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Blocking the Void and filling the Bridges

On the Staging of Conflict and Activist Selves in Contemporary Protest Cultures

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Translated from German by Alicia Reuter

Hamburg, July 2017. G20 summit, the city is burning and pulsating. ÒWelcome to HellÓ: this is how the protests were announced, we have arrived in droves, leftists from all over Europe. At the main station, police units greet us new arrivals with dozens of cameras mounted on poles. What a nerve, says a friend, that they are organizing this here in Hamburg – she means the summit, not the protests. Do they really want to bring out the security state's whole arsenal here in the middle of this trendy left-wing neighborhood? Marching units in bulky uniforms are patrolling everywhere, with helmets, tear gas, and water cannons. Helicopters are circling incessantly in the sky, while on the streets of the Schanzenviertel, tires are already burning, a firework explodes right next to my feet and almost blows my ear off. All day, we are busy trying to stay on top of the situation, running from location to location: where have the police scattered another crowd of people, where are bottles flying, where is support needed, where have they cleared the crowds? Then, suddenly, we're standing at an intersection on the edge of the Schanzenviertel that the police haven't managed to clear. We chant ÒHamburg hates the police!Ó at the retreating units. It is a powerful feeling. I, too, am angry that bleeding armored vehicles are driving through the city simulating war. Countless people —are they participants or spectators? —point their smartphones at this exceptional spectacle. Two people are having sex on some scaffolding that numerous protesters have climbed up on to hoist banners. Behind them, clouds of smoke are rising. For a while, the neighborhood is ours; then the police start breaking down the burning street barricades from all sides with heavy equipment. Later, we hear that a special task force has been deployed. It is dark. Across from the Rote Flora, we flee into a pizza shop and refuel until we stumble home at some point. After two days of protesting, we are completely exhausted.

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Every protest is inherently staged, just as staging belongs to protests. It turns local happenings into events and transforms an instant into a pivotal moment, in which a conflict or a problem surfaces and becomes communicable through the media. Participants place themselves center stage. They shape a collective activist self that creates internal coherence and enables new individuals to connect with it, while outwardly this self becomes capable of communication and action. How is a protest mobilized? Which repertoire of affection is employed? How is belonging performed? Which relationship do protest(er)s cultivate with the police and the state authorities? Different protest cultures crystallize from the various answers to these questions. In protests, as well as their prelude and

epilogue, these cultures enable specific self-experiences and open up distinct ways of dealing with conflict.

This essay focuses on two protest cultures that function in very different ways. The protests against the G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2020 exemplify a classic leftist, anti-capitalist practice of rebellion, as implemented in conflicts of all scales, from local, neighborhood disputes over occupied homes and venues to mass events such as the ECB blockade in 2015 or the *Ende Gelände* (Here And No Further!) anti-carbon protests. In paradigmatic contrast, this essay analyzes Extinction Rebellion's bridge blockades in Berlin in summer 2019. These protests are prototypical of another kind of rebellion. This protest culture that has emerged from a more recent ecological movement consciously tries to bypass some of the dead ends in classical insurgency practices and skillfully works with contemporary social media practices. The two protest cultures cannot be strictly separated. On the contrary, there are numerous overlaps in terms of personnel and the common goals of the two movements. And yet, as ideally contrasting forms of staging protest, they comprise quite different possibilities for activist involvement and self-realization, transformation and disruption. Moreover, they are based on profoundly contrasting conceptions of the nature and truth of conflicts.

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"We are fucking angry" is written in large letters on the black banner that is stretched over the "Welcome to Hell" demonstration's loudspeaker van. In the midst of the masses of demonstrators, the vehicle pushes itself through a fog of tear gas against an almost insurmountable block of police units. Not only the motto welcoming participants to the hell of the elite summit thrives on a dystopian feeling. A series of videos aiming to mobilize protesters, and which are circulating ahead of the summit, paint the picture of a contemporary wasteland, a socio-economic order that has reached its end.[1] The feeling corresponding to these images of an impoverished and destroyed world is the activists' anger. The protests enable venting this anger, a feeling that in this context is understood both as an appropriate emotional response and as potentially transformative: The anger functions as an attack on and as a denial of intolerable, dystopian conditions, as well as an affective foray into the gaps and ruptures of a neoliberal world devoid of alternatives.

