Struggles in search of a ground: protests after lockdown

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STRUGGLES IN SEARCH OF A GROUND

Protests after lockdown

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The worldwide impact of the COVID-19 virus and lockdown created an event at once seemingly global—an apparently shared experience—and relentlessly local, as manifested in divergent responses at national and city levels. While claims that the world changed forever after COVID-19 seem to be a bit of a stretch (given the long histories and dispersed geographies of plagues, epidemics, and pandemics), for London, the pandemic created a sense of the surreal time of lockdown and, afterward, a moment of re-adjustment to "normality" (as the anticipated "new normal" turned out to be surprisingly like the "old normal"). Lockdown itself was politically paradoxical: it was often the left that called for longer, more intensely policed, restrictions on the public, while the right called for freedom from state intervention and heavy-handed policing. Either way, "normal" politics was forced online or into private spaces. But neither state lockdowns nor the violence of the virus arrested people's desire to protest, in public, together.

Shortly after the first pandemic lockdown ended in late May 2020, *Black Lives Matter* protests, following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, took place outside the US Embassy in London and, a couple of days later, in Peckham, South London. Momentum built into mass protests a few days later in Trafalgar Square and in Hyde Park. As if in a dark mirror, these protests against the lethal brutality of policing were reflected in the increasingly severe enforcement of lockdowns in late 2020 and early 2021 in Britain, which were justified by the need to ensure public health and safety. In particular, the enforcement of "social distancing," designed to regulate the proximity of bodies to prevent the spread of the disease, had direct consequences for the (non)expression of public protest. This time, perhaps inevitably, also saw the highly uneven, sometimes chaotic, nature of enforcement as when the London Metropolitan police failed to ensure public health and safety: the vigil to pay tribute to murdered Sarah Everard in March 2021 organized by *Reclaim These Streets* went badly wrong when the police overreacted to a gathering of more than 400 women. Arguably, the police failed to understand the meaning of both social and distance.

In the liminal times of lockdown/post-lockdown/re-lockdown, the pandemic emergency measures themselves caused numerous protests—the most prominent being against the vaccination as well as against the restriction of freedoms under lockdown under the extra powers given to the police to enforce lockdown and social distancing. Yet, these "anti-vax" protests were themselves

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locked down (until the end of lockdown). On 26 June 2021, less than two weeks after then Prime Minster Boris Johnson confirmed that restrictions on public gatherings would be eased, a bewildering range of groups took the opportunity to take to the streets. Thousands marched through London. In Westminster, Lambeth, and Southwark people protested the lockdowns, while others demonstrated against climate change. The streets around Downing Street were packed with people carrying uncomplimentary messages for the Prime Minister. Tennis balls were hurled at the Houses of Parliament. Campaigners for the NHS, Palestine, and against austerity jostled up against one another. Protestors on a diversity of marches flowed through Regent Street. In a strange yet revealing coincidence, Anti-Lockdown protestors literally rubbed up against "Kill the Bill" marchers, who were campaigning against the government's plans to curtail the right to demonstrate or take direct action.

In this short visual essay[1], based on our ongoing observations as long-standing Londoners, we are interested in these intersections between people and places of protest. Consequently, our central question explores the ways that London is, or more acutely not, a site of intersecting struggles and political actions, where protests are more in search of a ground for the political than seeking to defend, occupy, or take ground, that somehow has already been constituted as political or as a site of political action. That is, conceptually, we are interested in interrogating the *non-intersectionality* of the city and political expression, to better see how political actions assume, make, or seek a ground in the city. We see intersectionality—whether as geography or matrix of domination, whether as a weapon of political awareness or resistance—as having to be produced. Consequently, we believe that intersectionality itself cannot be presumed or taken for granted: ontologically, socially, or politically.

