RIGHT TO PROTEST

What they don’t want you to see: On the visibility and repression of popular protest

Andrés Antebi

"Procession of the Insubmissive Pussy" ("Processó del Cony Insubmís") in Barcelona, during the demonstration against sexist violence in 2019. Picture by Jordi Borràs

Before we begin, let us pause for a moment before the glow of dozens of burning churches in Barcelona in 1909. From the systematic destruction of sacred images by the convent burners (*cremaconvents*) during the so-called Tragic Week (*la Setmana Tràgica*), something was born. Among the smoking ruins of those temples, demolished by popular fury, a new visual sacredness was beginning to form through photography.

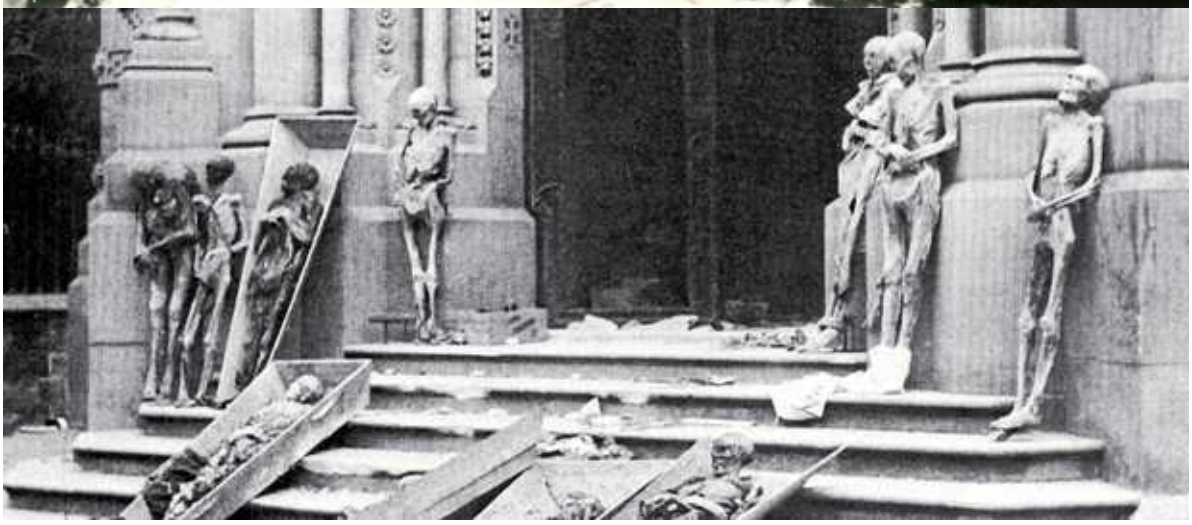
The old religious images were replaced by “new and modern” ones, the result of the work of photographers who, with their heavy plate cameras, from the street to the laboratory, laid the foundations of photojournalism in Catalonia. Among the enormous quantity of photos published in the days following the insurrection –an authentic editorial phenomenon that catapulted the social penetration of the graphic press– a series of postcards stands out.

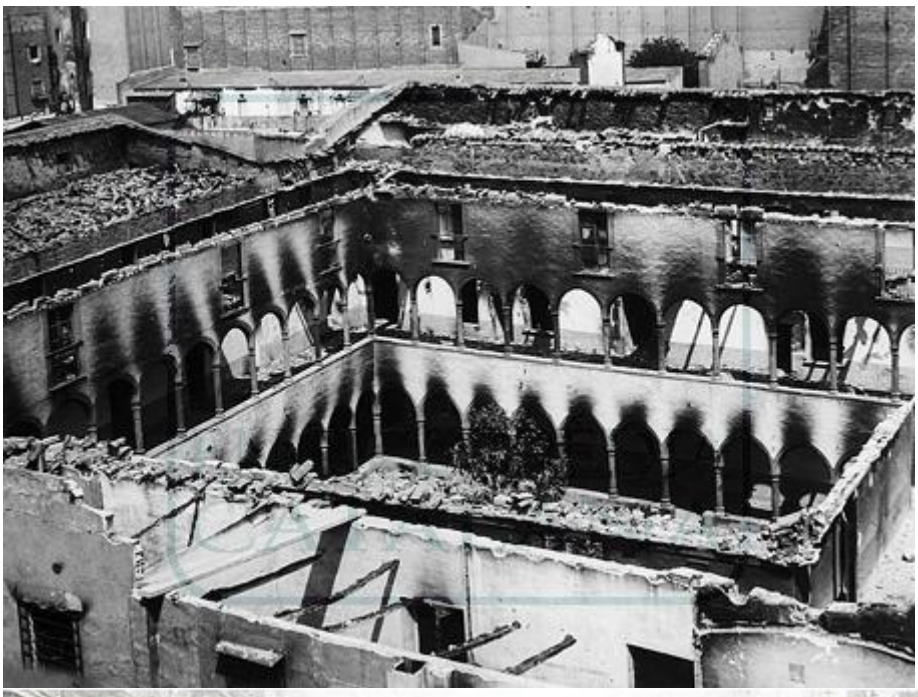
They show the interior of the attacked buildings, empty, with the play of light in which the sun's rays cross dense twilight environments until they land in the places that the high altars had recently occupied. This is explained magnificently by Juan José Lahuerta (2009) in his essay '*L'esglesia cremada. Record de Barcelona*', in which he analyses the controversial writings of Joan Maragall, shortly after the revolt. For the author, the Maragallian "ray of dark light" is consolidated in that series of photographic images:

