Creating and analysing protest: What dance research can do

Dance and theatre scholar Professor **Susanne Foellmer** briefly sketches how choreography can be used as an analytical lens through which to scrutinise the power relations of protesting

Recently, public protesting had to find other ways of expression when most of the world found itself in a first lockdown in Spring 2020 due to the pandemic situation caused by the then-novel coronavirus. However, social and political discontent and topics of injustice continue to matter, and the pandemic added even more causes for public debate. Hence, protesters had to find other ways of voicing their concerns. Especially the first months of the pandemic in 2020 produced an array of creative ideas for how to handle discontent differently in the public sphere, often meticulously choreographing the events in order to obey physical distancing rules, thereby showing a new display of activism. Choreography can serve as a tool to create protests: actions such as One Billion Rising (OBR), for instance – meeting annually on Valentine's Day in order to protest violence against women on a global scale – have been using choreographed modes of protesting as   >>

well. Participants learn a pre-scripted choreography via YouTube, then go and dance it on the day in a somewhat spontaneous, albeit pre-planned, flash mob.

Hence, finding new and creative ways of protesting in order to gain public attention is not a novel development. Furthermore, choreography can be also used as an analytical lens through which to scrutinise the power relations of protesting, for example, as I will briefly sketch in this article. More recently, social movements such as Occupy have probed new approaches to facilitating durational activities in the public sphere, such as on location at Wall Street, New York. Along with this went the desire and the need to rearticulate power relations within the movement as well, that is, finding possibilities to make everyone's voice heard (and not only of the one who speaks the loudest) and to flatten protesting hierarchies. Yet, such attempts do not happen in a frictionless way, and seemingly outmoded models of power can seep in when the new structures are facing problems: for instance, when those protesters who appear frequently on social media are accidentally becoming the 'de facto spokesperson[s]' of a movement (1).

The situations briefly outlined above address two modes of public assembly and two strands of power relations: firstly, the one of protesters having to deal with (state) regulations, and secondly, the question of power dynamics within a movement itself. The social movements that have been established in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008 have gained a lot of attention in academia: social movement studies and political sciences have conceptualised the ways protesting has changed particularly in the last two decades (2), while media studies have investigated the importance of social media for protests, especially since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, delineating its opportunities (for instance, Castels 2012) as well as its caveats (3). These disciplines can give detailed accounts about the contents, motivations and various modalities of protesting, describing, for instance, changing power relations or the ways social movements communicate their demands by finding new media platforms of distribution.

However, some scholars have identified a gap in the analysis, that is, when it comes to understanding how exactly protesting dynamics and its literal movements come about. These are usually the moments when the protesters' bodies act as agents of change, and thus their corporeal actions and motions on site come into focus. Here, social movement studies are still seeking methods and

Photo: Occupy Boston community.

tools to enable a more detailed examination of the very corporeal dynamics happening on site (4) and demand the need for interdisciplinary investigations by applying a mix of methods (5).

This is one of the moments where dance research comes into play, offering means of analysis that facilitate the understanding of how, for example, the embodied dynamics of social movements, their physical arrangements on location, their re-articulations of the public sphere, and the shifting of power relations – or the eventual re-establishment of power – are being engendered. Choreography as an arrangement, a structuring of movements in a certain assigned place and time (6), plays an important role in this particular political moment, hence my argument. By way of two protesting situations, I will now briefly describe how choreography is used as a (at times involuntary) tool to create a protest on the one hand, especially when it has to face public and physical restrictions, and how it serves as a mode of analysis on the other hand, in order to identify power relations within social movements themselves.

On 24 April 2020, members of the hospitality sector in Dresden, Germany launched the Aktion Leere Stühle (Empty Chairs Campaign). Owners of restaurants, bars or cafés voiced their concerns as the ongoing lockdown caused an existential threat to their businesses, and demanded that the German government would have to step in and give financial support in these times of hardship. Other cities, such as Berlin, followed their example, organising protests on the same day.

At first sight, this campaign doesn't seem to engage in the choreography of a protest because the bodies are entirely missing – as they actually were in hospitality, of course, and which, in fact, is the message of the campaign. However, the action did not only produce powerful images for mainstream and social media. It actually used principles of

choreography to make its claim while complying with the regulations at the same time, which, again, had caused the problems in the first place. The chairs are meticulously placed, forming an almost rhythmic arrangement. While the chairs literally 'stand' for the missing customers, however, they do not represent an arrangement that would be typical for a restaurant or café. Each of the chairs is about 1.5 metres apart from the other (the social distancing rule at the time), and the tables are missing. While forming a rhythmical pattern, each chair seems to stand alone, in solitude, due to the distances chosen. Hence, we can say that the protesters are using choreographic tools as they shift the everyday arrangement of hospitality's furniture by slightly changing the seating order, thereby creating an extraordinary arrangement and thus symbolising its impracticality for hospitality due to the lockdown measure. At the same time, the rhythmical pattern creates a strong image, shifting the power of protest often achieved through amassing bodies – gathering on site, eventually blocking public spaces in order to interrupt everyday life – to the power of the message being distributed in the news media, by presenting an arranged irregularity of the (otherwise) usual order.

