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Global Cultures  
of Contestation

*Mobility, Sustainability,  
Aesthetics & Connectivity*

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*Edited by* ESTHER PEEREN,  
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JEROEN DE KLOET  
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PALGRAVE STUDIES  
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Esther Peeren · Robin Celikates  
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Editors

# Global Cultures of Contestation

Mobility, Sustainability, Aesthetics & Connectivity

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# Introduction: Global Cultures of Contestation

*Esther Peeren, Robin Celikates, Jeroen de Kloet  
and Thomas Poell*

From the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011, via the Spanish *indignados* and Occupy Wall Street to the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong, in recent years different parts of the world have seen major instances of popular contestation. These were not isolated events; they influenced, shaped, and in some cases triggered each other. Together, they arguably form a new, global protest “cycle” (Della Porta 2016), “revolutionary wave” (Weyland 2012) or “regime-change cascade” (Hale 2013).

It is worth considering how the various terms used—cycle, wave, cascade—highlight different elements at play when protests spread beyond national borders. The image of the cascade foregrounds the way in which individual contestations follow upon each other in stages, with each subsequent stage taking from and building on the previous one, accumulating force in the process. The metaphor of the cycle

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usefully indicates how unexpected transnational proliferations of protest are not unique, but reoccur over time and therefore inevitably involve “remobilization” alongside “innovation” with regard to their “organizational structures” and “styles of activism” (Della Porta 2016, 1–2). The idea of recurrence is also accommodated by the figure of the wave, but with greater emphasis on its unpredictability (waves are not regularly spread) and its association with difference (waves can be of different magnitudes and durations). In addition, the wave evokes not just an intensifying force (as it builds toward the shore), like the cascade, but also the subsequent discharge and fading (as it breaks) that characterizes each protest surge and, conceivably, each specific protest within it. This indicates a momentum quite different from a cyclical return to the beginning, one that is vulnerable to counter-measures (wave breakers or breakwaters) and subject to highly variable outcomes; the wave may fizzle out, but it may also overwhelm and alter the landscape or cause profound damage, as in the case of a tsunami, to which the Arab Spring has been repeatedly likened, mostly by those framing it as a failure (Freudenstein 2011; Bradley 2012; Gartenstein-Ross and Vassefi 2012; Haseeb 2012). Finally, the wave, through its capacity to travel across vast distances, connotes geographical expansion more readily than the cycle (associated with circumscription) or the cascade (invoking the vertical movement of a waterfall).<sup>1</sup>

Conceiving the global swell in popular contestations of the 2010s as a far from unitary wave—which, in addition to taking inspiration from earlier protests, accommodates distinct “sub-waves” (Gerbaudo 2013) and produces, to the present day, ripple effects as it continues to inspire new and ongoing contestations in various, sometimes surprising ways—allows us to consider it in terms of sameness and difference, continuity and discontinuity, action and counter-action, build-up and fall-off, concentration and diffusion. Thus, on the one hand, we see the protests making up this wave and those influenced by it as different from each other in many respects—unfolding in specific national and local contexts, and contesting a variety of issues from divergent political perspectives. On the other hand, we consider how certain elements of the mobilized “collective action frames and identities” (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005) were actively passed on from one protest to the next, most notably a framing of the protests as expressing a desire for bottom-up, direct, or participatory democracy on the part of those feeling oppressed or ignored by autocratic regimes, or disenfranchised in parliamentary democracies, and as defining themselves against an indifferent, self-serving elite (Gerbaudo 2013, 90).

The protests also borrowed from each other in terms of their “organizational structure” and “repertoires of action” (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Regarding their organizational structure, what has been particularly striking is that these protests were, for the most part, not initiated or directed by traditional social movement organizations (although these sometimes became involved or took over in later stages), but appeared to be spontaneous political movements “from below.” Their repertoires of action, moreover, showed a shared reliance on: (1) the sustained or repeated occupation of public space (Butler 2015; Göle 2013; Feigenbaum et al. 2013; Treré and Mattoni 2016); (2) the establishment of alternative forms of sociality and civility in these spaces (Celikates 2015; Yaka and Karakayali 2017); (3) the extensive use of social media (Castells 2012; Juris 2012; Poell and van Dijck 2015); and (4) creative branding through the use of colors (as in the so-called Color Revolutions), catchy slogans (such as the Egypt Revolution’s “*Erhal*” [Leave], Occupy Wall Street’s “We are the 99%” or the French anti-gay marriage movement’s “*Manif Pour Tous*” [Protest for Everyone]), and quirky symbols (from umbrellas in Hong Kong to penguins in Turkey’s Gezi Park protests) (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Beraldo 2017; Poell et al. 2016).

While we agree that there is reason to celebrate progressive contemporary movements for their spectacular occupations of squares, streets, and buildings, their creative online tactics, and the new prefigurative political imaginaries they introduced, we also acknowledge that these movements’ long-term efficacy and sustainability have been called into question, with several (most insistently the protests in Egypt, Libya, and Syria) labeled as eventual failures (Bayat 2013; White 2016; Dean 2015; Elbadawi and Makdisi 2016).

