The Role of Imagination in Protest

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Abstract

Recent literature on social movements assigns a central role to the imagination (Haiven & Khasnabish 2014; Moody-Adams 2022; Schwartz 2021). One way for activists to further their aims is through dramatic, confrontational acts of protest. I argue that transcendent imagining (Kind & Kung 2016) is key to understanding what protest does *qua* act of speech. A common approach to protest sees it as a speech act of condemning some feature of the socio-political world and appealing for change. While this is a helpful general template for what vocal dissent is, it is insufficient to explain what gives protests their political power. Specifically, it overlooks the fact that effective protests usually create a theatrical spectacle of norm breaking. Displays of defiance lift a constraint on how we imagine our socio-political world, and so allow us to begin reshaping it.

1. Introduction

Recent literature on social movements assigns a central role to the imagination. Most notably, Michele Moody-Adams (2022) argues that imagination is responsible for creating the cultural narratives, concepts and civic aesthetics that form political societies. On Adams' view, progressive social movements imaginatively transform our communities to create space for justice. In a similar vein, Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) emphasise the transformative power of the 'radical imagination', or the visionary courage to imagine a changed social world. Avshalom

Schwartz (2021) argues that reinventing our institutions requires the 'critical' political imagination, which reveals that we can transform our socio-political reality, and the 'creative' political imagination, which allows us to rethink how we organise ourselves.

One way for social movements to further their aims is through dramatic, confrontational acts of protest. In this article, I argue that the imagination is key to understanding what protest does *qua* act of speech. I advance two claims:

(1) Effective protests often create a theatrical spectacle out of defying a social or political norm.

(2) Such protests aim to spark their audience's imagination about what the socio-political world can be like without the norm that they defy.

The idea that imagination plays a critical role in driving social change is gaining traction, yet the specific imaginative force of protest remains under-theorised within the philosophical literature. Here, I argue that protests contribute to the project of transforming the social world by putting up bold and theatrical displays of defiance. Effective protests do not only engage an audience's rational capacities. They also make our participation in insidious norm-governed practices starkly obvious and empower us to imagine new possibilities for action.

In §2, I assess a common approach to protest: that it is an act of condemning some feature of the socio-political world and appealing for change. I argue that while this approach provides a helpful general template for what a protest *is*, explaining the distinctive political *role* of protest requires us to also pay attention to the spectacles that protests create. In §3, I argue that spectacular protests lift a constraint on how we imagine the world. By breaking a norm publicly and theatrically, they empower us to escape our socio-political reality; that is, they allow us to engage in what Amy Kind and Peter Kung (2016) have termed a 'transcendent' use of the imagination. In §4, I argue that part of the political power of spectacular protests comes from their ability to spark transcendent imagining in an audience.

2. Protest as evaluation and prescription

It is both simple and intuitive to think of protest as an act of negative evaluation and prescription for redress. Consider an example:

> *Hijab burning*. In September 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was detained for a minor violation against Iranian hijab laws. She was killed in police custody. In response, several Iranian women took to the streets to burn their hijabs publicly.

The protestors in this case clearly condemned the cruelty with which Amini was treated. It also seems plausible that they demanded an upheaval of the laws and enforcement mechanisms that oppress Iranian women.

It is common for analyses of protest to take an evaluative-prescriptive approach to how protest communicates. For example, Rawls (1999) famously sees civil disobedience as appealing to a reasonable and publicly intelligible conception of justice. He claims that civil protestors identify an apparent departure from what justice requires and petition for it to be corrected. Kimberley Brownlee's influential (2004, 2012) account of civil disobedience also involves evaluation and prescription. On her view, if a law conflicts with one's sincerely and seriously held moral commitments, then conscientiousness demands that one must protest to communicate one's backward-looking rejection of the law and forward-looking desire for change.

