



Politics with objects? On the affective materiality of contentious politics

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Abstract

How does material culture shape contentious politics? Things, we argue, influence political contention in ways that are reducible neither to struggles over meaning nor to the thingly aspect of things. The article combines pragmatic semiotics with insights on ritual practice and collective experience. By bringing together three often separate literatures – contentious politics, material culture, and affect – we suggest a thicker understanding of agency. Agency, this article contends, is distributed between primary human actors and objects, which exercise a degree of secondary agency. Our aim is to explore how affect is stored in and channelled through seemingly ordinary objects. Political actors use these affectively charged symbol-index-icons in pursuit of various objectives; specifically, material things are shown to enable and constrain episodes of contention. As a result, our understanding of contentious politics involves not only ideas, texts, and opportunity structures but also the objects that help make social and political change possible.

Keywords

Materiality, material culture, affect, agency, contentious politics, objects

Introduction

This article asks: How does material culture shape contentious politics? Our answer is that material things help influence contentious politics in ways that are reducible neither to language games nor to their thingly character. We reach this conclusion by exploring how *affect* and *materiality* intersect in *contentious politics*. The combination of these three literatures enables us to analyse how actors engage in politics, including

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non-institutionalized direct political action, through seemingly ordinary objects. This approach draws upon an understanding of politics that overcomes Cartesian dualisms between subjects and objects and between cognition and feeling without discounting the significance of human interpreters.

Research into material culture has long transcended the study of ancient artefacts to include everything from late modern technology to everyday consumer goods and the clutter that accumulates in attics and basements (Boivin, 2008; Miller, 2005; Newell, 2018). Alongside this interest in new objects of study, the material culture paradigm is rife with controversy about whether things exercise agency independently of their human manipulators and what implications material agency might have for our analysis of social interactions. Our analysis of the specific political affordances of seemingly ordinary objects suggests that, in some limited but significant respects, objects can be said to possess a form of derivative agency. Yet this agency remains contingent on, and subordinate to, the agency wielded by human beings, whose interactions with objects make the latter politically significant.

The focus on human and non-human agency and on the political significance of things expands our understanding of contentious politics, which has typically focused on contentious performances, repertoires of contention, and political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1996, 2011; Tilly, 2008; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). While some studies of contentious politics do recognize that spatial, experiential, and technological aspects inure contentious episodes (Leitner et al., 2008), the materiality of specific objects within these episodes is often undertheorized. When they are discussed, objects are typically subordinated to broader structural questions surrounding regime capacity, political openings, and social, economic, or cultural transformations.¹

In turn, the specific political affordances of things cannot be fully comprehended without an appreciation of the affects conferred upon and inspired by their mobilization in contentious politics. Paying attention to the production and experience of affect sharpens our awareness of the sentiments that motivate political action as well as the ritual practices in which they are realized (Mazzarella, 2009a, 2009b, 2015). Affect's fluid, random, and unpredictable nature (cf. Massumi, 2002, 2015) is sometimes contrasted with emotions that are culturally conditioned and strategically deployed in social interactions (Gould, 2009; Nussbaum, 1996). Following the political anthropologist Navaro-Yashin (2002, 2009) (see also Jasper, 1998; Poletta, 2003), we argue against a rigid dualism between emotion and affect. Instead, we focus on the practices and collective experiences that confer an affective charge upon otherwise mundane objects. These objects, in turn, attain a totemic character, which can inspire emotions and direct them towards a specific political endeavour. Things are significant for contentious politics because of both their sheer materiality and their ability to store and inspire affect.

This article makes two main contributions. First, we bring together three literatures that often talk past each other but that we view as complementary: contentious politics, material culture, and affect. The result is a thicker understanding of how contentious politics functions, not only through language and ideas but also through seemingly ordinary objects and the sentiments they produce in contentious social interactions. Second, we develop a better understanding of the political agency of things, that is, their ability to enable and constrain the strategic pursuits of human actors. Building on semiotics, as developed by the relatively 'neglected' pragmatic thinkers C.S. Peirce and G.H. Mead (Ginnerskov, 2021), we show how humans harness material agency by curating, interacting with, and strategically deploying objects in contentious politics. We also reveal how human interactions with affectively charged objects produce intended and unintended outcomes.

