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Published in:
Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Thomassen, B., & Riisgaard, L. (2023). The mask as political symbol: On the ritualization of political protest through mask-wearing . In B. Abrams, & P. R. Gardner (Eds.), *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics* (1 ed., pp. 267-290). The University of Michigan Press.

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Book Title: Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

Book Editor(s): Benjamin Abrams, Peter Gardner

Published by: University of Michigan Press. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11722857.18>

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The Mask as Political Symbol

On the Ritualization of Political Protest through Mask-Wearing

Bjørn Thomassen and Lone Riisgaard

The “hot” fall of 2019 saw a series of popular political protests around the globe.¹ The range (strikes, marches, sit-downs, outright street riots) and global spread of the protests led several commentators to talk about a new “wave of protests.” This “wave” included people taking to the streets in Chile, Hong Kong, Paris, India, Cameroon, Spain, Ecuador, Iran, the Philippines, and Sudan, to mention a few salient hotspots. Many of these protests continued into 2020. Not without reason, commentators started to perceive a global replay of the Arab Spring. A major topic of journalistic and academic debate became the simple yet important question: What do these protests have in common? Can we identify “root causes”?

On November 16, 2019, *Welt am Sonntag* cleared its front page with the title: “Where Does the Anger Come From?” followed by a four-page article by Sascha Lehnartz, who wrote, “It is tempting to look for a global theory that can explain why citizens in so many countries take to the streets in protest against their government. But the causes are as diverse as the involved citizen groups” (Lehnartz 2019). Most certainly, in terms of what the protesters wanted to achieve, one could (and still can) witness a bewil-

1. Parts of this chapter draw on an article published in *Theory, Culture & Society*; see Riisgaard and Thomassen (2016), “Powers of the Mask: Political Subjectivation and Rites of Participation in Local-Global Protest,” <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416651685>

dering diversity. In Hong Kong people wanted democracy, in Catalonia they claimed independence, in Lebanon people took to the streets because of a new tax on WhatsApp, in Chile people protested against rising prices on public transport, in India there were strong elements of gender and religion behind the protests, in Egypt and Iran the issues were seemingly of a completely different kind. But was (is) there no system to the madness?

In an article in the *Washington Post* titled, “Why Are There So Many Protests across the Globe Right Now?” Fareed Zakaria launched the hypothesis that even if the protests on the surface looked different, they were all rooted in the economy—and more specifically, the collapse of economic growth: “When growth collapses, anxieties rise, especially among the middle class who feel squeezed, get enraged by corruption and inequality, and have the capacity to voice their anger” (Zakaria 2019).

Still, in *Welt am Sonntag*, Lehnartz expressed her skepticism about that explanation, citing the fact that the 2008 financial crisis spurred fewer protests. Lehnartz instead pointed toward the demographic factor as explanatory: “41% of the world’s population is less than 24 years old. It is not new that protest movements are carried by young people, who fear for their future” (Lehnartz 2019).

From a left-leaning (post-Marxist) perspective, writers such as Paul Mason sustained the “economic explanation,” identifying the wave of protests as evidence of the structural weaknesses of global capitalism, a system of exploitation whose true nature was becoming increasingly visible to the broader disenfranchised masses. Finally, the cruel nature of capitalism had dawned on the people!

On October 25, Amnesty International posted an article, “Protests Around the World Explained.” From their viewpoint, what was at stake was fundamentally a question of political rights:

Sadly, a common thread throughout these protests has been an extremely harsh response from the state, which in many instances [has] amounted to gross violations of human rights. [. . .] Protesters are exercising their human rights and should be allowed to do so. But what is just as important is that the reasons why people are taking to the streets are also often linked to human rights concerns.

In this chapter we wish to provide a different answer to the same question: what—if anything—ties together protesters around the world today? While recognizing some solid truths in all of the above accounts (yes,

inequality matters; yes, political freedoms matter; yes, accusations of corruption are a common theme), we wish to point to a commonality of a completely different kind, not related to the substance of grievances, but to a crucial performative aspect in the art of political protest: the fact that in the protests that unfolded during the fall of 2019, protesters made use of masks. Mask-wearing was not a complete novelty within the art of protest. Indeed, the use of masks in political protest has slowly established itself as a “repertoire of contention” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) since the antiglobal movement(s) emerged during the late 1990s. What one could witness in late 2019 was in a sense nothing but a particularly visible confirmation of a trend that started about two decades ago. But it opens up a bigger discussion and more general question that we would like to address in this chapter: *why* do political protesters today use masks?

Engaging this question leads us right to the main theme of this book, because we need to ask the even more fundamental question: what kind of symbolic object is the mask, that it can perform a political function that is apparently globally applicable? The aim of this chapter is to provide some elements of a plausible answer, although not an exhaustive one. Toward this aim, we will not go into further detail with any specific protest movement, but rather explore the semantic complexity of mask-wearing rituals in a broader comparative vein, providing brief examples as we go along.

