

SOME METHODOLOGICAL POINTS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PROTEST EVENT DATABASE IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. Introduction

Protests have become a standard feature of the South African body politic and everyday life. Without skipping a beat, a familiar voice in a national radio programme matter-of-factly moves from cautioning motorists on their way to work of 10-minute delays due to faulty traffic lights to suggesting alternative routes in order to avoid angry protesters burning tyres on roads in 3 different areas and provinces in the country.¹ But despite this apparent normalization of protest action, the fact that no one has so far come up with a solution to end the protests suggests that they have spiralled out of control thus underlining the fact that there is little understanding or consensus among state functionaries, policy makers and associated scholars with respect to what lies behind the protests, their prognosis, and indeed their place in the general political development of the country. No one disputes the fact that that there is an abnormal incidence of protest action in post-apartheid society, but there is uncertainty about exactly how many protests occur, what their exact character is and what they precisely signify. The most recent and authoritative analyses of the protests suggest that the protests exhibit signs of rapid change in form and content thus adding complexity to a phenomenon already vexed (Please see Booysen 2011).

There is a need for a comprehensive, accurate and reliable documentation and enumeration of the protests which could serve as a reference containing most of the factual information and knowledge that has so far been gathered on the protests in South Africa to date. In this paper we explore how a reliable database of the incidence of protests in South Africa could be constructed which researchers, policy makers and political activists could use as a basis for answering some of the burning questions arising out of the protest phenomenon. The paper suggests the use of an existing database, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)'s protest monitor (SABC News Research 2011), in order to explore the issues and challenges involved in developing such a database concretely rather than by way of theoretical conjecture.

¹ Rob Burn, Traffic Watch, AM Live, SAFM radio station, 7h30 report, 22 March 2012.

The SABC data has been chosen both because of its relative comprehensiveness in that it covers protest incidents in all the provinces and because the SABC as a news agency is the biggest and probably most influential in South Africa in terms of reporting upon and shaping perceptions of protest action. This paper therefore records the thinking informing and challenges faced by a team of researchers working at developing a protest event database using SABC data and, as will be explained further below, data from the South African Local Government Research Centre.

2. Why do we need a reliable database cataloguing protest action in SA?

The data we use as a basis for constructing our explanations of phenomena requires careful and credible compilation. In South Africa there exist widely divergent estimates of the number of protest incidents. Official police records, for example, have been found to be a useful but unreliable enumerator of protests (Vally 2009). The data compiled by the SABC, SALGRC (SALGA) and Municipal IQ are frequently used by researchers, but these sources have been questioned for accuracy, comprehensiveness and reliability (Alexander 2010, Pfaffe 2011). Nonetheless most commentary on South African protest action uses these sources as a basis for understanding this phenomenon (e.g. Atkinson 2007, Booysen 2009). It is our contention that, without an authoritative factual basis, these stabs at explanation have to be dealt with quite critically because it may be that many of them, if such a factual basis were to be provided, might prove to be largely impressionistic or even downright dubious.

A major problem with present estimates of protests in South Africa is the use of different definitions and methodological approaches which sometimes results in divergent estimates of the number of protests e.g. the SABC recorded 477 and the Municipal IQ 344 protests for the same period 2004 to 2011 (SABC News Research 2011, Municipal IQ 2010, 2011). And this without, as Pfaffe (2011:15) laments, giving “any details of what exactly constitutes their respective protest labels”. This suggests that at times researchers are not talking about the same thing, or are focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon being studied. For example, the police figures distinguish neatly between “legal” and “illegal” protests, but a researcher using these figures will often be interested in the incidence rather than the legality

of an event. The police figures also incorporate events that involve labour action (and even sports and cultural events) while many researchers distinguish neatly between labour and community protests. A substantial literature employs the concept “new social movements” as a lynchpin in explaining a significant portion of the mass mobilization that filled the post-apartheid protest calendar (Ballard et al., 2006). In contrast, the notion of “service delivery protests” features prominently in current analyses of protest activity in the country and the distinction between the two is sometimes blurred (e.g. Sinwell, 2010). There is also inconsistent use of “service delivery” with mobilization around issues such as crime, education and xenophobia, being included or excluded in different treatments.

