

MATERIAL PROTESTS: A CONTRIBUTION FROM THE CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY OF THINGS

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This article traces and exposes the material dimension of contemporary protests. In this piece, we consider protest as a particular type of human communication that gains intelligibility in specific social situations that are embodied in objects. This has led us to (re)think (about) the dialogue which exists between anthropology and communication in light of the role of material culture. We read and review these experiences from epistemological and theoretical frameworks of protest studies in Argentina and reconstruct social situations arising from our joint work developed at the research group *Cosas Cotidianas (CoCo)*¹, which we co-coordinate, dedicated to analysing, from an ethnographic perspective, how objects “participate” in social life. Our paper is structured into 3 parts. Firstly, an analysis of anthropology and communication is undertaken followed by protest(s) as social situations and finally, understanding protest through objects. We present how pots (in Spanish *cacerolas*) in Latin America, umbrellas in Hong Kong and waistcoats in Paris (France) appear as objects of protest in countries of the global south and north. The “cultural biography of things” is proposed as a conceptual framework for our analysis.²

KEYWORDS: Protests, social situation, objects, cultural biography of things, communication

7th January 2015. Guobin Yang and Ran Liu (2015) wrote an article entitled “Hong Kong’s Umbrella generation” for the “Boston Review” in which they analysed the seventy-nine-day protest in Hong Kong that had ended on 11th December 2014. This was a protest that brought together democratic demands for education, free expression and journalism organised behind one object: the umbrella.

29th October 2019. The Chilean journalist Miguel Farías (2019) wrote a piece for the Chilean online newspaper “El Mostrador” called “*Cacerolazos, arte y cultura en el Chile que despierta*” about the protest in the Chilean population that arose after prices on the underground increased, which revealed other structural inequalities in this society. Pots and pans took to the streets.

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19th March 2020. The online newspaper and media agency “Brasil de Fato” (Mançano 2020) reported on a series of protests against the (non) measures taken by President Bolsonaro in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. The demonstrations with pots - the *panelaço* in Portuguese - were the most talked-about topic in the Brazilian media.

14th March 2020. The Spanish-language daily newspaper “El País” (Ayuso 2020) announced that in France, the Yellow Vests Movement (in French, *Mouvement des gilets jaunes*), born in 2018 from a protest against fuel increases, took to the streets after the announcement of a measure banning the congregation of more than a hundred people as a result of the coronavirus. This movement returned to the streets with its garish grey and fluorescent yellow waistcoats.

Data used to analyse contentious actions such as demonstrations come usually from what is seen, said, written or even from silence. Unless they refer to artistic expression, “objects”³ remain outside the analytical interests of researchers.⁴ In studies where they are given due attention, objects are considered as illustrative of a theme, problem, or social situation, leaving them in their own “material shadow”. Our purpose in this paper is to portray the power of objects and thus to improve our understanding of a specific social phenomenon: protests.

Anthropology, archaeology, museology, and folklore studies have since their origins devoted efforts and resources to examine the traces – sometimes even ruins – of various social groups throughout history. Classical anthropological studies have analysed a wide variety of technologies developed in human history, focusing on objects created by stateless and small-scale societies, generally located in Oceania, Africa, and pre-modern America. Cases in point include canoe building (Malinowski 1987), the circulation of necklaces (Mauss 2012), the production of skirts from bunches of banana leaves (Weiner 1976) and the gift exchange and surplus burning ceremony known as potlatch (Boas 1897).

In this text, it is our intention to explore some noisy pots and pans, multicoloured umbrellas and various eye-catching waistcoats as objects that have been employed beyond their original purpose and exploit their conventional context of transaction, making possible the questioning of other available relations and other latent sensibilities they enhance. We test the idea that the anthropological perspective on objects, understood through their cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986), provides a new interpretative key for an analysis of social protests. We suggest that the material aspect of protest cannot be understood separately from the social situation in which it occurs (Gluckman 1958) and thus aim at re-storing the general and specific contexts of action.

3 While we understand the subtle differences between things and objects, for the purposes of this article we will use both terms interchangeably.