The one that shines here, in this call, is not the power of the divine, but –and in another way!– that of photography, more than just photography. In these photos, the marks of the fires are the signs of the necessary restoration work, and so they are offered: repeated, in series, standardised, reproduced a thousand times, printed, commercialised, sold, sent (…) Photograph of the ruin and the empty space: This is, then, the new power of images: the artistic economy, born out of fire, hundreds of new images born out of iconoclasm (Lahuerta: 2009, p. 130).

Metaphors of a deep change of scenery are frequently found in those photographs, where the long exposure times lead to the appearance of monsters on paper –whether these are police forces or demonstrators– liminal, spectral beings, blurred by the barricades or in front of the doors of a devastated temple. The impact of the insurrectionary fires and also of the camera flashes that multiplied their effect terrified the bourgeoisie, which unleashed an unprecedented wave of repression against the workers' movement.

At the same time, from the official media of the time, a certain imagery of workers' activism began to be put into circulation, associating it with barbarism and irrational violence, which was quickly countered by increasingly numerous strategies aimed at worker denunciation and self-representation. Arrests, torture, death sentences and censorship. Hand to hand battles, street battles and image wars in the media. A crazy coalman dancing with the mummy of a nun, against the dark background of what was happening in the dungeons of the prison-castle of Montjuïc.





Images of streets, buildings and temples of Barcelona during the Tragic Week (La Setmana Tràgica) in 1909

Sources: Barcelona City Council Municipal Archive, ("Setmana Tràgica: crònica documental" exhibition); Wikipedia; Òmnium Cultural and Institut Viladomat

Shortly before the beginning of the unstoppable rise of photography, two emblematic paintings by Ramón Casas, painted during those years, helped to explain how the forms of protest, surveillance and punishment of dissident bodies were changing. *Garrot vil* (1894) depicts one of the last executions in a public square in the city, and *La càrrega* (1903) shows the dispersion, swords in hand, of a massive workers' demonstration during the first general strike in Catalonia.

La càrrega, by Ramon Casas (1903). Source: Wikipedia

After a long time –centuries– during which repressive action and punishment were exemplary spectacles for all to see, at the end of the 19th century there was a shift towards hiding the state's monopoly on violence, leading to an increasing degree of secrecy. Thus, the history of social conflict from then on would be determined by those images that can or cannot be seen, that are only visible in a disguised way or that are put into mass circulation, if the powers that be so decide.

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However, the desire to conceal repressive/wrongful state actions that marked the protest cycle in the 20th century is being seriously questioned in the first decades of the 21st century, a period marked by fury and an outpouring of images (*Fontcuberta*: 2016). There are thousands upon thousands of raised hands holding mobile phones at demonstrations. Any passer-by is armed with a camera, anyone can record and broadcast instantly, at the most unexpected moment, what they don't want you to see.

'*Film it, film it, photograph his badge number, don't hide it!*' were the screams of a migrant boy a few days ago, while he was was violently beaten in the street by the Catalan police –*Mossos d'Esquadra*–. '*Film them all, film them, please!*', another young person asked, from the ground, for people to film officers after an incident involving the use of electric tasers

outside a psychiatric facility. A video uploaded to the Internet shows that the shooting of a homeless person by the local police in Barcelona –*Guàrdia Urbana*– was not committed in self-defence, as the officers had alleged. In each and every eviction a small swarm of cameras monitors the actions of the police against each family. At demonstrations, too.

