

BSA



UNIVERSITY OF
ABERDEEN

School of Social Science



Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

BSA Early Career Event
Saturday 6th April, 2019; University of Aberdeen

Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

Objects imbued with symbolic content can be powerful signifiers. In moments of protest and social unrest such objects can divide and unite social groups, tell stories, make declarations, spark controversy, and even trigger violent upheaval. This one-day conference will draw together scholars from a variety of fields to discuss symbolic objects in contentious politics: their meanings, usages, functions, and social responses.

SYMBOLIC OBJECTS are objects which hold symbolic value in contentious political action. We take a broad view of what these include; ranging from flags to protest placards, from controversial statues to symbolic bodies, from Anonymous masks and balaclavas to the machete and the AK47. Importantly, they are not *simply* symbols (they must be physical objects) nor are they merely objects (they must hold symbolic value). Symbolic objects can symbolise resistance, collective action, and peoplehood (racial, ethnic, religious, political, class, gender, sexuality, and others); they can present narratives, articulate symbolic arguments, and make proclamations; and they can be used as tools in protest and other collective actions.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS incorporates any form of disruptive action which aims to effect change upon the social order. This includes, but is not limited to, protests, social movements, strikes, resistance, armed insurgencies, guerilla or paramilitary actions, acts of terrorism, and revolutionary coalitions.

In bringing these two phenomena together, we hope to close an existing gap in the literature. The incorporation of symbolic objects into studies of contentious politics remains in its infancy; meanwhile, objects are now making a breakthrough in social theory that it is important to incorporate into our understanding of conflict and political dynamics. Our hope is to interlink these often disconnected areas of research and to expand this important yet under-researched area of scholarship.

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

SCHEDULE

10.30 AM	Registration
11.00 AM	Welcome and Introduction
11.30 AM	Session 1: Research Workshop
13.00 PM	Lunch
2.00 PM	Session 2: Discussion Forum
3.00 PM	Coffee break
3.15 PM	Keynote: Gabriella Elgenius
4.15 PM	Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics: Closing Remarks and Prospects for Future Research

Workshop Group A

Sonja Dobroski	On Eagles and Freedom: the Plains Feathered Headdress, Settler Semiotics & U.S. Nationalism
Scholastica Ngozi Atata	Biafra Protest and Iconography in Nigeria
Valerie Zawilski	Bodywork: A Justification for State Violence During the June, 2010, G20 Protests in Toronto, Canada

Workshop Group B

Bartosz Ślosarski	The Artifacts of Protest. The Social Life of Things in Contentious Performances
Dennis Zuev	The use of fire in protest action: examining the spectacle of the flaming object
Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner	Flags in Social Protest
Jannis Grimm	Anticoup-Protests in Egypt and the "R4BIA-Salute"

Keynote:

Gabriella Elgenius	The Symbolic Regimes of Nations: Nation Building and Rival Clusters of Symbolism in Europe.
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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics Mini-Conference in Aberdeen. This one-day conference is designed to bring together scholars from around the world and form a variety of sociological perspectives, in order to address an important but dramatically understudied phenomenon.

This session, led by Dr Peter Gardner, will introduce you to the conference, the University of Aberdeen, and the Symbolic Objects research agenda.

We look forward to welcoming you to Aberdeen, and to an exciting day of scholarly exchange.

Peter Gardner, Conference Chair | peter.gardner@abdn.ac.uk
Benjamin Abrams, Co-Chair | ba289@cam.ac.uk

Workshop Papers

On Eagles and Freedom: the Plains Feathered Headdress, Settler Semiotics & U.S. Nationalism

Sonja Dobroski, *University of St Andrews, UK*

The Plains feathered headdress or “war bonnet” is a flared, eagle-feathered headdress originating with the tribes of the North American Plains. It has come to be a widely recognized symbol of Americana throughout the world. Images of the nostalgic American West are evoked when the object is depicted on coins, products, and other national ephemera. This paper seeks to explore a type of semiotic materialism that interrogates the headdress and indeed its materiality as a broader, complex signifier of US settler colonial identity. The eagle, as freedom, the headdress as Native American intertwines with a nostalgic delight for a national past, present, and future. This temporal legacy, imbued within the headdress, has contentious implications for contemporary American Indian resistance and indeed any interrogation of the settler colonial Nation-State.

