

Moving Protests: The Stories Objects Can Tell

Anna Feigenbaum

*Public protests are a highly visible feature of social movements' activism across the world. They are spaces where people come together to imagine alternative worlds and articulate contentious politics, often in confrontation with the state, global companies or other interest groups. Protests consist of a broad range of (disobedient) objects and images that acquire meaning in their assemblages, or the ways in which they are arranged with other technologies, bodies and environments. As a researcher who focuses on communication, technology and social change, and especially on spaces and infrastructures of resistance, **Anna Feigenbaum** has been exploring the media, governance and social practices of protest camps around the world, demonstrating that protest camps are unique spaces in which activists can enact radical and often experiential forms of democratic politics, that are often represented by or communicated through objects. To build movement histories that can challenge the structures of power, there is a need for what Yvonne Marshall calls 'archaeologies of resistance', which invite us to listen to these objects, to discover their stories. In this essay Feigenbaum explores such stories objects can tell.*



Sometimes A Banner Says It All

A banner can capture the demand of a movement in one perfect sentence. A slogan that marches on sticks, a message dropped from the skies, or hung off the side of a motorway bridge. Today, a banner can be a beam of light, shone onto a corporate headquarters, housed in a city skyscraper, a projection speaking truth to power.

Or a banner can be a meme, a byte size, 140-character-or-less message that cuts to the core: re-tweeted, re-posted, instagrammed, gaining momentum as it bounces from one geo-location to the next. These slogans build a split-second connection with each glance, with every click. Symbolic transnational solidarity as Gillan and Pickerill have called it (Gillan and Pickerill 2015).

Banners and slogans tell us stories of protest pasts and protest futures. They map out activist legacies; tracing the routes that demonstrations travel. Signs can be carried from city to city, spreading the message on canvas and poster board. Even now, they might still follow us around. Resurrected, reworded, adapted and updated. They can remind us of where we come from, of what battles we have won, and of what other possible worlds are not yet built.

Social Scientist Bruno Latour claims that objects can talk. The trick is for us humans to get them talking. Our job is to understand where they came from,

what other objects they connect to, and how they move. Like fossils or hair follicles, objects of protest have their own ancestries. Like families they grow and change. Some leave the country, while others stay close to home.

Object Stories

As a researcher, I like objects because they offer a way to talk about protest history without the grand narratives and big categories that dominate so much writing on social movements. 'After 1968'. 'The Second Wave of Feminism'. 'The Labour Movement.' 'Environmentalism Today.' Just as our lives do not fit into one, single fixed tick box or another, neither do our struggles for social justice.

Objects remind us that if we look at what really happens – whether in meeting rooms, out on the streets, or around the kitchen tables that sustain protest – it becomes clear that there is no such thing as a pure Environmental Movement, or a discrete Anti-Capitalist Movement. They are always bound up together – chatting, fighting, planning, dreaming, and sometimes giving each other the silent treatment.

Sarah Ahmed (2013) writes that as objects circulate, they become sticky with affect. Our feelings, attachments and orientations toward the object become embedded, layered, entangled as it moves, taking on new meanings. As objects of protest circulate they are discussed and debated, soliciting many more perspectives.

As the women's anti-nuclear movement grew in the UK in the 1980s feminism was brought into direct confrontation with more traditional forms of anti-war activism, often associated to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The largest women's camp began with a peace walk in September of 1981, with 35 walkers travelling from Cardiff, Wales to the first nuclear cruise missile storage base at RAF Greenham Common in England. Within two years, the population of the camp swelled, hosting a 30,000 strong demonstration and fostering a transnational network of women's anti-nuclear peace camps. With its women-only mandate, the mainstream media began to draw comparisons between Greenham and the ancient play *Lysistrata*. Promotional flyers declared, "*Men Left Home for War. Now Women leave home for peace.*"

But the connections between feminism and anti-war ideologies were not so simple. In 1983 the Feminism and Nonviolence study group released a pamphlet

titled *Piecing It Together: Feminism and Nonviolence*. In it they argued for a recognition of State violence that went beyond the physical use of direct force. They argued that “for us violence includes conditions which themselves kill. Poverty, hunger and racism degrade individuals and inflict suffering.”

