not seem to be brand new, since it can be considered as a “modification of the idea of proletariat” (Dean 2014), “people” is not the only key-word that the so-called populists use in their rhetoric. They share with non-populists their systematic appeals to “society” and the “citizens”, which in fact are synonyms of “people”. Hence, as Stavrakakis et al (2015, 73) have shown, populism is a matter of degree, since all parties use a populist framing, albeit in varying degrees. Besides, many scholars have indicated that populism is to be found both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, in the streets or in power, organised in top-down or in bottom-up fashion, leader-centric or leaderless, statist or neoliberal, democratic or anti-democratic, agonistic or antagonistic, refined or vulgar, and so forth (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, Katsambekis 2019). In this sense, the notion of populism has been so overstretched as to become almost all-embracing, thus leading some scholars to call into question its relevance (e.g. Meade 2019, 12).

Similarly, at least in the work of the most prominent populism scholar (Laclau 2005), the logic of populism is the logic of (democratic) politics, which means that all democratic politics are populist in one way or another. Having said that,

in the democratic era (and area) political actors can only overcome their political opponents by gathering forces under the umbrella of the normative principle of “people” (and its synonyms). The notion of people is the master frame of the democratic era, as was “God” during the Middle Ages, when everybody was fighting in his name. In this way, characterising political actors as populist when they claim that “he or she cares about people’s concerns” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, 323) makes no sense. Who can address multiple political issues nowadays without making reference to the people, except if they abide by oligarchic or dictatorial principles? I believe (and hope) that the answer is “none”.

Furthermore, if we differentiate populist movements from other types of social movements on the grounds of their broader scope of membership and policy range (Aslanidis 2016), we have to conclude that movements for national liberation, democratisation, social-democratic, communist or other radical change, are by definition populist. In this context, using the catch-all concept of populism in social movement studies does not seem fruitful. Having said this, it is logical to ask ourselves if there are any political actors out there who are undoubtedly non-populist. Most definitions identify the elites as standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from populists, while many scholars speak of an emerging populism/anti-populism frontier (Stavrakakis 2014, Moffit 2018). However, populism scholars frequently make abstraction of the stance of the elites in the face of populist challenges: “you do not truly represent people, we do”. In this way, the elite claims that it is the real representative of people’s interest, while the populist opposition is a kind of political, ideological or economic elite, which tries to take advantage of people’s discontent. Even members of the establishment or a privileged class may use populist rhetoric when they criticise the state of political affairs (Vittori 2017). Similarly, anti-populist discourse, although it targets and demonises populism, “conveniently ends up by incorporating all references to the people as well” (Stavrakakis 2014, 506), while moralisation and binary consideration of politics characterises both populism and anti-populism.

### **Populism and the elite’s rhetoric**

Aslanidis states that “social movement scholars have thus far failed to give populism its deserved attention and to incorporate it into their field of study. Although sociologists, political scientists, and historians have explored diverse facets of the intersection of populism and social dissent, there has been no concerted effort towards building a comprehensive framework for the study of populist mobilisation, despite its growing significance in the past decades” (2016, 301). The truth is that the unwillingness of social movement scholars to use the concept of populism to characterise popular protest is rooted in the rejection of Le Bon and Tarde’s argument about the transformation of mobilised individuals into undifferentiated and unreasonable masses as well as of the subsequent academic sociology focusing on psychological strains rather than rationality and strategic options of social movements. The theory of populism,

like the aforementioned “old-fashioned” social movement theories, does not constitute an analytical tool alone, since “populism [...] was consciously transformed in an all-encompassing word aimed at denigrating or, at least, criticising those movements or parties, which contrast the mainstream views” (Vittori 2017: 43). If Calhoun's remark that “the most widespread, powerful, and radical social movements in the modern world have been of a type we may call 'populist'” is valid (Aslanidis 2016, 302), why is the opposite not so? Do the elites not call every widespread, powerful and radical movement “populist”? Indeed, during the Great Recession we witnessed “the proliferation of new types of ‘anti-populist’ discourses aiming at the discursive policing and the political marginalisation of emerging protest movements against the policing of austerity, especially in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal” (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, 134).

If we define “populist social movement as non-institutional collective mobilisation expressing a catch-all political platform of grievances that divides society between an overwhelming majority of pure people and a corrupt elite, and that claims to speak on behalf of the people in demanding the restoration of political authority into their hands as rightful sovereigns” (Aslanidis 2016, 304-305), 1) we exclude as a priori incorrect any explanation of crisis based on the unwillingness and incapability of political and economic elites to deal with crisis on behalf of the middle and working classes; 2) we consider as “populist” every ideology that does not recognise the necessity and legitimacy of inequalities; 3) we name “populist” even the denouncement of the many constitutional violations on the part of the elites during the crisis era. In this case, it would be difficult to distinguish the definition of populism from the elite's rhetoric. Similarly, defining populism as “democratic illiberalism”, whose main feature is supposed to be the idea of people's political sovereignty (Pappas 2015), would lead us to criticise as illiberal the Greek Constitution itself, which explicitly declares that “all powers derive from the People and exist for the People” or that “observance of the constitution is entrusted to the patriotism of the Greeks who shall have the right and the duty to resist by all possible means against anyone who attempts the violent abolition of the Constitution” (last article of the Greek Constitution). But it is impossible to be faithful to a liberal constitution and an enemy of political liberalism at the same time. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to state that definitions like the aforementioned include normative considerations and political connotations currently included in the elite's rhetoric. By contrast, even prominent populist scholars have argued that “actors or parties that employ only an anti-elitist rhetoric should not be characterised as populist” as well as “discourses that defend the principle of popular sovereignty and the will of the people are not necessarily instances of populism” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 151).

Furthermore, it is important to note that many definitions identify populism with any endogenous movement resource that can make a movement really dangerous for the status quo: mass mobilisation and leadership (Roberts 2006, 127), as well as moral struggle (de la Torre 2010, 4). Given that, we have to think of how mass non-populist movements can emerge. For most social movement

scholars it is difficult to imagine such a movement not relying on the mobilisation of mass constituencies, injustice framing, and formal (or informal) leadership (or leadership tasks).

### **(Protest) politics without “us-them” confrontation?**

Democratic politics are dominated by a series of antagonisms and confrontations. But populism is supposed to recognise only a single battle line separating society into two antagonistic social groups, the people versus the elite. Yet, “populists” are not alone in adopting this Manichean way of thinking.

Adversary framing is the typical discursive strategy of every challenger, in contrast with power holders who are likely to call for “unity”. In this context, both challengers and power holders seek to increase their political leverage via simplification and binary logic. Populism scholars bypass the fact that social movements are polycephalic and heterogeneous with these various parts being devoid of any control mechanisms, and consequently “populist” simplifications are unavoidable. A protest movement is not endowed with the ability to address authorities via detailed analyses and long discussions; it is not a party or a person. Consequently, it makes no sense to associate simplistic construction of “we”-“them” identities with conspirational theories. “Boundary framing” (Hunt et al. 1994) is a very typical social movement activity.

However, the theory of populism could shed light on the strategic options of protests. As Aslanidis notes, “cultivating the antagonism between People and elites was the best way to sustain a healthy level of mobilisation. The identity of the sovereign People-citizens became a jealously guarded treasure. Whenever individuals or groups attempted to assert a competing identity invoking class, religion, ethnicity, or other category, their actions were considered divisive or centrifugal and were met with great hostility by a majority of vigilant protesters” (2016, 315-316). Notwithstanding, he does not link these concerns with protesters' attempts to find a winning formula with respect to the legitimation/delegitimation game between themselves and the authorities. In other words, he underestimates the instrumental use of discourse and symbols. In final instance, protesters want to win their struggle, not express themselves. Even Tejerina et al., who consider that “one of the central themes in *occupy movements* has been the attempt to attain/restore valorised identities that provide the person or the group with recognition and dignity”, specify that “these movements cannot be said to be expressions of *identity politics*” (2013, 19).

### **A new kind of populism?**

Some researchers of contemporary protest movements prevent us from fully embracing the pan-populism argument by arguing on the one hand that extreme right activists cannot be considered fully populist in the strict sense of the term and on the other that populism that may be observed in the Occupy

and Indignados movements is highly specific. In particular, serious doubts have emerged concerning the conceptualising of the extreme right as populist, since the latter seems to be seeking to replace selfish and greedy elites by a more protective nationalist elite instead of returning the power to the people (Caiani and della Porta 2011), while mostly denigrating the immigrants, leftists, lgbtqi or roma people, rather than the dominant elites themselves. In this sense, the profile of the extreme right is more nationalist and nativist than populist (Stavrakakis et al 2015, 65-66).

By contrast, contemporary grassroots left-wing activism holds a more democratic, inclusionary and pluralistic profile (Gerbaudo 2017, Mead 2019, Kioupkiolis 2019). Contemporary mass movements, like the 2011 “square movements” are markedly different from traditional populist movements in a number of respects: they are leaderless, organised in a bottom-up fashion, through open, inclusive and participatory procedures (Gerbaudo 2019, Kioupkiolis 2019). They intentionally move away from the top-down, leader-centric populism of the past, which relied upon a vertical model of representation of a passive and homogeneous people. In this sense, most definitions of populism prove inadequate here. “Square movements” constitute a new kind of populism, a “radical democratic grassroots populism” or “post-populism” from the bottom-up (Kioupkiolis 2019), or a libertarian and individualistic variation of populism, a convergence of “neo-anarchism” and “democratic populism” that Gerbaudo (2017) call “citizenism”. However, to my understanding, it would be difficult to consider as populist a political discourse that has “citizen” in its centre (Gerbaudo 2017, 8) or is centreless, pluralistic, practical and hardly engaged with identity processes (Kioupkiolis 2019).

Horizontality and autonomy were the real novelty of the 2011 movements (Castells 2012), and this key trait prevented protests from taking a hegemonic and representational form (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2014). This very characteristic of “square movements” which combined the capability and intention of acting together with the incapability and unwillingness of self-transformation into an unitary entity with unitarian features led some scholars to speak of the emergence of a “multitude” in Hardt and Negri’s terms (Douzinas 2011, Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013). For theorists of multitude, this latter is defined as a heterogeneous group of singular individuals that act in common without representatives creating a common political will (Hardt and Negri 2004, 2012). If it is true that postmodern capitalism promotes individualism and networking instead of ideological identities and political concurrence (Douzinas 2011), we understand that it provides both opportunities and obstacles to collective mobilisation, since it facilitates mobilisation against an external common enemy, while it weakens in-group dynamics. This was exactly the Indignados case: the creation of a mobilised (but internally divided) social category unable to transform itself in a self-serving, self-reproducing and self-representing entity.

Hence, despite some attempts having been made to combine the theories of populism and multitude (Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014), no common

political culture or set of beliefs could unite the logic of hegemony and that of autonomy. In fact, there were different sets of participants in Syntagma Square with opposite values and ideas.

Did many passers-by, employees, elderly people or parents who participated for a while in the squares' activities find the idea of direct-democratic social or political organisation attractive? Were they disposed to undertake such commitments and pay the associated personal costs? Of course not. Since we suggest that horizontality and autonomy on an organisational level is linked to the efforts to create a micro-society according to a prefigurative logic (Ancelovici 2016), we have to take into account that the direct-democratic discourse was expressed by only a few thousand people from particular social groups: leftists and politicised youths. Horizontalism and prefigurative politics are associated basically with the protest community and culture (ibid). The majority does not express such concerns. They mobilise mostly on the grounds of fear rather than on the grounds of enthusiasm. Crisis of representation, which is "old" among the younger generations and "new" among the more elderly, constituted the common ground on which they met.

"Direct democracy" was a frame adopted after voting during one of the first General Assemblies in the lower square (27 Mai 2011) dominated by leftists and younger age groups (Mitropoulos 2011). As I have already mentioned, the politically more conservative protesters in the upper square made use of very different political imagery. Slogans were mainly aimed at politicians and the Parliament (Papapavlou 2015). A general agreement emerged on this topic, while everything touching on "direct democracy" remained shrouded in vagueness (ibid). Gaitanou's research "revealed that participants tend to locate the problem in the specific functioning of the Greek political system rather than questioning the structure of the system as such", since "the majority of participants claimed that the problem is not inherent in parliamentary democracy as a regime, but in the way it functions in Greece or in its political representatives (parties, politicians, etc.)" (2016, 177, 209).

What followed the signature of the Mid-term austerity program by the Greek Parliament (29<sup>th</sup> June 2011) was somewhat revealing of the dynamics of this movement. The masses withdrew, leaving a few thousand (and gradually a few hundred) "usual suspects" in the square. Afterwards, instead of a substantial diffusion of direct-democratic procedures or institutions, we witnessed spectacular changes in the party system along with the spectacular rise of SYRIZA. Assuming that the Greek anti-austerity campaign encompassed characteristics of both "contained" and "warring" movements (Diani and Kousis 2014), we consider the magnitude and type of changes Greek protesters were seeking to impose upon the Greek political system. There was an overwhelming desire to regain control over political decision-making through active participation. But not in order to replace parliamentary democracy with another, direct one. The masses sought to restore the state's capacity rather than decrease it. While many left-wing youths were inspired by direct-democratic ideals, the vast majority of citizens were inspired by its opposite: statism.

With this in mind, we can hardly argue, at least within the framework of our case study, that “the movement of the squares tried to build an ‘under-power’, a power from below, which starting from the square could progressively reclaim all levels of society, including state institutions” (Gerbaudo 2017, 10). What Gerbaudo (2017, 17-18) and Kioupkiolis (2019, 180-188) indicate as distinct features of “citizenism”/“anarcho-populism” and “radical democratic grassroots populism” respectively constitute the political culture of just one demographic component of the “squares movement”, the left-wing youth. “Populism” among the more elderly and/or more right-wing participants was totally different, and clearly more traditional. Hence, populism scholars should speak of the coexistence of different kinds of “populisms”. In such a case, what really counts is the examination of the frame alignment processes. But, if so, the contentious politics theory seems to be more relevant than the theory of populism when addressing this issue.

### **Populism is just a frame**

Bringing together conflicting orientations is not only a matter of adequate political discourses. It is equally a matter of a) a new repertoire of action (square occupations, popular assemblies) that allowed people with such different social and political profiles to gather all together; b) the massive presence and mobilisation of the “movement community”, members of acknowledged leftist and anarchist organisations, groups and networks, holders of skills and social capital acquired via previous engagement in social movements, campaigns or the December 2008 uprising, that all contributed to secure inclusiveness of popular assemblies, appeasement of tensions, direct-democratic processes in decision-making, sustainability and viability of square occupations and encampments as well as the coordination with other civil society actors, that are all crucial for protests to reach a massive scale, durability as well as social and political leverage; and c) claim-making on the grounds of master frames (anti-austerity and democracy). Populism can explain neither the physical presence of the people in the squares nor the development of protest dynamics. Instead, tactical innovation, networking of the protest community, and frame alignment processes can do. Hence, it is more fruitful to examine the role of relational and cognitive mechanisms and processes activated during the hot summer of 2011 in the shaping of protest dynamics in Greek Squares.

As Caiani and della Porta (2011) suggest in relation to social movement studies, it would be more useful to conceptualise populism as a frame, which can easily be bridged with other frames. At least one scholar of populism follows their suggestion (Aslanidis 2017). I preferred not to use the theoretical framework of populism at all for several reasons, which I will outline in a brief, yet analytic way.

Let us take Laclau’s definition of populist discourse, which is articulated through the establishment of a chain of equivalence among unmet demands of heterogeneous social groups, the formation of an antagonistic frontier

separating the people from the unresponsive power bloc, and the construction of an identity around of the notion of people. In my analysis, I preferred to use the relevant notions of Dynamics of Contention Program (McAdam et al 2001). More particularly, I spoke of *convergence* among protesters, instead of chain of equivalence, because convergence includes physical face-to-face interactions which are as important as the equalization of social demands on a discursive level. Furthermore, on the protest level, convergence presupposes *deactivation of traditional boundaries* between protesters with different values and ideas. In fact, this is where the difference lies between top-down and bottom-up political procedures: the latter take place exclusively among people with flesh and blood, whose communication is a demanding interpersonal and intra-group give-and-take process that exerts discursive articulation of claims, which can be accomplished by representatives. Moreover, equalisation of claims is not sufficient for protesters to converge, since common (or compatible) diagnostic and prognostic framing is needed too. For that reason, the establishment of a chain of equivalence among popular demands needs to be completed by *frame alignment*. As we saw earlier, scholars of populism associate different individuals and groups' opposition to authorities or the elites and their self-identification with empty signifiers (e.g. people) with the construction of an identity. In contrast, contentious politics theorists focus on the middle level of framing activity and its outcomes, which are considered to be contingent and subject to the broader protest dynamics. In this context, the *polarisation* process between protesters and the authorities can lead to *category formation* (McAdam et al 2001, 323), but not necessarily to the formation of a new identity. Finally, *boundary change* and the "formation of an antagonistic frontier" are obviously synonyms, albeit in our analysis boundary change is a by-product of both state repression and state unresponsiveness.

### **Concluding remarks**

Many scholars have tried to explain the Occupy/Indignados protests through the prism of populism. It is of the utmost importance for activists to be aware of the uses of populism by both academics and politicians or journalists, since populism is mostly used as a pejorative concept. As we have seen, many definitions of populism contain normative considerations currently included in the elite's rhetoric, while targeting whatever makes protests dangerous for the elites: contentiousness, massiveness, moral strength, and leadership. In contrast, contentious politics theory avoids political connotations, while being a very useful tool for the study of protest dynamics by focusing on mechanisms and processes activated mostly through experienced protesters' agency. Protest dynamics and the emergence of new political boundaries cannot be explained by the diffusion of a new kind of rhetoric alone. As the Indignados movement has shown, mass mobilisation from below entails much more than adopting a catch-all populist discourse.

Political conflict in the democratic era (and area) has much to do with the attempts of governments, parties, movements, and other political actors, to

transform social cleavages into political boundaries in a strategic way. The Greek “movement of the squares” is significant insofar as it enabled the emergence of a new political boundary that shaped the Greek political landscape and substantially changed the Greek party system. Indignados protests were characterised by social and political inclusiveness. Most importantly, previous boundaries between protesters started to lose salience, since a wide process of frame alignment was under way. In this context, a huge cognitive task was undertaken by thousands of activists, whose capability to appease internal disputes, bridge differences, highlight commonalities, and canalise common action towards common targets, proved a crucial precondition for long-lasting grassroots mobilisation in times of unprecedented social and labour fragmentation. For movements concerned with the victorious resistance to the neoliberal dictates, this strategic boundary framing must be resolutely employed as a tool for the reconstruction of key socio-political blocs that are capable of striking back.

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### **About the author**

Dimitris Papanikolopoulos is a post-doctoral researcher in the Aegean University. He specializes in the study of social movements and contentious politics. He has published three books, on '60s movements, the December 2008 riots, and the internal life of the contemporary movement community in Greece, while he has participated in research projects on Greek social movement organizations in the context of the anti-austerity campaign (2010-2012) as well as on actor attribution analysis in the context of Eurozone crisis. His current research focuses on protest in contemporary Greece and especially on Indignados protests and labor movement.

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## **“We’re not the party to bitch and whine”: Exploring US democracy through the lens of a college Republican club**

**Noah Krigel**

### **Abstract**

*Following Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential win, college Republican clubs across the United States – anecdotally reported by mainstream media outlets (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) – have increasingly supported the Trump Administration. This form of political support, however, appears to parallel elements found in the development of authoritarian governments. Contextualized by ethnographic exploration of one particular college Republican club at a mid-sized, western, public, wealthy, highly selective university which grew to become one of the largest clubs on the campus, I argue that these political expressions, similar to those found in single-party governments, could be a harbinger of broader governmental shifts within the US.*

**Keywords:** Conservatism, college Republican clubs, fascism, Donald Trump, politics, social movements

### **Introduction**

Across the globe, democracies appear to be entering a new era of “fragility” (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019, p. 21; Frazee, 2019; Traverso, 2019). For example, in Brazil, South America’s largest economy, president Jair Bolsonaro has stripped land from indigenous communities (Sims, 2019); attempted to ban “Marxist Garbage” from Brazil’s public schools (Bolsonaro, 2019); and supported far-right militants through such acts as calling Colonel Carlos Alberto Ustra – a former army officer who was convicted of torture and who frequently suppressed leftist political opponents – a “national hero” (Boadle, 2019). In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s rule has propagated a resurgence of hate speech toward Muslims; government erasure of historical, political, and religious Muslim ties to India; and an elevation of Hindu nationalism at the expense of growing violence toward lower-caste and non-Hindu groups (Gettleman, Schultz, Raj, & Kumar, 2019). The European Union’s 2019 elections demonstrated unprecedented representation among nationalist and populist groups as well as increasing political instability in the region (Erlanger, 2019). In the United States (US), President Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” rhetoric, suggestive of a mythically racially pure past, and frequent slurs toward underrepresented groups have been used to widen divisions within the country and destabilize the country’s democratic structures (Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018).

Analyzing these global shifts away from democracy, scholarly discourse appears

to focus primarily on macro-level repercussions, particularly a potential resurgence in authoritarian governments (Giroux, 2018; Harris, Davidson, Fletcher, & Harris, 2017; Robin, 2017; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018). One micro-level aspect that has been overlooked, however, is contemporary conservative college student mobilization (Munson, 2010). With the exception of Binder & Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018), contemporary conservative college clubs have been understudied. This oversight by activists and academics must be addressed given that conservative college students have historically been important players in Republican elections and administrations<sup>1</sup>. Conservative college students – both historic (Andrew, 1997) and current (Binder & Wood, 2012) – have also become conservative leaders and voters; therefore, their practices, value systems, and experiences must be better understood in order to predict and engage with future tensions, machinations, leadership, and policies of the conservative movement, as well as US democracy more broadly.

I addressed this oversight through a six-month ethnography of a college Republican club at a mid-sized, public, wealthy, highly selective, western, Predominantly White Institution (PWI), referred to in this paper as WestU. WestU students have a median household income significantly above \$100,000, highly disproportionate to the national median household income, which was \$61,937 in 2018 (Guzman, 2019). Socially, WestU students are involved in a plethora of on-campus clubs, organizations, and activist groups. Politically, WestU is predominantly liberal, though it has a student population slightly more conservative than the national average which, at the time of this ethnography, sat at approximately 21% (Jacobo & Lopez, 2019). Similar to this national study, I also characterize conservatives and liberals as those who self-identify as such. During my research, while there appeared to be hostile relationships between liberal/underrepresented student groups and the college Republican club, common ground was found in their mutual frustration with the WestU administration for their involvement in campus life.

Using an exploratory method common in qualitative research (Hochschild, 2016; Kidder, 2016), I began this project curious to understand how conservative students navigated a college campus, particularly those associated with the WestU college Republican club, which, following Trump’s presidential victory, grew to become one of the largest clubs on campus. Students from this club typically identified themselves as “CRs” (College Republicans), therefore I use this term throughout the paper. I also use the term “under-level” to describe students in their first or second years at WestU, and “upper-level” to describe students in their third, fourth, or fifth years. While I openly identified as a gay, liberal, Jewish researcher, I believe being white and male – two identities highly representative of the club – helped me feel welcomed with open arms by CRs, and made it challenging to reconcile the increasing and lasting fondness I felt for many members, and discomfort with the club’s rigid gender roles and

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew (1997) for his analysis on the impact of conservative college students involved with Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) in the 1960’s on both the Nixon and Regan administrations.

rhetoric against minorities. Operating together, these norms suggest a striking parallel with “mobilizing passions” (Paxton, 2004, p. 41) that have historically been associated with rises in authoritarian governments. This phenomenon must not be overlooked given the deep and often hidden ties to broader political environments that are forged during these formative years (Andrew, 1997, Binder & Wood, 2012, Robbins, 2002).

Given research suggesting that college campuses produce different types of conservative performances – that is to say that politicians and voters frequently reproduce activist styles learned during their undergraduate years (Binder & Wood, 2012) – CRs could, in future years, become important agents in authoritarian development. While there were frequently elements of authoritarianism embedded in US history throughout the 1900’s (Stanley, 2018), norms documented at WestU’s Republican club, as well as other clubs across the United States post-Trump’s political arrival (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) suggest a novel and unexplored challenge to democracy. In the context of an increasing number of unstable democracies across the globe (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019; Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018), it is paramount to continue excavating these potential threats.

## **Literature review**

### **Conservatism and college Republican clubs**

For the purpose of this article, I take at face value CRs’ understandings of conservatism. It is important, however, to highlight the myriad of discussions among activists and scholars regarding the challenges in identifying and/or defining different factions of right-wing politics. For example, focusing on morality and values, Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) argue that conservatives are a group that hold a “pessimistic view of human nature, believing that people are inherently selfish and imperfectible” (p. 1030) as well as place equal weight on “Harm, Fairness, In-group, Authority, and Purity” (p. 1041). Robin (2017) tracks the development of the Republican party in the US, describing conservatism as “an idea-driven praxis” (p. 18) that is “disciplined by its task of destroying the left” (p. 245) and a reaction to social progress from marginalized groups. Blee and Creasap (2010) draw boundaries between conservative and right-wing movements, arguing that the former coalesce around patriotism, capitalism and a set of morals while the latter centers on race/ethnicity. In comparison, Berlet and Lyons (2000) argue against drawing these boundaries, stating that they make invisible the links within different streams of conservative politics and reinforce the misconception of the fringe-right as socially marginal. In other words, precisely defining conservatism is fraught.

With regard to the intersection of conservatism and college students, however, despite widespread mobilization of conservative students (Munson, 2010), contemporary college Republican clubs have been understudied by social movement literature. Among the academic research that has emerged, conservative college clubs have been studied as vehicles for identity formation,

group solidarity, generating distrust of liberal bias embedded in academia, and community development for conservative students (Binder & Wood, 2012; Gross & Frosse, 2012; Kidder, 2016, 2018). There has been slightly more discussion in mainstream media, including a Vanity Fair article exploring victimhood among college Republican women at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Sales & Laub, 2018) and an NPR podcast highlighting anger and distrust among conservative and libertarian students associated with Turning Point USA<sup>2</sup> (Chace, Kolowich, & Chivvis, 2018). Still, the academic research and mainstream coverage that has emerged does not connect victimization and isolation expressed by these students (Binder & Wood, 2012; Kidder, 2016; Sales & Laub, 2018; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) to highly similar emotions found among right-wing members from extremist groups (Bacchetta & Power, 2002; Blee, 1991, 2002a; Ezekiel, 2002). Additionally, while Binder and Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018) both note that the conservative students they studied coalesced around political and social views that mirror the mainstream Republican party, such as limited government, secure borders, and a strong military, new reporting in *The Atlantic* and *Time* has suggested that mobilization is now occurring around Trump as an individual rather than an ideology (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018). Yet these tensions between conservative students who are pro- and anti- Trump have not been contextualized within broader US and global trends of increasing white nationalism and transnational governmental shifts from democracies to authoritarianism (Stanley, 2018). In other words, there is minimal analysis exploring tensions among contemporary conservative college students under Trump’s presidency.

### **Authoritarianism**

While many scholars agree that democracy is increasingly threatened by fascist-like elements, there is debate surrounding the manifestation and implications of this shift. Regarding political tensions in the US, Giroux (2018) points to Trump’s attacks on public values and language as prescience of “ghosts of a dark past which can return” (p. 23). Similarly, Snyder (2017) states that “post-truth is pre-fascism” (p. 71), highlighting Trump’s propensity toward banning reporters from his rallies and criticizing the media. Harris, *et al.*, (2017) look at the ways

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<sup>2</sup> According to its website, Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is an activist non-profit with over 800 high school and college chapters across the US with the mission to “educate students about the importance of fiscal responsibility, free markets, and limited government” (Turning Point USA, nd). TPUSA has also been known for its attempts to “defund progressive student organizations” (Fucci & Catalano, 2019, p. 3), fund right-wing student government candidates in order to transform college campuses (Vasquez, 2017), and oversee a professor watchlist which encourages students to “... document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom” (Professor Watchlist, nd). It should be noted, however, that approximately half of the professors on the list are included due to their personal beliefs, and not instructional behavior (Fucci & Catalano, 2019). While TPUSA does not publicize its funding sources, tax returns highlight millions in funding from leading GOP donors including the Koch brothers (Kotch, 2017).

in which the Republican party uses fear and racism to challenge definitions of conservative identities as part of a national shift toward a single-party system. Similarly, Stanley (2018) argues that power and fear, increasingly used by 21<sup>st</sup> century governments to propagate distrust of public discourse, are fracturing democracies. Curato, Hammond, & Min (2019) also take a global approach, although, they explore the ways in which understandings of human rights and global freedom challenge democracy and authoritarianism across the world. No scholar, however, has connected the growth of fascist-like – or even authoritarian-like – tactics to conservative undergraduate students.

### **Conservative women**

In far-right spaces, while white women typically “are less publicly visible than their male counterparts,” they nevertheless wield tremendous influence in membership recruitment, organizational development, and orchestrated attacks on outsiders (Baccetta & Power, 2002 p. 5; Blee 2002b; Blee & Creasap, 2010). Most notably, Blee (1991), in her study of women in the Klu Klux Klan, highlights how right-wing women frequently utilize “rumor, gossip, and demonstrations of political strength” (p. 153) as a mechanism to reinforce patriarchal ideals. Other scholars showcase a consensus among right-wing women to reject feminism and bolster patriarchal systems (Bacchetta & Power, 2002; Ginsburg, 1998; Schreiber, 2008, 2018). It is paramount, however, to study authoritarianism through a feminist lens as it provides powerful – yet historically overlooked – insight into the many political actors operating within a group (Blee, 2017; Passmore, 2008). In the 1920s, for example, “Klanswomen created a politics of hatred in ways differently than did Klansmen” that were overlooked for decades (Blee, 2017, p. 75). Additionally, in 1930s Germany, the Nazi party, with the support of many women’s groups, created the mantra “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” – Children, Kitchen, Church – to reward women with larger families and support religious and patriarchal structures (Bridenthal, 1973; Mason, 1976).

### **Methods**

#### **Methodology**

Qualitative research is a powerful tool to combat tenets of positivism and the expansion of neoliberalism (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006). Additionally, qualitative research can provide unique insight into a specific culture, aspects invisible to quantitative research (Binder & Wood, 2012; Hochschild, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative research allows for the opportunity to validate – but not overpower – the writing and analysis of subjects with whom researchers may disagree (Ginsburg, 1998; Ezekiel, 2002; Hochschild, 2018). One form of qualitative analysis which I utilize frequently throughout this paper, grounded theory, provides data analysis prior to applying theories (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

## **Reflexivity**

Though CRs consider their meetings, emails, and events open to the public, in the interest of transparency, I received written consent from the club’s president and verbal consent from the club’s board before beginning this research. To quell suspicion and build trust, I explained that I wanted to add their voices to the dearth of literature on college Republican clubs, utilizing a similar method to Blee (1991), who reached out to women in racist organizations by positioning herself as a “recorder of their lives and thoughts” (p. 11) as well as other scholars such as Ezekiel (2002) and Hochschild (2018), who also studied far-right spaces. I hoped my research would not present a platform for CRs to espouse their ideas – a concern noted among some activists (Tolentino, 2019) – but rather would allow me to “scale the empathy wall” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 10) and understand their community. Though I never hid my identity as a gay, liberal, Jewish researcher, as a white, male undergraduate student, I nevertheless blended into the spaces I was studying. In fact, not only was I frequently told I did not look like a “social justice warrior” by many CRs, there were many moments during meetings and events when I even received smiles, nods of approval, and welcoming gestures from other CRs. I believe details such as these are important as there is an absence of research on contemporary conservative college students performed by a researcher who, at the time of the study, was also an undergraduate student. Thus, I have also incorporated auto-ethnography into this paper, as this research method “legitimizes the personal location as a site of cultural criticism” (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009, p. 58; Creswell, 2012).

## **Data collection**

Data were collected from a mid-sized, public, wealthy, highly selective, Western Predominantly White Institution (PWI) referred to in this paper as WestU. During the 2018 Spring and Fall school terms (a total of six months), I attended 12 club meetings and events, each lasting between one and three hours. I utilized content analysis on the club’s Facebook page, emails, and group text messages to fully capture the breadth of perspectives, as well as performed 17 in-person semi-structured interviews with WestU students who identified as current or past CRs.

Following Gusterson (1997), I initially used polymorphous engagement, building rapport with a board member and a general club member in social circles outside of club settings. After I established their trust, these key informants introduced me to other current and past board and club members who then connected me with their friends, an iterative technique in qualitative research called snowball sampling (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and were performed wherever interviewees felt most comfortable, which included the WestU library, WestU dining halls, off-campus coffee shops, and students’ homes. To further

build trust and protect identities, pseudonyms were assigned unless explicitly asked otherwise by interviewees. Since CRs prohibited me from audio-recording any participant observations or interviews, I took notes in a notebook and on a laptop, highlighting verbatim and non-verbatim quotes. Following Strauss, Leonard, Bucher, Ehrlich, & Sabshin, (1964) and Kidder (2016, 2018), in this paper, verbatim quotes are represented with standard quotations while almost verbatim quotes are represented with single quotations. Block quotes, unless represented with single quotations, are verbatim.

## **Data analysis**

Utilizing Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, interviews and fieldnotes were analyzed using axial coding strategies, a vehicle to identify and connect experiences and relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially, I had planned on developing one large codebook to better systematically capture themes from both interviews and fieldnotes. After open coding, however, I noticed significant differences between interviews and fieldnotes; while interviews illuminated general reflections on how to navigate the club and WestU’s campus, fieldnotes captured specific club sentiments regarding upcoming and prior WestU events as well as (inter)national policy changes by the Trump Administration. To respect the unique nature of these data sets, I open-coded the data again, creating two separate codebooks. Codes included emic terms derived from club members’ discussions, such as “witchhunt,” “identity politics,” and “diversity of thought,” as well as etic codes I developed to denote themes such as “gossip,” “types of conservatism,” and “free speech.” Utilizing Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, data were then close coded to improve organization (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Throughout this process, I frequently memo-ed on these data sets and reviewed them with a feminist anthropologist and an organizational sociologist.

## **Background**

In the years leading up to Trump’s presidency, the club was known as a small, loose-knit group of around five white male students. About a year before Trump was elected, however, two white female under-levels who were avid Trump supporters joined the club. Said one of the white women, Shannon, an upper-level and board member at the time of the interview, “When I first showed up, there were just five people in a room. It was small and sad. So, I started by pestering the current president at the time about things I could do which got me a position [on the board] the next year. We then revamped the board, ... the bylaws, ... and the meetings.” Restructuring the board to allow for more leadership, shifting responsibilities, and adding social and educational components to meetings and events, said Shannon, helped CRs to become one

of the largest clubs on the WestU campus.<sup>3</sup> Lynn, the second white woman, added, “It’s now a full operation. We have 30 to 40 people consistently and the first meeting had over 100 people.” Indeed, meetings continued to have an average of 35 attendees, events upwards of 200 attendees, and an email distribution list contains over 500 students. Between the frequent free pizza, blasting of country music, scavenger hunts, Jeopardy games, and shooting range nights, the club felt more like a social gathering than a political space. That said, during its weekly meetings the club still included PowerPoint slides with news from Fox News and PragerU<sup>4</sup>, as well as an occasional segment they called “Craziest Things Liberals Have Done,” which highlighted recent incidents they thought were inflammatory. When asked how the club financed these meetings and events, Lynn stated, “Last year, we raised \$4,000 from donors.” Marcy, an under-level, white, female board member overseeing fundraising, corroborated Lynn’s statement, explaining, “We go door knocking on weekends and send letters to companies and other large Republican organizations.” Outside of fundraising, the club received a \$500 stipend from WestU for being a registered club, and also charged a voluntary \$50 yearly membership fee. While the majority of CRs were white men – a trend common to college Republican clubs studied by Binder & Wood (2012) and Kidder (2016, 2018) – at WestU, the club’s board was almost entirely white women, a contradictory phenomenon which will be further explored later in this paper.

Among interviewees, seven identified as white males, two identified as Asian-American males, and eight identified as white females. All but one interviewee grew up conservative. Approximately one-third identified as Catholic, one-third identified as Christian, and one-third Jewish, Mormon, or non-religious. Interviewees came from different academic disciplines and about two-thirds were upper-levels. At the time of the interview, about half of interviewees defined their involvement in the club as “very involved” while the other half defined their involvement as “somewhat” or “not at all” involved. When asked how they joined the club, almost all interviewees spoke of another CR who extended an invitation during their freshman year, a trend that echoes the use of social networks in social movement mobilization (Luker, 2007; McAdam, 2007). While I did not directly study class and/or wealth levels in this research, I did ask each interviewee for their home zip code. Cross-listing their self-reported zip codes with data from *the US Census Bureau*, it appeared that interviewees had a median household income lower than that of all WestU

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<sup>3</sup> During this time, similar stories of Trump-supporting students taking over college Republican clubs were reported across the US, reflecting broader transitions of the conservative movement under Trump’s leadership (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> According to its website, PragerU is a non-profit started by Dennis Prager, a conservative, Jewish writer and talk show host that “promotes the ideas that have made America and the West the source of so much liberty and wealth” (PragerU, nd). Famous for its weekly five-minute videos which have garnered billions of views, PragerU argues that “the Left” is “akin to hate groups” (p. 39) and that mainstream media is untrustworthy. It also promotes white nationalist thought by far-right thinkers such as Paul Joseph Watson, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Stefan Molyneux (Tripodi, 2017).

students – which is estimated to sit significantly above \$100,000 (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox, & Quealy, 2017) but still significantly higher than the US median household income, which was reported to be approximately \$61,937 in 2018 (Guzman, 2019).

## **Manufacturing victimhood**

Overwhelmingly, CRs told me they felt frustrated by how they were treated by their peers and professors for identifying as “conservatives.” Describing these feelings of marginalization, most CRs recalled moments of being called names or silenced in classrooms. Regarding this seemingly ubiquitous experience, Shannon even joked, “You’re lucky if people don’t call you a racist, homophobic bigot.” This theme of victimhood is highly similar to findings by other scholars studying conservative students (Andrew, 1997; Binder & Wood, 2012; Kidder, 2016; Sales & Laub, 2018; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018). Indeed, it may even be reflective of broader mechanisms of melodrama in the US (Anker, 2014) and a reinforcement of what Lowndes (2017) would describe as producer and parasitic language. Yet, when CRs described these attacks – and how they felt they should respond – three themes emerged: Clouded History, Appropriation of Liberal Thought, and Disrupted Hierarchies.

## **Clouded history**

CRs frequently expressed frustration toward and felt attacked by dominant historical narratives. Reflecting many other CRs’ beliefs, Shawn, a male upper-level and general member, said, “I don’t like this narrative that America was built on slavery or oppression. Obviously, we know that, but saying that America is a terrible nation won’t get us anywhere.” Like many other CRs, Shawn critiqued historical accounts of the US, suggesting that acknowledging slavery, for example, was detrimental to the development of the country. This mentality was also present throughout meetings; during one such gathering in November, board members walked club members through a PowerPoint they developed entitled, “Were the pilgrims villains like your teachers might say?” Slides included topics such as “Why the liberals think [Thanksgiving is] evil” and “Why you shouldn’t feel guilty.” One board member told the club, “Conquering land is a thing that has happened throughout all of human history. Europeans had better tools, so the Natives didn’t really protect their land all that well.” Feeling uncomfortable with the violent history of the US, CRs suggested it was best not to acknowledge the past. A better approach, they believed, was to augment these narratives in a manner that portrayed white Americans in a positive light at the expense of those oppressed.

## **Appropriating liberal thought / terminology**

CRs also commonly expressed their feelings of marginality through appropriation of liberal thought/terminology, including “coming out of the

closet,” “safe spaces,” and “diversity of opinion.” This terminology, however, also had the added effect of furthering an “us versus them” mentality, constructing boundaries around political leanings and racial backgrounds.

In the LGBTQ community, the expression “coming out of the closet” signifies the announcement of one’s sexuality to the public (Tamashiro, 2005). Framing the campus as an oppressively liberal environment, CRs utilized this expression to illuminate their feelings of marginality. “Closet conservatives” I was told, was a term used by the club to describe conservative students who were not public about their political views. Similarly, the phrase “coming out as conservative” was commonly used to describe a moment when conservative students publicly announced their political leanings. Russell, a multiracial male upper-level and board member, summarized what many other CRs felt:

Wearing a [conservative] shirt, standing in line [to attend a conservative activity], openly putting a [conservative] sticker on your water bottle, it’s hard because it ‘outs’ you. ... It’s hard to come out as Republican. ... I wonder what it must have been like in the early 1900’s to come out publicly or proudly as gay. And I feel like I almost do by being conservative. ... The hate and resentment we get over time from peers or people we thought were friends is astonishing.

An announcement of one’s conservative political beliefs – as many CRs explained – frequently resulted in backlash and ridicule from friends. As a result, CRs believed it was important to “come out” only when one felt comfortable. For example, Lisa, a white Christian female under-level and board member, said she frequently told incoming freshmen: “It’s okay if you’re not ready to talk with other people about [being conservative] yet. There are a lot of closeted conservatives around campus.” CRs felt they had to “pass” within the dominant liberal community, which served as a barrier to their freedom of expression.

CRs also appropriated the phrase, “safe space” to highlight their desire for freedom from what they perceived as hostile dominant liberal perspectives. In fact, at many meetings, board members welcomed club members by saying, “this is your safe space.” When asked why CRs frequently used this expression, Cheryl, a white Catholic upper-level and general member, replied, “It can get heated within the club, but no one is going to yell ‘bigot’ at you. That’s why I kind of like the safe space analogy.” Randy, a white Catholic male under-level and board member, added, “We help kids feel safe in a place that might be intimidating.” Jane, a white Christian under-level and general member, compared CRs to other spaces on campus, saying, “It’s a little nice safe haven like the Black Student Union. You can be around people with similar viewpoints like you.” Similar to the LGBTQ epithet, the “safe space” analogy allowed the group to further strengthen a sense of community within the club by identifying themselves as an underdog within a liberal system.

CRs, while critical of broader diversity and inclusion initiatives that they

believed were typically supported by left-leaning groups, nevertheless supported one form of diversity: “of thought.” For example, the club’s Facebook page stated that one of their overarching goals was to “foster intellectual diversity.” When I asked Shawn, a male upper-level and general member, what this meant, he responded, “Diversity of thought...is being driven into the ground, taking second to diversity of color. But I believe it is more valuable having diversity of ideas rather than one single megaphone.” For Shawn and other CRs, diversity and inclusion initiatives felt burdensome, erasing their larger identities as conservatives. At another moment, reflecting on a recent WestU initiative to increase racial diversity on campus, Jane said, “I never understood how let’s say a Black student comes to a college that’s primarily White and they feel uneasy. ... It doesn’t make sense why we need to force diversity. But I fully understand the importance of diversity of opinion.”<sup>5</sup> For CRs, racial and other forms of diversity were inconsequential compared to political diversity, which was considered a necessity. At the expense of other “underrepresented” groups, CRs validated their own feelings of marginality, drew boundaries around whiteness, and erased systemic oppression.