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From an anthropological perspective, a demonstration essentially consists of making oneself visible as a political community in the street through a series of mechanisms and bodily or communicative actions that interrupt the ordinary dynamics of daily life. Whatever the reasons for the action, walking together, concentrating in the same area, joining hands to form a human chain, dancing, chanting or shouting, violently attacking symbols perceived as oppressive, are different forms of action resulting from the will of a certain social group in order to convey a very precise message: 'look at us, we are here, we have something to say'.

Peaceful acts, uprisings, revolts or revolutions, popular protests are rituals expressed in the very act of showing oneself publicly, of making oneself seen, of appearing. "What makes us rise up?" asks Georges Didi Huberman (2017) in a poetic statement in the wake of his work, Uprisings:

"A variety of psychological, physical and social forces. With these we transform the immobile into movement, dejection into energy, submission into rebellion, renunciation into a swelling joy. Uprisings occur as gestures: arms are raised, hearts beat faster, bodies unfold, mouths are freed. Uprisings never come without thoughts, which often become phrases: people reflect, express themselves, argue, sing, scrawl a message, make a poster, distribute a pamphlet, and write a book of resistance. These are the forms through which all this can appear, become visible in the public arena. It is all about images".

Closely related to religious celebrations and popular festivals, with which they share a large part of their scenographic repertoire, demonstrations structurally possess characteristics similar to processions, marches, cavalcades, dances, parades and other similar forms of moving, in which perfectly distinguishable blocks of people cover a certain physical and perceptive territory. By positioning themselves, crossing or surrounding the area, they declare it in some way as their own.

When, at the end of the 19th century, mass protests began to carry greater weight in the political and social life of European cities, Barcelona became one of its main capitals. Two forms of solidarity, the Catalan solidarity and the solidarity of the workers, created very different types of protest, which ended up creating a peculiar breeding ground. These practices are now part of the city's traditional fabric. In this sense, works such as that of Temma Kaplan (2003) have shown to what extent the emergence of 'la Rosa de Foc' (the Rose of Fire) had to do with the close relationship between solemn processions, carnival parades and protest marches, as a means of social communication:

"No one in late-nineteenth-century Barcelona would have questioned the importance of

rituals and pageants. There were several religious celebrations a month and all political groups had their own festivals as well. But what did all these various community events really mean? Before radio and television, street rituals were, in fact, the main medium for communicating ideas. Processions of one political colouration or another provided visual tableaux of the different perspectives of the social order and were at least as persuasive as any other form of debate. Mass demonstrations signalled a community of shared values. They reaffirmed participants of their own strengths and intimidated opponents".

Communicating ideas. That is why street protest rituals perfectly embody what Hannah Arendt called a "space of appearance": they make it easier, at once and in a clear manner, to enter the political arena with a voice of one's own. By barging in and interrupting, body to body, they express the popular will at being in the social picture.

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That is why it is not by chance that throughout its history popular mobilisations have been so closely linked to the production and distribution of images. From those distant, often violent, nineteenth-century protests, the offspring of industrialisation and the exponential growth of an urban, exploited and individualised population, to today's expanded and spectacular multi-site demonstrations. From political publications known as '*Diarios de monos*', owing to the blue overalls (*monos*, in Spanish) worn by the militia during the Spanish Civil War, with their first photographs on paper, to the current war of cultural guerrillas, where connectivity, instantaneousness and the saturation of images lead to overlaps and a continuous superimposition of such spaces of appearance.

In all of them, yesterday and today, the recording and distribution of photographic/filmic images has played a decisive role in an equation that always works in a back and forth movement that which powers itself: as a device for making a statement and gaining social visibility, the protest becomes a primary subject of graphic recording. And as the primary subject of graphic recording, the protest becomes a device for making a statement and gaining social visibility.

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5 May 1985. Hundreds of people arrive at Barcelona's beach wearing feather headdresses and carrying axes, spears and peace pipes. They are leading a demonstration against Spain's entry into NATO and in protest against US President Ronald Reagan's visit. Along the way, from the Plaça de Catalunya, the redskins run through the crowd, drop to the

ground suddenly and rise again, waving their hands to the sky. They sing and dance among dozens of dummies, made of the most diverse materials, which satirise Reagan, Felipe González and other leaders. At the end of the journey they bury a big hatchet.