With this volume, coming out of the 2015 Global Cultures of Contestation conference organized by the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS), we seek to move beyond positions that generalize across the different popular contestations making up and influenced by the protest wave to present a singularly celebratory or dismissive account. We do so by presenting detailed analyses of particular contestations from a durational perspective that allows us to consider not only obvious and immediate outcomes, but also more subtle, deferred, or displaced effects. These analyses, moreover, focus on delineating the specific “culture of collective action” (Maurer 2011; quoted in Della Porta et al. 2015, 16) or “culture of contestation”—in the sense of the

forms of material and symbolic production (Williams 1988) through which the non-dominant “adduce opposing testimony” to the dominant (Lombardi-Satriani 1974, 104)—into which common elements were assimilated in each specific protest. Thus, each protest is approached in terms of both its specificity and its tendency, in a context of advanced globalization and digitization, to connect to, learn from, or influence other protests elsewhere.

The eleven contributions that make up the volume come from scholars across the humanities and the social sciences who analyze particular contestations in terms of how they unfolded, what inspired them, and how their afterlives have taken shape in Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, the UK, Spain, Greece, Poland, Russia, Hong Kong, and Australia, as well as on a transnational scale, as with the NSA-leaks and illegal border-crossings by migrants around the world. Combining perspectives from the social sciences and the humanities enables this volume to take into account the political and social causes and consequences (direct and indirect, immediate and delayed) of the various protests making up the global wave or following in its wake, as well as the aesthetic dimensions of protest communication and mobilization, online and offline.

It is important to note that this volume is concerned neither with “transnational collective action,” defined as “coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions” (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 2–3), nor with global movements that “identif[y] both a common identity—the ‘us’—and the target of the protest—the other—at the transnational level” (Della Porta 2016, 7). Rather, in tackling “global cultures of contestation,” it focuses on relations of influence, on a global scale, between movements that mostly define the mobilized “us” and the contested “other” at the national level (Gerbaudo 2013), even if, as with the Occupy movement, some also have a transnational dimension. What we seek to underline is that even if the target or addressee of a protest is local or national, advanced globalization and digitization have made it possible and practicable for such a protest to forge strategic links with other protests or movements, including transnational ones (the global justice movement, the global environmental movement, the global anti-capitalism movement), and to gain visibility on the global media stage, which may not only garner more support but may also give authorities pause when considering violent means of suppression. Such “going global” does not need to be an active move, as connections can be made

by global media independently of those involved in a particular contestation (as happened with the so-called Color Revolutions) and protest repertoires can circulate thanks to social media uptake by others independently of actors' intentions.

Instead of considering the global protest wave of the 2010s as having ended, this volume highlights its ongoing effects on how popular protests around the world, such as the Gezi Park protests, but also, more unexpectedly, Catalan secessionism and the French anti-gender theory movement, unfold. Continuity can be observed in the use of social media, in how these protests configure public space and "the people," and in how they are conceptualized: as civil disobedience, as mobilizations of non-heroic counterpublics, as creative insurgencies, and so on.

As the subtitle of this volume indicates, we focus specifically on issues of *mobility*, *sustainability*, *aesthetics*, and *connectivity*, leading to the following central questions: (1) How do the protests use forms of mobility and immobility (occupations, strikes, boycotts) as part of their action repertoires? What forms of mobility are implied in the global spread of the protest wave? (2) How are issues of sustainability—and its counterpart, precarity—addressed in the various protests? To what extent are the protests themselves sustainable as effective forms of contestation? (3) What are the aesthetics of contemporary protest movements? What new imaginaries and repertoires of protest (linguistic, visual, and acoustic) are emerging and how do they challenge and/or reproduce dominant cultural regimes? (4) What are the connective platforms that facilitate and structure today's protest communication and mobilization? How do these platforms not only enable contestation, but also shape its focus and dynamics? As the contributions in this volume underline, in practice these issues cannot be separated but have to be addressed in their intertwinement.

## MOBILITY

The strategic use of mobility and immobility in the recent global protest wave—from marching through the streets to refusing to leave public space—is addressed in various contributions. In the opening chapter, Marlies Glasius and Armine Ishkanian focus on the 2011–2012 "wave" of square occupations. On the basis of interviews, they explore how activists in Cairo, Athens, London, and Moscow experienced the social and political momentum created by gathering in and laying claim to a

central square, and what happened to this momentum after the occupations ended. Insisting that “the square occupations have been neither as transformative as their supporters had hoped, nor as evanescent as subsequent commentators would have us believe,” they trace how, in all four locations, despite increased government repression designed to prevent further mass mobilization, meaningful after-effects have emerged in the form of local initiatives that continue the prefigurative practices developed on the square.

Ewa Majewska similarly stresses the political force of occupying public space by using the erection of a “White Town” of tents by striking nurses in central Warsaw in 2007 as the starting point for her discussion of how this and later protests mark the emergence of a new politics of resistance based on the formation of “non-heroic counterpublics” engaged in an everyday resistance of the weak. An early example of the long-term occupation of central public spaces that became a key strategy in the protests of the 2010s, Majewska shows how the “White Town” resonated in the Occupy movements, the Arab Revolutions, the Majdan Square gatherings in Kiev, Ukraine, and the women’s protests of 2016, particularly in the way it combined a stubborn refusal to leave with a determination to facilitate the continuation of the movements of everyday life within the occupied site.

