

## **Repression and social movements**

**Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Lesley Wood**

With the events of the “Arab Spring” revolutions fresh in our minds, an *Interface* issue dedicated to repression and social movements may seem very timely. But the fact is that any time is a good time to reflect on repression and social movements. The two realities go hand in hand and have always done so.

Any reader can cast their minds back and call up their own memories of social movement repression, whether experienced first-hand, handed down as oral history, witnessed on TV from the relative comfort of a living room sofa, or drawn from a passage in a history book. Suffragettes being force-fed in prison in the UK in the early 1900s, vicious dogs attacking civil rights protesters in the Southern United States, the execution of environmental and indigenous rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa in Nigeria, the systematic kidnapping, torture and assassination of political activists in Argentina’s Dirty War, the massacre of students in Tlatelolco and Tiananmen Square: the list, unfortunately, goes on and on.

While these examples are striking representations of repression, the repression of social movements does not always take such visible forms. Much repression of social movements is deliberately invisible – from surveillance and infiltration to the mysterious deaths of labour unionist and environmental whistleblower Karen Silkwood or peace activist and Green Party founder Petra Kelly. Sometimes the media make repression invisible by not reporting it. Of course some forms of repression are difficult to detect, because the mechanisms used are subtle and institutionalized. Examples of this are the ways that intellectuals working in the academy are denied tenure or suspended for their critical intellectual work, or for their movement engagement. A few decades ago, scholars standing up for civil rights for women and ethnic “minorities” often faced hostile administrations. Even in theoretically liberal countries, critical scholars questioning the uses and abuses of anti-terrorism legislation, like Dr. Rod Thornton at the University of Nottingham, can be suspended or arrested<sup>1</sup>. General blacklisting processes, surveillance, “unspoken” understandings that joining a trade union might cost you your job or promotion, and public proceedings such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (1938-1975), are other examples of institutional mechanisms that silence and discourage dissent and activism.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/may/04/nottingham-university-row-after-lecturer-suspended>

## **The contradictory effects of repression**

But repression doesn't always demobilize movements. Sometimes it inspires greater resistance, and wider participation in protest. The Egyptian uprising this year was after all, partly triggered by the police beating and murder of Khaled Said. Even in cases of more subtle repression - the banning of protest, or the rumoured or threatened arrest of a leader - mobilization often increases. It seems that sometimes repression inspires more mobilization; and sometimes it effectively quashes movements or pushes them underground. Sometimes repressive forces are successful in characterizing protestors as legitimate targets of repression, and other times they delegitimize the State and increase the legitimacy of the social movements. We don't fully understand the conditions under which facing repression collectively can strengthen bonds between activists and strengthen movements and when it leads to fragmentation and demobilization (see Davenport et. al. 2005, Starr et al., 2008), although some very interesting work has been done in this area. Pfaff's (1996) work on the 1989 East German protests argues that collective identity processes within small groups in Leipzig explain why these protestors were the first to be willing to openly oppose the East German regime in a highly repressive context. More work that makes connections between latent or submerged intra-movement processes such as collective identity formation and more visible or manifest acts of protest and repression needs to be done.

Although the contradictory effects of repression on social movements have yet to be fully understood, there is a real sense that repressive repertoires are being transformed. How has the contemporary context, shaped as it is by the "global war on terror", increasing integration and transformation of economic and political relations and technological innovations, transformed the forms of repression social movements face? Many have argued that a new model of repression is emerging (della Porta et al. 2006, Fernandez 2008, Vitale 2005, Gillham and Noakes 2007).

## **Global regimes of repression?**

The "global war on terror" has fueled anti-terrorism legislation that has been used to quash dissent and to criminalize activists within countries whose states claim a particular affinity with human rights. But such legislation began to be passed before 2001. In the UK in 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act targeted direct action activists, hunt saboteurs, squatters, ravers and others engaged in "anti-social behavior" by criminalizing those who congregated and listened to music "wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats". The law's provisions relating to aggravated trespass made non-violent protest a criminal offence.

