Chapter 44

Mummery

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General Introduction to the Topic and Relevance for Protest Cultures

Between 1839 and 1843, protesters wearing "disguise or simply blackened faces"[1] were attacking and, if possible, destroying the newly erected tollgates in Southern England. In the summer of 2007, several hundred protesters wearing hooded shirts and sunglasses and covering their faces with bandanas clashed violently with the police. The press identifies them as the "black bloc," and they dominate the news coverage of the protests of more than 60,000 using various, mostly nonviolent forms of protest, against the G8 meeting in Heiligendamm, Germany, for several days.

The two examples show that mummery has a long tradition as a repertoire of contention, and the prominence of Guy Fawkes masks in the recent worldwide occupy and Internet protests underline its ongoing relevance. Mummery comprises all practices to conceal one's identity—usually by (partially) covering the face.

Historical Aspects

Despite its long tradition, the actual history of mummery as a protest practice is not at all linear. Less than forty years ago, mummery at protests and demonstrations was very uncommon. Photos from the 1920s, 1930s, and up to the 1960s show no accounts of demonstrators or even rioters covering their faces. It is only in the early 1970s that mummery became (again)

an integral part of the repertoire of contention of many social movements around the globe.

How and why did this practice become part of social movements' action repertoire? What does this practice tell us about protests and protesters? In the following pages, I explore the practice of mummery, starting with a description of its various forms, and proceeding with a discussion of its meanings, its historical roots, and the authorities' reactions to this practice.

Newspaper articles and photos from the first half of the twentieth century give generally no accounts of protesters covering their faces with scarfs or other means—with one notable exception, the Ku Klux Klan. Their white pointed masks were an integral part of the movement's insignia. They served to conceal its members' identity and to intimidate their potential victims and opponents. But otherwise, protesters did generally not try to hide their identity. Demonstrations were what Tilly has called "WUNC displays," coordinated performances to show the movement's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment, where participants wore neat clothes or uniforms and showed their faces.[2] The revival of mummery as an integral element of political protests started only in the early 1970s in the aftermath of the student movement and with the advent of the new life-world-oriented radical leftist movements in Europe. In battles about squatted houses and international solidarity, protesters again employed various forms of mummery.[3] Motorcycle and industrial protection helmets worn for protection against police batons were combined with bandanas for protection against identification. The Palestinian headscarf (kaffiyeh) appeared as a tool for mummery, reflecting the admiration of the revolutionary movements in the Middle East, shared by many activists of that period. In the 1970s and 1980s, mummery became more and more common and developed into a routine practice at demonstrations and protests of the antinuclear, the squatters, and the *Autonomen* movement. The latter elevated the black ski mask or baclava to an iconic status that soon became the symbol of the movement.

Today, manifold forms of mummery are practiced. The preferred form of the black bloc is the hooded shirt combined with sunglasses and a bandana. Other forms are white masks, masks printed with faces of politicians, carnivalesque attire, and clown masks.

To understand why this protest practice arose in the 1970s, and why it has become a part of the current protest repertoire, essentially two aspects have to be considered—practical and performative reasons.

On the practical level, mummery is used when protesters are threatened with negative sanctions for their activities. If protesters are determined or at least willing to break the law, and if they do not want to be arrested for doing so, then mummery is a logical choice. On this level, the last decades

show a constant seesaw between protesters and authorities. The introduction of video surveillance equipment by the police was one reason why protesters started to cover their faces in the 1970s. The growing practice of mummery then has prompted the introduction of more sophisticated video surveillance and led to the introduction of antimummery laws in some countries. These laws that make mummery an offense have then in turn influenced the practice of mummery—not by preventing it but by changing its form. The current form of concealing one's face by wearing hooded shirts and sunglasses is one that is legally more ambiguous than helmets and ski masks, but not less efficient.

But practical reasons alone certainly do not explain the use and forms of mummery. Mummery is always also—and possibly often even in the first place—an expressive form. Showing or hiding one's face is not just a question of avoiding repression, but a symbolic political statement. As a collective practice during a demonstration, mummery is an expression of the willingness to disrespect the legal constraints and to use violence.[4] Paris has called this symbolic aspect of mummery "militancy without militancy"[5] because the promise of violence does not have to be realized immediately—even though at some time it has to, or would otherwise loose its power. The uniformed black bloc is the prime example of this practice.