After years spent semi-hidden underground, in the transition from black and white to colour, protests were once again to be found in the early years of democracy, laying the foundations for a spectacular turnaround that would foreshadow much of the current protest structures on display.

During the Franco years, the military boot and Catholic paraphernalia had overwhelmingly dominated the scene, although not even during the Years of Lead did popular protests cease, lightning-fast events of which, in general, little is known. Virtually no image remains of them. Being underground meant acting at full speed and with maximum discretion. It is not by chance that the protests that accompanied the fall of the regime –Pro Amnesty 1976, *La Diada* (National Day of Catalonia) 1977, Anti-Rape 1977, Gay Rights 1977– were widely photographed. The photos were like a conspiracy, breaking decades of silence and secrecy. Some, such as those taken by Pilar Aymerich or Manel Armengol, who managed to convey the harshness of the repressive actions of the Armed Police Corps (the so-called 'greys') to the international press, are true icons of the so-called Transition and have established a visual paradigm of what the popular recovery of the streets was like after forty years of dictatorship.

Image of the first LGBT community demonstration in Spain, held in Barcelona on June 26, 1977

Picture of Manel Armengol on police repression in Barcelona in 1976, during the Transition

That strong popular desire to meet again in the public arena, to be visible in the street without an iron hand lurking, became the generator of a new story, soon after known as the 'Barcelona model', whose central theme was the possibility of successfully combining local identification, economic development and social cohesion.

> The spectacularisation of demonstrations coincided with the universalisation of the use of personal cameras: increasingly crowded, the protests were being turned into emotional mega-events designed mainly to have a media impact

Thus, many citizen movements began to be encouraged by the municipal power itself almost as an urban marketing strategy, a necessary part of a new image of a modern, dynamic, life-affirming city that was 'open to the world' and wanted to promote itself in the world market of cities. The new role of the socially aware citizen was one of the raw materials with which a new image of the city was being woven, an international brand that was based on the absence of conflict through continual participation in festivals.

The spectacularisation of demonstrations coincided in part with the universalisation of the use of personal cameras, already in circulation years ago, which gave the demonstrator the possibility of recording the progress of the action themselves. From then on, new patterns of performance were established in the protestant dynamics marked by an abundance of costumes, music, improvised choreography, giant mosaics and plays of colours. A

scenographic ensemble that helped to create a friendly, civic and integrating vision of popular protests. Increasingly crowded, the protests were being turned into emotional mega-events designed mainly to have a media impact.

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Very Big Data. A gigapixel photo is a gigantic, billion-pixel, digital panoramic image, usually resulting from the laborious composition of thousands of photographs into a single image. Technically, its production is complex, both from the point of view of the shot, in which robotic supports are usually used to shoot during the scanning, and in the post-production of the image, where specialised software facilitates the 'stitching' of each of the photographs.

In the 2013 National Day of Catalonia, *La Diada*, the independence movement had already been showing its strength in the streets for two years with increasingly large demonstrations. A major challenge was posed: to unite the whole country (480 km) through a great human chain, the *Via Catalana*, in which participants would hold hands at the agreed time (17:14). The call, under the slogan 'occupy your place in history' was again a success, catalysed this time through an unprecedented photo essay: a gigapixel photo in which 800 photographers and 200 volunteers worked for over a year to finally compose an image, starting from 107,000 snapshots. Photography, the visual record of the event, literally became one of its central motifs. The editorial of one of the newspapers most involved in the movement celebrated the event:

"The Via Catalana is a video clip, it is a gigaphoto, and there are now millions of videos, millions of individual photographs. Never before had such a massive event been held, never had the whole country moved so up and down in a day, and surely never had so many photos been shot in such few hours. Pictures that are saved on mobiles or computers, pictures sent and resent in WhatsApp groups". (Carles Capdevila, ARA, September 15, 2013).

In addition to the importance given to a visual experiment that defines the action as a whole, there is also the text that exposes and synthesises some of the main elements of a change of paradigm in which the centrality of the image of a demand, recorded by individualised devices and disseminated in real time via all networks, is absolute.

