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Protest in Berlin. A Semiotic Reading[1]

Massimo Leone (Turin)[2]

The article reports on the ethno-semiotic analysis of a protest demonstration in Berlin. After pointing out the main foci of the semiotic study of protest, and surveying the literature on the German context, the article concentrates on a reading of the the "Al-Quds-Tag", the German translation of "Rūz-e dschehānī-ye Ghods" [litt.: 'international Jerusalem day'], an Iranian national holiday instituted on August 7, 1979 by the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, upon a suggestion of Ebrahim Yazdi, the first foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is celebrated every year the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan. The holiday invites Muslims worldwide to unite in solidarity against Israel and in support of Palestinians. Since its inception, the holiday has spurred tensions globally, and brought about demonstrations that have often degenerated into overt and violent conflicts. The analysis specifically explores the ways in which present-day phenomena of local protest intersect global phenomena trends, such as those related to war scenes around the world, or the protection of the environment from energetic overexploitation. It concludes that, in Germany as well as in other Western European countries, globalization and the explosion of social networks contribute to increasingly separate local and global protests, these two dimensions of social confrontation being carried on by different people, with different signs, and different agendas.

1. Introduction

The present article exposes the preliminary results of a research project carried on in Berlin from August 4, 2014 until September 4, 2014. The project is part of a larger research agenda, aimed at investigating the 'cultures of protest' in Europe. The general project objectives are: 1) Singling out the main geographical places, social contexts, and rhythms of protest in present-day Europe; 2) analyzing through semiotics the signs, texts, and languages that are produced as a consequence of these protests, at the levels of protesters, institutions, and media; 3) investigating whether such signs compose a particular ‘language of protest’, which would be expression of a corresponding ‘culture of protest’; 4) assessing whether such languages establish an effective relation between citizenry, stake-holders of the protest-context, and institutions; 5) formulating hypotheses on how communication between protesters, media, and institution could be improved; 6) underlining elements and conditions that encourage the radicalization of protest into violence or other kinds of irrational behavior.

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[1] A deep sentiment of gratitude must go to the DAAD, the University of Potsdam, and Prof. Dr. Eva Kimminich, for granting to the present researcher the opportunity of spending a month of investigation in Germany. Such research sojourn represents the first step in what is hoped to be a long and fruitful cooperation with Prof. Kimminich, the University of Potsdam, the DAAD, and the German academic community as a whole. The research stay started on August 4, 2014 and ended on September 4, 2014.

[2] DAAD Fellow at the Institut für Romanistik (Prof. Eva Kimminich), Universität Potsdam, August 2014.

Research in Berlin aimed at pursuing these objectives in relation to the German context. It also had two further, specific goals: 7) familiarizing the researcher with investigation being currently carried on in Germany on the topic of protest, both from semiotic and non-semiotic points of view; 8) adopting Berlin as privileged platform of observation on four phenomena, increasingly associated with protest: 8.1) interaction of different, often radical antagonistic discourses of protest in multicultural cities; 8.2) transformation of protest into aesthetic occasion, spectacle, or even entertainment; 8.3) development of meta-protest attitudes and movements, that is, protests about protests; 8.4) synergies and contradictions in the ‘protest agendas’ of Germany, Europe, and the rest of the world.

August might not seem the best month of the year in order to carry on research on protest, given the slowing down of political activities that usually characterizes this month in the northern hemisphere. However, that was not the case during the research stay in Berlin, for two reasons: 1) as it will be pointed out, protest demonstrations are organized in the German capital city on a regular basis, August not being an exception; 2) the research stay began in the aftermath of the *al-Quds* protest demonstration that took place in Berlin on July 25, 2014. In the following days, reactions to such demonstration attracted the attention of politicians, media, and the public opinion in Germany for at least two weeks, before the German public focus moved toward the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine and Iraq/Syria.

Given the little time at the researcher’s disposal, two parallel activities have been carried on: systematic survey of recent literature concerning protests in Germany and/or by German scholars; analysis of some particularly significant case studies, with keen attention to the debate ensuing the 2014 al-Quds demonstration.