Using the example of two protests, one against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, another in Finsbury Park, North London, that is less easy to define as "a" protest, we pose a question about what it means to think of the city as a site of protest in search of a ground for struggle. Broadly, in our two examples, two different kinds of "ground" are in evidence. Our first instance occurs in the grey zone that is not quite pandemic or post-pandemic time, Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022 (see Kuptsova in this volume), prompting protests in cities across Europe. In some ways, protests against the invasion are "classic": there is a clear ground (London, Trafalgar Square) and a clear target for the protests (Putin, Russia), drawing a mass crowd. Yet, the ground becomes less obvious and secure when viewed from the different perspectives of the city and the nation. Indeed, the struggle itself begins to disappear and re-appear on other, trickier grounds. In contrast, our second instance was, in scale, a tiny protest that took place in Finsbury Park on 30 August 2021, during a brief respite from the COVID-19 lockdown. Our interest in this protest is that the park was used as a gathering point for four distinct protest groups, distinct yet also overlapping. The protest was noisy, yet quiet. Each group represented a single issue, yet also with concerns that could (perhaps, should) intersect, albeit in partial and asymmetrical ways, with the others. Puzzling, despite an apparently shared ground and shared struggle, they also appear, in moments, indifferent to one another. Here, the ground is also less certain. Groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) have used London's sites as grounds to highlight the climate emergency and the lack of a political and cultural response. Yet, these protests seemed not to be targeted or aimed, but rather in search of a place of action, of political action. The slow violence and social murder of climate change often produce a too diffuse sense of what exactly is causing the problem, especially when solutions take on technocratic guises, such as carbon offsetting or rewilding. Just as the harm is evident within slow violence and social murder, there are also quiet grounds and slow protests, where theatrical and silent protest moves through sites and spaces, leaving behind little evidence of either a struggle or

a ground of struggle. Our examples are deliberately disparate and "stretched," they are not intended as comparative or contrasting but as ways of illuminating and examining what thinking of the city as a struggle for space/space for struggle can entail.

Slava Ukraini/Slava UK

In the time after the ending of lockdown, London, like many other cities, witnessed numerous forms and sources of protest. Picking anyone can be used to make various points, but one of the largest of these is interesting precisely because it sheds light on the city as a struggle for space/space for struggle. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 was condemned across much of the world and prompted many acts of solidarity, including the welcoming of Ukrainian migrants and refugees—via visible and central reception activities—in cities across Western Europe. Dissensus, in the form of noting that the UK government adopted a wholly different attitude to refugees from Ukraine to the way it seeks to restrict other refugees, was certainly voiced but remains entirely marginal in public and political debate. The argument that the whiteness of the former contrasts with the "raced" migrants from, say the Middle East and North Africa, is evident, but this is more than a matter of skin color: the hostile environment to migrants in the UK, including political rhetoric and newspaper headlines, is applied extensively to (white) Romanian and Albanian refugees.

The Ukraine case provides more than one hole in the fabric of politics. It was a moment of seeming national unity in Britain. On 26 March 2022 demonstrations in support of Ukraine took place across Britain, with London as one of the main centers where numbers were in the tens of thousands. On a sunny day, people marched through central London carrying Ukrainian flags in a protest organized by the Mayor of London, supported by politicians from all sides, and with prominent media and entertainment celebrities either on the march or sending expressions of support. The British flag and the otherwise derided—due to Brexit—European movement became symbols of consensus.

The blue and yellow Ukrainian flag became a prominent symbol, appearing in places that probably few would have predicted. UK government buildings along Whitehall displayed the flag and a year, later they are still there. The gates of Downing Street were festooned with the flag. Prime Minister Boris Johnson wore a Ukraine pin on his lapel as did many other politicians. British newspapers frequently hostile to immigrants, and in which commentators scoff at liberals who had previously offered to house migrants in their own homes, were this time, cheerleading for British public support for Ukraine.

The March 2022 protest headed to Trafalgar Square, the symbolic scene of so many demonstrations and events in the history of the city. Here, in addition to the Mayor of London's website banner that "London stands with Ukraine," were banners that directly linked the city to Ukraine.

In this scene, London stands as a city "twinned" with a nation. The city seems like a state; it is coterminous and fully aligned with it. But this is not the same thing as claiming the city is the state. Unlike the latter, it has no army or any special role in national foreign policy. The Mayor's banner at the main protest illustrates this point. Yet, note the ways in which the poster for the demo links—and elides—the UK with the Mayor of London, just as, one year on from the start of the war, it is the UK flag that is twinned with Ukraine (see picture below). In this moment, London easily stands in with, and for, the nation. Whereas, at other times (such as during the Migrant Crisis and the Brexit debate), this elision is far less comfortable, and even thoroughly discomforting. The

FIGURE 17.1

capital city expresses a—and for some narrow and elitist (the place of the Westminster and media "bubbles," gentrification, and multiculturalism)—in relation to the rest of the country.

