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On the ‘Doing’ of ‘Something’

A theoretical defence of ‘performative protest’

TEEMU PAAVOLAINEN

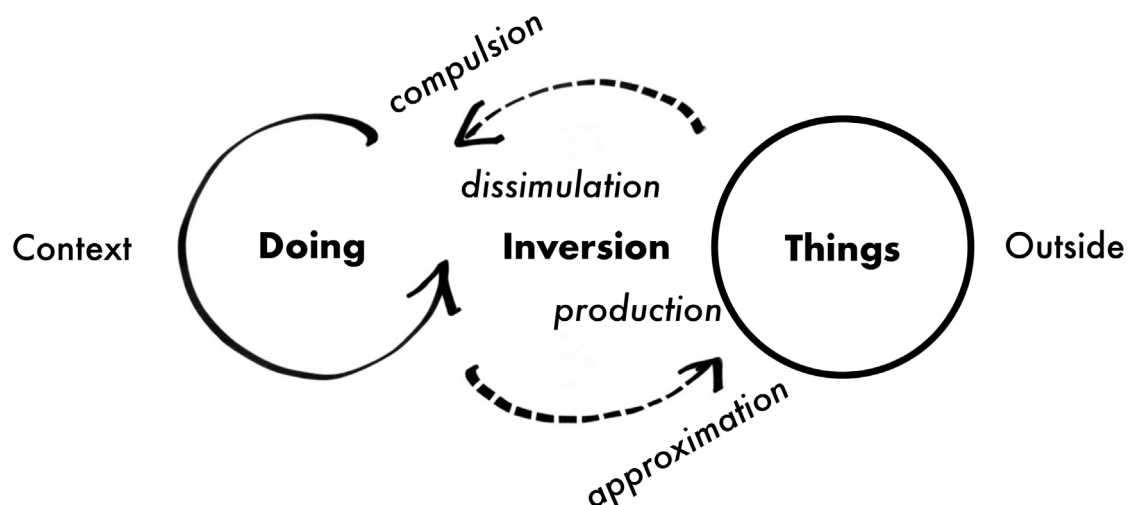
This essay grows from the simple observation that ‘performative’ or ‘performativity’, in protest as elsewhere, have a plurality of conflicting meanings. As to performative protest or performative activism, the overwhelmingly most common recent usage, online and on social media, has been the pejorative or anti-theatrical one, where performativity often just means the ‘for-showness’ of *theatricality* (Carriger 2021).¹ This entails the ‘hollow’ display of liberal wokeness, more obsessed with ‘being seen’ than ‘doing anything’: as one writer puts it, ‘activism is not supposed to be performative ... we do not need you to take up space so that you can look good’ (Tsuneta 2020). The converse of this is the active, efficacious performativity of performance studies – closer, in a sense, to the ‘real’ politics merely being played at by the theatrical variant, yet not unrelated to it, either, given how this performative efficacy often comes with assumptions of causal immediacy and visibility for an audience (Lucie 2021: 113–14). Third, it is not uncommon to see more academic discussions of performative protest focus on the ‘use’ of performativity in protests, so as to ‘raise empathy, gain solidarity and support, and

increase mobilization’ (Cadena-Roa and Puga 2021: 113, 103). Here, there are effects, but the means addressed are emphatically understood as aesthetic, artistic and theatrical; as is often the case, performative stands for ‘performance-like’.

While I am in no position to dispute any of these usages, I do wish to argue that there is something to be gained by featuring their very plurality – and their implicit duality – in the thinking of performativity, in general, and performative protest, specifically. The duality I mean is between explicitly positive and negative conceptions of performativity as a function of *novelty or normativity*: active subversion or passive submission, effective doing or theatrical dissimulation (Paavolainen 2018: 6–7). While her work is not at the core of my argument here, a similar duality is indeed crucial to Judith Butler’s influential theorization of gender performativity. Responding to ‘wildly divergent’ charges of either determinism or voluntarism, Butler insists that ‘performativity describes both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting’, and cannot be understood without both dimensions (2015: 63). Based on this, and the common

¹ Other authors to touch on this, in Carriger’s (2021) special section for JDTC, include Lindsay Gross, Kellen Hoxworth, Sarah Lucie, William Marotti and James McMaster. A basic example of such ‘performative’ activism – and the usage appears to have been boosted after the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 – is the quick and easy act of posting one’s support on social media. Notably, the phrase ‘performative protest’ is used much less often than ‘performative activism’.