These observations suggest that it might be increasingly unclear what exactly is being referred to and studied under the rubric “protests” in South Africa. As we will see below, there is evidence of inconsistent treatment of the question between and within different databases and researchers. This is underlined (or explained away) by the observation that the protests have evolved in character changing in nature during different periods of the post-apartheid era (Booyesen 2011). If protests are “multifarious”, to what extent can they be treated as the same phenomenon across these different periods? (Tilly, 2008). The fact that some mass mobilization involve attacks on “foreign nationals” has also sparked off a scholarly dispute with some researchers arguing that xenophobia is but the “dark side” of protest action (von Holdt *et al.* 2011, Langa and von Holdt 2010) while others argue for a stricter demarcation between xenophobia and service delivery or community protest (Alexander and Pfaffe 2009).

South African scholarship into protests needs to address and resolve some of these questions through establishing a more or less common factual basis upon which to examine the phenomenon of protests. Failure to do this will mean that researchers will continue to talk past each other, with some operating on the basis of inconsistent formulations and thus accentuating the problem of a discordant discourse.

It is suggested here that some of the challenges noted in the above could be better addressed by way of the compilation of a catalogue of events which could be reliable enough for

researchers to use in assessing past and present protest action. Such a catalogue would strive to standardize its definition of “protest” thus allowing researchers to work from a common set of facts, that is, in so far as these facts are constituted and compiled based on clearly defined criteria, premises and independently verifiable sources.

A reliable, verifiable database that covers the past decade of protest activity and that is updated on a daily basis would contribute immensely to protest scholarship. The advantage of such a database would be to provide a common and verifiable basis for studies of protests that could be useful to a wide range of researchers, activists and policy makers locally and internationally. The incidence of protests in South Africa is of interest to other researchers in the world because few countries match can match the sheer scale of protest activity in this country. The starting point for creating such a database, it is suggested here, would be the existing databases in the country, namely, those compiled by the SABC and SALGRC to begin with. Ideally, other sources such as the Municipal IQ database and protest monitors such as that by the UKZN Centre for Civil Society (CCS 2011) would also be used. The task at hand is to draw out information from all these databases, overcome whatever weaknesses and biases that presently exist, and on that basis create a definitive catalogue of protest events in South Africa. It should also be mentioned that additional sources of information are envisaged for this project going forward, namely, there is a plan to conduct several case studies employing a questionnaire. The use of ethnographic methods could serve to give the data more texture and address some questions which data aggregation is unable to answer e.g. individual motivation for participating in protest.

In this paper we explore the SABC database, and to a lesser extent the SALGRC database, as a first step towards the creation of the envisaged database.

3. Theoretical and methodological considerations

3.1 Evidence and explanatory frameworks

The use of ill-defined methods and the conflation of methodologies may be responsible for certain shortcomings in South African scholarship into protests. To understand and address this

problem requires a philosophical and methodological step back before delving into the foray of actual study and intellectual engagement. Charles Tilly's work documenting and analysing what he terms "contentious gatherings" is a useful starting point given his status as a universally pioneer and leading scholar in this field (Tilly 2005 and 2008, Tilly 1988; Tilly, Tilly and Tilly 1975). A meticulous social scientist combining sociological and historical methods, he admonishes social scientists in the field to pay attention to their theories of evidence, that is, the link between scientific explanation and the evidence used to substantiate this.

The study of protest events requires us to compile an "event catalogue"; that is, "a set of descriptions of multiple social interactions collected from a delimited set of sources according to relatively uniform procedures" (Tilly 2008: 47). Tilly prefers the term "contentious gatherings" rather than "protests" and he defines this as "an occasion on which a number of people (here, a minimum of ten) outside of the government gathered in a publicly accessible place and made claims on at least one person outside their own number, claims which if realized would affect the interests of their object" (ibid). This definition and theoretical approach is designed to overcome the theoretical shortcomings Tilly identifies in other formulations of the problem which we now turn to below.

Some researchers define their subject matter rather robustly as the study of riots and mobs, with "riot" defined as "50 or more people assembled trying to damage or seize property, attack someone, or coerce someone to act and/or desist from action" (Bohstedt 1983:4). Tilly criticises the centrality of the element of coercion and even violence in this definition; it is narrow because Tilly is interested in the "contentious making of claims" which may take both peaceable and less peaceable forms (2008:50). Furthermore, Tilly is concerned with "discontinuous" claim-making, that is, once-off events rather than routine or regular claim-making such as that done through parliamentary activity.