Jaume Castan Pinos’ contribution moves away from protests involving continuous occupation to explore the use of annual mass marches by the Catalan secession movement in Spain. In conjunction with other forms of activism, including online, the marches establish “semi-permanent mobilizations” producing “established patterns of interaction that have created the conditions for their reification and reproduction.” As proactive contestations initiated and led by civil society groups, these mobilizations have pushed the issue of Catalan secessionism to the top of the political agenda, with established secessionist parties becoming involved reactively. Hence, the Catalan secessionist movement should not be taken as driven by political elites, but as showing how grassroots mobilizations, when sustained over time, can lead to political movement, and how institutionalization (as with the emergence of Podemos out of the *indignados*) may strengthen a protest movement rather than signaling its appropriation and demise.

Castan Pinos also explores the importance of acts of civil disobedience for the Catalan secessionist movement, with leaders facing jail providing another impetus for regular mass mobilization. The question of what

constitutes civil disobedience in today's globalized world is taken up by Natasha Basu and Bernardo Caycedo, who introduce mobility into the concept itself. Exploring illegal border-crossings by migrants and Edward Snowden's disclosure of state surveillance practices, both tied to transnational mobility and mobilization, they argue that acts by non-citizens and fundamental challenges to (state) institutions should also be considered as civil disobedience, making it more prevalent and more revolutionary as a form of political contestation.

Issues of mobility and immobility are at stake, too, in Jeroen de Kloet's discussion of the 2014 occupation and immobilization of central parts of Hong Kong as a "*semi*-post-identarian movement" that was constantly reinventing itself during the struggle, and in Walid El Hourri's exploration of the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt as a moment in which "the bodies of protesters ... produce disruptions that go beyond the institutional assessment of success and failure." Invoking Jacques Rancière's notion of politics as redistribution through dissensus, both emphasize that disruptions, even when harshly repressed, produce a sense of hope and possibility, especially in young people, that persists and feeds into new contestations.

Taken together, these divergent case studies of protests involving mobility (crossing borders, marching, leaking), immobility (occupation, refusal), or their complex interplay reveal a spreading awareness of the political force of the—mobile or immobile—public assembly of bodies. As Judith Butler argues in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, "when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field" (2015, 11). Crucially, this force can be mobilized not only by those normally excluded from making political claims (the marginalized and oppressed), but also by state authorities (as when the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, called upon his supporters to go out on the streets to counter an attempted coup in July 2016) or by those seeking to deny the rights or demands of minorities (Pegida, *Manif Pour Tous*). Publicly assembled bodies, then, can contest established power relations or solidify them. What form their mobilization takes—whether the gathered bodies remain in one place to occupy a central square or area with high symbolic value, like Zuccotti Park in New York or Tahrir Square in Cairo, or whether they come together for regular marches in an increasing number of locations, like the Spanish

anti-austerity 15-M Movement or Pegida—depends on the specific context and circumstances, including the expected and actual response by authorities or counter-movements such as Legida.

While Butler focuses on the political force of the insistent, embodied presence of the many in public space and in the media—“the cameras never stopped; bodies were there and here; they never stopped speaking, not even in sleep, and so could not be silenced, sequestered, or denied” (2015, 98)—Jayson Harsin’s contribution to this volume on the strategic use of rumor bombs by the French Boycott School Day campaign (aligned with the wider anti-gay marriage *Manif Pour Tous* movement), which encouraged parents to keep their children at home to protest the introduction of “Gender Theory” in schools, makes clear that it is also possible to articulate “a bodily demand” (Butler 2015, 11) through the withdrawal of bodies from public space, as long as these are bodies normally able (or, in the case of schoolchildren, compelled) to appear there. Removing these bodies and drawing attention to this removal through social and news media creates perceptible absences that are politically articulate. In addition, Marwan M. Kraidy, whose contribution focuses on the centrality of biopolitics and phenomenology to embodied contestation in the modes of the “Burning Man” and the “Laughing Cow,” highlights how, in some circumstances, such contestation only requires a single body to manifest itself in an extraordinary manner in physical or virtual public space—such as the burning body of Mohamed Bouazizi he discusses in this volume or the blog post featuring a naked Aliaa al-Mahdy analyzed in his book *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (2016).

Mobility is at stake not just within particular protests, but also in the question of how a global protest wave gains momentum, with contestations triggering and taking inspiration from each other in terms of the frames, styles, and strategies used. Yet this process is far from straightforward. As Glasius and Ishkanian show, while the square occupations of 2011–2012 were, in part, inspired by and resembled each other in how they took shape, they did not form “a single, networked movement.” The question of how protests seen to constitute a global “wave” are linked has been approached primarily through the notions of “diffusion,” “brokerage,” and, most controversially, “contagion.” Diffusion, considered as a “causal process” capable of being traced and mapped (Strang and Soule 1998, 266), occurs when “challengers in one country or region adopt or adapt the organizational forms, collective action