2. Bibliographic survey

Literature on protest in general, and on protest in Germany in particular, is extensive. Among the classic studies on the topic, Ruth (2001) provides a good introduction, later expanded in the handbook Ruth and Ruth (2008).[3] Luhmann (1996) offers an influential sociological framework for the reading of contemporary protest cultures, to be compared with the one proposed by Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt (eds, 1999). Busch, Jeskow, and Stutz (2010) focus on the economic roots of protest. Schmidtchen (1992) inquires on the psychological, ethical, and moral background of protest among youths in Germany. Ebbinghaus, Henninger, and van der Linden (2009) question the heritage of 1968 protest movements in the German context. Vigil (2011) reads protest in Germany in relation to the global context. Leggewie (2001) is essential in order to understand the current German debate on “Wutbürger” *versus* “Mutbürger”.

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[3] See also the other publications of the research group “Civil Society, Citizenship, and Political Mobilization in Europe”, led by Prof. Dr. Dieter Gosewinkel and Prof. Dr. Dieter Rucht at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung until June 30, 2011: http://www.wzb.eu/de/forschung/beendete-forschungsprogramme/zivilgesellschaft-und-politische-mobilisierung/publikationen.

Nevertheless, attention toward the communicative dimension of protest phenomena is limited. Lahusen (1996) concentrates on the rhetoric of protest and Kleiner (2005) specifically deals with the concept of “semiotic resistance”. Also, Rucht, van de Donk, Loader, and Nixon (eds, 2004) expound on the interplay between protest and new media, whereas Rucht and Teune (eds, 2008) interpret the contamination of protest and entertainment.

The one-month research stay in Berlin allowed the researcher to familiarize himself with the most recent bibliography on protest in Germany.

The historical study of protest continues to attract attention in Germany, mainly in relation to 1968 (with re-editions of the numerous books published on the subject in 2008 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary; see, for instance, Siegfried 2013). Weber (2013) reconstructs protest movements in Baden-Württemberg in the 1970s and in the 1980s; Kempe (2014) concentrates on the Bodensee-Region; Foltin (2013) on the Austrian context.

As regards socio-cultural studies bearing on the present time, Balint, Lämmle, and Dingeldein (2014) analyze semantic and social differences between protest [*Protest*], indignation [*Empörung*], and resistance [*Widerstand*], comprising them all in the semantic field of revolt [*Auflehnung*].

The motivations of protest are a theme that continues to attract the attention of scholars, for instance Marg and Walter (2013) and Schönherr-Mann (2013).[4] The relation between cities and protest movements is also central in the German bibliography of protest. Wetzel (2012) investigates the synergy between protest movements and their urban setting/environment; on the same topic, see also the more recent Gestring, Ruhne, and Wehrheim (2014); Jäger and Seibert (2012) deal with the impact of squares occupation on the current conception of democracy.

Several studies are concerned with the relation between immigrant communities and protest in Germany. Bukow *et al.* (2013) provides an overview. Given the statistic and socio-cultural relevance of Turkish communities in German cities, it is no wonder that many of these studies deal with the echo of Taksim Gesi Park protests in Germany: Guttstadt (2014), Içpınar and Taşdemir (2014), and Yücel (2014). Other contributions concentrate on different geopolitical areas, for instance the Arab world (Horvat 2013); Brazil (Dilger, Fatheuer, Russau, and Thimmel 2014), Greece (Douzinas 2014), or Ukraine (Andruchovyč 2014; Geissbühler and Umland 2014). As regards specific case studies, Brettschneider and Schuster (2013) provide a close reading of Stuttgart 21. Engelhardt (2013) bears on the same protest movement, but from an ideological more than from a scholarly perspective.

Works on protest and communication continue to be a minority: Leister (2013) reflects on the ambiguous role of new media in present-day protest phenomena: on the one hand, new media enable protesters to form cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic communities; on the other hand, they often turn into devices of surveillance for the control and even the manipulation of protest movements.[5]

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[4] See also the “Neue Studien zu Protesten” (Arbeitsgruppe des Göttinger Instituts für Demokratieforschung, http://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/aktuelles/neue-studien-zu-protesten).

As regards the 'aesthetic' dimension of protest, Kessler (2013) adds to the debate on "Wut" *versus* "Mut", focusing on the 'aesthetic' and even 'artistic' resources of protest.