4 Recently, New Cultural Material Studies as well as the so-called New Materialisms offer a complex perspective on things (including the whole critique of thingification) and on matter/materiality.

The communicative approach allows us to reconstruct a broader relational matrix that combines material culture, political action, and various social actors that together constitute the public arena. We agree that objects, initially considered merely as part of the material inventory of societies, shape human experience.

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources. We trawled through national and international audio-visual material (newspapers, filmography and blog posts) on the social situations of protest, reviewed studies that analysed objects at different historical moments, and consulted an interculturalist specialising in China. The events analysed in this text took place between 2014 and 2020 in Hong Kong, France, Chile and Brazil. Based on various protest situations, we offer illustrative vignettes on the objects that enable us to think of new interpretative frameworks to nourish the communicative approach from the anthropology of objects. In giving our account of the biographies of the objects under discussion, we make use of thick description (Geertz 1991) as a textual and analytical strategy that allows us to highlight significant characteristics both to understand the cultural biography of an object and the social situation in which it is inscribed. According to Geertz (1991), ethnography is a thick description, which means that those who carry out ethnography employ it for the purpose of understanding the conceptual structures and explicit or implicit matrices in each social situation. The notion of thickness is of value in helping to notice that imperceptible character of meaning that is sometimes denied to us either by the immediacy or by the superficiality of the analysis. Our analytical strategy is not based on comparison but rather on the production of counterpoints that allow us to understand how the objects reconfigure the dynamics of collective action while making it possible to grasp the historical meanings embedded in their symbolism.

The paper has four sections; first, theoretical lines linked to the dialogues between communication, non-verbal communication (Pereiro 2019) and anthropology are introduced. Then, we present details about our proposal related to social situation (Gluckman 1958) and the cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986). Third, we explain some characteristics of collective action and objects in three situations of social protest (Pereyra 2013) including pots and pans, umbrellas, and waistcoats are specified. Finally, we show how objects can provide a novel analytical viewpoint to grasp protests and demonstrations. In brief, our project belongs to the line of qualitative research that seeks to describe and understand a social process involving things.

Following Igor Kopytoff (1986), we trace a cultural biography of pots and pans, umbrellas and waistcoats because we believe that such analysis provides a new perspective on how materiality occupies “the public arena”,⁵ and improves our understanding

5 For the analytical purposes of this paper, we refer to the concept of “public arena” specified by Daniel Cefaï: “This concept of arena has a double connotation, referring to a place of combat [*lieu de combats*] and of a scene of realisations [*scene de performances*] in front of an audience. It differs from the concept

of objects as carriers of tradition, movement, and protest. Our aim is to include objects in the analysis of social situations by proposing a transdisciplinary perspective that brings together anthropology and communication studies and thus enriches comparative by analysing the form, materiality, and other dimensions of social expression. We are interested in understanding the effects produced by the use and/or mobilisation of things, and how it affects public life. We claim that there is a shared imagery grounded in a common cultural heritage, which empowers the object to become a symbol of protest that communicates political ideas without the need for elaborate narrative argumentation.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

Dialogues between communication and anthropology have had a long history. Pioneering research was mostly focused on the crossover between linguistics and anthropology to assist anthropologists in formulating better theories of the development of culture (Sapir 1929; Lévi-Strauss 1951; Kluckhohn 1960). Edmund Leach (1977) became interested in the articulation between culture and communication early in his career. Undoubtedly, the cross-fertilisation that exists between the two allows us to understand how the production and utilisation of language constructs worlds of experience. In this regard, we follow the long-standing path of exchanges between communication studies and anthropology proposed by Caggiano and Rodriguez (2008, 7), which includes thinking about the concrete implications of the analysis of both communicative and cultural practices in its multi-dimensionality (Arrueta 2012).

Within the field of communication studies there are several analytical orientations, some of which tend to emphasise verbal communication, specifically focusing on language, and others that focus on non-verbal communication, concentrating on images and objects (Baudrillard 1975). This sheds light on both symbolic and material dimensions of communicative exchange. It is our claim that non-verbal communication conveyed by objects is fundamental in social protest.