Let us stress from the outset that our focus on the mask as a distinct material object and powerful political symbol is anything but a mere interest in artistic forms. Our hypothesis is, rather, that engaging with the performative powers of the mask allows us to capture something quite crucial about contemporary representational politics, revealing a problematique that resides with the Habermasian communicative rationality (Habermas 1984) of the modern “public” and the “sphere” in which it operates. Our proposal is that comparison can be profitable exactly at the level of artistic forms and processes, rather than merely focusing on structural “causes” or “sufficient conditions.” It seems to us that this volume invites a comparative engagement that works *through* ritual dynamics of political processes and hence moves beyond the dichotomies of structure/agency, materialism/idealism, or content/form.

Our argument is not an invitation to celebrate masked rituals as a happy consequence of new-gained creativity; something more is at stake. Nor is it a question of taking sides with masked protesters against a neoliberal “system,” or belittling or disregarding altogether the historical achievements of the liberal democratic state that is now being called into ques-

tion. Our analysis starts from the in-between space created by masked performances, and our aim is to throw light on the nature of the political meaning-formation and the exact type of communication that take place in masked political protest. In short, we wish to discuss the symbolic language of the mask.

We thus start from the assumption that protest forms are highly ritualized, and as such generate symbolic resources that direct and inspire processes of transformation. Put briefly, the mask offers an opportunity for subjects to construe their relationship with power. To explore this further, we briefly revisit and revive key insights from historians, anthropologists, and philosophers in order to argue that the powers of the mask reside not mainly in hiding the identity of the mask-wearer, but rather in the “liminal” transformative ability of masks to unify and transcend key oppositional categories and thereby dissolve the binary oppositions that form the very foundation of how we make sense of the world—and thereby create possibilities of action within it. Indeed, our hypothesis is that mask-wearing facilitates and expresses a subjectivity that negates fixed identities and the very ideal of representation of relatively bounded interests that lies at the heart of the liberal democracy.

We consider these oppositional pairs in turn and via brief examples illustrate their continuing relevance and transformative potential. Based on these insights and building on earlier Bakhtin-inspired critiques of Habermas (see Gardiner 2004) and liberal democratic normativity, we then elaborate on the nature of the political meaning-formation that takes place in masked political protest.

We focus on what the mask enables, not what it hides. We acknowledge the juridical significance masks may carry in hiding the identity of the bearer from authorities, and the increasing importance of this with the advent of new surveillance technologies such as face-recognition software. Yet we are not interested in authority-evading strategic uses of masks, but in mask-wearing practices where “authorities” are openly addressed. In a similar vein we do *not* explore the use of masks in protests that are primarily aimed at violence or political terror. The focus in this chapter is on the cultural and dynamic properties of nonviolent mask-wearing in political protests.

Powers of the Mask: Anthropological Foundations

The so-called “normal” may be more of a game, played in masks (*personae*), with a script, than certain ways of behaving “without a mask,” that are

culturally defined as “abnormal,” “aberrant,” “eccentric,” or “way-out” (Turner 1974, 78).

To understand the powers of the mask in contemporary politics, we start by taking a step back and open with some general considerations concerning masks and masked rituals. While masks and rituals of mask-wearing hardly figure as a key topic in political science or political sociology, the theme has indeed been touched on by historians, anthropologists, and philosophers—not to mention poets and writers, from Yeats to Blixen. Masked actors also took center stage in modernist artwork. Intriguingly, almost every single artist whose works sought to elaborate and penetrate the continuous eruption of (political) violence in modernity, would paint his subjects as masked creatures, from Tiepolo to Goya and Picasso. From the eighteenth century, artistic representations of revolutions or dramatic social and political change repeatedly depicted these key transitional moments as a carnivalesque setting-loose of uncontrollable forces, dominated by masked figures.

Moving further back in time, masks have been looked on with deep suspicion by Western religion. Before Christianity, Judaism, like all other religions of Semitic origin, had banned every use of the mask, together with the cult of images. This in and of itself raises a series of unresolved questions, for masked performances had played a huge role in the Hellenic and Roman cultural contexts. Such a prohibition cannot simply be interpreted in an evolutionist key, as a coming to maturity, establishing more rational forms of communication. A prohibition must amount to the recognition of something *problematic*, an identification of the powers at stake in mask-wearing rituals, and an experienced recognition of the possible *use and abuse* of such powers.

Interestingly, bans on the use of masks during public demonstrations flourish again today (antimask laws have been passed, for example, in Canada, Denmark, France, and Bahrain), often on the pretext of antiterror legislation—accentuating the criminal connotations of mask-wearing and clearly positioning the mask as an unacceptable political instrument. However, the fear of the mask runs deeper than the security threat involved in having unidentifiable protesters roaming in public. An essential part of the quasimystical power of mask-wearing is best understood as something immanent in the *object* of the mask in conjunction with the *act* of mask-wearing. Thus, although the specific connotations vary according to cultural context, mask-wearing is in and of itself an extremely powerful tool of expression. It has explicitly discussed as such only by very few social theorists.



