COUNTRIES OF UNREST – FORMS OF RITUALISED PUBLIC DISOBEDIENCE IN ARMENIA: THE VELVET REVOLUTION[1]

ADRIAN STOICESCU[2]

Faculty of Letters
University of Bucharest

Abstract

The protests, street movement and the civil society became a strong reality of the contemporary world both in countries with strong democratic system and quasi-democratic ones, both in countries with strong recent protest histories and in ones where revolts are quite rare. This article proposes an unconventional interpretation of the Armenian Velvet Revolution resorting to reading the street movement, its causes and its outcome, as a ritualised undertaking resembling the rite of passage structure. Based on ethnographic interviews, the article brings forth some images from the protest as organised in the three successive stages of van Gennep's theory, recasting the social function of transformative needs in the Armenian society.

Keywords: *cultures of protest*; *rites of passages*; *emotional crowd*; *heroic leadership*; *Velvet Revolution*; *Armenia*.

Introduction

The spring of 2018 brought again the small landlocked country of Armenia on the map of protests against the forms of government that have been perceived as increasingly deflecting from the peoples' interests. Armenia is a country of strong public disobedience, more than often public activism espousing street riots, with various degrees of success, in order to defend the rather strong convictions shaping the people outlook on self-determination, religion and secularism, democracy, rule of law, corruption and social inequality, domestic

[1] This paper stems from the research carried out within the framework of the research project 'Knowledge Exchange and Academic Cultures. Europe and the Black Sea Region', led by the University of Graz, and funded by the European Union, within the funding scheme Horizon2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie RISE.

[2] **Adrian Stoicescu** teaches cultural anthropology and ethnology at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Bucharest and is an associated researcher at 'Nicolae Iorga' Institute of History, for the project mentioned above. His research focus on the contemporary forms of cultures, ranging from post-communism to post-humanism; e-mail: adrian.stoicescu@litere.unibuc.ro

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violence, environmental issues which form the agenda of grassroot activism and of the NGOs incorporated to fight forms of non-liberal governance, policies and mentality (Ishkanian 2007, Ishkanian/Glasius 2013, Paturyan/Gevorgyan (eds.) 2014, Ishkanian 2016, Burchardt/Hovhannisyan 2016).

Generally speaking, Armenian history of protests appears to be divided into two very distinct categories based on the reason leading to rebellious behaviour. The first one is deeply historically rooted and pertains to the ever-present scars on the Armenian last century development: the 1915 Armenian genocide with its ethnic cleansing (leading to the 1965 movement) and the Nagorno-Karabakh territory status (leading to the 1988-1991 Artsakh Movement), joint together by strong nationalistic feelings (Ishkanian 2008). The post-Soviet era marked a downturn in the reasons for protests, shaping thus the second category which is more influenced by present time themes such as political and economic issues and power struggles. Furthermore, after the dissolution of the former USSR, the nationalistic traces of the Armenian protests gradually faded, being replaced, at least for the 2018 movement, by national features as was the case of dancing the traditional *fortress* dance in the overcrammed Republic Square on the day Pashinyan was voted prime minister. Totally distinct movements are those from 2012, from Mashtots Park (#SaveMashtotsPark, with strong environmental turn which further evolved into a generalised fight against corruption and oligarchy) and from 2015, Electric Yerevan, when the increasing of prices of electricity sparked public outrage led eventually to their decrease.

The political context of the 2018 protests appears a little distinct from the previous causes igniting the actions of the civil society seen at large. They may appear to be more the apex of constant generalized social frustration, rather than an immediate burst of public discontent. The reasons for the 2018 movements appear to originate around the 2015 referendum held in Armenia that enabled the conversion of the former semi-presidential state into a parliamentary republic (Baghdasaryan 2017a). As a result of such transformation, the general belief was that behind the democratic switch from one government form to another was in fact the pretext enabling the former Republican president to remain in power on the new position, that of a prime minister.