■ Figure 1. Plural performativity. Diagram by author



association of performativity with ‘doing things’ (Austin 1962), the basic dynamic through which I outline my argument is fairly straightforward – people *do* something, and it begins to look like some *thing*. (Think of verbs and nouns: protesting becomes ‘a protest’, behaviour comes to suggest ‘character’.) To present such ‘plural performativity’ at one glance, in Figure 1 the doing is illustrated by the drawing of a circle, the thing by the static boundary that ensues.

To elaborate only briefly, in Butler’s terms the cycle and the circle would reflect aspects of reiteration (in some social context) and normativity (with its excluded outside): to properly perform ‘manliness’, say, and not be excluded as ‘queer’, one has to repeat the kinds of behaviour that one’s society considers normative of manliness. Thus, Butler defines gender performativity as a ‘reiteration of norms’ (1993: 234). However, she also insists that the two aspects are not really separate – this is where the four italicized, connecting terms in Figure 1 come in. On the one hand, any norm can only ever be approximated by its performances, and yet its reiteration may appear compulsory: you will never quite embody the norm, but you have to perform accordingly, or else you will be excluded. On the other hand, insofar as any norm is only ever produced in its repetition, this very historicity has to be ‘concealed or dissimulated’ (12) for the norm to remain powerful and the performance to appear natural – in my manliness, I am not performing but expressing an inner essence of my own. Beyond Butler but central to the figure, this is the point also with ‘inversion’, taken from the anthropologist Tim Ingold, who rather poetically defines it as the distinctly modern logic of ‘turning the world in on itself so that its lines and movements of growth become boundaries of containment’ (2015: 74; see also Paavolainen 2018: 211, 24–8).

To get to the theme of protest, however, it is crucial to note that there remain two foci in the figure. Insofar as Butler’s theory of performativity emphasizes the constitution of social identities by norms repeated and concealed, the inverse of this is the constitution of norms by *actions* that themselves need to be obscured for the norm to stand. The first focus

aligns with the determinist reading of Butler – where any performative agency is always already ‘implicated in that which one opposes’ (1993: 241) – and with the long tradition, in social theory, set to convince people that they don’t really count against the forces of discourse or some other overwhelming structure. To invert this focus is simply to begin with the doing or the action itself. In the more activist view of performativity that I wish to defend in this essay, much influenced by the radical theorists David Graeber, Max Haiven and John Holloway,² the paragon of such ‘doing’ is neither speech nor gender but social action – it is not unconstrained, and it need not be human doing alone, but neither is it an unchangeable force of nature. Hence, too, the ‘things’ in Figure 1 are ‘really just patterns of action’ (Graeber 2001: 59): whether they be social constructions or more material realities – norms, laws, enclosures, climates – they arise from action, constrain action, and may also be undone by action.³ If protest is about ‘doing something’ about some perceived injustice, then the performativity of protest concerns the various ways that doing and that something relate.

On this theoretical basis, my wish in this article is to defend the notion of performative protest as more than just ‘playing politics’, or protesting with explicitly performance-like elements, even though both of these connotations do occasionally apply. To make the case I rely on the aspects proposed in Figure 1, not as an absolute solution to the conundrum of protest and performativity, but as prompts for asking the kinds of questions that might reveal something of its range: for example, what sorts of doing, in what contexts, count as protest in the first place, what sorts of things do they produce or approximate and what other sorts of doing might this compel or conceal? While the figure is not always used entirely seriously, and the reader may well forget it along the way, it does arguably encapsulate, in one view, the kinds of parts and dynamics that tend to be involved in performative processes. Not all of them are, all of the time, but many of them will be involved surprisingly often; in a sense, the figure *is* the argument I propose.

In the rest of the essay, the focus is on the two

² David Graeber (1961–2020) was an American anthropologist and anarchist activist, a leading figure in Occupy Wall Street; Max Haiven (b. 1981) is a Canada Research Chair in the Radical Imagination; John Holloway (b. 1947) is a Marxist sociologist and poetically spoken philosopher based in Mexico. Important for the middle section of this article, Ewa Majewska (b. 1978) is a Polish philosopher and political activist.

