

The Ecology of Change: The Algerian Protest Signs

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In this article, Khadidja Belhadi will analyze and examine protest posters and signs as a genre, and how they have been used historically to forge change. To illustrate, Khadidja will focus on the protest posters and signs used in the Algerian protests, 2019, known as the second wave of the Arab Spring movement. The planning, the production, the reception, and the distribution of the signs will be explored.

“We must not allow our creative protest to denigrate into physical violence”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

To express anger and disagreement and to show solidarity in a civilized and a peaceful way, people organize protests and hold signs, posters, banners, and placards. They may walk, chant, or just gather in vast public spaces. Protests have been one of the most influential mass human reactions to corruption, unfairness, and brutality practiced on people and civilians by governments and institutions. Protests are not only limited to political issues. People protest to support other social and environmental matters, such as the rights of women, people of color and queer people, and clean environments. Posters and signs are key elements in protests everywhere in the world. One can consider them the *language* of protests. In this article I examine protest signs as a **genre** of activism. **Genre** is a kind of text or artifact that can be produced to achieve a goal. According to Miller (1984), genre is defined as a typified response to a reoccurring situation. Accordingly, protest signs are texts and artifacts produced as a response to certain acts to communicate the message(s) of protesters. They are not isolated texts. Genres exist as part of

complex **activity systems**. The concept of activity systems refers to the interaction of people, tools, physical and conceptual spaces, and genre are produced as part of the interactions of these systems. As described by David Russell, this activity system is “historically developed within the culture in which they function.” It is social and dialogic and in conversation with the genre’s producers and their objectives and how best to achieve them. It is collectively produced and in a constant change” (Russell). Understanding the activity system helps us understand how a particular genre works to achieve its goal.

My goal in examining the Algerian protest signs is to understand their effect and **trajectory**. What I mean by trajectory here is the path a text takes in its production and distribution in relation to the people, contexts and histories that shape a genre or writing situation. Sounds boring? Hold on with me. You will be fascinated by the amazing stories of people making, planning, distributing posters and signs, carpooling and crossing dangerous police and military checkpoints to bring their signs to participate in the protests. By now, I guess you are wondering where in the world could all of this be happening? Definitely not in the U.S. Yes, you are correct! It is not an action movie either. This is happening in Algeria, my home country. A North African country located between Morocco and Tunisia. As I take you on this journey of the Algerian protest posters, be prepared to laugh and be surprised.



Figure 1: This photo shows the protesters in Algiers, June 8, 2019. (Image by Rihem jeon, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=79552691>)

To give my readers some context, the protests that are happening in Algeria are considered by many experts as the second wave of the Arab Spring movement that first began in 2011 in Tunisia, and then spread to several other countries including Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. In the Middle East and North Africa, people are out protesting against their corrupt governments and institutions. People are demanding decent lives for themselves and their children. Although these countries do have enormous natural and human resources, the majority of the people are living very close or below the poverty line. For example, the unemployment rate in Algeria increased to 11.70 percent in the third quarter of 2018 from 11.10 percent in the second quarter of 2018.

The unemployment rate in Algeria averaged 14.04 percent from 1999 until 2018, reaching an all time high of 29.50 percent in the third quarter of 2000 and a record low of 9.80 percent in the fourth quarter of 2013 (Trading Economics). The actual numbers are much higher.

Being Algerian, my **antecedent knowledge** will inform this discussion. What I have told you so far about my home country and the current situation is in fact my antecedent knowledge, or simply, my prior knowledge about the topic. However, to enrich this work, I informally interviewed and talked to friends who have been participating in the Algerian protests since it started on February 2019 (Wikipedia). As a genre, the Algerian protest posters represent a collective voice of the people to express their anger, frustration, hopes, and demands for real reform that would lead to a better future. The Algerian protests, known as the Hirak Movement, started out to protest the intention of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a fifth term. Bouteflika had been president since 1999. In 2013, Bouteflika suffered a debilitating stroke and, since then, his brother Saïd Bouteflika became the one who is running the country. When Abdelaziz Bouteflika's fourth term was ending, his entourage wanted to present his candidacy for a fifth term (Wikipedia). At that time, around March 2019, the president had not talked to the Algerian people for years. The Algerian people first wanted Abdelaziz Bouteflika to withdraw his candidacy for a fifth term. Moreover, demonstrators demanded massive radical change that would create more democracy and freedom under the rule of law. They wanted a change that would lead to the overthrow of the government of the ruling clans (Wikipedia; Hamouchene).

