

PROTESTS- AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract of Paper

This is a paper that wishes to understand the role that protests play in society and why they are such a large part of the political systems in place today. This paper is written in hopes of keeping all opinions and sub-topics in mind but it is not an exhaustive paper. There is a lot more that can be said when it comes to protest and related topics. Protests have helped change systems. Entrenched monarchies, brutal dictators, tyrant leaders and democratically elected leaders who have forgotten the very society that brought them to power have crumbled at the hands of the social movements which are determined to bring back equality and justice for the people. That is the power of protest, it is said that the follow through after a protest is said to be important. It seems to be a lot to expect protests to have detailed blueprints to rebuild nations, it's an extremely restrictive expectation. It results in protests becoming an event only for the "qualified" often leaving the poor and vulnerable who actually have most reason to protest without representation. And often there is no systematic change because political leaders on all sides engage in bartering power. But the average protesting citizen here or in the west is mostly doing it at high personal costs.

Protests - History

It would appear that historically the first protest recorded was the "Protestant Reformation" in Northern Europe in the early 16th Century. And as it would happen that the very first protest had religious and political motives. It is believed that ultimately the Protestant Reformation led to modern democracy, skepticism, capitalism, individualism, civil rights, and many of the modern values today. It would look like we have protested to thank or blame for what we call modern democracy. The idea is to not blame this ideal version of a government system that we have found, but to critique it. We are supposedly in a "better" version of a political life. Now the problem is who are we to decide what is "better"? Throughout history, there have been various forms of government, whether it be religious rules, monarchy, oligarchy, tyrannies or any other preserved or perverted form of government. It has repeatedly been noticed that the very citizens

these governments are supposed to represent and care for go under represented and are mistreated. Most individuals are in favour of ruling parties as it serves their interests. When it ceases to serve their interests they protest and dissent and try to mobilize other contestants who serve their interests better.

Herd Behaviour Being a Massive Reason for Mass Protests?

To begin with, it's important to define what exactly is Herd Behaviour. By definition, it is when people make decisions based on what others are doing despite their personal information suggesting differently. Choices as personal as whether to have a child or not, as discussed in 'Cultural & Economic Approach to fertility : Proper Marriage or Mersalliance?' by Robert A Pollak and Susan Cotts Watkins ; They talked about how whether one chooses to have a child can be heavily affected by others in the same area. Or, choices as political as who to vote for, as discussed by Cukierman in 1989, who says that Voters are likely to vote in the direction that the opinion polls suggest will win.

What is to be said is that this very idea that sways people's personal opinion and research isn't at play at the very mass level of protests. Protests are based on public opinions (either to bring to light a problem, or to change a public opinion). Such a movement should and does feed on herd behaviour. Protests don't exist because of herd behaviour, rather herd behaviour mobilises protests into a more powerful version of itself. The people join in on protests, with even an ounce of belief, simply because it's what the majority is doing.

But this does not disregard protests. Protests don't exist because people want to avoid negative externality, it exists due to a believed problem that is being followed in the institution, they expand due to people wanting to do what the majority does; and it sometimes sways personal belief, but mostly just strengthens it. People do it not just to avoid loss but also because of certain beliefs they may have about what is fair and just. But protests have to start with some individuals who provide behavioural priors that are picked up by others. These individuals are not following the herd as they are saying fundamental things that are necessarily against the status quo. It is unknown to us the exact function and role that herd behaviour plays in protests, but it can very well be concluded that herd behaviour isn't the primary reason for the existence of protests.

Protest can and very well exist whether humanity follows a herd or not, but the extent at which the protest exists is dependent on herd behaviour. It is simply a catalyst for a large protest, not the primary source of it.

Role of cult of personality and God complex in Political Leaders?

A cult of personality, arises when a country's regime – or, more rarely, an individual – uses the techniques of mass media, propaganda, the big lie, spectacle, the arts, patriotism, and government-organized demonstrations and rallies to create an idealized, heroic, image of a leader, often through unquestioning flattery and praise. A cult of personality is similar to apotheosis, except that it is established by modern social engineering techniques, usually by the state or the party in one-party states and dominant-party states. It is often seen in totalitarian or authoritarian countries.