More recently, anti-terrorist legislation has been extended and used to target protesters. One example of this was the anti-terror legislation and additional

police powers (introduced specifically for the event) which were used in Sydney during the 2007 APEC Summit when George Bush visited<sup>2</sup>. In the US, the PATRIOT Act, passed after 9/11 redefined 'domestic terrorism' as an act "dangerous to human life" that is a violation of the criminal laws of a state or the United States, if the act appears to be intended to: (i) intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping. Such a definition could be interpreted loosely and used to justify the investigation and prosecution of a range of movements. Indeed, eight protesters at the Republican National Convention in 2008 were charged with conspiracy to riot in furtherance of terrorism.

This use of, or threat of terrorism charges has spread rapidly - with environmentalists in Australia, Red Shirt protesters in Thailand, human rights activists in El Salvador, anarchists in Chile, and animal rights activists in the US all facing such charges in the past few years. But not all governments rely on anti-terrorism legislation. In Russia, for example, anti-extremist legislation is used effectively not only against left-wing activists, but also liberal opposition and far-right groups.<sup>3</sup>

New technologies have also been used both to repress and to avoid repression. Political flash mobs, such as those in the Philippines 2001, Madrid 2004 or Egypt 2011, are important examples of how new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used to mobilize protests in repressive political contexts and especially in contexts where there is limited freedom of the press or access to alternative media (Flesher Fominaya 2011; Rheingold 2003; Rafael 2003). Although such new technologies initially offered an unregulated way for activists to communicate, state governments have rapidly caught up with each innovation - monitoring, blocking and interfering with email, Facebook and SMS or text messaging (Tilly and Wood 2008).

Militarized weapons are also increasingly being used against protesting civilian populations in liberal democratic states, in a departure from recent practice. Pepper spray canisters, tear gas, tanks, sound and water cannons and riot control units are newly visible in countries where they have been absent for decades. Public police are increasingly sharing strategies with the military, and being trained and outfitted by the private sector. These strategies are globalizing and it appears that a new model of professionalized, high tech and militarized policing has emerged in the last ten years, in countries where this was not previously the norm.

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<sup>2</sup> See Goodman (2010).

<sup>3</sup> "Inappropriate enforcement of anti-extremist legislation in Russia in 2010" (see the section "Persecution of Political and Social Activists and Organizations"): <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/reports-analyses/2011/04/d21360/>

"Misuse of Anti-Extremism Legislation in March 2011": <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/news-releases/2011/04/d21313/>

This new model is seen as a shift away from the “negotiated management” model of protest policing that emerged in such countries in the 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, scholars and activists noted that repressive strategies were becoming more routinised and measured (della Porta and Reiter 1998, McCarthy 1998). While there was wide variation in different countries and regions, in many areas, police were becoming more professionalized, emphasizing formal training and shifting their strategies from an attempt to punish lawbreakers by any means necessary and limit protest, to a strategy of negotiated management that valued communication as a way to reduce the disruptiveness of protest.

As policing networks globalized, this model spread internationally, particularly among liberal parliamentary democracies. However, many activists became frustrated with increasingly routinized and scripted protests that seemed to blunt the power of street protest. The space for protest and dissent was shrinking and increasingly regulated. In this context, and with a rapidly transforming and globalizing polity and economy, by the late 1990s, the model of negotiated management began to show serious cracks.

By that time, increasing numbers of protesters refused to negotiate with the police, facilitating a series of movement victories, including the protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999. With these victories, the police in Canada, the U.S. and W. Europe shifted their approach. Influenced by the private sector and military tactics, a dual strategy began to emerge. Cooperative groups experienced negotiated management, but those perceived as risky, unpredictable or threatening became the target of selective escalation (de Lint and Hall 2009, Rafail 2010, Gillham and Noakes 2007, Vitale 2005).