[1] Two mobilization videos exemplifying the furious and dystopian perspective: "G20 mobi-song (WÜTEND IN HAMBURG)" by wü tend and "FIGHT G20!" by Roter Aufbau Hamburg.

Unlike previous summits, the 2017 G20 was held not only in an urban environment but in the immediate vicinity of Hamburg's Schanzenviertel, a well-known a alternative and anti-capitalist district. Within the left-wing scene, this was seen as a provocation, as an assault on its neighborhood, parts of which were declared a restricted zone in the build-up to the summit.[2] The conflict was thus also framed as a dispute over territory. One side claimed legitimate sovereignty as residents and representatives of an urban and rebellious self-organization, while the other claimed it as guarantors of order and security. This territorial dimension became evident in various ways: the dynamic fencing off and emptying of public spaces, their blockade by the police's "law and order" tactics, and their recapture by activist groups, as well as the permanent surveillance of the area from the air, with cameras and spotlights.

"8,000 Incoming Violent Hooligans," "Rioters From All Over the World"[3]: As external attributions, such juicy headlines and media framings contributed to reinterpreting political protest as an eruption of chaotic forces. The performative production of two confrontational collective selves — through grids and barriers, through police lines marching in formation, and through activist blocks chanting in choirs against them — was prefigured by managing expectations already months in advance. The *mise-en-scène*, as a warlike conflict, was initiated by the state authorities presenting their containment strategies, and the vehicles and technical aids waiting to be deployed. These proved to be true *in situ*. These preparations corresponded to months of training on the part of the protesters. They also shifted the conflict from criticizing the system to fighting police forces on the one side, and from guaranteeing democratic protest to containing dangerous riots on the other. From this shift emerged a prominent image of the conflict as a struggle between two irreconcilable enemies: radicals versus police, chaotic elements versus law and order, anarchic forces versus state agencies imposing drastic measures.

The crisis-like extraordinary situation was also staged and intensified from within. Nightly fires, chanting, guerrilla-like, yet futile small-scale attacks on police forces. This provided some sense of an infernal antagonism with clearly drawn front lines, which mobilization videos had already prepared the protesters for. The protest pushed the experience of a present that was perceived as catastrophic to

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2 The escalating dynamics of the protests offered the police and the government an opportunity to portray this place and its structures as a chaos-creating, violent threat — this aspect cannot be discussed here in the necessary detail. The film *Hamburger Gitter* (2018) by Marco Heinig, Steffen Maurer, Luise Burchard and Luca Vogel offers a comprehensive and critical assessment.

3 Video: "G20 in Hamburg: Eine Stadt im Ausnahmezustand (2017)" by Spiegel TV.

the extreme and revealed who was maintaining this dystopian here and now, and who was resolutely opposing it. The activists' collective self was vitalized by this confrontation — and intimately connected by the shared knowledge of the experienced repression. Sometimes a few agile, hooded figures charged the police lines, provocatively throwing bottles at the officers wearing riot gear; sometimes vulnerable, colorfully dressed people climbed onto a military-like vehicle; and sometimes the mobile crowd of protesters solidified into a marching "black block": The front, constantly re-actualizing itself in the microdynamics of the protest, gave the antagonism a particular intensity and stabilized the activist self. Tensions increased — and the desire for spectacle grew. The aghast, yet enthralled witnesses, who were enthusiastically filming events, only amplified this spectacular extraordinary state.

The media script of such protests and political events seems to be predetermined. A flood of video reports, articles, and news reports celebrate the state of war, the breathtaking vacuum of impending chaos — and its violent suppression. This, of course, may be expected to happen: participants and spectators alike know this. It will end in destruction, expulsion, and the return of peace. The concrete political contents of the protest become blurred— not only in the spectacle's magnetic appeal, but also in the intrinsic effectiveness of its staging. Or does another meaning, another reality, perhaps emerge?