3. Ethno-semiotics of protest in Berlin: some trends

Protest is a frequently recurring social event in Western Europe. Germany is no exception. In democratic societies, a certain amount of social tension is physiological, and protest is the communicative outcome of it. In certain geographical and historical contexts, though, national and local communities seem to be more inclined to produce protest communication than in others. That is certainly the case of Berlin in relation to Germany. Although one of the main tension points of the German socio-political landscape currently is Stuttgart, and the contested project of expanding the local railway station, no German city competes with Berlin as regards the amount and the significance of protest events. They can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, protests that take place in Berlin and concern Berlin, such as protest against the construction of the new Brandenburg airport. On the other hand, protests that, while occurring in Berlin, involve a political scope whose arch embraces Germany as a whole, or Europe as a whole, or even the World as a whole. That is the case of anti-Israel demonstrations in Berlin, for instance. In both cases, the capital city is elected as the primary scene of protest movements and events in Germany, for in Berlin they immediately turn into media objects, with aggrandizing effects on the social movements themselves. In no other city of Germany, indeed, protest can attract so prompt and systematic attention as in Berlin.

The recurrence of protest in Berlin is part and parcel of the social definition of the city to such an extent that it gives rise to a sort of professionalization. Agencies offer services for the organization of protests and their communication strategies. Numerous websites, many of them unrelated to any particular ideological stand, maintain and update lists of demonstrations and other protest events taking place in Berlin. On a Sunday in August, for instance, Berlin can be the seat of four or five major demonstrations, occurring in different areas of the city with various agendas. Two consequences derive from the concentration of protest in Berlin.

On the one hand, protest in Berlin turns into a sort of recurring show: the playful graphics by which protest websites list demonstrations in the city points to the quasi-ludic nature these social events can take on, both for protesters and for spectators of protest. Participating in a demonstration is proposed to citizens, visitors, and even tourists as one of the options for spending time in Berlin over a sunny summer Sunday.

On the other hand, though, multiplication of protests and their turning into serial events inevitably entails a dimension of routine. The number and frequency of demonstrations in Berlin are such that they impact on the language itself of protests. In every community, protest works insofar as it breaks the communicative standards that regulate the production and exchange of signs. A demonstration can work as protest for it dramatically modifies the urban communicative landscape, for instance by sharply increasing the density of people in a certain urban area, as well as by substantially decreasing the heterogeneity of signs in it: during a demonstration, people must walk with similar rhythm, chant similar slogans, wear similar colors, hold similar banners, etc., thus creating a semiotic uniformity that normally is not to be perceived in the city, and whose exceptionality allows protesters to stand out and make their message and ideology conspicuous. However, in a city where protests occur every Sunday for the most different reasons, demonstrations can lose their communicative strength by blending into routines.

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[5] On social networks and protests see also Sonntag (2013).

As a consequence, demonstrations in Berlin must compete with each other in order to attract the attention of citizens and media. They mostly do so through the following strategies:

1) Impressing by the number of participants: this is the most difficult communicative strategy, since it is not a strategy but rather the result of it. Protests that attract thousands of participants already *are* part of the public agenda, and need the attention of citizens and media only to attest their size and relevance. In other words, if a demonstration in Berlin is big enough to attract public and media attention, it means that it does not require particular strategies to attract more attention. Demonstrations of this kind, indeed, grow almost spontaneously and effortlessly.
2) Impressing by the novelty of communicative means: this protest strategy is difficult too, since it requires innovation and, hence, creativity. But being creative in protests in a city like Berlin – where people constantly compete on the novelty of demonstrations – is incredibly hard. It is not rare, indeed, that entire demonstrations in Berlin take place without presenting observers with any new slogan, banner, or protest communicative strategy. To this regard, it is important to underline that creativity in protests can attain different degrees: on the lower level, a minimal degree of creativity is required in order to come up with a new slogan in a chant or on a banner; on the higher level, a maximal degree of creativity is necessary to completely revolutionize the framework of protest itself, thus bringing about change of communicative paradigm as well as political breakthrough. An important element to take into account when measuring the level of creativity in protests is technology: development of new communicative technology, such as social networks, means opening up of new spaces for creativity in the language of protest.
3) The easiest way to attract attention in protest events is violence. That is the case because the public opinion usually is reactive to violence, and media are ready to feed the audience with it. The relation between protest, violence, and communication is complicated, but some key features of it must be underlined. On the one side, violence provides demonstrations with the embodiment of the confrontation between different agencies. Protest always is about tension and confrontation between or among agencies. Yet, in non-violent demonstrations such tension is sublimated into semiotic simulacra of various kinds: agencies fight through words, images, gestures, or other signs, instead of fighting directly. When violence occurs in protest, communication ends, but that is exactly the communicative force of violence: it embodies the confrontation of agencies directly and straightforwardly, without the mediation of any semiosis. In a semiotic theoretical

