

# Editorial

---

*Giovanni A. Travaglino and Benjamin Abrams*

It is hard to think of the study of social protest and political behavior as anything but an interdisciplinary enterprise. It is grounded in a great many different perspectives, approaches, and levels of analysis. Different disciplines may even rely on fundamentally different conceptions of the social, the political, or the individual. Accordingly, the field has been privileged with a rich and impressive array of theoretical and empirical work dating as far back as the work of Marx, Rousseau, and Hobbes.

The cost of our field's disciplinary polyphony has been the increasing disintegration of the intellectual discourse around protest and political behavior over time. Indeed, much of our knowledge about political behavior tends to be produced within distinct disciplinary silos. These silos have grown farther apart as our shared field has progressed. They have developed different languages, focused on increasingly specialized areas of interest, and favored very distinct methodologies. Consequently, our ability to understand this important social phenomenon has been held back by this disciplinary incommutability and a corresponding lack of cross-fertilization. This journal, *Contention*, was founded to provide a solution to this issue. It exists to promote a dialogue between these different though deeply complementary areas of knowledge, bridging their divides by the provision of common ground.

The need for interdisciplinary discourse is most pressing between the social sciences and humanities. As far back as 1959, the physicist and novelist C. P. Snow described the increasing separation between the two discourses almost in anthropological terms, as the "two cultures." He had noticed that the humanities and the sciences were to an increasing extent neglecting each other, thus acquiring different forms of expressions and different norms and outlooks. Perhaps more worryingly, they



were also taking different places in an alleged hierarchy of knowledge, with the hard (useful) sciences at the top and the easy (useless) humanities at the bottom.

Nowadays, after almost 60 years, and to our collective detriment, the gap between disciplines can only be described as wider. The current structure of academia, the hyperspecialization of fields of knowledge, and a paucity of resources have further undermined any linkage between science and humanities, even creating conflict between them. The social sciences, for the most part, have tried hard to avoid being on the wrong side of this conflict and have distanced themselves even more harshly from any form of knowledge that does not rely exclusively on single, separable scientific “facts.”

While this state of affairs is broadly damaging to our collective intellectual and cultural life, it has had especially negative consequences in the field of political behavior. How people resist power and attempt to change society is intimately connected to their creativity and capacity to challenge already imposed meanings. New attempts are consequently crucial in order to rebuild a coherent discourse which bridge these perspectives, drawing on insights from both sides of the sciences-humanities divide.

It is in this spirit that the present issue, guest edited by Nesreen Hussein and Iain MacKenzie, brings into dialogue a collection of articles from the humanities and the social sciences. As discussed by Hussein and MacKenzie in their introduction, the special issue focuses on the Mediterranean and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regions, analyzing the relationship between art and politics, and highlighting the mutuality and interrelated nature of both creative practices and resistant acts.

The interrelated nature of both types of acts is clearly visible in the juxtaposition of Ziad Adwan’s analysis of flying protests in Damascus, and Caroline Rooney’s reading of a performance project, Laila Soliman’s *No Time for Art* in Egypt. On the one hand, Adwan draws on theoretical repertoires in the field of theatre studies to analyze protests that only last a few minutes because demonstrators quickly convene and disband to avoid retaliation. On the other, Rooney addresses the meaning and importance of the political within Soliman’s piece, a documentary performance series about resistance against the pre and post-revolutionary regimes in Egypt. Both article reflect on and illuminate some of the complexities involved in the relationship between arts and politics.

In the remaining two articles, Ayman El-Desouky and Geroqe Sotiropoulos further explore the mutuality between creative and resistant

acts in the occupation of public squares, Tahrir in Egypt and Syntagma in Greece, respectively. Both articles focus their analysis on how the dynamics of creativity contribute to the reshaping and modifying of cultural spaces, giving space for the emergence and articulation of new identities and collective trust.

Taken together, the articles in this issue demonstrate how reopening and re-alibrating the dialogue between arts and social sciences produces important new insights and shed new light on how individuals confront oppressive power, as well as the multiplicity of meanings of art and resistance. It is our hope that this issue of *Contention* generates novel research questions and blazes the trail for new interdisciplinary, multifaceted analyses of political behavior.