While many lauded the group’s attempt to expand on simplistic ideas circulating in the anti-War movement of what constituted violence, their perspective also came under critique. “*Your booklet has been thought through with care and concern,*” a woman identifying herself as Nefertiti wrote in response, “*but you are ignorant, because you never suffered. How dare you assume that people in armed struggle choose violence? What makes you think they didn’t try peaceful ways?*”

Growing up white in Britain shields white people from the experiences of colonized people. The fact that such experiences of oppression are so often mystified by politicians and the media can mean that however well-intentioned white people might be, they can still fail to take account of the realities of non-white people’s lives. These struggles in the 1980s called on people who saw themselves as anti-war to challenge where their definitions of violence and oppression came from.

Such conflicts and synergies, convergences and spillages, often play out around objects. To use the boltcutter or not to use the boltcutter? These questions are what give protests their unique cultures and practices. They are also the reason that ‘Social Movements’ are often an oversimplified way to make sense of the complexity of protest dynamics. Drawn like boundaries around our bodies, often forcing people together under singular banners, the master narratives of Social Movements can distort reality more than they help us reflect on it.

Too often such tidy narratives are used by ivory tower researchers and podium-hugging mansplainers to make sense of things for us – not alongside us. When people zoom out and peer down at the empty streets, they frequently offer only narratives of failure. From such a high distance up, they make our actions, our passions, look so small and insignificant. Donna Haraway calls this the god-trick, a desire to be an all-seeing eye that can hover over the world and map it out, attempt to manage it from on top (Haraway 1988).

But objects talk back.

Small Stories Carry Big Lessons

The 2014 film *Pride* tells the story of this banner. It is a story of the relationships formed between one small Gay and Lesbian solidarity group in London and one small community of miners in Wales. The London support group raises money to help keep the group of miner's out on strike. In the process, stereotypes get smashed and unlikely friendships form. The miners' strike becomes a moment in history that a diversity of people feel an intimate connection to. It gives us more than a bland Wikipedia infobyte, "*The miners' strike was a major industrial action affecting the British coal industry.*" It offers everyday emotion in the place of a dramatic BBC quip: "The 1984 miners' strike was the most bitter industrial dispute in British history."

The story *Pride* tells challenges us to remember differently. It asks us to see a piece of British history through the multiple perspectives and experiences of different people, each with their own unique and messy life. *Pride's* story zooms in on the small events, reflecting the everydayness of solidarity, of brutality and of kindness. It highlights the importance of nonhumans in protest: the banners, change buckets, cups of tea, spare sofas, disco songs, subversive t-shirts and multi-seater vans that also form and shape protest.

In reality, the movement of hundreds, or thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people is always messy. Just like people themselves are messy. They are made of up spilling over categories, wobbly commitments, self-contradictions and never enough time, or money, or love, or all of the above. Likewise, the little events that congeal and get called a social movement are their own emotional roller coasters.

Imagine you are there:

The march starts and you join in near the front, dancing alongside the Samba band. You are there with a handful of friend, pointing and laughing at the wordplay on the homemade signs that surround you. Two hours later, your feet hurt, the march has reached its destination. You start to feel disheartened, listening to the same old speeches, watching the FIT team snap the same old pictures of who ever they have deemed a 'professional protester.'

As the sky turns a darker grey, the riot cops close in. A mild panic sweeps over you, stirring up some deep down memory of being trapped. You realise just how tired and hungry you are. Why didn't you bring that extra jumper? You have to

wee and would love to do so in a real toilet. You wonder if you should have come out at all. You could be home with a cup of tea, watching telly, tucking in your child, wrapped under the duvet.

You feel the day's joys turn. Tears well up in the corner of your eyes as you wonder just how long the police kettle will last, this time. But then, the sound of the Samba band picks back up. A small circle of people, streaked in glitter, hot pink scarfs wrapped around them, start dancing. Twirling, dipping, bouncing like they are meant to be right there, right now, in this moment.

Minutes later, on the other side of the police's human cage, the chanting begins. There is one voice at first, and then many. The words, barely audible across the open air, something to do with someone's bum, a British classic. The silliness, the defiance. The reason you are here in the first place.

Listening to Protest

Doing Social Movement Studies through objects offers a chance to revel in all of the messiness of protest. Feeling the stickiness, listening to all the different perspectives, putting yourself – as researcher – into the other's shoes. And I mean, literally, putting yourself into a pair of protest shoes.

It might be a pair of climbing shoes, wrapped around the bark of a beech tree marked for demolition at the Newbury bypass protests. Or it could be a pair of wellies caked with mud, fleeing the fourth eviction of a rainy morning at Greenham Common. Or maybe they are a pair of party shoes, platinum silver or pink flats, worn into the Tate Britain's BP-sponsored Summer Party in 2010. They are scooping up oil from an under-the-dress spill, re-enacting the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster for high-flying party guests on the gallery floor.

