

## Discussion

### Teaching protest and pressure as participation

Paul G. Nixon<sup>a</sup> & Robin Metiary<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a,b</sup> The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Johanna Westerdijkplein 75, 2521 EN The Hague, Netherlands, e-mail: <sup>a</sup>p.g.nixon@hhs.nl, <sup>b</sup>robin@rnpr.nl

We argue that the notion of protest needs to be included in our global education system as a distinct activity. It needs to take its place alongside other social sciences and humanities courses in our school curricula. We argue that the ability to impact society, to incite societal change, to participate through more means than voting, needs to be taught. It needs to be implemented into our global education system. We know that a lot of societies already teach their students about how citizens can contribute to the democratic system through the citizens' right to vote – why not take this a step further?

Protest, the articulation and manifestation of desired change in the status quo of any society, is of paramount importance in order to keep democracy flourishing. Ulrieke Meinhof once wrote that “[p]rotest is when I say I don’t like this and that. Resistance is when I see to it that things that I don’t like no longer occur” (1968, p. 5). For us, protest is a necessary form of resistance, particularly when one considers the power of the state or large corporations compared to the power of the individual. It is important that all citizens should not only have the right to raise issues on the societal agenda but should also be equipped with the toolkit of competences and skills needed to do so effectively. By raising issues onto the agenda that are not often, at least in the first instance, of majority interest, we enliven and enrich democratic debate. Furthermore, it will allow an avenue for the presentation and articulation of minority interests, thus democratizing democracy itself. As Rosa Parks once said, “I believe we are here on earth to live, grow, and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy freedom”. As she showed us, it is sometimes not enough to hope someone else will rectify the situation – sometimes you have to act, to protest.

Despite the vast majority of demonstrations and protests being non-violent (Chenoweth, Stephan, & Stephan, 2011), we can see in our newscasts that protest often gets bad press. There are those who would characterize protest as a negative, potentially destructive act (Akkuş, Postmes, Stroebe, & Baray, 2020). Let us first deal with the elephant in the room. Recent events have shown us how large-scale protest can be sparked by one incident. This has led to protests that have turned violent. That violence has been seized upon as a way not only to condemn the violence but also to demean and diminish the feelings of injustice that inspired the initial protest, and to call into question the act of protesting itself as somehow being subversive. For those who would seek to stifle or limit our ability to protest, it is perhaps important to recall the words of J. F. Kennedy who argued that “those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable”. In order to facilitate peaceful change, we need to recognise protest as a positive contribution to political discourse. By providing people with the skills to protest, by giving them a voice to articulate and explain their grievances or desires and also the ability to listen to the grievances and desires of others, one might expect to produce a better informed, more tolerant and compassionate society. A society which is sensitive to not just to one’s own issues but also to those of others.

Protest is a tool that can help shape societies’ responses to social issues that are somehow ignored, overlooked or under-represented in democratic structures, particularly those where rigid political party discipline and the perceived need for conformity militates against existing societal norms. Also, it is fair to say that some issues are cross-party in their appeal, or indeed can become so. For example, climate change and environmental protection were seen 20 years ago as being issues only of interest

to the Greens or other predominantly environmentally-focused or left-of-centre parties, and they have now become cross-party concerns. One can see the same cross-party interest in the current Black Lives Matter protests, which stand on the shoulders of the many previous civil rights protestors whose long fight for equality of treatment, not just within the law but generally, is gaining momentum.