The article approaches the affective materiality of contentious politics in reverse order. First, we discuss contentious politics as a matter of culture, context, and opportunity structures. Our aim is to show the extent to which this literature neglects material agency. Second, we examine the material culture paradigm and its thicker conceptualization of the agency wielded by things. While some scholars of material culture view objects as possessing agency in their own right (cf. Latour, 2005), we focus our attention on human interpreters and their social interactions – through objects – with other human beings. Third, we analyse the practices humans develop around seemingly ordinary objects during contentious episodes. We show how the affects generated by a collective are imbued upon things that shape struggles

over position, power, and political outcomes. Finally, building on the above, we introduce our semiotics-inspired approach to the affective materiality of contentious politics. Things, in human hands or wrapped around our bodies (da Silva and Rogenhofer, 2023a), do more than represent preexisting ideas or beliefs; they are social and political forces in themselves, whose affordances far exceed the discourses with which they are articulated.

Contentious politics

What is contentious politics? Most agree that it describes a collective claim-making activity characterized by non-institutional forms of interaction between claim-makers or their representatives with the state (Tarrow, 1996). Others, such as Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005: 469), add that political contention is episodic, is public, and typically bears on the interests of a government as a mediator, target, or claimant (cf. Tarrow and Tilly, 2009). Bringing together contention, collective action, and politics (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015), the contentious politics literature studies repertoires or patterns of interaction, whereby claimants seek to interrogate or renegotiate aspects of the prevailing social or political order. As such, contentious politics encompasses both the struggles over power and resources and the contestation of established meanings. Tilly (2008) likens contentious claim-making to theatrical performances, wherein participants continuously learn from their interaction and are enabled and constrained by their previous claims and bargains. Familiar or standardized practices such as demonstrations, sit-ins, or petitions together form the repertoires that actors can draw upon to advance their political aims. These modular performances can be strategically adapted to specific social contexts, providing both the scripts through which participants and observers make sense of collective activity and the basis for innovation. Repertoires of contention can, thus, be understood by an allegory to jazz music: something that is clustered, learned, yet simultaneously improvisational and that allows for local and temporal adaptation (Tarrow and Tilly, 2009). In their creative performances, actors draw together new and accepted frames and symbols to legitimate a political struggle or to mobilize actors and resources towards a common goal (Tarrow, 2011).

Things are never entirely absent from contentious episodes, however. In Tilly's (2008) analysis, they feature as a means of publicly acting out collective values through displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Of particular interest to our purposes here is Tarrow's (2011) discussion of the barricade as a new repertoire of contention during the 1800s. The erection of barricades initially allowed Parisians to protect their neighbourhoods from intruders and subsequently enabled the emergence of offensive revolutionary strongpoints throughout the city. The barricade facilitated the development of collective identities among their defenders against royalist troops. Appropriated and adapted by revolutionary movements across Europe, barricades attained a symbolic significance that goes beyond their material properties. Yet, even in this more detailed investigation of a material protest object, Tarrow privileges adaptation and innovation across protest movements over the precise interaction between the material and symbolic affordances of the barricade.

Students of contentious politics are increasingly aware of the temporal and spatial dimensions of contentious politics. In Bishara's (2021) notable study of protests in the Middle East and North Africa, differences between day and night-time protest activities and the strategic use of rooftops and other protected spaces are foregrounded. Tejerina (2017) stresses how the occupation of public spaces can enable novel forms of direct democratic participation, a development that could also be observed in the overcoming of traditional secular/religious, liberal/conservative, and working class/bourgeois cleavages at the 2013 occupation of Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park (Navaro-Yashin, 2013). Contentious politics is thought to engage multiple spatialities, including place, scale, networks, and mobility, which are relevant for both their co-presence and co-implication in the trajectory of contentious political struggles (Leitner et al., 2008).

Although many critiques of the emphasis on political opportunity structures have emerged since the 1990s (Goodwin, 1997), they remain an integral part of the contentious politics literature. By focusing on the features of regimes or institutions that may facilitate or inhibit political claim-making, these structuralist approaches give analytic priority to factors such as a regime's stability, the number of power centres

within it, or the field's openness or closure to new actors (Tarrow and Tilly, 2009). Contentious politics is, thus, understood less as an agentic struggle that spans ideas, discourses, and material culture than as a response to changes in political opportunities (Tarrow, 2011). While actors are able to seize or expand the opportunities available to them within an arena (Tejerina, 2017), structuralist approaches risk downplaying the significance of individual or collective experiences within processes of repression or mobilization (Fu and Simmons, 2021).

In contrast, our proposal is to bring together approaches interested in the generative and experiential dimensions of protest by recognizing that agency, collective identities, and intentions are not always precursors to mobilization but are, at least partly, produced within a contentious encounter (cf. Bishara, 2021). Furthermore, we argue that these experiential dimensions of contentious politics are shaped not only by discourses and ideology but also by everyday objects, which themselves raise important questions about the 'who' and 'how' of political action.