### **Disrupting hierarchies**

In the Fall 2018 term, Judge Brett Kavanaugh was in the midst of a highly contentious confirmation hearing for the US Supreme Court. Kate Manne (2018), in her analysis of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s sexual assault allegations against Judge Kavanaugh contextualized by other #MeToo moments, highlighted the term “himpathy” to explore the ways in which sympathy was shifted away from female victims and toward male perpetrators. Similarly, many CRs felt that men – and particularly white men – faced unprecedented persecution, which should be noted, is a common trope in white male victimization and a hegemonic sentiment that has pervaded US culture for decades (King, 2012; Robinson, 2000). Said Lisa, a white Christian female under-level and board member, “I consider myself a feminist but not the type who is around today. I define feminism as women equal to men. But nowadays women tear down men. ... There is definitely a war on men.” Sympathizing with male perpetrators, Lisa and many other white women in the club believed it was their duty to support these white men who represented a significant portion of the club and further fed the narrative of victimhood. Comparatively, almost every white male whom I interviewed, when asked how they felt as a conservative navigating a college campus, instead expressed frustration with their feelings of helplessness as a white male. Encapsulating these feelings, Billy, a white Mormon upper-level and general member said, “I’m a normal white guy who has no problem with anyone, but it seems like everyone has a problem with white dudes.” He and other CRs noted feelings of displacement – both on

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<sup>5</sup> While it may have been worthwhile to challenge CRs’ views by asking harder questions, I decided it was important to maintain the genuine relationships I had developed as well as ensure I did not compromise my research method – snowball sampling – which relied on trust (Charmaz, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

campus and by the media – as though white men were being attacked in ways that other “underrepresented” groups were not.

### **Community as a remedy**

At WestU, CRs used provocation – similar to CRs studied by Binder and Wood (2012) – and drew ideological boundaries between themselves and liberals – similar to CRs studied by Kidder (2016). Yet unlike CRs studied by these scholars – and following what may appear to be a national trend at other college Republican clubs (Godfrey, 2018; Martinez, 2016; Steinmetz/Fullerton, 2018) – CRs at WestU also used these tactics to foster a collectivized, hyper-loyal, and policed identity around President Donald Trump.

### **De-individualization**

A respite from the perceived hostility and sense of victimhood faced on campus, club meetings and events became an important site for community development and group thought. CRs encouraged each other to become unabashedly conservative, by being provocative publicly. When asked what constituted successful events, Lynn, a white Christian female upper-level and board member who reflected many other CR perspectives, said:

‘Every year, we have a free speech wall. Literally, all we do is put up a wall and people go crazy. I think it’s important to do things that are outrageous and provocative to see that the basic concept of these liberal policies can be outrageous. ... Like oh, whoa, that is kind of a crazy idea.’

A free speech wall, intended to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a common political event that has been noted at other college Republican clubs for at least the past 15 years (Binder & Wood, 2012). At WestU, however, this large plywood board in the middle of campus was more commonly recognized as a vehicle to spark reactions due to the Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, misogynistic and transphobic slurs written by students. This, in turn, provoked frequent op-eds in the WestU newspaper, protests across campus, and occasional news coverage by national media outlets. In previous years, CRs also hosted “Empty Gun Holster Day” to encourage CRs to parade around campus with an empty gun holster, as well as invited self-identified far-right speakers who preached racial superiority. Events such as these felt empowering to CRs who believed it helped foster an important sense of community. As Randy, a white Catholic male under-level and board member, explained, “The free speech wall, I helped put the nails in that. I love being part of something bigger.” Events and social gatherings produced a sense of electrifying excitement and a social cohesion. At meetings and events, particularly those that sparked protests outside, CRs welcomed each other with large smiles and hugs, rarely permitting anyone to sit alone. After one such contentious event, when CRs were met with a

group of about seven protesters wearing black hoodies and with handkerchiefs over their faces, yelling and taking photos, CRs began wrapping their arms around each other, chuckling as they walked by. “Good to know that they’re brave people” one white male CR said sarcastically, while another joked, “I’m a little underwhelmed.” Comradery among CRs appeared to be reinforced by verbal attacks from other students, helping legitimize their actions.

During one club meeting, while discussing a recent on-campus racist event, a white male general member proudly regaled CRs with stories from attending an open-forum put on by the WestU student government. Dismissing the emotional toll that the racist event had on multiple student communities (particularly the Black, Latinx, and queer communities), the member proudly explained how he represented the club’s voice: “I was the only one who wasn’t crying and stuff. It makes us look really good. We’re not the party to bitch and whine.” CRs relished the belief that their inflammatory actions, which represented their collectivized standpoint, would be propagated to by other students.<sup>6</sup> During another interview, when asked about inclusion on campus, Kevin, a white Catholic male upper-level and general member who also identified as a member of the on campus Turning Point USA club, said, “I’m always open-minded, but excluding Turning Point USA, the Republican club is the most open-minded club on campus. The rest of the clubs are basically fucking Communists. It’s really sad.” Many CRs, some of whom were also members of the on campus Turning Point USA club, drew boundaries around tolerance, suggesting that acceptance was found only in libertarian and conservative spaces, while insinuating that liberals reflected or were manipulated by radical-left thought.

There also appeared to be an ostensibly growing consensus to refuse ruling out violence against liberals. Kevin, when asked what he thought about CR’s record of inviting provocative speakers, explained, “We need someone to [verbally] punch back and hit people. I’m willing to accept [a speaker] who is a little rough around the edges but is able to fight for us. It’s either that or capitulating.” Similarly, when asked what he would do if he faced provocative protests from liberal groups, John, a white male upper-level and general member, said, “It’s good to get a little bruised up sometimes.” Violent rhetoric was also common during meetings and social events. During one meeting, a white female board member suggested CRs even host an “alt-Right fight night” and pit a liberal against a CR.

### **Legitimized viewpoint**

While there was some internal debate regarding the club’s official view on issues such as local candidates during elections, CRs vehemently defended almost every statement/action expressed by Trump, coalescing around him rather than

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<sup>6</sup> While I did not explicitly study relationships between CRs and other WestU clubs, relations seemed mutually antagonistic.

an ideology. Life-size cutouts of Donald and Melania Trump and flags stating “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) – the official slogan during Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign – commonly draped the walls of club meetings and events. CRs also adapted the MAGA slogan, signing most emails, “Make WestU Great Again” and selling \$25 red hats with the slogan as well. Meeting PowerPoints almost always included pictures of Trump and frequently included Trump-themed dating advice. At one meeting, for example, a risqué picture of Melania Trump was followed by the words, “Work hard so you can land someone banging and way out of your league like Trump did.” During the weekly club meeting speed-dating activity in which CRs were paired together, the Board asked questions such as, “Why is Hilary Clinton the worst?”; “Why do you like Trump?”; and “Which of Trump’s policies is your favorite?”. The Wi-Fi password at the unofficial house for club parties was, “Trump2020,” and the group text for all CRs was entitled, “God King Trump.”

Anyone who disagreed with or did not support Trump was excluded from the club. Said Annie, a white Christian under-level in the process of leaving the club:

‘Ever since winter last year, it went downhill. The Libertarians that wanted to drink and have fun were pushed out because they weren’t conservative enough. They were considered RINOS – Republican in name only. The club thought my friends weren’t conservative enough because they didn’t like Trump. To be conservative in the club now is to be as right-wing as you can. ... Our club has become the most extreme conservatives on campus, some of the most extreme right-wingers. That’s why I’m not that involved this year. I don’t even challenge them. I feel outnumbered. I don’t want to be on the girls’ bad side. I’m worried they’re going to spread rumors about me. ... They witch-hunted a lot of people out of the club.’

After Trump was elected, the board created socially unpleasant experiences for those who did not support the new president, using gossip to attack dissenters’ social reputations and encouraging them to leave the club. Members who stood up to voice disagreement with this practice were met with a similar reaction. One such member, Tim, a Catholic Asian male upper-level and former CR who was forced out of the club after criticizing this exclusionary tactic, said, “The purpose of the club is to be Trump’s puppets. ... They go out of their way to defend [Trump] on every basis imaginable.” More than merely defend Trump, however, it seemed that CRs did not tolerate almost any form of disagreement. In fact, for the most part, CRs did not challenge the board’s decisions. Many CRs did not feel comfortable explaining what they disliked about the club, fearful of becoming social pariahs. One CR during our interview frequently asked to obscure their demographic information, as well as speak “off the record.” Another interviewee, Cheryl, a white Catholic upper-level and general member, felt comfortable saying only, “If you’ve done something to upset one or multiple women on the board then it can kind of, word spreads quickly.” Suggesting that backlash came from the female-dominated board, Cheryl hinted at the policing,

but quickly asked to move on to the next question. Fear was a powerful vehicle in the club’s regulation of their internal discourse.

This policing extended outside the club as well. At one meeting, after receiving backlash from the Republican party for inviting a controversial speaker to campus, a white Christian female under-level and board member said to her fellow cheering CRs, “Local Republicans are pushing against us. I say they’re not real Republicans.” In another incident, in response to a WestU policy that increased student fees for out-of-state students to support working-class students – who were more likely to be students of color – a different white female board member spoke on a national conservative media outlet where she argued that WestU was cutting enrollment for white students. After WestU immediately released a counterstatement pointing out that it was illegal for the University to consider race in its enrollment process, the national media outlet apologized for falsely reporting on the issue. In response, CRs then released their own statement, denouncing both the conservative media outlet and WestU for their “promotion of identity politics.” Despite receiving financial support from the off-campus Republican party, CRs still challenged those Republicans for disagreeing with them. Preaching dogma which, in its dominant form, rested on an unwavering idolization of Trump, CRs regulated discourse and ostracized those with whom they disagreed.

### **Women in the club**

While most CRs were white men, the club’s board was composed almost entirely of white women, a phenomenon that may be increasingly common at other college Republican clubs across the US (Sales & Laub, 2018). At WestU, when asked why she thought this phenomenon was occurring, Annie’s response reflected many other women’s perspectives:

It’s really nice to be a woman in the club because there aren’t many of you, so you’re coveted. Like people will say damn she’s hot. If you’re a Republican girl, you’re way more attractive to conservative guys. ... I love to bake and clean, but I can also party hard. Other guys would look down on that. Certainly, liberal guys would look down on that. Like oh, you just want to be a housewife?  
Conservatives think you’re an awesome independent woman.

Annie, like other CRs, embraced a belief that the small population of Republican women made them more desirable to their male counterparts because of their aspiration, among other activities, to perform domestic work. Similarly, Lisa a white Christian female under-level and board member said:

Feminists tell women that if you want to stay at home then you’re less than. It’s unnatural and unhealthy. Science has proven that men are better at spatial reasoning skills. There are so many things that women are good at, why can’t they recognize that?

This was a common trope heard from many board members. Being a woman in the club appeared to grant a sense of empowerment and validation toward a hope to become a housewife. In fact, at almost every club meeting, the board led “group dating sessions” where they informally paired themselves with different men, answering questions about their personal lives. While male CRs typically groaned, shuffling their feet and glancing across the room uncomfortably, the women nevertheless cheerfully counted off everyone, forming different groups. While never explicitly discussed – at least in group settings or with me – it appeared that female CRs had a shared goal of finding conservative husbands, marrying, and having children. It was apparent that these women’s objectives were rooted in a desire to find a husband who would shape their future.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Coinciding with Trump’s presidential win, WestU’s college Republican club – a large group of white men led by a small team of white women – became one of the largest clubs on campus. Feeling victimized by liberals and people of color, CRs augmented their perceptions of US history to gain a sense of empowerment. Fortifying their in-groupness, CRs encouraged coalescing around Trump as an idol – rather than uniting under a set ideology. Protecting these values, CRs seemed to promote a singular opinion, which was regulated through violent rhetoric and a fear of internal social ridicule. While boundary work and in-group policing are certainly not unique to WestU’s CRs (Oren, 1986; Robbins, 2002), given the current political environment under Trump’s presidency, such policing may be reflective of more consequential constructs of victimized privilege. Indeed, individually, these strategies could be harmless, but taken together suggest a striking parallel with “mobilizing passions” (Paxton, 2004, p. 41) historically associated with rises in fascist governments. To be clear, it is certainly not my attempt to identify CRs as fascists; even defining fascism – which is understood by its elements rather than its historical manifestations – can be challenging (Harris *et al.*, 2017; Paxton, 2004; Stanley, 2018). That said, there have been fascist elements increasingly documented in governments across the globe (Giroux, 2018; Stanley, 2018) and as I argue, these fascist elements may grow when we ignore their intellectual centers.

In fascism, there is a “sense of aggrieved victimization” (Stanley, 2018, p. 90). Constructing a sense of loss within privileged groups while gaining power from the perceived loss, fascism encourages “replacement of reasoned debate with immediate sensual experience[s]” (Paxton, 2004, p. 17) causing a reliance on emotions rather than rationality (Harris *et al.*, 2017; Snyder, 2017). Similarly, CRs, a group primarily of white men led by a small team of white women with deference to masculinity, identified themselves as victims while naming liberals and people of color as a cause for their believed oppression. Imitating the mental shift from reality to fiction explored by Hannah Arendt (1951), CRs’ sense of victimhood contributed to their ability to produce an obfuscated history, distorting and/or dismissing historical documentations of oppression

toward underrepresented groups in order to build their “mythic past” (Stanley, 2018, p. 7; Traverso, 2019). Pointing to the club as a safe haven from hostility on campus (such hostility, it should be noted, was intentionally exacerbated by their own provocative measures), CRs felt an overwhelming sense of community, which frequently slipped into an erasure of individuality, another common trait in fascism (Ushpiz, 2015), and was replaced with a singular truth centered around Trump. In fact, almost every club activity, meeting, and event featured an element of Trump, be it himself, his family, or his “Make America Great Again” slogan. This unwavering faith in a male leader who “stands to the nation like the patriarchal father stands to his family” (Goodman, Shaikh, & Stanley, 2018) is, of course, another hallmark of fascism (Paxton, 2004; Stanley, 2018). Any criticism of Trump was met with immediate exclusionary tactics as CRs believed their “legitimate viewpoint” (Stanley, 2018, p. 35; Paxton, 2004) left little room for debate or alternative understandings. Removing CRs who did not support Trump, CRs used threats of social ostracization to police this dogma. While no physical acts of violence were ever committed leading up to and during the ethnography, the language used by CRs evoking violence as a form of political imagery is important as words do not only “produce meaning” but “generate consequences” (Giroux, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, in fascism, in-groupness is policed to a level of violent enactment as reality is distorted into a “war of survival” (Ezekiel, 2002, p. 156; Arendt, 1951; Paxton, 2004; Snyder, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Traverso, 2019). Lastly, white female CRs, by identifying potential husbands who would dictate their future, mirrored the common role of women in fascist governments to bolster patriarchal values (Goodman, Shaikh, & Stanley, 2018; Paxton, 2004; Harris *et al.*, 2017; Traverso, 2019).

At first glance, CRs at WestU may appear contradictory to current US and global trends. On a macro-scale, in 2019, approximately 59% of Americans 18 to 24 identified as Democrats while 33% identified as Republican (Badger & Miller, 2019). The percentage of Americans of all voting ages who identify as Republican has been slowly declining since 1992 (Saad, 2019) while among college students who identify as “right-of-center”, Trump’s approval ratings fell approximately 20% in his first year in office (Della Volpe, 2017). Furthermore, in the last decade, there has been a steady decrease in the number of incoming first-time, full-time freshmen who identify as “right-of-center,” falling to a level, 20%, last seen in the late 1990’s (Eagan, 2016). That said, in recent years, millions of dollars have been pouring into college campuses to support conservative students, financed by groups such as Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), the Heritage Foundation, and the Koch Brothers (Kotch, 2017). Following Trump’s initial presidential announcement, there have also been reports of a sharp increase in the number of chartered college Republican clubs (Godfrey, 2018) and Turning Point USA clubs (Kotch, 2017) across the US. Additionally, as the US becomes a majority-minority country, white Americans – regardless of political identification – are projected to increasingly support conservative policies (Craig & Richeson, 2014).

While this argument is based on an ethnographic exploration of a single club, there should be similar ethnographic accounts, particularly on both more and

less ethno-racially diverse campuses, rural and metropolitan communities, and within both pro- and anti- Trump states. Furthermore, with the introduction of Turning Point USA, there should also be greater research exploring how their novel involvement may shift campus terrains, as well as further research into the interactions of algorithms, media outlets, and college students (see Tripodi, 2017). For liberal activists, I believe it becomes increasingly critical to pay attention to and understand the driving/mobilizing forces behind conservative college student activism. This is a population that has historically been overlooked (Munson, 2010) and that is increasingly observed to act in ways paralleling national political trends (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019; Frazee, 2019; Godfrey, 2018; Sales & Laub, 2018; Stanley, 2018). It becomes increasingly crucial to engage with these actors during their formative years as they become future conservative leaders and voters (Andrew, 1997; Binder & Wood, 2012). As the practice of fascist behaviors may grow when we ignore their intellectual centers, liberal college activists therefore cannot afford to overlook these important players; they must instead anticipate and respond to the unique ways in which their conservative college peers operate and react (Binder & Wood, 2012). In other words, “the ghosts of fascism should ... educate us and imbue us with a spirit of civic justice and collective courage in the fight for a substantive and inclusive democracy” (Giroux, 2018, p. 23). These threats, while disconcerting, must also provide us with a sense of empowerment to promote change. This is a group that can offer key understandings into the future operations of the conservative movement.

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## Looking to ‘Bern’ for inspiration: the future of the Pro-Palestinian movement in Australia

Rohan Davis

### Abstract

*What is happening with Pro-Palestinian Movement in Australia? What can it learn, if anything, from the modern political situation in the US? How can it become more relevant to, and improve its image amongst, ordinary Australians? In addressing these questions this article is inspired by the great deal of work undertaken within the cult of personality and sociology of intellectuals tradition. This article highlights the increased prominence the Palestinian struggle for self-determination has received in the US since 2016, and reflects on and suggests changes the Australian-based pro-Palestinian can make to increase its exposure, highlight the current plight of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories and ultimately help fulfil the long-held Palestinian desire for their own state.*

**Key words:** Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Australian politics, US politics, Bernie Sanders, cult of personality, sociology of intellectuals.

### Introduction

Social movements anti-colonial and anti-imperial in nature are often treated in inimical ways by the political and intellectual groups, namely the elite, with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. The pro-Palestinian movement championing self-determination for Palestinians living under Occupation in their homeland has often been treated in this way in both the US and Australia. The global movement continues to find many allies throughout Europe (Barghouti, 2011), particularly in the Irish nations (Abu-Ayyash, 2015) who have experienced similar struggles against colonial and imperial enterprises, however it remains largely friendless amongst the prominent political, intellectual and media forces within Australia.

Australia’s duopolous democratic political system mirrors the US. Both parties, Labour and the Coalition, have always had a stranglehold at the ballot box. Both parties also share the foreign policy posture that Australia *must* remain unwavering in its support for Israel, and *must* push back against both internal and international criticism of Israel. Australia remains one of the few nations in the world consistent in its support for Israel at the United Nations (Becker et al., 2014), and the dominant political, intellectual and media elements who drive much of the public discourse within Australian want this situation to remain the same.

All of this is unacceptable to the Pro-Palestinian movement operating in Australia, which has expressed itself in some interesting and unique ways. It is best characterised as a loosely connected movement with key elements operating with a strong presence in Australia’s most populous cities. The movement’s core elements include *Australian Friends of Palestine Association* in Adelaide, *The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network* in Canberra, *Palestine Fair Trade Australia* in Sydney, and *Friends of Palestine Western Australia* in Perth. There are two interrelated key aims uniting these groups: 1) support the Palestinian people in their struggle for self-determination, and 2) raise awareness about the brutal nature of the Occupation amongst the Australian politic and policy and decision-makers.

Australia’s location vis-à-vis the Palestinian Territories geographically, and the relatively small population of those of Palestinian extraction living in the Oceanic nation (rough estimates put the population of Palestinian-Australians at around 7000) mean these are challenging tasks. Nonetheless this has not dampened the passion these groups have displayed for the cause. A close monitoring of the functioning of these groups in recent times reveals some interesting and effective approaches to helping achieve these aims and goals. There have been many fund raising activities, including dinners with visiting international speakers / Palestinian activists with on-the-ground experience in the West Bank and Gaza. There have also been events like *Run for Palestine*, organised study tours for Australians to visit the Palestinian Territories, and street protests, which are typically in reaction to the latest major strike in the Territories or to commemorate important days.

It is typically the case that these events receive *very* little, if indeed any, attention from the mainstream Australian media. Activists using social media and alternative media like *Green Left Weekly* and the now defunct *Indymedia* have done their best to help fill this void, however their reach has proven to be very limited. Obviously their readership is nowhere near that of the Australian mainstream news media. It is also the regretful reality for the Australian arm of the Pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters that they are not taken anywhere near as seriously as they would like to be by the majority of Australians. Visiting their demonstrations or occasional activist movie night held at universities or small independent movie theatres reveals the average Australian pays the movement little if any attention.

Of the Australians who have some kind of awareness about the existence and nature of the pro-Palestinian movement, it is very likely they will erroneously conflate the case with Islamic radicalism and terrorism. This is due in large part to the mainstream news media operating in Australia and concerted efforts by the comparatively well-funded and well-connected Australian-based pro-Israeli movement. The mainstream news media, which is dominated by the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corporation, is involved in a sustained process to represent the Palestinian resistance in ‘Israel’ to be one of the latest manifestations of the same radical Islamism that has inspired other ‘terrorists’ in places like Afghanistan and Iraq (Han and Rane, 2013) – nations where

significant numbers of Australian military forces were deployed, and ultimately killed, alongside the US military as part of the Global War on Terror.

Important research undertaken by Han and Rane (2013) reveals that while the Australian mass media routinely frame Palestinian resistance to the Occupation in terms of terrorism, there was a moment in time when the mainstream Australian news media *acknowledged* the Occupation of Palestine. Their extensive qualitative analysis of news articles found these representations experienced a qualitative shift with the democratic electing of Hamas in 2006. The Murdoch-owned media in particular chose to drop reference to the Occupation from their reporting in favour of focusing on Hamas’ calls for violence resistance against Israel and its general ‘radical’ and ‘terrorist’ behaviour.

In light of these findings, and a range of other and often more recent studies focusing on the representing of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by the Australian news media (Manning, 2018; Abdel-Fattah and Saleh, 2019; Kabir, 2007), it is safe to say the pro-Palestinian movement, just like the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories, suffers a significant image problem amongst everyday Australians. This is certainly a serious problem, however the pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters should take heart in knowing that this situation is far from terminal. It can be rectified, and one of the chief aims of this work is to offer some valuable insight as to how this can be achieved. These ideas are informed by extensive research undertaken in the cult of personality and sociology of intellectuals traditions, and by casting a critical eye over the Bernie Sanders political phenomenon in the US.

If our goals are to help raise awareness about the *true* nature of the Occupation, and to improve the public profile of the pro-Palestinian movement within Australia particularly amongst the politic, with a long-term view of helping bringing about some kind of change to the Australian Government’s current official stance as unwavering in its support of Israel, then we must first have an understanding of the major obstacles standing in the way.

### **Cult of personality**

The cult of personality is an interesting and revelatory field of study with important implications for helping improve both the visibility and influence of the Australian-based pro-Palestinian movement. The relation between an appealing personality of a leader or leaders, and the success of social, religious and political movement to which it is attached is well established (Paltiel, 1983; Strong and Killingsworth, 2011). On first appearances it is not uncommon for one to associate the cult of personality phrase and notion with totalitarian movements and regimes, both historical and modern, such as Joseph Stalin the former Soviet Union, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, Mao Zedong in China and, in more times, Xi Jinping in China. However, it is no longer the case that the cult of personality exclusively pertains to totalitarian movements. In fact, many of the ideas within this field of study possess great utility for modern

movements like the pro-Palestinian movement with far more altruistic objectives.

Research in the cult personality field reveals that an individual’s charisma and therefore popular appeal can be leveraged as a powerful political tool by a movement to achieve specific political, religious and/or social aims. The kind of cult of personality we are dealing with here is not the prevailing autocratic idea of yesteryear typically associated with Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao in Communist China – the bulk of Western literature in this field certainly does not advocate for the creating of new, or moulding of current, movements to fit an authoritarian style in order to take advantage of a charismatic personality. Rather we are here talking about a more modern conceptualisation that, amongst other things, utilises the great power of social media for grassroots mobilisation to pursue humanitarian aspirations.

We are able to glean from Lu and Soboleva’s (2014) studying the phenomenon of the cult of personality in the context of more modern political systems that some leaders who have achieved political success share similar characteristics. While Lu and Soboleva are not explicitly advocating for a cult of personality, we are able to see the critical importance of a political leader having a clear programme or ideology the politic interprets as providing the answers to pressing issues, having a broad appeal that translates into political supporters, a clear programme, mission or ideology, and being embedded within an established movement or institution possessing the ability to sustain itself.

Their noteworthy research builds on earlier work undertaken by Plamper (2012). While certainly not advocating for the recreating of a Joseph Stalin style cult or a cult of personality per se, his research helps bring into view some of the commonalities between personality cults operating within authoritarian regimes, and those located and working within more open and free societies. These similarities include the ability to use the mass media to construct an appealing image of the leader with the purposes of raising their profile and garnering widespread support amongst the politic, and having legitimate claims vis-à-vis the support of a significant part of the population. These are important findings to keep in mind as we go about analysing the pro-Palestinian movement operating in Australia, and think about new strategies to be adopted in order to increase its visibility and influence.

### **Feeling the Bern**

When looking at the political phenomenon that is Bernie Sanders in the US, we find it satisfies the criteria gleaned from work undertaken by Plamper, Lu and Soboleva. Sanders has been operating within the established movement that is the US Democratic Party, which is clearly able to sustain itself given its huge following and financial resources. His radical anti-establishment political message has been consistent since his bursting onto the political scene in the 1970s and has proven appealing to large swathes of the US politic particularly the next generation of political leaders (Sunkara, 2018). Political polling

consistently reveals millennials have wholeheartedly embraced his personality and his political agenda (Bahrampour, 2016; Wagner 2015; Savodnik, 2019), and it is noteworthy the current face of the young and highly mobilised left in the US, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is also product of Sanders’ first major tilt / 2016 campaign for the US Presidency.

Much has been written about the charismatic nature of Sanders. Some academic researchers and mainstream news media writers have used the term ‘Berniemanía’ to describe this political phenomenon first taking root in 2016 (Maxwell, 2018; Guentzel, 2016). The coining and repeating of neologisms like ‘Berniemanía’ and phrases like ‘feel the Bern’ by those within the academe and the news media only serves to strengthen the cult of personality that is Bernie Sanders. Keating (2016) is among those to have studied how Sanders’ charismatic nature during political debates, revealing how Sanders’ deliberate gesturing achieves positive results with his audience.

Further research by Abdullah, Bare and Burling (2016) found Sanders’ appeal amongst voters was largely due to his methodical and diplomatic nature, and his ability to address pressing issues in a serious and thoughtful way. This contrasts with many of his political opponents who have, for the most part, proven themselves more arbitrary in their political behaviour and speech. ‘People, who seem to support a candidate like Sanders’ they found, ‘are probably more introspective and tend to think a lot of things through a number of times before deciding on the decisions they should make in everyday life (p.19).’ In short, Sanders has proven himself to be the thinking man’s man.

Sanders’ political campaign has inspired a grassroots following and revitalized segments of the US politic who had already succumbed, or looked destined to do so, to the kind of motivational deficit described by Simon Critchley (2013) as prevailing within modern liberal Western societies. Critchley makes the important point politics *should* be about dedicating ones energies to helping end injustice and wrongs suffered by the Other. This is a process he describes as ‘infinitely demanding’, meaning more ‘good’ can always be done. Among the major issues with the modern neo-liberal democratic systems of government we see in nations like the US and Australia, is the state apparatus has primarily been conceptualised and utilised as a tool to promote partisan interests.

This prevailing approach to the political is reinforced by many intellectuals who assume key roles in the functioning of modern societies. As ‘mediators of ideas’ for a politic, or rather an ‘Imagined Community’ as Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously described, intellectuals play critical roles in translating or creating information about what is happening ‘out there’ in the social world for their audiences. They engage in this process despite often having very little, if indeed any, direct experience with many of the issues and events they are writing about. ‘Mediators of ideas’ is a phrase commonly used by authors like Gilles Deleuze (1995) and Thomas Osborne (2004), whose research forms part of what we call the sociology of intellectuals tradition.

This phrase is designed to convey the integral role modern intellectuals are playing in the knowledge-production occurring within today's societies. ‘The mediator is interested above all in ideas’ writes Osborne, ‘ideas which are going to make a difference...in some later event (p.381).’ Intellectuals writing in scholarly journals, newspapers, online and in magazines, are producing a lot of what we think we know about the nature of the social world. As many writers rightly acknowledge (Osborne, 2004; Said, 2002; Nazer, 1999; Wilson, 1981), it is these intellectuals who are ‘producing knowledge’ about the social world in the form of representations, which are then informing our judgments and decisions, including foreign policy-making processes.

Since his candidacy in 2016, Sanders has helped in shifting the US political landscape in such a substantive way that he has been setting Democratic Party policy. This is perhaps best exhibited by the fact the majority of his Democratic Party members hold favourable views about democratic socialism as a legitimate form of governance (Parnes, 2018). This seismic shift means a lot to close observers of US politics, who no doubt fully appreciate just how poisonous the term ‘socialism’ and its associated ideas have come to be thought of. However, what is most pertinent and illuminating here is what Sanders has been able to achieve for the US manifestation of the pro-Palestinian movement.

Sanders has been able to utilise his cult of personality phenomenon, which has manifested into the popular and catchy slogan ‘feel the Bern,’ to help put the Palestinian struggle on the US political agenda. More specifically, he has been able to leverage his popularity to promote the specific idea that Palestinians, like all people around the world, have a right to self-determination. This is some achievement given he is working within a duopolous political context revealing itself as typically unwavering in its support of Israel; so much so that in some US states it has been made illegal to criticise Israel in anyway (Younes, 2018). While his major internal Democratic opponent Hilary Clinton continued to tow the pro-Israeli line prior to the 2016 US election, Sanders has remained steadfast in his belief that Palestinians are deserving of a state of their own rather than having to continue to live under occupation.

Sanders’ long-time and firm commitment to the Palestinian cause has been music to the ears of many associated with the US-based pro-Palestinian movement. This movement has responded in kind to his political speeches, doing their part to support and promote Sanders’ campaign in the hope he will help bring about a major change to the official foreign policy stance of the US. There is no doubt the Occupation would look very different without the US’ political backing – not to mention the billions of dollars in ‘aid’ the US provides Israel each year, which has been used to develop its already impressive military capability designed in part to sustain the subjugation of the Palestinian population.

## **Lessons for the Australian arm of the Pro-Palestinian movement**

When comparing and contrasting the Sanders situation in the US with the current political situation in Australia; a nation similar in political structure and function, we find there is no such cult of personality phenomenon within the Oceanic nation that has made the struggle for Palestinian self-determination a key part of their political agenda. As it currently stands, Australia is under the leadership of an Evangelical Christian (Pentecostal to be specific) leader Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who like many of his colleagues in the Coalition party and like the majority of self-confessed followers of Christian-Judeo faiths in the US, has firm theological ideas about Israel’s claim to the Holy Land. Morrison was one of the *very few* leaders around the world who responded in kind to President Trump’s announcing his intention to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In December 2018, Morrison told the Australian public his government would have no problems in recognising the Holy City as the Israel’s capital: ‘Australia now recognises West Jerusalem being the seat of the Knesset and West Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. We look forward to moving our embassy to West Jerusalem in support of and after a final resolution (Kwan, 2018).’

During this December speech, PM Morrison also spruiked Australia’s close relationship with Israel, particularly in terms of military exchange and support: ‘The Australian Government will establish a trade and defence office in West Jerusalem. With deepening defence industry ties and Australia-Israel trade now running at over \$1.3 billion per year, this will help continue to build our strong bilateral trade relationship (Kwan, 2018).’ This landmark political speech signalled a more fervent commitment to the Israeli state by a nation who had already proven itself unwavering in its support. To say this signalling of Australian foreign policy by Australia’s PM was not well-received by the Australian-arm of the pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters is an understatement. President of the *Australia Palestine Advocacy Network* Bishop George Browning was spot on when he responded that any claims by Morrison or his government that Australia supports the establishing of a Palestinian state were ‘empty words’ designed to placate the many Islamic nations with whom Australia enjoys close economic relationships (Kwan, 2018).

It is within this political climate the pro-Palestinian movement in Australia has been crying out for a charismatic leader in the mould of Bernie Sanders. The human rights of the Palestinian people, which includes freedom of movement and access to healthcare and other basic life necessities many of us here in Australia take for granted, in addition to self-determination, has been pushed off the Australian political agenda. Not only does the movement need a similar cult of personality phenomenon to spark debate and help bring to light precisely how Australia’s actions are directly resulting in negative outcomes for the Palestinian people, it also needs the support from a network of *prominent* and *influential* public intellectuals. What is needed are intellectuals who are driven by the more lofty goals of shining a light on injustice, rather than a concern with

advancing their material wealth and political status within a neo-liberal system which has long demonstrated itself as prioritising economic outcomes ahead of acting in moral and ethical ways.

Not since the retirement of progressive and Greens Party leader Bob Brown in 2012 has Australia had such a popular and influential personality who has been committed to the promoting the Palestinian struggle. Brown led the Greens to its crescendo in terms of popularity amongst the Australian politic, achieving a primary vote of nearly 14% in the 2010 Federal Election (Holmes and Fernandes, 2012). This was no mean feat in what was up until this moment in time, and has since returned to following Brown’s retirement, a duopolous political system dominated by parties who have consistently failed and proven unwilling to do anything substantive to help promote the Palestinian plight.

Most importantly, Brown also helped to create a political environment in which the Israeli Occupation and Australia’s specific role in supporting it were able to be seriously challenged. For e.g. emboldened by popularity of their leader and inspired by his desire to shine a light on injustice, West Australian and Greens senator Scott Ludlam called for an arms embargo on Israel in light of its brutal subjugation of the Palestinian population, and South Australian colleague Sarah Hanson-Young backed up these claims when attending protest rallies organised by the *Australian Friends of Palestine* advocacy group. All of this was occurring in 2011 and 2012, when I was student at a popular inner-Melbourne university, and I could see the important flow on effects with regards to the willingness to discuss the Occupation on campus. The situation is vastly different now; the Palestinian-Israel issue and Australia’s involvement in it simply does matter to students in a way it did nearly a decade ago.

As it stands now the Greens Party is a shadow of itself. It has a leader most Australians cannot identify with, and its recent political campaigns at Federal and State levels have been marred by allegations of internal sexual harassment, bullying (Henriques-Gomes, 2019) and by the endorsing of candidates with controversial backgrounds especially with regards to the treatment of women (Willingham, 2018). Any claims by the third most popular party in the Australian political landscape to some kind of moral and ethical superiority are, simply put, no longer tenable. Combining this with the fact any substantive attempts by those associated with the either of the two dominant political parties to put forth the case for Palestinian determination have been shouted down and, in the recent case of Melissa Parke, disendorsed, and the net result has not been positive for the Australian-arm of the pro-Palestinian movement.

Parke was a Western Australian candidate representing the Labour Party at the 2019 Federal Election who was *gently persuaded* by Labour hierarchy to step down when her long-time support for the Palestinian struggle came to light. Her activism included working as a human rights lawyer for the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* from 2002-2004. Parke’s impressive CV also included assuming an Ambassadorial role for *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (winner of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its critical role in *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear*

*Weapons*) and an appointment by the *United Nations Human Rights Commissioner to the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen* to investigate alleged human rights violations in Yemen. It was her specific views on Palestine however that made her ‘undesirable’ and politically untenable; a sad reflection on the current nature of the Australian political landscape.

In order to stay relevant the pro-Palestinian needs a new charismatic personality in the mould of Bernie Sanders. A leader able to act as a vehicle for the Palestinian cause and arouse the kind of political debate about the Occupation that is so desperately needed in Australia, and hopefully inspire the next generation of leaders currently studying in Australian universities. The movement needs a cult of personality with the kind of mass appeal amongst millennials that Sanders currently enjoys in the US. Additionally, the movement needs a cohort of public intellectuals located within the mainstream news media dedicated to prosecuting the case that Australia should be helping to end the ongoing colonisation of Palestine, rather than strengthening existing and pursuing new (military) relationships that only assist Israeli forces in their stranglehold on the Palestinian Territories. Whether or not the Australian academe currently possesses the ability to produce these kinds of intellectuals given the neo-liberalisation of these learning spaces is a matter for further discussion.

The alternative is the status quo will remain. Australia will remain among the handful of nations around the world who enjoys a pariah status, particularly amongst Islamic nations, because of its unwavering support for Israel. The Australian mainstream media will also continue on largely unimpeded in its piecemeal covering of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the event the media does choose to cover the issue in any substantive way, it will continue to use frames representing pro-Palestinian forces as radical Islamists and terrorists in an attempt to elicit feelings of anger and condemnation within the Australian public. These are not viable nor acceptable outcomes for a movement that continues to watch what is left of the Palestinian Territories slowly disappear, and its children forced to live in abject poverty in Gaza, the West Bank, and in refugee camps in neighbouring nations.

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## **Rethinking demobilisation: concepts, causal logic, and the case of Russia's For Fair Elections movement**

**Michael C. Zeller**

### **Abstract**

*The study of social movement organisations (SMOs) has tended to converge on the initial, upward trajectory and most intense activity of SMOs, that is, mobilisation and campaigning. Comparatively little attention has focused on the downward slope: how do movements falter and fail; how do SMOs demobilise? Recent work has sought to fill this lacuna. Davenport's (2015) theorisation is the latest, most useful addition to the topic. Yet existing theories still omit facets of demobilisation and bear the mark of over-reliance on case inference. This article addresses these persistent conceptual problems. First, it argues for a reformulation of Davenport's theorisation of SMO demobilisation, re-aggregating demobilising factors internal to SMOs and broadening the scope of external factors to include the repressive activities of non-state agents. Next, the article asserts that the causal logic of demobilising factors is complex: the concurrence of factors is what produces demobilisation (this is 'conjunctural causation') and multiple combinations of factors can cause demobilisation (this is 'equifinality'). Finally, the article demonstrates the analytical utility of the proposed conceptual framework and concomitant causal logic by briefly analysing the case of the For Fair Elections (FFE) movement organisation in Russia in 2011-2012. This case exhibits the multiplicity of internal strains and external pressures that converge to produce demobilisation. Taken together, the article's conceptual framework and empirical example provide a guide for identifying, analysing, and characterising SMO demobilisation.*

**Keywords:** demobilisation, social movements, SMOs, Russia, For Fair Elections movement

The study of social movements has long concentrated on *mobilising* and *campaigning*, that is, how movements *get* moving and then *move*. Yet this concentration on the initial upward slope and plateau of the life of movements deprived the latter, downward trajectory of much scholarly focus. How do movements falter and fail? What takes them from the apex of their strength and brings them low? At one level, demobilisation is simply the partner process of mobilisation. What goes up must come down. But at closer inspection the processes of demobilisation that social movement organisations (SMOs) undergo is composed of different elements; not the mere failure to continue mobilising, but resulting from different conjunctions of demobilising pressures.

Some recent research—for instance, Lapegna (2013), Davenport (2015) and Demirel-Pegg (2017)—has gone some way toward building understanding and explanation of demobilisation. Yet existing theorisation is sometimes vague or else excessively particular, distorted by induction from case studies. While case studies can provide rich empirical depth, they cannot be representative; as such, deriving generalizable theory from single or small numbers of case studies is a shaky proposition. Further study is needed to create a more durable theory of social movement demobilisation.

This article contributes to that research agenda by addressing the question: *what demobilising factors are omitted or obscured by existing theorisation?* In answering this question, the article advances a ‘descriptive argument’ (Gerring 2012), that is, an answer to two ‘what’ questions: (1) what causal factors produce SMO demobilisation and (2) in what manner do those factors have a causal effect? Davenport (2015) provides the best existing theorisation of SMO demobilisation,<sup>1</sup> but inference from a single-case study produces a few significant omissions and misapprehensions. I provide a revision of Davenport’s theorisation, most notably by incorporating Earl’s (2003, 2004) concept of ‘social control,’ which yields a typology (Gerring 2012, 727) of demobilising factors, and by specifying important causal features of demobilisation processes. To underscore the advantages of this revision—particularly in regards to the demobilising pressure imposed by non-state agents and the causal complexity of demobilisation—the article illustrates the conceptual framework with the case of Russia’s For Fair Elections SMO, source of the largest demonstrations in the country since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In Davenport’s theorisation, this would be (to some extent) a deviant case (Gerring 2007), but revising Davenport fits it within a fuller coherent framework. The article thereby contributes a more comprehensive theorisation of SMO demobilising factors and the manner in which those factors have a causal effect.

I begin by reviewing the existent research on demobilisation, synthesising research from a few fields of study that address the issue but between which there has been little communication. Secondly, I formulate a conception of demobilisation and its causes. This involves discussing demobilising pressures *inside* a SMO, pressures *outside* a SMO, as well as the causal nature of these pressures in demobilisation processes. Thirdly, I apply the paper’s conceptualisation to the case of the Russian For Fair Elections SMO that emerged in 2011 and began to demobilise after the presidential inauguration of Vladimir Putin in May 2012. Interpreting this case with the revised conceptualisation of demobilisation reveals omissions and shortcomings within Davenport’s conception. Lastly, I identify some areas in which study of demobilisation can progress and contribute to better understanding of social movements.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, demobilisation at the meso- or organisational-level of analysis.

## Demobilisation research

At first glance, demobilisation<sup>2</sup> is a simple concept, the complement of mobilisation. Tilly's (1978: 54) definition typifies this: "Mobilisation: the extent of resources under the collective control of the contender; as a process, an increase in the resources or in the degree of collective control (we can call a decline in either one demobilisation)." Yet this (parenthetical) inverse formulation obscures the peculiarities of demobilisation, its distinct conditions and causal mechanisms, and may encourage the notion that it is the mere condition of a failure to maintain mobilisation. This false impression is perhaps compounded by the paucity of demobilisation research. Scholars have noted the relatively sparse exploration of demobilisation phenomena (Fillieule 2015), a sizeable gap in the field. This is not to say that scholarship has altogether ignored demobilising phenomena; on the contrary, there is rich case study data on several forms of demobilisation. But these studies are scattered across several research silos and frequently marked by descriptive specificity at the expense of theory building. Demobilisation research should be positioned within broader conceptual frameworks, facilitating *generalizable theorisation*.

In studies of terrorism, demobilisation—mostly in its literal military sense—has been a regular focus. Case studies examine instances of internal division (Morrison 2013), loss of critical public support (Murua 2017), ceasefire and negotiation processes (Bláhová and Hladká 2019), and several other demobilising processes. To date, Cronin (2009) offers the best theoretical synthesis of demobilising terrorist campaigns. She identifies six patterns of terrorist demobilisation: "(1) capture or killing the group's leader, (2) entry of the group into a legitimate political process, (3) achievement of the group's aims, (4) implosion or loss of the group's public support, (5) defeat and elimination by brute force, and (6) transition from terrorism into other forms of violence" (Cronin 2009: 8). Together, these patterns encompass the various forms of terrorist group demobilisation.

