Summary

Street demonstrations are omnipresent in Europe, as well as other parts of the world. Almost on a daily basis, people take the streets to voice their grievances about some state of affairs. The prevalence of street protest is explained by the fact that it pertains to the standard repertoire of political participation. So, next to voting, and petitioning, to list a few other forms of political participation, citizens may attempt to influence politics by participating in a protest event. From previous studies we know that many different social groups do this to address a wide array of claims.

The widespread use of the street demonstration is, however, not matched by research on the matter. That is to say, comparative research that allows for a systematic analysis of street protests is rare. This dissertation seeks to remedy this gap in the literature by presenting four empirical studies on street demonstrations and their core actors (i.e. demonstrators and the police), which are all comparative in nature. In the following, I briefly describe these studies. This is followed by a portrayal of the added value of my findings, both in theoretical, practical, and methodological terms.

FOUR STUDIES

The first study (Chapter 2) takes the demonstration as its unit of analysis. Following Fillieule, I conceive of a street demonstration as ‘any temporary occupation by a number of people of an open place, public or private, which directly or indirectly includes the expression of political opinions’. This conceptualization clarifies that street protests are characterized by several features, one of which being their political nature. This notion, that protests are political events, is widely supported by social movement scholars. Interestingly, though, scholars have not yet studied the political nature of demonstrations, at least to the best of my knowledge.

Chapter 2 seeks to address this deficiency by studying protest politicization, that is, the extent to which a street protest epitomizes a power struggle. So, in this chapter, I study how street demonstrations differ in their level of politicization. I hypothesized that a demonstration’s politicization level is manifested in six ways. Participants of a more
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A politicized event would feel angrier, and participate more out of collective motives than social or reward motives. Also, participants of a more politicized event would identify their opponent more clearly, and vilify their opponent more severely. Lastly, at a more politicized event, demonstrators would have a more specific claim, and make their claim in a more combative way.

To test whether these hypotheses hold, I deployed a mixed-methods dataset of two Dutch demonstrations: a reactive protest against the Russian anti-gay law (2013) and the ritual Pink Saturday parade (2012). These events were selected because I expected them to differ in their degree of politicization, the reactive protest being far more politicized than the ritual parade. Otherwise, the events were assumed to be rather similar, given that they were staged by the same social movement, in the same country, and within one year’s time. Such a ‘most similar systems’ design was believed to yield valid results, given that any differences between the events would, in all likelihood, be related to protest politicization.

As expected, the six indicators manifested themselves more prominently at the reactive protest. Based on this finding, I propose that the six indicators constitute a model to study the relative politicization of street demonstrations.

The second and third empirical study of this dissertation focus on demonstrators. Recent studies scrutinized demonstrators’ political attitudes, their demographics, their sense of group identification and empowerment, and the effect of group identification and empowerment on demonstrators’ future action preparedness. Although these studies are informative, they do not tell the full story of what participation in a street protest is about.

To help clarify this story, I studied demonstrators’ perceptions of protest atmosphere, that is, the affective state that the protest environment induces. To the best of my knowledge, the atmosphere concept has not yet been scrutinized, while it is, in fact, referred to by scholars and protest actors alike. To assess demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions, both chapters pose the same questions: How do demonstrators perceive protest atmosphere, and why? However, the two chapters take a different approach.

Chapter 3 assesses demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions by means of their own atmosphere reports. These reports were provided on paper-and-pencil questionnaires during two Dutch protests, which were staged against the Russian anti-gay law (2013) and the Dutch monarchy (2013). The two events were selected, because my consultation with the police made me expect them to differ substantially in terms of atmosphere, and, thus, in demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions. Otherwise, the events were expected to be quite alike,
given that they were staged in the same space and time period. Such a most similar systems design was expected to yield valid results.

Using the questionnaires, as well as other data, I hypothesized and found that demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions diverge on a dimension of pleasure, and that demonstrators who perceive a more pleasant atmosphere identify more with other participants, and feel more empowered. Partially confirming my hypothesis, I found that anti-monarchists who perceive a more pleasant atmosphere feel more aggrieved (i.e. perceive more societal intolerance); for LGBT’s no such relationship was found. Not as expected, for participants of both events the perception of a pleasant atmosphere proved to be unrelated to the perception of police aggression.

