Complicity, conspicuousness, and change: Protests for Palestine in St Andrews

Celina Chen

ABSTRACT

The genocide in Gaza continues, and the University of St Andrews administration has stayed silent. However, members of the student body have used their rights to protest week after week, calling for action from the University, the United Kingdom, and the rest of the world. This article examines student-led protests for Palestine in St Andrews and argues that the challenges and tensions that come with exposing oneself to the town and university can be simultaneously disheartening and motivating. Through mainly auto-ethnography, supplemented with participant observation and interviews, I unpack the ways people understand their roles and experiences in protests. Protests are a way to spread a message, and this piece hopes to spread a message as well.

The misty drizzle, the kind that does not feel as though it warrants the use of an umbrella but still ends up dripping through hair and sliding down faces, is unrelenting. The rain is not uncommon for a Scottish beach town, but the stillness and solitude that tend to accompany these days are disrupted by loud cries.

"Come rain, come shine, free Palestine!"

Someone leads the chants while the rest join in on the refrain and attempt to unite their voices into one. Hands clutch banners, flags, and signs. In the chilly air, I am aware of how exposed my hands are as they grip a wooden post, the message 'From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free' written on the cardboard above it. I hear my own voice ringing in my ears.

"Say it louder. Say it more… Not a conflict. Not a war."

"In our thousands, in our millions…We are all Palestinians."

Passersby tend to stare. Some seem uncomfortable while others smile. I find myself looking intently at their reactions, and it seems as though I am making eye contact with everyone. Students walk to and from class. Some linger, and others try to walk past as quickly as possible. Drivers look out their window, and some honk their horns in solidarity with the movement.

After going to these protests for months, I have seen the group vary significantly. Sometimes, I am lost amongst a crowd, and on other days, the megaphone is set down, and the small group huddles together, but every Wednesday, since before winter break and after the start of the term, members from the University of St Andrews have gathered outside United College to protest the genocide in Gaza. When the numbers allow, the participants march

throughout the town, continuing their chants.

I use 'genocide' purposefully and intentionally. With the post-structuralist turn in Social Anthropology, anthropologists have noted that the writing process cannot be separated from the observer, and the reflexivity of authors has a significant influence on how they communicate information (Clifford 1986: 2). I do not intend to take a neutral stance because I see the atrocities Israel is committing against Palestinian people, and I believe in the need for peace. Expanding on the growing acknowledgment of reflexivity in Social Anthropology, Gay y Blasco and Hernández (2012: 1) write that ethnographic knowledge is made by both ethnographers and informants, and thus, they should be owned by both (Gay y Blasco & Hernández 2012: 1). My interlocutors are protesters for Palestine, and we all show up each week with specific political goals. It would be disingenuous to both them and myself to frame this essay as apolitical and not communicate their wishes with all their political intents. Although anthropology is traditionally 'unbiased' to the extent that is possible, Scheper-Hughes (1995) disputes this notion. She states, "Witnessing…is in the active voice, and it positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will "take sides" and make judgments, though this flies in the face of the anthropological nonengagements with either ethics or politics" 419). I am a witness to the destruction of Gaza through news images and videos, and I am a witness to the protests in St Andrews that call for the end to this destruction, so I will make ethical and political judgments.

In this essay, I examine the feelings and motivations protesting and chanting brings participants. I consider complicity, on an individual and institutional level. How do people think about their positions in large-scale international movements? How does it feel to take on an extremely visible and loud position? How are feelings of complicity and visibility intertwined?

I argue that personal feelings of complicity are tied to institutional belonging and institutional complicity. These feelings then motivate exposing oneself to high levels of visibility despite vulnerability and nervousness. Protesters in St Andrews see that despite the smallness of the town, the institution is big and so is the issue. Protesting is full of tensions and contradictions that tend to fuel action for frequent protesters instead of canceling it out.

Every protest is a moment for self-reflection, and as I stand there every week, as I leave, and as I write this essay, I continue to reflect. I have been involved in social justice movements for numerous years before my time at university and now. I am no stranger to protests and marches, many on large scales, such as the wave of protests in the United States in 2020 for the Black Lives Matter movement and in 2022 for abortion rights. Although the weekly protests for Gaza in St Andrews are smaller, I find them just as important as any other social movement, and I find the potential impact of successful negotiations with the University to be great.

The feeling I got to attend these protests, long before I decided on them as a research topic, is strongly affected by my own positionality. On one hand, I am enshrouded in privilege. I write this while secure in my physical and economic well-being. I am able to attend university while all the universities in Gaza are now destroyed. On the other, I understand racism, censorship, and generational trauma. I empathize and feel an affinity with the Palestinian people as they experience imperialism and vilification, and although I cannot fully understand the atrocities

people in Gaza experience every day, I know I must stand with them. Both of these sides impact my motivations for participation. I do not intend to take on a position of self-righteousness or propose that protests are the only way to bring about change, but I also cannot separate my own beliefs nor strip the passions and motivations of my interlocutors away.