This strategy has many regional variations and is still rapidly evolving in spaces like the conferences of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, their international conferences in Latin America and Asia and CEPOL events including those organized by the European Police College. The spread of the resultant model is having and will have serious implications for the strength and success of popular mobilizations.

These shifts are of serious concern to both social movement scholars and activists. We need to better understand how this is influencing mobilization. Scholars and activists have long wrestled with the contradictory effects of repression on mobilization. In order to get beyond this confusion, we obviously need to look beyond simple linear relationships. We need to recognize that police street tactics, media strategies, surveillance by intelligence officers and others, as well as narratives like the War on Terror, legal controls, sentencing and immigration controls are all part of repressive strategy.

Then we need to look closely at the effects of these different pieces on the different processes of identity formation, emotion work, organization, alliance building and resource mobilization that underlie mobilization at individual and collective levels. At the individual level, how do arrests, violence, infiltration and subjection to mechanisms of control affect the recruitment, sustainability and biography of activists? How does repression affect movement and group

processes of identity formation, trust, evaluations of strategy, and movement generations?

The repercussions of the experience of repression can have longlasting and unexpected effects. The same act of repression can be experienced and processed in very different ways within the same movement. The case of the Arab Spring again comes to mind. When women in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen put their bodies on the line to support the push for democracy and freedom this year, their presence was seen as beneficial in at least two ways: first, as less likely to provoke police or military brutality (prevention of repression), second, as useful in providing medical assistance for the wounded (consequence of repression). For many of these women, openly protesting was their first explicitly political act and it had a radicalizing effect. But when they wanted to claim some of the "benefits" of the protest for themselves, and put forth specific demands for women's equality or progress, they were told to go home. <sup>4</sup>

These women were deployed strategically during the uprisings but then marginalized once the worst had passed, in a pattern that is all too recognizable for scholars of social movements and revolutions. The denial of women's recognition as political actors in their own right, by both repressive regimes and by sexist practices within social movements, has triggered feminist consciousness and mobilization in the past<sup>5</sup>. It is too soon to tell what the effects of this radicalization/marginalization process will be on these women or how it will affect the development of these movements for democracy. We know that surviving and sharing experiences of repression can contribute to feelings of internal solidarity, and often these experiences are incorporated into the myths and narratives movements tell about themselves. These myths are then handed down and form part of specific militant traditions, often in highly gendered ways. The effects of these repression narratives on internal status hierarchies, leadership, solidarity and other internal movement dynamics is another fruitful area of enquiry.

The incorporation of attention to emotions, culture and identity processes have also made important contributions to our understanding of the dynamics of movements in repressive contexts. We need to build further on the existing work in this area, that includes, for example, Cunningham and Noakes (2008) discussion of the effects of repression on activist emotions in U.S. movements, or Rachel Einwohner's (2006) work on repression, identity and collective identity in the Jewish resistance movement in the Warsaw ghetto.

In addition to breaking down what we mean by repression and mobilization, we need to move beyond the tendency to examine repression of contentious politics only in national blocks. It is clear that decisions around repressive strategy are taking place at the local, national and international levels. They are coordinated

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.womensviewsonnews.org/wvon/2011/04/women-told-to-go-home-in-aftermath-of-uprisings/>

<sup>5</sup> For example, in Latin American democratization movements. See Ray and Korteweg (1999) for an overview.

and enacted by both public and private authorities, and both are rooted in particular histories, and are diffusing across boundaries at an increasingly rapid pace.

### **The importance of context**

The degree to which acts of repression and acts of protest are defined and understood as such is clearly context dependent, and the degree to which that context shapes strategies and meanings is still understudied. Listening to rock music in a democratic country today is not considered an act of protest, in an authoritative regime like Stroessner's Paraguay, for example, such an act was a clear political statement, and one likely to get one arrested (and beaten for good measure). So while we need to seek connections between regimes of repression and protest globally, and study diffusion processes of both repression and resistance, we also need to be careful to avoid universalist analysis that fails to take into account specific national political, institutional, legal, and cultural frameworks. Finding a balance between particularist and universalist approaches is a difficult but worthy task.

