

Revealing power: masked protest and the public sphere

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Revealing Power: Masked Protest and the Blank Figure

When the year draws to a close, newspapers and magazines traditionally look back over the previous twelve months and reflect upon the impact of significant figures and events. In 2011, Time recognised rising levels of global unrest by nominating 'the protester' as its person of the year. This edition of the magazine looked at protests from around the world and included interviews with various protesters, first person accounts from journalists in the field, and even an article on Loukaikos, the protest dog. Rather than depicting a particular protest or protester on the cover, Time presented its readers with an imaginary protester. This cover is of particular interest because it encapsulates a 'common understanding' of the practice of political activism which highlights the way in which 'ordinary people' imagine the role of protest within the public sphere (Taylor, 2003, p.23).

The background of this cover depicts muted images of demonstrations from the era, in which 'protest was the natural continuation of politics by other means' (Time, December, 2011). The anonymous masses, suffused in a revolutionary red, can be dimly seen raising their faces up to the powers that be, their arms holding placards, their mouths calling for action. In contrast, the foreground is occupied by a single figure; a masked protester. The protester's identity is almost entirely concealed by a woollen hat and a cotton neckerchief. Consequently, the usually identifying features of the human face are concealed and the individual's gender, race and age remain deliberately undetermined. The protester's eyes, which are brown, are the only distinguishing feature. They reach out through the fabric of the mask covering their face and beyond the borders of the magazine framing their face. They are calm and determined but also defiant. They interrogate, rather than invite, the reader's gaze.

If, as Castells suggests, the media are the 'space where power is decided' (2007, p.242) then the appearance of this potentially challenging image, in a mediated space as mainstream as Time magazine, signals a shift in the way in which protest is perceived in the public sphere (Cottle, 2012). The image of the human face has always been a central element of political communication (Castells 2007, Street 2003). Leaders from Alexander the Great to Queen Victoria to Barak Obama have used the human visage to establish their political legitimacy and to create a sense of trust within the wider population. In this way, the emperor's face on a coin, the queen's face on a stamp or the president's face on an advertising hoarding can be seen to communicate power from above.

Goffman points out that 'power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it' and goes on to suggest that power will have different effects depending on 'how it is dramatised (1990, p.234). I would suggest that the masked human face signifies a new and potentially productive mechanism through which power from below, rather than above, can be articulated. This use of masks is particularly potent in a hyper-mediated world in which the interplay between mesmerising images, spectacle and simulacra between the real and the unreal begin to blur (Baudrillard, 1983). Kellner describes this dynamic as a

‘carnival of mirrors reflecting images projected from other mirrors onto the omnipresent television screens and the screens of consciousness which in turn refers the image to its previous storehouse of images produced by simulatory mirrors’ (2003, p.12).

Within this context, Time’s image of the masked protester brings into momentary focus a social imaginary in which power and resistance is both revealed and concealed, challenged and confirmed.

This article will examine the practical and theoretical implications raised by protesters who use masks to communicate power from below. It will argue that the refusal to be seen and categorised by the state is empowering in that it exposes, and then unsettles the power dynamics that structure public space. In doing so, it will suggest that the image of the masked face has the potential to make the previously unseen, unheard majority visible and is therefore a purposeful form of presence. It will conclude by maintaining that this use of imagery renegotiates the boundaries that usually frame the representation of popular protest, creating spaces in which us/them distinctions can be drawn differently.

According to liberal models of the public sphere, the media represents a forum in which all views can be collectively articulated, discussed and evaluated in order to arrive at a consensus about what best serves the common good (Habermas, 1974, p.49). This model aspires to be a ‘utopia of transparency’; a space in which ‘pure publicity and full disclosure’ (Johnson, 2001, p.97) enable the individual, via the articulation of rationally debated opinion, to exercise a degree of political power. However, this understanding of the public sphere as a transparent and inclusive space in which power has been bracketed off, can be deceptive, for as Fraser points out:

Declaring a zone neutral is not enough to make it so and consequently deliberation can all too easily become ‘a mask for domination’ (Fraser, 1990, p.64).