Material culture and material agency

The material culture paradigm is home to some controversy about the question of whether and to what extent things can be said to exercise agency. Does the locus of action rest exclusively in human hands, as traditional human-centred accounts suggest, or must we try to overcome strict Cartesian distinctions between subjects and objects, as an increasing number of anthropologists, archaeologists, and sociologists claim? The latter draw upon the realization that humble (Miller, 2005) and frequently overlooked things nonetheless have power over human beings (Woodward, 2007). Things are part and parcel of the creation and experience of culture. They influence the formation and negation of groups and collectives. The interactions of humans and objects mediate culture, not least because cultural values are embedded in the design, manufacture, and intended use of objects (Dant, 2004). Social significance is, however, not synonymous with agency, which promises a degree of intentionality towards its surroundings. Recognizing that human intentionality is formulated and executed in materially underpinned and culturally conditioned surroundings, Knappett (2010) suggests that agency cannot be defined as solely human property, thereby making room for the notion of material agency. Arguing that the embodied practices of material culture offer insights into human action, Warnier (2001) suggests that repeat use helps ingrain objects within our subjectivity, transforming our relationships with other human subjects in the process (see also Bruun and Langlais, 2003).

A helpful attempt to understand the power of objects is found in Gibson's discussion of 'affordances'. Objects, to Gibson, possess a variety of potentialities, which enable or facilitate a desired course of action: a chair affords the potential for sitting or for placing small objects on it. Affordances are the physical properties of a material entity that offer something to the interpreter, thereby allowing the entity to function as a thing (Gibson, 2014). Beyond an object's physical properties, the affordances perceived in human interactions are shaped by the social knowledge available to its interpreters (Knappett, 2010). This notion of affordances chimes with Mead's (2011) suggestion that objects call out to humans for them to be used in a certain way, the contours of what action is invited depending on the physical 'fit' of the object and its interpreter Mead (for a critical assessment, see Granberg, 2019). The constant flux of purposes and intentions in society suggests that an object's affordances likewise are never immutable and depend on the culturally conditioned perceptions, interpretations, and strategies of human actors.

The notion that objects might themselves be agents or 'actants' is taken to an extreme by scholars involved in the so-called ontological turn. Consider Latour's actor-network theory, which suggests that human and non-human forms fold into each other, so that neither the human holding a gun nor the gun itself can be considered an actor in its own right. Rather, agency is located within the amalgamation of actants, which are co-constitutive of a social situation (Latour, 2005). For Latour, the properties of objects depend less on things themselves than on a series of connections and associations with other things that result in a horizontal network of humans and things. Similarly, Bennett (2010, 2012) argues that superseding the 'old' materialisms enables an inquiry into thing-power that backgrounds human

actors and foregrounds the ways in which things ‘take over’ to influence social situations independent of human subjects. This betrays a rather narrow view of human agency, however. Humans are deemed to merely co-constitute an assemblage of human and non-human actants. By failing to closely evaluate the lived interaction between humans and things through practices, intentionality, and unintended consequences, the flat ontology underpinning the ‘new materialisms’ fails to capture the distinctive ways in which specific objects and their human manipulators shape a social encounter (Dant, 2004). Like people, not all objects are the same (Tilley, 2011). The sidelining of power relations and questions of hierarchy renders this approach particularly unsuitable for the study of contentious politics. Importantly, a mere return to an ‘old’ materialist approach to culture (Tilley, 2006) is also inadequate for our purposes.

Our proposal is that things acquire agency from the human actions that form them, essentially rendering material agency a form of human agency transferred into objects (Dant, 2004). Human agency is invested in objects through emotion, meaning, and interconnection. With Gell (1998: 20), we can distinguish between the primary agency of intentional beings and secondary agents through which humans’ primary agency is distributed to render it effective. Secondary agency is not self-sufficient but depends on specific contexts, wherein the object is enmeshed in social relationships with human actors. Taking the example of an elaborate hunting trap, set by humans for their animal prey, Gell (1996) shows how skill and knowledge can be located and objectified within a material object, which thus comes to embody and convey the ideas and intentions of the human agent. Objects become invested with the intentionality of their creators, users, and modifiers through their ability to stimulate emotional responses. Gell’s suggestion that agency is shared between humans and things has at least one important implication. It allows us to view objects as socially significant, beyond their symbolic form, by enabling and constraining different forms of political action.