There is some overlap between the demobilisation of terrorists and that of less violent mobilisations. Achievement of objectives, successful outcomes, 'positive demobilisation' are potential outcomes across mobilisation forms. Entry into established political processes, too, is an alternative available to many contentious organisations: 'institutionalisation,' as it is commonly termed. Yet the distinctive features of (wholly) militarised antagonism against the state, inherent in half of Cronin's typology (i.e., capture or killing of the leader, military defeat, and transition to other forms of violence), generally and rightly sequesters analysis of terrorist demobilisation from other forms.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of demobilisation is troubled by the use of many different labels. Decline, decay, decapitation, termination, discontinuation, disbandment—just a few of the terms that have been applied. I favour 'demobilisation' largely because in the existing theorisation and empirical study it encompasses many previously examined phenomena, it connotatively balances between the inadvertence of terms like 'decline' and the intentionality of words like 'termination.'

In a related vein of inquiry, research on ‘anti-regime campaigns’ or ‘regime change campaigns,’ encompassing violent and militarised action as well as non-violence<sup>3</sup>, occasionally considers demobilisation, alongside the more common interest in outcomes (i.e., success and regime change or failure and regime continuity). Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) supplement their large cross-case analysis of regime challenges with in-depth examination of the failed Burmese uprising in 1988-1990. Internal division and insufficient mobilisation made the campaign vulnerable to repression, which ultimately effected movement demobilisation and the reassertion of regime control. Similarly, Davies (2014) identifies pathways in which non-violent campaigns fail to change the regime and, concomitantly, demobilise. There is a tendency in this research area to treat as one the (failed) end of a campaign and the end of a movement or a movement organisation—a common, but not inevitable concurrence, which requires greater scrutiny in focused study of demobilisation (see below). Nevertheless, in highlighting the importance of mobilising supporters, securing elite defections, dealing with repression, and other elements, analysis of regime challenges speaks to the demobilising impact of certain factors.

Examination of repression, one category of demobilising factors, has garnered extensive inquiry all its own. Findings are vexingly inconsistent, though. Classically, repression can have its intended effect, raising the costs of participation enough to deter many or most would-be participants (Tarrow 2011). The resultant loss of participants (through deterrence or detention or some other means) and shrinking opportunity for mobilisation and action drives demobilisation. Yet repression can also backfire. Gurr’s (1970) landmark study identified the inciting anger, rather than suffocating despondency, that repression can trigger. Some subsequent research corroborates this claim (see Ayanian & Tausch 2016; Chenoweth & Stephan 2013), noting that repression can compound instigating grievances or earn challengers sympathy from third parties. What emerges from these antithetical findings is the synthesis that repression is one condition within the causally complex phenomenon of demobilisation. It is not necessary for demobilisation; after all, countless movements demobilise without the faintest whiff of repression. Neither is it sufficient for demobilisation. Demobilisation may occur because of repression, but only in conjunction with other conditions or, at most, as the initiating condition in a causal chain.

Finally, social movement scholarship has occasionally, if often only secondarily, scrutinised forms and levels of demobilisation. The ‘contentious politics’ literature typically addresses macro-level phenomena: the demobilisation (in the sense of declining levels of activism overall) of social movement industries and of broad, coalitional campaigns (Lasnier 2017; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004; Tarrow 2011) or even of whole societies (Beissinger 2002; Tilly 1978, 2008). At lower levels of analysis, theorisation is spread across many sub-fields. Some scholarship focuses on biographical outcomes or ‘impact’ (McAdam

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the liveliest subjects of debate is the effect of ‘radical flanks’ on otherwise moderate and non-violent campaigns. See Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) and Haines (1988).

1999), declining participation (Klandermans 1997), exhaustion and burnout (P. C. Gorski and Chen 2015; P. Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising 2018; Nepstad 2004), and other micro-processes of demobilisation. Other scholarship addresses meso-level, organisational facets of demobilisation: factionalisation (Tarrow 2011, 104, 206–9), recruitment and retention of members (Hirsch 1990), bottom-up and top-down pressures (Lapegna 2013), organisational capacity (Ganz 2010). Within their sub-fields, such studies provide illuminating findings about forms of demobilisation. However, these close examinations have generally done a poor job of positioning themselves within broader conceptual frameworks, failing to integrate these pieces in an overarching theory of movement demobilisation.

Christian Davenport's (2015) study is a rare exception to this trend: it puts the diffuse, un-systematised strains of demobilisation literature into conversation with one another, formulating a general theory of the demobilisation of SMOs. The resultant theorisation in places bears the marks of over-reliance on Davenport's case study, the black separatist 'Republic of New Africa' movement in the United States. The theory provides solid theoretical foundations, but it omits private (i.e., non-state) agents as sources of demobilising pressure and mischaracterises the causal nature of demobilisation. The next section describes and revises Davenport's theorisation.

### **Conceptualising demobilisation and its causes**

This section unpacks Davenport's (2015) theory of SMO demobilisation. It identifies conceptual gaps within this framework and provides a corrective revision by incorporating Earl's (2003, 2004) typology of social control. Taken together, the regrouped internal factors and added external factors yield an inclusive typology of demobilising factors (Table 1), which offers enhanced analytical leverage for cases of SMO demobilisation.

An important starting point in forming a fuller conceptualisation of demobilisation is uncoupling it from mobilisation. To be sure, at one level it is the partner concept of mobilisation, but at closer inspection it is comprised of different elements. Davenport (2015: 21) achieves this with his definition, identifying four forms of demobilisation:

- “(1) official termination and/or significant alteration of the formal *institution* engaged in challenging authorities;
- (2) departure of *individuals* (members) from relevant organisations – especially the founding and/or core members that participate most frequently;
- (3) termination of or significant reduction in dissident *interventions* (behaviours); and
- (4) a fundamental shift in the *ideas* of the challenger (particularities of the claim) away from what was earlier established.”

Davenport focuses the definition at the meso-level, that of organisations. Hence, the first form refers to ‘the formal institution’ that may exhibit demobilisation. Note also that this definition accounts for demobilisation *in kind*—i.e., the qualitative change between states of ‘being mobilised’ to ‘being un-mobilised,’ most clearly in the first and third forms—and *in degree*—i.e., becoming less mobilised.

Moving from *what* demobilisation is to *how* demobilisation occurs, we can say that prods to demobilise occur *internally*, from within SMOs, or *externally*, from outside movement organisations.

### **Internal sources of demobilisation**

Davenport (2015: 32–37) identifies five internal sources of demobilisation, which can be meaningfully aggregated into two categories. First is demobilisation by *lost participation*.<sup>4</sup> This category includes burnout/exhaustion and lost commitment. ‘Burnout’ or ‘exhaustion’ describes “not just a state of temporary fatigue or exasperation, but an ongoing and debilitating condition that threatens its victims” participatory persistence (P. C. Gorski and Chen 2015: 385).<sup>5</sup> ‘Lost commitment’ refers to fraying ideological or emotional connection to a movement organisation.<sup>6</sup> Whereas burnout denotes an *inability* to participate in SMO activities, lost commitment signifies an *unwillingness* to participate. For example, when activists in Russia’s For Fair Elections (FFE) movement no longer have the stamina or resources (such as funds to pay higher fines for protest activity) to participate, their exhaustion becomes a demobilising factor; when activists grow sceptical of the efficacy<sup>7</sup> of protesting against the Putin regime, their lost commitment is demobilising. Taken together, these sources of lost participation refer to deterioration at the micro-level: not necessarily a product of deficient organising, rather of social psychological processes among individual activists. These processes result in less participation, depriving SMOs of their lifeblood, members.

The second category of internal demobilisation can be termed *organisational failure*. This category encompasses membership loss, factionalisation, and rigidity. Similar to the fundamental logic of lost participation—that is, a SMO requires a sufficiency of members—‘membership loss’ refers to the demobilising effect that results from a failure to recruit and/or retain members (Hirsch 1990). Yet here it represents an organisational deficiency: not drawing on

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<sup>4</sup> On what causes individuals to end their participation in movement activities, see Klandermans (1997).

<sup>5</sup> See also Klandermans (1997: 103–104); Nepstad (2004); Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, and Rising (2018).

<sup>6</sup> See Edwards and Marullo (1995), Klandermans (1997), and Nepstad (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Klandermans (1997) on the expectancy-value theory of collective action.

available mobilising structures<sup>8</sup>; not involving members enough to retain their participation<sup>9</sup>; not recruiting new members to commence new actions.

Next, ‘factionalisation’ denotes the internal splitting of a SMO. Objectives, strategies, and tactics are sources of tension within SMOs, most basically between ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals’ (Tarrow 2011: 104, 206–9). Whereas moderates prefer more modest goals and restrained means, radicals favour further-reaching goals and more extreme means. Although ‘radical flanks’ can be an asset for movements,<sup>10</sup> coexisting comfortably or tolerably with moderate wings, the tension between moderates and radicals is at least as disadvantageous, threatening the cohesion of the movement overall.<sup>11</sup> The FFE movement conspicuously involved political actors across a wide ideological spectrum: from committed communists like Sergei Udaltsov to liberal democrats like Boris Nemtsov and Garry Kasparov to nationalists like Alexei Navalny. Such diverse ideological representation may serve the goal of mass mobilisation, but it leaves SMOs more vulnerable to factionalisation.

Last, ‘rigidity’ principally refers to an inability to adapt to change; more specifically, to modify objectives and strategies according to new circumstances (Davenport 2015: 36). This failure can manifest directly in the manner of SMO campaigns—as when a campaign of demonstrations is banned, and the SMO fails to adjust—or indirectly in the facilitating structures of a SMO—as when financial resources are blocked or disrupted, and the SMO fails to find alternatives. Many scholars have noted the importance of innovation and adaptability to SMO effectiveness (Bogad 2016; Ganz 2010; Mayer 1995; McAdam 1983; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 2008); inversely, failure to adapt produces demobilisation by obsolescence, if nothing else. Collectively, these three sources of demobilisation represent facets of organising failure, that is, failure to manage and deploy resources.

### **External sources of demobilisation**

Lost participation and organisational failure, however, only account for the internal sources of demobilisation. A realistic conception of demobilisation must recognise that it typically occurs as a consequence of intersecting internal and external factors. Davenport (2015: 23–32) distils the sources of externally induced demobilisation to three types: (1) resource deprivation, (2) problem

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<sup>8</sup> See Boudreau (1996) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) on *mobilising structures*.

<sup>9</sup> As discussed below, Russia’s FFE was robust in this respect, incorporating members’ input through the Workshop of Protest Actions

<sup>10</sup> On the ambiguous effect of radical flanks in anti-regime movements, see Chenoweth and Stephan (2013) and Haines (1988).

<sup>11</sup> Tarrow (2011: 207–208) discusses the paired mechanisms of *institutionalisation* and *radicalisation* that mirror the centrifugal pressures within a movement, between moderates and radicals. In Tarrow’s theorisation, these intra-movement mechanisms can be compounded by external mechanisms of facilitation and repression.

depletion, and (3) repression.<sup>12</sup> Resource deprivation describes the restriction of vital movement resources. Problem depletion refers to “removing (1) the perceived need for the movement and/or (2) the perceived relevance of the claims-making effort within the relevant population” (Davenport 2015: 26). Repression, according to Davenport (2015: 29), denotes “coercive actions undertaken by political authorities directed against someone challenging their beliefs, institutions, and actions or the context or conditions within which the government exists.” Insofar as this tripartite formulation attempts to account for *all* external sources of demobilisation, it errs. Implicitly in the conceptualisation of resource deprivation and problem depletion, explicitly in the conception of repression, Davenport identifies the state as the sole agent of external demobilisation.

Repression is the most relevant area of research to theorisation of external sources of demobilisation. Tilly’s (1978: 100) definition makes this plain: repression is “any action by another group which raises the contender’s cost of collective action.”<sup>13</sup> Reviewing the literature on repression, one may note the tendency to focus on the coercive apparatus of the state and omit other sources: systematic state-based repression (della Porta 1995), institutional versus situational repression (Koopmans 1997), policing of protest (della Porta and Reiter 1998), legal constraint of movement activity (Barkan 1984), covert repression (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1988; Davenport, 2015<sup>14</sup>). Yet a misconception of repression as the sole province of the state does some discredit to this body of research. ‘Raising the costs of collective action’ for another group can result from any number of actors and actions. Some case study research explores various forms of non-state repressive activity: countermovement activity (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; McMillen 1971; McVeigh 2001), mercenary disruption (O’Hara 2016), hired or incited hooliganism (Kuo 2019).<sup>15</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Piven and Cloward’s (1979) fourfold typology of state responses to challenges: ignore, conciliate, reform, or repress.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth contrasting Tilly’s definition with others; for example, Davenport (2007: 2, emphasis added) limits repression to “actual or threatened use of *physical* sanctions... within the territorial jurisdiction of the state.” But this excludes legalistic repression, as well as repressive action beyond the state’s territory (assassinating dissidents in exile, for instance).

<sup>14</sup> Davenport’s theorisation of demobilisation derives largely from a case study of the ‘Republic of New Africa’ movement, a separatist black-nationalist movement in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

<sup>15</sup> A brief digression: at time of writing, we are witnessing a complex, deliberate attempt to demobilise a movement in Hong Kong. Kuo reports the *overt, coercive* action of apparently *private* individuals (possibly connected to Chinese crime syndicates operating in Hong Kong) on protesters. Other sources report the *overt, coercive* action of *state agents distantly connected to national political elites* (i.e., police), as well as of *state agents closely connected to national political elites* (i.e., the Chinese army units amassing on the Hong Kong border) (Chor 2019b). We also see the attempt through *covert channelling* by *state* and *private agents* both to promote *factionalisation* within the movement (i.e., between ethnically non-Chinese residents of Hong Kong and Chinese Hong Kongers) and to inflict *membership loss* by persuading bystanders that its is a seditious foreign plot (Chor 2019a). In other words, the 2019 Hong Kong

we need a model that retains the forms described in Davenport's theorisation, but also includes the whole range of external agents of demobilisation.

Earl (2003, 2004) generates a typology of 'social control'<sup>16</sup> that circumscribes the universe of external sources of demobilisation. Integrating this typology into Davenport's theorisation provides a fuller conceptual framework for SMO demobilisation, accounting for the demobilising pressure that non-state agents can impose.

'Social control' explicitly stems from a Tillyan conception of repression (Earl 2003: 46) and thereby allows for any actor that might raise costs of collective action.<sup>17</sup> Earl's typology consists of three dimensions. First, what is the *identity of the repressive agent*? This dimension consists of three categories: (1) state agents *closely* connected to national political elites (e.g., the military or national law enforcement bureaus), (2) state agents *distantly* connected to national political elites (e.g., local police and administrative units), and (3) private agents.<sup>18</sup> The first two categories are most commonly associated with repression, but the third should not be overlooked. By 'private agents' Earl refers to other actors in the social sphere that can 'impose a cost' on SMOs. This may involve the use of physical force (e.g., some of the actions of the Pinkerton security and detective agency during labour uprisings in the United States in the nineteenth century [O'Hara, 2016]), or the threat of force (e.g., 'Antifa' activists partially rely on their violent reputation to deter participation in far-right protests). However, it also includes softer means of repression. Ferree (2004) describes how non-state actors typically employ non-violent repressive tools: ridiculing, stigmatising, and silencing opponents. Even counter-demonstrating, at first blush a merely expressive<sup>19</sup> form of opposition, is oftentimes an attempt

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protest movement is facing intense external demobilising pressure. So far, its adaptation to this pressure has included adopting new 'creative approaches' (Chor 2019b).

<sup>16</sup> The typology relates to 'repression,' but Earl (2004: 58) favours the term 'social control,' arguing that repression is a term overloaded with connotations that skew research toward the violent, coercive action of the state.

<sup>17</sup> NB: 'social control' can be understood as attempts to change a SMO's *opportunity structure*, whether 'political' or 'discursive.' Following Tarrow (2011: 32), 'Political opportunities' denote "consistent—but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national—sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics." Following Koopmans and Statham (1998: 228), 'discursive opportunities' refer to "which ideas are considered 'sensible,' which constructions of reality are seen as 'realistic,' and which claims are held as 'legitimate' within a certain polity at a specific time."

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the difference between state agents *closely* and *distantly* connected to national political elites, compare with Koopmans's (1997: 154) distinction between institutional repression ("formal, more general, less direct, and usually legally sanctioned repressive measures taken by higher-level state authorities, such as government or the judiciary") and situational repression ("informal actions of lower-level state agents, most importantly the police, who in direct contact with protesters apply repression in a relatively spontaneous, ad-hoc manner"). In these two terms, Koopmans bundles together the identity of the repressive agent and the character of repressive action.

<sup>19</sup> See Rucht (1988) on the 'expressive' and 'instrumental' logics of social movement action.

to impose costs on an initiating demonstration, organisation, or movement (Reynolds-Stenson and Earl 2018). The creation of Nashi, a pro-Putin youth group, was motivated by a desire to mobilise a counter-demonstration force against any ‘colour revolution movements’ (Atwal and Bacon 2012; Horvath 2013); unsurprisingly then, Nashi demonstrations were organised at the same time as Russia’s FFE movement. The advantage of Earl’s typology is most evident in this agent dimension, accounting for the full range of actors in the social sphere.

The various forms of action available to these agents introduces Earl’s second dimension: *what is the character of the repressive action?* Broadly, repression is ‘coercive’ or ‘channelling.’ Coercion accounts for the threat and use of force (Earl 2003: 48; Oberschall 1973). This concept accounts for Davenport’s formulation of repression, but strips away the aspects restricting it to state activity. Channelling “involves more indirect repression, which is meant to affect the forms of protest available, the timing of protests, and/or flows of resources to movements” (Earl 2003: 48).<sup>20</sup> It accounts for low- and high-level state actions, such as withholding permits for public protests or passing a law proscribing an SMO’s activity. It also accounts for private actions, such as donors withdrawing financial support to SMOs.

Channelling encompasses Davenport’s concept of resource deprivation. While channelling action against a SMO’s resources is commonly associated with financial or human resources, external forces could also attempt to deny any of the ‘moral,’ ‘material,’ ‘informational,’ or ‘human’ resources on which a SMO relies (Cress and Snow 1996). When Nashi activists held pro-Putin rallies (often at the same time as demonstrations by the For Fair Elections movement), they attempted to disrupt media and public attention directed at oppositional events. Pro-government protests thus have a channelling effect. Furthermore, susceptibility to channelling depends on the extent to which a SMO relies on external support. Hence, a strain of scholarship concentrates on the potentially co-opting or controlling effect of sponsorship. Some find it a de-radicalising, limiting force (e.g., McAdam 1982; Piven and Cloward 1979) while others find it a facilitating element (Jenkins and Eckert 1986).<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, channelling includes the concept of problem depletion. This manifestation of channelling is perhaps most relevant when SMO moderates are supported and successful—in other terms, being ‘accommodated’ (Gamson 1990) or winning ‘concessions’ (Denardo 1985)—thereby decreasing the support and potency of a movement’s radicals. Equally, a crowded field of SMOs working on the same issue may crowd out some SMOs: unable to garner enough support for their activities on the basis that others already are (likely with more

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<sup>20</sup> See also Oberschall (1973).

<sup>21</sup> Here, again, the study of radical flanks is relevant. Haines (1988) finds that the presence of a radical flank drives up support for more moderate groups, without imposing any tangible cost on the radical flank.

demonstrable success) (Soule and King 2008). In both instances, channelling action deprives SMOs of relevance.

Finally, Earl's third dimension asks, *is the repressive action visible?* This dimension distinguishes between 'covert and overt' coercion, and 'latent and manifest' channelling (Earl 2003: 48). Coercive actions taken to counter SMOs can be *overt* state violence against demonstrations, for example, or *covert* infiltration of opposition organisations. "Covert repression occurs when the agents of repression, their actions, and the purpose of their actions are intended to be unknown to the general public. In contrast, overt, coercive repression is intended to be obvious to both protesters and wider publics" (Earl 2003: 48). More ambiguously, channelling could be *manifest*, such as laws banning symbols particular to a movement or SMO, or could be *latent*, such as alterations to tax code that affects the opposition's funding. The latter is marked by nuance and a certain plausible deniability of any targeting of a group, whereas the former is a blatant attack against a particular group. This distinction is fuzzy, moveable, but essentially refers to the extent to which repression is *visible* to the general public.

Table 1. A typology of demobilising factors of social movement organisations

<u>Internal</u>		<u>External</u>		
<b>Lost Participation</b> (individual-level)	<b>Organisational Failure</b> (group-level)	<b>Social Control</b> (Three dimensions)		
<i>Burnout/ exhaustion</i> (inability to continue participating)	<i>Membership loss</i> (failure to recruit/retain members)	(1) Identity of repressive agent		
		State agents <i>closely</i> connected to national political elites	State agents <i>distantly</i> connected to national political elites	Private agents
<i>Lost commitment</i> (unwillingness to continue participating)	<i>Factionalisation</i> (internal splitting of movement organisations)	(2) Character of repressive action		
		Coercion – direct repression; the threat or use of force	Channelling – indirect repression (e.g., resource deprivation, problem depletion)	
	<i>Rigidity</i> (failure to adapt to change, to modify objectives and strategies according to new circumstances)	(3) Visibility		
		Overt / Manifest – observable, explicit, obvious repressive actions	Covert / Latent – unobserved, concealed, veiled repressive actions	

Collectively, the foregoing discussion yields a typology of demobilising factors, graphically presented in Table 1. Five internal factors, organised in two categories (lost participation and organisational failure) are matched by as many as twelve forms of social control (state agents *closely* connected to national political elites, applying coercive action, which is overt; private agents, applying channelling action, which is latent; etc.).<sup>22</sup> And the presence of one form of social control from one actor does not necessarily preclude it from simultaneously exerting another form, as when a regime makes concessions to moderate opposition while attempting to repress radicals (Tarrow 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Davenport’s (2015: 39) table of “Intersections of external and internal sources of demobilisation.”

## The causal nature of demobilisation

Different factors, both internal and external, combine in different permutations to produce SMO demobilisation. Davenport (2015: 38–42) suggests that sources of demobilisation occur in internal-external pairs, that state agents identify and attempt to compound internal pressures. But, in addition to omitting private agents as sources of demobilising pressure, this is the other major flaw in Davenport's theorisation. External agents are not always (or perhaps even 'often') shrewd, rational actors discerning and incisively targeting movement weaknesses. More importantly, demobilising factors occur in more complex combinations, unfolding in unique demobilisation processes.

SMO demobilisation displays several distinct causal features. Most fundamentally, it is *conjuncturally caused*: multiple demobilising factors concur to produce demobilisation. (It is unlikely that one form of demobilising pressure could occur in isolation and generate SMO demobilisation—such a case would be quite peculiar and potentially very instructive.) So it is not just, for instance, overt state coercive social control—as when the Putin regime arrests numerous oppositional demonstrators—that engenders demobilisation, but also resultant lost participation (both from exhaustion and lost commitment) and organisational rigidity that combine in a demobilisation process. Davenport's (2015: 39) theorisation would conceive of such a process as attributable only to one external factor (repression) and one internal factor (presumably *either* 'exhaustion,' 'lost commitment,' 'departing members,' or 'rigidity'). Closer inspection of cases reveals that the causal combinations of demobilisation are more variegated.

Speaking of demobilisation plurally, demobilisation processes, denotes that it can occur in multiple ways. In other words, SMO demobilisation is *equifinal*: there are many pathways of demobilisation. Different combinations of demobilising factors represent different ideal-typical patterns of demobilisation.

What causes demobilisation, moreover, is not the mere inverse of what is causally relevant for non-demobilisation (or continued mobilisation)—and certainly not the opposite of mobilisation. This is *causal asymmetry*. Examining demobilisation concerns different process and, in all likelihood, different causal factors than non-demobilisation and mobilisation. Similarly, some causal factors are causally relevant for both demobilisation and non-demobilisation. This is *multifinality*. Repression, by turns deterring (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004) and inciting (Gurr 1970), exemplifies multifinality.

Taken together, these causal attributes are consistent with a set-theoretic view of causation. That is, rather than conceiving causal factors as having linear additive effects, set-theoretic<sup>23</sup> approaches attend to the characteristics of conjunctural causation, equifinality, asymmetry, and multifinality. Demobilisation research should align its methodological choices with these

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<sup>23</sup> For an explanation of set-theoretic causation, and of the wider subject of set theory and set-theoretic methods, see Schneider and Wagemann (2012).

ontological expectations (Hall 2003): this means utilising case study methods and cross-case techniques, such as qualitative comparative analysis and coincidence analysis.

The next section presents a case study of Russia's For Fair Elections (FFE) SMO, which was mobilised in late 2011 and, by the middle of 2012, had begun a process of demobilisation. Whereas Davenport's theorisation offers some analytical leverage in examining this case, it would omit the demobilising pressure of non-state agents, like Nashi, and obscure the causal complexity of the demobilisation process. The revised theorisation facilitates a fuller analysis of FFE's demobilisation.

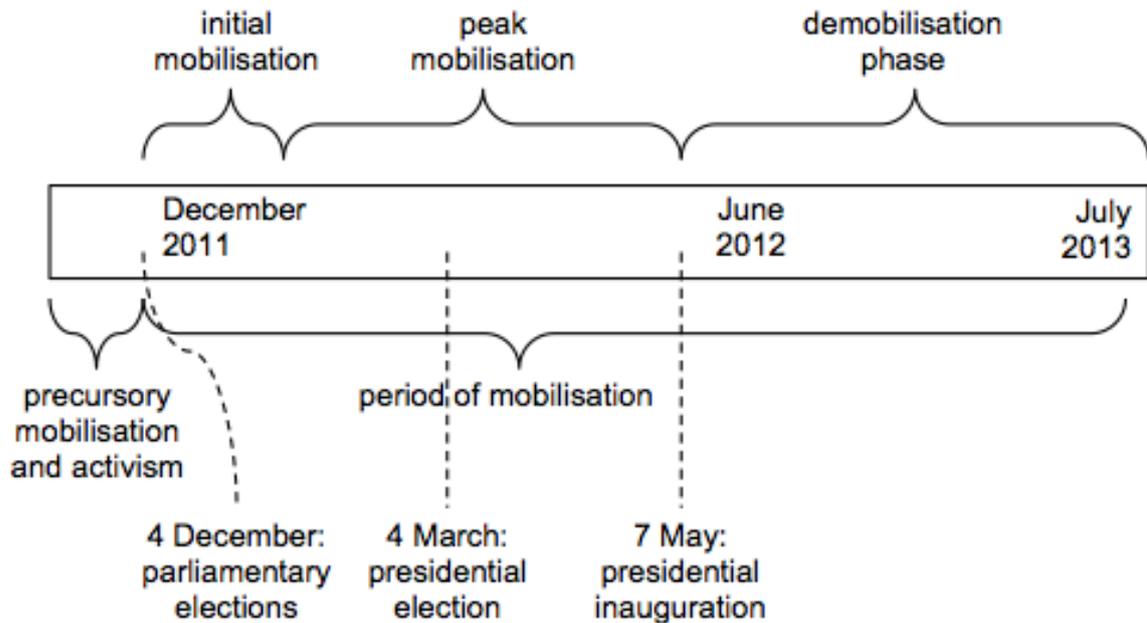
### **Russia's For Fair Elections movement**

On 4 December 2011 Russia went to the polls for elections to the Russian parliament (i.e., *Duma*). Despite a sizeable drop in the overall vote share—from nearly two-thirds of all votes in 2007 to just over half in 2011—United Russia, the ruling party associated with Vladimir Putin, retained a majority of parliamentary seats. These results, however, were marred by widespread accusations of electoral manipulation and malfeasance. The substance of these accusations came from a variety of sources—the fact that Russia's primary news channel, 'Rossia-24,' broadcast results that totalled well over 100 per cent in several regions deserves note (Volchek 2019)<sup>24</sup>—most notably an extensive network of volunteer election observers from the *Golos* organisation, which works for free and fair elections. The nearly 8000 electoral violations (Голос [Golos] 2011) recorded in 2011 remains by far the highest total observed by the organisation in any one electoral event. Thus, there were solid grounds to question the legitimacy of the election results, as well as a directly involved cohort of citizens already mobilised around the event. The day after the election, 5 December, approximately 5,000 'whistle-blowers' (many protesters blew red whistles) marched down *Chistiye Prudy* Boulevard to protest electoral falsification. Unsurprisingly, a central rallying cry was a longstanding slogan of the *Golos* organisation: *Za Chestnye Vybory!*, 'For Fair Elections!'

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<sup>24</sup> Reportedly at the insistence of government officials (Volchek 2019), the television station broadcast inflated numbers for the United Russia party—without manipulating the results of any other parties, so that tallies exceeded 100 per cent. The most egregious case came from the Rostov region, for which *Rossia-24* reported results totalling 146 per cent (58.99 for United Russia). But this was not an anomaly as other regions were reported with evidently manipulated results: for example, the Sverdlov region with 115 per cent (39.61 for United Russia) and Voronezh region with 128 per cent (62.32 for United Russia).

Figure 1 - Timeline of the For Fair Elections movement



Fraud in the parliamentary elections offered a conspicuous discursive opportunity and, at least superficially, a slight political opportunity.<sup>25</sup> Activists and groups that were already active before the vote, such as ‘Strategy 31’<sup>26</sup> and ‘Ecological Defence of the Moscow Region,’<sup>27</sup> joined individuals involved in election monitoring to form the For Fair Elections (FFE) movement organisation. As illustrated in Figure 1, for roughly a year and a half after the December elections, FFE was mobilised and campaigning. The organisational structure of FFE mostly took shape during the initial phase of mobilisation, in December, and more or less persisted through the phase of peak mobilisation. Following the presidential inauguration on 7 May 2012, which coincided with combative protests in central Moscow, FFE entered a phase of demobilisation that significantly diminished it by the end of 2012 and culminated, at the latest, by the middle of 2013.

The following sections present a concise analysis of the demobilisation of FFE. Of course, this noteworthy SMO, its campaign and leading figures, displays many characteristics worthy of scholarly consideration. Indeed, several articles

<sup>25</sup> Appeals for the head of the election commission, Vladimir Churov, not to certify the results were repeatedly voiced at the first protests, in early December 2011.

<sup>26</sup> This is a campaign group that formed to protest restrictions to the constitutionally-enshrined (in article 31, hence the group’s name) freedom of assembly.

<sup>27</sup> This group, which included leaders like Yevgenia Chirikova that would feature prominently in For Fair Election rallies, campaigned against government-supported plans to clear parts of the Khimki Forest in order to build a highway.

have directed attention to it.<sup>28</sup> But as yet there is no study of the demobilisation of FFE itself. This is rather surprising since FFE organised the largest demonstrations since the disintegration of the Soviet Union; that no study has examined this case of SMO demobilisation speaks to the general neglect of organisational demobilisation. At the same time, the case of FFE is crucial (Gerring 2007): an adequate conceptual framework should be able to identify the causal factors of FFE's demobilisation. Yet Davenport's framework falls short. FFE deviates in some parts from the causes accounted for by Davenport. To correct this and to indicate the enhanced analytical leverage of the preceding theorisation of demobilisation, firstly, I detail the organisational structure of FFE; then, I identify internal and external demobilising pressures that manifest in the case of FFE; lastly, I review the sequence in which these factors impacted FFE and highlight the conjunctural nature of the resultant demobilisation.

Before proceeding along these lines, it would be prudent to take note of two key contextualising events<sup>29</sup> that were actuating for FFE and for the regime it challenged. First, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2005, as well as the other colour revolutions in several post-Soviet states in the 2000s, undoubtedly left an impression on the Russian regime. In several countries, SMOs, supported to some limited extent by Western governments, toppled authoritarian regimes and (at least for a time) inaugurated more liberal democratic ones.<sup>30</sup> Incumbent authoritarians took notice—none more so than the one in Russia. By the time FFE emerged in 2011, the Kremlin had developed several defences against 'colour movements,' including mechanisms for managing divisions among the elite (March 2009) and purpose-built youth movements, like Nashi, that were made to counteract movement-based opposition to the regime (Atwal and Bacon 2012; Horvath 2013).<sup>31</sup> Second, at the United Russia party conference in September 2011 it was announced that Vladimir Putin would stand as a candidate for the presidency in 2012, and that then-President Dmitri Medvedev would lead the party list in the parliamentary elections. This executive switcheroo laid bare the regime's power dynamic: despite vacating the presidency in 2008, Putin had remained in charge; and re-assuming the

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<sup>28</sup>Koltsova and Selivanova (2019) plumb the connection between online connections and offline participation; Semenov, Lobanova, and Zavadskaya (2016) assess the participation of opposition political parties in FFE's campaign; and Lasnier (2017, 2018), and Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) have presented illuminating analysis of the *consequences* of FFE failure and demobilisation.

<sup>29</sup> Here, too, one might well include the sustained tightening of constraints on Russian civil society and activism that opposed the Putin regime or its vested interests, as well as swells of protest activity, such as the campaigns by 'Strategy-31' for free assembly and the 'Ecological Defence of the Moscow Region' for the preservation of the Khimki Forest, that fed into the eventual mobilisation of the For Fair Elections movement (i.e., 'precursory mobilisation and activism').

<sup>30</sup> The indicators compiled by the 'Varieties of Democracy' (V-Dem) project (<https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>), for example, attest to the liberal democratic gains made by Ukraine and Georgia after their colour revolutions in the mid-2000s.

<sup>31</sup> It is not a coincidence that Nashi was formed in 2005, in the immediate aftermath of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

Presidency signalled his intent to remain in charge for a long time to come. Though not remotely surprising, the move certainly exacerbated the grievances of those who were ultimately stirred enough to go out onto the streets during the election cycle.<sup>32</sup>

### **The organisational structure of FFE**

Though comprised of leaders and members from a variety of groups and organisations, the formal organisation of FFE was itself exceedingly spare. It consisted of three principal units: the Organisation Committee, the Workshop of Protest Actions, and the League of Voters.

The Organisation Committee performed the overarching managerial functions of FFE: organising protest events (including format, speakers, venue, time, etc.), fundraising to support FFE, promoting the movement and its events. Despite these vital duties, the Organisation

Committee was “an unsophisticated mechanism, which did not have a clear-cut hierarchy, an organisation, a structure or a leader” (Volkov 2015: 13).

Such haphazardness was the result of a lack of planning: the December elections were much anticipated, and the prospect of at least some electoral fraud rarely in doubt. Yet there are no indications that the major election monitoring initiatives—Golos, RosVybory,<sup>33</sup> and ‘Citizen Observer’<sup>34</sup>—had any plans to mobilise around this imminently foreseeable grievance. The Organisation Committee therefore formed only after the first protest (on 5 December 2011), and was immediately preoccupied with the arrangements for demonstrations in mid- and late-December.

While the operation of the Organisation Committee was driven by party and civic group leaders, the Workshop of Protest Actions was more malleable; an open forum where members

*Image 1 - Leaflet announcing the 'White Circle' protest, organised by FFE's Workshop on Protest Actions, on the Garden Ring Road*



<sup>32</sup> Polling from the Levada-Center (Volkov 2015) found that emotions like indignation and discontent were the most common motivations among protesters that participated in the initial mobilisation.

<sup>33</sup> Initiated by the *Fond Borby s Korruptsiyey* (‘Anti-Corruption Foundation’), which was established by Alexei Navalny. RosVybory was also supported by several oppositional political parties, including the Communist Party, the Yabloko party, and businessman and 2012 presidential candidate (with his own embryonic political organization, ‘Civic Platform’) Mikhail Prokhorov.

<sup>34</sup> Or *Grazhdanin Nablyudatel*. It was the initiative of the Solidarnost organisation.

of any standing could propose various protest actions and initiate them. Attendees occasionally formed small ‘steering committees,’ but these were *ad hoc*, focused on realising and then assessing protest actions (Volkov 2015). Workshop initiatives often took the form of actions within the large demonstrations organised by the Organisation Committee, though included a few separate protests, most prominently the ‘White Circle’ protest<sup>35</sup> on 26 February, when activists formed a massive human chain along the ring road that encircles central Moscow.

The League of Voters essentially served as a propaganda or public relations arm of FFE, attracting attention to issues of electoral transparency, as well as organising election monitoring initiatives for the 4 March presidential elections.<sup>36</sup> It was composed of ‘celebrity figures’ active within the SMO: journalists, artists, poets, and personalities. Though the League operated somewhat autonomously from the overall managerial role played by the Organisation Committee, the overlap of members represented in the two units kept their actions in harmony.

This organisational triad presents a couple important issues worth noting for they relate to demobilising factors and potentialities of FFE. First, the degree of horizontality is remarkable. Both the Organisation Committee and the Workshop of Protest Actions were open to all FFE participants. (The League of Voters was only open to invited persons.) And while decisions of the Organisation Committee remained in the hands of an indefinite collection of leaders from other groups, the Workshop did not even have that minimum of differentiation; rather, it was an open forum composed of spontaneously forming, operating, then dissolving ‘steering committees.’ Research on strategic capacity stresses the utility of organisations and structures that encourage tactical input from regular members (Ganz 2010) or allow for constructive ‘trust-building’ and strategic ‘reappraisal’ (Davenport 2015: 43–47). In other words, some organisational horizontality can guard against several demobilising pressures. The FFE’s horizontal, open units appear to be a by-product of its rapid formation, however, rather than a design feature. Nevertheless, FFE’s loose structure insulated it from demobilising *rigidity* issues since its organisation was never irretrievably locked in to any one course of action.

Second, the benefits of flexible structure were minimised by the preservation of striking *factionalisation* issues. FFE included leaders and members from a wide

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<sup>35</sup> As many as 40,000 people (Radia 2012) lined Moscow’s Garden Ring Road, festooned with white ribbons, holding white balloons, and waving white flags and flowers. Opposition leaders were interspersed along the ring; sympathetic motorists drove around the 10-mile loop, holding flags out their windows and honking in support (or else because the protest was causing several traffic jams). By way of counter-protest, groups of pro-government youth activists deployed at several points along the road and wore signs that said “Putin loves all” or “One week until Putin’s victory.”

<sup>36</sup> Organisation for election monitoring included systematising means of processing observer reports, issuing a ‘black list’ of individuals observed engaging in fraud in the parliamentary elections, and offering legal assistance to voters and monitors.

ideological spectrum: from liberal groups like Solidarnost and the Yabloko party, to the Communist Party and arms of its organisation, to avowed nationalists. Sharing the same dais, one could routinely see far-left activists, like Sergei Udaltsov, next to nationalist figures, like Alexei Navalny, and business figures, like Mikhail Porkhorov, next to environmentalists, like Yevgenia Chirikova.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxical ideological pairings abounded. On the one hand, it is a testament to the common interest in fair electoral institutions; yet on the other hand, it signals that FFE's structure, particularly the Organisation Committee, harboured significant factional divisions moored together only by a bare sufficiency of common interest.

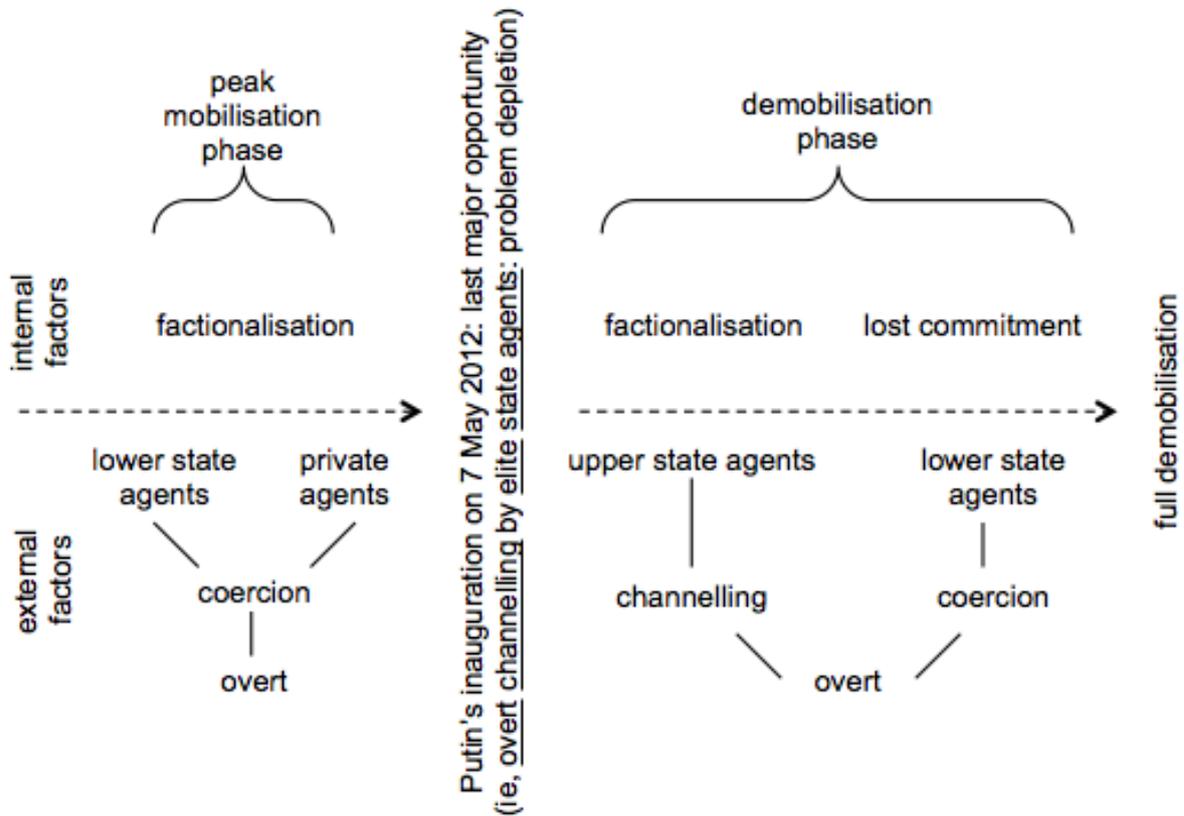
### **The demobilisation of FFE**

Intense activism by FFE lasted from mid-December through Putin's presidential inauguration on 7 May 2012. FFE activists seized on the opportunity of Putin's inauguration, organising several events (here, again, the influence of factions within FFE was evident), including the so-called 'March of Millions' (approximately 100,000 participated) on the day before, 6 May. Participants in these events were met with mass deployments of riot officers and eventually beaten and/or arrested for unpermitted protest action. This was overt coercive action by the state. The crescendo of activity was followed by a long, sustained diminuendo, where resolute external demobilising pressures exacerbated internal stresses and hastened the demobilisation of FFE.

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<sup>37</sup> NB: Ideological pluralism, and the frequently concomitant diversity of movement claims, is not necessarily a problem. Wang and Soule (2016) reveal how multiple claims and wide aims tend to be more advantageous than campaigns and movements with narrower purposes. Specifically, "multi-issue protest events are more likely to use novel re-combinations of tactics" (2016: 522) and "more peripheral claims, which you might find in large, coalitional SMOs, are more likely to introduce new protest tactics" (2016: 529).