frames, or targets of those in other countries or regions,” and is seen to have become more common and straightforward with advanced globalization and digitalization (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 3).<sup>2</sup> However, the limits of diffusion as a very broad concept that covers “direct and indirect mechanisms that link an event with an increased probability of a similar event happening elsewhere” or again in the same place (Saideman 2012, 714), as well as deliberate and spontaneous dissemination (Strang and Soule 1998), and that is associated with diffuseness (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005) have also been noted. This has led to the development of several categories of diffusion, from “relational diffusion,” based on direct contact, and “non-relational diffusion,” involving indirect influence often through mass media, to “mediated diffusion,” involving brokerage (Vasi 2011, 12). Brokerage refers to deliberate connections between protest movements forged by identifiable intermediaries (Tarrow and McAdam 2005), which are too narrow to account for the emergence of a protest wave comprising multiple, sometimes simultaneous contestations in dispersed locations. Contagion, finally, “conjures up the imagery of some behavioral, emotional, or ideational phenomenon spreading rapidly, uncritically, and uniformly,” which glosses over the role of disarray, disagreement, and contingency within and between the popular protests of the 2010s (Snow 2013, 1), and downplays the active role of movements in appropriating and reinterpreting symbolic protest repertoires.

In social movement theory, diffusion has mostly replaced contagion to account for the way in which protests put each other in motion across geographical distances (Snow 2013), although contagion does reappear in some recent work related to the global protest waves of the 2010s. Paolo Gerbaudo (2016), for example, takes up the notion of “emotional contagion” (Hatfield et al. 1993; Barsade 2002) to explain how support for the 2011 protests in Egypt and the *indignados* movement in Spain was generated through Facebook pages. His use of emotional contagion as illuminating how a movement attracts supporters could be extended to explain how one protest inspires another as part of a global protest wave. Contagion has also gained new prominence through its affinity with virality as a central mode of circulation within networks, with the meme as the new virus. In response to the latter development, Tony Sampson has developed a theory of contagion inspired by the work of Gabriel Tarde that allows it to be invested with a degree of agency without rendering it fully controllable by “locat[ing] the human condition

somewhere in between deliberate volition, biologically motivated mechanical habits and the self-spreading of desires and social invention” (Sampson 2011, 2012).

Agency, then, is not irreconcilable with either contagion (as shown by Sampson and by Gerbaudo’s linking of emotional contagion to the use of particular rhetorical artifices by Facebook administrators) or diffusion (which Della Porta and Tarrow see as involving not just adopting but also adapting). Yet contagion remains dominantly associated with a relatively indiscriminate spread of infection producing similar outcomes everywhere, which does not fit the particular routes along which the contestations of the 2010s evolved, or their disparate results. Diffusion, although capable of referring to both a deliberate action and a spontaneous process (in its scientific meaning), evokes a strict, chronological separation between source and adopter (Strang and Soule 1998), keeping it from accounting for mutual feedback loops between simultaneous protests. In addition, diffusion suggests a spreading with weakening effects that cannot capture the (at least initially) accumulating force of the global protest wave of the 2010s.

An alternative term for how different contestations within a protest wave influence each other is “resonance,” which has the advantages of accommodating differences more readily than contagion (resonance is not a transfer of the same), being associated with amplification rather than weakening, and being able to refer to both deliberate action—it is possible to make something resonate, although only within certain environments—and action bypassing human intention. Resonance has been used in social movement theory to convey the “effectiveness or mobilizing potency” of collective action frames, seen to depend on the “credibility of the proffered frame and its relative salience” (Benford and Snow 2000, 619; see also Snow and Benford 1988). Significantly, in his analysis of the global protest wave of the early 2010s, Gerbaudo (2013, 87, 90) combines diffusion and resonance to account for the wave’s “rather slow and convoluted progress,” arguing that

collective action frames and protest repertoires are not transmitted automatically even in the presence of certain diffusion channels; their successful reception depends on their ability to achieve cultural resonance in new geographical areas ... this is true for all forms of diffusion, given that an important factor in the diffusion of innovations is compatibility with pre-existing values and customs.

Combining diffusion with resonance allows an accounting for both the fact that, in today's globalized, media-saturated world, the presence of diffusion channels is almost guaranteed, and the fact that diffusion in itself does not guarantee uptake of the same or similar action frames, action repertoires, and, we would add, organizational structures. Moreover, since there is never complete compatibility of values and customs, "a complex process of translation and local 'domestication' of action frames and repertoires" is necessary (Gerbaudo 2013, 90).

In addition to diffusion and resonance, then, a third term is needed to convey the process of translation and domestication essential to keeping a global protest wave in motion. Because translation primarily refers to a finite process involving a single preexisting source and a single target that should resemble the source as closely as possible, Gerbaudo has to specify that it involves domestication. To capture this in one term, and to convey the various degrees to which the individual protests in the global protest wave of the 2010s resembled each other, as well as the feedback loops that existed between coinciding protests, we propose the concept of "versioning."