framework, it can be argued that violence in protest functions like a sort of *embrayage*: it divests the narrative structure that underpins protest of any symbolical coat, and pushes to the foreground fight as fight, conflict as conflict, desire as desire. Audiences are such an easy prey of the spectacle of violence because violence is, sadly, not only direct, but also simple and easy to understand. When two individuals or groups fight, no interpretive skills are required in order to comprehend who stays against whom for what. On the other side, not even violence escapes the communicative dynamic through which protest becomes routine and loses its capacity of attracting the attention of audience and media. A certain level of physical confrontation, for instance, is de facto expected in every demonstration in the West. One knows that, at a certain stage, the most extreme wings of a certain ideology will provoke their competitors, or the police, and a clash will ensue. Clash too, then, falls into the communicative routine of protest. Hence, for a protest to attract attention through violence, violence itself is not sufficient any longer. It must be qualified either in quantitative or qualitative terms, for instance through unusual devastation, the presence of victims, or other features that tragically escape routine.

4. The 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin: a case study

During the one-month research in Berlin, particular attention was devoted to the communicative strategies that protest in Germany adopts in order to attract and hold the attention of citizens and media. Ethno-semiotics of protest in Germany, with particular focus on Berlin, concentrated on three different levels:

1) Monitoring the organization and enactment of demonstrations and other protest events in Berlin during August 2014;
2) Participating in these events as an external observer, in order to single out trends, commonalities, and singularities among them; adopting an ethno-semiotic framework, the following features of protest demonstrations have been observed and analyzed: a) place and time of the event; b) number of participants; c) communication through flyers, media, and social networks preceding, accompanying, and following the event; d) relation to streets, squares, and other urban places; e) movements of individuals and collectivities; f) display of flags, banners, and other visual devices; g) reproduction of sounds, including chants and slogans; h) representation of the event in the main German media.

However, the cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic field of protest in Germany during August 2014 was completely dominated, especially in the first two weeks of the month, by the aftermaths of the July 25, 2014 “al-Quds-Tag” demonstration. Such protest event is comparable to a ‘rogue wave’, whose force and impact overshadowed that of all other demonstrations in Berlin in the following weeks.

“Al-Quds-Tag” is the German translation of “Rūz-e dschehānī-ye Ghods” [litt.: ‘international Jerusalem day’], an Iranian national holiday instituted on August 7, 1979 by the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, upon a suggestion of Ebrahim Yazdi, the first foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is celebrated every year the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan. The holiday invites Muslims worldwide to unite in solidarity against Israel and in support of Palestinians. Since its inception, the holiday has spurred tensions globally, and brought about demonstrations that have often degenerated into overt and violent conflicts. In July 2014, al-Quds was celebrated with intense participation in many areas of the world, also as a consequence of the heated international geopolitical tension caused by the renewed armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, starting from July 8, 2014.

As regards Germany, anti-Israel demonstrations had already taken place in various German cities in the period going between the beginning of the conflict in Gaza and al-Quds. On the occasion of these demonstrations, protesters had adopted several anti-Israel slogans and banners that clearly bore anti-Semitic messages and connotations.

On July 25, 2014, about 1,200 people gathered in Adenauerplatz in Berlin and marched to Wittenbergplatz through Kurfürstendamm. A counter-demonstration involving about 600 pro-Israel participants took place simultaneously. Members of the two factions were separated by the German police, whose presence was massive: around 1,000 agents, that is, almost an agent every two protesters.

