“Where Is the New Constitution?”

Public Protest and Community-Building in Post–Economic Collapse Iceland

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Following mass demonstrations in response to the country’s 2008 economic collapse, a dynamic civil society has emerged in Iceland focused on democratic reform through rewriting the constitution. This article demonstrates how, in the absence of the new constitution that was promised by the government, protesters are pursuing an unfinished project of reform by holding small, routinized protests founded on an ethic of empathic solidarity (*samkennd*). By exploring the aesthetic elements of these meetings, I argue that the protest site is being used to highlight and condemn ongoing government transgression while also providing a space to prefigure a future free of political corruption. To this end, explicit signage is shown to be reshaping political discourse while also extending (and denying) kin bonds between protesters.

■ **KEYWORDS:** constitution, crisis, discourse, Iceland, kinship, protest, signage, transparency

This article explores how protest continues to offer opportunities for Icelanders to engage in contentious politics against a “corrupt” political establishment, while at the same time providing a space to envision a future free of ongoing government scandal. In the decade following the collapse of Iceland’s commercial banking sector in October 2008, feelings of distrust toward politicians continue to be rehearsed through the organization of large anti-government demonstrations. In the winter of 2008, for instance, a quarter of the urban adult population protested what they perceived as the government’s failure to adequately prevent or respond to the banking crisis (Bernburg 2015). Such levels of protest mobilization had never been seen before. In this context, protesters demanded the resignation of the government, the organization of new elections, and the rewriting of the constitution (Pálsson and Durrenberger 2015). In early 2009, after months of protests, the government finally stepped down, and a review of the country’s core principles was mounted, particularly through a community-led push for the constitution to be amended (see Ólafsson 2019).

Drafted between 2009 and 2012 by select members of the public and the post-crash center-left government, the new constitution “was meant to symbolize a clean slate and to be a source of societal renewal” following the sudden economic crash (Ingimundarson et al. 2016b: 13).¹ Coinciding with political uprisings across Europe, Africa, and North America in response to fiscal crisis, the process of rewriting Iceland’s constitution was seen as a novel experiment in contemporary democracy (Landemore 2015). Moreover, it was a means of redefining Icelanders’ collective identity after the corruption that led to the collapse was revealed (Loftsdóttir

2019: 129). However, in 2013, when a conservative center-right government was elected, the draft was shelved, despite garnering majority support in a nonbinding referendum. Returning to the protest site en masse in 2016, calls for the government to resign and the new constitution to be legislated were again mounted after the Panama Papers showed politicians, including the prime minister, had stored significant assets offshore.

In the face of frequent government scandal, then, the fallout from the banking crash has "cascaded" into an enduring social and political crisis (Bernburg 2019), ultimately leaving the public to make sense of a rapidly evolving political climate. As Kristín Loftsdóttir (2014: 169) has noted, this sense of crisis can be conceptualized as a disjuncture in Iceland's ideological landscape, which continues to highlight and mobilize new subjectivities in a prolonged struggle for responsible leadership. In this article, I enquire into this sense of disjuncture by returning to the protest site following a high-profile sexual abuse scandal in 2017, which resulted in the government falling for the third time in a decade.² I show how, in the five weeks leading up to elections, several small protests were organized by 72-year-old influential musician Hörður Torfason, which drew inspiration from the 2008 gatherings. To this end, I demonstrate how, despite their size, familiar strategies were employed to highlight the potential for the constitution to reinstate and promote political transparency and social cohesion.

In this article, I undertake an anthropology of protest based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork (2016–2018) with social movement collectives in Reykjavík. Focusing in particular on the People's Voice (*Raddir fólksins*), a movement headed by Hörður, I reflect on the political developments that have contributed to collective action, the repertoires that have molded protest activities, and the internal dynamics that have shaped collective behavior and identity (see Lazar 2017: 7). In doing so, this article makes two key arguments relating to spatial and relational tactics on the protest site. The first is that the logic underscoring protests has shifted over the past 12 years to reflect ongoing distrust in politics: this includes a shift away from a logic based on the power of numbers in effecting democratic reform to that of bearing witness to ongoing revelations of government corruption and prolonged inactivity on pertinent issues, such as legislating the new constitution. The former approach—gaining numbers—is born of a visceral and urgent reaction to crisis, culminating in the assemblage of bodies on the protest site in a call to attention that is barely heard but intensely felt. The latter approach—bearing witness—is based on a reflexive sense of responsibility toward the community that is premised on an ethic of empathic solidarity, which frames action within a broader historical and cultural narrative. By examining this shift in repertoire, I show how changes in approach have resulted in lower levels of mobilization, yet renewed protesters' conviction for reform by combining sustained action with feelings of concern over the country's future (Juris 2008).

The second argument focuses on the protest site as a space of knowledge production and transmission (della Porta and Pavan 2017). Through ethnography with movement actors who have continued to a push for social and democratic reform since 2008, I show how provocative signage is used to critique dominant relations of power, while also producing new narratives that are giving rise to new kinship relations among protesters. In this way, collective action and signage are shown to be reshaping the political and social environment through routinized demonstrations that seek to push for positive, yet non-utopian, futurities (Masco 2017). This involves acknowledging political transgression through witnessing while also working to imagine a political "otherwise" (see Povinelli 2012) through the legislation of the new constitution. To begin, I explore the aesthetic and performative aspects of the 2017 and 2008 protests, making visible the similarities between them. In doing so, I highlight the use of signage and prefiguration as means through which the emotional engagements between protesters and their visions

for the future can be fostered to extend (or deny) kinship bonds and affective solidarity on the protest site.