Methodology and Challenges

This article is based on the interviews carried out in Yerevan between the 15th of May and 14th of June 2018, in a period in which the street protests had already ceased, but the frenzy of a successful attempt to overthrow the strongly unpopular former leader was still present. All the 21 interviews were made in English with the exception of one which was mediated by a translator (the other participant acted as translator), the language command of the informant being insufficient for to carry it out without help. The people I interviewed belong to three distinct categories: academia, members of formal civil society, organised in associations and some acting in news agencies and, thirdly, people who don't

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fall under either category, but participated in the street rallies. In terms of age, my informants are quite diverse, ranging between early twenties and late fifties and with only one exception they were all holders of at least a college degree, received either from a domestic university or from abroad.

Some of the interviews were recorded individually, in one-on-one discussions, others were recorded with two informants, in the form of a joint dialogue, and one with two interviewers, together with dr. Antoine Heemeryck, who was also present in Yerevan during a part of the timeframe mentioned above.

Besides the 21 recorded interviews, I also talked about the recent events with a member of the LGBT community that expressly forbade me to record the conversation for reasons of privacy stemming more from the fear of retaliations against him from a society that still displays rigid beliefs related to 'deviations' from 'normal sexuality'. Although I was not able to record our conversations I was still allowed to take written notes while we discussed.

The reluctancy displayed by this last person in connection to his identity disclosure was partly showcased by other informants who either stated directly that their names should be concealed, either advised me not to use their names. As a result, I will not make any reference whatsoever that may be leading in any way to the identification of the persons or of the organisations they are a part of.

However, such reserves may seem out of place judging by the outcome of the rallies. The civil disobedience dubbed as 'the Velvet Revolution' was successful, thus the power of the solidarity may still prove worthwhile supposing even the most remote traces of actions against free speech are noticed. Such perception stems more from the overt belief in the power of the people willing to sanction even the person entrusted with the solution to the problems the Armenians have. One of the interviewees bluntly stated that 'if Nikol fails us, we'll do the same with him. We proved our will with Sargsyan. We'll do the same with anyone'. Such a feeling of symbolic kinship in achieving collective goals may, on the other hand, be only generated by the emotional outbursts of successful undertakings. Not utterly stressed, but rather subconsciously lingering, the feeling of insecurity may still act as a deterrent against openly speaking one's mind outside the shelter of a group acting jointly.

Besides the need to conceal identity there was also a rather atypical, one might say, aspect revealed by the interviews. Some informants, being aware of the political unrest in Romania, turned to comparisons between what had just happened in Armenia and the not so clear outcome of the street movement from Romania. One of the focal points of comparison was the activity carried out by the former head of anticorruption structure in Romania, Laura Codruța Kovesi[3], since her activity, echoed by the international press, may function as model for those fighting oligarchy in Armenia. The changing roles between the interviewer and the informant opens the path for other grounds of comparison. For example, one informant recalled that:

[3] At the time of writing this article, she was dismissed by the President at the minister of justice's proposal.

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> "[…] there was a moment […] when everything was still in place: Serge [Sargsyan] was in place, the government was in place, police was on the streets, and people were protesting, and there was a moment I realized that we had won. […] these people don't go to work […] I never realised that you can put down a government by not going to work. […] they don't know how to govern a people which does not go to work".

Against the backdrop of this interpretation of the success of the anti-government protest, my informant referred to the only partial success of the Romanian rebellious behaviour against the pardoning government ordinance[4] by simply sanctioning the Romanian bad timing of protests:

> "You were protesting after work, that's why you still haven't got your revolution. You have to stop work, with your entire country and say this is what you want".

In the first case of comparison, the use of a Romanian figure, that is a part of the environment I come from, can be read as a way of making me understand the righteousness of the causes of the Armenian fight and the statue of flag-ship Pashinyan may hold in the struggle to overcome corruption. The second comparison may function on a completely different level and can emphasise the superiority of the solidarity and timing and the symbolic kinship within the unrest crowds I referred to before.