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Berlin, October 2019. We have gathered in small groups on a bridge in the city center. No car has crossed for hours; only the S-Bahn flies by on the other side of the river every now and then. Evening falls. Throughout the day, some traffic junctions in the city have been blocked, some longer, others shorter. There are constant streams of people between the blockades to distribute the activists. Somewhere further back, a woman with a guitar gives a spontaneous concert. Many participants are holding flags bearing the distinctive Extinction Rebellion emblem. The atmosphere is calm, people are chatting, and activists are fortifying themselves with the contents of thermos flasks and Tupperware containers. Alcohol and drugs are strictly forbidden. Anyone caught consuming, or breaching the action consensus, will be kicked out. The murmur of conversation is briefly interrupted. An ambulance appears at one end of the bridge. Immediately, a line of people forms and the ambulance is let through with clapping and cheering.[4] *We do not want to harm or hurt anyone.*

[4] The fact this is one of the movement's tried and tested instruments is shown, for example, by this video, shot by XR on October 9, 2019 ("XR zeigt, wie die Rettungsgasse an der Marschallbrücke spontan für Rettungswagen freigemacht wird") or by this XR Twitter post (April 15, 2019).

Now it is entirely dark. A minute's silence is held, in tribute to and solidarity for another protest. We stand up, each little group forming a circle. We hold hands. Candles are lit, mobile phones are turned into lights. Many circles of lights on the silent bridge. Only the sound of sporadic traffic can be heard in the distance. Otherwise there is nothing but silence. Then someone starts a song: "Heyho, take me by the hand/strong in solidarity we stand/fight for climate justice." More and more voices join the old German folk song[5] with the new climate justice lyrics until the whole bridge is singing, as clear as a bell, sonorous, united.

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The XR activist looks intently into the camera and speaks. Close-up so that the curves of her cheeks are visible, the strands of hair above her forehead, the different shades of color on her face. She talks about her own condition and about that of the world, as well as about the condition of those who are starving involuntarily. She is a hunger striker for the climate and bears forceful witness. After a few seconds, a tear runs down her cheek. Her lips tremble, she has to sniffle. Slowly, she loses composure. "I'm really, really proud I'm doing this. I'm really proud of every hunger striker who's out there. Who is doing his part."[6] Several such video were made as campaign material for Extinction Rebellion's "Global Hunger Strike" in November 2019. Some of them are sobering sequences of climate demands directed at the political elites. In many other videos, however, one aspect of self-experience in particular comes to the fore: the strikers bear testimony to their physical experience of starvation. They register how they become weaker, how they mourn in the face of the climate catastrophe, and how the passing of time wears them down. "This morning I'm feeling significantly weaker — I'm used to having a strong and healthy body — I feel really vulnerable today," as we hear in one of the videos. Their performances seem like approximations of their condition to that of the threatened planet — an affective synchronization. By noting the physical and emotional effects of fasting, the activists transpose the reality of mass extinction into lived experience. They speak as individuals who have understood a truth and express it through self-*experience* to mobilize others. Their video confessions connect their feelings to the ominous, but possibly still avoidable fate of Planet Earth and its creatures. In contrast to the G20 mobilization videos, there is no trace of anonymity here. On the contrary, the faces in these videos are systematically shown following current social media practices.

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5 This refers to the song *Hejo, spann den Wagen an* (Heigh Ho, Hitch Up the Cart).

