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Biography:

Shrehan Lynch is the Course Leader for the Sport Foundation Degree at the University of East London. Her former position included being responsible for the Secondary Physical Education Initial Teacher Training course at the University of East London. Her specialisms include research on sociocultural issues in physical education and social justice pedagogies. She founded the Socially Just Physical Education and Youth Sport Network and considers herself as a scholar-activist.

Protest, Power, and Psychological Resistance: Navigating Political Despair in Precarious Times

In recent decades, the United Kingdom and many Western states have experienced the consequences of inequality, political conservatism, and elite dominance. Citizens face widespread economic precarity, fuelling emotional and psychological distress. Political unrest manifests in job insecurity, stagnant wages, a housing crisis, and the erosion of social support systems, all culminating in the current cost-of-living crisis. This paper explores the personal and collective emotional responses to these political conditions, with a focus on protest as a psychological coping mechanism and an act of resistance. By drawing on both personal experience and academic literature, I examine the ways in which anger, political despair, and critical political consciousness intersect in the fight for social justice.

The Impact of Political Unrest on Emotional Well-being

Political unrest impacts citizens across numerous domains, from employment and wages to housing stability and education. The neoliberal agenda, with its focus on standardisation and testing, strips away opportunities for critical consciousness (Freire, 1972) and transformative justice. As schools and councils face funding cuts, young people are increasingly deprived of the chance to develop these critical capacities. The consequences of these policies are felt at a deeply personal level, where political structures intersect with individual lives (Leach, 2010).

At the same time, the emotional toll of this systemic inequality cannot be ignored. Political circumstances often generate feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness. Leach (2010) argues that political events create emotional meaning for individuals, who experience a range of emotions from guilt and sympathy to anger and happiness, depending on how directly they are affected. These emotions shape our understanding of what matters to us politically and influence how we choose to respond.

Protest as a Psychological and Political Response

One of the few democratic rights we still hold—and a key mechanism for psychological processing—is the right to protest (Leach & Allen, 2017). Protest allows individuals to act on their moral values, giving voice to personal grievances while resisting broader systems of power. My own engagement with protest began in secondary school where I organised a student rally, advocating for the right for girls to wear trousers like the boys. We refused to return to class after break, human chaining ourselves to the fence in an attempt to make our voices heard. Our chant, “Trousers, not skirts! Give us the choice,” echoed through the playground.

Although the protest was short-lived—ending when the teachers threatened detentions—it sparked a deep sense of personal empowerment. This was one of my first real experiences of standing up to authority, and it shaped my understanding of protest as both a personal and political act. Though unsuccessful, it was a formative moment in my ongoing commitment to activism. As bell hooks (2015) suggests, protest is not just about immediate success but about developing a critical political consciousness. Through this consciousness, I have come to understand my own struggles as part of a broader movement for social justice, one that involves not only self-recovery but also solidarity with others who face different but interconnected oppressions.

Anger and Political Despair as Drivers of Resistance

Anger is a common emotional response to injustice, and it plays a key role in political resistance. As Audre Lorde (2017) asserts, anger is not merely a personal emotion but a legitimate and necessary reaction to systemic oppression. “What you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering,” Lorde writes, distinguishing between anger as a moral force and anger as a symptom of personal grievance (p. 33). In my case, as a British Palestinian, my anger stems from the continued apartheid regime in Palestine and the complicity of the British government in sustaining this oppression. Anger, in this context, becomes not only an expression of personal frustration but a powerful driver for political action.

Protests such as the recent Pro-Palestinian rallies in the UK reflect this collective anger. These protests raise public awareness of the genocidal Zionist state (Gülsüm et al. 2024), yet they also reveal the limits of protest in achieving immediate political change. While protests are vital for raising awareness, they can also fuel negative media narratives, especially in the West, which shape public perception and bias.

Despite these challenges, sustained protest is crucial. Weekly demonstrations, rooted in principles of justice and fairness, play a key role in uniting people in the fight for a cause, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances (Gülsüm et al., 2024). Even when political efficacy is limited, values, morality, and other forms of efficacy can sustain participation. However, the emotional toll of constant protest can be immense. The sense of fighting an unwinnable battle against entrenched power structures often leads to exhaustion and despair.

Political Despair and Collective Action

Bird et al. (2024) refer to this exhaustion as “political despair,” a state that limits our ability to enact collective change. Political despair arises when individuals feel overwhelmed by the scale of injustice and disempowered in their efforts to challenge it. However, Bird et al. (2024) also suggest that despair can be linked to motivation to act—sometimes radically—when the circumstances demand it. For activists like myself, this recognition is crucial. We must understand that while anger and despair are natural responses to systemic oppression, they can also fuel radical political action.

As a scholar-activist, I am reminded that solidarity is essential in times of unrest. Collective action, grounded in a shared sense of injustice, has historically driven social change. The feminist movement, for instance, created lasting change for everyone, even as racism, sexism, and other forms of

oppression persist (hooks, 2015). Revolution, as hooks reminds us, is not a "one-time event" but an ongoing process of vigilance and transformation (p. 45). The smallest acts of resistance can lead to genuine change if we remain committed to challenging outdated responses to difference.

Conclusion: Building Solidarity through Psychological Resistance

In conclusion, protest serves not only as a political act but as a means of psychological resistance to the emotional toll of living under oppressive systems. In the face of political despair, protest allows individuals to channel their anger and frustration into collective action. As Bird et al. (2024) suggest, even in moments of despair, there remains the potential for radical, transformative action. Through sustained activism, we can continue to challenge power structures and build solidarity with others who are similarly affected by injustice.

bell hooks (2015) reminds us that revolution is an ongoing process, one that requires continual vigilance and action. In that spirit, I encourage scholars, activists, and citizens alike to confront the psychological warfare that accompanies political unrest and to channel their emotional responses—whether anger, despair, or hope—into sustained efforts for social justice and collective liberation.



Shrehan protesting against the twinning of Bournemouth town centre with Netanya and occupied Palestinian city (July 2024).



Shrehan counter-protesting at the far-right demonstrations in Walthamstow, London (August 2024).

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