The “Usual Suspects” of Icelandic Protest Culture

“Where is the new constitution?” demanded Hörður into the microphone. These words bounced off the parliament building in Austurvöllur square and echoed throughout the immediate downtown area. A feeling of determination hung in the air as a small group of Reykjavík’s creative class—comprised of middle-aged artists, musicians, actors, writers, and academics—assembled at the first outdoor meeting in September 2017.³ Many members of this group have come to be known as “the usual suspects” at protests: stalwart activists and members of grass-roots collectives who are often positioned on the frontlines. In 2008, these figures were joined by large swathes of the wider community, bringing together a cross-section of the populous in combined efforts to censure politicians’ handling of the crisis (Bernburg 2016: 58). In their activism—which has been influenced by global movements focused on peace, the environment and human rights—the usual suspects aim to combine socially progressive sentiment with the cornerstone of Icelandic identity: that is, a strong sense of equality as the foundation of relation between all citizens (see Durrenberger 1996).

Arriving on foot, by car, or on bicycle, attendees warmly embraced one another at the 2017 gatherings and formed small clusters in front of a makeshift stage (see Figure 1). Having worked with several social movements based in Reykjavík, I recognized the members of left-ist and alternative political parties (including the Social Democrats, the Citizen’s Movement, and the Pirate Party), women’s rights collectives, independent media, and the Constitutional Society dispersed throughout the crowd. Many had become involved in democratic reform following revelations of corruption within the ranks of the business and political community in relation to the banking crisis. As Jón Ólafsson (2019: 119) argues, “trust in fellow citizens

Figure 1: Protesters assembled at the first outdoor meeting in Austurvöllur square, September 2017
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seemed to grow [and lead to collective forms of engagement] as trust in government collapsed." It followed that, despite mass protests ultimately "vanishing" once the government stepped down in 2009 (Bernburg 2015: 75), the usual suspects have continued to mount "moral condemnation" via contentious politics toward the government amid ongoing corruption allegations (Ólafsson 2019: 119).

As the first 2017 meeting commenced in earnest, live music and speeches rang out across the square. While music performances satirized the establishment, or else were concerned with highlighting the richness of the nation and its history, the weekly speeches took on a more somber tone.⁴ Indeed, invited speakers lamented over the country's diminishing educational and health resources whilst members of the government were seen to be taking advantage of overseas tax avoidance schemes and exploiting their hold over the country's natural resources (see Maguire 2015). Speakers thus expressed concern over growing inequality and the degree to which heightened perceptions of class had fractured a sense of Iceland being a "homogenous" and "egalitarian" society after the crisis (Oddsson 2016). Through emotional appeal, it followed that speakers stressed the need for the new document to be enshrined in law to ensure that all Icelanders have equitable rights and interests.⁵

The rousing speeches that were read out each week resonated with the crowd through the laughter, applause, tears, and hollering they attracted. The meetings thereby provided a stimulating environment to express concerns in the lead up to elections. I enjoyed listening to speakers read letters to the government and recite poems that showcased Icelanders' proud oratory culture, particularly on issues relating to the integrity of the country's one-thousand-year-old parliament (since 930 CE). As one of the longest continuing parliamentary democracies in the world, the essence of the nation is understood as residing in the original parliament site at Thingvellir National Park (47 kilometers northeast of Reykjavík). Thingvellir is seen as the "beating heart" of the modern nation (Loftsdóttir and Lund 2016), where the first settlers of Iceland held outdoor gatherings, socialized, traded, resolved disputes, and bore witness to the recitation of their collective legal code (Hastrup 1985: 121). In doing so, the settlers established a parliamentary assembly that met annually from the tenth century, which is now understood to continue through the modern national parliament. Thingvellir is also where independence from Denmark was established in 1944 on the birth date of Jón Sigurðsson, the leader of the independence movement.⁶ The nation thus locates its existence in this history, the significance of which, many urge, needs to be upheld.

During the fourth meeting, as I stood toward the back of an assembling crowd, I was taken somewhat by surprise when a volunteer suddenly shoved a sign into my hands that read, "Clowns out of parliament!" (Ekki trúða á Alþingi!) Similar handmade signage dotted the square and was provided by volunteers (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Having been caught up in the lyricism of a particularly moving address, a feeling of unease stole my attention away from the stage as I found myself holding signage critical of the government. Until this point, I had felt thoroughly immersed in the proceedings through my weekly attendance and participation in call-and-response chants, in what Randall Collins refers to as the "high ritual density" of protests. For Collins (2001: 28), this occurs through a "bodily awareness of copresence" which promotes "a shared focus of attention" and produces a feeling of unity. However, through being given the sign, I suddenly became more conscious of my position at the protest, leading to an inner tension between supporting a cause and performing in protest activities. In turn, rather than the gathering simply being a site to observe politics in action (Juris 2008), the meeting also became a space to contemplate what is at stake in actively participating in contentious politics, and the kinds of ethics protesters bring to bear on their decisions to engage in sustained action against the government.

Figure 2: Protesters holding prepared signage at an outdoor meeting held at Austurvöllur square in September 2017 (© Timothy Heffernan).