Fig. 13.1. The Triumph of Pulcinella, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1754). “The Triumph of Pulcinella” is a series of paintings that deal with the carnival. In Tiepolo’s works the pulcinella often appears in several “cloned” versions that take part in mirth-provoking or slapstick scenes. Directly inspired by the political upheavals of his time, Tiepolo sees the pulcinella figure as spreading, copying itself into the many, forming a crowd.

In 1952 the young Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno wrote an essay in Italian, “Saggio sulla Maschera,” inspired by theater plays he saw in Paris, and visits to mask exhibitions in the Paris museums. The essay (translated into English as “An Essay on the Mask,” Pizzorno 2010) offers a useful vantage point for reflecting on the relationships between material and artistic forms and on the social life of symbols and rituals. Without engaging Pizzorno’s larger sociological project (see Della Porta, Greco, and Szakolczai, 2000), our argument takes a cue from the analytical openings present in Pizzorno’s essay, which resonate with insights from process approaches in anthropology, as in Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Pizzorno starts by confronting the standard approach to masks, this “purely psychological and negative notion of mask: something behind which the face of man hides” (2010, 6). In fact, linguists trace the use of the term meaning “to disguise” back to the middle of the nineteenth century, and not beyond. As noted by Marcel Mauss (1985) in his classical essay on personhood (which clearly inspired Pizzorno’s essay), the very word for

person derives from the Latin word for mask used in Roman theater (possibly borrowed from the Etruscan *pbersu*, also literally meaning a mask). Describing the notion of personhood among the Zuni, Mauss insisted that we should not consider the wearing of a mask as different from any “real” person behind the mask. The person *is* the mask, and in exactly this Maussian sense the mask can be considered a “technique of the body” (Mauss 1950). This understanding is only possible if we attempt to move outside a moderno-centric worldview (on moderno-centrism, see Szokolczai and Thomassen 2019). The person is a human being, but this designation is not based on a Kantian fiction of “autonomy”; quite the contrary—“persona” derives from the Latin verb, “per/sonare,” that is, to “sound through.” The mask is something *spoken through*. The mask does not conceal, it gives voice. The mask does not hide the subject, it constitutes subjecthood (this observation is also related to the literal and original sense of subjectivity as being “thrown under”: sub/jectum). As Saramifar (chapter 3, this volume) notes, people may pursue objects such as these “to surrender to them, positing them as a medium that facilitates transition and enables access to new modes of subjectivity.”

The Mask as a Material Object and the Act of Mask-Wearing

The making of masks is an extremely old practice, probably going back to the early Neolithic (c. 8000 BC; see Pernet 2006, 31)—but almost certainly not much further. It can be considered an extremely important technological discovery, an instance of preparing something for the sole purpose of producing an effect (Szokolczai 2010, 173). Pizzorno immediately identifies the mask as a material object, *a thing*: “Before being placed on the face of a man, it has a reality of its own, and thus an autonomous function” (2010, 6).

To continue on the mask’s materiality, masks are physical surfaces, most often two-dimensional. When placed on the face, they represent a boundary between the single person and the world outside. In this sense the mask is often considered as a threshold or a door (see again Szokolczai 2010). Put differently, and following here the process approach of Victor Turner (1988), masks are bearers and vehicles of liminality (Thomassen 2014; Van Gennep 2019, chapter 2). They essentially perform a mediating or in-between role (Lorrain 1900); it limits, by setting up a boundary—but as a threshold, it also brings into contact two distinct realities: subject/object, inside/outside, frame/message.

Therefore, Pizzorno stresses that a primary function of the mask is to create *participation*. *Wearing* a mask is no joking matter; it is intoxicating and liberating, as Roger Caillois put it (2001, 75). The full potential of this experiential effect, however, requires that there be someone to watch; the mask is put on for others, and in the ritual context its mystic power emanates via a powerful gaze of gazes. The masked individual can look at others, while not himself or herself being seen: it gives an enormous power, strikingly similar to Foucault's panopticon. No one knows what may not burst forth from behind the mask, and the tension created by the contrast between its appearance and the secret it hides can become almost unbearable. This is the *terror* (Pizzorno 2010, 15) the mask inspires. "I am exactly what you see," it proclaims, "and everything you fear is behind me" (Canetti 1984, 376).

These potentialities of the mask are not just of interest to ancient historians and comparative anthropologists; they somehow speak to central aspects of the modern public sphere. In his recent book, *Comedy and the Public Sphere* (2013), Arpad Szokolczai, much inspired by Pizzorno, proposes a path-breaking genealogy of the public sphere, moving completely outside established traditions in social theory. The general point is that we have overlooked a series of cultural practices that became foundational to the emergence of the modern public sphere, centuries before the Parisian coffee saloons. Szokolczai focuses for very good reasons on the role played by comedy in the late Renaissance and early modernity, as mimes, clowns, and comedians literally came to conquer public squares and spaces, starting from Venice and Italy. The mask returned to Europe right on the threshold of modernity, via carnival and theater. Building on this insight from Szokolczai, the more specific point we now wish to pursue is how the role of mask-wearing in current political contestation can also be analyzed against such an anthropological reading.