Chrisman and Hubbs (2021) advance a notable example of an evaluative-prescriptive approach to protest by adapting tools from speech act theory. Their innovation is to analyse protest by using normative functionalism, which characterises a speech act type as a function that changes what others are entitled or obligated to do (Kukla and Lance 2009). Chrisman and Hubbs view protest as involving dual speech acts of evaluation and prescription, and they understand these in terms of their functional effects on others' normative statuses. On their account, a protestor entitles others to evaluate the object of their protest negatively and imposes an obligation on an authority to

respond to their prescription. *Hijab burning*, for example, changed how Iranians can and should act: it empowered others to condemn Amini's death publicly and it pressured the regime into briefly suspending the enforcement of hijab laws (Engelbrecht and Fassihi 2022).

While the evaluative-prescriptive framework provides a plausible general template of what vocal dissent is, it does not pick out the distinctive role of protest in movements for social change. Effective protests often do more than evaluate and prescribe. They also create dramatic, confrontational spectacles. Consider the following counterfactual example:

> *Hijab rejection*. In response to Mahsa Amini's killing, Iranian women mail letters to the international media arguing that the hijab mandate ought to be removed.

Hijab burning and *hijab rejection* make the same evaluation and prescription: they condemn Amini's killing and demand change. Both also perform the same normative function: they entitle the public to express opposition to the hijab mandate, and they obligate the ruling regime to provide some response to their prescription. Yet there is a crucial difference in what each act does. *Hijab rejection* uses descriptive speech to make a patient, rationalistic plea to its audience. *Hijab burning* stages a dramatic scene by breaking the oppressive norms on women's clothing that the regime violently enforces. *Hijab rejection* petitions, while *hijab burning* confronts. The evaluative-prescriptive framework needs to be supplemented to account for this difference.

Protests that confront play an especially important role in social movements. Against Rawls, Moody-Adams argues that progressive social movements do not only appeal to a conception of justice that is intelligible to public reason. Rather, they move us closer to justice by transforming what we find reasonable (2022: 20). Protests often combatively push these transformative aims: for example, protests that vandalise or destroy public monuments commemorating racist figures help us to create new narratives for what justice requires (2022: 118). Robin Celikates (2016) also objects that Rawls' view underestimates the transformative effects of civil disobedience. Effective demonstrations are not mere appeals to conscience; instead, as Celikates perceptively notes, their

symbolic power increases when they are confrontational and disruptive. At its best, protest enables citizens to participate in politics outside of a prevailing socio-political order.

What gives protests confrontational force? Consider another pair of examples (the second of these is, again, counterfactual):

> *Art attack*. In October 2022, two activists from Just Stop Oil threw a can of tomato soup at a Van Gogh painting at the National Gallery in London. One said, 'What is worth more, art or life? Is it worth more than food? More than justice? Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people?' (Gayle 2022).
>
> *Art disparagement*. Just Stop Oil activists stand outside the National Gallery in London and hand out flyers arguing that we need to devote more resources to the future of the planet than to the preservation of art.

Like *hijab burning* and *hijab rejection*, *art attack* and *art disparagement* make the same evaluation and prescription: they disavow the present treatment of the environment and advocate for change. Yet *art attack* is designed to be provocative in a way that *art disparagement* is not. An evaluative-prescriptive approach can explain why both these cases should count as acts of protest, but it will overlook a central communicative purpose of *art attack*: to reveal the perversity of our disregard for the natural environment when compared to our reverence for works of art. *Art disparagement* provides reasons for change. *Art attack* creates a dramatic spectacle with the aim of making a deep-seated conviction glaringly obvious.

More precisely, three features explain the contrast between the acts of protest in *hijab burning* and *hijab rejection* or *art attack* and *art disparagement*:

> *Imaginative feature*: A protest has *imaginative force* when it aims to engage its audience's imaginative capacities, and not merely their cognitive capacities.
>
> *Affective feature*: A protest has *affective force* when it aims to cause a strong affective response in its audience.
>
> *Theatrical feature*: A protest is *theatrical* when it uses staged scenes, and not merely descriptive speech.

