

*Anonymous Solidarity in Social Movements***Abstract**

There are many reasons you may want to make your contributions to public debates anonymously, and there are many reasons you may want to act in solidarity with others. Why might people engaged in social movements want to do both at the same time? “Anonymous solidarity”—symbolized by a great many protestors wearing one and the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask—signifies not only solidarity (“we are as one”) but also multiplicity (“we are many”) and interchangeability of each for the other (“for every one of us who falls, ten more will take our place”). The latter two features make a movement more likely to succeed, the former by rendering it stronger and the latter by rendering it more robust. A raft of evidence shows that people are more likely to participate in collective action that is more likely to succeed, even if their own participation is in no way essential for its success.

Keywords: Anonymity; Solidarity; Anonymous Solidarity; Icons; Guy Fawkes mask.

FROM THE INDIGNADOS of Spain [Rovisco 2016] to the Occupy protestors across the USA and Europe [Apps 2011; Thompson 2011] and pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong [Ma 2019; Siu 2019], the Guy Fawkes mask has become a ubiquitous, iconic symbol of resistance against oppressive social institutions [Nickelsburg 2013]. But what does it mean for a great many people, both within any given protest and across many different protests, to be found wearing one and the same mask?¹ I analyze this phenomenon as the latest manifestation of “anonymous

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¹ Not quite as universally within any given protest, of course, as it appears in the final scenes of the graphic novel and 2005 film based on it, *V for Vendetta*, where it is worn by literally every

solidarity”—a phenomenon that recurs across history. Disentangling the key components of that phenomenon reveals the deeper logics that often underlie mass social movements.

Why Anonymous?

Today anonymity in public communications is the exception, but there was once a time when it was instead the rule. Three quarters of eighteenth-century novels were either anonymous or pseudonymous [Paku 2015: 1; see also Mullan 2007; Vareschi 2018].² So were the vast majority of political letters and pamphlets of that time, the most famous today being those concerning the ratification of the US Constitution [Shalev 2003; Ekstrand and Jeyaram 2011], with “Publius” [Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1787–1788/1961] sparring with “Brutus,” the “Federal Farmer,” and such like [Storing 1981]. Some reasons for those earlier authors’ preference for anonymity may seem quaint today, such as aristocratic scruples against publishing in print rather than circulating manuscripts privately among their peers [Paku 2015: 3]. But many of their reasons for wanting to communicate with the public anonymously still obtain.

What are those? I shall identify five reasons why people might want to communicate their public messages anonymously. The last is probably most pertinent to today’s social movements, and it will be the particular focus of the rest of this article.³ But all of the others remain politically pertinent, as the examples that I offer will show.

One reason for anonymity is simply to *avoid attribution*. People may seek to do this because they are not officially permitted to release the information in question. Thus, newspapers often report that informants have spoken on “condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations” [DeBonis and Stein 2020]. Another reason for avoiding attribution might be that the communication, or that mode of communication, is inconsistent with one’s social standing. Eighteenth-century aristocrats avoided being named as the authors of printed publications for that reason, as already mentioned. Sir Walter Scott, dubbed “The Great Unknown,”

member of the crowd converging upon Whitehall to watch the Houses of Parliament burn. See MOORE and LLOYD 1989.

² These included works by now-famous authors such as Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, and Laurence Sterne.

³ Mostly I shall focus on the anonymity of public messages communicated through traditional rather than new social media. Much of what I say carries over to social media messaging as well, although that also poses different issues beyond the scope of this paper [AKDENIZ 2002; WONG and BROWN 2013; MOORE 2018].

published his novels anonymously on the grounds that publishing them under his own name would have besmirched the dignity of his position as Clerk of a Court of Sessions [Paku 2015: 3]. Another example is that of Mary Shelley, who originally published *Frankenstein* anonymously, later explaining in a private letter to Sir Walter Scott that “I abstained from putting my name [...] from respect to those persons from whom I bear it” [quoted in Eilenberg 2003: 177]. She feared that the book’s being attributed to her might reflect badly on her parents (Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin) and partner (Percy Bysshe Shelley).

A second reason to communicate public messages anonymously is to *avoid distraction*. E. M. Forster [1925: 592] defends anonymity in literary creation, saying that “the poem, not the poet, is the important thing.” Ralph Waldo Emerson defended the practice of anonymous publication of articles in *The Atlantic*, which he had cofounded, saying that “[t]he names of contributors will be given out when the names are worth more than the articles.”⁴

The same line of thought can lead to anonymity in political interventions.⁵ John Locke, who published his major political works anonymously, explained in one early, unpublished tract that “by concealing [his] name” he wanted to leave the reader “concerned for nothing but the arguments themselves” [Locke 1967 [1660]: 118; see further Mullan 2007: 159–165]. In debates on the ratification of the US Constitution, Anti-federalists often said the same [Ekstrand and Jeyaram 2011: 45–47]. In our own time, the author of the anonymous September 2018 *New York Times* op-ed, “I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration,” offered the same rationale for anonymity: “I have decided to publish this anonymously because this debate is not about me” [Anonymous [Taylor] 2019: 11].⁶

Connected to that is a third reason for anonymity, to *avoid discounting* of the views being communicated. As the US Supreme Court has

⁴ Emerson is quoted in *The Atlantic* [2020]. See similarly ASENBAUM [2018: 464] and sources cited therein.

⁵ Analogously, mathematical theorists of democracy advocate “anonymity” as a desirable property of social-choice rules: in that context, it just means that the outcome is determined purely by the number of votes each way, rather than by the identity of the people who cast those votes [MAY 1952; SEN 1970: 72].