Protest isn't just a civic right, but a duty. A duty to oppose injustices and to challenge the authorities, whoever they may be, to re-engineer their actions, processes and procedures to better reflect the needs of the society. As Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "nothing strengthens authority so much as silence". And as Malcolm X recounted in his autobiography, "...early in life, I had learned that if you want something, you had better make some noise" (Malcolm & Haley, 1965, p. 4). This lesson was heeded in a recent Swiss protest by women against the gender pay gap and domestic violence, which included one minute of screaming to draw attention to the difference in incomes when compared to males ("Women stage," 2020). Even in a country like Switzerland, which holds many citizen referenda on policy issues, we need to recognise the value of sometimes inconvenient and noisy protest as a vital check and balance on the progress of a complex multi-faceted society. Following from such recognition is the need to foster people's ability to act upon their wish for change, and to do it as effectively and efficiently as possible. We believe that our education systems need to respond to this and provide education and training to empower citizens. We often see that protest is reflected in much of our social history teaching as only a precursor to change – the causes, outcomes or changes subsequently effected by politicians and officials themselves are noted and discussed, and not so much the means, methods and mobilization of individuals into a dynamic movement that is needed to refocus political priorities and engender societal change. But it should be an education that mixes historical evidence of past protest with the practical application of protest repertoires, including techniques, competencies and prospective potential platforms for message dissemination, for as Mahatma Gandhi said, "an ounce of practice is worth tons of preaching."

The range of protest knows almost no bounds. To give just two very recent examples: an Argentinian priest protested the differences in the type of premises allowed to be open during the COVID-19 lockdown by converting his church, which was not permitted to open, into a bar, which was ("Argentina pastor," 2020); and, demonstrating the dangers of asymmetric power in protest situations, a garment worker in Cambodia, Soy Sros, who protested on Facebook that her factory, which produced handbags for the luxury market, was laying off staff, was then imprisoned as a consequence (Jha, 2020). Another way to contribute to the democratic system, to advance democracy, is through citizen participation in social movements (della Porta, 2020). Over the last 60 years, we have witnessed the power of protest in a broad range of social movements aimed at bringing an end to inequalities in many aspects of our life, such as racial or gender inequality, nuclear disarmament, anti-Vietnam War, climate change and global capitalism, to name but a few. Often these larger social movements have become training grounds for activists, where skills and knowledge are passed on in protest educative forums, such as those that were so prevalent during the 'Occupy' anti-capitalist movements. How to participate in these social movements, how to initiate and further them, should be a mandatory class for all students in democratic societies.

As repertoires of action have been expanded and digitalized, one can identify a plethora of resources ranging from films, television documentaries, graphic novels, and even ABC board books for children such as 'A is for Activist' by Innosanto Nagara, through to online training bases that offer resources and guidance to would-be protestors, such as the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (2020). Of course, the drawback here is that you have to know that you wish to protest, or already have a cause for which you wish to protest, or something against which you wish to protest. Often individuals will feel powerless or so atomized that they feel incapable of setting off a form of protest, believing it might be best left to others who have more experience or more understanding on how to protest. It is our contention that everyone should have that capability and that this should be taught to them in our education systems. We don't tell our young children to go away and learn how to read or write on their own without assistance from those who can, or tell the older ones to simply get in the car, go out

and see if you can drive it. We arrange tutorship for them so that those vital skills are learned, as much as possible, by as many as can do so. Shouldn't we do the same for civic engagement, which we have argued protest is an important, even vital, part of? Could protest become an element of a civic internship in which the students work in areas to improve society and to engage students with people in need within society, such as those internships on offer in some, but not all, schools in The Netherlands? (Kompagnie, 2018).

If you accept the argument that democracy is only as strong as the level of peoples' participation in it, and that protest is a form of democratic participation and engagement, would you not wish people of all ages to be equipped with the skill sets to be able to fully participate? Where would those participatory skills be taught? Some might argue in the home, by the parents. Yes, there is a place for parental and, where appropriate, sibling involvement in such teaching, but is there not a requirement that if these skills are important and vital to the functioning of democratic life, then all children need to be taught by professionals? Consider the difficulties that many parents have had trying to homeschool their children during the CoVID-19 lockdowns, and their realization that the work of teachers isn't always as easy as it sometimes appears. Where else will people get this education if not through the universal provision of education at the school level? Teaching is a complex and time-consuming activity which we readily delegate to professionals, particularly in difficult or sensitive subject areas – sex education is one area that easily springs to mind. Certainly, as we point out elsewhere in this piece, there are a myriad of useful online sites where you can find information, techniques, strategies, etc., to enable you to become a more effective and efficient protester and/or activist, but are we happy to leave it to unknown others to provide that information to our children? Would we be happy with our children's sex education coming solely from online pornography, lacking in context, nuance and devoid of emotional engagement and negotiations of consent? If the answer is no, then does it not also follow that the same should be true for democratic engagement, and strengthen the case for this to take place in a school environment?