Thus, while in principle the media in such a model not only accommodates but actively welcomes the articulation of dissent, there has long been a feeling amongst the radical left that the mainstream media fails to adequately articulate, and sometimes even actively misrepresents, activist issues and debates (Herman and Chomsky 2008, Donson et al 2004, Stein, 2009).

This sense of injustice is felt particularly acutely by coalitions of protest groups who frequently find their polyvocal position difficult to articulate in an arena accustomed to a single and unified narrative. The frustration felt by activists is exemplified by the words of an anonymous protester who complained that the mainstream coverage of Orange Alternativeⁱ ‘happenings’ was ‘a veil that missed or minimised every substantive issue’ (cited by Lane Bruner, 2005, p.148). This perception of the mainstream media as a barrier that actively impeded, rather than facilitated, the flow of information from the political margins to the mainstream clearly has deeply problematic implications for the processes of democracy.

The Enlightenment ideals of sincerity and participation tactically depend upon ‘the banishment’ (Johnson, 2001, p.91) of anything that might impede or conceal the workings of democracy. Protesters’ use of masks initially appears to undermine the public sphere ideal of transparent communication. Moreover, and as Goffman points out, ‘when we think ... of those who dissemble, deceive or defraud we think of a discrepancy between fostered appearance and reality’ (1990, p.66) Consequently, the masking of the face has been read as a politically problematic concealment, which has usually been dismissed in one of two ways. It is either perceived as - a frivolous lack of sincerity, evidence of a fundamental lack of political seriousnessⁱⁱ, or understood as a duplicitous and insidious manipulation of the communication processⁱⁱⁱ. Thus, liberal bourgeois models see the mask as creating a communicative barrier between protesters and the wider public.

This is a view summed up by Silverstone when he says

Masks too are mimetic. As barrier it separates the worlds which otherwise it might connect: the celebrity from the fan; the terrorist from the victim; the bomber from the bombed; the self from the other. (2006, p21)

In Silverstone’s view the mask quite literally stands between individuals wishing to communicate with each other, distorting and disguising the communications process. However, in an article on the use of masks during the French revolution, Johnson makes an important distinction between a mask and a disguise. In this way he argues that

A mask is not a disguise. Disguise hides its ‘masks’. Masks hide a true identity in a visible way. Disguise asserts identity, a false identity, but the concealment is concealed. Only if a disguise is discovered can its masks be known (2001, p.96).

He goes on to suggest that by utilising communicative discourses which actively foreground overtly constructed barriers, such as the mask, protesters are able to draw the public’s attention to the structures that covertly shape political communication within the public sphere. In doing so, he suggests that the physicality of masks foregrounds protesters’ ‘ruse’ and highlights ‘the purpose of concealment’ (Johnson, 2001, p.96) enabling activists to become the tellers of an alternative and powerful truth. Protesters frequently use ‘very plain and common masks in order to more effectively ‘lose themselves’ in the crowd or more boldly to make collective political statements.’’ (Lane Bruner, 2005, p.140). I would suggest that this sense of interchangeable plainness is of particular importance to coalition protest movements, enabling them to bracket difference in a clearly visible way, which first overrides, and then foregrounds, political difference.

Our everyday actions and relationships are infused with practices designed to conceal rather than reveal (Goffman, 1990). As such they are incompatible with the notion of an un-fostered sense of self which is so necessary to the constitution of a classical understanding of the public sphere. The preformative element of public mask wearing builds upon this discrepancy by deliberately foregrounding the gap between the real and the unreal. Moreover, it does so in a mediated environment that projects and

reflects images of the self back and forth until they appear to fracture, fragment and dissolve (Kellner, 2003). As such 'the common sense distinction between true and false impressions becomes even less tenable' (Goffman, 1990, p.70). In this article I want to explore the way in which coalition protesters use masks in order to highlight the communicative barriers that they perceive to exist between themselves and the mainstream. In doing so, I will also reflect on the ways in which the use of masks enables different elements of broad coalition movements to express solidarity across political difference.

According to popular iconography, the wearer of a mask, particularly a black balaclava, is doing something secretive and/or illegal. This aspect of facemasks is addressed by the law in New York that makes it unlawful for three or more people to cover their faces at any one time. Cameron proposed introducing similar legislation in the UK following the riots that took place in August 2011. This was a call for action that quickly faded when it was realised that the police authorities already have the power to remove face coverings worn in public spaces. On this level, the mask can be read as a pragmatic means of hiding one's face, evading identification and therefore capture by the authorities. While this image is still occasionally romanticised by Hollywood representations of highwaymen and cat burglars, it is now increasingly being associated with far more serious and sinister threats.

