

IRN Conference 2022

‘Place, Space and Community’: a study of Extinction Rebellion and Climate Activism

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The presentation provides a phenomenological, micro-sociological account of the emotions of protest, from the perspective of people engaged in Extinction Rebellion’s Autumn Uprising in London, 2019.

This was a two week campaign taking place across the globe – but specific to London occurring between the 7th and 19th October.

The research study highlights the significance of Place, Space, and the sense of Community to peoples’ emotions.

In a slightly unorthodox way of paper presentation - You have just seen and heard a Verbatim theatre performance that included narrative from qualitative data collected from interviews and fieldwork– to give it a living reality, beyond the written page or powerpoint slides.

And on the screens, you will see a looping slide show of images from the protest events – while I verbally present aspects of the research study.

All together – 12 protest sites appeared in the study, with 28 participants, supported by ethnographic field notes, observations, and video/photographic content.

The research framework draws on Erving Goffman's (1959/69) notion of the presentation of self in everyday life, specifically that of its Dramaturgy and performative dimensions. But without the implied cynicism of seeing performance as a means of image portrayal and management, and people disingenuously adopting a public facing role.

In addition, the interpretive framework draws from James Jasper (2018) on the emotions of protest – that they are rational, a form of 'feeling-thinking' process with a purpose. This coincides in part with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's view of the intentionality of consciousness – being directed at something in the world.

'Place' refers to geographical locale, but with a human wrought purpose and significance (Whitehall, Place of Westminster, Parliament Square, Dept of Business and Trade, Bank of England etc.)

'Space' refers to mobile, transitional fields of time and space – where protesters make it their own – Camp/Blockade. This can involve the psychological salience and import of what they are doing and where it is being done. (See Gregory *et al.* 2009 for definitions of above).

'Community' in the sense of physical/virtual closeness, and/or ideological/psychological connectedness – here and now and beyond as a social movement.

As to why we should be interested in the emotions of activism, we might note they serve to position us in the world and the social situations in which we find or place ourselves in. Moreover, they are capable of being managed in order ‘to take advantage of their immediacy, their urgency [...] to motivate ourselves and others. We place ourselves in situations that we know or hope will make us angry or joyful for example, in order to *feel* something’ (Jasper, 2018 pg. 1)

But emotions in the context of protest are often viewed with suspicion (in an academic research context) and considered somewhat unfashionable. It is a matter of record that social psychological interpretations of crowds dominate presently.

Perhaps, understandably this is due to concerns about irrationality, that they are too visceral and beyond control to have any utility. And from classical reductionism: the idea of the Mob, a crazed, out of control organism infected by contagion and capable of manipulation by malign actors. For these reasons emotions have often been side-lined in the past.

In a Platonic sense emotions belong to the ‘spirit’, one of three elements of the mind— portrayed as one of two horses pulling a chariot under the direction and control of reason as the charioteer. This sub-ordination of the emotions has endured ever since.

Yet, emotions are indicators of what is going in the mind and body. They can lead to better understanding of ourselves in a situation. Ignoring emotions is like ignoring an aspect of existence.

This may sound rather too metaphysical and beyond understanding—yet, we see in this research study a glimpse of representation in the social world.

A different way of looking at the emotions of protest is to see them as:

Doing FOR us, rather than TO us

Being ‘Triggered by events, objects, or situations and their features,’ and helping people to process information, formulate actions and signal to others (see Jasper, 2018).

Emotions serving to help us make sense of things, and communicate through them with others around us.

Emotions as rational – capable of being known and reflected upon.

A cultural language – the culture of protest here in this context.

The *labelling* of emotion – does not necessarily correspond to the actual *feeling*. Example: ‘Do not get angry – I’m not angry, I’m upset/concerned/confused...’

Some of the ‘pleasures of protest [participation]’ (Jasper, 1997) derive from group identification and a sense of empowerment. Yet among these collective aspects of protest, individual phenomenology features – the intra-personal and micro-sociological. Specifically, the personal affective *gain* – what I call ‘Affective Capital.’

It is a strange contradiction that many protests fail in achieving their desired aims – But it doesn’t deter people. Something must be gained by participating.

It is this affective capital deriving from peoples’ interactions *with* and experiences *of* place, space and community that is reported here from the data and their interpretation.

Conclusions

Protest scenarios and activity have a dramaturgical dimension.

With a stage or stages, players (protesters, police, other agents, opposition, supporters, confederates, props. And sometimes a script playbook– ideology/narratives).

Emotions, if you will, infuse the protest performance – giving a vibrancy and reification of the abstract.

A situation in which emotions are engaged, expressed, shared, intensified, and may establish an enduring nature and impact beyond the immediate context.

People may not necessarily anticipate this state the first time that they participate, yet once they have it, they come to expect these situational incentives in the future (see Opp, 2009).

The synergy created through the significance of space, place and community provides a form of affective capital with an expectation that it will persist and sustain the individual.

‘All the world’s a stage – and ALL merely players.’ (As You like it).

ASIDE - But – with a purpose and outcomes.

Emotions are as real as anything social scientists’ study – and once we start looking they appear everywhere (Jasper, 2018).

References

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