

PROTEST AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



Johanna Siméant and Christophe Traïni

# Bodies in Protest

## Hunger Strikes and Angry Music

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*Christophe Traini*

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# Preface

*James M. Jasper*

In the last three decades, theories of social movements have descended from the lofty ether of political opportunities and post-industrial society to observable actions on the ground. From the grand comparative angle of a scholar hovering slightly above the earth, research now reflects the lived experience, the points of view and the feelings, the desires and projects of political participants themselves. Rather than attributing objective interests to them, we look at the goals that protestors themselves articulate. This convergence has reached the point that many scholars believe they can do academic research and engaged activism at the same time.

The final landing spot for this descent to earth might be the human body, with the phenomenological recognition that all action entails bodies, not only as subjects and as objects but also as something that is not quite either one. Bodies provide reasons for action, the means of action, as well as being the site where action occurs. This attention to the embodied practices of protest began with feminism, even though feminists' concerns to show the universality of patriarchy often led them to gloss over differences among bodies beyond that of male-female.

In the 1990s queer theory and related endeavours vastly extended this work, with a proliferation of research into physical desires, tattoos and other body modifications, understandings of illness and disability, and the staging, choreography, and performance of protest. Many of the protests that have been studied are about control over sexuality, from slut walks to Egypt's notoriously abused 'girl in the blue bra'. Others, including foremost the worldwide gay pride events, are about de-stigmatising collective identities. Some use the vulnerability of the human body to demand human rights and respect, as in the naked protests that have proliferated around the world. Activists have always invented creative ways to use the human body as a political platform.

The sweaty, messy details of individual and collective protest have never been so well documented as they are today. This completes a long arc since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (although stretching back much further): the bodily passions of crowds back then were used to dismiss protestors as bestial and irrational, incapable of the sophisticated discourse necessary to participate in democratic politics. Middle-class commentators were both dismissive and afraid of urban, working-class crowds. Starting in the 1960s, scholarly

observers grew more sympathetic, having often participated themselves, but they were too eager to portray participants as rational, simply pursuing their self-interests in non-institutional arenas, constrained primarily by distant political structures. Today, we live in an intellectual world in which we at least pay lip service to difference, we celebrate the sensual and erotic attractions of protest and we have developed a rich language for the many emotions that connect us with one another.

French scholars Johanna Siméant and Christophe Traïni are at the forefront of developments like these. Originally published as separate volumes in the French *Contester* series (edited by Nonna Mayer), the two halves of *Bodies in protest* reflect a resurgence of social movement studies in the last two decades in France, an explosion of research that is still too little known among Anglophone audiences. Beginning in the 1990s a new generation of scholars began to rethink mobilisation and social movements, not only critically recasting American concepts such as political opportunities but also developing a number of new conceptual starting points.

Empirically grounded and using a variety of research techniques, this work reflects the wide influence of Pierre Bourdieu, with his concern to attend to culture while placing it in structural contexts, to acknowledge individuals while seeing them as connected to broad social constraints, to engage political issues even while retaining scholarly rigor. His concept of *habitus*, especially its expression through human bodies, focused on gestures and postures, but it could be applied to a variety of emotional displays as well.

So the volume you are reading represents the intersection of two book series, the *Contester* books published by Sciences Po Press and the new *Protest and Social Movements* series published by Amsterdam University Press. AUP will publish translations of the *Contester* series alongside an exciting list of other new books on protest and movements. The most exciting aspect of the AUP series is that the books will all appear in open access only a year after their initial publications. This is a grand experiment in what is clearly the future of publishing. (But please do not stop buying books, as this provides the revenue to support the free versions.)

In the book ahead of you, a scholar who has done a lot to describe the emotions of protest, Christophe Traïni, turns to the role of music in social movements. This confluence of interests is no accident, as music is the art form that most extensively involves our bodies. It has often been treated as though it were nothing more than a carrier of cognitive meanings and ideologies, but its power comes even more from the emotions it evokes, and Traïni pays equal attention to these emotions and to the uses of music in

strategic arenas, providing a concise introduction to both fields of research. Music engages us in all sorts of collective endeavours, and to understand how it operates is to understand social action.

In her discussion of hunger strikes, Johanna Siméant looks at an unusual deployment of the body. When others are charged with supervising and disciplining your life and body, your body becomes the only thing over which you can still exert some degree of control. To starve yourself, always threatening and sometimes achieving death, is to make a shocking moral statement of protest, which authorities can rarely hide from the public. Although we think of famous historical cases like Britain's suffragists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the 1970s, hunger strikes remain a common strategy today. Even as I write this, struggles continue at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp as Islamic prisoners who refuse to eat are barbarically force-fed. Siméant ably tells us about the reasons, the modes, and the outcomes of this important form of protest.

I hope you enjoy these works as much as I have.

# Hunger strikes

*Johanna Siméant*

# Introduction

Hunger strikes have always provoked extreme reactions, from bitter irony to deepest admiration. Many other protest practices, such as strikes and demonstrations, have now become routine; they have slowly won their legitimacy over the course of history. Yet even today it still seems incongruous or improbable to resort to a hunger strike. This might be explained by the ambivalent status of this practice, on the frontier between the individual and the collective, between violence and non-violence. The relatively low number of hunger strikes also helps reinforce their image as atypical. This uncertain status explains why scientific production on this subject is somewhat scarce.