⁶ The quotation refers to his subsequent book, also published anonymously, but

applies to the original article as well [ANONYMOUS (TAYLOR) 2018]. When eventually identifying himself as its author, Miles Taylor [2020] further elaborated: “Issuing my critiques without attribution forced the President to answer them directly on their merits or not at all, rather than creating distractions through petty insults and name-calling. I wanted the attention to be on the arguments themselves. At the time I asked, ‘What will he do when there is no person to attack, only an idea?’ We got the answer. He became unhinged. And the ideas stood on their own two feet.”

observed, “an advocate may believe her ideas will be more persuasive if her readers are unaware of her identity... Anonymity [...] provides a way for a writer who may be personally unpopular to ensure that readers will not prejudge her message simply because they do not like its proponent” [Stevens 1995: 342]. In his anonymously published *Essay on the Regulation of the Press*, Daniel Defoe [1704] observed that it was often the case that “a book was damn’d for the author, not the author for the book.” Anonymous publication was a way of avoiding some censor saying: “O, I know the Author, he is a damn’d Whig, or a rank Jacobite, I’ll License none of his Writings.” Authors writing pseudonymously sometimes go so far as to provide an appealing (but utterly fictitious) autobiographical sketch of the person they are pretending to be, as did for example Benjamin Franklin [1722] in his “Mrs. Silence Dogood” letters.⁷

There are many eminently political examples in which this motivation may well have been at work. The authors of newspaper articles later collected together as *The Federalist Papers* may have written under the collective pseudonym “Publius” at least in part because two of them (Alexander Hamilton and James Madison) had been members of the Philadelphia Convention, which crafted the constitution that they were writing to support, and readers might have discounted their comments as biased on that account [Anonymous [Taylor] 2019: 10–11].⁸ John Marshall may have reasoned similarly when writing to newspapers defending his own Supreme Court decision in *Marbury v. Madison* under the pseudonyms “A Friend to the Union” and “A Friend of the Constitution” [Gunther 1969].

Connected to that, in turn, is a fourth reason for publishing anonymously: to *inflate the importance* of what is being said.⁹ People sometimes

⁷ FRANKLIN [1722], as Mrs. Dogood, wrote: “And since it is observed, that the Generality of People, now a days, are unwilling either to commend or dispraise what they read, until they are in some measure informed who or what the Author of it is, whether he be poor or rich, old or young, a Schollar or a Leather Apron Man, &c. and give their Opinion of the Performance, according to the Knowledge which they have of the Author’s Circumstances, it may not be amiss to begin with a short Account of my past Life and present Condition, that the Reader may not be at a Loss to judge whether or no my Lucubrations are worth his reading.”

⁸ It is important to bear in mind, however, that anonymous pamphleteering was an absolutely standard practice at the time: “between

1789 and 1809, six presidents, fifteen cabinet members, twenty senators, and thirty-four congressmen published anonymous or pseudonymous political writings” [BOUDIN 2011: 2155].

⁹ Publishing anonymously is also good publicity in that it sets off a search for the identity of the author. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* defines anonymity as “wanting a name,” which on one reading suggests this motive [PAKU 2015: 12]; as MULLAN [2007: 30] puts it, “anonymity is most successful when it provokes the search for the author.” Sir Walter Scott found it so [MULLAN 2007: 20–30]. In our own time, the initially anonymous author of the *roman à clef* of the Clinton campaign *Primary Colors* later said, “anonymity gave *Primary Colors* a mystical power I hadn’t imagined” [KLEIN 2019].

present their ideas anonymously in the hopes that others will suppose the ideas come from someone with greater social stature or authority than the writer actually possesses. That was particularly plausible at earlier points in history, when higher-status members of society published anonymously to avoid opprobrium from their peers when their writings appeared in print; lower-status members of society publishing anonymously might realistically have hoped to be mistaken for someone higher up the social scale.

Even today, publishing anonymously can be a way of insinuating that one is of higher status than one actually is. Although arch-conspiracy theorist QAnon publishes his or her online messages anonymously, the “Q” in the moniker implies (quite likely falsely) that he or she possesses high-level security clearance, making him or her privy to top US secrets [LaFrance 2020]. The anonymous 2018 *New York Times* op-ed and subsequent book, *A Warning*, was said (by both the newspaper and the book’s publisher) to be by a “senior official of the Trump Administration” [Anonymous [Taylor] 2018; 2019]. That official subsequently revealed himself to be Miles Taylor, former chief of staff to the Secretary of Homeland Security—not exactly a lowly position, but certainly lower than that of all the 1200 Executive Branch officials who require Senate confirmation, for example [Carey 2012].

Sometimes a relatively elevated author will employ anonymity to imply even higher authority. Claudius Salmasius, himself “a renowned scholar,” nonetheless wrote a seventeenth-century pamphlet “anonymously to convey a pose of divinely sanctioned ventriloquism in his condemnation of the [...] regicides” who executed King Charles I during the English Civil War [Paku 2015: 5].¹⁰ Something vaguely similar might occur with unsigned articles in today’s newspapers or periodicals. As E. M. Forster [1925: 594] says, “It seems paradoxical that an article should impress us more if it is unsigned than if it is signed. But it does, owing to the weakness of our psychology. Anonymous statements have... a universal air about them. Absolute truth, the collected wisdom of the universe, seems to be speaking, not the feeble voice of a man.”