Figure 3: Piles of signage prepared by volunteers (© Timothy Heffernan).

Protest Participation and Participatory Research

To be sure, anthropologists actively participate in and affect the field sites they enter by virtue of undertaking social research. Yet, in contexts marked by political tension, the history of which stretches back several years in the case of Iceland, the politics of engaging in demonstrations can appear somewhat opaque. This feeling was particularly pressing, as I had not been pres-

ent during past instances of crisis or experienced them personally, though I did fundamentally identify with the protesters’ cause. Looking around to see whether anyone would notice if I kept the sign or cast it aside, the large spaces between protesters who were spread out across the square alerted me to the fact that these meetings differed from those organized in 2008. Indeed, the two hundred to four hundred attendees who frequented the weekly gatherings seemed to pale in comparison to the thousands of protesters from across the community in 2008. By contrast, the 2017 demonstrations resembled smaller, more intimate gatherings between the usual suspects and their supporters. With new revelations of corruption providing a political opportunity process to push for social and democratic reform, it was therefore puzzling to see so few people attending each week, and the continued decrease of the press.

As with ethnography, which engages practitioners’ bodies and senses through emplaced research, collective action on the protest site necessitates a bodily labor—one that places identities, reputations, and well-being on the line in pursuit of a collective goal (Starr 2006). As I stood thinking over my commitment to holding the sign and questioning why so few people were in attendance, Alexandra, a friend and member of the Pirate Party, arrived at the meeting and stood next to me; smirking, she read the sign aloud. “You know, I don’t mind there being clowns in parliament,” she offered. “I can’t stand seeing *liars* in there!” (field notes, 14 October 2017). With this comment, Icelanders’ experience of crisis and the importance of protecting the country’s democracy at all costs—points which had featured in my discussions with the People’s Voice—brought into focus the need held by some members of the public to continue the unfinished project of democratic reform. For many, it seemed, it was important to finish the work started almost a decade earlier, regardless of the social and personal repercussions, by continuing to demand the new constitution be legislated without further delay.

For João Biehl and Peter Locke, a focus on that which is “unfinished” opens a space to inquire into ontological positions of being and becoming as individuals and communities build the worlds they inhabit. As they suggest, “the notion of becoming, which organizes our individual and collective efforts, emphasizes the plastic power of people and the intricate problematics of how to live alongside, through and despite the profoundly constraining effects of social, structural and material forces” (2017: x). In this light, the protest site can be viewed as an emergent space of becoming: one where new identities, behaviors, and aspirations are crafted and mobilized (Escobar 2007). This occurs in the service of bringing about reform through the development of protest messages, actions, and intended outcomes. Through the development of these attributes, new political formations emerge from a sense of responsibility within demonstrators who continue to protest at all costs (McAdam and Boudet 2012). By participating in the meetings, I was being called on to help sustain the protest narrative, with the placard being an invitation to do so. It therefore occurred to me that rarely is there a space for spectators at protests, especially when there are lacking numbers and a concern over being taken seriously.

Importantly, the protest messages that are key to the success of each event are often framed by organizers through employing different repertoires in order to increase supporters’ interpretation of collective action (McAdam and Boudet 2012). Such messages often emanate from established cultural, political, and national histories and/or local knowledge bases, discourses, and aesthetics that are used to build a cohesive narrative for change that all participants are called on to endorse (Werbner et al. 2014). Moreover, protest repertoires continue to be refined and developed by organizers in the face of shifting public aspirations and concerns, or as the case may be, to contend with emerging political opportunities, such as the sudden collapse of the government (Tilly 2006). Protest movements are thus seen as strategic political actors capable of developing messages that highlight the need for reform by producing and transmitting knowledge at protest sites (della Porta and Pavan 2017).

As studies on crisis have shown, information and knowledge become increasingly important in times of profound uncertainty, as individuals and communities seek to understand what has transpired and attempt to transition away from instances of adversity and toward more certain futures (della Porta 2015). Indeed, in moments of crisis, it is common for communities to search through their collective memories and shared systems of knowledge for situations that can provide a sense of guidance (Roitman 2014). In such contexts, discourse, as a historically contingent yet emergent system of knowledge, can be used as a resource through which individuals can make sense of their surroundings. To this end, written texts, speeches, symbols, and moving images, among other forms of discourse, may take on new importance or else be replaced or redefined to try to make sense of the past and present and envision a collective future (Fridolfsson 2008; Shawyer 2018). I turn now to demonstrate how this has occurred at small and large protests since 2008 and set the scene for the emergence of intense anti-government demonstrations. By keeping the 2008 and 2017 protests in view of one another, the production and transmission of knowledge on the protest site is explored to show how protest signage has become a useful means to bear witness to instances of government corruption and to prefigure a political horizon free of government scandal.

Power in Numbers: The 2008 Mass Demonstrations

Following an urgent television address to the nation on 6 October 2008 by Geir Haarde, the incumbent prime minister and leader of the conservative Independence Party, Icelanders began to descend on Austurvöllur square outside parliament house. Not merely responding to information that the country's economic prosperity was about to abruptly end with the threat of a global emergency, the wider public had become incensed by the lack of responsibility taken by the political and business community. Addressing the nation in unprecedented fashion, Haarde had alleged that privately owned Icelandic banks had suffered under shifting conditions abroad and the nation now faced the aftereffects of the banks' poor investment decisions. Warning of the country's imminent economic demise, Haarde encouraged Icelanders to support one another over the coming weeks in order to ride out an oncoming storm of monumental proportions, signing off with the statement "God Bless Iceland" (Guð Blessi Ísland).