³ Elsewhere, I argue that the proposed geological epoch of the Anthropocene can itself be regarded performative ‘in the sense that its effects only arise from a massive social repetition that is confused with essential nature and thus concealed’ (Paavolainen 2020: 6).

⁴To be sure, this is softer than ‘compulsion’ in Figure 1. For Holloway, however, such ‘fetishization’ of people’s free doing suggests more graphic dualities of poetic oppression: once established, the done tends to dominate over the doing, identity over plurality, ‘nouns over verbs’ (2010a [2002]: 58).

⁵That is, they express but fail to impress; moreover, even if they succeed in extracting a promise from the authorities – that basic performative speech act (Austin 1962) – there is no guarantee that the thing promised will ever actually be performed. Considering one of the aims of Extinction Rebellion, say, a government may indeed declare a climate emergency, and yet decline from acting as if there was an emergency.

central features already suggested: first, on the *plurality* of performative protest – or in Haiven’s and Holloway’s terms, of ‘the doing’ and ‘the done’ (done not a given) – and then on the *duality* of performative making and maintaining, related to Graeber’s take on imagination and violence. Given the nature of a theoretical overview, the examples are fleeting and cartoonish, covering a wide spectrum from anti-maskers and truck convoys to protest clowns and giant puppets; at the end, the themes addressed are summed up in another loose figure.

THE DOING AND THE DONE: PERFORMING PROTEST, PROTESTING PERFORMANCE?

So how would Figure 1 work with a standard dictionary definition of the noun *protest*, for example as ‘an occasion when people show that they disagree with something by standing somewhere, shouting, carrying signs, etc.’ (Cambridge Dictionary 2022)? Here, the thing done might be the communication of disagreement with something else, in the context of a protest occasion where the doing typically consists of standing and shouting. While other mappings are surely possible, I wish to derive the performativity of protest not from the ‘something’ that it opposes (think of it as the ‘outside’ in the figure), but positively from what the doing *does*, whether or not it affects this something at all. Indeed, the figure’s visual argument is for the fundamental cyclicity of performativity: beyond a linear sense of doing things – flip a light switch, do your bit and that’s it – performativity kicks in when the thing *done* lingers on and affects further *doing*. As Max Haiven elaborates on Holloway’s poetic categories, whatever one might consider as a ‘done’ that people collectively create (tools, machines, norms, institutions), it will ‘inform, discipline and shape how [they] act and cooperate’ (2014: 162–6).⁴ Beside this cyclicity, what I wish to argue in this section is for the *plurality* of both the doing and the done: remembering that there will always be much more going on, I use Figure 1 to proceed from nominal ‘protest’, through what such a noun might conceal, to the variety of things

that protest performs beside the showing of disagreement.

Evidently, dictionary definitions are confining. From a performative perspective, say, the expression of disagreement is really only that – an *expression* of the protestors’ standpoint – and even if they make explicit demands, these will likely be perceived as only ‘performative’, not causally performative like demands by the law or parents.⁵ As to specific actions, however, standing and shouting with signs and slogans remains probably the most typical image of protest that one might think of. In the literature, protests come in waves and cycles, but tend to be constrained by their known ‘repertoires’ (for example, Della Porta 2016: 16–18); in terms of Figure 1, such repertoires of actions – say marches, blockades, strikes and rallies – comprise the normative form that the doing of protest tends to approximate, even though it is by no means compulsory. In terms of message, such tested forms can be very efficacious, but then again, they also tend to become clichéd and boring. Hence an important aspect of performative protest is what Larry Bogard calls *tactical performance*, or the use of explicitly performative techniques to ‘open up public space ... rather than to merely occupy it with uniform marching and chanting’ (2016: 2, 117). Either way, the things done – the demands and the tactics that first serve as a point of orientation for the protestors – may later constrain their further doing, or be turned upon it by their opponents, keen on silencing the message and legislating the form (I focus on this dynamic in the third section).

At this point, however, I wish to note how the ‘done’ that protest performs includes diffuse material effects beyond these symbolic and formal aspects from the dictionary. On the beneficial side, first, it may increase group cohesion among the protestors, and perhaps gain solidarity and support from those witnessing their action. In her ‘performative theory of assembly’, Judith Butler herself argues that the act of gathering, as such, exemplifies an embodied, ‘plural form of performativity’ that exceeds ‘any particular demands’ and may indeed ‘constitute’ plural subjectivity ‘in the course of its performative action’ (2015: 8, 178) –

I end this section on this constitutive aspect.