Versioning is used in literary studies, computer science, and marketing to denote the generating of different versions of a text, document, or commodity (for various reasons, including the desire to maximize profit across different markets). It refers to a pragmatic process of transformation that can involve multiple actors and is not necessarily predicated on the idea of a single original or a notion of fidelity. The process of versioning itself is, moreover, "limited neither in number nor in its ability to supplement" (Peeren 2008, 209); it is a potentially infinite project of proliferation, with each new version capable of giving rise to more, that works in multiple directions and can be pursued with various degrees of domestication. As such, together with diffusion (allowing the identification of direct or indirect diffusion channels that form the precondition for resonance and versioning) and cultural resonance (drawing attention to the conditions determining whether the diffusion of protests will lead to their actual spreading<sup>3</sup>), versioning enables us to account for the manifold, complex ways in which the different protests making up the global protest wave of the 2010s moved and (trans)formed each other, with the relation being neither one of identical replication nor one of absolute difference, and some, such as those of the Arab Spring or the different Occupy protests, located in the same "global cultural region" (Gerbaudo 2013, 91), more closely resembling each other than others.

As Glasius and Ishkanian, de Kloet, and El Hourri emphasize in their contributions, although the global protest wave of the 2010s is widely considered to have fizzled out, many of the protests that formed part of it continue to have residual effects and perceptual afterlives. To their examples we may add the recent spate of university protests in, among others, the UK, the Netherlands, the US, and South Africa (Ratcliffe 2015; van Reekum 2015; Johnston 2015; Luckett and Mzobe 2016), which could be seen as a continuation—or, rather, versioning—of the same wave, as could the mass assemblies (the post-inauguration Women’s March) and semi-occupations (the airport protests against the “Muslim travel ban”) contesting the Trump presidency in the US, or the 2016 Women’s Strike in Poland, discussed by Majewska, which successfully challenged a planned abortion ban. As Butler (2015, 20) posits, the transience of particular assemblies, which can never last forever, is rendered productive when such assemblies are serialized, producing an enduring sense of “anticipation of what may be coming: ‘they could happen at any time!’” In other words, while a single wave may fizzle out on the shore, the sea never stops moving.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Many of the protests making up the protest wave of the 2010s or coming in its wake centered on tensions between sustainability (of longstanding political and economic structures, as well as, in Western countries, social security systems) and precarity (as socially induced individualized and responsabilized vulnerability). Autocratic rules of seemingly endless sustainability produced increasingly widespread precarity among the poor and, especially, the young in Northern Africa and the Middle East, while in Europe and the United States there emerged, after the imposition of budget deficit reduction measures and full-fledged austerity regimes designed to sustain political structures and economic systems seen as dis-serving the majority of the people, a need and demand for “an ethos of solidarity that would affirm mutual dependency, dependency on workable infrastructures and social networks, and open the way to a form of improvisation in the course of devising collective and institutional ways of addressing induced precarity” (Butler 2015, 21–22).<sup>4</sup> The forceful, embodied articulation of this demand was central to the Occupy protests and the 2007 Polish nurses’ strike discussed by Majewska as fostering the emergence of a counterpublic. In Majewska’s analysis, what started as a

demand for higher wages in a particular profession broadened, as a result of the sustained presence of the “White Town” erected by the nurses, into a general discussion about immaterial labor, precarization, gender, and neoliberalism, as well as prefiguring an ethos of solidarity through the nurses’ provision of healthcare and the support given to the nurses by Warsaw residents and the wider Polish public.

The protests discussed in this volume rely on the sustainability of contestation—on enhancing the revolutionary force of “opposing testimony” to the dominant (Lombardi-Satriani 1974, 104) through sheer duration, whether through the prolonged mass occupation of a central (semi-)public space, from Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park to Gezi Park and Hong Kong’s financial district; or through the regular repetition of a particular claim, as in the Catalan secession movement’s annual marches or the French Boycott School Day campaign. Such sustained action echoes and thereby highlights the unrelenting condition of precarity, which has been seen to produce a sense of “impasse” (Berlant 2011, 4) and to enforce a regime of “waiting” (Das and Randeria 2015, S12). At the same time, in its very duration and obstinacy, sustained protest challenges the lack of security and stability that precarity entails, as well as the lack of mattering it ascribes to the precaritized (Butler 2015; Butler et al. 2016).

But there is a limit to the sustainability of these protests—of which, as Glasius and Ishkanian show, those involved tend to be keenly aware. Firstly, in temporal terms: an occupation of a (semi-)public space cannot last indefinitely, especially when the protesters are the precaritized and when the movement’s aims either lack concreteness or are unlikely to be fulfilled. The powers being contested may, as with Occupy Wall Street, choose to wait out the protest until media attention lessens, the number of protesters dwindles, and internal conflicts start to come to the surface. Alternatively, as with the protests in Gezi Park, state violence may be used to end the contestation, at the risk, as the cases of Libya and Syria show, of escalating it into enduring instability or civil war. Secondly, in formal terms: it is difficult for protest movements that lack a hierarchical structure and that bring together actors from different social strata, ideological persuasions, and protest traditions to sustain a coherent identity in a way that keeps all protesters invested and the outside world, including the authorities and the media, engaged. Moreover, movements united in a single occupied space, once dissipated, tend to split into factions articulating very different goals.

