

Activism

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As the core element of social movements, activism attracts attention not only from anthropologists but also from political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, performance studies scholars, and historians. In political and legal anthropology, activism offers a vital optic on topics such as power, the state, hegemony, historical consciousness, identity, and the interplay of formal and informal political practices. Activists target a wide range of entities, including governments, corporations, legislative and judicial institutions, and international trade or financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, as well as entire economic systems such as capitalism and socialism.

While anthropological scholarship on activism has surged since the late 1990s and early 2000s, political scientists and sociologists have been more numerous and visible theorists of social movements, at least with respect to large-scale comparative research. Sociologists and political scientists are more likely than anthropologists to declare dichotomies between grand theory and case studies, to favor large surveys, and to construct analytical typologies (such as conventional vs. unconventional activism or high-risk, high-cost vs. low-risk, low-cost activism). Comparative research focuses on issues such as the effects of labor unions and political parties on organized popular action in Europe (where unions and parties are relatively strong) and the United States (where they are weaker). In contrast, anthropologists largely avoid such macrocomparative or typological approaches in their own work (though they often appreciate their value), tending instead to offer theoretical contributions through ethnographic case studies of particular mobilizations, organizations, activist networks, and the social and political fields from which they emerge.

Whatever their discipline or approach, scholars of activism need theoretical and methodological versatility in order to grapple with expanding political mobilizations that rapidly innovate. This has been the case in the years since the 1980s, which have seen an upsurge in political activism expressed through protest or social movements. A key question for scholars has been how to explain this upswing and how to connect it to the broader issue—theorized by scholars such as Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilley—of the periodicity of social movements. Some scholars argue that contemporary grassroots political movements have resulted especially from rising disenchantment with formal political parties and institutions or with representative democracy. Indeed, many assert that, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, contentious politics in the form of collective mobilizations has become more important than traditional political parties (Stekelenburg et al. 2013). The 1994 Zapatista rebellion in

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Chiapas, for example, sought new genres of democracy but not political party formation. Anticorporate activism intensified in 1995 when human rights groups mobilized globally to condemn the Nigerian military government's imprisonment and execution of writer and environmental justice advocate Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists who led struggles against Royal Dutch Shell's oil drilling in the Niger Delta. Nearly two decades earlier, Wangari Maathai founded in Kenya an environmental movement allied with progressive democratic forces (the Green Belt movement); in 2004, she became the first African woman and the first environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Global trade negotiations, rainforest destruction, national debt burdens, biopiracy, austerity programs, large land grabs, genetically modified crops, sweatshops, water privatization, and dam construction projects are just some of the foci of spirited protests in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the United States, the late 1990s and 2000s have seen growing activism in the form of Black Lives Matter, Occupy, the Tea Party, and campaigns for a living wage, immigration reforms, and environmental and gender justice, among other causes.

These US mobilizations display tactical diversity and many intersect with global or transnational activisms, such as those of the Arab Spring, Spain's *indignados*, and other protests against austerity or precarity in Europe and beyond. Egypt's Tahrir Square activists, for example, helped to support protesters in Wisconsin during the winter of 2011, when tens of thousands of people from many walks of life demonstrated for weeks against state budget cuts, privatization, and restrictions on labor organizing. The Occupy movements that emerged in the United States a few months later borrowed tactics from earlier "alter-globalization" movements, protests against the 2003 war in Iraq, and campout movements in Spain, as well as from protesters in Tahrir Square. And Occupy encampments themselves quickly spread across the globe. Predecessor alter-globalization activists in the global North "had come into contact during previous periods of solidarity projects in places such as Nicaragua, Chiapas, Guatemala, [and] Brazil" (Juris 2008, 63). Earlier decades as well saw activist excitement and inspiration spread across national and continental boundaries; activists from France, for example, addressed groups in New York in 1968, and protesters in Mexico distributed leaflets condemning the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Understanding such developments requires attention to historical and cultural particularities as well as to the larger-scale processes subsumed under labels such as neoliberal globalization or crises in global capitalism.