Scholars such as Wells (1990) use event catalogues to gather evidence of "protest" and this is "frequently conceived of as an expression of popular consciousness" and seeking to establish the "shared understandings" of the protesters (Tilly 2008: 49). Scholars who use concepts like "riots" define their object of study as "collective violence" (Button, 1978 and 1997), an

approach that gathered steam during the American ghetto and student rebellions of the 1960s. Another group of scholars and theories focus on “collective action” or “conflict” (McPhail and Wohlstein 1983). Tilly finds these approaches wanting in the light of his notion of the “contentious making of claims” that allows him to study meanings produced in the course of collective social interactions rather than from the study of individual consciousness. His approach focuses on relations, transactions and mechanisms which combine to form observable social processes which can then be explained.

The strength of Tilly’s approach is that his research team was able, using content analysis techniques, to reduce contentious events into “machine-readable” entries thus allowing him to cope with vast amounts of data in a consistent and verifiable manner. The exercise involves, since his sources are mostly periodicals written in narrative form, a lot of selection and interpretation converting the qualitative data into quantitative and machine-readable entries that can be fed into a database. The decisive factor is consistent, clearly-defined and verifiable criteria that guide the organization of the data. Thus the data is amenable to other researchers to use in testing Tilly’s conclusions and it can also be re-organised to answer questions corresponding to their own explanatory theories. It is in this way that such a catalogue of events can be regarded as a solid contribution to the advancement of social science in this field of study.

The method has its shortcomings. Tilly, for example, identified a systematic bias in his sources. He found that the periodicals he was using tended to identify more contentious gatherings than official sources; that they tended to over-represent events taking place in London city and under-represented locations outside of and distant from major cities; and also under-represented industrial conflicts. The newspapers he used also offered fuller accounts of the events than others. Having identified this bias Tilly was able to compensate for it in his substantive conclusions.

The important point to note is that Tilly’s substantive conclusions are arguably more convincing and less contentious than those made by others in the same field without the benefit of his solid empirical foundation. It is noteworthy that a comparison with other rigorous research

suggests the veracity of Tilly's method and conclusions e.g. there is an uncanny symbiosis with the work of Hobsbawm and Rude (1968). In summary, Tilly's insights are that 18th and 19th century British repertoires of contention, defined as "a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out" evolved in character from being parochial, particular and bifurcated "claim-making routines" into cosmopolitan, modular and autonomous repertoires (Tilly 2005: xx). This was primarily a result not so much of radicalization than the extension or widening of the means of contention-making through the emergence of organizations and perceptions with a regional and national rather than merely local horizon, a conclusion that matches Bohstedt's (Tilly 2005: 401).

What do we learn from the above in our endeavour to understand protests in South Africa? Firstly, it is apparent that Tilly put more effort, resources and rigour in constructing his event catalogue than anyone has done in this country. It took him 12 years to compile the catalogue employing numerous research assistants and collaborators and covering several periodicals including consulting secondary sources and archival material. He constructed his database from scratch and documented every decision, source, definition, interpretation, and much more, thus arguably being in more control and in a position to account for every step he took in achieving the research feat. In South Africa database compilers often are not in a position or are unwilling to document and share the nitty-gritty involved in constructing their databases. As we will see below, and as some researchers have discovered independently of this study, there are often inconsistencies or uncertainties as to why and how events are documented or recorded in the existing databases, here we are referring to the SABC, SALGRC and Municipal IQ databases. There is little transparency or control for the serious scholar to be able to come to conclusions with nearly half the confidence that Tilly is able to with his database. Hence the suggestion here that the time might be nigh for the construction of a database that approximates the rigour and reliability that Tilly and other scholars elsewhere in the world have achieved in the field of event catalogues of protests or contentious gatherings. It is to the work of other scholars internationally that we now turn.