In a society that takes pride in its public secularism, Haarde's statement contributed to a growing mood of utter urgency and resignation to a terrible fate. What's more, in the absence of any reasonable solution, the statement "signified complete loss and total abandonment, a deep sense of the country being out of touch with all reality and beyond any reason or governance" (Pálsson and Durrenberger 2015: xix). In turn, the full weight of Haarde's remark was taken by many as political desertion, leading to a feeling that the crisis could result in a loss of political and economic autonomy (Loftsdóttir 2019: 133). Historically, Iceland has occupied a geographic position on the European periphery, thus largely obscuring it from the global imaginary. Icelanders have thereby endured a lack of confidence and exposure on the international stage, especially as a result of being under Scandinavian imperialism for close to seven hundred years (Loftsdóttir 2019). Having gained independence from Denmark as recently as 1944, protection of Iceland's political and economic sovereignty remains important, thereby demonstrating the salience of mass mobilization in 2008 to condemn the negligence of the political and business elite.

By international standards, the contemporary Icelandic populous of around 366,000 appears relatively small when compared to other nations. Yet, international success and achievement by

individual Icelanders has strongly been celebrated since the country's initial push for independence. For this reason, the owners of the commercial banks that collapsed in 2008 garnered considerable support from across the nation, as they went about rapidly expanding their business operations overseas in the early 2000s. Indeed, in the lead-up to the collapse, successful entrepreneurs were colloquially referred to as "business Vikings" (*útrásarvíkingar*). Within news media and political discourse, these executives were referred to as embarking on an outward expansion (*útrás*) akin to ancient Viking raids, and were ultimately celebrated for their efforts in raising Iceland's profile internationally through their tremendous business success (Loftsdóttir 2015: 9).

Demonstrating the connection between political discourse and the construction of Icelandic identity, Loftsdóttir (2015: 6) suggests "the successful marketing of memory create[ed] a framework for understanding the present. In a sense, the past [become] a resource used by different actors in different contexts for understanding the present and making it meaningful." Continuing, Loftsdóttir argues that "when economic success was attributed to individual qualities in the entrepreneurs, the populace nevertheless claimed them as *Icelandic entrepreneurs*, and as such their success reflected on the character of Icelanders as a whole" (9). However, this sentiment changed during the crisis and became unmoored through the collapse of the banks: "As if we were in the fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen in which a child suddenly declares, 'The emperor has no clothes,' the aftermath of the crash caused some Icelanders to suggest that the Business Vikings who had been so celebrated before the crash now could be guilty of treason" (4). The anti-government activity that followed was thus triggered after Haarde's speech by the public's realization that their trust had been taken advantage of and that the nation's prosperity was built on shaky ground (Heffernan and Pawlak 2020: 7–8).

With estimates of 33,200 to 43,800 people descending on Austurvöllur square between October 2008 and January 2009 (Bernburg 2015: 66), the mass gatherings were said to resemble Latin American *cacerolazo* demonstrations: attendees brandished kitchenware, burned political effigies, and chanted anti-government slogans as they called for the government to step down (Bernburg and Víkingdóttir 2016: 81). Images of the protests were broadcast internationally and provided a visual narrative to media commentary on the severity of the economic crash. When set against a larger backdrop of economic duress and austerity policies across Europe and North America (della Porta 2015), images from Iceland's protests have been a precursor to instances of mobilization around the world, and the emergence of new political subjectivities attacking elite cultures for their part in economic oppression and inequality (Werbner et al. 2014).

In Iceland, sociologist Jón Gunnar Bernburg (2015) has demonstrated that, in addition to relative economic deprivation, many Icelanders were moved to protest due to the way movement organizers framed the government's role in the collapse. Movement actors strongly advocated that politicians ought to take responsibility for the country's economic woes, citing the neoliberal reforms implemented by the Independence Party as the crash's antecedence (Bernburg and Víkingdóttir 2016: 91). The government's reluctance to admit culpability, instead suggesting that the economic crisis was externally caused, ultimately weakened their position, and called into question their credibility (84). This was intensified by the government's decision to shut themselves off from the public as they negotiated a bailout. In the face of the government denying culpability, Bernburg (2015: 70–71) argues that the collapse was framed as a "moral shock" by organizers of the protests who sought to expose the links between Icelandic politics and the business community, reveal the level of political corruption, highlight the structural weaknesses of the banking sector and the flaws in neoliberal policy making, and illustrate the "moral necessity" of collective action as a way of effecting change.

Challenging Political Rhetoric through Protest Signage

As demonstrations began to strengthen in numbers, social movement leaders began organizing regular meetings throughout the 2008–2009 winter to continue to mount pressure on the government to resign. As a key protest organizer, Hörður, recalled:

I ended up going to a protest on 10 October 2008 . . . There were a lot of angry people there . . . and I said, “Well, who is leading this?” because nobody was. So, I asked a man who had a . . . megaphone . . . and I stood up and said . . . “Tomorrow at 12 o’clock I’ll be placing myself in front of the parliament, come and join me, let’s talk about this.” . . . On 11 October, I stood there and I asked everyone . . . “Can you tell me what has happened in this country, and do you have any idea what we can do?” . . . I managed to get a few of them to . . . talk, and I thought, well, I better do a big outdoor meeting . . . And I . . . talked to some friends . . . and looked for good speakers who could explain what had happened.