These insights point towards a thicker and more expansive view of agency. Following Enfield and Kockelman (2017), agency encompasses both the flexibility to carry out an envisioned action and a degree of accountability for its consequences. Flexibility entails elements of control, design, and anticipation concerning the reaction of other social actors. Accountability, in turn, combines elements of entitlement and obligation to carry out the act in question with evaluation from other stakeholders to generate a degree of ownership for the envisioned action (Enfield, 2017b). These dimensions of agency can be *distributed* across different agents, who each relate distinctively to the course of action (Enfield, 2017a). The news anchor reporting about a Trump rally exercises flexibility in the way she covers the event but can hardly be held accountable for the former president’s utterings. Similarly, the so-called ‘Facebook revolution’ in Egypt during February 2011 can be understood as a multicausal occurrence with different degrees of agency exercised by labour union and student organizers, police forces, and physical and technological infrastructures (cf. Elyachar, 2017). The locus of agency is not the individual but the social unit. Going back to Gell (1998) and his study of the Khmer Rouge regime, it is undeniable that while both the soldier and the landmine each exercise a form of agency, the latter’s agency is different and less extensive than that of the former, the latter bearing a degree of accountability seldom ascribed to things in themselves.

Human agents, unlike things, possess a fluctuating repertoire of powers and skills acquired and trained through social interactions and deployed in subsequent interactions with the material world. Moreover, humans adapt their aims and intentions in light of resistances encountered (Weissman, 2020). Following Mead, we acknowledge that feedback in response to our actions allows us to make sense of our position within the social world and places us within a dialectic with the things and people that humans act with and upon.

This distributed and differentiated conception of agency allows us to consider not only the conditions for, and consequences of, action but also the causal understandings and imaginaries that are used to account for, or make sense of, a causal process (Kockelman, 2017a). Material culture, in its ability to make abstract ideas tangible, plays an important role in both the physical enabling and ideational narration of events. In politics, this enabling and narrating effect can be observed in a vast array of objects, from statues and flags to news broadcasts, which facilitate practices that reproduce, reify, and redress ‘the state’ in a variety of different garbs (Navaro-Yashin, 2002). While material culture underpins politics

in general (cf. Newell, 2012), *contentious* politics is uniquely suited for studying how ordinary objects are accorded emotional significance and how such objects inspire politically significant affects. When politics becomes contentious, questions of materiality and affect become more relevant. This is because the repertoires of contentious politics involve heightened emotional situations and intensified bodily interactions. In such situations, the ways in which things and humans help define each other become crucial to our understanding of what is going on.

Affect, mobilization, and effervescence

Durkheim tied social movements and other forms of political contention to emotional conditions such as anomie or displacement (Tarrow, 2011). Blumer (1993), a student of Mead, stressed the role of feelings, grievances, and sympathies in the highly emotive construction of social movements (cf. Tejerina, 2017). More recent scholarship recognizes that contentious politics unfolds within a setting of ‘transpersonal emotional investments’, which provide a ‘collective psychological context’ for contention and can enable and constrain political action (Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005: 470). In this reading, emotions and affects are never just attributes of individuals or their behaviour. Rather, they combine with socio-structural characteristics and culture to shape political action.

This pragmatic understanding of emotions and affects has several advantages. It helps overcome the dichotomy between reason and sentiment (Nussbaum, 1996) while recognizing emotions as intrinsic to different modes of engaging with and responding to the social world (Bourdieu, 1984). Likewise, by recognizing that affect and emotion arise between actors and their situations, we can focus on the collective practices and experiences that confer emotional significance upon ordinary objects. These objects, in turn, inspire affects within and between groups of people. Conferred upon objects and arising in group settings, collective sentiments are ‘selectively drawn upon in attempts to reconfigure the psychical landscape’ (Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005: 498).

At this point, some terminological clarification is in order. Emotions are often deemed conscious, reflexive, and culturally contingent evaluative appraisals of reality (cf. Almond and Verba, 2015). Affect, in contrast, describes a broader category of intensities, potentialities, and resonances (Massumi, 1995) that, despite their political significance, frequently escape our grasp (White, 2017). Mazzarella (2009a: 291, 2010) suggests that ‘thinking affect points us toward a terrain that is presubjective without being presocial’: it is a way of making sense of apprehending social life that does not rely on a bounded intentional subject. Ahmed (2004: 14), in turn, focuses on affect’s function within social interactions, specifically on ‘how naming emotions involves different orientations towards the objects they construct’. Thrift (2008: 221) distinguishes between affects as states of being, to be contrasted with ‘cultural interpretations of affects’, namely emotions. In this reading, affect is deemed non-narrative and asignifying, whereas emotions are narrative and semiotic (Anderson, 2009). For Massumi, any definition annuls potentialities and transforms affective expression into discernible emotion. Emotions then are intensities ‘owned and recognized’ (Massumi, 2002: 23; Mazzarella, 2009a).