Figure 2 - the demobilisation of For Fair Elections



May 2012 marked the beginning of FFE’s demobilisation. Putin’s inauguration represented the last event directly related to the contested election cycle at the core of FFE’s claims. Merely by executing the inauguration, the government effected a demobilising pressure: ending the succession of events directly related to grievances mobilised by FFE; in demobilisation terms, this is overt channelling by state agents closely connected to national elites.<sup>38</sup> At the same time as this opportunity was closing—likely reducing protesters’ perception of the ‘political efficacy’ of their actions<sup>39</sup>—the risks of protest participation were purposely intensified. Following the arrest of protest participants on inauguration day, a series of legal steps were taken, by the federal government and by state agents more distantly connected to national elites, that restricted the mobilisation options for FFE: that is, instances of overt channelling. Three of these were of particular importance: new legal restrictions on protest activity, the so-called ‘Foreign Agents’ law, and frequent detention and criminal proceedings against opposition leaders. With the first of these measures, the

<sup>38</sup>What Davenport (2015: 26–28) terms ‘problem depletion,’ or might also be called a ‘discursive opportunity’ (Koopmans and Statham 1998).

<sup>39</sup>See Ayanian and Tausch (2016).

new law on protests<sup>40</sup> that President Putin signed into law on 8 June 2012, penalties for participation in unlawful protests were increased 150-fold (Amos 2012): minimum fines exceed the average *annual* salary in Russia. Succeeding years witnessed a fivefold increase in the number of fines imposed (Beilinson, Borovikova, and Smirnova 2019). The new penalties on protest represent *overt channelling by state agents closely connected to national political elites*; it was the federal government attempting to discourage a kind of protest participation ('unlawful protests,' i.e., protest that had not been given governmental authorisation) in a very visible manner. Unsurprisingly for a traditional conception of repression,<sup>41</sup> protest activity markedly declined in 2012, and has since largely remained below the levels of preceding years (see Appendix I, Figure 1).

In the next month, July 2012, the government introduced the 'Foreign Agents' law.<sup>42</sup> It instituted registration and reporting requirements on organisations that receive funding or other material support from outside the country, and required them to label informational materials as coming from 'foreign agents,' a term heavily laden with negative connotation in the post-Soviet context. In a similar vein, the government expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in September 2012. USAID had supported organisations and networks that produced colour revolutions in neighbouring states. The decision to expel it was explicitly justified in terms of preventing meddling by foreign agents in Russian politics (Elder 2012b). These measures, too, were an instance of *overt channelling by state agents closely connected to national political elites*; the federal government compelling many organisations involved in FFE to divert resources from activism to comply with new legal requirements, as well as to undermine their legitimacy, and banishing a common source of funding for many. (Golos, for example, received many grants from USAID.) In this specific case, it was an attempt to constrain the sort of oppositional networks that had led colour revolution movements in neighbouring states.

The final instance of 'overt channelling' social control—this time by state agents *distantly* connected to national political elites—manifest in the persistent legal harassment of opposition figures. To start, Alexei Navalny, Sergei Udaltsov, and Boris Nemtsov, three luminaries of the FFE and wider opposition, along with

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<sup>40</sup> Article 20.2 of the Administrative Code (Violation of the established procedure for organizing or holding a meeting, rally, demonstration, procession or picketing). (Статья 20.2 КоАП [Нарушение установленного порядка организации либо проведения собрания, митинга, демонстрации, шествия или пикетирования].)

<sup>41</sup> Again, such a conception would hold that raising the costs of participation (literally, in this case) is enough to deter many or most would-be participants (Tarrow 2011).

<sup>42</sup> 121-FZ: Federal Law on Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations Performing the Function of Foreign Agents. (N 121-ФЗ: О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в части регулирования деятельности некоммерческих организаций, выполняющих функции иностранного агента.)

hundreds of others, were arrested for their activities at the protest on Bolotnaya Square the day before the presidential inauguration. Subsequent to their 15-day detention, these leaders had their homes searched and were summoned to a police inquisition (Amos 2012). Later in the year Udaltsov was arrested again and then placed under house arrest with limited means of communicating with anyone besides his relatives and lawyers (BBC 2013). Navalny (and his brother) was tried for embezzlement (Elder 2012a); conviction on these charges would eventually justify invalidating his presidential candidacy in 2018. These and other legal attacks on the opposition severely limited the scope for activism by the FFE: depriving it of its most charismatic figures and their resources, tarring it with the appearance of petty law-breaking.

In conjunction with the other pressures brought to bear against it, including internal pressures, FFE stagnated. Turnout for demonstrations dropped. Its organisational structure became less active; an attempt to formalise the FFE organisation, replacing the Organisation Committee with the openly-elected Opposition Coordination Council (OCC), proved unsuccessful as the OCC dissolved in late 2013. By that time FFE was wholly demobilised.

What is illuminating about this case? Primarily, it exhibits the complex causation that the preceding theorisation of demobilisation emphasises. Davenport's (2015: 39) conception would omit the concurrence of multiple demobilising pressures, instead maintaining the simplistic model of paired demobilising factors. Similarly, while the role of the state was pivotal in effecting FFE's demobilisation, theories that omit private agents would miss much in cases like that of FFE: pro-Kremlin youth groups like Nashi and Young Guard regularly held parallel protests or menaced FFE participants; pro-regime news sources like NTV badgered opposition leaders and routinely portrayed FFE as orchestrated by U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul. Non-state agents were important sources of demobilising pressure, distracting attention from and undermining the legitimacy of FFE—but these sources of pressure would be missed under Davenport's framework.

During its period of peak mobilisation, FFE was to some degree beset by coercion from low-level state and private agents, as well as internal factionalisation issues. Nevertheless, it appeared largely unaffected, or at least not prohibitively hindered, by these pressures. Only when overt channelling by high-level state agents began, and pressure from low-level state agents persisted, did the movement begin its downward slide: factionalisation among leaders followed by lost commitment<sup>43</sup> among members, evinced by decreasing protest participation. Thus, overt channelling by high-level state agents comprised the pivotal causal condition in FFE's demobilisation process. Yet this effect occurred in conjunction with other causal factors, including social control from private agents. The revision of Davenport's conception of demobilisation accounts for these non-state sources of demobilising pressure.

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<sup>43</sup> Again, driven by increased risks combined with a decreased sense of political efficacy for engaging in protest action.

Despite its failure to bring about new elections and institute fairer democratic procedures, the experience of FFE shows that such cases of ‘negative demobilisation’ can still mobilise and train new cohorts of activists, establish social linkages that support future activism, and impart operational lessons. After demobilisation numerous FFE participants were elected to local government institutions. Anti-corruption protests in 2017-2018 drew on the networks of connection developed during FFE’s mobilisation. And recent protests against the refusal to register independent (read: not regime loyalist) candidates for regional elections display the endurance of affective dimensions of FFE.

Organisational demobilisation is only one part of contentious cycles. Demobilisation may signal a start, as well as mark an end. Events (and their agents) that fail to transform nevertheless produce effects: on participants, on the area of activism, and on the wider environment. Yet the conceptual framework detailed in this article and the For Fair Elections case direct attention to the part of social movement activity that has received the least attention. Much about demobilisation remains unstudied and under-theorised.

### **Next steps in the study of demobilisation**

Tracing the demobilisation of a movement or SMO or campaign, even just identifying their final, definitive ends, presents several challenges. In part, this is because the boundaries of these units are fuzzy: demobilisation can be a lengthy process and often ends in whispers, rather than a clearly identifiable bang.

Several aspects of demobilisation remain un- or under-examined. The theorisation and analysis presented in this article is directed at the organisational- or meso-level. It is configured around SMOs and dimensions of their operation; hence, the first element of Davenport’s definition of demobilisation, which concerns alteration to the ‘institution’ of a SMO. Nevertheless, inquiry might also be directed toward broader or narrower elements. In broader terms, some scholarship examines the demobilisation of whole movements (typically composed of several SMOs). Orcutt and Fendrich (1980) gathered survey data about activists perception regarding the decline of the student protest movement in the United States during the 1970s. Franklin (2014) examined the demobilisation of several U.S. movements (civil rights, black power, New Left) that resulted from the demobilisation of several SMOs that constituted them. And Heaney and Rojas (2011) specified the factors that undermined the coalition of the anti-war movement in the U.S. in the late 2000s. Such studies speak to macro-level sociological phenomena and movement dynamics.

Nearer to the opposite level of analysis one encounters the thorny issue of ‘campaigns.’ The term refers to the activism work of SMOs: their deliberate and

continuous application of tactics to further their objectives.<sup>44</sup> Campaigns might take the form of legal challenges mounted by an SMO, or of a series of demonstrations, or of strikes and boycotts, or of myriad other actions.<sup>45</sup> The end of a SMO's campaign is coterminous with a determination of the future of the SMO, wherein one of three outcomes is possible: (1) the campaign ends but the SMO endures, remaining active with other campaigns or activities; (2) the campaign ends and the SMO goes into 'abeyance' (Sawyers and Meyer 1999; Taylor 1989), that is, stops actively campaigning, but retains at least some of its organisational infrastructure; or (3) the campaign ends coincident with the demobilisation of the SMO. In other words, campaigns are often the stuff of life and death for SMOs: propelling them forward or signifying their end.

Future research can clarify the distinction between contention-based (i.e., movements challenging the state) cases of demobilisation from those resulting from social movement dynamics (e.g., movement-counter-movement interaction). Examination of demobilisation can add to the burgeoning literature on social movement coalitions and their campaigns. Most importantly, theorisation of demobilisation will benefit from cross-case study. For demobilisation research, like other areas of social movement studies, must guard against the inclination to particularise, to rely on single case studies and to ignore or obscure the generalizable elements of demobilisation.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011, 51).

<sup>45</sup> Sharp (1973) made an initial attempt (since revised and expanded) to list all methods of non-violent protest action, resulting in a catalogue of 198 actions.

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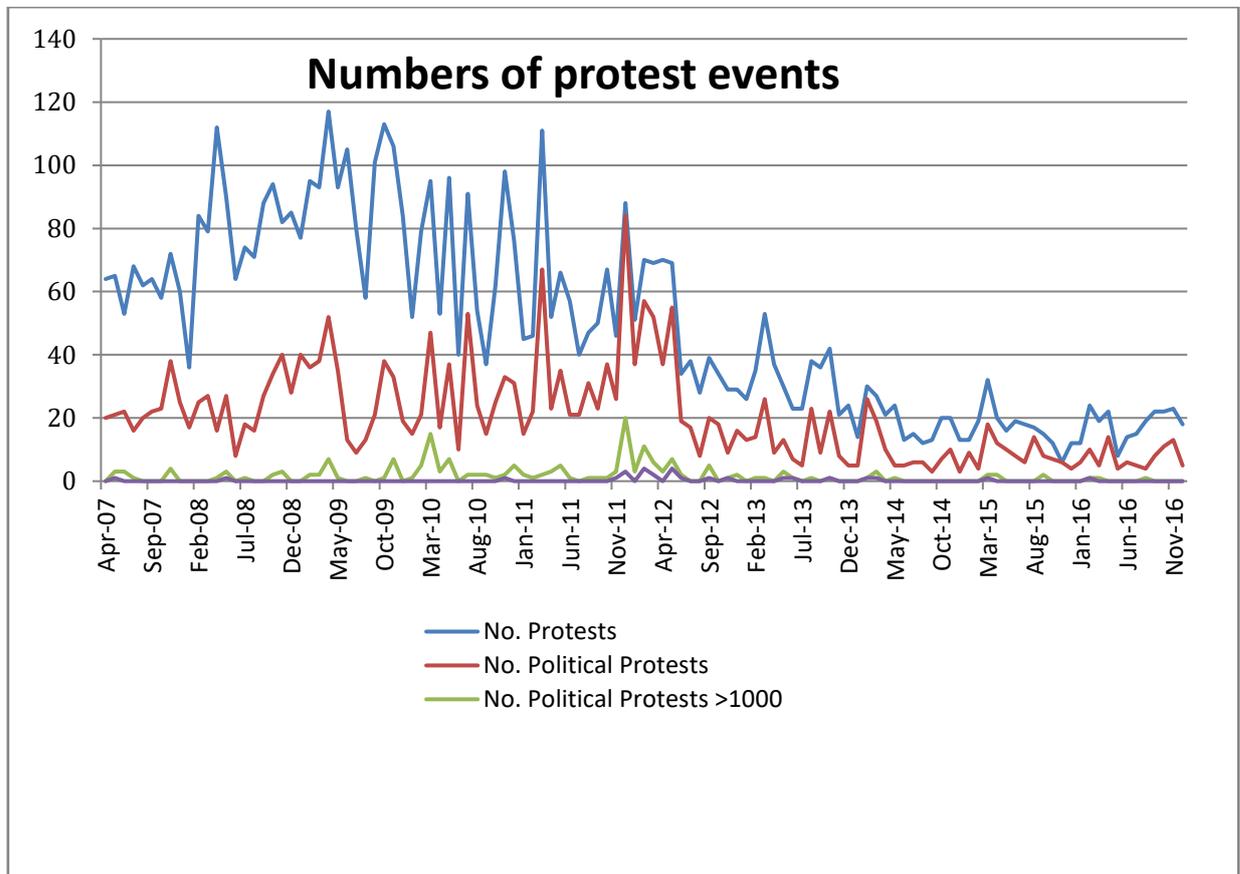
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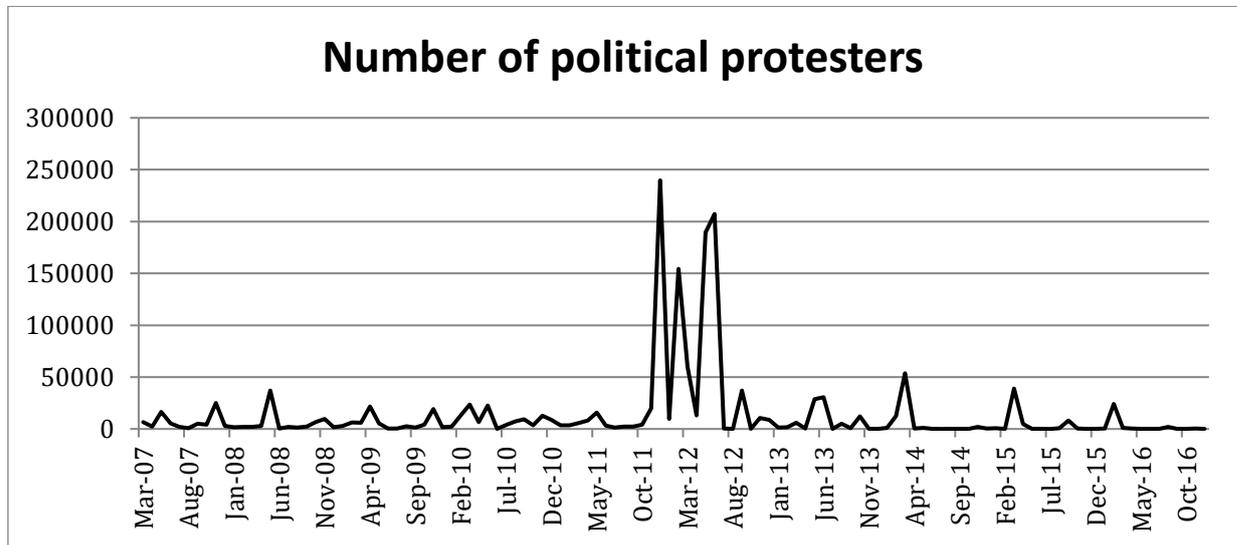
## Appendix I: Protest in Russia from Lankina dataset<sup>46</sup>

Figure 1.



<sup>46</sup> The Russian Protest Event Dataset compiled by TomilaLankina(2018) relies on news reports from 'namarsh.ru,' a non-government information source that collects information regarding protest activity throughout Russia.

Graph 2.



### About the author

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## **Scaling up nonviolent action: Do scholars and activists agree?**

**Charla Burnett and Karen Ross**

### **Abstract**

*In this article, we explore the way that both activist-oriented manuals and academic scholarship on nonviolent action in social movements and civil resistance have addressed issues related to the concept of scaling up: increasing movement strength, size, and impacts. Drawing on a database of nearly 200 case studies and activist-oriented manuals, we highlight similarities and discrepancies in the emphases of both scholarly and activist-oriented materials to illustrate differing priorities among academics and practitioners in the field. Our analysis addresses possible reasons for these discrepancies and suggests directions for scholar-activist cross-fertilization.*

**Key words:** scaling up, civil resistance, social movements, activists, scholars, impact

### **Introduction**

Research on the undertakings of social movements and movement activists has long been a focus of scholars seeking to better understand the process of social change at local, national, and international scales. Despite a broad and varied literature in this field of study, however, little focus has been placed on how movements scale – that is, how they create a solid foundation that allows for increasing their size, spatial presence, and overall impact (in both intended and unintended ways). Moreover, while scholars have long studied movement endeavors through methods such as discussions with activists or examination of archival resources, few analyses exist of materials produced *by and for* movement activists, in terms of their areas of emphasis. Fewer studies still engage these materials in comparison with academic research. This article addresses these gaps by examining the concept of scaling up as it is discussed *both* in empirical case studies of nonviolent movements and within training guides and manuals written for on-the-ground movement use.

Understanding how and when movements use scaling up tactics is important for several reasons. First, under certain conditions, specific strategies may have negative consequences that can prevent social movements from obtaining their goals, while at the same time, movement events may have positive consequences beyond those explicitly intended (Dedouet 2008). Second, lack of consistency in what is meant by movement “success” makes comparative analysis challenging. As we argue below, researchers’ understanding of what characterizes “successful” movements and campaigns is subjective, yet it strongly shapes the way we conduct research and interpret results.

Our analysis highlights significant discrepancies between empirical studies and activist-oriented materials. We suggest that these discrepancies, in particular lack of scholarly focus on internally-oriented scaling components such as strategic planning and creating a shared ideology, have limited our capacity to fully comprehend why movement campaigns are successful – or not. Lack of focus in manuals on certain key issues is also problematic in terms of ensuring adequate preparation for successful movement campaigns. We suggest that greater cross-fertilization across scholarly and practitioner-oriented writings for and about movement initiatives can lead to greater understanding of movement success and how to ensure that campaigns have the positive impacts they strive for.

### **Conceptualizing scaling-up**

Nonviolent movements have long engaged in processes aimed at enlarging the size of their networks and the scope of their initiatives. Indeed, the primary approach to exploring ‘scaling’ in relation to nonviolent activism and social movements has centered around increasing the size of the movement in terms of membership or territory, or expanding partnerships and coalitions (Lackey 1973; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 2005). However, we suggest that the process of ‘scaling up’ is multi-dimensional and includes more than just aspects related to movement size. For example, the social entrepreneurship and international development literature suggest that *internal strengthening* is crucial for building a foundation that enables not only physical/territorial growth, but also allows for broadening the *impact* of work done by social movements and small scale, grassroots peacebuilding and social justice initiatives (Dees 2004; Uvin 1995). Thus, we define scaling up as: *elements contributing to the internal strength of initiatives that result in and allow for external expansion in ways that broaden both intended and unintended impacts*. In other words, scaling is a process of *increasing the potential for positive impact at a higher level or scope than it currently is*.

To address the multi-dimensional nature of scaling up, we have developed a conceptual model of scaling that includes both internally- and externally-oriented elements and that emphasizes contributions to both intended and unintended impacts of movement endeavors (see Ross et al, 2019). In this article, we use this model as a framework for analyzing peer reviewed empirical case studies of social movement endeavors and nonviolent direct action, as well as activist-oriented movement manuals, to highlight aspects of scaling up that are emphasized by researchers and those utilized by activists and practitioners of nonviolent action – both when these are similar and when they differ.

Our conceptual model is grounded in the desire to identify a framework for scaling up that is embedded in both the theoretical conceptualization of nonviolence and the experiential knowledge of its practice. To this end, it is based on an extensive review of the theoretical literature on nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience, manuals and guides written by and for movement

activists, as well as social movement scholarship and literature in the areas of international development, organization studies, and entrepreneurship. Conceptually, the model draws upon but also extends upon the concept of “scale shifts,” that is, changes in, “the number and level of coordinated actions to a different focal point, involving a new range of actors, different objects, and broadened claims” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 331). In particular, we distinguish between two dimensions of scaling: what occurs internally in order to strengthen the movement (*internal strengthening*); and what happens externally in order to enlarge the movement in size or space (*external expansion*). Although some activities clearly are relevant to both of these, most fall largely on one dimension rather than both. We further distinguish between the “what” of scaling, or *tactics for scaling* that must be used as evidence of a scaled movement, and *processes of scaling*, that is, the concrete actions providing a basis for scaling. In addition, *communication for scaling*, while ostensibly a sub-component of the *processes of scaling*, is discussed separately because of its foundational nature that allows all other scaling processes to be achieved.

Within each of these dimensions are several elements, which serve as the indicators at the focus of our analysis. These elements are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Dimensions and Elements of Scaling Up**

	<i>Internal Strengthening</i>	<i>External expansion</i>
<i>Tactics for scaling</i>	1. Strong commitment among activists	1. Increased membership and development of partnerships and/or coalitions
	2. Strong strategic plans	2. Engagement of external third parties or international actors
	3. Diverse movement membership	3. Territorial spread
	4. Shared messages and ideology	4. Engagement with government leadership
<i>Processes of scaling</i>	1. Internal sharing of information (use of media)	1. Sharing information (use of media) externally
	2. Educational programming for activists	3. Educational programming for the broader community
	3. Engaging ideas across movements	
<i>Communication for scaling</i>	2. Strategic communication within the movement	2. Strategic communication toward the broader community
	Strategic framing	

## Methodology

In order to conduct this analysis, our research team compiled a database consisting of 128 case studies of nonviolent campaigns as well as 59 manuals written for/by movement activists. Our compilation focused on movement campaigns that explicitly referenced nonviolent action or strategic nonviolent tactics as a central component of their ideology. Moreover, in our search for empirical case studies, we limited our search to include three types of movements: those aimed at regime change (such as the collapse of the Communist regime in Eastern Europe in late 80s, the unsuccessful revolutions in Uzbekistan in 2005 and in Belarus in 2006, and the Arab Spring); those focused on eliminating discrimination against certain population groups or at producing structural changes (for instance, movements working in Apartheid South Africa, and the US Civil Rights Movement); and movements focused on the struggle for liberation from colonial rule, including nonviolent collective campaigns for national independence (African countries, India, Palestinian protests against Israeli occupation, etc.).

In other words, our analysis focused on nationally-focused movement

campaigns (although we note that transnational processes of learning and communication are characteristic of many of these) – not included within our databases were empirical case studies focusing on issues related to nonviolent action with an explicitly intentional transnational focus (such as within the framework of the anti-globalization movement). We defined our unit of analysis as *cases* discussed within academic publications, rather than the publication itself. More specifically, cases were defined as a specific campaign or group of campaigns occurring at a specific moment in time. For example, an analysis of Palestinian resistance to the occupation during the First Intifada (1987-1991) was defined as a separate case than an empirical analysis of Palestinian resistance during the period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada period (starting in 2000).

To create our database of cases, we systematically searched academic journals in the areas of social movement and civil resistance research (such as the *Journal of Resistance Studies*; *Research in Social Movements Conflict & Change*; *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*; *Peace & Change*; and the *Journal of Peace Research*) for empirical case studies focused on nonviolent resistance movements. We also conducted a broad search for cases using Web of Science and Google Scholar, using the following search terms: nonviolence, nonviolent resistance, nonviolent movements, nonviolent activism, nonviolent action, civil resistance, and people power. Finally, we systematically reviewed academic publications referenced in every entry in the Swarthmore Global Nonviolent Action Database. We recognize that these sources are not comprehensive or inclusive of more contemporary movement research and that this is a consequent limitation of our analysis; however, we believe that the cases reviewed reflect general patterns in academic scholarship in this field.

In addition to our analysis of empirical case studies, we also reviewed 59 manuals on strategic nonviolent action written by practitioners and activists, which were a mix of step-by-step guides to nonviolent activism and manuals focused on specific aspects of scaling movement work. Manuals were obtained directly from individuals affiliated with movements and social movement organizations, as well as via broad web searches using terms such as: nonviolent training, nonviolence manual, and resistance guide. Analysis of manuals was undertaken in order to provide a comparison with empirical research on this topic, enabling us to better assess similarities and differences in the ways researchers and practitioners conceptualize and prioritize aspects of scaling up.

The review and entry of the 128 cases and 59 manuals into our database occurred in multiple stages between January 2016 and January 2018. For each case or manual, we determined whether any of the given parameters/indicators were discussed, and how. Each time a case or manual mentioned a tactic of scaling, this was noted as a binary "yes/no," with additional descriptive information provided on how the indicator was addressed, if relevant. Initial analysis of the database revealed the need to consolidate and/or reframe certain components in order to better capture certain aspects of scaling up. Members of the research team discussed each parameter until consensus was reached about its definition and how to enter information about the parameter into the

database for each case. Our analysis in the following pages systematically explores these components of scaling as identified in our conceptual model.

### **Assumptions and limitations**

Before discussing our analysis, it is important to clarify key assumptions and goals relating to both our model and our analysis, as well as some of the limitations of our work. First, in our model, we assume that there is no hierarchy of indicators. That is, the tactics we discuss are assumed to be equally important to the scaling process. Second, our analysis is focused on movements with an ideological orientation toward nonviolent action, and as such, we do not explicitly address a *commitment to nonviolence* as an internal tactic for scaling. A commitment to nonviolence, rather, is incorporated into our broader exploration of activist commitment as an element of internal scaling.

Furthermore, our analysis is based upon an understanding of the need to identify gaps between researchers and practitioners' understandings of how movement strategies and actions impact success. However, it is important to realize that the definition of "success" for movement endeavors is not standardized for either academics or practitioners/activists, particularly with respect to empirical case studies, and differs according to the positionality of each author or set of authors. In other words, what is perceived as a successful movement or campaign by one scholar or activist, may well be viewed unsuccessful by others. Moreover, researchers' reliance on post-hoc interviews and/or secondhand accounts make defining the success of movements difficult and probably empirically futile as the perception of a movement's success shifts relative to time and place. The Civil Rights movement in the USA is a prime example of this: for a period of time, the Civil Rights movement was seen as a success, but ongoing racial physical and structural violence in the United States illustrate a lack of sustained change. Thus, in our analysis, we take a metaphorical step back to critically analyze authors' framework for retelling the *story* of scaling up from the local to the national, while remaining cognizant of their positionality and analytical approach.

Given this, our analysis does not enable us to empirically assess which dimensions of scaling up are related to movement success. Moreover, it is important to note the potential limitations of our analysis given our focus on specific kinds of movement campaigns, as well as our reliance on English-language literature and manuals (thus possibly introducing a Global North/Western bias into our analysis). In addition, we note that some of the manuals analyzed were written by and for activists in movements corresponding to the kind of transnational initiatives that we did not include in our empirical cases. This raises some questions about comparability across kinds of material examined.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our analysis can challenge scholars to expand their methods, approach, and scope of research when it comes to movement impact. In particular, our comparison of empirical case studies and

manuals in terms of how often elements of scaling are discussed as well as associated with success allows us to better highlight the gaps between what researchers define as being important and what activists actually do in strategizing and planning actions. This comparison presents a starting point for what we hope can be a fruitful collaboration between scholars and activists to better understand how movement actions shape opportunities for scaling and for movement impact.

## **Results**

Of the 128 case studies and 59 manuals we examined, a majority included some discussion of scaling up: 64% of case studies and 96% of manuals referenced at least one of the indicators of scaling up included in our conceptual model. While these were not necessarily discussed with the concept of scaling up in mind, this suggests that scaling as a concept has entered the thinking – even if not explicit – of both scholars and activists. Moreover, the difference between empirical cases and suggests that pragmatically-oriented conceptualizations of how scaling up occurs, and what researchers choose to focus on, are not entirely aligned. This theme of theory versus practice is one that we will explore throughout this analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of the analysis results.

**Table 2-Analysis of Scaling in Cases and Manuals**

Dimensions	N	%	% of cases defined as successful by authors		
	Cases (Total cases)	Manuals (Total manuals)	Cases	Manuals	
<b>Tactics for Scaling</b>					
<i>Internal Strengthening</i>					
Strong Commitment among activists	58 (128)	25 (59)	45.31%	41.67%	31.25%
Strategic Planning	35 (128)	38 (59)	27.34%	64.41%	32.01%
Diverse Movement Membership	68 (128)	20 (59)	53.12%	33.90%	57.14%
Shared Message and Ideology	11 (128)	32 (59)	8.59%	54.24%	5.19%
<i>External Strengthening</i>					
Increased Membership	61 (128)	21 (59)	47.66%	34.74%	55.54%
Territorial Spread	21 (128)	3 (59)	16.41%	5.08%	19.48%
Development of Partnerships and/or Coalitions	60 (128)	20 (59)	46.87%	33.91%	44.15%
Engagement of external third parties	77 (128)	18 (59)	39.84%	31.03%	55.19%
Engagement with Government Leadership	82 (128)	16 (59)	64.06%	27.59%	68.83%
<b>Process of Scaling</b>					
Sharing Information (through the media)	73 (128)	27 (59)	57.03%	45.76%	37.66%
Educational Programming	36 (128)	16 (59)	28.12%	27.59%	33.76%
<b>Communication for Scaling</b>					
Strategic Communication / Framing	42 (128)	57 (59)	32.42%	96.61%	29.5%

### **Tactics for scaling – internal strengthening**

The tactics for scaling that focus on internal strengthening include a strong commitment (to the movement) among activists, strategic planning, diverse movement membership, and building a shared message and ideology. A strong commitment to the overall goal of the movement, and willingness of members to act, are key to ensuring the movement's sustainability and thus to scaling up. The SOA Handbook for Nonviolent Action (1998) states that these reinforcing mechanisms of internal strengthening or building "group culture" are,

characterized by the possibility to gain new skills, fostering of social relations, sharing of competences and decision making (that is by consensus), and an open leadership structure. Our groups and organizations need to be at the same time empowering organizations – organizations that nurture empowerment processes among their members or activists – and empowered organizations, focusing on making use of power-to to achieve their campaigning objectives (38).

Theoretical scholarship suggests that these tactics of internal strengthening are mutually reinforcing and act as a foundation for scaling up nonviolent movements (Dees 2004; Uvin 1995), even as it is important to note that movements are not monolithic and can contain diversity in culture and leadership style. These internal mechanisms support and are supported by processes of external strengthening.

### **Strengthening the commitment of movement members**

Approximately 53% of the case studies and 42% of manuals directly address strengthening the commitment of movement members. Although increasing the commitment of members is a core process for ensuring continued movement activity, there are some differences in the ways the case studies and manuals go about discussing how this does or should occur. The empirical case studies primarily highlight tactics used to strengthen the commitment of existing movement members. These include: using the politicization of high profile figures, detainees or other "martyrs" to inspire activism; the use of strategic framing and storytelling (Ackerman and Duval 2000); supporting detainees and their families as a way to define and redefine community (Greene 2005); and describing visits to nearby local or national groups as a sign of solidarity after tragic events, in order to strengthen morale (Bartley 1999).

Like the case studies, the manuals generally argue that positive interactions and relationship building between movement members during these acts of solidarity and communication serve to strengthen movements (Nepstad 2011; SOA 1998; War Resisters 2012). However, the manuals also address other approaches to internal strengthening that in the case studies take a back seat to the more aggrandized stories of martyrs, detainees, and special leadership

inspiring change. Several manuals, for instance, focus on building relationships among all movement activists through communication, dialogue, and shared experience. The War Resisters (2014) manual provides a guide for resolving internal conflicts (p. 94). Pt'Change (2005) takes this one step further and provides a workshop outline for nonviolent communication, active listening, and group dialogue for both internal and external strengthening (130-5). Boyd (1999) takes an experiential approach, suggesting games and role playing to “strengthen individual confidence” for activism outwardly, but also to create and strengthen group bonds (p.20-26). These differences suggest that academic scholarship could do more to address the concrete steps taken by movements to strengthen activist commitment *prior* to the dramatic events that inspire solidarity, so that we might better understand what grounds activists and motivates their engagement to participate in such events in the first place.

### **Strategic planning (clear vision, capacity building, and M&E)**

Strategic planning is important because it serves as an act of forward thinking, but also because it creates space for dialogue, communication, and trust building, which help movement organizations and/or coalitions build consensus around tactics to be used in specific campaigns. The actual act of planning together also builds ownership over the process of movement activity, making plans more applicable for members to implement. It empowers group members to define their own roles, makes them accountable to other members and can foster deep emotional bonds.

Strategic planning was mentioned in 28% of the cases and 65% of the manuals reviewed in our analysis. We identified three scenarios that could be used to understand the lack of case study literature on strategic planning. First, case study authors often analyze cases after events have taken place, rather than assessing strategies in real time. Second, even when researchers may be present in real time, the often-violent nature of regime change forces strategic decision makers to limit strategizing and planning to a select leadership in fear of regime infiltration (Nepstad 2001). A lack of information about movements' strategic plans may also indicate that nonviolent movements are either somewhat spontaneous in their actions, or may hit a tipping point where planning is no longer occurring under their control (Ransom and Brown 2013). In other words, individuals or small groups may begin to act on their own initiative without guidance from leaders. Discussion of strategic planning in the manuals, on the other hand, paints a different picture of its importance. The manuals suggest that creation of strategic plans rests on three pillars: a strong commitment among activists (Harvey 2004), a shared message and ideology (War Resisters International 2014; Popovic 2007), and good communication skills and dialogue (Martin 2012). The manuals argue that without these mutually reinforcing tactics, strategic planning is difficult and consensus cannot be established.

Specific components of strategic planning receive less emphasis in both the case studies and manuals. For instance, only 27% of case studies and 44% of

manuals mention the creation of a clear vision. Likewise, capacity building in nonviolent movements – which provides members with the skills necessary to perform nonviolent action and civil disobedience – is seen as an important precursor to nonviolent action and is discussed in 50% of manuals, but is only mentioned in 15% of the cases reviewed. This could indicate researchers' inability to access information about planning processes, or potentially a lack of methodological frameworks for studying these processes.

Finally, the extent of explicit discussion related to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tactics in nonviolent movements also suggests a potential lack of theoretical and methodological frameworks for doing so. Less than 7% percent of cases and only 24% of manuals reviewed mention M&E; the manuals that do discuss M&E present fairly limited approaches to doing so. For instance, War Resisters International Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns (2009) provides a brief section on evaluating action plans (p.142). Similarly, Ransom and Brown's *The Grassroots Women's Community Justice Guide* suggests a set of questions that can be used to evaluate what went well in a particular action or what might be done better in the future. Amnesty International's (2008) *AIUSA Activist Toolkit* lists questions to use for monitoring internal dynamics while Ransom and Brown (2013) provides a rudimentary outline of traditional monitoring and evaluation techniques that focus on internal evaluation. The most comprehensive tool discussed, in Moyer (1987), is a Movement Action Plan (MAP) that "provides activists with a practical, how-to-do-it analytic tool for evaluating and organizing social movements" that includes approaches for monitoring some elements of both internal strengthening and external expansion. However, none of the manuals include guidelines for assessing the influence of issues such as strategic framing or internal consensus-building tactics on movement success. In other words: while it is certainly possible – indeed, likely – that assessment of movement activities happens in multiple ways, systematic approaches using accepted best practices for evaluation are far from prevalent. Such frameworks could be particularly helpful as a form of record keeping that could reduce the metaphorical distance between the real time actions of practitioners and the temporal restrictions facing researchers.

### **Diversifying movement membership**

Diversification of movement membership refers to a broadening of the cross-section of the population actively involved with movement activities. As scholars have noted, diverse membership can serve to reduce the social distance between the oppressors and oppressed (Bethke and Pinckney 2016; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 2014; Galtung 1989). Nearly 58% of cases discuss diversification in some form; however, often it is portrayed as a hurdle instead of an asset. For instance, several authors suggest that diversifying the movement through the incorporation of elites and members of the dominant groups can make the movement open to cooptation (Buhlungu 2006; Marx and Useem 1971). This is evident in the dynamics between white allies and blacks in the US Civil Rights movement (Ackerman and Duval 2000; Fairclough 2008; Garrow 1989;

Nepsted 2011).

Manuals, 34% of which discuss diversifying membership, tend to encourage diversification and emphasize its usefulness in increasing the number and scope of movement activists, but they also highlight the risks involved. Lakey et al. (1995) note, “When resources inherent in different backgrounds and perspectives are overlooked, a team’s effectiveness suffers. As a result, the team is less likely to be able to navigate safely through the whitewater or to deal with problems that crop up during everyday paddling” (p.36). However, the authors go on to argue that diversification of the movement “is not simply a numbers game of recruiting people different from you to support your own agenda” (p. 36). As is emphasized in many of the case studies, this and other manuals note that when mismanaged, diversification can lead to cooptation.

A handful of the manuals provide tools for managing the complexity involved in the internal dynamics of diversification, mostly focusing on integrating individuals from the dominant or oppressor group into movement initiatives. *Coming to Ferguson: Building a Nonviolent Movement* (2015), published by the Deep Abiding Love Project, warns against unmonitored diversification and cooptation by white allies, stating, “[I]f you’re coming to Ferguson with the idea that you are going to engage with police, get a photograph taken, get more Twitter followers, and/or write something for national publication, you’re seeking a Movement High” (3). This warning indicates that as the number of prospective members increases during peaks in movement activity, so do the opportunities for those new members to coopt and change the goals and strategies of the movement. To prevent this, the manuals offer a wide range of tactics for handling the diversification process, such as using diversity assessments or implementing sensitivity training using intersectionality, strategic messaging, group dialogue, and the creation of movement specific identity (Jay 1972; Lakey 1987; Burrowes 1996; Hunter and Lakey 2003). These tools suggest that movement actors have a clear sense of both positive and negative aspects of diversification; for scholars, they can serve as frameworks for better understanding how this process is managed in practice.

### **The creation of a shared message or ideology**

Finally, development of a shared message or collective understanding of movement ideology is another major tactic for the internal scaling of movements. This shared understanding is created through the collective framing of the movement’s strategic vision, goals, and tactics within the group. Only about 9% of the cases reviewed discuss the intentional creation of a shared message or ideology. For example, Ackerman and Duval (2005) reference Gandhi’s creation of a shared understanding, or ideology, of nonviolence that helped scale up resistance to British Colonial India in 1946. In analysis of a more contemporary group, Hallward and Shaver (2012) address the creation of a shared sense of purpose and collective ideology among Students for Justice in Palestine activists when pressuring the University of Berkeley to divest from

Israeli companies.

While some cases discuss the importance of having a common message, they shed limited light on the internal processes and strategies that movements utilize to establish and maintain a shared message and ideology. However, according to manuals analyzed – of which 55% discuss the creation of a collective ideology – this can be done through a number of tactics, including dialogue, storytelling, facilitated group strategizing, and community events (Amnesty International 2008; Nepstad 2006; The Ruckus Society 2004; Sen 2003). Ransom and Brown (2013) encourage movement members to “visit another group to share knowledge,” and learn about each other’s local practices. They can involve visits between communities, towns and even nations” (p. 21). We speculate that the gap between cases and manuals is, again, due to the challenges of monitoring or accurately representing, post-hoc, the internal dynamics of movement activists.

### **Outcomes of scaling – external expansion**

Scholarship in the social movement and civil resistance fields highlights the importance of increasing the size and scope of movements in order to influence change (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 2014; Principe 2016). The size and potential impact of a movement – what we refer to as external expansion – depends on the ability of movement activists to communicate, frame, and educate the broader public, including key influencers, the media, and representatives of political institutions. Yet, both the literature and the manuals warn against complexity of scaling up in numbers and scope too quickly, leaving the movement open to cooptation by other movements and infiltration of regime informants (Amnesty International 2008; Sen 2003; The Ruckus Society 2004). To reduce the negative effects of increasing movement membership, manuals suggest an array of tactics and strategies. In our conceptual model, we primarily emphasize four of these as dimensions of external expansion; increased membership and development of partnerships/coalitions, engagement with third parties and international actors, territorial spread, and engagement with government leadership.

### **Increasing membership**

Networking and building relationships with potential members – that is, individuals actively involved in some way with movement activities – is key to influencing social change. Nearly 48% of cases and 35% of manuals discuss tactics used for increasing membership. The ebb and flow of recruitment was cited in multiple cases as being dependent on external factors that change over time. For instance, Garrow (1989) recounted an “ebb and flow” to the recruitment process during the civil rights movement which fundamentally resulted in too much diversification and the eventual fragmentation of the civil rights movement (p. 80-83). Regional differences between the leadership and group interests can also cause a breakdown in communication.

Another factor in increasing membership is the ability to frame messages strategically in order to increase interest in a movement's work (we discuss framing separately, below, as a process-oriented element of scaling up). In some contexts, movements need to broaden their message in order to include a broader populace. For example, Waite's (2001) review of tactics used during the Chicago Freedom Movement for civil rights suggests that the movement attempted to capture multiple issues (rather than a single issue) in order to "attract a broad constituency" (p. 178). Certain manuals provide insight into strategically targeting movement messaging. One example is Popovic et al.'s (2007) *Canvas Core Curriculum; An Effective Guide to Nonviolent Struggle*, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding different types of community members, what their roles are, and how they hold power in society, in order to strategize and prioritize different messages. Through an exercise linked to this framework (p. 101-110), movement members and leadership can create targeted messaging to potential new membership.

On the case study side, Greene's (2005) analysis of the civil rights movement in Durham, North Carolina highlights the influence of women's spaces, particularly beauty parlors and clubs, as an avenue of recruitment and information dissemination. The analysis suggests, as does the *Canvas Core Curriculum*, that understanding the interests of potential new members can help facilitate pathways, build shared messaging, and create new norms and behaviors. Likewise, Bloch's (2014) *Training Function and Efficacy in Civil Resistance Movements* advocates a multi-level marketing strategy that "depends on the personal relationship to recruit the individual" and "penetrate sectors of society that hadn't been reached before" (p. 20). As a whole, the case studies suggest that understanding how to prioritize framing is important for scaling. However, prioritizing multiple messages also increases the complexity of movement endeavors and therefore the skills needed to control potential conflict between various groups targeted by the messaging.

### **Territorialization**

In addition to increasing the number of activists, movements can scale up in size by increasing their geographical spread, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as *territorialization* (Schock 2015). Movements with large numbers of members confined to a single geographic region have limited influence and are more open than other movements to repression from regime forces (Ackerman and Duval 2000; Arenas 2015; Høigilt 2015; Shock 2015). The process of territorialization can empower and protect marginalized groups that otherwise might remain isolated and prone to repression and manipulation by the regime. Expanding the territorial spread through increasing membership is dependent on how well a movement is able to manage the diversification process.

Despite its conceptual emphasis, only 16% cases and 5% of manuals discuss how movements expand territorially. Cases focused almost entirely on the importance of incorporating rural communities, particularly in uprisings that

originate in capital cities. As an example, Nepstad (2011) recounts the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement and how the lack of mobilization in rural areas made it much easier for outside soldiers to “crush the protests” in Beijing (p. 37). Similarly, Ash (2002) highlight how different trade unions from the cities teamed with farmers in the countryside to launch local strikes across the country for economic reform during Polish Solidarity Revolution in 1981 that eventually led to demands for long-term political change.