Finally, besides the interviews, the field research behind this paper is the Armenian digital sphere, as Facebook and YouTube played significant roles in the covering and dissemination of the events. Many of the live streams from the period of street rallies and from Pashinyan's hearings in the Parliament are still present on YouTube with consistent commentaries made by the people watching such streaming[5].

Discussing the Interviews

It is very difficult to analyse the events from a place which you inhabit only for a limited number of weeks, especially when you don't speak the language of that place and the culture of it is only mediated by reading. Yet I found myself in the rather privileged position from the development of the research point of view, namely sharing a rather similar past with the Armenians by being brought up under the same totalitarian regime either as part as the former USSR or as a member of the Warsaw Pact member. Additionally, the

[4] The reference centres upon the early 2017, when Romanian took to the street in their hundreds of thousands to protest against the government which has passed an emergency ordinance to pardon corruption deeds that were below a threshold of 200,000 Ron (approx., 50,000 Eur). The bill was perceived as being directed to some top politicians belonging to the government coalition who either were sentenced or were under prosecution.

[5] The commentaries informing this analysis are either in English or translated by Vardan Gevorgyan, PhD student in Cultural Studies at the University of Bucharest.

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recent developments in the post-totalitarian life of the two countries proved to be more similar than distinct, which confronted me with a research field bearing strong resemblance if not sometimes total similarity with the socio-political environment from back home. As a result, some interpretative frameworks and the results from the interviews may stand the test of validity by reference to the cultural systems, despite, of course, the inevitable differentiation between the two countries and cultures.

The Illegitimate Legitimacy

One of the questions I repeatedly asked the people I interviewed was related to the change in support for the Sargsyan administration, since no later than one year and a few months before the electorate voted in favour of the constitution modification. All the answers to this question led to the feeling that the voting process was tempered with, namely by electoral bribe and by the generalised feelings of fear, especially in small rural areas. The perception was that voting against the referendum question will inevitably lead to acts of revenge from the Republicans which will by all means see their wish to change the political structure of the state accomplished. This fear appears to have converted to the outrage eventually fuelling the street protests.

As already stated, the 2018 riots represent only the tip of the iceberg of the accumulated negative emotions related to the unfair treatment the people of the country feel they have been subjected to. It is a reaction to a well-solidified culture of corruption engulfing all sector of economic and social life, and furthermore, a reaction to the tactics of buying the access to decision-making position in the country's state hierarchy. There is extensive research done on the results of pervasive structure of the political power infiltrating the entire social structure in Armenia, from the very top ranks of the hierarchy to the lowermost parts of the society, thus instilling fear among the citizens who feel that should they fail to obey the decisions or question them, they might be subject to various types of retaliation (Baghdasaryan 2017b). Furthermore, a myriad of accounts of influencing the vote was disclosed by the civil society which intensifies the accumulation of frustration related to the political class that eventually led to the street events. What stems both from the sources informing this paper and from the interviews too is that people accepting the bribe developed a sort of sense of duty to fully commit to the actions they were paid for, as one informant discloses, that 'even though they were alone when voting, people didn't dare to vote differently. This thought hasn't even crossed their minds'.

This electoral informal (and symbolic) economy of bribing or coercion appears to be guided by some very strict principles, in a culture of honour of commitment even if, as Baghdasaryan posits it, such people are well aware of

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both the illegal and the immoral nature of selling the votes for money or privileges (Baghdasaryan 2017a, 2017b). Such an example may lead to idea that what is illegal becomes unsanctioned, and thus performable, as long as the authority is the one that bolsters such type of conduct, the law enforcer being selective when it comes to abide the law. Not even the watchdogs of democracy, represented by strong involvement of the civil society, were able to prevent the election fraud despite their extensive participation in the polls (Grigoryan 2017).