Quite as easily, though, the more unintended effects of protest action are perceived negatively, especially when the chosen tactic conflicts with the intended message. A notorious case in point would be the early Extinction Rebellion action of disrupting the London Underground at rush hour, 17 October 2019; as the angry commuters noted, surely the environmental cause should rather be for, not against public transport? Further ‘outside’ the immediate circle of the done deed, one ought also to consider performativities that are still more plural and distributed. Expanding on Sarah Lucie’s example of COVID-19 (2021: 113–14), a group of anti-mask protestors might simultaneously defend their individual freedoms and spread the disease highly effectively. Concerning performative agency, the shift Lucie suggests is ‘away from “What can I do”’ to everything one is *already doing* more passively (116) – and, beyond the example above, it need not be all bad.

Indeed, it is my contention that an exclusive focus on the performance of *protest* may hide from view more mundane ways of *protesting* harmful norms in everyday life. Whether this is done by repeating differently or doing something else altogether (Butler 1993; cf. Holloway 2010b: 124), to focus on the doing itself is to start dissolving strict separations between activism and life (Free Association 2011: 12, 26, 28).

One way to make this move is through Ewa Majewska’s minoritarian, feminist concept of ‘weak resistance’, opposed to what she calls the ‘heroic model of political agency’ (2021: 127–47).⁶ This is the patriarchal ideal that prioritizes ‘heroic fighters over peaceful protesters, men over women and the strong over the weak’ (133); for Majewska, it dominates liberal and fascist imaginations alike and also affects social protest. Instead of focusing on the exceptional and the extraordinary – conflict, victory and sovereignty – weak resistance grows rather in dependence, persistence and solidarity; if heroic agency is causally linear, weak resistance is a plural form of performativity. In Figure 1, a similar move is implied by the central notion of inversion (of doing into done, free practice into confining norms) that Holloway reads as both captivity and hope. No matter how utterly

the one dominates the other, in his Marxist analysis ‘the done depends on the doing’ for its existence and is therefore vulnerable (2010a [2002]: 35).⁷ Thus, to keep the doing and the done side by side, in the figure, is to keep this denied dependence evident; insofar as norms too depend on their repetition, ‘the latent is the crisis of the apparent, the verb the crisis of the noun’ (Holloway 2019: 274–5).

What this means in terms of protest is that underneath its overt variants of pressure and persuasion, demonstration or direct action, a whole range of weak resistance is performed that a more plural approach to the category should not exclude. Moving from noun to verb, *protesting* appears entirely normal, something people do all the time – as Majewska notes, by only attributing resistance ‘to a twenty-year-old man who went to a demonstration or two’, one habitually overlooks ‘all those who struggle for decades, resisting patriarchal, racist, heteronormative capitalism every day’ (2021: 18).

Admittedly, this sort of weak resistance tends to take place within specific social relations that seem omnipresent, such as patriarchy or capitalism. To the extent that one can evade retribution, one may try to *relate differently*, often by withholding some doing that is deemed normative (housework, sex, labour, paying one’s rent or debts). Indeed, Holloway sees a crucial continuity between overt activism and the millions of silent ‘refusals and other-doings’ of daily life (2010b: 12), including just ‘reading a good book’ (34) or helping one another without the involvement of monetary value – but clearly the protest element really comes to the fore when the threat of retribution is there. Classic examples include the refusals to move from a lunch counter or to the back of a bus, in the US civil rights movement, but there are closer ones as well. In the context of the 2022 Russian war on Ukraine, even wearing the Ukrainian blue and yellow in public might be dangerous, in Russia (opposition being illegal), and when an upsurge of weddings is reported, in Ukraine, one is inclined to think that the worn performative, ‘I do’, also performs as a stark protest against the forced foreclosure of a future.

Which, finally, brings us to the more

⁶ Majewska’s approach to weak resistance is richly influenced by Walter Benjamin, Gianni Vattimo, Jack Halberstam, Václav Havel and James C. Scott, among others.