Hörður’s question of who was in charge during early moments of the demonstrations is an important one that has come to be representative of the post-collapse period. Amid feelings of political desertion and the compromised image of the “business Viking,” discrete protest messages were developed on protest signs to expose and condemn the establishment for failing in their leadership responsibilities. What’s more, with no credible leaders within the government willing to step forward to steer the country out of economic chaos, movement leaders stepped in and successfully cultivated the public’s anger to push for democratic change. As Jasper Wu (2018: 142) suggests, reflecting on the use of protest slogans during the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, the production of protest discourse and sign-making are, in effect, inseparable from collective actions expressed amid protests. Indeed, protest discourse, public assembly, and collective action play important linguistic, performative, and affective roles in challenging dominant political rhetoric. In building movement momentum, protest organizers were able to develop and transmit highly critical discourse through signage-making in order to capture the public’s attitude toward the government’s political and economic management (see also Knight 2015).

An example that has become particularly well known includes the slogan held by local artist Gunnar Már Pétursson at the 2008 protests that read, “*Helvítis Fokking Fokk*” (Damn, fucking fuck) (Figure 4).⁷ In everyday usage, the phrase expresses annoyance that something has gone wrong, all the while highlighting the accidental nature of the incident (e.g., spilling a glass of milk). However, when used satirically on the protest site, the phrase was used to convey a message that the government had one job and that, in the end, they proved unable to successfully perform in their duties. As a signature of written, verbal, or pictorial discourse, such examples of political satire are useful means for subtlety or explicitly indicating that something has gone amiss—that a key custom or norm has been transgressed. Indeed, irony is often employed at protests to question instances of fairness and responsibility across politics and society (Haugerud 2013: 7). Painted in blue and white, the colors of the Independence Party emblem, the “*Helvítis*” sign mockingly suggested that, despite the economy collapsing under the watchful eye of the nation’s experienced economic managers, the government had become an “innocent victim” of an unforeseeable crisis that had begun internationally.

Amid an economic and political crisis, then, demonstrators sought to speak truth to power through the development of discourse that relied on humor and illuminated the public’s lack of trust in members of the establishment. With the government scrambling to appease international creditors and negotiate the terms of financial assistance, the future became increasingly uncertain as unemployment, underemployment, growing personal debt, and the repossession

Figure 4: A protester holds a replica "Helvítis" sign (© Timothy Heffernan 2017).

of assets became a reality (Heffernan and Pawlak 2020: 11). In this context, the business Vikings of the past, who had been instrumental in supporting neoliberal reforms, were nowhere to be seen. As Ágúst, an account manager, suggested, the sign became a way of summing up the public's feelings, as was demonstrated through its uptake across popular culture:

There was a good headline that became part of [the collapse]. On New Year's Eve, there's a comedy show called Áramótaskaup that everybody watches [featuring Icelandic comedian and former Reykjavík Mayor Jón Gnarr]. They showed a satirical send-up of the year, and they had this one sign that a protester was preparing, because everyone had gone down to the protests after the banking collapse. The sign was "Damn, fucking fuck." You know, [Gnarr] was just trying to write what he was feeling, but it was hard because *everything* was just so hard to take at the time. But he knew what he was feeling, so it was just a burst of emotion. It was like, "Damn, fucking fuck!" And that became like a tagline for things a few years there afterward—"Damn, fucking fuck."

The next scene of the television skit shows Gnarr at the protest site in 2008 looking generally bewildered, yet proud of the message he is bearing on the protest sign.

The use of humor and satire in the production of discourse was in this way used to explicitly convey the *Zeitgeist* of post-collapse Iceland and to highlight government inaction. In turn, the use of ironic humor also had the effect of bringing protesters together through discourse that mocked and ridiculed the politicians' response. However, as was stressed to me, the sign also carried a very serious tone, one that was used to gravely condemn those responsible for the crisis. In this way, the sign bears a message that the government rather than the public ought to have borne the brunt of the collapse, and that they ought to have acted with the integrity and responsibility inherent in their roles as political leaders and economic managers. The sign has therefore come to highlight how, in contemporary political discourse, critique need not be based on either sincerity or parody. Rather, new registers are produced through protest actions that blend or eschew the separation between earnest and playful rhetoric (Boyer 2013: 279). In this way, protesters used humor to create their interpretations of the collapse, which had

the effect of building solidarity between members of the public through the endorsement of a shared public narrative.

Bearing Witness, Building Community

Returning to the protest site a decade later, the organizers of the 2017 demonstrations sought to again use protest signage to condemn ongoing government scandal and the continued absence of the new constitution. Certainly, the “Helvítis” sign was visible across the protest site. However, the function of signage and the logic underscoring the meetings had shifted with shrinking attendance. While only the usual suspects and their supporters frequented the meetings, a Facebook event had circulated the week before the first gathering, indicating that a few thousand people were interested in attending. The small rates of attendance, however, resulted from the government promptly resigning and calling for new elections as the 2017 scandal broke. This was a marked change from years gone by when previous governments only stepped down after weeks and sometimes months of protests. The government’s gesture of contrition to the electorate demonstrates how social mobilization shifts in response to contingent social, political, and economic forces (Tilly 2006). Further, it highlights how protest repertoires and agendas continue to be refined to address emerging political processes and how protest tactics can be tweaked (Shawyer 2018).

