

Protest, Culture and Society

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Chapter 49

Suppression of Protest

Brian Martin

General Introduction and Definition of Terms

Protesters—especially when they are dramatic, colorful, or innovative—are a magnet for attention. But there are others to be aware of: opponents of the protesters. Individuals and groups that disagree with the aims or methods of protest sometimes ignore protest activity, hoping it will fade away, and sometimes compete with it by more vigorously advocating their own positions and values. Other options for opponents are to attack protest or to co-opt it, incorporating less-threatening components, modifying its demands, and isolating radical elements. A social movement during its life cycle may experience all of these responses, sometimes simultaneously by different opposing forces. The focus here is on one particular response: attack.

It is useful to distinguish several types of active efforts against protest. *Suppression* refers to methods for hindering, undermining, and disrupting without using force. *Censorship*, the withholding or hiding of information, is one type of suppression. *Repression* refers to use of force against challenging groups, including arrests, imprisonment, beatings, torture, and killing. *Oppression* is the systematic domination of subject groups through social arrangements such as economic inequality, political exclusion, and racial domination.

Who Reacts and What Conditions Shape Their Reactions?

Repression is used primarily by authoritarian regimes, or by liberal democracies, against armed movements. Western protest movements that use peaceful methods may encounter little serious repression, though following a military takeover or during wartime, the use of repression is more likely. Oppression is a structural feature in most societies. It can hinder protest but is not an active response. The focus here is on suppression, with some attention to milder forms of repression.

Protest can be suppressed in a variety of ways. *Cover-up* includes any method to hide information that might be helpful to movements. For example, environmental campaigners thrive on information about pollution, impending disasters, and the effectiveness of alternatives. Governments and corporations may refuse to collect such information, prevent scientists from reporting their results, or put pressure on media to curtail reporting. Campaigners also suffer from cover-up of their own activities: public protest movements may experience a virtual media blackout, sometimes due to news values—peaceful protests often are not considered newsworthy—and sometimes because media are directly or indirectly influenced by powerful groups to use industry-friendly perspectives.

Devaluation includes any method to discredit protesters, including labeling (terrorists, loonies, rabble), circulation of damaging stories—often irrelevant or distorted—about movement leaders, or trivializing important issues. Some protesters are stereotyped as mindless, emotional, or unscientific. Others are tarred by making them appear associated with fringe elements, extreme policies, or enemies of the state.

Protest movements usually devote a lot of effort to mustering evidence and arguments for their views, making a logical case. Opponents commonly challenge the evidence and arguments, but this on its own is not suppression: it is part of legitimate public debate. However, argument is often accompanied by *misrepresentation*, the use of claims and arguments in an unfair fashion. This includes lies about a movement's positions and methods, blaming activists for things they are not responsible for, and deceptively describing the consequences of movement positions. This is a form of rhetorical attack aimed at the credibility of the movement's arguments. Whether misrepresentation counts as a form of suppression depends on prevailing norms of public debate and on opportunities for responding. In any case, when public debate is open and robust, misrepresentation is less likely to be damaging.

Official-channel attack is the use of laws, regulations, and official processes to restrain and stifle protest. For example, governments may change or interpret tax regulations so that contributions to movement groups do not receive tax benefits. When groups seek to rent office space or buy equipment, governments may impose onerous requirements. Unnecessary tax audits can be a form of harassment. Governments and corporations sometimes sue activists, for example for defamation or restraint of trade, often as a form of harassment. In the United States, such legal actions are called Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).¹ Governments sometimes impose regulations on protest actions, for example requirements to notify police of rallies, to keep out of specific areas, to pay for the cost of policing, or to pay for insurance for possible consequences of actions. Such regulations lay the groundwork for arrests and subsequent legal actions against protesters, which can sap energy through protracted and expensive involvement in court proceedings.

Disruption aims to undermine the solidarity of a group or movement. It can involve the use of infiltrators—sometimes members of the police, sometimes group members paid or advised by government agencies—to cause members to become suspicious of each other, for example by spreading rumors. Sometimes government agencies send false letters or produce fake leaflets to produce tensions between rival movement organizations. Infiltrators who are *agent provocateurs* urge members to take rash actions, for example to use violence, and sometimes initiate such actions. This can split the movement through disagreements about tactics and can also discredit the movement in the eyes of wider audiences and provide a pretext for government crackdowns.