The place and visibility of hunger strikes in the repertoire of contemporary protest can be seen in a number of examples: the deadly fast of the ten IRA prisoners in 1981; the hunger strike by the French MP Jean Lassalle in 2006 against the closing of a factory in his constituency; the one carried out by the Indian activist Anna Hazare in 2011, protesting against corruption and claiming the heritage of Mahatma Gandhi; the hunger strikes in Guantanamo Bay; or those by refugees and asylum seekers throughout the world.<sup>1</sup>

My primary objective is to retrace the genealogy of the use of hunger strikes, because to date there is no historical synthesis of this practice. What are the origins of this practice, beyond the ritually invoked figures of the IRA prisoners, Gandhi, refugees or other political figures fasting to attract attention to their cause? Like all modes of protest action, hunger strikes have a history made of borrowed practices, imitation and contrasting uses.

A second objective is to reveal the very great diversity of these strikes and their actors. However, within this diversity there are typical ways in which this practice is used: anonymous individuals confronting administrative injustice, non-violent fasts, strikes by political prisoners etc. Each of these types presents specific characteristics and specific ways of connecting their demands to their means.

The third objective is to treat hunger strikes in concrete terms. By hunger strike I am referring to publically depriving oneself of food to accompany a

1 The notion of a contentious repertoire of action refers to the range of means that are most appropriate to the struggle of a group, in a given time and context, and in a specific relationship with the strategies of the authorities. Charles Tilly, 'Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834', *Social Science History* 2 (1993): 253-280.

particular demand, against an adversary or an authority able to satisfy this proclaimed demand, and most often involving putting oneself in danger. Yet this definition covers very different ways of acting. Before we move into the analysis of its signification, it is important to understand what a hunger strike consists of in concrete terms, whether it is unlimited or not, whether it is carried out by an individual or by a group, in prison or not. We must focus on each of its phases: organisation, medical concerns, intervention of authorities and force-feeding in prisons, relations with the media and support committees, and so forth.

It is on the basis of this empirical approach that we can best understand the meaning that the strikers give to their practice; a meaning that does not always refer to a supposed 'culture' any more than it is a form of 'moral blackmail'. Thus the analysis here relies on ethnographic observation of hunger strikes among the *sans papiers*<sup>2</sup> in France as well as secondary documentation and interviews relating to other kinds of hunger strikes. I also aim to distance myself from the sterile debates about the sincerity of hunger strikers, or the manipulative power of a method that plays on emotion. I show what kinds of constraints these men and women must confront to protest in this way. Above all, these chapters provide an analysis of the situation: when a hunger strike begins a specific process begins, with its own rules, temporality and logics, which create a sense of similarity between movements that are otherwise very different.

The demonstration is organised around the two axes presented in this introduction. It begins with a focus on the history of hunger strikes (Chapter 1), and a discussion of their atypical nature (Chapter 2). It then moves on to the way in which these strikes are situated within a universe of meaning (Chapter 3) and a political environment (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 then attempts to build a typology of causes that are defended in this way, beyond the diversity of these strikes. Finally, Chapter 6 looks at the processes that unfold when a hunger strike begins.

2 *Sans papiers* literally translates as 'without papers' and refers to the undocumented or illegal immigrants seeking residency or asylum in France. Because of the specific nature of this protest movement in France we will refer to it by its French name.

# **Angry music**

*Christophe Traïni*

# Introduction

## Well-orchestrated protest

On 23 March 2006, crowds of people<sup>1</sup> took to the streets in France to demand the withdrawal of the Villepin government's proposed 'First Job Contract' (Contrat Première Embauche [CPE]). Passers-by saw long processions of demonstrators brandishing placards and yelling slogans, while sound systems mounted on the backs of trucks provided a constant musical accompaniment. Groups sang 'Motivated, Motivated! Must get motivated!', a line that the band Zebda had recently added to the 'Chant des partisans', the famous anthem of the French Resistance during the Second World War. Further on, younger demonstrators made a show of anger by raising their clenched fists whilst the Diam's rap song 'La Boulette' echoed in the background: 'so yeah, we f\*ck around / yeah yeah, we shock you / nah nah it ain't the school that dictates our rules / nah nah, generation nah nah'.<sup>2</sup>

This musical accompaniment to a protest march is nothing new. No revolt, no significant social mobilisation, seems to have been able to do without musical and choral practices. The nationalist movements and revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the result of the entry of the masses into politics, cannot be dissociated from the large repertoire of romantic anthems and other operatic songs. As for the ideologies that clashed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as fascism, Nazism and communism, they were all just as hungry for fanfares and drum rolls. They were often staged with pomp and grandiloquence, involving forceful and virile choirs.

In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement that developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the resurgence of gospel music, the emergence of soul, and the support of white American protest singers. During the boycott of the segregationist busses in Montgomery in 1955 (one of the high points of the movement), the long, exhausting marches took on an even more political dimension because they were accompanied by the spiritual song 'Walk Together Children': 'Walk together children / Don't get weary / [...] There's a great camp meeting in the promised Land'.<sup>3</sup>

1 Three million according to the organisers, two hundred thousand according to the police.

2 'Alors ouais, on déconne / Ouais, ouais, on étonne / Nan, nan, c'est pas l'école qui nous a dicté nos codes / Nan, nan, génération nan, nan'.

3 Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and social movements: Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 98.

This book seeks to explore the complexity of the relations between protest and the musical forms that accompany its different situations. Often the musical proclamation of moral, religious or cultural principles, or the development of alternative ways of life, is more focused on reaching listeners than influencing politics. At other times it focuses on the fight against injustices of political authorities and the orchestration of popular movements with the goal of overthrowing a political regime (or more simply a government majority). Even more often, it involves the participation in diverse and temporary demonstrations of opposition to projects or decisions made by political authorities, either at the local, national or international level.