Like travel diaries, these objects recount the everyday experiences of protest. They carry histories of tactics, blending practical function with the creativity of resistance. Shoes – like banners – remind us that protests are both sites of ritual and tradition, as well as places of innovation and imagination.

These objects are time capsules, storage containers of memories. Sometimes their life-span can be measured in years: by numbers of marches, like an old union banner, or a well-worn badge with a rusted pin, or a decades-long commitment to paper mache.

But just like people's stories, object stories do not always reveal themselves to us right away. Rather, they can be hidden or forgotten. They are tucked into the drawers of old dressers, buried in boxes under the bed, left to mold in police lockers. Such stories often only unfold after years of trolling through libraries, social centres, and home attic archives. After hours weaving around oral history interviews, tracking down great-grandparents and listening in close for what lies beneath the surface of familiar scripts of being part of a protest. This art of getting objects to talk demands you engage all your senses.

Point your ear toward the megaphone and listen for the crackle of changing tactics. Stare closely at the old paint marks on the central marquee, stained by years of cross-country travel, carried from warehouses to lorries and back again. Feel the tip of the permanent pen as it brushes against your skin, reminding you who to call 'in case of arrest.'

Such close listening to objects can help us better hear each other's stories. It can get us to remember that every protest event – every march, sit-in, performative intervention, seemingly endless meeting, fundraising party, bail posting, or act of courtroom solidarity – is made up not only of multiple people, but of all kinds of different nonhuman things. There are animals, objects, architectures, and variable weather conditions that shape the many small events and moments that get culled together and called social movements. But for now, let's get back to the banners.

From Capitalism to Climate Justice

There is one banner in particular that has a lot to say about the contemporary history of British protest. Dated to its site of origin, for a glass cabinet display, the tag on this banner would read: August 2009, Climate Camp, Blackheath, London. Mixed materials.

This banner was strung up to commemorate a year of bankruptcies and bailouts. Of default loans, forced evictions, unplanned cuts and an unemployment rise of one million more people in a single year, bringing 2009 totals to 8%. Then there were the zero hour contracts, the precarious pay and the collapse of services to contend with. Chancellor Alistair Darling told the Guardian that things were "*arguably the worst they've been in 60 years.*" Predicting, "*It's going to be more profound and long lasting than people thought.*"

(Watt 2008) His bleak outlook was already held by many with a close eye on what happens when profit is put before people.

Capitlism is Crisis, as the banner proclaimed.

It was a simple slogan. But it was one that stuck. It captured the sentiment of a moment in three simple words. It was both an analysis and a coalitional call. The banner crystallized decades of protest, from the anti-capitalist legacies of Class War to the J19 Carnival Against Capitalism in 1999, from May Day Monopoly in 2001, to the 2005 G8 Summit protests at Gleneagles (itself home to an eco-village HoriZone camp).

At the same time, this banner carried forward short-term legacies of camping for Climate Justice. The same pink on blue designs featured in the 2008 'No New Coal' banner at Kingsnorth and the April 2009 Climate Camp in the City banner 'Nature Doesn't Do Bailouts.' Each were attached to tripods, structures that can simultaneously function as raised barricades, tree-less tree-sits, and banner poles. Usually made out of wood or scaffolding, tripods have a genealogy of resistance that travelled here from early pre-designs in India, to logging blockades in Australia, and then into the UK during Reclaim the Streets (among other adventures along the way).

While the 2009 Climate Camp banner was explicitly anti-capitalist in its message, since its inception, Climate Camp was committed to creating alternatives to capitalist life and targeting corporate proponents of climate change. Grown out of the 2005 G8 protests, climate camps have served as convergence spaces where a range of political ideologies and practices come into contact with one another.

Back at Climate Camp in 2006, a giant ostrich puppet helped to visualize how government officials had their 'heads in the sand' over climate change, ignoring the damning findings of the world's leading scientists. The following year this message was amplified at the Heathrow Climate Camp resisting plans to build a new runway – running right through local villages. There, the banner read 'We Are Armed Only With Peer Review Science.'

Crafting a front page worthy photo, this banner was hoisted up in front of rows of faces – portraits of those suffering from climate injustice – from unnatural disasters caused by the unwieldy greed of the 1% (only, no one called them that yet). These portraits were multi-purpose, designed out of pop-up tent boxes, they served as both a protective device for fending off police baton blows

and a transport mechanism for moving tents from the base encampment to the BAA headquarters blockade. The portraits were affixed to protesters' arms with straps made of foam pieces, rope and gaffer tape, one for the hand, and one to rest just before the elbow.