⁷ Here, Holloway poetically develops the Italian autonomists’ ‘Copernican’ inversion of class perspective from the 1960s. Beginning not from capital but from people’s own labour instead, this analysis shows the former to be utterly dependent on the latter. Like the body depends on its environment, so the master depends on the servant.

temporal sense in which the doing and the done performatively relate: in terms of Figure 1, it takes time to *produce* the done, especially when the *context* of the doing works to deter it. Arguably, such doing is less about ‘resistance’ than it is about long-term *persistence* in overcoming the resistance of those whose power depends on the status quo – ‘eroding, corroding, and carving’ that which ‘seems permanent and solid’, it functions as rehearsal for the moment when open protest becomes possible (Bogad 2016: 280, 80; see also Alexander 2018). If the doing has long been denied, its eventual outburst may appear sudden and surprising, to outsiders. Majewska’s examples include the Polish Solidarność of the 1980s and the worldwide #MeToo movement of about 2017, but both had been prepared by an increase in communication, be it in hashtags or underground newspapers. Against the politics ‘done by heroes, with heroes and for heroes’, she insists on ‘the performative efficiency of those millions of hashtags’ in fostering a sense of community and shared experience, beyond private refusals, beyond ‘the neoliberal individualism imposed as the only model of agency in the last thirty years’ (Majewska 2021: 80, 126). Once organized into public protest, this sense of alignment and mutual recognition might intensify into shared ‘moments of excess’ (Free Association 2011), in which the potential of social doing stands out and the resistance to it is momentarily suspended:

[Such an] exposure to a different order of doing ... transforms [its participants]. If we, as social beings, create ourselves based on the relationships, values, institutions, norms, ideals, conventions and social structures that surround us, how do we re-create ourselves amidst the radical event, when these fall away or when they seem more malleable, supple and changeable? (Haiven 2014: 172)

But surely this is already something other than protest, in the dictionary definition of people just ‘showing that they disagree with something’? Yes, in the sense that here the focus is on their *working to agree* on ‘what they are for, not only what they are against’; ‘composition’ not ‘opposition’ (Free Association 2011: 31, 49–50, 58). And no, in that the etymology of protest as public testimony (the Latin *pro-* +

testari) does also allow the more anarchist sense of protestors offering theirs by actively performing – *prefiguring* or *constituting* – the change that they want to see (Melina 2014). In the imaginary of ‘changing the world’, this suggests doing so ‘without taking power’ (Holloway 2010a [2002]) but doing so now and not in the future – a ‘revolution in reverse’ that starts directly in everyday life, instead of building its institutions first, defiantly insistent on ‘acting as if one is already free’ (Graeber 2011: 58). As the most large-scale recent example of such prefigurative protest, the Occupy camps of the early 2010s come across as extended rehearsals in democracy, and may have withered for their chosen lack of hard structure, but that is not the point here. Insofar as ‘our society and our lives’, as Haiven expands on Holloway, indeed consist of the ‘tension between the doing and the done’, no protest will ‘liberate doing completely’ or bring about ‘a better, perfect done within which all doing can occur’, both of which are impossible; what remains is the constant work of doing differently (Haiven 2014: 166).

In terms of Figure 1, the done of such proactive protest comprises an excess of doing otherwise, which the protestors hope might leak from their limited circle to the wider society outside – perhaps even seeding a ‘planetwide transformation of political common sense’, to cite Graeber’s quite hopeful definition of revolution (2013: 274). From the outside, though, it may well appear as just ‘performative’, hence in need of serious containment and some common sense. Enter the political ontologies of performativity.

ON IMAGINATION AND VIOLENCE

In this final section, let me consider some perhaps deeper principles by which the proposed performativity of protest may work to both change things or keep them as they are – what I earlier referred to as the duality of novelty and normativity. My main impetus is David Graeber’s long essay on the 1999–2000 alter-globalization protests in various US cities, ‘On the phenomenology of giant puppets’ (2007: 375–417).⁸ Specifically, I am interested in the ‘neat structural opposition’ he notes between the

⁸The subtitle reads, ‘Broken windows, imaginary jars of urine, and the cosmological role of the police in American culture’; I touch on all these themes very briefly below.