Cult of personality was first noticed under Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler along with a few other leaders from Spain and Portugal, all of these were in 1919-1926. Stalin is the next era 1927-1928 onwards and spread more efficiently the authoritarianism of the bolsheviks with more efficiency. Stalin has later taken on the role as one of the most famous leaders who embodied the 'Cult of Personality' ideals. Stalin and the people of the soviet union's mass belief in his sayings and ideals, are evident through videos and news reports of the crowd's undying cheering after a speech. It is said that the people in the crowd were scared to stop clapping and therefore would clap for stretches leading up to 5 minutes, where everyone was scared to be the first one to stop.

This extreme dedication from the public may have been the start but it wasn't nearly the end; after which leaders from all over the world, some typical, some even democratic, have used cult of personality as the basis for their form of leadership. Some use fear, while others choose to become synonymous with some opinion of great public belief like religion. Democracy has not been dismantled, simply skirted by people's undying support and unknown lack of choice.

Take for example a hypothetical leader who has chosen religion as their path to connect with their following, in this case the voting body. Choosing religion can appear to have a very unique

effect as not only does it play as a method of gaining a cult-like following already present in religious communities but is also by correlation puts the leader in a place of god likeness. This is a very obvious example of a hypothetical leader taking on a 'god complex.' This situation can very easily happen even in a democratic nation, religion is very commonly used as a part of democratic political campaigns.

When cult of personality in political leaders is talked about it is generally, even definition wise said to be a very authoritarian extremist leadership measure, but I think that's because when people think of cult of personality they think of Stalin and Hitler or Kim Jong-un, because that is what it has always been represented as, but if you look deeper into any political leaders who has a mass following, when a mass following is mentioned popular vote isn't implied but rather a genuine following, one might say a cult following, a mass following may also lead to a cult like following. You can see that leaders have clear signs of cult of personality, it plays a massive role in democracy yet people just assume that cult of personality means autocratic rulers, and it can be said that a large part of that is because individuals don't want to consider themselves a "cult follower."

Cult of personality in leaders tend to elicit very strong opinions from the citizen body. Some follow the leaders in a cult like trance while others take on the role of the opposition with equitable extremism. This breeds an ideal ground for protests.

The internet's role during protests / to ignite protests?

The internet has played a massive role not only in online demonstrations, but in physical protests as well. The internet plays its role as a catalyst between multiple like-minded parties. This helps to gather a following like no other when it comes to large scale protests. The internet helps mobilize political demonstrations, as seen in the Arab Spring, the Taiwan Sunflower Movement, and the ongoing Hong Kong protests.

These protests span across provinces, cities, states and even countries. So the internet has sped up the protesting process, it has sped up the rate at which the protest can formulate and communicate. Protest leaders from the oppositions don't need to find secret channels of

protected communication, they can simply DM (direct message) each other on twitter and work with a similar level of privacy and authority.

Protest leaders played a much larger role when protest did not originate electronically; the leaders had a tangible role to play, that was necessary at that time and was mentally and physically straining. Now we need a faceless viral post, and a swarm of very real people are activated in a change of protest that matters in theory. The only problem is the protest as much as they are valuable, these protests are not thought out and lack an institution to fall back on, once the institution they are protesting actually falls.

Take the Arab Spring for example

A massive Inter-country protest was ignited, many dictators fell and many corrupt governments dismantled, political prisoners were released and criminals were arrested, some women gained the right to vote while others voted for the first time. But the problem was they didn't think enough about what would be next after the protest was over, and hence no institution took the fallen corrupt leader's place. Therefore, people who have lived under the rule of dictators for decades now find themselves in unfamiliar territory and are looking for leadership. Leadership, that they dont have and had no time to establish due to the internet's ability to instigate large scale protests in no time.

Censorship: a solution or the problem in itself

The title could appear extremely misleading about my actual opinion. I don't think this topic even requires a deeper explanation, but in brief, censorship is not a solution, as it deprives people from being able to raise a problem in the first place. Though the internet may be a little too fast paced and may give people an ability to skirt accountability, it is still a very important platform for expression and public opinion. The internet, with all its flaws, is dotted with many positives, free speech being one of the most important of them, and uncensored information and thoughts is just about the biggest of these boons.