In an additional assessment I tested whether a pleasant atmosphere perception stimulates a demonstrator’s future action preparedness. This hypothesis was rejected. I found that a pleasant atmosphere perception deters a demonstrator’s willingness to engage in future collective action (only for anti-monarchists). However, a pleasant atmosphere perception also stimulates a demonstrator’s sense of group identification and empowerment, which, in turn, stimulate his or her future action preparedness (only for anti-monarchists). Besides, at the anti-monarchy demonstration, a demonstrator’s grievance was found to stimulate his or her perception of a pleasant protest atmosphere and his or her future action preparedness. What these findings indicate is that demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions are part of a complex motivational constellation that brings them back to the streets. Knowing that people do not only participate in protest to enjoy themselves, but also to voice their grievances, I conclude that the more demonstrators consider the protest atmosphere to be pleasant, the more they feel related to other participants, and empowered (which stimulates their future action preparedness), but the less they feel that the protest serves a political purpose (which deters their future action preparedness).

Chapter 4 seeks to unravel demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions in terms of intergroup conflict. To do so, I studied demonstrators’ evaluations of police-demonstrator interactions. This operationalization was based, inter alia, on previous research on (perceived) sport stadium atmosphere, which showed that people’s atmosphere perceptions are mainly shaped by their interactions with other people. For my analyses, I assessed a multilevel dataset of 75 European street demonstrations (2009-13). In this dataset, which had been gathered by the research project ‘Caught in the act of protest: Contextualizing Contestation’ (CCC), demonstrators were nested in
demonstrations. Such a multilevel structure, which is rare in protest research, allowed me to conduct a valid test of my hypothesis that demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions range from non-conflictual to conflictual. In addition, I was able to provide an integrated account of demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions. That is to say, I could assess whether atmosphere perceptions are shaped by demonstrators’ individual characteristics and the characteristics of the protest they participate in, as I expected.

The results confirmed my hypotheses. Demonstrators perceive four different atmospheres (in terms of intergroup conflict), being: harmonious, volatile, tense, and chaotic. These atmosphere perceptions are shaped by individual characteristics and demonstration characteristics. More specifically, demonstrators who are male, young, and have recently participated in a demonstration, direct action, or violent forms of action, are more likely to perceive a conflictual (i.e. volatile, tense, or chaotic) atmosphere than a harmonious one. Those demonstrators who participate in large events, moving events, or events that are repressed by the police also have a greater chance to perceive a conflictual (rather than a harmonious) atmosphere. Of these various predictors of demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions, police repression proved to be the single most important one.

The fourth study of this dissertation (Chapter 5) focuses on the police forces, which typically attend protests to maintain public order, and, indirectly, the established order (i.e. status quo). More specifically, I study how the police manage contemporary European street demonstrations.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Western democracies generally managed street protests by ‘negotiated management’, a policing style that protects the right to protest. Following the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’ and other transnational protests, Western police forces introduced a more repressive protest policing style called ‘strategic incapacitation’. Under strategic incapacitation, the police seek to preserve security and neutralize protesters who pose a security threat. While strategic incapacitation was initially believed to be reserved for transnational protests, some scholars now argue that this policing style has diffused to national protests that pose a threat to the establishment and/or police forces. However, research on this diffusion premise is rare, and while it is consistently supported in the United States, it is not in Europe.

On the European continent, strategic incapacitation was identified at a few threatening national demonstrations, but at several others it was not, or only in part. These inconsistent findings suggest that the diffusion of strategic incapacitation is limited. However, this
conclusion cannot be drawn, given that the reported studies assessed a few protests only, and did not differentiate between protests’ threat levels. After all, threatening protest events beget more police repression. So, the protests where strategic incapacitation was deployed may well have been more threatening than those where it was not.

Chapter 5 aims to provide more insight into the diffusion premise. To do so, I assessed researchers’ and protest organizers’ direct observations of strategic incapacitation tactics at 78 national European street demonstrations (2009-13). These events, which had been sampled by the CCC-project, were categorized as non-threatening, somewhat threatening, or threatening to the establishment and/or police forces. My analyses corroborate European studies on the matter but also nuance them: The police hardly use strategic incapacitation to manage national European protests, but (at least some of) the tactics that pertain to this policing style are more likely to be used at more threatening events.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The four studies of this dissertation advance academic research on street demonstrations and their core actors in various ways. The protest politicization model, which the first empirical study yields, provides a new way to study street protests. More insight into street protests is relevant, given that protests are understudied, but it may also help to explain more variation in protest participation. This is because the other defining features of street protests (i.e. the gathering of a certain number of people, the occupation of a public space, and the expression of an opinion) explain variation in protest participation as well.