Intimidation includes threats and physical attacks, including arrests and beatings, and threats to an individual's livelihood or opportunities. Many citizens are easily scared even when no physical violence is involved. Protesters may be harassed at work, lose their jobs, or be shunned by coworkers (who are afraid for their own jobs). Sometimes their possessions, such as their cars or homes, are damaged or destroyed. Police surveillance of protest—tapping telephones, photographing demonstrators, infiltrating meetings—can lay the basis for arrests and itself can be intimidating to protesters. Attacks on just a few protesters can scare others: intimidation can have a chilling effect on protest.

The media play a key role in supporting or opposing protest. Suppression is easiest when mass media take the side of movement opponents. Sometimes media assist in cover-up by ignoring protest activities; they can assist in devaluation by focusing on negative aspects of protest, for example

isolated incidents of violence or alleged links with stigmatized groups; they can assist in misrepresentation through biased coverage.

At a surface level, attacks on protest are targeted at individuals and organizations. This is relatively easy to see. At a deeper level, elements vital to the survival and success of movements can be targeted.

Resources such as money, equipment, and meeting places are essential to many protest activities, as recognized by the resource mobilization perspective in social movement studies. Several of the methods of attack, such as manipulation of tax regulations, target resources.

Communication is vital to movements. They need to communicate with current members to plan activities and with wider audiences to recruit new members and spread their message. Some communication occurs in face-to-face discussions and meetings, some via communication technology such as telephone and e-mail, and some via reporting on movement actions such as petitions, public meetings, and rallies. Suppression can prevent or discourage any of these forms of communication.

Credibility enables a movement to maintain and gain support; credibility is closely related to legitimacy and appeal. If a movement is seen as honest, committed, exciting, and concerned with important issues, it will be attractive to a wider public. Suppression against a popular, highly credible movement is seen as more unfair than against a disreputable fringe group. Therefore, undermining credibility enables other attacks.

Morale is what keeps activists going. It is linked to solidarity, which is the commitment of participants to each other and to the cause. Morale does not necessarily relate closely to movement success. According to Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan,² morale often dips just as a movement is gaining widespread support, whereas morale sometimes can remain high in the face of adversity. By undermining morale, opponents can hinder even a powerful movement.

Activists use a wide variety of methods to promote their goals. Within groups, there are meetings and electronic communication. In soliciting support from the public, groups circulate information, organize petitions, and hold public meetings and rallies. Activists may use direct action to support their goals. Many of these methods serve as countertactics to suppression.

The countertactic to cover-up is exposure. Activists collect and disseminate information that supports their positions, sometimes by their own efforts and sometimes by drawing on the work of researchers, investigative journalists, or whistle-blowers. Activists usually seek publicity for their own activities, which serves to expose their very existence. That is one of the goals of public protests.

Table 49.1. Some Links between Methods of Suppression and Vital Features of Movements

	Resources	Communication	Credibility	Morale
Cover-up		Reduced contact with audiences	Less public awareness of strengths and contributions	Reduced public validation
Devaluation	Less credibility can mean less support		Lower reputation	Reduced public validation
Misrepresentation			Public misunderstanding	Reduced public validation
Official-channel attack	Access to resources reduced	Means of communication restricted		Reduced public validation
Disruption		Mistrust reduces useful communication		Trust undermined
Intimidation	Resources damaged	Mistrust reduces useful communication		Fear can reduce motivation

For a more detailed explanation of repertoires of action applied by protest campaigns and targeted corporations see Veronika Kneip, "Protest Campaigns and Corporations: Cooperative Conflicts?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 118, no. 1 (2013): 189–202.

The countertactic to devaluation is validation, namely building the credibility of the movement. Movements often try to recruit prominent respected individuals either as spokespeople or for endorsements. Another technique is to behave contrary to stereotypes, for example dressing in formal clothes for protests. Protesters may make commitments to nonviolence both for principled reasons and to counter attempts to discredit them as violent or criminal.