Binary Opposites and Their Mediation

Following Pizzorno, it is possible to analyze the mask through a series of oppositional pairs that together animate its materiality: fixity/transformation, absence/presence, one/many, death/life, being/not being. The mask gains its social life via these binaries, exactly because it is situated in a liminal position that both divides and brings together (on the mask and liminality, see Szokolczai 2013, in particular part I). Let us consider these pairs, and exemplify them as we go along.

Absence/Presence, Hiding/Revealing—the Question of Authority

The power of the mask further emanates through a delicate game between absence and presence. The mask “does not perform the simple function of an image, as a statue might do: the mask indicates absence, at the same time as it affirms a presence. It is an empty, two-dimensional face, its head, its body are all that is not there” (Pizzorno 2010, 7). The mask hides *and* reveals, says Pizzorno. The mask creates an absence by erasing the real human being; it is a disappearance and a void that resembles death, but out of this void something new is created.

The most widespread global symbol of theatrical protest in contentious politics today is the Guy Fawkes mask. This mask first appeared in the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd in 1981² and later became associated with hacktivist group Anonymous’s Project Chanology protests against the Church of Scientology in 2008. Since then the mask has been widely used in protests across the world.³ As Pizzorno noted, a mask changes the person. Or, as Martin puts it, the mask “causes the reveler to become another without reneging on his or her self, it engenders a combination of the self and of one or several other(s)” (Martin 2001, 16). Exactly because the mask negates unitary conceptions of the self, but rather opens the self to exploration, masked protest is a symbolic staging with a counterpart: the uniform (note the word, uni-form, *one* form, viz. the verb, to uniformize).

In fact, the striking fact about many masks used by current-day protesters is that the identification established involves the very symbols of power contested, with protesters variously masking as corporate businessmen, bankers, politicians, and policemen, as illustrated in this image from a demonstration against the global antipiracy treaty, ACTA in Frankfurt am main in 2012 (see figure 13.2). The image shows two masked protesters dressed in uniform business outfits—a combination that forges identification with corporate interests while at the same time mocking and exposing them.

In other protests (e.g., the Million Mask Marches or the political contestation in Hong Kong), we see masked protesters wearing police or military uniforms. By forging an identification with institutional authority, the uniformed mask wearer seems to expose and undermine state power from

2. For a detailed analysis of the anarchist critique levied by the novel and later its film version from 2006, see Call (2008).

3. For a range of examples see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/opinion/guy-fawkes-day-v-for-vendetta.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>; accessed June 2020.



Fig. 13.2. “Save the Internet” demonstration in Munich, Germany (2019)
 (Credit: Photograph © Henning Schlottmann, 2019; CC BY-SA 4.0.)

within. As a participatory tool, the mask permits its wearers to engage in ironic and consciously defiant theatrics that essentially question state powers’ very right to authority. It ‘calls out’ the source of this authority from behind its protective veil of black suits and ties wielding empty or abstract political principles.

This strategy is almost the opposite of that adopted by political protesters in the 1970s, who consciously tried to look as *different* as possible from authorities (naked, unshaved, long-haired). What we have now is Weber’s rational legitimacy challenged by charismatic legitimacy, or, using Dumézil’s terms (as discussed in Caillois 2001, 101–2), we have an order *legiste* versus an order *frénétique*—and the dichotomy could not be more openly displayed. Johnson (2001, 108), in his analysis of the role of clothes as signifiers after the French Revolution, notes how uniforms are “the ultimate visual expression of a politics of sincerity.” Therefore, when a mask is superimposed on a uniform, this “politics of sincerity” is exposed as a deceit, and the general will and abstract equality that the uniform is supposed to represent is turned on its head.

The One and the Many: The Question of the “Public”

The mask is a fixed representation, literally like a facial expression frozen in time. “The mask is distinguished from all the other end-states of transformation by its rigidity. In place of the varying and continuous movement of the face it presents the exact opposite: a perfect fixity and sameness” (Canetti 1984, 374). It is this sameness that allows for its copying. The mask can transform the person wearing it, even as it always stays the same.

But just as mask-wearing refutes fixed and uniform identities, the mask at the same time allows a new form of universalism or collectivity that all protesters can join by simply wearing the mask, regardless of the motives that animate their protest.

Instead of embracing the first person singular “I” (the self-identical subject), masks and costumes also allow these movements to create a new form of third person subjectivity: “we.” Instead of being isolated by their identity, the mask allows for a new form of universalism, since the mask can be worn by anyone. (Nail 2013)

The impersonality that the mask brings forth is therefore crucial: Personifying and enacting the idea of renewal, revelers demonstrate that collective life is indestructible, regardless of the demise of individuals (Martin 2001). In fact, mask-wearing does not negate identity but “instead it signifies the possibility of a multiplicity of identities” gathered in a collective movement (Ruiz 2013, 275). The spread of masks indicates a mimetic process and the mechanical reproduction of sameness, *mockingly* so. In this way, mask-wearing political rituals reject a modernist, rational, identity-based individuality. Instead of the modern autonomous individual—that problematic pillar of social and political thought—we have a decentered and slippery person, jokingly multiplying into the many.⁴ Instead of the individual—*in-dividuum*, that which cannot be divided—we have the one and the many blurring into each other, and the very principle of division and re-aggregation is exposed.