Territorial spread is important to gaining legitimacy, diversifying the movement, and recruitment of new membership, and yet both the cases and manuals fall short in problematizing and strategizing how, where, and when to expand territorially. The manuals provide limited tools for scaling territorially. Hengren’s (2004) *Path of Resistance: The Practice of Civil Resistance* suggests some strategies for the occupation of land and discourse on its expansion but does not provide any clear frameworks. Ranson and Brown (2013) discuss the importance of land tenure, housing, and owning property in creating nonviolent communities and increasing women’s rights, but do not provide any tactics for scaling. Furthermore, Helvey (2004) argues that land ownership is hierarchical and is used to institutionalize classism. The heavy focus on localized land and housing initiatives in both the cases and manuals suggests that neither empirical scholarship nor practitioner-focused literature have framed movement expansion geospatially, particularly in terms of scaling between local, national, and global levels.

### **Partnership and coalition building**

Numerous scholars (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan 2014; Karatnycky and Ackerman 2004; Zunes 1999) suggest that engaging external parties and building partnerships across movements helps disseminate movements’ messages quickly and more efficiently by taking advantage of already formed networks and relationships. Indeed, coalition building creates opportunities for increasing a movement’s leverage and ability to persuade government actors (Finnegan and Hackley 2008). Approximately 31% of cases and 61% of manuals discuss partnerships and coalition building. Along with the emphasis on partnerships and coalitions in the conceptual literature, this suggests an awareness of the importance of this element of scaling. It is possible that the relatively low percentage of empirical case studies discussing this issue is a result of scholars’ focus on *single movement campaigns* rather than relationships *between* movements, or between movements and other actors.

The diversification process that occurs when movements seek out partnerships create a number of challenges to activists and movement leadership, particularly when the partnership is an outsider from the community. Indeed, both the empirical case studies and manuals analyzed stress the risk of movements being co-opted by third parties who have their own interests and agendas. The strong focus within empirical case studies on partnership failure and not on the tactics used to build partnerships may suggest that even when

this topic is addressed, researchers do not have a strong framework for understanding successful coalition building process. For instance, Wolff (1970) mentions multiple instances of partnerships being built between civil rights, black power, and black Africanism movements in the United States. Although he argues that these processes both strengthened and weakened the US civil rights movement, Wolff does not provide a history of these partnerships, thus limiting the potential for understanding what about them was beneficial and/or challenging for movement dynamics

Although many of the manuals analyzed point to the potential benefits of coalition- and partnership-building, several also warn of possible cooptation. Rickett's (2012) handbook for activists provides a full review of the pros and cons of partnerships and alliances that is handy when considering movement strategy (p. 51). For instance, Rickett notes that partnerships with international organizations and/or governments may result in increased suspicion and hostility from some members of the community, particularly given that outsiders often have their own agenda and priority when supporting initiatives. More critically, Miller's (2006) training manual argues that outsider intervention is often "unpredictable and hard to manage" (p. 113). This suggests that movement leadership should retain a healthy level of skepticism when approached by other organizations to partner or to build coalitions around a certain goal or initiative.

### **Engaging external parties**

A special kind of partnership occurs with third party, non-movement actors; these linkages are important for movement scaling because of their potential for bringing diverse support to the movement, as well as for the possibilities they generate for obtaining information and resources, and for putting pressure on government regimes (Dudouet 2008; Galtung 1989). The importance of third party support can be seen in the degree to which it is reflected in empirical and activist-oriented literature: this aspect of scaling is discussed in nearly half of the empirical cases (48%) as well as in 61% of manuals analyzed. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the type of actors that movements engaged with in the cases, including foreign governments, diaspora groups, local civil society and faith-based groups, transnational solidarity movements, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international nongovernmental organizations, and state actors. As the table highlights, there seems to be a close relationship between scholars' perception of the importance of these engagements for movement success and the degree to which relationships with different kinds of actors are discussed. For instance, state actors (such as political parties) are the third-party actor most referenced within the empirical case studies analyzed; the cases where these relationships are discussed are also those that, according to scholars' perceptions, were successful most often. This re-emphasizes the seeming focus in nonviolent movement and civil resistance scholarship on exploring success rather than more holistically addressing possible areas of (unintended and intended) movement impact.

**Table 3. Engaging Third Party Breakdown**

<b>Aspect of Scaling</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of Cases</b>	<b>% of successful cases</b>
Foreign Governments	6 (128)	4.69%	3.89%
Diaspora Groups	3 (128)	2.34%	1.29%
Local Civil Society, Faith-based Groups, Private Sector Group	15 (128)	11.72%	14.28%
Transnational Solidarity Movements	3 (128)	2.34%	2.59%
Local NGOs	2 (128)	1.56%	2.59%
International NGOs	5 (128)	3.91%	6.49%
International Intergovernmental Organizations	4 (128)	3.12%	1.29%
State Actors	36 (128)	28.12%	27.27%
Multiple	3 (128)	2.34%	1.29%

Likewise, many manual authors agree that engaging third parties is an important aspect of scaling up, there are limited tactics presented for doing so. Direct Action’s (1989) *Pledge of Resistance Handbook* is one of the few that does: this manual discusses the importance of networking with third-party actors and promotes the use of these networks as alert systems that can help movements keep tabs on police, military, or other government actors. Several manuals also suggest a system of retreats with third party actors to build capacity, exchange ideas, and develop strategies (Pt’Chang 2005; Herngren 2004; Oxfam 2014; Ransom and Brown 2013). These tools are meant to help movement leadership engage other groups to build consensus around shared goals and to pool resources, yet we suggest that more can be done to highlight concrete approaches for building relationships with external actors.

**Engaging state leadership**

Nearly 65% of case studies, but only 28% of manuals, discuss engaging government leadership. Movement literature emphasizes that engaging state leadership is fundamental to regime change and to changing oppressive legal and political structures (Bartley 1999; Eik 2001; Fairclough 2008; Cockburn

2014; Maguire 2003). Nonviolent movements often rely on the government actors to gain information, advocate for the movement’s goals, and to create less violent environments for civil disobedience. Dialogue, relationship building, negotiations, and strategic messaging can help to scale up strategic nonviolent action as part of civil resistance campaigns. However, when handled improperly, engaging state leadership can be harmful and even dangerous. Table 4 shows the breakdown of state leadership by type. The majority of cases where this is discussed, approximately 25% of all cases analyzed, discuss movement engagement with local, national, and military branches of government.

**Table 4. Engaging State Leadership Breakdown**

<b>Case Studies-Engagement with Government Leadership</b>			
<b>Aspect of Scaling</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of Cases</b>	<b>% of successful cases</b>
National	10 (128)	7.81%	7.79%
Local	15 (128)	11.72%	9.00%
National and Local	13 (128)	10.16%	11.60%
Military	13 (128)	10.16%	10.38%
Local, National, and Military	32 (128)	25.00%	29.79%

Within the manuals where engagement with government leadership is discussed, the primary focus is on tactics that can be used to deal with the threat of violence from state structures (Kahn 1970; Lakey 1987; Litvinoff 2013). The manuals place a strong emphasis on how these interactions can occur and on tactics to help activists manage these relationships. Hengren’s (2004) manual provides tactics on how to deal with police and military violence at protests as well as suggestions for how activists should respond to arrest and interrogation. Ransom and Brown (2013), on the other hand, suggest “Local-to-Local Dialogue” that “helps grassroots groups engage local leaders and public authorities” and “helps participants negotiate with and influence local authorities (15-17). Similarly, Jay’s (1972) against the British government suggests “preemptive diplomacy,” which includes seeking allies among government officials and collecting information and support from them (p. 42-46). These areas of emphasis, along with the relative lack of emphasis on this aspect of scaling up, suggests a grassroots focus in the manuals analyzed that

perhaps places greater emphasis on getting messages across at local levels than achieving large-scale, societal change.

### **Processes of scaling**

In the last section, we discussed the *outcomes* of internal and external scaling. This section is focused on understanding how these outcomes occur, based on our conceptual model. Processes of scaling are the basis for both internal strengthening and external expansion; they are interconnected with outcomes of scaling, and are often mutually reinforcing and aid in gaining momentum for change.

### **Sharing information / use of media**

Sharing information through the media, with both current and prospective movement members, is key to collective action and social change. These messages that movements disseminate can boost morale as well as provide movements with an outlet to communicate alternative narratives (authors, under review). From posters to social media, movements utilize multiple tools at their disposal to communicate and create a shared ideology. Emphasis on this issue in empirical case studies and manuals testifies to its significance: over 57% of cases and 46% of manuals discuss how movements share information with current and/or prospective members.

Approximately 31% of cases discuss movements engaging with local news sources, while 18.75% report the use of multiple types of media at once. For example, during the Civil Rights movement, activists used local newspapers and radio to recruit new members and express the movement goals as well as the reasoning behind certain actions (Garrow 1989; Sinclair 1998). Moreover, international journalists and media helped to hold the U.S. government accountable for beating and jailing protesters by broadcasting across the globe and shaming the administration (Hallward 2012). As another example, Ackerman and Duval (2000) describe how Dutch journalists openly discussed how the German Reich was forcing them to publish specific content and control the media, which helped to boost support of the resistance and increase suspicion of the invading force during WWII. These different examples point to the potential role of multiple media outlets for helping movements consolidate their message and disseminate it widely to obtain support.

Table 5 shows the breakdown of media types discussed in the empirical case studies analyzed, as well as how often these tactics were linked with perceived success of movement endeavors.

**Table 5. Sharing Information (using Media) in Case Studies**

<b>Aspect of Scaling</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of Cases</b>	<b>% of successful cases</b>
Local News	40 (128)	31.25%	31.11%
International News	10 (128)	7.81%	3.8%
Social Media	2 (128)	1.56%	1.29%
Multiple	24 (128)	18.75%	15.58%

As discussed earlier, there seems to be a strong relationship between discussion of scaling elements and their perceived importance for movement success in achieving its explicit goals. This further reinforces our argument that scholarship in this area over-represents tactics that are linked to success, with less emphasis on other strategies for scaling. Also important to note here is the dearth of cases mentioning social media; the cases that do examine social media (Golker 2011; King 2013; Tufekci and Wilson 2012) only superficially explore use of this tool and do not differentiate between internal strengthening and external scaling-up. However, we suggest this is largely due to the historical nature of much of the literature examined and does not reflect a perceived lack of importance.

In contrast with the case studies, which primarily highlight the role of media in shaping movement messages, the manuals on nonviolent action and civil resistance provide strategies and tips for engaging with media outlets (Canvas 2006; Direct Action 1989; MoveOn 2012), such as Helvey’s (2004) “seven golden rules for dealing with the press.” A whole chapter in War Resisters International’s (2014) manual focuses on media outreach, engaging with different types of media, and how the media can be both helpful and harmful, stating “it can be hard to interest the media in nonviolent direct action or civil disobedience, because of course you often have to keep things secret until the last minute” (p. 134). The differences in focus suggest a possible avenue for further scholarly research to address the gap between manuals explaining how movement activists *should* engage with media and case studies emphasizing the impact of media use on movements. Specifically, further examination is needed to understand the dynamics of how movement members *are* engaging with media in order to disseminate their messages, particularly in the current context of widespread social media and lack of centralized media messaging.

### **Educational programming**

As a process, educational programming can be used both as a tool for strengthening the work of existing movement activists, and as a way of disseminating ideas externally to gain supporters and movement adherents. Moreover, as membership increases and the diversification process introduces

greater movement complexity, educational programming can help manage hierarchical inequalities with movements and facilitate adoption of alternative institutions and more equitable practices. These alternative systems foster dialogue and build relationships between diverse membership, thus further strengthening the commitment of members and scaling internally.

Moreover, 28% of cases discuss educational programming as a tactic for scaling up, while only 6% of manuals do (although, of course, we can consider the manuals themselves an example of educational programming). For instance, Barkowsky (2013) explains how members of the nonviolent revolution in Poland in 1860s provided educational programming through lectures, theatrical performances, exhibitions and other forums. Educational programming is also cited as being used in nonviolent movements across Eastern block Europe in efforts to resist Russian and German advances (Lavery 2000). Moser-Puangsuwan (2013) outlines the ways through which activists used parallel educational institutions to the government's in order to foster the collective consciousness needed to resist colonial powers. Together, these cases suggest that educational programs assist in external scaling by increasing public awareness of the problems through framing and increasing membership.

Reasons for the lack of focus on educational programming in the manuals examined are not clear to us, although we speculate that for the purposes of organizers writing these manuals, educational programming may be intertwined with other concepts and not addressed as a separate issue. In those manuals that discuss educational programming, however, the focus is primarily on internal scaling, as distinct from the external focus of discussion in the case studies. Pt'Chang's (2005) *Nonviolence Training Project: Trainers Resource Guide* is an excellent training manual for teaching and creating a shared ideology around nonviolent action through "popular education and experiential learning" (p. 29). Several manuals suggest skilled facilitation as being instrumental to educational and constructive programming (Coover, Esser, and Deacon 1978; The Ruckus Society 2003; Sen 2003; Brown 2007; Miller 2006). Coover, Esser, and Deacon (1978) take this further, suggesting the use of Freire's (1996) *critical pedagogy* to restructure education and recommending the integration of nonviolent action into the entire education system. The distinction between cases and manuals here seems to reflect an emphasis on *outcomes* in the former, whereas in the latter, processes *that can lead to scaling* are of primary focus.

### **Communication for scaling: strategic communication and framing**

Finally, as noted above, we discuss communication processes separately because of their significance as a foundation for other scaling processes. In particular, messaging and framing are both used to strengthen nonviolent movements internally and helps to facilitate external scaling up. Frames – in the form of messages that movements send, either through the media, through expressions

of their demands and ideology that are presented at protests or demonstrations, or perhaps via educational activities – can help, at an individual level, lead to the process of cognitive liberation that is perceived as central to recruiting movement activists (Nepstad 1997; Piven and Cloward 1977). Indeed, in social movement scholarship, framing is perceived as central for movements to highlight interests and challenge dominant actors (Benford and Snow 2000).

Of the literature reviewed, however, only 32% of cases discuss framing, while 96% of manuals address this topic. In both case studies and manuals, framing is discussed as a tool to increase support, recruit new members, and build larger coalitions, while others include proactive or reactive framing to more generally address public discourse. Interestingly, both also focus on the *how* of framing, with cases describing how campaigns used an array of outlets to spread movement messages, and manuals addressing concrete strategies for doing so. For instance, Harvey's (2004) manual notes, "how you word or 'frame' a goal can have a huge impact on its acceptance among the members of the group, and potential allies and adversaries. It can be useful to test the suitability of your goal using the following tool" (p. 52); the manual provides a chart for mapping different types of messaging that is focused on the intended receiver. Likewise, Popovic et al. (2007) provide an entire chapter on strategic communication and framing techniques, arguing that framing messages is important for helping people express their discontent, convey the vision and objectives of the movement, provide information and facts that the opponent is hiding, and influence public debate and perceptions of key players that support the oppressive regime by conveying information to the media and international community. On the case study side, Ackerman and Duval (2000) explain how Gandhi's Satyagraha teachings were made into a manual that was used as a symbol of change against the oppression of Great Britain; they also highlight the use of framing as a strategy for gaining movement support in Poland during unionization strikes in the 1980s. As they note, use of union imagery and masculine attributes in the frames used by the anti-communist movement allowed it to recruit new members who did not normally subscribe to liberal ideals in rural Poland.

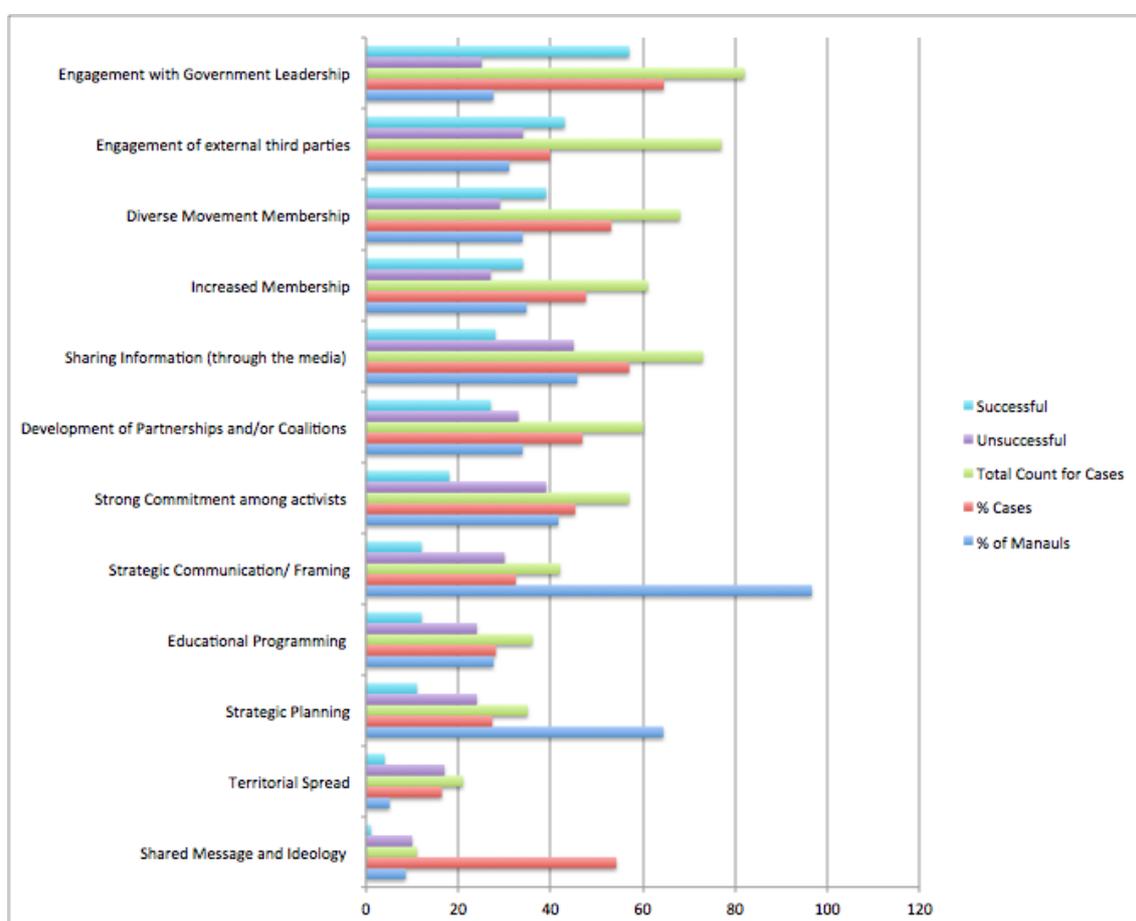
It is unclear why there is such a discrepancy between discussion of framing in empirical case studies and manuals, especially given the relatively similar emphasis on the significance and tools of framing where it is discussed. One possibility raised earlier in the manuscript is that decisions about how to frame movement messages may be made by a small cadre of movement leaders to whom researchers do not have access. Another possibility may be the focus of much empirical scholarship on actors and targets of change, rather than the more amorphous communication processes that underlie engagement in strategic action (Chabot 2012).

### **Using success to identify gaps in the research on scaling up**

Of the case studies analyzed, 36% are described as successful. As noted above,

there is no set definition for “success”; rather, its use to describe campaign outcomes depends entirely on the perspective of the case study author(s). While lack of a standardized definition may be problematic, it is also important for helping identify gaps in existing scholarship about civil resistance and nonviolent social change campaigns. In particular, our analysis allows us to better understand gaps between what is emphasized in manuals preparing activists for nonviolent action, and the aspects of scaling up that researchers focus upon because of a perceived relationship to success. We visualize this gap in Graph 1 below:

**Graph 1. Research Focus on Aspects of Scaling in Empirical Cases**



The graph compares the number of times each aspect of scaling up is discussed in empirical case studies cases determined by the author to be successful, with those described as unsuccessful, as well as the number of times these aspects are discussed in the manuals and case studies analyzed. By formatting the graph in descending order of number of successful cases described, we see that the general trend for discussing aspects of scaling up in empirical literature corresponds with how often those elements of scaling are linked to what are

perceived to be “successful” campaigns. This indicates that case study authors attribute similar aspects of scaling up to movement or campaign success; however, in focusing primarily on these aspects, the authors miss a more comprehensive understanding of how different dimensions of scaling can help broaden movement impact in ways that are not linked to achieving explicitly articulated goals or outcomes.

Comparing the cases studies to the manuals shows very specific gaps in existing research. According to this analysis, the manuals suggest that strategic communication and framing are particularly important, but these are not addressed much in the case study literature. Similarly, neither strategic planning nor the creation of a shared message or ideology are discussed in many of the case studies or associated with success, even as these aspects of scaling are heavily emphasized in the manuals. However, the reasons for these gaps are unclear. It is possible that the trends point to epistemological differences among scholars and practitioners – that is, differences in the way they understand nonviolent movements. As discussed earlier, it is also possible that researchers are not addressing these issues of scaling in their work due to methodological challenges, e.g., access to internal discussions about movement strategy.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Our hope is that this analysis opens the door to further discussion of the ways we study nonviolent action in social movement campaigns, and how this compares to the focus of practitioners and activists on the ground. Researchers often struggle to embed themselves in movements and capture internal dynamics in real time. As a result, scholarship on nonviolent activism has been largely reliant on second hand and post-hoc sources of data about movement actions, and these approaches have come to shape the methodological and substantive focus of the field – but have also limited our understanding of the dynamics that enable or mitigate success.

Our analysis sheds light on several avenues we believe warrant further exploration. First, it is clear that aspects of internal strengthening, such as strategic planning, are significantly under-researched in empirical case studies of civil resistance. We question whether successful outcomes can occur if foundational relationships and a strong, shared ideology are not already set in place through dialogue, open and free communication, and trust. The majority of empirical scholarship, however, fails to critically evaluate the process and tools used to increase dialogue and relationship building (for exceptions, see Chabot 2012; Finnegan and Hackley 2008; Wanis-St. John and Rosen 2017). This limited focus means that it is not possible to explore the ways in which internal dynamics can shape other dimensions and aspects of scaling up, and vice-versa. Yet, activist-oriented manuals suggest that these particular areas are significant and a core part of campaign planning. This demonstrates the need for further research to tease out these mutually reinforcing processes and help us understand success in more comprehensive ways..

Given the overall lack of focus in empirical case studies on aspects of scaling related to internal strengthening, we raise questions about the ability of scholars to conduct meaningful research without witnessing movement strategizing behind closed doors. Analysis of internal movement dynamics is crucial for understanding movement scaling, especially if internal strengthening is the foundation to scaling outwardly. It is true that our exploration of empirical case studies (as discussed above) is limited in scope and does not reflect the full range of movement scholarship, including more contemporary analyses. However, the reliance on post-hoc accounts is concerning, as it reflects a significant bias in how we aim to understand social movements and thus *what* we can understand of them.

We also argue for further attention in both empirical scholarship and among movement activists to certain aspects of scaling. For instance, capacity building is a broad term and comprises multiple skills. However, researchers often do not assess which skills are needed for scaling or what tactics have been used to teach members of the movement these skills. As a result, there are limited frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the work of nonviolent movements. This limitation is evident within movement manuals as well, even as the need for movement organizations and campaigns to critically assess each action is crucial. Likewise, more research is needed to understand the role of social media in scaling civil resistance and nonviolent movements. Our analysis illustrates that social media can be used both for increasing membership by engaging prospective activists, but also for communicating ideas and building capacity and relationships among existing movement members. However, the literature does not provide a conceptual framework for understanding social media or methods for researching this scaling tool. Moreover, social media use is not well defined within activist-focused manuals; when it is discussed, social media is addressed broadly, without distinguishing between its many forms. As social media use becomes an ever more significant organizing tool, the need for both scholars and activists to assess its potential benefits and disadvantages is clear.

Finally, territorialization is a topic that has been largely neglected within the scholarly literature. Many of the case studies mention issues pertaining to rural and urban outreach and how these geographies shape movement expansion, but no framework exists that might help movement activists understand which geographic areas to evaluate and target, particularly when scaling from the national to the international level. Greater attention to territorial spread by academic scholars can help activists aiming to scale their initiatives understand whether and in what ways they should approach geographic dispersal.

Beyond this, our analysis highlights a general disconnect between the focus of scholars working on issues of nonviolent action in social movements and civil resistance, and that of activists working on the ground to pursue nonviolent social change. Deeper integration across these two communities is important for understanding the dynamics of nonviolent movements and ensuring that the work of movement members is supported by best practices. Some of this might

come in the form of greater attention to systematic self-focused research among movement activists, who would likely greatly benefit from taking on an action research or participatory action research approach to enable critical reflection upon their work. We encourage practitioners and activists in the field to engage more in structured practices that enable reflection on issues such as activist commitment, systematic assessment of action impact, and clear analysis of skills needed to build movement capacity. These practices might take the form of regular (annual or semi-annual) meetings focused on systematic self-reflection, or dissemination of surveys to committed members of an organization or movement network, as a few possibilities.

Finally, we encourage scholars to engage in more real-time analysis of internal movement dynamics, and for movement activists to draw upon frameworks in the academic literature to more critically examine, and place greater attention to specific elements of, their processes of strategic planning and engagement with both third parties and government leaders. Our comparative methodological approach could also be applied to strengthen the findings from more recent analyses. Greater cross-fertilization across these groups will bring activists closer to achieving long-term, sustainable change.

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## **Social movements and the (mis)use of research: Extinction Rebellion and the 3.5% rule**

**Kyle R Matthews<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The misuse of academic research can lead social movements to engage in strategies that may be inefficient or misguided. Extinction Rebellion argues, based on research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), that once 3.5% of the population of a state is mobilised in sustained protest, that success is guaranteed. But the data this research is drawn from consists of campaigns against autocratic regimes and occupying military forces, rather than the liberal democratic contexts that Extinction Rebellion is engaged in. I argue that Extinction Rebellion is misusing this research, and therefore focusing upon mass, sustained disruption in capital cities, rather than alternative, possibly more effective strategies. Through an exploration of how one social movement misuses research by applying it to a context to which the data does not apply, I argue for closer engagement between academics and the social movements that they study. This engagement will improve our understanding of the work of social change, provide social movements with insights to make them more effective, and facilitate the accurate interpretation of academic research in order to prevent its misuse.*

### **Keywords**

Extinction Rebellion, cognitive praxis, repertoires of contention, diffusion, misuse, research, climate change, protest, strategy, tactics.

### **Introduction**

Extinction Rebellion (XR), a climate change movement that launched in November 2018, has quickly risen to prominence after engaging in highly visible and disruptive actions. XR seeks to achieve its goals by both educating and informing, but also disrupting ‘business as usual’, creating a sense of crisis, and putting direct pressure on elected leaders to enact change quickly. XR’s founders paid particular attention to social movement research when forming XR and developing its strategies of change, seeking to make XR successful in achieving its goals (Hallam, 2019a; The Economist, 2019). Since its launch XR has spread worldwide, forming a significant part of the global climate

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movement, with over 485 local groups in more than 60 countries (Iqbal, 2019; Feder, 2019).

This article explores XR's use of nonviolence research, particularly the '3.5% rule'. The 3.5% rule is drawn from empirical research done by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) on resistance campaigns from 1990-2006. In the dataset developed by Chenoweth and Stephan every campaign that mobilised at least 3.5% of the population in sustained protest was successful. However, Chenoweth and Stephan's data relates to state-wide systemic change, mainly overthrowing autocratic governments, and does not apply to change in liberal democratic states. Yet XR has adopted the 3.5% rule as being relevant to the liberal democratic context that it operates in, spreading this understanding throughout its global movement. I therefore argue that XR is misusing research by applying it to a context that it does not relate to. This misuse has informed XR's strategy of mass mobilisation and disruptive actions, and led it away from alternative strategies that may be more useful.

Through this case study focusing on XR, I seek to shed a light on how social movements understand, diffuse, and use academic knowledge, and the implications of that knowledge being misused. First, I will explore the literature about social movement knowledge transfer and the misuse of academic knowledge, arguing that what social movements 'know' about social movement research informs the strategies that they adopt. Then I will take a deeper look at the work of Chenoweth and Stephan which has led to the '3.5% rule', indicate why I believe this research is being misused by applying it to contexts to which it does not apply, and the implications of this misuse by XR. Finally I conclude by arguing that social movements and the researchers engaged with them need to be aware of the limits of research and its application to new contexts, but that this wariness should lead to more academic engagement with social movements to successfully operationalise social movement knowledge.

I engage in this work as a supporter of, participant in, and researcher engaged with XR. I am involved with XR at the local level through my membership and research work with Extinction Rebellion Ōtepoti Dunedin, nationally with Extinction Rebellion Aotearoa New Zealand, and globally as a member of the wider climate change movement. My relationship with XR explicitly calls for research that makes a valuable contribution to informing the goals and processes of social change. This activist-scholar approach is my response to the call by Meyer (2005) for social movements and their tactical choices to be informed by quality research rather than anecdote and assumption. I pursue this work through militant ethnography, a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within grassroots movements (Juris, 2007). This positionality has enabled me to see the 3.5% rule diffuse throughout XR and other social movements globally, analyse the impact of this diffusion on discussions within XR about the best way to achieve social change, and provided me with the knowledge to critique this rule within the XR context. My approach therefore is not to damningly criticise XR and their work, but

rather to engage constructively through sympathetic critique in order to make its strategies more effective.

### **Knowledge, document analysis, cognitive praxis, repertoires of contention, and diffusion**

There is a substantial literature noting the significance of activist knowledge systems and discussing the problems of academics ‘colonising’ this knowledge for their benefit (see, for example Bevington and Dixon, 2005; Choudry, 2015; Cox and Fominaya, 2009; Cox, 2014; Cox, 2015; Cox, 2018; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Routledge, 2013). But it is less clear how social movements use academic research on the strategies and goals of social movements. First, I will define my understanding of knowledge and outline the document analysis methodology that I have used in this research. I will then explore our lack of understanding of how social movements use research by exploring how knowledge is operationalised through cognitive praxis – the identities and strategies of activists constructed through knowledge - and repertoires of contention – the set of tools of social change that activists adopt. Then I will investigate knowledge transfer via diffusion, and the small body of literature that explores the diffusion of unsuccessful strategies of change.

A broad understanding of knowledge includes not only academic research, but also the documents, discourses, and beliefs that help construct collective understandings, as well as the experience and wisdom of individuals (Ward et al., 2009). This broad understanding of knowledge encompasses not only what is ‘known’ through research, but what is believed to be true, through interpretation, custom, experience, and beliefs. It is this broader definition of knowledge that I am using as I explore how research enters commonplace understandings.

In this research I have used document analysis methodology to collect and analyse relevant materials. Document analysis is ideal for investigating the diffusion of knowledge around a global network, because documents have been written with the adopting audience in mind, rather than moderated by subsequent revision or retrospective assessments such as interviews (Bowen, 2009). In this way I am assessing documents for the purpose for which they were written, and analysing whether and how they have been adopted by receivers. Much of the source material by which I have assessed XR’s adoption of the 3.5% rule is via documents produced by various XR groups, and also prominent individuals in XR. Some documents are published by media independent of XR, but in these instances the documents are either written by an XR spokesperson and published by the media as an opinion piece, or presented by an XR spokesperson during the course of an interview which is available unedited. I am therefore confident that these materials represent the unmediated opinion of representatives of XR. My document analysis is by no means exhaustive, however in my research and involvement with XR I have found only one instance of a significant challenge to accepting the 3.5% rule as

relevant from within XR – a series of think pieces by XR spokesperson Rupert Read that I will explore further below (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a). Other than this, there seems to be widespread support and diffusion of the 3.5% rule as both fact, and relevant to XR.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to the role of knowledge in social movements the concept of ‘cognitive praxis’ is useful (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Cognitive praxis is the ways in which individual and collective identities and the strategies of social movements are constructed by knowledge (Jamison et al., 1990; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). There has been considerable attention paid to social movements and their processes of knowledge construction (see, for example Gillies, 2014; Cox, 2018; Chesters, 2012; Cox, 2014; Choudry, 2015; Cox, 2015; Tarrow, 2011). Social movements use knowledge to build their collective structures, support their claims, and create strategies and tactics to pursue change. Activist knowledge is often created through praxis, an understanding of knowledge and social change that accepts that the two are inseparable, and that knowledge is tested in encounters within movements and between movements and their opponents (Cox, 2014; Foley, 1999; Rosewarne et al., 2014; Tilly, 2008; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). Social movements and the individuals in them therefore construct meaning not only through defining themselves as activists seeking social change, but in choosing, rejecting, and implementing strategies to seek that change (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989). These choices are mostly supported by theory, experience, and anecdote rather than systematic research, and further developed and reinforced through training, group dynamics, and collective activist experiences (Meyer, 2005; Ferree, 2003). Movements therefore often become both organisationally committed to a cognitive praxis that consists of opinions and feelings about ways of operating, and understandings about why alternative approaches are wrong (Cox and Fominaya, 2009).

A cognitive praxis helps to construct a ‘repertoire of contention’. Repertoires of contention are the strategies and tactics that form part of the set of tools a movement uses to overcome obstacles in their struggle (Tilly, 2008; Tilly, 1978; Piven, 2006). Repertoires of contention operate in historical, social, and cultural contexts, and are influenced by the dynamics of struggle between a movement and its opponents (McAdam, 1983; Crossley, 2002; McCammon, 2003). What activists know and believe, and what others expect activists to do influences the nature of a movement’s repertoire (Tarrow, 1993). As such repertoires reflect not only what activists collectively believe are acceptable methods of seeking change, but also what is believed to be most successful in the context that they operate in (Soule, 1999; Soule, 1997). In exploring XR’s adoption of the 3.5% rule I am therefore seeking to understand knowledge transfer at the level of cognitive praxis – how a particular understanding of research has led to the adoption of a repertoire of contention that views mass

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware of individuals outside of XR who have raised concerns with its use of the 3.5% rule (see, for example, Ahmed, 2019 and Berglund, 2019).

mobilisation as the best way to create social change in response to the climate crisis.

Knowledge transfer has been studied extensively in social movements, particularly the diffusion of knowledge. Diffusion is the spread of an idea or innovation across social institutions and through social networks (Walsh-Russo, 2014; Rogers, 2001). In social movements innovative tactics, frames, repertoires, and ideologies may all diffuse within and between movements (Soule, 2007; Soule and Roggeband, 2018). Diffusion occurs via a dynamic process in which both transmitters and adopters have agency. Transmitters may be actively engaged in the transmission process as they promote their knowledge and seek to push it into new contexts. Receivers may also facilitate diffusion by actively seeking out an innovation, considering its value, the context from which it came, how successful it has been, and its applicability to their own context (Rogers, 2001; Soule and Roggeband, 2018; Roggeband, 2007). They will then reconceptualise elements of it based on their experience and perceptions of differences between the transmitting and adopting contexts (Roggeband, 2007; Soule and Roggeband, 2018). This often requires the generalisation and abstraction of an idea from a particular reality into a general frame that can be reapplied more globally (Tarrow, 2005). Diffusion can create risks for social movements if an innovation is brought into a context where local political culture, institutions, or the reaction of the wider population make the innovation less successful or even dangerous (Soule and Roggeband, 2018). Particularly relevant for my research is the risk that a strategy that is successful in a transmitter's context, may not be successful in the receiver's context.

There are numerous factors that improve the likelihood that a repertoire will be diffused: the similarity of the transmitter's and adopter's identity and context; the nature of the repertoire and how modular and transferable it is; the adopting movement being non-hierarchical and decentralised; structures and networks that link the transmitter and adopter; positive media attention highlighting the innovation; successful action on the part of the transmitter using the repertoire; the innovation being particularly creative or 'catchy'; and the existence of a broker, an individual who helps translate and transmit knowledge to make it more accessible (Walsh-Russo, 2014; McAdam and Rucht, 1993; Tarrow, 1993; Soule and Roggeband, 2018; Strang and Soule, 1998; Morris, 1981; Strang and Meyer, 1993; Chabot, 2010; Wood, 2012). Brokers often champion the adoption of an innovation by incorporating it into a broader theory of change which assists diffusion by situating the innovation amongst familiar cultural practices and knowledge (Strang and Meyer, 1993). When transferring scientific knowledge to non-scientific groups the presence of an individual with higher education in the receiving group improves their satisfaction with knowledge transfer (Bunders and Leydesdorff, 1987).

What examples do we have of research that explores the diffusion of unsuitable repertoires of contention in social movements? Soule (1999) explores the diffusion of an unsuccessful innovation by American college activists in the anti-apartheid divestment movement. In the mid-1980s, college activists'

construction of replicas of South African shantytowns on American campuses was a popular tactic that quickly spread throughout the divestment movement. Yet colleges where shantytowns were employed as a tactic divested slower than colleges where it was never used. Soule (1999) argues that shantytowns diffused successfully because it was a tactic that was compatible with the values, experiences, and needs of potential adopters. It met their understanding of material conditions in South Africa, provided a visible and direct challenge to colleges, and was visually and physically similar to the sit-in, a tactic that was well understood in the American context due to the civil rights movement. It spread because of a social construction (by activist networks and media attention) that it was an effective tactic. Students monitored other campuses for cues on possible tactical innovations, assuming that it was successful because of its immediate impacts upon the targeted campus and widespread media attention, rather than assessing whether the tactic achieved the desired goal of divestment (Rogers, 2001; Soule, 1999). The success of a tactic is difficult for groups to measure, so social movements may instead use proxies for success such as media attention or a lack of state repression when considering adoption (Koopmans, 2004). The diffusion of repertoires to new contexts may therefore say more about the internal dynamics of social movements and their need to find strategies and tactics that are successful, than the quality of the repertoire. These dynamics and the need to find answers to complex problems, I will argue, have led to misuse by Extinction Rebellion.

I have built a picture of the diffusion of movement strategies and tactics, particularly the diffusion of unsuitable repertoires, in the absence of an extensive literature on the misuse of research by social movements. This picture is based upon my conceptualisation of the work of social movements as occurring within repertoires of contention that bound the strategies and tactics that movements view as acceptable and effective, and cognitive praxis, the ways in which activist identities and strategies of change are constructed by knowledge through struggle. The knowledge that helps construct a cognitive praxis diffuses between contexts through a number of means, particularly knowledge brokers, who access, translate, and spread academic knowledge to social movements. I have also outlined how a document analysis methodology will be used to analyse these concepts in relation to XR. I will now explore the cognitive praxis that informs XR's repertoire of contention.

### **Nonviolence research and *Why Civil Resistance Works***

XR is an unusual social movement because as well as being informed by research on climate science, it has paid close attention to social scientific knowledge on the structures and strategies of social movements (Hallam, 2019a). This social movement research includes strategic issues such as organisational structures and theories of change, but also practical issues such as the best ways to welcome people to XR meetings and encourage them to return. In particular the civil disobedience research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) and their 3.5% rule has guided XR's theories and strategies of change.

However, the selection of research that supports preferred arguments, and the construction of conclusions that are not supported by data are common risks in the application of research. Research is a contested, political process, rather than linear and value-free (Gillies, 2014; Tseng, 2012). In this section I will provide an overview of Chenoweth and Stephan's work before explaining why I believe that XR is misusing this research by applying it to a context that it does not relate to.

Despite the considerable influence of nonviolence theories on social change movements, it was not until Chenoweth and Stephan published *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* that there was a quantitative analysis of nonviolent movements which proved that they were more successful than violent methods of social change, and suggested reasons for this success. The nature and content of the Nonviolent and Violent Conflict Outcomes (NAVCO 1) dataset developed by Chenoweth and Stephan for this research is quite significant for my argument, so I will explore it in some depth. The NAVCO 1 dataset comprised 323 resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006 compiled from multiple sources. Resistance campaigns were defined as “a series of observable, continuous tactics in pursuit of a political objective” that fell into three categories: anti-regime, anti-occupation, and secessionist. (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008: 16) Cases were considered violent if they committed a significant amount of violence and nonviolent if violence was an insignificant part of the campaign. Campaigns were coded as having three levels of success: success, limited success, and failure. For a campaign to be successful it had to have achieved its stated objectives within two years of the end of the campaign, and the campaign had to be judged to have had a discernible effect on the outcome. Limited success occurred when a campaign obtained significant concessions, but not its stated objectives. If a campaign did not meet its objectives or achieve significant concessions, it was coded as a failure. The dataset included other variables such as the size of the campaign at its peak, whether the regime responded to the campaign violently, defections amongst the regime's security forces, external support for the resistance campaign and the regime, the democratic extent of the regime, and duration of the conflict (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

The results of this research were initially published in a journal article (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008), and then as a book (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011), both entitled *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. The research reported a number of significant findings. Nonviolent social change was twice as likely to be successful as approaches that primarily used violence. The success rate for nonviolent campaigns improved over time, rising from 40% in the 1940s to 70% in the early 2000s. Nonviolent social change movements were much more likely to lead to democratic states than violent ones in the long term. Some of the factors influencing the likelihood of social change were also significantly different between the two methods.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the NAVCO 1 dataset, including updated versions, see: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/navco>.

Nonviolent campaigns were six times more likely to be successful in the face of violent repression. Shifts in loyalty from the regime to the campaign by the bureaucracy and/or military forces were significant in whether a campaign was successful, but only if the campaign was nonviolent. Lastly, they concluded that broad-based, diverse nonviolent campaigns were more successful because they were more resilient and difficult to repress (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008).

Further work on the dataset by Chenoweth in preparation for a workshop with activists after the book was published led to the creation of the 3.5% rule.<sup>4</sup> Using the variable that measured participation, Chenoweth found that every campaign in their dataset that mobilised at least 3.5% of the population in sustained protest had been successful. She brought this conclusion to public attention in a TED talk given in 2013.<sup>5</sup> The 3.5% rule only relates to nonviolent campaigns, because they do not create the moral and practical barriers to participation that violent campaigns do, therefore making it possible for a significant proportion and range of a population to mobilise (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

Chenoweth and Stephan's work on civil disobedience has had considerable influence on civil resistance and nonviolence studies. As the first piece of quantitative evidence about the effectiveness and longstanding impacts of nonviolent campaigns, it provided evidence to back up moral and theoretical arguments for nonviolence. But the research has also been particularly significant in social movements. A number of social movements have explicitly or implicitly referred to the research findings and the 3.5% rule. Erica Chenoweth's TED talk has been viewed over 220,000 times since November 2013 and has been promoted by social movements in their social media and communications. The TED talk video presentation has disengaged the research conclusions from the data on which those conclusions are based, which are only accessible in the book. This disengagement has made it easier to diffuse the research into a context that is unsupported by that data.

A cognitive praxis guided by Chenoweth and Stephan's research might emphasise nonviolence, engaging in actions that are likely to attract repression and loyalty shifts by state forces, and a focus on building a broad-based, diverse mass movement. In particular, it would seek to build that mass movement towards the sustained participation of 3.5% of the population in order to guarantee success. But this cognitive praxis would miss important information about how this research is focused on 'maximalist' campaigns seeking to overthrow oppressive regimes, resist foreign occupation, or secede from a state. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011: 13) outlined the limited context which their research draws data from:

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<sup>4</sup> See comments by Erica Chenoweth on her blog 31 July 2017 (<https://rationalinsurgent.com/2013/11/04/my-talk-at-tedxboulder-civil-resistance-and-the-3-5-rule/#comments>).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJSehRIU34w>.