Comparative work is one way to address this issue. Mac Sheoin and Yeates (2009) make an important contribution in this regard, through an analysis of patterns and variations in State responses to policing anti-globalization protests. Their focus on a single global movement that mobilizes in a wide range of nation states allows a comprehensive overview of current policing of social movements. Their work highlights, among many other insights, how repressive tactics in some states are not only directed at summit hopping protesters, but target local dissidents long before the protest event ever takes place<sup>6</sup>.

Just as we need to guard against universalizing from single cases or from particular regions, it is important to avoid a monolithic understanding of "repression" and "social movements" and analyze the ways, for example, that repression is gendered and racialized in specific contexts (both in terms of how it is deployed and experienced), and how activists strategically mobilize particular representations in order to either reduce the likelihood of police brutality, such as presenting a "fluffy", non-violent, or deliberately "feminized" approach, or to heighten its visibility, as in the case of the Tute Bianche (below).

The effect of authoritarian contexts more generally on the dynamics of movements is a fascinating area of study that has yielded provocative and interesting work to date, such as Sophie Bedford's (2009) discussion of

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<sup>6</sup> Looking specifically at the policing and repression of the anti-globalization movement, *Interface 2/2* carries a comprehensive bibliography (MacSheoin 2010) that includes news media, academic work and material produced by security forces and charts policing by country, offering an important resource to scholars and activists working in this area.

repression and mobilization in Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan, or Adams' (2000, 2005, forthcoming) exploration of the politicization of shantytown women, who became active in resistance against the Pinochet regime through art workshops in Chile. Using longitudinal analysis, Romanos (2011) analyses the important role of emotion and the paradoxical effects of repression on the maintenance of clandestine anarchist activism during the Franco dictatorship in Spain over time.

The movements that exist today are partly the offspring of past interactions between movements and repressive authorities. As Vince Boudreau (2004, 2002) showed in his study of repression in three South Asian states, the form and nature of repression creates legacies in subsequent movements. Today's movements and their repression will have implications for the future. But as in the past, movements today are actively responding to repressive authorities and practices.

### **Movement responses to repression: cooperation, avoidance, confrontation**

While many activists try to cooperate with police and intelligence in order to be able to have the opportunity to protest publicly without interference, many others try to avoid the influence of police and intelligence on their organizing. We do this in different ways. We use "security culture" in the hopes of avoiding infiltration. We try to avoid isolation by building strong, diverse and well resourced movements. We develop teams of "activist lawyers", legal workers or legal observers to support social movements. Some individuals and groups operate as watchdogs of the state – protecting civil liberties and responding to changes to legislation – through legal and popular strategy. We support those who are prosecuted, raising money for legal defense, engaging in media campaigns, or taking care of the children of imprisoned activists.

Still another approach is that used by groups like the Tute Bianche (White Overalls) in Italy, who deliberately try to force an open confrontation in order to make visible the repressive apparatus of the State. Inspired by the Zapatista strategy of covering their faces to increase visibility through invisibility, the Tute Bianche combine strategic and performative elements by covering their entire bodies in thick white protective clothing and then deliberately breaching police red zones (or no go areas). Clearly, this type of collective action is shaped and conditioned by the level of political openness and media coverage that make these actions meaningful and strategically viable. What is possible and effective in one context is unthinkable in another.

## **In this issue**

Repressive authorities and social movements are engaged in a complex set of relationships that we don't fully understand. But the articles in this issue move us in the right direction. In this issue our contributors take up a broad range of issues related to repression and social movements around the world. Using the case of Germany to interrogate a widespread phenomenon, *Peter Ullrich and Gina Rosa Wollinger* chart the startling transformation in the use and legality of video surveillance of political protests and public gatherings more generally, and protesters reactions to these changes, before offering some theoretical possibilities for understanding them. *Liz Thompson and Ben Rosenzweig* show how public policy is "class war pursued by other means" in their article on the restructuring of international education economies in Australia. They show how regulation of international student visas and other legislation to protect Australia's "national integrity" served to disempower international students and undermine their capacity for resistance, in a wider context of xenophobia and economic nationalism, stirred up by politicians and legitimized by academic "experts".