The study of activism in social movements, perhaps especially in Europe and North America, has seen several conceptual turns: an economic turn in the 1960s, a political turn around the same time, a cultural turn in the late 1980s, a transnational turn in the 1990s, and affective and performative turns in the late 1990s and 2000s (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). Partly in reaction to earlier depictions of social movement participants as irrational, immature, deluded, fanatical, deviant, or alienated, dominant North American approaches in the 1960s and 1970s deemphasized protesters' perceptions, shared beliefs or cognitions, group consciousness, and bonds of solidarity and instead simply assumed the rationality of their viewpoints and examined resource mobilization and structural determinants of social movements (the economic and political turns). In such

approaches, resources were not just material but also moral, cognitive, organizational, and technical.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, Europe saw the rise of “new social movement” theorizing centered on collective identities of ethnicity or race, place, gender, sexualities, generation, and lifestyle, and these theorizations were part of an early phase of the cultural turn. Since the mid-1980s, scholars have challenged instrumental metaphors of rational economic calculation and purposive formal organizations, highlighting the role of meaning making, emotion, solidarity, and activist motivations that are not confined to pursuing material gain (the cultural and affective turns). Resource mobilization theorists eventually acknowledged that their framework insufficiently addressed such themes (Edelman 2001). Subsequent approaches more fully incorporate additional themes such as embodiment and activism’s artistic and performative dimensions, including aesthetics, the poetic function of language, music, stylistic devices such as voice quality and tempo, and co-construction of meaning through interacting with audiences.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, sociologists, social psychologists, and political scientists in particular incorporated transnational activism into their work and combined attention to political opportunity, framing, and mobilization. Some key scholars in this field (here a network of mostly North American and European political scientists and sociologists) concluded in 2013 that subsequent criticisms and refinements had yielded no new dominant paradigm; indeed, they declared a “paradigm vacuum” at the very moment when social movements were once again becoming historically salient (Stekelenburg et al. 2013). At least two of the understudied topics that these scholars highlighted are precisely those that anthropologists are well positioned to address: first, the interpersonal relations through which shared grievances, emotions, and identities are formed and articulated, and, second, how wider historical contexts shape the internal dynamics and life histories of networks, coalitions, movements, and countermovements (including how individuals decide whether to participate, how they assess tactics, and how coalitions emerge and break down). Inference or generalization from the kinds of nonstandardized, fine-grained case studies that anthropologists prefer, however, remains a challenge for comparativists.

Direct action and indirect action

Many scholars of activism have embraced a conceptual distinction between indirect political action and direct action such as blockades, sit-ins, and workplace occupations. An example of nonviolent direct action came in June 2015, during a period of heightened visibility of racial injustice in the United States. Shouting “this flag comes down today!” and reciting passages from the Bible, Bree Newsome, a thirty-year-old African American filmmaker, scaled a thirty-foot flagpole and removed a Confederate battle flag at the state capitol in Charleston, South Carolina. When she reached the ground, Newsome was promptly arrested, flag in hand, and images of her feat quickly circulated around the world through social media, YouTube, and national and international news coverage. Newsome’s flag capture had been organized in collaboration with

environmental activists who knew how to scale oil-drilling rigs and who taught her how to climb a tall pole. Her action resonated widely, partly because it occurred the day after President Obama eulogized the charismatic Reverend Clementa Pinckney, a black state senator who had been murdered a week earlier, together with eight other parishioners, by a white supremacist in a historic black church in Charleston. For some, Newsome became a celebrated symbol of individual heroism, hope, and courage—while others called for her prosecution. Acts such as Newsome’s capture of a flag that symbolizes institutionalized racism become part of public debates that help to propel social and political change, and they also become focal points of opposition to change. Indeed, efforts to remove other symbols of the Confederacy (e.g., street names, monuments, statues, and plaques) fuel white supremacist resistance. Some activists—on the right as well as the left—turn to direct action when they believe they have little or no capacity to accomplish their ideals through influencing the decisions of formal political institutions (Graeber 2009).

Indirect political action, by contrast, relies on intermediaries such as legislative and judicial bodies to enact reforms, though it still aims to heighten public awareness of and sympathy for change. The climate-change marches that occurred in more than 160 countries on September 21, 2014, are examples of indirect political action and were timed to coincide with a week when some 120 world leaders assembled in New York for a historic UN summit on climate change. The People’s Climate March in New York, for example, was a joyful multigenerational, multiethnic, family-friendly event that saw hundreds of thousands of demonstrators from over 1,500 organizations marching peacefully—and legally—through the city’s streets. To mark the occasion, activists brought out a 3,000-pound melting ice sculpture that spelled out “The Future,” a dinosaur float called “BP Rex,” oil-pipeline-piercing swordfish bikes, a wooden replica of Noah’s Ark, and a 300-foot-long blue banner representing a river, along with colorful costumes, drums, horns, and dancing.

