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# Transformation of Protests in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT

*In recent times, the power of protests as a political instrument has become quite evident. That being said are protests the same as they were in the early 18th century? If not what sort of changes has this instrument undergone. Have these changes bettered the manner in which protests are conducted or have they placed an unbearable burden of violent escalation on all those who seek to use this tool? It is in the answers to these questions that we shall become capable of truly realizing the potential of protests and similar unrests as an instrument for change.*

## MAIN MANUSCRIPT

The *“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest”*

**-Elie Wiesel**

A protest is defined as a public expression of objection, disapproval or dissent with regards to a particular course of action. Typically looked upon in a political sense, protests are usually the physical manifestation of the minority’s dissatisfaction with the status quo. 2019 truly was the year of protests. Generally referred to as the Global protest wave of 2019, this year navigated a period marked by the unnatural occurrence of a large number of high-profile protests in territories like Iran, Hong Kong, France, Catalonia, Latin America as well as the states of the Arab springs.

With such a large number of states and regions having now experienced the wrath of such demonstrations, the importance and utility of protests as a widely used socio-political instrument cannot be understated. This, however, raises an interesting point of discussion as to how the so called “art of unrest” has progressed over the course of years. From the French revolution to the non-violent Gandhian marches to the now the “#NotMyPresident” social media movement, it is safe to say that the art of protesting has progressed tremendously both in methodology and philosophy over the years. These changes have been affected, to a remarkable extent, by the period of occurrence of the protests. Dissecting these changes and

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how they have transformed protests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by means of comparing past and present occurrences will be the primary objective of this essay. In furtherance of this objective the essay will deal with, in detail, the elements of a successful protest, the changes that have been induced to the process of protesting over the years and what contributions these changes have made with respect to attaining the greater goal of the protest.

Across the years many demonstrations which would satisfy the definition of a protest have taken place. Over the course of these occurrences' certain trends regarding the hallmarks of a successful protest, in terms of inducing the changes it espoused, became apparent. In this regard, a salient message, ability of the protest to unite other movements under one common banner, ability to take effective action and an overall proactive, rather than reactive nature can be regarded as key determining factor with regards to the success of a particular protest. This is due to the importance of numbers and the ability to organize and control these number to ensure the event doesn't end up counter-productive to the final objective by emboldening the opposition.

In this regard the advent of the technological age has absolutely transformed the logistical burden of organizing and participating in a protest. For example, if one were to examine the historic march on Washington, very specific steps were taken to ensure the protest was efficient. Although the march attracted a significant number of people, control with respect to the messages being put forward both in regards to the chants as well as the posters were highly controlled. All the chants were managed via speakers where the mics were kept under tight control, participants were actively discouraged to get their own posters on the fear that any misplaced message could topple the struggle by miscommunicating its goals. Very specific actions were elicited from its members to impose pressure on the government. These include walkouts, boycotts, "freedom rides" and other forms of non-violent resistance. Communicating the same to its members without diluting the message proved to be pivotal in the movement's success.

Today, with the services at one's disposal the burden of organizing such a demonstration has significantly reduced. A mobile phone with a working internet connection for example furnishes a means for one to tell hundreds if not thousands of people exactly what to do, how to do it and where to do it. Applications like Telegram provide organizers with the means to communicate on a one-way channel, preventing dilution via miscommunication of the message. Technology has also furnished participants with the means to steer clear of trouble if and when the protest were to turn unlawful in its practice. For example, an application was used by protesters in Catalonia, where social media and GPS were coordinated to move

protesters away from a violent zone thus preventing the escalation of the situation. Another application developed by Tsunami Democratic, a Catalan protest group, used QR codes to link phones with the objective of coordinating protests in real-time and organize action in waves.

The changes technology has brought to table go beyond just logistical improvements, moving towards a conceptual shift in what would conventionally be regarded as a protest. Due to the immense presence social media possess in modern society, protests have become cable of shedding physical presence without diminishing their real-world impact in anyway. This was observed in the “Me too” and “Not my President” movements which in spite of a lack of immediate success did mount a massive amount of pressure on the government.

This brings to the table one very important question, do these changes contribute in a manner that is absolutely positive for society as a whole? At this point it would be asinine to deny that protests have played an indispensable role in ridding the world of some of its most crippling moral deficiencies. That being said they also suffer certain clear weaknesses as a political instrument. For such a demonstration to result in actual tangible benefit for society, there has to be an actual, obvious solution to the problem. In a lot of instances this is not the case, in which case a larger frequency of protests would be rendered a wasteful and futile expense. Another aspect that has be considered is how protests polarize stakeholders. Traditionally protests were utilized only when due deliberation and discussion regarding a particular topic had been undertaken. Protest by considering the solution to be obvious often attributing the lack of adoption to either apathy where individuals don’t care enough to initiate action, idiocy where individuals lack the education to make an informed decision or mere moral disregard where individuals like the moral fiber to make the morally correct choice. These characterizations often result in the protesters leaving the negotiation table. Due to the ease with which a protest can be organized, protests are now being utilized prematurely resulting a polarization of the masses and lack of mobilization due to the unavailability of a viable course of action.

As we lack the benefit of retrospective analysis of these changes, it is still unclear as to how these changes will affect society. Whether the connectivity brought about by technology transform protests into a tool that forges unity or will it be utilized as a tool that will fracture society on the basis of political leanings is something only time can tell, but one thing that is clear is that the “art of unrest” will simply never be the same again.