This study makes a further qualification. Nonviolent and violent campaigns are used to promote a number of different policy objectives, ranging from increased personal liberties to obtaining greater rights or privileges for an ethnic group to demanding national independence. However this project is concerned primarily with three specific, intense, and extreme forms of resistance: antiregime, antioccupation, and secession campaigns.

A sample of partially successful or successful nonviolent campaigns in the data will include many familiar to students of the history of nonviolence. Examples include resistance to military occupation, such as Denmark and Norway during World War II, and Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation in the first intifada (1987-1991), countries freeing themselves from foreign control, such as India (1947), Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia (1989), and East Timor (1999), and countries overthrowing autocratic rulers, such as the Philippines (1986), Chile (1989), and Serbia (2000).

The dataset contains no campaigns seeking social change in liberal, Western democracies. There were no campaigns seeking democratic parliamentary support for social justice or environmental issues, no labour unions going on strike for better pay or conditions, and apart from anti-apartheid campaigns, no civil rights campaigns seeking legal or democratic rights. The dataset does not contain a single nonviolent campaign from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, France, or Italy, all states where XR is actively campaigning. Other liberal democracies that appear in the dataset, such as Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary either appear as a result of foreign occupation in the first half of the twentieth century, or attempts to overthrow the Soviet Union's rule in the latter half of the twentieth century (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

It is therefore unclear what conclusions can be drawn from Chenoweth and Stephan's research by activists in liberal democracies seeking to force their governments to implement laws and policies that substantially change their nation's approach to the climate crisis. In particular, it is unclear from this research whether the 3.5% rule applies to liberal democracies. If a social movement in a liberal democratic country was successful in mobilising such a significant part of the population, it is unclear whether that would force the government to take action, and what that government action would be. Erica Chenoweth specifically acknowledged this in a radio interview in 2016, stating:

You know, if a nonviolent campaign is aiming for anti-war outcomes, or anti-nuclear outcomes, or economic and social justice reforms, or gender rights and things along those lines, indigenous rights. Do we see the same types of success rates of violent and nonviolent action? The answer is we don't know yet because those types of data collection procedures are not yet fully developed. But it's a really important direction for understanding what people in democracies might do, for example, to win their particular claims. (Saturday Morning, 2016).

My analysis of the NAVCO 1 dataset, the research publications that arose out of it, and the subsequent statement of one of the authors of that research, lead me to conclude that the data relates to one type of context, that of campaigns seeking to overthrow oppressive regimes, resist foreign occupations, and to secede from a state. In those contexts we can have some confidence about the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the research, and the likelihood of the 3.5% rule being applicable. However the diffusion of this research to inform the cognitive praxis of campaigns in liberal democratic states involves the risk that the resulting repertoire of contention will not be effective in the new location. This does not mean that the research has no value to those movements. It does, for example, suggest that nonviolence is likely to be the best method of social change in liberal democracies, that repression by state actors may make social change more likely, and that broad-based, diverse movements are likely to be more successful. However, it does not provide evidence for those conclusions. In particular, it does not indicate whether a strategy of building a mass movement to reach a threshold of 3.5% participation will lead to successful outcomes. *Why Civil Resistance Works* therefore joins a body of nonviolence research that informs the work of activists in a range of liberal democratic societies, but which should be used with caution to develop strategies in those contexts.

### **Extinction Rebellion and *Why Civil Resistance Works***

Climate change activists are in the difficult position of seeking fundamental social change against resistant political and economic structures in relation to an issue that gets more urgent and difficult to resolve as time passes. Climate change presents an existential crisis for humanity, involving increased drought, sea levels, food shortage, forced migration, and conflict (IPCC, 2018). Resolving the climate crisis requires fundamentally changing the systems of energy, transport, farming, and consumption that define modern civilisation, and likely the structures of capitalism itself (Klein, 2014; Foster, 2001). Despite decades of scientific knowledge and climate activism raising these issues little progress has been made to resolve the crisis (Climate Action Tracker, 2019). The looming deadlines set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to halve (2030) and reach (2050) net carbon become closer and more challenging as years pass with greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere continuing to rise. Setbacks such as deforestation in Brazil, significant forest fires in California and Australia, and melting glaciers and arctic ice provide ongoing reminders of the scale and impacts of the crisis. For activists the failure of their activism to resolve a crisis that poses existential problems to humanity is a matter of considerable frustration (Rosewarne et al., 2014; Read, 2019; Hallam, 2019b). For XR, this frustration, combined with the belief that traditional methods of climate change activism have failed, has led to a cognitive praxis that rejects conventional campaigning, such as “sending emails, payments to NGOs and more reports” as ineffective, instead promoting mass disruptive action (Hallam, 2019b).

This section will describe how XR as an organisation, and significant individuals within it, explicitly and implicitly use Chenoweth and Stephan's research to construct this cognitive praxis. I have begun by outlining how the climate crisis influences XR's approach to social change. I will now provide evidence for XR's adoption and diffusion of the 3.5% rule, presenting XR's web pages and publications, as well as media opinion pieces and interviews in support of my argument. Lastly I will explore the significance of XR's misuse of *Why Civil Resistance Works*, particularly how this misuse drives XR towards a repertoire of contention that may not be relevant to the context they are working in, and away from alternatives that may be more useful. I argue that this indicates that they have been selective in their use of research.

There are numerous references to the 3.5% rule in XR's institutional outputs, such as XR USA's web pages:

This type of rebellion is premised on extensive research that shows conclusively that if 3.5% of the population in any country is actively engaged in sustained resistance over a concentrated period of time, governments inevitably concede or collapse under the pressure. The research shows that governments simply can't endure this many people engaging in serious disruption if it lasts for an extended period of time. (Extinction Rebellion US, 2019)

An XR video arguing for nonviolent direct action states that "social science shows it's twice as likely to succeed as violent campaigns and is achievable with a relatively small percentage of the population". The text "3.5% Participation = Always Successful" appears on screen (Extinction Rebellion NYC, 2019).

A significant element of XR's work is 'the talk', a public lecture given to outline the nature of the climate crisis and encourage attendees to become involved with XR and its actions. These talks are a significant part of XR's public information campaign and membership growth strategy. The talk explicitly references Erica Chenoweth and the 3.5% rule, with speaker notes arguing that "It turns out only about 1-3% of a population is needs [sic] to be mobilised to bring about massive social change or the fall of a regime" (Extinction Rebellion NZ, 2019). XR is therefore developing and diffusing a cognitive praxis which argues that the 3.5% rule is relevant to XR as an institution and the countries that it operates in to achieve social change.

Although *Why Civil Resistance Works* has influenced the strategies of XR organisations institutionally, it has also influenced significant individuals within the movement to act as brokers to assist diffusion of the 3.5% rule through XR globally and public media discourses. XR founder Roger Hallam refers to *Why Civil Resistance Works* in an opinion piece written for *The Guardian*:

Drawing on the groundbreaking research of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan... we came to the conclusion that the only way to overcome entrenched

political power is through extensive campaigns of large-scale nonviolent direct action. (Hallam, 2019b)

In a video Hallam predicts that the model that Chenoweth and Stephan have explored in autocratic states will be successful in Western liberal democracies:

It's not guaranteed, but to say it won't happen is just completely social scientifically illiterate. It happens over and over again. And what's interesting here of course is that it's basically happening in a Western democracy for the first time. (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b)

In this statement Hallam has presented an internally contradictory argument – that social scientific evidence indicates that the 3.5% rule is correct, despite it never having occurred in the context to which he is applying it.

Hallam is not the only prominent actor within XR to argue for a strategy of mass mobilisation. XR co-founder Gail Bradbrook also argues for the relevance of the Chenoweth and Stephan's research to XR:

And we know from the research of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan that you need between 1 and 3.4% of the population to come together and to be willing to support people to get on the streets and be on the streets themselves. (Democracy Now, 2019)

Both Hallam and Bradbrook, as leaders of XR and individuals who have engaged in postgraduate research, are acting as brokers to assist diffusion. Their prominence as founders and spokespeople for XR combined with the cultural capital associated with their academic knowledge assists with diffusion by lending institutional and theoretical authority to their framing of the 3.5% rule as relevant to XR's struggle. The nature of the 3.5% rule, which is simple to understand and presented by XR as applicable to all contexts, gives receivers hope that it is a solution to the difficult problem of achieving fundamental change in relation to how humans interact with their environment.

The 3.5% rule has diffused through the global XR network and into wider public consciousness globally. It has appeared in media stories about XR around the world. These include the BBC (Robson, 2019), Buzzfeed (Feder, 2019), and Stuff (Aotearoa New Zealand's main newspaper publisher) (Kirkeby, 2019). The 3.5% rule has spread so effectively that it has transferred from XR to other, related climate movements. The September 27<sup>th</sup> 2019 climate strike mobilised an estimated 170,000 individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand – exactly 3.5% of the population. Media stories on the event referred to *Why Civil Resistance Works* when explaining why this number was significant (RNZ, 2019). Greenpeace NZ posted on Facebook that “3.5% of the NZ population participated in the youth-

led climate strikes two weeks ago. This is enough to change our world” (Greenpeace NZ, 2019). Regardless of whether the 3.5% rule applies to a context, or is useful for social movements engaged in a campaign, it has diffused through social movements and wider public discourse as though it is.

The evidence above outlines the diffusion of a cognitive praxis that misuses Chenoweth and Stephan’s research by advocating that the 3.5% rule applies to liberal democratic contexts, rather than the autocratic states where the evidence for the 3.5% rule came from. The research is used to justify this praxis by claiming that evidence indicates that the strategy will always lead to success. Activist adoption of this cognitive praxis promotes a repertoire of contention that seeks to change society by mobilising 3.5% of the population to engage in mass disruption. But successful and unsuccessful campaigns occur in particular times and spaces, often through waves of contention in which social change occurs in a complex web of social relations and interactions between individuals, groups, social structures, and events (Koopmans, 2004). The 3.5% rule may not apply to the liberal democratic context that XR is applying it to, thus it is unclear whether a strategy of mass disruption will be successful. XR as an institution and prominent individuals within it have diffused the 3.5% rule as a simplistic solution to social change rather than recognising the complexity of how this occurs.

In December 2019 XR spokesperson Rupert Read addressed a XR group in Sheffield, UK, directly addressing the relevance of 3.5% rule to XR. His speech further developed his thoughts raised in a pamphlet ‘Truth and its Consequences’ published in August 2019 (Read, 2019). First Read noted that the 3.5% rule has never played out in a Western industrial democracy. He takes this argument one step further, believing that as XR moves further into the unknown, historically-based social science becomes less relevant, and XR needs to rely more on its creativity to resolve the climate crisis (Read, 2019). But perhaps his most insightful conclusion was that the movements in the NAVCO 1 dataset that achieved the 3.5% rule were never aiming to achieve that threshold. They were instead aiming to speak to a broad population of their country, mobilise them to seek change, and to be successful in doing so. Achieving the participation of 3.5% of the population should therefore not be the goal, but instead a side-effect of successful social change (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a). This insightful argument is the first significant sign I have seen within XR of a challenge to the applicability of the 3.5% rule, and a consideration of how mobilisation functions in successful movements – by social movements speaking to the issues that engage people, and creating actions that are both inclusive and successful.

Social movements should construct a cognitive praxis and develop a repertoire of contention that is relevant to the context in which they are operating. Autocratic governments have a limited set of tools to respond to social conflict and are more likely to resort to repression to control a social movement (Carey, 2010). Repression of mass movements by autocratic governments oversteps the fragile state of their rule and undermines their tenuous hold on power. This is

the context in which mass mobilisation is most effective as a demonstration of widespread opposition to autocracy (Koopmans, 2004; Sharp, 1973a; Sharp, 1973b). Liberal democratic governments have a broader and more flexible set of tools available to respond to social conflict. They may use laws and public discourse to restrict protest to 'legitimate' and/or ineffective methods, public rather than corporate spaces, or limit the role of state in order to shrink the spaces and topics of valid political engagement (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Social movements may feel compelled to engage in democratic government processes in order to appear constructive, and find that their mass nonviolent power is deflected into bureaucracy and/or technocracy (Martin, 1994). Democratic governments can engage with the challenges of social movements by adoption, where they accept some of the demands of a social movement in order to weaken their claims, or co-option where they weaken a social movement by offering movement leaders positions in government or other recognition. In this context, social movements are likely to be more effective using a repertoire of contention informed by a cognitive praxis of strategic and tactical diversity that activates a broad and diverse movement (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; McCammon, 2012; Wang and Soule, 2016). By adopting a repertoire that focuses on mass mobilisation and disruption, XR are choosing not to engage with this alternative cognitive praxis.

What would a repertoire of contention informed by a cognitive praxis of strategic and tactical diversity look like? Mainstream political tactics rejected by XR such as lobbying elites, supporting the work of mainstream NGOs, and preparing reports are obvious examples. Climate activists globally have been engaged in a campaign to get local bodies and state governments to declare a climate emergency. As at 19 June 2020, 1,732 jurisdictions in 30 countries, with a combined population of 820 million, have declared a climate emergency (Climate Emergency Declaration, 2020). This grassroots strategy is intended to raise the profile of climate change by having it discussed in communities, and resolved via local actions (Salamon, 2019). Probably the most successful climate activism over the past year has been the student strikes. Inspired by Greta Thunberg sitting outside the Swedish parliament in 2018, student strikes grew into a worldwide movement in just over a year, with over two million young people walking out of school during a global strike in March 2019, and over seven million people participating in September 2019 (Fridays for Future, 2019). Youth strikers have presented a considerable challenge and inspiration to world leaders in relation to climate action (Guterres, 2019). I do not present these alternatives as a complete list or as an endorsement. Indeed, some, such as climate emergencies have been critiqued both by academics and social movements (Cretney, 2019; Beaumont, 2019). However they demonstrate alternatives to a cognitive praxis and repertoire of contention informed by the 3.5% rule.

Climate activists can explore strategies other than mass disruption while still engaging in radical action, such as direct action against fossil fuel producers. Whether direct action targeted at fossil fuel producers is more effective than mass disruption of capital cities will depend on the context that social

movements are operating in and the way that they develop and enact their strategies of change. But these alternatives should not be abandoned because of a cognitive praxis constructed through the misuse of research. In June 2019 activists from Ende Gelände (Here and No Further) occupied a large open-pit coal mine in Germany, drawing worldwide attention to ongoing fossil fuel use and closing the mine for several days (Cox, 2019; Swift, 2019). Climate activists in Aotearoa New Zealand have recently blockaded petroleum and mineral forums, a coal train, and occupied a deepsea drilling support vessel (Block, 2019; Todd, 2019a; Nightingale, 2018; Todd, 2019b; Mohanlall, 2019). These direct actions seek to raise awareness of fossil fuel extraction and use, engage in protest to prevent its extraction and distribution, and impair the businesses that profit from fossil fuels. Rather than seeking to create widespread disruption throughout society to bring governments to their knees, direct action against the institutions that benefit from fossil fuels seeks change by disrupting their business. A radical approach using diverse tactics and locations, combined with civil disobedience could have a significant impact upon the climate crisis and awareness of it. By ignoring these alternatives, and justifying a strategy based upon the 3.5% rule, XR are ignoring alternative research-based strategies (eg. Thomas et al., 2019; Bliuc et al., 2015; Haines, 1988).

Defenders of XR may respond to my criticism of the misuse of research by XR by arguing that the strategy that XR has adopted is that of a social movement positioning itself as a ‘radical flank’. Radical flank groups operate in a more radical space as part of a broader social movement of multiple groups, often acting as ‘muscle’ to enforce the demands of the more mainstream parts of the movement (Ellefsen, 2018). Radical flanks can have significant influence on processes of social change: creating space for mainstream discourses to be more successful, creating a sense of crisis to force change, increasing funding and support for more moderate groups, increasing government action on moderate demands, and shifting public opinion (Haines, 1984; Haines, 1988; Ellefsen, 2018; Tompkins, 2015). XR is well positioned in the climate change movement to act as a radical flank for more moderate groups such as 350 and the school strikes.

However there is limited evidence of radical flank theory in the cognitive praxis of XR. While XR argues that its radical strategies will shift public discourse and opinions, its strategy is based on the assumption that radical action will lead to the government succumbing to XR’s demands (Hallam, 2019a). Although radical flank theory provides evidence of mainstream groups benefiting from having a radical flank, it does not indicate that the radical flank’s goals will be achieved. If XR is operating as a radical flank for more moderate climate groups, it is not doing so as part of a research-informed cognitive praxis towards social change.

XR and its founders Roger Hallam and Gail Bradbrook have made explicit and implicit references to Chenoweth and Stephan’s research in XR’s web pages and publications, as well as media opinion pieces and interviews. My analysis of these documents demonstrates how *Why Civil Resistance Works* is being used

to justify a repertoire of contention based on mass mobilisation and civil disobedience that is informed by a cognitive praxis that argues for mobilising 3.5% of a population to resolve the climate crisis. However, Chenoweth and Stephan's research is being misused, applying it to a context to which the data does not apply. This has led to XR adopting a repertoire of mass civil disobedience that may be less effective than alternatives, such as lobbying elites, campaigning for emergency declarations, student strikes, and direct action against fossil fuel extraction, distribution and use.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that the misuse of academic research by XR has shaped its strategies in ways that may be unhelpful to achieving change. In pursuit of this argument, I have explored research by Chenoweth and Stephan that argues that once a campaign mobilises 3.5% of a population that it will always be successful. While I recognise the significance of this research, I argue that a close examination of the dataset that it is drawn from, key sections of the text, and the statements of one of the authors, limits the possible contexts this research can be applied to. It is therefore impossible to draw any conclusions as to whether the 3.5% rule is relevant to XR's campaigns seeking reform in Western liberal democracies.

There is a wealth of research on social movements, their production and use of knowledge, and the interaction between social movements and the academics that research them (see for example Choudry, 2014a; Choudry, 2014b; Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Cox and Fominaya, 2009; Cox, 2014; Cox, 2015). However, there is limited research seeking to understand how groups use or misuse social movement research when designing their strategies. In the absence of this literature I have situated this discussion in the literature of knowledge diffusion, particularly the diffusion of a cognitive praxis that informs activists of the strategies and tactics that are likely to be successful in seeking social change (Soule, 2007; Soule, 1997; Soule and Roggeband, 2018). I have argued that the complex nature of climate change activism and the urgency of the climate crisis has encouraged XR to adopt and diffuse the 3.5% rule as applicable to the Western liberal democratic context, providing hope of successful social change. The adoption of this cognitive praxis has seen XR pursue a strategy of mass disruption in capital cities and reject alternative strategies, yet this strategy is based on the misuse of research.

This is not entirely a negative story however. There is a nascent trend of social movements actively engaging with social movement research that social movement researchers should actively embrace. Historically, activists have often disengaged with social movement research because of its theoretical abstraction and lack of practical application, and their suspicion about the nature of the neoliberal university and the motivations of academics (Came et al., 2015; Bevington and Dixon, 2005; Meyer, 2005). Perhaps more than any other movement in history, climate change organisations and the activists

within them are engaged with and informed by scientific knowledge. This is particularly the case for XR which not only uses scientific knowledge to make claims, but uses social scientific knowledge to construct a cognitive praxis which informs its internal dynamics and strategies, including the 3.5% rule. The example of XR should therefore be encouraging for researchers working with and on social movements that their work has meaning to the subjects of that research.

Amongst this enthusiasm, we need to remain wary about the limitations of knowledge, its wider applicability, and reflect on how it is used by social movements (Tseng, 2012; Orsini and Smith, 2010). The solution to these issues is more, not less, engagement with social movements, in order to apply both academic and activist knowledge to the development of an informed cognitive praxis and effective repertoire of contention. This cognitive praxis and repertoire will be informed by the diffusion of ideas from other contexts, but should not be uncritically driven by them. I therefore echo calls for researchers to engage with social movements, recognise knowledge created within movements as valuable, and produce academic research relevant to the work of social change (Choudry, 2014a; Choudry, 2014b; Choudry and Kapoor, 2010; Cox and Fominaya, 2009; Cox, 2014). This work is inherently political, and requires academics to consider the purpose of their work, the limited value of knowledge that only circulates in the academic world, and how academia can contribute to the work of social change (Cox, 2015). It will require a close engagement with social movements to find answers to the questions that social movements raise. Some obvious ones raised by this research and XR's use of the 3.5% rule is how mass mobilisation affects the success of campaigns in liberal democratic states, whether the 3.5% rule or something similar applies, and what alternative strategies should social movements employ if there is no number that can be mobilised for guaranteed success? Erica Chenoweth has begun this work by creating a new database, NAVCO 3.0, which reports over 100,000 daily resistance events in 26 countries from 1990-2011 (NAVCO Data Project, 2019). This dataset, when analysed, may offer more useful knowledge to inform the cognitive praxis and strategies of XR.

A greater understanding of how social movements interpret and operationalise social movement research has the potential to further transform the relationship between academics and social movements. Knowing how social movements use research encourages academics to focus their work on topics that support activism. This in turn should help social movements engage with relevant research and use it to inform their work. However this interaction requires an honest assessment of the limitations of the applicability of research and frank assessments when research is being misused. Only then can research be successfully operationalised by social movements engaged in the work of social change. This work will reach beyond academic circles to impact upon social movements, their campaigns, and significant social and political issues such as the climate crisis and our responses to it.

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## **About the Author**

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## **Dignity, dreaming, and desire-based research in the face of slow violence: indigenous youth organising as (counter)development**

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Seferina Miss, Roberto Kus, Donna Makin,  
Florenio Xuc, Rosita Kan, Elodio Rash**

### **Abstract**

*This article provides an overview of an autonomous social movement defending and struggling for Indigenous land, dignity, and self-determination in Central America and the postcolonial Caribbean. More precisely, it highlights how Maya communities in Toledo District, Southern Belize are mobilising to protect and continue to breathe life into their culture, customs, cosmovisión, and communities. In doing so, we introduce readers to three of the primary organisations that partially constitute the social movement; the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA), and Julian Cho Society (JCS). In addition to historicising and profiling these groups, their ground-breaking land rights victory, and the unity they have galvanised amongst Maya villages, the piece demonstrates how Indigenous youth are engaging in and actively redefining development within the region. We do this by sharing a synopsis of an action camp that was organised by-and-for Maya youth. Before describing the undertakings and outcomes of the camp, we detail how the gathering was informed and shaped by calls being made for desire-based research. To this end, we explain how our methods and field activities were guided by decolonial, community-based, participatory-action, and creative approaches. Ultimately, the piece reveals how dignity-anchored, dream-driven, desire-based research that is animated and co-created by Indigenous youth not only can contribute to building pathways out of structural and slow violence—but also can at once counter and transform development. Notably, Maya youth are co-authors.*

### **Keywords**

autonomy; decolonisation; desire-based research; development; dreaming; Indigenous resurgence; social movements; slow violence; youth activism

...the struggle of Indigenous people for their dignity is, at its core, a *dream*;  
indeed, a very ‘Otherly’ *dream*.

Marcos (2001)

...it is crucial to recognize that our communities hold the power to begin shifting  
the discourse away from damage—and toward *desire*.

Tuck (2009)



*A welcome banner made by Maya youth hangs across the community and presentation space at the Sounding of the Conch Shell (SOCS) Camp in Toledo District, Southern Belize. The SOCS gathering (detailed in the sections to come) was a holistic environment where Maya youth could come together to freely express their thoughts and share perspectives about their joys, pains, and dreams as Indigenous youth. It was also a space where Maya youth garnered support from peers, elders, and village leaders as they—as youth—stressed the importance of being involved in community decision-making, collective mobilising, and building a better—alternative—future.*

## **Introduction: an indigenous, autonomous, radical movement**

While most social movement and critical development scholars who focus on land, autonomy, and resistance in Latin America and the Caribbean are familiar with the Zapatistas, far fewer have afforded committed attention to the other, parallel, Maya land rights struggle and movement in the region. Remarkably enough, it is a struggle against the ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano, 2000) that is currently unfolding and uniquely situated in both the Caribbean and Central America. Namely, it is the struggle for land and freedom of the Q’eqchi’ and Mopan Maya communities of Toledo District, Southern Belize.

In 2015, the movement made history vis-à-vis the recognition of Indigenous land rights by winning a victory against the Government of Belize (GoB) in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). The case affirmed that customary Maya land tenure was equal to all other property rights protected under the Belizean constitution (Caserta 2018). Yet even with their historic legal win over the GoB in the CCJ, the movement realises that self-determination is not something that can be secured through either the government or legal system, but rather, only via the political agency and collective work of grassroots communities themselves (Fanon, 1963). The movement recognises, as other targeted and oppressed Indigenous communities do (Rivera Cusicanqui 2007), that the path to freedom is one which will neither be carved nor offered by the state—but only through their own emancipatory praxis. In realising this, the movement has, since its genesis, been engaged in a wide array of diverse tactics and strategies aimed at effecting ‘non-metaphorical decolonisation’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012) and Indigenous ‘sustainable self-determination’ (Corntassel, 2012).

More specifically, this article provides an overview of the Maya Leader’s Alliance (MLA), Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), and Julian Cho Society (JCS), which together with the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District (Southern Belize), comprise a coalition and social movement fighting for autonomy. Henceforth, we, in most instances, will refer to the coalition as the ‘MLA-TAA-JCS’ to capture its symbiotic relationship and kaleidoscopic expression. Politically, the coalition is an autonomous and radical (from Latin, *radix*, meaning ‘at the roots’) Indigenous movement that is mobilising against Western institutions (e.g. the state) and the driving forces of capital accumulation (e.g. extractive corporations) (Shoman, 1994; Wainwright, 2011).

We explicitly use ‘radical’ to denote that the movement is attempting to get to the root of the problem(s) (e.g. colonial-capitalist worldviews, domination, exploitation, violence, oppression) and change things structurally. It is also, rather distinctively, socio-culturally positioned in what is at once Central America and the Caribbean (i.e. Belize, a former colony of the British Crown). In addition to a synopsis of the Maya struggle in Toledo District, this piece will primarily highlight how youth are contributing to and vitalising the movement’s desire-based and dream-driven (counter)development in a context of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2012).

A key takeaway from this piece and what we attempt to accentuate and offer is an understanding and brief glimpse of how Indigenous youth are mobilising in a historical-structural context that was expressly arranged to be hostile towards the Maya's very existence. In short, the focus will be on the political agency of youth, not the colonial damage that has been and continues to be inflicted upon their communities and lives. In illustrating this, we share a summary of a youth camp organised in 2019 that encompassed heritage site tours, prefigurative artistic expression, visual storytelling, photovoice, and dream-driven praxis. The last section of the paper, which details the youth-coordinated 'desire-based research' (Tuck 2009), direct action, and camp, is authored by Maya youth themselves.

### **Political context: structural and slow violence vs. *se' komonil***

To contextualise this research politically and conceptually, in Central American and Caribbean countries like Belize ('British Honduras' until 1981) (Bolland, 2003), where relatively large groups of Indigenous peoples reside, national economic development, often taking the form of industrial extraction, continues at the expense of and frequently to the detriment of Indigenous communities (Wainwright, 2011). Indigenous groups are being excluded and not equitably benefitting from national-international development agendas. This is in addition to non-consultation and violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent they must contend with (Anaya and Puig, 2017). The adverse impacts have been identified as, inter alia, lack of access to land and natural resources; indigent forms of poverty; reduced options for sustainable livelihoods; negative health effects; gender-based violence; destruction of heritage sites; ecosystem damage; and loss of cultural identity (Munarriz, 2008).

The cumulative consequence of the aforementioned impacts is that Indigenous people, especially women and girls, are among the most vulnerable groups to external market volatility, economic shocks, climate change, extreme weather, and disaster events (Gahman and Thongs, 2020; IACHR, 2017). According to numerous human rights organisations and grassroots advocates, there is a pressing need to provide greater (horizontal) support and solidarity to these communities to further increase adaptive capacity and safeguard rights (Marcos, 2018). A host of movement leaders and political activists also note that, globally, Indigenous communities are at the forefront of responding to these realities by confronting hostile forces and building pathways out of the alienation and repression to which they are being exposed (Montoya, 2016; Nunn, 2018). The MLA-TAA-JCS, inclusive of the youth who volunteer for the coalition, is case in point. It is an Indigenous movement 'from below' that has taken up the mantle of asserting dignity and demonstrating political agency in a Global South/Majority World context of state-sanctioned structural and slow violence (Kus and Miss, 2019; Grandia, 2009).

## **Structural and slow violence**

Structural violence can broadly be defined as exposure to premature death (Galtung, 1969). It is characterised by the suffering and alienation—experienced disproportionately by targeted and marginalised groups—created by oft-unseen social forces and taken-for-granted cultural norms. It is ostensibly invisible because it is deeply embedded within societal structures and institutions (Farmer, 1996). Structural violence includes exclusion from full participation in resource distribution and allocation, political decision-making, education, healthcare services, the rights and entitlements afforded by citizenship and residents with ‘legal’ status, etc (Gahman and Hjalmarson, 2019). It is related to social injustice yet also focuses on health-eroding forms of cultural erasure and epistemic burial, as well as discursive (e.g. stigma, ostracism, ‘othering’) and indirect (neglect, inaction, omission) violence. Structural violence, in short, is the foreclosure of both life chances and expectancies.

Structural violence also comprises institutionalised racism, sexism, xenophobia, classism, heteronormativity, homophobia, ethno-nationalism, transphobia, etc.. For Maya communities in Belize, structural violence is identifiable in the endemic poverty, land dispossession, loss of language speakers, forfeiture of customs, intergenerational trauma, and internalised oppression that has and continues to be generated by the historical trajectories of colonialism, state repression, market-driven extraction, and governmental abandonment (Common Struggles Gathering, 2017). Amidst this exploitative reality, the Maya communities continue to view themselves as neither pitiable nor helpless.

Slow violence, comparably, whilst innately systemic, expands upon structural violence and focuses on what is produced at the nexus of the global economy, resource extraction, industrial production, environmental effluence, ecosystem (ill)health (inclusive of human and non-human life), and risk (Nixon, 2011). It often occurs hand-in-hand with environmental racism and state negligence and refers to the chronic, protracted, and seemingly imperceptible debilitation of communities and ecologies due to fallouts associated with environmental degradation and toxicity (Pulido, 2017).

Examples of slow violence include commercial clear-cut logging; the leaching of mining impurities; fossil fuel removal and burning; deforestation; the commodification and depletion of wildlife; the unsanctioned and unregulated disposal and dumping of pollutants; contaminant bioaccumulation; and the aggregative human-induced causes and lasting upshots of disaster events and extreme weather. For communities in Central American and circum-Caribbean geographies, slow violence takes the form of illness and disease related to tainted freshwater and polluted ecosystems; arable land loss from unsustainable for-profit excavation; the destruction of cultural heritage; disruptions to seasonal subsistence-farming due to climate change and rising sea levels; and increased sexual exploitation from the presence of external corporations, etc.

(Common Struggles Gathering, 2017; Fabricant, Gustafson, and Weiss, 2017; Giardino, 2015).

Noteworthy here are that violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and non-compliance to internationally recognised human rights accords are arguably two of the key immediate drivers of slow violence being experienced by marginalised communities across Central America and the circum-Caribbean as a result of the ongoing coloniality of racial capitalism (Anaya and Puig, 2017). Both the GoB and corporate extractors are culpable for multiple accounts of precisely just these types of violations and non-compliances (Campbell and Anaya, 2008; COA, 2010; Cultural Survival, 2015; OHRHC, 2007; Purvis, 2013)

### ***Se' komonil* and self-determination**

Amidst this avoidable yet imposed structural and slow violence, many Maya, as countless have been doing for over five centuries, are responding with collective resistance and a movement towards social change and transformation (Coc, 2015). Maya communities of Toledo District continue to engage in an unceasing effort to carve out space for Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and living under Western institutions and impositions of 'modernity' and 'development.' The MLA-TAA-JCS's mandate, thus, has been to struggle to co-create alternatives to the (neo)colonial social relations, economies, modes of governance, and even maps that have been forced upon their communities for generations (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009). This entails protecting and revitalising their Maya lands, culture, languages, and cosmovisión. It also means asserting and practicing their Indigenous conceptualisation of dignity and togetherness, '*se' komonil*.'

*Se' komonil* is a deeply layered, intersubjective Maya term signifying togetherness that roughly translates to 'practicing a dignified life, collectively.' When explained further, *se' komonil* means 'living a just and dignified life, reciprocally, through a mutual recognition of worth, interdependency, and intergenerational inter-connectedness that is woven into the spiritual, material, human, and non-human world.' Revealingly, for the Maya, both land and heritage mutually constitute *se' komonil*, i.e. dignity and unity. Hence, reclaiming, recuperating, and revitalising both their lands and heritage sites means doing the same for their dignity.

The MLA-TAA-JCS's defence and assertion of *se' komonil* in the face of corporate extractivism and the consolidated power of a postcolonial capitalist state has not come without consequence. Members of the movement, from its genesis through the present moment, have been harassed, accosted, and arrested. Moreover, several have been subjected to intimidation, vandalism, and violence. In 2015, Cristina Coc, a Q'eqchi' Maya woman, mother, and current spokesperson of the MLA, was arrested, along with 12 other Maya land defenders ('The Santa Cruz 13'), whilst protecting a Maya heritage site from

destruction (Penados, 2015). The government's apprehension of the activists promptly garnered international attention and intense scrutiny, not least of which came from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz.

Tauli-Corpuz, in a public statement scolding the GoB issued from Geneva, noted the incident demonstrated disturbing neglect for Maya property rights, which 'the government must respect and protect.' The U.N. Special Rapporteur went on to assert that, vis-à-vis the state's specious rationale for arresting the Maya villagers and Coc, the 'current situation of conflict and mistrust cannot be allowed to persist' (OHCHR, 2015). After nearly a year of equivocation and defamation on the part of the GoB, all charges against Coc and the Maya organisers were dropped. Parenthetically, the criminalization and attempted humiliation of Indigenous human rights and land defenders has been and continues to be a preferred tactic of governments from across Central and South America (Guzmán Hormazábal, 2019; Mendez, 2018).

In short, what the Maya have been fighting for as Indigenous people historically, and what the MLA-TAA-JCS are continuing to defend presently, is self-determination and *se' komonil*. That is, community, life, and dignity. Indeed, *se' komonil* is at the heart of the Maya movement, as well as their Indigenous interpretation of autonomy and formula for 'development.' A version of development that equally undermines and counters orthodox notions of development, which have been defined and demarcated, writ large, by colonial worldviews, liberal Western modernity, and capitalist reason. Notably, youth are a key part of the Maya people's pursuit and process of dignity- and dream-driven (counter)development.

## **History and structure: the TAA, MLA, and JCS**

### **The TAA**

The Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) is an association of 78 traditional Indigenous leaders from the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District (UNDP, 2019). It is the main representative body and highest central authority of the Maya people in Southern Belize. A cornerstone of the Maya communities, social movement, and struggle, not to mention Maya culture, has been and remains the Alcalde system. It is the traditional (non-state) governance system of the Maya people. The Alcalde system, which was established and functioning in its Indigenous form prior to Spanish and British contact in the region, is rooted in the customary laws of the Maya villages and communities. Whilst not exclusively non-hierarchical, the ever-evolving system was more decentralised and dynamic than imperialist structures of authority (Mesh, 2017). Specifically, the Alcalde system is a localised form of Maya governance in Belize that is rooted in pre-Columbian modes of socio-political organisation, yet also has been shaped by what Bolland (2003, 131) refers to as 'the dialectic of colonization and

resistance.’ Meaning, the Maya had complex systems of governance which, as Rugeley (1995) notes in the case of the Yucatán, were disordered and eroded away at given that Spanish colonisers reduced the influence of Maya organisations down to the local level and community affairs. Despite the colonial distortions and co-optations, Maya elements such as the *batabs* (village chiefs, town caciques) along with the *a cuch cab* (councils), i.e. ‘those who carry the burden,’ and the *ah kulels* (delegates, representatives, mediators) survived. These features were adopted by the Spaniards in their attempts at indirect rule (Farriss, 1984), as well as serve as the foundation of contemporary Maya governance systems, which are regulated by customary law but discharge elements of statutory law (Penados, 2018).

Presently, each Maya community has two elected Alcaldes, resulting in a total of 78 Alcaldes across Toledo District (given there are 39 distinct communities). The lead up to the selection of Alcaldes involves neither campaigns nor elections. Being chosen to be an Alcalde is a result of building a track record of commitment to the community and dedication to the Maya people. In fact, most, if not all, of the men and women who become Alcaldes are farmers, workers of the land, and village and/or family members themselves, i.e. there are no career politicians, campaign managers, or distant elected officials in the Alcalde system (MLSB, 2019). When selected, Alcaldes for each respective community place themselves in the service of the people. That is, they take on both (non-state) judicial and administrative responsibilities. The duties associated with becoming an Alcalde are effortful and time-consuming. In many respects, the obligations of an Alcalde can best be thought of as weight or ‘carga’ that must be figuratively ‘picked up and carried.’ Meaning, the position more accurately signifies that one has a burden of responsibility than it does they ‘won an election’ (MLSB, 2019).

In practice, Alcaldes guide and manage the use and occupancy of village lands, render decisions on disputes that arise between villagers, and issue resolutions on how discord and wrongdoings can be rectified and repaired. The Alcalde system is the ‘only legitimate Maya governance body that represents the Maya people collectively, with the TAA being the highest arbiter and custodian for Maya customary law’ (MLSB, 2019). In addition to nurturing the health and spirit of the community, Alcaldes organise and oversee *fajinas*. A *fajina* is a customary Maya practice of collective work that involves village members coming together to communally clean and perform upkeep of village lands (Willoughby, 2019). The *fajinas*, rather than merely being a chore or task to be completed, carry deep meaning for Maya communities. They are significant because they are at once a practice of communal cultural heritage, a traditional rite of passage, and a means for village members to register their interest in and ultimately be able to occupy and use a parcel of land for one’s family and subsistence.

The role of the Alcaldes, in short, is to cultivate peaceful, harmonious, and respectful social relations within their respective communities based upon time-

honoured ways of Maya organising, conflict-resolution, and customary law. Unsurprisingly, under the shadow of a Westminster modelled state and its attendant hierarchy, the Alcalde system has been a key target of government-sanctioned provocation and disavowal for years (Bolland, 2003; Penados, 2018).

## **The MLA**

The Maya Leaders Alliance advocates for over 21,000 Maya people across 39 Maya communities that reside in the hinterland of Toledo District, Southern Belize. As a mutable grassroots alliance, it is comprised of members from the JCS, TAA, and rural villages. Broadly, the MLA is struggling to build, much like the Zapatistas (who are also guided by Maya cosmovisión)—‘a world where many world’s fit’ (Gahman, 2019; Mora, 2017). The MLA is advancing this ambition in the face of both neoliberal extractivism and a repressive postcolonial state. Although the alliance was officially formed in 1999, its members have been involved in community outreach and mobilising for nearly 30 years. The MLA embodies the Maya people’s ongoing collective resistance, intergenerational spirit of revolt, and hopeful outlook for ‘another world’ (McNally, 2006), which dates back centuries (Bolland, 2003). The MLA also represent the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District nationally, regionally, and internationally on issues related to human rights violations, environmental racism, border conflicts, heritage destruction, and threats to cultural survival (ELAW, 2015).

With respect to organisational structure, the MLA is governed by a collective board known as the Maya Steering Committee. The steering committee’s function is to guide, advise, and ground the work of MLA on behalf of Maya villages. Meaning, the Maya communities dictate the work and efforts of the MLA rather than vice versa. The structure and character of the movement is at once reciprocal, interdependent, and relational. Steering committee members of the MLA include current Alcaldes (traditional democratically selected community leaders) from the TAA; a union of former Alcaldes; and other Maya member organisations and representatives inclusive of village activists and advocates (Gahman, Greenidge, and Penados 2020).

Board members of the MLA volunteer their time and actively seek commitment from Indigenous community leaders and Elders to maintain stewardship of the MLA’s mission. The MLA is located in Punta Gorda, Toledo District, Belize and often collaborates with a range of international universities, NGOs, and researchers to conduct engaged, culturally safe, participatory research. The research is subsequently put in the service of Maya communities in struggle, as well as partially provides the resources necessary to advance the MLA’s rights-based and anti-racist work.

In short, the MLA blossomed in the early 2000s partly in response to the state’s demand for a single interlocutor at a time when there were several disparate

Maya non-governmental organisations doing advocacy work and the TAA was temporarily not as potent of a community force as it had once been. Consequently, the MLA surfaced and grew in strength in order to serve as a vehicle for concerted action by the loose coalition of Maya NGOs that were operating at the time. Since the early-mid 2000s, then, the Maya have transformed and reshaped the MLA in response to the changing character of their struggle. As the TAA became stronger over the decade-plus that followed, the MLA became a mechanism through which past Alcaldes—leaders who have a long history of involvement in the struggle—could continue to be involved. The MLA, in turn, was transformed into a mechanism and forum where elders and other wisdom-bearers of the Maya struggle could remain active and involved. Today, rather than viewing and parcelling them off as separate entities, the Maya often refer to the MLA-TAA conjointly when speaking of organising.

### **The JCS**

The Julian Cho Society emerged in 2004 as a way of honouring and carrying forward the legacy of its namesake, Julian Armando Cho, a Mopan Maya schoolteacher born in the rural village of San Jose, Toledo District. Cho began a peaceful social movement in response to increasing encroachments upon Maya ancestral territories by logging and oil companies that were being granted concessions by the state (Anaya, 2008). In order to protect marginalised Mopan and Q'eqchi' Maya communities, livelihoods, culture, and bioregional ecosystems, Cho began organising to secure rights to traditional Maya lands. His untimely death in December 1998 was an enormous loss for the Maya people and the defence of their lands and resources.

The precise details surrounding the passing of Cho remain conspicuously both beclouded and unconfirmed (Duffy, 2002). Incidentally, his loss occurred just weeks after he received death threats resulting from the suspension of corporate logging in Southern Belize. Cho, as a vocal defender of human rights and outspoken land rights activist, had been demonstrating against the state-sanctioned concessions afforded to multinational private companies (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009). Noteworthy here is that the broader Central American region remains one of the most dangerous places in world apropos the targeting, suppression, and assassination of Indigenous land defenders (Jaitman, et al, 2017; LRAM, 2018).

In turn, the JCS, alongside its partner organisations the TAA and MLA, continue to honour and give continuity to the legacy of Cho. The coalition breathes life into Cho's memory by carrying on advocacy for both land and human rights in and across Toledo District. The emphasis of the movement's struggle, which endeavours to engender the principles and spirit of Cho, remains centred on social justice, environmental defence, self-determination, grassroots sustainable development, and the assertion of Indigenous dignity. In staying true to Cho's conviction for critically conscious and politically educated

young people, the JCS also provides scholarships and avenues for Maya youth to be involved in the movement. This is in addition to research internship opportunities they offer to non-Q'eqchi,' non-Mopan, and non-Maya international sympathisers and domestic allies.