So what are these skills that we would have our children learn that some may see as anarchic or even revolutionary? Well, they are the very same 'subversive' skills that employers say those same children will need in their future work lives. They will need to be flexible and have the ability to move from one project (protest) to the next. They will need the skills of advocacy, namely verbal, written and increasingly visual communication skills, as well as the fuzziest, but equally important, 'people skills' that facilitate our interactions with others. They will need to demonstrate the ability to work in teams, building coalitions of interest to meet common goals and objectives, which is seen as essential in a modern workplace. If we cast our minds back to our own formative years, we are sure that many of us would have benefited from such training and recognize, with hindsight and personal reflection, the difficulties that the lack of it has added to our lives. They will need to be versed in the art of persuasion, of convincing people that what they are doing is of value to many. These skills may be taught in some schools via debating classes or in certain modules which may be optional, but we argue that they should be an integral part of any child's school experience regardless of their educational level or the electives they choose. They will have to persuade their peers using networking and lobbying skills, and that relationship-building will take place in hybrid form, both on- and off-line, across a diverse range of locations, media and platforms. Don't take our word for it – simply take a look at job vacancy listings and you will be convinced that these same skills, which are so crucial to protesting and fulfilling one's civic duty, are indeed being posted as career-enhancing prerequisites in the information age economy.

At what age would we have these skills taught to our children? Some would argue that young adulthood is the most appropriate time when they are deemed capable, but this attempts to negate the impressive role of younger children in protests, for example as evidenced in the 2019 worldwide school strikes in support of climate change, when they demanded policy change from their elders in order to improve their futures ("Children protest," 2019). We should not think that this is only a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon. Archival photographic records show two young girls wearing sashes calling for the abolition of child slavery (in English and Yiddish) at the Labour Day march on 1 May 1909

in New York City (“Protest against,” 1909). Later, perhaps somewhat less altruistically, children in Canada staged a ‘candy bar’ protest in 1947 concerning the raising of the price of a candy bar by three cents. Children also played a significant part in the Shagheen Bagh protests in India, where the protesters were objecting to the omission of Muslims from the extension of certain naturalization rights under the recent Citizenship (Amendment) Act passed in the Indian Parliament in December 2019. This led to unsuccessful calls for children to be excluded by law from taking part in such protests in India and sparked a debate around the world as to whether children should be protestors. One can see the same debate around recent BLM protests.

As mentioned above, the repertoires of action available for use in protest situations have expanded in the information age. There are countless examples of internet-enabled technologies being utilized to further protest around the globe, from the Zapatista uprisings in Mexico to the Arab Spring and beyond (Tufekci, 2017). Instant communications via a myriad of social media, with the ability, for many, to protest from the comfort of their own smartphone irrespective of location, exposure to mass protest through newsfeeds, re-tweets, Instagram accounts and more, facilitate protest. As protests are made visible via social media use, politicians and officials cannot so easily claim to be unaware of the concerns of the protestors. Of course, with every potential positive aspect of using new technologies there are also potential negatives. Leaving aside the not-inconsiderable amount of trolling of anyone giving their opinion on any subject on social media and other internet fora, there can be a propensity to attract adherents to the cause who only join as a form of clicktivism, and do not really fully empathise or engage with the cause or issue at hand but rather engage to obtain a feeling of belonging to something that is trending, from which they may hope to gain social capital amongst their ‘friends’, and which may also produce wider social capital gains (Liu, Modrek, & Sieverding, 2019). However, it must be said that this may also be true of people joining ‘live’ demonstrations and protests.