3.2 Protest event analysis: Some insights from the literature

History of the genre

Tilly's work is seminal within a field of study termed "protest event analysis" that is relatively new but has already given birth to, according to Koopmans and Rucht, a veritable "small research industry" (2002: 233). These authors identify three generations of scholarship in the development of the literature in this area of study. The first phase consists of "riot" studies in the 1970s (Gurr 1968, Spilerman 1970, Danzger 1975), juxtaposed with the study of political violence and strikes by historical sociologists (Snyder & Tilly 1972; Tilly, Tilly and Tilly 1975), and the first extensive use of the newspaper as a source for the identification and analysis of protest events (Lieberson & Silverman 1965; Snyder & Kelly 1977). The second phase coincided with the rise of social movement studies in the social sciences with protest event analysis burgeoning in terms of research output and increasingly employing quantitative methods in the study of the civil rights movement in the United States (McAdam 1982), protests in the mid-60s and 70s in Italy (Tarrow 1989) and USA farmers' protests (Jenkins 1985). The manipulation of protest data became more sophisticated during this phase (Koopmans and Rucht 2002). The third phase of the development of this scholarship has seen the exportation of this research approach and its application onto other countries outside the United States and Europe (Beissinger 1998; Olzak and Olivier 1998; White 1995). Comparative studies looking into social movement activation in different countries have been conducted by some researchers (Kriesie 1981).

What we observe here is the birth and growth of a field of study that is characterised by a movement away from informed speculation and scholarly generalisations based on careful study of particular dramatic events ("riots", strikes), either singly or aggregated, towards the development of an "exact" science that strives for reliability and validity through the application of a systematic and quantitative methodology on larger samples and a wider range of protest events. The search for comprehensiveness has led some researchers to traverse the boundary of observable collective action into the analysis of discursive forms of contention

such as the issuing of press statements and to extend the net to include events organised by “institutional actors” e.g. the state (Koopmans and Rucht 2002:235).

Definition and unit of analysis

The inclusion of discursive forms such as “press statements, petitions, participation in hearings, and litigation” (Koopmans and Rucht 2002:235) is an extension of the unit of analysis in protest event analysis which broadens the scope of the field beyond Tilly’s definition of a “contentious gathering” but still falls within his “contentious claim making routines” noted above (Tilly 2005: xx). However, there is agreement that each research study needs to define its unit of analysis in relation to theoretical and practical considerations on the one hand, and the specific questions the researcher concerned seeks to answer (Tilly, 2008; Koopmans and Rucht, 2002). The choices the researcher must make relate to the nature of the events to be investigated, the geographical location of such events, the time period to be covered, sampling or event selection procedures, the sources to be used, and so on. The reliability and validity of each study is a function of how the researcher deals with these factors.

The breadth and width of all the factors impinging on the reliability and validity of protest event analysis studies raises the question of to what extent authoritative claims can be made by researchers in this field. Protest event analysis studies cannot usually claim to cover all protest events they are concerned with unless the unit of analysis or scope of the study is defined very narrowly. Most studies rely on mass media sources, in particular, the newspaper, and these have an in-built selectivity bias (Tilly 2008). However, researchers have found mechanisms to reduce the extent of this bias through using more than one newspaper as a source and additionally using non-media sources such as official records (Barranco and Wisler 1999, Fillieule 1996, Hocke 1996, Mueller 1997, Oliver and Myers 1999). Protest event analysts defend themselves from the criticism that their work, because it is based on what gets reported in newspapers, does not constitute “reality” by arguing that indeed the world reflected in the mass media can be understood as a “constructed reality” but it is still important for policy makers and the wider public and thus affects the direction of social change (Koopmans and

Rucht 2002: 252). Researchers in this genre admit that there are questions which cannot be answered through aggregating protest events but that might require ethnographic study such as the psychological or motivational dimensions of protest action. Their argument is that it is important to define with rigour one's unit of analysis and to be consistent and transparent about the various steps one takes in constructing a catalogue of protest events. Therein lie the reliability and validity of the method.

4. Key considerations for developing a South African protest event database

The literature considered above, especially the work of Tilly, suggests that protest event databases or catalogues are invariably based on a particular theory and methodology. In South Africa, a cursory consideration of the three databases mentioned here is that two of them, SALRC and Municipal IQ, are underpinned by a theory that associates protest closely with the functioning of local government. The SABC database can be said to be informed by the imperative of news worthiness rather than purely scholarly considerations. Our team has taken some steps to ascertain more definitively the theory and methodology underpinning the SABC database and some comments will be made in this regard below.