Hörður’s decision to organize the protests in 2017 between the fall of one government and the election of another was therefore built on a repertoire of calling into question the character of Icelandic politics through bearing witness to frequent government scandals (see Cammaerts 2012: 121). As Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (1999: 174) contend, collective action premised on a logic of gaining numbers is suited to protests targeting the “external realities” of politics, such as highlighting flawed democratic processes. In contrast, the practice of bearing witness seeks to affect an “interior transformation” through actors highlighting key concerns within the culture of politics and making claims about how such conduct affects the functioning of society. Further, they note that bearing witness “is not designed to convince the public or decision-makers that . . . protestors constitute a majority or a threat. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate a *strong commitment* to an objective deemed vital for [the] future” (178, emphasis added).

In the absence of mass social mobilization, instances of political corruption and secrecy were scrutinized through routinized weekly demonstrations and provocative protest signage, the format of which were inspired by earlier protests and Hörður’s experience as a vehement activist. Recalling his own participation in contentious politics directed against the government and his motivations to continue to mount political claims against the political and decision-making elite over the past five decades, Hörður relayed:

It has become a habit for me to step up and do something. It’s something I’ve been doing for decades. But it’s more difficult for someone to be doing it for the first time. I was forced to do it [during social changes in Iceland at a time when I publicly came out as a gay man in the 1970s] and I learned a lot from it. I’m ready to do it. This is what I’ve done before and after 2008 when we had the crash.

Reference here to habitual engagement in protests is built on an ethic of asking what is at stake and raising awareness of political and structural injustices. As one of the usual suspects, Hörður’s actions demonstrate the importance of members of the public standing up for their principles against local and global elite cultures. Hörður’s continued engagement in collective action, moreover, is based on a feeling of having nothing more to lose in an ongoing struggle

for improved social, economic, and political relations, a context in which the logic of bearing witness takes root and thrives. Continuing, Hörður suggested, "I know the price you pay for it, and I've paid a heavy price for this throughout my life. In 2008, I helped people who were in serious troubles here. I did it out of *my own consciousness*. I have the self-confidence to do it . . . If you do a good deed, you do it because it needs to be done" (emphasis added). Hörður's approach to activism is in this way borne of a reflexive sense of responsibility toward others in the face of hardship—a position that is premised on thought and action that attends to the care of many (Kearney 2019: 14).

In Icelandic society, a sense of reflexive responsibility comes through a shared feeling of empathic solidarity (*samkennd*) with the larger community (Heffernan 2020). This sentiment emanates from their experience and knowledge of historical hardship under imperial isolation and the harshness of the Icelandic topography and climate: conditions that have given rise to and necessitated a sense of cohesion (Loftsdóttir 2019). In the face of political and economic crisis, empathic solidarity has become a means to contend with the reality of the public's close relationship with the government coming under strain, a relationship that previously highlighted the inherent equality between all members of society. Through a focus on nurturing and protecting the wider community against continued government corruption, empathic solidarity emerges from a position of self-consciousness that eschews self-interest through one attending to the experience of another and fostering a sense of togetherness (Rice 2014: 61).

As Hörður went on to explain, in preparing for the 2008 and 2017 protests, the acts of listening and talking became vital for gauging how the crisis and political transgressions have been experienced and understood by the community. Indeed, for Hörður, these practices were important in building a sense of community among protesters and aligning the objectives of each protest with the aspirations of the wider community: "I talk to people, *a lot* of people, before I do something. I go among people in the coffeehouses, swimming pools, or wherever. I ask, 'what do you think about this?' . . . This is where you start, it's always through talking . . . [As a musician] I see my job as telling stories, singing stories and getting a response." Through the acts of listening and talking with members of the wider community during the course of the week and then using speechmaking at the weekend protests as a tool to build a coherent message, Hörður has sought to channel his efforts into building a public voice through bearing witness to government inaction and maintaining a focus on achieving the demands that were put forward when the crash first occurred in 2008. It is through a focus on facilitating open discourse and the importance of maintaining a sense of equality that emerging registers and forms of collective organization take form and are used to continue to build and reinforce a sense of empathic solidarity (Heffernan 2020: 7).

Protest Signage, Discourse, and Community-Building

When empathic solidarity is paired with the anthropological notion of kinship, it is possible to see how a sense of reflexive responsibility is a practical step in challenging power relations. As a tool for understanding how individual and group identities, connectivities and boundaries are produced, kinship informs how people, places, ideologies, objects, and institutions are linked and brought into being (Kearney 2014: 45). As proponents of new kinship studies suggest, contemporary forms of relatedness are derived through more than social and biological bonds; they are built on "the ethnographic particulars of being related in a specific cultural context" (Carsten 2000: 4). Therefore, "whatever is construed genealogically may also be constructed socially" via claims of belonging based on shared circumstance and association (Sahlins 2013: 2). In this sense, concern for the future of the nation continues to produce affective bonds

between protesters, as they work toward achieving democratic reform. Motivated by a sense of equality as the basis of community relations in Iceland, kinship enables the “building up” of one-self in relation to others in order to fully participate in one’s cultural surroundings (Lazar 2017: 15–16). Indeed, the ties that bind are enduring forces that contribute to raising self-care and self-esteem in contexts marked by hardship (Butler 2019). For this reason, kinship is described as the “mutuality of being,” as it makes plain the very real ways we are “intrinsic to one another’s existence” and that, by extension, “this experience is more than individual” (Sahlins 2013: 2). Accordingly, the sense of affective solidarity between protesters is “crucial for understanding the social dynamics of revolutionary mobilization” (Shah 2013: 480).