We have argued that protest and pressure as participation should be a key element of education. To better enable individuals to play an active part in determining their own futures and have the confidence, competences and capacities not just to join at the peak of popular mass protests but to become those who initiate, often but not always, local, micro issues to campaign on, like the siting of a pedestrian crossing or even Greta Thunberg’s initial school strike. We should be teaching the skills of activism, advocacy, campaigning, coalition building, lobbying and persuasion in our schools and universities. Educating all people to become activists/digital archivists, who may choose different paths to the same goal of *glocal* (both global and local) social change. Empowering people to have the confidence to challenge the status quo, to press for change and then to effect it to make a better world to bequeath to their children, and ours.

## References

- Akkuş, B., Postmes, T., Stroebe, K., & Baray, G. (2020). Cultures of conflict: Protests, violent repression, and community values. *British journal of social psychology*, 59(1), 49–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12328>
- Argentina pastor turns church into bar in protest at uneven coronavirus restrictions. (2020, June). *News @ The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/13/argentina-pastor-turns-church-into-bar-in-protest-at-uneven-coronavirus-restrictions>
- Chenoweth, E., Stephan, M. J., & Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Children protest over climate change and environment. (2019, February 19). *UK Politics @ BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-47257547/children-protest-over-climate-change-and-environment>
- della Porta, D. (2020). *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy: Democratic innovations from below*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

- International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. (2020, May 15). *ICNS*. Retrieved from <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org>
- Jha, N. (2020, June 11). A woman who makes bags for Michael Kors was sent to one of the most crowded prisons in the world for a Facebook post. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com>
- Kompagnie, A. (2018, November 28). Maatschappelijke stage voor vo-leerling blijft geliefd. *AD*. Retrieved from <https://www.ad.nl/den-haag/maatschappelijke-stage-voor-vo-leerling-blijft-geliefd~a4735e3c/>
- Liu, J., Modrek, S., & Sieverding, M. (2019). The effects of political protests on youth human capital and well-being in Egypt. *Social Science & Medicine*, 243, 112602. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112602>
- Malcolm, X., & Haley, A. (1965). *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Meinhof, U. M. (1968). Vom protest zum widerstand [From protest to resistance]. *Konkret*, 5, 5. Retrieved from [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=895&language=English](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=895&language=English)
- Nagara, I. (2013). *A is for activist*. New York, NY: Triangle Square.
- Protest against child labor in a labor parade (1909, May 1). *Prints & Photographs Online Catalog @ Library of Congress*. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97519062>
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Women stage 'mass scream' in Switzerland over domestic violence and gender pay gap. (2020, June 15). *News @ The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/women-stage-mass-scream-in-switzerland-over-domestic-violence-and-gender-pay-gap>



Paul G. Nixon is a Principal Lecturer in Political Science at The Hague University of Applied Sciences and co-ordinator of The Hague Network Virtual Exchange. He is a Visiting Professor at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. His work is situated on the interface between technology and society. He has contributed chapters to many edited collections on the use of ICTs, particularly in the fields of political parties, electronic democracy and social welfare. He has previously co-edited ten collections, the most recent of which are *Reshaping International Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (with V. P. Dennen and R. Rawal, 2021), *Sex in the Digital Age* (with I. K. Dusterhoft, 2018), and *Digital Media Use Across the Lifecourse* (with Rajash Rawal and Andreas Funk, 2016).



Robin Metiary is the Academic Manager of The Summer School at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS). She is a key member of the Global Citizenship and Internationalisation Team at THUAS, which has as its 'true north' creating socially aware graduates who are global citizens. She also works as a freelance project coordinator and researcher, and is a committed social activist and feminist.