



Editorial

Everyday Narratives of Resistance and Reconfigurations of Political Protest after the Pandemic—Editors' Introduction

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Perhaps one of the most demanding challenges of the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 was the extent to which it arrived on top of a series of existing global crises. These were related to austerity measures after the global recession; historically high levels of refugee-related movement; the climate emergency; and crucially for us as political psychologists, the development of seemingly unstoppable conditions of rising populism, anti-politics, anti-democracy, increased authoritarian policing, and civil restrictions on protest. The central question which brings together the contributing authors and editors of this Special Issue on narratives of resistance in everyday life is whether features of this pandemic context, its social restrictions, the grand narratives of cross-border cooperation such as gene sequencing and vaccine development, and newfound narratives of togetherness would initiate a reconfiguration of political protest. Does the experience of the pandemic create the opportunity for citizens to develop more equitable worlds, to revisit our priorities, and to realize what counts?

This focus of this Special Issue can best be understood by adopting a developmental lens. The story starts back in early 2020, as the coronavirus was making its entry onto the world stage. In the UK—where two of us are located—the announcement by the World Health Organization on 30 January of a public health emergency, coincided uneasily with the deadline for the UK to exit the European Union on 31 January 2020. In what have been described as the 'lost 38 days' (Haddon 2020), the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, missed the first five COBRA (Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms) emergency meetings which were designed to put in place the necessary contingencies. The first Cobra meeting he chaired was not until 3 March, eight days before the World Health Organization declared the virus a global pandemic. By 17 March, the UK government reversed its earlier policy and embraced a strategy of social distancing. It is not surprising that at that time, many of us who had been participating in numerous protests in the UK wondered what the impact of this would be on demonstrations, which had been particularly widespread in the previous year.

On 19 October 2019, London had seen one of the biggest protests in its history, with an estimated one million people participating in the 'People's Vote', the fourth, and largest, of the anti-Brexit demonstrations since the passing of the referendum in June 2016. The month before that, the UK had seen its largest ever climate protests across the country, with an estimated 350,000 taking to the streets. Additionally, the month before that, Boris Johnson's decision to suspend parliament sparked thousands of British citizens to protest against the actions of their government.

And that was just in Britain. In many other parts of the world, citizens were rising against the policies of their government.

Four decades of highly bureaucratized neoliberal austerity measures and deregulated markets had conditioned a crisis of confidence in the State as an instrument to address injustices and material inequalities. Support for mainstream political parties, voter turnout,



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and trust in government declined across a wide range of national settings. The immediate political backdrop to the COVID-19 years was a sharp turn to right-wing populism, with its emphasis on borders, exclusions, and 'us and them' politics, under the leadership of unorthodox, brash, and self-promoting leaders promising to return politics to the way they were in the mythologized past and positioning themselves as anti-elite outsiders.

When India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act and introduced the National Register of Citizens in December 2019, rescinding and restricting access to Indian citizenship, violent protests erupted around the country. The government swiftly responded by prohibiting the gathering of more than four people in a public space. (Less than a year later, the government would pass three farm bills which attracted even larger protests; ultimately, the government retracted the bills).

The pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019–2020 became well known around the world, with their novel methodology to 'be water' and 'climb the mountain in a different way.' The protests were amongst the largest in Hong Kong's history and culminated in June 2020 with the imprisonment of countless activists and the passing of the National Security Law, effectively suppressing the right to protest.

Indeed, in autumn 2019, many countries around the globe experienced massive civil unrest. According to the Global Protest Tracker (<https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker>, accessed on 1 January 2020), these countries had protests of 100,000 or more in October 2019 alone: Bolivia ('Wild Fire' protests, 1.5 million), Chile (subway fare protests, 1 million), Guinea (term limit protests, more than 100,000), and Lebanon (October Movement protest, more than 1 million).

Additionally, this was part of a larger trend: the 2020 Global Peace Index showed that 'In the eight years leading up to 2018, the available comparable global data shows a 102 per cent increase in the number of riots, general strikes and anti-government demonstrations' (<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/angry-protests-in-britain-reflect-global-trend-of-civil-unrest/>, accessed on 1 January 2020).

So, this was the broad political context into which the coronavirus pandemic entered the world in the first quarter of 2020.