Claiming that the temporal and formal unsustainability of the protests of the 2010s has resulted in total failure—leaving those who contested power either in the same or a worse position—is ultimately as empirically and theoretically unconvincing as claiming that the simple fact that these protests have occurred already proves their success (de Zeeuw 2014). None of the protests have dissipated completely—they are all having more or less insistent after-effects, producing flickers of light even in the dark aftermaths of the (attempted) removal of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria (see, for example, El Hourri in this volume; or Bayat (2015) on the unionization and slum-upgrading movements that arose in the wake of the Egyptian revolution), and continuing demands for more direct forms of democracy in the US (where Bernie Sanders’ primary campaign echoed the preoccupations of Occupy), in Hong Kong (where the call for independence from China is gaining strength), and in Spain, where Podemos has taken the *indignados* movement into the Spanish parliament as the third largest party. It seems imperative, therefore, to gauge the “success” or “failure” of a protest not so much from its immediate achievements or, in the case of occupations, their unavoidable end, than from what it yields in the long term, also through processes of diffusion, resonance, and versioning.

## AESTHETICS

As Kraidy argues in this volume, the contestations making up the global protest wave of the 2010s cannot be understood without looking at their aesthetic dimension. For him, it is precisely the “peculiar aesthetics of creative insurgency” that enables it to disperse “the fog” of propaganda common to oppressive regimes and traditional revolutionary movements. But what are the “peculiar” aesthetics of contemporary protest movements? What new imaginaries and repertoires of protest (linguistic, visual and acoustic) are emerging and how do they challenge and/or reproduce dominant cultural regimes? As de Kloet shows in this volume, the yellow umbrella became the key image during the protests in Hong Kong in the fall of 2014, not only serving as an aesthetic ideological glue for the movement itself, but also helping to give the movement visibility. It was thus a sign rather than a leader that promoted the movement both locally and globally. The connotations of protection, innocence, and cheerfulness evoked by the yellow umbrella made it into an ideal logo for the movement. In his contribution, Harsin shows that aesthetic

strategies were also part and parcel of the rhetoric of the diverse French conservative activist groups behind *La Manif Pour Tous*. Facebook constituted a platform to post provocative images, for example of a woman with a wide-open screaming mouth, her neck wrapped in a barbed wire tattoo that reads “liberty, fraternity, equality,” while the logos of major French news channels appeared on her blindfold. Here, the power of the image—the post became highly popular—is turned against gender equality.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, El Hourri shows how an iconic image of Egyptian soldiers assaulting a woman, beating and stripping her to expose her blue bra, became a symbol of defiance for protesters during the protests in Egypt. In Spain, as discussed by Castan Pinos, the Catalan secessionist movement’s yearly macro protest marches have been complemented by more aesthetic forms of protests such as performances and flash mobs.

These examples attest to the power of images, sounds, and words that are mobilized as playful and ironic tactics for political contestation on all sides. They inject politics with a sense of the quotidian, articulating a non-heroic resistance of the weak, as Majewska shows. Thus, when analyzing political contestation it is pivotal to include its aesthetics. According to Walter Benjamin, the aesthetic and the political were aligned for the first time during the rise of the Nazi regime. In his words, “the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (Benjamin 1968, 241). But was this really the first time? Here we agree with Rancière, who claims that aesthetics and politics are, and have always been, already entangled (2004). Dominant powers, or in his words, the police order, are implicated in the distribution of the sensible, defined as

the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. ... Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of times. (12–13)

It is through the distribution of the sensible that the everyday ordering of society is safeguarded; it is between what is rendered visible, audible, and tactile, and what is not, that boundaries are drawn. But this distribution of the sensible at the same time provides the tools for its subversion: images, sounds, and words can be twisted, turned around, and tweaked

in order to redistribute the sensible and allow for different meanings and affects to proliferate. An image that was not supposed to be seen can undermine the legitimatization of a regime, as illustrated by the global scandal following the release of the Abu Ghraib pictures in 2004. The distribution of the sensible can also be challenged through a Debordian tactic of *détournement*, in which the language and imageries of the ruling powers are turned against it (Debord and Wolman 1956). During the protests at the University of Amsterdam in the spring of 2015, for example, protesters appropriated the official slogan of the university, which referred to “Competent Rebels,” by adding: “Dear University Board, are we rebellious enough now?” In the same vein, in Hong Kong, protesters used the communist visual language of the Cultural Revolution on a propaganda poster to make fun of chief executive Leung Chun-ying.

Such tactics of *détournement* are closely tied to representation itself; they tweak meanings to produce yet another message. These tactics are intentional. But often, images start to lead their own life, to have their own agency, and they may want to do something else than what was imagined (cf. Mitchell 2005). Take, for example, the image of the tank man, carrying bags in both hands as if just returned from some daily shopping, who stopped a tank during the student protests on Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. That image has since traveled the world and its meanings have multiplied; it has, among others, come to stand for the power of the individual, for democracy as such, and for the cruelty of oppression. The image has gained a life of its own, often disconnected from the events in Beijing on that bloody night. It is an image that has become part of a global consciousness. As Susan Buck-Morss notes,

images, no longer viewed as copies of a privately owned original, move into public space as their own reality, where their assembly is an act of the production of meaning. Collectively perceived, collectively exchanged, they are the building blocks of culture. (2004, 21)

It is often the visual that is given the limelight when analyzing the aesthetics of protest. In an era of ocularcentrism (Jay 1992), the visual is the sensory mode that seems the easiest to reproduce and the most effective in grabbing attention in newspapers, on television, and on websites. The audible, the gustatorial, the olfactory, and the tactile, in particular the latter three, are more difficult to mediate. Yet sound is also an important sensory regime of contestation. Protest songs, for example, have



a long history with the authorities, alerted to and worried by sound's affective implications, its power to create shared utopian moments during concerts, protest marches and rave parties, and its ability to produce, literally and metaphorically, noise, often banning these songs or jailing their performers (Street 2012). The challenge for future research into contestation remains how to move beyond the visual and the auditory, how to theorize the redistribution of *all* the senses and their political implications.