Accordingly, in what follows, emotions refer to a dimension of individual and collective agency that can be narrated and affects refer to non-narrative states of being. They are both social categories in that they help pattern individual and collective agency, including in its interplay with the material world. Their sociality, however, unfolds in two fundamentally different ways: emotions can be represented, but affects can only be expressed. As a matter of either representation or expression, emotions and affects impregnate the material world. A good example of this is the studies of affect and material culture in Northern Cyprus by the anthropologist Navaro-Yashin. Although she does not draw upon pragmatism explicitly, her ethnographic analyses can be productively read from a pragmatic lens in that they offer an important corrective to many existing descriptions of affect as abstract, illusive, immaterial, and invisible. According to Navaro-Yashin (2009), affect is emitted by the presence, visibility, and tangible nature of objects contained within Greek Cypriot buildings captured by Turkish Cypriots in 1974. Affects, she argues, linger in the aftermath of war or violence, conferring a sense of loss and melancholia onto the new users of captured

objects and the new residents of occupied ruins. Thus, while current studies of affect tend to focus on human bodies and their bodily experiences, material culture is never far afield (Frykman and Frykman, 2016). It is present in the porcelain plates that are smashed onto the floor in anger, in the banners flown with indignation at a political rally, and in the simultaneous reverence and disgust inspired in different onlookers upon the giant portrait of Chairman Mao adorning the entrance to the Forbidden City at Tiananmen Square. As Navaro-Yashin (2007) suggests, these objects do not harbour autonomous or self-contained affectivities but are experienced as affectively charged phenomena in specific social interactions. Thus, to experience an object's affective charge entails being directed not only towards the object but also to what is around it – including what is behind the object and the conditions of its arrival.

To see how emotions and affects are conferred upon and inspired by things, let us return to Durkheim's (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In this work, first published in 1912, Durkheim captures the notion of affect through a range of terms, including mana, energy, and effervescence. Affective energy, according to Durkheim, is conferred through rituals that, at once, set in motion the collective forces of society and affirm knowledge stocks and categories. It radiates from people and objects that have the ability to challenge and affirm existing orders. The ritual itself relies on the gathering of individuals and the electricity of crowds. Effervescence, then, is inherently social or collective – it functions through the proximity of bodies and objects. Contentious politics provide a useful illustration. The French Revolution, Durkheim's primary example of a modern democratic collective effervescence, relied on the coming together of individuals at the barricade and unleashed its transformative energy through new institutions and totemic objects – from flags and bonnets to the guillotine. Humans use attire, tools, and other totemic objects to transform disparate individuals into a collective political actor.

In an approach partially inspired by Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, Mazzarella (2009b) shows how festivals and cultural practices helped generate the affective energy for popular nationalist mobilization during the final days of the British Empire in India. The conflation of religious rituals and political rallies helped nationalists harness effervescent mass energy, not least through photographs and print media. Images also feature prominently in Mazzarella's (2003, 2015) analysis of the creation and reception of mass affects around consumer products and the death of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il. In both cases, actors engage in 'affect management' performances, rife with claims of authoritative knowledge about the correct emotional responses to social reality. Affective energy then is deemed vitalizing, a source of commitment and a stimulant of action in contemporary mass societies (Mazzarella, 2017). In a recent application of Mazzarella's approach, Walton (2020) reveals how monuments act as conduits for public affect. They are, at once, pieces of political iconography, sites of mourning and jubilation, and places for the creation and reiteration of nationhood.

The affective materiality of contentious politics

We have now discussed each aspect of the affective materiality of contentious politics in isolation. To bring these different elements together, we turn to the semiotics of C.S. Peirce. Peircean semiotics distinguishes itself from the structuralism of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes by recognizing that signs are not always arbitrarily related to their signifieds and by accounting for the significance of (human) agents and interpreters (Woodward, 2007). While recognizing – with Barthes – that objects have a story to tell, we suggest going beyond the purely linguistic properties of social life to recognize that the world is not *just* a text: although objects can take on a range of different symbolic meanings, their material properties enable and constrain action and its meaning in specific social and political contexts. Neither language nor objects can claim ontological primacy (Tilley, 2002). Our focus on actors, interpreters, and social contexts, thus, allows us to challenge the flat ontologies of actor-network theory and of the new materialisms with an awareness of historical possibility and political specificity. Therein, the interactions of humans and things are contingent, non-neutral, and power-laden (cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2009).