I deliberately used so far the feeling of *fear* as justification for such behaviour since it appeared constantly in the answers received. The question, on the other hand, is, without denying such emotional triggers, if this is the only argument for such obedience. There was one informant that added the idea of blind conformity as the cause for the such behaviour, which opens up the possibility of a wider understanding of it. One might add the political and civil conduct illiteracy of some voters, that mechanically act as they are instructed to. Secondly, there might be a question of cultural behaviours, of seizing the immediate advantage (especially financial), a type of conduct detrimental to the understanding the wider picture of consequences of such short-term thinking. And finally, there might be the case of copying the advice of the ad hoc leaders that prove to be extremely influential in context of indecision or reluctancy.

Whatever the causes, the general idea was that, not very differently form other polls in Armenia, the results do not necessarily picture the free will of the voters, but rather the outcome of a deliberately engineered process which questioned, under different voices and with various intensities, the legitimacy of the 2018 election of the former president as prime minister.

Lowering the stake from the general manipulation of elections to the individual levels, it becomes obvious that besides the strong resentment stemming from the idea that money and advantages can influence democratic opinion, an equally important role was played by smaller attacks to the very essence of civil rights the Armenians have. One informant, mother of a small child, brings forth the idea of social inequality related to basic everyday life needs:

> "If you are in a hospital with the parents, with your kid, you wait in line. They will come and step in front of you. Because they can".

Such a brief exemplification becomes relevant under different layers of sending a message. First, the anaphoric function of the pronoun leads to a generic antecedent with certain degrees of ambiguity. The dialogue up to that moment was centred upon topics related to the Republicans and the opposition, to the ways in which press was censored during previous street movements, the impossibly to censor the present protest due to the generalised access to the technologies of connectivity, all of which make the identification of a clear referent rather difficult. It may be only assumed that the generic *they* refers to

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the ruling political class and those privileged by them. Additionally, the use of the pronoun, implying the inherent existence of its first-person counterpart leads to an acute sense of otherness, by signalling a practice both detrimental to and differentiating from the *we*. Finally, it may not be very far fetched to interpret the avoidance of the name as strong indicator of despising delineation from those resorting to such practice as a counteraction to their lack of civility stemming from the taken for granted super-citizens rights status.

A second level of understanding of this statement resorts again to the linguistic selection of determiners attached to the nouns. Deliberately or not, this wording taps into emotion, not only by the use of words like *parents* and *kid*, but rather by the alternation of the definite article with a possessive. *Your kid* not only individualises, but beyond it, it nears the injustice to the most intimate circle where injustice may be felt.

It is important to restate that the interviews were carried out in the immediate aftermath of the successful changing of the former president-cum-prime minister, a period when the emotions (both positive and negative) are still very vivid in the public's minds and the citizens still indulge in optimism and joy. With the exception of few if any interviews, the reactions of the people representing my research pool were overwhelmingly positive, ranging from the choice of words to the almost always present smile of satisfaction related to the success of their will. It became rather obvious that the joy associated with the successful undertaking linked more to the Pashinyan's election as prime minister rather to Sargsyan's destitution from state authority. To this end, the newly elected Pashinyan appears to hold the almost religious aura of a Messiah who possesses the will, the strengths and the abilities to offer the solution to better the lives of those among which he emerged.

The Civil Commitment and Engagement and Their Emotional Impact

Especially in media saturated environments, as it is the case Yerevan, too, where control on the media, especially on the Internet, although very easily achievable from a technical point of view[6], was this time absent, the live streaming and viralisation of news, irrespective of their forms, create the grounds for a wide access of both official and non-official exploitation of the events happening especially in context of unrest. The power of networked society, from Castells (2010 [1996]) to Tufekcy (2017), was constantly charted and reassessed, and the

[6] The Freedom House report on press freedom in Armenia in 2016 classified it as 'not free' (https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/armenia, retrieved on the 4th of September 2018, 14:00). Account of closing TV stations and news channels for their struggle to maintain correct and timely updated information on the country's political and economic status are still vivid memories in the speeches of those acting today as free journalists.