Let us now look at a study conducted in China, a country known for its extreme internet censorship. This Study was called Implicit and Explicit Control: Modeling the Effect of Internet

Censorship on Political Protest in China by Jiayin Lu and Yupei Zhao. They concluded that awareness of internet laws is positively correlated to political expression and the more the students (participants of the study) view the censorship laws as a threat, the more they are unlikely to engage in political expression. Students who know less about the details of the Chinese internet censorship laws psychologically perceive the laws as more threatening and are therefore more likely to try and protest the law. And finally, Lu and Zhao conclude that students' degree of involvement in political expression positively affects their awareness of internet censorship laws and negatively affects their perceptions of them.

Threat of censorship may very well keep most of a country's population in check. It doesn't stop protest and it is very definitely not the solution in any manner to a healthy socially and politically free and fair nation. Here is a key instance of censorship in China failing to curb protest, specifically the #metoo movement, which happened majorly online, which is a curious case where active and evolving censorship laws did not work - China's long standing one child policy is now being reverted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as they fear that having one of the lowest birth rates may negatively affect their efforts to stimulate the economy. The CCP is now actively promoting that women have more than one child, despite the CCP's egalitarian principles, women are constantly told what to do with their bodies.

Now for the start of the #metoo movement in China, Lou Xixi was the first to speak up and her post had a massive reach of being viewed 5 million times, which kick started the movement. China's #metoo movement, led by college students, was the first coordinated student campaigns since Tiananmen Square. The censors were quite willing to take down all posts that had the hashtag or displayed similar sentiments. This is when the Chinese women started to use Chinese words that sounded similar to metoo such as the word rice in Chinese (米 - Mǐ) paired with the word bunny in Chinese (兔 - tù). They even rotated the text and used blockchain to try and work against the censors.

It is also important to note that China has little to no laws against sexual harassment, while sexual harassment is rampant nationwide. Statistics show that 50% of female commuters have

faced harassment with little to no reports being made to the authority. Also any forces that originated in China were shunned through family pressure. If they were able to move themselves outside China and continue the protest, they were turned as western hostile forces. This clearly shows the importance of these protests in China and the detriment that censorship poses in such situations. This is not to undermine the Metoo movement in the west, as it has been a problem even in the US, the cradle of feminism with supposedly the most empowerment given on paper to women. If anything the level of authoritarianism that is seen in China and Japan and other socialist type environments, sexism and misogyny may not be that different from in the non-socialist west. I think this reflects a little bit of the bias in the mainly english litt that we consume coming out of europe and the US

Governmental policing and excessive force during protests

The New York Police Department used excessive force during the wave of protests across the city against police brutality and racism, according to a report published by New York City's Department of Investigation. Mayor Bill de Blasio asked for the investigation in May 2020 ,as social media became deluged with cellphone videos showing police officers dowsing protesters, attacking elected officials and journalists with chemical irritants, shoving and hitting them while they struggled on the ground, and in one instance, driving police vehicles into them. The report said the NYPD's response was excessive in part because most police officers involved had not received "relevant training" in policing protests.

The daily New York City protests were a prominent part, of what quickly became a nationwide and international movement, prompted in part, by anger over George Floyd, a Black man killed by a white Minneapolis police officer, and that over Breonna Taylor, a Black woman killed in her Louisville home by white police officers during a botched raid. The report concluded that the city's unusual system of three distinct, sometimes overlapping agencies, conducting oversight of the police department had caused the problems. It recommended that the city create a single independent police oversight agency.

Police Commissioner Dermot Shea in a statement called the summer a "difficult period" and thanked the Department of Investigation for "20 logical and thoughtful recommendations that I

intend to incorporate into our future policy and training.” This blatant disregard for protestors and citizens with no accountability on the part of the police officers, for those who were protesting the very issues they were ignoring at that time, paired with the courts/ system suggestions instead of tangible punishments, proves that the system feeds the issue. This excessive policing shows the very reason for the protest in full force. It very much represented what can be termed as a self fulfilling prophecy. The police force of a nation that is allowed to protest peacefully were harmed for protesting peacefully, and “inadequate training” is supposed to be a valid reason. Protesting is fundamental to a democratic government system, without protest the new form of a democratic system cannot represent the people and therefore protests are legal and ‘allowed’, yet a protest, even if peaceful in nature, is pushed down and constantly minimised to silence the crowd, the very crowd the government is supposed to represent.