To challenge misrepresentation, protesters need to keep presenting their message, using a variety of methods, such as logical argument, metaphors, cartoons, and videos. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of movement efforts is a continual effort to explain what activists are trying to achieve and how they are going about it.

There are several ways to respond to official-channel attacks that burden a movement with regulations. One is to expose and argue against the

bureaucratic obstacles, highlighting their unfairness. Another is to openly challenge restrictive regulations, using this defiance as a way of generating greater support. Yet another is to sidestep obstacles by organizing through networks and more spontaneous actions, obtaining resources as needed, for example relying on volunteers rather than paid staff and relying more on resources such as free e-mail accounts and photocopying at workplaces of supporters.

The countertactic to disruption is solidarity. Building solidarity can be achieved by opening and maintaining communication; building trust through sharing ideas, feelings, and actions; and putting in place processes to deal with internal disputes. Being aware of the possibility of disruption is important in being able to counter it.

The countertactic to intimidation is resistance. This means continuing in the face of threats and attacks, exposing the intimidation, and using it to discredit the movement's opponents.

Methods of suppression and activist countertactics may evolve in response to each other. For example, suppose police assault protesters at a rally, but graphic photos of police brutality actually generate more support for the protesters. The government may respond by using more subtle and less visible means of harassment or by trying to provoke movement violence, using agent provocateurs, or perhaps by turning to official-channel methods, banning taking photos of police. The result is that suppression dynamics can change over time, though there are some recurring patterns as new cohorts of people join campaigns and new opponents respond. The lessons of earlier campaigns are sometimes written down, but there are no required training courses for either activists or opponents, so processes of trying out tactics and learning from mistakes tend to recur.

Protesters, in responding to suppression, can take one of three general approaches: defending, counterattacking, and sidestepping. For example, if the government tries to discredit protesters by calling them rabble, criminals, or terrorists, protesters can defend by appearing and behaving respectably. They can counterattack by pointing out how government leaders are disreputable, even criminal, or terrorist. And they can sidestep the attack by adopting a low profile, using quiet, private methods of promoting change that do not provide an obvious target.

Historical Traditions

Dominant groups have always used their power against challengers. The precise ways in which this occurs depend on the context.

Consider for example the movement against nuclear power. In early years, there was little media coverage of problems in the nuclear industry, a sort of de facto cover-up. But after the movement gained momentum in the 1970s, reactor accidents became newsworthy, and the 1979 Three Mile Island accident received worldwide coverage. The Soviet government initially tried to hide details about the 1986 Chernobyl accident, but foreign scientists detected radiation from it. A key focus of struggle was publicity about problems in the nuclear industry.

Antinuclear-power activists were criticized for being uninformed and unscientific. This sort of devaluation was linked to misrepresentation of antinuclear arguments, for example the claim that nuclear power critics had no solution for society's energy needs.

Official channels were used in some countries to constrain protesters. For example, laws against trespass were used to prevent or remove blockades against nuclear plants. Some scientists and engineers who spoke out against nuclear power lost their jobs.

Other movements have had somewhat different experiences. For example, left-wing revolutionary groups—especially those that consider violence to be a legitimate tactic—are much more likely to be met with disruption and intimidation.

The feminist movement has had a different trajectory because so much of its efforts have been oriented to changing ways of thinking and behaving. Few feminists have ever advocated armed struggle, so disruption and intimidation of movement organizations are rare, though many individual feminists have been harassed and assaulted. Beliefs and interpersonal behaviors have been key arenas of struggle for feminism, so suppression has more commonly been through cover-up, devaluation, and misrepresentation.

Efforts at suppression can occur at any stage in the life of a movement. When a movement is in the early stages of development, with interested individuals formulating ideas and organizing a few actions, attacks can be especially damaging, because there is little capacity for mobilizing resistance. Early-stage attack is more likely in repressive regimes where there is pervasive monitoring, infiltration, and disruption of any sign of dissent. In more open societies, a more common response to movements in formation is either neglect or derisive dismissal. Active suppression is often a signal that the movement has become a threat to vested interests or prevailing values.

At the height of a movement's visibility and strength, open attempts at suppression may be attempted but usually have the least chance of success, because the movement can use the attacks to mobilize greater support. Movements in decline are more vulnerable.