Max Gluckman conducted fieldwork between 1936 and 1938 in Zululand⁶, paying special attention to the constitution of this colonial state - completely heterogeneous and pluralistic. The relationship between the Africans and whites could be described as stable, balanced, but conflictive. His highly influential study of the inauguration of

of public space, which tends to be static and devoid of drama, and tagged by the reading J. Habermas in France. It stands apart from approaches in strictly market terms, which tend to reduce the shaping of public affairs to a balance between the supply of entrepreneurs and the demand of consumers of material or symbolic goods (...)" (2012, 2, footnote 22) (own translation).

6 Community located in the current KwaZulu-Natal province in the eastern part of the Republic of South Africa.

a bridge in Zululand has initiated a line of theorising known as situational analysis in which the concept of social situation is central. He describes the people participating in the event, the location of each of them on the banks of the bridge, the hierarchical relations of prestige and the construction of loyalties. A series of interactions amounts to what he calls “social situation” that crystallises and reveals a set of significant dimensions of the community. This, in turn, makes it possible to think about the social structure of the country. For Gluckman this type of analysis is powerful as it “reveals the underlying system of relationships between the social structure of the community, the parts of the social structure, the physical environment, and the psychological life of the community’s members” (Gluckman 1940, 10). A (supposed) singular event allows us to analytically weave social relations and to make visible mechanisms that sustain, as a bridge, the social structure of a community.

Another approach advocating constructing social biographies of things (Appadurai 1986) can also generate relevant information about the historical moment of production or use of an object, about social conventions and the rhythm of daily life in this or that place. Igor Kopytoff (1986, 68) points out that people have a multitude of biographies and that each one tends to deal with a specific aspect, sphere, or role of everyday life. These can be complemented by assuming that the produced knowledge is always partial, often individualised. Thus objects (González Villaruel 2010) can relate the individual history of those who possess or possessed them as well as the history of the object itself in regard to its production and material makeup. Not every biography is cultural unless one realises how a “thing” has been culturally shaped and utilises this knowledge.

In any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structure of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things. Some of this clash between culture and individual is inevitable, at least at the cognitive level. The world of things lends itself to an endless number of classifications, rooted in natural features and cultural and idiosyncratic perceptions. The individual mind can play with them all, constructing innumerable classes, different universes of common value, and changing spheres of exchange (Kopytoff 1986, 76).

Kopytoff understands, however, that “what one glimpses through the biographies of both people and things in these societies is, above all, the social system and the collective understanding on which it rests” (Kopytoff 1986, 89).

A SOCIAL SITUATION: THE PROTEST

Social movements have used protests to demand the exercise and recognition of citizens’ rights as well as to fight social injustice. In this regard, sociological research on social movements has incorporated into its analysis a specific approach to protests. As some

authors have pointed out, anthropology has been absent from social movement and protest study debates for some time, only joining them a few decades ago (Escobar 1991; Gibb 2001). But political activism has been recently registered on the anthropological radar with force⁷, leading to the intensification of research on the practicalities of social mobilisation (Escobar 1992; Cross 2003), particularly in the European tradition of social protest analysis.⁸

Over the last number of years, the study of collective action and social movements has taken off in Argentina especially after the institutional crisis of 2001, a landmark moment that unleashed a series of demonstrations and protests. The focus has been⁹ on protest as a visible collective action, on its size, its opposition to the state, and on its performativity. Such studies made use of contributions coming from North American historical sociology particularly from Charles Tilly who proposed studying macro-structural and micro-social processes without separating the dimensions but, rather, complementing them in the analysis. Such is the case of the notion of “repertoires of collective action” defined as

a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations (Tilly 1995, 26).

Tilly’s approach provides a perspective on actions and subjects that includes history but is not determined by it. Social protest is a type of collective action oriented towards a demand. This notion “refers to visible events of contentious public action by a collective, aimed at sustaining a demand (generally with direct or indirect reference to the state)” (Schuster and Pereyra 2001, 47) (own translation). Sebastián Pereyra (2013) is an Argentinian sociologist, who has analysed how social movements impact the

7 “Studies on social protest have become a field of analysis within the social sciences, from which we try to understand the proliferation and diversity of social conflict in the contemporary world. Within sociology, North American theories of ‘social protest’ occupy a central place in the study of these phenomena. Among them, three main approaches can be distinguished: theories of resource mobilisation, political processes and cultural frameworks” (Romanutti 2012, 259–260) (own translation).