Images of masked men are now more commonly associated with globalised acts of terror such as suicide bombings and hostage taking. Within this cultural context, the chaotic figure of the single rioter is replaced by images of multiple, coordinated frequently militarised figures. On one level such images represent 'the most objective form of naked power, i.e. physical coercion' but, as Goffman points out, they also function as 'a display for persuading the audience' (1990, p.234). At this point the mask's criminal connotations begin to be overlaid with potentially more powerful political ones. These images evoke the fear of an *organised* threat to society and have been used by nationally-based revolutionary/terrorist organisations such as the IRA in the UK, ETA in Spain and Hamas in Palestine. Within this context the mask loses its ambiguity and becomes part of a uniform that signifies 'the visible expression of an undivided general will' (Johnson, 2001, p.108).

This use of masks is clearly incompatible with Habermas' rather idealised notion of the public sphere. However, if one sees the public sphere not as a utopia of reason and transparency but as a Foucaultian nightmare of surveillance and coercion, then the balaclava can be read very differently. This is a reading which can be illustrated by examining the Zapatistas' use of the balaclava in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatista uprising, which took place in 1994 can (retrospectively) be understood as a key moment in the shifting social imaginaries that framed global protest against the unfolding effects of neo-liberalism. Moreover I would suggest that ordinary people's changing understanding of mask wearing in particular began to enjoy a more 'widely shared sense of legitimacy' during this time (Taylor, 2003, p.25).

The Zapatistas' black balaclavas, like those of Hamas or the IRA, preserve individual anonymity and offer a degree of protection from a potentially punitive state. While the Zapatistas have never been a separatist movement, they do articulate the neglected needs of a population rooted in a specific cultural and geographical location. Clearly, as part of an armed uprising, the Zapatista use of balaclavas still carries military

connotations. Their masks therefore preserve individual anonymity and offer a degree of protection from an often punitive nation state. However, unlike other paramilitary organisations, the Zapatistas softened their use of balaclavas by wearing them in conjunction with nationally undervalued indigenous clothing and symbols. This use of visual imagery confounded the Mexican government's efforts to dismiss the Zapatistas as 'a couple of hundred transgressors of the law' (Carrigan, 2001, p.431) and situated them within a wider globalised context that privileges indigenous cultures as authentic expressions of cultural and political difference. In this way the Zapatistas are a good example of how global solutions are increasingly being sought to address very localised problems (Bauman, 2004, p.6).

This sympathetic global gaze enabled the Zapatistas to move beyond an essentially unwinnable military campaign and to engage in a potentially more successful struggle over symbols. As Klein points out, while the internet^{iv} has played a well-documented role in the struggle in Chiapas, the Zapatistas' 'true secret weapon' was their use of language and cultural dexterity (*Guardian*, 2001). It is these qualities which enabled them to reach beyond the boundaries of their nation state and to shape the debate in the globalised public sphere (Castells, 2008, p.86) Within this context the mask stops being simply a means of evading state surveillance and becomes instead an expression of indigenous resistance. In other words, it becomes a communicative tool capable of 'shaping minds', rather than a military tool designed to coerce the human body (Castells, 2007, p.238).

The Zapatistas' use of the balaclava is rooted in a socialist anarchist tradition that strives to downplay the role of the individual and to foreground collective political endeavours^v. This is an ideological emphasis, which is shared but inflected differently by Black Block protesters in Europe and America. The Black Block are loosely organised collections of anarchists who routinely mask their faces and wear clothes which are 'intentionally menacing' (Mary Black, 2001) during public protests. In these instances, balaclavas or bandanas do more than conceal the identity of their wearers; they also signal a collective identity. This is important because while the Zapatistas are a community-based organisation, rooted in a shared sense of place, European and American anarchists tend to be geographically dispersed. Consequently Black Block protesters use masks to gather together otherwise entirely unconnected groups of individuals and enable them to converge in protest spaces and act as a more or less discrete political unit.

