

# Commentary

## The social psychology of protest by *Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans*

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Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans offer a comprehensive overview of key orientations and debates in the field of the social psychology of protest. They set out to assess how social psychology has attempted to make sense of why people protest, moving from older frameworks emphasizing grievances, through analyses underlining efficacy, to recent emphasis on identity, identification and emotions, and the importance attached to the correspondence between 'I' and 'we' necessary for collective action. Research challenges are highlighted, in particular the extent that protest continues despite failure, and the need to better understand the impact of wider sociopolitical contexts on routes to protest.

This is a very insightful summary of the major orientations shaping international approaches to the social-psychological study of protest. Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans highlight the question of identity and processes of identification that dominate this literature, and what emerges as a tension between 'identification' and 'efficacy' routes to action. Their article reminds us of the extent that social psychology has grown up with 'identity'. This is a concept born in American 'national character studies' of the Second World War, later entering sociology through 'reference group theory', embraced by symbolic interactionism and finally becoming a veritable intellectual steamroller during the period of ethnic politics in the US (Gleason, 1983), from there entering the sociology of social movements, largely overshadowing an older paradigm built around organizations.

This shapes the overarching framework evident in the literature discussed, and possibly the authors could address this more directly. Identity effectively

occupies the intellectual space once taken up by organization, and in a sense it responds to the same questions: how do people interact, what is the relationship between 'I' and 'we', how do they produce continuity over time. Surprisingly little attention is given to the question of action in this literature, possibly because it is conceptualized as 'protest'. This reflects a largely American approach to social movements, where the paradigmatic form of action is 'protest', leading to a relative lack of engagement with the labour movement and other forms of action that do not sing 'We shall overcome'.

While movements clearly protest, there is a sense in this literature that action is reduced to protest. Conceptualized in this way, action is approached fundamentally in terms of its continuity. But is action 50 years ago still the same as action today? The master concepts 'protest' and 'identity' in this literature underline its theoretical commitment to such continuity.

Is this a problem? It might be. 'Protest' is typically associated with the 'march', a form of rhythmic, embodied assemblage of bodies, movement and sound, with a significant historical debt to quasi-military municipal parades, marching bands and corresponding forms of order (Edensor, 2010). If we explore the way space is occupied by social movements today, we encounter quite different logics, from the experiential grammar of giant puppets (McDonald, 2006) to sound systems, dance and events that produce new meanings, new temporal experiences and senses of how the world is and might be (Thrift, 2008). How adequate is the term 'protest' as a tool to allow us to meaningfully construct research agendas to engage with this reality? Is

'identity' an adequate tool to explore the senses, experiences of recognition and strangeness, of attachment and detachment?

This literature remains committed to a core principle, namely that action requires 'collective' identity, and this is constructed by a correspondence between the 'I' and the 'we'. But today we encounter forms of action that seem more shaped by a logic of encounter and event than a logic of 'we', from 'flash mobs', 'networked individualism' or the forms of ephemeral mobilization associated with the Internet and alter-globalism. These are potentially critical transformations.

One approach to identity that could perhaps enhance the engagement with these realities is the work of Alain Touraine, which is surprisingly little present in this literature. He argues identity is not fundamentally structured in terms of 'I' and 'we' (a legacy of the way identity came to replace organization), but through a tension between experiences of creativity and domination (Touraine, 1988). This tension is evident in the labour movement between forms of action that seek to transform the workplace and those that seek rupture. A skilled worker will never destroy his/her tools, they are instruments of creativity, while unskilled workers experience the workplace as one of domination, and will often respond by withdrawal (ex drug use) or sabotage. From this perspective, the space of movement is one between autonomy and vulnerability, creativity and suffering. Contemporary experiences of suffering (Wilkinson, 2005) appear surprisingly absent from the social psychology of action.

This literature retains an important debt to Parsonian categories, framed as an opposition between 'instrumental' vs 'expressive' action and the discussion of 'efficacy' vs 'emotion' paths. Here

again, we might ask if this is adequate today to explore the experience flows associated with action. The way we walk in the street and construct embodied rhythm, experience time and feel transformative possibility is surely more complex than something either 'expressive' or 'instrumental'. Clearly action may be instrumental and also expressive, but at times the literature explored suggests that action is a work of art painted in two colours.

Science, of course, needs to reduce the complexity of reality. But many branches of science produce new concepts to name newly discovered realities. This, when assessing this literature, needs to be considered. The reliance on a cluster of concepts such as identity, protest, 'I' and 'we', efficacy and emotion, suggests an extraordinary continuity to social life, and in particular action. Almost as if the dancers and puppets in the street were not there, and had never come to replace the municipal marching bands.

## References

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