8 In Europe, work in recent years on new social movements has focused on highlighting the role of emotion in protest. With this in mind, James Jasper points out the way in which objects embody specific emotionalities while making possible the achievement of public demonstrations: “we arouse and display our own and others’ emotions as a way to get things done, using sensitizing apparatuses’ such as physical props and ritual actions (Traini 2009b). Organisers of demonstrations try to arouse emotions to attract new recruits, sustain the commitment and the discipline of those already in the movement, and persuade outsiders to join?” (Jasper 2011, 292).

9 For more information on the analytical dimensions of this perspective, we recommend reading Svampa and Stefanoni (2007).

political and economic order. His interest lies in understanding how collective actions can generate, provoke and influence public debates through the analysis of the specific elements of each social-political situation that nurtures such protests.

Although many influential scholars advanced our understanding of social movements and collective action repertoires, they rarely if ever focused on the objects involved in protest. Since every collective action has a performative dimension, we believe that incorporating it in analysis is important. For example, we may want to analyse the production of artistic expression in social demonstrations (Longoni 2010; 2014). These demonstrations usually bring to the fore visual, sonorous and tactile products that are not always seen as having any artistic value. Ana Lucía Cervio and Anvy Romero call them “expressive resources” as they are involved in “meshing the demands of collective identity with the demands of conflictual visibility” (2017, 37). Cervio and Romero’s construct their theory of the artistic dimension by conducting the qualitative analysis of the work done in a slum settlement (in Spanish *acampe villero*) by the *Corriente Villera Independiente* (a non-profit organisation whose goal is to make life better in slums) in 2014. As an example of expressive resources, Cervio and Romero refer to the

ringing of bells, release of white balloons, an spontaneous football match in the city centre, the honking of horns, the baring of naked breasts (in Spanish *teteadas masivas*), pot-banging protests (in Spanish *cacerolazos*), the use of bright or opaque colours, exhibiting dolls and vehicles made of cardboard or papier-mâché, replicas of official speeches in improbable places, slogans, chained protesters in public buildings, the burning of tyres, carrying torches, open-air concerts, colourful or monochromatic attire, the production of meals on public streets, demands sung, marched to, acted upon, stamped to, and painted over (Cervio and Romero 2017, 43) (own translation).

The designer Carlotta Werner and the artist Johanna Sunder-Plassmann led a research project that explores the use of everyday objects that have been “hijacked” in one way or another in mass protests around the world. Their work has been shown in The Museum of Modern Art (2001) in New York (United States of America) illuminating the emergence of altered everyday objects of daily life, such as pump sprays, toilet brushes, goggles, scarves and plastic bottles with pierced tops, as props in political demonstrations. Werner and Sunder-Plassmann (2014) showed how “objects contain certain information about the mode and nature of the protest itself. This includes the level of violence, groupings, organisational forms, and ways of communication, information about particularly striking events, social and civic qualities, and the cultural setting”.

Although Werner and Plassmann observe that analysis does not need to focus on the link between the subjects and the object but exclusively on its use as a resource of sound and visual display in the public space. Since a tyre, dolls, torches or horns lose their singularity, taking into account the social biography of things can complement and enhance the analysis. Objects cannot be understood outside of their contexts, and these can be studied in several ways, but situational analysis provides a particularly useful

tool to examine interconnections between the social situation and the structural context where the object acts. In the next section we illustrate these points by examining the role of three specific objects associated with have visibility in three specific social protests.

PROTEST WITH OBJECTS, OBJECTS WITHIN PROTESTS

Pots in Latin America

The pot is usually found in kitchens. In Argentina it is the repository of stews (in Spanish *mondongos*) and pastas, but also a prop in protests. During the institutional crisis of 2001 in Argentina a variety of people protested in the streets with pots and ladles.