During the anti-globalisation demonstrations of the late 1990s, the Black Block engaged in property destruction and actively sought violent confrontation with state authorities. In these circumstances a mask is undeniably useful, as it intimidates the authorities whilst also shielding the wearer from the surveillance of the state. While the activities of the Black Block are frequently dismissed by the national press as 'thuggery masquerading as protest' (*Guardian*, 2nd May, 2005 cited in Donson et al, 2004, p.12), it is important to remember that even extreme violence retains a political dimension. The provocation of state violence is a protest strategy that has been used to great effect by both non-violent and more confrontational protest movements^{vi}. Indeed, the death of Carlo Giuliani, a masked Black Block protester during demonstrations in Genoa, heralded a significant shift^{vii} in the public perception of the relationship between police and protesters (Monbiot, *Guardian*, 24th July 2001, Juris 2005).

Having explored some of the ways in which the Zapatistas and Black Block protesters use masks, this article will now explore how other, less confrontational, elements of contemporary protest movements have developed the communicative qualities of mask-wearing. Protesters committed to non-violent direct action tend to draw on the more frivolous, carnivalesque connotations of mask-wearing. As Bahktin points out, during carnival the usual order is subverted and revellers enjoy ‘a bodily participation in the potentiality of another world’ (1968, p.48). Within this context, the mask has a long history of being used to transform and liberate the pleasure-seeking self. Carnavalesque protesters deploy this sense of freedom, equality and abundance (Robinson, Ceasefire 9th September 2011) and build upon it by suggesting that these changes should, and will, become permanent.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that this more ‘frivolous’ use of masks somehow denies or eradicates the mask’s more threatening incarnations. Indeed, in many ways carnivalesque protesters’ use of masks is only effective because of those more menacing undertones. For, as Karen Engle points out in an article on the depiction of terrorists, the ‘threat to the state posed by a being masquerading without the proper identification, a being without a recognisable face or name’ is ‘absolute’ (2007, p.397). This point is well articulated by a non-violent anti-globalisation protester who acknowledges that ‘part of the effectiveness of our mass mobilisations rest on this threat of implied violence’ (anonymous protester cited in Do or Die 2001).

Carnavalesque protesters temper the confrontational and challenging nature of mask-wearing established by the Zapatistas and the Black Block with a much less threatening, far more media-friendly, emphasis on pleasure and political revelry. This is a tactic that has been deployed particularly successfully by Pink and Silver anti-globalisation protesters. Pink and Silver protesters are predominantly women who attend demonstrations dressed in tutus, sparkly tights, butterfly wings, sequined masks and feather boas. By exaggerating and exploiting the vulnerabilities traditionally associated with femininity, Pink and Silver protesters address the fear felt by many women confronting all-male police lines. As one protester from Quebec grimly stated ‘No one has come here expecting a safe or peaceful struggle. Everyone who is here has overcome fear and must continue to do so moment by moment’ (Starhawk, 2003, p.340).

The photogenic contrast between the brightly coloured, fragile bodies of anti-globalisation protesters and the darkly helmeted, padded up bodies of the riot police also offers protection in that it inevitably attracts the media’s attention. As one unnamed protester puts it ‘no police department wants a reputation for beating a battalion of ballerinas’ (Notes From Nowhere Collective, 2003, p.179). In this way, the Pink and Silver protesters’ exaggerated sense of femininity places ‘the responsibility for protesters’ safety in the hands of the authorities^{viii} (Doherty 2000, p.70). Moreover, they do so in the knowledge that should the police authorities fail to meet their obligation to them as citizens of the state, then it will be harder for the media to represent them as the perpetrators of violent conflict. In this way carnivalesque protesters, like the Zapatistas and the Black Block, build upon a protest tradition that implicitly aims to reveal the preparedness of the state to impose its version of order by force.

The cohesive qualities of mask-wearing can be further illustrated by examining how the anti-globalisation movement has utilised both the threatening and the frivolous

connotations of the mask to create an enormously effective and imaginative organisational tool. During the Carnival Against Capitalism in London, green, red and gold masks were distributed among the crowd. Each mask carried the message,

Those in authority fear the mask, for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping, cataloguing – in knowing who you are. The wearing of a mask symbolises the rejection of the cult of personality so crucial to consumer capitalism. While the elite gangs of state and capital become ever more faceless their fear of the faces of everyday resistance grows.