In practice, the MLA and TAA are community partner organisations with JCS. The MLA's role in this solidaristic and mutually interdependent relationship is to bring together community partners that are working on Indigenous and human rights issues. This fosters collective visioning, synergy of efforts, and a concerted holistic approach to pursuing the long-term aspirations and dreams of the Maya people. Both the TAA and the MLA organise and operate based upon traditional Maya processes of decision making and Indigenous governance protocols (Willoughby, 2019). In the same vein, the JCS, much like the MLA, whilst never abandoning its initial mission has been transformed by the Maya people given the evolving nature of their struggle. The JCS, thus, has become the formalised (state-registered) non-governmental arm of the MLA-TAA. This allows the MLA and TAA to at once adopt and maintain Indigenous leadership, exist as independent organisations outside of the constraints of Westminster style state laws, and remain beholden to Maya cosmovisión and cultural protocols.

In sum, the diverse Maya constituency of MLA-TAA-JCS and the 39 communities comprise the Maya movement. The reciprocal relationship that exists amongst the coalition and villages ensures that the MLA—the point organisation for the majority of the political work conducted by the movement—operates in response to the needs and realities of the Maya people as a whole, across the entirety of Southern Belize. Notably, the Maya youth who co-authored this article and coordinated the camp detailed in sections to come are volunteers with the JCS.

### **Desire-based research**

Our research served as an intervention into and exploration of the in-situ development challenges the Maya of Toledo District are experiencing. Practically and methodologically, the camp included a photovoice project, art-based envisioning exercises, processes of consensus-based decision making, transverse walks, heritage site visits, envisioning sessions, speaker presentations, interactive games, and leisure time. Theoretically, the camp was a creative, engaged, and collective process of identifying and detailing the differing joys, pains, dreams, and *desires* held by Maya youth in an agrarian, postcolonial, Global Southern-Majority World context. Conviviality and critical consciousness served as key goals and watchwords for the camp's spirit and ethos (Freire, 2018; Illich, 1973).

The research practices, in turn, took a variety of flexible, semi-structured, and non-rigid forms, which included photography, narrative-writing, artistic expression, go-along interviews, communal dialogue sessions, and

prefiguration. Of note, is that the youth camp was primarily organised and coordinated by Maya youth themselves, many of whom are co-authoring of this article. In connecting the camp to academic literature, the research activities conducted by the youth were qualitative, community-based participatory-action methods, which took their cue from decolonial praxis (Atallah, 2018; Tuck and Yang, 2012). The design was further guided by principles being used within ‘desire-based’ research frameworks (Tuck, 2009). In addition, the fieldwork activities and processes of data collection were heavily influenced by decolonial (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Smith, 2013), anti-racist (Mohanty, 2013), and intersectional-feminist (Collins, 2016; Spivak, 2008) ethics and epistemologies.



*Maya youth organisers, camp attendees, and advisors from the MLA-TAA-JCS, alongside non-Indigenous and international accomplices and co-researchers, gather together to discuss, co-create, and plan the field activities for the youth gathering in Punta Gorda, Toledo District.*

Overall, then, what this eclectic, collaborative, and even playful research represents is documentation and evidence of Maya notions and practices of (counter)development (Penados and Chatarpal, 2015) and non-metaphorical decolonisation (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Furthermore, it highlights how these Maya notions and practices are anchored in—as well as being driven by—se’

*komonil*, i.e. togetherness, dignity, and the pluralistic yet shared dreams and desires of Indigenous community members themselves, inclusive of youth.

The overarching design of the project was inspired by Eve Tuck's (2009) proposal that communities in struggle, particularly research conducted with marginalised Indigenous and negatively racialised communities, eschew 'damage-centred' research and move towards research that is 'desire-based.' Her proposal to focus on desire over damage is neither meant to insinuate that the aftermaths and wounds of colonialism are 'over,' nor does Tuck argue that they should be denied or go unspoken of. Rather, Tuck is offering desire-based research as an 'epistemological shift' and 'antidote' towards the danger posed by damage-centred research, namely, 'that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community' (Tuck, 2009, 413).



*Maya youth, along with their collaborators and co-researchers, listen to spokesperson of the MLA, Cristina Coc, discuss Maya technology, biocultural heritage, innovation, and the significance of aj ralch'ooch ('Children of the Earth')—Maya identity.*

In further explaining the implications of damage-based research, particularly that which does not attend to the historical, structural, and ongoing practices and processes of racialisation and colonial power, Tuck writes:

...as I have noted, damage-centred research involves social and historical contexts at the outset, the significance of these contexts is regularly submerged. Without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses. Our evidence of ongoing colonization by research—absent a context in which we acknowledge that colonization—is relegated to our own bodies, our own families, our own social networks, our own leadership. After the research team leaves, after the town meeting, after the news cameras have gone away, all we are left with is the damage.

Tuck's analysis here lucidly illustrates the fraught nature of damage-centred research, even that which is well-intentioned, that focuses upon or defines communities solely by what they are perceived to be lacking, deprived of, or are 'bleeding from.' In elaborating, Tuck argues research that asks or even demands communities and community members to 'show us your wounds' is as poisonous as it is hostile.

Of significance is Tuck's avowal that desire-based research neither be viewed as an antonym nor polar opposite of damage-based research. That is, damage and desire are not mutually exclusive, but researching either requires a great deal of (pre)caution, reflection, and community consultation. In particular, with respect to what anticipated or unintended outcomes, either positive or negative, might emerge. The point Tuck asserts is not that research should forget or negate the historical and continued trauma inflicted by colonialism. More readily, she is contending that researchers must be discerning, circumspect, and deliberate about avoiding the pathologising tendencies that arise in research which focuses on damage. Here, Tuck notes that priority given to desire does not shy away from wrestling with pain but takes action against it by highlighting the intricacies and nuances of social action, empowerment, self-determination, sovereignty, and agency—as complex and paradoxical as all of these things can sometimes be.



*Juanita Ical, TAA Executive Member and Second Alcalde of her village, addresses the youth on gender and power relations, the importance of women being in leadership roles, and the key part women play in the Maya movement's resistance, resilience, and overall struggle.*

Tuck's (2009) call to desire-based practice pushes us to ask what might research produce if it looks beyond what is/who are being framed as broken, conquered, and despairing; and towards identifying where there is—as well as who is imbued with—wisdom, hope, joy, and dreams. In offering a cogent summary of a desire-based framework's ability to at once cast light upon hostile forces and explain injurious historical-contemporary contexts whilst doing depathologising work and celebrating 'survivance' (Vizenor, 1994), regeneration (Alfred, 2005), and resurgence (Simpson, 2016)—Tuck succinctly states of desire-based research: 'Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*.'

With this methodological awareness of desire-based research in tow, our co-designed and collaborative project advanced with the goal of amplifying the voices and visions of Indigenous youth. And more precisely, we set out to illustrate how youth in Toledo District are mobilising to co-create the social, cultural, and economic relations—as well as political movement and Maya future—of their desire and dreams.



*Maya youth organisers and non-Indigenous co-researchers play games together to break the ice, familiarise themselves with the places each are from, and set a convivial tone for the site visits, photovoice project, and dream-based envisioning activities to come.*

## **Maya youth organising and authorship<sup>1</sup>**

### **The ‘Sounding of the Conch Shell’ youth camp**

The ‘Sounding of the Conch Shell’ (SOCS) youth camp was conceived by a group of Maya youth organisers who work and volunteer for the JCS committed to bringing Indigenous youth together and moving society forward. As Maya youth organisers, we are seeking to build a space of encounter and community for Maya youth of Southern Belize. Included in the camp were 15 JCS youth scholarship recipients, nine young women and six young men, whose ages ranged from 14-17. The SOCS camp aspired to create a space where Maya youth could begin to participate in dialogues on issues affecting their communities, develop their Indigenous leadership capacities, and highlight the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> This section and its corresponding subheadings are by the Maya youth. Namely, members of the JCS Youth Planning Team, including: Seferina Miss, Roberto Kus, Donna Makin, Florenio Xuc, Rosita Kan, and Elodio Rash. A non-refereed shorter version of this section is at: *Cultural Survival* (Creative Commons): <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/koef-grant-partner-spotlight-sounding-conch-shell-youth-camp>

community engagement—all while being cognisant of the crucial role women play in traditional Maya governance.

The conch shell, for which the camp is named, is a tool that has been used by the Maya for generations to invite people to attend community meetings. The conch is sounded by a designated person appointed by a village Alcalde (traditional Maya leader). When the reverberations of the conch shell are heard, villagers are signalled to attend a gathering (referred to as an *ab'ink'*) where they may express their concerns towards any public issues that arise at the meeting. This practice of sounding the conch shell to call people together to an *ab'ink'* is what we symbolically adapted for the initial SOCS youth camp. More specifically, *ab'ink'* is a Maya term referring to a communal meeting comprised of listening, dialogue, and collective participation. In short, an *ab'ink'* involves coming together to join hearts and minds in order to *create*. Notably, the *ab'ink'* is part of the Maya creation story told in the *Popul Vuh* (MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019).



*Maya youth, with collaborators and co-researchers, gather in Laguna Village for the SOCS gathering. The resilience, energy, and commitment of the Maya youth is an essential element in the continued development of hard working, peaceful, and self-governing communities.*

Overall, the SOCS gathering, iterations of which will occur in the future, was a place for concerned Maya youth to meet each other and create. We also saw it as part of a *process* (rather than one-time event) and essential first step towards generating what will be an ongoing series of youth assemblies. SOCS served as a call for and concrete effort in Maya youth participating in the co-crafting of their futures. Moreover, it was a space of encounter where we, as Indigenous youth, could discuss our joys, pains, and aspirations, and develop action plans to address any pressing issues we identified as being in need of intervention or resolution.

### **Why did we organise the SOCS youth camp?**

The sharing and transmission of traditional Maya knowledge from one generation to the other is of grave concern to youth as we are beginning to realise we are losing part of our culture, our heritage, our identity, and ultimately our knowledge. The SOCS was thereby created not only to be a space where youth could gather to regain traditional knowledge, but also a space where they become acquainted with other likeminded youth to start to hone their leadership capacities, and begin addressing concerns they have about their communities and experiences as youth.



*Maya youth reconvene inside to listen together, share and present their narratives, and describe photographs they have taken after an outdoor transect walk that constituted a pilot run-through and practice round of the photovoice project.*

The dissemination of both traditional knowledge and leadership capability to Maya youth from Elders and older youth activists and organisers was a key focal point for the SOCS gathering. The participation of youth in the development of their communities was another area the SOCS gathering set out to address.

In turn, the SOCS gathering was organised with the hope and goal of inspiring Maya youth to become enthusiastically involved in shaping the future of their communities. That is, the youth camp was structured to build the confidence and courage of youth so they would feel empowered to confront complex challenges and sensitive issues within their respective communities head on. Moreover, it was a place for them to see and learn more about Maya heritage. To collectively dream together about and discuss the future they desire to be a part of—and would like to co-create. The definitive goal of the SOCS camp, then, was to inspire youth to contribute to the construction of peaceful, united, hard-working, and self-governing Maya communities.

### **What did we do at the SOCS youth camp?**



*A Maya spiritual leader begins the SOCS gathering with a traditional Maya ceremony to ask for protection and wisdom. Maya spiritual ceremonies are a means of connecting us to both our spiritual realm and inner spirituality with*

*the pinnacle point of the ceremony being the harmonisation of our ancestors' spirits with our present struggles and undertakings.*

The initial SOCS gathering was a one-week camp facilitated by the Maya youth organisers in partnership with the University of Manitoba's (Canada) Community Service Learning Programme in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Learning Abroad (Belize); Aboriginal Youth Opportunities (AYO) of Manitoba, Canada; and the University of Liverpool's Power, Space, & Cultural Change Unit (United Kingdom), which represent three groups with pluralistic commitments to decolonial praxis, global solidarity, local community action, and grassroots social movements. Each organisation also includes select members who have connections with activists from the MLA and JCS, making the joint collaboration an easy fit. We began the camp with a traditional Maya ceremony. Maya spirituality is of great significance to our culture. It is a way to communicate with our ancestors, spirits, and Creator to ask for guidance, wisdom, and protection. Hence, it was only fitting that we launched the SOCS gathering by asking our ancestors for guidance and wisdom as we embarked on dreaming about a sustainable and just future for both our generation and generations yet to come.

To set the tone and open the minds of the youth, keynote presentations were given by Indigenous leaders inclusive of Maya Alcaldes (both men and women), Indigenous rights activists (both local and international), Maya spiritual leaders, and other supporters, sympathisers, and associates. In addition, youth speakers from the grassroots movement AYO, of Cree and Anishinaabe nations respectively, shared their personal stories of youth organising and involvement. This stimulated the 15 Maya youth participants to realise the necessity and importance of amplifying and centring Indigenous voices, as well as building solidarity and supporting one another as part of a youth movement. The week-long SOCS camp also included field visits to Maya heritage sites.



*Maya youth, alongside non-Indigenous co-researchers, break to eat homemade lunch during their heritage site visits and village walks as part of the field activities and photovoice project.*

The camp was divided into three key segments: 1) a photovoice project; 2) an arts-based dreaming session; and 3) the conception and development of an action plan that would later be implemented by the Maya youth attendees. For the photovoice project, the 15 youth participants were given cameras to capture images from differing Maya communities throughout Toledo District. The primary aim was to encourage the youth to take photographs of sites, places, and things that resonated within them; in particular, the joys, pains, and dreams they have and experience as both Maya people and as youth.

The ‘Dreaming of Our Future’ exercise was conducted to provide a medium through which Indigenous youth could share their hopes and aspirations. The third key activity was drafting an action plan, which included themes identified in the photovoice and arts-based envisioning exercises. The camp culminated by assembling Maya Elders, men, women, and spiritual healers to listen to the voices of Maya youth. The closing event was one we especially wanted to

resonate with our elders, namely the TAA Executive and other Maya elders who were invited as special guests on the final day. At the closing, which included traditional Maya song, dance, attire, and food, we communicated our action plan. The action plan was presented by Maya youth to the TAA Executive and Elders to demonstrate that the youth have genuine concerns for their communities, and are motivated to contribute to shaping peaceful, more united, and resilient Maya communities.



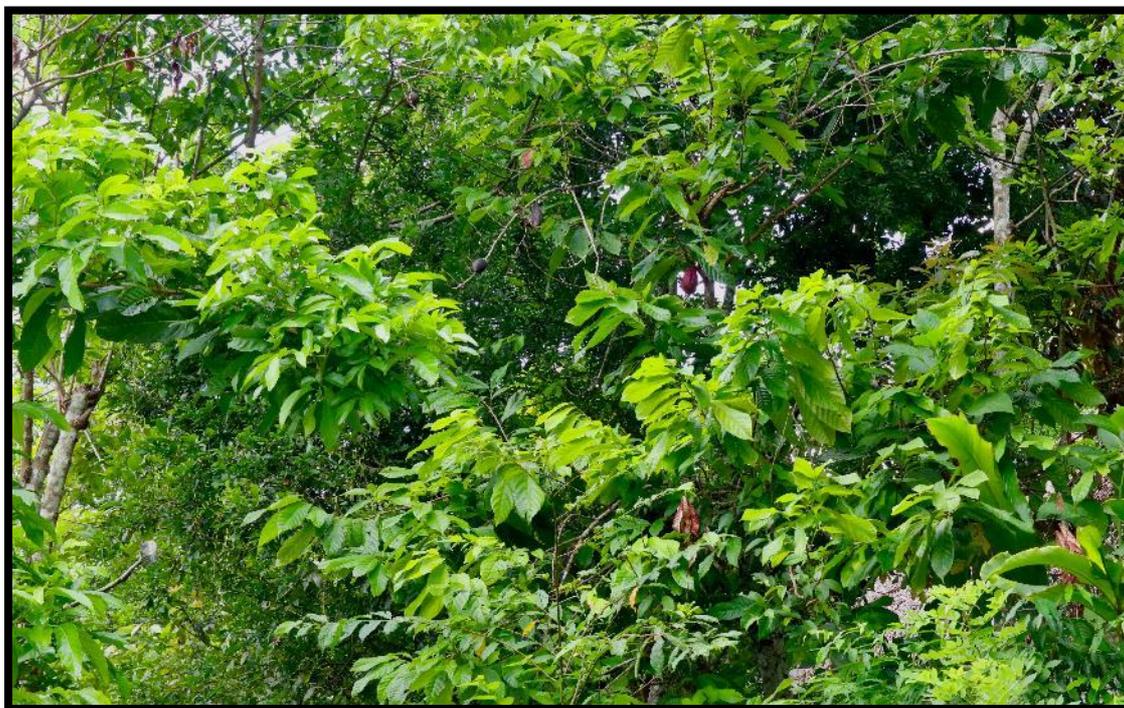
*Maya youth present their photovoice images and dreams on the final day of the gathering to community members before enjoying traditional Maya fare, song, and dance. ‘Togetherness’—‘Se’ Komonil’—is embedded in our culture. It is by working together with our leaders, elders and youth we will be successful in maintaining our traditions, knowledge, and philosophy.*

The closing of the SOCS gathering culminated with a traditional Maya ceremony at Nim Li Punit, a Maya Temple and heritage site. During the ceremony we offered our thanks to the creator and our ancestors for their guidance, wisdom, and protection throughout the initial SOCS gathering, as well as asked for further wisdom as we continue our journey.

## **What were the research activities of the SOCS youth camp?**

### ***Photovoice***

The photovoice project challenged the youth to fully immerse themselves in their communities and to connect with their joys, pains, and dreams. Participants were separated into teams to travel along differing routes across Southern Belize Maya visiting multiple Maya communities. The mobile method was as a means that enabled the youth to see more villages and heritage sites than usual whilst capturing photos and drafting narratives they would like to share with their peers and Elders. The youth, armed with cameras, were able to take photos related to the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats that are being experienced by Maya communities and culture. During the photovoice reflection, one team spoke on the significance of embracing culture and heritage, another addressed the importance of education in liberating one's mind, and one team highlighted the importance of protecting the Earth and the resources She provides.



*Photo taken by Maya youth participant as part of the photovoice project (narrative below):*

*'The cocoa tree is an important element to the Maya life. The cocoa drink is a channel for youth to reconnect with our ancestors to maintain our traditions. Us youths may well accomplish this by gathering with our Elders to enable the continuity of traditional oral knowledge.'*

The youth's stance on cultural revival, gender equality, and environmental protection was adamant. These were themes that continually re-emerged throughout the week-long SOCS camp. In addition, the youth were particularly enthusiastic when they realised their peers had photographed and spoke about similar themes and held concerns in common—they saw they were not the only ones thinking about cultural revival, environmental protection, and being involved. That is, Maya youth at once realised the potential they possess and the change they can bring about if they unit and continue to share their collective thoughts, dreams, and desires about what type of communities, and world, they would like to live in.

### ***Dreaming of Our Future***

The 'Dreaming of Our Future' exercise solicited youth for aspirations about their communities and futures. The SOCS gathering and the 'Dreaming of Our Future' envisioning activities were constitutive components of a larger ongoing initiative by the movement to articulate a dream and course of alternative development for both Maya communities and the land. The dreaming exercise involved art-based methodologies that are informed by communal practices that are part of the Maya *ab'ink*. Participants were posed with the question: 'Where do you see your community in the next 5-10 years?' They were then handed a clean canvas to illustrate, paint, and cast their dreams upon. The dreams shared by the youth throughout the exercise are dreams Maya people have continuously envisioned over the course of our historical and present-day struggles.



*Maya youth, after their arts-based envisioning session, organise drawings and stories into themes and action items. The ‘Dreaming of Our Future’ exercise was modelled after the Maya ab’ink and provided youth the opportunity to share their joys, pains, and dreams.*

The envisioning exercise produced colourful drawings of future dreams about living in peace, taking care of the environment, and practicing Maya culture. In addition, many of the youth drew and coloured scenes recognising the importance of good health, gender just social relations, and the value of critical education. A few drawings also represented the significance of continuing and passing down Maya traditional knowledge and customs. In short, they were dreams of Indigenous resurgence and flourishing.

From the dreaming exercise we, along with the other Maya youth participants, identified six themes for promotion and continued action: 1) Maya youth leadership; 2) Land; 3) Education; 4) Gender Equality; 5) Identity, culture and traditional knowledge; and 6) Health. Using these themes as inspiration, the youth developed action points that proposed ways to either enhance their joys or remedy their pains, as well as achieve the dreams and desired activities they intend to carry out in 2020. The Maya youth, via the envisioning exercise, made clear their awareness of issues faced by their communities and demonstrated they are willing to continue the struggle for Maya rights, recognition, and resurgence.



*Photo taken by Maya youth participant as part of the photovoice project (narrative below):*

*'This picture creates happiness within me, seeing individuals encouraging women to become leaders in their community, because they can be anything. In my mom's generation, she said that females can't just do anything without the father or husband's permission or can't voice their opinions too. Women now attend community meetings, can voice their opinions and become leaders. Sometimes, women execute better than men. To further improve the current situation more spaces need to be created for women. To engage women because being a leader may appear as male work... but men and women have equal rights, so women can be leaders.'*

### **Action plan and future mobilising**

The youth were grouped to initiate conversation on how they could begin to address the concerns pinpointed in the envisioning exercise. From the six themes identified, the Maya youth further narrowed down to three that they felt needed the utmost attention, the three themes they selected are: 1) Identity, Culture and Traditional Knowledge 2) Maya Youth Leadership and 3) Gender Equality.



*Maya youth gather with family members, Alcaldes, and village members to share their action plans and perspectives on a sustainable and just future from their arts-based dreaming exercise. The amplification of young people voices will be beneficial to the future is heard in every corner of the world. However, this is even more authentic for Maya youths. Their energy and spirits are radiating with the desire to be productive Maya people, anchored in Maya philosophy.*

A group felt that the way to build the youth leadership skills of the present Maya youth was for them to collectively learn from their elders. They expressed the need for exemplary leadership in their communities and further stressed on the need for the youth to be taught the skills that will make them morally grounded, committed and full of integrity. They stated they would like to have another gathering focusing solely on what it takes to be an impeccable traditional leader. Another group's action point focussed on gender equality - they thought that they should sensitise the youth on the importance of women in traditional Maya governance and they felt that this should be done through the mediums of workshops inclusive of youths, elders and traditional leaders. They wish to empower young women to become actively involved in the affairs of their communities and inform young men on the importance of giving respect to women. A third group reasoned that they could identify elders in their respective communities who they could invite to give them teachings on various traditional practices, ensuring the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. It will be the hub to build connections between the young and elder. These workshops will be spanned across the year 2020 and will have the youth learning traditional practices and knowledge they may have not had the chance

to learn growing up, honouring our ancestors in the process and ensuring that traditional knowledge survives in this generation and for generations to come.



*Youth visiting the sacred temple and heritage site at Nim Li Punit to raise the Maya flag during the photovoice project of the SOCS gathering. (narrative below)*

*‘The SOCS gathering was consistent in character with the larger Maya struggle in revitalising our culture and ensuring the protection of our land rights and human rights as Indigenous people. The ethos of the gathering was one of harmony, illumination, and respect among youth, with all expressing the importance of such spaces in joining their thoughts, words, and dreams.’*

### **What comes next?**

The Maya youth have spoken. They need to be a part of decision-making processes, even if it is just to be informed about new developments within and across their communities. They have made their mandate. In light of this, what is beyond the initial SOCS camp? Common ground related to the joys, pains, and dreams of the youth has been established. Maya youth organisers are now pursuing the action plans they developed fervently and are willing and hoping to

collaborate with other Indigenous groups to create their own versions of SOCS, and endeavouring to hold an annual SOCS camp in Southern Belize. The Maya youth organisers are also continuing to actively seek guidance from their mentors and elders in the MLA-TAA-JCS. For the reason that, as the Maya voice, it is by *se' komonil*—togetherness—that we conquer every challenge we have—particularly neo-imperialism and capitalism.

Progressive work has already begun on calibrating the ideas generated by the 15 youth who attended the SOCS camp. Holding events developed from the action plan throughout the rest of 2020 are on the Maya youth agenda. Issues related to gender equality, primarily shedding light on women in governance, masculinity, women's rights, and gender stereotyping, have all been made priorities. Secondly, an emphasis on Maya youth leadership and future mobilising was stressed. Meaning, we identified the need for youth to be present at every Alcaldes Assembly and on the Alcaldes Steering Committee. We feel it crucial that youth collaborate with the TAA, and that every community meeting conducted by Alcaldes be more inclusive of youth and women. Thirdly, we identified Traditional Knowledge and Practices as a topic of importance. Our aim going forward is to see youth be informed, included, and even contribute to upcoming projects and workshops that will ensure that Maya knowledge and *cosmovisión* are both revered and transferred.

In sum, the initial SOCS was a success. The projection of another SOCS gathering next year with a different goal to tackle or build upon what was started at this year's camp is now being planned. The Sounding of the Conch Shell camp, which was led and organised by Maya youth, will contribute to the construction of peaceful, united, hard-working and self-governing Maya communities through the continued assembling and mobilising of Maya youth.

## **Conclusion**

To end, the Sounding of the Conch Shell was an apt name for the gathering. It provided space for Maya youth to engage with each other, the reality(ies) of their communities, and to dream of the sustainable and just future(s) they desire, would like to live in, and will co-create. And, just as it has for generations, the conch shell continues to echo through Maya villages and across the landscape of Belize. It reverberates to call community members together for an ongoing *ab'ink*.

The SOCS gathering, in turn, was an *ab'ink* where Maya youth could come together to discuss challenges, strengths, problems, assets, threats, conflicts, joys, pains, happiness, hardships, solutions, and their respective gifts and plans of action related to their dreams. Notably, the conch shell is traditionally sounded by the Alcalde or a person assigned by the Alcalde. And in the case of the SOCS gathering, the Maya youth were handed the conch, afforded the opportunity to come together, and asked to share their vision. In turn, youth directly involved with the MLA-TAA-JCS took up the mantle and sounded the

conch. Markedly, Maya youth across Toledo District responded, as did several of their comrades, compañer@s, and accomplices, both Indigenous and otherwise.

What can be taken from the SOCS gathering, then, is confirmation that Maya youth—Indigenous youth—are mobilising under the shadow of state power and directly in front of capitalist threat, unapologetically, to create spaces for engagement. The *ab'ink* of the Maya youth has begun, their place of listening has been cultivated, and they are already listening to each other. And as they listen and share, they are demonstrating their capacity as Indigenous youth to at once imagine and build *an(Other)* world—a world that honours the past and opens up to the future. A world that is rooted in Maya heritage, culture, and cosmovisión, but also a world that welcomes and provides space for *Other* worlds and—to call back to the Zapatista quote that opened this article—‘*Otherly*’ dreams.

Indeed, in the face of state, structural, and slow violence the Maya youth have responded with dreams, agency, action, and an assertion of their dignity. They have also responded by collectively breathing life into *se' komonil*—community and togetherness. Undeniably, the message the youth have sent is that the Maya are neither static nor to be pitied, but that they have survived, are resurgent, and beginning to build the sustainable and just future they both desire and deserve.

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## **Book Reviews: *Interface*, 12 (1)**

**Reviews editor: Dawn M. Paley**

### **Books reviewed in this issue:**

Yasser Munif, 2020, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. London, Pluto Press. £19.99, 208 pp.

Review Author: Isaac K. Oommen

Masao Sugiura, 2019, *Against the Storm: How Japanese Printworkers Resisted the Military Regime, 1935–1945*, edited by Kaye Broadbent, translated by Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato. Melbourne: Interventions. AU\$25, 164 pp.

Review Author: Alexander James Brown

Samir Gandesha (Ed.), *Spectres of Fascism. Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press. \$33, 304 pp.

Review Author: Rogelio Regalado Mujica (in Spanish)

Daniel Ozarow, 2019, *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt. Comparative Insights from Argentina*. New York: Routledge. \$155, 271 pp.

Review Author: Agnes Gagyi

Andy Blunden, 2019, *Hegel for Social Movements*. Brill: Leiden, Boston. \$28.00, 289 pp.

Review author: Cameron Shingleton

Cas Mudde, 2019, *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity. £14.99, 205 pp.

Review author: Patrick Sawyer

Alyshia Gálvez, 2018, *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies and the Destruction of Mexico*. Oakland, California: University of California Press. \$29.95, 269pp.

Review author: Dawn Marie Paley.

**Book Review: Yasser Munif, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death***

**Review Author: Isaac K. Oommen**

**Yasser Munif, 2020, *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death*. London, Pluto Press. £19.99, 208 pages.**

The war in Syria is perhaps the most complicated ongoing conflict in the world. While a myriad of commentators and random uncles appear to have their analysis down pat, the sheer numbers of factions and changing alliances makes the conflict hard to understand.

Even while following a number of Syrian on-the-ground analysts, this reviewer found it next to impossible to figure out who is the villain, particularly as more external actors, the latest of which is Turkey, get involved.

Perhaps the toughest part of the equation to pull apart is which of the many factions enjoy popular support. As Arundhati Roy mentioned in her analysis of Kashmir in *Listening to Grasshoppers*, one becomes resigned to the fact that the situation is too complicated to simplify for analysis.

Yasser Munif's attempt to untangle this web in Syria is one that is laser-focused on struggles on the ground, and the regime's response to the popular uprising. In a country that is seeing fights between rebel factions –including the Free Syria army as well as various actors like Al Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, Turkey, Russia, Kurdish forces, Druze forces, tribal fighters and of course the Syrian state– Munif analyzes the competing nationalisms at play, and the many uses of power.

In an effort to have a well-rounded view of the revolution, Munif interviews activists in multiple cities (since each city is a microcosm of revolution) and visits several areas himself.

Central to *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death* is an analysis of the different nationalisms at play. Acknowledging from the first page the kind of factioning that happens among those discussing the situation in Syria (he uses the example of regime loyalists attacking a World Social Forum panel he organised), Munif separates organic nationalism that grew in Syria (and elsewhere in the Arab world) against the regime, from the nationalism manufactured by the Syrian state (currently under President Bashar al-Assad, whose father and grandfather preceded him in ruling the area).

*The Syrian Revolution* looks at the nationalism of popular movements in Syria –the ones that led to the temporary freedom of cities like Aleppo from the regime– as continuations of the Arab nationalism that fuelled the independence

movements that were abandoned after the 1967 war with Israel. This kind of nationalism emerged in opposing French colonialism, and had an openness to the definition of Syrian-ness and Arab-ness that allowed many groups to come together to fight the colonisers.

The nationalism of the Syrian state, on the other hand, is one Munif calls “authoritarian, exclusive and neo-colonial” (pp. 105), a nationalism made to maintain the grip of the state. According to Munif, then, the core of the conflict in Syria is one in which “two nationalisms are competing for dominance” (pp. 106).

It is through this comparison of nationalisms that Munif untangles the differences between the regime, revolutionaries and armed actors such as ISIS. The regime has created a rigid definition of nationalism that pushes aside groups such as Kurds and Palestinians.

ISIS hence falls into the same category as the state, imposing their strict ideology on the populace.

Though ISIS does mirror the state in this strict perception and enforcement of nationalism, Munif notes the difference in the two actors’ meting out of violent control: ISIS performs said violence in a highly visible way, whereas the Syrian government does so in a manner that makes them invisible while the actions stay highly visible.

ISIS performs beheadings before high-resolution cameras; however, Assad’s forces imprison people out of sight and use snipers to kill others, leaving no marks of their presence bar the marked bodies.

Finally, there’s the popular movements that began the revolution, who instead push for inclusivity to bring together Christians, Druze, Shia, Sunni and other groups.

The analysis of violence and control is also central to *The Syrian Revolution*, helping to unravel the complicated narratives about the conflict in Syria. From the use of sniper-guarded check-points and punitive bomb strikes to controlling the production of bread; death and population control are the macabre signatures of Assad’s regime.

Whereas revolutionaries tried to peacefully protest, such as during the Volcano of Aleppo shopkeeper strikes in March of 2011, the regime countered with a lethality practiced over decades. Control of industries such as bakeries was tightly implemented so that revolutionaries found it hard to move these businesses outside the state domain.

Imprisonment was (and continues to be) operated at a loss in order to maximise suffering. Bombing, snipers, foreign militias and tribes are deployed by the regime to control and kill populations. These tools are sometimes utilised to enact collective punishment as an example to other areas. The general idea through all of the above is that the regime is demonstrating to everyone that a post-Assad Syria is not possible.

Perhaps one of the most chilling ideas explored in *The Syrian Revolution* is that in this killing zone is that in Assad's Syria, life has no value at all. "A Syrian citizen is not essential to the regime, and as such can be disposed of," writes Munif (pp. 27).

Almost as chilling is the accusation of western complicity in the regime's machinations, from essentialist think-tank analyses, to Eurocentric news coverage and even UN complicity in working with the regime (delivering medicine to the Syrian government and hence making it unavailable to revolutionary-held areas). The sum of the above is a growing acceptance of the genocide in Syria by the rest of the world.

The only thing holding back Munif's analysis is the age-old hiccup of passive actions. Like many analysts, he notes that areas "were bombed" or that people "were killed" without naming those perpetrating the actions. Perhaps this form of writing too falls victim to the machinations of Assad's regime, where the result is seen, but the actor too often, remains hidden.

*The Syrian Revolution* is extensive within just a couple of hundred short pages in that it explores the varied ethnic, tribal and factional dimensions of the revolution while targeting state repression and PR efforts. Though complicating the narrative of the revolution, it brings essential clarity to state apparatuses in the combating of what would have been a democratic, people-centred revolution.

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## About the review author

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## **Book review: Masao Sugiura, *Against the Storm***

**Review author: Alexander James Brown**

**Masao Sugiura, 2019, *Against the Storm: How Japanese Printworkers Resisted the Military Regime, 1935–1945*, edited by Kaye Broadbent, translated by Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato. Melbourne: Interventions. AU\$25, 164 pp.**

From the commencement of Japan's Fifteen Year War in 1931, when the Japanese Kwantung Army staged a bomb attack on the Manchurian Railway in order to justify the invasion of Manchuria, until Imperial Japan's surrender to the Allies in 1945, labour organising and anti-war resistance in mainland Japan was subject to fierce repression by the military and civilian police. With some notable exceptions, most Marxists and labour organisations capitulated to expansionist Japanese nationalism, either recanting their views or joining in class-collaborationist projects such as the Patriotic Industrial Association (PIA), which compulsorily absorbed labour organisations and mobilised them for the war effort.

The new English translation of *Against the Storm*, Masao Sugiura's account of labour organising in the Tokyo printing and publishing industry, demonstrates that in spite of widespread capitulation and ruthless repression, pockets of labour and anti-war resistance did continue throughout Japan's darkest period. In doing so it also helps to explain how Japan's labour and socialist movements bounced back so quickly in the wake of the defeat. The introduction of more favourable labour policies by the Occupation authorities was followed by an explosion in union membership and strike activity and the election of the first short-lived socialist-led coalition government in 1947, as has been documented in English by Joe Moore (2003).

This English edition of *Against the Storm* is a translation of Masao Sugiura's insider's account of the *Shuppankō Kurabu* (Print and Publishing Workers Club), whose precursors emerged in the Tokyo printing industry in 1934 and remained active until 1948, when it was disbanded following the establishment of a strong national printworkers union. The original text, *Wakamono wa arashi ni makenai* (Young People Will Not Give into the Storm) was published in Japan in 1982 based on an earlier 1964 version. Kaye Broadbent edited *Against the Storm* and translated the source text together with Mana Sato.

Broadbent also provides an introductory essay which summarises the development of the socialist and workers movements in Japan in the early twentieth century and describes the deepening economic and social crisis of Japanese society in the 1930s. *Against the Storm* is rounded out with a short interview Broadbent conducted with Sugiura at his home outside Tokyo in 2016,

when he was 102 years old. A useful glossary contains definitions for the many terms which will be unfamiliar to non-specialist readers. The book is published in Australia by Interventions, a new not-for-profit socialist publishing initiative established in 2015 as a continuation of the earlier Jeff Goldhar Project. In Australia's limited publishing marketplace, independent publishing ventures with an explicit political objective are a welcome intervention into the liberal mainstream.

In the preface, Broadbent describes how she came across the 1964 Japanese text in the library of the Ohara Institute for Social Research, Japan's leading research institute for labour history, while conducting research for an essay on wartime labour activism (Broadbent & O'Lincoln 2015). Like Broadbent, I have had a longstanding interest in the untold stories of resistance to Japanese militarism during the war. However, the existing English sources on this history are limited. The publication of a primary-source document of this nature in English therefore significantly expands the information available to labour historians who seek to reclaim Japanese traditions of grassroots resistance in order to counter the continuing stereotypical portrayals of Japan as a nation of conformists who are incapable of standing up to their government.

*Against the Storm* takes us inside the lifeworld of working-class printworkers in 1930s Tokyo. Sugiura helps us to understand the poverty and harsh working conditions they endured, with long hours and often only two days off per month. The workforce was divided between an elite of full-time printworkers and an army of temporary workers who had no job security and even worse pay.

Sugiura shows us how the seeds of working-class culture took root in this environment. On his rare days off, he would attend performances at the Tsukiji Small Theatre, where the police would be in attendance to haul off members of the audience who broke out with the *Internationale* as the performers on stage acted out socialist realist plays about corrupt bosses and workers going on strike. As Sugiura notes, while mostly of working-class background and therefore unschooled in the elite Marxism popular among middle-class intellectuals of the day, the typesetters and printing workers needed an above-average level of education and literacy in order to do their jobs printing Japanese-language texts, which use thousands of Chinese *kanji* characters.

The Print and Publishing Workers Club's first incarnation was as a literary circle called *Ayumi*. By publishing and distributing a magazine of the same name, organisers were able to make contact with workers in different factories and talk about labour issues. This formed the basis of their later organising. Following a 1935 strike at Tokyo Printing, *Ayumi* formed the kernel of a labour organisation and helped to raise strike funds and support striking workers. While the strike was ultimately defeated, the strike committee and literary circle continued to organise, forming a society which was formally established as the Print and Publishing Workers Club in 1937.

The Club tried to help the newly unemployed printworkers find jobs, an activity which forced them to confront corrupt labour hire practices in the industry.

Organisers of the Club had a background in the union and communist movements, but they argued that the workers needed a different type of organisation that would nurture a culture of solidarity among the workers that would in turn help build class-consciousness and open up avenues for further organising.

The Club's focus on grassroots networking and developing the cultural life of its members helps to explain why their resistance remains relatively unknown. Rather than focusing on explicit union demands and risking almost certain arrest and repression, the club focused on building solidarity among the workers in different factories and the publishing industry more broadly. This kind of activity is less likely to leave a trace in the historical record than strikes and other more visible forms of labour activism.

The Print and Publishing Workers Club built connections between workers which enabled them to survive the hardships of their daily lives by organizing as a social club. Their activities included publishing a *haiku* journal, organizing sporting competitions and organising hiking expeditions to the mountains. During the summer months, the club rented a house at the beachside to provide rest and recreation opportunities for the members. The group also operated a lending library including both novels and popular literature alongside Marxist and other socialist texts. These social activities gave them a veneer of legitimacy and helped to minimize police surveillance and repression.

As the Japanese state increased its repression of labour organizing following the intensification of the conflict in China after 1937, labour organisations and the still-legal proletarian parties began to take the increasingly class collaborationist line of supporting the nation in a time of crisis. Unions were forced to disband and joined the Patriotic Industrial Association (PIA), a body established by the government and conservative union leadership to support the war effort. Due to its unique organizational structure, the Club continued to organize at the grassroots, avoiding open confrontation with bosses. They prepared to go underground by dividing their activities into separate organisations, such as *haiku* circles, sporting clubs and women's groups.

The Club was formally dissolved in the presence of Special Police witnesses in line with the directive for all labour unions. While this enabled the organisation to operate covertly, its networks began to fray as conditions worsened and members were sent to the front or transferred to munitions factories. In 1942 the author, Sugiura and leading organiser Shibata Ryūichi were both imprisoned under the repressive Peace Preservation Law and brutally tortured by the police before being sent to prison, where they remained for the remainder of the war. Shibata died in prison in 1945, just months before Japan's surrender, but Sugiura survived and was released in October 1945, along with other political prisoners. He immediately joined the now-legal Japan Communist Party and began organising in the print industry, helping to found the All Japan Printing and Publishing Trade Union in 1946.

In making *Against the Storm* available for an Anglophone audience, Broadbent and Sato have given us new insight into the world of cultural activism and underground organizing during the darkest period for the labour and socialist movement in Japan's history. Today, far-right forces within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are gaining confidence in their quest to rewrite the history of the Fifteen Year War, denying Japanese atrocities and minimizing the repressive nature of the wartime regime as they seek to rearm Japan so that it can play a greater role in foreign military conflicts.

Today, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe openly seeks to revise Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, the so-called peace clause which outlaws war as a means of solving international disputes. In their defence of the constitution, the democratic forces in Japan often point to the terrible violence committed by the Japanese military overseas and the repression carried out against the labour movement at home. However, this pamphlet reminds us that as well as remembering the crimes of the militarist part, it is also important to remember Japan's own traditions of resistance. The model of grassroots organizing, cultural resistance and industrial militancy the Club provides can give us confidence that even as fascism gains strength, it is possible to resist and in doing so to build the foundations of a democratic, peaceful culture.

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## About the review author

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**Book review: Samir Gandesha (Editor), *Spectres of Fascism*.**

**Review author: Rogelio Regalado Mujica**

**Samir Gandesha (Ed.), *Spectres of Fascism. Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press. \$33, 304 pp.**

El panorama sociopolítico contemporáneo ha desbordado los paradigmas establecidos por la globalización neoliberal y su triunfalismo temprano en los años 90's, dando paso a una reconfiguración del terror que desenmascaradamente se dispersa por el mundo.

Las fuerzas políticas que, con diversos matices tanto a nivel del Estado como en el campo social, han sostenido una agenda caracterizada por la violencia en múltiples acepciones, genera que desde distintos sitios se activen fuerzas, tanto por parte de activistas como de intelectuales y académicos, que intentan no solamente capturar su dinámica sino confrontarla. Este es el caso de *Spectres of Fascism*, una obra que se destaca inicialmente por su capacidad de hacer frente al fenómeno al que alude su título.

Desde los años 30's y sobre todo tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la producción académica con respecto al tema ha sido sumamente prolífica, centrándose principalmente en el caso europeo que ha acaparado la mayoría de esfuerzos por múltiples razones, eclipsando el conocimiento de otros espacios. Aún con la gran cantidad de información y análisis que existen, una pregunta sigue siendo pertinente: ¿por qué necesitamos otro libro sobre fascismo?

Tan abierta como se pronuncia, las respuestas pueden ser múltiples, comenzando quizá por la necesidad de comprender las variables que se han manifestado actualmente y que justifica la mayoría de trabajos contemporáneos.

Sin embargo, si la pregunta se efectúa particularmente a *Spectres of Fascism*, la respuesta resulta tan particular como enriquecedora. El texto editado por Gandesha nos ofrece la posibilidad de romper con el cerco disciplinario tradicional que aborda las problemáticas de manera hermética, mostrando una capacidad de desenvolverse de manera no segmentada, al menos no en la obra como totalidad, por los estudios sociales y las humanidades, lo que precisamente corresponde a las exigencias que el fenómeno presenta.