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pervasiveness of connectivity proves if not always its success, at least its overwhelming capacity to mobilize and motivate masses of users sharing the same beliefs and more than often attracting new supporters of a certain cause.

In this vein, almost all of the informants spoke about their Facebook activity aimed at the 'correct' disclosure of the events taking place not only in the square, but everywhere in the country, where either of the following occurrences was noticed. The first category consisted the events disclosing causes leading to the rebellious acts: the social inequality, authority abuses noticed at all levels of their presence, cases of corruption or their effects presented either directly, or a result of the constantly present dichotomy between *we*, the mass, and *they*, the small group of oligarchs and corrupt politician. This category of disclosed facts appears to accumulate each and every fact, deed or conduct which is perceived in tones ranging from unfairness to illegality and for which, rightfully or nor, the group of the *other* is responsible. Such accrued vilification is continued over the next category of disclosed events, narrating the actions of the protesters from the square. A common feature of this second category is made of instances of the clashes with the police, the 'Pretorian guard'[7] of the oligarch and some Republicans which, in civilian clothes, worked together with the riot police to re-establish order in the square and on the streets. Additionally, a big part of the cogenerated content under this second category comprises short interviews made with the protesters that simply felt it was the moment to speak freely about the what was happening then and there, empowered by the live streams and fueled by the heat of moment, which shatters the self-censorship deriving from fear.

Conversely, the moment of the election of the crowed-favoured prime minister changed the rhetoric of both speech and streaming, but preserved the emotional publics, which display this time the catharsis of victory. From that moment on and up until the moment when my interviews ended[8], my informants consonantly talked about a thirst of being aware of every move Pashinyan made, every action, decision, speech, in other words, all his activity being under surveillance for reason stemming not from sanctioning, which triggered the first batch of surveillance, but from support.

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[7] Becoming aware of a complementary force to the official riot police, I explored further during my interviews this issue. It becomes obvious that apart from the uniformed policemen there was an additional force fighting against the protesters. The interviewees talked about athletic individuals joining the police in their intervention and about numerous accounts when people from the street recognized such individuals as bodyguards or people from the entourage of the financially well-positioned members of the ruling party form Armenia.

[8] I am still in touch with Armenian people on Facebook, some of whom I knew before travelling to Yerevan. Their posts increasingly revert to posts from the period before Pashinyan, disclosing the faults of the Armenian society. It appears, as anticipated during the interviews, that the expectations build before the change of power are ever stronger, with constant refocusing on the problems the Armenian society still faces.

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However, no matter the topics of such crowdsourced journalism may have, the constant feature is centred upon the emotions, either as exploitation of the source for partaking in protests, recording and documenting them, or as response to the broadcast images, movies, commentaries or all together as a single product of the cultures of protest. My interviews and the observation of the unfolding rage from the commentaries to the YouTube streamings from before Pashinyan's elections converted to joy, hope and the feeling of accomplishment jointly backed up Eyerman's (2005) definition of channelling all emotions towards a specific goal in social movements, be it, in this specific context, made of an array of goals, as presented above. Be it deliberately used as strategized, goal-achieving, event making tool in the hands of a liberal agenda, or a spontaneous, event derived, contagious outcome, it appears it serves its purpose extensively.

I started my interpretation of the interviews by stressing the ubiquitous fear as a somewhat generalised condition doubling visible actions. The same fear appears, to a certain extent, to characterise the actions of *the evil otherness* as the protests unfolded. One informant, working as a journalist for a certain news agency recalled a quite trivial event which occurred after the Pashinyan was voted in as prime minister. One evening, as driving on the streets of Yerevan, my informant's car was pulled over by a police office in a routine check which used to translate into an invitation to offer bribe. My informant remembered shouting at the traffic warden that s/he would not offer money anymore simply to be allowed to leave. It was something which, outside the context of the successful protest, my informant would not even dare to imagine. When the policeman recognised her, he simply let her go telling 'please, don't write about me'.