In the context of Icelandic protest culture, signage has become a notable site of resistance between the public and the government but also of material connection and kinship (Carsten 2019), premised on building up equality between members of the community through trying to pair a stronger sense of unity between protesters and the nation’s democratic institutions. Protesters have been able to use signage to build a sense of solidarity by collectively demanding the new constitution be legislated as well as using placards to endorse and display aspects of the new constitution. For example, signs bearing messages such as “Freedom of Information is the Public’s Right” (Upplýsingarétt Almennings) and “Transparent Society” (Gegnsætt Samfélag) explicitly reference Article 15 of the new constitution, which establishes that everyone has a right to gather and disseminate information, especially that which is held by the government. When displayed at meetings, these messages provide a glimpse of what the future might hold for the community. At the same time, the act of holding signage helps to reinforce empathic solidarity through the mutuality of bearing witness to current and future generations, who will ultimately inherit the repercussions of political corruption.

While a sense of social cohesion was established between many attendees, the protests also came to exclude some members of the community. A small group of locals living rough in downtown Reykjavík, for example, were pushed out from an area in the square where they regularly met to drink and socialize. Sitting near a large statue, Jón Jónsson, the leader of the nation’s independence movement, the group took it upon themselves to move away when protesters spread across the square and filled the area with loud speeches. Visibly deterred by the noise in what was otherwise a recreational space that joined downtown Reykjavík to the Western suburbs, the decision to vacate the area highlights the ways that different groups variously occupy and lay claim to public spaces. In this instance, potential usage and occupation of the square ranged from collective action to seeking refuge, socializing, public passage, and commemorating the nation’s independence struggle.

During the fifth meeting, a clash of protest messages posed further challenges. As the meeting was beginning, a middle-aged woman abruptly joined the protest and began loudly blowing on a whistle and yelling expletives. The woman’s conduct resulted in the crowd moving away and shaking their heads. However, more than just being a distraction, the protester carried signage that deviated from the narrative promulgated by the meeting’s organizers. Pinned to her clothing on small pieces of paper and sprawled across handwritten signage were messages written in English that read, for example, “Hit me, baby, one more time!” The signage highlighted her experience as a survivor of domestic violence and concern over the decline of the nation’s health care system following financial cutbacks over the last 12 years. While issues such as these had been the focus of social and news media throughout 2017, the woman’s treatment by fellow protesters showed how adherence to protest narratives was a key marker of solidarity. In this way, protest messages and signage came to create unity and separation between different members of the public, despite the issues highlighted by the protest dissenter being similarly focused on the need for greater equality, responsibility, and compassion in Icelandic society.

It follows, then, that while all members of the public were welcome to attend the protests, the events themselves developed a univocal message that restricted forms of participation and created hierarchies of political claims-making. While the dissenter's conduct illustrated the boundaries of the community and the forms of accepted and unaccepted behavior, her presence also pointed to the vulnerabilities inherent in collective action, as she threatened to undermine the collective narrative through her alternative message (Fridolfsson 2008: 136). This shows the limits of equality as a binding social relation in Iceland. Certainly, unacceptable forms of "selfish" action committed in the political arena for the benefit of a minority of Icelanders is one such barrier to maintaining the relations between the public and the government. However, in the context of the protests, so too was the dissenting protester's failure to endorse a collective narrative censuring political corruption. In the latter example, the protester was seen to lack the reflexive sense of responsibility that underscores empathic solidarity, which is deemed important by the usual suspects as it promises to reinstate the erstwhile closeness enjoyed by all members of society. This goes to show how, during calls for reform, certain individuals may be ostracized through the development of collective actions and messages which inadvertently throw up barriers to ensuring the principles of democracy (Traustadóttir and Rice 2017).

Geared toward establishing an equitable future in the present, which is free of government scandal, the dominant narrative used during the demonstrations ultimately withstood the dissenter's raucous behavior and alternative message. Indeed, the aesthetic and performative elements of the meetings prefigured a future that was not dependent on complete social unity in the present but, rather, what might be socially and politically *possible* in the future through legislating the new constitution. During the fourth meeting, for example, attendees were invited to spread out in a circle, take each other by the hand, and collectively yell out messages about what the future might hold (see Figure 5). By looking inward, attendees shifted their gaze from the stage and toward the larger group, thereby providing a space to perform democracy and highlight the benefits of democratic reform for the wider community, now and into the future (Maeckelbergh 2011). With participants' voices echoing throughout the square, their

Figure 5: Attendees form a circle and yell about what they want for the future at the fifth meeting at Austurvöllur square in October 2017 (© Timothy Heffernan).

Figure 6: Attendees at the final meeting eat a birthday cake in the shape of the number 5 to celebrate the fifth birthday of the new draft constitution (© Timothy Heffernan, 2017).

actions gestured toward a more equitable future where the voice of the people is heard and duly acknowledged.