Peirce's theory of knowledge and the sign recognizes concrete, material circumstances as essential to the very possibility of signification (Keane, 2005). He identifies two non-arbitrary relationships between the

sign and the signified. For something to be a sign, it must first have attributes that remain whether or not it is a sign (Peirce, 1991). In addition to these material qualities, the sign must have a real connection with the signified and must be recognized as a sign and, thus, be perceived to be connected to the signified. At first instance, Peirce (1984) distinguishes between three types of signs: icons, indices, and symbols.

Icons are likenesses that convey ideas about the signified through imitation or resemblance. Resemblances exist irrespective of the referent object, and no physical connection to the object is required (Jappy, 2017). In other words, the icon's significance is grounded in its own qualities (Short, 2007). Statues and photographs are characteristic of this form of association, yet the resemblance between the object and its referent need not be tangible or readily apparent. An experienced interpreter will be more attuned to the likenesses of a sign than one who is unfamiliar with the referent object. Likewise, an icon can play on past resemblance with a now-altered referent object or on resemblance with a fictive, non-existing object (Keane, 2005).

Indices, in turn, are indications that focus attention and reveal something about an object on account of their physical connection with the signified. Smoke indicates fire, a weathercock points out the direction of the wind, and the smell of gunpowder identifies the site of battle. Indexicality is associated with causal proximity (Keane, 2003) – though actual causation is not needed – and can help identify specific likenesses as iconic of a particular object (Short, 2007). Unlike the icon, the index ceases to be a sign as soon as the underlying object is removed.

Finally, symbols are connected with their meanings through rules or laws of interpretation, entrenched through usage over time. A symbol is a meaning agreed upon and, thus, includes linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Examples range from words and flags that carry discrete official and unofficial meanings to more intuitive signs – the steam engine signalling the onset of the industrial revolution. As a result, while indices are physically connected to their referent objects, symbols remain connected to their object by virtue of an idea, without which no connection would arise.

Icons, indices, and symbols can coexist within a single sign. Symbols can grow from icons or indices, which themselves can coincide in the same signifier. Peirce's theory of the sign is, thus, processual. Signs can give rise to further signs resulting in a contingent, conflictual, and unending process of signification (Keane, 2003, 2005). As symbol-index-icons, objects realize different qualities – such as texture, shape, colour, and position – that may become contingent but real factors in the object's social life and political significance. Objects, for Mead (2011), can become part of the generalized other to the extent that human selves respond to them socially – the flag is part of politics through the protesters who fly it, and the water cannon becomes part of a contentious encounter when deployed by riot police. Objects, then, are open to events and practices that introduce contingency into established social orders (Keane, 2003).

In his 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism, Peirce further distinguishes between the categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (cf. Jappy, 2017). Firstness refers to a quality of feeling, the properties of a thing regardless of anything else. Secondness captures the reactions to or capacities of the thing's properties, from which a thing's Firstness might be discerned. Thirdness captures that which the object represents or is represented by, its purpose in social interaction. For instance, an umbrella's Firstness includes the materials by which it is made and its shape. Secondness includes the feel of its handle, the protection from rain experienced by the person beneath it, and the tug felt by its holder following a gust of wind. Secondness is, thus, a reaction to an object's Firstness and captures the dyadic and dynamic relations between bodies (Manning, 2016). Thirdness might include the English word 'brolly', the use of an umbrella to signal bad weather, or the 2014 umbrella movement's appropriation of this item as a symbol of democratic resistance against the Chinese Communist Party.

The representative qualities of an object are independent of their being perceived by any one interpreter, provided they are *capable* of being interpreted as symbols, indices, or icons (Jappy, 2017). Yet iconicity and indexicality themselves assert nothing: an icon tells us about the qualities of an object but not whether it actually exists, and an index tells us something exists but nothing about its qualities. These material characteristics (Firstness and Secondness) must always be interpreted in a social situation. To function socially, indexicality must be made apparent and furnished with instructions, and iconicity

must be recognized and, thus, associated with past experience. Crucially for our purposes here, the social function of these non-arbitrary associations between the sign and the signified is always mediated by Thirdness. Thirdness orients the sign towards the future and leaves room for agency to realize its different meanings and potentialities (Keane, 2003).