Anonymity may also make a message seem more important by implying that it emanates from a greater number of people than it actually does. In the period leading up to the American Revolution, “Sam Adams was quick to realize [that] writing could blanket the colonies, appearing

¹⁰ He was called out on this by John Milton, then less well known, in an opposing pamphlet.

anonymously or under false names, giving the impression that, as Franklin put it, ‘the discontents were really general [...] and not the fiction of a few demagogues’ [Warner 1990: 68]. This is obviously the case when the same person publishes the same views multiple times anonymously or under different pseudonyms. The publisher of *The Economist* [Economist 2017], in which ordinary articles have always been unsigned, notes similarly that its practice had historically “started off as a way for one person to give the impression of being many [...]. The first few issues of *The Economist* were, in fact, written almost entirely by James Wilson, the founding editor, though he wrote in the first-person plural.”

A fifth reason for anonymity is to *avoid identification and reprisals*. As the US Supreme Court has observed, “anonymity may be motivated by fear of economic or official retaliation, by concern about social ostracism, or merely by a desire to preserve as much of one’s privacy as possible” [Stevens 1995: 341–342].¹¹ The Court went on to quote approvingly the words of a previous judgment, “Persecuted groups and sects from time to time throughout history have been able to criticize oppressive practices and laws either anonymously or not at all” [Black 1960: 64].¹²

The Guy Fawkes mask originated in the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. Its author, Alan Moore, first saw the mask used in an actual public protest when the group Anonymous was picketing the Church of Scientology in London. In that connection, he remarked: “I could see the sense of wearing a mask when you were going up against a notoriously litigious outfit like the Church of Scientology” [Lamont 2011]. One person in the Occupy encampment at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London said similarly, “The point of wearing the [Guy Fawkes] mask is to be able to go to a protest without fear of retribution from the establishment” [Thompson 2011]. The *New York Times* prefaced the anonymous 2018 op-ed “I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration” with this notice: “The *Times* is taking the rare step of publishing an anonymous Op-Ed essay. We have done so at the request of the author, a senior official in the Trump administration whose identity is known to us and whose job would be jeopardized by its disclosure” [Anonymous [Taylor] 2018].

¹¹ My interest here is in motives, whereas for the Court’s legal purposes that was less important. As the Court went on to say: “Whatever the motivation may be, at least in the field of literary endeavor, [...] an author’s decision to remain anonymous, like other decisions concerning omissions or additions to the

content of a publication, is an aspect of the freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment.”

¹² Among them, in recent years, were Republican officeholders who lived in terror of a Trump tweetstorm [ELLISON 2020].

For the same reason that political protestors want to be anonymous, the authorities want them not to be. In the UK, the Black Act of 1723 outlawed “wicked and evil disposed persons going armed in disguise and doing injuries and violence to the persons and properties of His Majesty’s subjects” [9 Geo. 1 c. 22 [1723]]. In the wake of the French Revolution, the Commune approved an ordinance making it “expressly forbidden for all individuals to disguise, travesty, or mask themselves in any manner whatsoever” [quoted in Johnson 2001: 92]. Today, too, a great many jurisdictions outlaw wearing at least certain sorts of masks in certain sorts of public settings.¹³ The most recent of these is Hong Kong, where after mass pro-democracy protests in 2019 Chief Executive Carrie Lam used a colonial-era law to ban masks at protest demonstrations. The Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal upheld that regulation, saying that it was necessary for “deterring those wearing facial coverings from breaking the law and eliminating the emboldening effect of, and consequent propensity to break the law arising from, the anonymity provided by facial coverings.” The Court added that the regulation “would also obviously assist in the identification of those who nevertheless do break the law and facilitate their apprehension and prosecution” [Ma 2020: 104, 105].

An Icon in Common: A Sign of Solidarity

Thus, there are many possible motives for wanting to make political interventions anonymously. But as regards mass political movements, it is probably the last-mentioned—the desire to avoid identification and reprisals—that is the most common. That is presumably why people wear masks themselves at social protest events.¹⁴

¹³ Unless narrowly drawn, such laws can easily violate human rights to privacy, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. As the UN Human Rights Council [2020: 60, 51] explains: “The wearing of face coverings or other disguises by assembly participants, such as hoods or masks, or taking other steps to participate anonymously may form part of the expressive element of a peaceful assembly or serve to counter reprisals or to protect privacy, including in the context of new surveillance technologies. The anonymity of participants should be allowed unless their conduct presents reasonable grounds for arrest, or there are other similarly

compelling reasons, such as the fact that the face covering forms part of a symbol that is [...] directly and predominantly associated with incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence [...]”

¹⁴ In its free-verse manual *How Is It to Be Done?*, the anarchist collective behind the journal *Tiqqun* [2001: 286] counseled:

Learning how to become imperceptible.
 To merge. To regain the taste
 for anonymity:^[1]
 for promiscuity:^[1]
 To renounce distinction,
 To elude the clampdown:^[1]

That, however, is only a very partial explanation of the Guy Fawkes mask phenomenon. It explains why people wear masks, but it does not explain why so many people choose to wear *one and the same* mask. If hiding their identity had been the sole goal, people could have covered their faces with anything—surgical masks, Guy Fawkes masks, dish towels, or even paper bags, as people did when protesting the Hong Kong mask ban [Mahtani and McLaughlin 2019]. As one unemployed stockbroker participating in the Occupy Wall Street protests said, “If you want to show your support but are afraid you’ll lose your job, just wear a mask—any mask” [Nickelsburg 2013].

That was often not what happened, however. Instead, initially at Anonymous and Occupy events and later at Hong Kong protests, people wore the same mask, the one depicting Guy Fawkes. Why? Presumably the answer is that, by wearing one and the same mask, people were aligning themselves with one another and with their common cause. By wearing the same mask, demonstrators indicate that they are as one.¹⁵ They declare solidarity with one another [Scholz 2008; 2015; Kolers 2016].