Social movements often combine direct and indirect action. Tactical diversity is both a strength and a focus of intraorganizational contention. The twentieth-century US civil rights movement, for example, included intense internal debate about tactics and it combined use of freedom rides, bus boycotts, sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, marches, litigation, legislative lobbying, voter registration drives, and more. Today parallel discussions take place among activists in the Black Lives Matter networks that emerged in 2014 to address police killings of African Americans.

Activism, anthropology, and historical particularity

It is common to view the right to protest as a component of normative liberal citizenship—part of the bundle of individual rights and duties that accompany formal membership in a community or polity. But anthropologists look beyond the normative and explore as well the lived experiences of activists, including the friction or constraints that protesters encounter; the formation of discursive communities and counterpublics; activists’ tactical repertoires and modes of recruitment; and protest as

interactive performances in which participants make claims against those in positions of power or authority, build solidarity, and address internal movement conflicts.

Scholarship on activism reignites long-standing debates in anthropology about engagement with the “real world,” or about articulating the stakes of academic research for wider audiences. But, more than that, the anthropology of activism is about taking a political position (or not) and about how doing so can strengthen or weaken scholarly analysis or can contribute helpful information to a social movement’s own internal debates and self-critiques. Today these wrangles center on topics such as epistemology, research ethics, subjectivity, ontology, and how the realm of “the political” itself is defined (including the ways it may be reconceptualized to extend beyond familiar modernist notions of the state, political parties, nongovernmental organizations, and international governance institutions). Some anthropologists explicitly reject dichotomies such as theory/political action, activist scholarship/cultural critique, and textual practices/“real-world” practices, arguing instead that theoretical innovation emerges through political engagement and collaboration. Others entirely avoid aligning themselves politically with their research participants or collaborating with them.

Social movement theory uses concepts such as discursive opportunities, framing (interpretive processes of bracketing what is relevant in mobilizing grievances), and media resonance (popular receptivity to a particular frame) when analyzing activists’ strategies for conveying their messages to wide audiences. These strategies are high-stakes efforts, since they help to shape how events are remembered by participants, bystanders, opponents, and wider publics. As images and claims are framed and reframed, they are subject to multiple interpretations, transpositions, and shifts of affective valences. How social movements resonate with audiences is shaped especially by popular associations with earlier political events and by their representation in mass media.

The spring 2015 violence in Baltimore, Maryland, for example—touched off by a police killing of a young black man—triggered memories of what had happened in that city in the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968. Poverty, discrimination, police brutality, and inadequate housing, schools, and health care were grievances that drove widespread nonviolent protests and occasionally riots in 1965–68. Baltimore and some other cities (e.g., Detroit and Newark) that experienced the worst property destruction during the demonstrations and riots of that period remain economically distressed. Public opinion is sharply divided about causes and possible solutions. For some activists in 2015, the growing US protests invoking the slogan “black lives matter” and “I can’t breathe” (the last words of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man killed by New York police) signaled the start of a multiracial Black Spring (echoing the 2011 Arab Spring)—a political mobilization that reflects a perceived political opening for policy changes to address institutionalized racial inequalities. Its leaders call for police accountability and declare that the movement is not anti-police but anti-police brutality. A backlash from some conservatives, on the other hand, depicts Black Lives Matter as a racially divisive and violent movement.

Social media play a key role in this contemporary wave of protest. Especially since the August 2014 fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, networks of activists have used Facebook and Twitter to help mobilize collective action and to

heighten the public visibility of police killings of unarmed African Americans (Tanisha Anderson, Sean Bell, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Ramarley Graham, Freddie Gray, Akai Gurley, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Yvette Smith, and more). Preferred tactics and ideologies in Black Lives Matter vary from radical to liberal reformist and more, as is often the case in social movements. Some local community activists work with police and residents to mediate disputes and do not join in large demonstrations, while others view mass protests as a key part of the repertoire of political action to press for changes in policies and institutions. Anthropologists Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa explore both possibilities and limitations of “hashtag ethnography” and analyze how social media, or “hashtag activism,” challenges dominant news organizations’ representations of racialized bodies and helps to create new mediatized publics and “a shared political temporality” (2015, 4).

The discursive visibility of Black Lives Matter’s catchphrases, if not the underlying structural violence (institutionalized inequalities and indirect violence), quickly became apparent, as in the American Dialect Society’s choice of “#blacklivesmatter” as its 2014 word of the year and “#Icantbreathe” as its hashtag of the year (a new category). A related organization, the American Name Society, voted “Ferguson” as its 2014 name of the year. Protest flashpoints multiplied nationally and internationally (“#Tokyo4Ferguson” and “#Paris4Ferguson”), with the circulation via social media and news media of more and more video recordings of police killing unarmed African Americans.