The significance of this occurrence is quite symptomatic for the incorporation of fear as stemming from threat. On one hand, the individual fear in collective cultures of protest functions as an incentive for taking actions, for taking matters into one's hands, while, on the other hand, in case of an authority which holds a shaky foothold in the group summon to manage, fear appears to lead to withdrawal to rightful practice.

The ostensive actions of the empowered individual(s) and the withdrawal mechanism of the disempowered authority may finally be interpreted by resorting to the formula of representation. If the policeman lost the comfort endorsed by the corrupt high ranking official (the root cause of all evil), the protester, in a quite opposite way, gain the support of the political 'underdog' that managed to convert into saviour. To this end, the culture of protest seen at large, and the Armenian case as a particular instance, equate to the clash between the hero and the villain.

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The Reoccurring Hero

As stated before, my research in Armenia started after all street riots had ceased. The research done before, exclusively by browsing the international media sources offered me a glimpse into the reasons, the development and the outcome of the protest movements. The sources informing my first contact with the political activism in Armenia were more than abundant in disclosing one name, Pashinyan's. Of the visuals accompanying such news briefs, a powerful impact developed around the wounded, bandage-handed Pashinyan wearing a camouflage T-shirt, a backpack and a black cap[9]. When arriving at Yerevan, I only manage to find one snapshot, partly corresponding to the image. I was able to take the following picture from one previous shop window, now only an empty, closed commercial space showing two partly peeled off adhesive photos of a smiling Pashinyan.



I am not aware of any literature on the status of the hero on the making in contexts of political unrest and riots, yet there is a great abundance of approaches to the ways in which heroic actions are perceived. Generally speaking, the monomyth of the hero in Campbell's (2004 [1949]) understanding stems from a series of potentialities within the groups in which this figure takes shape. Although moving away from the mythological perspective in Campbell's approach, Allison and Goethals (2015:189-190), exploiting present time actions perceived as heroic, enlarge upon such potentialities by coining the concept of 'heroic leadership dynamics', which compensate for the 'cognitive and emotional need' that will further function as action driver for the people accepting the representative figure as heroic. Furthermore, heroic deeds may be noticed at various levels of life occurrences that exceed the private sphere, and

[9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/armenias-charismatic-opposition-leader-whips-up-pressure-after-talks-break-off/2018/04/25/e158f47a-488d-11e8-8082_105a446d19b8_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7225722f9882, retrieved on 4th of September 2018, 9:00.

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for Fried (1993: 500), the political figures of heroism can easily be narrowed down to 'struggles against oppression'. Finally, as the analyses centre upon the production of a culture of political protest in a media saturated environment, featuring a highly important visual component, as Strate (1995) puts it, a potential heroic deed augmented and acknowledged by the group is increasingly relevant only if such action narrative comes accompanied by the visual representation of its hero.

Pashinyan's image as stemming from the interviews is build, as stated earlier, by references coagulating around a feeling of awe that may be sometimes seen as religious. My interviews shaped by questions asked about the before – after protest movement environment reveal both the carceral dimension of the ever present corrupt political system, but also the imminence of the opportunity to demolish such a system. Although collective in nature, the movement needed an individuality to incorporate such aspiration and to take the necessary risks to act in accordance with the goals of the unrest masses. Pashinyan dared to speak by capitalising on the accumulated frustration and thus became the materialisation of all potentialities of the group. Furthermore, it is not very clear if he inspired conduct to the mass of people protesting or if his actions were in turn inspired by the actions of such mass, but it becomes rather irrelevant since both categories of actions and feelings collineate on the path of the common aspiration to put an end to the corruption raised to state policy. It is true that Pashinyan holds a background of actions against political majority, but his attempt up to this moment were hardly successful.