(Barker, Carnival against Capitalism, www.vanguard-online.co.uk)

Protesters were invited to follow their colour on a collectively led ‘Magical Mystery Tour’ which carried the colour-coded crowds onto buses, through side streets and into the underground. In this way, protesters eluded police and created a spectacular amount of transport chaos, before regrouping – as if by magic – into a multicoloured mass in front of the LIFFE building. Once assembled, more militant (masked) members of the protest stormed the building causing an estimated £250, 000 worth of damage to what was perceived to be a symbol of global capitalism (Barker, Carnival against Capitalism, www.vanguard-online.co.uk)

Anti-globalist protesters’ use of masks can be read as part of a wider strategy designed to disrupt mainstream representations of activists and to reposition them within a social imaginary in which they are understood as good citizens exercising their right to occupy public space. Seminal studies, such as those conducted by Hollaran et al in the 1970s and Gitlin in the 1980s, developed a nuanced account of the ways in which media representations contribute to ‘ordinary people’s’ understanding of the right to protest. These representations frequently pivot upon a change in register from the political to the moral (Mouffe, 2005) in which the protesting other is delegitimised as ‘dangerous criminals or terrorists’ (Juris, 2005, p.48). This type of reclassification was clearly identifiable in the rhetoric of the Bush administration used to justify the wholesale abandonment of rights and conventions following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre.

The uncompromising ‘with-us-or-against-us’ rhetoric used by Bush^{ix} made maintaining a nuanced position on ‘the war on terror’ within the public sphere difficult. Indeed, and as Gilroy points out, the articulation of even mildly expressed dissent quickly came to be perceived as a hostile act.

The state of permanent emergency enacted through the declaration of ‘war against terror’ allows minimal scope for active dissent. In many countries dissidence has been criminalised as a minor form of treason.

(Gilroy, 2004, p,65)

Consequently, common understanding of what was and was not permissible as legitimate forms of resisting practice in public spaces were inevitably, and radically, altered. These newly antagonistic divisions meant that the political terrain for activists

attempting to articulate a coherent and cohesive response to the war on terror became increasingly difficult and circumscribed. This was particularly true for those involved in formulating a response to the American government's illegal detention of 'enemy combatants' in Guantanamo Bay.

Despite these circumstances, activists continued to deploy the mask as a means of communicating to the wider public the unequal power relations between the individual and the state. The political possibilities inherent in mask wearing can be further illustrated by examining the use of masks by anti-war protesters in the form of Guantanamo-style hoods. Anti-war protesters frequently utilise orange jumpsuits and black hoods in order to signify a detainee's denial of basic human rights. Within this context the covered faces of (usually western) protesters creates an empty space that invokes the rights and privileges denied to (usually non-western) detainees. This use of masks deliberately blurs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' enabling protesters to renegotiate the position of 'enemy combatants^x'. In this way, activists' decision to deploy their 'right bearing bodies' (Gilroy, 2006, p.89) in community spaces creates an all-important 'sense of there being an elsewhere, and of that elsewhere being somehow relevant'. Thus the hooded figure, like the Afghani blacksmith heard by Roger Silverstone (2007, p.10) creates a presence within western political cultures that cannot be ignored.

A similar set of dynamics surrounds Occupy activists' use of the V for Vendetta mask. The masks are a spin off from a film^{xi} in which a lone anarchist makes a stand against a corrupt political system. The film ends with a group of unarmed protesters, all wearing the vendetta mask, marching upon parliament. The V for Vendetta mask was first worn in a political context by activists from the group Anonymous in 2008 during a protest against scientology. The mask has since regularly appeared during Occupy demonstrations and, perhaps more significantly, in the pages and screens which represent those demonstrations to the public at large. The mask has been described as a way of preserving individual anonymity while promoting a clearly visible collective identity (Rosie Waites, BBC news magazine). Indeed, this connection is now so strong that the V for Vendetta mask has become an iconic emblem of international anti-austerity movements across the US and Europe.