The sheer fact of anonymity can in itself facilitate the development of a common identity [Tiqqun 2001: 283; Ruiz 2013; Asenbaum 2018]. That is precisely the publisher’s rationale for leaving ordinary articles in *The Economist* [2017] unsigned: “it allows many writers to speak with a collective voice.” Newspaper editorials are likewise still largely unsigned and written in the first-person plural to represent the opinion of an amorphous collective, “The Editorial Board” [Clark 2011; McGough 2021]. In an earlier period, by writing what came to be known as *The Federalist Papers* under the pseudonym Publius, authors with partially differing views were able to speak with a common voice in defense of the new constitution [Forestal and Philips 2020]. In analogous

setting the most favourable conditions for confrontation.

Simply being in a large group might once have sufficed to guarantee anonymity. Le Bon [1895/1960: 30], for example, wrote that crowds, by their nature, are anonymous. But that was before the advent of mass surveillance and facial-recognition software.

¹⁵ To quote once again from the anarchist collective’s journal *Tiqqun*’s [2001: 283] free-verse manual *How Is It to Be Done?*:

I need to become anonymous. In order to be present.

The more anonymous I am, the more present I am.

I need zones of indistinction^[1] to reach the Common.

Le Bon sees the “mental unity” of crowds as an emergent property, a sort of “groupthink.” That may sometimes be true (for Le Bon it is true by definition of those agglomerations he calls “crowds”) [LE BON 1960 (1895): 23–24]. Here I focus on the opposite case, in which individuals have the same beliefs antecedent to their joining together, and they join together for precisely that reason.

fashion, entombing an anonymous “unknown soldier” converts a nobody into a symbolic Everyman [Warner 1959].

Whereas today’s protestors create a common identity for themselves by hiding behind the same mask, protestors in the past have done so by going by the same name. “Multiple-use names”—the practice of many different people employing the same name—have historically been the functional equivalent of today’s practice whereby many different people wear the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask. The message conveyed by the shared name, just as by the shared mask, is that “we are all the same, we are as one.”¹⁶

In one famous example, English textile workers in the 1810s went on rampages, smashing new machinery that would render their skills obsolete. As one commentator describes the scene: “The rioters appeared suddenly, in armed parties, under regular commanders; the chief of whom, be whomsoever he may, is styled General Ludd [...]” (hence the term “luddite”) [Darvall 1934: 69–70, quoted in Thompson 1968: 606]. Twenty years later, something similar occurred in the English countryside, when farm laborers left messages threatening to break newfangled threshing machines and burn the hayricks of those employing them; such messages were invariably signed by “Captain Swing.” One such “Swing” letter explicitly claimed it was “signed on behalf of the whole” [quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé 1969: 204]

The anonymity of a newspaper’s editorial collective can be an empty vessel into which meaning might be poured, a facade behind which a common identity can emerge. The appellations “General Ludd” and “Captain Swing” were not like that, however. They had some very specific demands associated with them from the start. So, too, with the Guy Fawkes mask: it “not only conceals identity but also creates a readily recognizable group identity” [Spiegel 2015: 795; see similarly Asenbaum 2018: 464–465]. The Guy Fawkes mask has become “iconic.”¹⁷ In religious settings, worshiping the same icons is a manifestation of a shared faith [Bevan 1940]. In political settings, wearing the same iconic mask is an assertion of a shared purpose.

Icons, by their nature, are material artifacts imbued with symbolic meanings and emotional resonance [Alexander 2010; Binder 2012;

¹⁶ “We are many, we are one,” in the words of one modern hymn [GIBSON 1998]. Forster [1925: 593] describes how the “mutual anonymity” of authors and readers of literature makes them “co-partners in it.”

¹⁷ As recognized by its creator David Lloyd in a BBC interview: “The Guy Fawkes

mask has now become a common brand and a convenient placard to use in protest against tyranny—and [...] it seems quite unique, an icon of popular culture being used this way” [quoted in WAITES 2011].

Kopper 2014; Binder and Jaworsky 2018]. They are objects or images that have become common cultural touchstones. It is common knowledge what meaning they carry [Sztomka 2012].¹⁸

In the context of the protests at which it is so ubiquitous, it is clear what the Guy Fawkes mask symbolizes—an embrace of individualism and an opposition to tyrannical institutions and privileged elites (“the 1%”).¹⁹ That is what wearing the Guy Fawkes mask at protests means for its wearers; and that is the meaning that it is intended to convey to onlookers. This meaning is reinforced by the common-identity claims embodied in the slogans on the placards carried by the mask’s wearers (“We are the 99%,” and suchlike).

Why Solidarity?

Thus, a great many people wearing the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask alongside one another is a proclamation of solidarity and of commitment to a shared cause. But why might people want to make that proclamation? Here I canvass three possible (not mutually exclusive) answers. One has to do with the personal satisfaction that they derive from the sheer affirmation of their shared identity. The others are more strategic in form, with the joint affirmations contributing in various ways to the success of the social movement in question.

The Personal Satisfactions of Affirming Identity

It has long been known that one of the strongest motivators for people to join in some collective action is to affirm their identity. That fact is confirmed by studies of social movements within both sociology [Melucci 1988; Calhoun 1991; 1994; Gamson 1992; Pollenta and Jasper 2001; Della Porta and Diani and 2006, ch. 4] and social psychology [Klandermans 1997; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008].

¹⁸ Within limits: there can be some variation in understandings as well as, of course, differences surrounding the associated value judgments [OLESEN 2015; esp. chs. 1–2].

¹⁹ WAITES 2011; KOHNS 2013. These associations derive principally from the film *V for Vendetta* and the graphic novels upon which it

was loosely based [MOORE and LLOYD 1989], as well as the practices of protestors worldwide who have donned it. These contemporary associations extrapolate of course from the intentions of the original Guy Fawkes, who was executed for his part in a plot to restore a Catholic to the English throne.