And, by far more important and irrelevant whether staged or by accident, the image of the hero-leader emerging from the masses and wearing an army-like camouflage T-shit managed to paint the picture of an absolute power that could not be unsuccessful. Such image is further enhanced by the bandaged hand holding the loudspeaker. The protesters' hero being injured has a great impact on the emotional public, but a hero re-emerging after medical assistance bearing the signs of repression on his body can only lead to an intensified wrath and unlimited support from the crowd. An arrested and freed Pashinyan, injured by the police under the eyes of the protesters that returns to the square only to further mobilize the already disgruntled masses is therefore a strategic move that ensures success.

Finally, Pashinyan is credited with the first use of 'Velvet Revolution' to define the 2018 street revolts from Armenia, a name entering rapidly in the common vocabulary of those I interviewed. It is not the place here to discuss to what extent the Armenian movement was in fact a revolution, but it is of great significance that none of the informants I asked was actually linking directly this name to the 1989 Prague movement. Only one person tried to comment upon the reasons leading Pashinyan to such a name the answer stated the need for a peaceful transfer of power from the Republicans to Pashinyan.

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This explanation is relevant for the rhetoric of hero making. Although suggesting the military condition by the type of outfit and although bearing the sign of brutal interaction with the police, the hero postulates the idea of non-violence in a somewhat religious conduct of pardoning those who had harmed him, the protesters and, indirectly, the goals of an entire country. This rhetoric of contrast may be seen as a well-established strategy to further capitalise on public support in a dialogue between the tear gas of the power and the smooth touch of the velvet from the opposition.

Discussion and Findings. From Street Revolt to Rite of Initiation

The literature on the cultures of protests and their social and political implications is vast and enlarges with every new movement from even the most remote place on the earth. Yet, analyses with the tools of cultural anthropology are quite rare. Having this as background, the question emerging is to what extent a strict anthropological interpretation may be applied to a field which traditionally have very little in common with ethnographic analyses.

Levon Abrahamian, who did in-depth analyses of the Karabakh movement reached, at the end a very mind teasing exploration of the street rallies, the conclusion that the street protest cultures might very easily find their equivalent in other forms of public gatherings the cultural history of the world incorporated and, subsequently, the civil society thus made bears as birth certificate the forms they most likely resemble. For Armenia, the origins are in *a carnivalesque civil society born in the square* (Abrahamian/Shagoyan 2015: 151). The carnival and the festival are, in fact, a rather common trait of the Armenian protests (Abrahamian/Shagoyan 2013).

Yet, observing the structure and the development of the 2018 movement and extensively drawing on the interviews made with the participants, the shape of this year's movement resembles much the structure and, furthermore, the functions of a rite of passage in an altered form. It's true that the structure was stemming from the changes in status of an individual within the group and it's also true that the passage corresponds to changes in the age, which must also be doubled by a metamorphosis in the cultural identity of the person subject to different types of initiation, the beneficiary of which are both the neophyte and the group. It is equally true that in 1909, when van Gennep coined the term to describe such acts of repeated conduct found in various groups traditions, he did not anticipate any type of societal development his theory might also be applied, let alone the use for the understanding the structure of the protest movements. But, observing the social tensions within the certain groups the actions of protest take shape, the transformative nature of the sequence of events leading to the change of status with a focus on the group first and some individuals as

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background and, finally, the possibility of reducing the multitude of actions to three consecutive stages that develop an overwhelming symbolical frame may not render useless the approach to the protest movements from the perspective of the trilaminar structure of an already existing ritual structure.

The first striking difference one might notice stems from the different outcomes of the traditional triliminality and the protest one. Supposing a neophyte failed the initiation (which equated, for instance, in the maturity rites with death), the unsuccessful attempt to achieve the expected outcome of a protest movement does not necessarily mean the failing of the ritual *per se*. Every protest movement envisages as ultimate goal a particular form of social modification – be it political, economical or cultural. Yet, should this goal be unachievable, the group aimed at changes still gains a form of initiation either in the tactics to further use or in postponing or redefining the goals it wants to achieve.