The Occupy movement's emphasis on mobilising the support of the general public (rather than policy makers) means that activists took a very conscious decision to avoid the more confrontational tactics which have characterised demonstrations surrounding summit meetings such as the WHO in Seattle or the G20 in London^{xii}. At the same time, the financial crisis and austerity measures, which in many ways prompted the occupation, mean that these demonstrations have had to be less utopically optimistic than previous demonstrations against neo-liberalism and have built upon the tactics of the anti-war movement. Nevertheless, the renegotiation of us/them, here/there dynamics remain central to the message being communicated by the Occupy movement.

While the more prominent Occupy encampments have all been cleared, there is little doubt that the discussions that took place in Wall Street, St Paul's and across the world have impacted upon the way in which the economic crisis is now discussed within the public sphere. As Chomsky points out 'the imagery of the 99% and the 1%' is no longer relegated to the margins but occupies a central place in people's understanding of the

financial system. Within this context, the V for vendetta mask played a significant role, like the Black Block's intentionally menacing balaclavas, the V for Vendetta mask brings together geographically dispersed groups of protesters by blanking out the identity of the individual wearer and projecting the anonymous 99% in their place. Thus while the us/them boundaries that characterised coverage of the anti-globalisation protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s used to distinguish between the mainstream (including the financial system) and activists (particularly trouble makers), now they distinguish between the mainstream including protesters and the financial system (particularly bankers).

The V for Vendetta mask's role in re-negotiating this shift can be seen in the flurry of articles that appeared in mainstream media outlets as 2011 drew to a close^{xiii}. These articles are interesting because they indicate a public awareness of the huge range of possible understandings surrounding the cultural practice of wearing masks during public demonstrations. The BBC describes the V for Vendetta mask as 'sinister' and, while it makes space for an unnamed protester to describe them as 'a symbol of the movement against corporate greed', it closes authoritatively with quotes from a recognised commentator who maintains that they are both a 'fundamentally violent image' and 'inherently ridiculous' (Rosie Waites, BBC). In contrast, the Guardian describes them as 'sophisticated, self-knowing and carnivalesque', while it acknowledges that the masks can be read as 'cheerfully sinister', it concludes by arguing that they are a 'jokey icon of festive citizenship' (Jonathan Jones, the Guardian).

My analysis so far has shown the ways in which different groups of protesters have used the mask as a means of articulating power from below or, in the words of one Occupy protester, of 'bypassing governments and starting from the bottom (anonymous protester, BBC). I will now reflect on the mask's role in articulating political difference in a little more theoretical detail. Neil Postman suggests that there is a powerful idea embedded in every technology. He argues that these ideas are frequently hidden from view because of their 'abstract nature' but maintains that they nevertheless have 'practical consequences' (1998, p.5). I want to finish this article by thinking about the abstract idea embedded in the use of masks and to reflect briefly upon the practical consequences of their use as a communicative technology.

One could interpret the mask as the coalition movement's post-modern answer to the banner, in that it both unites and directs protesters into a more or less coherent whole. However I would argue that while the banner is a textually prescriptive technology of communication, the mask enables activists to articulate an open-ended range of protesting positions. In this way, the mask enables activists from both idealistic and antagonistic traditions to occupy public space using a protest technology that communicates both political difference and 'political association' (Mouffe, 2004, p.20).

Kevin Hetherington's work on the 'blank figure' in the construction of social order is useful here. Hetherington proposes that a blank figure 'represents the presence of absence within the social order' (2000, p. 176) and argues that such spaces

allow us in certain instances to ignore or override
difference. They are figures of the between space...

facilitators of new possibilities in the connections they make between spaces otherwise not connectable within the recognised order of things. (2002, p.171)

He gives the example of the way in which the blank tiles in a game of dominoes, or the joker in a game of cards, create a space in which the player can challenge and unsettle the pre-existing order. This position has much in common with Laclau's conception of zero as an 'empty place' (cited in Gilbert, 2009, p.157) which makes mathematical systems possible.