two images the average American might have known of the mobilizations: that of black-clad anarchists breaking windows ('mass, anonymous, destructive') and then whimsically coloured puppets of 'goddesses and birds and pigs and politicians' (380). For Graeber, this juxtaposition mirrors what the protests aimed to achieve, owing to a long artistic/revolutionary tradition from surrealism and situationism to punk. With the 'Black Bloc' turning 'consumerist destruction' in on itself, in 'a literal shattering of illusions', the puppets represent the recuperation of 'unalienated experience in the collective festival': 'If "property destruction" is meant to shatter the existing Spectacle, giant puppets ... suggest the permanent capacity to create new ones' (394–6, 380–2). At the structural extreme, he relates these images to 'a much larger conflict' between what he considered the central competing conceptions of political reality:

The first – call it a political ontology of violence – assumes that the ultimate reality is one of forces, with 'force' here largely a euphemism for various technologies of physical coercion ... The other could be described as a political ontology of the imagination. It's not so much a matter of giving 'power to the imagination' [in reference to the 1968 revolutionary slogan] as recognizing that the imagination is the source of power in the first place. (Graeber 2007: 406–7)

In the performative frame, this striking combination suggests not only material tactics, but also idealized standards for 'bringing things into being' (Graeber 2011: 42). Whether or not one wants to go as far as Graeber and identify violence and imagination as the driving norms of Right and Left politics – based on an anarchist view of state power and the more romantic lineage of the Left (Graeber 2011: 45–7; Graeber 2007: 415n32) – they do indeed suggest alternative views as to social reality and how it is performed. In one sort of political realism, nation states are not just imaginary agents with imaginary interests, but 'real because they can kill you' (2007: 406); in the other sort, reality is 'something that we make, and could just as easily make differently' (2011: 47). Without denying that violence does take place in protest actions as well – and especially in their media coverage, a point I will return to – this framing makes it tempting to place the more constitutive principle

of the imagination on the side of the 'doing', in Figure 1, with violence as the constraining principle to defend the 'done' that has been done; for Butler (1993) too, norms become compulsory on the threat of violence. In Graeber's essay, the anarchists do break windows, but it is only the police who engage in full assault, not only on the protestors themselves but especially on the puppets that they seem to 'hate' even more – one possible reason, he argues, is that the puppets 'challenge their right to define the situation' by sheer power (2007: 401).

On this basis, my brief examples, here, move between these two principles in protest situations, across the political spectrum; the main argument is for the unsettled *duality* of performativity as both making and maintaining, and on the ways these intertwine.

So let us begin from Graeber's implicitly performative definition of violence, as a 'highly schematic' form of action, and 'pretty much the only way' to have 'predictable effects on others' actions without understanding anything about them': 'Hit them over the head hard enough and [what they think] becomes irrelevant' (2007: 101). Crucially, he argues that 'its ultimate purpose is to prevent others from being able to act' by stripping down and ultimately inhibiting *communication* (2015: 163) – rather than create anything, the police maintain what is and do not negotiate (2007: 410, 402).⁹

Interestingly, there is also a genre of protest that seems all about this sense of retaining or returning past order, and makes its case very much on the basis of perceived power. I refer to the convoys of trucks or cars that spread, in early 2022, from Canada to many other countries, my native Finland included. Typically, the protests would have been against COVID-19 vaccines and mask mandates or rising petrol prices.¹⁰ Apart from the implicit violence of the form – an extended armour in itself, a car *could* kill you and will certainly drown any conversation in the very burning of fossil fuel – the reason I bring it up is the congruence of this form with the defence of perceived normality. Thus when Extinction Rebellion blocks the traffic by sitting in the main thoroughfare of central Helsinki, the quick responses on social media suggest not only truncheons but water cannons, trucks,

⁹ Perhaps, as William Marotti suggests, the slander on protest as 'performative' is based on the 'self-evident adequacy of the status quo' that the police performs, ever defending the legitimacy of norms like their own use of force (2021: 118)? In fencing up potential sites of protest, they materially barricade the 'done' circle in Figure 1.

¹⁰ Also, both the Canadian Freedom Convoy and its Finnish counterpart called for the resignation of the respective governments of Justin Trudeau and Sanna Marin. One perceptive blog post considers the blockades in Canada 'remarkably performative', given the US far right's heavy involvement in promoting them (WorldbyStorm 2022).

snowploughs and tanks, whereas any intrusion by the car convoys falls within normal freedom of speech and assembly. Conclusion: violence is acceptable to defend settled norms and to resist any protest against them?

