

## *Research Articles*



# Protest in the Age of Cyberatomism

*miriam cooke*

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, US

*miriam.cooke@gmail.com*



### Abstract

How can we account for the exponential increase in worldwide mass protests over the past twenty years? While protests are not new, their rate and size are. Today, thousands of people can be assembled instantaneously to demonstrate for or against a variety of causes that in the past might not have attracted more than a handful of people. The cultural and social conditions of the cyberage have accelerated the distribution of information that fuels protests. I will argue below that this new phenomenon affecting all netizens needs a new key term to describe its range and power today. The best term, in my view is cyberatomism.

### Keywords

protest – cyber revolution – cyberatomism – networked individual – algorithm – Arab Spring

How can we account for the exponential increase in worldwide mass protests over the past twenty years? While protests are not new, their rate and size are. This essay is not about the specific factors provoking a spike in public protests. I leave causation to social movement theorists. My concern is to name the

conditions that pertain once a political cause has been identified, its information disseminated so that people will sign on to it, and the organizing begins. What has provoked the metaphysics of twenty-first century protests?

Today, thousands of people can be, and are being, individually targeted, instantaneously assembled to demonstrate for or against a variety of causes that in the past might not have garnered more than a handful of people. How does that happen? Cyber engineers are hard at work on creating algorithms that identify individual behaviors. They draw one-by-one attention to platforms with their leaders so stealthily that I call them “ventriloquist dummy-publicists” (see below). Once connected to the platform, individuals can be persuaded that they are in personal touch with their leader. Media technology exploits grievances real or imagined to galvanize assemblies. Individuals within those assemblies then communicate online among themselves and collectively strategize for action. Once the action has been launched, individuals can and do find alternative ways to maintain communication, even when authoritarian regimes close down social media outlets.

Current protests are disseminated but also dissimulated by media technology. The cultural and social conditions of the cyberage have accelerated the mass distribution of strategic information to individuals that fuels and undergirds protests. We need a new key term to describe the ways in which social media, artificial intelligence, and the Net’s infinite sources of information and disinformation direct our worldview and actions. Building on two theories, the ontology of ancient atomism and the modern political theory of social atomization, I suggest that this term should be **cyberatomism**.

### **Protest after Protest**

The third millennium burst on the world with a bang. Mass violence almost everywhere led to mass migrations and mass protests.

During the first decade alone, thousands poured into the streets to protest wars, global warming, economic and social inequities, rigged elections, and the denial of children’s, women’s and tribal rights. These protests crisscrossed the globe. In the United States alone between 2000 and 2010, hundreds of thousands protested racialized violence, multiple forms of discrimination and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Europeans participated in more than one demonstration in each of the following countries: Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kosovo, France, Russia, Hungary, Belgium, Greece, and the United Kingdom. In Sub-Saharan Africa during that same decade, people rose up for their rights in Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mali, South Africa, Zambia and Sudan. Nor was

Asia far behind. Asia between 2000 and 2010 was rocked by protests from China and Hong Kong to Iran and Palestine and the many countries in-between. In Latin America, AmericasBarometer 2008 reported that in the first years of the new century protests had erupted in most countries with the highest percentage of participation in Bolivia (an astonishing 29.3%) and Argentina (27.3%). Protests in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the United States, whether they succeeded or not, were being normalized as news outlets monitored impending gatherings spreading further and further and faster and faster. It was no longer so radical for large numbers of people to pour out into the streets to demand justice and to speak truth to the power of tyrannical rulers.

The most mediatized of these protests closed out the first decade of the 21st century. On 17 December, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in a town in Tunisia set himself on fire after a policewoman had insulted him just once too often. The country exploded in anger with more demonstrators than ever before in Tunisia pouring into the streets of cities and towns. Rapper El General targeted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali with his “Rais Lebled” that was to become the anthem of the Arab Spring: “Mr. President, your people are dying/ People are eating rubbish.../ I see injustice everywhere.” After El General was arrested, demands for his release spread like wildfire through cyberspace, forcing the government to let him go. On January 14, Ben Ali escaped to Saudi Arabia. The people (and the media) had won the first round.

Bouazizi’s self-immolation was not the first time in the 21st century that a desperate person had set himself on fire, but it was the first time that global media (thanks to the Qatari satellite TV station Al-Jazeera) had access to footage surrounding the event. The Tunisian protest spread by contagion across the region. On January 25, Egyptian activist Asma Mahfouz posted to her Facebook site a call to her compatriots: flood Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. Any man who did not respond to her call to action, she declared, was not a real man. “Friends” forwarded her call and within a day the Square was filled with crowds who set up camp for the duration. Using social media, they established protocols for policing and governing the space that they had appropriated. Within eighteen days President Mubarak had resigned. The people (and the media) had won the second round. Then Yemenis, Libyans, Syrians, Moroccans and Bahrainis<sup>1</sup> rose up against their autocrats and monarchs, opposing men who had believed that they could oppress their people with impunity.