This challenge also points to the importance of mediation. Protesters, as well as the authorities against which they protest, are by now deeply aware of the omnipresence of media in our media-saturated lives. Contestation thrives on mediation, and the more spectacular its aesthetics, the stronger its chances of achieving global mediation. This has amplified with the rise of new media over the past decades. New technologies are now mobilized to increase the impact of a protest beyond the actual protest site. Aesthetics, mediation, and a culture of connectivity (van Dijck 2013) conflate in today's politics of contestation. New media not only turns all protesters into broadcasters, but also allows for a rapid global spread of images, words, and sounds, resulting in the global production of millions of images. As Mitchell writes, "the rapidity and vast archival capacities of digital media render this material hyperaccessible to searching and retrieval, while at the same time it threatens to drown the researcher under a tsunami of material" (2012, 14). This quantitative shift, facilitated by a plethora of connective platforms, has profound qualitative implications for global cultures of contestation and its aesthetic dimensions.

## CONNECTIVITY

Exploring the qualitative implications of the rise of connective platforms, the contributions to this collection show that platformed activism is deeply entangled with and shaped by the specific political, cultural, and socio-economic relations involved in particular episodes of contention. In the popular press and in some scholarly literature there has been a strong focus on a small number of large connective platforms, which are considered central to the mobilization and communication of contemporary protest. As Segerberg and Bennett (2011, 200) note, however, the challenge is not to gauge the impact of specific platforms on popular contention, but to examine these platforms as part of "complex

communication processes involving many actors and technologies.” This challenge is taken up in this volume in several ways.

The chapter by Masha Alimardani and Stefania Milan shows that policymakers tend to reproduce the popular and scholarly fixation on large platforms. Examining Iranian online contention, the authors discuss how US “internet freedom” projects have contributed to hyping Twitter as a crucial platform for Iranian citizens. Yet, as their research suggests, this does not correspond with the actual experience of users in Iran itself. Alimardani and Milan found that Iranians tend to turn to Telegram for contentious communication rather than to Twitter or any of the other large platforms. For this reason, they label Telegram “a new indigenous form of emancipatory technology.” In other words, the construction of particular technologies as *political* technologies should be understood within a specific sociopolitical configuration. In this regard, not just particular modes of protest are subject to versioning, as discussed above, but so are connective platforms. This is not to say that platforms are simply localized, but that technologies and local practices mutually articulate each other. As Daniel Miller (2013, 153) notes in his research on the use of Facebook in Trinidad, where the platform is appropriated or rather “invented” as *Fasbook*: “*Fasbook* is invented by Trinidadians at the same time as Trinidadians are dialectically changed through their use of *Fasbook*.” Alimardani and Milan show that this process of dialectic appropriation also prominently involves institutional actors. In the case of Iran, the authoritarian state provided, in the words of the authors, “the very conditions to make Telegram such a particular phenomenon within the country,” while US efforts to promote internet freedom especially enhanced Twitter’s international reputation.

How sociopolitical strategies shape connective platforms is also illustrated by Harsin’s chapter on the conservative French activist movement and campaign *Journée de Retrait de l’École* (Boycott School Day; BSD). Harsin traces how this movement employed rumor bombs to attack the teaching of gender theory in French schools. Here we can see how connective platforms are integrated into a larger political campaign and used to micro-target rumor messages at specific audiences. In this configuration social media are primarily mobilized as one-way channels of communication rather than as interactive platforms: users were encouraged to share and act, but not to debate and comment on the movement’s messages.

These observations are especially interesting as scholars working on the online circulation of activist content have theorized such circulation practices through the notion of the “viral” and the “meme,” which suggests spontaneous user-driven processes of digital contagion (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012; Juris 2012). Harsin’s analysis reveals the intricate strategies behind such phenomena, helping us to appreciate how leadership, political strategies, and brokerage continue to play a vital role in what, from a distance, appear as distributed forms of online activism. As such, it contributes to the growing body of research demonstrating that activist leadership and brokerage continue to be important in popular contention centrally involving connective platforms (Della Ratta and Valeriani 2012; Gerbaudo 2016; Nunes 2015; Poell et al. 2016).

In trying to understand how connective platforms are shaped as political technologies, it is also important to consider how these platforms are positioned in the larger media landscape. The chapter by Dreher, Waller, and McCallum on indigenous contestation in Australia is especially interesting in this regard. They note that, for decades, legacy media have ignored the voices of First Nations on policy and funding questions, while indigenous community media have not been able to have a significant impact on public discourse and political decision-making. Analyzing the state-sponsored *Recognise* campaign for reform of the Australian Constitution to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Dreher, Waller, and McCallum show that disruptive activity through social media can have an impact. Indigenous voices were able to contest through Facebook and Twitter the terms on which the policy debate was held, highlight claims for self-determination, and affect the mainstream political agenda. Yet, as the authors emphasize, mediated popular contestation should not just be evaluated in terms of the ability of marginalized groups to express their point of view, but also in terms of “listening” on the part of political elites. From this perspective, the impact of contestation through platforms is much more ambiguous, and political inequalities and colonial structures still deeply entrenched.