In order to understand how these “protest” genres work to create change, we can use Illinois State University's version of a well-known theory called CHAT, or **cultural-historical Activity Theory**. CHAT can be used to make sense and understand all kinds of literate activity, including the activity of protesting. Here at ISU, CHAT breaks down into seven terms that are helpful to better understand literate activities in our world. For example, when we look at protest signs, two key terms come to mind: **representation** and **socialization**. First, representation deals with how protesters think about, talk about, and plan the text that goes on the sign. What goes on protest signs are reflections of social issues and demands. Second, socialization deals with how texts are taken up by others and the kind of reaction(s), positive or negative, that are probably going to happen based on that text.

Unpacking the Complexity of the Protest Signs

Protest signs and posters are complex texts. Therefore, they require some genre research. Genre research means exploring the context in which this genre is being produced, used, and circulated. Moreover, learning about the protesters, their history and objectives is helpful. In this literacy experience, using ISU's version of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to study this complicated genre is fascinating in a way that will help us unpack its complexities.

Let's CHAT Map Some Signs

As I CHAT map some powerful Algerian protest signs, I will share some interesting facts and stories that I have collected from friends and relatives. I will also discuss factors that have played an important role in the representation, production, and distribution of selected posters.

“They All Should Go” / *Yetnahaw Gaal* (Figure 2) is a slogan in Arabic (Algerian dialect) which appeared during the first weeks of the protests. How has this text been taken up? The reception and the socialization of this slogan were really powerful as it changed the trajectory of the protest. This slogan summarized the demands of the people. It has become one of



Figure 2: “They all should go” / *Yetnahaw Gaal* /. A T-shirt slogan, 2019.
(Image by By Reda Kerbouche, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=81483978>)

the most influential and powerful slogans that expresses the real demands of the Algerian people. It originated from a video shared on social media showing a young Algerian man interrupting a local correspondent of the television channel Sky News Arabia. The journalist was reporting that people are out celebrating the success of their protests after the president announced his decision of not going for a fifth term (Wikipedia). This slogan was eye-opening because it helped the Algerians wake up and not fall for the dangerous tricks that the government was planning to suppress the protest. It helped them realize that the problem is not only about the president's intention of going for a fifth term, but it is also about the whole corrupt system that has to be replaced.

“Yes, We Can” and “We are making Algeria Great Again” are interesting and powerful slogans that appeared originally in English. These slogans were borrowed from the Obama campaign in 2008 and Trump campaign in 2016. These slogans resonated with the Algerian people as they carried hope that their dreams might also become true, as was the case in the United States of America.

Since the start of the Hirak, the signs and the texts displayed were very powerful. They express the real suffering of the people and the humiliating practices exercised against them. People demonstrating on the streets, holding all different signs that show the dirty work of the government to the whole world, gradually inclined the government to offer semisolutions just to stop the ongoing protests. One of the important factors about the Algerian protest is its organization and persistence. The protests were organized in a way that put pressure on the government all week long. Students protest on Tuesdays, lawyers protest on Wednesdays, and Fridays are for all segments of the society. Although I live here in the States, I am always following what is happening there. When I started working on this paper, I was regularly in conversations with an old friend of mine. I was



Figure 3: Demonstrator wrapped in the Algerian flag, March 2019. (Image by Bachounda, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=77008419>)

interested to know how students were engaged in the protests. I learned that students make their signs in their dorms collectively. On Tuesdays, they usually start their march at the University of Algiers in the heart of the capital. For students, social media (in particular, Facebook) “are the main platform for organizing, sharing, and exchanging information” (Personal interview). The reception of the students’ powerful marches translates the minister of higher education’s decision to move the beginning of the winter break earlier and extend it to three weeks just to make the students go back to their home towns and minimize their activities and involvement in the Hirak. It is clear that the students and their opinions are a real threat to the government.