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1 In February 2011, 20% of Bahrain’s 570,000 protested, “making it ‘proportionally one of the greatest shows of ‘people power’ in modern history” (Sean I. Yom & F. Gregory Gause 2012 “Resilient Royals. How Arab Monarchies Hang On” *Journal of Democracy* 23/4, cited in Jones 2020, 740).

The Arab Spring also inspired protests in the United States, most notably Occupy Wall Street. Mirroring the events in the Arab world and inviting some of the Arab activists to come to the U.S. to share their experiences, demonstrators flooded New York's Zuccotti Park in September 2011.<sup>2</sup> By summer, bumper stickers on American cars had urged protests a la Tahrir with the slogan: "March like an Egyptian."<sup>3</sup> Occupy Wall Street resonated around the country and beyond, "federating a transnational network of solidarity" (Graiouid & Belghazi 2014, 33).

Less than two years later in July 2013, Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza and Patisse Cullors launched the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. They were responding to the acquittal of vigilante George Zimmerman in the 2012 shooting death of a Black boy called Trayvon Martin. Since then the BLM movement has organized thousands of protests demanding an end to the war on Black people. Their advocacy came to a head in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, when a white policeman murdered another Black man. The policeman dug his knee into George Floyd's throat for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. The action might have gone into instant backstory copy, had bystanders not recorded the event on smartphone cameras. Their videos mobilized protests in the United States that then sped around the world. A few months later, a jury that had watched these videos convicted the policeman of second-degree murder. While some hailed the conviction as a first round victory, many dismissed it claiming that it was the result of the theatricalization of a trial broadcast around the world. The protests against police racialized brutality have continued. A single conviction does not mean justice, it merely spurs consciousness of the need to honor Black people's rights, humanity and dignity. In the year since Floyd's murder, the Black Lives Matter movement organized over 4700 protests. Some are now arguing that the number, scope, and impact of such protests may be "setting in motion a period of significant, sustained, and widespread social, political change" (Buchanan, Bul & Patel 2020).

During the past ten years, the frequency and size of protests have grown exponentially across international borders and political divides. These protests portend a global *modus operandi*, *vivendi* even. Daily petitions to sign

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2 Many wrote about the dramatic and effective use of social media during the Arab Spring, notably Castells 2012.

3 On September 19, *Metrofocus* published "Protest like an Egyptian: An occupation of Wall Street" <https://www.thirteen.org/metrofocus/2011/09/protest-like-an-egyptian-an-occupation-of-wall-street/#> On October 5, Tony Karon of UAE's *The National* reported that the Tahrir uprising had become a leitmotif in US demonstrations with "Walk Like an Egyptian" a popular slogan <https://www.thenationalnews.com/how-wall-street-protesters-followed-the-egyptian-path-1.419702>.

on to some cause and invitations to participate in some protest flood email boxes. The democratically minded advocate protests like the Arab Spring, the Palestinian Intifada, the Black Lives Matter and #Me Too movements in the United States and the people's opposition to the military coup d'état in Myanmar in 2021. These protests allow the voices of the disenfranchised to be heard and often for the first time. We share the protestors' disappointment when initial successes falter and old and new rulers crack down on activists and subject them to constant surveillance. Others discredit and disrupt these protests with shout outs for white supremacy, homophobia, Islamophobia, and racist xenophobia. It is hard to overstate the impact of white supremacist protests. They have been an ongoing feature of the 2000s with the most alarming event happening on 6 January 2021 in the United States. That day, hundreds of armed President Trump supporters, some wearing Nazi symbols and waving Trump and Confederate flags, attacked the U.S. Capitol to protest what they claimed was a stolen election.

Who recruits and mobilizes these diverse groups? While we do not know the precise answer to that question, we can see how the process connects people who may have little more in common with each other than a vague sense of their own or others' disenfranchisement. Social media pick up on these grievances and then recruit and mobilize very different groups to take to the streets. To cite my own experience: my Facebook site or email or text message let me know when a relevant protest (BLM or #MeToo or Democrats strategizing for voters' rights) is scheduled to take place. Will I help out? I am offered a list of volunteer opportunities. Or, do I just want to attend? Please confirm and press the link to donate. The acceptance online of some form of participation generates automatic reminders that encourage physical participation. I am doing what I want to do because I believe in the cause, though ordinarily I would rarely make the effort to get to the site of the protest. Social media insistence almost coerces my actual presence.

There is something about our 21st century interconnected and technologized world that both facilitates and intensifies protests.