State of Research in Related Social Movement Research

Social movement research has given considerable attention to repression, for example analyzing the effects of repression on social movement mobilization: in some cases, repression stymies movements whereas in others it can stimulate greater resistance.³ A different entry point to studying repression and social movements is via nonviolent action (also known as people power or civil resistance). A key finding is that nonviolent action used against regimes is effective independently of the level of repression: the key to movement success is strategic acuity and the level of mobilization.⁴

In contrast to the study of repression, suppression has received relatively little attention in studies of social movements. Instances of suppression can be found in numerous accounts of social movement struggles, but suppression is seldom studied as a separate topic.

Interdisciplinary Methods and Approaches for the Analysis of Reactions to Protest

The predominant approach to studying suppression of protest has been case studies. Usually, suppression is addressed as one aspect of what happens to a movement, rather than suppression being the focus of attention. As a result, there is no established method for studying suppression.

There have been few attempts to systematize the study of suppression. One useful approach is to identify different types of suppression, providing examples of each.⁵

Research Gaps and Open Questions

Activists regularly deal with suppression, sometimes effectively and sometimes not, but the wealth of practical experience has not been matched by equivalent depth of research. From the point of view of movements, suppression is a practical matter involving choices between methods of avoidance and resistance, but researchers have seldom investigated tactics as a primary focus.⁶ To fill the central research gap in the area, the obvious path is to study suppression as a phenomenon in its own right, drawing on activists' experiences to provide and test frameworks.

There are many open questions in this endeavor. One is whether to focus on methods of suppression—for example documenting and classifying them—or to look for broader frameworks that may be able to provide

strategic insight by being applied to particular circumstances. Another is whether scholarly research into suppression has the same agenda as activist interest, or whether these could or should diverge.

Suppression of protest can be seen as a facet of protest or, alternatively, as a facet of multifaceted ways of exercising power, for example bullying, censorship, exploitation of workers, suppression of minority groups, environmental destruction, and genocide. It remains to be seen whether suppression of protest is best understood by paying closer attention to the methods used against protesters or by examining power struggles in diverse domains and applying resulting insights to the study of protest.

The academic study of protest can be used reflexively to better understand suppression of dissent in academia itself. Dissident intellectuals and ideas regularly come under attack using many of the same methods used against social movements.⁷ These attacks, and the cautious intellectual climate created by attacks, can lead to research gaps—areas that few scholars dare to study—and may be one reason for the paucity of investigations of practical relevance to activists. The study of suppression of protest thus has the potential for synergy between academics and activists.

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of fifteen books and hundreds of articles on dissent, nonviolent action, scientific controversies, and other topics. His recent publications include: *Nonviolence Unbound* (Sparsnäs, Sweden, 2015); *The Controversy Manual* (Sparsnäs, Sweden, 2014); and *Whistleblowing: A Practical Guide* (Sparsnäs, Sweden, 2013)

Notes

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1. George W Pring and Penelope Canan, *SLAPPs: Getting Sued for Speaking Out* (Philadelphia, PA, 1996).
2. Bill Moyer, JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, 2001).
3. Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller, eds, *Repression and Mobilization* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005).
4. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2011).
5. Jules Boykoff, *The Suppression of Dissent: How the State and Mass Media Squelch US-American Social Movements* (New York, 2006).

6. James M Jasper, *Getting Your Way: Strategic Dilemmas in the Real World* (Chicago, 2006).
7. Anthony J Nocella II, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren, eds, *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic-Industrial Complex* (Oakland, CA, 2010).

Recommended Reading

- Boykoff, Jules. *The Suppression of Dissent: How the State and Mass Media Squelch US American Social Movements*. New York, 2006. This comprehensive analysis classifies suppression into eight modes by the state and four by the mass media.
- Bunyan, Tony, ed. *Statewatching the New Europe: A Handbook on the European State*. London, 1993. This covers suppression of protest in Europe and can be supplemented by the magazine *Statewatch*.
- Glick, Brian. *The War at Home: Covert Action Against U.S. Activists and What We Can Do about It*. Boston, 1989. This is a valuable treatment of how protesters can resist suppression.