As it was witnessed by observers and commentators and reported by journalists and the police, as well as recorded on video, the protest discourse adopted by al-Quds participants did not simply consist in a legitimate critique of the Israeli government, but adopted signs, texts, and messages clearly belonging to Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. Many of the participants, especially in the front lines, would proceed through the demonstration yelling “Sieg Hail” [“Hail Victory”], one of the typical Nazi salutation formulae. Slogans uttered by anti-Israel protesters during the demonstration included several clearly anti-Semitic messages, such as “Kindermörder Israel” [“Israel killer of children”] (chanted while raising in the air puppets stained with red varnish), “Frauenmörder Israel” [“Israel killer of women”], “Zionisten ins Gas” [“Zionists in gas”], “Israel, Israel feiges Schwein, komm heraus und kämpf allein!” [“Israel, Israel, coward pig, come out and fight alone”], and “Israel vergasen”, “let’s gas Israel”. Most anti-Israel protesters were German citizens of Palestinian origin; however, also representatives of the anti-Zionist wing of the German political party *Die Linke*, as well as – at the opposite end of the political spectrum –, members of the NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) were active in the crowd of protesters.

Although the present researcher did not attend and observe this demonstration personally, during the one-month research in Berlin video and media coverage of the 2014 al-Quds protest in Berlin was systematically and exhaustively analyzed, reaching the following conclusions about the main semiotic dynamics of the event.

First of all, it has to be noticed that al-Quds demonstrations took place in the same day throughout the world, and especially in Arab and/or Muslim countries and communities. However, none of these protests gained the same attention, media coverage and, as a consequence, advertising as al-Quds in Berlin.

Reasons for such media success are multiple: the demonstration saw the participation of more people than most previous al-Quds demonstrations in Berlin. Records show an increasing number of participants over the last years: around 500 in 2010, around 600 in 2011, around 1100 in 2012, but only about 800 in 2013. However, other 2014 al-Quds demonstrations around the world showed more impressive figures of participants than the one in Berlin. The main reason for which the al-Quds demonstration in Berlin attracted so much public and media attention was, rather, the historical, political, and social context in which the demonstration took place. There is no doubt that signs adopted by anti-Israeli protesters during the demonstration were not only against the Israeli government but also against Israel and the Jews; i. e., that they were anti-Semitic. When participants were accusing Israel of being "a killer of children", reference was not only at the unfortunate and condemnable death of children during the Israeli bombardments of Gaza during Operation Protective Edge, but also to the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as killers of children, created by Christians in the Middle Ages and reproduced by Christians, Muslims, and people of other or no confession over the centuries until the present time.

Yet, anti-Semitic accusations of this type have been characterizing al-Quds demonstrations since the beginning of this "festivity". In Berlin, nevertheless, the poisonous intertwining of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic signs, texts, and discourse reached a different level, since it occurred by spontaneous but systematic resort to signs, texts, and fragments of texts strictly related to the *imaginaire* of Nazi and neo-Nazi Germany. Two elements immediately connected the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin with such *imaginaire*: place, and language. Protesters were yelling anti-Semitic slogans in the same place, and with the same language, that had seen the triumph of Hitler's Nazism over Europe. However, to many commentators these slogans sounded even more disquieting than those that, unfortunately, recurrently arise in the German and Austrian semiosphere in connection with neo-Nazi movements and phenomena. There were, indeed, among protesters, some neo-Nazi autochthonous Germans, who took the opportunity of expressing their anti-Semitic ideology in public and with important media coverage. However, most participants were not originally from Germany but from Palestine and other predominantly Arab and/or Muslim countries; furthermore, German was not their mother tongue. That was one of the most disquieting elements of the demonstration: anti-Semitism was staged in the German capital city, in German, and with reference to German Nazi signs and texts, but by people whose geographic and cultural origin was elsewhere. Paradoxically, indeed, those predominantly Arab and/or Muslim participants who were adopting the German neo-Nazi discourse during the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin were, exactly in their quality of Arabs, Muslims, or simply migrants or second or even third or fourth generation migrants, one of the usual targets of racism by autochthonous German neo-Nazis. On this occasion, though, they uncannily turned into their anti-Semitic allies.

Every protest is a *mise en scène*, but the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin had something grotesque about it. It is true: *every* racist and anti-Semitic demonstration is grotesque, since it inevitably distorts the image and meaning of humanity. However, this demonstration was grotesque also from another point of view. It was precisely this extra grotesque element that, to this researcher's mind, ignited the massive public and media attention that the demonstration attracted. It might be argued that German citizens were so shocked by this particular protest because they saw in its participants *a distorted representation of themselves*. On the one hand, participants were aping what Germans had been in their Nazi past: worshippers of an ideology that led to the annihilation of European Jews; on the other hand, protesters were also aping German neo-Nazism, with the extra-grotesque element that they were also potential victims of it. As a consequence, present-day Germans saw in these protesters a distorted image of their tragic past, but also a distorted representation of their present.