The question at the heart of this article, however, is a slightly different one from that conventionally addressed by theories of collective action. The question preoccupying the latter is why people turn out to the same rally. My question is why people who have already turned out for the same mass rally feel the need to employ some shared external symbol, like the iconic Guy Fawkes mask, to indicate that they are united in a common cause. That seems superfluous. After all, they are already at the same rally, holding placards bearing the same words, chanting the same slogans. There seems to be little left for the shared mask to signal.

That may be true enough for people who are together at any given rally. But what that response overlooks is the connection that they share with protestors at other rallies worldwide – a connection that is symbolized by the Guy Fawkes mask that they all wear. That mask is, as I said at the beginning, an icon that has “gone global.” It “effaces the individual whose face it conceals” in order “to express a sense of collective identity and solidaristic ties among protestors spread around the globe” [Rovisco 2016: 453]. Obviously, there are local nuances in its meaning. Broadly speaking, however, the iconic Guy Fawkes mask carries the same connotations everywhere it is worn in protest. By donning it, protestors are declaring common cause with wearers of that mask not only at the same protest but also at other protests all over the world.

That matters because people like to feel part of something bigger than themselves. Put in the most grandiose terms, people like to feel that they are “participating in the making of history” [Hardin (1982): 108]. “Collective action frames [...] empower people by defining them as potential *agents of their own history*” [Gamson 1992: 7]. Examples abound. “The civil rights movement at its height was an experience not to be missed,” just as a “twenty-year-old American male in 1943 might have joined the armed forces because going to war was likely to be the most important experience of his generation of males” [Hardin 1982: 108–109].

Social-movement leaders regularly gin up their followers with just such thoughts. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., told participants in the campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama:

There are those who write history. There are those who make history. There are those who experience history. I don't know how many of you would be able to write a history book. But you are certainly making history, and you are experiencing history. And you will make it possible for the historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter. [quoted in Branch 1988: 773]

Adolf Hitler [1925, ch. 6] appreciated the power of this sort of appeal in organizing mass movements. He commented in *Mein Kampf* on the strategic use to which communists put “gigantic mass demonstrations,

with processions in which 100,000 men took part. All this was calculated to impress on the petty-hearted individual the proud conviction that, though a small worm, he was at the same time a cell of the great dragon before whose devastating breath the hated bourgeois world would one day be consumed in fire and flame [...].” Hitler himself adopted precisely that strategy in his own subsequent mass movement.

Being identified with, and a part of, a world historical movement can thus be satisfying in itself. It can be so even if you know full well that the part you play in it is utterly inconsequential (Hitler’s “small worm”). That might be one reason for lots of protestors to wear the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask, rather than a brown paper bag that would shield their identities equally well. They might simply want to identify themselves with a movement that will (hopefully) make history, not only locally and nationally but, indeed, worldwide.

Their payoff from wearing the same mask would, on this account, come from the sheer act of identifying rather than from any further consequences that may or may not follow from it. We know from the raft of previous studies already cited that identity plays a very large role in mobilizing people for collective action. Claiming a shared identity, as an end in itself, is thus undoubtedly part of the reason why so many people don the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask when engaging in certain sorts of political protests.

The Appeal of Group Efficacy

Above and beyond that, however, “efficacy”—making a difference to the outcome—is also a strong motivator for people to participate in social movements and politics more generally. It goes without saying that “personal efficacy” matters. People are more inclined to engage in collective action when they think their participation will make some appreciable difference to achieving the desired outcome [Campbell *et al.* 1960: 103–105; Almond and Verba 1963: ch. 6; Verba and Nie 1972: ch. 5]. What is equally true is that people’s perception of “group efficacy” is also a major motivator of their participation in collective action [Bandura 2000; Zomerén, Leach, and Spears 2010].²⁰ People like being associated with winners, even if their being associated with them does nothing to increase their chances of winning [Klandermans 1984: 592; Bartels 1985; 1988; Zomerén, Saguy, and Schellhaas 2012: 621–623].

²⁰ See further the meta-analyses of nearly 300 social psychological studies by ZOMEREN, POSTMES and SPEARS 2008 and STAJKOVIC,

LEE and NYBERG 2009. For specifically political examples, see FINKEL and MULLER 1998: 43 and KOCH 1993: 321, 322–323.

Think of sports teams. Some fans are loyal followers of their team; their identity is bound up with it, and they stick with it regardless of its record [Goodger 1986; Goldman *et al.* 2016].²¹ But for many fans, “identification” with the team is much more contingent than that. It has been calculated for US baseball teams, for example, that a 10% drop in their winning percentage in one year leads to a drop of anything between 6 and 12% in attendance at their games the next year [Moskowitz and Wertheim 2011: 234–252].

The same is true of participants in social movements. Just as some sports fans take a perverse pleasure in backing perpetual losers, some social activists take perverse pleasure in championing lost causes. But most people shun “futile gestures.” As Brian Barry [1978: 30] observes,

Whatever the reason why a person may attach himself to a cause, more enthusiasm for its purpose is likely to be elicited if it looks as if it has a chance of succeeding than if it appears to be a forlorn hope. Nobody likes to feel that he is wasting his time, and that feeling may be induced by contributing to a campaign which never looks as if it has a chance.

As one Chicago neighborhood activist remarked, “When [people] see that you’re really [achieving] something, then they say, ‘You can count on us’” [Hirsch 1986: 383].