An earlier example, also from Finland, would be the January 2016 merry-go-round, in the freezing night of my then hometown Tampere, between two curious troupes of implicit protest. One was a self-appointed patrol of grim-looking men in black bomber jackets, the other, a more colourful flock of mostly female clowns; respectively, they called themselves Soldiers of Odin and Loldiers of Odin (Figure 2) (Paavolainen 2018: 228–34). Where the former, silently accepted by the authorities, took to the streets on the pretext of protecting Finnish women from migrant sex attacks, the latter followed them around, bouncing, prancing and crawling in the snow, so as to protect the Soldiers too. In the present context, this is a classic example of the principle of implied violence seeking to ‘define the situation’ (Graeber 2007: 401), but being challenged by an explicit use of creativity and imagination, exposing both the violence and its silliness; admittedly, the Loldiers would have known that the Soldiers could not respond with much force, many of them white nationalists with prior convictions of domestic abuse. If such protest seeks to ‘encounter violence without

reproducing its terms’ (Butler 2015: 187), the tactic here is to replace looming conflict with cheerful confusion. As Bogad notes of previous protest clowns, the Loldiers ‘neither flee nor fight’ but ‘stay and play’ (2016: 113). ‘The more predictable the opponent,’ he might add, the easier it is also to control how it appears to the public – whether the ‘irresistible image’ is of a clown kissing a riot shield or of many clowns clowning with neo-Nazis (43–4, 32).¹¹

Then again, media imagery tends to serve the self-reinforcing performance of normativity itself; with the ‘power of definition’ off the street again (Graeber 2007: 408), any imaginative protest actions may quite as well be inverted to their ironic opposite. If violence is the norm, it is often reinforced by making peaceful protests *look* violent too, either by a demonizing rhetoric of riots and hooligans and terrorism, or by provoking panic amid them by charging in with horses or police cars (Free Association 2011: 37). Often, too, there is a Hollywood-induced need for explicit good guys and bad guys – and if the police are obviously facing only a group of ‘idealistic kids’, the need for ‘military-style repression’ must first be justified to the officers themselves. In his puppet essay, Graeber reports such fantastically imaginary threats as the protestors squirting urine at them or the puppets concealing bombs (2007: 389–94). Conversely,

¹¹ Bogad’s chapter on ‘clownfrontation’ focuses on the more professional example of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (2016: 112–41). He defines the ‘irresistible image’ as one ‘so compelling or beautifully troubling that even one’s ideological opponents must reproduce it, even when it undermines their narrative’ (32).

■ Figure 2. Loldiers of Odin (on ground) and Soldiers of Odin (standing), Tampere, Finland, 16 January 2016. Photo Loldiers of Odin (2016)



it is no accident that much of American TV since the 1960s has invited its audiences ‘to see the world from a policeman’s point of view’, imposing quite a specific norm for them to idealize in a mild form of structural violence (410, 405).¹²

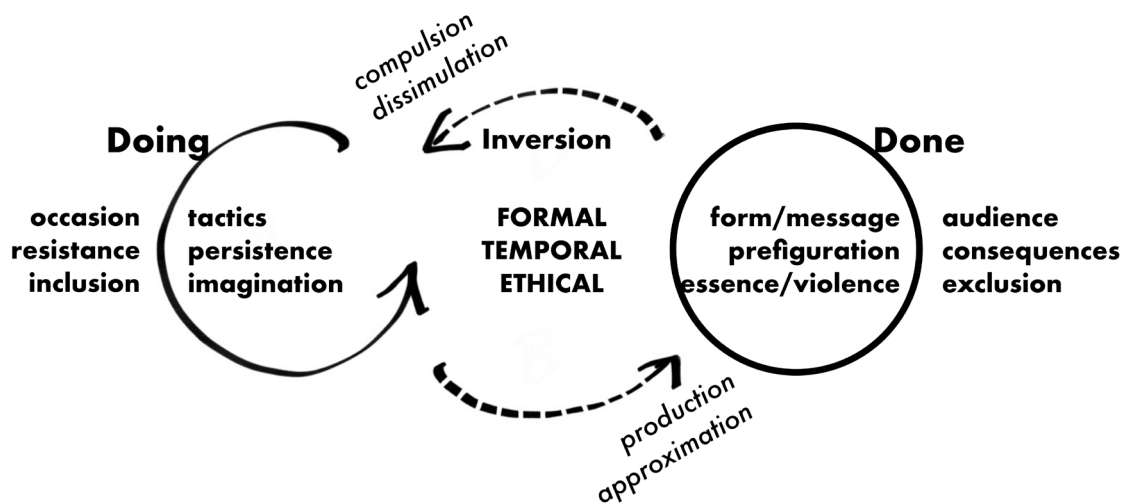
On the one hand, all this official resistance only testifies to the ultimate efficacy of protest; against all attempts to exclude it from normative politics – as ‘performative’, say – the performativity of protest is apparent in this very real fear it does seem to arouse. On the other hand, any protest movement is itself eminently capable of inverting imagination into institutions, plurality into the violence of some monological ‘we’, verbs of doing into confining nouns of settled definition; as Haiven asserts, ‘the solidification of the doing into the done cannot be avoided, just worked on and through’ (2014: 165–6).