Cultural belonging is a problem in Germany as it is in most European countries that are destination of important migration movements from other European countries or from the rest of the world. In Germany as well as in other European countries, debate about the relation of migrants and/or their children with the local language, culture, and religion is ongoing and often heated. In Germany, in particular, several voices have recently complained, also at the highest institutional level, about the lack of linguistic and cultural integration that certain migrant communities would display. Some commentators blame this lack on the insufficient efforts of migrants, some others on the deficient initiatives of both autochthonous Germans and their institutions, some others on both, in various measures. In this context, anti-Semitic participants in the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin were disquieting to most German citizens and commentators for they presented them with a tragic representation of the relation between Germany and its migrants: many of these participants showed features that were not those typical of the German social and cultural landscape; there were veiled women among them, for instance, or heavily bearded men. Many of these protesters, moreover, would mostly speak to each other not in German but in their native languages, and feature heavy accents when uttering German words. On the one hand, then, these protesters represented, to German eyes, those migrants that Germany does not succeed to integrate and to bestow with a feeling of belonging. On the other hand, those protesters worryingly proved that what they had absorbed from German society and culture was its anti-Semitism, that is, the signs, texts, and codes through which present migrants coat their anti-Israel discourse.

In other words, these participants and their language of protest were so shockingly unacceptable because they were living evidence that these migrants and/or descendants of migrants had absorbed from Germany exactly that which Germany had sought and still seeks to expel from its cultural DNA: anti-Semitism. In adopting Nazi discourse, al-Quds protesters proved to be completely alien to that which, on the opposite, constitutes the core of the German contemporary identity: a feeling of guilt toward the atrocities perpetrated during the Nazi period.

There was therefore something tragically ironic in the Nazi slogans of the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin; anti-Israel migrants were proclaiming, on the one hand, their capacity to absorb and handle the anti-Semitic discourse of Nazi Germany; on the other hand, they were affirming, by the same discourse, their immunity to the rhetoric of guilt that permeates public education in Germany. From a certain point of view, protesters were affirming their *entitlement* to anti-Semitism. There is no wonder, then, that neo-Nazi activists saw in this protest an occasion to publicly endorse the same entitlement for German autochthonous citizens too, and express the same urge to liberate them from the sense of guilt that underpins present-day German culture.

It is because of this cultural short-circuit that attention and reactions to the demonstration were so prompt and heated. They showed several interpretive lines, but most of them featured, to an external observer like the present researcher, an irrational, almost compulsive aspect. Most commentators indeed forgot about analytically dissecting the event and its context, and launched anathemas about the specter of anti-Semitism returning to Germany. To many German eyes, indeed, those protesters looked like a ghost coming from the past, to be removed as quickly as possible.

What is a stake, however, and what only some commentators pointed out, is much deeper than the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East or the resurgence of anti-Semitism among migrant communities in Germany. What is a stake is, rather, the regeneration and permanence of German collective memory, whose physiognomy is challenged in two ways: by the passing of generations (time), and by migration (space). Both phenomena, indeed, lead toward a society in which citizens have no longer any personal link with the tragedy of the Shoah, either because they are more than two generations away from it, or because they come from different historical and cultural backgrounds. The main question that public institutions face in Germany nowadays is therefore the following: how is it possible to perpetuate the post-IIWW German collective memory, as well as the healthy sense of guilt that stems from it, in people that come from a different time, or from a different space? With the further complication that the historical vulgate that many anti-Israel Arabs and/or Muslims around the world are taught is that there is a *direct* link between the Shoah and the creation of the State of Israel, with all the consequences that it has entailed for the population of Palestine. Why should therefore Palestinian descendants in Berlin feel abhorred and guilty about a page of German history in which they were not personally involved, and in which they actually see their ancestors being involved as victims? The feeling of entitlement to a neo-Nazi discourse that several Berlin al-Quds protesters displayed stemmed from this historical and cultural alienation.

