The cultural anthropology of protest against perceived injustice: Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

Cultural activities in a social setting offer a common ground to conceive complex power dynamics. Culture has been a place of escape throughout history for dissident people who were oppressed and marginalised by a social system that created injustice for them. The cultural anthropology of protest against the perceived injustice exposes the powerful actors who create injustice and uncovers how people demonstrate their reactions through different instruments in the cultural spectrum. The identification of agencies who create injustice from the point of view of the vulnerable people clarifies the dilemmas of a confrontation in a contested place. However, the articles in this special issue show that this confrontation also needs to be read by centralising the people who are subject to the injustice that forms and shapes different cultural forms at the same time. The cultural forms examined in this special issue indicate that the powerful authorities are not indestructible, and the layers of resistance have complex patterns as much as the structures of authorities do.

KEYWORDS: cultural anthropology, injustice, protest, culture, social agency

Injustice and reactions to it have long been the subjects of exploration for cultural anthropologists who have endeavoured to take our attention to the role of objects, language, images, voice, mimics, spaces, architecture, material artefacts, and immaterial symbols ranging from ideas and beliefs to social constructs that all define and expose the multiple meanings of injustice (Scott, 1985; Clifford, 1988; Hass, 1996; Caldeira, 2015; Kuper, 1999; Sökefeld, 1999). In doing so, these scholars have contributed to a growing literature in this area, which has demonstrated how the culture has been transformed into a mighty force shaping the power relationship while being under the influence of the same power that it shapes (Vawda, 1988; Wolf, 2001; Herzfeld, 2010). Dissident people who perceived injustice in everyday life sought different venues of liberation, prepared for protest, and rebelled against the perceived injustice (Graeber, 2007; Horowitz, 2012; Juris, 2015; Ortner, 2016; Auston, 2017). We bear witness to different forms of injustice today in the museums of colonial powers, in the streets of Hong Kong, in the occupied territories of Palestine, in the city squares from London to Istanbul and in many different places across the world (Allen, 2008; Simpson, 2011; Lam-Knott, 2017; Cayli et al., 2018; Vawda 2019). The perceived injustice shapes identities and produces a counterculture in the face of oppression. Cultural activities and cultural identity in the context of perceived injustice may transform a place of escape into a zone of resistance and protests play a key role in increasing the public visibility of resistance (Cayli, 2012; Kurtović & Hromadžić, 2017; Kunreuther, 2018).

This special issue aims to shed new light on our understanding of different forms of protests by centralising perceived injustice through challenging the disciplinary boundaries of cultural anthropology. There are two main reasons that the perceived injustice and protest are the two key elements on which this special issue focuses. First, the perceived injustice manifests itself through different cultural forms such as art, cinema, music, painting, architecture, and in cyber-space via digital media in diverse geographies (Ortner, 1995; Martinez, 1997; Farmer, 2004; Marcus, 2004; Uribe, 2005; Cayli, 2013). Such a formidable manifestation challenges the authority when the universal meaning of justice resonates similarly through different cultural activities and community interventions. As a result, the objective to bring all these cultural forms to the fore is an essential purpose of exploring the navigation of culture in a challenging social context. Second, the exposition of injustice by employing anthropological lenses may deconstruct societal dilemmas, destruct dictated cultural binaries, clarify the complexity of implicit oppression, and motivate us to produce a remedy against the injustice. Hence, the exposition of injustice in everyday life and the identification of actors in the pyramid of pow-

er hierarchy across diverse institutions and social contexts offer us hope and reason to survive and resist different forms of injustice.

The challenges to resist the more powerful agency also impose the designation of new cultural forms. In this respect, cultural anthropology purposes an important vantage point to delve into the worlds of injustice so we can expose, refute, and change different dimensions of societal dependencies and power hierarchies. This special issue consists of eight research articles and one photo essay that deploy different dimensions of protest and the perceived injustice across the world. The diversity of the cases, as well as its geographical scope, render this special issue particularly important in terms of its inclusivity and extensive analysis of the two key concepts of the special issue: (i) protest; and (ii) the perceived injustice. In the following paragraphs, I endeavour to highlight the importance of each contribution that challenges our way of thinking in cultural anthropology and offers us fresh and new perspectives with strong ethnographic lenses and reflexive presentation.