### **Information Revolution**

Once upon a time in America, not so long ago, our great-grandparents had one national newspaper, one radio and one TV channel. When other media outlets were added, they competed for audiences by providing a different, often opposite take on the news, the truth. By 1949, the distribution of vying "truths" led to the promulgation of the Fairness Doctrine by the Federal Communications

Commission that demanded fair and balanced coverage of controversial issues. In 1980, the news cacophony escalated after CNN's 24/7 news reporting was launched. The multiplication of round-the-clock channels demanded more words to fill more airtime. Pundits were added to flesh out a much-repeated message. And then a crucial turning point came in 1987: the cancellation of the Fairness Doctrine. It removed all pretenses to fairness and balance in American media coverage went. Anchors and pundits could say whatever they liked, and they did.

What was said multiplied. The 1990s cyber revolution caused a seismic paradigm shift in information dissemination comparable to the Guttenberg and Industrial Revolutions. Technology accelerated time and reduced space, enabling the immediate flow of information wherever people had access to the Internet. Media outlets proliferated, information and disinformation invaded homes, and each individual acquired a direct link to a preferred source of information. We no longer needed a common information conduit to trust the source of the news. I am not suggesting that technology alone, operating in a vacuum, has taken over our lives. Even when machines outstrip the capabilities of their human inventors and managers, they remain in tension with them. International relations professor Lucas Kello argues that while technology is not the **only** force of change in the cyber revolution, it “is the principal instigating cause of change... political revolution is not possible without it... Technology can be but one among several important factors that shape the scope of possible political action” (Kello 2017: 97, 100). Political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri amplify Kello's statement, observing that machines have been elevated “to the ontological plane of the human, a common plane of embodied cognition... Humans and machines are part of a mutually constituted social reality... The machinic never refers to an individual, isolated machine but always an assemblage” (Hardt & Negri 2017: 110, 121). Humans channeled through a machinic assemblage  direct the uses of expanded, previously unimaginable media options. Technology today organizes the logic of assemblage through digitally mediated platforms that appeal to emotion—my outrage about sexual harassment and racial injustice, the Proud Boys' fear and fury about being replaced by anyone unlike them—while shaping the worldview of their users.

What is a platform and how is it instrumentalized? *Surveillance Studies* editors David Wood and Torin Monahan define a platform as “a new governmentality—not just a particular kind of organizational form associated with the tech industry and social media, but an entirely new mode of governance, perhaps an authentic political economic descriptor of the structure of the information age” (Wood & Monahan 2019: 2). This new mode of virtual governance

exposes us to appealing information but also hooks us. It tempts us to stay on line to see what interesting idea, or fun group, or extreme ideology, or lovely object will pop up next on our screen. We keep clicking without caring that each click leaks data.

Yet, we should care, I would argue that we must care, lest like boiling frogs who have become accustomed to the tepid water we do not notice the lethal rise in temperature and succumb to cyber exploitation. A term from cyber warfare, cyber exploitation refers to “the penetration of an adversary’s computer system for the purpose of exfiltrating (but not defiling) data... to influence and possibly alter the shape of an adversary’s government or foreign policy; or to undermine public confidence in an institutional or alliance system to which the nations of targeted officials belong” (Kello 2017: 53). Beyond commercial gain, cyber exploiters aim to change individual behavior, particularly political behavior, on a massive scale. Sequenced, scaled videos keep unsuspecting netizens glued to their screens, content with the onslaught of surprisingly relevant advertisements and emotionally charged information designed to excite the user. Giving up personal details along with Amazon orders for a game or a book while exposed to data breach and identity theft, netizens become prey to exploiters and recruiters. They are part of a commercially codified system that is as sophisticated as it is silent and hard to detect.

Netizens must stay alert to the warming waters, those unambivalent recommendation algorithms that tailor ideas to suit but also to create desires. In her crucial work on surveillance capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff warns that a few monopoly surveillance firms and tech giants are betting on behavioral futures as the key to commercial success by recording, measuring, predicting and shaping human behavior: “the means of production are subordinated to an increasingly complex and comprehensive means of behavioral modification... prediction, monetization, and control” (Zuboff 2019: 8, 352). In other words, after watching YouTube videos that project messages at odds with their former beliefs, netizens need to keep abreast of gradual, imperceptible changes in their desires, convictions and behaviors. Who or what is behind behavioral data processing? Who designs, and benefits from the engine that personalizes recommendations that keep netizens online?

*The Guardian’s* Paul Lewis suggests some answers when he explains that what we “watch is shaped by [YouTube’s] algorithm, which skims and ranks billions of videos to identify 20 “up next” clips that are both relevant to a previous video and most likely, statistically speaking, to keep a person hooked on their screen. [Engineers experimented] with new formulas that would increase advertising revenues by extending the amount of time people watched videos... YouTube systematically amplifies videos that are divisive, sensational

and conspiratorial” (Lewis 2018). The engineers’ mandate was to design ways to glue citizens to their screens for as long as possible in order to generate revenue from advertising. The duration of surfing is not decisive by itself, but through repetition a message can be persuasive. Conspiracy videos proved to be the most effective glue. They raised viewers’ emotional temperature, inviting them to join or stay connected to a cybertribe bonded by belief in a marginal world-view trending to become mainstream.