Individually, the form of mummery can be read as an identity statement. The black ski mask stands for the "urban street fighter," the Palestinian scarf for the "freedom fighter." Other forms of mummery are more immediate political statements. Masks printed with the faces of politicians are used to protest against policies attributed to them. White masks worn by peace or antinuclear activists symbolize death associated with nuclear technology and weapons. More recently, protesters wearing clowns masks[6] and costumes are reviving the older traditions of carnival and mockery, which can be traced back to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.[7] During the carnival, "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions"[8] were suspended. Disguised with masks and presented in the form of ridicule and mockery, political attacks against the authorities were possible that would otherwise have had severe consequences for those who uttered them.[9] The black bloc type of mummery and the identical white or printed masks let the individual fade into the crowd. They are a uniform, an identity statement that puts the collective before the individual.

The carnival type mummery functions differently. Concealing one's true identity behind a mask allows the individual to slip into another role. It gives its bearer visibility and authority that he or she would otherwise not have. The use of superhero costumes by Superbarrio,[10] who was campaigning for the rights of Mexico's poor or the "precarious super heroes"[11] who

were redistributing stolen fancy food among Hamburg's poor are possibly the most visible examples of this use of mummery that guarantees media attention but nevertheless hides the activists' true identity.

Certainly the most iconic figure using mummery as a political tool is Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesman of the Mexican EZLN. The black ski mask that may originally guaranteed him some anonymity soon became—together with the pipe—his hallmark. The mask functioned in a curious way as at the same time inciting a cult around his persona and proclaiming that his individual identity would not matter at all.

As we see from this cursory review, the practice of mummery can serve to hide one's identity as well as create an identity. The mask conceals its bearer and marks her at the same time, and this dual character makes it an important ingredient of processes of collective identity in social movements.

Research Gaps and Open Questions

Despite its prominence in press reports about protests, the practice of mummery has so far been largely neglected in the scientific literature. The one exception is Rainer Paris's article on the psychology and symbolism of mummery where he discusses mummery as a method of self-empowerment, orchestration of heroism, and as a flight from identity.[12] Other studies of protest practices are either completely silent on the practice of mummery or mention it only fleetingly.

The gap between the importance of mummery in the public perception of protest and its negligence in the literature on social movements and protest leaves many questions unanswered. Further research might explore the relationship between prefigurative politics and mummery, between surveillance technology and mummery, or the transnational travel of various forms of mummery between movements.

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in *State Transformations in OECD Countries: Dimensions, Driving Forces and Trajectories*, ed. Heinz Rothgang und Steffen Schneider (with Henning Schmidtke and Steffen Schneider; Basingstoke 2015).

Notes

1. George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730–1848* (New York, 1964), 159.
2. Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004* (Boulder, CO, 2004), 4.
3. Nikolaus Jungwirth, *Demo. Eine Bildergeschichte des Protests in der Bundesrepublik* (Weinheim, 1986).
4. John Holloway and Vittorio Sergi, "Of Stones and Flowers—Dialogue between John Holloway and Vittorio Sergi," http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/heiligendamm-2007/of-stones-and-flowers/.
5. Rainer Paris, "Vermummung," *Leviathan* 1 (1991): 117–29.
6. For the mission statement of the "Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army," see http://www.clownarmy.org/about/about.html.
7. Marc Amann, ed., *go.stop.act! Die Kust des kreativen Straßenprotests,* 2nd ed. (Grafenau, 2007).
8. Mikhail M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), 10.
9. Herbert Carl and Doris Kessler, "Eine Revolution ohne Gaudi ist keine Revolution," in *Wilde Masken. Ein anderer Blick auf die Fasnacht,* ed. Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde (Tübingen, 1989), 181–97.
10. Berta Jottar, "Superbarrio Gomez for US President: Global Citizenship and the 'Politics of the Possible,'" *e-misférica, Performance and Politics in the Americas* 1, no. 1 (2004), http://hemi.nyu.edu/journal/1_1/sb_intro.html.
11. Luke Harding, "A Merry Band," *The Guardian,* 17 May 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/17/germany.lukeharding.
12. Paris, "Vermummung."

Recommended Reading

Amann, Marc. *go.stop.act! Die Kust des kreativen Straßenprotests.* 2nd ed. Grafenau, 2007. A rich source of descriptions and interpretations of current protest tactics, including the carnivalesque forms of mummery as clowns.

Holloway, John, and Vittorio Sergi. "Of Stones and Flowers—Dialogue between John Holloway and Vittorio Sergi." http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/heiligendamm-2007/of-stones-and-flowers/. A conversation between the sociologist John Holloway and the Black Bloc activist Vittorio Sergi in which Holloway questions the practice of mummery and violence during

the G8 protests in 2007 in Heiligendamm, whereas Sergi interprets the Black Bloc as an authentic, antagonistic, and prefigurative practice.

Paris, Rainer. "Vermummung." *Leviathan* 1 (1991): 117–29. A rare in-depth treatment of mummery in relation to protest and social movements in which Paris discusses mummery as a thick symbolic practice of identity construction, resulting in a double movement of self-stigmatization and self-elevation.