Identity shapes conflicts and, unsurprisingly, it becomes a source of violent confrontation in a sectarian society, considering the strong relationship of identity with personality and collectivity (Peacock, 2007). Violence in identity politics is ironically both the most unwanted and used method. Das (2006) demonstrated the power of violence in the sectarian Indian society during the partition of India in 1947. Her research is an excellent example, showing us how violence has a prodigious capacity of determining the fabrics of everyday life dramatically. The materiality of landscape and place are the fundamental factors in Northern Ireland as it reveals the demands of social justice and the need to creating public memory in the midst of sectarian conflict (Donnan, 2005). In *Walking together as protest: Collective identity transformation in sectarian Northern Ireland*, Amanda J. Lubit explores Lyra's Walk for Peace which is a three-day 68-mile walk across Northern Ireland that unites people to protest the bitter past of sectarianism and seek a better future for the country. Lubit meticulously deconstructs the walk and shows us how the walk of this group articulates the symbolic and functional dimension of protest on the one hand and strong emotional solidarity among the participants protesting sectarianism on the other. Employing the walk itself as an ethnographic method, her original perspective indicates the temporal dimension of protest should not be undermined as the participants engage with the present during the walk while remaining under the influence of the past and the desires of the future. Her article pushes the methodological boundaries of discipline by centralising the walk itself to read the conflict critically and reflect on the post-conflict aspirations.

The influence of films on masses through the audio-visual elements demonstrates one of its embodying transformative power. The instrumentalisation of film fosters to expose grievances in the public sphere when more people are informed concerning the worlds of victimised people whose lives, otherwise, cannot be narrated effectively. To make a broader audience aware of injustice and discrimination, ethnographic film making targeted patriarchal, colonialist and orientalist film production and directors (McDougall, 1978; Kuehnast, 1990; Ginsburg, 2011). The contribution of visual and cultural anthropology has offered a broad space for the vulnerable groups whose voice has found little space in the mainstream cultural and social space. The anthropology of filmmaking is particularly important to consolidate justice as it has the capacity to present the process of victimisation to the masses, which is helpful for the audience that experiences the challenges in the lives of vulnerable people for the first time. In the scenes of confrontation, the audience bears to witness suffering and injustices; in doing so, they can better contextualise the lives of people who are subject to violence so they can uncover the reasons and actors that produce violence (Stone, 2015). Many complex societal issues need a holistic perspective to unpack the dilemmas and the origins of problems with which people have to cope. However, the collaboration of scholars, who have different expertise and roles in a project, is a challenging task, but when it happens, it may lead to fruitful and unexpected results particularly in the field of cultural anthropology. The article of Alastair Roy, Amanda Ravetz, and Mark Prest, entitled *Unsettling narrative(s): Film making as an anthropological lens on an artist-led project exploring LGBT+ recovery from substance use* is an excellent example of a collaborative work. Roy took the role of audience and critic, Amanda took the role of an anthropological filmmaker; and Mark commissioned the project of film making to explore the injustice that LGBT+ people face. In doing so, they aimed to explore different forms of injustice by focusing on the recovery from substance use with reference to their own biographies. Their innovative perspective of filmmaking conveys the message that 'involvement in making art and taking it public constitutes an important moving with events rather than a forcible mastering of them.' They demonstrate throughout the paper that 'art can help effect from operating primarily as a site of escape for oppressed people towards becoming a zone of socio-cultural resistance and epistemic transformation.'

If we seek a modern cultural material that functions to convey the message of the oppressed people and their anger against the social system, we do not need to go further; it is sufficient to look at closely to the city walls where graffiti and drawings speak volumes for a curious and meticulous observer about the social, political, and cultural fabrics of a contested place. As a cultural product, graffiti is a mirror of urban tensions in

which cultural anthropologists and sociologists have explored its multi-dynamic role (Lee 2013; Ross 2016). Peteet's ethnographic exploration of graffiti during the Intifada in Palestine fostered her to mark graffiti as 'a form of cultural production deployed as a means of resistance' (Peteet 1996: 139). In the article of Plácido Muñoz Morán, *Graffiti and the perceived injustice: The relational texture of Barcelona's public space*, the readers uncover how graffiti becomes an active agency to demonstrate the perceived injustice in the public space of Barcelona while shaping the sensory orders and socio-political relations in the city. Morán's long ethnographic work in the city purposes a new concept, "graffiti texture", through which we are able to understand the power of graffiti, the role of local artists, and the extended social networks that constitute a heterogenous movement altogether. His careful and nuanced focus, which was coupled with three photographs that he took, highlights the interface of socio-political agencies. Thanks to this interface of multiple agencies, we are able to construe the material and immaterial significance of graffiti that plays an indispensable role in the making of a city.