I would argue that mask can also be read as a blank figure. By introducing a blank element into political discourse, the mask creates a space that can be occupied by those who perceive themselves to be excluded and which explicitly refuses to shape or filter that which could be heard. In doing so, it challenges and unsettles the power structures that construct, and indeed constitute, the public sphere. Thus, the mask does two things. It suggests a way of thinking about blankness as a means not only of *erasing* difference but also as a means of *articulating* difference. The political potential inherent in these qualities can be introduced by returning to the example of the Zapatistas and thinking about the way in which they have used the black balaclava to unsettle the communicative barriers which commonly exclude polyvocal articulations of dissent.

Firstly, the presence of a mask creates a space, which can be occupied by those who perceive themselves to be excluded from current debates. Subcomandante Marcos argues that the balaclava acts as a mirror reflecting and incorporating the identity of all those who observe it. As such, the mask does not negate identity; instead it signifies the possibility of a multiplicity of identities. According to this view, the mask articulates the struggles of those 'fighting injustice' whoever and wherever they may be, enabling 'anyone, anywhere' to become a Zapatista (Subcomandante Marcos cited in Klein, 2001). This is a position which has been taken up and re-articulated by carnivalesque affinity groupings who insist that they wear masks 'to transform ourselves...to show that we are your daughter, your teacher, your bus driver, *your boss*' (my italics, Notes from Nowhere, 2003, p.346). As such, the mask has become a unifying symbol of the anti-globalisation movement's revolutionary identity, a 'soft weapon' (Holmes, 2003. p. 346) that both reflects and empowers those who have been excluded from the public domain.

Secondly, the blankness of a mask explicitly refuses to shape or define the nature of the narrative, which has been excluded. This use of masks has important theoretical implications as it creates a space in which dissenting becomes the key criterion for inclusion. The mask as mirror enables protest movements to preserve (in a backgrounded form) internal political differences, while foregrounding (in a highlighted form) political differences from the global mainstream. In this way, nuanced and textured opposition to neo-liberalism can be comprehensively articulated. This contributes to the redefinition of traditional us/them distinctions and creates a space in which one can begin to renegotiate the boundaries between political inclusion and exclusion. Thus, this use enables one to go beyond thinking of the mask as a barrier and to begin to conceptualise the mask as a transformative threshold between different types of identities, organisations and spaces.

As this article has illustrated, these aspects of mask-wearing are utilised in subtly different ways by different groups of protesters. So, for example, the intentionally menacing bandanas of the Black Block enable activists to ‘act like an anarchist’ regardless of their ‘long term vision’ (Graeber, 2004, p.214), while the deliberately fragile masks of carnivalesque protesters enable activists to demonstrate their right as citizens to expect protection from the state. The black hoods of anti-war protesters also play on a sense of vulnerability and establish a connection between the men in Guantanamo whose rights have been erased and our own right-rich position in the UK. It also underpins protesters’ use of the V for Vendetta mask, which has enabled activists to ‘reveal themselves as you and me, the 99%’ (Jonathan Jones, the Guardian). In this way, masks act as ‘rectifiers and communicators’ of alternative identities and needs (Hetherington, 2000, p. 181) and articulate protest positions which draw protesters into a flexible and inclusively dissenting ‘us’.

I do not wish to suggest that the use of masks is an entirely unproblematic position within the social imaginary. As the Guardian’s generally positive article points out, ‘images slip on their moorings’ (Johnston, The Guardian) and this inevitably leads to tensions and misunderstandings. The frictions created by mask-wearing as a protest repertoire can be illustrated by the fact that anti-road protesters at Newbury in the late 1990 were advised against wearing masks in general and balaclavas in particular, on the grounds that images of masked protesters would alienate the middle ground. On the other hand, the internet is full of anger directed at non-violent activists who purposefully remove the masks of activists engaged in property destruction (Mary Black, 2001). Consequently, it is important to stress that I am not suggesting that masks present a means of unifying coalition movement protest repertoires into a single and coherent whole. Rather, I am suggesting that they allow for a multiplicity of narratives to stand in a nuanced and sometimes contestatory relation to one another.