En otras palabras, el pensamiento positivo fragmentario sirve solo para capturar la imagen estática del fascismo sin que esto contribuya a su disolución: *Spectres of Fascism*, inspirado en los desafíos esgrimidos por la Escuela de Frankfurt, constituye una crítica importante a dichas aproximaciones y lo hace a partir de su propio movimiento.

El título presenta ya una interpretación original del problema: los espectros del fascismo (*spectres of fascism*), como concepto, se distingue de las

consideraciones recientes sobre el neofascismo o el posfascismo al indicar que no se trata de un retorno de esta fuerza, sino más bien de su aparición fantasmagórica. Hace eco de las voces de Freud y Adorno, que ha atravesado los puertos migratorios de Europa, donde según el autor nació, y que se desplaza por el mundo familiarmente al hacer evidente el lado barbárico de la civilización que lo caracteriza.

El punto de partida de estos espectros que Gandesha advierte en la introducción, está marcado principalmente por dos acontecimientos del siglo XXI: el ataque a Estados Unidos del 9/11 y el colapso financiero del 2008. En realidad, estos acontecimientos, como base material contemporánea, se comprenden vinculados a los procesos de acumulación de capital expresados por el neoliberalismo, donde el fascismo se ubica como una contra-revolución cuyo relato expresa la crisis de la modernidad misma en su confrontación con la democracia liberal.

A lo largo de *Spectres of Fascism* se sostiene el vínculo con el neoliberalismo, la democracia liberal y los acontecimientos del 9/11 y 2008, además de otro elemento que deambula por la totalidad del texto: el papel de la tecnología. Nuevamente, recuperando la importancia de la Teoría Crítica, en este caso a Benjamin, el libro pone especial interés en el papel de las plataformas digitales y la reformulación que suponen a la industria cultural. Destacar esto es importante porque da paso a la comprensión de la estrategia propagandística del fascismo hoy en día y, al mismo tiempo, advierte los nuevos campos en disputa que pueden ser tomados en cuenta por los paradigmas emancipatorios.

*Spectres of Fascism* está compuesta por tres apartados: el histórico, el teórico y el que aborda los horizontes contemporáneos. Las diversas fuentes que lo nutren se anclan a corrientes críticas europeas. Por el texto vemos la influencia de Trotsky, Schmitt, Gramsci, Deleuze, Gattari, Lacan, Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer y obviamente a Marx y Freud. Esto resulta interesante, porque la obra en general no se concentra en los autores que tradicionalmente aparecen en el panorama de los estudios de fascismo contemporáneos, a reserva de la Escuela de Frankfurt a la que al menos se le suelen hacer guiños en casi cualquier discusión al respecto.

Sin embargo, tal como se apela a la diversidad disciplinaria para el enfoque crítico, resultaría pertinente encontrar en la obra la misma diversidad teórica/epistemológica. Otras corrientes críticas de pensamiento no europeas, seguramente podrán levantar la mano tras leer el libro y presentar otras líneas de entendimiento que nutra el análisis contra el despliegue del fascismo.

La primera parte de *Spectres of Fascism* se denomina 'Historia' y la componen las aportaciones de Ingo Schmidt, Jaleh Mansoor, Alec Balasescu y Tamir Bar-On y sostiene un ánimo crítico que ronda la historia del arte, la arquitectura y las plataformas digitales, consiguiendo una sutil perspectiva histórica.

El trabajo de Schmidt nos ofrece una mirada a las luchas contra el fascismo en la Alemania de los años 20's y 30's a partir de la crítica al Estado, el capital, las relaciones de clase y la psicología social. Mansoor, desde la historia del arte y la

teoría crítica, especialmente recuperando a Benjamin, propone la comprensión del futurismo italiano vinculado al fascismo, mostrando la potencia de la estética. En este mismo tenor, el trabajo de Balasescu nos propone la forma en que la pureza constituye un pilar para el totalitarismo y cómo, a través de la estética de la salvación, se activa políticamente el discurso contra la impureza.

Tamir Bar-On ofrece un análisis comparativo del movimiento Alt-Right y la Nueva Derecha Francesa que se desenvuelve en una perspectiva politológica. El enfoque de Bar-On, a diferencia de los otros capítulos, pierde un poco del perfil crítico que se venía presentando, aunque es el que con más énfasis nos ayuda a entender el papel contemporáneo de las plataformas digitales con su análisis del movimiento Alt-Right.

La segunda parte de *Spectres of Fascism* corresponde a la ‘Teoría’ y comprende los trabajos de Am Johal, Laura U. Marks, Samir Gandesha, Hilda Fernández Álvarez y Gary Genosko. Tiene como objetivo específico presentar interpretaciones teóricas que conformen una constelación capaz de ofrecer claves abstractas para el abordaje del fascismo contemporáneo.

De esta manera, el trabajo de Am Johal basa su texto en el uso político del trabajo de Carl Schmitt por parte de la izquierda en Estados Unidos. Aunque Johal propone un desarrollo crítico, a ciertos momentos se entrapa en las categorías burguesas que explora, de manera que obstaculiza la posibilidad de plantear otra gramática que desborde la clásica división politizadora entre amigo/enemigo.

El aporte de Laura U. Marks constituye una muy potente interpretación de la relación entre fascismo y misoginia, lo que resulta fundamental para los análisis actuales. La autora ofrece una interpretación del trabajo *Male Fantasies* de Klaus Theweleit, haciendo evidente las relaciones de violencia, especialmente con respecto a la mujer, en el escenario contemporáneo.

No solo se puede leer en clave de denuncia, sino como propuesta de resistencia y emancipación, lo que definitivamente contribuye al perfil crítico de la obra. El trabajo de Marks tiene similitudes con los planteamientos de Rita Segato, por lo que puede ser interesante establecer puentes entre su texto y la obra de la pensadora latinoamericana.

El editor del libro, Samir Gandesha, aborda la propaganda fascista en una discusión con Adorno y a la luz del clima político estadounidense. Una de las cuestiones más importantes de este capítulo es que pone al centro el problema de la identidad, crucial para comprender la dinámica del fascismo, además de que se desenvuelve hábilmente entre el plano abstracto y material, lo que nos da una posibilidad más potente de comprender la naturaleza del fenómeno.

El siguiente texto nos conduce por la teoría psicoanalítica clínica, mostrándonos la forma en que el subconsciente tiene participación en el ámbito político, especialmente explicándolo a través de la concepción de la compulsión por repetición. Hilda Fernández Álvarez nos ofrece otra clave teórica al introducir a Lacan en la obra, especialmente con el “significante-maestro” y cómo este se vincula al despliegue tanto del fascismo como al discurso de la izquierda.

El texto de Gary Genosko retoma a Deleuze y Guattari, especialmente el efecto del agujero negro y la resonancia, para mostrarnos la manera en que operan los micro fascismos que teje con el caso estadounidense. El capítulo es importante porque hace evidente la adaptabilidad del fascismo y la manera en que este se ajusta al espacio social, como lo muestra con su explicación sobre los *subreddit*, las comunidades virtuales específicas ligadas a la plataforma de medios sociales 'Reddit'.

El último apartado de *Spectres of Fascism*, denominado 'El horizonte contemporáneo', revisa cuatro locaciones geográficas: Brasil, Canadá, Estados Unidos e India. Los capítulos no plantean un estudio de caso de estos Estados nacionales, sino que los presenta como espacios que ejemplifican, desde distintas perspectivas, el recorrido del espectro del fascismo.

Vladimir Safatle, comienza trazando el panorama latinoamericano y explica cómo las dictaduras en la región sirvieron como laboratorio para el despliegue del neoliberalismo. Precisamente frente a la crisis del modelo neoliberal y el fracaso que significó el intentar incrustarle un rostro humano, como lo ejemplifica el caso de la Francia de Macron, nuevamente América Latina, específicamente Brasil, vuelve a ser laboratorio mundial, esta vez para mostrar la potencia fascista del neoliberalismo que el autor denomina "con rostro inhumano".

Luego, Patricia Barkaskas muestra la relación entre colonialismo y fascismo. Aunque no presenta una identidad entre estas dos formas, su abordaje sobre la situación de las comunidades indígenas canadienses, nos convoca a desafiar los discursos dominantes desde la teoría de resistencia indígena.

Aunque ha rondado buena parte de *Spectres of Fascism*, lo que quizá se explica por su capacidad mediática, el capítulo escrito por Joan Braune, remueve nuevamente el aire americano. Sin embargo, esta ocasión destaca porque no hace un análisis de la personalidad de Trump, sino que se introduce en el corazón de la maquinaria política del fascismo estadounidense a través del análisis de Steve Bannon y la influencia de la Teoría Generacional y el Tradicionalismo en su actividad política.

Ajay y Vijay Gudavarthy escriben el capítulo correspondiente a la India. La profundidad con la que desarrollan su texto, especialmente para los lectores no relacionados con el contexto indio, es la primera cuestión a resaltar. Exploran la relación entre fascismo y desarrollo tejida en la concepción del populismo bajo una importante influencia de los estudios gramscianos.

El horizonte contemporáneo que muestra Johan Hartle para cerrar *Spectres of Fascism*, está basado en el arte y la Situacionista Internacional, especialmente concentrándose en el concepto de 'espectáculo' que le permite realizar una crítica a la izquierda porque su desenvolvimiento, al menos en el ambiente artístico, ha quedado encerrado en las claves liberales, lo que deja la puerta abierta para la emergencia del fascismo.

*Spectres of Fascism* ofrece una ventana distinta para quienes quieran aproximarse al estudio del fascismo más allá de los esquemas politológicos tradicionales.

Su capacidad de analizar el fenómeno a partir de la psicología, la estética, el arte o el derecho, nos otorga una dimensión profunda del problema que rememora los esfuerzos de la primera generación de la Escuela de Frankfurt.

Aunque la obra fue concebida principalmente a través de una red de académicos que se conecta en Norteamérica y que se mueve principalmente con la epistemología occidental, es un esfuerzo considerable por trasgredir la concepción del fascismo incrustado exclusivamente en Europa, como lo apela el concepto que da título al libro.

No obstante, corresponde a los próximos estudiosos ensanchar la senda que abren Gandesh y los colaboradores de la obra e incorporar otras latitudes, experiencias y reflexiones que, siguiendo la intención crítica, no se dedique más a la simple acumulación de material sobre el fascismo, sino que contribuya al posicionamiento contra el mismo que alumbre posibilidades emancipatorias.

### **About the review author**

Rogelio Regalado is professor in the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla and a doctoral student in sociology in the “Alfonso Vález Pliego” Institute for Social Science and Hisotry (ICSyH-BUAP).

**Book review: Daniel Ozarow, *The mobilization and demobilization of middle-class revolt***

**Review Author: Agnes Gagyí**

**Daniel Ozarow, 2019, *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt. Comparative insights from Argentina*. New York: Routledge (271 pp.)**

Daniel Ozarow's new book *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* is a longitudinal study of middle class mobilization and demobilization in Argentina since 2001, when debt default pushed Argentina's GDP down by one-fifth. Unemployment reached 25 percent, poverty soared to 54 percent. As millions of highly educated citizens became impoverished, the middle class was virtually extinguished overnight.

In December 2001 and throughout 2002, an enormous protest movement shook the country, where middle classes joined workers and the urban poor in a movement that came to be known by the slogan *que se vayan todos* (get rid of all of them).

Demonstrators' deep dissatisfaction with the political system, occupations of public spaces, experiments in direct democracy and horizontal decision-making, as well as a proliferation of neighborhood assemblies, collective self-help, and various models of alternative solidarity economy solutions made this movement a significant model for worldwide movements that reacted to the 2008 crisis. Ozarow offers his study of mobilization and demobilization as a contribution that can orient our thought about the future of post-2008 movements.

Following their initial successes (like removing four presidents in two weeks in December 2001), the 2001-2002 movements in Argentina were demobilized and co-opted by the Kirchner governments. Building on the corporatist tradition of Peronism, this regime carried out a reorganization to post-neoliberal developmentalism. The government took over and implemented some of the demands and practices of the movement – it supported the formation of cooperatives, included participative budgeting, nationalized some key industries, and provided significant state aid to the poorest strata in the framework of a “consumption pact” that helped grow economic demand.

These concessions were part of a regime of world-economic integration where the Argentine state made significant efforts to protect national capital's development, and meanwhile sustained a reorganization of dependent integration through commodity exports, based on extractivist industries. This model implied new concessions to export targets like China, or to multinational companies like Monsanto or Chevron, in turn sparking new conflicts with Indigenous groups hurt by the industrial expansion.

According to Ozarow's study, compared to significant state aid to poorer strata, the impoverished middle class started to feel neglected and disregarded. Parallel to the demobilization of protest, the links of solidarity to poorer strata built out during the 2001-2002 protests started to disintegrate. Competition for the same jobs, the lack of targeted state aid, or occasions like piquetero actions where roads were blocked by the urban poor, obstructed middle class workers' commute set the two groups against each other.

In *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt*, Ozarow shows how ideas of solidarity and belief in collective action gave place to political disillusionment, anti-poor sentiments, and a crisis of middle-class values tied to hard work, upward mobility and meritocracy. The Kirchner governments (2003-2015) came to be seen as corrupt, nepotistic, a power that rests on free aid to the unemployed, supported by the taxes of the struggling middle class neglected by the state.

In expressions of these feelings, long-term patterns of race-class divisions were activated that distinguished between white upper and middle classes of European origin, and Mestizo and immigrant workers and peasants – a division known in Argentinian politics as *la grieta* (the crack).

In a Freudian projection, diminishing differences between impoverished middle class and poor workers' positions were overemphasized in symbolic differences like race and moral values. Memories of 2001-2001 protests were rewritten in a negative light. If the significance of middle-class politics in 2001-2002 was manifested in the break of previous neoliberal policies and the installation of a left government through a social alliance with workers and the poor, the new anti-government protests that broke out in 2012-2013 contributed to the coming to power of the conservative and business-oriented government of Mauricio Macri in 2015.

These protests, contrary to those of 2001-2002, did not speak of material claims, but about values: corruption and the lack of meritocracy. Ozarow sees this cycle as a warning sign that progressive middle class movements can degenerate into passivity, moralization and voting for the "lesser evil." In the case of Argentina, this enabled political alliances with upper classes that, from the perspective of the material conditions of the struggling middle class, Ozarow interprets as a form of false consciousness.

During the Macri government, the economic growth promised in the campaign as a result of new foreign direct investment did not happen, while a new monetary crisis resulted in one of the largest IMF loans so far. Ozarow asks whether the new wave of multisectoral protest gaining strength in face of the new economic difficulties could result in a new *que se vayan todos* type of movement.

Building on longitudinal survey data and interviews with people sampled from surveys carried out between 2002 and 2016, *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* looks at how changes in economic status,

participation in collective action, and broader conditions of political opportunity and macroeconomic context relate to each other.

Contrary to the tenet of resource mobilization theory that correlates movements' power with the robustness of their organizational structure, Ozarow points out that the Argentinian movements relied on informal modes of organization that did not build up into broader structures: assemblies acted as "nerve systems" of the protests, solidarity economy worked as a site for social mixing that enabled solidarities, and workplaces where proletarianized middle class workers met each other acted as catalysts of collective action.

*The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* finds that previous experience in collective forms of organization strengthened participation. The author confirms the theory of J-curve and relative deprivation, which expects rebellion to break out when expectations for improvement are suddenly busted: in 2001-2002, the swiftness of economic downward mobility in his data correlates with the propensity to protests.

He shows that the change from individual coping solutions of the 1990's to the political protest of 2001-2002 was due both to the sudden economic collapse and the lack of the regime's political legitimacy, which allowed for middle class sentiments of individual failure to be reorganized as political struggle against an external cause of their misery.

Ozarow closes *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* with a series of recommendations. He advises movements to avoid what he describes as losing sight of their systemic aim, being co-opted by top-down reforms, and then turning against their former allies through an alliance with elites.

Instead, contrary to the Argentinian movements' reluctance to build structured political organizations, movements should sustain structures of mobilization: they should be able to have mobilizing vehicles, tools to influence politics, and autonomous solidarity economy structures that sustain movement capacities and allow for social mixing. They should avoid forms of false consciousness that allure them to ally with upper classes, and maintain solidarities with workers.

The single point where I had questions was the relation between middle class claims and capitalist integration. From what I understand, Ozarow says that middle classes and poor workers share the same anti-systemic interest, and middle class politics that thinks otherwise is a result of false consciousness. In terms of long-term anti-systemic aims this of course makes sense, however in terms of analyzing more short-term dynamics of middle class politics, it obscures the limitations of semi-peripheral middle class development, and the resulting competition for state help.

Within the conditions of systemic integration, the short term interest of the middle class does not necessarily include solidarity with the poor. This is rather a characteristic of politicization reacting to crises, typically followed by a competition against poorer strata for state resources (e.g. Silver and Slater 1999, Janos 2000).

*The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* does not make clear whether by progressive aims he means full anti-systemic struggle, or rather the broadening of social benefits within the conditions of capital accumulation. At points (pp. 253) it seems like he promotes the fulfillment of middle class desires for upward mobility together with an increased mobility of the poor.

Within contemporary hierarchies of global accumulation, the social democratic success of the latter version is impossible not only in semi-peripheral regions, but also in former welfare states of the core. Moreover, if we are to use the force of movements to destroy contemporary forms of accumulation in order to make survival possible in the face of climate crisis, encouraging movements and parties to reassure middle classes that based on their values, they deserve the fulfillment of their desires (pp. 254-256) seems counterproductive.

Middle classes' desire for upward mobility has been a key vehicle of systemic integration; in order to get rid of the system that is threatening to kill us all, middle classes, too, need to disengage with desires linked to systemic stakes. Ozarow's proposals for autonomous infrastructures of solidarity economy where middle classes can mix with other strata and create new common understandings and practices seem more promising in this respect.

On the whole, *The Mobilization and Demobilization of Middle-class Revolt* is an important resource for middle class self-understanding in the context of an escalating global economic and political crisis. Instead of universalizing moments of middle class progressive politics, it shows how these can give in to systemic pressures, and gives practical recommendations for how to avoid such effects by building autonomous structures of solidarity.

At the beginning of a new global crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we see the rise of new wave of solidarity response, this warning could help us focus our attention to sustaining and broadening new structures of solidarity as a means of systemic disengagement and anti-systemic struggle in face of the climate crisis, instead of treating them as temporary measures before everything returns back to normal.

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### **About the review author**

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## **Book Review: Andy Blunden, *Hegel for Social Movements***

**Review author: Cameron Shingleton**

**Andy Blunden, 2019, *Hegel for Social Movements*. Brill: Leiden, Boston. \$28.00, 289 pp.**

If I had to pull a figure out of the air, based on my years teaching undergraduate philosophy, I would guess that approximately half of students who ever try reading the 19th Century German philosopher Hegel are put off by the philosopher's dense, sometimes turgid, prose.

Coming to Hegel for the first time, it's hard not to feel that at least some of Hegel's problems might cease to seem problematic if Hegel had chosen to be clearer about the meaning of the basic terms he was using.

However at a guess I'd say many of the remaining half of first-time readers fall at a different hurdle: Hegel's apparently relentless intellectualism. Big concepts, rather than more immediately recognisable forms of knowledge or experience, seem to be front and centre of Hegel's thinking.

Perhaps a third troubling factor, for readers who get a bit further, is what we could call Hegel's programmatism. Hegel's urge to fit everything together into a grand system, with Hegel's own philosophy sitting at the top of the whole edifice, at times seems to be pursued for its own sake.

Like any good philosopher, Hegel himself was of course not unaware of these potential difficulties. One can easily imagine him returning from the dead after 200 years and explaining why everything in the vast intellectual edifice of Hegelian thought had to be the way it is and no other.

In *Hegel for Social Movements*, author Andy Blunden's main concern is with the second issue I've mentioned: how to show that Hegel's framing of problems is practical, and decidedly political, in an unlikely sense.

The aim of *Hegel for Social Movements* is to take the reader step by step through Hegel's work, with periodic pauses for really committed students to read Hegel's own words. While not quite a representative sample of Hegel's work, Blunden's selections are intended to help readers to appreciate Hegel's contribution as a social thinker.

Blunden's central argument in the book is that Hegel's dynamic, dialectical, holistic understanding of concepts makes his work particularly suited to addressing many types of real world problems, particularly the challenges of social activism, which are clearly the author's passionate intellectual concern.

Probably the most novel interpretative manoeuvre in support of this is the claim that the core interest of Hegel for social activists lies in his logic: that

thunderous super-structure of ideas and thought movements leading from the categories of Being, Nothing and Becoming, up through Essence/Reflection, up to what Hegel's translators call variously the Concept or the Notion.

In interpretative terms, this means Blunden de-emphasises Hegel's first main work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in particular the role of the well-known Master-Servant dialectic. Blunden makes clear that he thinks *Phenomenology* is the wrong place to start for Hegel beginners and shows why, though not without interest, the Master-Slave dialectic has become something of a fetish of 20th Century European thought.

The interpretative framework of *Hegel for Social Movements* also entails re-interpreting the very concept of the Hegelian Concept. Blunden is at pains to demonstrate that Hegelian concepts are fundamentally forms of activity or practice. This opens the door to the wider claim that when Hegel shows us concepts dialectically emerging from one another, coming into contact, falling into contradiction, being opened out and split apart and re-emerging in richer, more complex forms; he can also be taken to be describing the way social movements form, struggle, evolve, devolve, win their struggles through revolutionary action or piecemeal reform, or fade into the background, by being superseded by other movements, through outright failure or by being successfully institutionalised.

With the raw logical mechanics on the table, and their relevance for real world political activity set out, Blunden can then cast new light on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820), where the philosopher addresses himself more directly to social and political questions.

Blunden takes his readers step-by-step through Hegel's *Encyclopaedic Logic* (1830) and his *Science of Logic* (1816), then through the *Philosophy of Right*, at every point trying to dispel the fog of Hegel's style. He introduces relevant examples and provides common sense explanations, together with short case studies from the history of left-wing political movements, all with a view to bringing Hegel down to earth.

Many of the better-known watchwords of Hegel's system are singled out for specific elaboration. If you have heard but never really seen the point of Hegel's famous quip about Napoleon (famously apostrophised as the "World Spirit on horseback") or failed to grasp his rather less vivid idea that "the Rational is the Real and the Real is the Rational," *Hegel for Social Movements* provides a neat refresher.

The main strengths of Blunden's book lay in its clear-minded exposition, or, to put it another way, in the author's ability to bring just the right amount of detail (what Hegelians would call "concrete particularity") to bear on Hegel's rather ephemeral thought structures.

Another strong point of the book is the author's refusal to gloss over moments in the conceptual journey where Hegel seems sketchy, or where his theories have been invalidated by later scientific or historical developments, or where he is deemed to have been a victim of the ideological prejudices of his time. One of

the more amusing passages in the book comes when Blunden comments on Hegel's blinkered view of family life:

When you read the *Philosophy of Right*, I think, insofar as you can follow Hegel's arcane manner of writing, and tolerate his occasional rants against his contemporaries, everything makes abundant sense. . . until you get to the section on the Family. Suddenly one finds oneself confronted by such an atrocious, paternalistic, misogynist prig that one could be forgiven for tossing the book away and having nothing more to do with Hegel (p. 183).

Blunden is good at explaining the often counter-intuitive or unconventional sense of many of Hegel's basic terms, another potential hurdle for readers approaching the philosopher's work for the first time.

Take, for example, Hegel's slightly unnerving habit of talking about the truth of *concepts*, rather than the truth of propositions or sentences, or his knack of revealing one concept as the "truth" of another concept. Or take Hegel's even more unnerving habit of performing the same manoeuvre at a meta-textual level, for instance in claiming that his own logic is "the truth of" his phenomenology. Blunden comments clearly and incisively on this latter *obiter dictum*:

When Hegel says something is "the truth of" some process, he means: this is what the process turned out to be in the end. In the case [of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*], consciousness develops up to the point of absolute knowing ("absolute" because it is secure knowledge, not liable to fall into contradiction with itself when it passes some limit) where it comes to know itself as a necessary process of development, as the work of Spirit, he would say. (p. 68-69).

Hegel's talk of "the Absolute", which might, to the unschooled reader, have sounded like a vaguely totalitarian exercise in concept-mongering, appears instead as a not uninteresting exploration of the limits of ideas in a non-standard, thought-challenging idiom. In fact, Blunden's book abounds in clear-minded, low-key explanations of this sort.

*Hegel for Social Movements* shares some of the flaws of Hegel's own work, particularly a tendency to grand systematising that makes the reader feel at times that the phenomena of thought and history are being shoe-horned into an overall conceptual scheme, rather than the conceptual architecture genuinely taking shape from out of the thought or history under discussion.

The relevance of Hegel's concepts to the dilemmas and challenges of social activism is at times asserted rather than shown. And crucially, there is no detailed attempt to outline a distinctively Hegelian approach to contemporary problems of social activism.

There is no mention, for instance, of the hyper-mediated world of the Internet and the dilemmas it raises for activists trying to initiate open-minded debate or get out the vote or organise politically effective street protests: a pity, given that “mediation” is one of the strongest and most persuasive of Hegel’s conceptual themes. Likewise, *Hegel for Social Movements* makes no mention of the dialectics of the environment and the economy that are so often posed in shallow terms by the mainstream media, though one can well imagine contemporary climate activists of an Hegelian bent having a much more telling take.

In his exposition of the *Philosophy of Right*, and particularly Hegel’s logic, Blunden’s book is organized into sections which begin with slightly formulaic phrases (“And so we come to the concept of X. . .”). At times, the reader may feel that the connection between the new logical or social theoretic category and the one that has preceded it is more rhetorical than substantial, let alone a matter of logically unfolding concepts out of themselves. Though again, this is a failing that many readers will encounter when reading Hegel’s work itself.

At times, Blunden really does find himself between the rock of ideas and the hard place of Hegel’s style - a perennial problem with much continental philosophy generally. There is a sense that Hegel, and Blunden following him, seems at times to be taking rather simple thoughts or ideas that don’t go more than one or two steps beyond the meanings implicit in our basic conceptual vocabulary, and dressing them up in grandiose philosophical clothes. In some cases, Hegel simply seems to garble common sense for the sake of sounding profound and difficult. Thus it is to some extent with his discussion of the categories of “purpose” and “intent” in the *Philosophy of Right*, glossed by Blunden in his chapter on Hegel’s Theory of Action.

*Hegel for Social Movements* makes a brief attempt to deal with a major methodological objection to Hegel’s dialectical idealism in a short section on logic and history. The problem is essentially that deriving the major concepts of social theory such as class or the legal system or the state through a method of quasi-logical deduction gives the concepts far from satisfactory historical or empirical or practical purchase.

There is no denying that Hegel took a fairly high-handed approach to this issue. He states, for example, in the *Philosophy of Right*:

The historical origin of the judge and his court may have had the form of a patriarch’s gift to his people or of force or of free choice; but this makes no difference to the concept of the thing. . . [Similarly] if we ask what is and has been the historical origin of the state. . . all these questions are no concern of the Idea of the State. (*Philosophy of Right*, 258n, 219n, quoted in Blunden, p. 189 - 90)

Objections to this way of proceeding essentially come from two quarters. First from non-Hegelian Marxists, who tend to argue that Hegel’s concept of both the state and of class were simply too thin for the purpose of either interpreting or

changing the world of bourgeois modernity. The second come from Weberian sociologists, who point out that without due attention to the historical forms that the exercise of state power has taken, without specific historical studies of the way different forms of state power are legitimised, one's concept of the state is likely to forfeit a great deal of explanatory heft. Again, because Blunden's aim is to provide a kind of advanced primer, rather than a definitive answer to Hegel's most sophisticated critics, the depth and interest of these debates can hardly be broached.

The most notable shortcoming of *Hegel for Social Movements*, however, is that Blunden doesn't quite succeed in showing that Hegel, let alone Hegel's logic, is an indispensable manual of progressive politics.

Helping social activists make sense of Hegel is rather different from showing that Hegel can or should be considered an "operational manual" of social activism, whenever activists are dealing with a group of people organised around an idea or a social project of any kind. Likewise, digging up novel lines of Hegel interpretation in terms of the notions of activity and praxis, or, as in the final phases of Blunden's book, in the work of Hegel's latter-day Soviet exponents, though in itself a worthwhile intellectual exercise, hardly seems guaranteed to enhance social activists' ability to change the world. (One notes that, apart from in these later sections of the book, Blunden makes little reference to the voluminous history of Hegel studies: a reasonable omission, given that the book aims to speak to an audience of politically active beginners.)

Does Blunden succeed in bringing clarity to Hegel's work for first time readers or, say, readers who have given Hegel a go in the past and been beaten back by all those teutonic abstract nouns? The short answer is yes.

Does Blunden succeed in showing readers that Hegel is indispensable for anyone trying to understand how politically committed social action works? The short answer here is not quite.

In order to have done so, Blunden would have had to do more than contextualise the inchoate (and at times downright objectionable) features of Hegel's philosophy. But is there any getting around the fact that Hegel is almost infinitely interpretable, and hence very difficult to take in the tangible sense required for finite action in the social/political world?

That said, *Hegel for Social Movements*, in spite of its limitations, is a fundamentally sound and interesting work of Hegel interpretation. Blunden does indeed make a strong case for suggesting that Hegel can be of assistance to activists in understanding, if not exactly solving, the "wicked problems" that are the main object of their struggles.

In a way, Hegel emerges from Blunden's interpretation in a positive light, but not one that is all that different from other great thinkers. Hegel's achievement is not so much the (always ambiguous) one of changing the world, but the equally interesting feat of deepening and widening the very possibilities of change.

And in opening out Hegel's achievements to first-time readers of a progressive political bent, *Hegel for Social Movements* has succeeded in making those possibilities accessible in a world in which sophisticated frameworks for conceptualising politics are just as necessary as ever.

### **About the review author**

Dr. Cameron Shingleton is a member, and former Head, of the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy. His research interests include the history of philosophy, ethics, aesthetics and the philosophy of technology.

## **Book review: Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today***

**Review author: Patrick Sawyer**

**Cas Mudde, 2019, *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity (205 pp., £14.99 paperback)**

Thirteen years ago, Cas Mudde wrote in the introduction of his classic text on *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* that the radical right party family was still a “relatively marginal electoral force in the vast majority of European countries” which would often leave his students in disbelief (Mudde 2007, pp. 1-2).

As history has shown, much has changed since then, giving a new sense of urgency to the question of the far right in the 21st century. The objective of *The Far Right Today*, Mudde’s most recent publication, is to take into account these new changes and provide a condensed, easy to read manual summing up decades of research on the far right.

In *The Far Right Today*, Mudde develops his thesis of the “fourth wave” of the far right. The fourth wave pertains to the mainstreaming and normalization of far right politics in the modern day. Events such as the 9/11 attacks, the great recession, and the refugee “crisis” (Mudde disagrees with this framing) helped bring far right politics into the mainstream by way of journalists and politicians who increasingly discussed the issues, adopted the frames, and pursued the policies once exclusive to the radical right.

This contrasts with the previous three waves in Europe, wherein far-right politics had generally been seen as out-of-bounds (with some exceptions) for mainstream parties and politicians and their parties were left to inhabit the political space at the margins. In the fourth wave, the borders between the far right and the mainstream become increasingly difficult to distinguish.

Drawing on his own and others’ research, Mudde lays out several shifts that are currently underway among right wing parties during the fourth wave. First, he argues, it is becoming increasingly acceptable, or even unavoidable, for mainstream parties on both the national and local level to enter into coalitions with radical right parties as many cases from Italian and Austrian electoral history demonstrate.

As far right parties gain in the polls, the feasibility of reacting to them with a policy of demarcation or an official *cordon sanitaire* becomes less tenable, as the incentives for mainstream parties to cooperate with them increase. An example of this can be seen in the recent scandal in Thuringia, Germany when the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was condemned for collaborating with the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party in order to undermine a coalition government headed by *Die Linke*.

A second, parallel phenomenon is the emergence of successful radical right politicians from within traditionally conservative parties, such as with Trump in the United States, as well as the complete transformation of conservative parties into fully fledged radical right parties, as with *Fidesz* in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland.

These events testify not only to the relative success of radical right politics in the contemporary era, but also to the extent to which traditional conservative parties have moved rightward. Under their leadership, the parties of Sebastian Kurz in Austria, Nicolas Sarkozy in France, and Teresa May in the UK all witnessed significant shifts to the right on issues like immigration, integration, and terrorism.

As the parties themselves change, so do their voters. *The Far Right Today* argues that the electoral base of the far right is becoming more diversified and that the bloc of “typical” moderately-educated white male voters once believed to be the linchpin of the far right base in the 1980s, is becoming less of a reality today.

Part of the explanation for this lies in several Western European radical right parties, such as the French *Front National* (FN) and Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), positioning themselves as “worker’s parties” in the midst of the social democratic parties’ move towards “third way” politics, which allowed them to pick up votes from the broader working and middle classes who felt alienated by this ‘betrayal’.

Aside from an overview of emerging trends over the past decade, anti-fascist and anti-racist activists will find that *The Far Right Today* has much to offer in terms of strategies of resistance to far right parties and movements.

While Mudde himself admits that the academic literature has not pointed to a definitive “silver bullet” to stopping the rise of these parties, he posits that a number of strategies have been successful in certain national contexts. Insofar as the state is concerned, a straightforward ban on more extremist parties has shown to be effective in many cases, though Belgium's *Vlaams Blok*, which had been found guilty of violating anti-racist legislation in 2004, simply bypassed this by forming a slightly more moderate party, the *Vlaams Belang*, only several weeks after.

Some success in fighting the far right can be had with a policy of demarcation, wherein all parties decide to ignore the radical right party and forbid their members to cooperate or engage with them, thus refusing them the possibility of presenting themselves as a respectable opposition party. Given national contexts in which radical right parties are still small in size and where all political parties and major media outlets agree to the strategy, the rise of the radical right can be limited to some extent. That being said, the *Vlaams Belang* and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) are notable exceptions of cases where these parties have only increased in prominence despite a formal *cordon sanitaire*.

While there is a brief mention in *The Far Right Today* of the impact that civil

society actors and anti-racist movements have had on the rise of the far right, much of this focused only on a small sub-set of activities.

Other successful community efforts to resist the far right, unfortunately, were passed over for a focus on the more media-friendly anti-fascist demonstrations which turn violent.

The online activist group Sleeping Giants, for example, has led an incredibly successful campaign targeting Breitbart News' advertising pool, which Steve Bannon himself has admitted had greatly damaged the business model of the "home of the Alt-Right."

Moreover, the work done by anti-racist activists to reveal the extremist views held by members of the far right (the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center comes to mind) and put pressure on their employers and administrators of the social media platforms that host their content are also of importance in the struggle against the far right.

That being said, *The Far Right Today* was never meant to be a *Rules for Radicals*-style manual for anti-racist activism. The large number of anti-racist actions excluded from consideration is of course understandable if it is seen as a way to avoid distracting from the main message the book has to offer.

Another surprising exemption from the chapter on the repertoire of responses to the radical right is any mention of his colleague Chantal Mouffe's (2018) theories concerning the role that left or "inclusive" populism may have in stemming the ascent of the radical right and fostering a democratic reinvigoration. An engagement with these ideas and the way in which Mudde's theories diverge from Mouffe's could have been a rather fruitful addition to the book.

*The Far Right Today* ends with twelve theses on the fourth wave that summarise the mountains of research accrued on this topic over the past two decades. That the rise of the far right is once again a major issue confronting democratic societies today testifies to the importance of this book.

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## **Book review: Alyshia Gálvez, *Eating NAFTA***

**Review author: Dawn Marie Paley**

**Alyshia Gálvez, 2018. *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies and the Destruction of Mexico*. Oakland, California: University of California Press. \$29.95, 269pp.**

Alyshia Gálvez' 2018 book *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies and the Destruction of México* approaches changes in foodways in the country since the infamous North American free trade agreement was signed in 1994. It looks primarily at the transformations in the ways Mexicans eat, but also at the systems of food production, distribution and marketing and how they've changed over the past decades.

In *Eating NAFTA*, Gálvez calls on fieldwork carried out between rural areas in the central Mexican state of Puebla and the state of New York; she reflects on inequality and high-end dining; and she dives into statistics regarding food-related illness among Mexicans in Mexico and among those who have migrated to the United States.

*Eating NAFTA* begins with the story of Aura, a woman from a small town in Puebla who lived for years in New York City. While in the US, Aura slowly stopped eating the "beans, tortillas, eggs, squash, herbs and occasionally meat or chicken" she grew up with, and began to increase her consumption of meat and soft drinks (pp. xi). After returning back to her village with a fair amount of savings, Aura opened a convenience store. But instead of enjoying economic stability later in her life, she found herself battling diabetes and fearing for the health of her son.

Gálvez makes clear that Aura's story is far from exceptional. Throughout the book, Gálvez does an excellent job of shifting the narrative away from blame and individual choices towards the systems that determine the availability and accessibility of healthy food for Mexicans at home and in the United States.

She writes: "Economic transformation has not only entailed development in the broad sense but has also specifically promoted the market penetration and affordability of processed foods while simultaneously stunting the market reach and affordability of basic subsistence, minimally processed, and locally produced foods" (pp. 100).

Diabetes and other diet related illnesses have increased worldwide in past decades. *Eating NAFTA* makes the case that Mexico has been particularly hard hit. This is, of course, of particular interest in the context of the coronavirus

pandemic, as many of the complicating factors for those who become extremely ill and even die from COVID-19 are related to diet.

Gálvez convincingly proposes that we “...consider the massive proliferation of diet-related illness as a kind of structural violence—a result of policy decisions and priorities” (pp. 6). She goes on to make a compelling argument that this structural violence makes it more difficult for people and communities to make demands regarding the economy and the political system.

The transnationalization of Mexican foodways, which has tended to pull the poorest people away from healthy, locally grown food while flooding the market with imported and processed food, undermines not only community health, she writes, but also local autonomy.

The centrality of corn to traditional diets in Mexico provides the consummate example of this transformation, and is a major theme of *Eating NAFTA*.

Gálvez describes how the concentration of the production of tortillas and cornmeal, as well as massive corn imports from the United States, have meant “Older methods for processing and distributing corn are no longer practical or the norm for most people” (pp. 41).

Among other things, this means landrace (*criollo*) corn is increasingly under threat in Mexico, which now imports 40 per cent of its corn from its northern neighbor.

The diet related implications of importing so much corn from the US go beyond the partial destruction of Mexico’s food sovereignty. “...what we see as a result of increased US corn in the Mexican market is increased consumption of processed foods that use corn byproducts (mostly syrups and starches) accompanying a decline in consumption of tortillas” (pp. 51).

According to Gálvez, “The idea that Mexican corn is inherently inefficient is a recurring theme, traceable back to the conquest era –but in the last few decades it is US corn production that provides the counterpoint to Mexico’s, shaping ideas about progress and modernity” (pp. 68).

*Eating NAFTA* points out that the labor time needed to produce a ton of corn in the United States is 1.2 hours, while in Mexico it is 17.8 days. That said, most of the corn grown in the US “cannot be consumed directly, the way Mexican corn can be eaten fresh (*elotes* and *esquites*) and for grain (in the form of masa for tortillas or tamales)” (pp. 68-69). *Eating NAFTA* goes on to examine in some

detail how arguments around productivity and efficiency lead to a kind of faulty logic regarding where corn should be grown and by who.

One of the most original sections in *Eating NAFTA* is about the Pujol paradox, named after Pujol, chef Enrique Olvera's elite México City restaurant.

I will admit to sometimes waking up at night thinking about Pujol's *mole madre*, which I tried when a friend visiting from New York City took me to the fancy Polanco restaurant.

Our meal at Pujol that day cost nearly \$600, well above the monthly minimum wage in Mexico. Gálvez suggests that the elevation of corn-based cuisine "can only attain such a high value globally by being lost to those who customarily ate it" (pp. 30).

Her argument that the erosion of ancestral foodways via land concentration and industrialization are necessary precursors for traditional foods to be prepared by elite chefs is persuasive. These chefs, she writes, "rationalize their stratospheric prices as the cost of their salvage of methods and ingredients that would otherwise be unappreciated and in the process of slipping away" (193).

Another section of the book is devoted to understanding how food technologies and processed food connect to women's reproductive labor (which also tends to be invisibilized through the celebration of world renowned, often male, chefs).

"The production of tortillas for an average household prior to the mechanical grinding of corn required about forty hours of labor per week, including the nixtamalization of corn with mineral lime, grinding of corn, kneading of masa, and hand shaping and cooking of tortillas," writes Gálvez (pp. 153). Thus, the mechanization of tortilla production was "a linchpin for the imagined liberation of middle-class women" in Mexico (pp. 153), although of course, the reality for many women in Mexico today looks quite different.

The overall tenor of *Eating NAFTA* is one of terrible loss; even the subtitle suggests the book is about the "destruction of Mexico." But at times it seems Gálvez glosses over the resilience and ongoing presence of non-corporate food systems that reach back hundreds of years, especially in urban environments like the city of Puebla.

Her descriptions of Puebla as a super modern city bearing a "striking resemblance to Los Angeles, California" where citizens use cards to pay for everything and "the car is king" (pp. 92) are specific to the city's exclusive south (especially Angelopolis and Lomas de Angelopolis), though that is not made clear. Rather, Gálvez seems to suggest that beyond Puebla's colonial old city, wealthy areas make up most of the urban area. This is a far cry from what things look like on the ground in the metropolitan area of over two million.

While indeed Puebla does have gated, upscale suburbs and a massive esplanade featuring exclusive, US style malls, it is also home to huge amounts of social housing and low and middle income highrises and walk-ups, as well as dozens of markets and outdoor *tianguis* that bring together fruit and vegetable venders,

butchers, fishmongers and food vendors in cash-only settings, sometimes outside the purview of state and local governments.

A much richer and more textured account of popular life and especially the organization of food markets in the city of Puebla is Sandra C. Mendiola Garcia's 2017 book *Street Democracy: Vendors, Violence and Public Space in Late Twentieth Century Mexico*, which is surprisingly absent from Gálvez' bibliography.

There were two moments while reading *Eating NAFTA* that I felt less than sated, desiring that the author provide more explanation and deeper detail. Both came as Gálvez used the same formulation to shyly advance two of her most provocative ideas.

First, she writes, "It is possible that the countries the United States has interfered in the most, with the highest level of migration to the United States and the highest levels of foreign direct investment, will demonstrate the highest rates of diet related illness" (pp. 96).

Later, she goes on to note, "It's possible that being treated as Mexican in the United States is as detrimental to health as any potential genetic predisposition, as time in the US is a predictor for the onset of disease" (pp. 164).

Further development of these hypotheses is crucial, but unfortunately *Eating NAFTA* doesn't pursue either. That said, Gálvez' strong arguments and the data she presents about politics, economics, migration and the transformation of foodways; as well as her explorations into many other aspects of food in Mexico, make the book well worth reading.

"We can see that the aftermath of NAFTA is not just a changed food system, but in fact a revision of the relationship between the state and its people," writes Gálvez. This quote provides a powerful example of *Eating NAFTA's* synthetic, accessible, and critical scholarship, which doubles as a call to action for researchers and activists to consider food and diet as an integral part of Mexican political economy.

## **References:**

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