Here I shall consider two ways in which the sort of “anonymous solidarity” symbolized by lots of protestors wearing one and the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask might contribute to the prospect of their movement succeeding and, in that way, provide an impetus for them to take part in it. One has to do with “strength in numbers”—a great many people wearing the same iconic mask emphasizes the magnitude of support that their cause enjoys. The other has to do with “strength in interchangeability”—a great many people wearing the same iconic mask emphasizes that the movement is robust against the loss of any (or indeed a great many) members.

The Strategic Advantages of Multiplicity

We know that people who are individually powerless can often band together to form a powerful collective to pursue their common interests. The trade union movement is testimony to that fact. In the words of

²¹ The Chicago Cubs’ fans stuck with them despite a 108-year losing streak, for example. The explanation in the case of the Cubs seems to be that their owner, Philip Wrigley, marketed “the fun and the healthfulness, [... and]

the sunshine and the relaxation” in his ivy-covered ballpark—no matter whether the team won or lost—as effectively as he did his chewing gum [USEEM 2016].

“Solidarity Forever,” its classic anthem, “what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one, but the union makes us strong” [Chaplin 1916].²² William Gamson [1992: 7] calls this the “agency component” of the “collective action frame,” which embodies the claim “not merely that something can be done but that *‘we’ can do something.*”

With solidarity comes size, and with size comes social-movement strength. The group Anonymous today boasts “We are legion” [TechCrunch 2011; Lyons 2015].²³ This is a modern echo of a famous stanza in Shelley’s [1819] poem *The Masque of Anarchy*. Paraphrasing words spoken from the podium just before the Peterloo massacre, where the British cavalry slaughtered peaceful protestors demanding extension of the franchise, Shelley urges the masses to:

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few.

Those last words have been widely evoked through the years, by everyone from striking New York garment workers in 1909 [Zinn 2003: 326] to protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Tahrir Square in 2011 [Mulhallen 2015]. Those same words are regularly evoked by British Labour Party leaders [Chakelian 2017], and they provided the name for the campaign against the poll tax in Britain in 1990, as well as the title of a film documenting the largest-ever marches worldwide, the 2003 protests against the Iraq war [Amirani 2014].

But why, exactly, should numbers matter? There are at least two reasons.²⁴ The first has to do with the “irresistible power given [a movement] by its numerical strength” [Le Bon 1960: 38]. Consider in this connection, for example, a message penned by an anxious clerical magistrate to Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel (founder of the modern police) in response to the “Captain Swing” uprising, warning him that

²² Likewise in politics. In their “civic culture” survey, Almond and Verba [1963: 141, 152] asked respondents, “Suppose a law were being considered [...] that you considered to be unjust or harmful. What do you think you could do?” They quote one American office manager as replying, “You can’t do anything individually. You’d have to get a group and all get together and go to the proper authorities to complain.”

²³ The phrase has unfortunate biblical associations. When performing an exorcism, Jesus demanded the evil spirit’s name; it replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many” [Mark 5: 9].

²⁴ In DELLA PORTA and DIANI’S [2006: 171–173] discussion of “the logic of numbers,” both are discussed but not separately identified.

“[i]f this state of things should continue, the Peasantry will learn the secret of their own physical strength” [quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé 1969: 100–101].

The thought expressed there is simply that the more people there are pushing on a door, the more likely it is to burst open [DeNardo 1985; Leighley 2001]. As the example of the Peterloo massacre suggests, however, things do not always work out that way. The more push there is, the more pushback there sometimes will be [Cantoni *et al.* 2019: 1069]. A government that would not bother to send the cavalry to quell a small protest might be more inclined to send them in to quell a large one.

A second reason that numbers might matter is that greater numbers confer greater legitimacy [Trumbull 2012]. Henry Hunt, the speaker interrupted by the Peterloo massacre, was subsequently elected to Parliament. There, he often proclaimed that he spoke not just for himself, nor just for his Preston constituents. Rather, he insisted, “I speak the voice of millions [...]”—in stark contrast, Hunt pointedly added, to “all the other members around him [who] were nothing more than the tools and instruments of the boroughmongers [who controlled depopulated ‘rotten boroughs’] and the aristocrats” [Huish 1835: (2): 467, 478]. Some might have heard that as a veiled threat of *force majeure*. But Hunt himself clearly intended it as a legitimacy claim.

Legitimacy is itself a source of strength for a social movement. It is no guarantee of success, of course, but it nevertheless makes that success more likely. The perception of legitimacy makes people more inclined to join in a movement, because it is seen not only as more legitimate but also as more likely to succeed for that reason.

Lots of people wearing one and the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask, at the same demonstration or better yet at many demonstrations all around the world, can be seen as a deliberate assertion of the “strength of numbers.” It emphasizes that there are not only a lot of people present at the protest but that they are protesting the same thing—they are united in a common cause. The fact that they share the same visage signals their intention to be seen to be speaking with one voice. If there is strength in numbers, the endlessly recurring image of Guy Fawkes argues powerfully for the fact that the protestors wearing it have numbers on their side.

Wearing the same Guy Fawkes mask is a way for protestors to signal that fact, both to one another and to onlookers monitoring the progress and the prospects of their movement. It is obviously important for protestors to signal their strength to others whom they want to impress. But it is also important for protestors to signal their allegiances and intentions to one another [Gambetta 2011]. Nobody wants to protest

alone: to do so would be utterly ineffectual and hence pragmatically pointless. People need assurance that enough others will join in the protest to make it worth their while doing so as well [Granovetter 1978; Macy 1991; Oberschall 1994; Watts and Dodds 2011: 476–477]. Economists might dismiss anonymous signaling (by wearing a particular mask for example) as “cheap talk” [Kreps and Sobel 1992: 863–865], on the grounds that you can hardly hold anyone to a commitment if you do not know that person’s identity. But in an Assurance Game of the sort the protestors are facing, reassurance rather than collateral is all that is required [Sen 1966]. Thus, icons like the Guy Fawkes mask, and rituals more generally, can suffice to create common knowledge among protestors of one another’s allegiances and intentions [Chwe 2001].