However, and this is my final point, I do not wish to suggest that norms and nouns are not necessary (if people like a norm they call it ‘values’, if not they call it ‘ideology’). If violence, in the somewhat biased view I have taken, is often used to defend some idealized past, to resist change and to contract people in on themselves in fear, then perhaps the imagination is that in which protest persists, that opens people towards some idealized future, that combines estrangement with affirmation (cf. Weeks 2011: 204–8). Against more postmodern versions of performativity, this is the meagre essentialism still allowed on the normative side

of Figure 1. Apart from specific demands, any future hope that protestors might carry can only be a vague ‘essence’ or aspiration of what they want to achieve – a receding horizon rather than blueprint or eternal verity. For Graeber anyway, what the imagination produces are just such ‘images of totality’, even if none will translate directly into reality (2011: 56–7); likewise, Haiven frames ‘the radical imagination’ not as a thing to possess, but as something that communities *do* together, that both emerges from and enables their collective doing (2014: 262). To be sure, in protest situations as elsewhere, this doing will be fraught with conflict and a painful alignment of different imaginations. While the estrangement of the present is relatively easy (think of Loldiers or the giant puppets), imagining new futures is substantially harder, even if many of their ingredients are already present in the present. Perhaps the most that any protest can prefigure is an adjectival sense of a world more open and more openly performative – not a done statement but ‘a lived imaginary’ of ‘color and life’ (Stephen Duncombe and L. A. Kauffman cited in Bogad 2016: 96–7).

Drawing together the aspects of ‘performative protest’ that have been encountered in this essay, Figure 3 suggests only three general layers, all of which suggest a variety of questions. (Admittedly, the division is fairly arbitrary, and its sole purpose is to quickly recapitulate some of the main themes, from the simpler to the more complex.) The first, formal level is about the tactics that protestors choose to use

¹² In Graeber’s definition, ‘structural violence always seems to create extremely lopsided structures of imagination’ (2007: 405, also 101–2), in which the down-trodden cannot but try to ‘imagine the perspectives of those on top – while the latter can wander about largely oblivious to much of what is going on around them’ (2015: 81).



■ Figure 3. Performative protest? Diagram by author.

to get their message across to an audience; if the form of the event overrides the message, it is not unlikely that the event is perceived as only 'performative' in the anti-theatrical sense. The second, temporal level points to the kinds of weak resistance that people already perform in everyday life – the ways that protest persists in resistant environments – as well as to more prefigurative work and the openness of any long-term consequences. On the third, ethical or ontological level, the hard question to would-be protestors is the extent to which their imagination remains common and inclusive, or is closing in, as it eventually will – the essence of what they seek feeding the violence of what it excludes. While not all these fairly abstract slots will be relevant to all kinds of protest, they do suggest possible dynamics for its performativity; in all cases, there is a doing of things that have real effects both outside the done and back again on the doers. Effectively, the performativity lies in the cyclical relation between the doing and the done: whether consecutive or concurrent, there is an aspect of making and an aspect of maintaining (hence production, approximation/compulsion, dissimulation). Perhaps, it is simply the balance between the efficacy of the doing and the artificiality of the done that also gives us the more positive and negative connotations of 'performative protest'?

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