Human agents, as interpreters in the semiotic process, select objects for their iconic, indexical, or symbolic properties or potentialities and deploy these within political endeavours, making sense of their material surroundings along the way. Both primary human agents and secondary material agents are simultaneously sources and sites of perception and projection – shaping the understandings of onlookers and themselves through their actions (Kockelman, 2017b). As such, the material agency described in this article is simultaneously about identifying, influencing, and narrating causal processes, in line with political objectives that are themselves constantly revised in response to resistances encountered.

This semiotic meaning-making process is not only materially underpinned and political through and through but also inherently affective (Newell, 2018). In contentious politics, the ritual practices that produce symbols and leverage them rely on the creation and manipulation of affect. Material symbols, indices, and icons function by inspiring or channelling affects towards strategically defined outcomes. These signs are mediated by political and emotional cultures (cf. Almond and Verba, 2015) as well as collective practices that increase the affective resonance of one sign over another. Consider the colour red. Whether on flags, banners, or posters, red has a different affective significance in former Soviet countries than in those without a communist legacy. In the USA, red is associated with the Republican party, which is most adamantly opposed to leftist and communist ideas,² and with Trump's characteristic baseball caps (da Silva and Rogenhofer, 2023b). In encounters with red objects, the colour red does not only represent or communicate social knowledge; rather, it produces an array of relational effects (Young, 2006). Its brilliance can focus attention and make visible distinctions – between rival teams, ideas, or political factions. It can also provide analogies to other material phenomena, red creating a reference to blood spilt as part of a revolution or in its aftermath.

At times, affective resonance occurs with little resemblance to linguistic codes. Rather, the sign can trigger effects in its users and audiences: a sense of alarm, deep-seated resentment, but also reflexive contemplation on the equity of the prevailing social or political order. Used in contentious politics, ordinary objects, thus, bring to life shared memories, past emotional experiences, and imagined futures. They afford participatory reflection and fuel collective action (Bracken, 2007; Newell, 2018). Things, according to Newell (2018: 6), 'store up affect' and promise 'social repercussions' upon release. Signs realized through materiality are the product of various competing forces (Turner, 2002), yet they become independent forces in their own right.

Effervescent and eminently social collective practices such as contentious politics produce affect and – through objects – help reinvigorate the social (cf. Mazzarella, 2009a; Newell, 2018). These affect-charged symbols help political actors cement collective identities and instigate social action (Turner, 2002). Following Tilley (2006), material forms can act as metaphors for intangible ideas and identities. Objects create responses in people's minds that often cannot be conveyed with words. Rather, they become tangible benchmarks around which connections between humans can be created (Mackay, 2013). The resulting collective affects and identities are embodied and objectified through action; their material symbols become the locus of a struggle over power and meaning (Tilley, 2006). Thus, when American presidents, including Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George Bush Jr, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, don cowboy hats at rallies and campaign events, they appropriate the mantle of the gunslinging Western hero, promising to defend the American Dream. The Wild West's murderous settler colonialism swiftly disappears into the shadows of an icon of American exceptionalism. The sign need not convey the complexities of the object on which it is based.

Writing about the different faces of the Turkish state, Navaro-Yashin (2002) shows how the tearing down of the Turkish flag by a Kurdish activist inspired an indignant flurry of nationalism, manifested in demands across the cultural industry that all citizens hang red and white Turkish flags in their homes and store windows. The resulting flag display helped cement a Turkish nationalist identity against the

idea of Kurdish separatism and bolstered support for the Turkish state. Peircean semiotics, we claim, expands and clarifies Navaro-Yashin's ethnographic findings: deployments of the Turkish flag in buildings and public spaces turn it from a symbol, whose meaning is absolutely arbitrary, into a powerful symbol-index-icon of Turkish nationalism with significant political affordance. The worship, in large sections of Turkish society, of images and likenesses of Kemal Ataturk creates a similar, materially underpinned basis of collective affect and identity. The proliferation of Ataturk busts, statues, posters, and badges, especially from the mid-1990s onwards, served to revitalize Turkish statehood in the face of hardship and helped proliferate a symbolic excess around Turkish nationalism.