The global resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement was apparent in 2015 in the “migrant lives matter” protests in Dublin and London against the European Union’s responses to the African migrant crisis. During a period of intense political polarization in Europe, thousands of African asylum seekers and economic migrants fleeing war, persecution, and poverty had drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in unsafe or flimsy boats, or they had faced neglect and abuse once they reached Europe’s shores after life-threatening journeys. In addition, in May 2015 in downtown Tel Aviv, thousands of Ethiopian Israelis and sympathizers staged a Black Lives Matter protest against racial discrimination and police brutality. And, in August 2015, thousands of people in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, protested police killings of unarmed Brazilians of African descent.

Black Lives Matter and related protests have become part of a revitalized politics of intersectionality (interacting race, class, gender, and other identities) in waves of protests that have focused on climate change, economic inequality, austerity politics, immigration law, wages, access to health care, voting rights, and reproductive rights. Large public demonstrations, most of them peaceful, swept across hundreds of US cities in 2014 and early 2015. Illustrating intersecting racial and class identities, low-wage workers in demonstrations for living wages also declared “I can’t breathe” and raised their hands and shouted “Hands up, don’t shoot!” Organizational networks such as Ferguson Action grew as collective experiences of Black Lives Matter and other protests spread. Many low-wage workers themselves describe being harassed by the police, and Black Lives Matter highlights extreme economic inequalities that affect a wide swath of people in the United States as well as many other countries.

This protest surge and its attendant counterpublics (Fraser 1992) invite analysis of new political possibilities, shifting collective loyalties and actions, tactical innovations, and the ways protest events build on one another. Social movement scholarship on protest cycles and waves—historical periods of heightened protest frequency, intensity, and scale (such as the 1930s and 1960s)—invites us to pay attention to how especially visible events, such as the 1955–56 Montgomery bus boycott in the US civil rights movement, can “end up symbolizing entire social movements” and “altering ... cultural meanings or signification of political and social categories” (della Porta 2013, 1017). At the same time, protest events that become cultural icons can personalize what are usually collective campaigns and can obscure important antecedents and long organizing efforts. Presumably, future scholarship on Black Lives Matter, as well as other contemporary activisms, will explore such changes in cultural meanings and reveal experimentation with tactics, cultivation of relationships of solidarity and collective identification, as well as waxing and waning participation and internal contestation and factionalism. As activists chip away at hegemonic processes that use power to organize consent and to secure political projects, some turn to irony and humor.

Humor and activism

Humor and play have long been part of social movement repertoires. Protest as play or as festive critique or satire includes, for example, sixteenth-century carnival revelers, court jesters, and Shakespeare’s wise fools. The Yippies “levitated” the Pentagon in 1967 and ran a pig for president in 1968 (turning loose an actual pig in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention), and participants in global movements for social justice during the 1990s and early 2000s donned sea turtle costumes and marched alongside protesters holding giant puppets. Occupy Wall Street staged “couch-ins” at Bank of America branches to protest mortgage foreclosures, and a March 2012 meeting of Occupy organizers in a Greenwich Village, New York, church basement was interrupted at a testy moment with calls of “Clown check!” to announce the actual appearance of singing and dancing clowns. A Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc was part of the global justice movement a decade earlier. Participants wore rainbow wigs, rode unicycles and “four-foot-high bicycles, playing makeshift instruments, singing songs,” attacking the satirical Billionaires with “squeaky toy mallets” and chanting “Democracy? Ha! Ha! Ha!” (Graeber 2009, 410, 417). The culture jammers and pranksters known as the Yes Men impersonate corporate executives and officials such as World Trade Organization delegates, creating temporarily successful media hoaxes such as posing as a Dow Chemical executive and announcing on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster that the company would compensate the victims. Since the mid-1980s, the feminist artist-activists known as the Guerrilla Girls have protested elitism and gender and racial bias in the art world with theatrical flair, disguising themselves in gorilla suits. “Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met Museum?” queries one of their colorful posters.

When students at Harvard and other US universities occupied administration buildings and called for divestment from fossil fuel companies in early 2015, those

actions prompted an oil industry countercampaign featuring a short video cartoon called “Breaking Up with Fossil Fuels Is Hard to Do.” The international environmental organization 350.org (founded by Bill McKibben) responded with a video parody titled “Breaking Up with Fossil Fuels Is Easy to Do,” which YouTube removed not long after it was posted.