For the production of the protest signs, examining the protest posters available online, people have used some photos of some current figures in the government and glued them on big posters and wrote next to the picture phrases showing anger and discontent about their performance. As an example, they would handwrite, “O Thieves! You Ate the Country.” Others used cardboard and markers, and others typed and printed large and small size signs. Most protesters have made their own signs. They make them at home or they may gather in safe places and work on them (Personal interview).

The Algerian flag shown in Figures 1, 3, and 4 was also one of the most popular protest signs. The presence of the flag, in all the figures above, means a lot to the Algerians. I went to Algerian schools for my elementary, secondary and high school, I still remember we were always taught that our



Figure 4: Protests in Blida, one of the Algerian cities, March 10, 2019. (Image by Fethi Hamlati, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=77231028>)

flag is the symbol of sacrifice, freedom, and independence. The colors red and green are symbols of the 1.5 million who paid their lives to free the land. Holding the flag is a reminder that our ancestors freed the land and now it's time to free the people. In Algeria, flags are sewed locally and bought in bulk to be distributed during the protests on Fridays. Distribution is another CHAT term that in this situation refers to how the protest signs, such as the flag, are distributed and circulated for the objective of making it one of the strongest messages of the protesters. The flag was strongly present during the Algerian protests in all cities. When strikes on the streets and main sights became a real threat, the government called police and gendarmerie forces and placed them on all main entrances to Algiers, the capital. Because the government blocks all entrances to Algiers each Thursday, people were not able to bring their signs with them. They were not even able to bring the Algerian flag. Anyone caught trying to enter Algiers with signs and/or flags could be arrested or, at best, sent back. Therefore, people started carpooling to minimize the number of cars entering the capital. A solution was to have locals give signs and flags to protesters coming to Algiers from neighboring cities to hold once they get to the main place of protest, which is *la grande post* (the main post office) located in the center of Algiers, a vast public area. The reason behind blocking the entrances to the capital is that the government claimed the size of the demonstrations was amplified only because of the many thousands of participants coming from outside Algiers. Blocking the main entrances of Algiers was an attempt to significantly reduce the size of the demonstrations. This was one way the government tried to weaken the weekly marches where millions of protesters (young, old, men and women) participate by chanting peacefully and holding powerful signs. This weekly phenomenon made the government lose any hope that it will easily put down the Hirak and ignore the legitimate demands of the people. The circulation of the protest posters played an important role in the socialization of all Algerians around the world. Despite being away from home, I was following all the news and events of the protest. I was fascinated by the people's awareness of what's happening around them and in the world. People shared live protests videos on Facebook and YouTube on a daily basis. Many were able to upload live videos of the interaction between the police and the people, which I find civilized and peaceful. The Algerian protest of 2019 was reported and aired on several world channels. The whole world witnessed and admired its peaceful character. According to many activists, people would gather in safe places to print and create banners and signs. After each protest, people were determined to clean up the public spaces where the protests took place. Because a lot of people were coming from neighboring towns and villages outside the capital, residents of the capital, especially those families who live close to the main post office where people

protest, cooked meals and fed the protesters. They also distributed cold water bottles during hot summer days (Wikipedia).

The protest slogans and signs aim to lift the spirits of people and help them understand their history and how politics in the past and are enacted towards stripping them of their freedom and rights as citizens. People realize now, decades after emancipation from direct colonial rule, the quest and the dream for real independence still figures highly on the Middle East and North Africa agenda. You also, as a writer researcher, can use CHAT to do your own genre research to learn more about this creative genre and other genres that matter to you. The narratives drawn from these slogans and signs have great and positive impact on the society. Such cultural texts explicitly point out the ill reality of political and social life today in Algeria and in the Middle East as a whole. Examining such themes and factors may uncover new foundations for social and political change. This is not an overreaching dream after all. In 2015 Tunisia became the first Arab country ever to be judged fully “free” by Freedom House, an American monitor of civil liberties, and it moved up a record thirty-two places among countries vetted by the Vienna-based Democracy ranking association (*The Economist*). Algeria is still at the early stages of peaceful protests since February 2019, and so far Algerians were able to make the former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika step down and force the military to give some minor concessions.

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