It should be noted that pots can be made of different materials: aluminium, anodized aluminium, teflon, ceramic, stainless steel, cast iron, copper or glass. But not all of them emit the same sound or make it possible to sustain a protest. Two of the most commonly marketed pots are those made of stainless steel or aluminium. The former is very resistant to scratches and is ideal if you have induction or glass ceramic stoves. The latter are cheaper and have a lower heat resistance, so many people cure them to make them last longer. Some are used for decoration while others either for cooking and/or for protest. The type of pot tends to indicate the social position of its owner. In some families, pots are inherited and passed down from one generation to the next, as objects that give continuity to social and affective ties.

The expressed purpose of a pot, be it preparing a meal or collecting water from a leak can suddenly be usurped by it being turned into an object of protest. According to Roxana Telechea (2006, 143) the first recorded *cacerolazo* (“casserole protest” in which people make noise with pots and other utensils) on the streets of Chile dates to the 1970s, when they were employed against President Salvador Allende in the city of Santiago. Other countries in Latin America also had *cacerolazos*, such as the housewives’ demonstration in Venezuela in 1983 or protests against the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, when the *cacerolazo* for the return of democracy was held in the living rooms of people’s houses to avoid physical repression in the urban space.

Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero (2005) analysed protest objects used in producing sound. The object they selected for analysis, the pot, was useful because it

was exactly what the protesters were looking for: to make a lot of noise, offering an acoustic that was off-key but of remarkable intensity. The action of beating them was related to the fact that the protesters felt that they wanted to defend democracy at any cost, even over the President, and that all those who did nothing for the people should go (Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero 2005, 5) (own translation).

Their situational analysis argues that “the empty saucepan symbolised the emptiness of power, as well as the hunger and misery that characterised the economic situation suffered by countless Argentinians” (Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero 2005, 5) (own translation).

They focused on the political dimension of the object as a tool for articulating demands, leaving aside the materiality that such an object has in the lives of Latin Americans.

In Latin America, social protest with pots is closely linked to the capacity of a group to make a demand visible. The sound of the pot is a clarion call for attention but at the same time it emphasises the collective hunger and impoverishment of social life. Recently, in Brazil, the *cacerolazos* resurfaced to highlight the absence of federally coordinated anti-Covid 19 policies from the central administration led by President Jair Bolsonaro. The pot in Chile, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina has ceased to be an exclusively domestic object and the name of casserole pot, for example, has provided the root of a new verb employed in the social situation of protest: *cacerolear* (to bang on pots and pans as a form of protest).

Umbrellas in Hong Kong

Protests in Hong Kong's financial district began in late September 2014. They were triggered by the decision of the Standing Committee of the twelfth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China that set limits for the 2016 Legislative Council election and 2017 Chief Executive election in Hong Kong. The "Occupy Central" movement united various pro-democracy activists and proposed a non-violent occupation of Hong Kong's Central district as an act of civil disobedience. The aim was to apply maximum social pressure in order to force China to retain universal suffrage in Hong Kong. It all began with a strike of 100 young students who occupied the Government Central Complex and the Civic Plaza. The response of the security forces was an outburst of violence, tear gas and mass arrests that highlighted the failure of negotiations between the movement and the government. Within a few days, half a million people had flooded onto the streets, mostly young people, and took over Hong Kong's main public and political spaces with yellow umbrellas and other household objects symbolising their social protest.

Western media outlets such as BBC and CNN referred to these demonstrations as the "Umbrella Revolution" because of the unusual sight of the masses of people demanding democratic elections under a sea of yellow umbrellas at night without rain and sun. This mobilisation was coordinated not only by "Occupy Central" but also by the "Scholarism" group, headed by student leader Joshua Wong. In the early hours of September 28th, 2014, large groups joined the social protests and were immediately attacked by security forces that used tear gas and pepper spray. Against this repression, all they could do, was open the umbrellas they were carrying, for "protection", and suddenly an everyday object assumed a political meaning.

