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Protest: Forms, Dynamics, Functions

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Contents

THE LITERARY AESTHETICS OF PROTEST

Introduction: Protest: Forms, Dynamics, Functions

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1. Introduction

In cogently framing the scope of this volume, it may be useful to begin with a few questions: What is a "protest" or what is meant by "protest"? What forms does it take and how have these shifted in accordance with time, place, and context? That is, where and when is a protest – for political, social, cultural, or economic reasons – carried out? Who or what does a "protest" confront and for what types of reasons? What effects does it have on the structures, institutions, or the current state it confronts? Do the effects involve transformation? Are protests always formed by a homogenous group? And in which contexts is it possible to speak of, or reflect upon, forms, dynamics, and functions, as well as the aesthetic dimensions of "protest"?

According to Michel Foucault, it is in the form of (political) struggle that individuals confront an authority that has subjugated and subjected them to a form of power that exerts control by way of structuration. Therefore, political struggles are directed "against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission" (Foucault 1982: 781). Furthermore, "the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much 'such or such' an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power" (ibid.). In this reading, protests are a visible form of struggle against a structuring form of power or, to re-phrase it, struggle *for* the power to shape the discourse on a structuring form of power. Power, of course, works in multiple directions and the visible liquefaction of power via altered means of communication, reduction of horizontal structures, and increasingly disobedient publics have empowered hitherto powerless minorities. Traditional political power, in the Weberian sense, can no longer be contained by the institutions of old, a fact that led Moisés Naím to contemplate the question of power's demise (or, rather: its changed nature) in *The End of Power* (2013). The increasing ubiquitousness of protests against and challenges to existent power structures on a global scale has led commentators to question whether we live in an "age of protest" (cf. Friedman 2016; Kauffman 2018).

More generally, "[s]ocial, economic and political conditions" have triggered forms of protest that address inequality, fears, or political and economic grievances that are often "highly confrontational" (Courpasson/Vallas 2016: 1) or even violent within their specific contexts throughout the world. Different forms of protest, activism, civil disobedience, and resistance have repeatedly aided protesters in gaining political rights, agency, a voice, and have sometimes led to betterment of social conditions that often are felt to be unbearable. These protests are most fre-

quently put forward through the means of language – the primary mode of self-expression for human beings. Sometimes and in some frameworks, however, protests may also be carried out in or through visual works of art or even by means of silence in conjunction with a certain mode of action (cf. Spivak 1988: 103-104).

This volume on *Protest: Forms, Dynamics, Functions* has its origins in an academic symposium held in 2019 as part of the 25th-anniversary celebration of the Faculty of Humanities at Chemnitz University of Technology. The symposium was organised by the Department of English and American Studies, and set out to discuss the questions raised above by exploring forms, dynamics, and functions of protest within the frameworks of networks and politics, textuality and literature, ideology, social media, language and speech, political activism *and* narratives, civil disobedience (one of the most prominent concepts within the general discourse of protest), commemoration, party-activism, and the politicisation of citizens against migration policies – as the events in Chemnitz in August 2018 have most disturbingly illustrated. Accordingly, the emphasis on "protest" in our volume's title is intended to equally address the historical, local, and global significance of protests within a wide range of cultural and political, national, and regional contexts, and the extensive impact, perhaps also effect, of "protest" on understanding and reflecting processes of power relations and political change in a wide variety of arenas, eras, and areas. Consequently, the high diversity of papers collected here reflects the vast extent of the terrain but does not aim for a strict, stream-lined conceptualisation of protest. Rather, within the already enormous and constantly growing output of literature on protest and social movements, this volume finds its place among the collections of case studies on manifestations of public dissent and a contemporary historical embedding and multi-disciplinary analysis of such cases.

Protest is a very broad term. It is first and foremost an umbrella term for the repertoire of direct actions collectives can employ to publicly voice their dissent. As this volume will illustrate, it can be applied to very different modes of political participation and take various forms of political action, as individual protest events, for example, can easily transform into movements – the field to which protest is most often applied and associated in the area of academic research (cf. Doherty 2009). How a protest is viewed and the commentary it generates largely depends on the degree of legitimacy the media and the non-protesting majority accredit to it. The use of violence is a crucial factor in this process. What was announced as a rally or demonstration might easily become a riot. Uncalled for brutality on the part of the state might alter the light in which a hitherto illegitimate protest is viewed by the wider public. It is worth noting in this regard that the collection of measures included under strategies for civil disobedience in almost all cases entail some form of physical force and oftentimes defy the state's monopoly on violence. Successfully navigating the grey area of repertoires that are approved in the eye of the public despite their use of physical force is a task many