Since protests are linked to solidarity and participation, I found a mix of auto-ethnography – which is the dominant method in this piece – participant observation, and interviews with student protesters to be the best way to articulate my findings. As previously stated, my positionality and my life experiences are tied to my choice of research focus and my motivations to protest for the rights of the Palestinian people. Because of this, I feel as though my own thoughts and feelings are important to note. That being said, despite my previous engagements in political protests, I do not claim to be a complete 'insider' because the boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' are always fluid as an anthropologist (Ryang 2005: 154). I examine the expressions of my interlocutors in their own right, and I draw common parallels between their feelings and mine.

Complicity & The University

"This Uni is complicit. This Uni is complicit."

This chant seems to hold more significance as the protesters march throughout the University since it is a direct challenge to the institution where most of us reside. For Sarah, one of my interlocutors, the feeling of complicity is a fundamental reason for protesting. She argues that the University and the British government exacerbate these feelings from their silence and non-action. St Andrews' credibility provides it with the power of prestige and a large platform, and higher education institutions have political power based on the soft power and renown they bring to states. Great Britain exists within the imperial core of the world, but it has largely been against or neutral in calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

She also states her own complicity as a person who lives in St Andrews and attends university here. I find my own feelings about my privileges remarkably similar. Despite only being a second-year in the University, St Andrews has become one of my communities. I am entangled in this town, this university, and all its people. I am aware I challenge an institution I am a part of, but I also find I am able to because of my position in the community. I echo Hale's (2008) framing of activist research as contradictory because we advocate for justice, yet we are implicated in the political processes we oppose (98). I found that this acknowledgment complicates research but also adds meaningful nuance and reflections from my interlocutors and myself. On one hand, we are restricted by our membership in the University as our demands must be phrased and positioned in ways that are more likely to be achieved. On the other, we are only able to protest because of this membership since we have political power as people who give the school money and credibility with our achievements.

Protesting becomes a way of challenging individual complicity by challenging institutional complicity. We see the potential of a snowball process in which individuals can come together to spark action from the University, which could in turn spark action, including sanctions, condemning Israel for human rights violations, etc., from the government. "Performance is a form of agency expressing a political voice" (McGarry et al. 2020: 18), so through the performance

of protests, participants use their positions to express agency and retaliate complicity. There are tensions in complicity as protesters are aware of the way they contribute to the issues they oppose, but this discomfort is part of the reason to join and become visible in the movement. The following section will explore the tensions in visibility and the ways protesters also use these feelings to spur action.

Visibility

Another one of my interlocutors is Hind, a pseudonym she deliberately chose to pay respects to Hind Rajab, the six-year-old girl who was killed by Israeli troops surrounded by deceased family members after hours of pleading for help. With the choice of this pseudonym and the choice to attend protests, Hind's goal is awareness. The visibility of protests for Palestine in St Andrews is tied to the visibility of Palestinian resistance globally. From the poems and stories shared to the shorter slogans that are easily understandable to passersby, human rights for Palestinian people and the refusal to look away from their struggles are highlighted.

Protests are meant to be a spectacle. Protests are about aesthetics or performances in order to communicate a political message and to mobilize action (McGarry et al. 2020: 17). The aesthetics of protests encompass objects and slogans that symbolize or impart the political objective (18). In the case of the protests for Gaza in St Andrews, the various banners and signposts state the names of organizations that support the cause along with messages, such as 'Boycott Apartheid'. The Palestinian flag is waved, and many protesters wear the keffiyeh, a Palestinian garment that now symbolizes the liberation movement. All of these objects along with physically standing there and taking up space play into the visual aspect of the protest and the wider goal of being seen and heard.

Buthpitiya (2022: 118) writes about forms of visibility in protests conducted by Tamil families of the disappeared in Northern Sri Lanka. Buthpitiya argues, "[Visibility] affords both political possibility and risk where the struggle for self-determination is concerned. Visibility is also central to the design of truth and reconciliation processes, where violations and violences are required to be made visible" (123). Using this framework of visibility, we can understand how the protesters in St Andrews use the medium of public protests as a form of "political possibility" as Buthpitiya theorizes. Although the risk for most of the protesters, at least those who are not Palestinian, is not necessarily direct self-determination, protesting still holds risks, such as potential ostracization, public scrutiny, and other forms of social tensions that come with having clear stances in issues mainstream Western media has made controversial. However, visibility is necessary for the goal of protests, which is, once again, to be seen and heard. In order for "violations and violences" to be addressed by institutions, they must also be brought to light by the grassroots resistance. When protesters perform, they expose themselves to others.

