Performing Protest. Media Practices in the Trans-Urban Euromayday Movement of the Precarious

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the question of how contemporary social movements use protest media strategically in creative and productive ways that go beyond representation. Mediated repertoires of contention are brought into play to create new political subjectivities, establish credible political actors, and circulate struggles across regional and national borders. However, media need to be aligned with specific cultural settings to unfold their performative power. Despite increasing interest for protest media in social movement- and media studies, their culturality has received little theoretical and methodological attention. This dissertation develops a cultural approach to protest media, drawing on critical anthropology, European ethnology, cultural studies, and theories of practice. The research is situated on the micro-political level, while post-operaism, governmentality studies and regulation theory provide a macro-perspective. The study offers a comparative cultural analysis of a trans-urban labour-related movement which mobilised around precarity throughout the 2000s. The most visible public performances were simultaneous Euromayday Parades on International Workers' Day in over 40 European cities. Using complex media arrangements, activists circulated plurivocal imageries of precarity. Methodologically, the research is based on a processual, flexible multi-sited ethnography. It traces imageries circulating in the network and reconstructs their historical and contemporary contexts through participant observation, interviews and extensive online ethnography. This is complemented by visual and textual analysis of selected media products. Following a critical review of cultural perspectives in social movement scholarship, reflexive activist scholarship is presented as a research position between the fields of activism and academia. In addition to a network perspective, detailed case studies in three global cities examine how imageries and narratives of precarity were aligned with everyday life, popular culture, symbolic time and urban space. Specific cultural politics were conductive to the adoption of the precarity frame in some cities (Milan, Hamburg) and led to its abandonment in others (London). Overall, it is argued that protest media were constituent in the formation of the Euromayday movement and central to its performativity. Mediated practices of meaning-making were crucial in generating situated knowledge on precarious conditions, developing new forms of organising and producing empowered political subjectivities based on multiple experiences rather than unity.

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Tables and Documentation

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Table 3: Euromayday Online Archive: Entries per city 2001-2010

Table 4: Interviews conducted with actors in the Euromayday network

Table 5: Multi-sited fieldwork on media practices in the Euromayday network

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