In general, the South African approach is to define the subject matter as “protest” and “service delivery protest”. This has implications for what finds its way into South African protest databases. Our research team has chosen to stick with this tradition and we have defined our subject matter as “protest”, and more specifically “community protest”, following Alexander's (2010) definition and motivations in this respect. This approach is distinguishable from researchers who define their subject matter as “service delivery protests” in that “community” protests arguably covers or conveys a sense of a wider range of protest activities, issues and targets of protest action than “service delivery”. This definition allows us to eschew coverage of labour action and strikes for practical and theoretical considerations. But it is arguably responsive to what some researchers have identified as the dynamic nature of protest activity in South Africa in terms of changing repertoires, demands, methods and targets of protest action (Booyesen 2011). For example, Booyesen identifies 6 different phases of the protests with

each phase associated with a particular feature or characteristic of the protest. But these dynamics can be accommodated in the “community protest” rubric.

The dynamism and evolution of protests and protest repertoires was identified by Tilly (2005) with respect to “contentious gatherings” in Britain during the 17th and 18th centuries; one of his main findings was that protests evolved from being parochial to being cosmopolitan in character. Alexander (2010) observes a developmental dynamic or trend in South African protests that leads him to suggest that they are likely to increasingly link up with each other both in terms of demands and forms of organization, on the one hand, and on the other they are becoming or will become increasingly anti-capitalist. Similarly Booyesen’s (2011:165-166) prognosis is that the “local, ‘community’ protests [might] transform into networks of national protest”.

The escalation of the protests from local to the national sphere in character and scope suggests Tilly’s (2005) observation of a movement away from bifurcated to autonomous protests, that is, a movement away from local groups seeking intermediaries to address national issues to claimants establishing direct communication with national centres of power. Booyesen (2009) suggests that the issues, demands and targets of the protesters in South Africa have changed away from a sole focus on local government to the spheres of provincial and national government. Langa and von Holdt (2010) attended a rally addressed by President Zuma during the height of the protests in Balfour where residents refused to be addressed by local, provincial and even national political leaders, demanding and allowing only the president himself to address them.

We have mentioned Alexander’s speculation that community protests and labour action might team up in the future, a question that concerns many on the left in South Africa (Harvey 2007, Ceruti 2010, Lehulere 1985). There is also the question and debate about the relationship between protest and xenophobia which was mentioned above (Langa and von Holdt 2010; Alexander and Pfaffe 2011; Ngwane and Vilakazi 2010). It has also been observed that many of the protests are led by youth rather than by adults (Sinwell *et al.* 2009). These are just some of the questions which a database on South African protests might help to answer. The

complexity of some of the questions raised here requires a database that is quite rich in information and fairly sophisticated in its choice of variables and how these could be manipulated and related to each other. It is perhaps not possible to imagine a project as thorough and monumental as Tilly's 12 years compiling his database with the support of at least a dozen research assistants and collaborators, and no doubt a generous budget. But, if the resources could be found this could be a very good thing indeed; in reality pragmatic choices would need to be made in compiling a South African database based on the priority issues and questions that such a database would need to help us address and answer. Political and scholarly considerations have to be taken equally into account in this country given the compelling urgency of the issues and their direct impact on people's lives, there is very little scope for science for its own sake. We can thus expect and need to be able to answer the question: After all is said and done, what indeed are we trying to achieve with our event catalogue and who would benefit from this achievement?

5. Work in progress: Some characteristics of the SABC database

The SABC compiles protest data through its research service which plays a supportive role to the institution's news service. In a personal communication with the head of the research department it was explained to us that the data is actually compiled by one person from news reports sent in by staff reporters located throughout South Africa's major centres. However, the compilation also includes material from other sources besides. The compiler records in narrative form parts of these reports and keeps them in a database as a record or archive and as a possible resource for further stories. The value of the reports from the SABC's point of view is that they are mostly based on newsworthiness and it can be argued that this is a key selectivity bias. Many if not most of the reports are used for SABC radio and television broadcasts in its 18 radio stations and 3 television channels.

A key advantage in using the SABC data is the accessibility of the data compilers which makes it possible to find out the reasons for including or excluding events in the database and other considerations that might influence the selection process. This "assessing... the selectivity of the sources from which information is drawn is crucial to all kinds of PEA" (Koopmans and

Rucht 2002:246). With the SABC the process is made easier because only one person compiles the data thus suggesting a degree of consistency. Our team will need to do further empirical investigation on this question including finding out the types of news reports that get filed by reporters and understanding the selection process involved before they are entered into the database. First impressions suggest that if there is a large number of people involved, there is significant disruption or violence, and people get arrested or fired upon by police, are some of the factors that make it more likely for a contentious event to find its way into the SABC protest database.