Two important documentaries connect with engineers who have been working on recommendation algorithms. They begin to tell the story of how protests have become the new norm. Jeff Orlowski’s documentary *Social Dilemma* (2020) digs beneath the surface of anonymous behavior modification. In interviews, engineers admitted that they did not recognize until later the dangers in their brilliant, magical algorithms. Their remit to find ways to keep individuals hooked to their screens in order to enhance advertising company profits had produced an epidemic of cyber addicts. Worse, they had exploited the power of the “up next” algorithm to direct netizens to conspiracy sites that unpeel layer after layer of concocted evil in order to infuriate users, often driving them to action, smartphones in hand.

While *Social Dilemma* looks at engineers working for ad agencies, Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer’s<sup>4</sup> documentary *The Great Hack* (2019) focuses on a single company. Their documentary probes the role of Cambridge Analytica in skewing the 2016 American election results in favor of a surprising and surprised Donald Trump. The documentary follows journalists uncovering the connections between Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics company specializing in military style psychological operations. Their alliance led to the undermining of democratic process in 2016 United States. Facebook data algorithms identified individuals with profiles susceptible to persuasion. Undecided and independent voters were bombarded with recommendation algorithms that pushed disinformation and support for the platform’s candidate. While the 2016 outcome is still being processed and its long-range damage assessed, this weaponizing of personal data for specific political ends is not limited to the United States or a single election cycle. It has been repeated around the world in numerous countries where some group or entity has sought a particular election outcome.

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4 Noujaim and Amer directed *The Square* a 2013 award-winning documentary about the 2011 Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square.

## Language Matters

How do we analyze a revolution which outpaces our ability to describe it? We need new language—maybe even only a single word—to understand the imbrication of the human and the machine in behavioral changes. Glibly attaching old terms to new realities and behaviors dispenses with the need to think through what has changed. To use a word like fascism to describe deplorable people and politics provides a copout term to denounce 21st century politicians and their supporters worldwide.<sup>5</sup> A vivid example comes from the United States between 2016 and 2021. Pundits warned that Trump was a fascist leader-in-the-making. They cited his contempt for human dignity, his trumpeting of populism, ethnic nationalism and national rebirth (MAGA), his obsessive lying and insulting of proposed enemies and Hitler/ Mussolini-inspired leadership that needed daily if not hourly twitter reinforcement. Without calling him fascist, Mabel Berezin does credit Trump with one thing: a rhetorical style that “spurred at least one growth industry: commentary on fascism” (Berezin 2021: 12). His style may have looked fascistic, its substance and impact were not analyzed. Slavoj Zizek argues that epithets like corporatist, populist, racist and militarist are fascist only when they articulate into a global ideological project (Zizek 2001: 243; see also Arendt 1975: 415). In other words, the term “fascism” is not relevant to situations utterly different from the conditions of WWII Italy, Germany and Japan that each had a global ideological project (see Toscano 2017 and 2020).

A new term is needed to define the conditions shaping our lives. We must think about how specific words shape our desires. When we read or hear words from a preferred platform we nod in agreement with the connoted meanings. For the message to stick it must be repeated. That is why in the build up to the 2020 election in America QAnoners heard daily from Trump and I from Jamie Harrison, the Democrat senatorial candidate for South Carolina. The key to this ability to tailor-make and render attractive a political bubble is semantic malleability: Your mob is my community; your compliance with the president’s invitation to attack Congress is my treason; your patriot is my domestic terrorist; your truth is my fake news.

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5 Ashoka University political scientist Pratab Bhanu Mehta, for instance, declared that Narendra Modi’s government in India ticked “the checklist of fascist qualities... colloquially speaking, this is a fascist government.” But the analytical benefit of this correspondence between Modi and Mussolini is limited as I argue below. See <https://thewire.in/education/pratap-bhanu-mehta-resigns-as-professor-at-ashoka-university>.