In this sense, the chairs act as 'choreographic objects', a concept that has been coined by choreographer William Forsythe (7). Projects such as The Fact of Matter (2009), for instance, consisted of a course made of vertically hanging ropes with rings on each end – resembling equipment some of us may still recall from the sports hall at school – and through which the visitors could 'walk', thus being brought into motion by the swinging choreographic objects. In the case of the hospitality campaign, we could say that the arranged chairs are serving

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as choreographic objects as well. However, they merely represent a movement that literally took place in another, pre-pandemic social time, and that now is missing. Literary scholar Andrew Hewitt speaks of 'social choreography' by referring to social dances that represent and shift, for instance, social patterns of behaviour (8). Usually, chairs (and tables) in a restaurant also arrange a certain mode of socialising and, quite often, conviviality. Here, though, the chairs' arrangement has been shifted and re-positioned, now choreographing the missing (customers') bodies, thereby uttering a loud, albeit silent, cry for (financial) help.

The example above already intertwines the two choreographic modes I highlighted in the beginning: the one of creative re-arrangements of bodies or objects in protests, and the use of choreography as an analytical tool, in this case by examining the rhythmical patterns on display in the protest's media images. I will follow up on this in the next example and briefly offer an idea of analysing power relations in social movements by way of looking at the corporeal groupings depicted in images.

As mentioned before, the Occupy movement was very keen to establish another model of protesting that makes as many voices as possible heard, introducing non- or flat hierarchical ways of communicating. For instance, Occupy Boston stressed on its website that "our movement is without a formal leadership structure [...] so that we do not reproduce the power inequalities that plague our society." (9) Placed above the text is an image depicting a moment of a rally on location: the General Assembly at a local church. We can see a speaker standing somewhat elevated in front of a large audience, assumingly placed on a kind of platform or stage. They read from a handwritten manuscript – perhaps it's a general speech addressing political issues, perhaps it's an action plan outlining the events of the following days. The listeners standing before them are situated on a lower level, most of them seated, some standing. A few of them have to crane their necks in order to see the speaker properly.

Seating is often a preferred option, especially in rallies organised by grassroots movements, as this enables more people to see what's going on (standing is blocking the view more easily). So, on the level of the audience, we can talk about a conscious layout of the audience's bodies in order to facilitate a level space of attention, or at least as much as this is possible. In this sense, that is, on the side of the corporeal seating arrangement, the idea of a flat hierarchy enabling equal access for

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everyone seems to be working. However, if we look at the elevated speaker, a quite different model of power dynamics becomes evident: they are talking 'down' to the members of the movement, and thus providing the picture of a rather conventional set up of a rally, often establishing visual hierarchies between orators (on stage) and fellow protesters (on the ground). The picture chosen by Occupy Boston to illustrate their principle of flat hierarchies is thus, oddly, maintaining the 'classical' spatial divide between speaker and listeners.

Of course, it is hard to tell from the picture alone whether this kind of arrangement was needed in order to allow for the audience to properly see the person speaking. However, one could ask why a social movement which is very sensitive when it comes to power relations, and which fosters a 'bottom up' type of leadership (10), chose this photo of all to illustrate its novel approach towards leadership and hierarchies. So, the brief choreographic analysis of the bodies' arrangements on the photograph enables us to detect the contrasting messages depicted in the image and in the desire to install flat hierarchies voiced in the text. The contents of text and photograph are thus providing juxtaposing narratives, which can be highlighted by way of choreographic (and in this case, iconographic) analysis.

Furthermore, when it comes, again, to consciously using choreography in situations of public protest, and as a mode to queer power relations in this very case, one could ask why the speaker would have to be elevated in the first place. Perhaps it would have been sufficient to just hear them, and thereby to avoid the described conventional (oratorial) representation?

Dance scholars such as Susan Leigh Foster emphasise the value of choreography in situations of protest, for instance, as a way of training bodies and obtaining particular corporeal techniques in order to gain perseverance (11). Examples such as the website representation of Occupy Boston show the need to not only take care of how the movement represents itself on-site, but also point towards the necessity of meticulously arranging the media level of its communication in order to avoid the subversion of the very grassroots message. Applying choreographic principles can help to get the message across. At the same time, dance research provides the tools to detect such paradoxical messaging by taking a closer look at the particular embodied structures of protest on location and in its media products, occasionally revealing top-down power relations, as accidental as they may be.

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3. c.f. Dencik and Leistert 2015, Milan 2015
4. Fahlenbrach 2016: 107 f
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7. Forsythe (no date)
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10. See Boyd and Mitchell 2012
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