In the early 1990s, there was a critique among the anthropologists who argued that anthropologists would play a better role to bring their insights to explore social movements in the contested political and legal terrains (Escobar, 1992). There has been a growing anthropological literature on social movements since then (Gibb, 2001; Edelman, 2001; Ciavolella & Boni, 2015; Lamphere, 2016). In this special issue, Anni Hui explores student protests in Thailand against the military junta in 2014 in her article, entitled *Appropriating dissent: The three-finger salute and Thailand's pro-democracy movement*. Shortly after the coup d 'état launched by the Royal Thai Army on May 22, 2014, students protested the military junta on the streets of Bangkok by three upright fingers in salute. The salute was largely embraced by pro-democracy protestors and became the unofficial symbol of their resistance. By focusing on this symbol and its cultural and political imperatives, Hui highlights 'the counterhegemonic potential of mass culture and the ways in which cultural symbols are (re)claimed by the public to resist existing power structures and exert a collective identity for a change.' Her detailed analyses bridge the popular cultural symbols of fiction with the resisting symbols of people against the injustice. This connection is an important contribution to our knowledge as it unveils how cultural symbols, both in fiction and real life, shape our expression and empower our position against the authority.

The cultural construction of the good builds on the understanding that people are aware of the good in different social contexts which determines the delimitations of the anthropology of morality (Fassin, 2012), yet this awareness of the good does not push hu-

man agency into passive boundaries. Even in a deteriorating social context, people may appreciate what is already done for them but, at the same time, they continue to demand the elimination of injustice and equal treatment. The article of Žiga Podgornik Jakil, *Resisting emergency shelters and humanitarianism: Asylum seekers' struggles for fair accommodation in Berlin*, provides an overall evaluation of a group of local activists as well as refugees related to housing problems in Berlin. Jakil's detailed account during his ethnographic work elucidates that both local activists and refugees might have different priorities; however, both groups agree that the German government's humanitarian policies related to the refugees should go beyond offering shelter. This change in principle can be realised by providing proper accommodation by embracing the ethical approach that promotes the civil equality of asylum seekers. In this article, the readers explore that the current housing policies of the German government marginalise the asylum seekers and create injustice which motivates them to protest and resist along with the local activists. Their resistance leads to new cultural forms of struggle in everyday life, which Jakil remarkably discusses through centralising the resisting political culture of asylum seekers against Germany's liberal constitutional political culture.

The ancient concept of exile primarily invokes displacement, but it also has a strong relation with mobility, boundaries, and political projects (Hackl, 2017). The violation of the freedom of speech and social conditions enforce people to be refugees. This enforcement is an imperative of an alarming global order which is not independent of the global crisis of neoliberal academia (Özdemir et al., 2019; Ramsay, 2019). In his article, *The trickster of exiled intellectuals – arcane opposition to the perceived injustice*, Christian Franklin Svensson focuses on persecuted intellectuals, artists, academics in Northern European countries whose critiques against their regimes in their home countries as well as their experiences in the host countries offer us as an intriguing social context. In his ethnographic work, Svensson applies the trickster concept and engages with his interlocutors reflexively. He successfully argues that cultural transformation is possible in cultures and identities which are supposed to be static. The perceived injustice of the exiled intellectuals renders their insights highly important as they experience a new cultural sphere in the host countries. Nevertheless, this new cultural sphere also provides a new perspective to critically observe the social and cultural approach towards them by the natives of the hosting country. The trickster concept of Svensson, therefore, enlightens this duality between liberty and censorship in diverse cultural contexts.

Leonidas Oikonomakis' article, entitled *The forest beings protect us and we protect them: Cultural resistance in the Ecuadorian Amazonia*, is based on his ethnographic research on

Sarayaku which is an Amazonian Kichwa community on the shores of Rio Bobonaza, Ecuador. What makes Sarayaku a compelling case study lies in the anticolonial, anti-extractivist, and anticapitalist resistance culture that refutes the intervention of oil companies and state authority. The local community has empowered their justification through *Kawsak Sacha*/the living jungle concept which signifies that there are visible and non-visible beings protecting the area, and they should be bearers of legal rights against any intervention either by the private companies or state authorities. The field research of Oikonomakis and his interviews with 25 community members lead to remarkable insights as he connects cultural anthropology with legal anthropology in his article. He argues that securing legal protection can curb the long-term resistance and laws can be changed swiftly in response to the demands of local people over time. However, the resistance culture cannot be easily eliminated by external forces as the local community shapes the culture.