4. In, *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri (2004) included a section titled “Carnival and Movement,” devoted to “protests that are carnivalesque, however, not only in their atmosphere [but] also in their organization.” They credited Bakhtin for “help[ing] us understand . . . the logic of the multitude, a theory of organization based on the freedom of singularities that converge in the production of the common.”

This is well illustrated by the message on the 9,000 masks distributed during the Carnival against Capitalism in the City of London in 1999:

Dressing up and disguise, the blurring of identities and boundaries, transformation, transgression; all are brought together in the wearing of masks. Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together, to shout as one to those who rule and divide us “we are all fools, deviants, outcasts, clowns and criminals.” Today we shall give this resistance a face; for by putting on our masks we reveal our unity; and by raising our voices in the street together, we speak our anger at the facelessness of power. (author unknown)⁵

While recognizing that other forms of costumed political protest, such as the wearing of red dresses or yellow vests, also facilitate a collectivity that transgresses identity-based individuality (see, for example, Lavender 2019), the powers of the mask, as we shall discuss below, run much deeper.

Death/Life—the Opening of a Different World

As we learn from religious practices, masks and mask-wearing practices have enormous powers that need to be tightly controlled to avoid threatening to unravel the established structures of society as we know it. These immanent and arguably perennial features of mask-wearing are also described by Martin (2001). Masked performances are symbolic markers of renewal: they are placed in a ritual sequence with liminality in the center: a beginning, something about to emerge, liminality, an end. But the seeds of renewal are still hidden, not to be seen, and the order of the cosmos to come lies hidden and undeclared in its substance. Putting on a mask is a symbolic entry into a new calendar, a different marking of time, an entry into a new cosmic order where other rules prevail. It is not only a subversion, but something much more radical in terms of protest: it is the opening of a different world—or as phrased by the Occupy movement, “another world is possible.”

Often political protesters use the language of binary opposites quite consciously, as illustrated by the Zapatista movement: “In order for them to see us,” Subcomandante Marcos says, “we covered our faces; so that they would call us by name, we gave up our names; we bet the present to have

5. Accessed October 2014 at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/carnival.html>



Fig. 13.3. Anti-ACTA demonstration in Frankfurt am Main, Germany
(Credit: Photograph © Heiko S, 2019, CC BY 2.0.)

a future; and to live . . . we died” (from Marcos *Ya Basta!*, 115, quoted in Nail 2013).

Life and death, indeed; much like the Ndembu neophytes studied by Turner, who ritually paint their faces black and white to emulate death—a death that is not merely symbolic, as the person undergoing the ritual actually does cease to exist, only to transfigure into something or somebody else (Turner 1967).

What Turner recognized as the jointly destructive/creative energies of the liminal period are equally at play here, and the political protests playing out on our urban squares are prime examples of what he termed “public liminality.” “The village greens or the squares of the city are not abandoned but rather ritually transformed” (Turner 1988, 102). This public liminality is also what Turner (1988, 102)(1988: 102) calls “public subjunction”: “For a while, anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed, the low are exalted and the mighty abased” (see Thomassen 2012 for a general application of Turner’s work to the study of political revolution).⁶

6. Jeffrey Alexander (2004) equally sees a performance-based approach as the only meaningful way to move beyond the structure/agency divide, and refers to the work of Victor Turner when arguing that social performances can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones. However, Alexander ultimately grounds his performance approach in a Goffman-Durkheim tradition. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, Alexander argues, social performances must engage in a project of “re-fusion,” bringing together the various symbolic elements into a whole and communicating meaning to an audience. It is only in this way that rituals become effective, and this “success” relies on the integrative powers of the performance. This is ultimately a problematic perspective in general (see Thomassen [2016] for further discussion), but it positively prevents an analysis of mask-wearing practices that

While contemporary contentious politics is not simply identical to theatrical performances (with their scripts, stages, actors, and audiences) or carnivals (with their temporary lifting of bans and taboos and their ritual inversion of hierarchies and power), many features are similar and are consciously used as such by the protesters. Indeed, political revolutions are quintessential examples of liminality at the macro level (Thomassen 2012), characterized by the recurring use of theatrical performances and carnivalesque techniques. By putting on masks, the protesters invoke a carnivalesque sense of exception.