The English word umbrella derives from the Italian *ombrella*, a modification of the Latin word *umbra* meaning shade. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "an object with a round folding frame of long, straight pieces of metal covered with material, that you use to protect yourself from the rain or from hot sun". Although there are many

different materials used in the construction of umbrellas, in urban and metropolitan western environments waterproof materials (e.g. nylon) are most common. Umbrellas made from paper (*washi*) and bamboo are widely available in Asian countries such as Japan, where they are used in tea ceremonies, traditional festivities such as marriages (white) and funerals (red). Their materiality is closely linked to their use, be this protection from rain or sun. Thus, the umbrella is an object that protects people from a variety of inclement weather conditions, but it can also protect them from tear gas, pepper spray and national government surveillance drones during social demonstrations.

Kacey Wong – designer and Hong Kong protester – stated to the BBC that during the protests he had been inspired by seeing people defending themselves from police brutality with domestic accessories. Carrying an umbrella in the street is not an obvious sign of civil disobedience, but the social situation of occupation transforms the meaning of such act into a signifier of protest. The documentary “Joshua: Teenager vs Superpower” illustrates perfectly the process whereby streets became domesticated as people raised tents and started cooking and entertaining themselves publicly. The film shows construction workers setting up barricades of bamboo poles to defend the protesters. It was a bamboo wall and a sea of umbrellas that protected protestors on the streets of Hong Kong.

The East has its own traditions and Chinese culture is a perfect example of how continuity, ruptures, revolutions, dynasties, heterogeneity and constant homogenization coexist, said Alejandra Conconi, an Argentinian Chinese expert. She brought to our attention the fact that the yellow that was so striking during the first days of protest was not accidental; it is the colour of nobility in China. Confucius defined it as the purest and most supreme of colours that integrates benevolence, righteousness, wisdom and trust. The emperor’s clothes, the roof of the Imperial Palace and most umbrellas of the protest were yellow. The yellow umbrella has served as a symbolic vehicle for intertwining history with the present and has become a distinctive marker of the protest movement, that served “as an expressive medium to communicate a political voice” (Ismangil and Lee 2021, 17).

The object and its colour have had a profound and enduring effect on the people of Hong Kong, to the point that yellow has again been used in a series number of public demonstrations linked to demands for political participation. A case in point is the ‘yellow-ribbon camp’ which occurred in the mass protests of June 2019 (Ngai 2020, 333). At that time, the streets were also flooded with yellow ribbons on police barricades and on the wrists of protesters.

Vests in France

A vest’s origins are linked to the emergence of the Italian word *giulecco* or the Turkish *yelek* and its use by the daughter of Murad III (of the Ottoman Empire) that was recorded as early as the 16th century. The item, that has become increasingly popular

over the years, can be purchased in leather, linen, denim, and either single-row, double-breasted, fancy or hunting. However, most vests that have been flooding the streets of Paris and France since 2018 are not made of fine, noble fabrics or royally coloured. Instead, they are reflective vests with fluorescent strips that are sold on digital platforms or shops. They are not fitted or measured but have one standardised size *de rigueur*. What a yellow vest symbolises, above all, is visibility. What is new is that it has now entered the public arena as a marker of collective action.

The Yellow Vests movement was born in October 2018 in France when people in precarious professions, in some cases living in medium-sized cities or in rural areas, found themselves challenged by what they saw as unjust policies of the French government that increased inequality. This movement brought together a variety of sectors but the spark that lit the fuse was the increase in fuel prices announced by Emmanuel Macron (President of France) that came into operation on 1st January 2019.

Repeated protests took place on Saturdays in different French cities, and according to media sources more than one million people from regions all over the country participated. What began as roadblocks and blockades of small towns, escalated to the centre of Paris with the burning of automobiles, the smashing of windows of luxury stores, the painting of graffiti on the facades of historical buildings, and the looting of the interior of the Arc de Triomphe. The Ministry of the Interior estimated that, during the months of the demonstrations, there were more than 1,600 protests throughout the country. Outside of the capital protests were peaceful, but in Paris there were clashes with city police, the use of tear gas and the arrests of protestors. Some media outlets have identified certain continuity between the Yellow Vest movement and the long French tradition of protesting tax increases. For example, the *Bonnets rouges* (red caps) movement began in Brittany in 2013 in response to a new tax on truck transport. The Yellow Vest movement is characterised by its decentralisation (Boyer et al. 2019), and also by its unusual long duration (Mozorov et al. 2019). The vests signal visibility and a rallying call to congregate and demand justice.