Citizen’s growing aggression during protests

When a protest is asked to be ‘civil’ and ‘peaceful’ and to respect the democratic system, the pristine images of historic protest figure heads are called on, figure heads that supposedly pioneered the civil war to civil disobedience. While leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are very definitely the figurehead of peaceful protests leading to big change and they might be considered the ideal now, but it has to be mentioned that during their time they were still arrested, they were not respected for their peaceful ways, they were reprimanded and accused of inciting violence. Civil disobedience in India, as taught by the history text books, was a “failed protest” according to Gandhi, as it ended in violence, something he was strongly against. So we cannot question Gandhi's intentions and undeniable affinity of his nonviolent approach, but what we can question is, if in the middle of an oppressive regime was his non violence rewarded? Was his nonviolent approach to protests and disobedience appreciated by the regime ? The answer to this is an obvious no. Gandhi was still considered enemy number one, he was still considered a criminal, as was Martin Luther King in his time. These are the leaders the protesters are supposed to look up, the individuals who represent the moral gold standard of protests, the ones who so strongly stood for non-violent action even in the face of extreme intimidation, but it is forgotten that in their time they were said to have the same issues that protesters are told they have today. It can be said that they paved the system in which we can use their way of protest and their way alone to protest. But Martin Luther King was arrested for

leading a non permitted protests and protests without permits still end in tear gas and rubber bullets. But even peaceful protestors are being ignored and put on anti-terrorism lists, and this brings the question, if peaceful protests aren't bringing the change that they are supposed to, is the 'harsher' protest a better, more confrontational form of bringing systematic change? - these harsher protests usually imply riots.

Riots are usually insinuated in response to a flare up in what according to the protester can be deemed as a systematic mistake or failure. These protest can be on issues such as individuals who believe the democratic system has failed and therefore the US capital needs to be stormed to bring that issue to light or others who believe they need to take it to the streets and start a riots due to the systematic failures of governments to properly represent a minority, or police brutality or climate change. There doesn't need to be one set reason, riots are what appears to be a response to a radical action on the part of the government or the body that may be represented by the government, or simply a body that has a large enough social/ political impact.

Riots are deemed a 'criminality with no excuse' as described by a powerful political leader during a large-scale racial protest. Now it is very difficult to represent the ethics behind a riot, riots are in no way ethical and by law they aren't legal either. So that brings us to the question, are they necessary at all? Because, that could be the only way left to justify a riot. Riots have been deemed as an act of self-defense by rioters, as riots are said to usually only happen during times when society or a community feel deeply threatened by the very government/ system that is supposed to protect or support them. The same way nations can act in self defence when they feel attacked by external factors. Similarly, it is said that when the minority communities feel attacked, riots should count as self defence, because that is what it feels like. Riots aren't the best method of civil disobedience and they definitely aren't the civil approach to it that the system being protested may want, even though that thought goes against the very meaning of a civil disobedience movement. But it is also very important to mention that riots tend to get out of hand, putting at risk other peaceful protestors alongside the rioters, individuals who the rioters supposedly mean no harm too. And the overall political consequence of riots have to also be brought into account. Riots may bring media coverage and attention to the issues, but not the limelight a rising political movement may want. Riots aren't helpful to the very issue it is rioting

against, The negative backlash to riots may harm the police force keeping the riot in check. This may lead to more oppressive powers by the government to avoid any more consequential harm. Though this attention may sometime in the long term lead to some support by the government to the communities. However, is the small amount of support worth the harm that a riot may have caused to the very issue it was supposedly protesting for? Riots are the consequence of a political system failing a community in society, usually a minority; and a few radical individuals in that community, feeling inconsequential in their own power, in a political system they constantly feel underrepresented in. Riots are not the best way to protest, but it's important to question why these riots were deemed necessary by the members of society, even in a democratic country that is supposed to represent everyone.

In conclusion, I hope this paper reiterates the importance of protests in not only bringing about the existence of a representative political governing body for nations lacking it but also to redefine what a democracy means. Democracy is defined as 'a regular multi party electoral competition' but democracy can't stand for 'of the people, by the people, for the people' while its reality is elites competing at the ballot box. For democracy to be real it has to be something the citizens participate in everyday and protesting democracy is supposed to renew the meaning of what a democracy is. The paper has covered topics such as herd behaviour - its economic reflection as well as its role in protests, cult of personality in political positions of power, the internet's new and increasing role in governments and the role censorship among it while also bringing up means of protests and the legalities and consequences of riots. I hope it has played a role as a comprehensive yet not exhaustive deep dive into protests.

Resources / Citations

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