Carnivals are not political facts first and foremost, but they can *become* political. They become political already by an essential analogy that under specific circumstances transforms into isomorphism: carnivals are plays on life and death, order and disorder, self and the other, hiding while becoming manifest. For Georges Balandier, “in carnival order and disorder are like the obverse and the reverse of a coin: inseparable . . .” (as quoted in Martin 2001, 16). Or, as Martin states it, with reference to Da Matta, carnivals reverse

the surface of everyday life in playful fantasy. Carnival, however, plays not only with the surface but with what the surface hides[. . .] Carnival’s logic is totalizing, a both-and rather than either-or game[. . .] Inversion theory is not false, but it is falsifying because it neglects the dynamics that connect what Bakhtin calls “debasement” [. . .] with incorporation, the dream of ever more inclusive, total ways of feeling, desiring and acting. (Martin 2001, 4)

Not only does the mask not hide: it manifests what is. If politics is power over life and death, then carnival is a ritual staging, unraveling, and renewal of life and death. Carnival, as political power, is therefore a technique of subjectivation, and it is this technique—ancient and novel—that the sheer putting on of the mask evokes and operates.

Being/Nonbeing—and the Question of “Representation”

“Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloguing: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival

are exactly not about a “whole,” and that simply cannot be captured within a Durkheimian form of “collective representation.”

needs masks, thousands of masks; and our masks are not to conceal our identity but to reveal it” (Author unknown; printed on the back of the 9,000 masks distributed at the 1999 London Carnival against Capital).⁷

In various local/global protest performances, the rejections of fixed and uniform identities are taken a step further to expose and reject the idea of representative democracy itself. In his short but insightful piece, “The Medes,” Nail (2013) identifies “a practical and theoretical convergence of the mask” with what he calls the “anti-representational political movements” of the last 20 years, ranging from the black balaclavas worn by the Zapatistas to the Guy Fawkes masks worn in Occupy demonstrations around the world. He—correctly in our view—sees mask-wearing in contemporary political protest as a political and strategic critique of “the currently dominant form of political subjectivity based on identity” (Nail 2013). What is targeted here is the very idea of representative democracy. “Political parties and states . . . require some form of identity to represent” (Nail 2013). If you do not display an identity to be represented, you are not counted as a citizen. Escaping this trap therefore liberates a new potential.

By refusing to be identified, mask-wearing protesters reject the legitimacy of state representation in favor of principles of direct participatory democracy and a multiplicity of identities and positions. Masked protesters are not asking the state to represent them, nor are they seeking the recognition of yet another minority to be “included”—they are calling for a different order altogether.

This critique is related to another key feature of the liberal democratic model, namely that of interest representation—the expression of interest groups with more or less bounded strategic interests that can be represented. As noted by Thévenot and Lamont (2000), the principle of representing a wide range of interests, through political parties or stakeholders, is at the heart of a broader liberal political model of deliberation and of balancing group interests and power (Cheyns and Riisgaard 2014).

Indeed, theater is the ideal form for representational experimentation (Agnew 1986). It is from here that the political notion of representation derives, and it is from here that it can be questioned once again. By wearing masks and costumes, masked participants “reject the traditional presupposition that political minorities are seeking a party to represent them precisely by refusing to allow visible signs of participants’ specific identities to be identified” (Nail 2013). According to Nail, the history of representation

7. Accessed October 2014 at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/carnival.html>

has so far been one of misrepresentation. And thus in contrast to “different minority identities vying for representation, the use of masks disidentifies these movements and allows them to speak for themselves, in their own name” (Nail 2013).

Thus, mask-wearing facilitates and expresses an alternative subjectivity to the one prescribed by the liberal democracy model. This subjectivity is not based on fixed identity and representation of relatively bounded interests. The nature of those very interests is put into play: “By wearing a mask in protest, the protesters are unraveling the apparatus of representation itself” (Nail 2013).

A political subjectivity based on identity and interest representation and the very ideal of coherence and consensus-seeking is transcended. The World Social Forum and Occupy Wall Street are good examples here. They explicitly have no aim of reaching overall consensus, they make no collectively binding decisions, they have no general will or no common strategy, no central decision-making mechanisms. In other words, “consensus” as understood here simply means open participation, and thus does not aim to reduce the variety of viewpoints to a generalized social will (on this see Conway and Singh 2009; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Gerbaudo 2017).⁸

Thus, in the actions of various protest movements one can discern a deep critique of liberal democratic political imaginaries, an attempt to reimagine the political as more open-ended and without the imperative of uniformizing—a perspective that fits exceptionally well with the inherent qualities of mask-wearing, namely, to deny fixed identities and representations of bounded interests and instead to insist on open spaces, diversity, participation, and open ends. A good example of such positionality is the “Sardines movement” that emerged in Italy in November 2019 and for many months dominated the streets and squares of Italy. Representatives of the Sardines have up until today insisted that they do not seek any form of political representation. They have explicitly banned political party symbols during protests for the very same reason. Like the Occupy movement, the Sardines explicitly make a point out of not seeking consensus, leaving things open and creating spaces of heterogeneity or antihegemony in their widest sense. They are, in line with World Social Forum and the Zapatis-

8. Based on their analysis of the World Social Forum, Conway and Singh (2009, 75) suggest that “the imperative to arrive at universally binding outcomes may in fact impede social solidarity and hinder collective action by raising the stakes of deliberation in a way that necessarily suppresses diversity, emphasizes division among interlocutors, and turns participants into competitors fighting to define the ‘general’ will and to determine the final outcomes that will be binding on all.”