But Germany also faces another challenge, which is strictly related to the first one. Several commentators, especially among those who feared a resurgence of anti-Semitism in Germany, complained that the German police, while extremely apt at avoiding violent confrontations between anti- and pro-Israel factions during the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin, was not swift enough in intervening against language and signs that would be clearly in contrast with anti-Nazi provisions in the German Constitution.

Both challenges involve a semiotic dimension and are actually two faces of the same question: on the one side, how to perpetuate a collective memory that has proved vital for the equilibrium of the German society and its relations with the world; on the other side, how to regulate the circulation of signs in the German landscape of protest. Protest is certainly essential to any democratic society; yet, in order for a democratic society to remain such, language and signs of protest must be regulated so that they do not turn into their opposite. Indeed, protesting against something or someone is exactly the opposite as suppressing that something or someone. When protesting against someone, the protester believes that that someone *can be convinced* to change her or his mind through appropriate communication; when that someone is suppressed, on the contrary, there is no reason to protest anymore. In the same way, protesting against the politics of the government of Israel is certainly a right in every democracy; however, protesting against Israel as such, or against Jews as such is not protest anymore but its opposite; it is incitement to suppress the addressee and, therefore, the rationale of protest.

In political and legal debates about how to regulate protest in a democracy the following consideration should therefore always be taken into account: while signs that seek to change the mind of the protest’s addressee should always be allowed, signs that seek to suppress the body, and therefore the mind, of the protest's addressee should never be permitted. That is the difference between protesting against a political decision of the government of Israel and protesting against the Jews: only the former is protest, while the second is a violent travesty of protest.

Against the confusion of these two dimensions, an exercise of semiotic discrimination should be constantly carried on: every sign, text, and code of protest should be analyzed in order to ascertain its semantic connotations, its syntactic construction, and especially its pragmatic entailments: does it refer to a culture of violence? Is it constructed in a way to self-deny its nature of protest message? Most importantly: does it have among its pragmatic consequences the paradoxical suppression of the addressee? For instance: is burning a flag a legitimate sign of protest? From the point of view proposed here, it is not, since it symbolically conveys the intention of suppressing the addressee of protest, and therefore protest itself, transmogrifying it into sheer violence.

Outlawing and sanctioning in the public arena signs for which the analysis would answer affirmatively is tantamount to protecting protest in a society, not to thwarting it.

5. Conclusions: protest *impasses* in the German social landscape

The question remains of understanding how protest phenomena like the 2014 al-Quds demonstration in Berlin relate with the other foci of the present-day German discourse of protest. Such question is too wide to be properly addressed in a short report, but some elements of it must be, nevertheless, underlined. On the one hand, protest in Germany shows the same trends characterizing protest in other Western European countries. Progressive and inexorable disintegration of grand ideologies after the end of the Cold War, as well as systemic financial and economic crisis have brought about a cultural, social, and political climate of deep mistrust toward traditional political institutions and forms of representation. It might be actually argued that the idea itself of representation is increasingly mistrusted and discarded: citizens do not want to vote for political representatives anymore; they want to vote for political actions. Given this attitude, large-scale political agencies are not possible any longer; they are not viable at the national level, let alone at the European or at the international level. The more a political agency is seen as distant, the more it is mistrusted or even despised. People tend to concentrate on local issues, and delegate national, European, or global issues to the new collective agency of social networks, which is nevertheless more mythically than rationally construed. In this context, no public enterprise of national interest but with local externalities (such as the construction of a new railway station in Stuttgart or a new airport in Berlin) can be successfully carried on without generating paralyzing protests and confrontations.

These untreatable phenomena of local protest intersect global phenomena trends, such as those related to war scenes around the world, or the protection of the environment from energetic overexploitation. Yet, one is left with the impression, in Germany as well as in other Western European countries, that globalization and the explosion of social networks contribute to increasingly separate local and global protests, these two dimensions of social confrontation being carried on by different people, with different signs, and different agendas. Given the lack of convincing ideological frameworks and the still stammering political voice of the social networks, both local and global protests seem to be easy prey, in Germany as well as elsewhere, of rampant populism, the only political force that is currently able to connect local and global communities, often through the creation of conspiracy theories and imaginary culprits.

Coldly analyzing the tangle of voices that agitates the present-day discourse of protest might prove an essential task for contemporary semiotics, and one of its most important contributions to the construction of a rational public discourse.

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