Of course, it is not London itself that is at war with the invaders of Ukraine; the displays and tone are more about expressing solidarity. This is a form of politics that has its own value. Positioning London as the ground for protests, as the Mayor did, does, however, bring out the curious counter-image of a city that has something missing, like a role in a war. The overlap and consensus across political parties (Labour London and Conservative UK) make for quite an arid, almost post-political, debate in which there is limited scope for contestation or opinion diversity. By this, we do not mean that voices opposed to the war, or ones that point to issues and problems in Ukraine (such as its very high ranking in the world corruption index, or even the racist chanting by some of its football fans) do not exist, rather that these are both marginal and treated as marginal. They attempt to intervene in and politicize an issue, but by being ruled out of court, they display the closure of any politics. This is evident in the way that the mainstream media simply ignored the "Stop the War" protest on 25 February 2023, which called on the British Government to stop supplying arms to Ukraine. Ignored, despite the protest being backed by renowned anti-war organizations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Stop the War Coalition (which organized massive rallies in opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003). While Ukraine generates such a level of consensus, the politics are less a ground for struggle than a ground without a war.

The symbolic spaces of the city—such as Piccadilly Circus, Parliament Square, and Trafalgar Square—that have witnessed many protests, and numerous scenes of violence and destruction, instead become a place of consensus. Symbolic buildings—Government Departments, the Houses of Parliament, Downing Street—all carry the Ukraine flag without any controversy. The flag becomes a prominent symbol across the city, displayed on churches and other public buildings, and evident across the city in seemingly ordinary household spaces. It becomes an un-contentious

FIGURE 17.2

FIGURE 17.3

FIGURE 17.4

object, its meaning and purpose seemingly universalized and self-evident. Yet, of course, placing the same object in a different location, even in the same city, carries other less consensual meanings. When, before the war, Ukrainian fans displayed the flag in a football match at Wembley against the England team, the British press drew attention to the times when black English players had been booed by Ukraine fans. Thus, while there are voices that are not aligned with the national consensus in support of Ukraine, they are limited to short-lived and easily erasable guerrilla actions, such as stickers and graffiti, as in this picture linking Ukraine to Zionism.

Rebellion in the Park

Thus far, we have sought to show how London can, strangely, become a peaceful ground for protests about struggles, including those against wars and all forms of violence, that are taking place elsewhere (reminiscent, perhaps, of demonstrations against Apartheid South Africa in the 1960s–1980s, as well as the 2022 and 2023 protests in support of Palestine, and of women in Iran). Next, we wish to look at the ways that protests might have less of a common ground—perhaps, be less of an opportunity for joining up struggles—than it may at first appear.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a self-declared global environmental movement, formed in an English rural town in May 2018. Their first actions took place soon after, in October 2018,

FIGURE 17.5

when they occupied the London offices of Greenpeace. This was followed by a "Declaration of Rebellion" on 31 October outside the Houses of Parliament. Taking their inspiration from the direct action of The Suffragettes, the US Civil Rights Movement and (the brief flowering of) Occupy, XR has instigated a series of high profile, highly disruptive protests as well as spawning offshoot protest groups such as Just Stop Oil. Without any apparent evidence, it is rumored that Extinction Rebellion has its roots in the Wood Green neighborhood of north London by locals (even though the widely accepted account of XR's foundation directly contradicts this, the rumor persists). So, it was no surprise when Extinction Rebellion's famed pink yacht suddenly appeared outside Turnpike Lane tube station (just to the south of Wood Green) in August 2019. Even so, rumor notwithstanding, it is a mystery why Turnpike Lane had suddenly become the ground upon which to stage a self-identified global protest. On the surface, there was no special reason to pick Turnpike Lane. Indeed, the protest seemed squeezed in, ill-fitting, and in between a main road and a small park (Ducketts Common).

A global struggle had found micro-local expression. Cars stopped for a theatrical march. Leaflets were handed out. Micro-local, yet the stakes could not be higher: life, or death. There didn't seem much dispute over which is the best option. Car drivers tooted support. Leaflets were read and tucked into pockets. Or they were thrown in bins—the protests ignored—a scene both present and absent simultaneously. Still, there were other things to do, perhaps less oppositional. There were places to exchange clothing and food, recycling in action. Extinction Rebellion had found a way to "ground" its global struggle but perhaps had not found a site of oppositional political action.

Two years later, in August 2021, Extinction Rebellion returned to Turnpike Lane. If it was a mystery why XR was there in the first place, its return embellished the mysterious connection between the global climate emergency and a usually unremarkable north London crossroads. Nonetheless, it was from Turnpike Lane that Extinction Rebellion Unity decided to march upon and

FIGURE 17.6

FIGURE 17.7

FIGURE 17.8

FIGURE 17.9

gather at, Finsbury Park, a couple of miles to the south. Walking through Finsbury Park on Sunday 30 August 2021, you would be forgiven for thinking that the police were holding a massive picnic in the park. Dozens of police vans lined the roads interior to the park. Sat inside, perhaps a hundred police, looking bored, but obviously capable of responding to an outbreak of political violence: riot shields at the ready, should it be necessary. But it wasn't. Non-violence is also political.