Fig. 13.4. Protests in Santiago, Chile, in 2019
(Credit: © Carlos Figueroa, courtesy of the artist, CC BY-SA 4.0.)

tas, opposed to “*pensamientos unicos*”—universal thinking—hegemony of any sort that denies the possibility of other ways of thinking. For these purposes, mask-wearing is a perfect fit.

This is not to say that that mask-wearing political protesters always reject representative democracy. Increasingly, during political protests we see the mask in combination with national or political identity markers such as flags, as illustrated in the photo (fig. 13.4) of a 2019 protest in Santiago, Chile (Gerbaudo 2016; Barret 2019). Gerbaudo (2016) described this combination as a merger of neo-anarchism (signified by the mask) with a kind of democratic populism (signified by the flag). Hence, in some cases, masked protests might be seen as opposing misrepresentation and abuse of power rather than rejecting representative political institutions altogether.

Binary Opposites and Their Sublimation

Masks evoke danger, and this is still so when they are used in the context of protests and contentious politics today, although the powers called on may no longer refer to the same religious forces as in earlier periods. As argued by Johnson (2001) and further developed in Ruiz (2013), images of masked

humans evoke the fear of an unidentifiable but organized threat to society. However, mask-wearing associated with political contestation plays much less on “the organized threat to society,” at least in the more traditional revolutionary sense of wanting to replace the current regime. So what is the real power of the mask?

No substantive answer can be given. Building on Pizzorno’s insights, the game of unifying or sublimating key oppositional pairs—the very cognitive building blocks of how we make sense of the world—is extremely powerful. It nullifies established categories that are essential to our language, our understanding of the world, and our navigation in it—leaving it open, mutable, and undefined, in a liminal state where anything can happen, where “another world is possible.” Thus, the conventional boundaries of the possible/impossible no longer restrict. Or rather, the mask serves to *identify* those categories, expose them, and open them up to interpretation, reversal, and nullification, as indeed anticipated by Bakhtin:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (Bakhtin 1984, 40)

Continuity and Change in Ritualized Protest: Beyond Transparency

We have so far seen the liminal transformative ability of masks to unify key oppositional categories and create possibilities of action with them. We have seen how mask-wearing facilitates and expresses a subjectivity that negates fixed identities and the very ideal of representation, and how masked protesters do not simply refuse to play the “communication game” of the modern public sphere, but by doing so paradoxically unmask and expose the very ideal of transparency. Now let us explicate more clearly the language that the mask speaks in protest and contentious politics and consider some theoretical implications.

As illustrated by Johnson’s (2001, 91) account of the banishment of masks by the early French revolutionaries (after having played a central role in the 1789 revolution), revolutionary transparency based on the Enlightenment ideals of sincerity and participation depended on banish-

ment of the mask, since mask-wearing would impede or conceal the workings of democracy. During the French Revolution even puppet booths were eventually closed. The very first legislation that Napoleon's troops enacted as they conquered Venice in 1797 was to prohibit carnivals and masked performances.

Yet the mask never disappeared entirely. Carnavalesque techniques have been employed over and over, and what we see today is indeed another resurgence of something that runs deeper than what is most often assumed, and that we need to re-pose as a question. After all, it was French situationist Raoul Vaneigem, with his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1994 [1967]), who fueled the May 1968 student movement with what could be called Carnival liberation theory. Presciently, Vaneigem wrote that “a strike for higher wages or a rowdy demonstration can awaken the carnival spirit,” and “revolutionary moments are carnivals in which the individual life celebrates its unification with a regenerated society” (as quoted in *Tancons* 2014, 297).

At the same time, the context within which masked performances occur today is different from the context of 1789 or 1968. Protest movements today draw on carnivalesque techniques, but they relate such techniques to political power more directly. They bespeak power and authority in a conscious and planned manner, and they do so as a reflexive exercise aimed toward earlier periods of social protest. Current-day protests are evidence of a reflexive stance not just toward dominant institutional forms of power, but also toward the emancipatory narratives that were supposed to counter that power.

Masked protests, in particular, can be read as hyperreflexive plays on the very ideal of transparency. In a Habermasian approach, the demand for transparency grounds the “purity” of the ideal-speech situation. The language that the mask speaks is different.

In his discussion of “wild publics,” Gardiner draws on Bakhtin to stress how language itself is of an open-ended dialogical nature, where speakers are not in full control of the semantic resonance of the words they use:

[I]ndividuals can impart their own “emotional-volitional tone” to the word through various techniques (the use of irony, selective paraphrase, parody, and so forth) but they cannot unilaterally determine its meaning, which is constituted through the struggle between the polyphonic voices and never subject to closure. (Gardiner 2004, 36–37)

It is such a Bakhtin-inspired perspective, we argue, that enables us to recognize the powers of the mask. The word, says Bakhtin, is better understood as a “mask” that obfuscates rather than a “face” that reveals (as in Gardiner 2004, 37). In place of a homology between the intentions and motives of speakers and the meanings of utterances or signs they generate, masked performances employ a symbolic language characterized by polyphony and multi-accentedness, a loophole left open. Multivalence and reversibility open up a universal field of application, enabling signs and words to flow in global space in a unified language open to local interpretation—as with the Guy Fawkes mask. As argued by Call (2008) in his analysis of the Guy Fawkes mask, precisely because of its slippery nature the mask as a “free floating symbol” has become a potent instrument for postmodern anarchism and destabilization of the representational order.