*The Strategic Advantages of Interchangeability*²⁵

If all that the protestors wanted to do was to signal that there were many of them who shared the same opinion, however, there would have been no need for them to hide their faces. They could simply have worn the same hat, like the Phrygian *bonnet rouge de la liberté* worn during the French Revolution [Harris 1981]; or the same-colored ribbon, such as the one worn by participants in the 1983–4 Yellow Revolution in the Philippines [McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 107–120]; or carry an umbrella, as did pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong in 2014 [Tatlow 2014]. Those items too were, in context, icons of solidarity.²⁶ If a public signal of solidarity is all that people seek, why would not something like that suffice? Why do they employ an icon that, literally, masks their identity? Why opt for an icon that confers anonymity, over and above affirming solidarity?

There are, as I have said, plenty of reasons for protestors wanting to remain anonymous, independent of any reasons they may have for wanting to display solidarity. So it is, of course, possible that two wholly separate sets of reasons led many protestors simultaneously to don the iconic Guy Fawkes mask. But here I am particularly interested in one particular reason that they might have to don it, that of pursuing “anonymous solidarity” collectively, rather than the reasons they might

²⁵ For further elaboration of the arguments in this section see GOODIN 2023.

²⁶ In the words of Robespierre, “the *bonnet rouge* [...] was a guarantee to all the world of [its wearer’s] unadulterated patriotism”

[quoted in HARRIS 1981: 285]. Or at least it purported to be—in the case Robespierre was discussing, it served to disguise its wearer’s true allegiances.

have had to don it as separate individuals—albeit individuals who were using the same device (the Guy Fawkes mask).

Wearing the same mask as a great many other people signifies that you are the *same as* them. But any other symbolically laden item of apparel could equally well signify solidarity in that way. What a mask does that other items of apparel cannot is to confer anonymity upon its wearers. That signifies that they are *interchangeable* with one another, in ways that are strategically significant for the success of their movement [Ruiz 2013: 266].²⁷

The interchangeability of a social movement's members with one another makes that movement stronger and more robust.²⁸ This has long been appreciated as regards a movement's leaders. If any one of them is indispensable—perhaps because that person is uniquely capable of uniting the movement's disparate factions—then if that person is eliminated, the movement will collapse. That is what happened to the movement for Ogoni autonomy in the Niger River Delta, for example, which collapsed after the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa [Bob and Nepstad 2007].

Martin Luther King Jr. was, for that reason, always at pains to emphasize his own dispensability to the civil rights movement. In 1956, during his first nationally prominent protest against segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. King's house was fire-bombed. Dr. King emerged from the smoldering residence to proclaim defiantly: "I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. If I am stopped, our work will not stop" [quoted in Branch 1988: 166].

The strength of a social movement does not merely depend upon its leaders being eminently replaceable. It also depends upon all of its component parts being likewise. In mechanistic terms, that is the lesson of standardization in manufacturing, which enables screws from one manufacturer to be replaced by those from another if supply from the

²⁷ As Spiegel [2015: 795] says of the Guy Fawkes mask, "This collective identity offers the sense that the rising oppressed are omnipresent—that one can brutalize and imprison single individuals, but that their spirit will remain free and embodied by others." Indeed, in social choice theory, "anonymity" is literally defined as "interchangeability." Social choice's "anonymity axiom" requires that, in a binary choice situation, if one voter switches sides the outcome remains the same just so long as one other voter switches in the opposite direction [SEN 1970: 72].

²⁸ However, the value of each "spare" capable of substituting for others will ordinarily decrease with the number of "spares" there are, so each additional one has diminishing marginal value to the group, and hence to anyone contemplating joining the group in order to contribute to its efficacy by becoming an additional "spare." In some ways, having a greater number of interchangeable, strategically substitutable participants in a movement can sometimes be a hindrance [CANTONI *et al.* 2019: 1067–1071].

original manufacturer is interrupted [Whitworth 1841; Matutes and Regibeau 1988; ISO 2018; Yates and Murphy 2019]. Militarily, that is why such value is attached to interoperability among different branches of a country's armed services and different countries' forces in a military alliance [NATO 2006].²⁹ "Cannon fodder" is a derogatory term, sometimes appropriated ironically by soldiers themselves, for dispensable and interchangeable military personnel.³⁰ The Western Front was chockablock with them in World War I; so was the Eastern Front in World War II. In a war of attrition between unspecialized armies of interchangeable parts, the side with the greater number of replacement troops is greatly advantaged.³¹

For much the same reason that manufacturers and militaries need to standardize their operations and employ interchangeable parts within them, so too do social movements. They, too, need their component parts to be readily replaceable in order to be robust to the loss of any one of them. A social movement, like a military, is all the stronger when its members function as "interchangeable cogs" in that way.

Having a great many "spares" capable of replacing anyone who falls by the wayside makes a movement more resilient and more likely to succeed. That conclusion is confirmed theoretically by computer modeling of network structures [Albert, Jeong and Barabási 2000; Carley 2006]. It is confirmed on the ground by case studies of movements as diverse as the African National Congress, FARC in Columbia, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka [Bakker, Raab and Milward 2012].