The atmosphere concept, which was scrutinized in the second and third empirical study of this dissertation, provides insight into demonstrators’ protest experiences. Such insight is needed, as these experiences are understudied, at least from a demonstrator’s perspective (i.e. based on demonstrators’ own accounts). In terms of intergroup conflict (i.e. based on demonstrators’ evaluations of police-demonstrator interactions), research on demonstrators’ protest experiences is not rare but unsystematic, given that it is mostly based on case studies, which lack a comparative design. By assessing how the participants of 75 European street protests perceive protest atmosphere, and why, I do provide systematic information on demonstrators’ protest experiences. This information allows me to draw more generalized conclusions on how and why intergroup conflict erupts.

What the first atmosphere study also yields is insight into the understudied phenomenon of sustained collective action participation. After all, demonstrators’ atmosphere
perceptions proved to influence their willingness to participate in future collective action, over and above the variables that are known to have an effect, such as grievances, group identification, and empowerment.

The fourth and last empirical study of this dissertation is expected to revitalize the academic debate on the policing of protest on both sides of the Atlantic. This is because my findings do not only validate and nuance European studies on the matter, but also contradict American protest policing research, which corroborated the diffusion premise.

Next to its theoretical implications, the dissertation also has practical value for protest organizers, demonstrators, and police officers. Protest organizers will be interested to learn how demonstrators perceive protest atmosphere, and why, given that demonstrators’ atmosphere perceptions impact on their willingness to engage in future collective action. To promote sustained participation, organizers should stage an event that is entertaining, but also has a clear political aim.

Protest organizers and demonstrators may also benefit from knowing that the police hardly deploy strategic incapacitation tactics to manage national European protests, even if these events are threatening to them and/or the establishment. After all, this suggests that protests are not considerably more likely to get out of hand than in past decades and that, as a result, demonstrators should not be more likely to be caught in intergroup conflict.

The police forces will benefit from knowing how demonstrators perceive protest atmosphere (in terms of intergroup conflict) and how these perceptions are shaped by individual and demonstration characteristics. After all, such insights will help them to better understand their interactions with demonstrators, and predict which events will get out of hand. On the one hand, my findings corroborate police knowledge of demonstrator threats. On the other, they indicate how the police contribute to the emergence of intergroup conflict themselves. Hopefully, these findings will be used to prevent or, otherwise, mitigate conflictual police-demonstrator interactions so that demonstrators can peacefully make use of their democratic right.

On a final note, I would like to mention the methodological relevance of this dissertation. By means of its contributions to academic and practical knowledge, the dissertation demonstrates the added value of comparative research. While such research is rare in the domain of street protest, it is needed to advance our knowledge of this interesting phenomenon. After all, we can only generalize our findings when we test our theories on diverse cases. This dissertation
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Acknowledgements

Over the years that I have spent writing this dissertation, I enjoyed the support of numerous people. This is where I would like to thank them.

First and foremost, I am grateful to my supervisor, Bert Klandermans. Bert, thanks for your continuous support and constructive criticism. Even when the going was getting tough, I felt that you believed in me (and my research). Equally grateful I am to my co-supervisor, Jacquelien van Stekelenburg. Jac, thanks for your enthusiasm, and for setting the bar high; my research benefitted a lot from it.

Also, a special thank you goes to John D. McCarthy for his contribution to Chapter 5. John, your theoretical and methodological insights significantly improved the paper. Thanks also for your (and Pat’s) hospitality during my stay in State College: a place to stay, a car, and even driving lessons. I could not have asked for more.

Further, I would like to sincerely thank the members of the reading committee—Hans Boutellier, Donatella della Porta, John D. McCarthy, Otto Adang, and John Drury—for the time and effort they spent assessing my work.

Then, I also want to thank all the researchers who participated in the research project ‘Caught in the act of protest: Contextualizing Contestation’ (CCC) for their enjoyable cooperation. Here, I especially want to mention my Dutch colleagues: Marie-Louise Damen and Dunya van Troost (and Daniel Blocq, who repeatedly gave us a helping hand).

When it comes to my own research projects, several people need to be acknowledged for their assistance. In July 2012, Clifford Stott did fieldwork with me at Pink Saturday (Haarlem). Then, early April 2013, Igor Petrović and Joost Weling helped me to sample the demonstration against the Russian anti-gay law (Amsterdam). At the end of that month, Lisa Klinkenberg and Laurens Olde Wolbers did the same for (and with) me at an anti-monarchy demonstration (Amsterdam). Also worth mentioning here is that Ruben Sprong was so kind to share some of his interview data on the latter two demonstrations. Thanks to you all!

By the same token, I would like to thank all of the protest organizers, police officers, and protest participants who cooperated with the CCC project, and the research that I conducted at the three before mentioned protests in the Netherlands. Without the information that they provided, this dissertation could not have been written.