CONCLUSION: MATERIAL PROTEST

“Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure”.
(Kopytoff 1986, 67)

Social anthropology is a discipline that quite early raised the question of otherness and developed the tools to study it in a systematic and sustained way through the examination of social technologies, artefacts, goods, objects, and things. This attention to production, circulation, exhibition, use and, discardment of objects enabled anthropologists to come up with new ways of studying all kinds of phenomena, including social protest.

As we have pointed out, objects communicate at different levels and in a variety of languages. In the social fabric, things are charged with meaning and generate effects. We protest with objects and objects inhabit the protests. They offer protection from tear gas, pepper spray or drones, but they also convey important messages. Colours may symbolise unity, the material a thing is made of signifies meaningful choice and may become a vehicle of communication that gains currency in the public arena. Indeed, an analysis of objects allows us to observe, understand and grasp collective strategies and subjectivities involved in social demonstrations around the globe. They are not decontextualized protests but protests that must be understood as social situations.

Vests, umbrellas, and pots have a use for which they were designed and a “normal” cultural meaning. They are private, and reinforce the sense of personal individuality of those who use them in everyday life by their colour, size, print (in the case of umbrellas), materiality (in the case of pots) and by their use as protective clothing (in the case of vests). These are objects that shape everyday life in the domestic and other everyday environments. Protest equalises practices and collectivises demands through a novel use of these same objects, creating – in conjunction with them – a collective that draws on the individual to strengthen the social. The clanging of pots, the opening of umbrellas and the wearing of fluorescent vests transforms the meaning of these everyday objects and turns them into tools expressing collective demands. The pot in Latin America, the umbrella in Hong Kong and the vest in France are transformed from anonymity into objects of social dispute. People modify, alter, and strengthen these items’ symbolic uses and functions and turn them into “objects of protest”, in a manner consistent with Kopytoff’s (1986) longitudinal approach to the cultural biographies of objects, an approach designed to understand their historical and cultural trajectories.

For example, pots in Latin America have come to be seen as a huge part of protest, in the public arena. The humble pot as a container of aromas and dishes based on traditional recipes has flavoured political action in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. Umbrellas in Hong Kong are a common sight in the means of public transport because, in everyday life, they protect those who hold them from adverse weather. But in a social protest situation, the opening an umbrella turns the holder into a protester. It is not just any object that is established as a communicational tool in a protest; it is an object with a particular historical biography that has been updated for the present – with a significant social value for those who transform it. Fluorescent vests are associated with labour and afford their wearers with daily protection by making them visible from a distance. And at the same time, it is a run of the mill item of clothing that could be said “to cast an ugly shadow” on the elegant streets of different cities in France.

In this regard, their communicative function has less to do with the sender’s intention and more with the effects it produces both among those who protest and those to whom the protest is directed. The importance of the senses should not be

underestimated in the process, be it vision, smell and/or sound. Pots produce a type of sound that attracts attention, while the umbrellas and vests draw attention through the stridency of their colours that echo earlier times.

We are of the opinion that objects can be seen as markers of territories of protest, seen through the prism of a continuity with historical experience. To study this phenomenon we relied on the communicative perspective (Arrueta 2012; Knapp 1997), the idea of studying the cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986), and the concept of social situation (Gluckman 1940) helped us to guide our path. Our aim was to think about the way in which objects complexify any analysis of protest and social demonstration and to focus on the “political practice of collective social actors” (Escobar 1992, 395).

Attending to a diverse set of objects in different latitudes, social events or historical moments makes it possible to reconstruct a material dimension of practices, especially of protests. Analysing umbrellas, vests, pots, street parades, drums, flags, masks, and green handkerchiefs raise new questions about how the world and social demands are interpreted and performed. However, the challenge of constructing a robust analytical frame that would help to theorise the spatial, temporal, and material dimensions of social protest (and other social situations) through the analysis of things remains.

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