

# SYMBOLY OF DISSENT: HOW ARE CULTURAL SYMBOLS CREATED AND CO-OPTED TO EXPRESS DISSENT?

## ISSUE BRIEF

### INTRODUCTION

In a globally connected world, visual symbols of dissent cross the boundaries of time and space and have the potential to be reused and take on new meanings removed from their particular origins [1]. Given the flood of visual narratives that we encounter on social media, television, and film, images which capture our attention and imagination merit further exploration. This workshop will examine recent symbols of dissent and investigate the qualities that make these symbols effective and enduring (or ineffective and ephemeral). Participants will also have the opportunity to imagine and create symbols of their own.

### KEY SYMBOLS & BACKGROUND

#### The Raised Fist and the Bent Knee

- The fist is associated with working class solidarity, anti-racism, and leftism
- An early instance of its use in the US can be traced to 1913 when "Big Bill" Haywood lifted his fist at the silk strike in New Jersey. [2]
- Another prominent instance occurred in 1968 when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists at the Olympics in Mexico City. [2]
- In 2020, the raised fist became a prominent symbol for and within the Black Lives Matter Movement. [2]
- The symbol of the bent knee became contentious in 2016 when football player and civil rights activist Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest racial injustice during the U.S. national anthem. [8]



#### Reactions to Censorship in China: White Paper Protests and Memes

- In Urumqi, Xinjiang on November 24, 2022 a fire in an apartment building killed at least ten people. The difficulties faced in putting out the fire were attributed to the government's covid restrictions. Some questioned whether residents were sealed inside the building. [3]
- Vigils were held in cities across China and across university campuses. Many in attendance held blank white pieces of paper in protest of the party's censorship. [4]
- A vigil in Shanghai turned into a protest with some calling on Xi Jinping to step down. [4]
- Forms of protest against censorship of dissent also took the form of memes. A meme adaptation of the Abbey Road album cover became popular. [3]
- The symbol of the blank sheet was adopted in the U.S. by students holding vigils. [5]

#### The Hijab in Women, Life, Freedom Protests

- The hijab is a head covering mainly worn by Muslim women. It is a symbol of religion and culture. It has many different meanings for those who wear it. [7]
- In the Islamic Republic of Iran, wearing the hijab is compulsory for young girls and women.
- On September 16, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22 year old Kurdish Iranian woman, was murdered by the morality police for wearing her hijab in a manner that did not comply to the Islamic Penal Code. [6]
- In response to the murder, people took to the streets with some protestors removing and burning their hijabs. Protests were met by the state with violence, arrest, and killings. [6]



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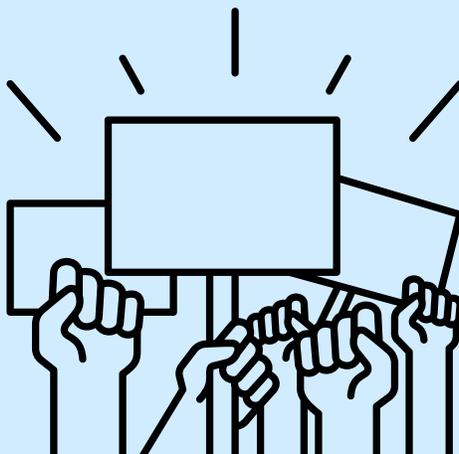
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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What can visual symbols extol or accomplish that other forms of protest or dissent cannot? Do they have more or less power in an age of global circulation?
- Has a certain symbol of dissent impacted you personally? How so?
- How do the symbols described above relate to each other? Do they have similar or different evolutions, meanings, and objectives?
- Which of the symbols we have observed were "created" and which were "co-opted"? Is there a difference between these symbols in terms of message or effectiveness? Is this a distinction worth making?
- Is there a particular symbol, including one that is not pictured here, that you would like to examine in greater depth?

## WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

This workshop will begin with a brief elaboration on the key symbols, people, and historical events described on the previous page. Participants will then have the opportunity to add to the listed symbols and explain why these visuals impacted them or other people. Once a list of symbols has been created, participants will chart the similarities and differences between them, considering visual, historical, and thematic elements. Workshop attendees will consider a cause, small or large, that is important to them and how they might visually represent it using the information and ideas from previous steps of the workshop. One might choose to create their own symbol using simple drawing materials or to outline the circumstances by which they think a symbol could be arrived at for their cause. In closing, participants can opt to explain their work or idea.



## RECOMMENDED READING

Aarabi, Kasra, and Jemima Shelley. "Why the West and Its Feminists Need to Support Iranian Women." *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, December 27, 2021. Accessed March 16, 2023. <https://institute.global/policy/why-west-and-its-feminists-need-support-iranian-women>.

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Nickelsburg, Monica. "A Brief History of the Guy Fawkes Mask." *The Week*, January 8, 2015. Accessed March 16, 2023. <https://theweek.com/articles/463151/brief-history-guy-fawkes-mask>.

Rey, Debora. "'Handmaid's Tale' March for Argentine Abortion Rights." *Associated Press*, July 25, 2018. Accessed March 16, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/3a0e7a56ee924135a0fa2b31e906eee3>.

Teh, Cheryl. "People Are Holding up Blank White Sheets of Paper in China to Protest COVID Lockdowns. It's Become a Symbol of Defiance against the Communist Party." *Insider*, November 28, 2022. Accessed March 16, 2023. <https://www.insider.com/blank-paper-china-new-symbol-of-defiance-2022-11>.

## REFERENCES

[1] Alexa Robertson, "Introduction," introduction to *Screening Protest Visual Narratives of Dissent across Time, Space and Genre* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1, digital file.

[2] James Stout, "The History of the Raised Fist, a Global Symbol of Fighting Oppression," *National Geographic*, July 21, 2020, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/history-of-raised-fist-global-symbol-fighting-oppression>.

[3] Chang Che and Amy Chang Chien, "Memes, Puns and Blank Sheets of Paper: China's Creative Acts of Protest," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2022, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/28/world/asia/china-protests-blank-sheets.html>.

[4] Chris Buckley et al., "After Deadly Blaze, Surge of Defiance against China's Covid Policies," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2022, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/27/world/asia/china-covid-protest.html?smid=tw-share>.

[5] Ryan General, "Hundreds across US Hold up Blank Sheets of Paper While Protesting in Solidarity with Chinese Citizens," *NextShark* (Los Angeles), November 30, 2022, accessed March 16, 2023.

[6] Zahra Khosroshahi, "Iranian Women Burning Their Hijabs Are Striking at the Islamic Republic's Brand," *The Conversation* (Melbourne), October 25, 2022, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/iranian-women-burning-their-hijabs-are-striking-at-the-islamic-republics-brand-191809>.

[7] Clare Duffy and Annika Gordon, "Muslim Women Answer: 'What Does the Hijab Mean to You?'," *The Beacon* (Portland, 2017), accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.upbeacon.com/article/2017/04/meaning-of-the-hijab>.

[8] Kurt Streeter, "Kneeling, Fiercely Debated in the N.F.L., Resonates in Protests," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2020, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/sports/football/george-floyd-kaepernick-kneeling-nfl-protests.html>.