Despite some unevenness in the entries made in the SABC database, there is often enough basic detail to make each entry usable as a source of information. It can also be argued that once a protest event is identifiable this makes it possible to do further investigation to find out more about it if necessary. The basic details that can be garnered from most entries in the SABC data are: location of the protest, date of the protest, number of protesters, demands made, method of protesting and response of the authorities in the form of police and/or government officials and elected representatives. Despite the fact that in many instances more or less of this detail is included in each data entry, there is arguably enough information in the 500 or so protest event entries recorded for the years 2004 to 2011 to create a viable, machine-readable database of protests. And this is what our team is doing.

The team is using the Microsoft Access programme to capture basic information about each of the 500 or so protests recorded by the SABC. The process of populating the database with information provides a good vantage point to assess both the SABC's compilation of protest events and to consider the challenges of embarking on such an exercise. We can report that at this particular moment all of the SABC data has been fed into the database being created. This painstaking process involves reading each protest event entry in the SABC database, identifying key information and variables, entering these into the Access data entry form. This exercise can be understood as translating the narrative reports into machine-readable form. Since the narrative reports were not designed for this purpose the challenge is creating forms that best fit

the data but also taking into consideration the researchers' theoretical and methodological imperatives.

A challenge we have come across is the existence of "borderline cases", a mountain that Pfaffe (2011) scaled and documented in his pioneering study using Protest Event Analysis on South African protest data. Examples of borderline cases arising out of recent protests would be Malema's economic freedom march (Laing 2011), the Grabouw parents' protest against poor education (SAPA 2012), and the Implats mine strike that involved community protests (SAPA 2012). The question here would be whether these cases fall within our definition of "community protest". The SABC data would exclude all of these because they are not "service delivery" related whereas we are inclined to include them. An interesting borderline case is the Right to Know campaign which, although involving working class community organisations, appears to be distinguishable from other kinds of protests because of the extent of middle class involvement and the participation of "institutional" actors (Please see the Right to Know Campaign website www.r2k.org). The Khutsong case is not a borderline case in terms of whether it meets the criteria of our definition of community protest yet it is complex and difficult to process because of its long duration and use of a multiplicity of repertoires before it achieved victory (see Phokela 2010). In the SABC data it appears in at least 10 separate entries and in some instances it is recorded as taking place in two different towns and provinces. Clearly, Khutsong has to be treated as a special case and will require further research to clarify some of the questions it raises.

We will conclude this section by briefly considering other databases that exist in South Africa and which will or can be useful in this project. As pointed out, the SABC database provides the entry point into the project. A cursory examination of the SALGRC database suggests that it covers protest events not necessarily covered by the SABC although there is a lot of overlap, and also that it does so giving more detail. For this reason the next big step in our project is to populate our database with data from this database. The new information will be superimposed on the old one although we will be careful to keep track of the changes made. No decision has yet been taken as to what direction the project will take once all the SALGRC

data has been entered but our vision is that at some point we will seek to supplement the aggregate data with ethnographic research of selected case studies or protest events. Other databases such as the Municipal IQ might also be used if they prove to be accessible enough to use their data and to allow the application of a selectivity bias test. The Centre for Civil Society Protest Monitor (CCS 2011) uses online news reports as its main source and it is possible that our team can collaborate with them in future work.

A mechanism for updating the database on a daily basis is part of our vision for the future. In this respect the project might expand to use more diverse sources including, for example, the idea of setting up a website where movement and media activists would be invited to record protests that don't usually get reported in the mainstream press. It is likely that once the complete database is up and running new theoretical and methodological insights will be generated which will shed new light on present and past debates including those concerning protest activity going back further than the 2004 cut-off year that we are presently working with. Such insights are also likely to inform present and future prognoses of protest action in South Africa and beyond.

6. Conclusion

If indeed South Africa is the protest capital of the world, as has been suggested (Alexander 2012), then it would be a missed opportunity if its social scientists were to be unable to place themselves at the cutting edge of research in the field of Protest Event Analysis. This paper represents an argument and a plan to lay the basis for this to happen through taking the first steps in compiling a reliable and valid protest event catalogue that other researchers could use for their theoretical and empirical work in this respect. In the paper we have presented some of the challenges that have to be faced in achieving this feat by way of considering the literature and reporting on work in progress in this project. Our hope is that the reader, like us, will, after reading the paper, be convinced of the necessity and worthiness of spending money, time and energy on this research endeavour.

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