Rather, in the gloom of a typical London summer day, a small crowd of around about 400 had gathered. Most had walked the two miles from Turnpike Lane, a diverse group, some proclaiming the rights of indigenous peoples, a group of dancers wanted to "save the Amazon," XR Buddhists were there, while others were against fossil fuels (a progenitor of now notorious Just Stop Oil). One banner simply read "unfuck the world." There was even a white elephant, named HS2 (a mega infrastructure project to build a new train line). All gathered seemingly under the banner of XR

FIGURE 17.10

FIGURE 17.12

Unify. This was not, it turned out, one protest, but four. Four grounds for a struggle, coordinated, co-located, but unified?

Each protest had its own tent. XR Unify. Just Stop Oil. Kill the Bill. Black Lives Matter. Each tent gathered its own crowd, expressing itself through different means. A small stage drew speakers from each of the tents. Each speaker talked of urgency, emergency, the need for action, and the need for radical change. Yet, the crowds drifted in and out, never quite merging into a unified whole. Each speaker was enthusiastically greeted. Call/response moments passionately engaged.

FIGURE 17.11

But not by everyone all of the time. It felt like the ground should unify, the calls to action would galvanize (as the police anticipated) into direct action. It didn't happen.

A number of different struggles, all in one place, but not on the same ground. Seemingly unified under a Unify banner, fellow travelers in allied struggles, but not. The Kill the Bill speakers talked of police brutality, calling up a history of deaths at police hands in nearby Tottenham. Chiming strongly with demands of Black Lives Matter. Yet worldwide migrant deaths had a different traction. The destruction of the Amazon rainforest called in a different set of protestors. Global and local struggles refused to fuse together; each tent, somewhat symbolically, drifting away at different times, one while the speakers were still rallying the troops. Political Action. Ground. But no single struggle. And, sometimes, it felt, too peaceful to be a struggle.

The "taking place" of struggle(s)

This short contribution is designed to raise questions about the relationship between the city and protest, the ground and the struggle. In each of our examples, there's a disconnect between the city and the protest, between the ground and the struggle. The "local" and the "global" are not quite aligned; they do not quite work up and down the scales of politics smoothly. The global is never fully global and the local is never just local. The ground and the struggle do not (therefore) always have to be in the same place. Indeed, the ground can carry histories of earlier struggles that can be easily overlooked or forgotten, and this is true of very well-known sites such as Trafalgar Square, as well as overlooked or less prominent ones, such as Finsbury Park (even though it has its own microhistory as a site of protests).

Hence, there can be multiple disconnects between past and place, between protest and city, and a highly uneven connection to what is global and local. The events we have looked at occurred in the perhaps anomic time of lockdown/post-lockdown when many of the normal rules and practices of social interaction had been interrupted, disrupted, or dislocated. The emergency nature

of the pandemic produced a very large degree of political consensus across parties, yet this did not prevent dissensus, only its expression in public (see Haritaworn in this volume). Yet, protest is not always dissension. We have shown that the city can afford a site through which to express people's alignment with national geopolitics. In this, no ground is taken; it remains exactly where it is. No violent political action is offered, or accepted. On the other hand, it is easy to over-read the coherence of protest, or worse, to romanticize the affinities and solidarities implicit in any protest. Often protests are highly heterogeneous, even where there is apparent common ground, stated solidarity, and apparent shared affective energy (rage, righteousness, grief, disgust, or the like). Our "Unity" example, thus, does not occupy a single coherent ground, and therefore, does not stem form, or emerge into a single coherent struggle. Rather, there is something far more do-it-yourself, almost banal. Thus, we have highlighted the routine and everyday performance of protest, including flags and banners, chants, and drumming, that rehearse the cozy familiar repertoire of demonstrations. Drawing from these examples, we suggest the use of "the struggle" and "the ground" should be problematic, creating an analytical lens to question the practice and expression of protest in the city. In this way, we suggest that it is productive to also think about how the spaces and times of grounds produce or do not produce protest. Sites of struggle are, therefore, not just where the struggle takes place, but about how places make struggle—about how struggle *takes place.*

Note

1 Image sources: First image: © European Movement UK (www.instagram.com/euromoveuk/), Image two to six: Steve Pile; Image seven to twelve: Karim Murji.