This malleability emerges out of the saturation of the public sphere with empty signifiers, words with fungible meanings. The ether echoes with voices competing for netizens' attention offering them information they believe because a trusted platform and its publicist have assigned words meanings they recognize. Never before have so many people read so much or had a virtual platform that creates and projects their version of reality. Eyes glued to screens, ear buds in, netizens attend to an authoritative voice that gives words meanings they think they understand even when others use these same words but assign different meanings. Digitally attuned but functionally illiterate, many netizens mouth the words they hear and read without being sure they understand until their platform's publicist dictates the absolute meaning. It is like the millions of non-Arab Muslims who "read" the Qur'an daily without knowing the meaning of the Arabic words they decipher and mouth until an authority translates them into the language they understand. Hardt and Negri refer to this process as "taking the word... Sometimes this involves coining new terms but more often it is a matter of taking back and giving new significance to existing ones... Note that many times this operation of translation has served strategically to confuse and falsify the political reality... Every radical enterprise in political thought has to redefine our political vocabulary" (Hardt & Negri 2017: 151, 152). In other words, translators may also be confusers or falsifiers who invite individuals to become part of a community whose words they trust and understand, shocked that others assign those same words other meanings. Read, for example, the language of a far right white supremacist site called mymilitia.com: "We are a growing community of Americans that believe that the supreme laws of our Constitution must be diligently protected and upheld." The site presents itself as a "forum for free speech" and "An American Patriot Network" that helps like-minded people to find each other. Now, imagine you don't know that these like-minded people are promoters of violence against non-whites, Jews and foreigners. How would you read these words? Would they encourage you to trust the platform that identified you as a likely member?

To understand the new logic of machinic assemblage that identifies and targets individuals, it must be named anew and not locked in the grid of an old, historically freighted term. Indeed, "one of the central tasks of political thought is to struggle over concepts, to clarify or transform their meaning" (Hardt & Negri 2017: xix). Lucas Kello warns against subsuming "new trends in political action within familiar deductive theories... the obstacles to understanding arising from old theory are enormous" (Kello 2017: 248, 250). Žižek likewise attacks the use of old terms like postindustrial for a shift in paradigm that function as a "theoretical *stopgap* [far from] enabling us to think the historical reality

they designate, they relieve us of the duty to think—or even actively *prevent* us from thinking” (2001: 136, 138). In other words, to use an old term like fascism or totalitarianism to describe the conditions and personalities of the cyberage stops thought because the term does not derive from observed analysis but rather attaches old epithets on to new realities. In so doing, the old term today masks elements of the cyberage that have facilitated unprecedented levels of activism. We need a new more salient term. Language matters. Names matter. The wrong word blocks thought. The right word unlocks it.

### Cyberatomism Defined

I have coined the neologism “cyberatomism” to depict this new historical, ontological condition in which the rapid and repeated dissemination of information and ideologies to millions sparks protests. This is not the first time that I have recognized a condition without a name that needed a name to be understood. After 9/11, Muslim women became highly visible as representatives of their religion. As such, they acquired a singular identity collapsing religion and gender into one that some vilified and others praised. I named this identity: the Muslimwoman. In 2008, a roundtable of feminist scholars of Islam discussed my neologism Muslimwoman. Some liked it and others were not so sure. I was asked to write a rejoinder and the discussion was published in the *Journal for Feminist Studies of Religion*. I quote what I wrote thirteen years ago at some length because today I recognize a similar if broader need for a name to define another condition without a name: “There are many situations, conditions, and identities that we recognize but cannot name. The lack of a name does not matter until it does; at that point, it becomes urgent to articulate succinctly what before had been dimly felt and poorly expressed. The process of naming is fraught: Does the name really explain anything? Does it have analytical value? Is it worth the effort of adopting a new name for what had been nameless? Neologisms are routinely distrusted because they compel a rethinking of the familiar. Once coined, however, the name expands understanding and allows for new discursive structures” (cooke 2008). It is my hope that cyberatomism also will expand understanding and allow for new discursive structures.

Technology permeates every fiber of our being. We are always—even while asleep—available for seduction, eager to be sold exactly what we want without knowing that was what we wanted. Cyber exploiters extract valuable information that they distribute to marketers. These marketers include recruiters for Islamic State militants and brides in Syria or white supremacists in the U.S. or

Amazon advertisers around the globe or Russian hackers intent on skewing an American election. This does not feel like propaganda just interesting, enticing information.

There are two sources for the term cyberatomism: atomism and atomization. As ontology, cyberatomism can be traced back to the ancient Greeks but also to tenth century Muslim theologians. As a political theory, cyberatomism connects to Hannah Arendt's notion of atomization. Each provides useful precedents for the term even while being clearly distinguished from the condition of simultaneous fragmentation and connection that characterizes today's cyberspace.

Ancient Greek ontologists espoused an atomist natural philosophy that "denied divine intervention or design, regarding every composite of atoms as produced purely by material interactions of bodies, and accounting for the perceived properties of macroscopic bodies as produced by these same atomic interactions. Atomists formulated views on ethics, theology, political philosophy and epistemology consistent with this physical system."<sup>6</sup> Over a millennium later, Muslim speculative theologians developed this natural philosophy into its opposite, i.e. a "physical account of God's creation that was reasoned and reasonable... they wanted to show not only how the atoms were held together but also to prove that they could only be held together by God" (Montgomery 2013: 344, 358). In both cases, atomists were interested in ontology, namely, existence, being and reality. They were not concerned with social organization.