Cartoons and caricatures are the cultural symbols and aesthetic reactions of artists who interpret societal issues and reflect it on their works. From this vantage point, when we look at a cartoon, we also deconstruct it to break its multiple meanings into the elements of perceptions. Whether we agree or disagree with the message delivered by a cartoon, its imperatives highlight a cultural conundrum illustratively. The article of Mirco Göpfert, *An artistic reaction to perceived injustice: Cartooning, resistance and textures of the political in Iran* is based on his five-year ethnographic research with cartoonists/caricaturists in Iran. The article is a ground-breaking work in the way that it shows the existence of possibilities by going beyond dualities in the cultural world of cartoonists/caricaturists whose reactions against injustice and the interpretation of injustice echo in their professional works. In a very sophisticated classification, Göpfert finds out three different types of cartoonists whose primary goal and interpretation of injustice differ from each other. Unfolding each type of cartoonist's world with careful analysis, he suggests that the cultural imperative of different form of cartoons shows the diversity of human being and paints the political landscape of Iran.

The photo-essay of Jeroen Stevens, *Architecture acts too! Protests and proposals for housing in Brazil*, presents the housing problem of a local community whose access to proper accommodation is strictly limited. The ten photographs taken by Stevens are excellent evidence that brings the power of images to the fore to bear witness to the challenges of hundreds of thousands of people in Brazil and their protests against the injustice to which the local people are subjected. Taking photos of architecture and its diverse surrounding area becomes an act of translation to decode and narrate this injustice in the

everyday life of people. Moreover, Stevens translates this injustice deftly by illustrating the conditions with which the people have to cope. In doing so, the readers who look at the images and engage with the photos become the partners of an anthropological journey that the author has already completed in an emotional and challenging social environment.

The nine articles in this special issue shed new light on the cultural anthropology of protest against perceived injustices. Even though each article focuses on different protests across the world, the special issue, as a whole, shows that the protest against the perceived injustice is highly related to the local space. Hence, the injustice produced by local and global actors shapes the local space's physical, social, political, and cultural terrain. The reaction against perceived injustices takes diverse cultural forms and appears in public spaces, squares, buildings, drawings, walls, films, and music. The cultural reaction against the perceived injustice, therefore, reflects the complexity of human being and the toil to protest and resist injustice.

Nevertheless, all these struggles convey a strong message that if the resistance exists, there is always hope for a change. The cultural anthropology of protest against the perceived injustice is a rising sub-discipline of social and cultural anthropology that hinges on three factors: (i) identification of the root reasons of injustice; (ii) demonstration of the concerns of discontented people; and (iii) exposition of different forms of injustice. The three pillars of the cultural anthropology of protest against the perceived injustice resonate in different forms in this special issue, but the provocative tone highlighting these three pillars remains the same. Future researchers, who aim to contribute to this field, may consider these three pillars both to render the research project relevant to the lives of people and to give a voice to those people whose lives are marginalised by the more powerful authorities.

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Povzetek

Kulturne dejavnosti v družbenem okolju ponujajo skupne temelje za snovanje zapletene dinamike moči. Kultura je bila skozi zgodovino kraj pobega za disidente, ki jih je družbeni sistem zatiral, marginaliziral in bil krivičen do njih. Kulturna antropologija protesta proti zaznani krivici razkriva močne akterje, ki ustvarjajo krivico in razkriva, kako ljudje skozi različne instrumente v kulturnem spektru dokazujejo svoje reakcije. Identificiranje agencij, ki z vidika ranljivih ljudi ustvarjajo krivico, razjasnjuje dileme soočenja na izpodbijanem kraju. Vendar pa članki v tej posebni številki kažejo, da je treba to soočenje brati tudi s osredotočenostjo na ljudi, ki so izpostavljeni nepravičnosti, katera hkrati ustvarja in oblikuje različne kulturne oblike. Kulturne oblike, preučevane v tej posebni številki, kažejo, da močne avtoritete niso neuničljive, sloji odpora pa imajo ravno tako zapletene vzorce kot strukture oblasti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: kulturna antropologija; krivica; protest; kultura; družbena angažiranost

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