

Editorial

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Social protest is not always a simple process. Social movements, activists, or political parties can attempt to change the status quo, but they do not often do so through a single, traceable process of contention. Instead, they encounter selective participation, community dynamics, dilemmas about how and where to spend their time, and interventions by governments and other elites that seriously impact their momentum. The articles in this issue assess these complicating phenomena, examining issues of system justification, local community responses to hate, the balancing of online and offline protest, and the role of government and media elites in circumventing the rise of protest movements.

This issue opens with an exciting and timely intervention on social protest from the field of social psychology. Vivienne Badaan and colleagues open this issue with “Social Protest and Its Discontents: A System Justification Perspective.” Badaan and Jost, from New York University’s Social Justice Laboratory, have produced this theoretical proposition in collaboration with researchers spanning three continents. These include Danny Osborne and Chris G. Sibley from the University of Auckland, Joaquín Ungaretti and Edgardo Etchezahar from the University of Buenos Aires and the National Scientific and Technical Research Council in Argentina, and Erin P. Hennes from Purdue University.

“Social Protest and its Discontents” draws together the team’s work on the social and psychological bases of political action and inaction from the perspective of system justification theory, considering cases in Lebanon, New Zealand, Argentina, and the United States. It advances that, alongside political conservatism and religiosity, the psychological variable of “system justification” helps to explain popular resistance or acquiescence to political and social contexts. Of particular importance are “low system justifiers,” individuals who prefer instantiating



egalitarian alternatives to the status quo over the maintenance of a stable society.

The second article in this issue explores the role of framing in counterprotest activity through the lens of an ethnographic analysis of 107 Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) pickets and interviews with 183 counterprotesters. Rebecca Barrett-Fox's "Comic, Tragic, and Burlesque Burkean Responses to Hate" analyses community responses to hateful groups in dialogue with the framing theories of Kenneth Burke, with impressive results. Barrett-Fox's analysis shows that while counterprotests are well intentioned, their framing means that WBC is often used by communities as a foil for their own hurtful treatment of vulnerable members. The article draws on data gathered during observations of counterprotests and consulting work with organizations planning counterprotests, to advocate for a Burkean "comic frame," which might resolve these issues.

The third article in this issue considers the intersection and interactions between social movements' online and offline activism. Michael Briguglio's "Digital Activism, Physical Activism: Malta's Front Harsien ODZ" offers a focused analysis of a Maltese environmental movement organization. Briguglio's analysis is at once an academic report and a form of movement writing, offering a careful deep dive into the processes of contention in digital societies, through the lens of a single, meticulously researched case.

This issue's fourth article also considers contention in digital societies—namely, the Arab Spring. Charles Mitchell, Juliet Dinkha, and Aya Abdulhamid's "The Silent Spring: Why Pro-democracy Activity Was Avoided in Gulf Nations during the Arab Spring," investigates the reasons why pro-democracy movements were circumvented in most Gulf Cooperation Council countries. It does so by means of a qualitative analysis of diverse sources including: academic research, news sources, and reports from governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as policy papers. The authors' analysis—drawing on data from an impressive array of thirteen cases—found that pro-democracy activity was avoided as a consequence of generous allocations of public goods and that successful policy interventions (notably welfare systems) preempted revolutionary activities in the Gulf.

This issue closes with a final analysis of digitally mediated protest, with a focus on online newspaper coverage of social movements in Hungary. In their article, "How Movements Are Mediated: The Case of the Hungarian Student Network in 2012–2013," Bálint Takács, Sára Bigazzi, Ferenc Arató, and Sára Serdült explore the media

representations of statements made by the 2012 student movement in Hungary in the nation's two most prominent newspapers' online reporting. While the Hungarian media would regularly report on educational policy demands made by the Hungarian student movement, the movement's core principles and practices were ignored or discredited by these same organizations. Because of this, they argue, the substantive contrasts between the prefigurative political culture of the student network and that of the Hungarian state were rendered invisible, which in turn suppressed the student network.

As well as a variety of innovative theories and methods, what is perhaps most exciting about this issue is the way in which every article draws on incredibly timely research. Every single case discussed in this issue depicts a struggle or conflict in which contention is still taking place in some form. Because of this, we hope that the articles in this issue might come to positively impact the struggles they have discussed and contribute positively to activist practice, as well as academic knowledge. *Contention* welcomes commentaries or responses to articles published in our issues, by activists, academics, and any others in the field of contentious politics.