In May 2020, we received an invitation from the editors of *Social Sciences* to guest edit a Special Issue of the journal, on the topic of 'Creating Lives in Everyday Narratives'. Given the intensity of the political fallout which the pandemic had already caused, we were interested in how everyday lives of political resistance would be reconfigured in the new world of social distancing and 'stay at home' imperatives. Already, we had seen a retrenchment of civil liberties in countries around the world (see the COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker (<https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>, accessed on 1 January 2020) for relevant data. This website tracks several different aspects of the health of 'civic space', including emergency declarations and limitations on freedom of speech). However, it is the category of measures affecting the right to assemble which initially interested us here. At the time of writing, there are currently 156 countries which have measures in place regulating the right of citizens to assemble, some of these mentioned above. Many, although not all, of these pertain to governments legislating the reduced right to freedom of movement due to the coronavirus, e.g., aimed at limiting contagion. However, there are others which more directly concern assembly for political protest. One such case is that of the Policing Bill, which became the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act on 26 April 2022 in the UK. This Act, which had seen 'Kill the Bill' protests across the UK, included challenges from politicians, police officers, three former Prime Ministers, and the public. Despite these coalitions of resistance, this new policing act gives the police power to impose noise restrictions on protests, to stop one-person protests, and to create a buffer zone around the Houses of Parliament.

In the early months of the pandemic—specifically March, April, and early May 2020—we were not alone in wondering if forms of political protest would be altered by requirements to stay at home, and when outdoors, to keep socially distant. As political psychologists, we revisited Gene Sharp's ([1973] 2020) work from nearly half a century ago in which he

identified 198 methods of non-violent protest and wondered if this new pandemic context would initiate a reconfiguration of political protest. During this moment of our first 'taste' of the coronavirus pandemic, many of us spent hours, days, and weeks consuming news of and in a world which had effectively stopped. For those of us with access to digital media, we were provoked to think of this unusual moment as a critical turning point in the way the global economy 'did business'. We found reasons for hopefulness amid evidence for despair. Already in April 2020, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace issued a report in which they identified areas of pandemic-related activism (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/21/civil-society-and-coronavirus-dynamism-despite-disruption-pub-81592>, accessed on 1 January 2020), which included the categories of mutual aid initiatives, repurposing initiatives (filling gaps left by the state), and campaigns fighting disinformation. Rebecca Solnit (2020) echoed this message, with her statement that 'the impossible has already happened', showing that the crisis of the pandemic had already led to extending worker's rights and benefits, early release of prisoners, sheltering the homeless, and temporary citizenship for migrants and asylum seekers. Although she was writing in the first week of April, less than a month after the declaration of the world pandemic, she already identified this moment as a crossroad which could 'teach us about hope'. This was the same week that Arundhati Roy published her iconic article, framing the pandemic as 'a portal':

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

Despite or perhaps because of the disruption of the world as we knew it, somehow, there was a sense for some that we were in a moment of possibility, one which demanded a rethinking of our lives and how we as inhabitants of the world might sustainably co-exist. Looking back on those days now, it is hard for some of us to remember our desperate hope for hope, and our ability to find potential in even some of the darkest corners.

Cornel West asks 'how do you sustain a democratic hope in bleak times?' and then turns to describe resistance as 'a historical process with many moments of disruption' (West 2021, cited by Corinne Squire et al. 2022). If the first few months of the pandemic represented a moment of disrupted organized political resistance of a conventional kind, that came abruptly to an end on 25 May 2020 (several weeks after we received the invitation to guest edit this Special Issue). On that date, when US policeman Derek Chauvin murdered the unarmed George Floyd by blocking his airwaves for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, his cries of 'I can't breathe' were heard around the world. This was a critical turning point in the course of pandemic political protest, where, despite the risk of contagion, millions of people gathered in disparate locations around the world with the rallying cry that 'Black Lives Matter'. In the United States alone, polls estimate that, in the summer of 2020, between 15 and 26 million participated in demonstrations against racially motivated police brutality, rendering it the largest protest movement in US history (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>, accessed on 1 January 2020). However, the protests were not limited to the United States; indeed, they occurred in over 60 countries and on all seven continents, creating a global legacy of the Floyd murder, as the protest against racist brutality resonated with marginalized communities around the world.