Like television news satirists Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and Bassem Youssef, political activists too have learned that wrapping a serious message in ironic humor attracts listeners who otherwise might tune the message out. That is the premise of a media-savvy national network of satirical activists in the United States who have called themselves Billionaires for Bush, Billionaires for Bailouts, Lobbyists for McCain, and Billionaires for Tar Sands, among other names (Haugerud 2013). Donning ball gowns and tiaras, or tuxedos and top hats, they adopt fictive personae that evoke the robber baron era or our own new Gilded Age: Phil T. Rich, Noah Countability, Tex Shelter, Lucinda Regulations, Iona Bigga Yacht, and Alan Greenspend. Waving professionally printed signs declaring “Corporations Are People Too” and “Leave No Billionaire Behind!,” they stage a glitzy form of satirical street theater in post office plazas on tax day, opposite grand hotels hosting political fundraisers, and outside national political party conventions. Theirs is a reformist rather than radical agenda: campaign finance reform, progressive taxation, a strong social safety net, and restraint on monopolies. These are issues that US public figures such as Robert Reich and Elizabeth Warren have helped to promote and are concerns that resonate among economic justice advocates globally as well.

Unlike many satirical Billionaires, Occupy participants around the world have often rejected involvement in formal political parties and institutions and experimented deeply with deliberative or alternative forms of democratic practice such as participatory assemblies and workshop groups organized by participants. But, like reformists such as the Billionaires, members of Occupy are committed to a prefigurative politics (Epstein 1993) in which new activist organizational practices model imagined futures or sought-after societal changes.

Significance

The anthropology of activism is a vibrant scholarly domain that continues to yield new insights into when, why, how, and with what effects a sense of injustice or grievance or other critique is converted to public protest or other displays of commitment to change. To capture the exuberance, effervescence, and camaraderie that mark collective protests is a challenge for which ethnographic methods are well suited. The study of activism, for many anthropologists, invites attention to the emergent and ephemeral, to discursive gaps, to disorder, and to unintended consequences and difficult-to-trace effects. Such concerns are central as well to wider disciplinary reflections on theory and method—in contrast to a much earlier era when maintaining social order and stability was political anthropology’s core analytical focus.

A remaining shortcoming in activism research is that social scientists overall devote “disproportionate attention . . . to movements they like” (Edelman 2001, 286), a pattern

that partly reflects the challenges of gaining ethnographic access to groups whose political orientation a researcher clearly disavows. There has been little or no ethnographic research on reactionary activism such as the violent and nonviolent tactics of white supremacists, opponents of abortion, or anti-immigrant movements in Europe and North America. In addition, the growing scholarship on transnational social movements has given little attention to transnational agrarian movements, though “these are among the largest social movements in the world today” (Edelman and Borrás 2016).

Activism through protest, of course, is just part of the repertoire of political participation. All protest cycles eventually end—sometimes, as della Porta puts it, when authorities work to “divid[e] the movement through a mix of co-optation and exclusion” or when they “increase repression or learn how to better target it against the emerging actors” (2013, 1015). Furthermore, individual participants cannot sustain intense levels of engagement indefinitely.

Yet the effectiveness of even modest activist initiatives should not be discounted. The work of securing hegemony is always uneven and incomplete, and change must be imagined before it can be enacted. Activists whose aim is to reframe issues or to illustrate contradictions between ideological claims and actual political practice can have profound effects, however subtle or difficult to measure they may be. Although protests sometimes can be seen to affect policy, voting patterns, or legislation, they are likely to be just one influence among many. More subtle outcomes of activism include expanding citizens’ sense of what is possible, cultivating dignity in the face of injustice, helping to reframe public debates or discourses, destabilizing conventional political categories, building skills and networks that can be mobilized in future campaigns, expanding political participation, and reshaping individual political subjectivities. Anthropologists are well positioned to probe such outcomes. Studies of activism can uncover the very meanings and dreams that impel political life.

SEE ALSO: Action Anthropology; Anthropology, Careers in; Applied Anthropology; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Civil Society; Community-Based Ethnography; Cultural Politics; Democracy; Digital Anthropology; Environmental Activism; Ethnographic Engagement; Geneticization; Global Governance; Humanitarianism, Anthropological Treatments of; Humor and Laughter; Indigenous Theory; International Development, Anthropology in; Migration and Health; Multispecies Ethnography; Penal State; Political Anthropology; Protest; Public Anthropology; Resistance; Revolution; Sex Work; Social Movements; Stakeholder Analysis; States; Visual Anthropology

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