The difficulty of intervening in public space in the face of opposing state powers and indifferent legacy media is also the starting point of the chapter by Dima and Cantinho, who adopt a more critical perspective on connective platforms. They consider how activist interventions can be preserved and sustained, as many of these interventions often go unnoticed by the general public and tend to quickly disappear

in the constantly evolving platform ecosystem. In response, the authors are developing, through a series of workshops, a digital commons space called Erehwon, which aims to preserve activist attempts to intervene in public space. Moreover, it aims to contribute to community-building by bringing together activists, technologists, and scientists. Online, it focuses on linking activist projects in an interactive visualization that displays the details of each project and the connections between them. The authors stress the importance of focusing on connections between projects instead of between users to “overcome the exhausted logic of social networking and promotion,” which does not appear to sustain more durable relations. This assessment echoes concerns voiced by Oliver Leistert (2013), who argues that today connective platforms increasingly decide “what fits, not an organized group where each member is committed to responsibility.” In his mind, “this has many dramatic effects on duration, sustainability, identity production and ... on how robust the political trajectory can become.”

In combination, the chapters offer a variety of perspectives; each reflecting on how connective platforms are positioned in larger sociopolitical environments. They show that platform connectivity attains a different meaning in each contentious episode, depending on context and objectives. In this regard, they move beyond the technological determinism and historical presentism observed by Kraidy in many of the available studies on contemporary protest. In his contribution to this collection, he argues that much contemporary research tends to ascribe “agency to machines rather than to humans.” He proposes that public contention is instead best understood as “sustained by permutations of words, sounds, and images circulating between a variety of interlocked media platforms” that create a “hypermedia space.”

While Kraidy warns against ascribing agency to machines rather than to humans, his observations point in the direction of an actor-network theory approach, focusing attention on the heterogeneous connections between words, sounds, images, and technologies. Rather than trying to understand how either technologies or humans shape public contention, we need to gain insight into how technologies and humans become inextricably entangled in contemporary activism. Moving away from the idea that we are analyzing homogenous sets of relations, this means, in the words of Bruno Latour (2005, 5), tracing the “trail of associations between heterogeneous elements.” Following this approach, we can observe, when studying public contestation, how a wide variety of

practices and technologies shape each other. As demonstrated by the contributions to this collection, such heterogeneous configurations are never self-evident or stable, but need to be traced each time anew. Political strategies, institutional responses, activist tactics, and mainstream reporting practices shape the role connective platforms play in particular contentious episodes.

Besides exploring the intricacies of specific sociopolitical configurations, it is simultaneously important to critically and carefully trace how connective platforms become actors in such configurations. A lot of research on contemporary social movements still appears to understand these platforms as activist instruments. Yet, as political economic research shows, they are primarily commercial enterprises revolving around targeted advertising and data services (Couldry 2015; Fuchs 2013; Turow 2012). These commercial objectives, in turn, inform the development of platform architectures, which greatly shape how users can express themselves and connect with each other (Bucher and Helmond preprint; Gillespie 2014; van Dijck 2013). Furthermore, platform technologies and business models are constantly evolving, which means that the role of connectivity in public contention is always subject to change. Although connective platforms clearly enable activists to expand the reach of protest communication and to develop new modes of mobilization, at the same time they appear to complicate the construction of sustainable communities, as well as efforts to generate sustained public attention for larger political issues (Langlois et al. 2009; Leistert 2013; Milan 2015; Poell and van Dijck 2015). In the end, what role connective platforms play in particular contentious episodes cannot be determined beforehand, but needs to be carefully explored in relation to the sociopolitical practices, activists, institutions, and other actors involved in public contention. The challenge is to trace how connective platforms become deeply entangled with these actors, while simultaneously recognizing that they operate on the basis of very different objectives and concerns.

## NOTES

1. Using naturalistic metaphors to discuss social and political phenomena should never be done uncritically and can have severe drawbacks, as becomes clear, for example, in the current, highly problematic use of the image of the wave or tsunami in relation to migration.

2. Against this, Gerbaudo (2013, 94) points out that the global protest wave of the 2010s was slower to spread than the waves of 1848, 1968, and 1989. However, these earlier waves were arguably more restricted geographically (to, respectively, Europe, the US and Europe, and Eastern Europe).
3. In terms of the mobility of protest, it is necessary to consider not only how protests may inspire each other, but also how cultural dissonance or the disappointing outcome of particular protests may dissuade others, causing a protest wave to lose momentum.
4. Significantly, the demand for such an ethos of solidarity has more recently been overshadowed by a populist nationalist or nativist demand, arguably in response to the same spreading socially induced precarity, for a restricted solidarity with only those seen to properly belong to the nation, at the expense of everyone else.
5. The alliance between aesthetics and the extreme right is of course not new, as Nazi Germany, too, can be considered a profoundly aestheticized project (Koenick 1999).

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