Protests can display some or none of the above features. I claim that protests which display all three form a distinctive class that deserves theoretical attention. I use the term *spectacular protests* to describe this class. In the rest of the article, I focus on how the imaginative force of spectacular protests contributes to their confrontational force.[1] I argue that spectacular protests make blatant the existence of norm-governed social practices, especially those that we engage in unreflectively, lack the power to break out of, or ignore out of self-interest. The use of theatre in protest shakes us into imagining alternative possibilities for the socio-political world.

3. Effective protests aim to spark their audience's imagination

Spectacles in protest are a tactic for getting through to an unyielding audience. Even though *art attack* did not (and was not intended to) damage Van Gogh's painting, it provoked shock. The protest impacted even those of us who are committed to preserving the environment because it revealed a contrast in our psyches. Watching soup thrown at a priceless painting causes us to feel horror precisely because we view the painting as priceless. Meanwhile, sights of environmental destruction fail to have the same effect. The use of theatre not only shows interlocutors that our norms around the environment must change, but also gives us the ability to see how our beliefs and practices reinforce these norms.

The importance of theatre to protest has a parallel in cases of interpersonal conflict. Consider:

(i) *Dirty dish pile*: A woman finds that she is always the one left cleaning up after her husband's dinner. She brings this problem up with him on multiple occasions, and he is always apologetic, but there is no change in his behaviour. Fed up, she leaves a large, obtrusive pile of soiled dishes in the sink.

[1] Note that protests do not need to be imaginative to have imaginative force. Well-worn techniques for protesting can be just as effective – sometimes more effective – than new ones. For example, UK Suffragettes and Indian freedom fighters used repetitive hunger strikes to drive home the urgent stakes of the issues they were fighting for. By doing so, they allowed us to identify and rethink the importance we assign to, e.g., the women's vote, or self-rule.

The woman in *dirty dish pile* is unable to make her husband appreciate the gendered imbalance in their household responsibilities through gentle means, but the pile of dishes she creates puts it on clear display. Patient calls for change are often ineffective at rooting out deeply entrenched patterns of behaviour. Putting up a show of norm-breaking is an attempt to make such patterns blatant.

Spectacles in protest, I argue, are devices that can make us imaginatively envision our socio-political reality in the absence of some existing norm. There are many ways of taxonomizing types of imagination in the literature. Kind and Kung (2016) advocate for a distinction based on how the imagination is used. *Instructive* imagining allows us to learn about the world: as, for example, when a customer pictures whether a sofa she is about to purchase will fit through the door at home. *Transcendent* imagining allows us to imaginatively escape the world: as, for example, when a reader engages with a work of fiction. These two uses of the imagination at first appear incongruent. It is puzzling how the same faculty can both teach us about reality and enable us to be free of it. Kind and Kung explain the difference by pointing towards the number of constraints one places on imagining. Instructive imagining is heavily constrained by reality, while transcendent imagining is not.

I argue that spectacles of norm-breaking can spark a transcendent use of the socio-political imagination in their audience. Note that Kind and Kung's typology is not uncontroversial. Other approaches carve up types of imagination differently.[2] However, the framework of imaginative constraints is especially useful in thinking about the effects of norms on our behaviour. How we can and do act is restricted by existing norms, and protestors create theatre to make it vivid how pernicious they believe these restrictions to be. Putting up a dramatic display of a norm being broken aims to free us of the imaginative constraints on our behaviour that the norm creates. A

[2] For example, Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) distinguish between *creative imagination*, or imagination that involves new ways of combining ideas, *sensory imagination*, or imagination that creates perception-like experiences, and *recreative imagination*, or imagination that makes us experience the world from a new perspective.

spectacular protest communicates with an audience by seeking to engage their imaginative capacities. It does not create a total representation of an imaginatively transformed socio-political world; rather, it provides inroads into imagining a world in which we do not let pernicious norms guide our actions.