Atomization, by contrast, is a crucial characteristic of mass social organization and control. As an ideology, Hannah Arendt writes, atomization is not "interested in the miracle of being," only in the control of individuals through terror and isolation that disables opposition to dominant powers. Atomization demands "total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member [deriving a] sense of having a place in the world only from his [sic] belonging to a movement" (Arendt 1975: 469, 323–324). Loyalty to the movement entails direct connection to the leader "without the intervening levels of a functioning hierarchy" (405, see also Theweleit 1987: 434).

In the atomized condition of 20th century cultures like North Korea, Syria and Iraq, individuals were welded to each other in a single mass connected and obedient to the totalitarian ruler. There was safety in the bonding, danger in separation and isolation. When individuals/ atoms were alone and unsure of others' interpretations of their words and actions, fearful of their intentions to report, they perceived all others as threatening. This condition characterized

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6 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atomism-ancient/#AtomPartTheoScie>.

several other countries under authoritarian rule. In Hafiz Asad's Syria, where I lived for several months in the mid-1990s, the fear of friends and relatives who might report disloyal words or action to the *mukhabarat*, or secret police, assured strict self-censorship; the walls were no longer described as "having" ears, they "were" ears (cooke 2007). This fear created a condition that Arendt called loneliness, "the beginning of terror... the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (Arendt 1975: 474, 475). To be solitary but not lonely may be spiritually and creatively fulfilling; to be lonely is to be cut off from all that is nurturing and to experience social death.

Cyberatomism contains elements from these antecedents. The Greek and Muslim atomists were ontologists explaining the deep nature of being and not its social experience. With or without divine intervention the universe of atoms somehow held together. The 20th century atomization Arendt analyzes was the desired outcome of an ideological project to bind the masses in terrified obedience to a leader (Arendt 1975: 466). Atomization deprives individuals of agency and their sense of belonging to the world, rendering them superfluous. Today, the word "atomization" is sometimes used to describe a political and cultural climate but without specifying the political project or the psychological condition it engenders. Writing about the Bahraini authorities' digital control of the protestors, Marc Jones asserts "community and networks are in many ways seen as subversive; atomization and antisocial distancing are now the new normal" (Jones 2020, 747). In his article on social media influencers, Joshua Citarella argues that social "atomization and economic precarity are sending increasing numbers of people out on to the web in search of answers" (Citarella 2021). But there is much more to our current condition that has been transformed by information technology than atomization.

In an atomized society individuals are held together by terror, but in a cyberatomistic society desire and pleasure provide the glue. This is not the pleasure that Harry Harootunian analyzes in his discussion of Adorno's 1951 "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." What he calls the "artificial bond of a *libidinal* nature" emerges out of the submission of the individual body to the masses through identification with the narcissistic leader (Harootunian 2021: 5). Cyberatomistic pleasure is individual and far from loyal either to the mass or the leader. From a cornucopia of options, netizens choose everything from goods to ideas to political affiliation to religious communities. Every click engenders pleasure. Instead of suffering from growing isolation that threatens loneliness, netizens are turned into pleasure-seeking docile bodies. They are becoming cyber addicts in need of therapy but without the linguistic, intellectual or social resources or even will to find that treatment.

The cyber revolution has enabled isolated survival without the terror and loneliness that characterize individuals living in atomized totalitarian systems. We know this is true because in 2020 we lived through a deadly pandemic that confined most of us to our homes wherever we were on the planet. This universal experience of physical isolation and seclusion provides evidence of our radical fragmentation into atoms but also demonstrates our ability to survive it. Without technology, deprivation of physical sociality could have been psychologically and for some even physically lethal. Connecting isolated individuals virtually, technology saved netizens from loneliness by providing social media instruments to function alone in the real world. Networked individuation, being alone together, stops solitude from turning into loneliness.

### **Where Have All the Leaders Gone, Long Time Passing?**

What distinguishes these protests of the second decade of the new millennium is the invisibility, or better, the interchangeability of briefly visible, soft leaders. Where is the next generation of iconic leaders like Che and Arafat and MLK, Jr.? Those twentieth-century icons had clear and consistent agendas that became synonymous with who they were. They spread their messages through networks and chains of messengers who distributed leaflets or, as in the case of the 1987–91 Palestinian Intifada, spray-painted walls with instructions for the next gathering. Before the cyberge, it was often the charisma and consistent agenda of the leader that drew loyal followers who spread the call to action by word of mouth. But there were also less iconic leaders of mass protests, who “belonged to antiwar organizations and identity-based, student, or church groups... Movement leaders “steered” the crowds, managing crucial resources like access to funding. Championing a carefully crafted narrative, they performed the role of “social movement entrepreneurs,” monopolizing the cultural production of the movements... Movement organizations and their media were the voice of the protesters, actively interpreting collective identity and leadership” (Milan 2015: 4). Traditional movement leaders controlled groups rather than individuals.