While performing aspects of the constitution in this way enabled attendees to make reform more palpable and corporeal, the meetings were also able to make the protest movement itself more personal—even familial. To this end, one week before elections, during the fifth and final meeting, a birthday celebration was held to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the draft constitution (finalized in 2012). Having assembled for five consecutive weeks, and having used explicit signage to bear witness to government corruption and political transgression, the meetings culminated in participants eating birthday cake together, socializing, and discussing the upcoming election (Figure 6). In this way, the protest site continues to be a space of social and political significance, where collective action gives rise to a sense of togetherness and kin are seen to “participate intrinsically in each other’s existence” through the sharing of time, food, discourse and conversation (Sahlins 2013: ix). This occurs in the service of a larger aim, one that remains unfinished in Iceland yet promises to restore a sense of togetherness, through actions that emphasize equality among the wider community.

Conclusion

Following a tight election campaign, a Left-Right coalition government was formed between the Left-Green progressives and the conservative Independence Party (a party that has very much become a mainstay in Icelandic politics for nearly a century). A decade after first being introduced as a means for social and democratic reform, the constitution remains no closer to being legislated, as the incumbent coalition has not signaled any intention of implementing the new document—despite survey results at the time of the 2017 election suggesting that more than 55 percent of Icelanders were in support of changing the constitution (MMR 2017). The nation’s new draft document, therefore, represents a point of great contention between supporters and

detractors, with the permanent shelving of the constitution ultimately reigniting debate over the credibility of the decision-making class. At a time when political leaders are confronted by a "double crisis" of attending to constituents' concerns and responding to global processes (Yuval-Davis 2012), legislating the new document has become a political hot potato in the context of a protracted economic crisis which has now morphed into a social and political one.

Through an anthropology of protest, this article has brought into conversation the political developments punctuating life in Iceland over the past 12 years and highlighted how protests remain a viable means for the public to engage in contentious politics against the government. To this end, the internal dynamics of the 2017 protests have been explored ethnographically to show how the five outdoor meetings produced new political subjectivities and discourses in a continued push for the new document to be legislated, the roots of which stem from earlier episodes of collective action. As I have shown, an anthropology of protest boasts potential for practitioners to make sense of evolving political tensions and to highlight the ways these are rehearsed on the protest site. Indeed, as my own reflections of protest suggest, gaining an informed understanding of collective behavior, political dynamism, and emerging subjectivities remains an important goal for practitioners. This is especially needed as anthropologists adventurously (or inadvertently) become participants in anti-government protests through their work in trying to understand ongoing disputes between diverse publics (Graeber 2009).

Through a focus on the spatial and relational aspects of demonstrations, this article has shown that while a logic of gaining numbers can put tremendous weight behind protesters' demands and provide a media spectacle to spread awareness of their cause, the logic of bearing witness is useful in maintaining pressure on leaders through a sustained focus on the need for changing the culture of politics. This comes through a reflexive sense of responsibility to the wider community, particularly at a time when social fragmentation in Iceland continues to take hold. By focusing on the protest site as a site of knowledge production and transmission, this article has illustrated how signage is used to perform and promote the virtuousness of the new national document. Highlighting the social and political possibilities inherent in the new constitution, I have explored the discourses and relationships that have developed between activists on the protest site, despite prolonged government inactivity on legislating the new document. In turn, the assemblage of collective action, signage, and the occupation of space leads to new ways of relating, whereupon a future horizon of possibility comes into view, binding individuals together in their shared aspiration for reform, particularly through actions based on solidarity, compassion, and mutuality.

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NOTES

1. In 2009 and 2010, national fora (þjóðfundir) brought together randomly selected participants tasked with putting forward statements and values they felt ought to be emphasized in the new constitution. A separate group of 25 people, elected by popular vote, later deliberated over drafting the new document (Landemore 2015).
2. A freedom of information request revealed the father of incumbent Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson had supplied a character reference for a convicted pedophile. The reference was provided under Icelandic law to restore the “civil standing” (æra) of a criminal wishing to hold a professional position on their release (Fontaine 2017). As one parliamentarian, Birgitta Jónsdóttir, reported: “This information [had been kept] more of a secret than the code for the American nuclear missiles” (Gretisson 2017). I do not consider this the space to explore this incident in detail, an incident covered extensively in Icelandic and English media. Rather, I explore the ramifications of these revelations as an example of a political opportunity process.
3. There were equal men and women participants; most were locals aged 35 to 75, with few tourists or migrants participating.
4. Bleating sheep featured in one song to ridicule the incumbent prime minister. As a UN Champion of the HeForShe gender equality campaign, Benediktsson was satirized for supporting a leading newspaper in running a story on sheep farming rather than the 2017 scandal. On social media, Benediktsson was dubbed “He for Sheep.”
5. Achieving this outcome, it should be noted, is complicated and requires further consideration.
6. Iceland was under Scandinavian imperialism from 1262 to 1918. Between 1918 and 1944, Iceland was recognized as an independent state in a personal union with Denmark, and it was during this period that talk of amending the constitution, which had been written by Denmark, first arose. In 1944, Iceland claimed full independence.
7. I use this phrase in full to demonstrate how Icelanders’ reckoned with the collapse.

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