Protests against racialized brutality continue to resound across the world, for example, the fatal beating in 2023 of 29-year-old black Tyre Nichols who received 71 impossible and contradictory commands within 13 minutes from a gang of Memphis police officers. Arguably, it is now possible for serving police officers to be charged with murder, a shift in parameters of resistance unseen before the pandemic.

In parallel, another global form of organized resistance began to take shape: that against state interference mandating vaccines and other measures to limit contagion of

the virus. According to the Global Protest Tracker, twenty-seven countries experienced protests relating to lockdown and/or other restrictions related to the coronavirus. When we originally conceived of this Special Issue on political resistance during the pandemic, we did not foresee that this would become such a significant source of protests for much of the world. That this has been so serves to remind us of the full spectrum of anti-government political protests.

The [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance \(International IDEA\)](#) (2021) published its Global State of Democracy Report, stating that, simply put, the previous two years ‘had not been good for democracy’. Indeed, three times as many countries are moving in the direction of authoritarianism as are moving towards democracy (<https://www.idea.int/gsod/>, accessed on 1 January 2020).

In the context of the pandemic, many democratic governments have adopted questionable restrictions to fundamental freedoms that, in many cases, mimic the practices of authoritarian regimes. Democratic backsliding, namely the sustained and deliberate process of subversion of basic democratic tenets by political actors and governments, is threatening to become a different kind of pandemic—it now afflicts very large and influential democracies that account for a quarter of the world’s population.

The scholarly accounting of narratives involves careful reflexive practices between the stories told to social scientists and the decisions made about how to contextualize those stories showing a duty of care ([Nesbitt-Larking 2022](#)). At any one time, certain political narratives come to the fore, and this is evident in the selection of narratives that the authors have chosen.

Some narratives become dominant in a specific context through processes of struggle over political meaning and selective appropriation of certain elements, while others are omitted because they are considered less appropriate. Experience-centered readings of narratives stress the significance of stories for expressing and building personal identity and agency. ([Andrews et al. 2015](#), p. 141)

It is worth noting that narratives of everyday resistance to state authoritarianism can lead people to progressive acts against police brutality but, equally, to reactionary acts against vaccine mandates following the same broader narrative of resistance, where ordinary citizens coalesce against the actions of the state. Agency and political resistance may well take the form of protest, but as Ahmed notes, it can also take the more subtle form of a non-reproductive labour, “the labour of trying to intervene in the reproduction of a problem” ([Ahmed 2021](#), p. 163). This allows political resistance to be about stopping something from continually being reproduced.

Contributions to This Special Issue—Complexity, Alternative Futures, and Business as Usual

This then brings us back to the theme of this Special Issue: what forms has political resistance taken during the coronavirus pandemic, and what impact has the global crisis had on political activism? The narratives of resistance, insights, and analysis brought together in the articles within this Special Issue can be understood along three broad themes; these relate to the complexity of political resistance; the possibilities of progressive alternative futures; and finally, the persistent reproduction of ‘business as usual’.

The Complexity of Political Resistance

First, the very complexity and opaqueness of the emerging patterns of political resistance lend themselves to the methodology of a narrative analysis. A narrative analysis is attuned to the diversity and real-time adaptation of people’s storied accounts of their present circumstances, along with evaluations of their pathways to the present and hopes for the future. In times of crisis and tension, when information is scarce and uncertainty prevails, narratives are in constant development, adaptation, and reformulation.

Such developments and the associated ontological insecurity are the bases of Kinnvall and Singh's exploration in this volume of the impact of disruptions and challenges caused by the global pandemic within the context of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. Kinnvall and Singh establish a contrast between the securitizing narratives of the Hindutva and the counter narratives of their opponents. Hindu nationalism essentializes the past and present and, in so doing, constructs an illusory pride, attachment, and desire. In a climate of uncertainty and doubt, ontological security secures subjectivity through the creation and recreation of securitizing desires and fantasies, characteristically associated with nation, religion, and gender. Interweaving anti-science, post-truth and anti-elite claims, Kinnvall and Singh argue that 'Hindu nationalists...invoked "ontological security" by appealing to the nostalgic greatness of ancient Indian science to cure modern diseases'.