To see how spectacular protests spark transcendent imagining in their audience, note that we often engage in norm-governed social practices unreflectively. Consider our norm of revering works of art, for example. Until *art attack*, most of us had not even thought to question the fact that we devote immense resources to art conservation. Schwartz (2021: 3329) identifies norms as a part of what he calls the 'constitutive' political imagination, i.e., imagination that maintains and legitimises our existing socio-political reality. In Kendall Walton's terminology, Schwartz's constitutive political imagination is *spontaneous* and *non-occurrent*: we do not consciously direct it, and it does not occupy our explicit attention (Schwartz 2021: 3330; Walton 1990: 13-14).[3] In other words, we can uphold normative constraints on our actions without actively recognising that we have the power to remove them. Spectacular displays of defiance aim to get through to an audience by exposing how their actions are guided by some imagined norm.

Theatrical protests like *hijab burning* and *art attack* make an audience experience the world without a seemingly pernicious norm, which makes them more potent at revealing its imagined character than non-theatrical forms of social criticism like *hijab rejection* and *art disparagement*. Sally Haslanger makes a similar point to Schwartz: under the influence of an ideology, we often fail to recognise how our actions are guided by socially constructed norms (2021b: 28). Even those who find an ideology problematic can act in ways that conform to it. For instance, she points out that those who are conscientiously egalitarian still tend to overburden women with domestic labour

[3] Walton (1990: 13-14) contrasts *spontaneous* imagination with *deliberate* imagination (i.e., imagination that we do consciously direct) and *non-occurrent* imagination with *occurrent* imagination (i.e., imagination that does occupy our explicit attention).

(2021a: 14). Our need to coordinate with those around us can trap us into complying with socio-political practices unreflectively. Combating oppressive norms requires more than changing how we think: we must also be able to see how we can act and coordinate without them (2021a: 51). The husband in *dirty dish pile* is both aware of and apologetic about his contribution to perpetuating a gendered imbalance in household responsibilities, yet it takes a dramatic disruption for him to appreciate how he is engaging in problematic behaviour. Criticism of a norm, no matter how incisive, is often insufficient in getting its imagined character through to an audience's consciousness in a way that alters action. Spectacles, on the other hand, can.

Spectacular protests can also effectively target those who are unable to break out of norm-governed practices due to oppression. Imagined social norms place constraints on how we view our place in the world. For instance, even though restrictions on women's dress have no objective basis, women in Iran are not free to wilfully disregard the hijab mandate. We often experience oppressive norms as normal. Even if we recognise that they are unnecessary, they become part of our everyday lives. Haslanger's work on the effects of ideology is once again instructive here. She points out that we participate in unjust social structures in ways that are not always obvious to us, even when we are the ones disadvantaged by them; in other words, the subjects of oppression contribute to enacting the norms that sustain their oppression (2021a: 31). How we view our social roles is heavily restricted by how the socio-political world is presently constructed. Social practices are difficult to root out in part because we lack the ability to imagine our reality differently.

While some audiences for a protest are simply unreflective, others have self-interested reasons to wilfully ignore the existence of a pernicious social practice. This is another species of opposition that spectacular defiance can target. Many of us exhibit *affected ignorance*: our emotional ties to a practice can make us choose not to examine whether it is wrong or make us unwilling to change it even if we believe it to be unjust (Krishnamurthy 2022: 309; Moody-Adams 1994).

Rational persuasion is often insufficient to convince those with self-interested motives. Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr.'s activist methods were based on this observation. In King's view, combating affected ignorance requires more than to engage the cognitive capacities of one's audience (Krishnamurthy 2022: 313). Insidious social practices are often perpetuated by those who reason in bad faith. As Moody-Adams eloquently puts it, reasoning and argumentation are insufficient means to convince those whose perspective on the social world is distorted by bias. Sparking their imagination, however, can make them experience things from a new point of view (2022: 132).