Today it looks as though people with more flexible identities instinctively know where to go and when to gather, even if the protest is to take place at some distance and almost immediately. They do not need a specific leader or organization to bring them together. As Moroccan social theorists Said Graiouid and Taieb Belghazi wrote about the Arab Spring in an analysis that applies to all protest movements, people seem to self-organize into a collective that “finds an outlet in everyday spatial practices where body proxemics, noise,

song and smoke (as in the suqs, streets, and hookah cafes in Khan Khalili in Old Cairo or old medinas in Morocco, Tunisia or Jordan) create an elevating and intoxicating tapestry wherein subjectivities simultaneously acknowledge and transcend material limitations of corporal reality and immerse in the ethereal ecstasy of the crowd” (Graiouid & Belghazi 2014, 29). In the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, pundits pondered the dilemma of this absence of identifiable leaders without paying attention to the ongoing role of social media and the intoxicating crowd dynamic that sustain an event. But then they opined that the protests in West Asia and North Africa had failed because without a leader the protestors had no agenda. In other words, leader = agenda. They did not consider the role of poetry, street art and videos in ensuring the survival of the movement.

But do the people not know what it is that they’re demanding? Yes, they do but less because the agenda is embodied in a leader than because they have signed on to an action that appeals to them and whose narrative they can tailor to suit their evolving identities. This self-generated narrative, Dutch professor of new media and digital culture Stefania Milan writes, participates in crafting a personalized collective identity that “allows individuals to take along their own cultural-ideological background and grievances, adapting them in dialectic interactions with their fellows. The resulting collective identity, created by juxtaposition and selection, can virtually fit anyone since it is built on malleable minimum common denominators rather than ideological strongholds impermeable to individual interpretations” (Milan 2015: 6). In this cyberatomistic context, individuals-in-the-group with particular interests and grievances that they turn into their own narratives acquire a visibility previously unavailable to them. This new visibility allows them to interpellate others “by means of tags, citations, and mentions” (Milan 2015: 7). These leaderless protests attended by networked individuals and powered by digital media that extend the duration of the protest beyond its actual occurrence in real time<sup>7</sup> have become the new norm.

The question of leadership has preoccupied commentators, and rightly so since diverse crowds do seem to respond to whoever is holding a bullhorn. But that spurs another question. If there are no more Ches, Arafats and MLKs today, then who are the women and men holding the bullhorn? They are what I call ventriloquial platform-publicists. Like the familiar but now forgotten Charlie the ventriloquist dummy invented in the mid-1930s, the platform

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7 Digital media allow for the infinite replay of an action and in the process “collective identity is continuously activated and recursively reinforced as opposed to surfacing only in occasion of meetings or demonstrations” (Milan 2015: 7).

publicist is not the originator of the ideas expressed but rather a spokesperson for the agenda of a digital platform that assembles a team of investors, programmers, advisors, and content providers with the machine. What is crucial about the platform is its invisibility or better its apparent neutrality. Milan explains that algorithms “create an illusion of platform neutrality. They also conceal the presence of... bots or virtual agents that perform automated tasks unbeknownst to human users” (Milan 2015: 3). Speaking on behalf of we know not who or what, ventriloquial publicists target each networked individual with a particular, appealing worldview.

In the age of cyberatomism, leadership fragments so that each operation, however long or short, will produce its leader-for-the-occasion. When the action is over, the groups slide back into their digital cells that may split into contending cells if the action fails and requires scapegoats. Each cell, old or new, will bow to its leader-for-the-while, while waiting for the next Charlie tweet summoning them to join with the same or other groups with their own leaders-for-the-while for another cyber-mediated action.

But some may object that I have overlooked one spectacular leader, former President Trump, and his role in assembling and leading idolaters. Ruler of the most powerful country in the world with loyal followers who jumped at his every beck and call, was he not a leader? No, he is a reality TV star with no ideas of his own who could not have commanded the kind of following he achieved after 2016 without snagging a platform. Consider the cover of the January 10, 2020 *Politico Magazine*, titled “Repeater of the Free World.” Its image illustrates how Trump has long played the role of dummy, even if the editors do not use the metaphor of a ventriloquist’s dummy. The image features Trump’s distinctive silhouette with a large red bullhorn cutting across his cheek and ending between his lips. A Lilliputian dressed like Trump in gray pants, white shirt and red tie stands on his right shoulder just below the ear. The little man is holding the thin end of the bullhorn in front of his shouting mouth. His words shoot through the bullhorn and spray out of the silhouette’s wide-open mouth. The cover title reads: “Trump’s Art of the Steal: How Donald Trump rode to power by parroting other people’s fringe ideas, got himself impeached for it—and might prevail anyway.”<sup>8</sup> Seven months out of office, Trump continued to parrot dangerous, fringe ideas, for example, anti-vaxxers should use ivermectin, a deworming medicine for horses, instead of getting a Covid-19 shot.