The theoretical lesson is therefore that our understanding of a democratic public sphere as a transparent and inclusive space in which power has supposedly been bracketed off is not only deceptive, but part of the problem. In line with Foucault and feminist poststructuralist positions, we recall that the rhetoric of consent and inclusiveness often conceals strategic engagement, power inequalities, and exclusion (Fraser 1990; Bickford 1999; Fraser 2007b). As Nancy Fraser points out, “declaring a zone neutral is not enough to make it so, and consequently deliberation can all too easily become ‘a mask for domination’” (Fraser 1990; here as quoted in Ruiz 2013, 265).⁹ In a sense, the use of masks in local-global protest serves as a mirror to already masked games; it is a perpetuation of power games, but also the opening of a hybrid space of multiple reversals. The mask provides an occasion to express, contest, or adjust social representations at the most basic level, thereby giving concreteness to that “moment of opening” that Fraser recognizes—but somehow fails to identify—in her discussion of “abnormal justice” (2007a, 74).

The deeper point is therefore also that the ideal of total transparency is itself a regulatory power, reminiscent of totalitarianism. Our “freedom to enter” an ideal-speech situation implies nakedness, also in the sense of defenselessness and vulnerability (Szokolczai 2013, 20). The ideal of “open discussion” easily transmogrifies into permanent hypercriticism that denudes personal life as well as the social life of meaningful dialogical

9. For Fraser (1990), the liberal political model assumes that it is possible to organize a democratic form of political life even though it is based on socioeconomic structures that generate systemic inequalities. This model thus supposes that social equality is not a condition for participatory parity.

sociality. In situations of highly structured asymmetries of power, political subjects need a language of truth that emanates from the threshold that the mask represents.

Thus, the mask, by refusing to recognize communicative rationality as the norm, unsettles and uncovers the covert power structures that constitute the public sphere. The mask, by refusing to play by the communicative rules that are considered acceptable in liberal democratic models, at the same time exposes how the ideals of transparency, inclusion, participation, and balance of interests in reality often obscures power inequalities and forms of exclusion. Thus, the ritual masking we have identified paradoxically must be understood as an unmasking; or, as captured by Bakhtin's notion of grotesque realism: via the grotesque, the real becomes visible.

No Final Act

To unmask, that was our sacred task, the task of us moderns.
(Latour 1993, 44)

Human beings have been aware of the powers of the mask throughout history and across cultures. That is why the use of masks has been extremely circumscribed, and occasionally even banned. This is no joking matter; in many cultural settings in the past, masks could under *no circumstance* be used outside a ritual context. To put it on in private, without a ceremony master, was considered such a transgressive act that in some cases it would be punished by death. That is also why masks were almost always fabricated secretly and often destroyed or hidden after use (Caillois 2001, 87).

In addressing our question, we have been facing a perplexing puzzle that somehow goes to the heart of political modernity. Self-understanding in Western modernity can easily be pinned down by the underlying notion that only “primitive” peoples took masks seriously, while we, as rational moderns, no longer need such devices: having rid the world of superstition, we could see the world for what it truly is. It is becoming increasingly clear that this was an illusion all along. We need to go beyond and behind the Enlightenment view of rational discourse as something that can only erupt once we take off our ritualistic masks and start to communicate “freely,” in an “ideal speech situation,” a situation where we, stripped naked, dispossess ourselves of all our human “attributes,” in full transparency.

With a mask, ambivalent and contradictory attitudes toward power can be expressed at the same time. Social representations form a shared body

of implicit images of and ideas about the society in which a group lives and the makeup of their social environment. Depending on the cultural codes particular to each group (subject to the more detailed study of particular movements that we have not engaged in here), images and ideas symbolize elements of the environment in order to make sense of it and to make action on and in it thinkable and feasible. The mask, thus, must be understood as an effective vehicle for the symbolic expression of social representations of power. Mask-wearing ritualized protests potentially push to the foreground and expose the very notions that were supposed to form the background of modern, emancipatory politics: transparency, free speech, representative democracy.

Wearing a mask is about the act of seeing, it is about a gaze. It is not a closure, but an opening, and what it opens is not a predefined substance but the very realm of the sayable, made possible through an inner projection of the seeable, thrown onto the world stage of politics-in-the-making. And perhaps here we arrive at a conclusion long ago anticipated by a theatrical writer indeed: All the world's a stage. And the theater is still called "the globe"; ever-more so.

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