The importance to the success of a movement of its participants being eminently replaceable is well known among participants themselves. In a video posted by the group Anonymous and entitled "Message of Solidarity," the narrator proclaims: "For every one of us who falls, ten more will take our place" [#Anonymous 2020].³² You might be tempted to dismiss that statement as empty internet bravado. But similar

²⁹ Although standardization requirements were not imposed across all branches of the US armed forces until 1952, knowledge of the advantages of standardizing some elements of military operations dates back to antiquity, the design of Roman military roads being one famous example [ELWELL 1970].

³⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "cannon fodder" as "people or things which are regarded as expendable." The term was first introduced in Chateaubriand's 1814 pamphlet denouncing Napoleon's attitude toward recruits to his armies. But the concept goes back much further: in his play *Henry IV, Part I*, for example, Shakespeare [1598: Act

II, line 72] has Falstaff referring to his troops as "food for powder."

³¹ Marshall Pétain's explanation for the defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian war was: "too few children, too few arms, too few allies" [LENOIR 1991: 150].

³² Note that this point differs (but perhaps also derives) from the one Alan Moore puts in the mouth of his character V, the initial wearer of the Guy Fawkes mask in *V for Vendetta*: "Beneath this mask there is more than flesh Mr. Creedy. Beneath this mask there is an idea. And ideas are bulletproof" [MOORE and LLOYD 1989, quoted in ROVISCO 2016: 453].

sentiments were explicitly vocalized by activists putting their lives on the line in the American South during the civil rights movement.³³

Thus it is clear why it is good for the *social movement* to have many participants who are interchangeable with one another. But why would *any individual* be tempted to participate (at any significant cost, anyway) on that basis? After all, each participant is, in the cases here in view, eminently dispensable.³⁴ Some of them may be playing an important role, to be sure; but any one of many others could (and would) take on that role if they did not. Where members are interchangeable, none is essential. None is individually efficacious, in that sense.

Nevertheless, the very same fact that makes each individual inefficacious makes the group as a whole all the more efficacious, more likely to succeed. Given that people like to back winners and to take part in groups that are likely to succeed, that fact in itself gives people a reason to participate in collective actions in which they are mere “cogs,” redundant elements of the movement whose role is only ever likely to be that of ensuring that there are plenty of others to fill the places of the fallen.

By “taking part” in a movement, people become part of it [Goodin 2018]. They may be redundant parts; their role in it may end up being causally inert. But they are part of it, even so, and that can be personally satisfying in itself, as I have said. Furthermore, even those who do end up being redundant parts of the movement will nonetheless have played the crucial role of “backups,” available if needed. And as I have said, having a reserve of such backups in place helps to ensure the success of the movement. So even redundant members nonetheless play an important causal role in the success of the movement, albeit at one remove. That thought, too, can be motivationally compelling, leading people to join a social movement even if they know that they will almost certainly be superfluous in a narrower sense.

Conclusion

People participate in social movements, and politics more generally, for all sorts of reasons [Hardin 1982; Scholzman, Verba and Brady 1995; Klandermans 1997]. Not all of those reasons have to do with their being

³³ Howard Zinn recounts just such a story from a 1962 voter registration drive in Georgia [ZINN 1964: 142–143; 2003: 454–455].

³⁴ James Coleman [1982: 26–27] offers a similar observation about bureaucracy: a bureaucrat is “merely an occupant of a

position in the structure [...] [who] can at any time be replaced [...]. [While] this is good for the smooth functioning of the organization, [...] it takes away something of central importance to each of us: the sense of being *needed*.”

instrumental in changing the outcome. People sometimes want to take a stand as a matter of moral principle, even if they know it will make no material difference [Goodin and Roberts 1975]. Or, as a manifestation of their group identification, people sometimes simply want to root for “their side” in political contexts, much as they would at a sports match [Cialdini *et al.* 1976; Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Zomeran, Postmes, and Spears 2008]. Protestors’ choice to wear the iconic Guy Fawkes mask can sometimes be explained in those terms.

But there is another, and perhaps more important, side to the story of the Guy Fawkes mask’s ubiquity than that. People sometimes take part in social movements for reasons that are more instrumental, albeit at one remove. People like to be part of groups that they think are likely to succeed, and many individuals wearing one and the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask is a way of protestors communicating to one another and to the world at large that their movement is likely to succeed. The ubiquity of the iconic Guy Fawkes mask communicates that it is likely to succeed, firstly because it has numbers on its side, and secondly because its many interchangeable parts make it more resilient.

Perhaps no one wants to think of themselves as Hitler’s “small worm” or as a “mere cog” in history—certainly not under those descriptions, at least [Miller 1965].³⁵ But as C. S. Lewis [1948: 136] wrote, “it is not chastening but liberating to know that one has always been almost wholly superfluous.” Being part of something bigger, more powerful, and more important than oneself is a source of deep satisfaction. People can be persuaded to join social movements on that basis, even knowing in their heart of hearts that the overall success of the movement will most likely not depend in any way on their own contribution. Indeed, they might be all the more moved by the knowledge that no one individual really matters—because that very fact makes it more likely that the movement overall will succeed, which in turn makes it a movement with which it is more worthwhile to be associated.

To be sure, that is not the only way of motivating collective action in general or participation in social movement in particular. But it is, I submit, an important part of what lies behind the “anonymous solidarity” that characterizes so very many cases. “Anonymous solidarity”—as typified by lots of protestors wearing one and the same iconic Guy Fawkes mask—makes the movement more likely to succeed,

³⁵ Karl Jaspers, for example, despairs of “the titanic interlocking wheel-work of which each worker is one of the cogs. [...] The

individual is no more than one instance among millions; why then should he think his doings of any importance?” [JASPERS 1951: 39, 50].

and (other things being equal) the more likely the movement is to succeed, the more people will want to be associated with it.

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