The navigation of uncertainty and adaptation is further evident in Corinne Squire and Jamilson Bernardo De Lemos's account of the lives of people affected by HIV in the UK attempting to live through COVID-19 restrictions. As Squire and de Lemos say: 'They live with a condition whose medical, psychosocial and material complications escape unified description or theory and appear most intricately and fully in narratives'. People affected by HIV have double the chance of suffering from COVID-19 and experience a range of serious comorbidities. Squire and de Lemos's analysis sets out a range of tactics of resistance from calls for the restoration of economic rights, for support, and for food to the organization of alternative structures of social and psychological support.

Mastoureh Fathi's work on the complexity of home(s) and homing among migrants, such as the asylum seeker Touraj, illustrates how patterns of exile and migration have shaped and conditioned how a home is narrated in specific and detailed ways. The impact of COVID-19 has problematized the taken-for-granted treatment of homes as safe and comfortable spaces. Fathi expands upon this theme in her case study of Touraj's phenomenologies of home.

Alternative Futures within a Post-COVID-19 Polity

The pandemic has afforded many people the opportunity to step back from the everyday and to reflect on existing social and personal practices, to communicate with others on these matters, and to reformulate imaginatively how things might be done.

'Another world is better' has been a familiar progressive response to the disruptions and challenges of COVID-19. Jill Bradbury's article makes reference to what she calls 'tentative hopes that the global crisis might be a forceful impetus towards alternative forms of social life'. Balancing a realistic perspective on resilience and retreat with the possibilities for resistance, Bradbury's analyses are able to convey both that we are riding out the same storm and that we might be in different boats.

Kesi Mahendran, Anthony English, and Sue Nieland's (Forthcoming) study invites participants to rule the world using an interactive mapping tool; their dialogical analysis reveals that citizens express an ideal of a border-free world irrespective of whether they then chose to control or removed borders on the world. Yet, within this ideal, they show little understanding of what the reified term multilateralism means. When brought into dialogue with Antonio Guterres's United Nations speech 'multilateralism under fire' in the absence of a working definition of multilateralism, they anchor their response to Guterres within everyday narratives of cooperation and productivity. As the authors note, this lack of public understanding of multilateralism raises questions for global governance.

Ann Phoenix's analysis of both journalistic and academic writings on resistances to racism in the pandemic illustrates how the contradictions and conflicts unearthed by the pandemic have prompted new intertextual understandings and inspired new senses of hope in critical anti-racist interventions. These initiatives are achieved through the solidarities made possible through pandemic conditions. Quoting Meretoja, Phoenix says that anti-racist 'narratives enlarge the space of possibilities in which we can act, think, and re-imagine the world together with others and how they restrain or impoverish this space'. Against a backdrop of reactionary protests within Canada, McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking

consider the struggle for hegemony amongst competing progressive and reactionary narratives arising in response to the pandemic. Their analysis of the Canadian Periodicals Index database throughout the pandemic assesses the narratives of mainstream journalists and opinion leaders regarding expectations for the post-COVID-19 polity. Delineating between predictive and prescriptive narratives for the future, they foreground key themes of rationality and science, social equality, the role of the interventionist state, the local and the communitarian, and deep participation as predictive of a post-COVID-19 future in Canada. While the results are mixed, there is a marked preponderance of positive and progressive perspectives and very few reactionary or negative proposals or predictions.

The Reproduction of Business as Usual

Finally, after the virus settles and some version of normality becomes possible, a question arises: will life be a matter of business as usual? Will pre-existing regimes—authoritarian, populist, neoliberal, tyrannical, liberal democratic, and theocratic—continue to structure our existence? Will widespread inequality, poverty, discrimination, racism, gender-based violence, and other regime characteristics be challenged or changed?

This theme is investigated in Mark Davis's analysis of how both the UK and Australian states extend neoliberal governance in the individuated requirement that populations must now learn to 'live with the virus'. This approach reinforces pre-existing inequalities and employs the ideology of possessive individualism to conceal the ways in which the pandemic disproportionately affects those who have fewer resources and are oppressed.