This was not the case of Armenian street movements analysed here. The success of the attempt corresponds to the alteration of the social state, thus leading to the second question of which is, after all, the neophyte subject to initiation. Even though this movement had a distinct, visible and individual leader, the scope of initiation was not related to him. As stated, the entire group is subject to the ritual initiation in the culture protests since this group is solely the entity transformed by the projected future governance which will act according to their expectations. The leader, although inevitably necessary, is no more than a simple agent in the group transformative need during part of the rite. Pashinyan took the risks, incorporated in his speeches the problems leading to the need of transformation, yet he was not under considerable mutations. Even his access to power as a result of the successful completion of the passage, which of course is a change of status, is a simple incorporation in the ritual and this does not make him the beneficiary of the change.

In terms of the three-stage ritual structure, each stage has its unique features, which could however be subject to stereotyping irrespective of the group in which the protests arise. The separation set of practices may far and wide be associated with singling the instances of lack of conformity to the group's identity, irrespective of the particular level of interest where such discrepancies may be noticed. It is the least visible stage since it particularly functions as a subversive set of actions which leads to accumulation of group frustration. As a result, the preliminary stage features two significant traits: the delineation and the accumulation.

The threshold stage is, as anticipated, the most elaborated and densest in visible actions. It is the moment of the actual street movement, which involves the clashes with the supporters of the authority being challenged, and which consists of the disquieting of all causes of frustration initially recorded as a process of accumulation. It is the most unpredictable stage in terms of the selection of the tools used in expressing discontent and equally the most

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creative (the emergence of the leader, the crowdsourced journalism covering all the events, the strategies to confront or to avoid the riot police, etc.). It is, at the same time, the stage in which the most notable differences from the traditional rites can be seen. Among the constant features of this stage is the emergence of the leader, which in some cases, as it was the case of the Armenian 2018 movement, incorporated heroic features. It is also the moment of emotion conversion. For this case, the fear converts into hope. The emotional alteration of the masses subject to initiation is somewhat algorithmic in the sense that it comprises a variable emotional input which, in the liminal stage, always converts to hope.

And finally, to complete the last stage of the rites of passage in this undertaking, the postliminal, the leader of the masses takes full charge of the further events. If for the first two stages, the leader has rather side roles, in the aggregation stage the leader becomes a fully-fledged yet symbolic neophyte. It is fully-fledged since it incorporated the entire expected transformational essence of the protests and it consists of symbolic unification of all goals in a single instance. It may be built by means of contrast in the sense that if in the first, preliminary stage, the source of the need of transformation is more than often narrowed down to only one (or a limited few), the emergent hero from the liminal stage accrues the potentiality of completing all the goals, set by the masses on the move at the beginning of the protests.

Conclusions

Although benefitting from extensive research, the cultures of protest are rarely read from a cultural perspective in cultural anthropology wordings. As seen, in the case of Armenia, such successful attempts were made, yet there is room for further analyses resorting to conceptual frameworks which are not specific to the field of social movement. Yet, the cultures of protest are to a certain extent stereotypical, with some patterns emerging irrespective of the place where such movements occur. Keeping this in mind, this article, inspired by the previous interpretations of protest movement in a comparative approach to the theory of festival, bounces off the idea of a triliminality of the protest movement applied in the specific case of the Armenian Velvet Revolution. The new wording of van Gennep's theory incorporated the lexicon of emotional crowds as integral part of liminality seen as a process of conversion from negative (fear) to positive (hope) as triggered by various stages of perceived empowerment. Furthermore, this type of liminality operates with changes of focus from individual to collective and the assignment of hoped changes to an emblematic figure, which displayed heroic features.

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