These portrait-shield-tent transport devices brought together function and art. They carried forward the tactics of Greenham Common women's woven webs that ensnared officers during evictions. They echoed of Claremont Road's sculpture installations-come-barricades. And afterwards, they went on reverberating in the book blocks of Italy that made their way into the UK student protest against tuition fees in 2010—designed through passed along box on gaffer tape techniques. In these ways creativity travels through protests just as much as ideologies or badges of belonging that stick us to specific organisations.

Such playfulness of disobedient design is often a response to state brutality, to violent modes of policing that also travel transnationally. The shield, the mask, the barricade, adorned and re-designed over the years, always develops in response to repression. They are fossils of resilience, but they are also artefacts of social control. When tricked into talking about repression, these protest objects tell another set of stories:

A tear gas canister from the company Chemring, like the ones found on the streets of Occupy Hong Kong, speaks about the rise of tear gas, a weapon modernized by the British at the UK's military laboratories in Porton Down in the 1950s. At the time, the Empire's supplies did not store while in the heat of India, where the weapon was regularly used to suppress colonial uprisings. The scientists' new formulas were tested on animals, then on war veterans without their consent.

First used on UK soil against civilians in Northern Ireland in 1969, British CS gas seeped from the streets of Derry's Bogside into houses, community centres and medical clinics. In 1996 CS moved to aerosol form, finding a place on the hips of British police officers. Ever since, such chemicals have been sprayed in the faces of nonviolent protesters. They were recently used on UK Uncut protesters, students occupying at the University of Warwick, and demonstrators at the Reclaim Brixton march against corporate gentrification.

In the years since the 2011 Arab uprisings and urban square occupations around the world, sales in so-called crowd management equipment have tripled.

Here in the UK, the summer riots and student fee protests were used to justify the purchase of water cannons for the London Metropolitan Police. As austerity cuts and climate injustice continue to fuel civil unrest all over the world, those in the business of selling riot control see their profits rise from the repression of protest.

Capitalism is Crisis, as the banner goes.

In October 2011, this banner resurfaced outside of St. Paul's Cathedral. In a semi-organized act of encampment, on 15 October 2011, the day to show international solidarity with Occupy Wall Street, an estimated 2,000 Londoners took to the streets around Paternoster Square, home of the London Stock Exchange. Greeted by double rows of metal barricades, riot police, dogs and horses, it soon became clear that camp was not going to be set up in the planned concrete courtyard outside the Exchange.

After circling all of the entrances in hopes of a back way in, we found ourselves in the square outside St. Paul's Cathedral – the only space in the area big enough to handle such a large crowd. Within two hours the crowd had decided, by consensus, that they would camp right there in the square outside St. Paul's Cathedral. Call outs were made to start coordinating food, shelter and sanitation.

In the early weeks of Occupy LSX, the *Capitalism is Crisis* banner became an icon above the tents of the encampment. It was often used to frame photojournalists shots of the encampment. It hung over the area where general assemblies were often held. It greeted tourists and reminded commuters of why the camp was there.

Like any symbol, it was contested, debates arose of whether the camp was really anti-capitalist or just wanted alternatives to austerity and banking power. Such debates were not new to UK protest. Like other convergence-based campsites, people came together from all different experiences, backgrounds and attachments.

When St. Paul's Cathedral faced its decision of whether or not to evict the camp, *Capitalism is Crisis* came down and a new banner went up: *What Would Jesus Do*. The banner was a call to action and to a deeper reflection. It was an act of activist PR, hijacking the debate and the media frame with a story that mattered. It drew out other debates emerging in the encampment – around homelessness, mental health, the need for public space, the responsibilities of

governments in a democracy, and the role of religion in contemporary Britain. In other words, things got complicated. But then, things have always been complicated.

Sensing Movement

In the 1990s the Anti-Globalisation Movement was often referred to as a 'movement of movements', what Hardt and Negri (2004) termed the multitude. A linking, a coming together, a crossing over. The sentiment of interconnectedness was there. It was built upon a foundation laid decades before, birthed from the promiscuous protests that came before; a messy family tree including slavery abolition, May 1968 uprisings, Anti-apartheid campaigns and queer anti-capitalisms (to name only a few).

But the problem is that Movements don't move. Movements are just a god-trick for looking down, separating out, categorising, taxonimising, pinning butterfly wings to the wall. It is people who move. They move under what Judith Butler has called wavering banners of identity.