More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has produced its own, materially underpinned signs. During February and March 2022, the letter 'Z', which does not feature in the Cyrillic alphabet, rapidly emerged as the symbol of support for the Russian military campaign. Decried as pro-Kremlin propaganda and a 'new swastika' by commentators (Sheets, 2022), the Z appears – at first sight – like a typical arbitrary linguistic sign. Its purported meaning inspired a range of speculative interpretations ranging from *Za pobedy* (for victory), *Zapad* (westwards), and – somewhat less plausibly – two stacked sevens, one upside down, representing 77 years since Victory Day (Cole, 2022). Opponents of the war also link the Z to the Russian words *Zig* or *Zigi*, references to the Nazi Fuehrer greeting *Sieg Heil*. Conversely, in an attempt to distract from the sweeping nature of the invasion, the state-owned television channel Russia Today has branded the war 'Special Operation Z', an alleged targeted strike against supposed neo-Nazi elements within the Ukrainian state (Coalson, 2022). Beyond this symbolic overdetermination, the political significance of the Z only fully emerges from its deployment in specific material contexts.

The Z entered the public conversation as it was seen adorning Russian tanks and military vehicles. In this context, the Z affords identification and battlefield communication with allies and opponents. Here, the Z remains a symbolic sign, whose relationship with its referent is purely arbitrary. Outside the battlefield, the symbol would soon be displayed on posters, T-shirts, and cars as well as through flash mobs and ballet performances (Hrudka, 2022; Sauer, 2022). It becomes an index: as a socially embedded object, the Z is the war. The propaganda sign turned mass consumer product allowed (or forced) all segments of Russian society to take a stance: for or against the invasion. The objects to which this sign alludes depend on its material underpinnings. In official renditions, it is depicted in orange and black, the colours of the ribbon of St George, alluding to the awareness ribbons used to commemorate Russian soldiers who fought on the Eastern front during World War II. The Z here is Uncle Sam calling on civilians to support the troops. In more informal, though at times still Kremlin-coordinated renditions, Z displays within Russia are banal expressions of nationalism, not unlike the Turkish flag displays analysed by Navaro-Yashin and originally theorized by Billig (1995). At international sporting events, Russian athletes used improvised masking tape renditions of the symbol to merge their own sporting victories with the Kremlin's war effort and to 'stick it' to world sporting association officials, which seemed – for years – to disproportionately penalize Russian athletes for illegal doping (Ingle, 2022). Finally, at political rallies in Belgrade, the Z painted atop cars and motor vehicles is simultaneously a statement of support for local ultranationalists and far-right groups and against European efforts to form a united front against Russia (Associated Press, 2022). Through these varied reinscriptions, the Z now has a physical relationship to the mental concept it conveys. It becomes an icon, an emblem for interpreters' political hopes and fears. As a symbol-index-icon, the Z is the redefinition of the world order. In other words, Z's Firstness refers to its shape; its Secondness includes the reactions and feelings that peculiar shape induces; its Thirdness, which captures what Z represents more generally, brings us closer to an uncertain future where a nuclear apocalypse becomes a pressing possibility.

In each context, different material underpinnings alter the political significance of the Z, which is at once a military communication device, a propaganda tool, a means of resisting international or institutional dictates, and a focal point for Western indignation. The confluence of symbolism, indexicality, and iconicity in political struggles over the meaning of the Z points to the crucial significance of linguistic and non-linguistic, material, and ideational as well as affective elements of contentious politics. By overcoming Cartesian dualisms and going beyond a reading of contention 'as text', we hope to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the political struggles, which will shape our present for many years to come.

Conclusion


This article studies the affective materiality of contentious politics. Taking our cues from American pragmatism, and Peircean semiotics in particular, we adopt an approach towards material agency that attempts to bridge the material and ideation worlds by recognizing both the linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of meaning and the interaction between primary (human) and secondary (object) agents. By recognizing the significance of conflict, power, and hierarchies – which are intrinsic to contentious politics – this approach contrasts starkly with explanatory models that deny the role of humans in constructing and manipulating things or otherwise background human agency. Closer to but nonetheless distinct from our approach are psychological approaches that identify the agential or animate qualities of things in the literature and scripture.

In contrast, this article sought to shift our focus towards contentious politics and the ways in which objects enable and constrain the strategic goals pursued by human agents within contentious struggles for power and resources. Agency, then, is distributed between primary (human) and secondary (material) agents. Secondary material agents shape contentious politics not only as enablers and constraints of specific action proposals but also as sites of affect and shared emotional experience. Imbued with affect because of their indexical and iconic properties once ordinary objects do something extraordinary, they capture public attention and set free the collective energies conferred upon them. While subordinate to the actions and intentions of their human operators, these tools of contentious politics are, nonetheless, a key ingredient in social and political transformation.

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Notes

1. One notable exception to this trend is Tarrow’s (2011) insightful discussion of the barricade as a repertoire of contention throughout 1800s Europe. This repertoire is discussed in more detail in the next section.
2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

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