This paper is based on 12 months of ethnographic and archival field work that traces and makes sense of centuries of non-Native semiotic interaction with the feathered headdress. This paper will argue that the image, the symbol, and the object’s materiality are parts of a semiotic whole, and are critical elements in the creation and maintenance of a U.S. national identity that privileges ideologies of power, freedom, and liberty.

Biafra Protest and Iconography in Nigeria

Scholastica Ngozi Atata, *Federal University of Agriculture, Nigeria*
Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale, *University of Ibadan, Nigeria*

Protest is an important adjunct to politics, a significant factor in social identity and cohesion. Protest is staged using different symbolic objects embedded with interpretative significance. The symbolic objects include placards, songs, flags and iconography that are embedded with ideas and values. This study explains the symbolism and meaning attached to Biafra iconographies. Iconography represents images with symbolic meanings that are associated with people in a given society. The peculiarity of Biafra iconographies is mostly presented in forms of flags, currency, customized Biafra cap, Biafra war technology relics

and Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu statue. These iconographies explain the symbolic interpretation of Biafra activism, construct a sense of social cohesion and are used as means of social identification that trigger unrest, appeal to the social consciousness of Biafra-Igbo activists in moments of protest in South-Eastern Nigeria. The narratives of these Biafra iconographies explain the embedded meaning, composition of Pre-Nigeria Civil War and contemporary Biafra resurgence. Using qualitative method of data collection and analysis, this paper argues that Biafra iconographies are symbolic objects that drive the cohesion of the Igbo for collective actions during protest. This study reveals that Biafra iconographies are formidable *tools* that unite the Igbo during Biafra protests in Nigeria.

Bodywork: A Justification for State Violence During the June, 2010, G20 Protests in Toronto, Canada

Valerie Zawilski, *King's University College, University of Western Ontario, Canada*

1500 people were 'disappeared' and detained during peaceful demonstrations in Toronto during the G20 meetings in June 2010. It was the largest mass arrest in Canadian history. A class action suit against the Toronto Police Forces will be heard in Canadian courts in 2019-2020. In a systematic content analysis of the 50 testimonies given by people who were detained (and through my own personal observations as I was also detained), the data indicate that individuals who engage in bodywork practices such as tattooing, piercings, hair dying, unusual hair styles, wearing bandannas and/or were from the GBLTQ+ communities were more likely to be systematically singled out, threatened and attacked by the Toronto Police. This finding is unfortunately not a new observation, but it is one that allows us to think abstractly and practically about the link that is made between individual creativity, anarchy and resistance and how this is culturally, socially and politically defined by those who control the means of violence.

The Artifacts of Protest: The Social Life of Things in Contentious Performances

Bartosz Ślosarski, *Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań & University of Warsaw, Poland*

The aim of my paper is the analysis of the theoretical perspectives for the analysis of material artifacts in contentious performances on the streets (Tilly 2008). So far, in the main sociological discourse, cultures of protest have been understood mostly as a structure of symbolical meanings (Jasper 2010; Melucci 1988; Rucht 2016; Snow 2004). To broaden our theoretical scope, I employ the concept of social biography of things (Kopytoff 1986; Lash, Lury 2007) which is set in motion by three types of mobility (Adey 2009): (1) of cultural practices (what we do with the artifact in a protest situation); (2) of the cultural objects (how the form of the artifact changes – e.g. from material object to the digital one); (3) of meanings (how the artifact is filled with meanings in different contentious situations). The theoretical investigation is based on the results of the research project, in which various visual methods were employed (Doerr, Milman 2014; Philipps 2012): the content analysis of press-photo coverage of street protests in Warsaw, Berlin, Brussels and London, ethnographic observations in mentioned cities, and photo-elicitation interviews with organizers of protest events. In my paper, I will discuss the typical social biographies of contentious artifacts and their implications for cultural research on social mobilization.