Our messy selves, stick and unstick to issues and each other. People stick and unstick because of friendships, lovers, families, class backgrounds, racial identifications, jobs, childhood attachments, spoken languages – what Aimee Rowe Carlson calls our longings and belongings (Rowe 2005).

Understanding protest requires methods for analysing how struggles are bound up together. But this binding must reach below the surface of social network graphs, beyond the transcript ready interview responses on the tips of spokes people's tongues.

There are truths that objects record that people alone cannot recount. They archive the contradictions and conflicts that stick and unstick people. Those differences that bind struggles together, as well as those that repel, or frighten or discomfort. They can draw out those negative thoughts that get buried deep down or called fancy sounding things in Jacobin speak like 'ideological disagreements over Marxist ontologies'. This happens in our work because it is easier than talking about how we are scared of each other sometimes. That we just can't stand the sight of each other. That other people are hell.

God-trick formations of movements are far easier to peer review publish

than woven tales of mismatched threads. It is easier to be a multitude than to pry into the fictions of 'we', into the depths of not being all in this together.

These complicated times call for complicated stories. Stories that do not shy away from the mess. Yet, our analyses also need clear targets for intervention. Distinct, yet interconnected. How can our work better contribute? What can it track and trace?

Money flows traced back to profiteers, as well as to the experts that legitimize state and corporate violence. The geologists pinpointing perfect fracking spots, and the PR firms selling the public on them are also – though not equally – responsible. Like the doctors and psychologists that helped make Guantanamo Bay, expertise and communications are key members of any climate criminal gang. In all of these networks, objects are also to be held accountable. Tracked, mapped, sabotaged as they wind around the land and under the sea, like pipelines and internet cables.

But to confront these complex networks of capitalism as crisis, other attachments of Social Movement Studies need to keep being narrated away – attachments to the god-trick of seeing from above, to categorizing outcomes into neat little boxes, to creating new words with ever expanding -izations, to disciplinary recognition, to the myth that any of us go it alone.

The struggle is to find ways to tell complicated stories that can later be simplified. Both the research and the protests that move us come from complicated work. They arise out of wading through mess: researching, strategizing, reflecting, planning and rehearsing. Making time and space for care, building trust into relationships and sitting with discomfort, are all necessary components of research that goes on in the background, before the final act appears. It must be complicated before it is three simple words.

Capitalism is Crisis.

** This essay was originally commissioned as an introduction for 4 Boys by The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home.*

Anna Feigenbaum, November 2018

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2013): *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.

Rowe, A. M. C. (2005): Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation. *NWSA Journal*, 17(2), 15-46.

Haraway, Donna (1988): Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2005): *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. Penguin.

Gillan, K., & Pickerill, J. (2008): Transnational anti-war activism: solidarity, diversity and the internet in Australia, Britain and the United States after 9/11. *Australasian Political Studies Association*, 43(1), 59-78.



Anna Feigenbaum is a Principal Academic in Digital Storytelling at Bournemouth University. Before joining the department of Journalism, English and Communication, she was a Lecturer in Media and Politics from 2013-2015. Prior to this she taught at Richmond, the American University in London and held fellow positions at the Rutgers University Center for Historical Analysis, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the Institute for Historical Research at University of London. She graduated from McGill University in 2008 with a PhD in Communication Studies. Her doctoral research on communication and creativity at women's peace camps was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada and the Beaverbrook Fund at McGill. Beyond the university, she runs a variety of workshops on data storytelling for local businesses, NGOs and community groups. She also provides consultancy for campaigns, archives and museum exhibitions related to her research. This has included contributions toward the Signs of Change exhibition, Music & Liberation, and the Disobedient Objects show at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2014. Recent Book publications include „Tear Gas: From the Battlefields of WWI to the Streets of Today“ (2017), „Protest Camps in International Contexts“ (2017) and „Protest Camps“ (2013). She has also contributed to the upcoming book „Design (&) Activism“ (2019), edited by Tom Bieling.

© 2018: Anna Feigenbaum, DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal (ISSN 2511-6264)

Authors retain the rights to their articles, which are published by DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal with their permission. Any use of these materials provide proper citation to the author and DESIGNABILITIES | www.designabilities.org

Citation Information:

Feigenbaum, Anna (2018): Moving Protests – The Stories Objects Can Tell. In: DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal, (11) 2018. <https://designabilities.wordpress.com/2019/11/02/moving-protests-the-stories-objects-can-tell> ISSN 2511-6274