*Kristian Williams* provides a way to understand current counterinsurgency and community policing practices with specific emphasis on their application in the US. Not only does he document the nexus between police and military institutions in the transfer of theory, strategy and technique, but also shows how NGOs and nonprofit agencies are used to control political opposition, and suggests the implications of counterinsurgency techniques for social movement practice. *Fernanda Maria Vieira and J. Flávio Ferreira* discuss the persecution and criminalization of indigenous Mapuche leaders who are struggling to protect their communities against expropriation of their lands, and link it to the historical roots of Mapuche repression in Chile. They show the linkages between colonial discourses on the "inferiority and backwardness" of indigenous peoples, the neo-liberal agendas of the State and economic elites, and the current repressive context within which Mapuches struggle to mobilize. *Roy Krøvel* untangles the difficult relationships between guerrillas and indigenous people in the authoritarian regimes of Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala and reflects on the implications of these relationships for the outcomes of civil conflicts.

In our event analysis section, *Musab Younis* analyzes the British tuition fee protest of November 9, 2010 that emerged in response to the Browne Review, which argues for the redefinition of higher education in the UK from a public good to a consumer product. Younis documents the police violence suffered by protesters and journalists and places it in a wider context of a growth in state forms of social control justified by the threat of terrorism. *Dino Jimbi* shares the media strategy used in the "Não partam a minha casa" (Don't break my house) Campaign against forced evictions in urban shantytowns in Angola to foster grassroots mobilization and gain institutional support in a highly repressive context. In his practice note, *Mac Scott* uses the repressive 2010 G20 protest experience to offer some lessons on how radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-patriarchal community organizations can achieve lasting coalitions.

*Aileen O'Carroll, Alessio Lunghi and Laurence Cox* offer practical responses to the all too common activist experience of media smear tactics and bullying.

Also in this issue, *Eurig Scandrett* and *Suroopa Mukherjee* show how the movement of survivors of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster have abstracted more generic oppositional projects from their local campaigning - ranging from environmental justice, through class struggle, to gender issues. *George Sranko* provides a new analytic framework for assessing and explaining the dynamics of policy change in a collaborative context, and *John Agbonifo* shows how attention to place can help us understand the long-running conflict in the Niger Delta. We also have reviews of a number of crucial new publications that wrestle with social movement theory and practice.

We hope you find this issue a stimulating read and as always we welcome your comments and feedback.

*This issue is dedicated to all those who have stood up for social justice and have suffered repression because of it.*

*Cristina and Lesley wish to thank Andrejs Berdnikovs, Laurence Cox, Elizabeth Humphrys, and Alf Nilsen for their comments and help in the writing of this editorial. We also want to thank all of the editors and many collaborators at Interface who made this issue possible.*

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### **About the authors**

**Lesley Wood** is an Associate Professor at York University, and a member of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. She is trying to understand how both protest and repression are changing, and influencing each other. She has a book *Direct Action, Deliberation and Diffusion: Collective Action after the WTO Protests in Seattle* forthcoming with Cambridge University Press. She can be contacted at ljwood AT yorku.ca.

**Cristina Flesher Fominaya** is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Aberdeen. She is co-founder and co-editor of *Interface*, and co-founder and co-chair of the Council for European Studies *European Social Movements Research Network*. She has a PhD in Sociology from UC Berkeley and has published work on autonomous social movements, collective identity, and the anti-globalization movement. She is currently writing a book on the politics of victimhood following the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and New York (2001). She can be contacted at c.flesher@abdn.ac.uk.