Neoliberal ideology also underpins the article by Tereza Capelos, Ellen Nield, and Mikko Salmela on explanations of victimhood, frustration, and *ressentiment* among young Korean men. Capelos and her colleagues refer to the continuation of patterns of anti-globalization, misogyny, and neoliberal ideology that predate the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ressentiment* is an emotional construct in which there are experiences of victimhood, envy and injustice, a deep sense of destiny, and the feeling of powerlessness, transmuted into hatred, vindictiveness, and resentment. The crucial question, according to Capelos and her colleagues, is how enduring national narratives of meritocratic collectivism within Korea interplay and are resisted through a sense of new powerlessness related to recently arrived transnational narratives of competitive individualism.

Along with Bradbury, Phoenix, and Squire, Wendy Luttrell and her colleagues Mieasia Edwards and Jose Jiminez take the case of the focal point of the murder of George Floyd to examine how a strategic consensus can build amongst parents in schools. They use an innovative mixed-methods approach, which serves to bring out the importance of understanding intersectionalities in how the costs of COVID-19 are reinforced and amplified for racialized and stigmatized people. At the same time, by presenting narratives of those actually living through the pandemic, they also reveal opportunities, openings, and resistances. Through the exigencies and strictures of COVID-19, mediated through experiences of racism, African American New York parents have come to rethink their children's lives, and there have been many revelations. Luttrell and colleagues show how parents use narratives of resistance to form alliances to demand change.

Conclusions—Reconfiguring Political Protest

Together, the contributions to this Special Issue take different focal points and moments since 2020 to show how certain processes have become reconfigured by the pandemic. For example, the murder of George Floyd and the mainstreaming of the Black Lives Matter movement has built lasting alliances which resist the mechanisms of racial capitalism and its everyday expression in institutional racism and policy brutality. Equally, alongside opportunities for hope, we observe the extent to which the same mechanisms such as high-speed global communications and social movements, which create everyday political narratives to build consensus and progressive alliances, are also those which support reactionary anti-democratic alliance and unlikely coalitions. To some extent, elite narratives which

exhort us to learn ‘to live with viruses’ allow for business as usual. Equally anti-democratic actions since the pandemic began have reached new levels of political extremism.

Generalizing on the basis of the impact of something as complex and multifaceted as a global pandemic is a major challenge, and the range of potential developments and outcomes set out across the contributions to this volume are, therefore, appropriately diverse. The coexistence of other global forces and relations, including catastrophic climate change, deepening economic inequalities and inequities, the bellicosity of the Russian regime and Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, and the growing sabre rattling of Xi and the Chinese regime, render any attempt to measure the precise impact of the pandemic extremely difficult. It would be futile to attempt to draw inferential links and to identify any isolatable, independent causes and effects. Along with the contributors to this volume, perhaps it is best to assess the current and emerging circumstances as those of an era of contention, struggle, and conflict between aspirations toward a more progressive and inclusive global order and the grim determination of certain organizations and regimes to counter such developments. For every rise in right-wing and authoritarian populism, there are counter forces, as seen, for instance, in the recent electoral defeats in the United States, Brazil, Slovenia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Systemic racism across police forces in the USA and beyond continues to target black people. At the same time, movements such as Black Lives Matter have become global and captured the imaginations of a generation that is mobilizing against racism and racialization. The advancements made by progressive forces in gender politics have also become globalized, as is evidenced in the spread of #MeToo awareness and the recent cross-national outpouring of support for the women of Iran. At the same time, the reactionary set of legislation and judicial decisions in the USA, Poland, and Russia, including bans on women’s reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive literature, is evidence that gender justice continues to be in question. Early impressions during the pandemic were that front-line, precarious, and remote workers deserved better support and improved working conditions. There is some evidence that this has been translated into better wages, a rebirth of union organization and collective consciousness, and an enhanced social status for routine workers. However, many governments appear to have dropped their promises of economic and other forms of compensation for key workers, and the global rise in interest rates to control inflation recalls the early 1980s when ‘wrestling inflation to the ground’ led to lay-offs, increasing unemployment and a consequent weakening of the working class.

It may simply be too soon to come to any consensus on what difference the pandemic made to global patterns of resistance and protest. Perhaps this will become clearer in a generation or two from now as the narrative threads developed during the pandemic are woven into the fabric of our changing global order.

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