

‘Performance protests’ get the most attention but they are neither radical nor innovative. They may even focus attention away from more important campaigns.

Student occupations of inner London department stores, barricades at Dale Farm, camps outside the Stock Exchange, and even the summer’s riots show that civil disobedience in the UK is on the rise. But are we witnessing a new kind ‘performance protest’? [Charlie Beckett](#) argues that these protests are now more focused on media reaction, such that they are more like performance art, often with little cohesion, programme, or objectives.



Is political protest turning into a ritual performance? And if so, is it a product of media saturation, post-modernist individualism or an ideological vacuum? Answers please, as they say around here, in no more than 10,000 words writing on one side of the paper.

But seriously folks, Brits are supposed to be reserved. Yet there are serial protestors on scaffolds on a travellers’ site in Basildon being tasered by regiments of riot police; a colourful camping site on the streets in the heart of the City of London; while earlier this year we had students occupying Fortnum and Mason. Even the summer riots felt more like a kind of mega-frenzied rave rather than a demonstration of socially-driven political anger.

It is so exquisitely Performance Art and Street Theatre that they would be getting Arts Council funding if that hadn’t been slashed.

It certainly doesn’t feel like the usual politics of protest. Partly because of the dressing up but also because of the obliqueness of the sloganeering to the ‘real’ issues currently in play such as the economy, health service, education etc. Even when the protest is focused on the economy it is expressed in a universalist complaint about ‘the system’ or ‘banks’ with no programme or objective, let alone a cohesive organisation.

And it so often feels self-indulgent and particularist. The Dale Farm site is situated in an authority facing massive cuts. The process of enforcing the legal judgement will cost millions that could have been spent on services. I would wager that for many of the supporters of the Travellers it’s the first time they have been to Essex, let alone a working class area.



Credit: Eduardo Carrasco (Creative Commons BY NC)

There may be nothing new in this. Public protest has always been performative, by its very nature. I am old enough to remember [Red Wedge](#). Traditional formats such as mass marches, rallies with speeches or pickets (yes, I have my honorary miner’s lamp) have become impotent, even as communal actions to keep collective spirits up.

It’s not just the Left either. The Countryside Alliance was also a largely symbolic and cultural protest, albeit with much deeper class resonances. Other groups such as Fathers For Justice have also deployed spectacular tactics. America has the Tea Party.

And the media does love a spectacle. The SkyCopter hovers above kettled students, Fergal Keane camps with the travellers re-enacting the Siege of Sarajevo, while Laurie Penny tweets and blogs from one protest to the next like a peripatetic socialist Joan of Arc rallying her troops. Naturally, the excellent [Guardian live blog](#) is ‘at’ Dale Farm today.

This is the paradox of performance protest. It does get the most attention. MP Stella Creasy’s noble but grinding campaign against ‘legal loan sharks’ has deployed every [social media tool she could find](#) but for maximum publicity she should have smashed a few shop windows or got herself truncheoned by the Met. But

then ideally she wouldn't have picked on a subject that has a real impact on people's lives and that can be solved. How dull of her.

Of course, there's a lot more going on here than a fashion for [witty placard slogans](#). An optimist might describe all this as a carnival of protest that is helping create a new generation of activists. Out of this chaos, real politics might emerge. I have [written elsewhere](#) about how a [new networked politics](#) is emerging and this kind of action may well be a symptom of that.

Despite my optimism, I am not convinced. Certainly on the Left these protests don't feel substantially radical or innovative. Instead they appear rather irrelevant to the big themes of contemporary society. This is not, repeat not, a western 'Arab Spring'. Yes, mainstream parties may be dull and out of touch but they are still in the mainstream where power and politics eventually gets done in a relatively democratic way.

It used to be that there was a radical career trajectory that did include engagement with the mainstream at some point. The lessons of the street were taken into the corridors of power. The danger for contemporary radicalism is that once bored of the circus of gestural protest, all these bright young things might never enter the more humdrum business of producing practical politics. Meanwhile, the media lens remains focused on the rent-a-mob at Dale Farm, not the unemployed.

This article first appeared on the [LSE's POLIS blog](#) on 19 October.