4. The imaginative aims of protest make it an effective tool for social change

Transcendent imagining is linked to creativity. By sparking a use of the transcendent imagination in their audience, spectacular protests enable them to begin creatively reconstructing the socio-political world. Kind (2022: 39) argues that individuals can make transformative discoveries by imagining without some of the usual constraints on a conceptual space. Consider one of her prime examples, the theory of special relativity. Einstein's discovery was prompted by a thought experiment in which he pictured himself travelling alongside a beam of light. This exercise required him to remove constraints arising from Maxwell's then-prevalent view that space is filled with luminiferous ether, a medium that allows light to propagate. Asking what the light beam would look like led him to come up with special relativity. Spectacular protests have the creative potency of Einstein's experiment: they allow us to imaginatively picture the socio-political world in the absence of some insidious norm. They prompt creative discoveries about alternative ways in which to organise ourselves.

The close ties between transcendent imagining and creativity are why spectacular protests are effective in targeting the first kind of unyielding audience: those who engage in social practices unreflectively. We need not only to reject social norms, but also to see that it is possible to act and

coordinate without them; in other words, that we only imagine them to restrict our behaviour. By putting norm-breaking on display, spectacular protests can make us appreciate that a norm-governed practice has no objective foundation. We see that it is socially constructed and amenable to change. The realisation that we can act in our socio-political world without its present normative constraints empowers us to creatively restructure it.

The potential for spectacular protests to cause creative discoveries is also what makes it effective in targeting the second kind of unyielding audience: those who lack the power to reject pernicious social practices. The imaginative experiences that protests prompt can be freeing. Iranian women cannot presently dress as they please, but *hijab burning* reveals that it is possible for them to claim greater agency. When protests reveal that our norm-governed actions can be otherwise, they empower us to imagine social and political possibilities for ourselves that existing norms do not allow. They give us the push that we need to begin shaping our reality differently.

Targeting the third kind of unyielding audience, those with affected ignorance, is tricky. King's solution to affected ignorance involves using rationalistic appeals for change in combination with shame. In his view, shaming dominant social groups can transform them morally. Shame makes those with affected ignorance see themselves as failing to meet moral standards, see oppressed groups as having the moral authority to call them out on their failures, and thus, appreciate the need for action (Krishnamurthy 2022: 316). However, shame has its limitations. Meena Krishnamurthy draws attention to Stokely Carmichael's criticism of King: shame can only transform those who have a conscience, and much of the United States does not (2022: 326). Krishnamurthy argues that the presence of institutional racism even today is evidence that shaming tactics often do not work.

Imaginative devices like spectacle add another valuable weapon to an activist's arsenal against affected ignorance. By confronting self-interested groups with a spectacle of norm-breaking, protestors force them to reckon with the fact that they are emotionally invested in a malignant

practice. *Art attack* distresses us: we do not want to look at a treasured Van Gogh being desecrated. Indeed, spectacular protests often cause a strong backlash; for example, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has described a case similar to *art attack* as nothing but reprehensible vandalism (Jacobo 2022). Affected ignorance is incredibly resilient, and the tactic of confronting it dramatically is not without its limitations. Protest methods should be chosen carefully and must be coupled with other methods for achieving social change, such as consciousness raising. Yet spectacles of defiance have the potential to make those with affected ignorance reflect on their own biases. Effective protests make self-interested audiences imagine possibilities for action that they would rather not see. If audiences feel horrified by this experience, they may also start thinking about why.

Political theorists appreciate the importance of spectacle, transcendent imagining and creative thinking to social movements. Erin Pineda (Çıdam et al. 2020) discusses disobedient demonstrations in the US civil rights movement, which she claims aimed to transform individuals and institutions by making it possible for us to envision our social structures differently. Demonstrations enable protestors to dramatically express dissent, but they are not mere cathartic substitutes for real change. They play the crucial role of forging new relationships and new forms of agency. These ideas parallel the argument that I have made in this article: by breaking norms publicly and theatrically, spectacular protests allow us to imagine new possibilities for how we act and coordinate.

5. Conclusion

On a prevalent view of protest, it is an expression of negative evaluation and prescription for change. I have argued, however, that the imaginative aims of protests are key to what gives them confrontational power. Effective protests use theatrical spectacles of norm-breaking to spark

transcendent imagining in their audience. In doing so, they enable us to make creative discoveries about new ways to act and coordinate.

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