I began the analysis in this article by examining the ways in which the black balaclava has been deployed by organisations committed to armed resistance in Latin America. I then investigated the ways in which these protest repertoires have been developed by anarchist/autonomous activists willing to provoke state violence in Europe and America before focusing on the ways in which masked carnivalesque demonstrators expose these demonising frames and force the state to take responsibility for their physical well-being. I went on to explore the ways in which, despite the antagonistic reaction to expressions of dissent following the attack on the World Trade Centre, activists have continued to deploy masks as a means of communicating with the wider public. Last, but not least, I have reflected on the ways in which the V for Vendetta mask has been deployed by the Occupy movement and interpreted by the mainstream. Thus this analysis has investigated the cultural practices surrounding varied activists’ use of masks, explored them in relation to state power and suggested that the use of masks in popular protest ‘sets the stage for a kind of information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and re-discovery’ (Goffman, 1990, p.20)

My analysis has pulled out some of the many different ways in which masks create transformative spaces which break down the boundaries of the public sphere as it is traditionally conceived. It has argued that the blank spaces created by activists’ use of masks signify the presence of a deliberately unspecified absence and facilitate the possibility of thinking differently. In this way I have suggested that masks create a

mechanism through which a profusion of previously excluded organisations can gain access to the public sphere, articulating a range of nuanced (and sometimes contradictory) protest positions. I have concluded by arguing that this strategic form of presence reveals the usually invisible boundaries of the public sphere and in doing so unsettles the dynamics of power which structure articulations of dissent.

This contribution has been shaped by a theoretical engagement with the concepts of the public sphere. Habermas argues that the public sphere should be an inclusive and universally accessible discursive arena. Moreover he argues that political debate within these spaces should be characterised by reason, sincerity and *transparency*. Consequently mainstream images and narratives of protest invariably frame the wearing of masks in public spaces as a frivolous and/or duplicitous barrier to communication. The uncertain, in-the-middle position of the mask creates a space in which connections can be made between both different elements of coalition protest movements and between coalition movements and the mainstream. Consequently the blankness of the mask can be seen as contributing to a re-articulation of the boundaries, which shape the social imaginaries surrounding the cultural practice of activism. In this way the mask, providing that ‘witnesses by and large... believe that performers are sincere (Goffman, 1990, p77), can be read not as duplicitous or frivolous impediment to political communication but as a communicative mechanism which helps reveal already tainted power dynamics. As such, rather than eroding the quality of contemporary political communications, the mask can be seen to contribute to an invigorated and enlivened public debate.

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ⁱ The Orange Alternative originated in Wroclaw, Poland in 1981 and organised 'happenings' designed to outwit and embarrass the authorities. It made no explicit demands and enjoyed huge popular support. More information about the Orange Alternative can be found at <http://www.pomaranczowa-alternatywa.org/orange%20alternative%20overview.html>

ⁱⁱ Tony Blair's dismissal of the anti-globalisation movement as 'spurious' in 2001 would be a good example of this type of response. More information can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/may/01/mayday.immigrationpolicy1>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Cameron's suggestion that face-masks should be banned following the riots, which took place in August of 2011, would be a good example of this type of response. More information can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14485592>

^{iv} Cleaver, 1998, Olesen 2004 and Krovel, 2010 have written extensively on the implications raised by the Zapatistas' use of the internet.

^v This ideological lineage is somewhat ironic given that the charismatically masked Subcomandante Marcos has been singled out by the international community as the 'face' of the Zapatistas.

^{vi} The independence movement in India and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa would be good examples of the use of these tactics.

^{vii} The public's attitude to police violence continues to shift, as demonstrated by the work of Rosie and Gorrige on the coverage of protest following the death of Ian Tomlinson, and Younis' work on the 'kettling' of children during protests against cuts in funding for higher education.

^{viii} Doherty describes this tactic as 'manufactured vulnerability' and discusses it in relation to anti-road protesters' use of tripods in the late 1990s.

^{ix} This phrase was used by Bush and quoted by media outlets throughout the world including on CNN, (6th November 2001)

^x A more extended analysis of the way in which anti-war protesters have used the hood to renegotiate friend/opponent/ enemy distinctions can be found in my contribution to *Notions of Community*, edited by Janey Gordon.

^{xi} The film was directed by James Mc Teigue and is based upon a comic strip written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd.

^{xii} A useful account of these discussions by Stephan Said can be found at progressive.org/future_of_occupy.html

^{xiii} Examples of these articles can be found in the Huffington Post and the New Yorker as well as the BBC and the Guardian. These articles are invariably followed by a long and varied selection of readers' comments.