6 Video: 21 Nov - Day 4 UK | Global Hunger Strike For People and Planet

In this culture of rebellion, staging seems to be aimed not at antagonism and opposition, but at unification. Joint funeral processions in appropriate costumes — that paradoxically accompany the shared commitment to *survival* — are complemented by collective singing and holding hands. Almost all local XR groups publish their own catalog of songs (which, by the way, consists largely of reinterpreted liturgical repertoire).[7] Personal confessions such as the hunger strike videos, but also videos with titles like "Why I Protest" encourage individuals to take action and combine the call to action with a feeling of pathos and reversal. These messages reveal the self-images and motives of individuals — while transcending the individual toward attaining a common goal. The repertoire of emotions begins with grief, touches moments of intimacy, allows sentimentality, and sometimes tips over into despair. The use of emotionality is certainly intended and reflected. The experience and staging of hopelessness and despair are explicitly mentioned and scientifically explained in many XR documents. Yet again, affective reasoning with an apocalyptic situation is said to have transformative potential. It is, however, less about frenzied, nay-saying rage as an energizing and dystopia-appropriate driving force for action as is common in classic left-wing protests. Rather, it is about defusing grief, which also makes those who admit it vulnerable, as the first step toward existential change — which then ought to translate into change that is relevant to humanity as a whole. Even when we speak of rebellion, the warlike or combative momentum is more or less absent. Confrontation is not imagined as a fight, but instead as an act of conviction based on a common truth. Tell the truth! is the movement's very first commandment.[8]

This also opens up a different way of dealing with those representing the state's monopoly on the use of force. Out of conviction or for tactical reasons, these representatives are framed not as representatives of a destructive system but as potential allies. Arrests are taken into account in preparing blockades and other actions. Not, however, as moments in which state violence reveals itself, but as a predictable or calculable consequence of a particular legal system.

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XR's strategy of deliberately undermining antagonisms, of taking the front lines out of protest, so to speak, works above all by referring to a catastrophic future: the imminent end. The prospect of potential destruction — the disappearance of a future at all — creates a common fate for humans and living beings *beyond* political conflicts of interest. It is, according to its own

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7 Many of the songs can be found here: https://extinctionrebellion.de/og/wuppertal/aktions-lieder/

8 https://extinctionrebellion.de/wer-wir-sind/unsere-forderungen/ or https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/

understanding, a matter of survival: “This is not a political movement. This is a movement of humanity,” as one of the XR videos phrases it.

Thus, the “exception” has an entirely different meaning in the two protest cultures, even if both operate with dystopian scenarios. In the staging of left-wing protest events, the extraordinary circumstances sets in motion a kind of *spectacle of revelation*, an advance into an underlying reality, which emerges as an irreconcilable, asymmetrical conflict of interests with relentless repression. In a state of emergency, the state removes its velvet gloves and reveals the iron fist inside the glove: Peter Sloterdijk’s dictum hits this idea of unmasking squarely on the head.[9] This also determines the inner tendency of this protest culture, or rather its “direction of impact”: it is a matter of shifting the asymmetrical power relationship or destabilizing an illegitimate hegemony. The *truth* behind the revelation and the central problem of the protest is thus an (unjust, asymmetric) *power relation*. This explains the importance of provocation in this protest as a means of “teasing out” this naked truth – in order to open up for another, more democratic, more equal, less repressive collectivity. On the other hand, the ecological protest culture surrounding Extinction Rebellion, as described here, declares the exceptional state of affairs on its own. In doing so, it refers to a terrible truth *beyond* power struggles, which, in principle, everyone can acknowledge. Thus, the key problem here is not the exposure of unequal power relations, but rather the dissonance between scientifically proven truth and collective action. The dividing line — because this culture of protest of course also draws one — lies less between conflicting interests than between those who emotionally comprehend this truth and act accordingly and those who refuse to accept it.

The contrasting stagings of these protest culture thus point to very different conceptions of the nature of the conflict: one conception focuses on power relations and injustices — and therefore operates with a collective self of *combattants* aiming to *overthrow* an illegitimate hegemony. The other conception claims a unifying truth beyond conflicts of interest — and thus presents the collective self as *heralds* demanding collective *reversal*.

[9] The entire quote by Peter Sloterdijk reads: “In a state of emergency, the state removes the velvet gloves with which it normally touches its citizens. Then it reveals the iron fist inside the velvet glove”; Peter Sloterdijk interviewed by Tomasz Kurianowicz on September 9, 2020 in the Berliner Zeitung.