Editors’ Introduction: Protest – Popular Conscience and Barometer?

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This exciting new issue continues to make inroads into understanding the profusion and particularities of protests around the world, past and present. These days, it seems that relatively few countries and their governments are safe from protests. The empirical record appears to confirm this impression. Even autocracies witness their fair share of protest activity. Carnegie’s “Global Protest Tracker,” (2022), for instance, reports that “significant protests” have roiled 78% of “authoritarian-leaning countries.” As the conflict in Ukraine grabs headlines, preoccupies politicians, and disseminates a “politics of injury” the way wars always do, in Christine Sylvester’s formulation (2013), protests have predictably arisen, too. From London and Sydney to Geneva and Berlin and Moscow itself, thousands decried the Russian invasion from its earliest days (_DW_ 2022). The moment is well-suited for comparisons with anti-war mobilization as when, on a February 15th nineteen years ago, millions voiced opposition to the impending US invasion. United across continents by echoing slogans—“The world says no to war!” and “No blood for oil!”—such coordinated, bottom-up action was unable to stem the tide of Bush’s adventurism (_Walgrave and Rucht_ 2010). Yet the anti-Iraq war protests stand out as an indelible episode of trans-national solidarity against unfettered, unjustified militarism. Have anti-war protests been sidelined or weakened since?

It is due to moral imperatives and empirical indications such as these that protest rings with urgency. People _need_ protest, as a conscience and a barometer of where they stand and what they think about a whole host of issues. Countless affronts to humans and their ecosystems, from imperialist violence...
to industrial pollution to detrimental deforestation, spur demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, and collective dissatisfaction with governments and their policies. Protest is a string of moments and practices in which everything seems to dissipate and people come together in joint censure, refusal, or pressure on actors, institutions, and structures of power. No surprise, then, that the global protest turn pushes forward. So far this year has seen celebratory yet frustrated remembrances of 2011 Arab Spring revolutions in Syria (France24 2022) and Tunisia; anti-government protests in Kazakhstan sparked by outrage over fuel prices, prompting bloody repression (Abdurasulov 2022); and Brazilian protests disavowing the “death combo” of five proposed bills that threaten land rights and encourage mining, among other “ecocide” policies (Malleret and Phillips 2022). Triggered by the Ukraine-Russia war, the global hike in food prices may incite protests across the Middle East and Africa (Shalal 2022), as already seen in Iraq (Alrabiya English 2022). The link between food prices and protests is a recurring one in recent Arab political history (Sadiki 2000). As we scan the globe, the empirical and analytical questions are of course always: What next? Why? How?

In the coming pages, our contributors collectively take on a range of protest activity. The Research Articles span the MENA region as well as Latin America. Reaching back six decades into the historical record, Professor Rhoda Chaves offers a re-interpretation of Castro’s revolution in Cuba, highlighting its anti-colonial roots and cumulative unfolding. Khalil Osman probes the counterrevolutionary forces and tendencies at work in Lebanon’s 2019 protest wave. Dina Amin travels with us back in time to the monumental protests of Egypt’s Tahrir Square that led to Mubarak’s ouster in 2011, illustrating its theatricality and performativity through the lens of writer Yusuf Idris’s corpus. Mohamed Ourya scrutinizes the February 20 movement in Morocco, part of the initial Arab Spring protests and uprisings, paying particular attention to its internal discord.

In our Special Essays section, this issue is graced by Lizette Lancaster’s investigation into the explosion of undeterred violence in South Africa’s July 2021 protest outcry against the Zuma protest verdict. Jesús David Salas Betín comments on the 2020 protests in Bogota, Colombia after the police killing of an attorney. For Global Protest Voices, Fernando Jose Ludwig briefly muses over Brazil’s most recent spate of protests with the aid of a Bourdieu-ian lens. Also in this issue, we interviewed Middle East scholar Asef Bayat in a wide-ranging discussion about the past’s imprints on present consciousness and research inclinations, the “everyday” of popular resistance in the Middle East, the future of contentious politics studies, and the lacunae in examinations of
counterrevolution. We hope all of these articles offer food for thought, enjoyment, and learning!

References


Walgrave, Stefaan and Dieter Rucht, Eds. 2010. The World Says no to War: Demonstrations Against the War on Iraq. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.