The Use of Fire in Protest Action: Examining the Spectacle of the Flaming Object

Dennis Zuev, *Nurtingen-Geislingen University, Germany & Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES-ISCTE), Portugal*

In this work I wish to analyze self-immolation as a political tool and consider its rhetorical power in terms of spectacularity and morality. I refer to the theory of spectacular and spectacle of Guy Debord and the situationist school and examine self-immolation as a monological spectacle. As empirical data, I refer to the cases of self-immolation as a spectacular form of protest and consider the self-immolation as a form of individual's protest (singular form of protest), contrary to the collective forms of spectacular protest. Self-immolation is becoming a transnational protest tool and has a communicative power of a concentrated spectacle. Phenomenon of self-immolation allows to examine complex relationship between the singularity of the body and its protest potential in the protest movement, the phenomenon of the modern day martyrdom can be seen through perspective of spectacular self-destruction.

Flags in Social Protest

Benjamin Abrams, *University College London & University of Cambridge, UK*
Peter Gardner, *University of Aberdeen*

In this paper, we provide a theoretical framework for the study of flags in the context of protest. Flags are a persistent and pervasive element in protest. They are multifaceted, semiotically loaded objects, playing diverse roles in service of myriad outcomes. Despite this, the social sciences lack any systematic approach to the flag in cases of protest. In response to this gap, we outline our "Flags in Social Protest" (FISP) approach, categorizing flag usage into three broad tendencies: relational speech acts, descriptive speech acts, and physical objects. We furnish our theoretical approach with an array of illustrative case studies: Northern Ireland, Egypt, France, Portugal and Spain. Our ambition for FISP is as an invitation to the study of flags in sociology both in general and in relation to social protest.

Discussion Forum (Open Session)

In this session, we will discuss a variety of questions relating to the overall research area of Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics, with the intention to lay the groundwork for future research and new collaborations. The first 2/3rds of the session will address broad questions of relevance to the topic, while the final 3rd will leave time for attendees to raise further questions of their own.

Topics for Reflection:

1. Delimiting the field: What is, and is not a symbolic object?
2. How do symbolic objects relate to dimensions of inequality such as: gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, ability and ideology.
3. Has the social role of symbolic objects transformed over time?
4. Are the material aspects of symbolic objects special?
5. Do symbolic objects have a key role in the pursuit of social justice?

Keynote

The Symbolic Regimes of Nations: Nation Building and Rival Clusters of Symbolism in Europe.

Gabriella Elgenius, *Universities of Gothenburg, Oxford and London (SOAS)*

As part of the nexus of symbolism, national symbols are used as political tools to raise awareness, claim and construct national identities whereas negating others. Nations use similar toolkits – they all have flags, anthems, national days and national museums – to demonstrate that they are distinct, yet equal and independently on a par with other nations. Nation building therefore follows similar patterns. All national symbols are introduced at pivotal times in the nation's history with independence, the break-up of empires, the loss of empire, the forming of republics, kingdoms or unions. Symbols constitute therefore *strategic markers of nation-building*. Studying national museums as part of wider national building strategies draw attention to nations as layered and to nation building as an on-going as well as strategic undertaking on behalf of nations and groups within. An interesting pattern emerges when national symbols are analysed in a systematic manner. Of particular relevance for this comparative framework are the the adoption of flags, national days or inaugurations of national museums in Europe (and the presence of rival clusters of museum-making within).

Gabriella Elgenius is Associate Professor in Sociology (Docent/Reader) at the Department of Sociology and Work Science at Gothenburg University and Associate Member at the Department of Sociology (University of Oxford) and the Centre for Migration and Diaspora (SOAS, University of London).

CONTENTION

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Contention is dedicated to research on social protest, collective action and contentious politics. As a multidisciplinary journal, Contention's mission is to bridge scholarly divides and promote knowledge exchange across a diverse audience of scholars in the social sciences and humanities. The journal publishes articles by academics and practitioners on topics spanning the full range of social and political contention.

Contention welcomes research articles that expand our knowledge of contentious politics and social protest, as well as novel theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions. The journal also publishes critical review articles, as well as book reviews of new or noteworthy texts.

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