Image of the 'Via Catalana' protest, in 2013, on section 675 in Figueres. The final gigaphoto included 107,000 photographs like this. Source: Joan Sabater/El Punt Avui

Today the pounding of bodies on the concrete can no longer be separated from its virtual counterpart. Information circulates from the street to the networks and vice versa, feeding back into both spheres, enhanced by the increasing connectivity of individual devices and their vast visual recording capacity.

The successive pro-independence demonstrations that reached a climax during the referendum of 1 October 2017 have been an example of a spectacular mega event in recent years, which, as was made clear on that day, has not lost its capacity to monitor and denounce the repressive action of the state. Media and thousands of micro cameras focused on the arrival of the police vans and the involvement of police officers who used extreme violence at the voting centres. The viral nature of those images gave the protest a global diffusion in real time and altered the repressive strategy of the authorities.

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How does the frenzied circulation of images influence the double visibility (the popular-spectacularised protest and the exposure of police violence) that characterises contemporary social conflict?

On the one hand, as the strength with which the Black Lives Matter movement has taken hold following the killing of George Floyd has shown, there is a direct relationship between the capacity of the police to record and disseminate violent action and citizen support for global demonstrations. The US police is well known for its trigger-happy approach to black citizens –in 2020 alone, they also ended the lives of Ryshard Brooks, Daniel Prude, Beronna Taylor and Atatiana Jeffersson– but the video of Floyd's death by asphyxiation, which reached millions of people in a matter of hours, has been at the top of the most important citizen demonstrations in the history of the USA.

On the other hand, following the trend set in motion by movements such as the Arab Spring, *15-M* and Occupy, the hypervisibility of the daily life of the recent wave of anti-racist protests has been one of their main driving forces. The power of micro videos disseminated on the Internet, such as those of monuments to slave traders or colonists knocked down by demonstrators, beheaded, written on, and submerged in the depths of

rivers, end up attracting the conventional media and exponentially multiplying the dissemination and social penetration of the protest. Once again, iconoclasm, the destruction of cult images –in this case, national heroes, supposed heroes of civil society– provides the basis for 'new and current' images that have the capacity to remove the foundations of the official story and reconfigure the perceptive spectrum of society.

In the case of the anti-racist movement, the ad infinitum increase in visuality, the saturation of the circulation of images facilitated by digital technology, has even shattered the communicative sphere of its own demands. Across networks, influencers promote campaigns to support the movement through racist performances such as blackface, and in the streets through streams of selfies, posers or fashion shows, using the visual strength of the crowds as a mere set.

Black Lives Matter protest in New York.
Source: The All-Nite Images

A protester raises a sign with the slogan ‘Black Lives Matter’. Source: GoToVan from Vancouver

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As we bring this paper to a close, thousands of people are demonstrating in various cities in France against the new global security law proposal, initially aimed at prohibiting the recording of images of police and gendarmes during the course of their duties. The government has had to backtrack, as was the case in Spain with the so-called Gag Law, in force since 2015, whose most controversial article, similar to the one in French law, was recently overturned by the Constitutional Court. In the Spanish case, beyond the legal text, the rumours of punishment ended up working as an agent of popular self-censorship: the law did not prohibit filming or photography but rather the dissemination of the images, but many people ended up convinced of the censorship.

The objective is always very similar: to criminalise acts of protest that are not channelled through bureaucracy and to attempt to minimise certain forms of audiovisual recording and broadcasting with no intermediaries. This is especially true for those who can testify to abuses and at the same time increase the viral nature of events, at a time when the so-called public arena, which is less and less public, is in dispute.

> Power maintains its monopoly on violence, but faced with its own reflection it has begun to lose, street by street, night by night, its monopoly over its own image

The situation points to a reaction on a global scale to neutralise counter-surveillance and the use of judicial channels to curb, in the name of public security, an unstoppable cascade of evidence that, here and there, proves the excesses of the armed forces that supposedly work to safeguard that very same security. Ongoing coercive offensives are spreading across the globe and include measures of all kinds: the specific blocking of websites, the filtering of images, videos or keywords, the removal of publications or individual accounts, pressure on companies that manage network traffic, mass spying and, in the most extreme cases, going back into the dark by shutting down the Internet in certain conflict situations.

Images of violence, the violence of images. Power maintains its monopoly on violence, but faced with its own reflection it has begun to lose, street by street, night by night, its monopoly over its own image.

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