Expanding on this idea, the tensions of visibility are clear from the experiences of my interlocutors, who have given speeches and led chants. Hind states that the first time she spoke into the megaphone, she was filled with nervousness as the crowd was silent and she was the center of attention. Although she states that these feelings eased the second time she gave a speech, there is still hesitancy around being the main focus. However, she also told me that once she thinks about this hesitancy, she changes her mind and realizes that she wants people to look. She is speaking

for the Palestinian people and raising awareness so as many eyes on her as possible would have the best chances for reaching the political objectives of university and state calls for ceasefire and divestments from Israel. Visibility fuels the goal of peace. She also finds it easier to speak with support from the audience. Engagement by nodding, clapping, or cheering aids the ability to articulate her words and continue speaking. Looking across at a group of supporters for the same cause can be relieving.

Similarly, Sarah notes that when she leads chants, in the moment, while she yells into the megaphone, she is consumed with remembering the calls and responses and not making a mistake. She expresses similar anxieties about attention. However, when she steps back into the crowd, she recalls the necessity of this attention and how more protesters and more people watching will show the university that the Freedom for Palestine movement has a considerable following, and the student body has stated enough interest in the cause.

As I watch the crowd, I notice people chanting at various volumes. On numerous occasions, a protester has stumbled on the refrain or continued chanting while everyone else stopped, which tends to lead to a slight giggle and looking around to see if anyone else caught the dissonance. I understand this feeling since everyone is trying to blend their voices together, there is the anxiety of being an outlier in the group and being the sole chanter. However, as I have seen in the crowd and what I noticed about myself, once other people look back empathetically or choose to ignore the minor fumble, voices gradually increase in volume again as the main goal of visibility is remembered. Tension seizes throughout my body numerous times, especially when large crowds walk past or people on the street stop to take videos. Protesting in a small town can be difficult for many as anonymity is not granted. I noticed myself looking around for people that I knew, simultaneously hoping to catch my eyes on a familiar person and draw them in and also being nervous at being seen, but after contemplating these feelings, I am reminded they are valid but not as important as my motivations for continuing. Upon further reflection on this tension and from the statements of my interlocutors, I have come across a recurring theme that being loud and seen is better than being ignored or not doing anything. For Sarah and me, we found commonality in the feeling that these chants become somewhat cathartic as it is a way to try to be heard. The anger that comes with the feelings of invisibility and hopelessness when institutional change is slow-coming and violence continues to be perpetrated flows through the outlet of yelling.

In the organization and sustenance of political movements, emotions are essential (Bayard de Volo 2006: 461). They may play into why people initially join protests, such as the feelings around complicity, but the emotions that protests impart onto people are also important. They can take the form of encouragement and high spirits or anger and mourning as stated above. Emotions and the bonds people create from joining in on the same actions form a collective identity and the motivation to continue protesting (461). Various feelings impact tensions and motivations. Emotions, such as anger and empathy, can make people louder, and thus, more visible.

Numbers also matter. Numbers matter when it comes to supporting speakers and other protesters as Hind noted. Larger numbers mean fewer people to ignore, which continues to feed into the goal of visibility. A larger crowd also means more supporters and typically, more energy that other people draw on. Once again, individual motivations are spurred

by group belonging. As I have observed across the weeks, numbers fluctuate, and for my interlocutors, who go more regularly, small crowds can be disheartening. However, small numbers do not necessarily mean failure, and many protesters felt the need to be louder to make up for the people who they had hoped would be there. Once again, discouraging and tense feelings end up serving as further motivation and emotional stimulus to accomplish the broader goal of awareness and action.

Although small crowds can be impactful, the goal of protests is to gain more people and draw more attention to the cause. There is more to protesting than the individual. If there is one message Sarah could impart to the student body, it would be: "Don't stay silent." Hind wants people to know there are people behind them, so "do not be afraid."

Conclusion

From the experiences of protesting for Palestine in St Andrews, I have noticed that protesting is full of tensions and contradictions. However, these tensions and contradictions seem to be more of a motivating factor for participants. Complicity is uncomfortable. Acknowledging one's own past complacency and the ways one might feed into structural violence is not an easy reconciliation, but it is also this acknowledgment that spurs people to act. Visibility is simultaneously nerve-wracking, desirable, and liberating. Protesting and chanting can lead to personal catharsis, solidarity, and a collective identity.

I do not find this knowledge to be absolute. My interlocutors are either organizers or frequent attendants, so these conclusions are more applicable to us. We believe in the power of protests while others may not, and I want to note the dynamism in people's feelings and emotions. The negative aspects of the feelings of complicity and visibility may detract people from participating. Protesting is full of highs and lows, victories and losses, but for those who continue to show up, they must reconcile these strains. For people to continue showing up, they must use these tensions. There are many scales to consider when protesting: the individual, the institutional, and the global. We build relations between protesters (in St Andrews and beyond), between ourselves and the Palestinian people, and between our pasts and futures. What do we hope for ourselves, our institutions, and the world? Protesting is a way of confronting these questions.

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