So how did Trump get his bullhorn? Is it not possible that the QAnoners, Wolverine Watchmen, Boogaloo Bois, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, 3Percenters and other white supremacist groups with widely divergent interests and

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8 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/10/donald-trump-art-of-the-steal-096841>.

concerns recruited Trump to speak on behalf of a platform created and constantly tweaked by a machinic assemblage of enforcers with, maybe, Q at the forefront with Q-Web's Deep State Mapping Project? If that is the case, they will have to look hard to find as powerful a publicist as the former president of the United States. That does not mean that they will disappear. They will re-appear elsewhere, intent on pursuing their hate-driven actions at a local or regional level.

When ventriloquial publicists are deplatformed, their followers move on in search of a better fit that a platform's algorithmic harvesting of information about their disgruntlement may lure them into another more appealing bubble. This is what happened when Trump was deplatformed. A striking example comes from Ethan Nordean one of the Proud Boys leaders who on 14 May 2021 spewed his disgust: "Alright I'm gonna say it. FUCK TRUMP. Fuck him more than Biden. I've followed this guy for 4 years and given everything and lost it all... We are now and always have been on our own. So glad he was able to pardon a bunch of degenerates as his last move and shit on us on the way out."<sup>9</sup> The platform was losing its allure, and followers started to look for another bullhorn to blast out their bile, because they do have an agenda, their hatred of anyone who might replace them.

### Conclusion

We are living in the age of cyberatomism. The cyber revolution has fragmented society into atoms connecting with other compatible atoms via digital platforms that can be stealthily used to modify behavior on a massive scale. Behavior modification can lead to unexpected action including political participation in ways not previously imagined. To understand how protests work today, it is not enough to consider only those that we judge to be morally justifiable, since others may consider these same causes and actions morally reprehensible. We must study different protest movements with opposing agendas, all using the same words like patriotic, mob, or racist.

Whether we support or deplore the numerous protests of the 21st century, what matters is their context. They are all taking place within a cyberatomistic environment. Many protestors are risking their lives for dignity and justice. Asma Mahfouz launched the 2011 Egyptian uprising through her Facebook page. From 2013 the Black Lives Matter demonstrators have used social media to

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9 [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-member-charged-in-capitol-attack-felt-betrayed-by-trump-you-left-us\\_n\\_609e92a8e4bodaf2b5a0e012](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-member-charged-in-capitol-attack-felt-betrayed-by-trump-you-left-us_n_609e92a8e4bodaf2b5a0e012).

crowdsource for actions. In 2021, the people of Myanmar used smartphones to call compatriots to the streets where they stayed with the corpses of their slain companions to protest the military coup d'état. At the same time, Palestinian protestors crowd sourced opposition to the Israeli government and settler provocations in a Jerusalem neighborhood that crescendoed in the violent confrontation between Gaza's Hamas and the Israeli military. On the 6 January 2021, Trump used his Twitter account to invite white supremacists to invade the US Capitol to protest what he called the stolen election. They obeyed, screaming death to Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence. Videos of the invasion broadcast around the world show individuals waving smartphones in the air to shoot the insurrection but also to stay in close touch with others, especially the military-trained self-appointed leaders who knew how to steer the crowd through the underground labyrinth of tunnels. Thanks to their enthusiasm to record their actions they have provided the prosecution with evidence.<sup>10</sup> Whether we salute protestors or deem them criminal, whether we favor those who protest on the left or on the right, they are all subject to the conditions of cyberatomism. In all cases, digital platforms mobilize the assemblage and then organize the event. In all cases, the protestors use digital media to plot, stay together, invade, patrol and dominate the territory they want to occupy.

Behavior modification and disinformation on this massive yet individually targeted scale is new and can only happen under cyberatomistic conditions. Tech giants with their engineers and corporate investors bombard networked atoms daily with petitions and invitations to protests for justice, rights and peace but also for violent action. The need for cyber info-security analysts and engineers to find a way out of the vicious cycle of warring behavioral modification algorithms is becoming more and more urgent. Atomized into docile bodies, brains rewired, hating new enemies, bonding with strangers, and living in deadly fear of mysterious others, netizen atoms must become digitally literate if they are to survive with their brains intact and their hopes alive.

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<sup>10</sup> After the failed insurrection Google stopped sending advertisements to sites like mymilitia.com that then started to lose their members.

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